

THE LOIRE

SOURCE TO SEA



JOURNAL
OF OUR
GREAT ADVENTURE

Penny & Damian Buckley

SEPTEMBER 2005

The Route



The Facts

27 days: 13 September - 9 October 2005

1347 kms (837 miles) cycled in total

13 Departments traversed in 5 Regions

5 châteaux visited:

Chambord, Chenonceaux, Blois,

Azay-le-Rideau, Angers

Daily Summary

Day	Date	From → To	Kms
1	Tue 13-Sep	Bournemouth → Stansted → Lyon → Valence	--
2	Wed 14 Sep	Valence → Lamastre	40
3	Thu 15 Sep	Lamastre → Lachamp-Rafaël	54
4	Fri 16 Sep	Lachamp-Rafaël → Le Gerbier → Goudet	64
5	Sat 17 Sep	Goudet → Le Puy-en-Velay	31
6	Sun 18 Sep	<i>Rest Day at Le Puy</i>	--
7	Mon 19 Sep	Le Puy → Aurec-sur-Loire	87
8	Tue 20 Sep	Aurec-sur-Loire → Feurs	72
9	Wed 21 Sep	Feurs → Charlieu	80
10	Thu 22 Sep	Charlieu → Digoin	60
11	Fri 23 Sep	Digoin → Décize	80
12	Sat 24 Sep	Décize → La Charité-sur-Loire	70
13	Sun 25 Sep	La Charité-sur-Loire → Léré	50
14	Mon 26 Sep	Léré → Jargeau	95
15	Tue 27 Sep	Jargeau → Thoury (Back of Beyond!)	70
16	Wed 28 Sep	Thoury → Blois	30
17	Thu 29 Sep	<i>Rest Day at Blois</i>	--
18	Fri 30 Sep	Blois → Amboise	60
9	Sat 1 Oct	Amboise → Tours	40
20	Sun 2 Oct	<i>Rest Day (and Penny's Birthday) in Tours</i>	--
21	Mon 3 Oct	Tours → Saumur	85
22	Tue 4 Oct	Saumur → Angers	55
23	Wed 5 Oct	<i>Rest Day at Angers</i>	--
24	Thu 6 Oct	Angers → Champtoceaux	81
25	Fri 7 Oct	Champtoceaux → Savenay	76
26	Sat 8 Oct	Savenay → St-Nazaire <i>St-Nazaire → Rennes (Train)</i>	30
27	Sun 9 Oct	<i>Rennes → Lison (Train), Lison → Carentan</i>	20
		<i>Carentan → Cherbourg → Poole(T + Ferry)</i> Poole Quay → Bournemouth	17

Day 1**Tuesday, 13 September****Bournemouth → Stansted → Lyon → Valence**

The great adventure of our Gap Month starts at 5.45 am. The bikes are in their boxes in the car as also are the panniers, all that remains is to pack hand luggage and the 'codes'. We make good time to Stansted and our luggage is safely checked in as 'outsize'. Cheap 'n cheerful is the Easyjet watchword but our flight is completely uneventful. We arrive at Lyon and take the shuttle bus into the city centre. There are two railway stations in Lyon but the time to transfer the bikes from the bus to either station is never quite enough, consequently blood pressure is raised somewhat! We finally get onto a train with our unwieldy luggage and arrive in Valence. Hotel les Négociants is wonderfully close to the station. It is sophisticated and provides a good meal. It is a world away from most English Station Hotels - we are not even kept awake by the rumble of trains.

After a good meal, we take a walk for a coffee and finish up directly in front of the station. It too is a world away from the average British station, pleasing architecturally and clean. We fall into bed tired but very excited at the prospect of cycling tomorrow.



Bikes ready for flying

Day 2
Valence → Lamastre

Wednesday, 14 September
40kms

Our first priority is to assemble the bikes. They seem to have survived the journey well and by 12.00 midday are ready. We have an excellent fortifying lunch and decide to get to Lamastre by bike. This is a change of plan as we thought we would take the local bus which can carry two bikes as far as St Agrève. The infrequency of this service means the next one doesn't depart till very late afternoon and we are reluctant to be arriving at our destination so late. We set off.

The road out of Valence takes us over the Rhône and immediately we see the mountains from which the region, Rhône Alpes, takes its name. The sun is shining and almost immediately we begin climbing relentlessly, in fact eight miles of steep climbing - not quite lung searing but not far off. It is a stark introduction to the reality of the Massif so we can only make 4 mph. We stop for rest/refreshment at an isolated crossroads and get our first experience of that 'hors saison' feeling; tables, chairs and sun umbrellas are all stacked away for the winter. At about 15 miles we have climbed to 758m at Col des Fans - the highest point of the ride, after which we have a lovely, long downhill descent into Lamastre.

Hotel les Négociants in Valence made our booking at, coincidentally, Hotel les Négociants in Lamastre. It is a typical French Logis, absolutely adequate but the decor is rather 70s. The meal is good. Afterwards we talk to a couple who had seen us at Col des Fans. They were suitably impressed by our plans and offer advice and good wishes for the ascent of le Mont Gerbier.

Col des Fans



Day 3
Lamastre → Lachamp Rafaël

Thursday, 15 September
54kms

Hotel les Négociants in Lamastre is as disobliging as its namesake in Valence was the opposite. The accent is on 'petit' for déjeuner and we leave Lamastre at 9.45 am destination Le Cheylard. First 10 kms to the coffee stop is a fair climb followed by downhill run into Le Cheylard. I feel frustrated that, having once achieved a certain height, we have to come down most of it, only to go back up to an even greater height. There's not much to be done about it and we start the remorseless, relentless Lung Searing Ascent (LSA) to Mézilhac. This is probably going to be the most challenging climb, if the profiles in the Little Book are to be believed. The Book is absolutely right, the road is a series of sharp hairpins with unprotected edges. It is hot and hard work and we scarcely exceed 4.5 mph. There are no villages and few houses and I wonder why I was so keen to start this crazy exercise.

