

Part 1

The Mont St Michel Way

Bournemouth to Royan



The Way to Santiago: Journal of a Pilgrimage
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Day 1

Home → Portsmouth

Bank Holiday Monday, 31 August

52ml/85km

Our much anticipated pilgrimage begins today. It is a given, when undertaking a pilgrimage, that a certain amount of hardship and privation can be expected. We just did not expect it on the first day. We wake to rain – lots of it and the urge to snuggle down in bed and drink more cups of tea is overwhelming; that is not an option, whatever the weather throws at us we must be at St James Square for 9.30 am. Moreover, we cannot be tempted into thinking we can ‘pop’ home after le Grand Départ - therein lies the possibility that we might never get away again. There is nothing for it, waterproofs, pannier covers and ‘moon’ boots must be the order of the day. This will surely spoil our send-off and deter any of our friends who were going to come along. To my huge surprise and delight, this is not so and there are many people there including some I had not even told of our adventure. How did that work? The grape-vine must be alive and well.



A prayer with Fr Denis in St James' Square, Boscombe

Father Denis blesses our enterprise and it's time to leave, we cannot delay. We feel like the newly-married couple setting off on the honeymoon – there is much kissing and chap-handshaking, followed by waves as we set off down the road into the great unknown and rain.

By Highcliffe, I have added my ‘bonnet de douche’ over my helmet to keep my hair dry. The visual effect is questionable, more practical than chic.



We make good time to Portsmouth, stopping at St John's cathedral for a stamp, the third, on our pilgrim passports. We have a great supper at Wetherspoons and head for the ferry terminal. I love the feeling of arriving at the port on bikes. It feels carefree, liberated and very bold for two OAPs. We can ride straight to the front at the check-in booths leapfrogging all cars – I feel **very** smug.



Le grand départ

We are among some 30 cyclists on the ferry and fall into that easy conversation possible between this relatively select band. One young woman is cycling to Portugal and expects to make it in three weeks! She has front **and** back panniers, is carrying her 'house' and cooker but is much younger than we are. The chap next to me is carrying three separate consignments of his father's ashes, which he plans to scatter in locations where his family had enjoyed holidays. He also lets slip that his wife doesn't know he is here but wishes she could enjoy cycling – hmmm, there's more going on here, I fancy; truly, all of life and death is here.

A little bit behind schedule, we are boarding and are invited to stow bikes in a dedicated room, separate from cars. There are plenty of ropes to lash them together.



We find our cabin and are into bed before you can say 'compostela'. Tomorrow will be an early start. Happily, the weather is looking better.

Day 2

St Malo → Antrain via Le Mont St Michel

Tuesday, 1 September

45ml/72km

We're in France - hooray! This is really Day 1 of our pilgrimage though southerly progress will not truly start until we leave Mont St Michel.

The ferry crossing has been comfortable and uneventful, barring leaping out of bed at 3.30 am thinking we had arrived in port. Memories of sleeping through the PA wake-up call in 1992 when we visited Germany with Frank, must have been lurking somewhere in my sub-conscious. On that occasion, we arrived on the car deck to find our own in solitary splendour with Frank looking somewhat anxious beside it.

I love the feeling as we set off on french soil at the start of another adventure. I feel exhilarated and ready to take on the world, especially now the sun is shining. Riding into St Malo, we collect a stamp, hereafter referred to as a 'tampon', in our pilgrim passport, and set off for a brief walk of the city walls and town with its lovely cobbled streets and enticing shops.

The distance between St Malo and Le Mont St Michel is approx 45km; one can see the Mount rising out of the bay from some considerable distance, first appearing as just a tiny 'blip' on the skyline.



Château of St Malo. Loveliest of all the channel ports



We last visited in 2007 on Manche-Med. Since then the approach and surrounds have been completely re-engineered; visitor parking is now well away from the Mount. We park bikes at, ostensibly, the last opportunity and catch the 'passeur' to take us to the mount. In medieval times, guides, known as passeurs, would escort people across the treacherous waters of the Bay of St Michel; hereabouts, it is said, the tide comes in at the speed of a galloping horse and people do drown. In the 21st century 'passeur' has acquired notoriety as being the word to describe people traffickers for illegal immigrants. Our passeur is a free shuttle bus with a driver's cab at both ends. One may stop the bus at any point along the causeway and hop on / hop off.



