

Entre Deux Mers; or how to fill in time between paying jobs.

Early September usually means a trip to PLASA in London town for those working Lighting Directors who can spare the time, to check out the latest in new lighting toys. The invitations came from Manufacturers as they do, but this year, I had something else lined up. Paid lighting work had been a bit thin on the ground since the end of the series that took me to New York. (Autumn issue of Television Lighting) The mobile hadn't rung with any offers of work for some time, only for 'taxi' requests from the youngest member of my family. So I had this plan, I was going to 'get on my bike' and go out to earn some money. Not for myself, though.

I think I need to make myself clear. Some years ago, I read a book called 'Fat man on a bicycle' which was, I believe, also serialised on Radio 4. It told of the author, who was a self confessed 'big' man, and his journey across France on a fairly ordinary bike, and his experiences thereof. It made good reading and made me think, if he could do it, why not me? He did take quite a long time to do the journey (presumably on expenses as he was accompanied by a BBC Producer). Each day he just cycled along through the byways of that country noting the sights and smells of rural France on his slow and stately progress towards the Mediterranean Sea. Each evening they stayed in pleasant hotels and ate and drank well. Mmmm.

You know how it is, we all of us have 'pipe dreams' that we would like to do but can never find the time/motivation/money/partners understanding or any combination of these to actually make them happen. Most of those factors were in my favour, so I started to plan my mission. This was to be my personal 'Everest'.

The idea gestated in my mind for several years, but each year something came up to use as an excuse but this year (2002) I decided that it had to be done. Spring or late summer were the obvious timings for an attempt; work precluded May and June, so September was in my sights. The route could be as much as 800 miles if I took the Dover Calais crossing. Coming from Cardiff, it made sense for me to take the longer sea crossing from Portsmouth to one of the ports on the northern coast of France.



It didn't take too long to work out that St. Malo offered the shortest land journey through France, a mere 600 or so miles. Narbonne was to be the contact with the Mediterranean Sea. It is the eastern end point of the Canal du Midi and is quite well known to me through earlier cycling trips to the Languedoc region.

How long to allow for the trip? I had only once (some 40 years ago) cycled more than 60 miles in a day. Although I cycle fairly regularly, I didn't know what I could achieve on a daily basis with all my

worldly goods in panniers, which I didn't have.

I started canvassing for support for my wild idea; who fancied accompanying me in a support vehicle with spares, my luggage and sustenance to keep me going between one restaurant and comfy bed and the next? Well, that was received with lukewarm enthusiasm, so I looked at plan B.

Travelling with no support. Tools, spares, wet weather gear and clothes for a fortnight. Somewhat less enticing. I did not want to do it on my own, so I looked for willing

volunteers. My elder son Richard, who is a keen off road biker, said he was up for it, so we made a commitment by blocking out the first two weeks in September.

Initially, my idea had been just to do it as a sort of 'holiday', but events in the spring of this year were to change that. A friend and colleague, who some of you will have known, Teg Jones, an Engineering Manager (and farmer) who had worked for BBC Wales for many years, became ill with lung cancer. Like many of his friends and colleagues I went along to see him in hospital. And like them, I felt so helpless at being of any actual use to him. The real stars were the doctors and nurses for whom he had nothing but praise. But then, I should know, being married to a nurse who works as part of a hospital team specialising in that very illness.

Within a matter of weeks, Teg had died and it was at his funeral service that I decided what I should do. I would seek sponsors for my cycle ride to raise money for the Macmillan Cancer relief charity.

My son, Richard has a demanding full time job and was not able to spend the amount of time training that I could do. He also had a week's holiday booked in Egypt scuba diving, immediately before our trip. My time was more flexible and I went about training to prepare my 58-year-old body for what I knew would be quite a challenge.

I remember reading some years ago how a 65-year-old chap had cycled from Blackpool to Barcelona during the world cup, on a penny-farthing bicycle in 12 days! I had also met a couple that had done a route similar to mine in 10 days with a day off en route. Using a combination of maps and Microsoft's Autoroute Europe I split up the trip into manageable chunks of between 60 and 85 miles per day. I reckoned that it should be possible to do it in maybe 8 days, but ideally, I wanted to do it in seven.

