

Cycling the River Loire - September/October 2005

by Damian Buckley

Motivation - and a Word of Gratitude

We thank a stalwart of the CTC in Bournemouth, Terry Walsh, for starting us on this adventure. He had been leading the Saturday morning "introductory" rides from Christchurch for a number of years. My wife, Penny, and I had been enjoying doing 25 miles with this group for a long time before finally we took the plunge, joined the CTC, and felt like "real" cyclists.

We are most grateful to Debbie Murphy, who initially lent us a copy of a guide to the route (*The Book*)¹ and to Terry's brother, Mike, for his continual support and encouragement to start this adventure.

At last we gave in to his arm-twisting and booked our transport from Bournemouth to Valence in the Rhone-Alps region of southern France. Yes - the Loire starts way down in the south of the Massif Central, only about 100 miles from the Mediterranean. As you can see from the map, by the time it gets to Orléans, it's already more than half way from its source, at le Gerbier de Jonc, to the sea, at St Nazaire in Brittany.



Figure 1 - Outline Map of the Route

Preparation

Software When Penny presented me with the set of 8 detailed IGN maps², I knew that there was no going back. The pile of information grew: the Michelin Guide to the Châteaux of the Loire, the Logis de France handbook, our own copy of *The Book*, a notebook, bilingual information sheets for bike brakes and gears, etc. We were getting towards carrying a considerable weight of paper. So, out with scissors to remove the unnecessary parts of the maps and the guidebooks, thus saving a pound or so (half a Kg for the youngsters).

¹ Cycling the River Loire, by John Higginson, ISBN 1 85284 383 7 Place names, road numbers and directions are given in detail in this book; if we mentioned them they are our deviations or points of special note.

² Institute Géographique National "Carte de Promenade", 1:100 000, numbers 24, 25, 26, 27, 36, 43, 50, 52

Throughout the summer we'd be plotting the gradients of local hills from the OS maps and comparing them with those in *The Book*, and checking our ability to climb them (see Firmware), and then going out and buying bigger rear cassettes.

Hardware Our old bikes had done us proud for years, but most parts were, like the author, creaking, or cracked, or pretty well worn out. Although OK for short jaunts in and around the New Forest (within mobile phone range of a taxi in an emergency) we couldn't trust them for a long and demanding expedition abroad. We bought two new Saracen Panorama tourers and kitted them out with some lower gears, rear panniers, lights, etc.. Also, we thought we'd better get some of the yellow, wick-away tops and padded lycra shorts that "professionals" wear; but neither of us was convinced that cycling shoes would be needed, so we stayed with our trusty old trainers.

Firmware That's she and me! We started as floppyware, but recognised the need to build up our capability in stages over a period of about 3 months, to prepare mind and body for the onslaught! That was the plan, but family visitors descended for days at a time through the summer, so eventually we put in about half the anticipated training.

Our scheduled aim was to get out 3 times a week, often with local CTC groups, typically achieving about 120 miles per week for 3 weeks. I was worried by my inability to keep up with the rest of the riders ascending hills. Going down was easy for me - that was the bonus of being overweight! But, knowing the gradients that were in store for us as soon as we got to France, we worked hard. At the time we didn't notice any improvement, but in the event, we felt it was worth putting in the effort.

Never having toured before, we did two long weekend rides, visiting friends and family, to discover what clothing and equipment was essential and what could be left at home. That experience enabled us to prune our loads for the main expedition by several pounds, to about 12 - 14 pounds per pannier (5.5 - 6.5 Kg each), plus picnic lunches, water, energy bars, etc. Thankfully, we did not have to carry camping equipment.

Getting to France

The Book recommends taking the European Bikebus to Orange, so as to visit Chateauneuf du Pape and the roman aqueduct at le Pont du Gard, before returning northwards towards the Loire via the spectacular Gorges de l'Ardèche. Because we'd motored over the Gorges before, we thought that we could do without the huge climbs and terrifying descents that would be involved at the start of this journey. However, *the Book* also mentions a local bus which carries 2 bikes some of the way towards the source, starting from Valence, south of Lyons. So, feeling in need of every assistance, we made Valence our start point in France!

