

Day 16. Into the Alps

I had arranged our accommodation via several emails with Anna Maria last February. The Verde Musica is a house on the edge of Borgofranco d'Ivrea and is on the Via Francigena, a pilgrim route from Canterbury to Bari by way of Rome, so I must have crossed it at least once on my journey already. Anna Maria speaks a little English and is most pleasant. The room was light and airy and the bathroom huge and we were able to do the washing and hang it to dry in the garden. This morning we had a good breakfast of yoghurt, bread and home-made jams and coffee and set off at 0859, Anna Maria having taken a photo that she wants to put on Facebook.

The first part of the journey dodged and dived on and off the SS26, fortunately not very busy and wide enough for comfort. We went through some pretty little villages and



found some bike lanes alongside the river Dora Baltea and, at one point had to squeeze into a recycling compound to get onto a bridge over the river. The weather was pleasant but chilly and we wore jackets for much of the day.



For the first time we were seeing cattle outdoors, herds of cows some with bells around their necks playing a bucolic symphony. There was little to test the legs until we had to get out of the river valley and back onto the main road when we suddenly had a sharp 17% pitch before winding along a narrow road with a cliff on one side. Luckily for us there were roadworks that we were able to cycle through whilst keeping away from the traffic.

The views were increasingly beautiful with townships with fortifications towering above



the river which we crossed several times. The scenery was becoming increasingly alpine with mountains high on either side of the valley that took an autostrada, a main road,

railway and river.

The road turned at right angles as it made its way to Aosta and we decided to follow it rather than the river valley which made Rita groan regularly. Fortunately we managed to be back on track in time for a lunch stop that I had scheduled at the IX Miglio Trattotria.



I had spaghetti and Rob had Calzone and we each had a small beer and a pitcher of fixxy water. All very nice and not too expensive but resulted in the third stop of the day for my companion.

Onwards to Aosta along a busy but wide road. Most of the heavy traffic was on the autostrada but there was the odd maniac driver so we had to keep our wits about us. In



the distance we could see Mont Blanc with snow still hanging on the side as we climbed steadily up the valley.

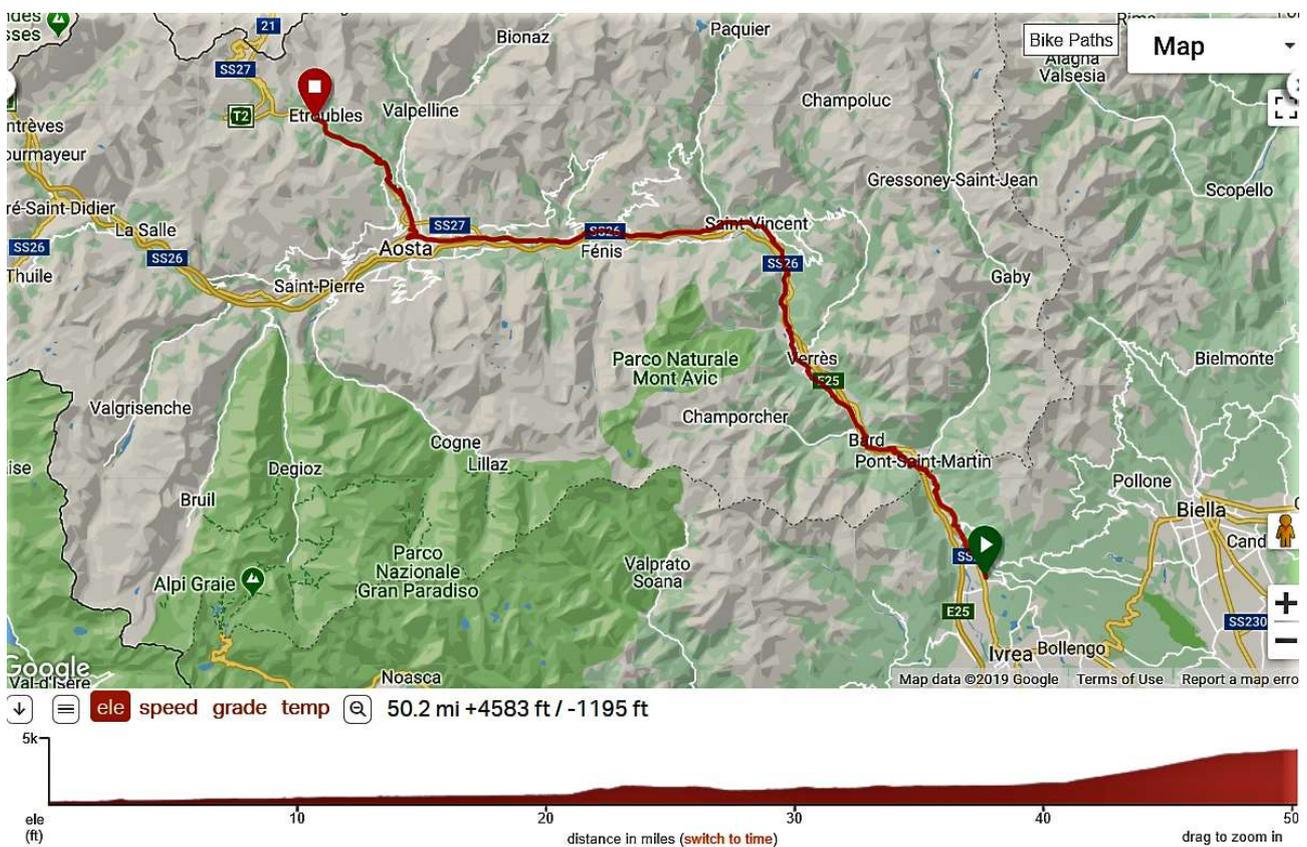
At Aosta we turned north and the climbing started. The first couple of miles were probably the steepest and Rob sped away from me on his lightweight bike. I calculate that with my weight and cycle panniers I am probably lugging about an extra 50 kg up



the hill to Rob so it's not surprising that he is able to accelerate away.

So progress was painfully slow. I was averaging about 5 miles an hour although I wasn't feeling particularly puffed. The legs are strong and able to keep turning on pretty much anything though they are sure to be tested tomorrow. About 3 miles from our destination, Etroubles, we met a strong headwind blowing down the valley. Again roadworks meant that we were able to stay off the main carriageway and we arrived at the Hotel Beau Sejour at about 4.15pm

Although the room is fine with a balcony for clothes drying, first impressions were not good when we were charged 3 euros each to garage the bikes and the hotel want an extra 3 euros for internet connection. We are paying £81 for the room which is considerably more than I have paid anywhere else, so you would think such things might be included. It leaves such a bad taste that we have decided to go and eat elsewhere on principle. The wind is blowing stronger than ever so I hope it won't be like this in the morning.



Day 17 – Over the Top

As threatened we went across the road, in a howling gale, to La Croix Blanche. The restaurant is obviously family run with paterfamilias sitting at the entrance and barking orders to junior family members. We were quickly seated and expertly served by a multi-lingual waiter who was happy to humour my poor French and make good with his excellent English when words failed me – an object lesson in how to provide real service. We had a beer each to start and then went on to a bottle of local vino rosso which was OK but not brilliant. Rob had a cabbage, bread and cheese soup, an Aosta valley speciality, which he pronounced excellent whilst I had a lasagne which was up to but no better than Home farm standard. Rob had veal escalope while I had an entrecote steak, perfectly cooked a point and served on a hot brick with various veg. It was a most enjoyable meal and we walked back across the stream by the covered bridge replete and childishly happy to have taken our business elsewhere.

If anything the wind had increased by the time we went down for breakfast. One advantage was that the washing dried in double quick time on the balcony but it did not bode well for the day ahead. Breakfast was good and plentiful and we both ate plenty before releasing our bikes from the garage and starting at 0921. We were immediately into some 6% climbing and I found it hard to get going. The weather was sunny but we had both put on plenty of clothes against the wind.



After 3 miles the road forked, the main road heading for the St Bernard tunnel whilst our road headed for the Col. The tunnel is currently closed for unspecified reasons but we followed the covered course up the mountain until it actually becomes a tunnel.



There is some impressive engineering and more work is currently proceeding to by-pass the villages of Etroubles and St Oyen.



We were now into a constant grind of 6-8% but I was finding my rhythm and, if not exactly enjoying it, not finding it too hard. Rob was still streaking ahead and stopping to take pictures whilst I caught up. We could see heavy cloud cover over the Col and there were threats of snow at the top

Once past the treeline we were able to look back on what we had already climbed and



forward to what was ahead. It was a daunting sight, especially with the wind which was in our faces for most of the journey.





The higher we climbed the more the wind increased until right at the top I had to get off the bike for fear of being blown over. It was also bitterly cold. Rob had every stitch of winter clothing he had presciently brought with him whilst I was still in shorts which were the only cover that I had and the picture shows just how shattered and cold I was at the top. This was the border between Italy and Switzerland and there is a border guard but nobody bothers to check passports.

Shortly afterwards we each posed for the picture in front of the signpost which is not, actually at the very top but, presumably, designed to provide pictures without disrupting



traffic, which, today, was sparse. When we finally reached the true summit which is a Swiss Hospice with restaurant and gift shop we were both so cold that we abandoned the bikes and went inside for a bowl of hot vegetable soup and a hot drink.

