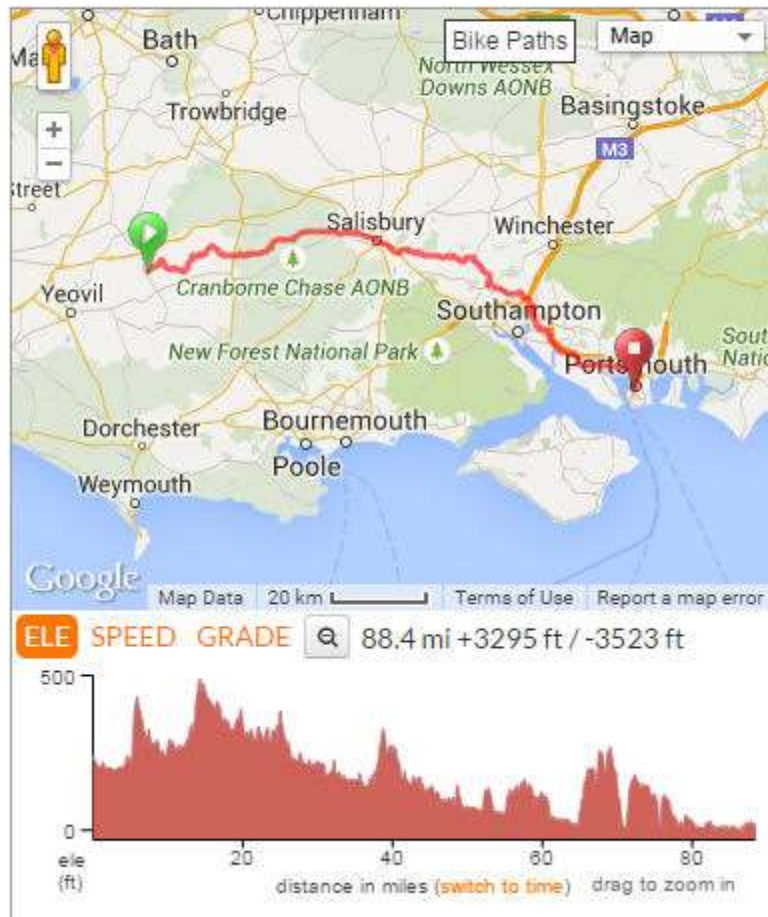


# Day 1 Home Farm - Portsmouth

DISTANCE: 88.4 MILES



Because the weather forecast was for squally showers and strengthening winds later in the day I decided to set off earlier than intended. So, having said farewell to the nearest and dearest I hit the road at about 0850. The legs felt good and I climbed Hartmoor Hill out of the Blackmore Vale with relative ease, the extra weight both front and back not affecting me. The day was bright but rather windy from the south west so, if anything in my favour, although for much of the day it was blowing across me. I made good speed through Gillingham when, just short of the A350 at Semley there was a bang and rapid escape of air from the back tyre. When I looked there was a hole in the tyre and, more alarmingly, cuts on the inside. I patched the cuts and put in a replacement tube and hoped it would last until I could find a bike shop. In the event it held up until I found Stonehenge Cycles in Salisbury who fitted a new back tyre. (Thanks Nick). I rather hoped that would be the end of my troubles and carried on towards Romsey. Having passed a couple of pubs that were closed on Mondays I wondered if I would have to go hungry but on the A3057 I found the Bear and Ragged Staff where I enjoyed a plate of Lasagne and a pint of London Pride.

Well-fortified I pushed on through Romsey, where I got slightly lost, and on to Eastleigh and the A27, when suddenly there was the familiar feel of a flat rear tyre.

Unloading all the bags I fished out another new tube and, having found no evidence of anything in the tyre, fitted it and pumped it up as best I could with my little pump. I found another bike shop and "borrowed" some air but when I tried to buy a couple of replacement tubes they had sold out of the right size. On I went up and down the not inconsiderable hills of Southampton suburbia when, damn me, it happened again and I had to effect yet another repair with my final spare tube. There was still no sign of any foreign object in the tyre so I fixed it and hoped for the best.

Fortunately that was the end of the punctures and I finally rocked up at the ferry port at about 1930 having taken a few wrong turns including a totally unnecessary circuit of a lake on a rough track. Such are the joys of GPS navigation: it's all too easy to turn too early and find yourself on the wrong road.

Having had a pretty unpleasant cheese and onion toastie, which was the only thing on offer in the Port building, and a rather nicer pint of Worthington, I made my way, as requested, to the departure gate at about 9pm. I was let through in front of everyone else but was then told to wait and didn't finally board until about 1015, having had to



wait under the loading ramp to keep off the worst of the wind and rain. If you go onto the Brittany Ferries website they have a video of a cyclist saying how well they treat his ilk: I thought it pretty poor. When I was finally allowed to cycle up the ramp I was behind half a dozen motorbikes belching fumes before I finally left the bike. My smart new bike was pretty much chucked in a pile and roped together with others so heaven knows what state it will be in when I return to it in the morning. I think Brittany Ferries could, and should, do better.

We finally left harbour at about 11pm. I have a reclining seat but can't get a Wi-Fi signal when in it, so have had to come up to the bar which is full of French adolescents dancing to Europop. There's no food on offer so my only options are to drink myself senseless or try to get some sleep: hopefully the latter as I have another 85 miles to cycle tomorrow and need to find some spare Chambres a air in Caen before I head off into the Norman countryside.

## Day 2 Ouistreham - Verneuil

DISTANCE: 92.6 MILES



I've just discovered a major problem. When cycling yesterday I managed to lose the adapter from UK to euro (don't ask, it was one of those days). What that means is that I can't charge this tablet and I'm almost out of battery. I'll try to get a replacement

tomorrow but until then this post will remain incomplete. Suffice it to say that I made it to Verneuil without major mishap.

The crossing to Ouistreham was much calmer than I had feared and, although I didn't get much sleep, I rested. We docked pretty much on time and, having had a remarkably good value Full English breakfast on the ship for 4.95 pounds (keyboard doesn't do pound sign) I set off in company with a Welshman who was cycling down



to Bordeaux. There was a terrific headwind as we made our way along the traffic-free canal path, which has an excellent tarmac surface, so progress was slow, down to 8mph at times. We parted company at Pegasus Bridge as I continued on the cycle path before crossing the next bridge. There was a sharp 7% climb up from the canal as I made my way, as planned, through an industrial estate and onto another cycle path that took me out of Caen. I then had to take to a major road with constant traffic, fortunately with a rudimentary cycle lane, for about 5 miles before I was able to take to the back roads.

After yesterday, I was out of inner tubes and needed to restock in case of future problems. I had repaired one tube but was uncertain of how good it would be so was pleased to see what appeared to be a bike shop on the main street of a small village. However when I pulled up it appeared to be closed and the doors bolted. Looking more closely I saw a jumble of old bikes and scooters down the side and at the end a workshop. I poked my head around the door, explained what I wanted in bad French and was delighted when Monsieur appeared with two tubes of the correct size. Back in business.



Once off the main road I was able to enjoy the ride, although the wind made it very hard work. In Mezidon Canon I came across a building being demolished which gave me an unexpected 2 mile detour but I pushed on knowing that there was some interesting riding to come. Before leaving I had viewed my routes, where possible in Google Street view and realised that some of the shortcuts were along rough tracks. I soon came to the first of these but after about 100 yards realised it was too rough to continue so came back to the road, slightly longer but much quicker. 5 miles on I had identified a cycle route along an old railway that ran 10 miles to Livarot but after only a couple I gave up and went back to the tarmac. Just after I detoured from the track I

met a couple of heavy hunter type horses. The grey took a dislike to the bike and wouldn't come past but eventually the other horse, who was also wary but less feisty, led him past.

Taking to the tarmac meant a lot more climbing, long 5-6% grades steepening to 9 % in places, good practice for what is to come in the Alps but not what I had expected. This meant a fast swoop down to Livarot before I hit the main road to Vimoutiers. From here there is a 6% climb up the other side of the valley where I took to some charming lanes through woods and orchards. Another climb at Pontchardon, the last of the day, before a sweep down to The George bar in Le Sap where I enjoyed le formule of a savoury croissant, gammon and potatoes, help yourself cheese plate and lemon tart and coffee for 11.50 euros: good honest cooking which, with a couple of pints of beer set me back 20.80 euros - excellent value.



After lunch I stuck to the tarmac until I turned off onto a side road where I passed a paddock containing 4 inquisitive spotty Norman cattle. The road petered out into a field of barley for a mile or so. It was so rough I had to get off and push but eventually found some hard track and carried on, reaching Verneuil at about 1730 after 93 miles made harder by the wind.

The Hotel du Saumon is the former Post Office in a large square dominated by a tower with a bell that strikes regularly, day and night.



Fortunately my room was at the back and I was not unduly disturbed. I unpacked everything, had a shower and lay on the bed. The next I knew it was 2050 and dinner service stopped at 2100. Fortunately Madame took pity on me when I appeared at 2102 and I had a rabbit terrine followed by skate wing and cheese, all perfectly well prepared but not very exciting. 50cl of good white wine brought the bill to 34.30 which was expensive. I updated the blog until the battery ran out and then had a reasonable night's sleep.



## Day 3 Verneuil - Olivet

DISTANCE: 95.4 MILES



I had a reasonable night's sleep in a comfortable double bed and felt pretty good when I woke at about 0730. After faffing around in the room for a while I went across to help myself to a very good breakfast: as well as cereals, croissant, bread and brioche there were cold ham, cheese and hard-boiled eggs and a choice of various teas, orange juice and coffee. I made the most of it and fuelled up for another 90 mile day.



The bill for dinner, bed and breakfast was 95 euros which was on the high side but the hotel was comfortable and the service good so I was not unhappy. I left Verneuil at about 0930 and immediately set off on the wrong road because my

GPS failed me. However I wasn't particularly bothered, as I was heading in the right direction and Chartres, my initial destination was only about 35 miles. After a couple of miles on the main road which was, thankfully, not especially busy, my GPS picked



up my correct route and I turned off to join it. It was a lovely morning with weak sunshine and much less wind and I made good progress up the valley of the Avre through woods and alongside the river which is about 15 metres wide at this point. I came across a forestry operation with dozens of clean oak butts beside the road awaiting collection: the French are very good foresters and grow good straight timber. They don't appear to suffer from the scourge of the squirrel as much as we do but maybe they are just better at controlling them.

The roads went up and down but without any major climbs and I spent a large part of the trip to Chartres in woodland which was very pleasant. However the woods soon disappeared and I was out on the wide open prairie of Northern France. It was wall to wall crops of wheat, barley and oil seed rape with the odd field of peas and beans. All of it looked pretty healthy and much of it was being irrigated. I made a couple of off road excursions which cut off distance but increased time. The tracks were very rough but I rode all the way and had no mishaps. I passed several large granaries, alongside the railway and was to see these throughout the day. They looked from a distance like cathedrals, appropriate for this region that boasts three of the largest in Northern Europe.



About 5 miles from Chartres I came over the hill and saw the Cathedral towering over the town so I knew where I was heading without looking at the GPS. Chartres is smaller than I had expected and quite compact but, as so often with large structures, when you are close to them they disappear and I went round in a couple of circles trying to get to the cathedral before I finally found it. I parked the bike on a stand in the Cathedral Square and locked it up with a security strap through the panniers and my Hiplok lite which I wear around my waist when cycling. Having secured everything I took

the handlebar bag and went off to search for FNAC which is a cross between HMV, Waterstones and Currys. With help from the Tourist Office I found the store who were able to provide me with an adapter so that I can plug in the charger for the tablet on which I am typing this blog. Hooray! I can get back on line.

As it was now lunchtime I stopped in a little brasserie and enjoyed a meal of veal stew and noodles with a cherry gateau and a couple of beers. Slightly more expensive than yesterday at 25 euros but, considering I was in a top tourist town, not bad value. The host was cheerful and we made conversation in bad English and French.

The Cathedral sits high on a hill so I had quite a climb to get up to it and now, a swoop down into the valley where I picked up my route and set off towards Orleans. The landscape was now all huge arable fields with large irrigation rigs everywhere. The roads were well surfaced and fairly flat so I was making very good time, averaging 17 mph for much of the afternoon. However I was also feeling a bit tired and saddle-sore and the prospect of another 60 miles was not enticing but I knew that I had to push on. I was also feeling much thirstier than normal and made regular stops to drink from my water bottles.

My Garmin GPS has given me trouble from the start. It seems that if you stray from the designated route it wants to take you back to where you started and continually tells you to turn off or around. Fortunately the Ridewith GPS app on my phone is much more reliable and simply stays silent until you get back onto the correct route which I was able to achieve by reading the map on the phone. It is hard to understand why a bike GPS is so much less sophisticated than a car GPS but I can only suppose that it takes too much power to put them on a par and that you would very quickly deplete the battery. However I carry two battery packs that I can plug into the Garmin and the phone whilst in use and these keep the devices well charged and only require recharging every couple of days. They sit in the handlebar bag and are connected by USB cables which don't get in the way. Equally they are small enough to go in a pocket if you didn't have a handlebar bag and are a brilliant and inexpensive innovation, costing under a tenner each.

The day was wearying: although the wind had died down from yesterday it was still in my face and the sun was hot. I was longing to get off the bike from about 20 miles out from Orleans and was mighty glad when I saw the Cathedral towers in the distance. Orleans is a major city on the Loire which I am to follow for the next



couple of days and, although I made good time to the outskirts, it took an interminable time to get through the city centre with its tram-lines and imposing buildings. My stop for the night was Olivet, a commercial centre to the south of the city so I crossed the Loire in heavy traffic before climbing up from the valley. There were cycle lanes all the way but, especially on the bridge not enough room to squeeze past the cars so progress was slow. Eventually I made my way through the attractive town centre of Olivet and out into the commercial area where I found the Hotel Acadie without trouble and was able to leave the bike in a



building at the rear which used to be a restaurant but is now a store house for the hotel. It is a typical cheap French Hotel (46.70 including breakfast), purpose built with small rooms and no soul: however the welcome was warm and efficient and the beds comfortable. The bathroom is small but the shower works well and it provides all I need. Alongside the hotel are a couple of restaurants and I was able to pig out on an all you can eat Chinese buffet for 15.90 with a couple of beers raising the price to 22.30: good value if a bit bland.



I then tried to update the blog but the hotel Wi-Fi was so clogged that it was impossible to maintain a connection and I had a frustrating couple of hours before I decided to write the blog in a word-processing programme to be saved until tomorrow morning before I leave, by which time the Wi-Fi should be under less strain. I have still to work out how to get photos from my phone to WordPress so that I can publish them. I'll play around until I work it out but for the mean-time the blog is picture less.

## Day 4 – Olivet – La Charite-sur-Loire

**DISTANCE: 88.9 MILES**



I woke at 5am thinking that I could hear a gale blowing outside and not relishing the thought of cycling into it: however it was the noise of traffic on the nearby road and the wind was relatively benign. Because I was awake I tried the Wi-Fi and, glory be, it worked, so I was able to upload the last couple of days blog. I stayed in the room until 0730 and then went down for breakfast. It was typical French breakfast but plenty of it so I stoked up well. After packing and loading the bike I set off at about 0850 and, amazingly, picked up the correct route almost immediately. This took me on a cycle route alongside the tram line and out through the grounds of the university, past students waiting for lectures. There was a cycle lane all the way out to the edge of Olivet and then I hit a fairly minor road to Sandillon where there was little traffic. The wind, however, was still trying; directly in my face all day accompanied by full sun. I soon consigned my helmet to the rear rack and donned a sunhat and then applied Factor 30 to exposed areas.



The route to Sully took me across country, through arable fields but about 10 miles into the journey I diverted onto a green lane which then became a hard track but rough enough to slow me down considerably and my speed for the first 2 hours was a paltry

9.5mph. I arrived in Sully, with its impressive chateau surrounded by a moat and stopped for a coffee. From here there is a cycle route along the levee of the Loire, varying in condition but generally good.



Just before Sully I could see the cooling towers of the Dampierre nuclear power plant belching steam and after passing them I could see the towers of the Belleville power plant another 25 miles upstream so navigation was easy. The route goes inland before re-joining the Loire close to Gien where I stopped for lunch. I was running late due to off-road jaunts and the wind and had meant to have lunch in Briare but the Rive Gauche Restaurant attached to the Sanotel provide a good value 4 course formule for 28 euros including a couple of beers and a glass of wine, an excellent rabbit terrine followed by a rump steak and raspberry Charlotte with cheese and coffee.



I was soon in Briare with its impressive canal bridge that spans the Loire. Unfortunately there was no traffic on the canal but it is an amazing structure

built between 1890 and 1894. Having taken several pictures I carried on on the right bank. Having foolishly forgotten to fill my water bottles at the lunch stop I was pleased to find a Carrefour where I bought 1.25 litres of water which filled my bottles and gave me a good drink as well. The ride along this bank started on an uninteresting road but soon took to a path along the levee and then a tarmac drive closer to the river. It was most attractive and easy riding until I re-crossed the Loire, in error at Chatillon. However there seemed to be a perfectly good cycle track on the left bank so I plugged on. Unfortunately the track deteriorated and I had an uncomfortable ride between there and the nuclear station at Belleville which considerably slowed me down.

However from Belleville there is a well surfaced tarmac cycle road, occasionally shared with a very few cars, that runs all the way to my destination at La Charite-sur-Loire. It would have been a joy but by now I was very tired from the sun and wind and, I think, the fact that I had cycled uphill all the way. Normally you go up a hill and then get a rest when you reach a downhill section but because the track follows the river it is constant climbing and I was feeling absolutely knackered and saddle-sore. My water-bottles were, once again, empty and I still had over 20 miles to travel, but north of Sancerre the cycle route joins a canal and I was over-joyed to find a water tap at the information point and had a long drink and filled the bottles. The track was excellent, proper tarmac and well maintained with km markers set into the road surface and well-marked. If I had been fresh it would have been very pleasant but I



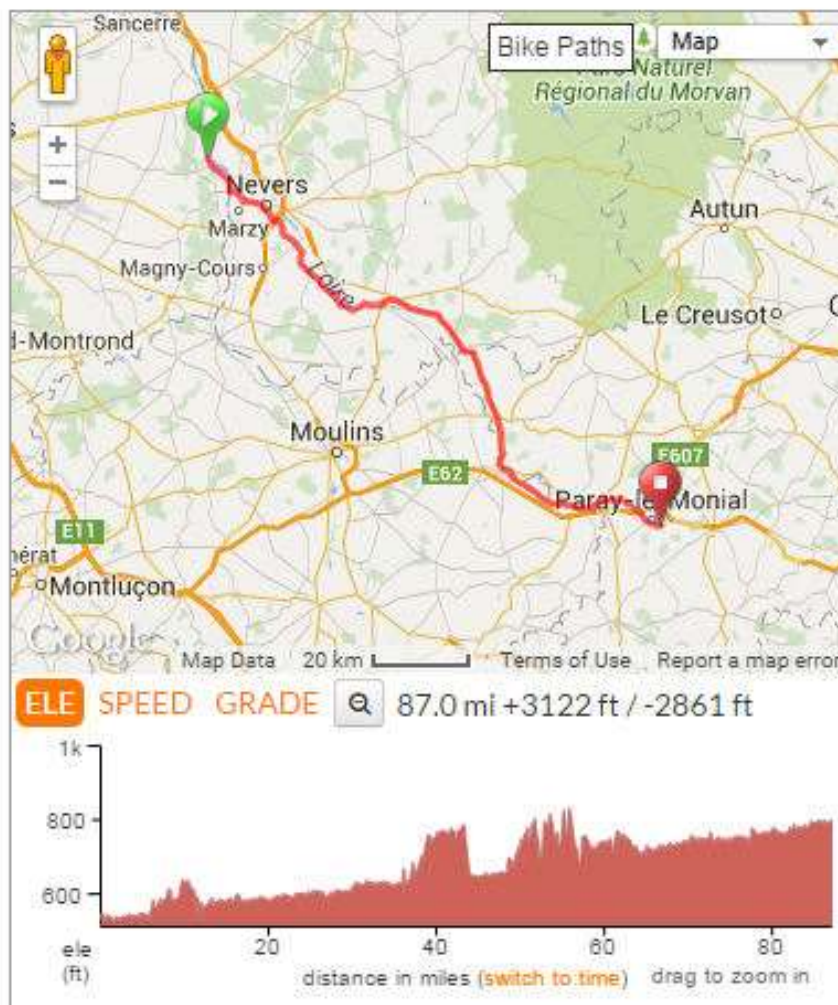
was dying to get off the bike, have a shower and something to eat and go to bed. I manned up, stopping regularly to rest and drink and finally arrived at Le Bon Labourer Hotel, a very old building, which has been well refurbished, on an island of the Loire at about 7.45pm after 89 miles and 8 hours 40 minutes in the saddle and 2 hours 40 stopped. I was able to grab a shower before eating a nice dinner of herring salad and grilled chicken followed by Crème Brulee, all washed down with a couple of pints of 1664.