Le Mont St Michel

Just through the main entrance to the mount, we see our first scallop shell indicating that Mont St Michel is on the pilgrim route to Santiago. The scallop shell, in many guises, will become the leitmotif of the next thousand miles of our pilgrimage. We have our pilgrim passports stamped and head back to the bikes for the ride to Antrain where we have accommodation booked. This is the only night we have booked on the whole pilgrimage.



La Cour Horlande, Antrain is our Fawlty Towers moment. Our reservation cannot be found although Monsieur assures us there will be 'a solution'. The hotel feels like a combination of school/convent/retreat centre; it does not feel like a hotel in the normal sense of the word. At best, it is adequate but there is nothing else in this unassuming little town to which we can flee and it's getting late.

In his defence, Monsieur is desperately anxious to please but signally fails by the normal standards of hospitality. Dinner, we are told, will be taken with the eight other guests, this is always enjoyable and a great opportunity to practice my french – bring it on I say.

The meal is wholesome, if unadventurous, fare though we could do justice to twice as much. That is the beauty of a cycling trip, we can eat for England, and France, guilt-free. The other guests are suitably impressed with our project but as soon as we decently can, we excuse ourselves and high tail it for bed. It's been a long day.

Day 3**Antrain → Rennes****Wednesday, 2 September****43ml/68km**

We wake to a misty, moist morning consoling ourselves that we're close to the river and it will 'burn off'.

I was right! La Cour Horlande was once a girls' boarding school, I knew there was a familiar feel to it. Run under the auspices of a religious order, the school closed in 1975 leaving the sisters in residence for a further 20 years. The experience was not unpleasant, in fact it reminded me very much of my first boarding school in Sussex, however, Monsieur could certainly benefit from revisiting hospitality school. We bid our farewells and head off to find the church and/or Mairie for our tampon.

Antrain has certainly seen more prosperous days. Like many another french town, it now has its fair share of empty properties and closed businesses, victims of the success of 'les grands surfaces', the out-of-town supermarkets, combined with arcane french inheritance laws; it wears a slightly forlorn, unloved air. We find the church with Mairie opposite. In the church, the caretaker and local gendarme are in a flurry of excitement requiring both to scuttle from one side of the church to the other, in the manner of a Whitehall farce. The cause of the consternation - the church clock has gone into overdrive, striking one too many hours and must be corrected; of such drama is Antrain life made.

***Château de
Bonfontaine
on the
Châteaubriand
trail.***



Madame in the Mairie obliges us with our tampon and we can head out of town, direction Rennes. Tonight we are staying with Warm Showers hosts, Sylvie and Jocelyn and their young family.

Our route takes us along the Canal de l'Ille et Rance. The great advantage of canals is that they are flat and traffic free; we are bowling along effortlessly at about 15 mph and the canal towpath will take us right to the centre of Rennes.



***Beside the
Canal de l'Ille
et Vilaine -
marvellously
flat cycling***

I ring Sylvie from the centre of Rennes and she suggests we head out of town on the Nantes Road; she will meet us on her bike, a wonderfully kind and helpful gesture which we are delighted to accept. We rendezvous with Sylvie and her young son, Edern, in the seat behind his mother, and follow them to their home in the suburb of St Jacques de la Lande. We spend a lovely, happy evening with Sylvie and Jocelyn, who is the physiotherapist for Rennes Football Club. They invite us to share their supper of breton galettes which are delicious and we swap stories of past cycling adventures and triumphs. Our end-to-end of France seems more like a day trip in comparison with their epic journey through south east Asia – Vietnam, China, Thailand – all with three young children and over a period of seven months. What spirit, what fortitude! I feel fortunate to have shared an evening with such a lovely family.

Day 4

Rennes → Messac

Thursday, 3 September

39ml/63km

We wake to the sounds of a young family hurrying to get out of the house in the morning. Our hosts have been charming and welcoming and suggest that when we are ready to leave, we lock up and post the key through the letter box. We feel privileged to have shared their home with them

The plan is to return to the city of Rennes to visit the cathedral and also to change a large denomination euro note. This proves to be quite impossible at any bank or even the main PTT¹; it falls to the sacristy in the cathedral, to act as our Bureau de Change. Before leaving Rennes, we book our hotel in Messac/Guipry, although with some misgivings, it is opposite the station: in England Station Hotels are rarely a byword for grande luxe but there seems little other choice there.