I booked the ferry from Portsmouth to St. Malo, outward on an overnight crossing on September 2nd, the return was to be on Sunday 15th. That gave time for the journey plus some R & R and a couple of days for the return to St Malo: by train. Next, I booked the rail tickets. After a couple of abortive attempts on the SNCF web site and some even more abortive phone calls to SNCF's help line, I finally found a small company in Ellesmere Port who specialised in bespoke rail journeys in Europe.

Their advice was succinct and accurate. "Avoid the TGV because they only take folding bikes, and avoid Paris." Within minutes they had sorted me a route via Bordeaux and Nantes with an overnight in Nantes before the last short leg to St Malo. They could not pre book the bikes, but assured me that the bikes could be loaded on the guards van of the trains concerned.



Perigueux. Shame about the Camper vans.

Booking accommodation was not quite so straightforward. I checked out the (excellent) Logis de France web site and requested reservations at a number of carefully chosen hotels for our journey. Carefully chosen for facilities and food; we were not intending to slum it!

In mid August, I went off to France with Jean, my wife for a ten-day holiday, taking the bikes for some gentle touring in the Loire Valley area. A sort of rehearsal, I suppose. Whilst there, we experienced a period of rain that lasted for 45 hours non-stop. I found this worrying to say the least. We actually drove on roads that I knew I would be cycling on in just ten days time. Seeing the snow that the trucks were producing and knowing that I would be the recipient of all that mucky Page 2

water did not make me very happy.

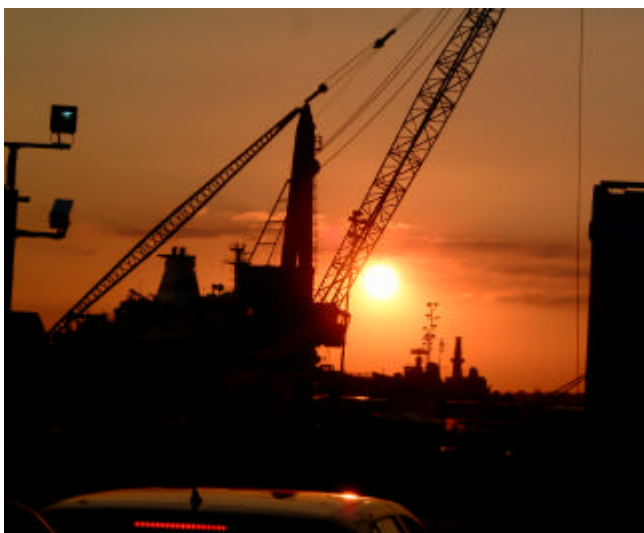
I hadn't had any replies from Logis de France before we left home, but guessed that all the confirmations would be in by the time we got home. Wrong!

The confirmations had been automatically cancelled because I had not been there to accept the confirmation within 24 hours of the offer being made. I now had just 5 days to sort out some alternative accommodation. Upon closer inspection, I noted that booking a Logis would have an automatic charge for the first nights accommodation if less than 24 hours notice were given of a change. Not a lot of good to us as cyclists who had many elements of uncertainty about our journey: weather or breakdowns, either mechanical or physical.

So I went down the Chambres D'Hotes (Bed and Breakfast) route. I booked the first three nights or so by phone and programmed the numbers of the remainder into my mobile to book as we went along. No credit card details needed, so some stress avoided there.

Our local bike shop arranged the loan of panniers and frames for us; we had no intention of repeating the exercise so purchase was not an option.

Monday September 2nd 2002



D-day minus a few hours. We arrive in Portsmouth (by car) at 1945 ready for a 2030 sailing on the good ship 'Br tagne'. T'was a perfect summers evening in the mouth of Port. We also had the luxury of being allowed to cycle on board before any of the cars. As I found out at the time of booking, September is a very busy month with all the middle-aged people with grown up kids (like me!) on their way to enjoy a quieter Europe with all the school holidays over.

I do like the entrance and exit to Portsmouth, especially at dusk as one passes the Naval Dockyard and all it's mysterious shapes and lights. One absentee is the Ark Royal, which has recently left to do 'exercises' in the

Med. Was it on its way to meet us, or watch over Iraq?

