

Los Escapados

On the Pilgrim Trail - Le Puy, the Picos du Europa, the Pyrenees and Portugal

A Short Tour of the Great Western European Littoral.

"My legs flapped so limply I thought I would fall to the ground. But I knew and had known since the fifth mile that there was no question of me doing anything else but continue - and this confidence created a layer of mental peace over the physical pain. Whatever I was feeling, whatever I might feel I was stronger than those feelings, because I chose to be".

Feet in the Clouds - Richard Askwith (fell runner) on completing the Bob Graham Round.

Kora - *A circumambulatory pilgrimage whose goal is not arrival but transcendence by means of passage through sacred geographies, of the attachments and inattentions that constrain awareness of greater reality.*

(Paul asked me to do a brief article for the PF newsletter - and please note there is occasional use of robust cycling terminology but if you've ever ridden with Carl then you shouldn't be too shocked - here goes).

The genesis of this trip can be traced back to 2016 when Michael Walker and myself rode the length of the Pyrenees, west to east, Atlantic to the Mediterranean, coast to coast. This was my first visit to Spain and it really opened my eyes and I wanted to see and experience more. Simply put the Pyrenees are the green part of Spain and I wanted to see the dustier, dun coloured country. So when we were discussing a trip and destination for 2018 this was part of the criteria. First suggestions were; follow the Camino (the pilgrims' route) to Santiago de Compostella and then on to the end of the world (so to speak), so Mick gets to work on his trusty PC. And it's here and now that I want to put on record and express my appreciation for his diligence and the downright graft that Mick puts into these trips and his commitment to making them a highly enjoyable success - route planning, and bookings, travel arrangements to / from, determining and downloading the routes on to Garmin, producing route profiles, sorting the bike courier, and his ability to constantly pull that accommodation rabbit out of the hat with a succession of great overnight stops. Chuck in his sharp wit, patience and good humour plus the fact he's a good bloke in a crisis, it's all down to him.

Santiago was eventually discounted, too far to ride out there from Santander and ride back and a nightmare using public transport. I roll the dice and throw in the Picos de Europa as an un-touristy part of this large country. Mick tweaks, embellishes and applying divergent and convergent thought comes up with a plan - courier bikes to St. Etienne (we've gone by Eurostar but SNCF is not interested in transporting bikes, they have to be broken down and bagged, there's no dedicated space you have to stand your ground against bolshie gap year American students for a luggage rack space). So brief itinerary; 28th June to 24th July 2018, starting with the train from Skipton, Leeds to London, overnight in London, then Eurostar to Lyon, local service to St Etienne. Picking up the bikes there we ride at a rough mitre alongside the Pyrenees to their western edge where we turn the corner at Bilbao. From there we run parrellish to the coast then turn left in to the Picos de Europa, cleaving them in two, then across the meseta heading for Braganca in Portugal. After a night out in Portugal it's back in to Spain and back across the Meseta to Valladolid. Train from there to Santander, and the ferry back to Blyth.

I've only put down here what was in front of my nose at any one time and mostly what's floating around my head with only a minimal amount of research. So if you are expecting a Haynes manual on the finer points of cycle touring or be enlightened on the local cathedral bells which are tuned to F# peeling a nifty grand sire triple, or that plate tectonics in the Ordovician led to mountain formation, then you'll be disappointed. A mountain is a mountain, a river is a river, a town is something we pass through, it probably only gets a name because we are stopping there overnight.

Getting to the Start Line

*"So I started out for God knows where,
I guess I'll know when I get there."
Learning to Fly - Tom Petty.*

Arriving by train at Leeds we are early so sit in the Spoons on the concourse for an hour before heading for the platform and our appointment with Richard Branson. Hang on! what's this? We've just walked past most of the carriages and are now at the front of the train where the 1st class carriages are and Mick hops onboard. What's happening here? I know my place and a 1st class carriage is not it! Turns out Mick has got us bumped up to 1st so we settle down in style and in air con, raiding the trolley for food, beer and other assorted (all in the price) goodies. It's also nice not having to lug the bikes around with us too. We overnight in London in a hotel just ten minutes' walk away from the 7.30am depart from St Pancras the next morning but which still leaves me limping. Let me explain, Mick has a maxim whereby he never takes anything on tour that he hasn't already tried and tested extensively under field conditions and its veracity or otherwise confirmed. Me, I operate under no such constraints so my £8, size 8, grey lightweight shoes from Winfield's which seemed like a right bargain if a smidge tight at the time are now ripping the skin over my right achilles to bloodied shreds of sinew.

We check in at the hotel reception where we are met with a surly shrug and shake of the head from the concierge sat in his little cubby hole when Mick goes and asks if we can have breakfast early or maybe packed up to take away with us. I get the feeling he has a baseball bat stashed under that counter, in easy reach - for just in case.



Neither of us sleep much especially as we are right next to the main route for scaffolding lorries and other assorted clanging vehicles and are up an about for 5.00am and leave the hotel breakfastless for the short walk (or limp) with panniers in hand round to the Eurostar. On the concourse we sit in awe under the fantastic public art sculpture.

It seems quiet on the station concourse until it finally dawns on us that we are sat in the wrong place and we wander down to the official depart gate. Producing boarding passes we filter through the formalities. It's at the security baggage check now, and I have been conscious for some time that stowed in one of my panniers is a 300mm long, hollow steel tube and which could to some jumpy or over-zealous or sleepy end of night shift official, be mistaken on the x-ray screen for a gun barrel. My overactive imagination sees me thrown to the ground, my right arm twisted up to the nape of my neck while a size 11 patrol boot grinds into the small of my back, my face forced in to the cold tiles, the muzzle of a police issue Heckler and Koch pressed harshly into the side of my temple with the "safety" off. As the crowd scatters in panic I am left screaming "it's a bicycle pump, IT'S A BYCYCLE PUMP, HONEST". Back in reality I casually mention it to the security and the official nods, says something like "don't worry we'll sort it" and "Yep OK" and waves me through. Phew!

The journey down on the Eurostar to Lyon is uneventful and France whizzes by in a pleasant high-speed, strong, onboard coffee blur and soon we are at Lyon and disembarking and looking for the onwards TER train to St. Etienne. We are way over an hour early and as it happens there's an earlier train departing in 10 minutes but our tickets are for the next one. We gamble on there being no checks and even if there is it's unlikely we'll be challenged and this is how it turns out to be. But it's warm.

Did I say "warm"? Well it's well warm now! In St Etienne we get our bearings mostly via the map app on Michael's phone and lugging panniers set off for the hotel and our bikes. My ankle is now giving me loads of gyp and I leave a blood trail all the way across centreville heading towards our hotel. Having the effect that the St Etienne judicial police are called in, the Police Major floods the area with Vieux Guilliam, twice the number of the usual suspects are rounded up, all police leave is cancelled and eventually extra detectives from Paris working overtime are called in to get to the bottom of this baffling case.

We check in with the efficient concierge and claim our bikes that have been delivered by van and train in our absence all safe and sound. Finding our room, we return to the entrance with assorted multi tools to rebuild our bikes back up. We've had to remove and rotate the bars, remove pedals and

mudguards and in my case the pannier rack. What should be a five minute job takes 40 in this dry heat sun trap making a hot day hotter and dehydrating us quicker than you can say "fluid drip" and wouldn't you just know it after a long days travelling I strip the thread on an allen bolt on probably one of the most important load bearing parts of the bike, the one securing the lower pannier mount to the frame. Swearing the red hot air blue, I botch the rack up with the now useless bolt and a cable tie but it's not going to last till Valladolid so I put it to the back of my mind, not worried about finding a replacement, there has to be something compatible locally, but annoyed at being so cack-handed.

Showered and changed or as changed as two small panniers and a top bag will allow, we go into St Etienne for a kebab and a look at the opera house. The architectural highlight is the bright yellow la Poste building.



St Etienne to Le Puy

60 miles, 5,715ft ascent, 5hrs 23 mins. Max elevation 2,890ft.

"I see you stand like greyhounds in the slip, straining upon the leash, the games afoot, follow your spirit and upon the charge cry "God for Harry, England and St George".

Henry V, St Crispin Day speech - William Shakespeare.

If I'd have cried the above as we set off, I'd have probably have got us lynched as it's based on the 1452 battle of Agincourt when English and Welsh long bow men slaughtered the best and the rest of the French nobility. I think Will is referring to the French cavalry charge, the English weren't charging anywhere. Our longbow men simply stood patiently behind their wall of stakes, arrows stuck in the earth within easy reach, waiting for the French to enter the killing ground, then they loosed off all their arrows. Best keep stuhm. Buffet breakfast eaten, paid up and checked out, we recover the bikes from the hotel's conference room, load the panniers, take photos and that's it, rear mech to the kerb and we're off. In our green kit we are travelling under the Pendle Forest CC flag of convenience.



Am I prepared for what lies ahead? The miles? The physical exertion? The heat? Do I still have a tour of this length and climbing in my legs? I don't want to wreck the adventure for either Mick or myself so I had prepared as best I could. And instead of staying in each day for the last six months sat farting into the same sofa cushion, mainlining on mid-afternoon Classic Corrie from 1992 on ITV 3 (right after the repeat of Loose Women in case you are interested), I've been out riding all year as usual then clocking up 900 miles in May (mostly on Fat Boy the heavy 20 year old mountain bike with 26in semi-slicks to get me used to riding a heavier bike), and just short of 700 in June so hopefully? The pre-tour jimjams kicked in, in earnest two weeks before when we dismantled the bikes and wrapped them up in cardboard for collection and transit to our start hotel in France. That's when it started to feel serious. Before that, looking at the route and elevation profiles that Mick had created for each day I rationalised it by thinking "50-60 miles a day doing 3,000 - 6,000 foot of climbing, that's only like 3 times round the Keba, that's do-able....." In true PF "B'reight" style - despite my age it's still not too late to have a future.

Anyway now we are in St. Etienne so let's not die not knowing so like I said, it's rear mech to the kerb and into the traffic and start getting used to the loaded up but still responsive and highly rideable touring Hewitt Cheviot "the Chevy". The mercury is rising as we align the bikes with the purple Garmin ley line that will take us all the way to the Valladolid on the Iberian Peninsula. And you know, it's rather pleasant to begin with although my feet are starting to overheat. Throwing caution to the wind I am wearing a Christmas present - a pair of novelty, mid calf, black and yellow polka dot souvenir Tour de France socks, which would be fine in a normal English summer but not for a continental heat wave, oh if only I'd listened to Mick and followed his tried and tested regime! After today they keep the bottom of my right pannier warm and don't see light of day for weeks.

The road winds down thru the burbs, then retail and then industrial parts of this town. First stop is at a builders' merchant for the replacement allen bolt. "c'est casse" I say pointing to the offending part of the pannier/frame. Blank look, then a response of something like "do we look like a bike shop mate? Be honest" so anyway I come away with two rolls of green mineral felt, they'll come in handy sometime? A bit further on it's not a bike shop but a unit where a young bloke is wheeling out some e-bikes, so we swing in to the yard. "C'est casse" he twigs straight away and waves me through the shutter door entrance. Inside it's a treasure trove of nuts and bolts, he selects the correct one and gives it me. Not only does he refuse any payment, he tells me to wait awhile and when he returns he gives me two more bolts and a handful of cable ties. Again he refuses payment with a "mon plaisir". What a nice bloke, what a smashing people, what a great country!

The pleasant ride down the valley is soon to end though and I have learnt thru experience that turn left or right off any valley road and you can bet the pick-up truck on it that there will be a pleasant uphill pretty damn soon - and so it proves. And it's a 20%er and as I acquaint myself with the Grannie (the first time of many) Mick rapidly shifts down across the cassette and off, dumping the chain twist sprockets and spokes and brings himself to a sudden stop. With reactions faster than Peter (the Cat) Bonetti, Mick does a super quick, quick release with his left foot, clips out and averts disaster (or a grazed knee / elbow at the very least). Twist of the grub screw on the mech and problem solved and I think, barring both us tweaking the brakes up that's the last of our mechanicals for the tour - oh I forgot - one puncture.

It's lumpy and hot but fantastic riding, a mix of main roads to maintain forward progress and quiet country roads to avoid traffic. We stop for a coffee and cola then move away into the shade for dinner. The digi-display outside the pharmacy is indicating 36/37 degrees, at this moment in time the planet Mercury is cooler!

The last few clicks are spent in the company of the valley of the infant Loire and flat, then, suddenly the road goes brutally up. Half way up I have to stop for a gel to get me over the ridgeline, then it's a quick descent into the outskirts of Le Puy for another coffee stop and to get our bearings and it's back on the bike to find our digs. The heat is stifling as we ride into town proper. We get separated at a set of lights and having lost sight of Mick I aimlessly circle the town centre until I stop and ring to link up again. We are staying a couple of kilometres out of town and it's more uphill. Our first night on the road is to be spent glamping in a stylish wooden chalet and we can see them on the hill opposite but it appears the only way to them is up a steep gravel track. Surely there's a road somewhere as well? Nope, when Mick calls, the owner confirms and after only a measly 5m our tyres are slipping in the gravel as we set in for a long push.

The chalets are great, two sets of bunks, a kitchen and shower room and toilet, on the door is the scallop shell symbol of the pilgrimage. So it's official we are now pilgrims on the pilgrims' trail, the Camino or as we are in France Voie du Puy or the Way of St James.



For tea we have to ride back in to town where we find a pizzeria which is open but not serving food just yet so while Mick goes in search of an accordion, I grab us a table and coffee. It's a nice place but hot in the evening sun. It always strikes me as strange that in this country which is world renowned for its cuisine we mostly eat Italian pizza and middle eastern kebabs. It's needs must I am afraid, a sit down five course menu is not practical or probably affordable so it's cheap and quick calories for us besides, throw in a bit of lettuce and pizza and kebab cover all the main food groups. Wandering the town centre there's a buzz about the place, turns out that France has beat Brazil in the World Cup so the town is en fete. We have a beer opposite the market then ride up hill to our pilgrim's chalet. I chose a

bottom bunk in the hope it'll be cooler nearer the floor and reflect on a day's riding, Mick seemed ok with it and took it all in his stride but for me it was a toughie, the heat and hills taking their toll. Still, looking on the bright side best to get the hardest day over with early eh?

Le Puy to St. Chely d'Apcher.

51.51 miles, 6,738ft ascent, 5 hrs 07 mins. Max elevation 4,593ft.

"It's only on these trips that the back of my hands sweat"

Michael commenting on one of the effects riding in the heat has on him.

We bought breakfast the evening before so fill up on unusual (to us) French cereals, pack up and portage our bikes and kit back down the gravel track where we rejoin the tarmac ley line and return to town to the market to buy food for dinner out on the road. Stopping to take snaps of the townscape from a derelict car park Mick's bike peels away from the chain he's propped it against, it slips thru my hands and keels over and lands with a clatter. Trusting Garmin we slalom through the town mostly uphill then suddenly drop back down on to the main road. Surprisingly after a short period of flat this main road suddenly transforms itself into a small country road that takes us straight up and out of the valley, and with hairpins thrown in we go uphill for the next 12.5 miles. Mick leaves me standing as he heads off uphill like a stung whippet. For completeness sake we descend for 6 miles then ascend again with hardly any respite for another 18 miles with varying degrees of gradient. All this with heavy legs and a just eaten breakfast sloshing about inside. And it's already very, very hot. Not only do the back of my hands sweat but the bar tape turns from black to a pallid fish-belly grey as a result of the drenching.

I like to consider myself a fairly experienced long-distance tourer, but with the start of each new tour I feel that over the first two or three days I have to learn over again on how to tour. For example, living on the bike and all that entails, navigation, the exertion, the packing and unpacking of panniers, and then there's the coping with a strange land, language, currency, staying in different accommodation every evening, taking care of security for our kit, it goes on. All this and more has to be taken in rapidly and it's two to three days before routine kicks in and things start to become second nature and slick. One of the things I have to re-learn is how to handle the long gradients, completely unlike anything I normally experience at home. As soon as the road goes up it's straight down on to the smallest chain ring for me. The reason being I have to lessen the gradient as much as possible and by using low gears and spinning I can do this, so I start riding adagio while pedaling allegro to presto. Also spinning makes it easier on my legs because, not only do I have to get to the top of this hill (but without keeping Mick waiting too long for me), but also the next hill, and the one after that. In addition, I have to finish the day with enough in my legs to get me to the end of the day after and then the next, and the next etc.

Once we top out on the first hill, we hit a main road, which after a few kilometres Garmin tells us to turn off left into the hills. We stop a minute and consulting Garmin further we decide that this way was in anticipation of this road being busy, however it's Sunday quiet, going the right way and though uphill, an easy grade so we stick with it. And this again is part of the regime we have to re-learn, thinking on the hoof and reacting to whatever the circumstances demand.



Two thirds up the next hill and with Mick out of sight my Garmin suggests that I've missed a left turn even though the purple ley line is taking me straight on, it just doesn't feel right and surely Mick would be hanging on for me there, so I ride on. "Do a U turn when safe to do so" Garmin repeatedly screams (if it could talk) as I repeatedly ignore its pleading. I am in no-man's land now, I should be seeing Mick

because the top has been breached but I've gone too far to turn round to go back. I stop to ring Mick but no signal in this backwater so I plough on. It's the right decision he's there and just down the road is a ville with a shady corner in the square next to the church with a bench with our name on it where we can have our bait.

We both use Garmin Edge Touring to keep us locked on to the ley line that will take us to Valladolid (plus I have a back-up hard copy road map stuffed in one of my panniers) with each day's route worked out and downloaded by Michael. I suggested some weeks before that we could do alternate days navigating to allow one of us to have a day off. It can get stressful especially negotiating towns and cities and which I leave to Mick. But with ironclad logic Mick vetoes saying it's best we keep both Garmins navigating at the same time. It's the right thing, and over the next weeks it proves that its best to have four eyes focused on route finding than two, we both pick things up that the other had missed.

The day is getting hotter and hotter and instead of the long gradients it's lumpy and switchback which breaks up the rhythm of the ride. We leave the open fields and head into a large stand of pines, "great" thinks I, "shade", not a bit of it, the sun is in our faces directly overhead as the road steepens and steepens and the forest traps the heat making it feel stifling and airless. Mercifully as I am about to drop to my knees we top out and while I eat a banana saved from dinner Mick informs me it's job almost done for the day with about 8 miles to go. In to the valley we stop for welcome shade and ice cold Orangina outside a hotel. The hot shelf in the Aga would make for cooler cycling at the moment. Ha! But now we have to get out from the valley but after reaching the top of the scarp it's a series of leg numbing small rises, false flats and small descents as we get to the outskirts of St. Chely d' Apcher and the sanctuary of the Bel Horizon hotel. Slightly out on the other side of town it's great accommodation and the nice lady owner isn't at all phased by our bikes which she indicates that we stow in the void under the stairs. It seems disrespectful to lock them even if they are next to the open door. Michael's offer of payment is accepted. The room is perfect, modern and spotless with great views of a road junction. It's a relief to get out of the sweaty, clammy lycra kit and shower. Donning compression socks that I am trailing, (unlike other kit that I've not road tested these seem actually beneficial, even if it's only for the placebo) I flake out and doze on the bed. Michael on the other hand with his restless energy goes off to explore the town.