*We never did discover
why there was
a model of
a NASA astronaut
on a balcony
in the centre of Rennes*



¹ Poste, Télégraphe et Télécommunications = The Post Office

By the time we are pedalling out of Rennes it is 1.15 pm, later than we would wish but it will be a short day's ride and we cannot miss out on seeing one of the great cathedrals of the journey.

Exiting from major cities is never easy and Rennes is no exception. It takes two hours and we make several unscheduled, scenic tours of the industrial estate before Rennes is finally left behind. Younger members of our family wanted us to use GPS; we felt happier and just as confident with good old fashioned paper maps, besides, GPS seemed to be not in the true spirit of a pilgrimage, for which the sign of the scallop shell and / or yellow arrow indicating the Camino should be sufficient. I may, however, be having second thoughts as our maps are getting on for 20 years old when much of this industrial estate was just a twinkle in some developer's eye. Damian bears a heavy responsibility in the map reading department on all our rides, so at times like these, I find the best policy is to stay very silent, lest anything I say would come out rather harsh and to be regretted.

Once we finally leave Rennes, we are along the side of the River Vilaine and the canal de l'Ille, making good progress and arriving at the Hotel CarRé D'as at about 6.45 pm. Despite a rather meagre star rating, the CarRé D'as proves to be excellent. It has been recently refurbished in a modern, 'quirky' style, all gun metal grey and cerise pink – it reminds us of our B&B, De Çi de Là, on Ardèche-Cévennes. It is comfortable, well-appointed, with an excellent restaurant offering an imaginative menu; we enjoy a great meal. We are also able to hitch up to free wifi. How things have changed in the ten years since we cycled the Loire. This is the go-to attribute we now look for in hotels. In 2005, I would have to buy a phone card and find a public phone; to use the internet was a luxury of which I could only dream. For us, the second bonus point of any hotel is a full length bath but CaRé D'as fails on this count. Should we ever find an establishment with both, we shall indeed have hit the jack-pot.

Day 5

Messac → Le Gavre

Friday, 4 September

31ml/51km

After a wonderfully refreshing night's sleep we're away by 10.00 am. Not a great start but better than yesterday. We won't get to Nantes in one day but it will be good to be so positioned as to arrive in the late morning on Saturday allowing us time to look around before finding our second Warm Showers host. On the domestic front Damian's washing is mostly dry bar his socks, which he attaches to his panniers letting them blow jauntily in the wind. The idea is practical but the effect is most un-officerlike; I hope they dry quickly.

The first stop is the Mairie at Guipry. Four days into our pilgrimage we have nine stamps. We are expected to get a minimum of two stamps per day, preferably from churches, cathedrals and town halls. The advice in the english passports which were sent to us first, says that one may get a stamp from a bar but 'a record exclusively of bar stamps should be avoided' – the pilgrimage is not to be viewed as an extended pub crawl.



We arrive in Porte de Roche and I notice a sign to an english garden and, as in many a french village, there is a memorial to those who lost their lives during the war.



Memorial to members of the Resistance killed at Porte de Roche

Porte de Roche is no exception and was a centre for the resistance where several were shot as a result of a simple error. On the night of 5th August 1944 a column of german tanks was approaching a vital bridge, the first tank flying a french flag. The 'maquisards', unable distinguish the uniforms in the half-light, let the column pass and were shot once the whole column had crossed over the bridge. This incident continues to be remembered annually.



Refreshments fit for a pilgrim!

We fall into conversation with the owner of the english garden and delightful manoir in the background of the previous photograph. He is English, although not the designer of the garden, and invites us in for a cup of tea. This is never so welcome. The french really have not mastered the art of making tea and we both feel we could murder for a cup. Those offering hospitality to pilgrims definitely earn 'brownie' points. Our host is charming, if somewhat louche and brings a tray laden with a coffee pot of tea and wafer-thin porcelain cups and saucers. We enjoy this refreshment sitting on his lovely stone terrace while he tells me that he too walks a section of the camino each year with his sister.

Five days into our pilgrimage and we have already met many people who have walked, or continue to walk their way to Santiago. We take our leave thanking him for his hospitality.

A short while later we take a side trip to a site of menhirs – les Demoiselles. Brittany is well known for standing stones, think Carnac, but also many lesser-known examples. We visited Roche aux Fées on Manche–Med where a local was pleased to tell me that they were 'better than the pyramids'. Les Demoiselles, the Damsels, are not quite so impressive as Roche aux Fées but it doesn't matter and I am always up for making a detour in the morning, less keen in the afternoon.

