

CYCLING MANCHE TO MED

BOURNEMOUTH - BORDEAUX - BEZIERS



THE JOURNAL
OF OUR
THIRD GREAT ADVENTURE

©Penny & Damian Buckley

September 2007

For our four 'sweet peas'
Alastair, Noah, Emma and Annabel

OUR LOGO and ROUTE

Charity Ride - September 2007 Bournemouth-Bordeaux-Béziers



Life
Registered Charity No. 274144

Julia's House
The Dorset Children's Hospice

Registered Charity No. 1067125



DAY BY DAY SUMMARY

Day	Date	From → To	Distance Cycled (kms)	(mls)
1	3 Sep	Bournemouth → Poole → Cherbourg → Créances	71	44
2	4 Sep	Créances → Céaux	91	56
3	5 Sep	Céaux → Fougères	63	39
4	6 Sep	Fougères → Pouancé	106	66
5	7 Sep	Pouancé → Cholet	100	60
6	8 Sep	Cholet → Vouvant	82	51
7	9 Sep	Vouvant → La Rochelle	81	50
8	10	Rest Day at La Rochelle	--	--
9	11	La Rochelle → Saintes	82	51
10	12	Saintes → Blaye	82	51
11	13	Blaye → Bordeaux	84	52
12	14	Rest Day at Bordeaux	--	--
13	15	Bordeaux → Lucmau	82	51
14	16	Lucmau → Condom	85	53
15	17	Rest Day at Condom	--	--
16	18	Condom → Castelsarrasin	85	53
17	19	Castelsarrasin → Toulouse	70	43
18	20	Rest Day at Toulouse	--	--
19	21	Toulouse → Bram	85	53
20	22	Bram → Coursan	98	61
21	23 Sep	Coursan → THE MED at Valras-Plage	25	15
		TOTAL MANCHE - MED	1372	852
		Valras-Plage → Béziers	29	18
22	24	Rest Day at Béziers	--	--
23	25	Béziers → Narbonne	34	21
24	26 Sep	Narbonne → Perpignan → Southampton → Bournemouth	--	--
		TOTAL DISTANCE	1435	892

Pre-departure.

Our previous two long distance cycle rides in France were enormous fun and we wanted to set ourselves at least one more challenge and so decided on Manche (The Channel) to Med. This time, with the encouragement of family and friends, we decided to ride for charity. Damian was to ride for Life, the anti-abortion group and I for Julia's House, the Dorset children's hospice. Our original target of £1,000, was very quickly met, and continued to grow magnificently. We designed and printed our own logo, showing our route, on to T-shirts and as a poster.

We planned carefully, spending many long evenings poring over the IGN* maps, plotting the best, most interesting route - for us, 'best' equals least-hilly. We had had our fill of hills in the Ardèche, and most recently in West Dorset; we were not looking for any more LSAs**.



***Kit layout for 23 days.
We both carried
two panniers weighing
approximately 8lbs each,
plus bar bag for Damian
and rucksack for Penny***

* Institut Géographique Nationale
** Lung-Searing Ascents

We also factored in some must-see sights: Le Mont St Michel, the house-we-almost-bought-in-France and town/cities not previously visited. To minimize weight and aware of the sacrilege involved, we pared down the maps and, as carefully as possible, removed relevant pages from the guide-books. The cut off sections weighed 13 oz - a substantial weight saving!

Mindful that the Rugby World Cup would be happening at France at the same time as our ride, we thought it prudent to book some accommodation ahead, particularly in Bordeaux and Toulouse, where Ireland would be playing Namibia and Wales Japan respectively (did anyone know Japan had a rugger team?). We then realised that we'd published our logo showing all the stops and decided to book all the accommodation ahead

***Our fund raising
stall outside
church***



Day 1

Monday, 3 September

Bournemouth → Cherbourg (via Poole) → Créances 71 kms / 44 mls

Today we embark on our third Great Adventure full of hope that we shall rediscover something of our Loire trip.

We set off for the fast craft from Poole at 6.20 am with our neighbour, Alan, who has generously offered to get up appallingly early to come with us, to the port, in our car and bring it back. It's cold, but so exciting as we cycle straight to the front of queue and onto the ferry. I have always wanted to do this; I am not quite sure what this says about me! We meet a couple of other cyclists going down to Lake Constance. They have tents and all the paraphernalia of self-sufficiency packed on their bikes. I do not feel in the least bit envious of them; a proper bed, bath and delicious meal have always been my minimum requirements.



*Departure from
Poole at 6.45 am*

We're first on **and** first off the fast craft. We find our way out of the port of Cherbourg and up the hill out of town, feeling smug about the recce we made in June and are soon alternately toiling/winging our way down the Cotentin Peninsula to Briquebec, a delightful town which brings back happy memories of early 'booze cruises'. While eating lunch, we meet some English cyclists and swap stories; they are suitably impressed with our plans and donate to our charities. We all agree that France is the most wonderful country for cycling.

Our route from Briquebec is on a 'piste cyclable', newly created from an old railway track. While it is obviously traffic-free and flat, a real bonus, it is

also somewhat dull, missing, as it does, all the villages and signs of life that so enliven cycling. This must sound rather churlish since dedicated cycle routes are what we would die for in England. Strangely, there are few signs of wild life.

Our first night is B&B in an old mésnail or manor house. Sadly, I feel this once beautiful old house has been rather spoilt by the previous owner's efforts to restore it. He has adopted the 'quick fix' model rather than the loving restoration. The present owners are kind and helpful.

Day 1 is over and we are 43 miles towards the Med - only another 757 to do!

We have a generous breakfast with the most sublime pain au raisin and good tea. Jan and Dave are kind and helpful but we feel the house, once a grand old lady of a building, with stories to tell if only stones could speak, wears a rather dejected air under the pseudo 'original' improvements. I feel sad for what might have been achieved with more care and time. We are away in good time and are happy to trade the flat, traffic-free, dull 'piste'; for the hillier, slightly more traffic populated D* and C* roads through the villages in what is known as Carrot Country. This is our sort of cycling; no one village is particularly remarkable but together they are utterly delightful.

Our goal for today is Céaux, just round the corner at the bottom of the Cotentin Peninsula and carefully avoiding the heights of Avranches. This requires threading past the railway station and through some 'zones industrielles' but also seeing immense expanses of the Baie de Mont St Michel at low tide. As we are flying along, I catch my first glimpse of the unmistakeable, iconic shape of Mt St Michel in a gap between houses.

Unfortunately, we have broken, on only the second day, our third cardinal rule of cycling - never pitch up for the night in 'one-horse towns'. We are full of foreboding about Le P'tit Quinquin, although the room is adequate; we have our doubts about supper and recce the area for other options. The choice is strictly limited and anyway would require a return journey on bikes, which inevitably limits wine consumption. We reluctantly decide it will have to be P'tit Quinquin. While we are out, we ride down to the coast path to look over to Le Mt St Michel, classified by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 1979. It is only a silhouette and looks enigmatic in the setting sun but I am thrilled at the prospect of seeing it tomorrow morning.

In the event, we are delightfully surprised by a truly delicious meal: smoked salmon on forest mushrooms, followed by lamb. P'tit Quinquin has redeemed itself and we speculate on breakfast - plentiful buffet or rigid portion control.

We have completed 2 days, ridden 100 miles, an eighth of the journey and can send one map home to lighten our load!. We're getting there!