Tuesday September 3rd

Dawn dawns after a very smooth crossing in a very nice 'compact' cabin. We emerge to the blinding rays of a low autumnal sun in St. Malo. It's 8 a.m. when most sensible people are just having breakfast. After a slightly wobbly ride out of town as we get used to the weight of the panniers, we are soon cycling along some very quiet Normandy roads, trying to keep out of the way of the busy Route Nationale and it's BIG trucks. The early sunshine had disappeared behind banks of cool mist. It was so quiet, almost eerily so, as we rode along through lines of poplar trees that could only be France. I could actually hear a leaf fall onto the road some twenty metres away. The only assault



Crossing a canal at Evran in Normandy



Serious payload

on the senses was the unmistakable stench of muck spreading. We thought that it would have been a local phenomenon. Wrong! Although the detail of the stench changed (Cow, pig, hen) it was to stay with us for much of Northern France.

Three and a half hours and 40 miles later (our chosen unit in the land of the kilometre) we park our steeds, each with over 2 stones (15 kilos) of 'payload' against an Italian restaurant in Geveze in search of nourishment. Richard has a theory that pasta is readily converted into energy appropriate

enough for our calorie burning exercise. An hour later we came out into brilliant sunshine.

Just another 550 miles to go. In the nearby village of Corps-Nud (truly) there are signs of a town centre makeover by Messrs. Titchmarsh and Dimmock.



Just a few metres from the water feature, and there is a church built in a style that looks somewhat out of place in Northern France.



We approach and cross the city of Rennes without incident but decide to get off the busy Route Nationale for minor roads. Towards the middle of the afternoon, it's a case of "Hello Houston, we have a problem". Richard examines his rear wheel after hearing suspicious pinging noises. The non-circular shape of the wheel marked the demise of two of his spokes. It was a newly built wheel and gave us cause for concern, as we were many miles from anywhere. Neither of us had ever had a spoke 'go' before and this was a worrying development for day one. Good cycle

shops certainly exist in France, but their frequency and location was, to us, an unknown quantity. As a precautionary measure we transferred some of the load from his bike to mine (Gee thanks) and continued carefully towards Chateaubriant, some distance off our intended route on the assumption that help would be available.

It was a bike shop, not a steak that we were hunting, and with the help of a very obliging pedestrian we found one on the outskirts of town. It was hot, we were both tired and still some distance from our overnight accommodation. We showed him the problem. Gallic sharp intake of breath, then: "I am very busy, monsieur, are you going to wait?" (in French, of course!)

"We have no choice!" I replied, explaining our manic mission. In between taking in work for the following day, chatting to his colleagues, and fixing two other bikes, he virtually rebuilt the wheel. 20 euros later, (including some spare spokes) we continued towards our destination of



One wheel on my bicycle, well, Richards actually

Pouancé, still some 14 miles away.

Reaching our first Chambre D'Hote after 8 hours cycling and a total of 94 miles that day, we noted that it is some distance from the town where the restaurants undoubtedly were. Showered and partially rejuvenated, we walk in to town to find that one after the other, the restaurants are all fermé. No, it's not Monday. Eventually, we find an open bar where the patron gives us advice without losing the cigarette at the corner of his mouth and pouring us two beers instead of the two glasses of wine for which we have asked. Not a time to argue, so we down the drinks and head in the general direction of his outstretched arm towards the farthest corner of the town.

Here we did find 'the' open restaurant and ate our fill before a half hour trek to bed.

Well, at least there was a nice sunset to end the day. As we prepared for bed, Richard reminded me that I had indicated a *maximum* of 80 miles per day. My excuse was that I never was very good at Maths.



Sunset over Pouancé

Wednesday September 4th

Wednesday dawned as Tuesday, misty and cool. As we approach the valley of the great river Loire, it was clear that there are some well-heeled châteaux



about. Between the 15th and the 18th centuries, more than 200 chateaux were built in the Loire valley for the King. Apparently he lived in each for about a month at a time, taking his furniture with him. That explains why so many châteaux are so sparsely furnished.

Even on a tiny D road we saw this splendid Château at Challain la Potherie near Segré. It does look to have a little problem with one of its 'antennae', though.

Along with the pasta, bananas were also deemed to be quick sources of instant blood sugar. Unfortunately, we soon discovered that only about

one village in three had fruit and veg shops. That combined with the fact that all shops closed from noon till about 2.30 pm. was a cause for concern on more than one occasion. Not a problem when you are in a car, but our progress was at a rate of 12 mph or less.