Michael returns and we wander back into town for some tea. As they eat late in France and Spain we've taken the precaution of taking some snacks to eat as soon as we end the day. The town is pleasant and Mick gives me an informative guided tour of the town. We forgo the first eatery and walk on to a leisure centre which does excellent pizza and a beer. Then it's back to the room to sleep away some of this fatigue that's starting to build. What was I saying about getting the hardest day over early on?

Saint Chely d Apcher to Rodez

63.07 miles, 5,587ft ascent, 5hrs 14 mins. Max elevation 4,412ft.

"I just dropped in (to see what condition my condition was in)".

Mickey Newbury.

We breakfast with several other guests in the dining room, and it's "help yourself" that suits our needs perfectly, I think I might have even pinched some toast for a mid-morning saddle snack. We return to the room get into our clobber and go collect the bikes. While Mick is wheeling the bikes out I try to tell the lady owner that we've enjoyed the stay and it's a nice hotel, thanking me, smiling she prints off and hands to me a sheet of A4 which I initially think is a duplicate receipt for yesterday's payment, but when I look at it, it's a bill for the room and breakfast. Confusion reigns as I try to tell her we paid on arrival. I call Michael who's just outside loading up his bike, explain to him the situation, and who then produces the receipt for the card payment. Now she's really confused, trying to get her head round what is obviously a scam by these shady Johnny foreigner cycling types and how exactly did they manage to forge an authentic hotel receipt? Probably off the internet! After a bit more checking and more pidgin French it's all smiles again and we shake hands. Michael says later it was lucky he had the receipt to hand and that he'd not binned it as he often did.

Now for reasons of brevity and because it's getting boring I am not going to continue with the daily weather updates, so take it from me that each day mostly starts hot and sunny and gets hotter and sunnier by the hour. I will only pass comment if there is any variation to this groundhog day weather.

This upland landscape we are riding through is open, giving fine views of endless sub-alpine pasture and heathland, bounded by rickety fences interspersed with stands of conifers, the valleys we have to get out of are heavily wooded with deciduous trees. And it appears that this land we are transiting is made up of a series of river valleys. I may be wrong but as we head approximately from north-east to south-west to nip round the Pyrenees at their junction with the Atlantic, we cross these valleys at a tangent as they all seem to be roughly aligned south to north. And it becomes apparent that once we extricate ourselves from one valley, there's a descent, another valley to cross then a climb up the next successive ridgeline, now on the far horizon. We have days of this cadence.

After 20 miles of steady climbing we hit the day's maximum elevation of 4,412ft above sea level and then it's a glorious 15 mile descent down past pilgrim hostels and their pilgrims walking to Santiago, with scallop shells, an apotropaic, hanging from their rucks advertising their bona fides. We wish them a "bonne randonee" or simply "courage" as we hurl ourselves downwards. Just imagine that, 15 miles defying gravity? Open roads, sweeping bends with good sight lines - bliss! I adopt my trademark



descending position "The Whittaker Aerodynamic Tuck" as we plunge down over 3,000 feet. It's that long we break this flow downhill with an idyllic dinner stop at tables on a village green in the shade of Lime trees. Further on as we head towards the valley floor I exercise discretion and pull over to let a heavily laden lorry stacked up with haylage pass, he'd followed me for long enough and I really didn't want him stuck on my back wheel for the last two or three steep miles especially if his brakes start overheating before fading to nothing.

Right then left into the ville and over a bridge spanning a large river, we now have to get out from this valley floor but turning right off the main road a sign announces "Route Barree". And it does look serious but It's not an option to stick to the main road which would take us away from our destination of Rodez, so, fingers crossed, we carry on up this pleasant but steep lane hoping there's a way round the blockage that we can ride or at least portage our bikes. Deep joy there is! It looks like there's been a substantial landslip that is blocking the road to all traffic but a gap between the subsidence and the hillside allows us a short ride over some rough stuff that easily sees us through. Heavily wooded but sans cars we are now out of the sun but it's still stifling under the trees. A group picnic in the deep shade enjoying their sloth as lethargic bovines take shelter next to a drinking trough while we mad dog cyclists slog, sweat and grunt our way up this slope under deep green triple canopy. The only other thing moving is La Poste. On our left is an amazing boulder scree.

With fantastic views across the valley to that lovely fifteen mile decent which is now just a pleasant memory Michael thinks he's found us a short cut to Rodez so we abandon the official route and go off-piste eventually ending up in a small ville in the valley of the N88 to Rodez. We'd stop for coffee but there is no café so it's a banana and a cold sparkling water stop. Throwing the banana skins and empty bottles into some large road side skips we re-trace our route until we turn right and shun the valley road in favour of a country lane that will take us up and over the ridgeline.

At the top, in the near distance we can see Rodez blurred through the heat haze. In under 20 or so minutes and I'll be in a cool shower at our digs. But it's not to be and this is where the riding gets harsh because these last few miles now turn lumpy and circuitous, and what, under normal circumstances and with fresh legs would be pleasant country lanes become a series of energy sapping short, sharp inclines. And I am not feeling fresh, whereas Mick attacks and sprints up them, they just don't seem to bother him. So near to our destination this sort of riding at the end of the day becomes not only physically draining but mentally too making them the cruelest of miles. But that's just the way it is, it's fine and warm and the countryside is terrific and I am in France in good company so turn the mindset to sunny. Garmin takes us down a dirt track which, after a few short metres we refuse and return to the road down to La Monastere before the very last (hallelujah) climb of the day up to Rodez and sanctuary.



Digs located we wait for the key holder sat outside at the pleasant café next door and it's been another brilliant day on the bike, tough but rewarding. Later in the evening Michael points out that the young couple who were sat there when we arrived are still sat there some hours later, still nursing their coffee and tin of Fanta. The key holder arrives and lets us in to the flat, he says we can leave the bikes in the lobby or carry them up to the flat, which we do. Michael (as befits one who does all the admin for these trips) gets the bed while I opt for the pull-out sofa in the lounge / kitchen, my only worry is if the café next door gets busy and noisy (it doesn't or if it did I didn't notice).

We have an evening stroll in to Rodez to check out the town and source something to eat. In a country of haute cuisine we feast royally on a Fanta, frite and a kebab of unspecified meat. Now this is fine dining!

It's Just a Perfect Day

Hard nose the Highway

Van Morrison

By now we've got into our touring groove, so I'll outline a typical day. We wake to the strains of a Hawaiian melody courtesy of my Samsung phone alarm at 7.00am. In most of the accommodation we share the room but occasionally we get our own. Within the day's routine we each have our own micro routines, so while I stretch out the last precious minutes in my bed Mick uses the bathroom. Once done I tend to my ablutions. We breakfast at the earliest time we can, usually between 7.30 - 8.30 (Sunday is often later) or at the convenience of the accommodation. On occasion we are asked what time we would like breakfast. Usually it's pretty good, some basic, some, like the buffet breakfasts are brilliant. Some are home-cooked, some are just packets left out. It doesn't really matter as long as there's enough to fuel hungry cyclists. Only once is it not enough, leaving us to go foraging for a proper breakfast in a nearby supermarket. Buying in to Maitre Jacques philosophy we aren't going to get far on "a coffee and croissant", although we will forgo the amphetamine sulphate thank you.

We always breakfast in our civvies, then go back to the room, stow our gear, mix in the hydration tabs. It's time to get changed and apply the factor 50 (or to give it its technical term "yakumed up"). I've had heat stroke before or maybe it was sun stroke (not sure what the difference is). I was working in forestry, working near one of the Meons in Hampshire in southern summer heat, knocking back Gorse in stands of Norway Spruce. The next morning I just managed to fall out of bed and crawl to the shower and sat there (standing was not an option) with the tap turned to cold as my body thermostat went haywire. Not something I ever want to experience again. So mitigating the effects of the sun is important if I want to continue. We retrieve our bikes or in some cases simply wheel them out of our room and often into a lift. And if that's the case then depending on the size of the lift and how busy it is we have a Chuckle Brother type routine of always one of us being with one set of bikes and panniers, security being paramount. Michael usually offers to pay on our arrival but if it isn't appropriate we pay on leaving. In France it's "Bonjour, l'addition si vous plait" it's often a blank look "ah! la note". Got it so that's what it's called. Next stop and "la note si vous plait" blank look. It's easy to forget that France and Spain have their own vernacular, their accents and dialects.

Panniers fixed we set Garmins to the appropriate day's ride and we're off, or rather we're off to the first food shop. We don't know if there's going to be any shops when we stop for dinner so it's best to stock up at the first opportunity. Our dinner diet alternates between, cheese, ham, tomatoes, tinned fish sometimes a tin of sweetcorn then some biscuits or cake for afters and always fruit, peaches, apples or bananas are welcome crowd pleasers. When your belly's empty there is no such thing as a monotonous diet. We need the calories too. I take the opportunity to buy an energy drink for myself. Michael brings his own powder specially for the trip but I enjoy sampling the local bottled brands, with their radioactive luminescence, they are chock full of chemicals and E numbers etc. hopefully they will prove to be performance enhancing or even better I will get a giddy sodium benzoate bump soon after my first swig.

We operate a kitty and usually it's me that holds on to it. This covers daily dinners, and sundry cake and coffee stops and sometimes stretches to evening drinks. But we usually buy our own evening meals. It's tried and tested.

At Michaels' instigation we segment the day into thirds, given that most days are around the 50-60 mile mark, it's a coffee and cake stop at the 20 miles mark, dinner at 40 ish miles and a final coffee or cola stop within the last 10 miles, or if we are ahead of schedule we have a brew at the destination until we can access the accommodation. It might sound a bit soft I know but with the climbing, heat and accumulating fatigue each stop is gratefully accepted. In addition, after our 2016 trip we both felt we should take in more of the journey instead of simply heads down and get to the destination.

All accommodation is booked beforehand by Michael and is always of a high standard. This is important as it's a massive morale booster and also one less thing to worry about; because I know that at the end of the day, however exhausted I am, there will always be a good room with a good shower and bed for the night. At the accommodation, using all our linguistic powers we check in. Mick usually offers to pay with his card. As is usual on these continental tours the accommodation is never phased by our bikes, we've left them overnight in our room, in the hotel lobby, in conference rooms, in basements and garages and in secure yards. Only once in three weeks did we feel the need to lock them (it would seem an affront if we did) when they were left outside in a ginnel between the hotel and a block flats. They were still there in the morning. I try to remember to apply the chain wax before leaving the bike so it beds in for the next day.

Once in the room I shower first while Mick phones home and logs into the WiFi. Sometimes we have to ask for the code, often it's on a piece of paper on a bedside cabinet. It's nice to have music "Out of Mind" and "Texas" by Magic Man' "Thirty" by The Weather Station and "Gimme Shelter (live version)" by the Rolling Stones with Lisa Fisher on backing vocals become my soundtrack to the trip as does the screaming of Swifts, ever present overhead in town and villages.

We mix and drink our recovery drinks, allowing us to start the next day's ride in the best possible condition. Here our routines differ, Michael likes to totally empty the contents of his panniers and places his kit round the room, whereas I, fearful of losing stuff, only take out what I need at any one time. Once the shower is free I use it to wash my cycling kit using whatever shower gels or soap is available. It drip-dries in the shower and then gets transferred to the window or small balcony if available to "air". Given the arid conditions it's always dry and ready for wearing the next day. Pretty sure I suffered from the dreaded "soggy chamois" on only one occasion. As it's a three-week tour I also wash my civvies this way, that's usually when Mick starts complaining there must be a polecat loose in the room somewhere.



All the gizmos that need charging, Garmins, phones, cameras are now charged and such is our energy needs that EDF Nuclair have to throw a few extra fuel rods onto the reactor to meet our demand.

At this juncture Michael goes for a wander and checks out the town and potential eating places. I start the most important part of my recovery plan and have a sleep. Once Michael is back we usually lounge then go eat. Then it's back to the room for a doze before it's time to turn in for the night.

Rodez to Albi

52.51 miles, 3,433ft ascent, 3hr 52 mins. Max Elevation 2,638ft

Hypnagogic - relating to the state immediately before falling asleep.

We leave the key in a niche in the wall by the top of the stairs as instructed and start the day's ride by reversing our route back down hill to La Monastere then it's straight back to hardscrabble again as we ride up the other side to pick up our ley line, the N88 out of town.

The truth is I don't remember much of this day into Albi, and I refer the reader to the italics above and in which state I seem to spend most of the first week on the bike. I know I nearly got side swiped this day on the busy, undulating highway out of Rodez, a lorry and trailer swinging back in after overtaking us. Not wanting to get a clout off him I jumped the Chevy on to the verge. But we soon turn left and on to the more familiar lanes through great arable farm land. A joy to ride through. I remember the café stop sat in the shade of a large curtain wall.

We regularly see piles of scat on the side of the road which I suspect, given their size, is one of the field signs of Wild Boar which are common here. The Boar are omnivorous and this spoor is studded with wild cherry seeds so I guess they must Hoover up this sweet windfall treat and use the roads for easy travel and their toilet, rather like we do. We didn't see any this year, they tend to be nocturnal and hunker down during the day so we were lucky to see them in Provence in 2016 crossing roads. Stocky and powerful with strong rooting snouts they are good for woodlands but bad for agriculture and even worse for cricket pitches and cherished lawns. They can turn nasty too if you mess with them and they can shift, I wouldn't like to put bike versus boar to the test, we will sort of meet them again later in Spain.



Approaching a village Michael notices a large car park with benches and tables and as it's dinner timeish we stop. It turns out it's the car park for an artisan ceramicist studio and seems to be set up as a tourist attraction, though it's deserted at the moment. Dinner over we set off for Albi, we only get a few hundred metres, as far the village centre which is perched on the top of an escarpment with great views over the river and plain below. And what's more there is good looking café there as well so it's about time for a coffee stop and why not?



My next recollection is sitting in a boiling supermarket car park watching the petty bourgeoisie going about their business, while Mick is inside doing the big shop. A cold Fanta and a peach are very welcome and with cold water we top our bidons up. Passing along ribbon development where one place merges into another we eventually drop down on to a major highway, busy but with a wide hard shoulder at least we are keeping pace with the traffic. First exit right on a roundabout takes us into Albi and I try to hang on to Mick's wheel as we negotiate traffic lights, bus lanes and junctions.

Just on the edge of the town centre, crossing a bridge I look to my right and I am stunned by the amazing vista, a large river, a brick viaduct, brick buildings and staring back at me a huge brick cathedral situated on a ridge. I shout to Mick to look right but he's accelerating away from me. I slow and end the chase, taking in the view. After a series of traffic lights, I catch him at the top of the rise in to Hauteville. Mick says no he didn't see it as he was too busy concentrating on navigating when I tell him about the amazing view to the right.



Finding our hotel for the night we're early and it's closed so we grab a coffee in a nearby restaurant. The lady informs us she's closing but makes us a coffee anyway (it comes in paper cups but it's still good). We sit with our coffees on the edge of a small square in the shade of Plane trees waiting until the hotel opens. Which it is now so going in, the bikes with Mick outside, I launch into my best "bonjour! Nous avons reservee....." spiel. The owner says "it's OK I speak English". "Is my French so bad?" I explain that I don't expect people to speak English and it's incumbent on me to at least try and speak some French. "We can speak French if you want, we also have Spanish, but let's stick with English" he says. So we do. Turns out that the Spanish comes courtesy of the Cubano domestique. We stow the bikes in the function room and the manager takes us on a guided tour of the premises, in the dining area he seems inordinately proud of the fresh orange juice maker and gives us a crash course on its operation. I didn't bother but I think Mick tried a glass next day.

On our way out into town I ask the concierge for eating places and he highly recommends "the Doumo" for their pizza. Albi central is very impressive, the whole place is made out of light buff coloured brick as is the massive cathedral giving it a modern appearance. The Doumo is not open for food till later so we wander back and forth looking for somewhere else in the meantime. Strolling back downhill towards the river I have an epiphany on my gamy ankle, I simply fold under the offending back of the shoe over inside so it's not constricting and rubbing my heel and that's it, problem solved. From then on the ankle heals.

Walking over the bridge I'd spotted on the way in, looking over the parapet, there is a gravel spit protruding out from two or three of the bridge's caissons in to the river just below the weir pool. The spit is full of pigeons taking in the murky waters. Lurking at the water's edge are large, black sinister shapes. And I remembered, I'd read an article years ago in the Independent about this freshwater version of Jaws, they are native Catfish. Usually catfish are bottom feeders (to a catfish that's a compliment) but they have learned to become opportunistic, ambush predators, on the prowl for fresh meat and they snatch at any pigeon that comes close enough to the river's edge to be grabbed and dragged into the water, simultaneously crushed and drowned. Is this adaptation or evolution, did they start with the odd drowned bird sinking to the river bed, got a taste and then realised that the same prey was available just out of the water coo-ing away waiting to be got? I am not a big fan of feral pigeons but it's a horrible death.

We return to the main square and go for a look inside the cathedral, and it's well impressive. In the doorway a young man who looks like he's a pilgrim tips the dregs of his tin of lager on the floor and then steps bare foot into the spill and walks away leaving beery footprints.



The cathedral turns out to be much older than it looks, started early medieval times. I tip my hat to the brickies, glad I wasn't on the hod on that job though!

Back at the Doumo we take a table just before it opens and starts to busy up. The staff are efficient but very much under the watchful eye of the owner who exudes bonhomie front of house but who doesn't miss a trick and who I'd bet is very much the boss here. The pizza is good, 7/10 but facing this marvellous building I guess its popularity is down as much to its location as its produce.

In the square underneath one of the huge brick cathedral buttresses a bloke break dances lost in a world of his own.

Albi to Toulouse

54.77 miles, 3,262ft ascent, 4hrs 21 mins. Max Elevation 769ft.

"Your bike is discovery, your bike is freedom"

Doug Donaldson, writer.

After a good breakfast but without the freshly squeezed orange juice (I prefer my drinks laden with toxins - artificial flavours, preservatives and artery clogging levels of sugar) we pay and bid adieu to Hotel les Pasteliers. Great digs in a great town. We leave Albi via a different route and discover more tree lined squares. What we don't find though is anywhere to buy us our dinner time baguette, cheese and ham. Finally leaving Albi's suburbs we decide to go off route and Michael instructs Garmin to find us a supermarket. It's taking us all over the place and I stop to ask an old lady "pardon madam, c'est le bonne direction pour la Super Marche sil vous plait?" Just as she starts "hmmmn? Ah! au droit, au gauche, au droit" Michael shouts out he's found it.

Now we've got our bait we get back on the ley line. On our right over the fields of wheat is what looks to be a massive quarry possibly for clay maybe even for the brick for the cathedral started all those years ago. We keep coming across this brick for miles outside of Albi so it seems to be the staple building material in this part of France.

One of the things that always baffles me is that riding here in France and also in Spain and Belgium there is a total absence of road side litter which is endemic in the UK. Where are we going wrong? Ok there's the odd bottle you see on the continental wayside but nothing on the scale there is over here. Riding up over the Kebs one Sunday, alongside Coal Clough wind farm there, I started to count each individual item of road side rubbish. Long before I'd cleared the top edge of the wind farm just before that sharp left hander, I'd counted 100 pieces of litter. Then I gave up counting and put my brain back to nice thoughts. And this on a minor moorland road too. So why are we such a dirty, couldn't care less nation who see the countryside not as beautiful landscape but as a convenient place to fly tip or empty their cars of unwanted detritus? Sorry gripe over!