En route down the Cotentin



First, distant sight of Le Mont St Michel at dusk

Day 3

Céaux → Le Mont St Michel

Le Mont St Michel → Fougères

Wednesday, 5 September

12 kms / 7.5 mls

51 kms / 32 mls

We wake up to a promising morning, though Madame cheerfully tells us it's 6 degrees outside; we're away by 8.30 am! This is excellent and something we would like to achieve every day, to maximise daylight hours. It is only 7 miles to the Le Mt St Michel and we're soon there. As the sun is rising on it, the effect is quite stunning and I hope, desperately, that the pictures we take will capture this. I was not exactly sure what sort of road would lead to the mount. Would it be like the Passage du Gois over to Ile de Noirmoutier, passable only at low tide? It is, in fact, a fully paid up road, passable at all states of the tide and has been so for many years, anything less would seriously compromise the money-spinning opportunities of this World Heritage Site. It is truly thrilling and arriving by bike only adds to this feeling. I cannot do justice in this little journal to this place founded in 708, the result of a dream of St Aubert, bishop of Avranches - it is stupendous, breathtaking, not only the building but its situation in the middle of the bay. We see it at low tide as **vast** expanses of sand are exposed.



**Le Mont
St Michel**

We have allowed ourselves a morning at Mt St Michel, not really long enough, but we have 52 kms to Fougères so we cannot linger; this has been a taster and perhaps we shall come back at some future date.

Just before Fougères we plan to visit a dolmen. There seem to be several of these in the forest. Most seem to possess magical properties for the finding of husbands and conception of children - happily, I don't need to put it to the test! There is not much to see at this one but someone piled those stones one on the other for a reason.



***Dolmen -
Pierre
Courcoulée in
the Forest of
Fougères***

Hotel du Commerce in Fougères is as charmless as its name suggests. Madame shows little interest in welcoming her latest guests so I try to summon some English 'froideur' - not easy in tight Lycra, hair tousled from 50 kms under a helmet. The effort is quite lost on her and we accept her room which does have a good, big bath, generally the first thing we note in a room. She invites us to 'park' our bikes in the corridor leading to the back door almost blocking it. Such an arrangement would be quite unthinkable in England but the French adopt a much more relaxed approach to matters of 'Elf 'n Safety'.

Day 4
Fougères → Pouancé

Thursday, 6 September
106 kms / 66 mls

Breakfast at Hotel du Commerce is generous buffet with unlimited butter (bonus point). The day starts misty and gets worse but I can only think how lucky we were yesterday for our visit to Mont St Michel - the sparkling sun on the water could not have been improved. We have a long day but allow ourselves till 10.00 am to look round Fougères.

Leaving the panniers in the hotel, we feel light as air; no hill is so steep that we cannot negotiate it in our lightened state! The old part of the town, all half-timbered houses, is clustered round the foot of the château. I hope the photos will have the 'atmospheric' look. While in the courtyard of the château, we talk to more English people who want to know what we're up to and offer a donation - people we meet are generous and amazed. However, ever mindful of time, we return to the hotel, saddle up the panniers and head south.



***Château de
Fougères***

To date, Damian's map-reading has been brilliant. Unfortunately, OC Maps makes a big faux-pas as we leave Fougères and we find ourselves on a route nationale. This is scary; heavy lorries use these roads. For the most part French lorry drivers are a much more considerate breed than their

British counterparts, pulling up behind gently, waiting to overtake when safe and giving cyclists a wide berth. There are a few, though, who forget these kindnesses Some 10 km on Damian signals to turn off and admits his mistake. Nul points for losing time and adding distance to a long day!

We have to content ourselves with viewing the château of Vitré from our picnic bench. We have 40 kms to do after lunch and kilometres are longer after the lunch time hour. This goes hand in hand with panniers weighing more and the steepest hills appearing. Shame on us, we have broken Golden Rule1: don't overestimate ability.

We have planned to visit Roche aux Fées, billed as the best dolmen in France after Carnac (Brittany). It is not well signposted but we ask a chap clipping his hedge who gives us directions. He is keen to tell us that 'they are better than the pyramids'. Even allowing for his natural Gallic pride, this would seem to be somewhat overstating the case! We find the dolmen which has been standing for 4,500 years amongst a group of trees.

Slightly incongruously, where once a low-tech notice board with description sufficed, the Département de la Patrimoine is building a shiny new visitor centre nearby, no doubt to interpret 'The Dolmen Experience'. Presumably there will be staff and 'facilities'. Hey ho, that's progress!



4,500 year old dolmen - Roche aux Fées

Day 5**Pouancé → Cholet (La Séguinière)****Friday, 7 September****100 kms / 60 mls**

We make a bad start by oversleeping on what we expect to be our longest day - not promising. Nevertheless, we're on the road by 9.30 am and bowling along lovely, quiet country roads. This is perfect cycling, mostly gently undulating, long, long gentle downs followed by moderate ups requiring only modest effort. It's perfect and the sun is shining, we have been so lucky so far.

We are scheduled to cross the Loire at Ancenis. This brings back the most happy memories of our Loire cycling adventure; we have our picnic in the grounds of the castle just where we had been two years previously. I can't explain why this should feel so exciting, people return to previous holiday locations all the time but this seemed to be so different. We still have some way to go before Cholet and we have conclusively proved Buckley's 4th law of cycling, namely that after the lunch time hour, kilometres are longer, bikes heavier and hills steeper - NO QUESTION! We have no option but to press on. We also have 8 kms of route nationale this afternoon; this will be another test of nerve. We are in a B&B tonight in a suburb of Cholet. We were lucky to find this as there is a 'spectacle' at Puy de Fou this evening with 40,000 visitors and a cast of thousands - beds were scarcer than hens' teeth.

38 Rue du Manoir is a delightful house in a quiet suburb. Madame is kind and drives us to a local restaurant for supper. I have my first moules à la crème, followed by warm goat's cheese salad - wonderful. We walk back through the deserted streets but catch sight of the news that France has lost its game against Argentina - aaargh - there will be some very disconsolate Frenchmen about tomorrow!



*Inner
courtyard of
Château at
Ancenis*

Day 6

La Séguinière → Vouvant

Saturday, 8 September

82 kms / 51 mls

Six days on the road and weather has been incredible. I can't believe how blessed we are and how difficult it would have been getting up each morning donning wet weather gear - never mind that so much of the enjoyment would be totally lost. This is also the day we make a detour to see the house-we-nearly-bought in the Vendée.

Breakfast is a marvellous spread delightfully presented - our napkins are tied with a (real) strappy leaf and sprig of gypsophila, more wedding breakfast than cyclists' breakfast. We're away rather late, an unavoidable drawback of B&Bs, when one has stayed 'en famille', it seems rude to rush away without exchanging pleasantries.

Unfortunately, our exit from La Séguinière necessitates crossing an unmanned railway crossing, absolutely not for public use, if the warnings and gates are anything to go by. The option is a 4 km detour which is not an option: with great care and one at a time we cross - that is about the limit of adventure I want for today, thank you.



As we are bowling along and about to leave St Laurent sur Sèvre, we catch sight of the massive basilica built in memory of Saint Louis de Montfort, a local missionary; we spend an hour here.

Crossing the Loire is always a great moment for me. I love to see the signs of the change in climate (as opposed to climate-change) which are immediately apparent - flat, pantiled roofs, sunflowers, the 'arrosage' machines. I am not sure what to expect when we get to La Chataignerie but I want to lay the ghost of our dream of living in France. Will I want to meet the people who bought 'our house'? In the event, they are not at home but we note they have renewed the roof and put in new windows and shutters. We suspect they may be French. So that was it. We console ourselves that, had we bought, we would not have had the time or energy for our three great rides.