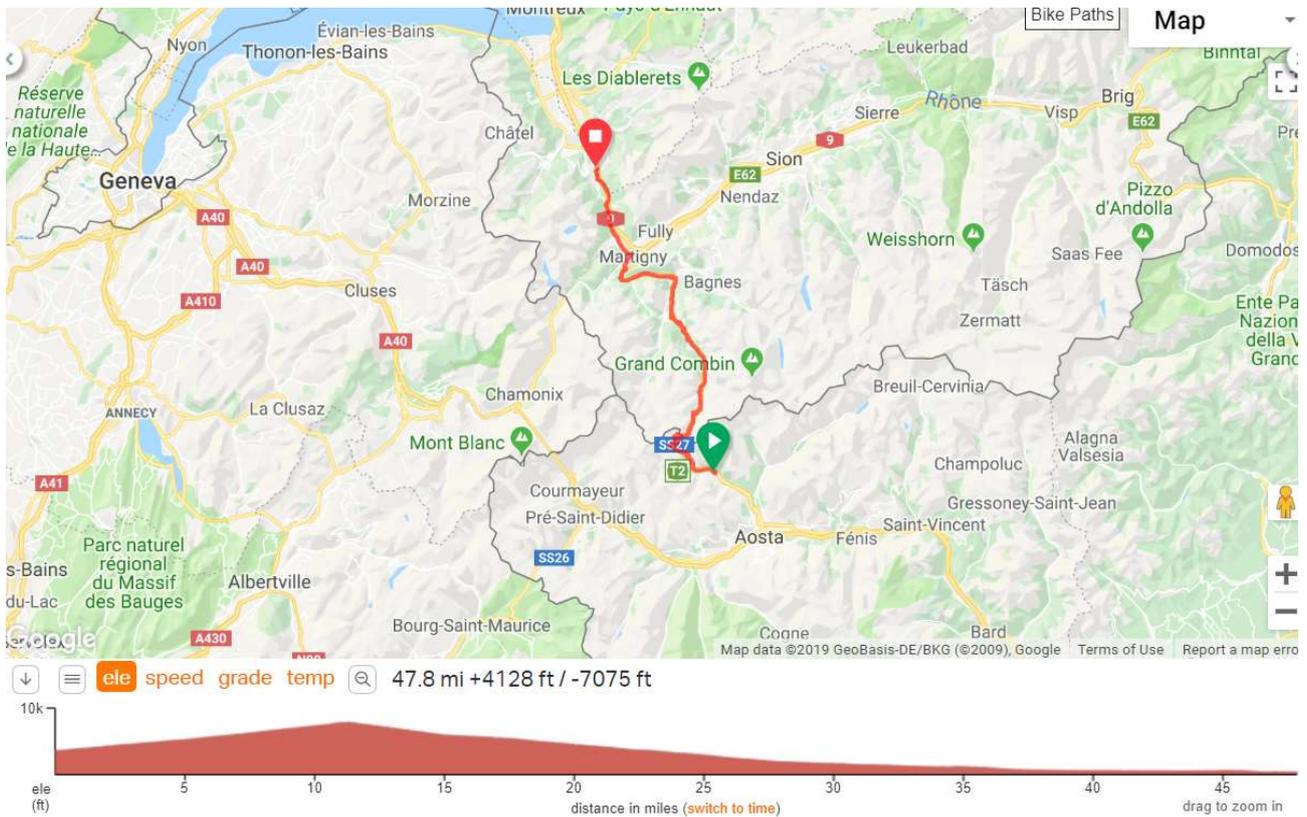
We felt better but were still cold and worse was to come as we set off down the mountain on what should have been a glorious schuss but which became a struggle to control brake levers with numb hands.

The descent seemed to take forever and it was not until we reached Martigny, 28 miles



down the steep hills, that our feet and hands warmed up sufficiently to shed some layers. We took to some bike paths which were, surprisingly poorly surfaced. Who'd have thought the Italians would teach the Swiss a thing or two about bike lanes. The last 10 miles were on the main road but in a marked but unsegregated bike lane and at one point we took off on a road that ran parallel to get away from the traffic.

Finally we came into St Maurice where we are spending the night at the Franciscan Monastery Hotel. It's perfectly nice and the heating is on so we can dry the clothes but horrendously expensive by comparison with Italy. We were offered, and refused, breakfast for £10 each and will take our chance in the nearest cafe although that will probably be equally eye-watering. If you're not Swiss, earning their wages, everything is frighteningly expensive. We'll go out for a meal tonight which will probably cost the equivalent of £100 but I'll report on that in tomorrow's blog from the equally expensive city of Geneva. 1092 miles now covered and less than 700 to go.



Day 18 – Follow the Lake

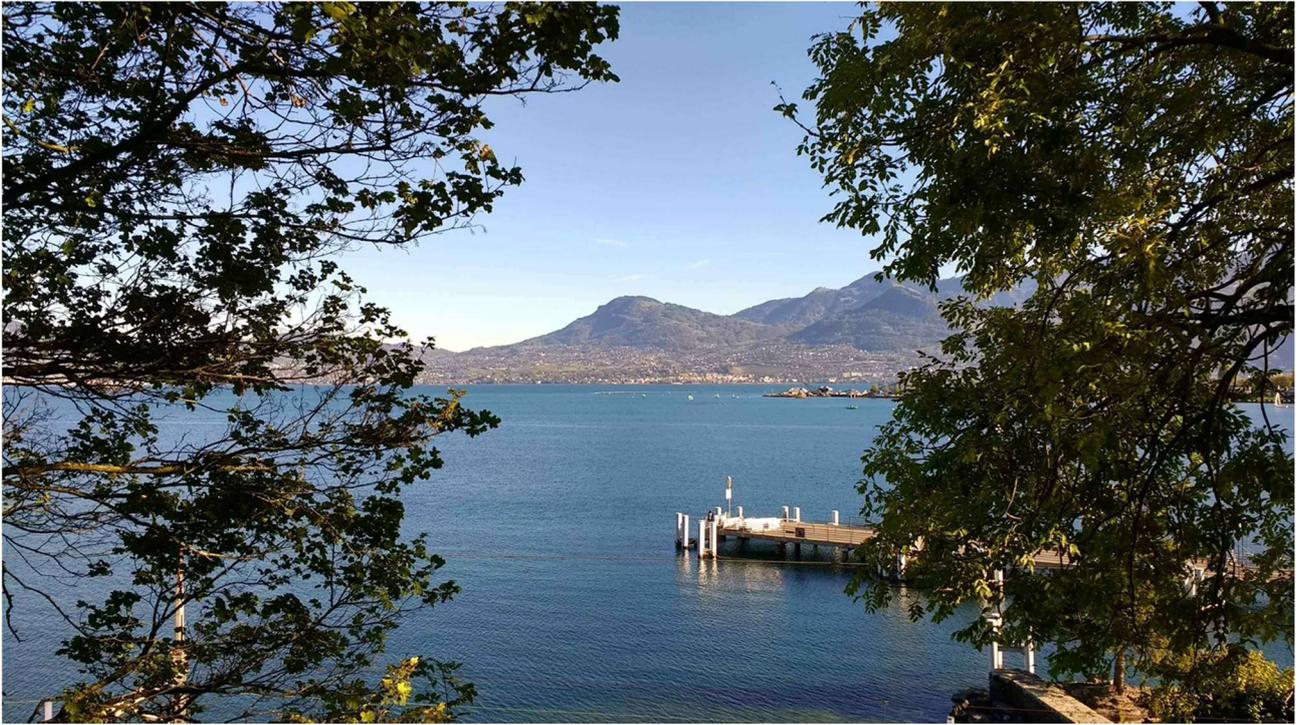
When booking in we were offered the opportunity to eat vegetable soup and stew in the refectory for 18 francs each but it had to be eaten at 1845 so we decided to go out and see what we could find in Saint-Maurice. We found a pizzeria which had a surprisingly extensive menu. I decided to eat like an Italian with a primi and a secondi. The waitress looked at me as though I was barking for wanting two plates of food, but duly turned up with an excellent Spaghetti Zingara which I followed with perch and vegetables whilst Rob decided one course was enough and had steak, egg and chips with some extra veg. All three courses were very good and we each had a beer and shared 50cl of local red wine. Surprisingly the bill was 99 CHF which is a mere £78, so less than I had feared but still expensive by UK standards.

We set off from the Hostellerie, which was basic but good, with a heated towel rail that dried our washing well, at 0901 after a breakfast of coffee and croissants that Rob bought at the local boulangerie for half what breakfast would have cost at the Hotel. Saint-Maurice sits in deep shadow in the morning and it was decidedly chilly for the first



couple of miles until the valley broadened and the sun came through.

It was a glorious autumn morning and we were spoiled by a ride along one of the best cycle tracks I have seen, the Route de Rhone which, unsurprisingly, follows the banks of the eponymous river as it spills out of Lake Geneva on its way to the Mediterranean Sea at the Camargue which I visited in 2015 on my last French bike trip. The path was being sparsely used considering it was a weekend so we had a very good run of 15 miles up to Port Vallais and our first glimpse of Lake Geneva.



Here the bike path ended and we were forced onto the only road that runs along the southern lake-shore as we made our way into France for the first time

Although the road was busy enough the journey was not too nerve-wracking and, as we



had made very good time, decided to stop for coffee at Meillerie. It was a pleasant break: we had not forced the pace at all as we only had just over 60 miles of flat terrain

to cover and I was glad of a day without too much to do as tomorrow will be a test of stamina.

I was aware that I had plotted a route that left the lakeshore and went inland. I decided



to stick with the easy lake route through Evian whilst Rob went off on the plotted route that had a bit more climbing. We agreed to meet where our routes crossed 10 miles on for lunch at Thonon-les-Bains.



I went past the Evian water factory, which is actually nearer Thonon than Evian, and arrived about 5 minutes ahead of the “climber”. We secured the bikes with cable and

my bike lock and went into the bar of La Brasserie du General to the amusement of the locals and the barmen who, tongue-in-cheek, suggested that we take off our bike shoes at the door.

Menus were produced and we each had a beer and a bottle of fizzy water. It looked as though there was a menu de weekend but, in the event it was the price of the individual dishes from the menu. I chose fish with veg and potatoes and Rob had a pot roast pork chop with similar garnish. We each finished with a large slice of Tarte Myrtilles and Rob had a coffee.

Thonon sits high above the Lake with lovely views from the belvedere and there is a funicular railway that runs down to the large Marina by the lake-shore. The weather was still sunny but chilly and I kept my jacket on as we continued our journey. Our course now took us through suburbs for the next six miles or so, nice houses on sparsely used roads and we passed several cyclists out for the day. The road had been divided in places, half for bicyclists and walkers and half for cars so it was care-free cycling.