Once again we are riding on terrific lanes and through small villages. Since day one I had been looking forward to this and the previous day as they were (on paper) less hilly than the first three days offering some respite and a chance to recuperate but they still prove to be undulating which is still taking it out of my legs. There is an old saw in touring cycling that it takes a good three days before your body adapts to the rigours of tour riding. It's going to take a lot longer for me on this one!

We both comment on and are delighted with the roads Garmin is taking us down, although in truth its more down to Michael and the hours he has put in on his PC and "Bike Hike". The bulk of each days riding is spent on quiet or traffic free roads through glorious scenery. Often we are guided on to the old road which is empty with the modern road a couple of fields away.

After stopping to get our bearings in the centre of a small village just as we come to the last few houses on the edge of the ville we come across a "Route Baree" sign and just beyond there is a large hole in the road, more civil engineering than road works. And this time there is no cycle friendly passage at the side of this excavation. Michael takes the left side of the lane and I the right along the remnant of verge remaining between the hole and a fence at the back of some houses. Michael says it's no good on his side so I push on to where a metre-wide trench comes out at a right angle to the hole and fence blocking my way. I judge it's just about narrow enough to stride across (and in truth fearing a fifteen mile detour if I don't) when there's a loud voice behind me engaging Mick. That's it I am not going to argue with some burly navvy who's going to turn us back. I'll argue from the other side of the hole. Steeling myself I lurch (with bike) across the trench. Looking left in to the void it's holiday spoiling deep should I and the bike tumble in, and I'd end up sprawled and broken over the pipe work at the bottom, the Chevy with its snapped headset piled awkwardly on top of me. The far edge of the trench crumbles as it takes the weight then I am over. Turns out the voice belonged not to some irate clerk of works but to a friendly villager who tells Mick "no, follow this lane round to the right then 50 metres on take the first left and Bob's yer monkey's uncle" (or the French equivalent). And so it proves as we meet up five minutes later. I admit it was a bit daft of me to attempt striding that gap; whatever, the route barree provides us with several traffic free miles.

Toulouse is getting nearer and bigger as we've been riding through rich wheat country. Also we've been riding along roads lined with one of my favourite trees, the London Plane. There aren't too many mature specimens of note in East Lancs. that I've come across, the churchyard just outside of Copy Nook has some nice examples, Chadderton cemetery had a nice avenue of them. Here, they are in an abundance, many of them pollarded and legend has it that Napoleon had them planted so his armies could always march in the shade though they would have to be fast growing for his troops to get any benefit, unless he was thinking of future wars three generations on.



Now we hit the metropolitan sprawl heading towards the inner city. The air is oppressive and sky darkening. As we hit the edge of the town we have to become urban cyclists, making sure we're in the right traffic lane, avoiding pedestrians on cycleways, watching out for cars and traffic lights. A cycle way takes us alongside a sluggish river then over it via a footbridge. We stop to get our bearings right outside the Toulouse Budget Ibis, our stay for tonight. I introduce ourselves to the polite concierge who then, unusually for France, asks us for our passports. I have mine to hand but Mick empties the wrong pannier first before finding his in the other pannier. She says we can leave the bikes in the garage, but they'd not be safe there or we can take them in the lift up to our rooms.

Once we've got the admin sorted I have a doze while Michael goes in to town for a coffee and to check out the facilities. He's back after an hour, then some more admin and it's off into town for eats. We are some distance off the centre but it's bustling and an interesting walk through what was once probably a well to do part of town and we walk past belle époque period houses, for sale and empty now except for the pigeons. These large houses would be worth a million in trendy East London, but not here, deserted and unloved, they just crumble.

We have another pizza (I never tire) in a good restaurant just as the heavens open and in spectacular thunder and lightning we retrace our steps to the hotel, grabbing any shelter we can to keep out of the rain.

Toulouse to St Gaudens.

69.94 miles, 5132ft ascent, 5hrs 57 mins

*"God please bring the rain,
Yeah and bring it soon,
Let it flood around the houses....."*
Shadowlands, Ryan Adams.

We have our breakfast amongst the working folk, the self-employed, the reps, the seminar attendees, the commercial travellers, the harassed and the stressed. Whereas we go get changed, ride the bikes down in the lift, bid the concierge adieu and hit the ley line through La France profund. Lucky us! Once again we comment on how easy it is to navigate with Garmin as it eases us out of town. "Imagine" we say "doing this by map, negotiating a busy city" it would be a nightmare. Garmin sweeps us easily to the edge of town even taking us round road works where some of the squares have been closed off. On the edge of town are a series of cycleways running parallel to the main road which we start to use but soon abandon, we are constantly crossing and re-crossing the main road and slowing then accelerating for minor junctions.

A first for us while out on the road it starts to rain so we stop in a field gate and put on our Pac-a-Macs. The strange thing is though all the local cyclists don't seem to be over bothered about the rain and ride in shorts and short sleeve jerseys. They obviously don't watch the weather forecast or if they do they know it's warm rain and cagging up will just result in boil in a bag. Not long afterwards, up a short hill we ride into a village and stop at a café. Coffee and cake consumed we resume and it's stopped raining. We won't see any more again on the bike for the rest of the trip.



The agriculture here is mostly given over to maize, brassicas, pulses and potatoes and as a result there is a lot of irrigation infrastructure in place with large bore irrigation pipes laid out in between rows of plants and spray heads dotted around the fields. I even recognise the couplings between pipes which are still the same as the ones we used on the forestry nursery decades ago and where, if some dozy person hadn't clipped the connector on properly when water pressure was applied it would blow. The pressure would drop at the spray heads while at the break the escaping water would scoop out large gobs of earth. On a large field finding the break was a pain and when you did you'd get soaked in green, stinky, stagnate water as you tried to reconnect the join under pressure. Once you did the pipework would creak and groan and twitch then it would probably blow somewhere else.

We stop for dinner in a fair-sized village but there's nowhere for us to eat our packed lunches (ha sandwich spread what memories), the only obvious place to settle is in an old covered market but there is no seating there just a low wall. While Mick starts to settle I ride on a bit through an arch taking me up alongside a church and its car park and up in to a small park with trees, benches and tables. Mick follows and it gets even better, the park sits on the edge of an escarpment and what a panorama, staring us in the face are the Pyrenees Occidentales. It's good to see our old friends again and these giants who were kind to us on our 2016 transect. After the previous, relatively flat by comparison last two or three days it has become noticeable that it's getting hillier. In the far distance somewhere in that jumble of peaks are the charismatic Tour climbs - the Col du Tourmalet, Col d'Aspin, Superbagneres and others, we are now truly in the Pyrenean horizon.



With our start elevation at 459ft above sea level, we end the day at 1,558ft so it's all been uphill and the last ten miles seem particularly lumpy and dragging. But finally we pull up on to the gravel at the gate at Les Glycines on a ridge above St. Gaudens. The gate is locked and the bell gets no response, neither does ringing both booking numbers. All this is a bit un-nerving to a weary traveller, but on the plus side the name on the address plate says Mrs Taylor so there should be no language barrier when / if she turns up. Unflappable Mick sensibly suggests we drop down into town, get a coffee, locate somewhere to eat and keep ringing. After a quick recce of the town centre we sit in a bustling square and there is still no joy on the phone, and suddenly we have to find shelter under the arched walk way from a short sharp downpour that sends a torrent of drips through the stone on to the table. Much to our relief we eventually get through to Mrs Taylor (she tells me afterwards that she went shopping just over the border in Spain (things are cheaper) and she'd forgot we'd booked in for the night). The plan now is, go back to Les Glycines, book in, shower and change then ride back into town for some tea, but I am bushed, it's a four mile round trip and once I am at the B&B I really don't fancy the riding back into town to eat. I tell Mick that I am going to buy something here and take it back to Mrs Taylor's. Mick is going to stick to the plan but getting back on the bike he has a flat back tyre. I am happy to wait but Mick says no, we're expected now so go on and get us booked in, which I do.

When I reach Les Glycines Mrs Taylor is apologetic, I explain about Mick and she shows me into the house and up the polished wooden staircase to our rooms. The room is a single and a double separated by the en-suite. I ask and she's OK with me eating my bought-in tea here. After I've showered I sit outside chatting with Mrs Taylor and Buddy the ageing Alsatian dog, her face furrows when I suggest she's from Essex, she isn't! (all southerners sound alike to me). She gives me the background to her living here. Her and her family love the lifestyle and as they moved when the children were small, now as adults they are as much French as English. It's so pleasant sat out here chatting away though I feel a little self-conscious eating as I have a feeling she may simply have been polite earlier when she said it was fine and she says later we could have had an evening meal if we'd booked. Still didn't stop me from wolfing down the two baguettes I'd brought back. Mick's taking too long just to mend that puncture, so, concerned, I text. No response then just as I ring he turns up, he'd had loads of problems with the inner tubes.

The bikes go in the workshop and Mr. Taylor, who's a chippy, turns up and he's an experienced mountain biker too so the garage is well equipped with bikes, bike stand and tools, which we are invited to use. He tells us he regularly guides parties of bikers into the mountains. Taking advantage of this domesticity I seize the opportunity to launder as much of my kit as I am not currently standing up in. Over the last few days my clothes have developed a certain odour that leaves me smelling like I've been rolling in fox shit. Probably explains why me and Buddy, the German Shepherd dog, get on so famously. Mrs Taylor can't decide the charge and says two euros for the wash and dry, I give her three. Les Glycines is great and has been put on the list for a potential return visit at some time in the future.

St Gaudens to Lourdes

51.64 miles, 4,091ft ascent, 4hrs. 33mins. Max elevation 3,567ft.

Pilgrim, from the Latin Peregrinus - a wander, a foreigner, a traveller.

We breakfast in the kitchen and there is a wide variety of tasty, cycle touring friendly food, so much in fact that I ask if it would be ok if we wrapped some up for dinner? "it'll only go to the chickens so help yourselves". It's a good job we did too, between here and Lourdes we hardly touched on any habitation, let alone anywhere big enough to support a shop or a café. It was great, this short stay with Mrs Taylor (why the formality? She must have said her first name?), and because it was a small B&B and that it was easy to talk to her made it different from all the other stop-overs.

It's cool now as we set off and we actually don't need extra clothing not long afterwards. A short stop in a convenient bus shelter sees Mick doing some more "on the hoof" route planning, while I snack on toast and jam. Mick thinks he's found us a more direct route through to Lourdes which is fine by me. The hills are coming thick and fast and steep and that's only fair since we are in the foothills of a major mountain range.

Tracking down a lovely wooded valley we get talking to a French bloke on a bike who's took a year off work to tackle many of France's cycling "monuments". I didn't talk to him that much as I couldn't keep up with both him and Mick but I did notice a right turn that we nearly missed while they were chatting away and instantly the road goes straight up the valley side leaving me groping for the small chain ring.

Finally, we are on the flat into Lourdes, and with Mick on the front and panniers rattling about on the racks we make a paceline. I know he's revving up for the sprint for the Lourdes place name sign but my legs are still in spinning / grimpeur mode and unaccustomed to this turn of speed he gets the points uncontested. It was fun while it lasted. Just off the centre of town is a roundabout then just past on the left our hotel. The hotel looks good but not over busy, the bikes go in a store room with the laundry and cleaning materials and we set off upstairs then in to a corridor, which, when the door closes is pitch black. There is no light switch to speak of so the lights must operate by sensor, that's not working. We follow the corridor sliding our hands down the wall to keep our bearings until Mick fishes out his bike LED. When we eventually get there the room is compact and clean.

Later we walk down the slope into Lourdes, we stop for coffee and beer rubbing shoulders with people from all over the world, most I guess here out of devotion. It's busy but not over busy. All down this street are shops selling all manner of religious souvenirs and it's always been this way for major centres of pilgrimage; statues and statuettes, postcards, holy water sold here in everything from small phials up to 5 litre clear plastic containers. You name it, if it's associated with the Catholic Church, they've got it. The further down the street the more upmarket the shops.



We start to see more and more supplicants sat in sturdy three-wheeler push chairs being pushed and pulled by nurses - in convoy, line astern. These nurses in their old style, severe looking uniforms seem more para-military than caring profession. At the bottom of the hill it opens out over a bridge and it's now busier as we approach the Sanctuary and Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes with pilgrims and tourists milling about heading to and from the shrine. I buy a postcard and leave my Euro change with a beggar sat at the bridge.

The evening meal is taken back up the hill, a kebab meal deal in a place a few doors down from the hotel.

Lourdes to Arette

54.84 miles, 3,520ft ascent, 4hrs 10mins. Max elevation 3,393ft.

"not when you consider what Niaka means in English - means somewhere round-a-bout",

(He says - describing a large arc with his right hand),

"Feller says he's going one way, means to go t'other"

The character Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) from the film The Searchers (explaining to his nephew the mindset of the Niaka Comanche Indians, who's war band they've been tracking).

I am right about the hotel not being over busy as we have our breakfast with only an elderly couple for company. Mick points out the laminated A4 signs posted round the room saying (in several languages) "The food here is for breakfast only and to be consumed at this sitting and not to be removed". It is obvious that cheapskate pilgrims have been wrapping up and secreting extra breakfast goodies about their person sneaking them out to save them buying lunch. Given the amount of laminated warnings about the place this has obviously irked the management somewhat.

Once we've collected the bikes and been frisked for any contraband bread rolls, the manager walks outside with us to wave us off on our way, only we've got to fiddle with the bikes, fit panniers and top bags, lube the chain, top the tyre pressures up, get the Garmins going and the goodbyes are taking a bit too long, especially as they are conducted in pidgin Franglais and I have to stop almost immediately to adjust a pannier and he gets fed up and much to our relief goes inside.

We buy our dinner stuff and roll downhill, and pass round to the left, passing limestone crags and large, dowdy buildings. It looks like the authorities have seen fit to run a risk assessment on a potential attack on the Grotto and Sanctuary of Our Lady and large concrete hostile vehicle mitigation barriers looking like giant white Lego bricks have been placed at its entrance. Travelling in to Manchester on my favourite bus, the X43, it's often a Friday and it's disheartening to see synagogues' employing security guards and chain link fencing. Whatever happened to the 1687 / 88 Declaration of Indulgence and its sanctioning of religious tolerance. It's just plain wrong that someone would see a place of worship as a legitimate target. Or maybe those oversized Lego blocks could just be to stop coaches from parking there.

It's another hilly day today and our last full day in France, tomorrow we'll be in Spain. Not to put too fine a point on it I am pooped. I am ok on the flat but as soon as the road goes uphill the speed tails off and I just grovel up. And the road goes mostly uphill. The day starts off reasonable enough following down the valley on wide roads then we venture uphill and half way up there looks like what was once a sanatorium tucked away far enough to be out of mind but handy enough for Lourdes and may still have some medical function now. Another sanatorium, also hidden away, but this one was high on the moors above Oldham, Strinesdale, was an old-style isolation hospital where the tubercular were sent. Derelict when I walked round it in the 1980's, smashed glass and eerie, not a place to linger, consumption seeped out of the brickwork and hung in the billowing curtains.

It's a series of sharp climbs from now on, that get sharper each time. The weather is brilliant though and as we crest each hill a look over to the left gives us incredible views of the green / grey / blue flanks of the Pyrenees. Alpine pasture where it's not heavily wooded, large drifts of snow dot the upper reaches of the peaks. This scenery is breathtaking, well worth the sweat and grunt to see it and the route is just brilliant taking us along high-level single-track roads.



We drop down into a picture postcard village, white painted houses, a small meadow in the middle of the village, a crystal clear stream bounded by avenues of lime trees at its centre, a graceful church. It's quietly stunning; unspoilt by commerce. If this was the UK however it would be a themed tourist trap overrun and ruined with coach tours; cohorts of people aimlessly wandering around from shop to shop selling Meer Kat dolls in local costume, key rings, tea cloths, while adding to their waistlines from a burger van, munching on Pyrenean Boar Burgers (made and packaged in a unit just outside of Heywood). Luckily it's in France and it's idyllic and unspoiled.

Michael has thrown in a special treat today, a loop up the Col du Marie Blanc (things sound better in French) but after a couple of especially severe 20%+ climbs which have me breaking out the life support machine (the small chain ring) it brings a thought that I've been kicking around with lately to the fore. This small col makes my mind up for me. Down in the valley Michael calls for a coffee stop and I explain my predicament "look mate I'm knackered so I don't think I am going to tackle the Col, so I am invoking "power of veto". It probably wasn't put as formally as that.

I'll explain what's just happened here. On these tours Michael and me get on really well, peace and harmony prevails, this despite spending virtually all day, every day (in this case over three weeks) in one another's company, often fatigued and sometimes under stressful conditions. All decisions are usually joint decisions although most go unspoken e.g. "let's stop for coffee here" doesn't need both of us to offer an opinion, it's not the Oxford Union Debating Society, we just stop. There are times though when one of us begs to differ (for whatever reason) from the other and so to keep the cycling on an even keel we have an (un)official policy of "power of veto". We recognise that each are entitled to their own view on things, their own way of doing, their own limitations. It seems to work well and there's never even been any mild dissent on the road let alone any catastrophic bust ups ending with us duelling, pumps drawn at the side of the road because one of us bought cheese and not ham for the dinnertime butties. It's not infallible though and the less said about the "Great Cataluña Cycle Pushing Safari of 2016" the better. We were both culpable on that one, one of us should have said "enough is enough here, let's turn back" but we didn't, though strangely it turned out to be one of the most memorable days of that trip, and one we often refer to. A tarmac road has never looked so good! Probably "opt out" would explain it better.

No sooner have we set off just there on the right on the edge of the village centre and over the bridge are some picnic tables in the shade of a stand of Planes. A broad grassy bank leads down to a wide river, blue with mountain run-off. So it's time for dinner. A puppy gambols at the water's edge thrilled at the big world. As we eat we consult the Garmins, Michael is quicker off the mark and confirms there is an alternative valley route to Arette which sounds good to me. Michael is still resolved to do Col du Marie Blanc; the ley line temporarily divides.



My only reservation here is that there is a glitch on my Garmin which, for some inexplicable reason will very occasionally prevent me from going direct to a destination. With the route downloaded it's not been a problem but when I freelance it often wants to send me on massive loops and it still steadfastly refuses to take me from Chapel St Leonard's to Wainfleet St Mary direct via Croft (about eleven miles). With a haughty "I know best" it sends me on a loop via Spilsby making it twenty-three miles. Even though I am actually riding through Croft, it just won't acknowledge it. Looking at various forums online it seems it's not unusual. So I am a little wary today.

I needn't have worried Garmin works impeccably and when I come to the busy N134 it gently shepherds me on to the old road the D116 where I fall in with a local racing lad. I've stopped for a "pi-pi sur la ble" when he comes past then I overtake him a klick down the road when he stops for one too. He catches me up and we get to chatting away in poor French, dodgy English and the universal language of cycling, introducing ourselves with a right hand, left hand, bikies' handshake. Sebastian lets out a low whistle when I tell him our itinerary. Wanting to help he offers to guide me round the next town of Oloron Ste-Marie. Even though the Garmin is insisting that I go through the town centre. He leaves me on a busy bypass sign posted "tout directions Bayonne". That's going to take me out to the French Atlantic coast two days away and the bypass is busy too so after waiting a decent interval til Sebo is out of sight I turn around and cut back through the town.