We arrive at Mézilhac, a windswept unexciting col. Mont Gerbier de Jonc is still some 15 kms distant but Damian thinks we might make it and we set off. This turns out to be far too optimistic and we decide to look for accommodation in Lachamp Rafaël, the next village, which, allegedly, has a hotel. To call it 'hotel' is to give it delusions of grandeur. We have difficulty finding M le Patron but he eventually turns up and shows us his best room which we accept gratefully. It is certainly not what we would choose but beggars and choice come to mind and despite all its shortcomings, which are many, there is plenty of deliciously hot water, though the bath and basin do not bear close scrutiny.

We find somewhere to serve us supper, which is clean and resolve to annotate the Little Book which advises Lachamp Rafaël as having 'no facilities'. By 8.30 pm the good folk of Lachamp have turned in and we do the same. Tomorrow is the day for Gerbier de Jonc and the source of the Loire. So ends the second day of our Great Adventure.

Day 4

Lachamp Rafaël → Le Gerbier → Goudet

Friday, 16 September

64kms

We are more than happy to shake the dust off our heels at Lachamp. After a mean breakfast, we set off for Le Gerbier at 9.00 am - it's cool but then it's high - 1200 m. We are soon crossing the watershed between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic and the road climbs to over 1400 m, finally, the extinct volcano is suddenly there before us, a most strange, rocky extrusion on the landscape about 85 m high. We lock up the bikes and set about the climb, following a well indicated path but nevertheless moderately challenging. It is an amazing feeling, after weeks/months of looking at this spot on the map, on the dining room table, we are here. Many times I doubted we would get to this point; we almost talked ourselves out of the whole adventure several times, doubting if we would have the stamina. It's a great feeling at the top and we make sure we have plenty of photographic proof of the event before coming down.

Before we leave, we visit the cowshed in which we find one of the apparently many sources of the Loire. The building is refurbished and, because of its symbolic importance, is accorded due reverence.

Time is moving on and we set off for the rest of the day's ride. There are still some LSAs but from now on it will generally be downhill. The Loire starts off as a modest stream but quickly becomes wider. After 8 miles at La Palisse it is a river tumbling over rocks and boulders beside lovely meadows.

As we race along thinking all's right with the world and 'we've done it', Damian lets out a strangled cry that a wasp has stung him in the mouth. I'm worried and relive my own wasp experience, so launch into full paramedic role, I attempt to see the sting on his lower lip and suck it out. From this episode, I decide that such adventures can only be undertaken with a cycling companion with whom one is on the most intimate terms! I cannot say if the procedure has been successful but give him Piriton, after 15 minutes we set off again - chastened and mouths firmly closed.

After another LSA, we stop for lunch at the 'lavoir' (medieval launderette) at Usclades and arrive at Lac d'Issarlès about 4.00 pm, too early to think of stopping for the day, so we press on for Goudet.

This is a mistake and we're tired and worried that Goudet will not have a hotel. Mercifully it does and M le Patron is welcoming and kind enough to do our washing for free.



Increasing the height of Mont Gerbier de Jonc!

Day 5
Goudet → Le Puy en Velay

Saturday, 17 September
31 kms

We wake to a very cold grey damp morning. We would have snatched at almost any excuse to delay our departure but there is nothing to keep us in Goudet. The village is built almost exclusively of the greyish black volcanic rock of the region and today looks forbidding and unwelcoming. Before we leave M le Patron says if we can't find accommodation in Le Puy, due to the fête, Roi des Oiseaux, we can ring him and he will come in his car, collect us and our bikes and bring us back to Goudet. This is a most kind and generous offer, we hope we don't have to take up but nevertheless is a good back stop. Before leaving we rouse the keyholder of the church who shows us round. In fact, the church is surprisingly warm and well maintained especially as there is no regular weekly mass.

We head out of Goudet straight into a LSA. Again it takes about an hour to do 4kms. Coffee stop is St Martin de Fugères at a warm, inviting bar/patisserie which we share with eight walkers on the Robert Louis Stevenson trail. RLS wrote his Travels with a Donkey in this area of the Cevennes. We swap notes and they are suitably impressed at our adventure, they also strongly advise us to book our hotel in Le Puy which we do. As we leave it is still cold and grey and I am thankful for Tim's old tracksters which have proved to be leg savers if not life savers.

The road is still very hilly, particularly the approach to Solignac. There is a hunt taking place in the woods and I see my first wild, wild boar - only briefly and not in the woods but in the unlikely setting at the edge of a stone quarry. I assume it is the quarry (no pun intended!) since there are dogs barking and baying all around. The French appear to be much less squeamish about hunting and there are none of the class overtones with which some people associate hunting in this country.

The bus shelter in Solignac is our lunch stop, affording a little shelter from the cold - it is 8°! The village is not particularly exciting but has a bar for hot tea. M le Patron tells us it can get to -27° which seems amazing since I didn't think we were in the Russian steppes.

We set off down hill to Le Puy. This is the first town of any size and there is a rather good feeling as we ride in. The centre of town is full of

medieval strollers of all ranks and classes; it's the XXth Fêtes Renaissance du Roi de l'Oiseau. We watch jugglers, dancers, minstrels, drink Hypocras, eat mincemeat pies listen to the animal band but cannot see the real dancing bear for the crowds. Everyone, from the very old to the youngest toddler, has entered the spirit of the event but it does not seem forced or contrived.

Tomorrow we shall have a rest day to see some of Le Puy.