42 miles in we were back on the main road for a short time before turning left onto country roads. I stuck my arm out to turn and gave plenty of warning but some stupid idiot still tried to pass us on the outside as we were turning: fortunately no damage but it gave me a fright.

We were now on narrow country roads, passing through hamlets and more suburban developments and then out into broader countryside with maize and vines growing and, in the distance, Mont Blanc from the other side to which we had seen it on our approach to Aosta. Again lovely quiet roads although we were only 5 miles or so from Geneva. We had been climbing un-noticed during the day, for the hill down into Geneva was steep.



We found the lake-side with the famous Jet d'eau and stopped to take pictures of one another and then on along the crowded promenade before we took to the streets and



diced with the traffic before finding ourselves back on route with Rita giving excellent instructions to guide us to the Ibis Hotel at Geneva airport where we are staying tonight. Kate and Davide had sent the bike bag that I had brought my bike in from the UK to the hotel and it awaited our arrival. Rob was able to pack his bike in it ready for his flight back to Bristol tomorrow, whilst my bike is safely locked away in a basement room. We shall now go and look for a meal: it's sure to be expensive but that's Switzerland for you.



Day 19 – Back to France

I'm pleased that I decided to cancel the booking of the bottom end hotel situated just over the French border about 3 miles from the airport and substitute the Hotel Ibis which is bang opposite the airport and runs a free shuttle bus to departures. The Geneva airport Ibis must be a goldmine for Accor hotels: it must be full 12 months of the year. We were booked in by a very efficient English speaking clerk who explained everything and then arranged for my bike to be stored in a lock-up in the garage whilst Rob packed his bike into the bike bag that I had used to fly my bike to Sicily and which Kate and Davide had kindly sent to the hotel to await our arrival.

This morning, after a poor night's sleep due to a hot room (it was either that or plane noise) we had an excellent International breakfast and both of us made the most of it.

We were packed and ready to go by 0830 and I left on the bike at 0844 at the same time that Rob took the shuttle to the airport.

When I programmed Rita I tried to stick to bike lanes to get out of the city and what an amazing journey it was. For the first 11 miles until I got to Chancy I was either in a bike lane marked on the road or, for the majority of the time, on a segregated bike path.



At one point the road had been completely closed for an event, possibly a bike race or a marathon, but I was able to sail past the police on the bike lane with a friendly bonjour from the armed policewoman.

At Chancy I crossed the Rhone once more and, in so doing, re-entered France and left Switzerland behind for good. Shortly afterwards I had programmed a shortcut that took me up an unexpectedly steep gravel track. Half way up it I felt the ominous bump of a flat back tyre. I was in no great hurry, the sun was shining, although it was distinctly chilly, so I fished out a replacement tube, checked the tyre for damage and effected the repair. All was well and I set off again to join the tarmac.

I was now following quite a large road that snakes along the Rhone Valley and about 8 miles further on the same thing happened. This time I could see a bit of glass embedded in the tyre so at least knew the cause: however I was down to my last spare tube which was worrying. I had a patched tube in the bag so I put that in and, thank goodness, that was the end of flat tyres for the day. I think I shall buy two new tyres and some more tubes at the first opportunity.

I was heading across the southern end of the Jura mountains so I knew that there would be quite a lot of climbing up and down and so it proved. The route was mirrored by the



A40
Autoroute that has some impressive viaducts and tunnels and I kept seeing it either above or beneath me for about 10 miles until I forked north to the lake of Nantua,



Nantua is a deep glacial lake that is a tourist attraction and has many restaurants along its shores. It also has these rather splendid chainsaw sculptures although, sadly the sky had become overcast by this point and the image

leaves a lot to be desired.

Because of the punctures I was running later than expected so did not reach my proposed lunch stop until after 2pm by which time it was closed so, as I had had a good breakfast, I decided to plough on.

I was now heading into some very hilly countryside: fortunately for me I was on top of a plateau and had to descend fast and steeply to the village of Cerdon which has a certain amount of fame for its caves and, indeed, the descent towards the village was rather reminiscent of Cheddar Gorge. Once again the conditions were far from ideal for photographs.



As I've already said I tend to stop at any available water fountain to either have a drink or fill my bottles. I was spoiled for choice in Cerdon where I counted no less than four, including this fancy one with a wine barrel around it. Unfortunately no wine.

I now crossed the route that I followed across France on my way to climb the Col du Galibier in 2015. I stayed the night on that occasion in the village of Poncin and I now passed through it and once again saw the A40 crossing the River Ain on a graceful viaduct.



Then came possibly the hardest part of the day. The road climbed out of the Ain valley for 2 miles at a steady 4-6%. Once at the top of that it plummeted down into the next valley where, unusually, I saw dairy cows grazing outside, before a similar climb up the

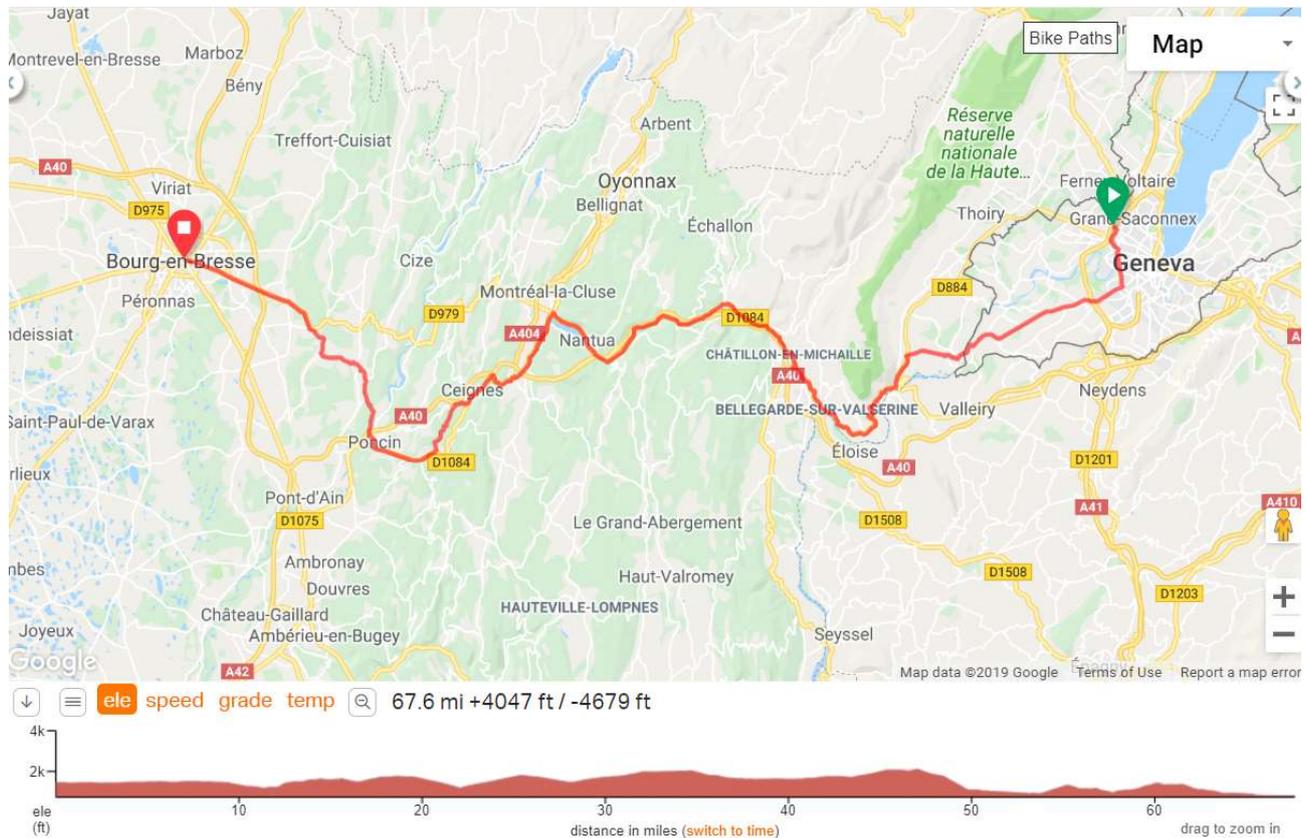


other side - hard work at the end of the day. The views looking back at what I had passed through were rewarding.

I was now only six miles from my destination Bourg-en-Bresse but on the way met a closed road. I thought that I would go down it anyway and found myself in the middle of the Town fete with brass band playing and some colourful floats. It was rather a nice



way to end the day and also ensured that I had a clear road to ride into Bourg. I arrived at the Bourg Residence which is a building that has been divided into apartments. The room is a good size with cooking facilities that I shall not use. The staff were busy cleaning the room ready for me and I had to wait 15 minutes or so to get in. My bike is upstairs with me and I am left to my own devices. I shall go in search of a boulangerie for breakfast. I had been looking forward to a meal of Bresse chicken but, sadly nearly every restaurant in the town is closed on a Sunday except for the fast food joints.



Day 21 – Along the Canals

The last two places I have stayed have had electric towel rails and what a godsend they are for drying washed clothes. I initially hung the washing out in the garden to drip dry and then brought it in at dusk and stuck it on the towel rail. Lovely dry clothes for the morning.

I walked about half a mile into town up a slip road from the expressway which felt a bit dangerous but was the only way to cross it and get to La Boucherie restaurant. This is a French chain of restaurants that, as the name implies, specialise in meat. They did a Formule for 14.90 of a main course and a dessert, and, after lunch, I didn't need more than that. I opted for steak and chips and cheesecake both of which were fine. I had a couple of pints of 1664 which pushed the price up to 27.90. They also had a decent Wifi so I was able to upload some photos ready to put in the blog tomorrow when I get to

my next hotel.

Breakfast of coffee, croissant and bread and jam was served in the kitchen by Florence's mother and once I had had my fill and paid the bill I set off in an early morning mist at just before 9 am. I had to go along roads for about two and a half miles before I got back onto the canal tow-path and I put my rear light on to make myself more conspicuous. I have been carrying a two litre bottle of water on top of my pannier rack and the light shines through that and diffuses very well (or so Rob told me).