At the side of a shady green I pick up a sign for Arette straight on but Garmin wants me to go left. A man is sat at a table outside a small bar with baguette and bike. I shake him out of his coffee, Gauloise and Ricard induced revelry by asking if I am on the right road? Initially he looks bemused then twigs, "oui Arette au gauche" sounding Arette with a guttural machine gun "Aratttt" so that's what confused him. At peace with the world I suspect he's been doing this every Saturday afternoon for the past few decades and I hope it continues.

I still end up on the by-pass but only for a minute as it ends in a D road then it's a pleasant pedal up to our destination for the night. And Arette is a gem of a village as is our hotel. I introduce myself at the bar and the lady lets me stow the bike away in the office before showing me to the room. The place has a ski lodge feel to it which is enhanced by the panelled room and when I push the shutter open a small balcony with great views of mountains are revealed. I spoil this enchantment later by hanging a pair of dripping bib shorts off the balcony - needs must I am afraid. I wonder how Michael's gone on, on the high col. I find out when he arrives just as I am having a coffee outside at the front of the bar. He's had a good day too, he's done more altitude but I've done two more miles so we break out the 1903 Cyclists Almanac to see who's done what and by using one of their formulas (miles/height (divided by) number of dew ponds passed (divided by) the number of needle exchange programmes in the area (times by) the half-life of the nearest Lama farm) and it works out "honours even"

We wander round the village later and it's obviously a hot bed of cycling with a smashing mural of local cyclists done good on the front of a community centre. The big names here being Gilbert Duclos-Lacelle and Andre Darrigarde. They'd be mountain goats for sure coming from here. Also for this small place there is a good sized bike shop selling high end mountain bikes. We take our ease while watching a group of petanque hustlers, and check out the local signage illustrating walks, mountain bike trails, the local ecology and history. It's Sunday tomorrow and the shops might be shut so as a precaution we nip into the shop next door to buy our dinner. Back at the café we sit out front with a couple of local brews, a wheat beer for me and a strong ale for Mick, before going into the garden out the back for the evening meal. There are only two options on the menu but it's good and filling. One of many great days out on the bike and we end this one sat in a sunlit garden, surrounded by mountains, with good food and beer taken with the pleasant hum of conversation (my bib shorts, gently dripping from the balcony, drying).



Arette, France to Elizondo, Spain.

57.33 miles, 7,214ft ascent, 5.hrs, 36mins. Max elevation 3,567ft.

"The hill to happiness,

Is far too steep"

Good as Gold - Beautiful South

The day starts out with breakfast taken with groups of mountain and road bikers, we don't interact with them, even at the buffet table and each party gets on with their own breakfasts, coming and going carrying bikes and babies. By the days end we will be in Spain so I'll be able to swap my unintelligible French for a barely comprehensible Spanish (later two people said my Spanish was OK - they were being kind!). It's a shame to be leaving Arette it's a lovely, peaceful place and I could easily have stayed a few more days here, although I could say that about every other place we've stopped too, all bearing testament to Michael's meticulous planning.

The first pedal strokes are easy enough, taking us down lanes between small fields greening up again after the haymaking. The D918 is pleasant enough. The first heavily wooded hill isn't far away though, and soon there is the dreaded left turn as we leave the main road and drop down to a clunky concrete bridge more with function in mind than ornamentation. Crossing the river the flat runs out and turns into hills.



Along the next valley it's noticeable that the road signs all have dual place names with French and un-French like names, rather like in Wales. The Basque country extends in to France I know but I didn't think it went this far west, and besides our first stop over the border is in Navarra, although the Basques claim this to be part of their homeland the Spanish government contest this view and there does seem to be a bit of fudge involved. Wonder what the Navarrans think?

All I know is down a valley road is a sign for Lascarry / Laskarri straight on but we turn right signed Ahusquy / Ahuzki and immediately the road goes up and does it go up. Instantly I am on life support and I can honestly say I have never spent as much time on the largest sprocket on the smallest chain ring than I have on this hill. As a rule the bottom gear is hardly ever used even panniered up and even then only on the steepest sections which are usually fairly short. But not on this slope and I spend more time than normal in the bottom gear just to maintain forward motion on these sustained and excruciatingly steep gradients. And once Mick has gone haring off ahead it's all still and quiet and peaceful. There are amazing views over my left shoulder of peaks and clouds passing into infinity. In spite of the severity of the gradient and the effort it's taking, I am lucky to be here and experience this.

I can hear voices from behind, old sounding voices that are catching me up. Then three OAPs come whizzing past on chunky mountain bikes. No need to look round I've already guessed, they are on electro bikes as just keeping upright on this slope is a feat, carrying on a conversation at the same time is out of the question. As the first one passes I lean out to my left and make a theatrical grab at his back, trying to get a tow, his companions laugh and shout encouragement to me. I am now climbing into noise and the sound of echoing cow bells, and then here they are large blond and fawn coloured cows wandering about all over the place, on the road, in the small stands of spruce or lounging in the crushed bracken.

As I ride along a hanging valley a throaty roar precedes a pimped up Ford Mustang, a 4x4 would be more appropriate up here on this glorified goat track, it's going to take him ages to get all the cow muck off the wheel arches. The road ramps up again leading to a saddle and a fork in the road and I see Michael there waiting for me at the top. "Get your breath back mate and get an energy gel down you". It's not only the effort getting here that is taking my breath away, the views are spectacular.



We initially drop down the other side, the road clinging to the side of the hill, a sharp drop off to our left. It then rises to a desolate plateau the only living things being stunted Hawthorn dotted about. The descent starts proper now as we get to the lip of the plateau but instead of the well-earned high speed lunge we descend slower than a cautious pensioner walking on ice as we get stuck behind two Dutch camper vans warily edging downhill. It's ironic in this crystal Pyrenean air that we trail them down in a fug of black diesel particulate and that hot brake smell. Fair play to them they do pull over on a patch of gravel to let us pass, saving our lungs from clogging up with soot and allowing us to see how far we can get without braking as we swoop into the valley way below.

A quick coffee stop at the bottom and we're back on the ley line to Spain. There is a dinner stop as usual then Mick calls for an afternoon coffee and cola stop in St. Jean Pied-de-Port. Sensing my imminent collapse Mick kindly tells me there is only one more hill to go then we're in Spain and it's a short drop into Elizondo. Gee'd on with this advice I renew my struggle with gravity. And it's a long old drag up the D19 but thankfully not as severe and as long as the climb this morning. Finally we get to the top of the Col d'Ispeguy. It's busy up here too with coach loads of day trippers and ski lodges either side of the border. There is no checkpoint Charlie on top of this col, just two parallel white lines laid across the road showing the demarcation between the two countries. We take pictures of us stood under the elevation marker and straddling the two white lines on the crest of the col, one foot in France and the other in Spain. A coach arrives from the French side and discharges its passengers who head for a ski lodge on the Spanish side. For some reason the coach does not cross the line in to Spain, the driver parking the coach in the carriageway with the bumper millimetres off but never encroaching on to Spanish territory before reversing back the way he came.



We are now "Escapados" and it's a brilliant descent as we set off from the border where the road contours the open hillside, dropping us down deeper into Navarra and on to Elizondo. As we get further into the Batzan valley it becomes more wooded and steeper with hairpins, forcing us to brake hard as the tree cover conceals the switchbacks. On the way down, on the left is an old man stripped to the waist working away on his allotment, now I can't recall ever seeing anyone like that in France. My daughter asked me afterwards how does Spain differ from France? Well there's one thing!

Bringing the full majesty of the Spanish language into play I book us into the posada for the night, which is tucked away and it's great. Of course, this being Spain he asks me for my passport and transfers the details on to a sheet (often it's both our passports or sometimes it's just Mick's as he's made the booking). This always leaves me uneasy and in the past we've had our passports photocopied or sometimes it's just their details written down, we've even had the passports held overnight. I have half an idea that it's a hangover from Franco's days when all foreigners travelling around the country were considered a security risk but don't quote me on that. I still don't like it, especially in these days of identity theft, but rules are rules. I expect the local British Consul would take a dim view when explaining to them that "no we didn't have our passports stolen we simply handed them over to a complete stranger when asked for them!"

The concierge scratches his head when I ask about the bikes but then leads us out and round the side of the hotel. The bikes are to be left on a path overlooked by a block of flats and for the first time we lock our bikes, the green chain link fence enclosing the path would not deter even the laziest of bike thieves. Once we've got our admin sorted it's down in to town. The place is busy and there's bars a plenty but nowhere doing food until eight at the earliest. We've checked out a pizza place further down by the river but then have to stroll about until it opens, which would be pleasant if I wasn't so hungry. Eventually we are sat back inside the pizzeria ordering pizza and Spanish wine for me and Spanish beer for Mick.

On our way back to the hotel we throw a loop in and happen upon a square full of people of all ages sat at tables with friends and family under heavily pollarded Plane trees. It's too good to miss and we grab an empty table. It looks like this square is served by two or three bars and each has its own strictly demarcated area of tables and whose attentive staff circulate, taking orders and returning with drinks and tapas. Just sat soaking up the atmosphere, this place it seems magical to me in this warm evening the light filtering through the planes, but to the locals I guess it's just a normal Sunday evening.



Elizondo to (Urrestilla) Azpeitia

57.33 miles, 6,124ft ascent, 5.07 hrs. Max elevation 2,316 ft.

"They say "wot's it like? Spain?" an I'll say " its hot, hot, aw its f.....g hot". "Too hot?". "Not for me, I love it".

The character Gal Dove (Ray Winston) - former London criminal "breaking the fourth wall" on his hacienda in Spain. From the film Sexy Beast.

KERRRAASSSSSHHHHHH. We both sit bolt upright in our beds "what the.....?". It's a very bleary 05.00 in the morning and it sounds like Armageddon has arrived. Looking out into the street a local contractor is taking this early morning opportunity to empty the bottle banks from the small car park opposite into the back of his lorry. **AT FIVE O CLOCK IN THE MORNING!** I was lucky enough to see one of the last operational Vulcan bombers doing a flypast over Townley at the Burnley agricultural show. It glided down the valley lower than Theively and then once over the show-field the pilot pulled full military power and from a mile away the howl and whine of those engines rattled the windows as the house shook and danced on its foundations - that I could have slept through!

And of course after that shock I can't get back to sleep until five minutes before the alarm goes off.

After another good breakfast Michael squares up the bill and we go and see if the bikes are still there. They are and we wheel them round to the front. There's some maintenance to do and some joking about with the concierge and the old wreck of a bike parked up outside the front door. After the early morning shenanigans with the bottle bank it's fair to say I am not at my best and things are going to get worse. Michael has brought a Lezyne mini track pump with integral gauge. It's a lovely piece of kit and enables us to get the correct pressure into our touring tyres. Only this morning every time I try to un-screw the adapter I inadvertently un-screw the valve seat, instantly deflating the tyre. I inflate and deflate the front tyre at least three times before I crack it. There's no need to try this for yourselves just take my word for it it's an absolute pain.

The long trek round the supermarket looking for dinner and Spanish energy drink does not lighten my mood. I also need insulation tape as my sweaty hands are making the bar tape unravel. There's a hardware shop on the main street and Michael taking pity on me volunteers to go in. He comes out with black insulation tape and smiling "didn't even have to ask" he says "knew where it was, the layout is exactly the same as the hardware shop in Nelson!".

It's another brilliant day's cycling, almost "run of the mill" you could say. There's glorious Alpine scenery and stunning villages their houses painted white, all calling to us Siren-like for us to stop awhile. There's lots of trees and there is even a large toad for us to avoid as it crosses our path. There's lots of hills too and one of the more frustrating things about this region is the number of false summits we encounter. After a sustained climb we crest what looks and feels like the top of the hill and start to descend, only to cross a saddle then continue on with the climb once more. This means we lose 50,100,150 or so metres which we then have to climb again. Dinner is taken at a picnic spot with no bins forcing us to carry our rubbish out with us. The high spot is the sharp peak of the Santa Ageda pass at 700m.



We leave Navarra and cross the border into Euskadi (Basque Country). As well as riding in a country within a country (some would say, some wouldn't) we may also be riding through a "hybrid zone". In botanical terms a hybrid zone occurs where two divergent taxa (in this case two species) which have been separated by time and geography meet. So we are in an area where contact between two closely related but genetically different populations cross fertilise. I am referring to the Plane trees that I keep mentioning and admire and it's here that the American Plane, *Platanus occidentalis*, and the Oriental Plane, *Platanus orientalis*, cross fertilise to produce a hybrid, the London Plane or *Platanus x hispanica* (denoted by the multiplication cross). Just to put a fly in the ointment, some now believe that the hybridisation occurred not in Spain or Southern France but in London in a tree collection in Vauxhall in the 17th century. All I know is I am always happy to see these noble trees, either heavily pollarded or as specimen trees, these Western and Hybrid Planes.

We are at our destination now for tonight the San Martin casa rural. We turn left off the road and up a short track to the house. I knock on the door, the only reply I get are the hounds wailing in the kennels from behind the house. Is this it or is it the other place a bit further along? While Mick checks I ride on to the other house. It's all bit "Marie Celeste", there's signs of life - a shooting brake with the lid open, but there's no reply to my knock on the door here either. Another thing, neither house is displaying any signage advertising it as a casa rural. Mick is still puzzling over Garmin when a lady turns up. Despite the language barrier it's obvious that yes this is San Martin but no it's not a casa rural. We apologise then beat a retreat to the main road before the hounds are let-loose.

Confused we ride back along our ley line a kilometre to the small town of Ezerill. Stopping in shade on the edge of the town centre Michael has solved the puzzle. Looks like Garmin has taken us to the wrong San Martin in the wrong valley. The real San Martin, the one we're booked into is in the next valley over, nigh on 11 kilometres away which means that we'd have to ride down to Azpeitia then up to Urestilla then retrace our steps tomorrow morning back through Azpeitia. "I don't much feel like riding that extra now" says Mick and neither do I, I am banjaxed! There doesn't appear to be much accommodation here either, as its mostly lo-rise flats and graffiti. However, Michael being the epitome of calm under fire, courtesy of his Smartphone and Booking.com in less than five minutes snatches victory from the jaws of defeat by announcing there is a hotel with availability about five kilometres down the valley in Azpeitia. Should he book it? I am on the bike and away even before he gets to the question mark.

Later Michael calls this "the San Martin Fiasco - right road, wrong valley", I call it a happy accident. We ride down and through Azpeitia via back streets, workshops, garages and blocks of flats. A left turn off a dual carriageway sees us immediately grinding up a 25% lane, crunching down through the gears we soon realise this is wrong and resume the dual carriageway which sweeps up and round and to the rear of (but we don't know it yet) our hotel.

Going through a gap between two massive buildings set at right angles to each other we enter the corner of a large square, the hotel entrance is to our right up a ramp. Mick stays with the bikes and I go in. It's cool and dark in the large lobby with a grand staircase to my left and the concierge to my front. Conscious of my grubbiness in these opulent surroundings I tell the concierge we have a room booked. Luckily he has good English to my poor Spanish and non-existent Basque. He sheaves through a batch of A4 sheets and pulls a face "what name again?" then "I am sorry but I can't find any booking in that name?" (An image of a Basque bus shelter flashes through my mind with bikes propped up against it). "We've not long made the booking via Booking.com" I add hopefully. Looking on the computer "ha!" to my relief he confirms. The bikes go through the dining room, across a terrace and into a tool shed in the grounds. Our room is up the grand staircase and with a swipe of the key we enter our room. It's great and gets even better when we throw open the shutters to reveal an amazing view of the tree lined square flanked on the left by the imposing building and cupola of the Sanctuary and Basilica of St. Ignatius Loyola; dedicated to the man who was instrumental in the founding of the Jesuits and who was born here in Azpeitia.



Michael returns buzzing from his usual post ride walk, and is full of enthusiasm for what he's seen. We go out into the early evening heat and walk into a modern bar / café nearby. The next hour is spent walking to and from the counter trying the excellent pintxos, the Basque equivalent of Spanish tapas, accompanied by robust red wine and German style lager.

Hunger sated for the time being, we walk through the small park next to the square towards the town only to discover it's an arboretum with many fine and unusual specimen trees, of note are the huge Liquidambers, I never realised they grew to this size; planted for their fine kaleidoscopic, vibrant autumn colours they'd be something to see at the right time of year. We sit outside a restaurant on the other side of the main road out of town, which we'll be taking tomorrow. It's Michael's round and he comes back with dessert and white wine.

I am fast running out of superlatives to use to describe each day. The cycling is still hard though and it's about to get harder.

Azpeitia to Eibar - Bilbao

16.98 miles, 2,138ft ascent, 1hr, 53 mins.

"And I arose and I knew I was tired and I continued my journey"

Edward Thomas, poet, soldier.

Given the sumptuous surroundings I opt to go down to breakfast in my Sunday best as the breakfast room is bound to be chock full of the upper echelons of Basque society, interspersed with aristocracy and even the odd minor royal making the numbers up, so it's only proper I look presentable. Disappointingly it's not, there's a couple of reps and what look to be a trio of van drivers. Michael, refusing to be intimidated goes down as normal in shorts and T-shirt.

We aren't allowed to retrieve our bikes via the route we used the day before, instead a young lady walks us to the tool shed then escorts us from the premises waving us off from a small gate at the side. Today is the "queen stage", it being 59 miles with just over 9,000 foot of ascent, the elevation profile looking like the fins of a "frenzy" of sharks, with six major peaks to ascend plus other lower subsidiary ones. After only a couple of kilometres down that main road we sat next to last evening we turn into the car park of a small supermarket and with Michael overseeing the bikes I go in to buy dinner for the day. I can't quite explain the situation, I felt fine as we set off, tired - yes, but then tired is the default setting. Now walking between the aisles I feel - different. Not dizzy, not sick, not light headed and certainly not that cold, clammy feeling you get just before you are on your back, on the floor, looking up at a circle of people looking down, concerned, with the words "it's all right son, t'ambulance is on its way" (in Basque obviously) echoing through your consciousness. It's nothing like that, probably the best I can describe it as is I just feel empty, drained, washed out. It is one of my worse fears this and having to utter those dread words "Michael, I'm sorry mate but I just cannot go on"

Outside I mention none of this to Michael who as usual is hunched over Garmin understanding the route and the terrain ahead of us. The dinnertime spoils are shared out between us and we set off for Bilbao. We are heading towards the A8 a major route into Bilbao. The road starts off gently enough then turns into a modern feeder road courtesy of Euro millions and constructed to get traffic out of the valley and up on to the high level A8 and into Bilbao as quickly as possible. And to do this it ramps straight up the hill. Michael goes en danusse while I slip back and grovel along on the wide shoulder, the busy traffic speeding past.