Tonight we are at another B&B in the Forest of Mervant-Vouvant. English owned, it is a 'longère', carefully and stylishly restored. I feel this house is very comfortable with its new identity as a B&B. It is in the middle of the country and we watch a farmer loading five lovely cream (blond aquitaine?) coloured cows into a trailer. It is all completed briskly and without ceremony. We wonder if they are off to the abattoir.



***Basilica at
St Laurent
sur Sèvre***



Day 7

Vouvant → La Rochelle

Sunday 9 September

82 kms / 50 mls

Another brilliant start! Sadly, we are sent off on a rather dispiriting little breakfast. In every other way, Carol has been most generous. We wish good luck to the other guests who are all staying while they finalise purchase of their own French dreams.

Food is a major feature of our French adventures. We justify eating for England **and** France in the sure and certain knowledge that we will burn the calories off quickly, consequently, we rarely miss out on cakes at elevenses. Being Sunday, Fontenay-le-Comte is bustling with people collecting their tartes aux pommes etc from the patisserie. Some patissiers windows are works of art, each tarte a masterful creation of raspberries, wafer thin slices of apples, pears and chocolate to die for. For lunch we buy slices of marbre marin - a 'log' made of chunks of salmon, baby tomatoes all held together with a stuffing. It is delicious but then it should be, it is £15.00 a pound but, hey, it's Sunday!

We have a long 'Sunday lunch'. It has become seriously hot and we don't want to cycle in the mid-day heat, we also feel it prudent to put on long sleeves as our forearms are bearing the brunt of the sun. The route into La Rochelle will take us alongside the River Vendée. The river is murky but it's good to be bowling along, two abreast. We see what we think is a snake but are assured by the archetypical old French woman sitting outside her house that it is, in fact, a 'couleuvre'. this is not a snake at all and her five cats play with them! It is yellow and black chequered and looked pretty much like an adder to me. I am glad 'es dead.



A (dead) couleuvre

We are now well into the Marais Poitevin a flat, green marshy area criss-crossed with ditches; we're managing 30 kph comfortably, it feels similar to being in the car on the motor way - the miles are just being gobbled up. Tomorrow is a rest day in La Rochelle - oh, the bliss of it - my bottom is feeling seriously shredded.

We visit the fortified church at Esnandes which looks like a castle. We confidently expect to be back on the road within 20 minutes. Not so, we are engaged in conversation by a delightfully enthusiastic couple whose daughter was an au pair in Bournemouth. One thing led to another and we leave an hour later but we both agree that it is exactly these meetings that make our trips such fun and so interesting. We eventually arrive at La Rochelle at 6.30 pm.



***Fortified
church at
Esnandes***

It is great to be back in La Rochelle and takes us back to our first family holiday in France 18 years ago, the children were 14 and 11. Quite unintentionally, we find ourselves at the very same bar we visited all those years ago and we have huge pancakes and chantilly cream, the sort of thing I'd never dream of eating at home but which is so attractive on a balmy night on the edge of the old port of La Rochelle.

It's been a great week: 361 miles, nearly half our journey, five maps finished and a rest day tomorrow when we are to meet Mary and Tim.

Day 8

Monday, 10 September

Rest Day at La Rochelle

Another luminously sunny day. We have been on the road a week now and my bottom, legs and soul are craving this rest day. The plan is to meet Mary and Tim under the Grosse Horloge; we have a couple of hours in hand. Conscious that the good soldier looks after his horse before himself, we want to get the bikes to a cycle shop for a 'once-over' degreasing, relubricating check. Unfortunately, it's Monday and most shops are closed - bad planning! Instead, we make for the Vieux Port. La Rochelle is 'yachtie' heaven; there is serious money moored up in the inner harbour and the whole city has a jaunty, sophisticated air; it is a real pleasure to walk round the quay.



View of the harbour and Chain Tower, La Rochelle

After visiting the Chain Tower at the entrance to harbour, we rendezvous with Mary and Tim. They have cycled over from Ile de Ré on their tandem. It all seems slightly surreal being together and so removed from our natural habitats. We have a happy lunch and try to persuade them that long distance rides in France are great fun; for various reasons they are not persuaded.

When we return to Hotel Bordeaux we note four new bikes. These belong to four lovely young Irishmen who are cycling down to Bordeaux for the Ireland rugby match on Friday. We swap stories and not only do they seem genuinely impressed with our plans, but they dig deep into their pocket for our charities. We must be close on £3,000, a sum we never dreamt of when we started planning in the spring when £1,000 was the target.



La Rochelle - Lunch with Mary and Tim

Day 9
La Rochelle → Saintes

Tuesday, 11 September
83kms / 51 mls

Our lovely rest day is over, but the sun is shining again and we dream of never having to break out the waterproofs once. Saintes is our destination, another city visited 18 years ago when the children were young. Now I feel we are getting to the really interesting part of our trip. We get away at 8.30 am but not before we discuss with a young girl her plans to cycle in India next year. This makes our adventure seem awfully tame; we have found so many people doing such interesting things on our trips.

Exit from La Rochelle goes pretty well according to plan and I marvel at OC Maps ability to work out how to avoid dual carriageways and take advantage of 'piste cyclables'. Five miles later and we're in the country again.

After eight days on the road, we encounter our first market. I love the bustle of French markets; I have to see every stall even though I cannot possibly take anything home. At Aigrefeuille as well as fruit and vegetables I could buy a bed, table and chairs, nightie even a budgie or a gold fish or order double glazed windows. We settle for our morning cakes. Damian chooses an éclair and I a 'réligieuse'. This is a heavenly confection of choux pastry, coffee cream and more cream - it is calorific meltdown but not in any way sickly or cloying and, anyway, I'll cycle it off. We're sorely tempted to buy another.



Moules stall



Dried flower stall

We join a young chap at a picnic table on the River Boutonne for lunch. It turns out that not only is he English, he is from Poole and delighted to speak to someone. On the spur of the moment he decided to cycle to down from Cherbourg to Santander in Spain but in half the time we have taken, averaging 100 miles a day. We offer him some of our lunch and salute his stamina and bravery but can't help feeling he is missing so much by racing through and not engaging with anyone.



Window dressing par excellence in Tonny Boutonne

By 4.30 pm we are rolling into Saintes. Hotel de l'Avenue looks as though it is going to achieve Best Hotel of Trip award. It is stylish and our room has a bath AND a balcony - I can't wait to soak in one and sit on the other. However, before that, Number One Priority is to track down IGN map 46 of Bordeaux. For some strange reason we omitted to order this with the other maps. It is essential, we have this to get us into (and out of Bordeaux).

Day 10
Saintes → Blaye

Wednesday 12 September
82 kms / 51 mls

Another crystal clear blue sky. The breakfast room of Hotel de l'Avenue is most chic and delightful, we feel arriving in our jolly, homespun charity T-shirts is not quite the thing, it's almost *lèse majesté*. We are not out till 9.15 am but Hotel de l'Avenue has certainly earned Best Hotel award so far.

Saintes is an old Roman settlement and I am sorry not to be able to spend a little longer looking around. We visit the Abbaye aux Dames and see the Arc de Germanicus built in 18-19 AD.



Arc de Germanicus

By 10.30 am we're out on the road and following the River Charente This is 'big country', huge open skies, and we're cruising along at about 30 kph - this is the life - along country roads where we can easily ride two abreast. I feel lucky to have seen the most beautiful landscapes in the sunniest of weather. Last week and 400 miles ago, it was Carrot country, later, corn on the cob fields and now we're into the beautiful vineyards of the Cognac and Pineau de Charente region. There are endless opportunities for 'dégustations' but how would we ever be able to clamber on bikes after a wine tasting? What starts off as rather a shame, will become something of

a catastrophe as tomorrow we cross the Gironde to the heart of the Médoc country.