The internet has hods of information and recommendations about methods of travel and preparing and packing bicycles for transit. Apart from the CTC's pages, it was contradictory and confusing. Eventually we decided on a one-way car hire from Bournemouth to Stansted Airport, Easyjet from Stansted to Lyon, shuttle bus in to Lyon city and train from there to Valence. Most was booked on-line, and our fares totalled about the same as two first class day returns by train from Bournemouth to London!

Our return would be from by rail from St Nazaire to Cherbourg; thence by ferry to Poole and by bike for the 8 miles home. Thus our bicycle packaging could be binned at the first destination.

We begged manufacturer's cardboard cartons from the local bike shop, added a polythene shoe³ to the trailing end and prepared to lug them behind us for the outward journey.



Figure 2 - Bike Cartons, with Slippery Tails

³ Half of a 2 litre ice-cream carton, attached with Duck tape, makes for a wear-resistant and slippery tail end for crossing tarmac, paving slabs, cobbles, etc. - see Figure 2.

Our arrangements worked: although we had to dismantle the bikes to fit inside them, the boxes survived the attentions of the airport baggage handlers and our own efforts. (Tip No 1 - look for the trolleys and disabled access points and lifts.) At last, after a 5.45 a.m. departure from Bournemouth, we tumbled in to our hotel in Valence at 7.45 p.m.

En-route for the Source

Next morning, whilst I finished off re-assembling the bikes, Penny visited the bus station and discovered that the next bike-carrying bus departed 5 hours later. We decided to cycle all the way to our first night's stop at Lamastre, aiming to be there before the bus set off, or, if the going was just too steep, we would still have time to return to Valence to catch the transport.

The first 5 miles of the D533 were fairly easy: cycle lanes helped us in the city, then we were over the River Rhône, pausing to photograph the impressive ruined fort perched on a high point above the road and trying not to notice the even more impressive hills behind it. Fortunately, the sun was shining and our hopes were high. We were off! Within the hour we were "toiling in the boiling": the gradient felt like 30° and the temperature was exactly that! It was just as it said in *The Book* - a lung-searing ascent (LSA), to be followed in due course by a "thrilling" descent.

That was the pattern of our first 3 days: hot hard work! In this region of extinct volcanoes, it was a series of hard climbs of several hundreds of metres up to a col (or pass), then down the other side, losing most of the height, usually crossing a river in the valley bottom, then repeating the process. The D578 took us from Lamastre to Le Cheylard to Mézilhac, where we joined the route of *The Book*.

By mid-morning of day 3, we made it to the source - from Valence, at about 40 metres above sea level, to the crossroads under the summit of le Gerbier de Jonc at 1417 metres - just under a mile high. And still we enjoyed warm sunshine and blue skies for the final climb up to the tip of the cone, on foot, to gaze out for miles over an impressive panorama of peaks and valleys as far as the eye could see.



Figure 3 - The Watershed between Atlantic & Mediterranean



Figure 4 - The Summit of le Gerbier de Jonc

This official source of the Loire is a spout of good-tasting water, jetting into a cattle trough at the entrance to an erstwhile cowshed; now a souvenir shop. There are a few other springs in the neighbourhood, which could equally well claim to be the source, but being close to the road, this official one is convenient for tourist access and the vending of refreshments and mementos!

The Massif

From the source, our road twisted downhill for some 5 miles, and our river grew from a modest stream to a proper 10-metre wide river, fed by dozens of rivulets trickling off the high moorland. We wished we'd stopped to take photographs of the infant Loire, but, at 30 mph, we were watching the road: there was no time to look at the scenery!

After a long day's ride through the northern Cevennes, and without having booked any accommodation, we were extremely relieved to fall in to the very hotel in the village of Goudet that Robert Louis Stevenson had used whilst on his "Travels with a Donkey".