Michael is waiting for me just past a slip road and looks concerned and says something like we need to get off this. I agree and I think in my haste I actually turn round and nip down the shoulder a short way against the oncoming traffic back to the off slip. We stop on a side road; Michael interrogates Garmin, there looks to be an alternative route and it's here that he speaks some of the most beautiful words in the English language "and I've found another route" he says "and it is shorter and mostly downhill". Beautiful! It's not up for debate and I am instantly sold on the idea.

It looks like the road we are now on is the old road in to Bilbao. It's still lumpy and it takes us through a succession of busy small towns, making navigation tricky and the day becomes a series of stop / starts. At a busy roundabout hemmed in by cliffs we think we have found an alternative route but soon realise it's taking us away from Bilbao so it's back to the roundabout which means we have to take a tunnel. Neither of us are keen on tunnels and fit our LEDs front and back. As soon as we enter we can see daylight, which is frustrating. That's how this day is going. We stop in Eibar for another Garmin check when Michael says "have you noticed what's up there, up to the right?" I turn round - blank look! "A trainline" he says. "No! No! No! never" I scream "You cannot be serious" I say jabbing my finger into Mick's chest "You can, mate! You can! But never in this world will I ever countenance such a thing! We are committed to riding every micro-mil of this trip, how dare you ever suggest otherwise? Take a train? I will never, ever, do such a thing! It will compromise the whole integrity of the ride, destroying its purity!". Anyway two minutes later we're up in the station buying tickets and twenty minutes after that we are on the 11.15 Eibar to Bilbao. Sat in the clean comfortable carriage in the space reserved for wheelchairs I lean wearily against my bike, grateful and relieved that Michael had spotted and suggested the train. I would have carried on, I would have had to, but it wouldn't have been pretty! It was a very, very good call on Michael's part.

Planning for this trip Michael posited the idea of a rest day or two. I vetoed saying I'd rather keep moving, a couple of short and easy days would be a better plan. Now I realise this assumption was based on a lack of understanding of the daily mileage, the terrain, the heat etc. all taking it's toll and the effect it's having on us, or rather me.

And suddenly we are in Bilbao, having our dinner on a bench next to the river, further down on the opposite bank is the angular looking shiny silver Guggenheim Museum. We cross over and do a quick flick round the Gugg before heading back up river to find our digs, deep in the barrios.



Down a small ginnel we find our hostel on the left. Going in it has a hippy love-in vibe. I am just about to introduce myself when an American gentlemen walks past me straight to the counter. I've not come here for an argument so I let him carry on while I tune in to the surroundings and watch what the drill is. There are two young ladies staffing the concierge and they go through the formalities with the American. When I hear the phrase "and this is your lock and key for the locker" alarm bells start ringing, "oh-oh!" looks like we are in a dorm sharing with other pilgrims. I hope it's not going to be like a hostel in York where me, Mick and John stayed one spring some years back. We shared a large mixed dorm with maybe twenty other people, and we had to put up with ladies walking around in various states of undress. As it turns out Michael has reserved us one of only two private rooms available giving us an air of exclusivity - VIP pilgrims.

Eventually attention is turned to me and I check us and the bikes in. One of the ladies suggests we leave the bikes in the care of a fella lounging on a nearby settee while we portage our kit upstairs, the bikes have to go in our room too. The bloke is happy to oblige but we decline, turns out he's Irish and is as laid-back as the American was uptight.

Bikes and kit are jammed into the lift whose walls are full of post-it notes with inspiring slogans written on them. Our private suite is small with large windows and bounded by a small balcony, outside there's great views over the multi-coloured roofscape of Bilbao.



Once we get sorted in the room Mick heads off on walkabout back to the waterfront to check out the Guggenheim and I drink the equivalent of a good-sized paddling pool of hydration and recovery drink and spend the rest of the afternoon sleeping, so don't bother asking me what Bilbao is like, I was never there! I should have drawn the curtains too on the large windows looking out on to the balcony which was empty when I dozed off but now when I wake, it's full of people all trying not to notice this bloke led on the bed sound asleep in shorts and knee length compression shocks. It's more recovery drinks and lots of water for me taken out on the balcony until Michael gets back. He'd paid to get into the Guggenheim and I get the impression he's a bit disappointed with the exhibitions. He's much more taken with the large mural on one of the spans of the modern bridge over the Nervion river.

As it's evening we set off looking for a meal. Michael takes us to a couple of places he's reced earlier but don't really appeal so we head back into the Barrios. We go into a modern, expensive looking bar for wine and pintxos, it's my shout and I approach the bill with apprehension. I needn't have bothered it comes out at a reasonable 9 Euros. The next bar is more of a greasy spoon or more characterful than

the last place. We order more wine and more pintxos by pointing at stuff through the glass counter. There is a bowl that's full of small chorizo style sausage floating in oil. Go on I'll try them, and so does Mick. They taste amazing. Mick gets the bill and is stunned, the bill comes to 14 Euros. With hindsight, we are passing through, with no language and I think we got ripped. Or those were some expensive chorizo! The rest of this pleasant evening is spent aimlessly wandering the Barrios and stopping to sit outside small bars drinking white wine.

Back in our room we turn-in. There is a family sat out on the balcony so I put my ear plugs (unlike Mick who always uses them, I only use them as a last resort) within easy reach on the bedside cabinet, it could get noisy out there later. There is a sign as you go out on to the balcony saying something like "please respect the other guests and please keep the noise down at night". And that's exactly what this family do and I doze off to the pleasant lilt of hushed Spanish voices, even their laughter is turned down to gentle.

Bilbao to Hoznaya

67.57 miles, 5.30 mins, 6,097ft ascent. Max elevation 1,465ft.

"See those pallets on the loading dock?

Well they're just gonna sit there til they rot.

*because there's nothing to ship and nothing to pack,
just busted concrete and rusted track".*

We Can't Make it Here Anymore - James McMurtry.

After a good night's sleep, breakfast is a "help yourself" one taken communally. Nothing cooked is available so it's coffee (two cups), bowls of cereal (two - filled to the brim) and toast and jam (lots), plus fruit. Standing in the ginnel I guard the bikes while Mick settles up. I am feeling much better than I did this time yesterday but only time will tell. A quick loop through the barrios sees us sitting outside a Carrefour until it opens in ten minutes time. It's enjoyable watching Bilbao going about its business. Our ley line takes us back past the Gugg on the other side of the river then over a busy road bridge. Garmin shows us a cycleway running alongside the Nervion which takes us out of Bilbao by its rustbelt. Docks and blocks of flats, there's probably no mention of this district in the tourist brochures.

We follow the ribbon of development out of town up steep hills and past lumber mills, chimneys and brutalist concrete buildings. We briefly lose our way in a small town, turn round and our ley line takes us across a car park, down a narrow passageway, in and out of the stalls of a small (and busy) open market then out back on to the road. Just past a set of road works we bear left and start the first major climb of the day. Come on legs, don't fail me now! And you know? I feel fine, good even and climb up at a decent rate. Yesterday's case of the jim-jams was thankfully, hopefully a one off, a blip, an aberration. And from today I feel I get stronger.

An early coffee stop is taken in a café in a square surrounded by blocks of flats, a man and a woman take their ease sat at the table next to us, both having coffee and a civilised mid-morning glass of white wine.

Cresting one col there is sign announcing "Euskadi welcomes careful drivers" or it would if I could understand it and it appears that we have briefly left the Basque Country only to re-enter it. I didn't notice we'd even left; maybe this road is similar to the "concession roads" that twine their way along the border of Northern Ireland and the Republic. Today's route takes us up and through the Armaion Parke Naturaia.



Riding up in to a small town looking for a dinner stop a child runs straight out in front of me, he'd been stood at a crossing with his mother. He'd waited until Michael was clear then as I followed on he darted out. Both me and his mother shout at him and he jumps back, I never made the brakes.

The road takes us along a valley which eventually leads to a pass between two massive limestone hills either side of the road, we could be passing between the Pillars of Hercules.

Still on limestone our ley line has almost got us to our destination with just one more hill to ascend before we drop down to the door of our hotel for the night. The weather is dull now, hot and muggy, and as we aren't far from the coast this is probably where this cloud is rolling in from. As we ride down this last valley surrounded by large limestone hills (our Dales pale at the size of these crags) there is a big rock wall to our front and given all the hills we've climbed up in the past weeks I've become adept

at spotting the ogee up to where the road finally crests the summit. I can't make it out from the bottom of this one and start wondering if we are actually in a box canyon with the only way out back the way we came. I needn't have worried, the exit reveals itself via a series of hairpins. While Michael heads off uphill at warp speed I climb at a steady but easy pace. And you know what? I still feel good. All thoughts of yesterday morning's wobble in Azpeitia have been banished, I've had a good day today and this has given me the self-belief that I will now be alright all the way to Valladolid. I enjoy this last big hill of the day with its lush herbage and once at the summit we are rewarded with amazing views back down the valley.



There is no deviating from the route today as the Calle La Plaza forms part of our ley line and the hotel is just here on our left. The lady concierge is expecting us, and our bikes are stashed away in the adjacent function room. We have a cola and as we are now back in Spain - Cantabria to be precise - we have tapas.

In the room I've had my post-ride doze when there's a knock on the door. It's Mick back from his wanderings, "well?", me, still in a daze "well! what?" "I've been to the barbers and had me haircut". All those miles back in Leeds Mick sneaked off from the "Spoons" for, but failed to get, a haircut. Now he's fresh from the local "Crimp and Curl" with a whole new look, which looks like the old look but shorter.

There is a restaurant in the hotel but it feels like it's not open for business so we head along the main street. Just across the road there's a place next to the river, it's not open yet and we don't particularly fancy it either. Mick knows of another place further down and on the way points out his barbers. The main street is modern with a mix of residential, garages / workshops, shops and high-end looking hotels. We stop outside the hotel / restaurant which looks busy. When Michael had coffee here earlier he said it was much busier with woman on the school run nipping in and queuing for cake. We find a table right in front of the large screen showing England playing in the quarter finals of the World Cup. My huevos, chorizo and patata is excellent and filling even without the large basket of bread. A rustic red wine the perfect accompaniment.

Walking back to the hotel there is someone else preparing for sleep for the evening although he's not in the hotel but in the bus shelter opposite where he and his little terrier dog will be spending the night.

Hoznayo To Panes

63.54 miles, 5hrs 17 mins, 5,827ft ascent. Max elevation 1,692ft.

"and have you ever been hungry lady? And I don't mean just late for supper? Then you'd eat dog"

"And have you ever eaten dog Mr. Russell?"

"Eaten dog and lived like one!"

The character John Russell (Paul Newman the hero "Hombre" of the title), from the film "Hombre" explaining to his fellow passengers what hunger is and why the Native American often resorted to eating dog meat.

From the hotel window I watch as the traveller and his terrier pack up, nothing is left behind and he leaves the bus shelter tidy. We go down into the bar for breakfast, introduce ourselves and grab a table. Two cups of coffee and two croissants are placed before us by the barman. Is this it? or is this just to keep us going until breakfast arrives? We eat and drink and wait, then wait a bit longer, then wait some more. The barman wanders in and out showing no inclination to serve us with anything else so that must have been it. He's completely disappeared now and we are losing daylight so we go and change and pick up the bikes (we'd paid on signing in yesterday).

We still need to fuel up so we ride across to the nearest supermarket. Propped up against the wall is a neatly packed Bergen and tethered to the Bergen is the small terrier cross guarding it, the traveller having gone inside. As Mick walks past the Bergen to put something in the litter bin nearby, the dog yaps and snarls at him, doing its job. They are a team these two, the traveller feeding and providing for them both and the dog giving close protection and companionship. A second, more substantial breakfast of baguettes, jam, bananas and biscuits is taken in small park opposite. Just before setting off we return to the supermarket for something and he's there now, filling the dog's bowl with bottled water. We both hand over our Euro change to him and I pass on the remains of our breakfast and a pack of biscuits. He's as clean and as tidy as anyone who's sleeping in bus shelters can be and good naturedly accepts our offerings asking if we are Pilgrims.

To give some indication of the terrain we are going to be travelling over today, our start elevation is 125ft, our end elevation 77ft with a minimum elevation of 65ft but with 5,551ft of climbing in between. We are in the foot hills of the Pico's alright and often towards the end of the days ride when the stands of Eucalyptus allow, we get high level views on the right over the narrow coastal plain to the Mar Cantabrico.

The day is cloudy and cool enough for us to start off in arm warmers and to gilet up after a half an hour's riding. There is more development for us than normal to begin with today, even though we are skirting the Parque Natural de Cabarceno. We spend most of this morning on modern main roads. Luckily they are quiet and good to ride on given their lack of traffic and smooth surfaces.



In the centre of a small village the tarmac abruptly changes to pitted gravel then on the other side back to tarmac leaving us wondering what the highways budget was spent on for this section.

Eventually we leave smooth behind and the ley line takes us down a narrow lane to a river past a quarry, rain washed piles of gravel varying in size from clumped wet dust to large crusher-run, representing substantial hazards for us to slip and skid across. We cross the river and turn right and ride between a mill complex attached to the quarries which Mick subsequently informs me is now converted to a hotel. This road between cliff face and river turns in to a dead end but luckily for us becomes cycleway. I say luckily, Garmin knew all along, we however would have been lucky to have found this route using only a large-scale road map, it would have involved lots of map stops for sure. But that's the joy of Garmin.



The coffee and cake stop is taken in a pleasant little café in an idyllic village. It's likely that men from this area of North West Spain once enlisted in the service of the Roman Empire as Auxilia, non-citizen soldiers of Rome, that is once they had been subdued and assimilated into the Empire by Rome's own Legions. Part of their legacy remains in the name of the adjoining province of Asturias which is now a remnant of a much larger geographical region, these Astures formed a cavalry unit that contributed to the building of Hadrian's Wall c 128 AD.

Garmin wants us to turn left on to a cycleway but its barred off, however there was a lane a bit further back going in the right direction so we take it. With the river to our right and the hillside on our left It leads us through series of small hamlets. There are several landslips to negotiate, caused by the recent rain, there's nothing serious but they leave us and the bikes slipping in the claggy, red mud.

The day is warm now and it's a good mixture of hills, lush farming valleys, small villages and lanes, industry and main roads. We have dinner sat at a table in a small park sandwiched between the road and offices, the local parks maintenance gang sweeping up around us.

Dropping down from 1,692ft on the last major climb of the day to the righthand side are two oldish men stood next to a small foss and horse trough having taken the opportunity to wash and cool down in the mountain stream. I think they were loaded up and on heavy clunky bikes, I didn't particularly notice, my focus being on this long, winding but fast descent. When I catch up with Michael on a bridge, he's laughing and incredulous "see those two blokes back there washing?" "yeah?" "Next to that waterfall?", "Yeah? So?". Turns out that when Michael went past they were stood there at the side of the road under the small waterfall stark naked. Thankfully they had their vests and underpants back on by the time I went past.

And then it's a left on to a main road that soon takes us into Panes. Mick wants some cold bottled water so we pull into a garage on the outskirts of town. On the forecourt I wait with the bikes next to several stacks of crates all containing bottles of cider. Of course I remember we are in the "cider belt". It's an over simplification this but in terms of alcoholic drinks Europe can be split roughly into three separate areas (or four if you include the spirits, whiskey and vodka but these two share the same grain base (when potatoes and anti-freeze aren't available) as beer), based I suppose on climate, geography and geology and what grows best to ferment locally. So Southern Europe is naturally the "wine belt", where it's optimum for growing vines, France, Spain and Italy being the main three. Northern Europe is the "beer belt", the UK, Belgium, Northern France, Germany, Czechoslovakia. The UK also has its own "belt" the "barley belt" running the length of the east coast from Kent up to Scotland producing the best two-row malting barley in the world. Squeezed in between the northern and southern belts is the "cider belt". Obviously Somerset, Hereford, Gloucestershire in the UK and to a lesser degree Kent and East Anglia. In France it's Normandy and Brittany and there's parts of Eastern Europe where it's the staple alcoholic drink. And here in Spain it's the Picos and we are slap, dab, bang in the middle of it stood here on this garage forecourt. I like cider but rarely drink it so I have to try some this evening.

It's a casa rural for us tonight and it's on the other side of Panes one of the last houses out of town. The genial host welcomes us in to this lovely casa and indicates that the bikes can go into the garage/cellar. We go through the formalities via an English/Spanish translation app on his phone. It's mainly about what time it shuts and how to get back in after hours. He looks bemused when I take my shoes off then smiles and thanks me when I show him the steel cleats which would cut big chunks out of his wooden staircase. The room is all dark wood and spotless.

Admin sorted, let's go find somewhere to eat and above all cider. We stop at a small bar opposite our digs re-hydrating on cokes and fanta but there's not much to tempt us to stay so we resume our cider trail which takes us back through downtown Panes. Bearing left we walk into a small nature reserve. It's a nice spot right next to the bright blue river with its bleached limestone cobbles and it's educational too with its informative interpretation boards on the local fauna and flora. Over the bridge is a small bar and at one of the tables is a group drinking cider or more correctly sidra. This is the one for us so we grab a table and it's Mick's shout so he orders the tapas and gets for himself an Estrella and a sidra for me, or more accurately a small "pequena" sidra. Mick gets his beer but I get a large green bottle with a weird looking cap on it. "Pequena, pequena" Mick says in mock horror, the barman is instantly in on the joke and laughs. I knew that the sidra here is uncarbonated so pours flat and as if on cue one of the old lads on the next table does an impromptu demonstration on how to get a head on the drink. In one sweeping action as he pours his drink he simultaneously angles the glass lowering it towards the ground while swinging the bottle in an arc upwards and away, giving the sidra a head. It's a neat trick requiring years of sidra drinking and plenty of burst blood vessels on your nose and I for one am not going to attempt, it'll all just end up on the floor if I do. It also explains the cap on the neck. The next shock is that this flat and cloudy sidra is a whopping six percent and on an empty stomach and with over sixty miles in today it's not the ideal post-ride recovery drink. It's sharp and dry, which is how I prefer cider and as it goes straight to my legs provides Mick plenty of entertainment as within five minutes I am starting to slur my words.



We still haven't eaten yet but have a lucky find, set back from the main street we happen on a small bar which looks like it's a renovation of an old building. We sit outside and have more beer and wine. We ask if they do food and they do in about half hour's time and she leaves bowls of olives and peanuts to stop us from getting too famished. It's just so pleasant sat here watching the world go by and as the sidra melts my legs, we wait and order more drinks. We eventually order our meals and again there isn't too much choice but it's excellent. Afterwards I find the guide book a bit sniffy about Panes "Panes

itself isn't worth a stop, characterised by a modern bridge in rusted iron and a 19th century church topped by a tacky pastel blue Jesus". I am afraid I beg to differ, I rather liked Panes, it was well worth the stop. However it does go on to say about tomorrow's ride "From Portes you begin to ascend the Puerto San Gloria, this stretch of road offering perhaps the best views in the entire Picos. The contrast between the lush green valleys and the harsh grey mountains are superb". Ok I'll give it that, it does have a point there.