What worries me most is that I have another day tomorrow that will be much the same, constant climbing and over a marginally longer distance, followed by another similar day on Saturday and the weather forecast is for 30C+. I hope that I can cope!



## Day 5 – La Charite-sur-Loire - Hautefond

DISTANCE: 87.0 MILES



This was a day I wasn't sure about. In theory it was the longest distance run, although Day 2 eclipsed it because of navigation errors, but it was going to be at least 93 miles and after 4 days of 85 miles plus I am beginning to feel a little weary.



I started at 0850 from La Charite and was immediately back onto the Loire Velo route which is beautifully surfaced and virtually flat. The wind had died a bit but was still in my face and I was making a respectable 11mph for the first hour or so. The track was on top of the river levee and I met several cyclists coming the other way, mainly couples of about my age or older, but noone going uphill like me. I also, rather surprisingly, met a herd of sheep and goats who were being driven in the same direction as me: they were reluctant to move to one side and I had to push my way through them.



After 8.6 miles the track joined the Loire canal and was excellent going, with a well maintained tarmac surface and virtually flat. I am exact on this point because I lost the first few miles of the journey on RWGPS and had to replot it! At Nevers I realised that I could cut about 5 miles off the journey by cutting across the big loop in the river. This meant crossing over the Loire at Marzy and heading up a 5% hill. To my surprise this was actually quite enjoyable after the flattish paths I had become accustomed to and, at the top of the hill I spotted a supermarket and called in to buy 1.5 litres of water as it was becoming very hot and I had more or less exhausted my supplies. I went through the middle of Nevers and crossed back over the Loire, stopping to take some pictures. The other side of the bridge my satnav picked up the route and guided me onto a lovely flat and tarmac surfaced canal path which was to continue until Decize,

about 42 miles into the journey, so I was feeling rather good. At Decize the Loire Velo track seemed to divert from the canal so I left it and headed for the town centre. I had exhausted my water again so I stopped at Intermarche and bought another 1.5 litres which replenished my bidons and gave me a decent drink and a couple of apple tartlets to keep me going

It was now about 1.30pm and I was unsure about restaurant opening hours, so, instead of stopping for lunch, as I should have done, I pressed on. The route now took me away from the Loire and on a switchback road that ran arrow straight for 5 miles at a time. This was quite disheartening and I found myself stopping every 5 miles for a drink and to get off the bike - it's amazing how long it seems to take to cover 5 miles in these circumstances.

Eventually I reached Bourbon Lancy and another Intermarche topped me up with a further 1.5 litres (that's over a gallon so far), but bearing in mind that the temperature was over 25C, I needed the fluid. From B-L there is a dedicated cycle path that runs all the way to Le Ronsy, 71 miles into the journey, where it joins the canal that was to take me all the way to my destination. The downside of this path, and that along the canal, is that, at every junction, there is a double barrier across the track that has to be negotiated and it means slowing down and occasionally unclipping to achieve it, so it slowed progress considerably. However the surfaces were smooth and it was a joy to ride them.

Because I'd skipped lunch I hit the wall about 15 miles from the finish and had to stop for 10 minutes to recover. I continued stopping every 5 miles to ensure that I got to the finish which I reached at about 7pm. Because the first 8.6 miles are missing from the map above, the total journey was 95.6 miles





The Delfotel is on the outskirts of Hautefond and is a sort of motel standing in its own grounds. The room is large and comfortable, though the bathroom is the opposite. Having had a shower and washed out my clothes I went to the restaurant and had a decent meal of Goose Rillettes and Monk Fish and potatoes with creme caramel to finish. WiFi is totally unobtainable, even in reception, so I've been unable to upload my ride for today. I hope that this will just sit on the phone until I can find a WiFi signal and won't get lost in the ether. Anyway today has been hard work but not as bad as I feared. Tomorrow is a similar distance but with more climbing: a good night's sleep is called for.

## Day 6 Hautefond - Poncin

DISTANCE: 91.0 MILES





Not a great night's sleep because the bed and pillows were a bit hard, so I was a bit slow getting going and didn't get on the road until about 0910 after a typical French breakfast. There was plenty of it so, as usual, I stoked up. No more than two miles into the journey I made a wrong turn and heard the dreaded noise from my phone that tells me I'm off course: however I was soon on the right track again and found myself in Charolles, home of Charolais cattle (and for all I know sheep as well). Every field I passed was full of contented white cows and calves, chewing the cud and

enjoying the sunshine. I dropped down a hill into the centre of Charolles and missed the right road, climbing a substantial hill before realising I was wrong. Buzzer!

Back down the hill I went and found the correct road which took me through some lovely country. No more large arable fields, just fields of grass and cattle, and a lot of haymaking going on. After a while the topography changed and I looked ahead at some quite substantial hills, hoping that I wouldn't have to climb them. How wrong I was! Up I went with grades of 8-9% which made me puff a bit but I was enjoying it. I think the last couple of days of virtually flat, or slightly uphill straight roads is much more enervating. I was climbing through forests which were protecting me from the sun, the roads were switchbacking up and down and I was never quite sure what would be round the next corner.

About 20 miles into the journey I found myself on a dirt track and had to get off the bike when it became very steep downhill. At this point my roads followed alongside the E62/N79 motorway and I stopped at the Auberge du Lac at Chandon for a coffee. Presumably because I was now on what used to be the main road to Macon there were hotels and restaurants galore. What sort of trade they now do with the traffic zipping past on the motorway is anyone's guess but I was the only person at the Auberge du Lac.



My road continued, passing under and then over the motorway twice before a significant pitch took me up to the Voie Verte from Chalons-sur-Saone to Macon. This reached a severe 12% before I came across the Tunnel du Bois Clair that runs for 2 kms through the hillside. The Voie Verte follows the line of the railway and is superbly surfaced. As with yesterday the only downside is the barriers at every road junction but it was a joy to ride along, especially as it was largely downhill. Even though it was Saturday there was hardly anyone on it.

I had decided in advance that my lunch stop would be the Cafe de la Gare at Charnay-les-Macon. This sits on a junction of the Voie Verte about 5 miles short of the city of Macon and, on a day like today, was a delightful place to eat a veal escalope and chocolate tart washed down with beer. Madame spoke a bit of English and the waiters were attentive. They filled my bidons with ice-cold water and gave me directions.

I made my way up the hill towards Macon and soon hit another cycle path that took me right through the centre and over the Mitterand Bridge over the Saone, my second great river. On the other side my GPS and phone started arguing and I found myself going up rough tracks until I found myself in front of the high embankment of the Peage with no way of going forward. I retraced my steps and tried another couple of tracks but there was no choice but to go back to the end of the motorway and make my way round it. This I did but I was now well off course. However by looking at the map on the phone I eventually found my way back to the correct track which was south of the main road from Macon to Geneva by way of Bourg-en-Bresse.



As this morning this was a delightful journey through fields and woods, generally undulating but without any really steep pitches and, despite the heat, which was considerable, I was enjoying myself even when I took to some roughish tracks.

However, once again, 15 miles from my destination my resolve was tested and I found myself stopping regularly. I was even glad to be held up at a railway crossing whilst a streamlined 3 coach train came ambling through. When I saw the front of it I thought it must be a TGV, but it was a local stopping train: how different from UK rolling stock.

I knew from my route-planning that the last 6 miles of the journey were across country including at least one very rough track. I had planned this because it was the most direct route to my destination. How foolish. I would have been much better to



have travelled the extra 5 miles on decent roads than what I was faced with. At one point I was going down a 20% gradient that looked as though it would be a stream in winter and there was more to follow. The last 5 miles took me nearly an hour and can't have done the bike much good. To top it all one of the buckles on my right shoe broke: I can manage without it but I think I

shall have to buy a new pair when I can find a shop.

Anyway I eventually arrived in Poncin which is a lovely little town on the river Ain, after 91 miles and a surprising 5140 feet of climbing. The

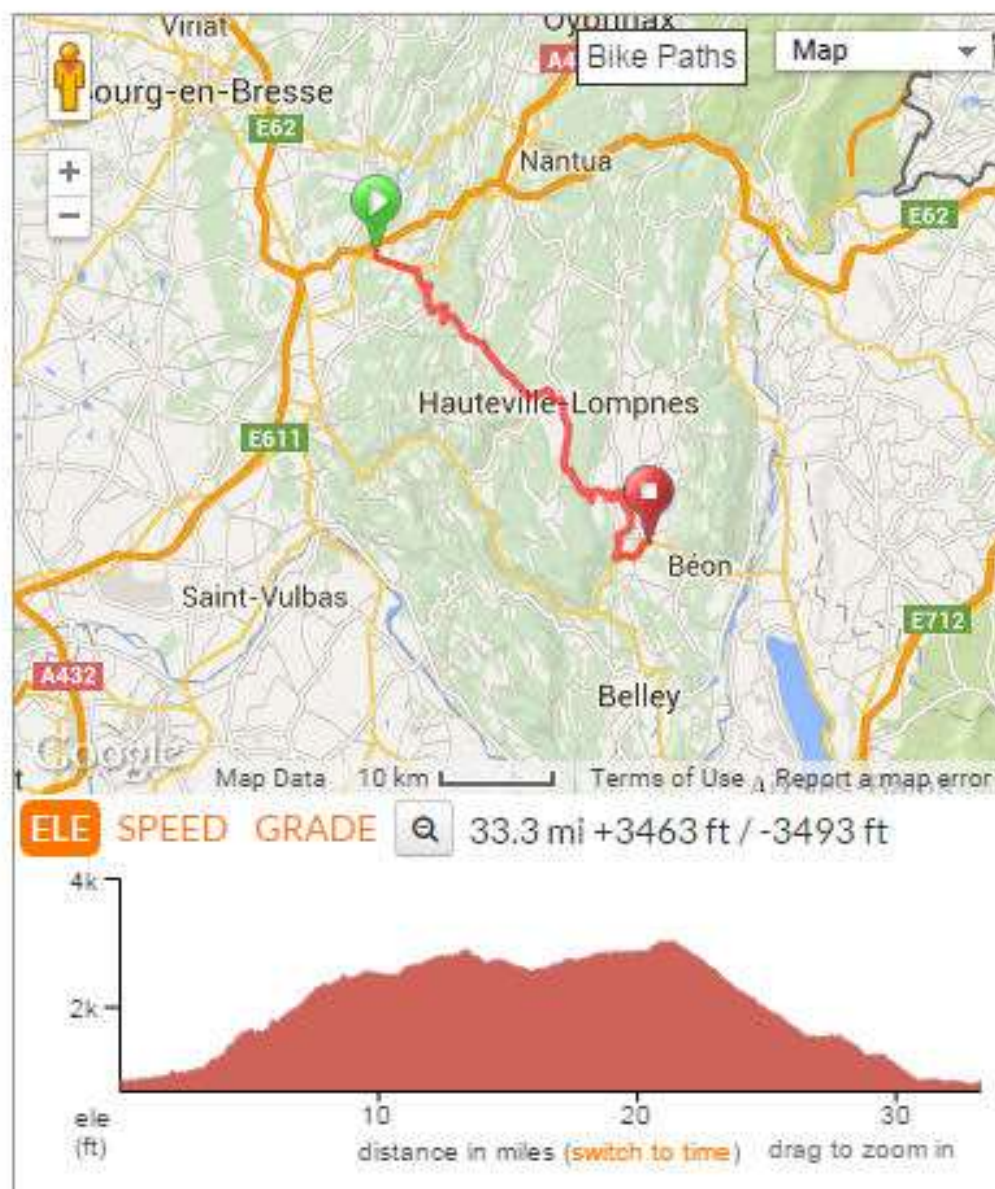




hotel/restaurant are on the main town square and I have the disabled room which is very spacious. As I arrived a German cyclist was booking in and Lutz and I shared a table and conversation at supper which, in my case was a plate of charcuterie followed by a pizza which went well with the half of red wine. I need hardly say that the conversation was in English of which he is a master! Thunder is now rolling around the area and may lead to rain tomorrow which is my first day of concentrated climbing with 4500 feet in the first 20 miles. Thereafter it is fairly flat

## Day 7 Poncin - Montmelian

**DISTANCE: 33.3 MILES**



The thunder that was rolling around at supper time duly turned into a heavy storm, by which time I was in bed listening to the rain coming down outside. By morning it was bright and clear again and I went for breakfast at about 0830. The fare was limited to one croissant and a piece of bread with butter, jam and coffee so I did not have my usual full belly when I finally left at 0910; however whilst eating I had a fractured conversation with Edouard the hotel owner who was popping various pills. Apparently he had a full heart transplant 11 years ago and needs the drugs to prevent problems. He complained about the fact that there is no money in being a hotelier. He is open 7 days a week 365 days a year but still only makes enough to pay the bank. None of his children want to follow him; too much like hard work etc etc. It's the same the whole world over!

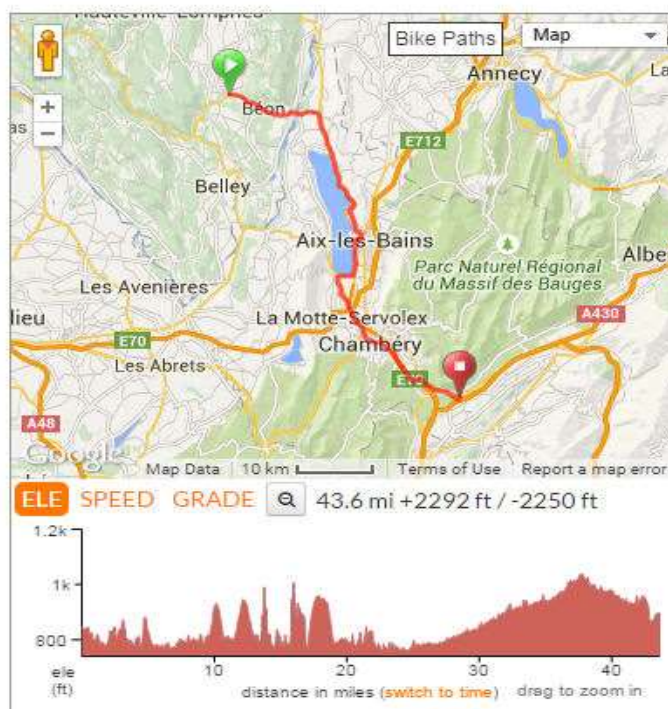
I set off hoping that the GPS would put me on the right road fairly quickly but, in the event, it took me along a dead straight main road, fortunately not very busy, until it picked up a signal at my first turn. The side road was still wet with puddles from last night but the sun was shining brightly and they were soon turned to steam. I was



immediately into some steepish climbing, up to 8% in places, but was finding it quite comfortable. The road snaked up the hillside occasionally opening out into vistas but mainly within the forest and I was soon at the Col de Montratier where the road levelled out before dropping down and then switchbacking through Chatillon and Corlier before I finally reached Hauteville Lompnes which was my designated coffee stop. The Cafe du Sport provided the caffeine break and I continued up, not as steep as I had feared, until I reached the summit at the Col de la Lebe at

914 metres. I stopped for a drink of water, knowing that most of the climbing was finished for the day and that I had 50 miles of downhill or relative flat before my final destination.

**DISTANCE: 43.6 MILES**



Down I went, touching 35 mph at times, unfortunately so fast that I missed a turn and ended up about 3 miles off route. No big deal as it had been an enjoyable descent through woods and forests and on good surfaces. I consulted the phone map and made the necessary adjustments to get back on route.

I was now well behind schedule; I had intended to stop for lunch in Brisons but was still an hour away so I stopped at the first available restaurant which happened to be the Restaurant Chevalier in Beon. As seems to be normal



there is no menu formule at weekends but I had a very good entrecote steak with fries and salad followed by a Banana split for 22.30 euros.



Carrying on I soon crossed major river number three, The Rhone, which, all being well, I shall re-cross at Avignon and the Bouches de Rhone in a week or so. After a surprising amount of climbing I eventually found myself alongside Lac du Bourget which I followed for its full length to Aix-les-Bains. There is a cycle lane all the way along the lake but it is narrow and cars don't necessarily give much room so I was glad to reach Aix-les-Bains and pick up the Voie Verte that runs all the way off road to Chambéry. Being a sunny Sunday the lakeside was full with bathers and watersports enthusiasts and it was, occasionally, difficult to pick my way through the throng. The Voie Verte is excellently surfaced and well-marked until you get to the centre of Chambéry where it is easy to lose the route.

After a couple of false turns I was through the city and out into the country beyond, following the railway which makes its way down the Maurienne valley to the Frejus tunnel to Italy. For some reason I, once again, ended up on a rough track but soon put that right and finally made my destination, the Hotel George in Montmelian at about 1830 after a generally enjoyable day of 77 miles. The Hotel is pretty much empty, and an 18 euro supper was a solitary meal of not very inspiring soup and chicken with beans and mushrooms followed with a jam crepe. Beer was followed by a half of Cotes du Rhone before I went upstairs to update this blog.

Again a slight cock-up in navigation means that the ride has been saved to two maps. There is a way of stitching these together that I shall work out before too long and, hopefully, end up with a single map of the whole journey in due course.

I'm tempted by a bit of a day off tomorrow. My cycle shoes need replacing and that can be achieved in Chambéry followed by a flat 45 mile ride down the Maurienne valley to St Michel before tackling Col du Telegraphe and Col du Galibier on Tuesday. I'll see how I feel in the morning.