Shortly afterwards we pass through the curiously-named Guéméné-Penfao, where we collect another tampon.

Our destination for the day was to have been Blain, but, with the stops to see the sights en route, this is a little optimistic and we stop for a necessary tea-break at the hotel La Croix Blanche in Le Gâvre, a pilgrim friendly hotel but one which has seen better days.



Monsieur le patron's son is married to a Manchester girl; we fall into conversation and enjoy his tea which he confidently believes he is making à l'anglaise. We have become so chatty that it seems churlish to leave and move on to another establishment. For better or worse, we accept his room and dinner. The former is barely adequate. The latter will be revealed in due course. In fact, dinner is tasty and imaginative but the effect is spoilt by the Christmas decorations either early for 2015 or, more likely, not removed from 2014.

We fall into bed tired and content; in five days we have cycled 210 miles.



Cross of St James at La Croix Blanche

Day 6

Le Gâvre → Nantes

Saturday, 5 September

40ml/64km

Our night at La Croix Blanche is best described as serviceable, with a very miserable breakfast, not the sort of fare to fortify the cyclist. I get the feeling that this hotel has missed out on its fair share of TLC for some few years. Monsieur has his gaze firmly set on retirement and is merely riding out this time. Sadly, I fear La Croix Blanche will join many other hotels which have pulled down the shutters for the last time. It will languish unsold and unloved, gradually falling into a sad state of disrepair like so many other businesses in Le Gâvre, waiting for new owners – it's sad!

We press on for Nantes hoping to arrive by 2.00pm an achievement which chef d'équipe thinks is wildly optimistic. In fact, much to his surprise, we do achieve it, guided the last part of the way right to the centre of the city by three delightful young lady students. I am reminded of our entry to Toulouse on Manche-Med, when it was the young nurse and her mother who led us into the city.



We finish up in front of the cathedral, a wonderful soaring, gothic edifice, sparkling white in the sunshine.

***Cathedral
St Pierre et St Paul,
Nantes***



Accommodation tonight is another Warm Showers host, but we do not want to arrive too early. Cécile and Mathias live in the Indre suburb down by the river. We passed very close by on our first trip down the Loire.

First port of call, as always, is the Tourist Office who supply us with a great town plan and tell us about the Machines de l'Île. Nantes' most famous son is Jules Verne, he of 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea fame. Known as the founder of science fiction, it is his legacy which has inspired the creation of these immense machines including, most famously, the mechanical elephant. I have heard of this and want to see it for myself. It is an amazing, HUGE construction, having all joints fully articulated right down to the eye-lids. It even 'breathes' steam; a cross between the sci-fi of Jules Verne and the mechanical world of Leonardo da Vinci. It is quite extraordinary and moves ponderously by means of a driver in a cab at the front and pushed by a motor at the back. We watch in amazement as it lumbers around the huge open

space, once part of the Nantes shipyards.



***Immense,
'breathing'
mechanical
elephant on the Ile
de Nantes***

It's a lovely warm afternoon but we have to find our hosts for the night and before arriving, want to buy a bottle of champagne as it is Cécile's birthday. As explained earlier, Warm Showers is airbnb for cyclists, although unlike airbnb, no money changes hands. One is expected, however, to take a gift, as any well-mannered guest would do, and to reciprocate by offering hospitality to other cyclists: this does not necessarily mean those who have hosted you.

Cécile and Mathias have invited friends for supper and have kindly invited us to join them. It turns out to be a double celebration as Cécile announces that they are expecting their second baby. We feel privileged to share a happy family evening; they have made us feel welcome and at home. We have also been able to put our kit through the washing machine, another great bonus.

Tomorrow we plan to be up and away by 9.00 am to be back into Nantes for 10.00am mass at the cathedral



Fantastical creatures on the carousel on the Ile de Nantes

Day 7

Nantes → Clisson

Sunday, 6 September

30mls/48km

On previous long-distance rides, we have planned a rest day every five days, generally in a city with lots to see/do. This time we decided not to spend a whole day anywhere but to make some days short, perhaps 15 miles, arriving late morning and having the rest of the day for sight-seeing. This way (we hope) our legs never forget what cycling is all about. We plan a 'three-quarter' day in Nantes and a short 25 miles to Clisson.