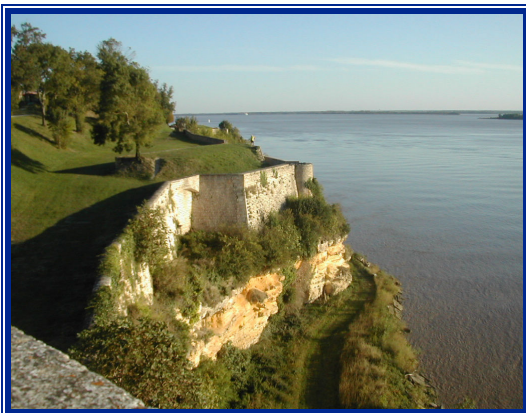
We have 33 km to cover to Blaye, half way down the Gironde estuary. The landscape is all vines, immaculately tended, no weeds are allowed to grow beneath the vines and top growth is severely trimmed, looking across a field, I feel this procedure must have been achieved with a spirit level.

There has been a wedding here recently due to the 'triumphal arch'. This one is made of a bamboo branch with tissue paper 'flowers'.

A wedding archway



The last ten miles into Blaye are hard and fast. We learn from Tourist Info that there are only four ferries a day across the Gironde; we must not miss the 10.00 am boat which will allow us to visit some of the great vineyards of the Médoc, Chateaux Rothschild, Margaux, Latour and many others, a viticultural Who's Who. Before supper we visit the Citadelle, an amazing fortification, originally built by the Romans to protect the entrance of the Gironde, later developed by Vauban to protect Bordeaux. It is vast with immensely thick walls and reminds me of Festung Ehrenbreitstein in Koblenz which we visited with Nikki many years ago.



***View of the Gironde
from the Citadelle at Blaye***

Day 11
Blaye → Bordeaux

Thursday, 13 September
85 kms / 52 mls

As I write up the journal, I can confidently say I have had the best day so far. I am sure there will be others, we still have ten days to go.

We get up briskly knowing we have to be on the 10.00 am ferry from Blaye - miss this and we cannot get across the Gironde till 4.30 pm - this will wreck our schedule. I have read that the Gironde is the biggest estuary in Europe; apparently 13 km at its widest. It reminds us of the James River in Virginia. However, despite a dazzlingly beautiful day, we are not remotely tempted to swim as it is colour of muddy drinking chocolate. With a little time before the ferry leaves, we return to the Citadelle which is such a feat of engineering. Although built for defensive purposes, the masons still managed to dress the stones decoratively.



***Crossing the Gironde on
the Blaye ferry. Just like
the Sandbanks ferry.
I love the element
of water when we're
cycling!***



Naturally enough, our route is always in a southerly direction, for the first and only occasion of the trip, we make a slight detour northwards to visit the town of Pauillac on the other side of the Gironde and centre for the vineyards. Unfortunately, Damian makes a five mile mistake; crew is **not** impressed but I cannot be too angry, it's a dazzlingly bright day and, in the world of wine, it doesn't get much better than this. We are cycling through the premiers grands crus and find ourselves at a unmarked crossing with vines in four directions. The grapes are hanging in heavy bunches and we 'liberate' some, feeling rather naughty. I wonder if anyone has seen me.

After lunch I am on a mission to find Chateau Mouton Rothschild. There is not a blade of grass, a vine or a grape out of line here and I feel I should be whispering! Unfortunately, the chateau is hidden behind locked gates and visits have to be booked. We learn that the 'vendange' (harvest) will begin the following Monday and we hope to see some of the picking as we ride down through Languedoc Rousillon

We must now high tail it to Bordeaux. We have 36 kms of which the last 15 will be suburbs. It will be scary, there is no alternative but to grit my teeth, hold a steady course and pray for some 'pistes'. Our routine for entering cities is for me to ride ahead, shouting out the road names while Damian locates them on the map and shouts directions back. It works, more or less, most of the time

It takes two hours to reach our B&B, a delightful, cool old Bordeaux house just off the Boulevard. I love it now we are in the centre, it is the arrival which puts the wind up me. Madame recommends a nearby restaurant, it does not look particularly smart but we have a wonderful meal, warm goat's cheese salad, confit de canard, crème brûlée all for £10 I suspect this will be one of our best dinners and the most amazing value. One could scarcely buy a Harvester meal for £10!

Tomorrow is a rest day and we can treat ourselves to a half hour 'lie-in'!

A SELECTION OF CHATEAUX OF THE MEDOC



Château Pichon Baron



Château Branaire



Château Palmer

Day 12
Rest Day Bordeaux

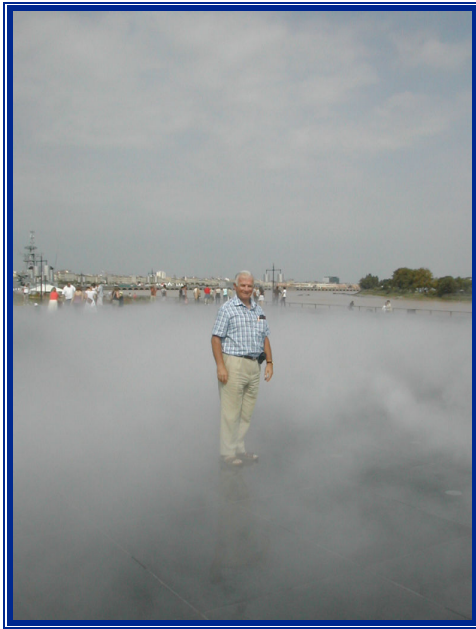
Friday, 14 September

Another great day, Madame gives us a good breakfast and promises to do our washing. What a bonus but better than that, what a time saver! Using public transport is a great way of seeing new places and I am very happy to use the bus into Bordeaux. Since our last visit, in 2003, Bordeaux has completely reinvented its inner city public transport. There are trams, plenty of 'piste cyclables' and many roads available only to cyclists. It is good to note a cross section of people using bikes, apart from the usual students and young people there are young mothers with children in seats behind, and even men and women with brief cases. They move confidently almost oblivious of others. Bordeaux also has a new system whereby you can hire a bike at one point and return it to another. The bikes have a rather heavy 'municipal' air about them but that could be intentional. It is all very heartening to see but it will need a sea change in the British motorist's attitude before I would feel as confident in England.

I revisit the Place in front of the Bourse which is now car-free and very elegant. The Miroir d'Eau, newly installed this year, is a 3450 square metre expanse of tiles with water spouts. At regular intervals, the spouts produce a jet of water approximately an inch high. They then subside and the area is engulfed in rising steam. It is one immense, very shallow paddling pool and children and adults are doing just that. It all seems very simple, with very little opportunity for the 'Elf and Safety police to wave the rule book; it is its very size and simplicity which makes it so interesting. Perhaps the Miroir d'Eau will become as iconic as the Pyramid at the Louvre.



***The Miroir d'Eau in
front of the Bourse***



The steamy phase

We walk ourselves ragged in Bordeaux, so 'rest day' is something of a misnomer but we've visited new places - Musée d'Aquitaine, and revisited old, the Quinconces and Place Gambetta, location of old family joke.



*Monument to
Les Girondins
at the
Quinconces*

We have agreed to eat at Madame's restaurant in Bordeaux and do a quick recce and are taken aback to note that Rue du Loup shares a corner with the coffin shop! I really do a double take here. In a former life it used to be a shoe shop and this can still be seen on the front under the black paint. The coffins are plain and look as if they are made of plywood, perhaps they are for clients who want to maintain their green credentials even in death - we shall never know.