The next day was cold and rainy. As we went up a few more LSA's, the temperature went down and down. By lunchtime it was 8°C, having been 28°C the previous day, and we were crammed on every item of the (summer) clothing that we'd taken. As we approached le Puy en Velay, the squally showers were throwing stinging sleet at us, threatening to blow us in to the roadside ditches. We were pleased to be entering a large town after the sparse, isolated and spartan hamlets through which we'd passed.

On our arrival, Le Puy was "en fête": the annual medieval festival was in full swing and we stayed a two nights here. We rubbed elbows with lords and ladies, soldiers and serfs, farmers and farriers. We drank the spiced wine and ate the mincemeat (meat and fruit) pies and watched the street entertainers - a welcome break from turning the pedals, but ye gods it was wintry!



Figure 5 - 10 miles from the Source at la Palisse



Figure 6 - Live Music in le Puy-en-Velay

For the next three days we cycled northwards, outwards from the severe, inhospitable and unforgiving heart of the Massif. We endured many long LSA's and were rewarded by magnificent views from summits, until, north of the city of Roanne, the countryside relented and became less harsh. Cliffs and rocks, forests and scrubland gave way to fields and farms alongside the river. Man had been able to make his mark on the land. This was the sort of France that we'd cycled before, and to which we'd looked forward.

Twixt Massif and Orléans

From Roanne, the Loire continues its middle course - wide, established and stately - for some 200 miles in a generally northerly direction, paralleled for a considerable distance by canals, firstly the "Roanne - Digoin", then the "Latéral à la Loire". The route here is often closer to the bank of canal than the river, making for fast, level riding, until bridges are encountered.

At Digoin, an aqueduct carries the canal over the river. An interesting and unusual engineering monument to the Napoleonic era, it provide a good excuses to stop pedalling for a while and take photographs. Modern industry is to be found in this region too: a massive power station, a concrete pipe factory, sited either in the open countryside or just across the road from a medieval monastery - typically French!

Passing Décize; we reached Nevers, with its cathedral - bombed by the RAF during the war and now boasting some startlingly modern stained glass - and took time to stroll past its ducal palace, historic streets, walls and towers.

A little further on, La Charité-sur-Loire is a modest-sized, historic town, as full of bookshops as Hay-on-Wye. Between the two world wars, because of the width of the river and the town's situation, midway between the mouth of the Seine and the Mediterranean Sea, it became a staging and resupply point for seaplanes and flying boats.

A few miles further downriver we diverted to visit the attractive hilltop wine town of Sancerre. The panorama from the top would have been worth the LSA, but, by the time we reached the viewpoint, the clouds gave up the unequal struggle and released a deluge which lasted all afternoon. Thank goodness for the under-cover car park and the hotel-restaurant opposite! Eventually, we were awash with coffee and had run out of postcards to write, so out we went. What a time to discover that your new helmet seems to funnel the water along your specs and straight in to your eyes! But hey - who needs to see the map anyway! And what joy to find, when you get there, that the overnight hotel doesn't open for another half hour yet!!

The next day reminds us that autumn has arrived; it's cool and misty. We get some atmospheric camera shots around the picturesque Mantelôt Ecluse, a canal-river junction at Chatillon-sur-Loire. Two miles up the road we go under a bridge and then up beside it. It's another Pont Canal, decorated with sculptures and elaborate lamp standards, taking the canal over the Loire to Briare on the opposite bank. We use it to visit this attractive small town with pleasure boats in the canal basins. Locks, bridges and pretty baskets of flowers everywhere complete the picture. Unusually, its church is faced with ceramic tiles; once a staple product of the area.



Figure 7 - The Pont-canal at Digoïn



Figure 8 - The Pont-canal at Briare

Then it's on past Gien, to Sully-sur-Loire, where we stop briefly for a look at the first of the "Chateaux of the Loire" before crossing to the north bank to allow us to visit St Benoît-sur-Loire. The village name comes from the Benedictine monastery there. (In 672 the Saint's mortal remains were transferred there from their original resting place in Montecassino and became the focus for spreading his principles through the western world.) After re-crossing the river at Chateauneuf-sur-Loire, we eventually stop for the night at Jargeau, an unexciting little town about 8 miles east of the centre of Orléans.