While at mass we collect our tampon. Since our last visit to Nantes (Manche-Med) the centre has been completely reworked. It is now spacious with wide, open block paved boulevards, and a remarkable lack of traffic. This could be a false impression as we are here on Sunday and relatively early. Just as in Bordeaux, the town planners have installed a tram system and bus lanes shared with cyclists. The whole effect is to lighten up the city. Inevitably, there are one-way streets but these all allow bicycles. One definitely feels that 'bike' is the way forward. Nantes has also introduced its own version of Boris Bikes.

Again, as in Bordeaux, there is a miroir d'eau in front of the château, though smaller than that in Bordeaux. Only later do we learn that it is being formally opened this weekend; the children and dogs are LOVING it. We spend time in the château which, by great good fortune, is free of charges, it being the first Sunday of the month. What a great idea, England could learn from this, I fancy.



Newly inaugurated Miroir d'eau, Nantes



Château of Nantes, built by François II, it was the home of Anne de Bretagne, who married not just one but two French kings

We set off for Clisson about 4.00 pm. The weather seems better and we are soon crossing the Loire. Over the many years we have visited France, we have come to learn that, once over the River Loire, the weather changes and, coupled with the change of roof style from steeply pitched slate to flatter pan-tiles, we feel we are en route for the sun. Despite our best efforts, we don't exit Nantes any more efficiently than Rennes and find ourselves almost on the slip road to the périphérique², not required!

Clisson is a delightful, flower-bedecked town and even on this September Sunday evening is agreeably busy. Situated at the confluence of the Sèvre Nantaise and Moine rivers, with an impressive castle and church; it is very photogenic and I feel it ticks all the boxes for 'honey-pot' village status. Our hotel, The Villa St Antoine is a Best Western and is great – stylish and spacious. Against our list of 'must-haves' it fails on the bath but has tea-makings in the room. This is a rare luxury in continental hotels.

² Ring road



Dinner is a culinary tour de force, majoring on presentation but nevertheless, delicious, if on the 'less-is-more' principle, not ideal for cyclists where rib-sticking carbs is the preferred option.

Tomorrow we plan a shortish ride of 30 miles to Chantonay in the département of the Charente, near where we almost bought a house 12 years ago. I never forget this event which was going to open the door to our own french dream. As things turned out, we know we would never have become cyclists and would not have had so many great adventures all over this lovely land – perhaps it was for the best.

Day 8

Clisson → St Fulgent

Monday, 7 September

24mls/38km

We have been on the road a week now, possibly a quarter of our pilgrimage done but I fancy not. We estimated 1100 miles in total and, over such a great mileage, this did not allow for side trips or, more pertinently, mistakes.

Villa St Antoine has undoubtedly earned best of pilgrimage – so far. It is stylish and great value with a buffet breakfast to die for – croissants, of course, brioches, cold meats, cheeses, fruit. We do liberate a couple of butters for our lunch but I draw the line at pocketing pieces of fruit and hard boiled eggs which I have seen others do.



***View of Notre Dame, the Romanesque church of Clisson
from the terrace of Hotel St Antoine***

Monday morning; Clisson is busy and the sun is shining – what's not to like. I feel there is enough critical mass in this lovely town to sustain it and protect it from becoming a tired backwater, however, its charm and interest becomes our undoing. We had planned to make Fontenay-le-Comte tonight after spending the morning looking at the town, château and church, all interesting and, in the words of the Michelin Green Guides, 'worth the detour'.

As we head for the church, this is, after all, a pilgrimage, I note the door to the presbytery is invitingly open. Excellent, we can get our tampon.

The chap tells us that he is 'ravie de nous voir' loosely translated as, thrilled to see us; we chat for rather longer than is prudent, but that truly is one of the pleasures of our journeys and always has been.



***The invitingly open door
to the presbytery,
where we obtain
our tampon***



We spend the morning at the château, more château fort than in the Chenonceau sense of the word, and do not leave Clisson till midday.



Château de Clisson - from the terrace of Hotel St Antoine

We stop again in Montaigu to visit the Pavillion des Nourrices and catch a glimpse of the calm setting of the nearby château.



We are never going to make Fontenay-le-Comte before 4.00 pm – it's way too late for comfort, plus it's hot and we're tired. We must find somewhere closer. At the planning stage, I had flagged up several hotels along the route and by great good fortune Hotel Les Colonnades at St Fulgent – has anyone heard of St Fulgent? – is the next village, even more fortunate, it is directly in front of us as we turn at the cross roads AND it's is open. This also is slightly surprising since many french hotels, particularly in country areas, close on Mondays. Madame has one last room to offer us, thank you, St James. Madame also points us to the laverie³ which is sited in the supermarket car park on the outskirts of town and next to the car wash. The most basic of shelter protects it from the weather. This is washing 24/7, a real benefit particularly for cyclists.