The coffin shop on the corner of Rue du Loup and Rue St Georges

Supper at Le Loup is a gourmet extravaganza but we both agree we would have done at least as well at the restaurant of last night, saving travel time and some expense but Le Loup served a fine crème brûlée! By the end of the meal, Madame has arrived and we discuss our leaving arrangements for tomorrow. We attempt a translation of the concept of our bottoms being on fire after 80 kms in the saddle, she nods knowingly and suggests that this could be misinterpreted; we all nod knowingly!

Day 13

Bordeaux → Lucmau

Saturday, 15 September

83 kms / 51 mls

We must make an early start; exiting Bordeaux will, as usual, be a test of nerve. We're away by 9.15 but must visit first a cycle shop to tighten the cone on Damian's front wheel. OC Maps has printed, from Google, a detailed plan for exiting Bordeaux and it works well - we scarcely put a pedal wrong but it is two hours before we have left the last suburb and can call ourselves in the country. We're back into vineyards but this will be for a short time before we enter the rather less exciting pine forests of Les Landes.

Mid morning cake stop is at La Brède. We have chanced on this town where Alain Juppé, former Mayor of Bordeaux, government minister and all round big cheese is holding a public meeting. Half the Gironde seem to be gathered and we chose a gentle slope on which to settle ourselves with ring-side view of the disabled parking area. Then the floor show begins. It is unfortunate that a disabled driver has run his front wheel into the ditch. Suddenly a crowd of macho frenchmen are gathered around discussing the problem in loud tones - think 'how many frenchmen does it take' Eventually, one announces he has a Volvo and tow hook and, hey presto, the poor unfortunate is free.

As we prepare to leave, OC Maps announces he needs map 7. This will require delving to the bottom of my cycling pannier to retrieve it from Map Storage. I am now the floor-show as the contents of my pannier are exposed to public view, pyjamas, knickers, curling wand and all non-cycling clothes. I reprimand OC Maps and remind him that he must submit his map requisition, in triplicate, in advance, prior to packing panniers!

We are now well on the way to achieving our goal; what seemed so impossible just over a week ago as we left Fougères, is now within sight.

Les Landes is unremitting pine forests with long straight roads stretching to infinity. On the plus side, they're also quite flat so we are making 30 kph, which 'gobbles' up the kilometres; we are motoring, as it were.

We find our B&B at which we are eating supper en famille and with another guest. We spend a very happy evening.



Unusual church at Lucmau

Day 14
Lucmau → Condom

Sunday, 16 September
85kms / 53 mls

Today was to have been moderately easy - under 50 miles. Due to various factors, it turned into something of a nightmare. We get away a little late; we feel very much like family guests particularly having enjoyed such a good French evening the night before.



***Leaving
La Palombière***

We have 20 more miles of pine forests to get through before we reach some sunny uplands. We are bowling in the sun when I note Damian swerve rather wildly. He has a puncture, first one in 570 miles but, nevertheless, a time consuming pain. In fact, we lose an hour because, shame on us, and we shall have to keep this from all the Saturday cyclists in Bournemouth, we did not check the tyre properly for the offending flint so that when the new tube was blown up it promptly punctured again! Hmmm, a double puncture!

The day, pleasant so far, has now become seriously hot. It will be very necessary to have a long lunch in the shade and to refill the water bottles. We must cover 20 miles after lunch so put on long sleeves and pray for no more punctures. On the map, Les Landes is one great big green area with very few villages. We both agree it is tedious and rather unfriendly. While it is obvious that new plantations of pines have been planted by someone, we presume they are then left to get on with growing untroubled by man. This is in contrast to the vineyards which are manicured regularly and are such a joy to ride through - it's the Bill Bryson 'hand of man' thing. To make the miles pass more quickly we play "Je suis allé au marché et j'ai acheté un/une" we manage to get to 'N' before giving up!

We are glad to leave Les Landes and are now into the vineyards of Armagnac; the cycling is better, if hillier.



***Fourcès -unique
among bastides
because it is
built in the round***

We find Relais de la Ténarèze and Damian, literally, falls into the place. As I drop my bike to rescue him, it falls on Madame's prize white gardenia, forcing her to come out in a flurry of indignation. She is only slightly mollified when I explain the situation - it is important to get her on side as we need her co-operation with bike storage.



Day 15
Rest Day at Condom

Monday, 17 September

We wake up to rain! This is the first rain and quite welcome as the air is refreshed and the sun is already breaking through as we set out to visit Condom. For the English it is an unfortunately named town producing only loud guffaws; the Green Guide says Condom comes from the roman word condominium meaning shared ownership, this sounds altogether less racy.

It is a rather depressing town and Monday so the bustle is missing. Of all the 100s of towns and villages we have visited in France, no self-respecting Mairie would omit to deck the town bridges with flowers. Condom has singularly failed in this respect.

We walk round the town. It has the obligatory former convent later used as a prison/hospital in the two world wars but is otherwise unremarkable.

We decide to visit the village of Larresingle to the west but just as we are toggled up in cycling clothes the heavens open again. There is absolutely no point in getting clothes wet unnecessarily, indeed, it could be that we cannot avoid it tomorrow, so we high tail it back to our room to write the journal. This is the first rain in a fortnight so I really cannot complain. We hope it will improve tomorrow.



Day 16

Condom → Castelsarrasin

Tuesday, 18 September

85kms / 53 mls

We are delighted to be leaving Condom, the town and the hell-hole that is Relais de la Ténarèze. Even at my most charitable, I can find nothing to recommend this hotel so it has earned Worst Hotel of Trip.

Happily, it is not raining and the forecast is promising. We have a fair distance to conquer - 50 miles. We find we have consistently underestimated our distances and, more seriously, we are going to be 'mapless' for about 25 kms at the end of the day. I cannot imagine how this has happened, we prided ourselves on our careful attention to detail. No matter how we look at it, we have failed and my favourite saying of 'you're never lost if you have a map' sounds rather hollow.

We are in the Gers département now. Not quite so well known but very beautiful, all sunflowers, vines and millet - they must have an awful lot of budgies in France! We are alternately creaming down long, gentle, sweeping hills and toiling to hill top villages. We had not expected such hills after we had left the Vendée. However, they are short, two kilometres at most, and do not qualify for LSA status.

Two of the great pilgrimage routes to Compostela cross the Gers, we are using the route from Le Puy en Velay which is also the GR 65. We meet many pilgrims, easily identified by the stick, rucksack and, often, the cockleshell of St James. We even see one chap with his horse and cart loaded with tent. He tells us he started at Auriac and was going all the way to Santiago. We wish each other 'bonne route'. We share a lunch table with a couple who are on their last day and will complete their personal pilgrimage, starting at this spot, next year. The whole concept has been revitalised in recent years but 21st century pilgrims carry only a day sack while their real luggage is carried on ahead.



***A waymarker for the
Chemin de Compostelle
and information for a gîte***



***A 21st century pilgrim
on the
Chemin de Compostela***

Hotel Marceillac in Castelsarrasin is delightfully faded 'fin de siècle'. However, we cannot get dinner in the hotel and must get out into the town. In common with many small to medium French towns, the streets become pretty quiet after 8.00 pm. The pub is a foreign country to the French, there is little opportunity to drink unless one is eating as well. The only two open restaurants are at opposite ends of the town so we choose the Vietnamese which is busy - always a good sign. I choose giant prawns in garlic which are sumptuous and the meal is immediately added to my 'best meals' list.