Notre Dame de France

St Michel d'Aiguilhe



Day 6

Rest Day at Le Puy

Sunday, 18 September

The day dawns no brighter than yesterday; it's cold and grey but the breakfast is good and substantial. Thus fortified we set out early, choosing one of the town walks to take us round the old town. Le Puy is built in a region of extinct volcanoes and the old town is full of tiny winding cobbled lanes, which defy anyone to build anything, let alone massive edifices such as the cathedral. Soon the 'medieval' folk are abroad, including one herding a flock of geese with the aid of a goose dog. This seems a novel concept but on reflection only an extension of the idea of a sheep dog. After mass at the cathedral, we find our way to Notre Dame de France. A truly remarkable hollow structure built on another volcanic plug. It is similar in idea to the Statue of Liberty though not as big. It is made from the captured and melted down cannons seized at Sebastapol and has looked reassuringly down on Le Puy for nearly 150 years

Finding something to eat is not easy. There seem to be many medieval cauldrons boiling up anonymous victuals but most look unappetising though hot which has a certain attraction. In the end we find some charentaise mussels - a long way from home but good.

To warm up, we walk to St Michel d'Aiguilhe, a chapel built on another volcanic plug. This too defies all my previously held notions of construction. There seems to be room for no more than a couple of dozen workers and then there are the building materials to be brought up! It all seems incredible but they managed it in 962 and then enlarged it later.

Le Puy was one of the main gathering points for pilgrims on the route to Compostela. The cockleshell symbol of St James is everywhere, carved on pillars, door lintels, in niches etc. In the 21st century pilgrims are still making the journey; a German couple AND their dog were setting out from our hotel as we were checking out. I am not sure if it is tourism or spirituality perhaps one comes from the other.

The week of medieval merry making of Roi des Oiseaux culminates in a procession of several hundred participants from the cathedral to the lower part of the town. It's noisy, colourful and quite unlike anything seen in England. We feel lucky to have arrived, coincidentally, in Le Puy when it was taking place. Tomorrow we are on the road again.

Day 7
Le Puy → Aurec sur Loire

Monday, 19 September
87 kms

The rest day is over and we think it may be a little warmer. We have a full day's cycling ahead; quite how full we don't realise till later on. With a good breakfast inside us we set out for Le Pertuiset. Unfortunately, we cannot book the hotel, so immediately we have a slightly uneasy feeling. It is Monday and many/most shops and hotels close on Monday, certainly in country areas. On leaving Le Puy we learn of a deviation in the area of Lavoute Polignac. This is just where we are going but are confident that 'Route Barrée' couldn't possibly apply to cyclists - not so! We have to turn back and make a massive LSA detour up over the mountain which adds at least 1½ hours to our journey; at times we can only manage 3.9 mph. While toiling up, a chap stops his car and we chat about our adventure. He too is a cyclist and has cycled from St Nazaire up the Loire. He's pleasant but I think no more about it. When he gets back in his car, though, I marvel at such friendliness and doubt whether anyone would stop in England in similar circumstances. We press on and reach our lunch stop at Vorey. It too has the deserted Monday feel about it but we do find a bar for hot tea. Shortly after, in walks our friend from the LSA, quite obviously he set out to find us having an idea of our direction. He took us under his wing, cycling with us for 15 kms and showed us a way to avoid another steep hill. He eventually left us before our long steep descent into Beauzac. Jaques was charming, good company and gave us much needed encouragement. By the time we had parted, we had exchanged names, taken a photo but sadly could not exchange email addresses.

We make our night's destination and found the tourist info with about 10 minutes to spare. This is cutting it too fine and we resolve to book the night's accommodation *before* lunch time in future. Happily Tourist Info sort us out with chambre d'hôte and somewhere for supper but it gives us a nasty moment.

Supper is a gourmet experience as far removed from last night as could be imagined. Each dish is a culinary confection to delight the eye, served with hushed reverence and announced just in case we had forgotten what we had ordered. Nonetheless it is delicious. Tomorrow we head for Feurs and rendezvous with my cousin Cliff

Day 8
Aurec sur Loire → Feurs

Tuesday, 20 September
72kms

Today looks as though it could be better. We saddle up and set off. Happily the Little Book tells us that this section will see the last of the LSAs and we look forward to this. We have a steep climb to Chambles, from which there are amazing views of the Loire gorge but once down from this village the whole nature of the countryside changes; it's flatter, softer more cultivated and, joy of joys, it's warmer. It is much more the France we know and love. Villages appear every 5-8 kms; very different from the Massif. Despite the fact it is 10 deg warmer, we still have a very strong headwind which makes riding difficult. We feel we could add 5 kph were it not for the wind. We ride into Feurs in good time and find our Logis. At 6.00 pm we make our rendezvous with my cousin Cliff. It all seems a little bizarre to be meeting in the middle of France, having met only once before in the last 34 years. However we have a happy evening and swap news and stories.



Lunch stop by the river

Day 9
Feurs → Charlieu

Wednesday, 21 September
80 kms

It's a cold start. I visit Carrefour in search of cycling specs and Damian needs a scarf for his shoulders. I feel quite bold setting off on my own and negotiating french traffic fully 'panniered up'. In fact, almost unfailingly French drivers give us a much wider berth than English and we find that when a car does cut us fine it turns out to be an English car. There doesn't appear to be the frenetic rush which so characterises the driving in England. It makes for a much more pleasant experience.

Again, we notice the real change of landscape. We're into fields with cows grazing, no scrubby hillsides now. The Little Book has told us that the LSAs are over and that seems to be so as we bowl along. However the route takes us away from the river up a steep hill to St Jodard - who has heard of St Jodard? There is a religious community here - monastery/convent, who knows but we get a clue as a slightly ancient car comes noisily down the hill with two nuns. This is followed, as we struggle uphill, by the sight of a young nun, in full regalia, jogging downhill. There is no reason why a nun should not want to keep fit but she made a strange spectacle in habit, wimple and sandals with rosary and pectoral cross flapping wildly as a result of her efforts.

We arrive at Château de la Roche for our lunch stop. It is a fairy-tale castle built on a rock in the middle of the river. We can see that the water level is about 40 feet down and parts of the river are a livid, luminous green. It looks uninviting and unhealthy, far removed from the clear stream tumbling over rocks as it came down from St Eulalie on Day 3.