It was whilst we were looking for bananas before the bewitching hour of noon that I saw this old smithy cum garage cum cycle repair shop. No bananas, though.





Crossing the Loire

As we progressed ever southwards we saw the gradual transition of crops from maize to sunflowers and vines. We enjoyed a long descent with open views into the Loire valley and soon entered the beautiful city of Angers. Well-designed bike lanes took us speedily into the heart of the city past beautiful floral displays and more rivers than I had remembered. They are the various tributaries of the river Loire that converge just west of the city.

Crossing the Loire was our first great landmark, or should that be watermark? Lunch was very good and very French, taken just south of the

great river. Food took on a different value, that of fuel every bit as necessary as a tank full of unleaded. Orangina and water were the only permitted liquids.

As we passed the Château of Montreuil Bellay I rang a friend of many years, Serge Pouit, a retired farmer of a similar age to me, who cycled out to meet us on the outskirts of Loudun. His wife, Suzanne had prepared a feast to satisfy even the hungriest cyclist. They also gave us use of their Chambre D'Hote for our use as their contribution to our cause. Another 94 miles done over some quite busy roads but at least over flattish terrain.



Montreuil Bellay

Thursday September 5th

We allowed ourselves the luxury of a slightly later breakfast and start. Serge's friend, a journalist with the local daily paper took a picture of us in full kit and interviewed us, in French, about the purpose of our mission. A daunting task! (Not long after our return to the UK Serge sent us a copy of the article.)



The mornings ride was quite blissful, cycling through pretty villages in warm sunshine on long, quiet roads. Lizards scurrying out of our way, huge fields without fences or walls full of sunflowers and maize, and almost entirely flat. The countryside was east Anglian, but the welcome warm sunshine was definitely mid France!

We approached Poitiers in late morning with over 220 miles on our trip computers since leaving St. Malo. Our city approach was always the same, avoiding major roads as much as possible, the advantage of two

wheels being that one can penetrate where cars cannot. Because of weight constraints, I had assaulted an old Michelin road atlas and cut out all the relevant pages covering our route. These were all kept in my panniers except for the 'Maps of the Day', which were in an A4 plastic folder which was always on the ready tucked into a pocket in my 'dayglow' top. We zig zagged down into Poitiers for sustenance. Opposite the main railway station we tied up our transport to a railing and entered a fairly up market Italian restaurant/pizzeria.

The smart be-suited manager greeted these two hot and sweaty cyclists and showed us to a table by the window, where, he pointed out, we could keep an eye on our bikes! Our fuel cells replenished we climbed a long steep hill out of Poitiers, leading to largely level and endlessly straight

roads. It was whilst cycling along such a road that I worked out that each mile took approximately 200 pedal rotations, that's 16,000 per day!



There was one amusing detour that went slightly wrong. We were following a marked cycle track that diverged from the road towards a forest. It didn't feel quite right as we descended the long track with no sign of anything or anyone. Then, suddenly we heard shrieks and squeals

of delight from behind a line of trees. Then I saw an artistically painted notice fastened to a tree. 'Maison du nature'. Could it be..? We didn't stay to find out.



Gencay, south of Poitiers

Confolens on the River Vienne was our stop that evening in a gorgeous old three-story house overlooking a pretty valley.

There was even a tempting pool in the garden but our first priority was to refuel. Our host showed us our room, and then invited us to join him in an aperitif. How could he have known that Pastis was my favourite drink! Two Pastis on an empty stomach later, Richard and I headed for the bright lights of town. It was a familiar formula by now: Big meal, some wine, big sleep.

Friday September 6th.



A dramatic change in scenery now, hills were the order of the day again. We left Confolens by a minor road along the valley of the Vienne recommended by our hosts. Richard was much happier with this, each hill was an achievable target rather than a straight road disappearing into infinity. Visually, it was probably one of the prettiest roads on our route. There were some totally rustic and eclectic farmyard scenes, real time warp stuff.

We were entering the Limousin area of the Perigord. The forests were more plentiful; we saw wild deer, kites, buzzards and swallowtail

butterflies. Today we did a lot of climbing but not so much going down. The temperatures were good for cycling, sunny but not too hot. Leaving the vines and sunflowers of the Loire behind, we were back in lush green cattle filled pastures and fields that could be somewhere in Britain.