## Day 8 Montmelian – St Jean de Maurienne

DISTANCE: 43.5 MILES



When I was planning this journey I gave myself three options for today. First, and most ambitious, to cycle along the Val de Maurienne to La Chambre (about 30 miles) then up the Col du Glandon and Col du Croix de Fer and back down to St Jean de Maurienne finishing at my hotel in St Michel, just up the valley, after about 69 miles and fearsome 7500 feet of climbing. I realised fairly early that this wasn't going to happen so was left with taking a different route over the top of about 50 miles and still quite considerable 5300 feet of climbing over the Col du Grand Cucheron, or to take this as a day of relative rest and follow the Val de Maurienne for about 43 miles with a steady 2000 feet of climbing, which is what I have done.

There are several reasons I've wimped out: the weather forecast for today was for thunderstorms from about 2pm, my cycle shoe is broken (now cobbled together with a

bit of a coat hanger) and my body is telling me I need a rest before I tackle what is likely to be my biggest challenge, the Col du Galibier at 8678 feet, tomorrow.

In the event thunder has been rumbling around since about 230pm but, as yet, no storm. I left after a breakfast of croissant and bread and excellent jam and coffee and was offered more bread and coffee if I wanted it. The owners were both very helpful but the hotel looks a bit sorry for itself, though they are doing some refurbishment. I hope that business improves, and, of course, I am seeing it out of season, both summer and winter.

I set off at 915am and immediately crossed the Isere river by a bridge opposite the hotel and found myself on a rough track, not too badly surfaced, but with potholes, which I followed along the left bank of the river for about 5 miles. I was between the river and the motorway that leads to Albertville and branches off to Turin via Frejus and was largely shaded by trees and hedges. The route then took me back over the river and onto the D1006 which I was to follow for the rest of the day. The road has a cycle lane for most of the way but I had a difficult ride, feeling very saddle sore and lacking in energy, and arrived at my hotel in St Michel at about 150pm to find that Le Midi had finished and, if I wanted to eat, there was a snack bar down the road or a Carrefour in town.

The patron, about 40ish, was reserved and pretty unhelpful when it came to getting a WiFi connection. He gave me a password but I have been unable to get a connection, even in Reception, so I think this blog will have to await publication until Briancon or beyond. My room is large and has a wash basin but no loo or shower which are down the passage, but the bed is the most comfortable yet and the cost is only 39 euros: however I do have a busy road and railway just outside my window. I went into town to get something to eat and found an excellent patisserie where I had a delicious quiche and a blueberry sable which had lovely short pastry so my inner self immediately felt better.



I returned to the hotel and lay down for a couple of hours before trying to update the blog. Le repas was taken at about 8pm and, after a biere pour le soif, I had air dried ham followed by some well-cooked lamb chops with chips and green beans and un demi of vin rouge which was very pleasant. And so, after some more blog updating, to bed. The scenery has been spectacular all day with mountains rising steeply from the valley floor, occasionally coming so close together that you wonder how they manage to fit a two lane motorway, a railway, a river and another road between them. There is still plenty of snow on the tops and I shall see it up close when I get to the top of my climb tomorrow. A good night's rest will set me up well for the energetic ride to Briancon.

## Day 9 St Jean de Maurienne - Briançon

DISTANCE: 47.8 MILES



The day dawned fair, and I awoke very early, whether from a passing train or lorry I don't know, but I couldn't nod off again. However the bed was comfortable and I felt rested which was a good sign. Breakfast was croissant, bread and coffee and perfectly adequate and I set off at about 0850.



There was little chance of getting lost, large signs point to the Col du Telegraphe, my first climb of the day. I was straight into it and the first 3 miles are a testing 8-9% which was challenging. It levels out a bit in places but is still an average of 7.3% over 7.5 miles and I found myself stopping to drink and rest quite regularly. I eventually crested the 1566m summit at about 1045 and stopped to take some pictures before the surprisingly steep descent to Valloire, a ski station which stands at only 694m. What a waste of effort it seemed to

now have to re-climb nearly 900m on my way to the Col du Galibier.

In Valloire I had pre-determined to stop for coffee but, apparently, French cafes, certainly in Valloire, close on a Tuesday, a fact that I was told, as if I were stupid, by the owner of one that was being redecorated. Anyway I was able to fill my bottles with mountain water and carry on.

Again I was frustrated by a closed road. I probably would have got through on the bike but followed the diversion which took me down a steepish hill: another unnecessary climb. Having made my way back to the end of the diversion I was faced with a 6% climb out of the village. By now the effort was starting to hurt and I was being passed by an increasing number of cyclists, albeit a lot younger than me. On reaching the next hamlet the road levelled out to a more reasonable 4% and I was able to make better progress. However it was still hard enough to warrant regular stops before I reached Plan Lachat which is a bar/restaurant at the base of the really big climb. My plan had been to call in for a drink and something to eat but, again, it was closed and I had to go on after a brief rest.



Looking at what is to come from Plan Lachat is daunting. The road seems to climb up the side of a sheer face, snaking back and forth before disappearing out of sight. Even then it is not finished; it goes on in much the same way for a further 5 kms until it arrives at the tunnel which is only open to cars and motorbikes. Cyclists have to climb a further 3kms of 8% + before they finally arrive at the summit at 2642m. I confess it was too much for me. I found myself getting off and pushing for about 500m before making the final effort to cycle to the top which I did at about 2.15pm.

At the top I found a fellow Brit from Sevenoaks who had cycled up from the other side. We each took pictures of the other and then I started down the steep hill to Col du Lauteret where the road divides to go down to Bourg d'Oisans or, as I wanted, to the





Serre Chevalier valley and my ultimate destination, Briancon. On the way down I was wary of marmottes. Apparently these little critters take out one cyclist a week when they run across the road. I saw two but, happily, they scurried off to the side.

I stopped at the other end of the tunnel, finding a restaurant that was, amazingly, open, and had a cheese omelette and a cup of coffee to keep me going (there is an image that sometimes appears at the head of this blog of hairpin bends and a building at the bottom: that's the restaurant!) By this time thunder was rumbling around the mountains and by the time I reached Col du Lauteret it was spitting with rain. Further on it started raining properly and I pulled into a shelter under an old tunnel in the hope that the storm would soon pass. Unfortunately not; eventually I carried on, having put on a thicker jersey and my waterproof jacket. If anything it got worse and when I reached the first village at the top of the valley I pulled in under a covered way and sat there for three quarters of an hour. The storm rumbled around and the rain continued.

Eventually I judged that it had eased off a bit and set off again with about 10 miles to go. I stopped in a couple of bus shelters when things got really bad but kept going until I reached Briancon. Full marks to the Garmin that took me straight to my hotel.

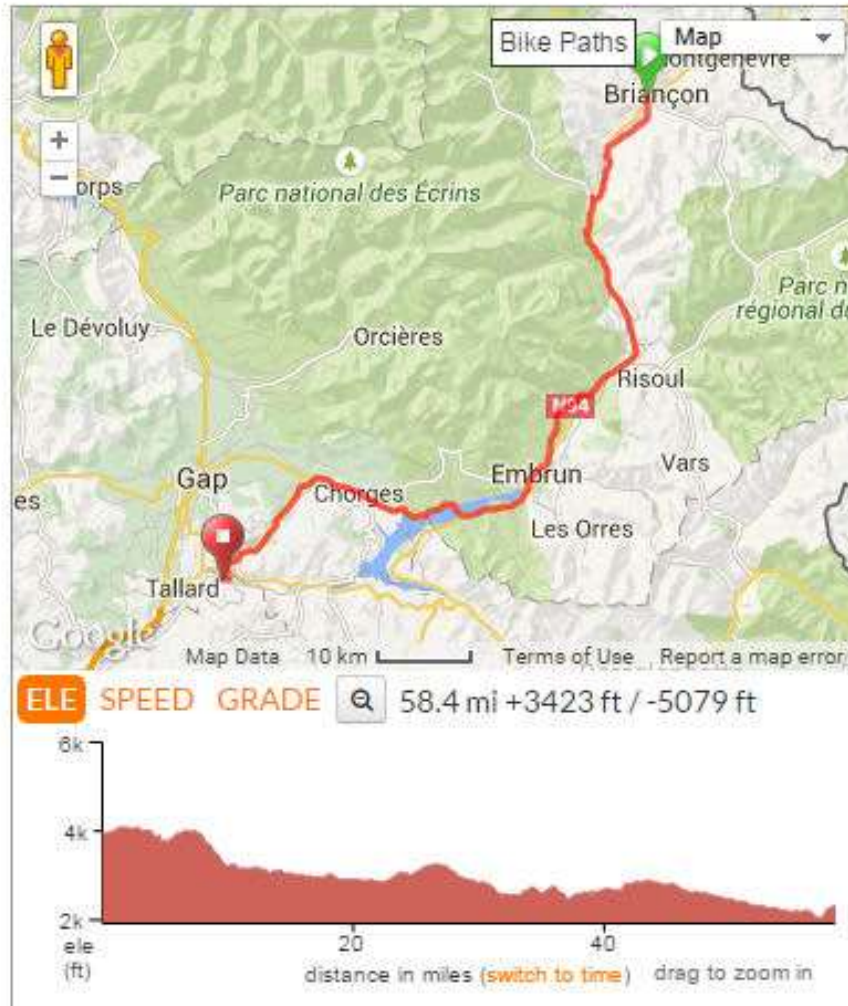
Having pulled in around the back of the hotel and unloaded all my kit, I made my soggy way into the hotel only to be told that it was closed! Consternation, until it transpired that there had been a death in the family and all the bookings had been transferred to the Hotel Vaubon about 100m back towards the centre. I packed everything up again and eventually found a charming receptionist in the Vaubon, who speaks impeccable English, who had me booked in in no time at all.

A downside is that the hotel restaurant is closed and I had to find somewhere else to eat: however there were several places nearby, including an Alsatian restaurant which was my choice for a large plate of sausages and choucroute. The significant upside is that the double room I have been allotted is far superior to the single room that I had booked, with a bath in which I was able to have a good soak to get rid of some of the aches and pains. It also has a hair-dryer that I was able to use to dry my shoes and socks (not very green!)

So, mixed feelings about the day. I'm pleased that I made it to the top of the Col du Galibier, though disappointed that I had to stop so often. Although I only travelled 48 miles I climbed 7263 feet. The rainstorm was not a great way to finish but it did prove that my Regatta jacket is 100% waterproof as are my panniers. It looks as though the weather for the next couple of days may be wet so I am glad that I can keep things dry even if my bottom half ends up at the mercy of the storm. Fortunately only 56 miles tomorrow, mainly downhill so I'll wander around Briancon and have a later start, as I can't book into the next B&B until 5pm.

## Day 10 Briancon – Halte Dodo

DISTANCE: 58.4 MILES



I was in no hurry to start as I only had about 56 miles to cover, so I wandered into Briancon and looked at the market stalls - the mountain in the middle is the one I came over yesterday - before making my way back to the Hotel to sort out my phone. I have a 3 PAYG sim card for this trip which I had taken on the basis that calls, texts and data allowance were to cost the same in France as in the UK. However it seems that I have already burned through the 10 quid that I put on it before I left and needed to add some credit. I'm not sure how I've managed to spend so much so quickly but it may be to do with some pics I sent by SMS. Anyway it took me quite a while to work out how to add the credit, and my phone was trying to



update pictures at the same time, so I was quite a while fiddling about and left about 1130.



I knew that the journey was largely downhill. Briançon at 1326 m is the highest city in France and my destination, near Tallard is about 600m. The weather forecast was for overcast skies with a high possibility of rain later. However I didn't want to arrive too early so had to juggle with the options. The GPS quickly picked up the route and, rather puzzlingly I found myself climbing out of the city! However the climb was short and sharp and I was soon on a gradual descent that became steeper and steeper until it turned into

something not unlike the descent from Col du Galibier, only on a much wider road. This route is often climbed in the Tour de France as it ends up at the Col d'Izoard and there are km markers showing the steepness of the climb. I was glad not to be doing it in reverse and quite enjoyed the sweeping descent and the spectacular views and jagged rocks.

Eventually I arrived at the junction with the N94 which is the main road from Briançon to Gap and this was the road I was stuck on for most of the day. Occasionally I was able to turn off onto side roads but, for most of the time there was little alternative. As you can imagine it's not much fun cycling on a main single carriage highway. There is, at least, a hard shoulder but the surface of this varies enormously and you have to be careful not to get pulled off the edge of the road if you hit something rough. Many of the large Lorries didn't seem to have much thought for the poor cyclist and seemed to pass by dangerously close at times. It was a relief to get off onto side roads, even for a short time.

It's by no means all downhill, there are quite a few ups and downs in the road so I had to work quite hard at times, especially between Embrun and Savines-le-Lac where I had intended to stop for lunch but, not feeling very hungry, made do with a delicious raspberry muffin and a rather dry cookie from the sandwich shop. Savines is the point at which the N94 crosses the Lac de Serre-Ponçon, an artificial lake caused by damming the Durance river, by way of a rather fine bridge which was quite fun to cross on a calm day but would have been a different story in a cross-wind. There was a flotilla of children learning to sail but it is still early in the season for a lot of holiday-makers.



I continued on the N94, now dropping quite rapidly as I made my way south, but diverting slightly through the village of Chorges which was remarkable for the number of restaurants. I can only assume that, in the holiday season, so many people

come to Lac de Serre Poncon that there is a good living to be made. Today few of them were open, albeit that I was late in the day for lunch. The other side of the village I re-joined the main road as it started to spit with rain. I donned my rain-jacket and kept going but soon after I turned onto the D942, it became hard enough to seek shelter which I did under an overhanging roof which kept me pretty dry. Fortunately it was only a storm and after 15 minutes the skies brightened and I was on my way again. The road was much less busy than the N94 and was downhill all the way to Valserres where I turned off onto some very narrow and rough roads that made their way across country before, once again, crossing the Durance river.

I knew that my stop for the night was in a small hamlet not far from Tallard but I wasn't quite prepared for the very steep climb, during which it started to rain again. However I gritted my teeth and made it up without stopping although the legs are still feeling the effects of yesterday.



Halte Dodo is a B&B with two guest rooms in Florence and Thierry's home. I have a comfortable double bed and en-suite bathroom and breakfast in the morning for the extraordinary price of 28 euros! Definitely value for the climb. The downside is that there is nowhere in the immediate vicinity to eat; but Florence, whose English is no better than my French, showed me a pizza takeaway menu and pizza, chips and a soft drink were delivered to the house so I was well fed in the living room whilst Thierry was

watching re-runs of the A Team in French.

Tomorrow is likely to be quite gruelling. It's only 57 miles but over 4000 feet of climbing, in places up to 16%, through some interesting looking Gorges. To have to do that the day before Mont Ventoux is not ideal but I hope it's better than I fear. I'll probably start about 915am and take a few stops along the way

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## Day 11 Halt Dodo - Sault

DISTANCE: 61.2 MILES



Florence provided me with a lavish breakfast of sweet rolls and home-made jams and yoghurt and some decent coffee. She then tried to press a packed lunch of bread, cheese and sausage on me as well; but my panniers are full so I took a peach, filled my water bottles at the fountain outside Halte Dodo and left at 9 o'clock. She was so kind, providing so much for so little and always with a smile on her face.

Unfortunately I had forgotten to load the route onto Garmin, so my only navigation was audio from the phone which is not great at showing me where I have gone wrong. I set off down the hill at great speed only to find that I was going the wrong way! I wasn't about to go back up the hill so, after looking at the map on the phone,



deduced that I could go along the main road and then cut back and re-join the planned route at Tallard, only a couple of miles extra.

This I duly did and the traffic on the main road wasn't too bad. When I got back on the right road I found that it was a very pretty journey, downhill and through pine woods and was a designated cycle route. The road soon emerged from the woods and into the valley at Curbans which has a lake and intensive fruit and vegetable growing. There were a lot of cherry and peach orchards covered in netting against the birds, and tractors were going up and down the rows in between, spraying water. This intensive farming continued with the odd break for mixed oak and pine woodland until I was about 20 miles into the journey when I reached the bustling town of Laragne-Monteglin

Having got myself lost in the town and retraced my steps, I found the correct road and started to climb. The hills were easy, no more than 4% and I found myself really enjoying the sunshine. For a change the wind was behind me and I made good time to the turn-off to the Gorges of Meouge. I wasn't sure what this would be like. I had scouted it on Google Streetview and the roads looked narrow and, possibly, steep. In the event it was a joy to cycle. Not much traffic and most of it tourists who were being considerate. The gorges are spectacular, with great folded rock formations towering above you. The climb didn't go much beyond 5% so I thoroughly enjoyed it.



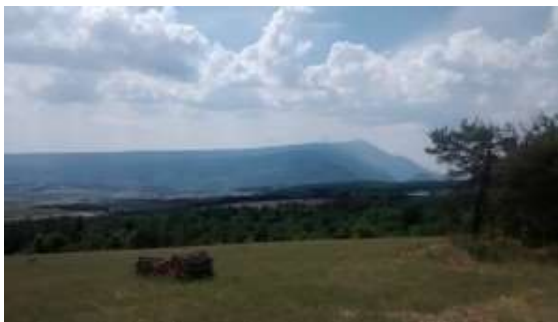
After about 5 miles the road straightened and flattened and I was passing through mixed woodlands and pastures with cows with bells around their necks and the odd herd of sheep. At Lachau I spotted a snack bar and dropped in for a drink of freshly pressed lime which was most welcome. I decided to keep going for a bit further before stopping for lunch and, about 5 miles further on, just short of Sederon found the perfect place with a 13.50 menu of quiche, chilli-con-carne and pineapple upside-down cake. I only had one small beer as it was getting very hot and I knew that there was some significant climbing to come.

My original plan had been to lunch in Sederon itself but I'm glad I didn't. The place was deserted except for a deputation of fierce looking ladies complaining about the

closure of the Premiere class of the school who were sitting beside the road bringing their case to the public. I kept going.

Just outside the village the road started going up and I found myself climbing hard up 6-7% grades, but enjoying it, despite the heat. My legs felt really good and I even had the puff which had deserted me on Galibier. Maybe the drop in altitude was the reason but I actually had to make myself stop for 5 minutes under a shady tree because I was getting too hot. Having eaten my peach and had a drink of water I kept going and soon reached the Col de Macuaigne at 1068m. Here my road branched off and I kept climbing, through pine woods and past a team of road menders who were taking time out from the sun.

I was enjoying myself hugely, no aches and pains and, although the grades were not exceeding 7%, climbing well. The road now levelled out, even dropping a little before my next stop, the wonderfully named Dead Man's crossing (Col de L'homme Mort). I had spotted this on the map and it had to be a photo opportunity.



I was now about 50 miles into the journey and emerged from the woods above Ferrassieres to catch my first glimpse of Mont Ventoux, my main objective for the trip and the reason that I was heading for my overnight stop at Sault. It stands above the plain with a radio mast clearly visible on top and is an impressive sight. Unfortunately the

day was hazy and my photograph didn't really capture the majesty. From the Belvedere the road dropped down to Ferrassieres and the surrounding plain. For the first time on this journey I saw small fields of solar panels. The French do not seem to have taken to them in the same way as the Brits. Maybe the subsidies aren't available.