With admin details squared away, we have a delicious supper; bavarois of goats' cheese and smoked salmon starter, as good as last night's in Clisson and rather more generous – yum yum! Damian rounds off the meal with breton whiskey, a novel and, apparently, delightful experience. One wonders what the Scots would make of this. Tomorrow we promise ourselves to be up by 7.00 am and on the road by 8.30. There will be nothing to detain us as there are no tea-makings in this room.

³ Laundrette



echo: 8109/2015

Day 9

St Fulgent → Fontenay-le-Comte

Tuesday, 8 September

40mls/64km

A much better day in terms of distance but the riding has been hard, with a strong nose wind. We're away by 9.10 am, not quite as planned but sustained by a great and bountiful breakfast. Les Colonnades, while not the last word in style, was comfortable and Madame charming and helpful.

We are now in that region where our love affair with France first began in 1988 and our french dream nearly became a reality in 2003. In the event, we pulled out of buying the house at La Châtaigneraie at the eleventh hour. We are now passing signs to Bazauges en Pareds, Tiffauges, St Vincent Sterlanges, all places where we looked at houses and indeed several tas de pierres⁴ which estate agents tried to sell us as 'full of potential'. It's been such a difficult day that I even decline to make a detour to La Tardière where it all so nearly became reality.

Shortly after leaving St Fulgent we see our first walking pilgrim. In fact, he also had been staying at Les Colonnades and had made good progress, having got away much earlier than we. We stop and swap stories and learn he will finish, for this year, at Surgères. As he is our first, we ask if we may take his photo to which he agrees. As we travel, we shall meet up and recognise several pilgrims.

After lunch the riding becomes even harder. By some perverse law, miles get longer, hills steeper and panniers heavier. This is all summed up in the following bit of doggerel we made up on Manche-Med:

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

Our average speed is down to 8.6 mph, a figure I scarcely like to admit in these pages which may be read by members of CBC⁵. All in all it's a bad day and the spirits of the équipe are low. I don't say anything for fear of making concrete a suggestion of giving up. I think now might be the time to break into John Bunyan's pilgrim hymn 'He who would valiant be' – anything to lighten the moment.

⁴ Pile of stones

⁵ Christchurch Bicycle Club



***The wide open country of the Vendée.
A strong wind on the nose makes for hard, slow cycling.***

We last visited Fontenay-le-Comte on Manche Med but then only for a lunch stop. On a later house-hunting expedition, we stayed at Hotel La Fontarabie. Built in 1520 at a crossing of the river Vendée, the hotel, of the Logis de France chain, is an old coaching inn and was the centre for the trade of wool and miniature horses from Spain and mules of the Vendée. It is excellent and has had a makeover recently, also in gun-metal grey and magenta – these are obviously the go-to colours of the moment. We have another great dinner and fall into bed exhausted.



Fecha: 09/09/2019

Day 10

Fontenay-le-Comte → Surgères

Wednesday, 9 September

34mls/54km

We make a bad, aka late, start but it was a difficult day yesterday and we feel we deserve it. The weather is beautiful, warm and sunny and much less windy – bonus! Fontenay-le-Comte is a delightful town all a-bustle; I would love to stay longer. We call at the mairie for our tampon then high tail it direction St Jean d'Angely. It will be about 45 miles and nothing booked as yet.

Progress is much better, we are now crossing the Marais Poitevin, therefore flat and making 15-16 mph – a real improvement and meaning our daily average is 9.2 mph . Weather's hotting up; all's right with the world.

At the little village of Maillé, we see a sign indicating 1400+km to Santiago. This is a photo op not to be missed. It also turns out to be a pilgrim friendly house. Monsieur is kind enough to take a photo of us, refill our water bottles and puts his own tampon in our pilgrim passport adding that, if we come unstuck, we can call on him for a bed. Such is the nature of people on the camino.