The River Vienne

A short day in distance, just 60 miles, less than previous days,



Brantome

but it had been quite tough riding. The gradients are still relatively gentle. As we approached Brantome, we were rewarded with a long downhill run into the town that describes itself as the Venice of the north. Now where have I heard that before? To be fair, it is a very pretty place and we enjoyed a beer or two by the riverside in a Stratford-on-Avon like ambience before seeking out our accommodation.

As our Chambre D'Hote was a mile upstream, the option of walking to a restaurant (described as 'nearby') was not one we found attractive. Into town we went on delightfully pannier free bikes. Much later, we returned from our meal in almost complete darkness down roads that we hardly knew. Quite exciting as we had no lights and had to negotiate a large churchyard in moonlight with its Gothic gravestones. All we needed was a crane with a big HMI and a bit of smoke. (Well, it is a lighting mag.)

Tomorrow we must cross three major rivers. But so far we are on schedule and on target. Four days down, 321 miles 'in the can' and according to my pocket altimeter, a total of 3,751 metres climbed since rolling off the ferry.

Saturday September 7th

Once again, thankfully, it was dry and bright. The maps show that we have quite a bit more climbing to do today, but the scenery and ever improving views makes it worthwhile. There are noticeably fewer trucks now, but more tourists, mostly Brits and Dutch.

We manage to get 40 miles in by lunchtime which is taken in the small town of Le Bugue in a rather nice restaurant where, once again, we feel rather inappropriately dressed. No problem, we are treated with the utmost civility.



Bonjour!



Belves

The sun is blazing out of a clear blue sky, so we slap on sun lotion for the afternoon, the temperature is touching 30 degrees, a bit hot for biking. An hour and a half down the road, we veer off up a short but tough climb that takes us close to the pretty medieval village of Belves with some very non-mediaeval music blaring across the field from a P.A system. It was their annual Fete.

A few miles on and we are running low on water. Both of us are drinking many litres a day so we are forever on the lookout for shops that are open. Not always easy in La France. Eventually, we find a Spar supermarket that has several staff and no customers. As I approach the till, the shop assistant comes inside from the sunshine and the store's Muzak suddenly launches into the British national anthem! Is that just for me?

The long climb continues through heavily forested countryside bringing us eventually to Monpazier,



Monpazier

a bastide, which professes to be one of France's prettiest villages. A quick stop here for Orangina and water and a few photos. As we approach the 80-mile mark, we get a distant view of an impressive Château in a commanding position overlooking the valley of the river Lot.



Château Biron

Château Biron, stands close to the watershed between the valleys of the Dordogne and the Lot, and can be seen for many miles around. Our route



takes us right alongside before we make a long and welcome descent through a pretty wooded valley to our chosen Chambre D'Hote near the village of Gavaudun.

Owned and tastefully restored by a Belgian couple, it is an old paper mill in a sylvan setting. There is a large inviting pool, but we settle for hot baths before joining our hosts and guests from Australia, Hungary, Holland, and France for aperitifs on the terrace watching the sun go down, then inside for a very welcome dinner cooked by the owner who used to be head Chef in the Brussels Hilton. Nice one! Sleep is once again assured, this time partly due to the soporific sound of water in the rushing stream.

Sunday September 8th

I awakened to the sound of running water. It didn't sound quite the same as it had done the previous night. I peered through the curtains to see what we had both dreaded: rain. Steadily falling from a grey sky. In theory we could have taken a day out to rest but Richard was of the same opinion as myself, we should press on. Following a superb breakfast we donned our wet weather gear and by 9 a.m. we were on our way through the valley of the river Lot in constant drenching rain. Particularly annoying as we later found out that back home in Wales they had enjoyed a hot sunny day.



Rainy Day in France

Although I have cycled in rain before, it is never from choice and not usually for very long. This was my first experience of hour after hour of water coming at me from all directions. Sunday is a no HGV day in France, but we were sprayed by various milk tankers and vehicles carrying perishable goods that are, I suppose, exempt.

My glasses were soon retired to their case, which meant that the frequent map reading became a time consuming event. We even climbed into low cloud and met vehicles with their headlights on! It was late morning in mid France but felt more like the Brecon Beacons in December.