I was to stay on canal paths for most of the day. In a way they are great in that they are relatively flat and well-surfaced but they are also incredibly monotonous.. I stopped to



take a picture of the mist on the canal which hung about until almost mid-day.



The first thing of any interest was crossing the Loire river at Digoin, eight miles into the journey. There is a fine aqueduct that takes the canal across the river and I was able to cycle across, stopping to take some pictures in the middle.

On and on I went with little to break the monotony. Occasionally a heron would flap lazily away and pairs of ducks would come to be fed by a lady with a baguette to spare but the lack of interest made me think of my saddle sore and how far I still had to travel.



I think the French must have a standard bridge for crossing canals because you see hundreds of these pre-cast concrete specimens on all the canals I have cycled along.

I was making very good time, averaging over 13 miles an hour for the first time this trip and trying to beat the clock gave me something else to think about..



After 20 miles I needed to cross over the Loire again but they were working on the road and had closed the exit from the canal so I was forced to lift the whole bike over some railings onto the road before I could make progress. After this the canal path became a Voie Vert, open only to cyclists and pedestrians, horse-riders strictly prohibited along with motor vehicles. Again, lovely in principle but as they are usually surrounded by trees not much to look at. The other downside is the pesky gates that make you slow down every time the Voie Vert comes to a road crossing. They vary in style but are usually two poles set about 3 metres apart that, as intended, are difficult to negotiate. On the canals they are even worse, in some cases, barely allowing enough room for a cycle to pass.

The Voie Vert was following the line of an old railway and came to an end, without any warning at the disused Bourbon-Lancy station. Bourbon-Lancy is still a spa town and the railway used to serve it before the roads were improved. At this point I was confused because Rita was suggesting that there was a continuation of the track that simply was not there so I had no alternative but to turn on to the main road to Decize. I remember this road well from 2015. It goes up and down like a roller-coaster and in 2015 I travelled the whole 22 miles along it in searing heat.

My heart sank at the thought of having to do it in reverse but I had to make progress. However about four miles on I noticed a cycle track sign pointing left so I decided to follow it down into the Loire valley where, sure enough, it joined my original route. Why the piece of track between B-L and La Picharne has not been completed is a mystery.

Anyway I was now able to follow my plotted route through vast fields, in one case I cycled for a full mile along one field of standing maize and goodness knows how far



back it extended from the road.



The way was well marked with signs and I re-crossed the Loire before seeing this building obviously constructed against the floods that probably happen regularly.

50 miles and less than four hours into the journey I arrived at Decize. I had stopped at the Intermarche there to buy water in 2015 and, as it was lunch-time and there was no sign of restaurants on the route, I pulled in there and bought a filled baguette, a can of Tango and some filled croissants which I ate in front of the store.



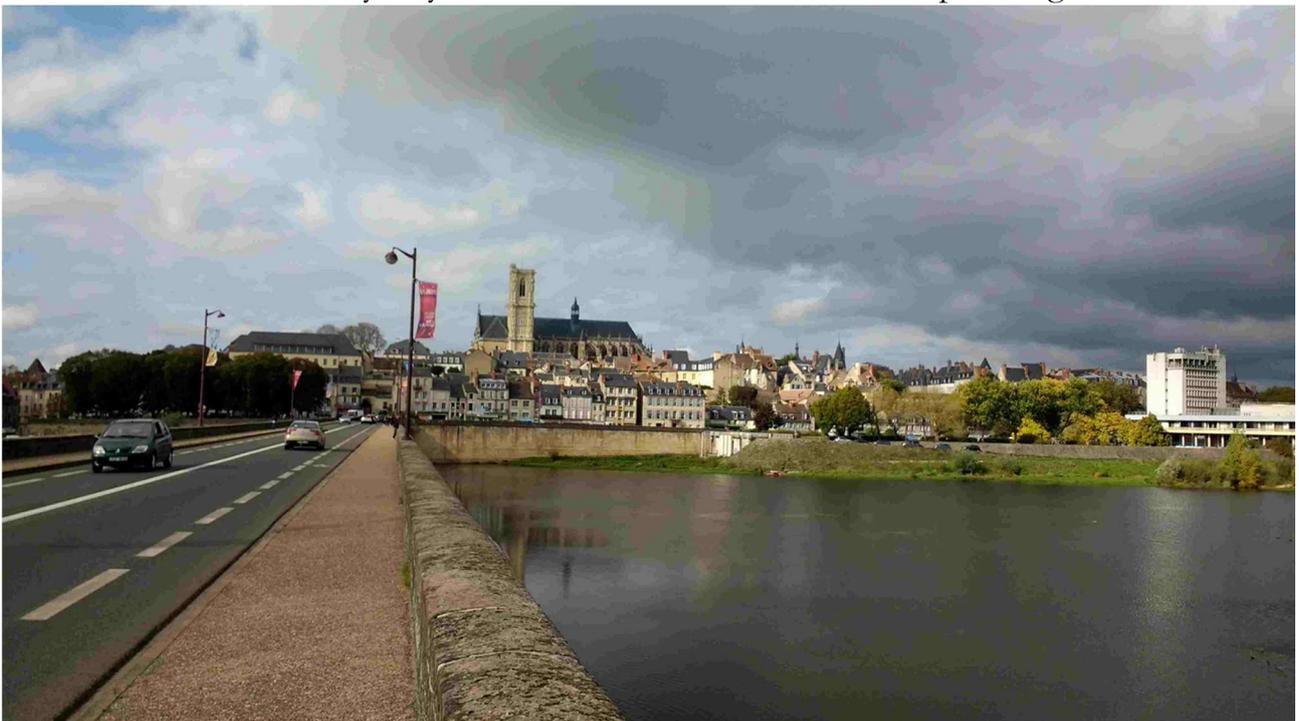
I was now back on the canal again, even more tedious than before. I stopped to take pictures, more for the relief of doing so than for the subject matter which was drearily similar. There has been a massive acorn crop this year and the crunch of them beneath my wheels is rather satisfying.

The few locks provide a bit of interest and the lock-keepers vary in the amount they do to brighten their surroundings. Most have a few flowers, some have a small cafe attached. Curiously the tarmac path seems to end about 50 metres either side of each lock and the surface becomes rolled red stone

There was almost no-one on the water. I counted only three moving craft all day. At the main marinas there were lots of barges and pleasure craft and occasionally I would see boats and barges that had been left to rot.

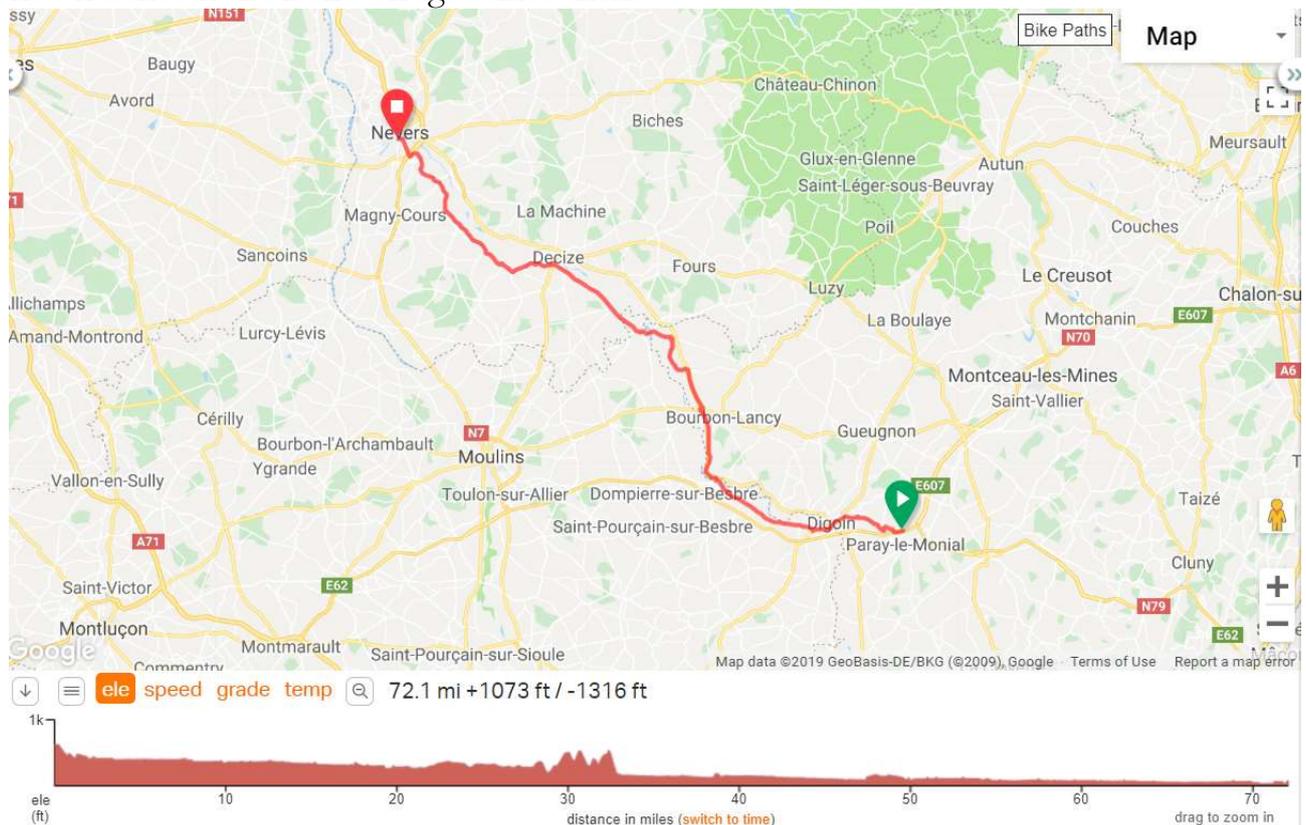


Finally, finally I arrived in Nevers, my stop for the night. I'd travelled 74 miles, mostly downhill, but I felt worse than when we climbed the Alps last week. The town is quite handsome and I made my way across the Loire once more and up through the



pedestrianised centre to meet a demonstration that was being heavily policed. I don't know what it was about but it all seemed good humoured when I passed. My hotel is old fashioned and I am in a large room that has obviously been used by a smoker recently, despite notices from the management forbidding it. I opened the window and hung my washing on it. I'll go in search of food which should be in plentiful supply mid-week.