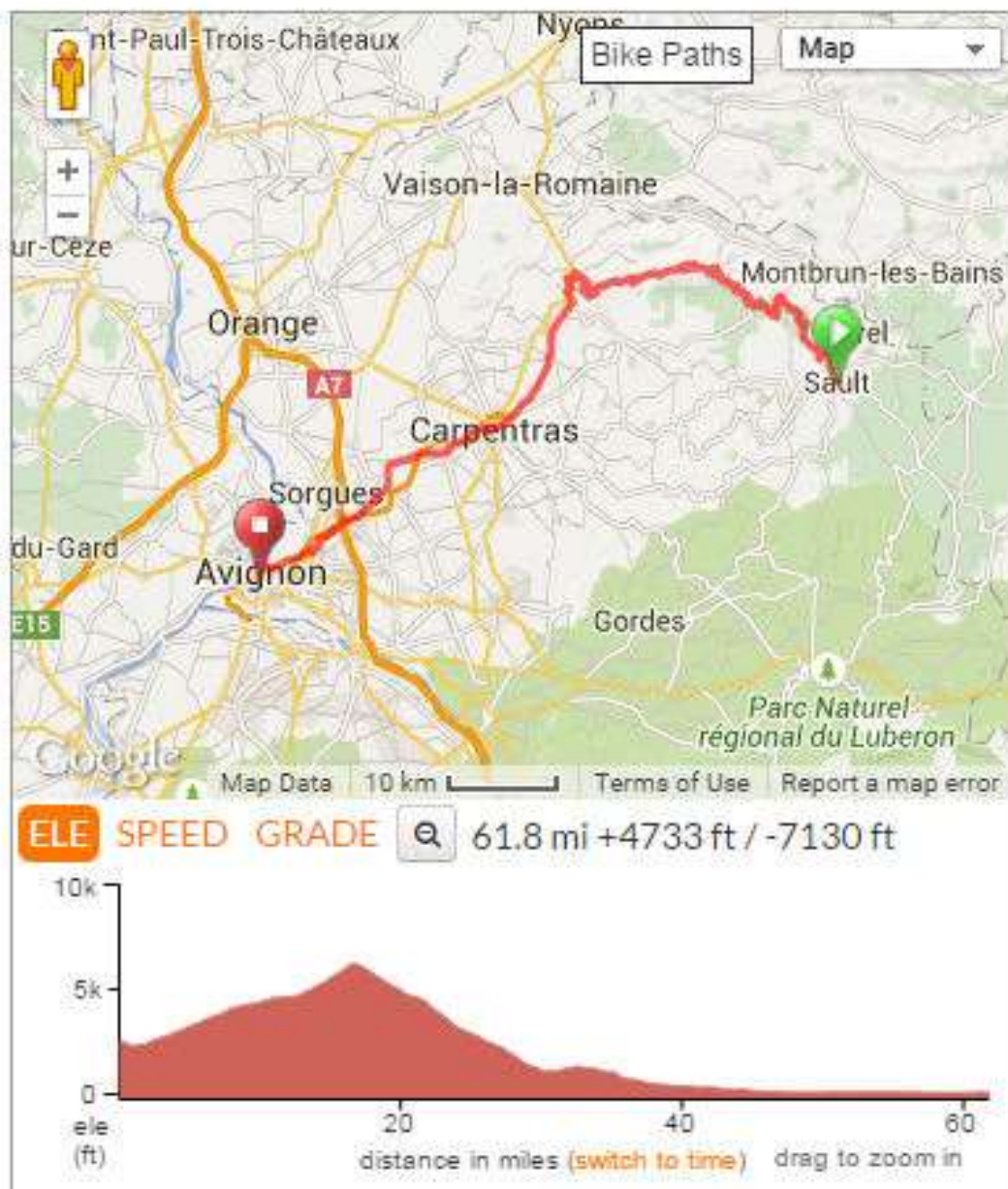
I took little time to get to Sault, ugly surroundings but a charming Provencal village in the centre. My overnight stay is in the Gite Pilpoil right in the centre. It has 5 bedrooms but I am the only occupant tonight and there is a large communal table and sitting area as well as a kitchen. The real surprise is that there is an excellent WiFi connection so I am able to update the blog. I have to get my own breakfast but that is quite handy because the weather forecast for tomorrow is not good and I would like to make an early start. I reckon I should make it to the top of Ventoux in three hours so an 8 o'clock or even 7.30 start should get me off the mountain before the storms blow up at midday. I'm almost certain to get wet, even early in the day, but that's preferable to the 80mph winds that can blow up.

I dined at Le Provencal restaurant on an excellent aubergine puree starter with a tomato sauce, followed by fillet of pollock in a butter sauce, sheep's cheese with 4 different seasonings and to finish a tarte au citron which could not have been better. A

demi of local red wine complemented it all beautifully. So ends a happy day and the hope that tomorrow will bring success.

## Day 12 Sault - Avignon

**DISTANCE: 61.8 MILES**







Well the strap-line is redundant: I made it to the top of [Mont Ventoux](#) at 1050am.

As I said I would, I got up early to the sound of pouring rain and, having packed my bags made my way up to the boulangerie to buy a flute and croissant for breakfast. I was feeling a bit queasy for some reason so didn't eat much of the bread, leaving it for those that follow me into the Gite Pilpoil today. It's a really nice place to stay and would make a good base for a family holiday.

I left the house at 805am and it was raining, so I had my rain-jacket on already. Sault lies on the side of a hill and I immediately found the right road which took me to the bottom of the valley. The climbing started immediately: there were some nasty little pitches in the first couple of miles that made me feel the aches in my legs from yesterday but, as I warmed to the job, I noticed them less, especially as the rain had stopped. I was passing through open landscape with little farms and vineyards. The odd dog barked at me as I went past and cuckoos were calling all around me.



The route now passed through forest. Mainly pine and spruce but a few stunted oaks now surrounded each turn and there was little to see apart from trees. The road snaked back and forth gaining altitude all the time. The climbing was fairly easy, 5-6% on a very good surface so I was exceeding the 5mph I had set myself to get to the top in 3 hours. There was little wind in the woods but, occasionally I would come around a bend and it would hit me. What I didn't know was the direction once I got to the exposed top and it worried me that it might be strongly against me.

Once I had climbed about 2000 feet the pitch lessened and, at one point I went slightly downhill though the road was deceptive and the drop looked much greater than it was. I reached Chalet Reynard, which is where the final brutal climb starts at about 10am and decided to keep going. It's 6kms to the summit but the average is



7.1% and in places it hits 11% so it was slow going for me. The wind, thank goodness, was predominantly behind me.

I stopped at the ominously named Fontaine de Grave to fill my water bottles and then went for a big effort to [Tom Simpson's](#) memorial where I stopped to pay my respects before the final 2kms to the top. This is the really hard bit with about 300m of in excess of 10% and most people could have walked past me, but I kept going and was standing on the top at 1050am. On the way up I had only been passed by one person and had seen only 2 descending but within 5 minutes there were several people finishing and by the time I had had my picture taken and was on my way down the other side they were coming up steadily.

I set off down the road to Malaucene, the other side of the mountain just as it started spitting with rain. Within minutes there was lightning flashing and thunder rumbling all around and the rain started in earnest. It is a steep and open descent and I passed



many people making the climb from that side but I was getting very cold and having trouble controlling the brake levers, so I stopped under a rudimentary shelter, put on my thick jacket and waited for about 10 minutes. If anything the storm grew worse but I was getting colder by the minute so I pushed on to the bottom. By the time I reached the restaurant

at the base, about 2 miles from Malaucene I was so cold that I went in and drank two hot chocolates to try to improve things. The storm raged on for another hour but finally dropped enough for me to leave and go on to Malaucene. The town is full of bike shops, more than I have seen anywhere in a town of that size. I had noticed a couple of days ago that I had lost a bolt from the rear rack so took the opportunity to replace it. Ventoux Cycles kindly allowed me to scrounge one from their tin of oddments and I was on my way.

I now had to make my way through Carpentaras to Avignon but the satnav, maddeningly, took me up a side track which petered out and I had to retrace my steps whilst it nagged me to continue. I ignored it, found a sign for Carpentaras and, eventually, got back on route.

By now the rain had stopped and the sun was shining as I made my way down some narrow wooded roads past a Llama breeding farm and honey and wine sellers before arriving at the outskirts of Carpentaras which I successfully circumnavigated.



The GPS now took me along some lovely quiet backroads whilst the main traffic to Avignon thundered by on the main road. The scenery wasn't great but it was nice to be in the sun and on the flat. I looked back to where I had come from from the vineyards of Ventoux



All good things must end and, as I approached the outskirts of Avignon I had no option but to join the main road. It has a hard shoulder so the cyclist is protected but it's no fun. At one point I went through a Police speed-trap, a slightly bemused copper lowered his gun as I went past and wished him bonjour. There were 2 others on high-speed motor-bikes waiting to chase wrong-doers.

No more than a mile further on I felt the ominous change that meant a puncture, this time in the front wheel. I was able to lift the bike over the safety barrier and repair it. There was no sign of any foreign object so I used one of the new tubes I had acquired in Normandy and carried on. I was a bit lost and had to keep stopping to consult my phone. At one point I was taken up a rough track that almost gave up completely before emerging under a fly-over.

Eventually I got into the centre of Avignon as it, once again, started to thunder and rain. In the end I found myself at the hotel at about 5pm. I have a single room with a shower. It's basic and there is a fan in the room which is definitely needed, but there is WiFi which seems to work and the bed seems comfortable.

So a day of highs and lows. I'm chuffed to have made it up Ventoux relatively easily and without having to get off and push but the weather has spoiled the day and, unfortunately, the forecast for the next 3 days is no better so I may have to get used to getting wet.

## Day 13 Avignon - Arles

DISTANCE: 60.9 MILES



This was always designed to be a day for sight-seeing and recovery, travelling less than 60 miles with little climbing.

Last night I went out looking for somewhere nice to eat and, although Avignon is packed with excellent restaurants it was difficult to find anywhere that was not fully booked because the rain meant that they could not use their outside tables. Eventually I ended up in what is little more than a burger bar where, to be fair, I had a very good starter of tagliatelle with pesto followed by a perfectly good burger. Once they

stopped serving food the karaoke machine came out and there were some quite reasonable performers: I didn't take part.

Part of the reason I tell that story is that I awoke in what seemed to be the middle of the night but was, in fact about 6am. I searched for my phone to see what the time was and couldn't find it anywhere. I remembered having it with me in the restaurant but not since. I turned the room upside down looking for it but no sign, so I assumed that I had left it in the restaurant, and hoped that I could recover it later. Its loss would be serious: not only would I lose phone contact with the outside world, it is also a prime means of navigation, as I have already explained. My room had a shower and basin but no WC: that was on the landing and shared with the other rooms on the same floor. Before going down for breakfast I went to the loo and there, on the floor was my phone which must have fallen out of my pocket the night before!



After breakfast I decided to go and look around Avignon for an hour or two. It was a pleasant relief to walk, after riding a bike day in and out. The day was pleasant, sunny but not too hot and Avignon is a very attractive small city. It has complete city walls and some interesting

architecture. Its most famous buildings are those that make up the Papal Palace. In the 14th century the French assumed the Papacy and moved the court from Rome to Avignon where it remained for 67 years. The buildings are undergoing major internal renovation and I did not go in. However I had a pleasant stroll around during which I noted that Avignon must, for some reason, be on the Japanese tour itinerary because there were hundreds of them wandering around.

I wandered into Les Halles, the covered food market that sells everything you could possibly want to eat with some especially enticing fish displays. There was also a little huddle developing on one side and when I investigated it was a team of horn players aged from about 8 upwards. Now horns in the wrong hands can sound pretty awful but I stopped to listen to a septet of them playing Brahms (reminded me a lot of the opening number of Spring Fate) and they were excellent



I returned to the hotel, loaded the bike and set off just before 11am. Inevitably I took a wrong turn and, because I hadn't consulted the





map on the phone, left the city by the wrong bridge. The one I took gave me a view of the famous Pont d'Avignon with Mont Ventoux in the distance but put me wildly off route. I stopped and checked the map but made even more errors and ended up cycling into a cherry orchard where the grower, who was picking cherries for sale that day, informed me that I was lost. I agreed with him and he told me how to remedy the situation.



This involved re-tracing my route, seeing my first field of sunflowers, crossing under the main road and climbing steeply up some hillside roads. I thought it was going to be a day without climbing: how wrong I was, at one point it was so steep that the front wheel lifted off the ground and I had to get off and push rather than risk going over backwards.

My destination was the Pont du Gard, the famous Roman aqueduct about 16 miles from Avignon and I followed the route that I had plotted on the computer before leaving home. Inevitably I ended up on a cyclo-cross route which, because of yesterday's storms covered the bike in thick red mud that clogged up the mudguards and brakes so much that I had to stop and clean it as best I could.

By the time I got to Remoulins, the town closest to the Pont du Gard, it was lunchtime and I cycled past a restaurant that looked promising, advertising a menu du jour for 15 euros. So I stopped and parked the bike outside and went in. Now the same thing happened to me last weekend, so maybe I should have realised: when you get inside and sit down and ask for the menu du jour you are told that it doesn't happen at the weekend, despite the fact that they are advertising it outside. It's a bit underhand and would probably not be allowed in the UK but I suppose if it's normal practice most people know the form. Anyway I chose from the rather more inflated priced menu and ate a perfectly nice meal of charcuterie and entrecote steak (beautifully cooked) washed down with some very nice rose wine.

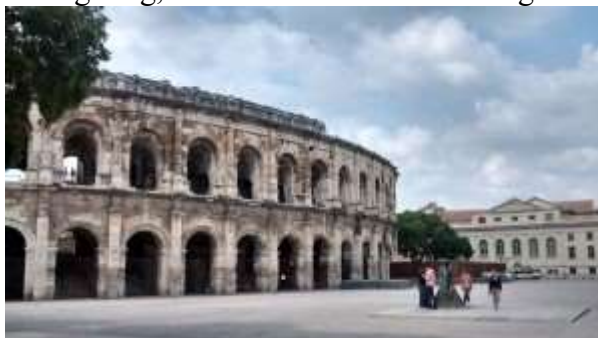


I cycled on to the [Pont du Gard](#). It's a most impressive structure and amazingly well preserved. There were hundreds of people there but the site does not look crowded because of the scale. I was told to get off my bike and push it, sensible on the bridge but it seemed a bit unnecessary in the surrounding area. So I did a full circuit, returning to Remoulins and then striking out for Nimes which was the city for which the aqueduct was constructed.

Having had so much navigation trouble in the morning I determined to stick to the main roads. Fortunately these weren't too busy in most places and have wide hard shoulders which make cycling OK. The result was that I bowled along at a good pace and soon found myself in Nimes. This has a wonderful water garden, all part of the same system as the Pont du Gard and culminating in an impressive fountain, as well as this rather amusing bit of street "sculpture" from a dead tree. I cycled, inadvertently, onto the edge of the boules arena and was tut-tutted away. There were half a dozen games being played and several spectators.



Nimes also has a very complete Roman arena that is used to this day for opera and bullfighting, and several other interesting buildings.

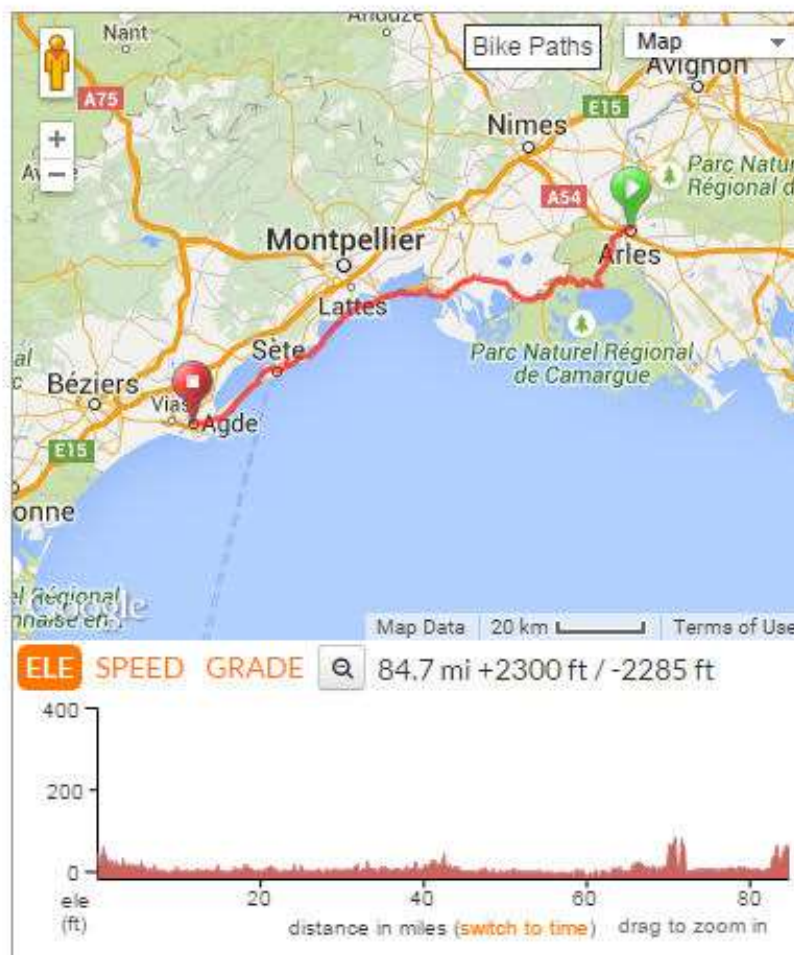


However I couldn't delay too long as I had to make my hotel in Arles before nightfall so I set off and followed the main road, into a strong head-wind all the way. The phone and GPS were bleating at me to turn off down every side road but I could see the signs for Arles and followed them, arriving at the hotel, where I was booked in by a most efficient English speaking young man who took my bike down into the cellar. My room is on the third floor with no lift but is modern and well-appointed and the enormous bed is comfortable

A sign of how far south I now am is the sound of cicadas for the first time and that several of the fields that I passed are flooded rice paddies. I shall hit my most southerly point Agde, tomorrow night before I turn north to Carcassonne.

## Day 14 Arles - Agde

DISTANCE: 84.7 MILES



I had looked forward to visiting the Camargue, home of black bulls, white horses and gypsies for many years. I don't know why, in particular, but it seemed to have a mystique and beauty to it that was worth investigating.

I left the hotel at about 9 o'clock after a very good breakfast of the usual croissant and rolls but also yoghurt, cheese and ham. The efficient young man was still on reception and collected my bike from the cellar. I asked if he had been to England but he said all his English had been learned in school. I complimented him and said that he must have had a good teacher, with which he agreed.



As usual I managed to get lost leaving the city, but not badly so and was soon in the Camarguais countryside, cycling along well surfaced, deserted roads on a pleasant sunny Sunday. It wasn't long before I saw my first bulls but they didn't like the look of me and hurried away across to the other side of the field. There were white horses in the

same field but they didn't look like the stuff of travel posters: altogether disappointing.

Then it got really bad! I had planned my route to include some short-cuts - never was a word so wronged. I struck out on a decent surface but within a mile it had deteriorated to a track, then a track covered in broken glass and finally a track that was more water and mud than surface. I had to get off and push the bike, which was clogging up with sticky mud, for about a mile. When I finally got to the other end and back on a road the bike was filthy and my feet were sodden; and I had to stop and clean off the worst of it before I could go on.