We steamed gently in a Pizzeria in the hill top village of Lauzerte in contemplation of some downhill runs into the valley of the Tarn. The weather after lunch was better and we crossed several tributaries of the Tarn on our way to Montauban, where we got totally lost in search of a bar for a soft drink and a way out of the town that didn't take us on the autoroute. This place, we both decided, was not a cycle friendly town. I studied the map carefully with a view to picking up a minor road that would take us alongside the Tarn to our overnight stop. We joined the only road that crossed the river for miles in any direction via what looked suspiciously like a motorway slip road. No 'velo' exclusion signs, though.

In fact, I think we did actually cycle on the hard shoulder for a few hundred metres in our blissful confusion. It did get us across the river, though. After many more kilometres, albeit flat, we arrived in our Chambre D'Hote way out in the countryside in the village of Mezens, north west of Toulouse. We both agreed that a kilometre at the end of a day felt every bit as long as a mile. Today we completed 80 miles in seven and a half hours in the saddle.

The Chambre D'Hote was run by a young, recently widowed Belgian lady with a young family. We enjoyed a fine meal that she had made for us in the company of an elderly Dutch couple, he having been a research Physicist at one of Holland's top universities. Meeting people like this in an informal setting around the dinner table has been one of the great experiences of this trip. It was also extremely good value at just 60 euros for dinner bed and breakfast for two. Oh, and that included wine!

Monday, September 9th.



The previous evening, I had looked closely at the route for this day and worked out that the climbs via the direct route that I had planned would have been too much for both of us. It would have necessitated a climb of over 1000 metres to approach our destination. I knew it was a fantastic downhill run from the top of the pass from previous visits, with distant views of the Med and the Pyrenees but we both agreed that we should follow an easier route curving round to the south through Revels and Carcassonne. There was a mileage penalty, however, and I wasn't sure what that might be. I was concerned that we might have to spend another night frustratingly close to our target, but I was prepared to do that if necessary.

The day dawned bright and cool, there having been overnight rain. We had an early breakfast and were on our way by 9 a.m. First we had a few easy miles along quiet roads gradually ascending along the valley of the river Agout towards Castres. Then it was off to the last set of hills before the coastal plain. And climb we did. It was a like a very big roller coaster, but with the advantage of passing through gorgeous countryside, not unlike



Tuscany with its hilltop farms and stands of Poplar trees.

The temperatures were still a bit on the cool side until we made that final downhill run onto the coastal plain where it was noticeably warmer. Here we were really lucky as we turned towards the east at Castelnaudary in picking up a strong tail wind that pushed us along at high speed. This for me was the best part of the entire journey.



Just for us?

We were approaching our journey's end along flat, quiet roads. It was warm and sunny. It was also quite exhilarating whizzing along at over 20 mph for hour after hour past the



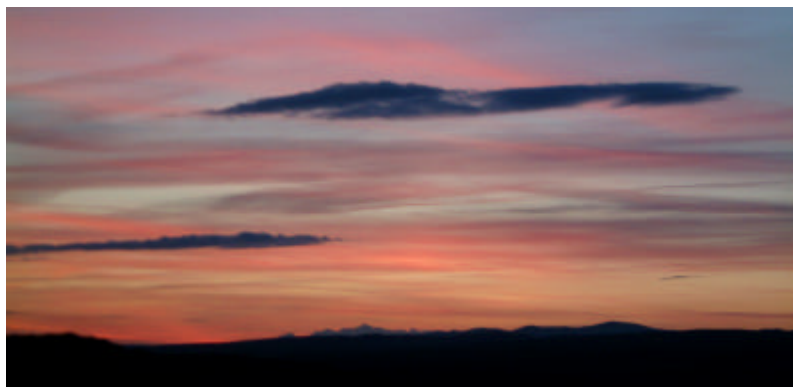
Carcassonne

many peach tree plantations and vineyards of Languedoc.

We reached Carcassonne by mid afternoon, with a pause for re-hydration. Two hours later our tired legs

took us through the 100-mile (in a day) barrier. The sun was getting low in the sky when we crossed the Canal Du Midi and climbed just one more long hill to our friend Margaret's home, just 30 miles from the Mediterranean Sea.