Panes to Portilla de la Reina

39.97 Miles, 4hrs 09mins, 5,739ft ascent. Max Elevation 5,259ft

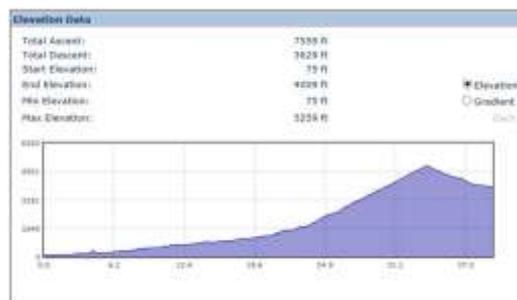
"Have you ever looked over a mountain, a mountain you've never seen?

Have you ever looked over a mountain, a mountain you've never seen?

Have you laid down at night and had one of those awful dreams?"

Awful Dream - "Lightning" Sam Hopkins.

The elevation schematic for today's ride shows we start out at a mere 75ft, our finishing elevation 4,009ft with the maximum elevation 5,259ft. On the elevation profile these stats illustrate a satisfying continuous curve uphill, barely losing any height once we've got over the top. Instead of the frenzy of sharks fins we had the other day, today we just have the single, solitary dorsal of a Great White.



Looking out of the window, there's a fly in the ointment, it's foggy and cold and doesn't auger well when we are riding at altitude, if it's like this here, what's it going to be like up there, at the top of the Picos? Also I could have done with a bit more for breakfast it was cereal and mostly cake things. Sat on the next table is a family of Brits, the father looks like a "Rupert" or has been and we don't speak. With our northern flattened vowel accents I get the impression we aren't quite their class.

Michael does the big shop at the local store while I fiddle about with the Chevy taking the opportunity to check the tyres, tweak the brakes and tighten up every allen bolt I can find. The weather has bucked up and is clear and sunny and promising more. We are straight out of Panes and begin to climb only to stop almost straight away to take pictures of the panorama before us. There is a sign just out of town warning drivers "Atencion, respete al ciclista" with a graphic showing a car overtaking two cyclists riding (horror of horror) side by side. The arrow between the car and cyclists expresses 1.5m safe overtaking distance. We see quite a few of these and also other signage in a similar vein announcing that the road is a quiet road and frequented by cyclists and drivers have been warned.



We ride on, on a steady gradient, the fields and woods thinning to give way to a spectacular limestone gorge which goes on for miles. We cross and re-cross the river as the gorge gets narrower with overhangs, rock spires and pinnacles. Brief stops at road works give us time to look round or rather look up. It's warm but humid and the gradient is no problem but I don't remember much downhill (because there isn't any). The rock walls must be unstable as we pass rope workers high above pinning steel mesh to the crags

There is the odd habitation but only one village of any size, though it does have a smart hotel on the left over the river. The road works with their temporary traffic lights have another beneficial effect, instead of a steady stream of traffic (in truth it's not that busy anyway) we get short pulses of 4 or 5 cars when they are released by the lights. In between we have the pass to ourselves.

It seems a shame but suddenly we are out of the gorge and go straight from claustrophobia to agoraphobia, as the road widens and we are out in the open and there to our right is a stupendous view over towards a cluster of massive limestone peaks, if you Google Picos de Europa these mountains will probably be in the first three images.



Portes demands a coffee and Fanta stop with lots of ice. Michael always puts any surplus ice in his bidon to cool it down. We leave Portes by the wrong road and have to make a U-turn and ride back through it. Once out and on the right road the scenery makes it very apparent now that we are going Alpine, and most of the scenery is below us. From here it's 25 kilometres to the top, Mont Ventoux is 22 kilometres, but probably with a higher average gradient.

There's a couple of huge birds circling high above us and then alongside of us and then finally below as we climb. We've noticed them before and I had previously mis-identified them as Condors (we must be lost, Condors are a South American bird) but they are Vultures. In popular imagination Vultures wait patiently in the heart of Africa circling on the Veldt while the lions have their fill, or they sit up in trees and talk with scouse accents. Now who'd have thought there were Vultures in Spain?

The Puerto San Gloria steepens and steepens and as we head on up punching holes in the stratosphere we get into our "portamanto" routine, one rising, one falling back. There's an old couple in a small field with pitch forks ruffling the hay. There's a road gang working from a small depot, cutting the verges. At a small hamlet in lieu of a garage a car is parked nose first into a bus shelter. And suddenly out of nowhere two racing snakes come flying up past me, the one on the front sat down spinning, the second rider is out of the saddle his jersey unzipped. I offer them an "up, up, up, up, up!" and the second rider laughs, and then they've gone. If not pro's then they were elite level. Not long after I stop for a minute and have a gel, not because I particularly need one but just to break up this remorseless climb. I refrain from looking at Garmin's elevation screen, I don't want to know how far I am from the summit, I'll know when I get there.

Hairpins start now and they staircase high above me as I look up, flowering gorse growing in between in the loops. Then rounding one hairpin Michael is there, bike parked up and helmet off. I mistakenly think this is the top but it's just a viewing stop with a metal statue of a deer which must represent something. Pictures taken it's a another three or four kilometres of steep section to the top and that's it.



Then we are at the top proper and we stop briefly for pictures at this high point of the tour then head off down. On the descent we leave the province of Cantabria behind and drop in to the province of Castilla y Leon and the drop off is nothing like the ascent, narrow with tortuous curves and a lousy pitted and cracked surface that has us braking and bouncing off our line on the bends. Luckily it's only about seven or eight kilometres from the top to our hotel for the night.



We are early at the small hotel which seems shut but walking round it appears the entrance is to the rear and walking past the snoozing dog and its kennel with the pantiled roof I go in. We are a bit early to get to our rooms so settle for coffee sat outside and discuss and re-live a stunning day on the bikes. The hotel is small and impressively clean (as all our digs are - clean that is not small) and looks like it's geared up for skiing in winter and walking in summer. The bikes just fit inside the small beer store opposite. In the lobby there is a multi-lingual sign asking us to take our shoes/boots off and a selection of

Crocs available for those who have their big toe poking through their socks. The room is great if a bit dark with just one Velux letting light in and a small window at floor level, it later becomes apparent why when we are sat in the bar. The hotel is built to avoid losing heat, and there are photos of the road out front blocked by huge snow drifts up to and over the eaves of the houses. Funny that I would never have associated the words "Spain" and "snow drift" before today.

I have energy to spare now so I can take Mick up on his invitation for a stroll before tea. And Portilla de la Reina is well worth the energy consumption. A small community hunkered down from the weather in a cleft in the rock, it follows the river upwards then abruptly stops. Trout swim in the clear shallow water. We also start seeing the scalloped shell symbol for the Camino de Santiago, the pilgrims' route. We must have seen them before but now that we've got our eye in they become ubiquitous so that by the time we get to Leon we are tripping up over them.



We eat in the small bar later with two Spanish walkers, which then turns busy when a couple of families come in for drinks and a chat, it's a nice, friendly atmosphere. It would be a good place to get stranded in, in snow drift weather

Portilla de la Reina to La Candana de Curueno

49.99 miles, 3 hrs 28 mins, 2,523 ascent. Max elevation 4,028ft.

"Bonar is served by buses from Leon but also has a train connection to Santander on the private FEVE network. It's a somewhat bleak place like much of this region"

Northern Spain Handbook

Breakfast is lost to me now but we had it back down in the bar. I know I remember a good night's sleep. Due to its isolation there was very little ambient light and the room was pitch black which I like. Back home on my street there are that many security lights and LEDs lighting up the fronts of houses that it's like sleeping in the middle of the Blackpool illuminations. Mick has given us a choice of routes for today, a fifty mile mostly downhill or a 72 mile mostly uphill, and with over 6,000ft of uphill, though on paper, scenically, the longer route is the better route. I don't recall much debate between us over which route to take, in fact I don't recall any debate as we head mostly downhill.



It's nippy outside at this altitude despite the morning sun and not long after, for the first and last time, we dig out the leg warmers from the bottom of the panniers, putting them on using the Armco for support. Also for the first time in Spain we come across a large body of water. The poor road turns into good, wide smooth road as it skirts the lake or rather reservoir as it has the appearance of a recently flooded valley with partially submerged trees jutting from the water. As the water condenses in the cold the rising mist is caught by the sun, make for eerie and atmospheric cycling.

I've stopped to take loads of photos and Mick is waiting for me at the dam. This dam and the new roads smacks of Euro millions. Just over the next hill the mist is lifting to reveal on our right another huge limestone sharks fin peak and another body of water. If this isn't a photo opportunity I don't know what is. Further down the road I wait for Michael and we fix the LEDs as there is a tunnel ahead. Mick dislikes tunnels more than me, and I ride in fairly cautiously. It's downhill but well lit but I can't see the end and the road is slick with drips from the arched ceiling. I am going too slow for Mick though who is shouting for me to go faster. We exit the tunnel which leads us over a dam then straight into another tunnel. The last one fortunately.

Our descent eventually drops us into the valley bottom, the road sandwiched between river and rock face, small villages appear where space allows. The day is hotting up rapidly and the leg warmers are once again consigned to the panniers. At a T-junction we stop for coffee at an isolated small cafe surrounded only by fields. I get shut of half a ton of Euro change that's been jangling away in the kitty and holding me back on the climbs. We ask if there is anywhere to get dinner and he says about five clicks in the direction we are going there are shops. We miss them.

I stop to root out a gel from the top bag as we are at the bottom of a steep hill and I could do with something to eat. Near the top on the right, is the surprising sight of colliery winding gear. And like I



never associated Spain with snow drifts, neither did I associate it with industry in general and coal mining in particular; Sombreros', chorizo and stuffed donkeys yes, but not narrow seams and pit head baths. I stop to photograph. I have an affinity with coal mining, my father was a collier. He once took me and my brother underground with him one Saturday under the guise of a school trip. Now every time I ride through Bank Hall I always touch my cap to those colliers and to my father and uncle and others of my family that worked underground. And that far below under my feet (though more accurately somewhere below Cliviger), on the face at the bottom of "Dip 4" are still my initials in white chalk.

Over the hill an old man walks across the road, nothing unusual there, on his feet he has a pair of wooden sabots, bit unusual, but what really is unusual is that on the soles of the sabots are two wooden ribs running laterally across the fore foot and heel, raising the sole off the ground. I can only think that they are made like that to raise the wearer out of water on wet ground, or a flooded coal face maybe? And being wood they wouldn't spark.

On the left is a shepherd, a bag slung across his shoulder just sauntering behind the flock, his two big white dogs doing all the shepherding for him. There's no urgency in either him, the dogs or the sheep, each knowing their roles, the sheep constantly grazing the sparse grass as they walk.

And then it's Bonar whose only entry in the guide book are details for transport on how to get out of the place. Mick goes and does the dinner shop and then just on a ways we stop for coffee. As we ride off looking for a place to sit there are road closures and in the distance horns sounding. We find and sit down in a square which then explains the road closures and blaring horns; the square is full of lorries and we've bumped into the local lorry fest. And it's quite entertaining too, lorries of all shapes, sizes and ages. Eventually they all set off for another drive-by leaving us sat in a cloud of diesel fumes and deafened by the cacophony of air horns. Again I can't see why the guide book was so down about this place, it may not have had grand buildings and wasn't perched half way up a magical, mystical mountain but what I saw of Bonar was ok with me.

And now we can afford to dawdle as the notes for tonight's stay says the doors don't open until 7.30. And it's only mid-afternoon. "Why don't we ring to see if we can get in earlier" suggests Mick as we sit sweltering outside a bar drinking coke, admiring the dilapidated building opposite. Well, talking face to face in poor Spanish is one thing but talking down the phone in it is another. So here goes and I've dropped lucky as the lady on the other end speaks good English; Mick is in stitches at my enunciation as I put on my posh phone voice. "Whenever you want" she says in answer to my question about arrival times. Forty-five minutes later, after first riding past the row of houses we are stood outside and knocking on a large double door designed to keep out armies. The lady answers and lets us in to a small courtyard and just when you thought the accommodation couldn't get any better we've just walked into Wonderland. Vines hang down from trellis work and cables strung overhead and the courtyard is at once flooded with light but shady too. We introduce ourselves and our bikes are left propped up against a wall. We are shown up the stairs on to a wooden balcony and ours is the end room.



Unusually, after we've got our admin sorted, it's Mick who heads to his bed for a doze. I go and sit outside for an hour, marveling at and enjoying the magic of this place, the midges rising, the smell of the early evening heat, enjoying the peace and quiet and mesmerised as the swallows swoop in, astonishingly fast and low to their nests in the recess for the room next door, only to pull up at the last second.

The evening meal is taken downstairs in the small dining room attached to the bar. I ask the lady about her English and she tells us she worked as an au-pair in London in the 80s. She says my Spanish is fine whereas I suspect that to a Spanish person I sound like Zoonie off Fireball XL5. The food and wine are excellent.

La Candana de Curueno to Leon

24.27 miles, 1hr 42 mins, 861ft ascent. Max Elevation 3,164ft.

"It doesn't get easier, you just get faster"

Greg Lemond.

One of the many things I enjoy about these tours is the simplicity of spending all day for days on end riding the bike. And it almost feels akin to how the Irish writer Brian O Nolan / Flann O'Brien / Myles na gCopaleen postulated - after years of riding bikes man and bike would, due to the constant bumping on rough roads, fuse to become a man / bike hybrid. Back home I ride the bike quite a lot but mostly the real world intrudes (and if I had a pound for every time I'd heard "you spend more time on that bike than what you do with me!" I'd have my own private jet on standby). But here it's all about riding the bike and you become so attuned to it, it becomes an extension of you, understanding its every mood and every nuance, it becomes so natural you forget it's there.

Once again I am sorry to be leaving but after breakfast in the bar, I am fiddling with the panniers on the rack. I've long suffered from pannier envy where in contrast to the awkward clasps and strap and Velcro fitting on my bags, Mick's just slide easily on the rack, locate and lock. That's why he's across the road looking at Garmin, waiting, while I am cursing and trapping my fingers, still in the courtyard.

Officially it's the shortest day today, on the road, with an easy run in to Leon. We start off with a gentle leg warmer down through a wide lush valley. We leave this valley road behind at the junction with a main road and after all the miles on tricky, narrow roads at this wide benign junction I almost run smack into a bollard as I cut the corner off. And wouldn't you know this gentle run is not going to last as Michael notices a trio of bikes in the distance and the speed goes up as we start riding en bloc and hit the paceline. Then Mick slams the brakes on. At the top of a telegraph pole are some huge nests and stood on top of the nests are some huge birds - Storks. Mick turns in to a twitcher and is really taken with these birds and from now on every time he spots them he gets the camera out. Pictures taken Mick resumes the paceline to track down those riders, which we soon do. They must have thought it was a medical emergency or we were late for a train as these two lads on tourers, panniered up, come whizzing past them. Eventually I can't hold the pace, I'm on the rack and have to let Mick go, the lactic winning out over the endorphin.



We soon turn off and get back on the lanes and the land now turns in to the scrubby sub-meseta of my imagination. Small pueblos separated by dusty, arid land. The villages in Britain usually have the church and its graveyard situated in the heart of the community. Here the church is located centrally but the graveyard with its white walls and small chapel are away from the village and often on a prominence.

We reach some bluffs then start to descend on to the plain and I complain to Mick the Chevy feels unbalanced, skittish. On the outskirts of Leon looking round at the panniers I've got them wrong sided the left one with the tools, spares and shoes in is now on the right-hand side and the right pannier with my clothes in is on the left side. As we're on the outskirts of Leon it's not worth changing them round but I've lost percentage points with that gaff.

And Leon is great. There is hardly any sprawl to negotiate and we are soon safe within its walls. In the Plaza Mayor we stop for coffee opposite the cathedral currently being renovated. A man walks past, bread in one hand key in the other about to enter in to the building next door and starts talking to us, gesticulating and pointing at the telly nearby and then to the sky. A shrug of the shoulders and a

“Lo siento, no habla”. Ha! He’s complaining about the noise the crowd will be making outside his first floor flat tonight watching Spain playing in the World Cup. Obviously not a football fan.

Before leaving the Plaza Mayor we prop the bikes up against the large metallic letters L E O N for a photo op then go in search of our hotel. Avoiding pedestrians, we follow our ley line down ginnels and narrow lanes but it’s not far. We check in but because we are early, we can’t access our room for an hour or so but the helpful lady concierge says its ok for us to get changed here and leave our panniers with them in the hotel. The bikes go with Michael and the porter who take them down the street to overnight in an empty shop the hotel uses as a store. Back in the hotel the porter offers to stamp our pilgrim’s “passport” as proof of our progress to Santiago de Compostella.



We don’t have them but the hardcore pilgrims do and to qualify you must be making the pilgrimage under your own steam, walking is the favoured method but cycling is acceptable too. Also there is a certain distance you have to travel often starting proper from a recognised town or city usually with religious connections. The passport is stamped along the Camino as proof of the pilgrim’s dedication to the pilgrimage and it can gain the holder access to certain types of accommodation for the night and food or obtain discounts. Ten minutes later as we wander back to the Plaza Mayor I realise I have left my passport and the bulk of my Euros in the panniers. I am pretty sure I can trust them.



Everywhere we go, on the walls, on the floor, in the signage, is the scallop shell and Leon is bustling with back packing pilgrims so it must be a major way station on the Camino. As the pilgrims and tourists mingle it will get even busier by evening. We cafe hop a bit and have a sit-down dinner opposite a large curtain wall then walk on some more. Wasting time is fun in Leon. We eventually return to the hotel and my passport and Euros are still there. The room is great and it’s at the

back of the hotel so it’s quiet. A shower and a sleep then it’s back out in to the bustle of Leon. Mick wants to go to the Taxman, a bar themed on the Beatles which is fine by me, I am a fan of the Fab Four. It’s a bit of a trek but the bar is full of Beatles and 60s memorabilia, and better still with every drinks order come peanuts, then crisps, then olives. Surprisingly we struggle to find anywhere to eat as it’s early and end up walking back across town to a pizza place courtesy of Michael’s phone. Afterwards we head back towards the Plaza Mayor and there is a good-looking bar in a good-looking building so we head in, only to stand at the bar for five minutes being completely ignored. Maybe we had to order from a table or maybe the staff were just plain surly? We’ll never know because we left. It’s all good though, we discover a brew pub, The Four Lions, just round the corner in the shade, serving wheat beer, lagers and ales. I enjoyed Leon and it was good to have a short day on the bike and a long day off it, being tourists.

Leon to Congosta

55.27 miles, 3hrs 58 mins, 2,686ft ascent. Max elevation 3,002 ft.

*“And smale fowles make melodye,
that sleepes al time with open ye,
so priketh hem nature in hir courages,
thanne longden folk to goon on pilgrimages”
Book of Tales of Canterbury - Geoffrey Chaucer.*

After a good breakfast we collect the bikes then head back to the main square for more photos before getting back on Garmin’s purple pilgrim ley line. It’s warm already but the heat holds no terrors for us now, and I feel fully acclimatised. I am feeling fully fit too; still tired but the body has adapted well to the rigors of the road. For the first three days or so while I wasn’t exactly counting them off to the end of this adventure when I could finally stop pedaling, but I was aware that the riding was much more challenging than I’d anticipated and Valladolid was a long way off. Not now, I am still counting down the days but ruefully, as I am aware that it’s the last week of our adventure. One of England’s most underrated bike racers Barry Hoban always wished the Tour de France lasted for four weeks and not three as he always felt stronger in the last week. And that’s how it feels to me now, I could go on easily for another week, a month even, what’s Christmas like in Spain? The whole experience is fantastic.