After lunch we saddle up but the sun has got to Damian and we stop a little longer in the shade. When we do get going, the comfortable words of the Little Book turn out to be 'faux amis' and there are yet more LSAs to be conquered, which all seems rather unfair. As there is no option, we press on and get to the Logis above the barrage at Villerest. Here we completely revise our accommodation plan and decide to make a run for Charlieu, north of Roanne. This is not ideal, it being nearly 5.00 pm and 40 kms to do but the heat has gone out of the sun and if we don't get on we'll only have achieved 25 miles today - not really enough to keep us on target.

We establish there is a room at the Logis at Charlieu and set off. Due to time pressure, we go straight through Roanne which seems disappointing. We leave Roanne through an area which reminds us both of York Road, Baltimore so perhaps we haven't missed too much after all (apologies to Baltimoreans who read this!). The route is nearly flat and we fall into our next hotel at 7.05 pm with great relief and sore tail ends!

We have an excellent supper and rate the crème brûlée sublime.



**Château de la
Roche**

**Giant sundial at
Villerest**



Day 10
Charlieu → Digoin

Thursday, 22 September
60kms

We have an excellent and plentiful breakfast, apart from appalling tea. All other aspects of the hotel are excellent. We make a slight detour to visit the town which has many beautiful old buildings serving various religious orders. Before we leave the sun is shining strongly. Very soon we are into beautiful countryside travelling, much of the time, alongside, not only the Loire but also the Roanne to Digoin Canal. It is all very pretty and we realise we have left the grey/black volcanic rock used for building the villages of the Ardèche and Auvergne. Now we are into a warm honey-coloured stone reminiscent of the Dordogne. Even on cold, wet days this stone cannot look too forbidding. We get along famously, stopping at the various villages the Little Book points out. I am struck by the gardens in France. The herbaceous border is something of a closed book to the French: in France the potager, kitchen garden is 'king' and the rest just muddles along. The French potager is a well ordered area of vegetables laid out in neat, well weeded rows. Flowers are generally restricted to dahlias which are for cutting. Even at this tail end of the year it looks got together. The rest of the garden, if there is any, is an unconnected assortment of bushes dotted about over the lawn. In addition, of course, there are hanging baskets and window boxes in which the French are in a league of their own.

While bowling along merrily we pull up on the canal tow path for a break and are invited by an English couple to share a cup of tea. They have hired a canal boat and we swap stories. They are suitably impressed by our adventure.

We leave them and high tail it for Digoin, where we hope to have an 'admin' afternoon, to visit the launderette among other things.

The Logis, into which we are booked, is comfortable; the room has a delightful balcony and classy bathroom with corner bath and two handbasins - light years away from our room at La Champ Rafaël! The meal is pretentious!

Day 11
Digoin → Décize

Friday, 23 September
80kms

As we expected, breakfast was a disappointment; a masterpiece of portion control rather than buffet and appalling tea. After buying provisions we set off. It's another cracking day and we are grateful. This adventure would have been difficult and unenjoyable if it had rained. As it is, to date, the photos look great and we feel lucky to be able to be doing it.

We arrive at Abbaye de Sept Fonts: another large religious foundation. I decide to buy a postcard but this simple purchase causes the 80 year old Cistercian monk an apparently superhuman struggle with the earthly minutiae of a computerised till. It all seems rather trivial for someone whose mind and time is generally spent grappling with much higher matters.

We carry on managing a respectable 15 mph. The Little Book warns us that the landscape will change and become industrial. This is indeed the case and we are surprised that there are not planning restrictions on building heavy industry plant on the banks of the Loire. Would anyone dream of manufacturing concrete pipes on the banks of the Thames? We're out of this and soon enough back to herds of Charolais cattle grazing and on to Décize

**Pont
Canal at
Digoin**



Day 12
Décize → La Charité sur Loire

Saturday, 24 September
70kms

We have a good buffet style breakfast and are on the road by 8.30 am, a personal best so far. It's a great time and I realise what we miss when we leave at 9.30 am. There is an ethereal mist lingering over the canal and the river, probably a result of it still being extremely cool. It reminds me of the photos publishers choose for October and November in calendars. Unfortunately, once out of Décize, we miss our turning but only add a few miles so it is not a big problem. We make good time and are riding into Nevers at 11.00 am. Again there is something very exciting about turning up in the centre of a big city on bicycles. We lock up and set off to see the sights of Nevers in the time we have allowed. This means the Cathedral, Ducal Palace and walking the Blue Line on the pavement. This is a great idea we first encountered in Boston but surprisingly, the Nevers version does not seem to be quite so well got together or perhaps it is us who are not so well got together!

We leave Nevers at about 3.00pm en route for La Charité - it's extremely hot and once out of town we have to pull into the shade of a church for a rest. We arrive in La Charité at 5.30pm.

It seems to us that La Charité is the Hay on Wye of France and like other small towns we have visited, 'hors saison'. There is precious little choice in where to eat.

**Pont Canal at
Briare**



Day 13
La Charité sure Loire → Léré

Sunday, 25 September
50kms

We encounter our first set-back today but we have been lucky with the weather so far. We have a 'portion control' breakfast and eventually set off, after a tour of the ramparts, at 11.25 am. It's sunny and all feels right with the world. Our first stop is to be Sancerre in the middle of the Sancerre wine region. The Little Book warns us of the steep climb to the hill top town and this is so. It quite reminds us of the Mézilhac, Ussades and other climbs. All around are vines beautifully tended. The grape harvest has begun but not finished. We make it to the panorama at the top and have our lunch and as we are finishing the rain begins. For the first time in our adventure, we break out the waterproofs. Suddenly there is a murky mist all around and it would be a complete waste to try to take any pictures of the town. To kill time, in the hope of an improvement, we head for the restaurant in the town centre. It being Sunday lunch, mine host is in no hurry to serve two rather wet tourists cups of coffee; we write some post cards and drink more coffee but eventually have to brave the weather. There are places to see in Sancerre, we visit the church of Notre Dame but give the tower a miss - a pity since the view would, no doubt, be stupendous - on a good day.