What was appealing to me about the Camargue was the Etangs, great salt-water lakes that are home to numerous birds including flamingos. The problem is that you can't see them from the road so the journey was pretty un-interesting. I just pushed on across flat countryside along fairly busy roads. All I could see was crops, rice, maize and a bit of barley and, as I neared Aigues-Mortes a lot of vineyards of the Sable wine and market garden crops which were being sold at the roadside by enterprising growers.

Beyond Aigues-Mortes I stayed on the main road and headed for the Mediterranean at La Grande Motte. I picked up a cycle route but the surface was poorly paved with slabs and it was not particularly pleasant. I went as far as I could on this and spotted a snack bar and bought an american with fries. This was a baguette filled with minced beef, tomato ketchup and fries and was very filling.

Having run out of cycle track I then picked up the Canal Rhone-Sete. This was a pretty rough surface but I could still bowl along at 12-13mph. I also saw some



flamingos but so far in the distance that you can't tell from my photo. I left



it at Solignac and took to the road for a couple of miles until I rejoined the Canal at Palavas-les-Flots. On the map this shows as a lovely straight path through the middle of Etangs and, indeed it started well. However they have been doing a lot of work to strengthen the embankment and have churned much of the surface to sticky mud that I couldn't avoid. For the second time today I was forced to GOAP and then try to clean the bike as best I could. It took me an hour to go 5 miles and I was fuming.

Eventually the track finished and I emerged onto the Avenue des Etangs where, it seemed, there had been an impromptu jazz concert that I caught the end of. Now, in complete contrast I picked up a well-surfaced bike track that I followed all the way to Frontignan where I got a bit lost before picking up the main road to Sete.

It was here that I made a serendipitous error, turning inland instead of staying on the main road. Having realised my mistake I went to turn round and, lo and behold, found a car wash. I took the wheels off the bike, turned it upside down, put 1 euro in the slot and cleaned all the gunk off it in 2 minutes. Never was 1 euro better spent.

Feeling in much better spirits I loaded the bike and set off back towards Sete, realising after about 200 yards that I had left my helmet at the car wash so had to return to retrieve it. I carried on through Sete, knowing I had about 10 miles to go to Agde, and realising I was short of drinking water. On the way through I passed a garage and for the princely sum of another euro picked up 1.5 litres of cold bottled water.

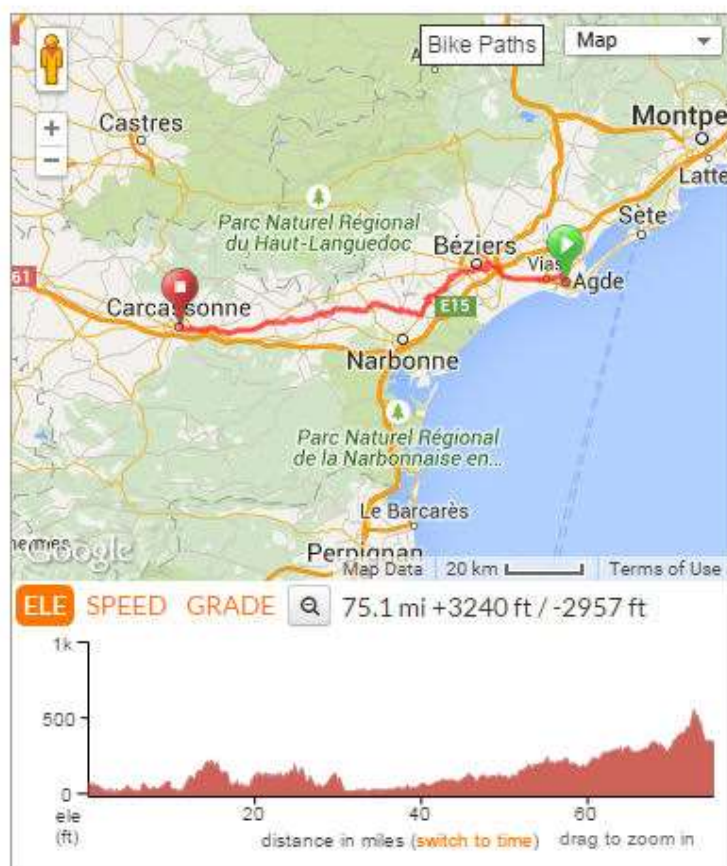


From Sete to Agde there is a superbly surfaced cycle track that runs through the dunes just behind the ocean, so I made very good time. Extraordinarily there are also vineyards, next to the track, within 200 metres of the sea. The satnav brought me straight to the hotel which is a bit of a curious affair, standing in the middle of a residential area at the end of a no-through road. The proprietor was helpful but the room is very basic, not even a TV (not that I would watch it anyway) and he does not take credit cards. The bike has had to stay outside but should be safe.

So in the end I cycled 83.5 miles in just over 7 hours which, considering the hold-ups was quite respectable. I hardly rose above sea-level all day but still managed to climb about 2300 feet, although it was very easy. Tomorrow I start heading north.

## Day 15 Agde - Carcassonne

DISTANCE: 75.1 MILES



I thought that this would be a straight-forward day, just under 70 miles to run without much climbing..... I thought!

I had a decent enough breakfast, the usual croissant, bread, orange juice and tea and



left about 9am, quickly picking up the route on GPS. Although I had researched the route before leaving the UK I had forgotten most of it. Within a couple of miles the GPS took me onto the towpath of the Canal du Midi and I thought I would probably stay with it for most of the day. What a disaster: the towpath is mud and tree roots and, in places, holes where it has eroded. In trying to avoid one of these I had my first fall of the trip, grazing my right knee but otherwise unharmed. I vowed to get off the towpath as soon as possible. Unfortunately the only road open to me was that to Beziers which was taking me further north than intended but I wasn't going back to the towpath.

I missed a turn in Beziers and spent about an hour going round the city, finding myself at one point on the Canal de L'Orbe with a 9 lock lift, followed by a very rough

surfaced track which gave me a front tyre puncture, before picking up the road to Narbonne. Also, as a result of yesterday's wash, the chain on the bike had lost most of its oil and was giving problems. I thought I had some oil but the container had come open in the bag and there was none left, so I sprayed the chain thoroughly with WD 40 which improved things but is not a lasting solution, and I need to get some proper oil as soon as possible.



Eventually, after a lot of faffing about and consulting the phone map, I managed to get back on my

route. By now this was surprisingly easy, along back roads with little traffic and through some interesting countryside, including a lot of vineyards of Aude, the area I was travelling through. It also picked up, again, on the Canal du Midi for a while and I cycled past several pleasure boats chuntering along and enjoying the weather.

I left the canal once again and cycled along some very poorly surfaced roads, the worst I have seen in France. Up until now if a road has been surfaced it has usually been fairly well maintained, but a lot of these had large potholes and worn surfaces which called for a lot of care, especially as I am now out of inner tubes.

I also saw a wind farm and a solar farm in close proximity. I have not seen any wind farms since leaving Normandy, so I can only assume that the French Government is happy enough with its reliance on nuclear power, not to subsidise green energy in the way that we and the Germans do. With the amount of wind that was in my face all day I reckon turbines should be paying dividends.



With about 15 miles to go I picked up on a main road that was to take me to Carcassonne. It was a switch-back ride with straight roads which make it more difficult to bear, and the wind was straight on my nose, slowing me considerably. I was longing to get off the bike, have a shower and something to eat and take a rest. This simply made the last 10 miles excruciating and was made even worse by my missing the road into Carcassonne, resulting in a further 2 mile detour up a steepish hill and then down

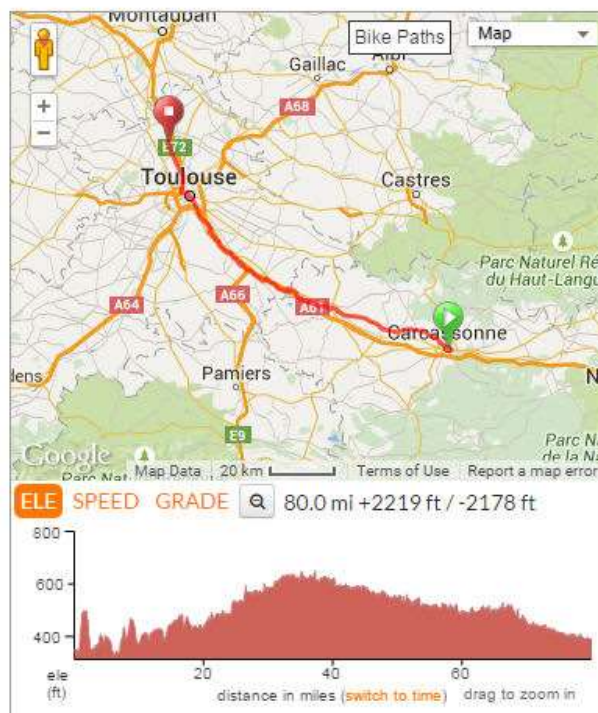
the other side.

However I made it at about 630pm after 75 miles and 3240 feet of climbing. The Garmin took me to the Hotel, which sits, very anonymously in a side-street and I missed it and cycled past twice before finding it. In the event it's a pleasant surprise. The landlady speaks pretty good English and was very helpful. The room is huge and decorated in African style and the Wifi works. My bike has had to go to a garage about 200m away but it should be safe for the night. The shower is one of the best I have ever experienced and there are nice little touches like cotton-buds and face-wipes in the bathroom and a kettle and tea and coffee in the room, the first I have seen on this trip.

Tomorrow I go over the watershed between Med and Atlantic but follow the Canal all day. I am praying for decent surfaces on my 75 mile journey.

## Day 16 Carcassonne – St Jory

DISTANCE: 80.0 MILES





My hotel in Carcassonne was a pleasant surprise which was improved by an excellent breakfast, good croissant and bread and a bit of cheese as well as cereals, orange juice and coffee. The Hotel was called Maison sans Frontieres for the reason that the owners have an extended family, three children of their own and two adopted, one from Senegal and one from Sri Lanka. My room was decorated with African pictures and curtains and was very pleasant.



As I had about 75 miles to go to my next stop and did not want to arrive before 6pm I went and had a look around the medieval city of Carcassonne. It really is an extraordinary place. Around every corner ( and there are plenty of them) you see another building that could have come out of Grimms Fairy Tales. The place is full of restaurants and, in some ways I would have been better to go there last night for dinner. Because there are so many of them the prices are quite reasonable and probably better value than the Bistro near the station where I ate. The Bistro was rather reminiscent of Browns, housed in a palatial building with a menu of fish or meat but with an Alsatian section as well. What I ate was fine but not especially good. However the medieval city was about a 25 minute walk uphill whilst the Bistro was 10 minutes from the hotel.



I set off from the hotel at about 9 and had an hour or so in the old city before returning to the centre of the new city to try to get an inner tube as I had used all mine and only had one that was patched for emergencies. I didn't know what the surfaces would be like on the canal towpath so wanted to be prepared. In the event I was unsuccessful as the only place I could find catered for mountain bikes and did not have a small enough tube for my tyre.

I had been researching the route the night before and found an excellent blog by a Canadian lady called Jennifer who had cycled the Canal du Midi in the opposite direction and gave her views on the road surfaces. She suggested that the towpath from Carcassonne to Castelnaudary, about 20 miles west of Carcassonne was very poor in places so, looking at the map I decided to take the main road and then pick up the canal at Castelnaudary. This was not a great experience but better than the sort of potholes I had endured at Agde. the traffic was regular and the road switchbacked. The wind, as ever, was full in my face. A marvellous sailing breeze, 4 gusting 5 but not what you want in your face all day on a bicycle.



Just short of my destination it started to rain enough to put on my jacket. I found my way to the canal and set off on a roughly stoned surface which kept my speed down below 9mph. It deteriorated at one point to a mud track with grass up the centre and I thought I was in for a really bad time. However just as I was beginning to despair I reached a cluster of houses at a village called Le Segala and spotted a restaurant. As it was lunchtime and it was still raining I pulled in for the formule which was an excellent simple salad of lettuce, sweet peppers and bacon followed by chunks

of goose stew with pasta, not quite cassoulet but similar. It was just what I needed to improve my spirits and was topped off with an excellent creme brulee. With a beer (pour le soif) the bill was 15.50 euros.

Resuming the ride I realised that I was just at the watershed between the Mediterranean and Atlantic and that I was starting to go downhill. Not only that but

the surface of the track was properly paved with tarmac and continued like that all the way to Toulouse. What a difference it makes to ride on that sort of surface. Suddenly I was bowling along at 12-13 miles an hour and, even though the weather was still pretty awful, I was starting to enjoy myself.

Once I reached the outskirts of Toulouse I came across an amazing structure to take the path over the canal. I can only describe as like an inside out helter-skelter in a fairground. The path wound around the inside of a cylinder so that it ascended until it was high enough to clear the canal traffic below. Then over a bridge and down the other side and the path continued.

Shortly after, the canal path ran out and I had to rely on Garmin and RidewithGPS to guide me through the middle of the city. This was interesting as they were, once again, arguing and I found myself off route on two or three occasions. By carefully studying the map on RWGPS I managed to get through the city and out the other side, back onto the Canal de Garonne tow-path which is fully paved all the way to my destination at St Jory.



I had not booked anywhere to stay in the Toulouse area in advance and had toyed with the idea of using AirBnB both here and in Bordeaux. I had looked for suitable places to stay over the period of my journey and found what seemed to be an ideal stop at St Jory, about 9 miles north of Toulouse. Four days ago I contacted Sylvain and Veronique who described themselves on the website as cyclistes practiquants which seemed to be a good omen. I explained that I was a very poor French speaker but would like to stay with them. I had an immediate very welcoming response and the deal was done.

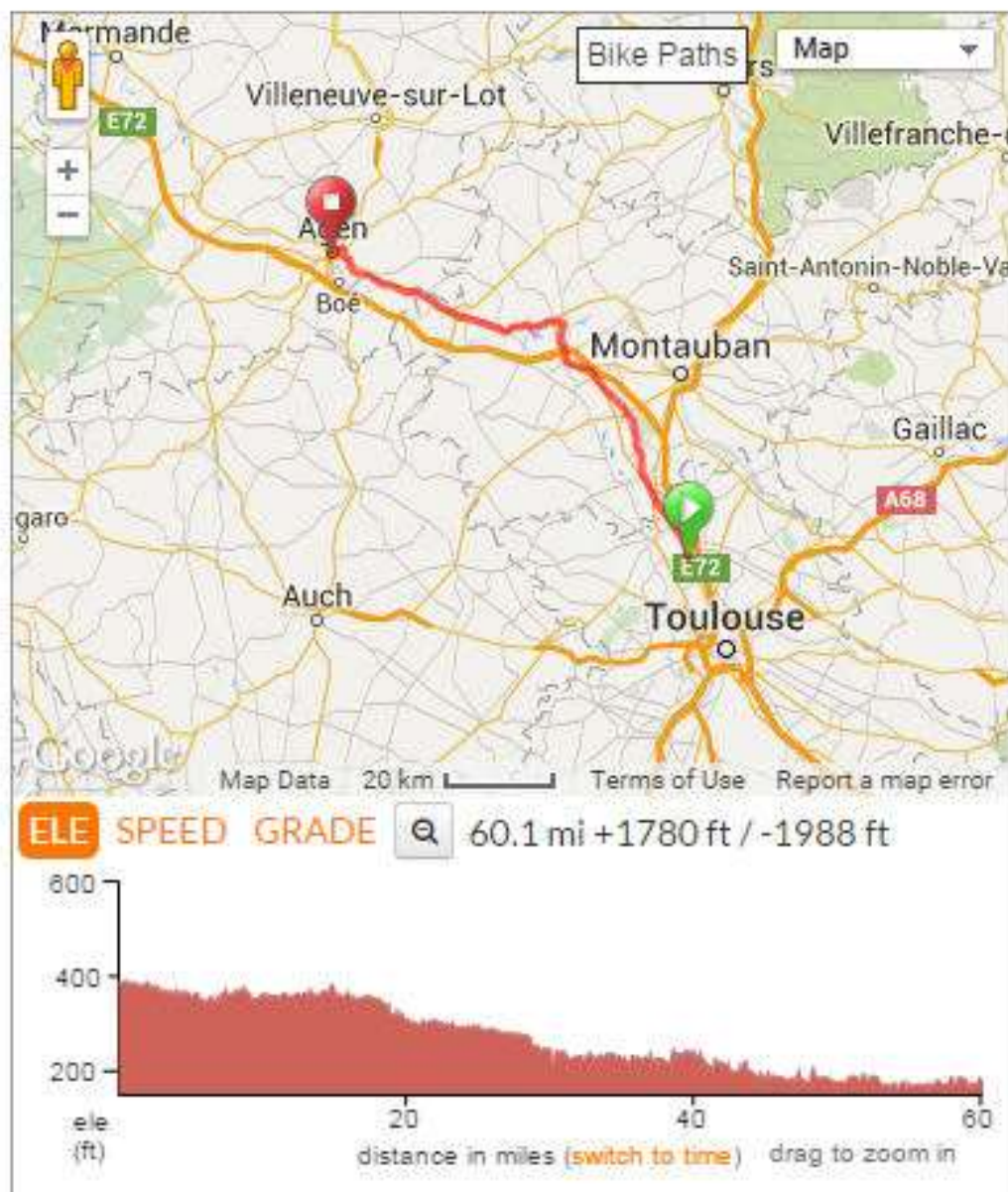
I had originally said that I would arrive between 5 and 6pm but Sylvain emailed that 6pm would be better as Veronique would be back from work. I had not plumbed their address into RWGPS so when I arrived in St Jory at about 630pm, because of hold-ups along the way, I had to fiddle around with the phone to, firstly, find the address and secondly ask Google Maps the way. In the event it was extremely simple to find the street but, just as I was trying to work out the numbering of the houses the heavens opened and I was drenched. Sylvain and Veronique live in a gated close so I had to work out which bell to ring, all the while, in the torrential rain. I got an answer, said who I was and the gate opened. I then had to work out which house to go to and very quickly saw someone at the door. This was Florian, their son who showed me the garage for the bike and then my room. I was soon under an excellent shower and then got dressed and met Veronique who, by now, was back from work.

Veronique then very kindly washed my cycling clothes and invited me to eat with them and explained that Sylvain would not be back from work until about 8. I started to write up the blog and met Sylvain when he came home. Despite his suggestion in

our correspondence that his English was as bad as my French, he is an excellent English speaker and very easy to talk to, so I have had a most entertaining evening in which I have been very well fed on pasta and red wine. Not only that but, because Sylvain works in a cycle shop he brought me 2 inner tubes and a bottle of chain lube that I asked him for, so I should now be set up for the rest of the trip. I could not have asked for a more friendly and welcoming family for my first experience of AirBnB.

## Day 17 St Jory - Agen

**DISTANCE: 60.1 MILES**







After a very good night's sleep Sylvain gave me an excellent breakfast and took me back to the canal where he took my picture in front of the sign showing the canal route. He then turned towards Toulouse, and work, on his bicycle whilst I went west.

The whole day was to follow the Canal lateral de la Garonne which was the canal that I joined at Toulouse last evening. The surface of the towpath is tarmac almost all the way so is very easy cycling but it becomes a little monotonous and I began to welcome the little hillocks where a road or path crossed the canal.