There is a bit more urban sprawl on this side of town, blocks of flats, access roads, cycle ways but soon enough we are back out on to the meseta, the high plain. Where there are low hills the land is “scrub” with small fields of wheat squeezed in between. Large Holm Oaks dot the landscape and things have

to be hardy to live here. This land is unforgiving in any season. Where the land is flat and open there is agriculture and we share the roads with large John Deeres, shelter belts and deep irrigation ditches to our side, their water sluggish and green. Many of the villages here don't seem to have benefited from The EU as well as others have?



Over the last few days many of the Castillo y Leon comunidad signs had been vandalised with the Castillo crossed out, looks like the Leonistas aren't happy at being incorporated with Castillo.

Stopping for a "comfort break" we get our last glimpse of the Picos over our shoulders, a hazy blue shadow sketched on the far horizon. I am sorry to be turning my back on them, they were kind to us and added much to our adventure. The ley line takes us on through isolated pueblos, some so small that they are basically farm yards, slurry caking our tyres. Often with one or two houses their dozing dogs turning indolence into a fine art, who welcome us as the highlight of their day, barking in salute at our passing, then having earned their crust going back to more lounging. Don't bother looking for these places on any road map, they aren't there.

At one of the pueblos we look for somewhere to sit to eat our bait, the first square has noisy dogs so we move on to the adjoining one. Sat there dishing out our dinner time treats an old lady appears and greets us. In response to our blank looks and "no habla" she says "Aleman? Francais?". "Inglesa" we reply, "ah" she asks "did Sean Dyche get that defender he was after in the last transfer window?" Actually she asks if we have enough water to drink, we have but it's a lovely gesture to two strangers passing through her village.

Just as I am flagging a bit, the meseta in its own way taking it out of my legs just as much as the mountains did, Michael says this is it, this small pueblo is our stop for the night. It's so far off the beaten track that the beaten track would be classed as a motor way. It just does not look big enough to offer any sort of accommodation. And again it's "oh-oh!" time, this doesn't look right! There is a "Casa Rural" sign pointing us 0.5k further down the lane which instantly turns to a rough metaled track. "Oh-oh!, This really can't be right? Surely?" as our bikes slip and skid on the loose surface, taking us further away out in to the badlands. Then we are there, turning right over the small stream into a car park with a few status cars parked up. This is Hotel El Molino (the Mill). It's a large building set half into the hill side. We ride up a ramp and on to the terrace. It's dark inside when I go to book us in; the lady is friendly and we have to rely on my wobbly Spanish, but they are expecting us. The bikes go into the yard round the back and we go upstairs. I shame now at my earlier misgivings this place is great and has a hunting lodge feel to it, and it's a shrine to the wild boar with virtually every wall hung with pictures of it, wanted dead or alive.



After admin there isn't much else to do or to go so it's down on to the terrace for coffee. We walk back in to the bar to order and there's two men in camo gear sat at the counter discussing the finer points of deflection shooting on a fast running Wild Boar "it's easy, you just don't lead the sow as much as the boar". They look up to check us out, then get straight back to their conversation "now I am not saying

your Nikon is a bad scope, far from it, but give me a ten power Unertl every time". They ignore us not because we are foreigners but because we haven't come here to shoot things and therefore are of no interest to them. Spain has a large population of Wild Boar with some tens of thousands of them, which some would argue needs culling and I think it's open season on them, not sure? I suspect El Molino exploits a bit of a niche.

In the late afternoon heat we order wine and beer and tapas which is taken on the terrace in the company of a group of kids who turn up on bikes, buy bottles of pop and eat their own sandwiches out of tin foil wraps chattering away to each other and their phones. Meanwhile a little albino terrier takes a shine to us or rather takes a shine to anyone who sends its stone chase skittering across the tiled floor for it to be retrieved and kicked again - repeat. The tapas is good and probably made out of Wild Boar extremities, we eat lots, working our way down the counter. The meal isn't until 9.00pm, a bit too late for hungry ciclistas. To find this place go to the middle of nowhere and from there it's just a mile down the road, this mill out in the middle of the meseta.



Congosta (Spain) to Braganca (Portugal)

64 miles, 5hrs 25 mins, 5,289ft ascent. Max elevation 3,598ft.

"The bicycle has a soul. If you succeed to love it, it will give you emotions that you will never forget"
Mario Cipolloni.

Another day, another country. We breakfast back in the bar served by the husband, again I think it's bread, cheese, ham, jam and cake. He shows Mick the before (a ruin) and after pictures of this place. The bikes are retrieved from the yard and it's back down the gravel to the road. Once again Mick has come up trumps with the accommodation conjuring up this gem out of nowhere.

There is an early coffee stop in a small isolated bar, but it's welcome, the riding is lumpy breaking up any rhythm and it's hot as always. I think it was this day, I can't remember for sure but it doesn't matter that much; we are descending down a fast, empty road and there is a long strip of black rubber that has shredded from a lorry tyre. It's about 1m in length, at a right angle to the verge. I am doing 25+ so I am not going to risk riding over it, I point it out to Mick and swing out into the middle of the road to go around it. At the bottom Mick says "did you see it?", "yeah that strip of rubber, I wasn't going to ride over it, it could have had wire in it", "No, it was a bloody big snake!". Spain has thirteen species of snake, seven of which are venomous and later it's identified as a Seoane's viper, one of the biters. We come across a large green snake a day or so later. There are a small number of deaths from snake bites in Spain every year. Now I don't have ophidiophobia but up until then our comfort stops have been taken discreetly in the scrub at the side of the road, not anymore and I now stand bang in the middle of the road when I have a pee.



We don't really come across anywhere of any size until we get to Puebla de Sanabria and as it's nearly dinner we stop at the local supermarket. While I am inside the kitty money goes to my head and I fritter part of it away on a large bag of spiced, roasted sweetcorn. Just as we are about to set off in search of somewhere to sit down and eat, Michael's phone rings and it's, well if not exactly bad news, it is unusual. It's a lady from Booking.Com letting us know that our accommodation for tomorrow night in Ceadea has been damaged due to fire and is not now available. The owner is able to offer us an alternative about 19 kilometres away from our original accommodation. But that could be in any direction and way off our route. After a quick confab we decide to be masters of our own destiny and book our own accommodation.

We only get as far as the edge of town when we come across the ideal spot to stop and eat. There is a large grassed area next to a large river, with shady trees and looking down on us from the top of the crag a large castle. I share out the goodies and apologise for my lack of financial constraint with my impulse buy of the roasted sweetcorn. They turn out to taste brilliant and we are both hooked, and I instantly want to buy the franchise and start exporting them to Britain. Before we leave we pay a visit to the cleanest, best kept public toilet in Europe. The castle and crag soon lose their appeal as we have to ride up the hill past them.



And now we are stood in Portugal only we aren't sure if we are. We've ridden some distance since our dinner stop so we can't be far off. We had to stop at the edge of a small village when a campervan kept blocking us with its irregular stopping and starting. We've ridden over a harsh set of cobbles and beyond the village on to a bridge on our left. I guess we must be in Portugal because there is the Portuguese flag; if there was a border I certainly didn't see it.



As we stop to take it all in an old man walks past "buenas tardes" I say, and he hits the roof, shouting and cursing at me and covering his head with a cardigan that's draped across his shoulders. We thought afterwards that this son of the soil just didn't want his photo taking and this being Portugal maybe he also took exception to my Spanish salutation. And I wasn't going to argue with him, over his shoulder he was carrying a large rake and a vicious looking mattock. Mick notices a bar under the flag and we ride over for ice cold Coke.

The riding is lumpy, taking us through long isolated stretches of scrub and stands of pines, their resin scenting the hot air. There is a theory that this lovely air freshener smell, pleasant to us is actually the trees suffering heat stress releasing chemicals to warn other trees. Sounds daft? Trees in one form or another have been around millions of years and are far more complex than previously thought, for example it's only recently that science has started to understand the symbiotic relationship between certain fungal mycelium and the root hairs, fine filaments that cover the root tips, a relationship without which some tree species just wouldn't survive.

At a T-junction not far from Braganca Michael points out that he can see Pendle; Poor lad, the sun has finally got to him and he's hallucinating he thinks he's back in Nelson! Yet there in the distance, there it is in outline - Pendle Hill, or its Portuguese doppelganger. I know everyone somewhere in the world is supposed to have a double, didn't realise that it applied to hills as well!

We eventually drop down on to the outskirts of Braganca where Michael is almost side-swiped by a car turning right on to a motorway slip. Once in town it all gets a bit confusing, turning up streets only to retrace and there is a weird junction in what looks like the centre of town where everyone and no one has priority, which we cross warily then turn round to cross again. Michael ends up going in to a dry-cleaners where the helpful lady points out the next street down or rather the small ginnel. It's a boutique hotel tonight and thoroughly modern. The bikes go down a floor into a store room and we go up two floors to ours.

Not sure what to make of Portugal in general and Braganca in particular. For one thing, even though we are only just over the border, Portugal isn't Spain. And Braganca seems to be an eclectic mix of old quaint housing and white painted churches bumping up against en-trend plate glass architecture. On the main street (?) we aren't sure at which place to eat and settle on what looks a bit like a greasy

spoon take away but in our price range. Delivery lads on scooters waiting to dash off a take-away order sit idly on the kerb. It is noticeably busier than the other more upmarket places further along, which turns out to be a good sign. We choose to eat outside at a table on the pavement, inside there is a huge griddle over charcoal, the griddle choc full of large lumps of meat, everything from links of sausage to half chickens. I can't remember what we ordered now and there was definitely a language barrier but I know it was very good. Before going back into our hotel we stop for a beer in the bar opposite; I bet you won't find this place in any of the guide books for Braganca but dropping down the steps its cool, dark and old inside, the perfect local.

Oh and something else which is confusing about Portugal - we didn't realise but we've crossed an international date line. I don't know how we discovered it but we have jumped back to the future, and I have to turn my watch back an hour (Mick doesn't bother with watches) and coincidentally we are now on UK time too.

Braganca to Fornillos de Alista

49.94 miles, 3 hrs 54 mins, 4,252ft ascent. Max elevation 2,966ft.

*"Kunungr eru fimm,
kennick pér nafn allra,
ek em him sétti sjalfr".
Eriksmal*

After a good night's sleep in the well-appointed room we drop a floor or two for breakfast. It's my favourite, a help-yourself buffet so its lots of cereal, fruit, nuts and seeds and lots of toast with jam and Nutella but I make a hash of the toaster by adjusting the wrong controls. Mick settles the bill and carries the bikes up and out while I wait in the cool of the ginnel with the panniers.

We set off only for Mick to take photos of a large public art work on a roundabout. Garmin takes us down back streets on to a gravel track. We aren't having any of that and return to the public art and descend on the road we came in on yesterday, soon to turn off. "Now did I put my passport in?" I am sure I did but there's no harm in checking; Mick is too far in front to hear my shout as I stop for a root in my pannier. A lady walking past says something but since my Portuguese only stretches to "hello, thank you, frog, mouse and rat", it's not much of a conversation. It's there as I always knew it would be. Dropping downhill there is no sign of Mick. I get to a junction where we turn right and start to climb, as there is still no sign of Mick I have to follow the purple ley line. About 0.5 kilometre into the climb Mick comes whizzing past with a salutation, I throw one back at him, he's just frightened the life out of me. He's stopped for a pee and seen me go past - I never heard his shout.



It's hilly and hot and we drop down past a small hamlet and on to a bridge, Two small rusty metal plaques representing the Portuguese and Spanish flags stand shoulder to shoulder in the middle of the bridge. This is all that's left of the border. There is a small customs post on the Portuguese side but that's long closed or maybe it's just mothballed in anticipation of a Portugexit or a Spexit. Then something weird happens, or maybe not if you think about it, as we move about on the bridge the time on our Garmin alters. It's that international date line, and we've become "time travellers" jumping forward one hour to Spanish time then jumping back to Portuguese time depending on which side of the border we are. There are hours of fun to be had here walking backwards and forwards, confusing Garmin.

On the first hill in Spain we ride under a modern concrete road bridge, and high above our heads scores of Swifts circle under the decking, they must have nests there built into the structure, whether by accident or design I'll never know.

On the outskirts of San Vitero we have a coffee stop then move on into the village to buy dinner. It's a sleepy place but there is a shop selling groceries, walking in I get a bit of a shock, it's a hardware shop even though it plainly says Alimentacion painted on the wall outside. My confusion is noticed by the friendly young woman who ushers me in to an adjacent room. Ah! This is the food part. I gather up sardines, cold bottles of water but no bread. At the counter the lady swaps the water I've selected with other bottles, I think she's says something like "these are better value". I ask for bread and she dashes off to reappear with a bag of sliced white, but she wrinkles her nose and shakes her head and

instead leads me outside and gives me directions to the panaderia up the street. I urge Mick to go in and have a look round, not telling him about the hardware bit. When he's back out with cokes, he's laughing. We set off up the hill looking for the bakery and inadvertently ride past it. At a square at the top of the hill three old lads come to our aid and turn us around back down. Outside the panaderia the owner who by now has been tipped off is stood outside waving us down. After all this kindness and help it seems unreasonable only to buy 1 Euro's worth of bread so I buy a big bag of cake buns too. Now for somewhere to eat, there is a bench and table but it looks like it's in someone's garden but just across the road are the local council offices. I go inside and there are two ladies and a child, I ask if we can eat at the seating outside - no problem, help yourself. Just as we get sat down they appear and lock the place up saying goodbye to us. Obviously we never leave any litter behind whenever we stop but someone before us has so when we leave we even pick that up too lest they think it's us that's left it. Welcome to San Vitero, friendliest village in Spain.



At a crossroads is an old stone cross. Once an isolated spot in the middle of this great high plain; perhaps a way marker for travellers - pilgrims and mule trains. Now modern travellers don't give it a second glance but it's easy to imagine here dirty deeds done dirt cheap. It has an air of ambush and a dagger held to the jugular of a lone pilgrim's throat as he's relieved of his meagre belongings. I like these remote places, and it reminds me of the Reaps Cross high on the watershed catchment above Upper Gorple, a monastic cross perhaps. Or the Rey Cross "at a certain lonely place called Stainmore" up on the Brough/Bowes road, or what's left of it sat alongside the modern A66. It is classed as a "stump cross" which sums it up perfectly. It has a supposed connection to a dark age Viking King, Erik Blodoxi (Bloodaxe) who may have died somewhere nearby along with his hearth troop, defending his kingdom, lured out from his powerbase in York. It's possibly a memorial to him set up by his supporters, as befits a Viking warrior king who dies in battle. His wife commissioned the Eriksmal (see the stanza above) a poem or drapa about his life - "Kings there are five, them all I shall name" brags Erik to Odin as he arrives at Valhaol bearing his wounds from the field of battle "I am the sixth". Rey is a derivation of hreyyr which means a boundary in Old Norse so is it a grave marker (Erik's?), a memorial or is it a boundary, or all three?

We now have to find our hotel having crossed over the main road with its sensible left turn loop allowing us to negotiate it in safety. As Michael is checking Garmin I ride on a little and it's there on the left. I introduce us and go through the passport formalities, the lady concierge opens an adjoining door and the bikes go into the function room downstairs. I ask if we can eat here tonight "si" she confirms.

The room is good and from the window a short way off across some waste land we can see the main road which means that this village and its hotel is effectively bypassed by all traffic consigning it back to a backwater. Going downstairs we sit in the bar drinking coffee and beer at the counter and it's nice sitting here reading El Pais, the television on the wall tuned to the Tour de France, Perico the summariser. Men wander in and out drinking, talking, and for twenty minutes or so sat on that bar stool I enjoy being a local in Fornillos de Alista. We can't stay there all evening though so we go have a look round the pueblo. A donkey brays in the distance and a dog scavenges round the recycling skips and sat in front of us is a small built barn perched on top of a massive free-standing boulder. At the other side of the church we find a bar and we sit outside with Fanta and beer. In the shade of a small apple and cherry trees it's so pleasant that we have another, Michael goes in to buy more beer and pop and says to the owner "muy tranquilo" which pretty much sums this place up.



It's a shame to leave but it's nearly tea time so it's back to the hotel. While we wait in the bar having an aperitivo I call Mick's attention to something pinned to the wall behind the counter. Neither of us can scarcely believe it as there, bold as brass, in this small bar, in this small hotel, in this small pueblo out in the Spanish hinterland is a pennant, a proud white rose on a blue background - the Yorkshire flag. How the heck did that get there? Unfortunately we've not enough language to ask so we'll never know. We are ushered into the dining room and order off the menu. We also ask for a glass of wine and another beer for Mick. The beer and wine are served first but instead of the glass of wine I've ordered the waitress brings a full bottle. Now we are in a bit of a quandary, does the full bottle go on the bill? In that case it's far too much for me but it'd be rude to leave any, or do we pay just for what we've had, e.g. one glass. Later I text a mate who travels a lot in Spain but he doesn't know either and texts back "you're on your hols, get it supped". Mick comes to the rescue and we finish the bottle off between us. It's probably academic anyway, the bottle would have only cost a couple or so Euros.



Fornillos de Alista to Villalpando

53.37 miles, 3hrs.48 mins, 3,022 ft ascent. Max elevation 3,250ft.

"Ruta frequentada

POR CICLISTAS

RESPETALO"

Spanish road sign.

After breakfast in the bar we leave the lovely village of Fornillos and are straight back out in to the boonies. The coffee was good. And soon we are riding on the worst road of the whole trip, the meseta is fine, no problems there but it's a leg sapping first forty minutes for sure just trying to make forward progress. The mild gradient isn't the problem either, but for the first few kilometres the carriageway is severely degraded, twisted, full of loose chippings and cracks and ruts; imagine riding through super glue dragging a sack of spuds. There is absolutely no roll to the road. However, here's the reward. Michael is waiting for me at its junction with probably, not just the best road in Spain but in the whole of Europe. In complete contrast to its smaller sibling this road is big, wide and modern and is coated with the most beautiful, super slick, fast rolling, black asphalt you'd ever want to ride on. Couple that with the undulating terrain and it makes for fast, smooth and exciting riding. And just when you think things can't get any better there is a total absence of any traffic. In my head I do a cars per mile calculation and for something like the eighteen miles or so we are on this road I don't think a total of more than ten cars come past us, either way. So much so that when a car does have the impudence to be on our road it makes me jump. At first I wonder if it's Sunday which may explain the lack of cars but it's not, it's a Thursday.



As we ride though the pueblos many of the houses have bottles of water in various sizes left delivered on the door step. I put this down to them being so far out on the meseta that they are "off grid". I am wrong.

We pass over modern infrastructure, new bridges and mostly empty motorways, it looks like Spain is future proofing itself with the aid of teraflops of Euros from Brussels. The views are fantastic and we can almost see the curvature of the earth over the endless fields, some full of wheat waiting for harvest, some harvested with the recently tilled soil baking in the heat. Grain silos shimmer and appear almost as apparitions on the hazy far horizon. In small pueblos men and dogs languish outside bars; only mad dog English trouble to exert themselves in this clean, dry, heat. Hectares of sun flowers start to make their presence felt and we both enjoy taking photos of them despite the cliché.