It seems amazing to think that three weeks ago I was still in Sicily. A lot of water has flown beneath the Loire bridges since then.



Day 22 – Loire a velo

I found a brasserie close to the Hotel and had a Formule of a mixed salad starter, fish and chips and Isles flottante. Nothing fancy but well cooked and washed down with half a litre of Bordeaux. The hotel room was fine in all respects except that it stank of cigarette smoke: however once I'd opened the windows and hung the washing to dry I didn't notice it and completed the blog quite early. The Wifi was excellent and held up throughout. Because the hotel is on quite a busy road I woke up very early with the traffic, closed the window and went back to bed for a couple more hours.

After brewing myself a cup of tea in the room, I was a bit later starting than normal and did not have breakfast at the hotel but stopped just up the road at Aldi to buy some pain au raisin and beignets which set me up OK.

I had about 5 miles to ride out of the city before crossing the Loire and taking to the Loire a Velo cycle path which I was to follow most of the day. This is a well surfaced path, sometimes shared with vehicles, that runs from Nevers to the coast at Saint-Nazaire. The first 40 miles was superb and I was averaging over 13 miles an hour and thinking that I would be in Sully before 4pm.

The track has markers set into the tarmac at kilometre intervals, to show you where you are but it appears that several of them have been removed by souvenir hunters, not that it made any difference to me as I had my head down and was going for it.

The first notable sight was the bridge at La Charite-sur-Loire. I had stopped in a hotel there on my way to the Alps in 2015 and it had been a very hot and tiring day. Today I was feeling fresh and zipped past, doffing a metaphorical cap to Le Bon Laboureur.





The path continued past fields of maize being combined and, in the distance, I could start to see some low hills. On the other side of the river was Pouilly-sur-Loire noted for Pouilly Fume wine. There seem to be remarkably few vineyards on this stretch of the Loire, the most notable being Sancerre, with its mediaeval buildings sitting atop a



small hill, which I passed next. The vineyards stretched along the hill and disappeared soon after as the land flattened once again.

47 miles in my route took me around the Belleville Nuclear Power plant. Today there was no steam coming from the cooling towers but research tells me that it is in operation and will continue to be so for another 12 years.



This where my day started to fall apart. I had scheduled a lunch stop in the village of Belleville and made my way to La Diapaisson brasserie. Having made myself presentable and locked the bike to a post I went in and the place was almost full. There were a couple of waitresses who were busily working the tables but completely ignoring me. Eventually I managed to catch the eye of one and she, rather, reluctantly I thought, showed me a vacant table. She then went away and did nothing for me for about 20 minutes. I was on the point of leaving when she asked me what I wanted and I asked for a plate of charcuterie and a Bavette. The food then appeared reasonably promptly and I had a dessert as well. I don't know why I was so poorly treated but the food was OK and what I needed after nearly 50 miles.

For some reason the Loire a Velo route seems to peter out at Belleville. . I had a route programmed that went down a rough track at the side of a canal and then stopped completely with no way forward. I retraced my route and decided to cross the Loire and try the other side. That was much worse on a busy main road so I dodged back across the Loire again and went inland on a rollercoaster road that took me to Chattillon-sur-Loire where I picked up a D road that I recognised from two years go.

I found myself going underneath an ornate bridge that was part of the pont canal at Briare. This is probably the most ornate of the canal bridges over the Loire and forms part of the canal that joins the Loire to the Seine.

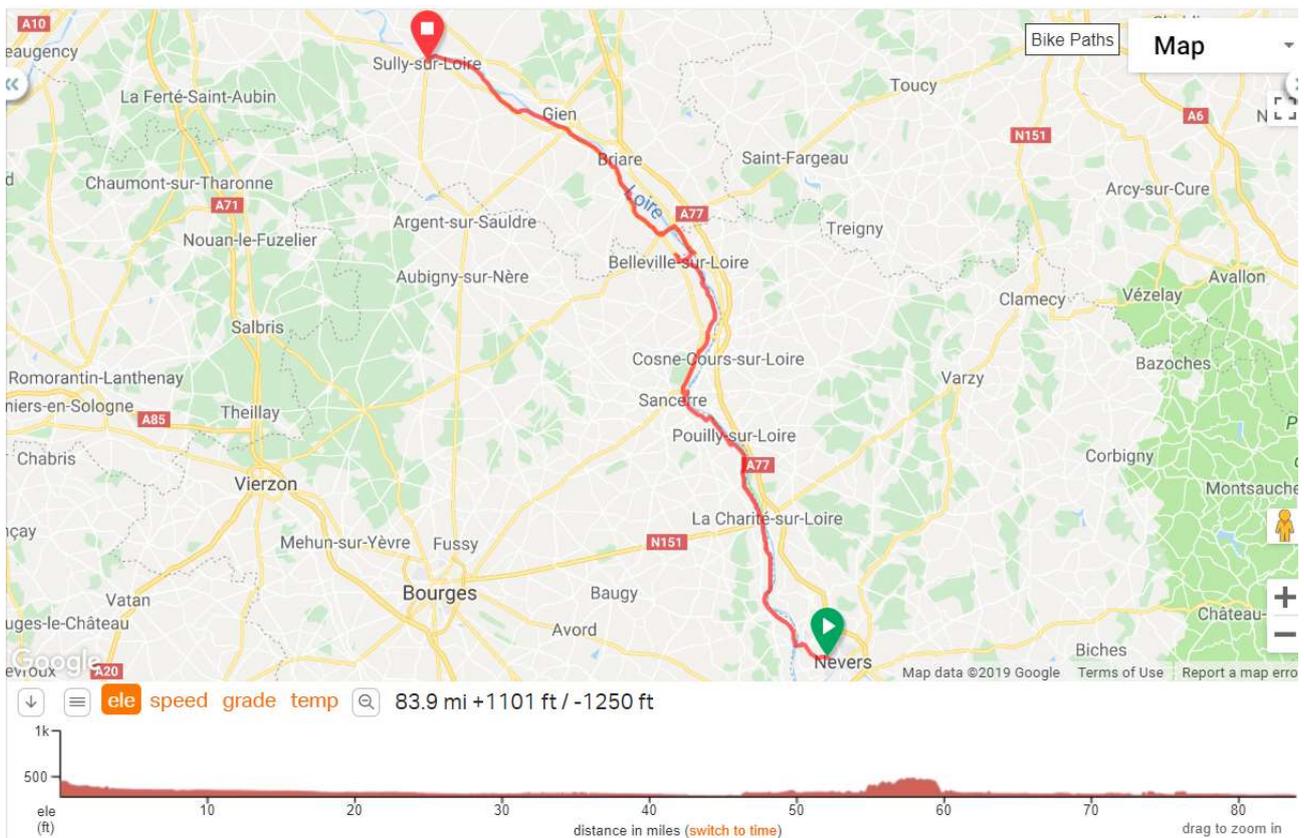


I continued to Gien where I had eaten lunch on my way up the Loire in 2015, knowing that the route from now on was straight-forward.



I could see the four cooling towers of the Nuclear power station at Dampierre and knew that I was close to the end of the journey. There was a bit of gravel track but mainly tarmac to take me to Sully-sur-Loire and its magnificent Chateau and the Hotel Henry IV where I am staying tonight.

A journey that started so well finished as a bit of a shambles. My projected 76 miles was one of the longer days but it has stretched to 85 with the false trails in the middle. I've been reversing the route I took in 2015 and I now remember that I had similar problems around Belleville then. Maybe if I do it again I shall be able to work out the correct route but it does seem strange that there hasn't been more effort to join the Loire a Velo properly.



Day 23 – Loire, woods and plains

I was given a smiling welcome at the Hotel Henry IV in Sully. The receptionist spoke about as much English as I speak French but we roughly understood each other. She provided a cup of coffee and booked me in. The room was small, just about enough room for the double bed but it had windows that opened out to the back of the building and I was able to do the washing and hang it out to dry.

I then set down to compose the blog. About half an hour later there was a thud and I looked up to see that a white cat had come in through the window. He had a walk around and a scratch under the bed before I turfed him out. He had a bit of trouble getting past the muslin curtains but made it in the end. I carried on: a few minutes later there he was again. This time, having ejected him, I thought it best to close the windows. Fortunately I was able to leave the washing hanging off the shutters, hoping that there wouldn't be a storm during the night.

Having run out of inspiration I went in search of food. Sully seems to be one of those places that people come to on a day visit. There is a vast coach and car park by the



Chateau but by the time I went out the town had largely closed down. The brasserie next to the Hotel was shut and I walked past another closed restaurant on my way to the Castle Tavern. The fare was not great, mainly burgers but I had a plate of pork products followed by a burger and Iles flottante which seems to be on every brasserie menu. A couple of pints of Leffe blonde sent me to bed in a sleepy frame of mind.

The bed was comfortable and I had elected to pay extra for breakfast which was sufficiently French, though expensive at 7 euros. The WiFi was excellent and, generally, it was a pretty good little Hotel but looking a bit shabby and in need of some TLC.

Having paid the bill and loaded the bike I set off at 0925 feeling quite chirpy. I knew that I had to cross the Loire again which I did having stopped to take more pictures of



the Chateau. It is an extraordinary building surrounded by a moat. It was built between the 13th and 17th Centuries by the Dukes of Sully and remained in the family until 1962 when it was acquired by the French State. I didn't venture inside but there are some tapestries worth seeing if you are so inclined.



After crossing the Loire the route took me through some back streets before becoming a quiet country road that deteriorated into a gravel track but perfectly well surfaced. Three

miles in it joined a tarmac road that ran along the Loire levee to Chateauneuf-sur-Loire with some good views of the river. There were swans and cormorants aplenty but I didn't see anything else.