We were both physically exhausted, having cycled 108 miles in 8 hours 10 minutes. I felt euphoric and yet, there was also a feeling of anti climax. We sat on the terrace sipping a glass of wine watching the sun go down over the hills of Minervois. It hadn't quite sunk in that we were *there* at journey's end and tomorrow there was nowhere else to go. In fact, once I had recovered from the day's exertions I actually felt as though I could have gone on, and on. Looking at the map, I said to Richard, "We could be in Barcelona in two days!"



Sunset in Cazelles

The journey had told me quite a lot about France and the French, but most of all about myself. At 58 years old, I had exceeded my expectations (and probably those of people who know me!) in several ways. It had been an adventure, albeit a relatively safe one, that, had been one of the best experiences in my

in hindsight, life.

Thanks are due to Richard, my son, for picking up the poisoned chalice and emerging from the challenge with full marks for helping me achieve my personal Everest; also to Jean, my wife, for coping without a house husband/gardener for two weeks, and not forgetting Margaret our good friend who gave us three days of good food, hospitality and R & R in her home in Cazelles. Thanks also, of course, to the many individual sponsors (over 150) who dug deep in their pockets to make Page 11 the trip all worthwhile.

The journey home



Thursday September 12th was the day that Richard and I were to actually reach the Med and check our train arrangements whilst in Narbonne. After an early breakfast, we hared off down the long hill from Margaret's onto the coastal plain. Then alongside the Canal du Midi for a while, and some 30 miles on, into Narbonne, just a few miles from the sea.

It was almost a disappointment when we finally arrived at the broad beaches of Narbonne Plage. The weather was not exactly what we had hoped for and there was no Brass Band to meet us!

Margaret, however, *was* there to meet us and show us to a garage where she had made arrangements to leave our bikes overnight for the early train the following morning. Although we had our tickets in our possession, I asked her to check with the station staff (with her infinitely superior French) as to whether our bikes would be OK for travelling with us. I had read on a web page that sometimes they will only send them separately on another train. Not a lot of use to us.

I could tell by the expression on Margaret's face on her return that all was not well. "There is good news and there is bad," she began. My heart sank. "No problem with the train to Bordeaux, but there is no *official* room for your bikes on the train from Bordeaux to Nantes."

'Merde', I thought, but in English. Not a lot of good having seats for us but no room for our faithful wheels. That night I admit to having lost some sleep over this possibility. Then I remembered someone once told me "If you don't want an official 'No' then don't ask the question officially". Subterfuge was to be plan 'B'.

Friday September 13th

Not only Friday 13th, but our tickets told us that we were in coach number 13 and I was in seat number 13! By late morning we had travelled from Narbonne to Bordeaux, where we had a break for lunch and awaited our next train for Nantes. The actual platform for any particular train is not announced until about twenty minutes or so before the scheduled departure. As soon as we knew, we hared of to the platform via steps and tunnels in the hope of secreting our charges aboard before any staff saw us. 'Hared' is perhaps a slight exaggeration. As my son was climbing up to Platform X two steps at a time, I was taking a slightly more leisurely pace with transport/life support. Embarrassingly, a lady clearly many years my senior took hold of the rear end (of my bike) and gave me a welcome lift!



A French Guards Van!

In the event, we got the bikes on through a door marked 'Access Velos' with no one around to stop us. We secured them in a rather tight space and went to our seats.

My relief was palpable when the train moved off. It was short lived, however. The guard/ticket collector entered our carriage some minutes later, starting with the usual "Bonjour Messieurs et Mesdames" and ending on an interrogative note. The word "velos" was Page 12

somewhere in the middle. I knew enough French to realise that he was asking who had the cheek to fasten their bikes in the middle of the train where bikes were not allowed. (I later worked out that we had parked in a place reserved for wheelchairs. Oooops.)

Such embarrassment as we had to come clean in front of a carriage full of people! Was this a capital



Our hotel in Nantes by day..

offence in Euro land?

He indicated that we would have to remove our bikes from the train at the first stop...(Oh NO, I thought) ... and take them along to the guards van at the end of the train. Phew,



..and by night.

Richard and I were



waiting by the bikes as the train pulled into the station. It was a very long train and many people were getting off as we struggled with our bikes to get them down onto the platform and along to the guards van against the flow of passengers. Not an easy task, and we had no sooner heaved them in to their rightful place than the train was on the move again.