As we head down the steep hill out of Sancerre I think of the many other more pleasurable ways I might be spending my Sunday afternoon. However, if I think rationally, we are fully watertight, we're together and we have a room booked 8 miles down the road at Léré - things could be worse!

Léré is a small town, it's Sunday afternoon and the Lion d'Or does not open till 6.00pm. When we arrive we're wet and have 20 minutes to wait before M le Patron arrives to open up. I am surprised at how **undespondent** I am but this is to change when we are shown our room. The room is typically french, dark flock wall paper, tiny window, a bathroom of Stygian gloom and **cold**. The situation is only slightly redeemed by plenty of steaming hot water - the first prerequisite of the wet cyclist - and working space heaters. To add to our cup of joy, mademoiselle tells us that there will be no-one to serve breakfast the next day but she will bring up a tray to our room with breakfast before she leaves that evening. We're not happy but there is not much we can do.

We are looking forward to dinner - a hearty cassoulet would go down well but this is not to be and only when we see the menu we realise what is in store. Patently, M le Patron is trying to major in the dining room department. It is charmingly and expensively tricked out with a menu to match and one instinctively knows the emphasis will be on the 'less is more' principle. This is not what we want and we decide to use the restaurant in the square

On our return to our room, most of the wet clothes are dry and we can only pray for a better day tomorrow.



La Charité sur Loire

Day 14
Léré → Jargeau

Monday 26 September
95kms

We are more than happy to shake the Léré dust off our heels. As we expected, the coffee, kept in a flask overnight, was cool - altogether a bad experience. As I packed my panniers the thought crossed my mind that they seemed remarkably empty. I then realised that I was wearing all the clothes I could lay my hands on. We had hoped for a better day, after all it couldn't be worse; it was - cold and misty - the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness had arrived in one hit and the proximity of the river only added to the effect. The views are non-existent. We notice that the moisture condenses on our eyelashes and Damian's rear view mirror before dropping off rather dispiritingly. Now we do feel despondent. Happily by about 10.30 am the sun starts to burn through and whole aspect of the day is lifted.

We spend nearly an hour at the canal basin at Mantelot near Chatillon sur Loire and watch a pleasure boat pass through the lock. It provides a clear lesson in the principles of locks and dispels the notion that lock keepers are pipe smoking, crusty old salts. A young girl is in charge of opening the gates and once she had finished working this one at the Mantelot Ecluse, she climbed on her bike and pedalled off, at top speed, down the tow path to overtake the boat and repeat the process at the next one.

By now the sun is well up and we are heading into Briare, where canals and rivers meet and mingle. It's a pretty town and we linger over our lunch in front of the church but not too long there are still a good few miles to do and we must press on.

The landscape has changed, in particular, the roofs. Gone, several days ago in fact, are the flat pantiled roofs so indicative of hot sunny climes, now the accent is on slate with a good pitch to throw off the water. The last part of today's ride is along the levée beside the river. Until the recent hurricane in Louisiana, I had not heard of this expression but it admirably describes the raised road which gives such a brilliant view up over the river. We eventually fall into our Logis at Jargeau run by Sulky Susan with the sloppy slippers.

Day 15
Jargeau→Thoury (Back of Beyond!)

Tuesday, 27 September
70kms

The day starts off moderately well with a surprising reasonable breakfast - good tea! We set off along the levée in the direction of Orléans - it is a brilliant cycle way, although the surface is a bit lumpy and the hands are taking a pounding but there is no vehicular traffic. This area is the market garden of France with serried ranks of many lettuce types growing in the flood plain of the Loire. We also see a lot of corn on the cob but this is not for the table, the French feed it to their livestock. The cycle way continues into Orléans and we find ourselves at the cathedral, another massive edifice currently being cleaned - there is no other word - it looks *stunning*. Orléans is a cycle friendly city, traffic does not cut us up and there is much more respect from motorists towards cyclists. Before we leave Orléans we book a room at a chambre d'hôte in a village in the middle of the Forest of Chambord.

The Little Book which, until now has been excellent and easy to follow, now loses the plot - or maybe it is us! To leave Orléans, it suggests using the GR3 which hugs the river but is very rough going and consequently very slow. We are in danger of not getting to our destination before dusk. However, it is something of a Hobson's choice since the other option is the Route Nationale - horrid and fast; we eventually abandon the GR3 and opt for the main road and make better speed although it is not a very comfortable experience.

It is getting late and by 6.00 pm we still have to get through the Forest of Chambord, which is dark and unfriendly, and the road is straight as a die as far as the eye can see in front of us. We eventually find our chambre d'hôte which is situated some miles beyond the village, truly out in the sticks. It is full of rustic charm and not much else. There is no opportunity to go back into the village for food so Monsieur rustles up some puy lentils and tinned sausages. This is **not** what I have come to France for but it is hot.

I am sorry that we had to miss several worthwhile places, Beaugency, Meung sur Loire and Sully sur Loire in order to get to Thoury at a reasonable hour and this is a shame. We must learn not to book so far ahead and I must learn not to become impatient as the day draws towards dusk - this is definitely my 'bad' time. On the plus side it doesn't rain

Day 16
Thoury→Blois

Wednesday, 28 September
30kms

Once again we are happy to shake the dust off our heels chez Mme Touchet. It is basic, unwelcoming, in the sticks and expensive. Damian even considers the possibility that buying the house in La Chataigneraie last year might have been a mistake because of the distance from it to any bar etc particularly 'hors saison'.

We have only a few miles to Chambord and arrive as the sun starts to break through. Once again we are thankful for the weather which has made our expedition such a success to date in spite of the fact that autumn is well and truly in the air - fallen leaves, hips and heavy dew in the morning. Château de Chambord is a wonderful Renaissance confection of towers and chimneys - 365 in all, we are told. It is situated close to the Cosson, a minor tributary of the Loire, and when Francis I built it he wanted to divert the Loire. However, this was a step too far and he compromised by slightly diverting the Cosson. We spend several hours there and learn a lot with the aid of the English audio guide.