Sylvain had kindly blown up my tyres and oiled my chain before we left his house. Blow me if about 15 minutes into the ride I stopped to take a picture of one of the locks and when I went to get on the bike the back tyre was flat! I am not being lucky with punctures on this trip. However the day was fine and sunny and I was in no particular hurry as I only had about 65 miles to cycle, so I took my time and carefully examined the tyre to see if there was anything in it. Once again, no sign of anything, so I put in one of the new tubes that Sylvain had supplied and blew it up as best I could hoping that I might find somewhere en route that would top up the pressure.



I carried on to Montech, the first town on my route, which has an interesting flight of locks that can be bypassed by one of only two water slopes in France. The principle behind this is that a large barge can be isolated in an area that has enough water to make it float whilst a diesel powered engine

pushes it up the slope until it reaches the height at which it can be released into the canal above. It was inaugurated in 1974 but is now seldom used because of the lack of suitable traffic. Pleasure cruisers use the 5 stair lock system alongside.

Next objective was Moissac. Shortly before reaching the town the canal crosses the River Tarn by a magnificent bridge built of stone and pink brick known as the Cacor canal bridge that was constructed in 1845. The downside for the cyclist is that the surface of the path across the bridge is



cobbled: I decided to push my bike the whole way. In 1930 when the Tarn river flooded, causing devastation all around the area, the iron railway bridge was washed away whilst the canal bridge held fast. As railways had become so important they ran the railway across the canal bridge for two years whilst the railway bridge was rebuilt.

In the centre of Moissac the cycle route becomes a little uncertain but I had spotted a restaurant housed in a curious building that looks like a bandstand and, as it was lunchtime stopped for the Midi. The menu was a pancake stuffed with shredded duck and foie gras followed by a piece of salmon that had been excellently cooked to retain its succulence and was served with polenta and salad. I finished off with a raspberry fool that was a little bit heavy but in general it was an enjoyable meal.



Beyond Moissac the route follows the canal all the way to Agen. There were lots of people cycling towards me, going uphill with the wind behind them but not many that I saw going in the same direction as me, as usual, head to wind. Many of the cyclists were towing trailers behind the bike. I've never tried this way of carrying my belongings but if you are on a relaxed but long journey maybe this is the best way. The scenery along this stretch of the canal is not inspiring so it all became a little tedious but I eventually booked into my hotel at about 5pm. It took a bit of finding as I had not done my map planning properly and found myself in the wrong place. However consulting Google Maps eventually worked.

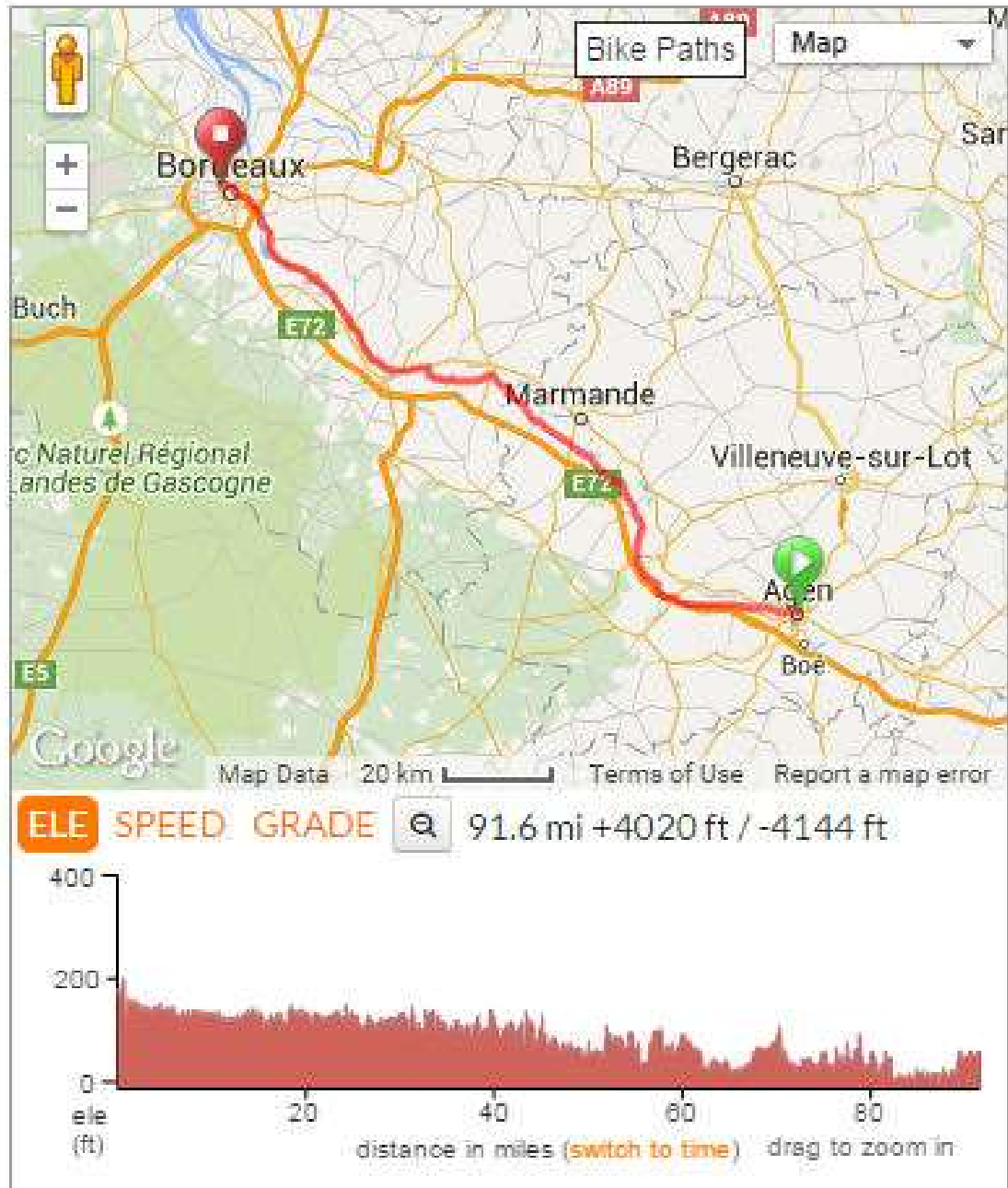
The Hotel is a strange affair: right in the middle of town but in dire need of renovation. I wondered if I was going to put my foot through the stairs on the way up and the walls of the bedrooms are paper thin. The bathroom is about as tight as it could be and the shower stall is tiny, though the shower itself works well. Anyway it's a place to rest my head before a very long day tomorrow. I have a 95 mile trip to Bordeaux and, frankly, I'm not sure I can manage it. I shall set off and see how I feel but if, by the time I get near Marmande, I don't think I'm going to make it, I'll jump on a train and halve the journey on bike.

By my calculation I have now covered 2000 kilometres since I left Horsington on 1st June so I haven't done badly. I am finding canal paths tiresome. Although they are almost flat there is no rest, you have to keep on peddling and I am finding it difficult to stay focused. But tomorrow is another day and maybe I shall wake up in the right frame of mind.

Thanks to everyone who is following my progress and especially to those who have donated to DEC. Keep the donations flowing!

## Day 18 Agen - Bordeaux

DISTANCE: 91.6 MILES



What a difference a day makes! Yesterday I was lethargic and sore, really troubled by a spot on my crutch that was making it very difficult to get comfortable. I had assumed it was some sort of a boil appearing, but when I finally got around to inspecting it in a mirror there is nothing very obvious so I shall have to live with it until I get home. I've been smearing quantities of Sudocrem on the area each day so it shouldn't, at least, get infected.

I went down for breakfast after a terrible night's sleep. To start with I was too hot and the pillows were all the wrong shape. Finally, after tossing and turning I switched the light on and noticed that there was a ceiling fan. I pulled various switches and, lo and behold it worked, so, at least, I had a cooler room. No one smaller than me would have been able to reach the switches without standing on the edge of the bed or a chair.

When I had packed everything and taken it down ready for my departure I went into the breakfast room to find a couple of cyclists already there. They were a Dutch husband and wife who were cycling the Canal de Garonne and the Canal du Midi. They had started at Beziers but the wind was too strong for them so they had taken the train to Agen and were going to reverse their route. I cautioned them about the state of the paths beyond the watershed and hope that they have fun. They are not doing great distances 50-60k a day and sight-seeing.



I set off from the hotel at 0849 and immediately picked up on the route which was a good omen. My route from Agen took me over the aqueduct over the Garonne, at 600m the longest aqueduct on this canal system. It is, perhaps, not as beautiful as the Moissac that I crossed yesterday or as ornate as that at Briare that I crossed on my journey down the Loire

but still an impressive piece of engineering.

I was feeling good, despite my lack of sleep, and quickly settled into a good rhythm. What slope there was, was downhill and I was cycling on good surfaces through avenues of plane trees that were protecting me from both sun and wind so I was motoring along at 13-14mph.

My first objective was to see if I could make it to Marmande, from where there is a direct train line to Bordeaux. If I was uncomfortable or tired I would head for the railway station and jump on the first available train: however I, myself, was going like a train and with every passing mile thought, more and more, that I could make the 90 mile trip on the bike.



At Buzet-sur-Baize I came across a small park filled with camper vans and people sunning themselves. The track continued to be good; in fact, in places, it was excellent with brand new tarmac that had me up to 17mph. I even came across a man on a tractor that was sweeping the track and blowing the



debris into the canal. How well the cyclist is treated in this part of the world.

Shortly before Castets-en-Dordogne where the canal joins the navigable River Garonne I had done 50 miles by 1 o'clock, just over 4 hours which, for me, was very good going. To celebrate I stopped at a canal-side pizza barge where I had a very good Pizza Marina (lots of seafood) and a couple of beers.

Then the canal path (because there was no canal) ran out. I crossed the Garonne on an austere girder bridge and found myself being asked to go down a rough track by the navigators. I consulted the map and spurned their advice, heading north from the river where I picked up a main(ish) road that took me in the direction of Bordeaux.

I was entering the country of vines, not large areas like the ones I had seen in the Aude, but much smaller affairs, some only an acre or so on the side of the valley, facing south. As I continued the vineyards grew a bit in size and in Cadillac were quite substantial. Most were open for business: if you wanted to taste or buy, just drop in.

I was on a mission; yesterday I had nowhere to stay in Bordeaux and had been toying with Air BnB again but the closer I got the fewer the choices. Apparently Vinexpo 2015 has filled the available beds of Bordeaux rapidly and I was left with few choices. Booking.com had an interesting possibility called Sunny Space at about the right price but it was outside the main town and away from restaurants. Beggars can't be choosers so I booked it. Having done so I was a bit annoyed to see that there was an additional fee of 10 euros for cleaning which should, for transparency, have been included in the price. There was nothing I could do but grin and bear it and the price was not outrageous even with the extra fee. Nathalie the renter had contacted me to ask when I would be arriving and, at lunchtime, I said probably 7pm but, if I got lost it could be 8. She sent me her number and asked me to text when I was near.

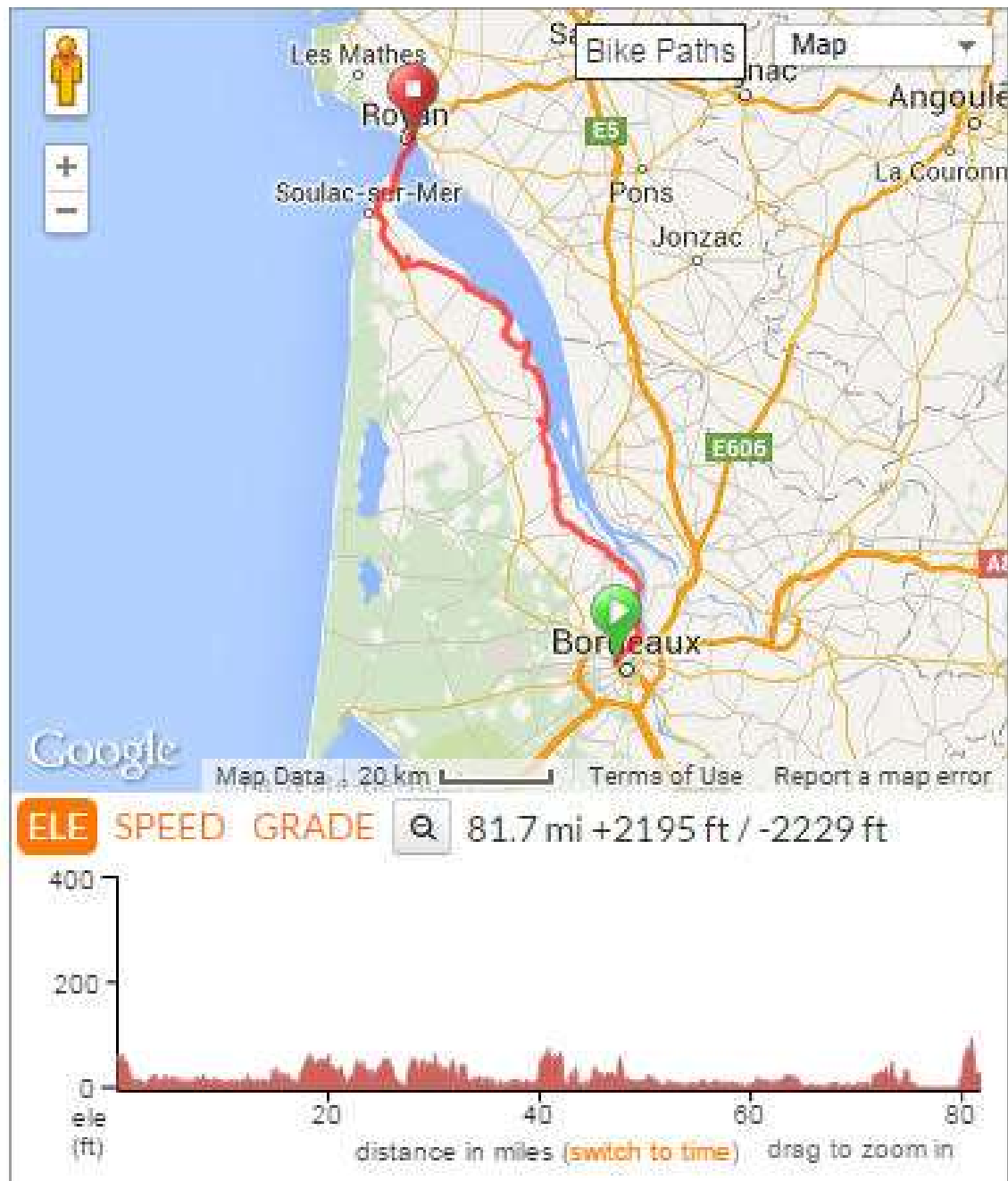
In the event I made very good time getting to Bordeaux. The roads weren't too busy and there were few hills to slow me down. I was making 15mph along the roads, even with a slight headwind so I was amazed to realise that I was going to be there before 530pm. There was little point in alerting Nathalie until I arrived at my destination which I did at 515pm having negotiated the city centre, thanks to my trusty phone GPS and 91 miles in 8 hrs 26 minutes including stops .

The "hotel" is nothing of the sort: it is a room in a block of flats on the AirBnB lines. Nathalie is charming and speaks good English and came down and found me, put the bike to bed in the basement and then took me to my room where I had a good shower and shave before heading out to see Bordeaux and get some food. Although it is not her flat she is staying here as well but has left me to my own devices while she goes off to meet friends. I've been able to use the washing machine, relax and write up the blog whilst drinking a bottle of very pleasant Cotes de Bourg.



## Day 19 Bordeaux - Royan

DISTANCE: 81.7 MILES



Once again from the sublime to the gorbliney and all because of the wind: why can't it follow me occasionally? Yesterday I was protected from the wind by the trees but today there was no hiding place, especially at the end of the day.

I set off from the flat at 0905 after a cup of tea, thinking that I might stop somewhere for a petit déjeuner but I was on one of the main routes out of the city and busy trying to avoid the traffic, especially a Number 9 bus which I kept passing and re-passing

between traffic lights. Eventually there was a proper cycle track and I cleared the city and found myself passing a bakery so I popped in and bought 3 almond croissants which I ate straight away.

I wasn't feeling at my best due, partly, to the bottle of claret that I had drunk whilst writing up the blog yesterday. I had also walked a considerable distance around the city centre to see what it looked like and to find somewhere suitable to eat so maybe I was just plain tired, though I thought I had slept quite well.

My plan was to go up through the Medoc passing through some of the great wine areas of Bordeaux: Margaux, St Julien, St Estephe and Haut Medoc. I assumed that once I was clear of the city I would start to see vineyards but I had been riding for an hour before I saw my first and another half an hour before I rode into the Margaux area with its large and prosperous looking Chateaux that are worthy of the name. The first hour I was riding through fields of barley and maize. Clearly wine terroir is all important and the French see no point in planting up land with vines just because it happens to be in Bordeaux.



It became clear that elevation is important. All the best Chateaux were on a slight plateau and as soon as the ground dropped down below a certain level it was back to trees and grass or arable. Special vineyard tractors were spraying or cultivating between the rows of vines, many of which had a rose planted at the end of it. Once through Margaux there were some lesser wineries until I approached Pauillac which has three of the first growth Chateaux, although I missed the Rothschild by turning towards the coast.

I had assumed that Chateaux meant that there would be a grand building attached, but, in many cases, the buildings were no more than village houses, all with their offers of tastings and cellar tours.

When I planned the route it looked completely flat but, as I have already said, there are small plateaux that make the cyclist work and, with the wretched wind in my face I was feeling the strain.

At lunchtime I had passed through Pauillac a large and prosperous town with a supermarket at each end and was on my way through St Estephe when I spotted Le Peyrat restaurant. What an amazing find: I sat down only for Madame to tut-tut in a very friendly manner that I was sitting at an a la carte table and should move to a table set up for Le Menu Jour. I duly moved and within a minute or two she appeared with

a tureen of vegetable and noodle soup from which I helped myself to however much I wanted and 25cl of red wine. When I was done with the soup she appeared with an egg and crab mayonnaise, which was delicious. I was then asked how I would like the bavette cooked and it arrived medium rare, as ordered, with a bowl of french fries. Very good indeed. Would I like pudding? You bet. She appeared with a tray of yoghurt and some bowls of apple cake. I took the cake. Would M'sieur like cheese? I'm not sure I can manage it. Tant pis, and off she went bustling on to the next table. A family run restaurant with everyone working in harmony. And the bill for all this was 12.90 euros.



The patron filled my water bottle and I went outside to have a look at the estuary which was full of milk chocolate coloured water. I moved on and headed north. I was now in Haut Medoc, generally much smaller chateaux, much of it Cru Bourgeois and the buildings were, generally less

impressive although, having followed a sign to Ch Loudenne I saw a very impressive house indeed. Apparently the Chateau has been bought by a Chinese Group who are hoping to open a hotel on the site.

This was almost the end of the wine. The further north you go, the vineyards peter out until there is just rough salt marsh with a few trees. I made for the main road to Le Verdon and Pointe du Grave from where the ferry crosses to Royan, my stop for the night. The wind was full in my face and, with no protection, it was exhausting work but I finally reached the ferry port and for 5 euros bought a ticket for me and the bike. The crossing takes about half an hour so I booked into my hotel, which is right in the middle of Royan, at about 7.15pm after about 80 miles of hard riding.