Chateauneuf has a chateau that I cycled past. It looks a little dilapidated but I think it doubles as the Town Hall. My route got a little jumbled after that and I had to push the bike up some steep steps to get back on the right road which made its way out of the town about 12 miles into the journey. I'd been going for well over an hour but was enjoying the day which was overcast with a hint of sun every now and then.

At Trainou, 22 miles into the journey, I stopped to buy a bottle of water at Carrefour. In the Alps and Jura we were spoiled for choice of drinking fountains but they seem to have disappeared as I have made my way north. The old public fountains are now relics and each village has red hydrants for fire fighting but not, apparently, for thirsty cyclists. However the taste of the tap water makes it worth investing 18 cents in 1.5 litres of water.



Rita suggested that I turn off the main road and then asked me to turn right down a grass track. I looked at the alternative which was a lot further and, as the ground was dry, went for it. I'm glad that I did. It was really quite fun cycling through the middle of fields and, provided, I kept a wary eye out for potholes, not much worse than a gravel track. I joined a road, back onto a grass track and made my way through the village of Rebrechien.



A mile further on the tarmac road bore round to the left but Rita asked me to go straight on into woodland. This was the Forest d'Orleans, at 35000 hectares the largest expanse of forest in France. What a great experience. The track was hard surfaced to a cross-roads where it became a hard grass track.

It was great fun cycling along it through some magnificently managed woodland,



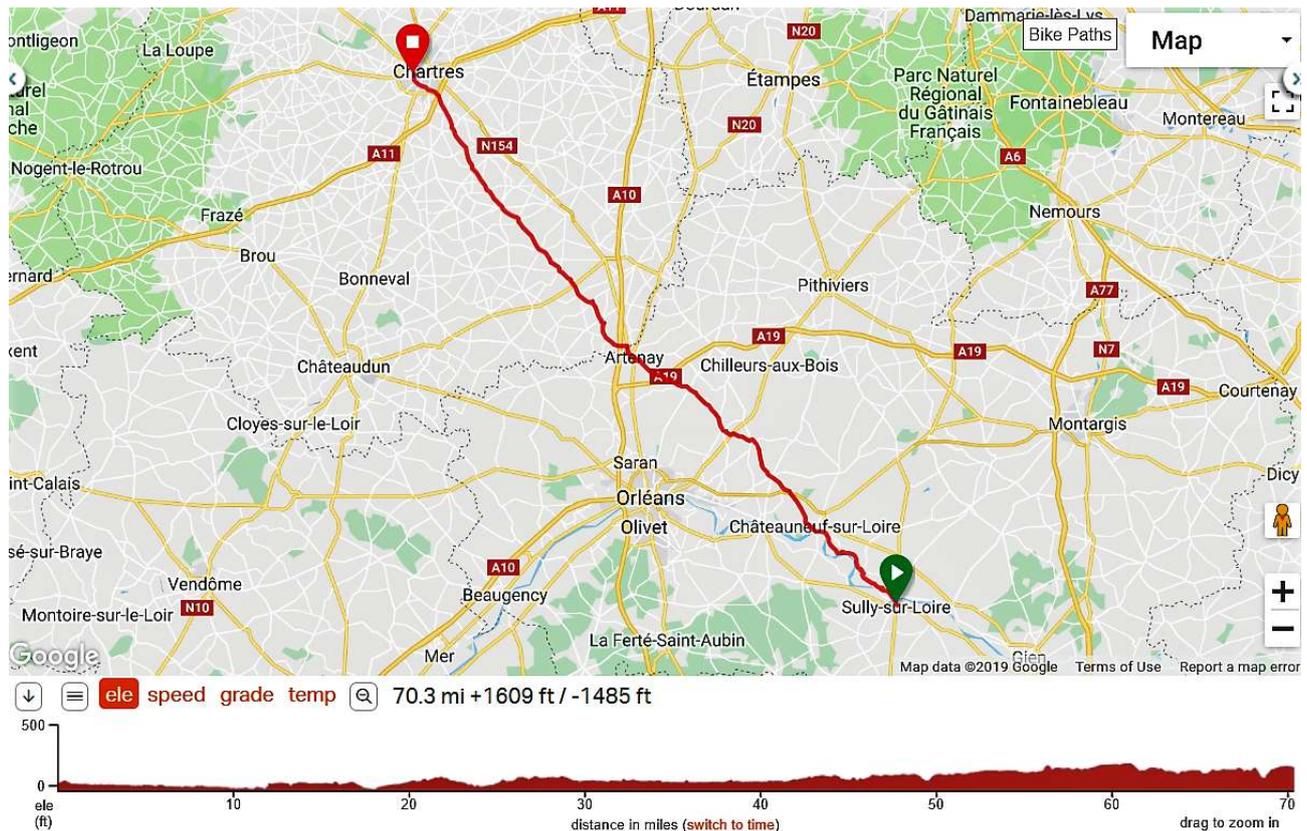
occasionally a bit worrying when the proposed route seemed to be petering out but it all came good and I emerged unscathed. The French do seem to be able to grow some very good oak. There is little evidence of squirrel damage though I have seen squirrels on my journey. Most of these have been a rusty brown in colour, not like our native red squirrels and certainly not like a grey, although I suspect they are a variant.

I emerged from the forest about 30 miles into the journey and not far off half way. I looked around for somewhere to eat lunch but as I passed nothing and didn't feel especially hungry thought that I would push on.



Now I was on the great central plain, uninspiring landscape and little to see but miles and miles of maize fields in the process of being harvested. There were grain towers dotting the plain and this large processing plant belching steam. Frankly it was boring and I was again thinking of my saddle sores and aching shoulder. At one point the road had been closed and diverted around a huge warehouse that was being built - Amazon??

After that it was more of the same until 10.5 miles from my destination Chartres, there was the cathedral commanding the horizon. The trouble was that it seemed to take forever to reach it, but reach it I did by about 4.15pm and checked into the Hotel du Centre which is anything but, as it stands about 2 miles from the Cathedral in the suburb of Luce. However it seems a bit of a find. Celine, who booked me in, is Oriental, I would guess Vietnamese and speaks good English. The room is large and bright and the bed feels comfortable. The WiFi is excellent so all I need now is some food to set me up for my last big day in France tomorrow, Friday 13th. Saturday is a shortish ride to Ouistreham and the 2300 ferry.



Day 24 – Old railway line

Having started the blog I went out hoping to have a North African meal at a restaurant just around the corner but they were closed, so I wandered in the direction of Chartres and found a creperie, totally empty at 8.30pm. Anyway I was seated and given a menu which had a Formule of a kir royale, main course, pud and 25cl of cider for 18.50. The galette was chicken, mushroom and spuds and the crepe chocolate and apple, both very nice. I went back to the room with a bottle of red from the shop across the road and finished the blog.

I woke up this morning thinking it must be early, because of the lack of light from outside the room. When I got around to looking at the clock it was 0800 and looking out of the window I could see the problem – fog. This was a bit unsettling because I knew the first 25 miles of the journey was on main roads of varying widths. I packed up but did not leave until 0908 but it was still very foggy so I switched on my rear light. Leaving Luce I was riding in a cycle lane but after a mile I was at the mercy of drivers. Fortunately the road was not busy and I'm happy to report that I didn't really feel



uncomfortable. The fog continued, worse in some places than others until long after midday..

Foolishly I hadn't taken advantage of the fact that there was a boulangerie alongside the hotel so had had nothing to eat or drink since the night before. As I was entering the village of Champrond-en-Gatine I saw a restaurant that was open so went in for a coffee to keep me going.

After 25 miles I turned off onto quiet country lanes and had a little climbing session that



made me feel better.



I was heading towards a Voie Vert that would take me over 30 miles across country and the road soon narrowed and crossed a bridge with a pirate ship playhouse beside it before I joined the Voie Vert which is on the path of an old railway line.



It is typical of such tracks, not very interesting because you are surrounded by trees and have little to see, but you can make good progress on generally well surfaced paths so I bowled along quite well and sang my way through the saddle soreness. On the 30 miles I was on the track I saw only 2 other cyclists and a handful of walkers so progress was good.