We leave in good time to cycle the 9 miles to Blois. This is the shortest day's riding of our trip so far but now that we are in the most interesting section of the Loire, we may spend more time at each major city.

Both Damian and I enjoy being in a city overnight and agree not to book into chambres d'hôte if they are in villages/small towns again - this is important for us not having a car. As we lock our bikes away this afternoon we meet two couples who have come from Canada with bikes and cycled from Nantes to Blois - this seems particularly impressive as they are going on to Barcelona, though not with bikes. They are about our age and we tentatively suggest meeting tomorrow morning at breakfast to share experiences.

We find a good restaurant and have a wonderful confit de canard for supper. There is much to see in Blois and we decide to spend another night here - it's just great to be in a busy city again!

Day 17
Rest Day at Blois

Thursday, 29 September

This is good news, we haven't had a rest day for nearly two weeks although we have not particularly wanted one. After a dodgy start, the sun shines again and the Château of Blois is shown to its best advantage. Bad or even indifferent weather would have completely changed how we looked back on our Great Adventure. We spend the morning in the château trying to digest a million facts of French history - some of it is sticking from the previous day's visit to Chambord. We come up for air, briefly, at lunch time and go back in for the afternoon. By 3.30pm we are "châteaued out" and just go walkabout - equally enjoyable as Blois is a big city and there is lots of people-watching to do.

In the evening we meet the Canadian couple, Bev and Bill Stewart, firstly for drinks in our room, then they join us while we have supper. We spend a most happy evening comparing notes. We learn that they have negotiated the Paris Métro with fully assembled bikes. This seems wildly ambitious to me and makes our arrangements seem comparatively modest. In addition, they are travelling with another couple and I feel this raises their adventure to an altogether higher plane. Tomorrow they are going on to Barcelona by train.

**Château at
Blois**



Day 18
Blois→Amboise

Friday, 30 September
60kms

After swapping email addresses with the Canadians, we get on the road. It's not too far to Amboise but this is part of the problem, if one can call it that - there is just so much to see in this part of the Loire Valley. Each village has some ancient antiquity and we feel we must do justice to them all. It is not a brilliant day but we're in Amboise for lunch and decide to cycle out to Chenonceaux after lunch. This scheme contradicts all our self imposed rules for sight seeing, namely that we do not do culture overload, which only results in muddling them all up and not full appreciating each individually. However, Chenonceaux was one of my 'must sees' so there is nothing for it but to embark on our third château in as many days. It is beautiful and breathtaking and built on the Cher. Having arrived in the afternoon, it is very busy even in late September; one can only imagine how it might be in peak season.

We use the cycle way back to Amboise which takes a quiet and pretty road, though it seems to take longer. The French are making a positive effort in their approach to green transport; one is tempted to think that the English approach is more lip service.

Amboise is an attractive town and the château is right behind our hotel but we don't visit this one. The town has a good choice of restaurants and does not seem completely dead once the shops are closed at 7.00pm. We find a welcoming establishment serving moules - just what I want tonight and we both enjoy a delicious meal.

**Château at
Chenonceaux**



Day 19
Amboise → Tours

Saturday, 1 October
40 kms

We wake up to a slate grey morning; the roofs are shiny with water; we can scarcely see across the river and there is the unmistakeable slush of water as cars drive along the road. Our run of good weather has broken and we wonder if this is it for the rest of the trip. We try to think of any good reason to put off the moment of donning wet weather gear but none presents itself and we realise there's nothing for it but to set out. I am not good on such days. We pay a brief visit to the Chanteloup Pagoda, a folly and all that is left of what was once a château but it doesn't seem worth the visit and we set off for Tours.

Tours is the biggest city on the Loire and it will be interesting not to say scary getting into it. We visit the cave co-operative at Montlouis for a dégustation and buy a bottle. We would love to try more but it would be stupid for me to have more than a sniff when I still have to negotiate Tours. Our hotel is in Rue Gambetta, a common enough name in French towns but it is our fate to either never be able to find it or, once there, to leave it. Tours has a novel approach to traffic in the pedestrianised area, **only** buses and bicycles are allowed. In the rest of the city car traffic is generally slower and more generous towards cyclists. There are more dedicated cycle lanes.

**Bridge
over the
Loire at
Tours**



Day 20

Rest Day and My Birthday in Tours

Sunday, 2 October

As I fell asleep last night, I reflected on my 55th birthday tomorrow. I don't think I have ever done anything so exciting or bold before and I am still rather surprised at my undertaking such an expedition and loving it so much!

Breakfast is plentiful - I always seem to be hungry and I love being able to eat for England, knowing I will be burning it off very shortly. It's cool with the promise of showers as we set out but there is a blue sky and even some sun. Tours is St Martin's town and Tim took Martin as his confirmation name. We are reminded that we had promised to visit with Tim one summer holiday many years ago. As we approached the city the car radiator had started to boil and we felt we dare not stop, so Tim missed his visit.

We walk around the old quarter, tall houses, narrow streets and pretty squares. After a long lunch of moules, we think about our exit strategy from Tours tomorrow. My Father used to say 'time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted'. We get on the bikes for a trial run and find ourselves getting on to a road which begins to look suspiciously like a motorway slip road. It's 5.00 pm on a Sunday afternoon and almost busy; we don't even want to think of it at 9.00 am on a Monday morning. We find an alternative route through the suburbs of Tours and trust we have tested it sufficiently to get us safely out of town. We feel we have demonstrated the wisdom of my Father's words.

Sunset at Tours



Day 21
Tours→ Saumur

Monday 3 October
85kms

We manage an early start from Tours - 8.30am - this is good! Sadly, our efforts to find the efficient exit are frustrated by the on-way system, but we get there in the end and are soon in the country

We plan to visit the château of Azay le Rideau but must leave after lunch in order to make our night's stop in Saumur. It is an absolutely cracking day, bright blue sky, sun, not hot but this cannot really be expected in October. All around are the unmistakeable signs of autumn, bright crimson leaves on Virginia creeper, conkers and fallen leaves all around.