Royan is a sea-side resort and clearly popular. There is a huge choice of restaurants and lots of people promenading. I chose Paella and beer in L'Italien restaurant in a French seaside town - how much more cosmopolitan can you get? Then back to the hotel to write up the Blog.



## Day 20 Royan - Niort

DISTANCE: 73.1 MILES



Again, a complete change from yesterday. I had a decent night's sleep and woke to clear skies and somewhat less wind than recently, though, inevitably, what there was, was in my face. Breakfast was good, the usual bread, croissant and cafe au lait and, once I'd retrieved my bike from the shed where it had been unceremoniously hung up by its front wheel last night, I loaded up and set off at just after 9am. I quickly found my route out of Royan through the usual straggle of commercial buildings that mark the outskirts of every French town. There was a surprisingly steep climb to start with which got the blood circulating and then a drop down to a roundabout which seemed

to be by a lake; however on closer inspection it was a sea of plastic protecting a potato crop.

I passed by oyster farms with tidal pools that were empty when I went by but which



fill twice daily with the tide and provide a living for the owners who were keen to attract passing trade with degustation offers such as I saw yesterday in Medoc.

I had to stay on the main road north for a few miles before my route took me west to Saint Sornin and the marsh

land that stretches into the distance. The road was a bit rough but the scenery and wildlife made up for it. I never seen so many herons in one place. At one point a family of swans stood in my path, both parents extremely unhappy with my presence and I wondered, for a moment if the cob was going to attack but he contented himself with a lot of hissing and wing flapping until I was safely past. There were birds of prey and egrets and a much larger white bird that I couldn't identify (no, not a swan). This would be a bird-watchers paradise and I saw one man with a telephoto lens waiting for opportunities.

Whilst cycling alongside a roadside canal I heard a splash and there, swimming along beside me was a mammal. At first I thought it might be an otter but apparently it was a sort of coypu that is quite common and, indeed, I saw several more sunning themselves on the banks.

Eventually I climbed out of the Marais and up onto some rather more typical farm land with plenty of crops of maize growing well in the heat. I had managed to get myself off route (again) because I was faced with some cross-country roads that looked too daunting. So I had to take to a main road that was pretty busy but, at



St Agnant, I turned onto the Charente Maritime cycle path that follows an old railway line. This was glorious cycling shaded from the sun by high hedges and with a hard surface, not tarmac, but generally very smooth. I only saw half a dozen people on the route, even though it was Saturday and having bon joured a pretty girl cycling the other way was rewarded with 500m of tarmac. The only downside, as with all these voies vertes, is the chicane that has to be taken when the track crosses a road.

I crossed La Charente, quite a substantial river and, when the cycle route ran out, took to some lovely byways with virtually no traffic. The French road signage is so much nicer than the brash signs that we tend to use in England. Elegant and informative but not in your face. Also nearly all their little roads have names. How nice to go from La Vinsonnerie to Chemin du Vignaud, onto La Combe and then Beausejour,



followed by Chemin des Deux Communes and Rout des Sablières. I could go on, as the roads do, but you get my point. Now today, after 19 days of listening to the lady from Google telling me to turn right, left or go straight on, I decided to give her a name, Rita. I'm not sure why, but Rita the RWGPS and Gary Garmin seem appropriate so that's what they will be from now on. Now Rita has absolutely no idea about French pronunciation so the message I get has to be interpreted. Chemin sounds like Shimmy and Vignaud would sound something like Vig nord. This leads to some amusing moments and you can imagine what she made of St Georges du Rex!

As I carried on the countryside started rolling and I was cycling through fields of barley and maize, some of it irrigated. The sun was shining brightly but I did not feel hot. The legs were feeling good and I was making 12-13mph with ease.

From 1230 I started looking for some lunch but there was nothing en route. By now I had strayed onto a larger road with a bit of traffic and needed to get off the bike and relax for an hour or so. I found myself on the outskirts of Surgeres a small market town and, although Rita and Gary were trying to take me round the ring road I went for the centre where I found Le Manuel which, amazingly, had a Menu de Jour on offer on a Saturday. So I sat down to a very good Herring salad followed by a steak and apple tart washed down with a beer, 25cl of rose and an espresso coffee for 19.10 euros. Not the quality or value of yesterday but very acceptable.

As I sat down to lunch there was the noise of a diesel engine and into the square chugged an old John Deere tractor towing a caravan. This was a gentleman doing a Tour de France, somewhat further than mine but with charitable intent. He was climbing about 20 cols in the Alps and Pyrenees but not Galibier.

Before I left England I had been speaking with my cousin Annie and she mentioned that she had a long-standing friend who lived in Niort. As this could be on my route I asked if she thought that Susan and her husband Nick might give me a bed for the night. This they very kindly offered so I scheduled my journey accordingly. At lunch I texted Sue that I was on the way and hoped to be with them by 5pm.

The road after lunch was very pleasant, odd bits of cross-country mixed with good side roads. At one point I came across a snake that had been killed. Maybe someone can identify it.



I had to leave the side roads at the approach to Niort and the journey to the centre was a bit uncomfortable but once into the town was easy going and Rita and Gary both agreed that I was in the right place. I rang the bell and was let in and asked if I wanted a drink, which I did. As the house is upside down I had to go up to the kitchen and who was there to meet me but cousin Annie who had decided to come out for a few days to celebrate Sue's birthday which is today. What a lovely surprise. I asked for a couple of hours to have a shower



and complete the blog and then we can have a jolly evening together. Another very pleasant day.

## Day 21 Niort - Saumur

DISTANCE: 81.7 MILES



Once again I would be crossing the Loire, which I last did on Day 5 when I crossed the Decize bridge: a lot of water has flowed under both bridges in the last 16 days and I have travelled many miles since then. The morning was bright and I went upstairs for breakfast at about 830am to find everyone was already up and about. We had had



a jolly evening celebrating Sue's birthday with champagne and red wine, together with barbecued chicken and sausages, accompanied by potatoes and an excellent salad. I had already had a pint of beer pour le soif and probably drank more wine than was good for me. Anaïs had made a marble cake and Annie had made profiteroles. A jolly good feast. I breakfasted on yoghurt and weetabix with some bread and jam and lots of coffee and orange juice so felt ok for the day ahead.



I'd intended to leave at 9am, as usual, but it was 9.15 by the time I had said goodbye, and thanks for their kindness, to Nick, Sue, Josh and and Anaïs (and thanks for teaching me how to put a diuresis over the i of your name) and, of course, Annie. They were planning lunch in the area that I had travelled through yesterday and I had absolutely no idea where lunch would happen for me, if at all.

Lack of full preparation meant that I was not starting my trip to Saumur from their gate as far as Rita and Gary were concerned so I had a couple of false starts before we finally got underway. There was a steep pitch as I came away from the valley of the Sèvre Niortaise river but it soon levelled out into a pleasant and steady climb up onto the surrounding plain with its mixture of cereals and maize that I have come to expect. The first hour went well and I was averaging 12.5 mph along good back roads with little traffic.

On I went through countryside that was becoming quite familiar: small fields and high hedges of thorn and ash with the occasional oak; I could have been in Somerset. Occasionally I would climb through woods, sheltering me from the sun and lighter winds than of late, although they were still in my face! After two hours I had climbed to the maximum elevation of the day and it was downhill to the Loire. I texted Sue that I was over the worst, thanking her for her hospitality and wishing her a good lunch.

Unfortunately I didn't know what lay in store. Soon Rita suggested that we take off down a track that looked decidedly rough. I consulted the map and decided to avoid her suggestion by going a little bit further and joining the track a bit further on. That worked fine but she was soon at it again and this time I followed her command. Oh dear. I was on on a very rough but hard surface that was shaking me and the bike. The stone



surface disappeared and we were on hard packed mud. Soon that disappeared as well and we were on grass and then onto a track that didn't appear to have been travelled this year. I got off and pushed for about 750m through brambles and brush. At one point two quad bikes came from the opposite direction, enjoying the challenge. I was able to get out of their way but it took me a long time to make a very short distance.

Eventually I emerged onto a road and made progress but I was soon being urged into some more cyclo-cross. I put up with it for a bit longer but then decided to stick to hard roads. This was quite difficult because the map that I have on the phone does not differentiate very well which means that you risk ending up on cart-tracks unless you follow a main road, which I eventually did, picking up the, fortunately, not very busy road to Parthenay. It was now about 1215 and Rita wanted to go around the bypass. I didn't give it much thought at the time and went with the suggestion. Of course, beyond Parthenay there were no major settlements for miles which meant no restaurants.

I kept plugging on through a mixture of good and bad roads, including a bit more off-road before I thought I ought to make for a main road in the hope that might, at least, be a petrol station where I could grab something, even a Mars Bar and a Fanta, just to keep me going. No such luck and it was not until I hit the outskirts of Thouars at 3pm that I saw a sign to Patapain open 7/7. I heard it before I saw it: a rock band had been hired for the afternoon, I suppose, as their celebration of the [Fete de Musique](#) that takes place annually in France on 21st June. Anyway I could put up with anything in the quest for fuel and was soon tucking into a large pizza, an apple tart, three custard doughnuts and a can of Fanta. Even with the racket from the band, what a relief.

I followed the main road from Thouars to Saumur but soon tired of the traffic and took myself back to the pre-destined route that Gary had been trying to get me back to. This was a bit circuitous, up and down along tarmac roads, over downland covered in cereal crops and even some wind turbines, but eventually got me down into the valley of the Thouet river where Rita threw her final curve ball. Turn right!



My heart sank as I saw the rough track but, consulting the map, any alternative seemed to be miles out of the way. I turned and immediately found myself cycling through the middle of a maize field. If it had been wet it would have been impossible but after a mile of tractor ruts I eventually emerged onto a cyclepath that took me into the centre of

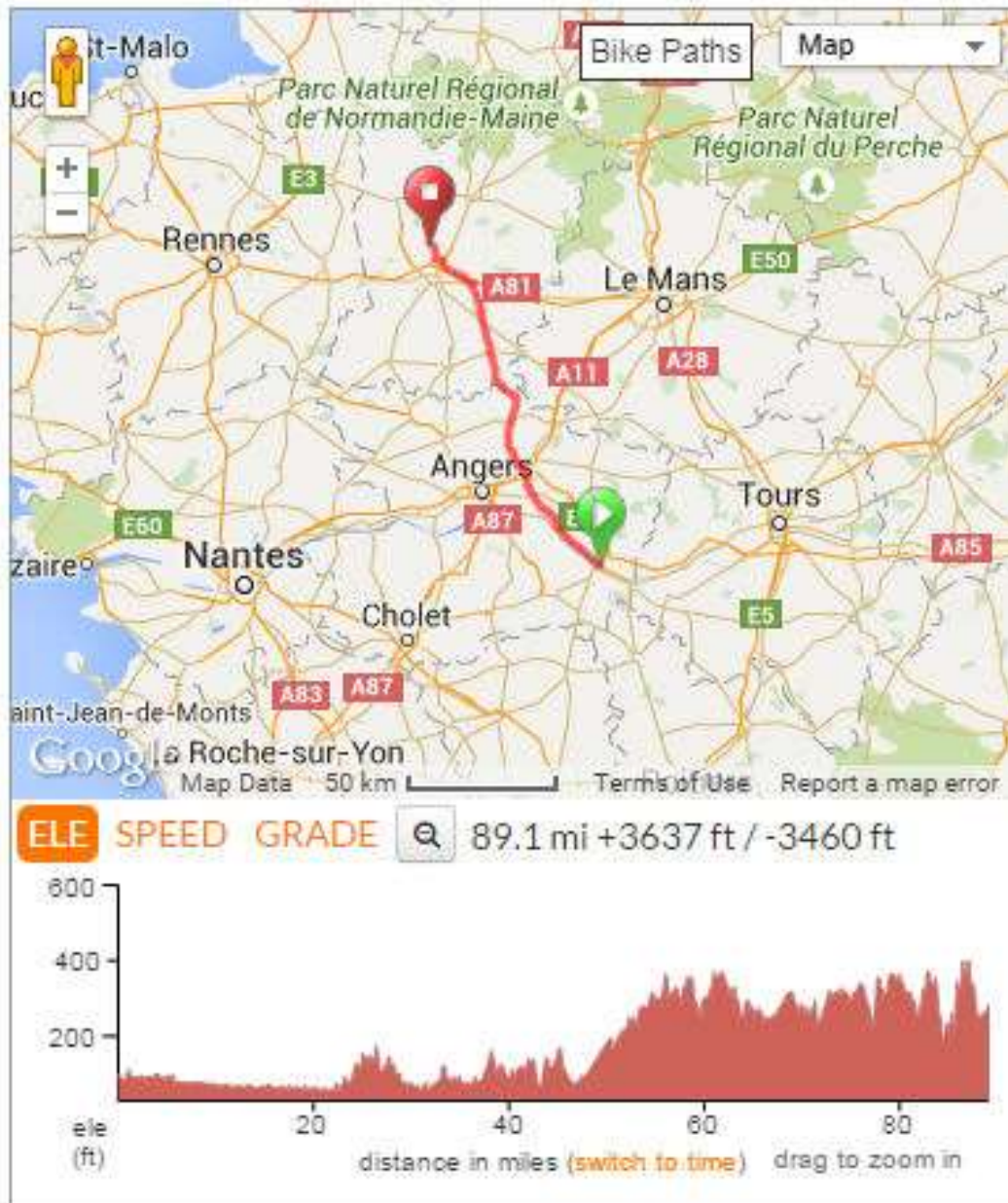
Saumur, where further musical celebrations were happening. There were bands playing and people dancing. Fast food sellers were doing good business and the streets were crowded. I got off my bike and pushed through the crowds until I came to the first bridge across La Loire. There are two with an island in the middle and my hotel was on the far bank. I finally booked in about 6pm, after 80 miles and 2634 feet of climbing, went upstairs for a shower and shave and then went down for a simple supper of charcuterie and salad with Saumur white wine before coming up to complete the blog.



Tomorrow I head for Andouille, 85 miles, but hopefully not as taxing as today. More importantly for me the following two days in France are both short distances and it is only the journey from Portsmouth to Horsington left that is over 80 miles. We shall see!

## Day 22 Saumur - Andouille

DISTANCE: 89.1 MILES



It's been an odd day. I was quite expecting it to be hard; 85 miles and a bit of climbing and with my recent record, today might have been an "off" day, but, in the end, the cycling was easy.

I slept quite well. My bedroom had windows on two sides and I left them open all night so kept quite cool; possibly too cool because I woke up in the dark feeling cold, but soon put that right by pulling the duvet over me. The hotel is next to the train

station but the trains don't run between about 2300 and 0600, so it was the early train that finally woke me for good.

I packed up and took all my kit downstairs for breakfast at about 0815. I found a couple already eating breakfast and it didn't take long to realise that they were English so I struck up a conversation. They were both over 80 and from Warrington and were cycling the Loire a velo. They had two weeks to go where they pleased at their own pace, which was about 30-40 miles a day. They had driven from England, found somewhere to leave their car and started cycling west: however they had been bothered by the headwind so, like my Dutch chums from Agen, they had jumped on a train and headed west so that they could cycle south east with the wind behind them. She told me that she had cycled up the Col du Galibier in the 1950s on a bicycle with 5 gears. "I didn't get off", she said, "well you couldn't, could you?" Chapeau.

I really liked the hotel. The owner was very pleasant and spoke good English. He had made good improvements to the building and took an interest in his guests. Unfortunately the food menu was very limited, so my repas of the evening before was very basic but the breakfast was excellent with the usual French offering plus yoghurt and fresh fruit. I was offered, but declined, more bread. Good value and good service.

I set off at 0903, having filled my water bottles at the hotel: I do like the way that French bars have cold water as one of the taps on the beer dispenser. I immediately picked up the route, which was a good sign, and followed side roads until I emerged onto a cycle track beside the main road. This was pretty basic: it reminded me somewhat of the track beside the A9 in Scotland, not a very good surface but, at least, it kept you away from the traffic.

Eventually Rita took me away from the river and we followed the railway along some gravel roads. They weren't awful but neither were they great and my average speed fell away. However after two hours I had covered about 23 miles which was OK.

Having said goodbye to the railway we wriggled our way north west on a mixture of gravel and tarmac through some, frankly, uninspiring landscape, flat and featureless with a mixture of field crops and horticulture. There was a bit of climbing to break the monotony but it was a rather tedious ride.

I had forgotten much about the planning for this day. On most days I had a lunch stop planned but I had completely forgotten where. Fortunately at about 1300 hrs I chanced upon the Relais le Porage. There was a large area for lorries and vans and it looked fairly busy, always a good sign. I left the bike against the wall and didn't bother to lock it, went in and the bar was full of drinkers. I said I would like to eat and was ushered through to a restaurant which, in turn, was quite full. I was shown to a table and asked if I would like de l'eau et du pain? Yes, please, and du vin aussi. These quickly arrived and I was asked to help my self to hors d'oeuvre from a chilled cabinet groaning with terrines, pates and salads. It was take as much as you want and go back if you want more. Having finished that, there was poulet avec frites, or Farfelle with bolognese sauce, which is what I chose, and jolly good it was too. Some cheese and a slightly indifferent creme caramel was finished off with a cup of



espresso. The bill 11.50 euros the lot, and, I think, if I had finished the 50cl of wine I would have been brought more. The cooking wasn't classy, just good and filling as befits a truck-stop but I can't think of anywhere in the UK that you would find that value for money.

Hunger satisfied I continued to Morannes, a small town on the River Sarthe, and it was only as I rode over the bridge and Rita said "Lunch" that I remembered that this was my scheduled stop!



It was clear from the GPS that I had a bit of climbing to do after lunch and after about 50 miles the road sloped up onto some downs, not unlike Salisbury Plain. However Rita didn't want me to go on the road: Oh no, only the most tree covered of green lanes would do. Fortunately the surface has been fairly recently cleared and, though it was only grass and earth, was not too bad to cycle and the climb was soon over.

The sun now deserted me and the clouds started threatening until I felt a few spits and spots. I put on the raincoat and kept going. It never developed into anything heavy but it was persistently annoying for the rest of the journey. There were odd moments when I lost the track but managed to recover.

About 5 miles from my destination, as I was climbing a steepish hill I got the dreaded Off Route noise. I couldn't see where I had gone wrong but went to turn around, lost my balance and over I went: another bloody knee. Having applied first aid I spotted the turn that Rita wanted me to take. It started fine with a nice run down into the river valley but then petered out completely. Eventually I took to a grass field until I found the narrowest of tracks through the woods. I had to unload the bike and put it over a barbed wire fence, reload it and then push it up what can only be described as a stream bed, for about 100 yards. Having got to the top I emerged onto the road that I had originally turned off, where I had my fall! Grrrrr!

From then on all went well and I turned up at Au Pigeon Blanc in Andouillé at about 620pm. The owner, a Dutchman, and his French wife had been trying to phone me throughout the day to say that the hotel would not be open until 6pm. Unfortunately they had the wrong number so it was to no avail anyway, but my escapades on the way meant that it was not a problem. The Hotel is fine but the restaurant is very basic and I was offered steak or eggs to be served as soon as possible so that they could close up for the night. They only open for outside trade at lunchtime. I got food, beer and wine so that was fine but there is nothing to do in the town so I was soon back in my room composing the blog.



I'm not sure what to do tomorrow. There is only about 50 miles to the next stop and there doesn't seem to be much to see on the way so I shall probably dilly and dally after a late start.