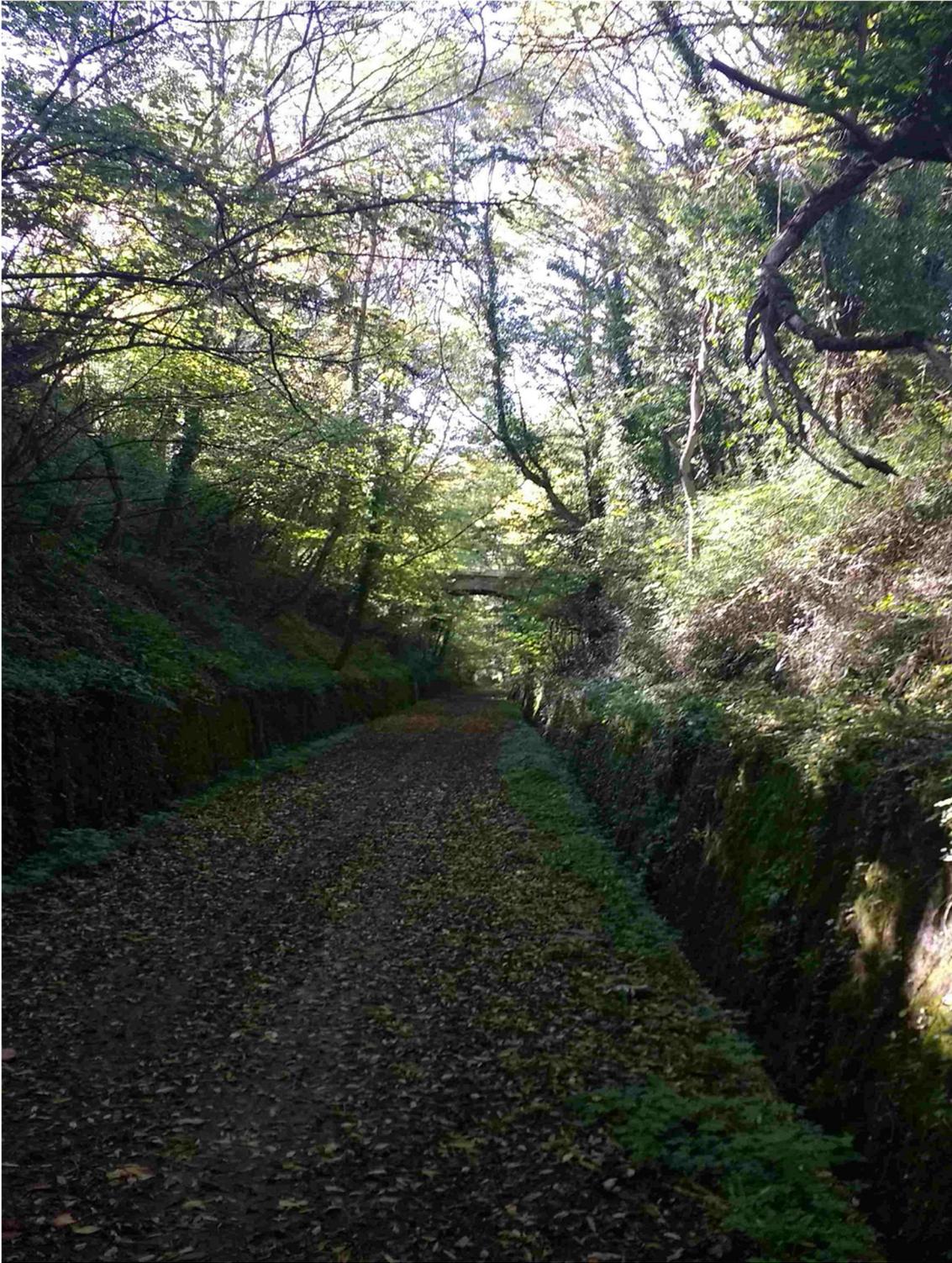
Several of the old station buildings are still in place in varying stages of repair. I can't imagine that such buildings would be left to moulder in Britain. They would have been turned into des res's long ago.



As I made progress there were one or two that had been given a lick of paint and were obviously occupied.



About 50 miles in, shortly after stopping for lunch at a Creperie in Mortagne-au-Perche where I had an egg, ham and cheese Galette and a crème brulee with red fruits, I acquired a passenger who stayed with me for about 10 miles before flying away. I think this is one of those nasty Harlequin variety that are ousting our natives so I'm glad not to be bringing her home but it was fun whilst it lasted and she seemed happy for the ride. I also took the opportunity to stop at a supermarket and buy some more water.



62 miles in I waved goodbye to the little green road. It was nice to be off road for so long, though occasionally the surface left something to be desired, but I was glad to get out into the open, away from the slightly claustrophobic trees and railway cuttings.

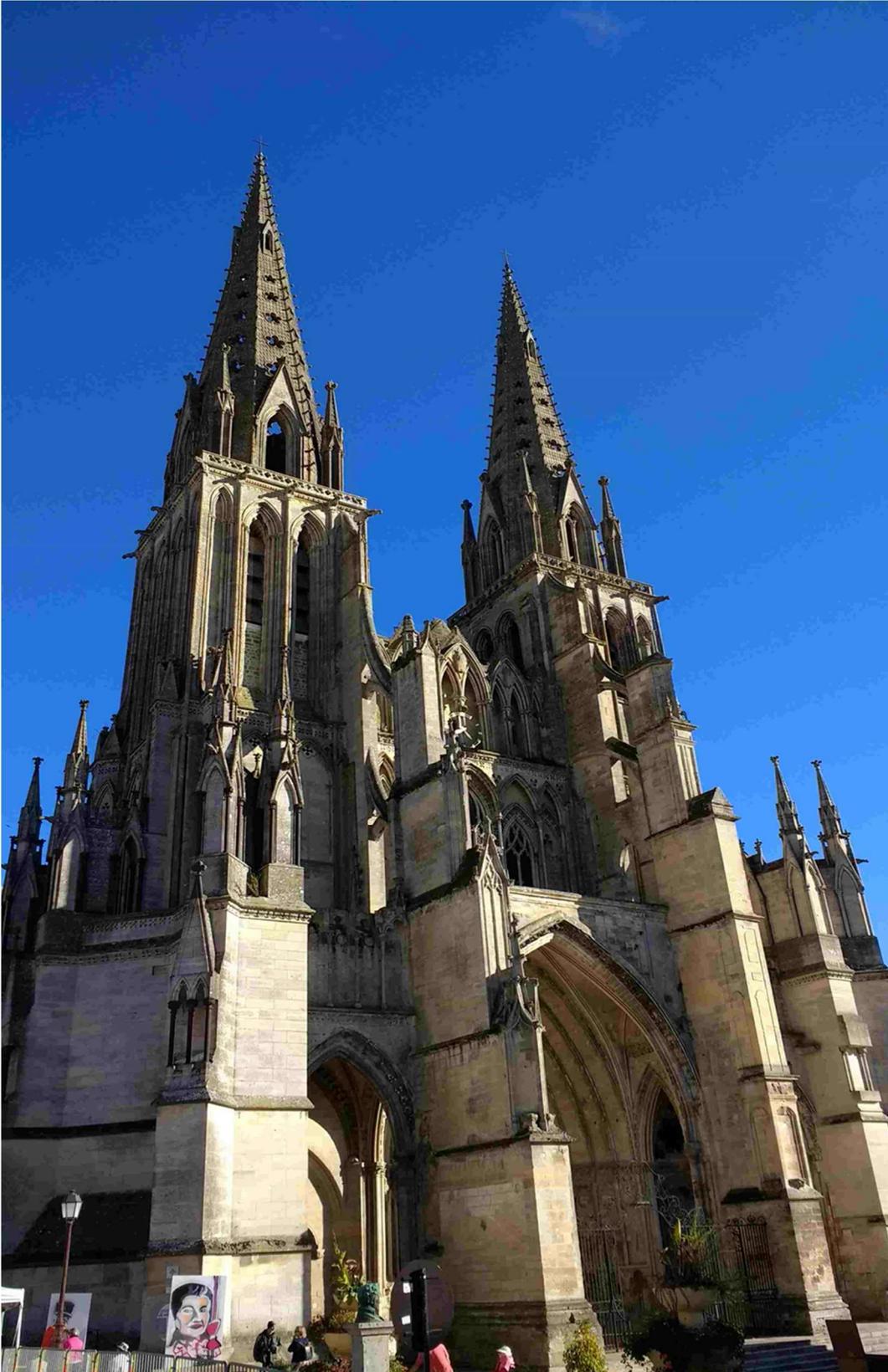


Now I had about 15 miles left. I essayed through Essay and moved back onto the open



rolling plains with more maize and stubbles waiting for the next crop

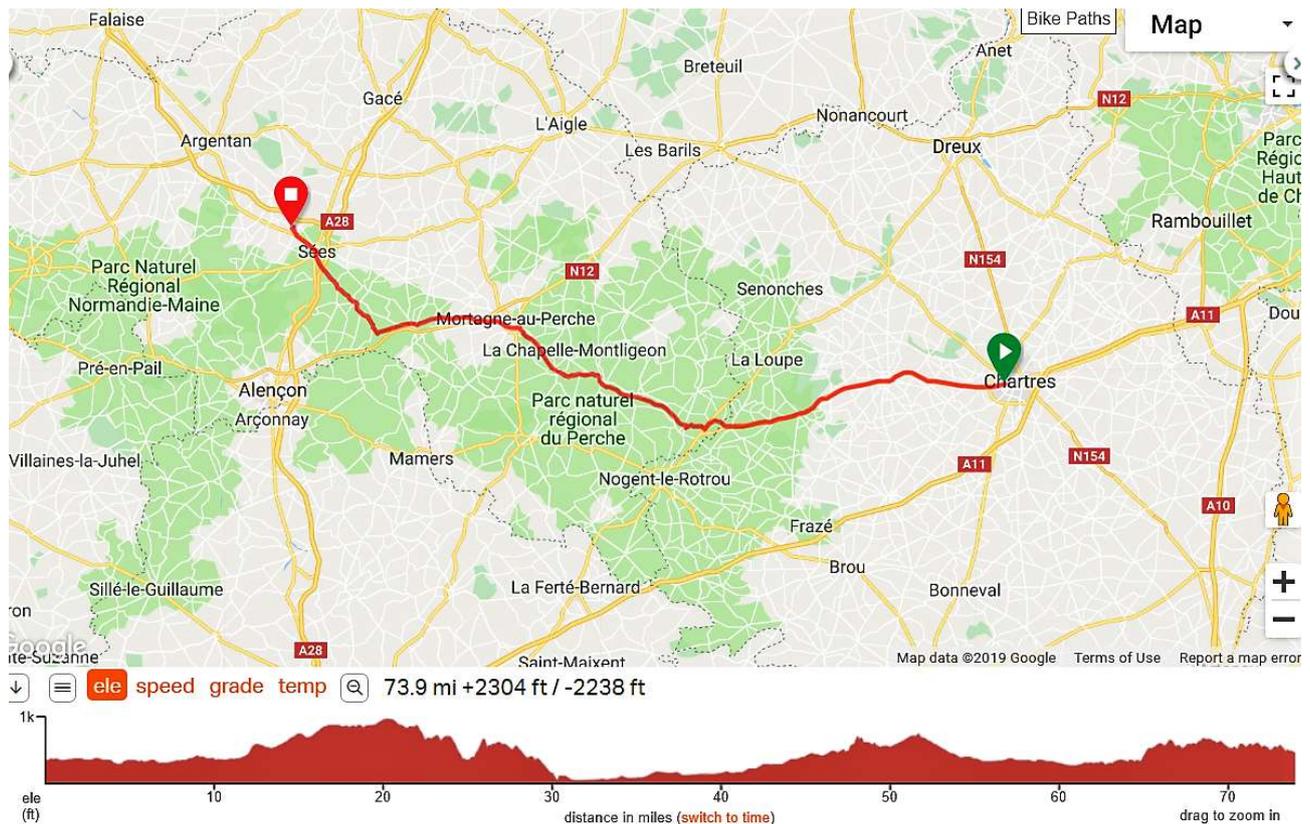
Although my projected route had by-passed Sees (there should be an accent there somewhere but I can't work out how to put it on with this keyboard), I decided to go through the middle and was glad to do so. There is some sort of fete (again where's the accent?) happening there tonight and there were barricades around the fine Cathedral that would have been worth a visit if I wasn't in a hurry to get to my resting place. There was also a classy Town Hall and a ruined church worth investigating



Only 4 miles to go and I was looking forward to the rest so I pressed on. The Ile de Sees is a Logis Hotel in the middle of the countryside. It was the main house to a dairy farm but is now a comfortable hotel with bar and restaurant. I think I shall enjoy my evening.