We arrive at Azay le Rideau at 11.00 am, just enough time for a guided visit and have the exclusive use of a lovely young French girl to tell us about the château. She makes it interesting and informative and spoke slowly!

With the change of month, France is now definitely on 'hors saison' schedule and the château closes for lunch. We have ours, picnic style but in full sun then saddle up for a fairly long run into Saumur. We are making excellent progress when we come up against another Route Barrée sign. Not what we need, but a chap suggests we set off over a field and we will eventually rejoin the road beyond the obstruction. Happily, and despite my scepticism, this turns out to be so and we don't have to retrace steps. The route is now alongside the Loire and we arrive in Candé St Martin, the place where St Martin died in **397!** It's a delightful town with huge church dedicated to St Martin. Unfortunately, we return to the bikes to find Damian has a puncture. We're not altogether surprised having suspected as much in Azay but it's annoying and the thing I most dread. It's soon mended and we're on our way again. It is a great evening and the late sun on the bridge and north bank of the river makes a wonderful sight as we arrive in Saumur.

Unfortunately, our hotel is some distance from Saumur centre ville, surprising for a Logis de France, which, on this journey at least, have been central and rather traditional establishments. Saumur Logis is more formulaic like the Campanile chain. It is 3 km out of town - impossible to get back in for supper and return late on bikes.

Day 22
Saumur → Angers

Tuesday, 4 October
55kms

We make a wonderfully early start this morning after an average breakfast. By 8.30 am we're on the road back into Saumur. The château is huge and has a commanding view overlooking the river. It is an incredible building, again set off to perfect advantage by a crystal blue sky - we are so lucky. We feel we cannot visit the inside, probably a mistake, but there is a real danger of 'château overload'. We plan our route out but realise we have left a water bottle at the hotel, so all the benefit of the early start is negated and we curse that this hotel is situated so far out. By the time we have covered the ground 3 times we are pretty familiar with it and feel Saumur is a pleasant town of a good size. The exit for cyclists is good. I am amazed at how ladies of a certain age glide serenely and confidently round roundabouts apparently oblivious to motorists who, equally, maintain a generous, unthreatening distance - would that this could be the way in UK. As we leave, we pass the School of Cavalry and there are plenty of soldiers about.

The road between Saumur and St Hilaire St Florent is lined with several prosperous caves and we look wistfully as we pass, dreaming of the dégustations to be had inside. Wine tasting and cycling don't mix and anyway we couldn't carry a bottle so put the idea away in the memory bank till we can return in a car.

It is while on this stretch of road we meet the couple on bikes **with** their pampered pooch. Pooch was enthroned in a carrier on the back of her bike: think old fashioned, large chafing dish and remodel in tasteful pale blue plastic, the lid was up allowing pooch to take the air! Here you have the last word in travel for the mutt who has everything! It made a strange sight.

The day is almost the best to date, which implies that other days have been bad this is not so; almost every day has been great but this is even better, hot but not enervating and a ride through wonderful French countryside - I love it!

The road takes us alongside the Loire through a succession of pretty and patently affluent villages. They are well kept with good surfaces and flower bedecked. There is something to be seen and some photo

'op' in each but this slows progress and we still have some miles to go and accommodation to be booked in Angers - we try not to stop, difficult as it is.

Eventually we are into the outskirts of Angers, a huge city whose cathedral twin towers can be seen from a distance of at least 4.4 kms. I find entering big cities daunting but Damian seems to have successfully adopted the French approach. I am full of admiration but yet to copy. Our hotel is well situated right in the middle of the city, good value - perfect!



Château at Saumur

Day 23
Rest day at Angers

Wednesday, 5 October

Angers is a confusing city, busy but buzzing with life - it's a university city. There is a château and we are reminded of the Canadians' maxim ABC Another Bloody Château but how could one visit Angers and not visit the château with its famous Apocalypse Tapestry? I am ashamed to admit I have not heard of this tapestry but it is on the same scale as Bayeux and possibly the Overlord tapestry. There's no doubt it needs all the superlatives to describe it.

It is not quite so bright in the morning but the afternoon is better and I sit in the central square - Place Raillement to write postcards and watch Angevin life go by. It's a great way to spend time requiring no effort on my part. I am also thinking that we are now within sight of our destination; our Great Adventure is coming to end.

The Adam and Eve house in Angers



Day 24
Angers→ Champtoceaux

Thursday, 6 October
81 kms

St Nazaire here we come! When we finish today's ride we will have 62 miles to do. It still seems unreal as I remember the day in Bournemouth when I highlighted the route on the maps, I wondered if I really would make it. God willing, we will.

We leave Angers at 8.30 am with a remarkably painless departure considering it's the morning rush hour - even the awkward part where we must get off and push is accomplished with ease. I am pleased; of the whole journey entering/exiting large cities is the worst part. The weather is overcast so the photo 'ops' are limited in fact it doesn't brighten up till about 3.00 pm when we make a quick detour to Ancenis.

We have our lunch beside the river at St Florent le Vieil. The river is quite broad here and fast flowing, difficult to imagine it has come from that little spout in the cowshed at Gerbier de Jonc. We are just about to leave St Florent when we find the Benedictine Abbey at the top of the town. The abbey church is huge and the land and buildings around equally huge with a great feeling of space and wonderful panorama over the Loire. Tucked in beside the church is a quiet courtyard with 10 sand pitches for some sort of game **not** pétanque - Damian's suggestion. I can't think what it is and anyway what would monks be doing playing at games of chance? I shall have to ask someone at home.

We spend quite a lot of time around this community and look back on 23 days of this adventure, as well as our many holidays. We marvel at the outpouring of talent and devotion offered in the name of Christianity. How different and boring the landscape of Europe would be without that influence. Every village has its church, generally visible from all approaches, the cities have soaring cathedrals visible from even further - think Chartres. Along roads, major and minor, are calvaires and shrines and at street corners shrines and niches all contributing to the fabric of the landscape.