Another fine day greets us; our route takes us along the flat top of the raised *levée*, overlooking carefully cultivated expanses of market garden produce and on into the outskirts of Orléans - where *The Book* runs out of accurate guidance - just where you need it. But by now we can relate the map to the ground, to within a hundred yards or so, so we leave the cycle track and follow the road which takes us under the railway and up on to a cycle track on the large bridge leading in to the city. We chicken out of the busy roundabout and push our bikes over the two carriageways and in to the narrow streets leading to the cathedral.

The scale of the building is BIG - designed by the same architect as Notre Dame in Paris, and very similar to it; but this cathedral's twin towers are topped with "crowns" of delicate stonework, since at the time of its construction, Orleans was the capital of France. Inside, the life story of Joan of Arc is told in the stained glass windows and on the wall of her chapel is a memorial plaque, in English and French to commemorate the one million dead of the British Empire who gave their lives in the Great War. A

poignant reminder of the futility of war and of man's inhumanity to man, but housed in a soaring palace of peace.

There is more lovely architecture to be seen in the nearby squares; elaborate ironwork on the balconies, buildings topped with slate-covered cupolas and decorated with flamboyant, confident *fin-du-Siècle* carving and caryatids, which combine to create a harmonious and satisfying atmosphere. There are reasons to stay longer, but still many more miles to be done before nightfall.



Figure 9 - Sully-sur-Loire



Figure 10 - Orléans Cathedral

Orléans to Angers - the Real Chateaux Country

The recommended route out of Orléans, following the GR 03 right alongside the north bank of the river, is a bit of a snare and a delusion. To be sure, it's traffic-free, but it's such slow going. It is not clearly marked in some places; some parts have poor surfaces and the approach to St Ay it is downright dangerous and should be avoided by cyclists.

There has to be a better way to leave the city - but by the time we realised this, we'd toiled along for over an hour, avoiding pedestrians and their dogs, and only achieved about 3 miles from the modern, "rainbow-arc-ed" Pont de l'Europe bridge, which marks the end of Orléans. The alternatives were either to retrace our path back in to the city and look for a route on the south bank or to use the nearby RN152 towards our destination. We decided to join the incessantly busy traffic on the Route Nationale and get along it as fast as we could to Meung-sur-Loire, where we were due to cross the river again. It was a bit hairy, but at least we were travelling at 15 mph and not a walking pace.

Over the river and on to the D78, a more tranquil road, whew! Our aim was to reach a bed and breakfast at the village of Thoury, putting us close to the chateau of Chambord, for a visit the next morning. The delay on the GR03 meant that we were behind schedule and daylight was starting to go: with some apprehension we made best speed towards Beaugency. At the junction with the D19, the commuters were going like the clappers, hell-bent on getting home for supper, so we left the planned route to by-pass the town.

The man with the map was confident of his ability to regain the original route eventually, but the tired and hungry wife was full of foreboding. Thankfully, after a couple of miles a farmer confirmed that we

were going in the right direction, but there was still a good distance to be covered. The day was becoming cooler, we were getting more tired, the light was beginning to go, the road ran uphill through a forbidding forest, as far as the eye could see. After 10 miles of relentless riding we arrived at the village, only to find that we still had to carry on in to the unknown, looking for a farm in the back of beyond. At last we found it, and although distinctly agricultural, it was never so welcome.

The next morning, we were glad to be on our way to visit the chateau of Chambord. Built in the time of François I, it is vast and magnificent, covered with ornate chimneys, turrets and spires: several hours should be allocated to do it justice.



Figure 11 - Chambord, North Façade



Figure 12 - Chambord, South Façade

We took the D33 from there to the city of Blois. What a pleasure it was to stay in a reasonable hotel and meet English-speaking fellow cyclists of a similar age, who had brought their bikes over from Canada. We swapped many a story over supper and wished them well on their (non-cycling) visit to Barcelona, then set off to explore the chateau. Again, well worth the visit - two hours should suffice here - but try to be taking a coffee/beer at midday outside the cafe/bar near the end of the courtyard shown in Figure 13. A surprise awaits you!