Tomorrow I have a 60 mile ride to catch the ferry at 2300 so I can take my time and will probably find something to do in Caen to kill a bit of time in the late afternoon. I shall be happy to get back home.



Day 25 – To the ferry

The Isle de Sees hotel is a family run affair and Monsieur greeted me and Madame showed me to my room. It was the most comfortable bed I have slept on in the last 25 days, the shower, although within a bath, was excellent, and there were plenty of power points. I sat down and composed the blog and then went down for supper at 1940. There were only a handful of people staying so service was attentive. I had large beer and then opted for the Logis Formule menu for 28 euros and had a very tasty terrine salad for starter, kidneys in a mustard sauce and a plateful of various local cheeses. It was all very good, with half a bottle of Sancerre and I returned to the blog well sated.

Breakfast too was up there with the best on the trip (Forli was marginally better). Eggs, ham and cheese with the usual croissants and bread and I made the most of it. However outside it was foggy again. Fortunately I did not have much riding on main roads so I was not too concerned but I put on the rear light just in case. I passed through a few hamlets before Rita told me to turn up a rough track. I followed her advice and it was an easy ride to the next bit of tarmac. This was a pattern of the day. I'm not sure what



I was thinking of when I plotted the route but I spent more time on rough tracks and even grass headlands than I did on the road. Actually it was rather fun.

I slightly dreaded a puncture or dropping into a big pothole but for the most part the tracks were in very good order and followed the headlands of large fields.



Only in one place did I have to GOAP when I saw a big sea of mud in front of me. Fortunately I was able to walk round it easily and remount the other side.



I was only about 8 miles from Caen when I left the final track and had to take to a busy main road into the city centre. To gird my loins I stopped at a snack bar and had a pannini. It was an interesting ride. I kept finding myself on the main highway instead of the cycle lane but eventually made it to the castle which was my destination.



The castle contains the Museum of Normandy and the Museum of Fine Arts and the cost of entry to both was 8.50 euros. I'm afraid that the art gallery was disappointing: lots of second rate art mainly by people I had not heard of. There were a couple of nice Boudins but otherwise not very inspiring. The museum of Normandy traced the history of the area from first habitation through to about the 19th century and was well laid out and enjoyable. There was also a special exhibition of the English Norman history from 1066 to the end of the Hundred Years War which was well explained.

By 5 o'clock I'd had enough culture and made my way to Ouistreham by the excellent Voie Vert that runs for about 9 miles from the City Centre to the port. About 4 miles



from the end the fog came down once again and I was able to photograph Pegasus Bridge being lifted in the fog to allow a couple of tugs to come upstream.

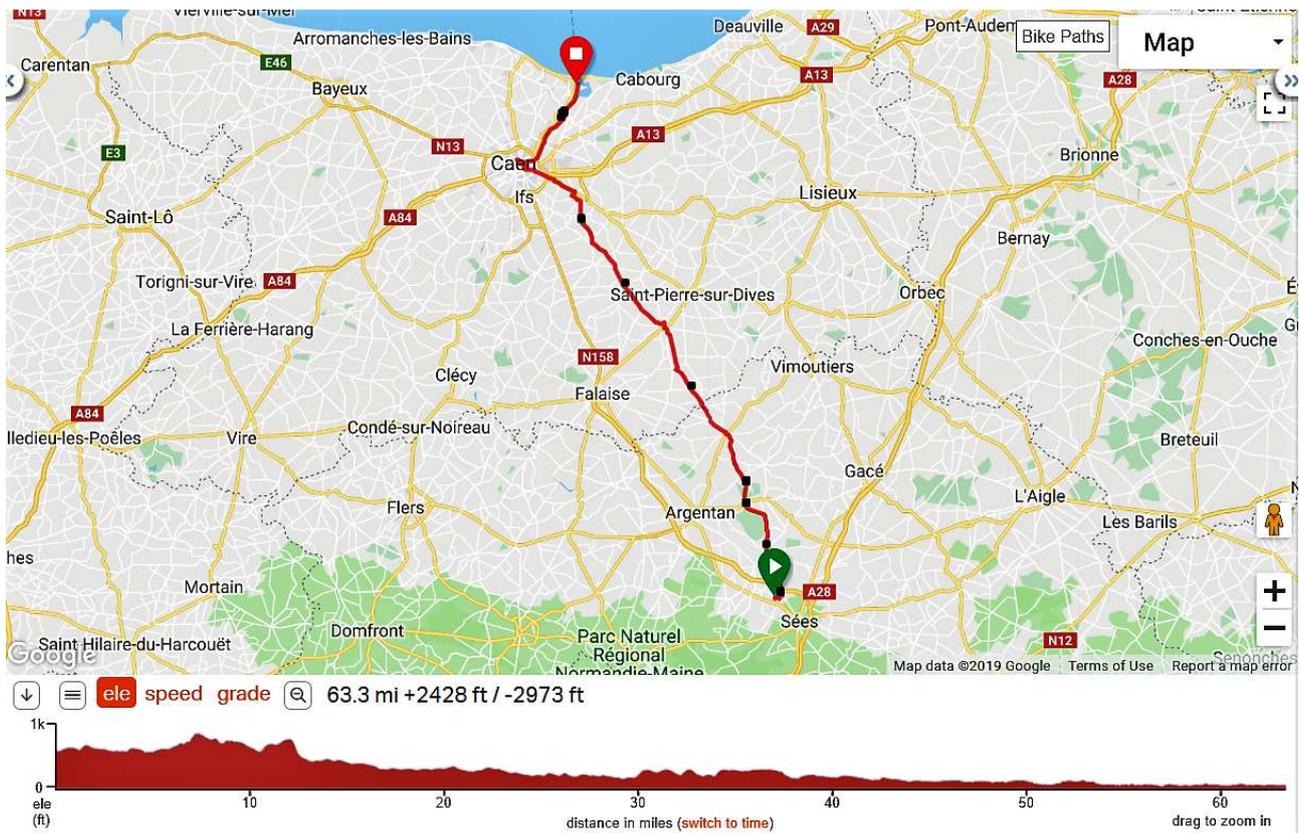
As it was still only about 6.15 I looked for somewhere to eat and found that La Marine was open for business and had a secure area at the front where I could leave the bike whilst I ate. I had a gourmand meal of an assiette of sea food, Sea Bream cooked in a tomato and mushroom stock, and a plateful of sweet delicacies to finish washed down with a pint of beer.

On my way down the Voie Vert I had passed a lot of African youths making their way towards Ouistreham and when I got there plenty more were hanging around the front presumably hoping to stow away in lorries or vans and get to England. As I walked from the restaurant the Gendarmes turned up and the youth scattered. I'm sure that they'll keep trying

On my way into Ouistreham I stopped and bought a bottle of wine. It would have been nice to buy some French wine but I couldn't find a single bottle with a screw cap so had to buy South African.

I thought that I might as well book in and wait in the ferry terminal but having got through with my boarding pass could not get my bike into the terminal. Fortunately I found that the loo block was open and I was able not only to park my bike in the lobby but also found a plug that I could use to charge the phone and particularly the Garmin which had almost run out of power. So I spent a rather shifty hour and a half in the lobby, reading a book on my Kindle as lots of pre-pubescent French children used the loos. About an hour into the wait a door beside me opened and the French Gendarmerie came in mob handed to search the loos for potential stowaways so I can categorically say that they are doing their bit to try to prevent illegal entry to Britain.

Once boarding was announced I went to the front of the queue and was ushered through quickly and was almost first on board. My bike is tied up on the main car deck and I'm upstairs in an almost deserted lounge of reclining seats typing the blog. I'll have to go elsewhere to get a WiFi signal and if I fail this won't get published until I get back home tomorrow. I've just realised that it will be dark when we dock, unlike last time I did the trip in June. I'm not sure my lights are up to cycling in pitch dark so I may not get home quite as soon as I hoped.



Day 26 – Back Home

The ferry docked at about 6 am and by the time I'd collected the bike and ridden off past Immigration it was light enough to see, although I kept my lights on so that I could be seen. From previous trips I knew where I was going and avoided being pulled onto the main roads. As I was cycling past terraced houses I was hailed by a young girl in party clothes who said that she had been abandoned by her friends and was totally lost. I tried to put her in the right direction (about a mile away) and would have guided her if I didn't have quite so many miles to travel in the opposite direction. Hopefully she made it to safety.



The day was fine and I tried to make my way round the harbour but the cycleway was blocked at Alexandra Park and I had to head inland onto the A9 before joining the A27 under the Motorway. There was little traffic and I crossed the Hamble at Little Swanwick before climbing up to Bursledon and heading

inland to cross the Itchen at Woodmill. I got back onto the A27 at the Motorway interchange and headed along the Botley Road to Romsey where I managed to take a wrong turn but eventually found the road to Mottisfont and across the Downs to Salisbury.



From Salisbury I was on very familiar territory and made good time to Tisbury. As I was climbing the hill towards Semley, a familiar car came from the opposite direction and pulled up. It was Tom driving Rob who had brought his bike to accompany me back to Home farm. I took the panniers off the bike and put them in the car and continued with Rob leading the way. The bike felt very strange without the weight but I soon got used to it and about an hour and a half later we arrived at Home farm to be met by three excited grandchildren and the rest of the family.