We toil up the hill to Champtoceaux which, coincidentally, is twinned with Verwood. Champtoceaux is attractive and has one of the best panoramas of the Loire. Now we really are getting close.

Day 25
Champtoceaux → Savenay

Friday, 7 October
76kms

The day promises to be good despite early morning mist - it's October for heaven's sake! This is the day we negotiate The Big One - Nantes. We have driven round the périphérique many a time on the way to holidays and that is hairy enough, cycling right through the centre and out the other side is something else. In fact, I guess Nantes is a little smaller than Birmingham - 2nd city of England. However, it has sorted out a good system of cycle lanes so that any reasonably alert cyclist need not feel unduly threatened. The first part is along the north bank of the Loire and this is pleasant, especially as the sun is coming out. Soon we are following the green cycle lanes into the very centre of the Nantes. Interestingly, trams, phased out in the 60s, have been given a makeover and are reappearing in several French cities, proving the old saying what comes round goes round. Like all big cities it takes ages to get through and when we are through we heave a sigh of relief. However, I salute Nantes for getting its green transport plan together.

Our route takes us through the Marais Audobon, a marshy area in which I see an otter - a first!

We reach Savenay and know that it is only 17 miles to St Nazaire tomorrow. Savenay is disappointing, the room is depressing and there are several very old fashioned smells lingering. All has a general air of grubbiness even the Post Office looks modern grubby; so different from the PO at Angers - a wonderful example of fin de siècle architecture.

We take the opportunity to look at train times for our return to Cherbourg and realise that it is not going to be as easy as we had thought. However, the clerk clearly wants to help us in our quest, a novel concept to us who have grown up with British Rail, for whom the customer is mostly an inconvenience. We think we are onto something which will allow us to catch the 8.00 pm boat from Cherbourg but it will involve 3 changes and some fast leg work in Cherbourg but it's the best. We may find something more convenient at St Nazaire particularly if SNCF has more than one helpful booking clerk.

We go to bed extremely excited at the thought of reaching the Atlantic tomorrow

Day 26
Savenay→ St Nazaire

Saturday, 8 October
30 kms

Today's the day!!

We are more than happy to leave Savenay, which is smelly/dirty, and get on the road for the last 30 kms. It's another GREAT morning, sunny high blue sky, wisps of cloud, perfect for The Photo at St Nazaire. We are quickly there, stopping only to take a picture of the new Pont St Nazaire which seems to soar into the sky.

We arrive at the American Monument and ask an assortment of passers-by to take our photo telling each of our achievement. I put my feet into the sea; it is a great feeling, we have cycled nearly 900 miles since leaving Bournemouth, which it seems months ago. On several occasions I doubted whether we would succeed but once we were out of the Massif I felt that we could do it, although there were still opportunities for things to go wrong.

We're elated but mindful that we must get up to Cherbourg; the adventure is not over yet. St Nazaire station is again helpful and we sort out a journey over two days and five trains! The problem is finding trains to take bikes. We settle on getting to Rennes this evening with the rest of the journey tomorrow, arriving in Cherbourg with only an hour to get to the ferry terminal.

Having sorted the admin, we buy some lunch, including a bottle of champagne and plastic wine glasses and head back to the seafront to celebrate our achievement. We are thankful for blue skies. What a shame if we'd had to huddle in a bus shelter. Several people pass by wishing us 'bon appetit' and we cannot resist telling them what we have done.

After lunch we visit the submarine pens briefly and head for the station. By the time we complete this journey we will be fully proficient in vélo travel on French rail. The first stage is easy; we walk our bikes onto the train and hang them from designated hooks on the side wall of the carriage. There is space for 4 bikes; by this method they take up minimum room and do not move about. We take a picture to send to Network Rail. The next two trains are not so bike friendly, they are older generation and the bikes have to be manhandled up three steps.

We reverse one into the loo and pack it out with panniers and leave the other in the corridor. This is not perfect but there is no option. At Redon a young man in the carriage offers to help us extricate the bikes, just another example of unlooked-for kindness we have experienced. We're into Rennes on time and into our hotel, close to the station.

After a record quick change we're out to a great supper in a buzzing city.



American Monument at St Nazaire
We've made it from source to sea!

Day 27

Sunday, 9 October

Rennes→Cherbourg→Poole → Bournemouth

Today we really put SNCF to the test. Do we have the power of persuasion to sweet talk M le Contrôleur into allowing two vélos onto his **non** vélo train - we shall see but it's another lovely day.

The first train has bike hooks and we settle down for the two and a half hour journey to Lison, which is obviously just a point in the French bocage where two railway lines happen to cross. Nobody seems to have heard of Lison and it doesn't have any facilities. Very quickly we are in conversation with a young English lad who had hoped to find his fortune by means of his guitar, flute and clarinet somewhere in France. He had not been successful and freely admitted he was going home somewhat with his tail between his legs. He also was on his bike and had a full Michelin atlas which he offered us. Since Lison is the back of beyond and we have two and a half hours to wait there, we use the atlas and time to plan the route from Lison to Carentan which, we know from past 'booze cruises', has hotels. At least by cycling from Lison to Carentan, about 12 miles, we expand our options, namely: if M le Contrôleur decides it's more than his job's worth to allow two bikes on his train we will be in a town with accommodation and will have to accept that we don't get to Cherbourg till Monday. It will be annoying but we feel we have covered the eventualities as best we can.

Happily, we get bikes and panniers onto the train. M le Contrôleur sees us and nods benignly and we know we've done it **and** without having to cross his palm with silver!

We are soon in Cherbourg and have only to get to the ferry terminal. Time is short and roads busy but we make it onto the lower deck with the lorries and within a few minutes the bow door is being raised.

This could be the end of our Great Adventure but we have actually to get back from Poole to Bournemouth along the prom at 11.30 pm.

We get home at 12.15 am after One Great Adventure!



Celebratory champagne on St Nazaire sea front