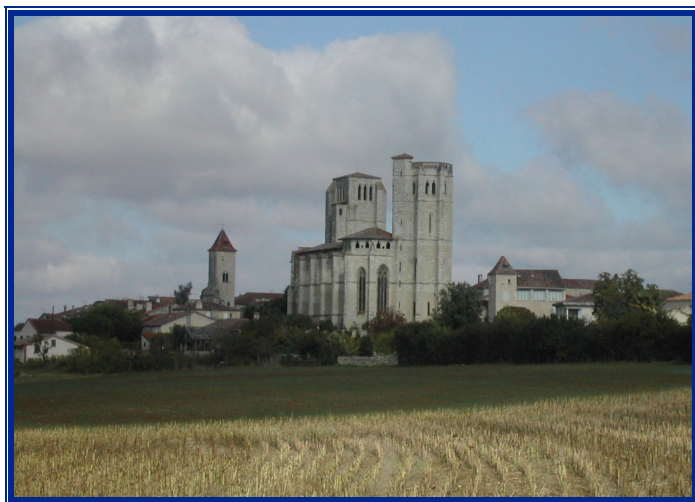
After supper there is nowhere to go for a drink so we high tail it back to the hotel. Tomorrow will be a busy day, we have to get to Toulouse which the Green Guide advises is France's 6th city. I fancy we shall need all our wits about us and more besides!



Pilgrim's Validation Stamp



***Hill top village
in the Gers***



***Abbey at
Le Romieu***

Day 17

Castelsarrasin → Toulouse

Wednesday 19 September

70 kms / 43 mls

As we have a slightly easier day, we allow ourselves a 15 minute lie-in! It promises to be another great day, although fresh, the sun is up, the sky is azure blue with high wispy clouds - that'll do for me! Hotel Marceillac is Portion Control Central, and breakfast is served, slowly, by Madame, a rather thin lipped, earnest woman. However we're away by 9.30 am stopping only to buy our cakes - coffee éclair and tarte aux framboises.



The countryside is less attractive now being almost flat but that's good for covering the miles; we're soon following the river Garonne. We realise again how lucky we have been with the weather - only one day of rain and that our rest day but the signs of autumn are all around now, fallen leaves, conkers, morning dew on the ground and the good french ladies who are now turning out in the morning in their cardigans - there is a smell of autumn.

Pigeonnier de la région

We enjoy lunch in a sunny courtyard beside the church in Aussone; I would like to sit longer on the bench soaking up the sun but Toulouse has to be negotiated and we don't want to leave it so late that we get caught up in the rush hour. I just imagine all those alpha-male aero engineers wanting to get home to their cassoulet - I don't want to be part of it!

We pick up the 'piste' for a couple of kilometres and then it stops. We are just wondering how on earth to proceed when a couple on bikes come towards us. I ask how we might get into the centre. They are a mother and her daughter, a paediatric nurse. They give us some directions and want to know about our T-shirts, they then talk to each other and announce that they will lead us, along the piste through the suburbs.

We can scarcely believe our incredible good fortune at finding such kindness. They lead, at some speed, for about four miles all on the 'piste', weaving through suburbs and eventually finishing up at the river. We feel so incredibly lucky, we would never have found our way, since the 'pistes' were not marked on the map. It was such a pleasure to talk to these delightful people and such a blessing we met. Jeanne and her daughter leave us at Pont St Pierre from where it is about half a kilometre to our hotel. From this point, we're into the heart of the city and although busy, we're on dedicated cycle lanes and do not feel too threatened. Cars, buses and bikes all seem to more or less flow like fishes in a pond- there is not the cut and thrust of English driving.



***Entry to
Toulouse
Pont Neuf over
the Garonne***

If it's Toulouse it's the Hotel Ibis - comfortable but totally anonymous. We could be anywhere. As usual, we're starving! We find a great restaurant and choose fresh anchovy salad, a creature but distantly related to the desiccated little brown fish trapped in tins with which we are more familiar, followed by confit of duck. I have eaten so much duck I must be growing webbed feet!

We are getting close to the end of our epic journey now and I have mixed feelings; I'm longing to get to the Med but I want the adventure to go on. I also love being able to eat for England - that will have to stop once we are home!

During coffee the floor show begins and a trio of musicians come in, a double bass, guitar and saxophone. They seem to be playing for their own pleasure as much as for any audience which consists of us and another couple. Despite the music being mostly spanish/mexican when we would have dearly loved to hear some French songs, it is a great end to the evening and tomorrow is a rest day - hooray!



The cabaret at The Twenty Canons

Day 18
Rest Day in Toulouse

Thursday, 20 September

Hooray, rest day, double hooray breakfast is an excellent buffet! There is plenty of fresh fruit salad and mini pastries, I feel no shame and go back for seconds and thirds.

Toulouse is known as the 'pink city' because many buildings are built of brick. It's a beautiful, cosmopolitan city full of young people. Toulouse has been associated with aviation since 1918; the pilot/author, Saint Exupéry flew from Toulouse; the new Airbus 340 is now being built here.

We visit first the basilica of St Sernin dating back to the 4th century and walk the route suggested in the Green Guide. By mid afternoon we have walked ourselves to a ravelling, seeing squares, Capitole, Esquirol, de la Dourade, more churches and hidden courtyards we feel we have earned ourselves a spell of people watching at a café on the Boulevard. I love doing this, I can write the journal/post cards but still feel I am not missing anything. Damian sets off to find out how we get to the Canal du Midi which we shall use to exit Toulouse.

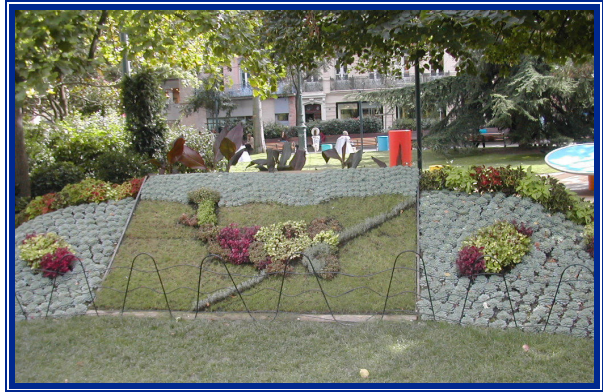


Place du Capitole.
NB the poster for the
Rugby World cup



Place Président Wilson

*Floral display with
'nod' to the aviation
industry*



Exhibition in the Capitoleum

Basilica St Sernin

*Detail on
capital*



Unfortunately, supper tonight is a big disappointment; paella, it is all show and not much substance, this is our first meal which is not delicious - as the Green Guide might say 'not worth the detour'. We visit last night's restaurant for coffee but there is no live music and feel lucky to have caught it last night.

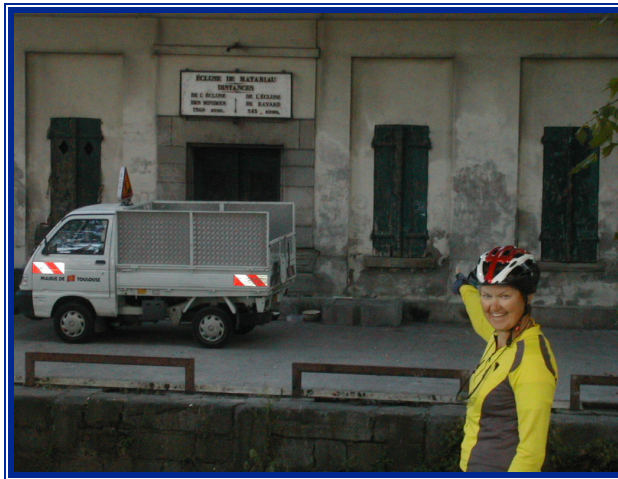
Tomorrow we leave Toulouse on the canal towpath, I am really looking forward to this, we have been told that it will be very pretty. We have also learnt that it is easy to get to the Canal - go to the station and turn right. I think even I can manage that one without mishap.