It only remained for us to struggle through umpteen smoking carriages holding our breath as we did so. We also worked out that it was a good idea to get up to the guards van well before the train approached its destination. Carrying full panniers along a corridor train is tricky, to say the least. On one occasion, we arrived in the guards van to find that our bikes, still chained together, had been moved. As we tried to work out why, the guard arrived and we noticed the tell tale oily chain marks on his trousers. As I

summon all the French words of apology that I can muster, he smiles broadly and indicates that it is only his uniform after all.

In Nantes, we found a superb Hotel just minutes away from the station. A short walk before an excellent dinner and then on to a fair nearby was about as near as I got to 'lighting' in the two weeks. Moving lights were everywhere, by virtue of some pretty colourful fairground lighting. The logistics of building a portable big wheel and keeping all those bulbs working are a bit mind boggling.



Somewhere out there is England. From the walls of St Malo old town.

Saturday September 14th

We arrived in St. Malo at lunchtime. Richard was not feeling very well and took to his hotel room. I went for a long cycle ride around the coastline from St. Malo towards Mont St. Michel. That took me most of the afternoon and was quite exhilarating, taking in beautiful coastal scenery and, best of all, no panniers! Before dinner, I take a walk

around the walls of the old town in the warm evening sunshine.

It is a time for reflection. I realise that it's all done bar the shouting; the fat lady has sung and I am wandering around St. Malo, slightly fazed amidst the weekenders who are booze cruising or just seeking good food at reasonable prices.

A final celebratory meal is ordered, a bottle of good wine is on the table. Mission accomplished, Everest climbed. I'm just sat there hoping someone will ask me what has brought me here?

Nobody did!

Sunday September 15th

We return to the U.K., which is also enjoying warm sunny weather. Richard took several days to completely recover from 'Pharaoh's revenge'. He had lost more than a stone in weight during the two weeks that we were away; I lost about 4 pounds. Dieters take note!

Statistics of the trip:

1. Total mileage from St. Malo to Cazelles (Had we gone straight to the Med, the mileage would have been slightly less) was 590 miles
2. The total climb over the 7 days was 6100 metres, more than half the height of Everest.
3. We were in the saddle for a total of 50 hours giving an overall average of 11.8 m.p.h.

F.A.Q's

What was the worst part of the trip?

The half-day of rain in the valley of the Lot. Because of the extra weight of the panniers, we had to be extra careful whilst braking and descending hills. Getting soaked was not fun.

And the best?

Speeding along the RN 113 in the valley of the Aude being pushed along by a warm wind.

Did you have any mechanical problems or punctures?

No punctures, we used special semi slick Michelin road tyres that were pumped up to 85 p.s.i. (5.5 bars) to reduce friction. Three spokes broke in Richards rear wheel necessitating a partial rebuild of his wheel.

Did you have any physical problems?

Yes, it would have been surprising if we hadn't. Saddle soreness was certainly one of them, but was not as bad as I feared. During the ride, my feet suffered from a sort of repetitive strain injury as they ached each night with the 16,000 or so forward thrusts each day. My big toe nails look as though they are going to drop out. Both our hands have suffered from numbness down the heel of the hand into our little fingers. This is very slowly improving.

Would you do it again?

No, done that, got the T shirt, but maybe something else another year. The gauntlet rests with Richard! Whilst collecting the sponsorship money, I have been repeatedly asked as to the nature of my next challenge. My first reaction was "not likely!" Then I remember why I did it and think that maybe I should do *something*. It'll be somewhere different and not so intensive; 600 miles in seven days was just a tad ambitious.

How much did you raise for the Charity?

At the time of writing, (November 2002) it is approaching £4000.

Notes for cyclists

The roads on which we travelled were amazingly flat and smooth. Much better than the U.K. Very few of the lumpy bumpy surfaces that used to be the trade mark of French roads. Even repairs were smooth: I wish they would show British road repair people how to do it! Hills are graded well, with consistent slopes, ideal for cyclists.

Drivers are mostly extremely considerate to cyclists, I'm sorry to say far more so than has been my experience in the U.K.

Travelling on French trains with bikes is fairly straightforward. Always head for the Guards van at the rear of the train. There are hooks in the roof to hang your bike from, or to fasten it in place.

We were never asked to pay for them. The cost of a single ticket from Narbonne to St. Malo was £51 or about 80 Euros. (September 2002) Very reasonable.

Only folding bikes are allowed on the TGV.