Also there are Stone (or Umbrella) Pines and these small trees, with their habit a broad dark dome crown on a short bole are well adapted to the meseta. Seeing them here and now I realise I ride or walk past three of them most days back home almost without noticing them. One is in a back garden

and two are part of a highways verge planting scheme. With their large globose cones the ones in cold and damp Burnley are growing way beyond their natural range, giving testimony to the general hardiness of plants. Later, each time I walk past them my mind goes back to their favoured habitat.

Villalpando comes in to view and we ride down its long work-a-day main street with its non-descript low rise flats, workshops, it looks like agri-industry is its main stay and a large grain silo would confirm this. The hotel is right at the far end. Standing at the bar waiting for a pause in the serving I introduce myself to the Danny de Vito look-a-like barman who gives me short shrift and passes me over to the other barman. The bloke is much more helpful and signs us in and then I rejoin Mick to take the bikes round the side. He's waiting for us at a large shutter door and the bikes go in the store area. Our room is on the first floor, just past the busy dining room which is a good sign mid-afternoon.

We have a coffee in the bar before going to have a look round Villalpando but it's obvious there's not going to be much to see unless you are a big fan of dust and diesel spills. Mick as usual can't sit still and is reading all the notices pinned up around the room, "what do make to that one?" he says indicating with a thumb over the shoulder. Curious, I go and have a look at a sheet of A4 sellotaped to a nearby pillar. With its municipal stamp of authority one word stands out "arsénico". "What's that about" I ask "it looks like it's something to do with arsenic?". Michael takes a photo of it on his phone which then translates it in to English. And it turns out that's exactly what it is. This official document informs the local population that there has recently been a spike in the level of arsenic and fluoride found in the local drinking water exceeding safe WHO levels. It has now dropped back to within an acceptable range but certain at-risk groups, the old, pregnant and infirm should avoid drinking it. This is a bit of a concern as we've both been drinking litres and litres of the supply water. Going online looking for information I find these toxins can leach into the ground water and are often released as a consequence of local agriculture or mining. On the effects and symptoms of arsenic poisoning it seems that we aren't really at risk, we haven't had prolonged exposure and if we have ingested any it'll soon be flushed out of our system. It's bottled water from now on but one thing I did notice once I'd changed from supply to bottled, that tainted water was certainly keeping me regular.

We get another surprise too once we leave the hotel for a late afternoon stroll, once away from the main drag, Villalpando has an old town. Walking past the Guardia Civil building which has more cameras than the BBC into a maze of narrow streets that lead us on into the large Plaza Mayor. And as it would be rude not too we select a bar for an aperitivo. We grab a table outside and going inside to order it's cool and dark, the bar groaning with tapas. With wine and beer on the counter she asks me which tapas I want, I am spoilt for choice so I ask her to choose, exasperated she shrugs and fills a plate. Sat outside with a glass of wine and the salty anchovy tapas this lovely square is an absolute pleasure.



Testimony to the wealth of this small town is the number of various banks dotted about the square; don't think I saw a Marsden Building Society though. Exploring further we are rewarded with castle walls and a recently renovated bastions and gatehouse then with nothing else pressing we go and sit back at our table for more aperitivos and to enjoy the now bustling Plaza Mayor.

Back at the hotel dining room for 8.00 my request of a glass of wine turns out to be another bottle put on the table but this time Mick refuses to help me out so ruefully I only have the one glass.

Villalpando to Valladolid

53.37 miles, 3hrs 47mins, 2,034ft ascent. Max elevation 2,810ft.

"Later, much later, I was lifted to my feet and half-led, half-carried outside. Then, stretched fast asleep in the back of the car, I was driven like a corpse to Valladolid"

As I walked Out One Midsummer Morning - Laurie Lee.

Today is a day of "lasts" so this is the last time on the road that we'll have breakfast. After collecting the bikes we head off towards Medina de Roseca. Heavy storms have been forecast for the afternoon so I am keen to get a move on as we will be riding across a plain with little or no shelter and sharing a ditch with venomous snakes snapping at our ankles while lightning cackles round our ears is excitement I can easily do without. As soon we leave Villalpando it becomes apparent that it's not going to be the easy processional ride we thought it would be. We ride straight into a bloc headwind, a north easterly blowing in from Russia. We have it without any respite until the afternoon.

It's cool riding so for the first time since Portilla de la Reina the arm warmers go on. Mick tells me later he hated this headwind so he must have channelled that aggression into the bike as on every little rise he just powers away from me. By the time we get to Medina de Roseca the clouds are rolling in. We stop to buy dinner then Mick calls for a coffee stop. I'd like to crack on a bit further but who can refuse coffee and cake and so this becomes the last time on this holiday we'll have a mid-morning stop. The two blokes in front of me order their coffee and cakes which look so good I am going to ask for the same as what they are having. It turns out that I don't have to, the cakes come complementary with the coffee.

Brew stop over we take the wrong road, soon realise and turn left and ride at a right angle through the town back to our ley line. We must be going through the old town given the look of the buildings when we are stopped in our tracks. Stood in front of a church is one of the strangest pieces of religious iconography imaginable and it creeps the b'Jabers out of me. It's a half sized bronze statue of a man and a boy, the man has a staff in his right hand, and appears to be striding forward purposely, his head covered with a hood with two large rough black holes cut out for his eyes, his body cloaked in a gown hanging down to the ground. His left hand is holding the hand of the boy whose hair is maybe cut in a monk's tonsure. The man could be a penitent as similar garments are often worn for Easter religious festivals. I am left wondering what this strange figurative sculpture symbolises, standing outside this church.



Leaving Medina de Roseco behind we are initially on a busy dual carriage stretching up and over some hills in the middle distance. Thankfully that's not for us and just as I start to worry about being stuck on this road we veer left, then right and we are back on quiet lanes taking us through the scrub. In a small pueblo we sit by the church and for the last time eat our dinner.



And as it's our last day with all the grunt over and done with and nothing to save our legs for tomorrow we set up our own paceline. Now that the wind has dropped we up the tempo on these flat roads and head for Valladolid. We pass through vineyards, the countryside heavy with vines. There are also lots of Stone Pines and I can't decide if they are plantations or natural stands of trees.

The road is tilting us downwards towards Valladolid and we ride on modern roads which we leave briefly to find somewhere for a mid-afternoon coffee. We don't find one but we do find a large castle in the process of renovation, large cranes and porta cabins turning it into a building site. It's an imposing building occupying key ground dominating this approach to Valladolid. It would be even more spectacular if it wasn't sat in the middle of a housing estate surrounded by modern houses and hairdressers' shops. Once back on the road we are on the edge of Valladolid when Michael says "that's it, you took the sign". I never even noticed and feel lousy about it. That Valladolid place name sign announcing the fulfilment of our ley line which began all those miles and weeks way, way back in St Etienne and which, under normal circumstances I'd have sprinted myself inside-out for, was Michael's by right.



With no sign of the forecast storms we find our posada for the night after a bit of a wrangle with a Valladolidista, a driver who takes umbrage at us for not using the cycle lane, but it's mild stuff in comparison to what I have to put up with on a normal ride back home. We crisscross our way through a pedestrianised area to our hotel and book in. The helpful concierge locks our bikes in the function room, but I soon have to return to them, as while I am unpacking, I realise I've left my helmet fastened to the handle bars or rather I hope I have so I interrupt the concierge from his admin to retrieve it.

When Laurie Lee was here in 1935 I don't think he was over impressed with Valladolid, the highlight of his short stay was spent watching the muleteers watering their pack animals and avoiding bored soldiers and terribly disfigured beggars. He'd walked here via Zamora after he'd sailed, on a whim, to Vigo resolving to see Spain, mainly because he had a couple of Spanish phrases and wasn't doing much else at the time. We must have crossed his path somewhere just to the north east of Puebla de Sanabria. We drop off our key pass at the concierge, pick up a tear off street plan from the counter and go and see if they still water the mules in the turgid Rio Pisuergra.

We have a quick look at the town then walk back to our hotel laden with bottled water. As Michael is retrieving the pass and talking to the concierge there is a large gentleman and a small woman standing in the lobby. I realise I am partially blocking the stairs "sorry I'm in your way?" I enquire. Turns out they are Americans and the man is polite and says its fine they just are waiting for the concierge but the woman rounds on me, her face contorted into a grimace, giving her the appearance of someone who's just licked piss off a nettle "I'm from New Yawk" she snarls at me "if you was in my way you'd know about it - buddy!" Her voice harsh she draws that last word like a knife, turning "buddy" in to a threat. Obviously she's been to the Tony Soprano school of charm.

Later, going back into town we walk pleasantly but aimlessly around taking our ease outside the plentiful bars as the mood takes us. We'll have to find somewhere to eat but there's no push the wine and tapas will suffice for the moment. Going from square to square the weather is becoming more oppressive. We walk past a fountain with a full-sized sculpture of a reclining male nude, giving the impression that he's leaning back into the pool. His metal body is dark with the heavy patina of oxidation, that is save for one part of his anatomy that is rather shiny from the constant attention it gets from wandering hands. Modesty forbids me saying what part the shiny bit is but it makes passing ladies of a certain age go all unnecessary. They seem to have a fondness for peculiar statuary in this part of Spain.

Towards the Campo Grande we still haven't found anywhere to eat but what we do find is a road race and given the large amount of infrastructure in place we simply assume that it's a pro race. As the various teams wait for the start we walk amongst the support cars and riders either warming up or already warmed up and slumped over the handlebars, waiting for the start. There is a mobile stage on which the various teams and riders are introduced to the crowd over the PA. Even the officials are introduced. The event is also well marshalled with civilian, Guardia Civil Trafficos and the Policia National with cars and motor bike outriders. None of the Guardia and the Policia seemingly wanting to mix with the other. The whole plaza is buzzing with activity then as we approach the start gantry there's a sign announcing it as the "XXVII Vuelta Ciclista a Valladolid Junior". So it's not a pro race at all, all this is for a three day amateur junior event. It absolutely knocks us out and I can't help feeling that all this is Spain investing heavily on the next generation of top flight pro bike racers. And maybe also it's good training for all involved for the larger races too.



As we watch them depart the storm that has been forecast finally arrives and thunder crashes in over us as the racers leave the plaza in a plume of rooster tails, we dive headlong in to a Papa Johns across the road for shelter and pizza; they have an evening of racing in the wet ahead of them.

Hotel Roma to Estacion Norte Valladolid.

1.02 miles, 8mins 41secs.

Then to Santander by car.

Estacion de Tren de Santander to Plaza Bomba B&B.

0.58 miles, 6mins 11 secs.

*Double park, don't lock the door,
push the pedal to the floor,
Give it loads and then some more,
It's a hire car baby.*

*Rent it, dent it, bang it, prang it,
Bump it, dump it, scorch it, torch it,
crash it, burn it, don't return it.
It's a hire car baby.*

Hire car - Dr. John Cooper Clarke

It's Sunday and we have to check in the bikes ninety minutes before our train departs. The plan was to complete the tour in Valladolid then catch the train onwards to Santander for the ferry. As the train leaves at 8.45am we do without breakfast (which is always later on a Sunday) to ride across the Campo Grande to the Estacion Del Norte. Michael elects me to go and sort out the check in procedures and true to form whenever I take the lead on these things there's a problem. I show the tickets at the counter and the lady in decent English says "are these for the 7.30?" she asks pointing to the sleek white train standing over at the nearest platform. "er no its for the one after the 8.45". Studying the tickets she says "ah, there are no cycle spaces available on that train", "but we have tickets and reservations for two passengers and two bikes". She's not for budging though and how can she? If there is no space available for bikes on the train, then there's no space, no matter how much she wants to help. It's as simple as that. I go tell Michael the bad news, and we can't even transfer the tickets to another train as they are "tarifa promo" a promotion. Michael goes to find out more and returns flummoxed. It's about three hours to get to Santander so we'd got an early train booked to have this afternoon and all day tomorrow to be tourists. We also have a room booked for tonight and tomorrow night. To get tickets for the next train would cost us extra but that one doesn't leave until 5.54pm, there's nothing in between. And we'd have to find out if that one accepts bikes too.

Still we are nothing if not adaptable and I mention to Mick there was a Hertz office back in town; even better as we go outside there are three hire car offices right on the station. This seems to us to be the cheapest, easiest and realistically the only solution, so Michael gets his driver's licence out and wades into the one that's open. We end up with a Volkswagen Golf and in the car park we break down and pack the bikes in ultra-carefully (I ask a passing cleaner for some of the cardboard she's taking to the skip) to avoid damaging the upholstery, we set the sat-nav to Santander and set off. It's been a bit of a stress but this really was the only option, and it's worked out well considering.

The drive back is straight forward. We stop for breakfast in a small town just off the autovia. Sitting outside eating our breakfast the square is full of weary looking backpackers tramping their way along the Camino. I feel a pang of sympathy for them, at least we crossed the meseta relatively quickly, the terrain changing fairly rapidly. But not for them and they must have day after day of seemingly endless fields or scrub. Somewhere near Santander we cross our ley line of the previous week, I didn't recognise it.

After filling up the tank with petrol in Santander we embark on the "hire car drop off challenge". We can see the offices, in the station precinct but we can't weigh up how we get the car there and just end up in continuous loop mode in the one-way system. Finally and with nerves fraying we find the entrance to the precinct. The lady is just shutting up for the day and says drop the car keys through the letter box. We build the bikes back up, Michael takes photos of the interior and exterior of the car, then dropping the keys off we head back out into the one-way system again. It's not far to the Plaza Bomba and our hotel for the next two nights.

Santander

*"Ride as much or as little,
or as long or as short as you feel,
but ride".*

Eddy Merckx

In the early hours of the morning there is a shattering, clattering, banging on the hotel door. Our hotel occupies one floor of a large building on the edge of the Plaza Bomba. It's accessed by a large door at street level and a lift and stairway to a landing then a locked door with a buzzer to call for attention and access to the hotel and our rooms. There is no overnight concierge service. The bikes go in the store room, the racking full of spare mattresses, sheets and scores of five litre disinfectant containers. The banging and shouting and buzzing becomes more insistent. There is no way I am going to get up and let who knows who and how many, in who knows what condition, through that door. Take a phone next time or better still a key would be my advice as I put the earplugs in and roll over. Her cries go from irritation to pleading back to irritation before they finally stop when she's let in, presumably by her roomie sometime later.

After a good breakfast Michael goes for his morning walkabout then rings from the café on the corner, "there's a coffee here waiting for you mate". As we are sitting there letting the day slip away Michael says "a bit of a daft idea, why don't we go for a bike ride?". It's not daft at all, in fact it's a brilliant idea, so, coffee supped we walk back and pick up the bikes. Michael takes his bike down first in the lift and I press the call back button as soon as he leaves. For a while nothing happens, I wait some more. Still no lift, it should have been here by now. Getting fed up with waiting I shoulder the Chevy and lug it downstairs. Turns out someone had pressed the alarm button which stalled it and put it out of action until the next morning when the engineer turns up.

We head towards the port area then follow the sea front going from the chic, modern cantilevered building overlooking sea and mountains, past derricks, and dry docks, these silent relics of industry now part of a pleasant frontage for families to enjoy, the toil long gone. We follow a boardwalk which becomes sandier and sunken until it becomes just sand and we re-trace our route back along the front to the far end and the still working part of the harbour.



Our evening stroll takes us to a small bar serving food, one of us tries to order at the bar only to be directed to the menu on the wall with a note pad and small pens underneath. It's like a culinary Argos, you choose from the menu, write it on the pad, add your forename at the bottom and hand your slip of paper over at the counter together with your Euros. They call your name out when it's ready. On our way back at the top of a street there's an interesting looking door into a bodega so we walk up and stick our heads straight into another world. The entrance corridor is narrow with chairs down one side and bottles on dusty shelving stacked from ground to ceiling height. The floor is flagged and leads us on in to a bar. Round to the right is a seated dining area where hams hang in a profusion from hooks in the ceiling. I'll bet this place hasn't changed much since it was last modernised in 1907. It's just wonderful and bustling and atmospheric. We grab two of those chairs in the corridor and drink it all in along with our wines and beers. A family walks in and takes up the empty chairs next to us. They start encroaching on us and Mick out of politeness offers up his chair to the older lady. I can't help feeling that we're being flim-flammed out of our seating so they can all sit down together but who cares and I let them have mine too. They soon leave anyway and we get to sit back down again. I am seriously considering missing our ferry tomorrow, claim asylum then I can spend every night for the rest of my life propping up the bar in this bodega. I think we've had a glimpse back to an older Spain, one that Laurie lee would have been familiar with.

Bay of Biscay

"We're only two miles from land - straight down!"

Nautical saying

The ferry isn't until the middle of the afternoon so we delay as long as we can in the hotel but soon enough we have to vacate so we café hop round Santander until we can board. Sitting on the dock side when it's time we pass through the formalities easily enough, walk the bikes on to the far end of the car deck and lock them to the bulk head. We locate our berths way down in the labyrinthine depths of the ship. This is our home for the next 24 hours. Going back out on deck the engines vibrate to an almost unbearable pitch as the ship finally breaks the inertia and moves slowly away from the quayside. The crossing of the Bay of Biscay for the most part is uneventful and we go our separate ways spending time between decks and cabin, meeting for coffee and beer and meals. There is one moment of excitement, as I am half dozing in the cabin the lights suddenly go off and the dull background thump of the engines stop. It's suddenly pitch black and very quiet. I can hear hushed, puzzled voices in nearby cabins. I half expect to see water start seeping under the door. Mick is up on deck and probably right now stood at his muster station in a life jacket patiently waiting his turn for the life boat. Normality soon returns, the engines kick back in and the lights come on.



After docking in Portsmouth we are soon allowed to return to the car deck to pick up the bikes. I have a quick chat with a bloke who had his three week touring holiday on the bike round France ruined due to sun stroke. It's a short ride to the car hire firm but there is a glitch, the car Michael has ordered is late and it's been changed too, it's now a Kuga. No good says Michael, boot's too small. Through Michael's insistence we get a Ford Fiesta. It's the usual drill in breaking the bikes down and fitting them in. A quick stop at B&Q for pipe lagging and Tesco's for tea and we set off only to hit drive time traffic. We start making time once we've left Portsmouth. Southern England is parched brown and it's not until Staffordshire that the country starts to green up.

Back in the familiar territory it's the sleek silhouette of Pendle that's on the horizon now as Mick drops me off first, and all of the sterling work Mick has put into the planning and organising of this adventure is now almost complete. Mick will drive on home and return the car the next day. As I am walking up the drive to my house, carrying panniers and bike I can smell the honeysuckle growing in the back garden, its scent hanging in the still evening air, welcoming me back home.

It's winter now and hail is bouncing heavily off the window and I can't get out on the bike so I am spinning away on the turbo and even though I am sat in the perpetual twilight of my garage, my head is in the good, good sun of the Picos. And I am up there in the clear blue - the mountains and valleys and vultures are way below us as I ride the San Gloria Pass.

"The best rides are the ones where you bite off more than you can chew, and live through it"
Doug Bradbury - pioneer mountain bike builder.

D. Whittaker.