Sunset tonight is beautiful and forecast good.

Day 19
Toulouse → Bram

Friday 21 September
87 kms / 53 mls

I have been so looking forward to the day we ride along the canal. I love cycling by the water! Leaving Toulouse is indeed 'a walk in the park' which makes a refreshing change. Hotel Ibis is not far from the station and yes, we see the Canal and turn right - nothing could be easier - no roundabouts or cross roads to negotiate - it was indeed 'a piece of cake'. At this stage the Canal towpath is not attractive, it is full of the unpleasant detritus associated with a big city but we're soon into the suburbs and the path is excellent, broad and well maintained, we share it with joggers, roller bladers, young mothers with prams etc etc. All normal road signs are replicated for cyclists slightly smaller.



***Our first lock in the
centre of Toulouse -
unfortunately not
very picturesque!***

We have entered/exited many cities but Toulouse has taken the prize for the easiest.

It is a wonderful day the canal and locks are busy with boat traffic and we meet many cyclists, one even wants a close up of the T-shirt which, after three weeks of blazing sun, is becoming a very faded version of the original.

The piste is metalled as far as the Seuil de Naurouze but becomes a much narrower, gravelled track ribbed with many tree roots afterwards. This slows our speed considerably and completely shreds our bottoms.

In addition and infuriatingly, a very strong head wind has sprung up. I heard M le Météo mention the Mistral twice in the forecast this morning but did not catch it all - is this the prelude to a storm?

We leave the Canal at Castelnaudry - it is too slow and we still have 16 kms before Bram. Now begins 16 kms of the very worst riding of the whole trip. It is past 5.00 pm, my 'watershed'. By this hour I want to be soaking in a bath or at least at the hotel writing the journal. Because the road to Bram is flat and straight, cars and lorries are rushing past us; it's Friday and they all wanted to be at home half an hour ago and now the headwind has increased, perhaps 50 kph and gusting. We're in bottom ('granny') gear, barely making 5.5 mph and scarcely able to turn the pedals; we feel low and terribly vulnerable. We have not even the energy to play games. I can think of nothing except how on earth can I continue, but we have no choice! The countryside is not remotely attractive and the odd village we pass look down-at-heel and disagreeable. Added to this, cars are coming towards us have headlights on; it looks stormy and this is our holiday! I confidently expect Bram to be The Pits with a hotel to match.

This is definitely the lowest point of the trip but we both acknowledge that is not quite fair because it is the **ONLY** low point: even the double puncture did not merit 'low' status. We finally reach the hotel. Sixteen kilometres has taken us nearly two hours and we learn later that the winds were, in fact, 60-70 kph! However, the Hotel Clos St Loup is not at all bad. Hotel de la Ténarèze's dubious accolade stands!

Inside the hotel we realise that we are now within spitting distance of the Med. OC Maps puts in the requisition for Map 10 - The Last Map. All's well with the world; the hotel fully redeems itself with superb salade de chèvre chaude and confit de canard.



***Boat on the Canal
du Midi***

Day 20
Bram → Coursan

Saturday, 22 September
98 kms / 61 mls

The first thing we do is look out of the window. It doesn't seem too bad. If it were to be as bad as yesterday we would have to re-examine our route. At yesterday's progress, 50 miles would take 10 hours plus stops for food and other essentials. This is out of the question. There is a slight breeze and misty rain, the sort which makes you thoroughly wet, is falling. Within the hour, we have put on waterproof legs for the first time in 20 days.

OC Maps insists that we follow a short cut down a side road and we spend an hour trying to escape a maze of vines. It's a waste of precious time on a long day! By midday we have reached Carcassonne. We will have to pedal hard if we are to reach Coursan but the terrible wind of yesterday has not materialised, for which we are grateful.

We trade canal towpath for road: the trade off being a straight track and a better surface, but more traffic. Intermittently, we get back to the canal but the day is still overcast. We see another 'first' - first olive orchard.



***Toilettes
open air style***

Domaine Ile St Rose, our B&B, is a beautiful house and our hosts most welcoming. We are eating with them and their other guests and spend a happy evening. Finally, our host who comes from Brittany, gives us a fine performance on the bagpipes. Imagine the scene: we're in the south west of France, sitting on a terrace by a floodlit pool listening to a frenchman, playing the bagpipes. Bagpipes go with haggis and cold January evenings in England.



***Jean-Yves plays
the bagpipes.***

As I fall asleep, I realise tomorrow is THE DAY.

Day 21

Coursan → La Méditerranée

La Méditerranée → Béziers

Sunday 23 September

25 kms / 15 mls

30 kms / 18 mls

Today's the Day - the goal is in sight! It's not a brilliant start but it's not raining or windy. After a good breakfast with our fellow guests we leave Domaine l'Ile St Rose destination The Med.



***Domaine d'Ile St
Rose with Monsieur
Archie***

The Med is only 12 kms distant as the crow flies but we have chosen to 'hit' it at Valras Plage - a seaside resort. We will then have a shortish ride into Béziers. On the way we pass through Fleury sur Aude and are bowled over by the powerful smell of fermenting grapes. Surprisingly, we have been in France throughout the 'vendange' but incredibly have not seen any pickers and yet most of the vines now are picked. Do the fairies come in the night? We meet a Sunday cyclist who tells us that the route we have planned is closed and suggests an alternative, joining us for much of the way. By the time he leaves us we have only a few kilometres to Valras Plage. I am first to catch sight of the sea at 11.30 am precisely but only because I happen to be in front. We rush onto the beach, shoes off and into the sea and then dragoon a chap, quietly minding his own business, into taking our photo. We have done it! Cherbourg to the Mediterranean - excited - we are fizzing!

Part of the pleasure of achieving our goal is celebrating the moment in style and for this we must get the lunch, the most important element of which is the champagne and flutes. As it's Sunday and nearly midday we must hurry otherwise the shops may close especially the boulangerie.

Damian goes in search of champagne and flutes and I buy the rest, baguette, mini quiches, cheese, tomato, peaches. For cakes, a religieuse for me and for Damian 'les bras de Vénus'. I am sure Damian will like this it sounds so much more sensual than lardy cake or Chelsea bun! This is a FEAST!



We've done it!

We toast each other and our achievement in champagne, not minding how many passers-by we tell of our great journey; most are kind enough to look astonished and/or impressed and we ask one to take our photo. We send texts and receive congratulations almost by return. We also ring our mothers who are just as pleased to share our excitement.

We have done it! There were a few days in the first week when I had some worries and on the windy road to Bram only two days ago but by that time nothing was really going to stop me. If I had to walk the remainder, I would have done!

We feel we have fulfilled our contract to cycle Manche to Med and we have the proof, should anyone need it before parting with sponsorship money. We have three days left. We called these our 'slack' days and they were built in just in case anything went wrong and we needed some extra time. We are now free agents and can go to Béziers whatever way we want.

Quite by chance, we find Valras Plage is hosting the National Jet Ski championships this weekend; today is the final. Valras is en fête and buzzing with the swaggering young bloods of the jet ski world and their hangers on - it is wall to wall testosterone.



Valras en fête



Tempting as it is to lie on the beach for the rest of the day, and despite the fact that we have cycled 1395 kms, we must head inland for Béziers. OC Maps has guided us pretty nearly faultlessly the complete length of France and, in this little journal, I want to pay genuine tribute for a great achievement. We now pick our way over another bum-numbing road past former salt-pans and vineyards before getting back onto the Canal tow path for the final run into Béziers.

That could be said to be the end but we have nearly three days left in this lovely part of France - Béziers, Narbonne and lunch in Perpignan with Fanny and Chris.