***Maillé-
only 1437 kms to Santiago –
no pressure!***

Damian is finding the heat tiresome and despite good progress a stop-over in Surgères is looking attractive. It only has one hotel which is full but Madame points us to a B&B. Unfortunately, we cannot raise the owner but just as we are heading out of town Damian's eye is caught by another chambres d'hôte sign. Behind a slightly tired door which in days gone by had opened on to a fine town house, Monsieur emerges. Happily, he has two rooms from which we can choose. The house is cool, high ceilinged with graciously proportioned rooms, Patrick explains that it had once been owned by a vigneron⁶. He also comments on our CBC tops and is the first person to wonder if it is Christchurch, Dorset. Hooray, he is, in fact, the first person on all our long distance rides to guess correctly but then reveals that he has the 'inside track' in this matter. In 1982, part of his training was at the Chewton Glen, no less. We feel confident that our stay at H-de-Surgères, as the establishment is known, will be excellent, anything less would reflect badly on the Chewton Glen. Patrick is immensely proud of his town which is not large but has a beautiful, restored romanesque church.

Arriving at 4.00 pm has been a real success and we have time to look around the town, locate the Mairie for the tampon and make a judgement for the best restaurant. Unfortunately, the fair is in town and has parked itself in front of the church and Mairie, completely obscuring both. In a rather grumpy, old person sort of way, we wish the fair could be elsewhere but it will enliven the town and bring out the young bloods of Surgères, creating commerce and not to be dismissed lightly.

We have another great supper and head back for an early start;; 9.00 am would be good, can we achieve it?

⁶ Vineyard owner





Notre Dame, the romanesque church of Surgères



Day 11

Surgères → Saintes

Thursday, 10 September

40mls/70km

Breakfast is not so much fuel to sustain the hungry cyclist as a picture in food artfully arranged on a slate. Surgères is known for its butter which has AOC⁷ designation and even this every-day ingredient is presented tastefully as a baton of butter wrapped like a sweet.



***Artistic breakfast
VERY
Chewton Glen***

First, as is now de rigueur, we head for the Mairie for our tampon where we learn that, as bona fide pilgrims, we are entitled to a free coffee at the café on the square. Having only just had breakfast we don't really need it and press on.

We set off for St Jean-d'Angely, a well-known stopping point on the pilgrim route at the junction of the Mont St Michel Way and the Via Turonensis⁸. It's hard riding up long, slow, grinding hills again and somehow the pay back of the long descent never seems quite as generous as one might think. Thinking back to previous rides, I have the feeling our panniers are possibly 2kgs heavier; I must re-evaluate the contents and see what I can send home. In addition, we are both carrying two water bottles in preparation for the long, waterless areas of Spain through which we will ride.

⁷ Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée

⁸ The Way from Paris, Chartres, Tours



St Jean is our lunch stop where we find a shaded garden which seems to belong to an insurance company's office plot, we feel a bit cheeky but they don't seem to mind and the shade is very welcome.

***The Pillory fountain in
St Jean d'Angely.
Rescued from
the Château de Brizambourg
and erected as a water source
for the town in the 1800's***



***The iconic twin
towers of the Royal
Abbey of
St Jean d'Angely.
viewed from "inside"***



We spend some time in the Royal Abbey but are mindful that we have 20 miles to Saintes. This would not normally cause a problem but it's hot and hilly and we feel tired. My spirits are somewhat down and, not for the first time do I question what on earth we are doing. Aborting does not compute so it's 'ultreya', the pilgrim greeting, an all-round encouragement, loosely translated as 'onwards and upwards'.

Thankfully, we make good time into Saintes and the Office de Tourisme books our hotel.

***Arrival in
Saintes.***

***Sunset
over the
cathedral
of
St Pierre***



In Saintes, we look back with fond memories of previous visits. Firstly, in 1989 with the children and once again on Manche-Med. On the first occasion, Nikki had a seriously teenage moment and stomped off into town. She was gone for rather longer than was comfortable but eventually we made a successful rendezvous! This time we opt for a hotel on the west bank of the Charente river. Saintes is a lovely town, twinned with, amongst several towns, Salisbury, Wiltshire. Just now they are celebrating the 25th anniversary of that twinning for which several british telephone boxes have been placed strategically around the town.

Home from home in Saintes



We change quickly and are out again; the chilled white is calling me and we spend a happy evening in the old part of town, planning tomorrow when we hope to make Royan, to take the ferry over the Gironde. It is here, at Point de Grave, that our pilgrimage will enter its second stage. We have clocked 415 miles to date and my spirits are completely rejuvenated.