## Day 23 Andouille - Flers

DISTANCE: 65.4 MILES



What an extraordinary day of cycling. I covered 65 miles of which 50 was off-road on superbly surfaced voie vertes.

As I only had to cover about 53 miles if I went by the shortest route, I was in no particular hurry. Speaking to the Dutch owner of Au Pigeon Blanc, Ronald, during an excellent breakfast of bacon and eggs as well as the usual croissant and bread, I ascertained that it might be worth visiting a small village called Fontaine Daniel which has a reputation of being picturesque. This would take me about 10 miles extra. Otherwise he had no suggestions as to places to see along the way.

Ronald and his French wife, Veronique have owned Au Pigeon Blanc for six years. It has a large bar and seating for about 80 people: however they only open at lunchtime. In the evenings it is only guests in their four hotel rooms who can eat and they are keen to get this over with as early as possible so that they can get away. So I felt very rushed when I had a perfectly good bavette and it would have been nice to have been able to sit in the bar and have a chat and a few beers. However they were very kind and washed my cycling kit and returned it to me dry, at breakfast, without charge.



I set off at 0923 and found the route immediately. There was a 5% drag out of the village and then a similar drop to the valley of the river Mayenne where I joined a well surfaced track alongside the canalised river. Every few miles there was a weir with a lock alongside it, though I saw no boat traffic at all. It was a lovely sunny morning but I was in amongst the trees and felt quite chilly at times. It was well set-up for cyclists and walkers with loos at regular intervals and there were several fishermen trying their luck. There was bird-song all around and the river looked lovely, a really enchanting ride of about 10 miles, until I reached the eponymous town of Mayenne, perched on the steep side of the river valley. There was a castle and several old buildings and the town looked prosperous.



Rita was inviting me to take the ring road but I needed to cross the river to go back south to Fontaine Daniel, which I did. Unfortunately when I got there I could not see the attraction. Yes, it was picturesque with a large lake and gardens (a bit like Stourhead maybe but not as nice) so I quickly returned to Mayenne and



followed the signs to Flers and Caen. Having got onto the main road I consulted Rita and Gary who both said I was a couple of miles off route and needed to re-cross the river. So, nothing ventured, I did so and went up a steepish hill the other side. Part way up I got the "route found" signal and then almost immediately lost it. I went



round a roundabout and came back down the hill and spotted the start of a cycle route which I joined.

This was the start of an extraordinary ride along the track of an old railway, superbly surfaced and in amongst trees and hedges. There was the usual draw-back of road crossings but I was able to make really good speed. I saw no other users at all. For nine glorious miles I cycled alone along a smooth track.



It was lunch-time and I wondered if I would find a suitable stopping point in this glorious wilderness but suddenly I came to a road crossing and there, in front of me, was Le Gué de Genes at Ambrières les Vallées. I propped the bike against the wall and went in. The restaurant was doing good business and fed me well on the menu de jour which was a potato and ham salad followed by a pasta carbonara which was delicious. I finished it off with a fromage frais and coffee. Not cheap: 19.90 euros with 50cl of red wine but it set me up for the afternoon.



The cycle trail continued for another 4.5 miles including a section where the rail track was still in place but then, suddenly, it stopped without any explanation or indication of where to go next. Bizarre. Fortunately Rita and Gary were on the case and guided me to the D23, the main road to Céauce (which is twinned with North Petherton) and Domfront. The road was not busy and, although there were several ups and downs I made

good time.

Domfront sits on top of a hill and has a mediaeval city section which includes some interesting buildings. For some reason the navigators were keen to take me to the top of the hill where I got lost before deciding to follow the signs to Flers. I came whizzing down the hill on the main road when Rita suddenly picked up on a different route. I stopped and, sure enough, there was a small road off to the left.



Having followed the road down I found myself with a choice of voie vertes and, by judging the direction I was meant to be taking, I joined another smooth surfaced road which took me along another old railway line to within 3 miles of Flers. Again a most enjoyable ride on which I saw a few other like-minded souls, and a herd of goats sunning themselves in the middle of the track. However once the voie verte came to an end there were



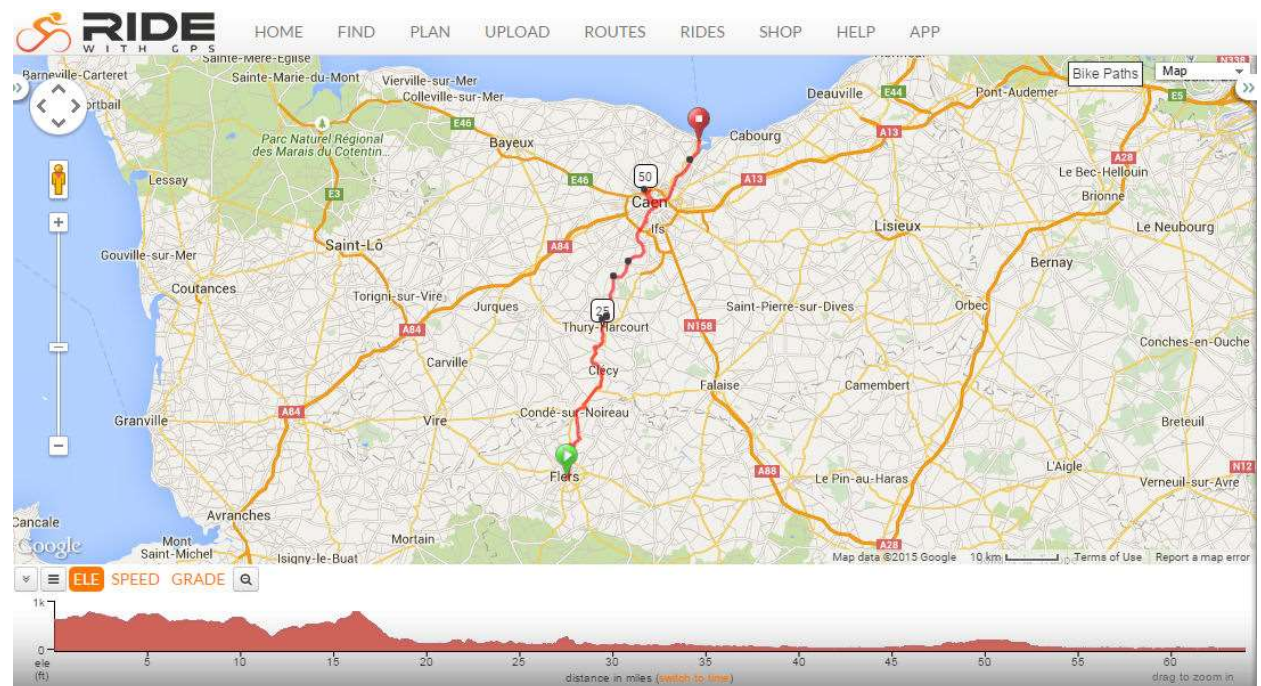


absolutely no signs of where to go next. No signs to Flers or anywhere else for that matter.

Eventually I worked it out and found the main road into Flers from which Gary ably guided me to the Beverl'Inn where I am staying the night. It's a strange beast: very modern decor and close to a Travelodge in its fixtures and fittings, and the room is very comfortable with lots of power points and a good shower. The staff are very helpful but speak about as much English as I do French. The bike is safely in a garage and I have been extremely well fed on haute cuisine foie canard, roast pork and a delicious fruit mille feuille, with a pint of beer and a pichet of rosé for 29 euros which is pretty good value.

The ferry tomorrow night doesn't leave until 2245 so I have a choice of going 50 miles straight to Caen, largely up voie vertes, or diverting to Bayeux to, once again, see the tapestry and other sites and then to Arromanches and a coastal ride to Ouistreham which will add another 25 miles. I'll see how I feel in the morning, bearing in mind that I have an overnight crossing, during which I may not get much sleep, and an 85 mile ride back home when we arrive in Portsmouth at 0630.

## Day 24 Flers - Ouistreham



Well I made it to the ferry. It's been a frustrating day in many ways but I'm on board and settling in for the crossing.

I was in no great hurry to start as I decided to make for Caen and take in the Memorial museum with this rather wonderful statue of a US sailor and his girlfriend, rather than

make the extended trip via Bayeaux and Arromanches. I had a leisurely breakfast, very basic, bread, croissant (neither good) and plain yoghurt and was on the bike at 0911, earlier than expected.

The day didn't start well: I couldn't find the right road out of Flers and did a couple of circuits before I succeeded. This was the main road to Caen and quite busy, without a cycle lane. However once I got out into the suburbs there was a reasonable hard shoulder and then the road opened out and the riding was quite comfortable. About 5 miles from the start there was a substantial hill down to a roundabout and I missed Rita's direction completely. It was only when I was half way up the next climb that I realised I had gone wrong. I thought I could probably make my way across country but ended up on a no through road, passing some tree surgeons and the post lady on her yellow bike before having to head back to where I started.

Eventually I found the right road, although Rita gave me a couple of false alarms which made me doubt myself. I was on a road down a river valley, very picturesque and tree covered but, unfortunately, also a busy highway for lorries, some of which were not very particular about cyclists. After about 5 miles I was able to turn off but found myself climbing steeply 8-10% and, having reached the crest of the hill about the same down the other side. This was the pattern for the first 20miles, up and down like a fiddler's elbow. I didn't mind the climbing too much but a lot of it was on main roads.

I knew that I was heading for another voie verte but I didn't know how soon I could connect to it. In making my preparations I realised that in the village of Thury Harcourt there was an old railway tunnel, The Tunnel de l'Hom that might be the start of the Suisse Normande Voie Verte. However the small amount of information I had managed to glean from the inadequate Suisse Normande website suggested that the tunnel would not be open for traffic until the end of June. When I got there the sign said that was, indeed the case. Maybe if I had just gone for it I could have got through. But I was a good boy and tried to find an alternative route. This was very difficult and involved climbing and descending a couple of steep hills. Eventually I found myself on a very rough stone track that claimed to be a no through road. Half way down the back wheel punctured so I had to unload everything and use one of my two remaining spare tubes.

I wheeled the bike down the remainder of the hill and, at the bottom, found a lovely tarmac road that took me 18 miles to Caen. I don't know what it is about the French and



their voie vertes but its almost as if they don't want you to find them, and when you do so the signage leaves a lot to be desired. I came across a strange bicycle railway



alongside the cycle path, making use of the rails that were still in place. I went wrong a couple of times on my way to Caen because the signs were badly placed but eventually arrived at about 3pm.

I then had to find my way to the Memorial Museum so went looking

for the Tourist Office, picked up signs which then ceased and went round in a couple of circles. Eventually I stopped and asked a couple of girls who were doing some customer research and they put me right. The TO gave me a plan and I set forth, uphill again. Several wrong turns later I was getting pretty angry, but at about 4pm I found the museum and had a very poor lunch of quiche, muffin and tango which kept the hunger at bay.

It's not cheap, 19 euros full price but I got a three euro discount for age. However it is good, well signed in French, English and German and interesting, if a bit harrowing. I came out after 3 hours feeling a bit low having had to confront man's inhumanity to man.



The journey to the ferry started equally badly and Rita almost ended up with an early bath in the harbour in the centre of Caen after giving me confusing directions. Once I was on the right road it was easy and I was soon back on the path that brought me towards Caen 23 days ago, still with the wind in my face! This was the first time that I have retraced my route, once again passing Pegasus

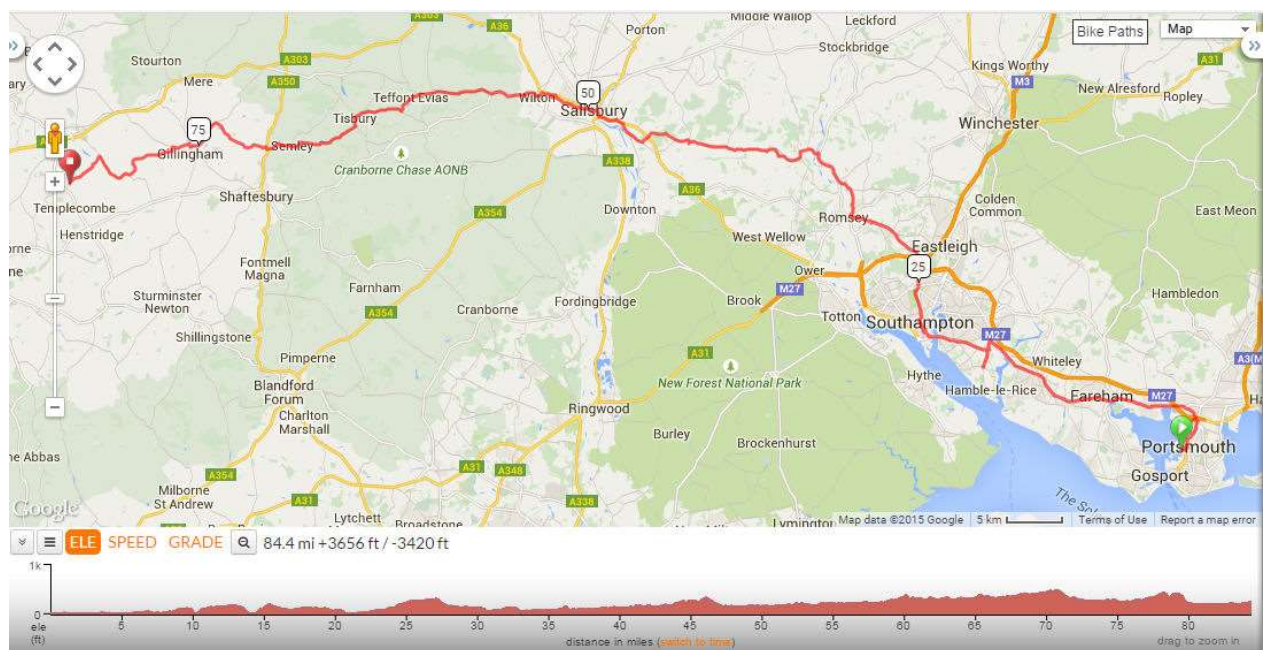




Bridge, although I shall do so entirely tomorrow. In Ouistreham I found Le Channel restaurant and sat down to a feast of bulot and crevettes salad followed by a delicious fish choucroute and cheese washed down with beer and wine. A good end to a frustrating day.

The tannoy has just suggested that we don't get in until 0815 so it may be 6pm before I get home but I'm looking forward to a good pint of English beer at the Half Moon.

## Day 25 Portsmouth – Home Farm



The Ferry left Ouistreham on time and I settled down to update the blog before trying to get some sleep. Brittany Ferries acquitted themselves better for the cyclist in France than in Portsmouth; there is even a covered area for you to wait before boarding. As it happened I was only made to wait for a couple of minutes before they called me on board and the bike was soon stowed, again very haphazardly next to a fork lift truck and in a jumble of other bikes. It would take very little for them to have some bike hanging racks as they do on the French trains, less risk of damage and a better use of space. I shall be writing to them!

Sleep was hard. The reclining seat I was given was in a lounge full of snorers, chatters and people trying to make themselves comfortable on the floor. After an hour or so I gave up and went searching for an alternative which I found in the shape of another lounge of reclining seats that was absolutely deserted. I moved all my kit through, closed the door, and settled down on the floor with one of my panniers as a pillow, and had a bit of rest, if not actual sleep.



I woke up at about 5am and lay there for a while before setting off in search of some food to keep me going for the 85 mile journey. The full English breakfast was good and by the time I'd finished we were in the Solent and heading for port. I'm not sure exactly what time we docked, but I was on my way by 0706 and, having queue barged some cars, was through Immigration and on the road by about 0730.



I immediately ran into navigation problems: Rita wanted me to turn left towards the Motorway and, rather than risk being pulled onto it I turned right and tried to judge my direction. In fact I ended up on the road that had brought me in 25 days ago, so recognised where I was and made good progress towards the cycle way that runs around the harbour. From there it was pretty much a question of following the A27 to Southampton, a very busy road but with cycleways or, at least, a cycle lane for most of the way.

The problem with cycleways, as with the Voie Vertes in France, is that cross-roads take precedence, so you have to slow down and check for traffic, which is annoying; so I tend to stay on the main carriageway where I can, which probably annoys car drivers. Anyway I made it without being mowed down.

Having crossed the Hamble at Lower Swanwick, I failed to turn left in Bursledon and made an unnecessary detour which I compounded by heading too far south and having to retrace my journey. My sense of direction completely failed and I went on two more false trails before finally picking up the road to Southampton and crossing the Itchen Toll Bridge which, pleasantly, is free for cyclists. I faffed about on the other side, unsure of my route but eventually made it to Southampton Common which bypassed much of the A33.

Once past the Motorway interchange, which I crossed over on the A33, going was easy to Romsey, where I re-joined my outward journey. As I was coming down the hill at North Baddesley I came across what must have been an entire school walking down towards Romsey, hundreds of them with adults looking after them. Goodness knows what they were doing but it was a strange sight.

I bypassed to the north of Romsey up some 5% hills, but they seemed easy after what I have been through over the last 3 weeks and I batted along the Stockbridge road to Mottisfont where I turned off past the Abbey with its lovely National Trust owned rose gardens, across the River Test which divides as it crosses the water meadows, before crossing the railway at Dunbridge.

I was now on entirely familiar territory and Rita and Gary were no longer required as I made my way across the downs through Lockerley, East and West Dean and on to Long Drove that took me through the woods to Clarendon and Alderbury. The weather was lovely, sunny but not too hot and it was all one could expect of an English summer day.

Onto the A36 at Salisbury and then through the centre (which annoyed Rita because she wanted to take me through Netherhampton) and out through Churchfields to the Wilton Road which involved an unexpectedly steep climb at Quidhampton, but, fortunately, not too long.

I had it in mind that I would be lunching in Alderbury but I had made such good time that it was still only 12pm when I passed through Wilton, so I kept going out on the A30 to Barford St Martin where I turned off to follow the River Nadder. Just before Dinton I spotted the Penruddocke Arms: the time was right so I pulled in and ordered a pint of Greene King IPA. I would like to say it was like nectar, but 3 weeks of 1664 or Heineken, has clearly altered my tastes and, although perfectly drinkable, was not as enjoyable as I had expected. The menu was produced along with a special menu of about 8 standard pub meals, each of which was £6, so I opted for fish and chips, very well cooked and served, which went down well. Bearing in mind that many of the Menu de Jours that I have been enjoying have cost 12-14 Euros (£8-10 at current rates) for 3 courses, this was still a pretty good deal.

Now very much on the home straight, I made my way through Tisbury and Semley to Gillingham and then up to Buckhorn Weston. Making my way back across Horsington Marsh the wind was, once again, straight in my face where it has been for 25 days but I battled against it, arriving home at 1520. This was much earlier than expected and I hadn't been able to alert the home team because my phone was out of credit. As I pulled into the yard I could see a ribbon stretched across the gateway and assumed that they had been moving cattle. I was wearing my helmet and didn't look upwards so



pushed the bike carefully under the ribbon and went into the garden to find Annie and Jim playing in the stream with grand-daughters Florence and Annabel. After all the hellos and well-dones the question came "Did you break through the finishing tape?" When we went back there was a lovely sign above the "ribbon" with Finish and balloons attached which I had totally missed! Anyway, with Florence looking on, I broke the tape and went inside for champagne. A lovely end to a memorable journey.