Day 22

Monday 24 September

Rest day in Béziers

A wonderful, dazzlingly bright day, it seems incredible to think we have had only one 'wettish' riding day in three weeks. What amazing good fortune. We must now consider how we get to Perpignan. We're quite happy to cycle all the way but there is not much opportunity to be beside the sea. We decide to cycle to Narbonne tomorrow, spending the night there and take an early train to Perpignan on Wednesday.

With the plan of action sorted we set off on foot to explore Béziers. Unfortunately, the most notable aspect of this city is its badly-maintained and filthy streets. We may have much to learn from the French about cycling, but the dog owners of Béziers have a lot to learn from us about clearing up after their dogs. Their streets are disgusting - yuk!

It's a hot day and we find a restaurant in a little triangle near the cathedral. We have another sublime lunch, prawns, salmon, crème brûlée with pichet of wine included - what value! The afternoon is a write-off! Before we slip into oblivion, we arrange to meet Linda and Michael on the theatre steps this evening.



Lunch in Béziers

We don't seem to achieve much in the afternoon, before settling down in a café for tea - not quite like English tea but good for watching les Biterois, as the folk of Béziers are known and writing the journal which, together with the route plan and marked maps has now metamorphosed into 'intellectual property'; this sounds altogether grander. I must not lose it!

We meet Linda and Michael for supper and spend another happy evening. They are astonished that we have done on a bike what they have taken two days to do in a car, namely arrive at Valras Plage!



Theatre

***View of
river Orb
from the
cathedral***



Day 23
Béziers→ Narbonne

Tuesday, 25 September
35 kms / 21 mls

It's a cool(ish) start. We have a short ride to Narbonne, expecting to be there before midday. I am really looking forward to cycling again, neither my legs or bottom feel in any need of respite. To exit Béziers we shall go back along the Canal du Midi, which in the early morning is pleasantly uncluttered, although the path is now beaten earth and plane tree roots. Our departure from Béziers seems much quicker than arrival, that is just a facet of finding ones way in a new place. Very quickly it becomes another radiantly beautiful day.

***The staircase of
9 locks on the
Canal du Midi
into Béziers***



As we approach Narbonne I am delighted to see some human grape pickers followed within minutes by a massive machine doing the same. We try several bunches of the grapes which are deliciously sweet and juicy perhaps their taste is heightened by the illicit nature of their provenance! I would have been truly disappointed to have returned to England without seeing any sign of workers toiling in the vineyard.



Grape picking by hand



and by machine

Narbonne seems an instantly pleasing town, not as big as Béziers, but the pavements are in better condition and **much** cleaner. Hotel La Résidence is beautiful, newly refurbished in black and white with fabulous black Murano glass chandeliers - très chic!

Before seeing Narbonne, we buy our tickets for Perpignan. We are meeting Fanny and Chris at midday and need some time before to get something, though at this stage we are not exactly sure what, to package up our bikes for carriage by Flybe. The rail tickets really do seem to mark the end of our adventure. We reflect again on the wonderful weather, the many, many people we have spoken to both English and French who have shown astonishment, interest and kindness in equal measure and in that order. We have stayed in a wonderful variety of establishments - beautiful, interesting - shame about Hotel de la Ténarèze! Yes, it will be good not to have to pack up panniers and move on each day but all in all a GREAT ADVENTURE!

Day 24

Wednesday 26 September

Narbonne → Perpignan - train

Perpignan → Southampton - plane

Southampton → Bournemouth - train

We're on the train out of Narbonne by 9.45 am. Just as well, since the next train appeared to be cancelled due to industrial action! The journey reminds of us our Cévennes trip when we took the train from Perpignan to Avignon. Getting ourselves in and out of French trains always provides a bit of an adrenalin surge - can all be accomplished before the doors start closing? We're becoming quite proficient now.

It's good to be back in Perpignan and we must try to find the materials for packaging bikes. We settle on some more 'bungees', parcel tape, nylon string and I snaffle some plastic packing from the Champion supermarket. I do feel a bit like a 'bag lady'!

We meet Fanny and Chris at midday and have another happy lunch, sitting in sunny, palm-treed Place Catalogne. The next meal will be in chilly Bournemouth which is, apparently, 6 degrees with northerly winds - nice!



***Place Catalogne,
Perpignan
Lunch with Fanny and
Chris***

Fanny and Chris want to know what we have planned for next time and suggest Santiago de Compostela. We're not sure; it is not so much the 'cycling' as the 'in France' that is so enjoyable and allows our long, long, almost 20 year, love affair with France to continue, besides what's Spanish for 'puncture'?

We plan to leave at 3.00 pm, latest and must not take too much wine on board as we have 6 kms out to the airport before sorting out the bikes, estimated time: three quarters of an hour.

In the event, we leave the restaurant just after 2.00 pm. The ride to the airport is, once again, into the teeth of a stiff wind, though nothing like the road to Bram. We set about preparing the bikes: turning the handlebars and pedals, removing the front wheel, deflating the tyres, finally wrapping as much of the package in a giant plastic bag which I manage to purloin from AirFrance. This whole process is achieved in the main hall; without a doubt, we are the floorshow for the Flybe check-in queue. The bikes are ready and although we expect to pay £17 each bike, we are told they can go for free - even better! As we send them off on the conveyor belt, we can only pray they are treated gently as we need them to get home from Bournemouth station.



Arrival at Perpignan airport

We have only just enough time to spare before boarding. In no time at all we have flown up the Bay of Biscay and are landing in Southampton. Now, the acid test: how have our bikes fared? In fact, they are fine and we can reassemble them in the arrivals' hall, then to the railway for the train to Bournemouth. By 7.30 pm we're cycling down William Road. I had rather hoped someone might be coming out of their house so that we could make a triumphant return but this is not to be!

What a trip! Not only have we raised £3,350 for Life and Julia's House. but we have accomplished a substantial personal achievement. In years to come, I like to think that our grandchildren will be a little bit amazed that their grandparents cycled France, End to End!



Celebration champagne at Valras Plage

FACT FILE

1435 kms / 892 miles
top speed 37.3 mph / 60 kph (Damian!)
17 days cycling,
6 rest days
15 Départements,
7 Régions
1 puncture (a double!)

KIT LIST

Cycle lights & lock	Passport	Picnic plate
Cycle computer	EU medical assistance card (E111)	Spreading & Fruit knives
Helmet	Travel insurance policy	Picnic salt and pepper
Cycling glasses	Credit/debit cards	Sewing kit
Water bottles	Foreign currency	Polythene bags
Pump	Maps & Guides	Leisure clothes
Puncture repair outfit	Notebook	Socks
Spare inner tube	Camera	Underwear
Tools	Mobile phone	Sandals
Cable ties	Compass	Sunglasses
Spare spokes	Battery chargers	Washing kit
Dog dazer	Cycling clothes	Curling wand
Emergency rations	Cycling gloves	Scissors
First aid kit	Waterproofs	
	Overshoes	

Buckleys' Cardinal Rules for Cycle Touring in France

- 1 Don't overestimate your ability for gradients and distances:
there always seems to be more of both on the ground than is marked
on the map.
- 2 Book accommodation ahead for Sundays and Mondays and don't
schedule Mondays for rest days - "France is closed".
- 3 Don't choose 'one-horse' towns in which to spend the night;
the only hotel is sub-standard, the only restaurant is closed for
refurbishment and you only find out when you get there!
- 4 Stay out of the sun at noon (GMT)
and remember that after lunch,
hills are steeper,
panniers heavier
and kilometres longer.

This can be summed up in the following ditty:

*"Get half way before midday,
Get most of it done by half past one,
Then, stay off the rue till half past two."*