Day 12

Saintes → Royan

Friday, 11 September

30mls/48km

We wake to a misty moist morning but not raining and feel refreshed by a good night's sleep and excellent breakfast. I cannot leave without capturing the town twinning sign which is on the roundabout right outside our hotel.



Damian has to visit the bike shop some way out of town to correct a problem with the front mudguard. It's all very well having bullet-proof tyres but they are fatter and frame clearance becomes an issue. While he is doing that, I go back to the Tourist office for our tampon and also to buy our lunch. Lunch is always the same formula, a baguette, cut by madame + some pastries/gâteaux, some cheese and/or sliced meat and two tomatoes. As previously mentioned, we always expect to snaffle a couple of pats of butter. It has been this way on all long distance rides and works well.



We cannot leave Saintes without a visit to the church of St Eutrope, first bishop of Saintes and patron of the city. It is also the pilgrims' church and refuge. This is the first refuge we have seen and as we pass through the gate, I wonder how many millions of feet have walked this path over the centuries happy to know they are at the end

of their day's walk. We have been happy to know that refuges are available and good value but they are basic. In the normal course of events, we feel too old for bunks, sleeping bags and communal living but who knows, perhaps at some stage on our pilgrimage, we shall have to use them and will no doubt be hugely grateful. Instead we have opted for hotels, chambres d'hôtes and Warm Showers hosts.



***St Eutrope,
Gateway to the
pilgrim refuge***

***Sign on the wall
at the entrance***



In the sublimely lovely countryside of the Saintonge, we come upon the national cemetery at Rétaud. During the closing years of WW2, the north and south banks of the Gironde at Royan and Pointe de Grave harboured pockets of german resistance, which had been maintained to prevent the Allies resupplying their armies after the invasion of France. The area around Royan was one of the last pockets to surrender. Those who died in the ensuing fight are buried in this cemetery including 129 muslims, alongside Christians and Jews. It is 70 years since those events, almost out of living memory.

Passing through the village of Thézac we come across a party of four sturdy Flemish ladies on huge, heavy-looking bikes. We stop and swap stories; apparently they had seen us yesterday in Saintes. This is rather galling, they are riding much heavier bikes with more luggage and without wishing to be uncharitable, were rather 'bigger' than we are, and yet had caught up with us. How does that work? In our defence, we do a lot of stopping and staring and 'photo ops'.



***The
Nécropole,
near Rétaud***

Meursac, an unremarkable village, is our lunch stop, from here we cross wide open landscapes to Royan. This is 'big sky' country sunflowers, corn and vines predominante. I manage to liberate some figs and grapes but find the latter sharp and not particularly juicy. The corn on the cob will be fed to the livestock; no self-respecting frenchman would consider it suitable fare for himself.



***A giant
sunflower
head***

We approach Royan and head for the office de tourisme. Ever helpful, they book us into a hotel and give us details of the ferry over the Gironde.

***Our first sight of
Notre Dame cathedral, Royan.
Most of the town
was rebuilt post 1950.***

It would have been good to have crossed the river today, but we are mindful of our scheduled Skype call to the first social meeting of Cercle Amical de Ringwood. Jackie and David have worked hard to put the technology in place in the meeting room so that we can update the meeting on our progress



We set ourselves up in a restaurant on the edge of the port de plaisance. Which has a good wi-fi connection. Unfortunately, the overall technology signally fails us; we either can hear each other, or see each other, but never manage both simultaneously and consistently. Despite allowing ourselves half an hour's grace, we can't make it work and sadly acknowledge defeat.

Royan suffered badly during the war and was almost completely rebuilt during the 1950's. There don't seem to be any old buildings of stone; the material of choice is concrete and most buildings are rather angular; the architectural influences of the day, Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer are evident. It now majors on yachting and as a tourist destination: the port is ample testimony to these pursuits, being full of sailing and power boats. Even in these mid-season days of September, the port wears its jaunty air lightly. I can easily imagine the shops and restaurants round the corniche heaving with activity in high season; for now it is subdued and as soon as we have left our table the restaurant starts closing down for the night.

Tomorrow we must be on that 9.30 am ferry over to Pointe de Grave, picking up the Voie Littorale and then pedalling for all our worth down the

Atlantic coast; it will not be difficult riding, the terrain is absolutely flat but accommodation is scarce in Les Landes; we must plan our stops carefully.

SOME WAYMARKERS IN THIS SECTION



*On trees ,
posts,
house walls*

and drainpipes