Figure 13 - Blois, East façade

Figure 14 - Blois, Typical Ornamental Fireplace with the royal emblems of the Salamander and Ermine



From Blois we followed the southern bank to Amboise. We skipped the chateau and cathedral here, to avoid cultural overload, since we had earmarked the afternoon for Chenonceaux before returning to Amboise for the night.

The château is a few km to the south of the Loire, literally on the river Cher: the arches of the bridge-like foundations, which can just be seen in Figure 15, house the kitchens and other domestic departments. As at Blois, monumental fireplaces are much in evidence



Left: Figures 15, 16 - Chenonceaux - the château from the garden and vice versa

Above: Figure 17 - The Salamander and Ermine portrayed on a grand fireplace at Chenonceaux

The following day we set off in the rain for Tours, through a succession of vineyards. After taking in a *dégustation* in Montlouis-sur-Loire, we found an alternative to the fairly busy D751, almost parallel and about ½ a mile south of it, running past the extensive rubbish tip, then through a retail / business park, on past an enormous factory area, followed by the ubiquitous high-rise apartments that seem to surround most French cities and on in to the centre of Tours.

The tourist information office is on the north side of the “main” east-west boulevard, 150 yards north of the station. We were given a helpful map, with an enlargement of the city centre. Even with this to guide us, the one-way systems seemed always to be the wrong way round to the British way of thinking! Again, we spent two nights here, since there is lots to see: and one major task is to reconnoitre the route out of it and avoid joining the south-bound dual carriageway!! We ended up leaving on the D88, or was it the 48(?) between the Loire and the Cher, passing through more acres of well-tended market garden produce, as far as Savonnières, where we rejoined the D7.



Figure 18 - The Bridge at Tours

Because we were wanted to visit the chateau at Azay-le-Rideau, we continued though Villandry to the junction with the autoroute and took the steeply climbing D39 south before dropping down some miles later, in to the little town on the river Indre, beside which the chateau stands.

Azay is not as immense as Chambord or Blois - it rises like a graceful, iced cake from the surrounding moat. In common with with the others we had visited, this chateau contained huge, elaborate fireplaces, sporting the salamander⁴, fine old stone carvings, tapestries and furniture, as well as elaborate turrets and roofs.



Figure 19 - The château of Azay-le-Rideau



**Figure 20 - Azay-le-Rideau
"Salamandered" Fireplace**

Rejoining the D7 at Marnay, we continued past the fairy-tale castle of Ussé, allegedly the setting for Sleeping Beauty, and pass a less-attractive, modern architectural monument: the nuclear power station of Chinon. Shortly after that, we cross the River Vienne at its confluence with the Loire at Candes-St Martin, an attractive little town whose church is built on the spot where the Saint died in 397. The story is told that as his body was being taken upstream to Orléans during November, the shrubs on the river-bank burst in to flower, giving rise to the expression of a "St Martin's summer".

At this point, we experience our only loss of air from a tyre on the whole voyage: not a puncture but a failure of a tube seam. Pressing on, we note the that hillsides on our left bank of the Loire are covered in vines with the names of the vineyards spelt out in large white letters: also the cliffs are riddled with caves and troglodyte dwellings - walled-up caves, with windows, doors and chimneys incorporated.

In Saumur, we discover that our hotel is 2 miles out of town on the northern side at the entrance to a light industry park. The architecture and meal match the setting and we are pleased to be on our way the following morning to see the historic part of the town and make the steep ascent to the castle ramparts for fine views over the city. Time for a drink . . . where did someone leave his *bidon*? Yes, at the back of the *hotel ordinaire*, perched where we wouldn't forget it whilst loading up in the morning! So, nothing for it but to retrace our tracks over the river, the mid-river island, the next bridge, etc., etc., to the hotel, pick up the water, and set off again, regaining our route, past a cavalry barracks, and, via cycle tracks around and under a major



Figure 21 - Château of Saumur

⁴ The salamander was the armorial device of King François 1 of France

intersection, leading to the comparative calm of the D751. This road took us through a succession of small, generally pleasing and historic villages, most of the way towards Les Ponts-de-Cé, 2 miles of bridges and revetments over the Louet and Loire, with a tower guarding the entrance to Angers.



Figures 22, 23, 24 - En-route to Angers - Trèves, Chênhutte and Les Ponts-de-Cé

Angers is must-see city and we were pleased to spend two nights at the Hotel Continental, centrally placed, with a little room for bike storage and a reasonable tariff. The ancient chateau dominates the bridge over the River Maine, near its confluence with the Loire. It houses the largest medieval tapestry in France, similar in importance to the Bayeux, depicting the end of the world and last judgement - as understood at that time. Again, a knowledgeable guide brought the subject to life for us. Again, the architecture of the historic centre with its churches and houses was a joy to behold.



Figures 25, 26, 27 - Footloose in Angers - Old House and Château Garden

Angers to the Coast - The Last Leg

Leaving Angers, via Les Ponts-de-Cé, we join the *Corniche Angevine*, undulating over the many small hills and valleys with streams feeding the wide-spreading Loire, where the valley below is now a couple of miles across. A little before La Haie Longue, we pause at a pair of sombre granite memorials to pioneers of flight, one to René Gasnier, and one to his brother and wife within a tomb dedicated to Our Lady of Loretto, Patron of Aviators. We lunch at the waters edge at the village of St-Florent-le-Viel and take in a visit to the abbey. The adjacent gardens have a memorial column about half the height of Nelson's in Trafalgar Square, commemorating nothing more than the visit of a duchess in the 1800's. Stopping only to take a swig at Bouzillé, we venture in to the little town of Ancenis with its ancient riverside castle, sited to exact taxes from passing merchant vessels. These had to pass right against the castle walls, thanks to barriers placed in the river to guide them there.

The road then climbs to the clifftop village of Champtoceaux, one of the most important medieval cities of France, and whose name is derived from 'city in the sky'. Some excellent panoramic views can be had from the gardens behind the central church. Leaving the village, we whizz down the steep hill to river level, only to be confronted by a hard climb again, before the road flattens out on the river bank.

Soon after stopping to photograph the floral watering can at La Pierre Percée, you must turn right on the D37 to cross the bridge in to Thouare-sur-Loire (unless you intend to take the Nantes motorway ring-road). **Immediately** after crossing, take a track to the left, which is the GR03 and follow it, and then a cycle track, directly in to the heart of the huge city of Nantes.

We missed our directions by the railway station, but followed our noses to a vast open area of traffic islands, teeming with cars buses and trams. Thankfully we were close to the tourist information office, which gave us an excellent map, showing numerous cycleways, one of which went due west, through interminable miles of old docks, then waste tips, then an eternity of suburban sprawl until we were clear of Coueron, with its shot tower and former naval base. Suddenly we emerged in to the deepest depths of unimproved rural France: a network of narrow roads through flat marshy fields, with only herons and cows for company. After joining the D93, the chimneys of yet another nuclear power station (Cordemais) became visible, grew, and diminished, then our destination for the day - Savenay. Quite the most depressing and dusty little town that we ever stayed in - the nearby railway station was probably the most interesting feature. We should have taken the hint in *The Book* and lodged just to the north.

But we were excited: the next day would be the last one! So, with light hearts and in bright sunshine we set off for the last dozen miles, past the huge oil terminal at Donges, past the airfield, stopping for a photograph of that breathtaking new bridge winding its way in to the sky, then on in to the town of St Nazaire. Follow around the docks and you can feel the long road is leading you to the sea. And there it is - the American memorial, the seafront, the beach. We've made it!



Figure 28 - Near Nantes - La Pierre Percée



Figure 29 - St Nazaire Seafront - The American Plaque

After a champagne picnic, it was time to plan our return to UK. Who can believe that it takes from Saturday lunchtime until Sunday evening to get to Cherbourg for the ferry to Poole? and five trains? and an overnight hotel in Rennes? Ah well - all part of the great experience!