

Part 2

La Voie Littorale

Soulac-sur-Mer
to
St Jean de Luz



dessin de H. Holbein - fin XV^e s.

The Way to Santiago: Journal of a Pilgrimage
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Day 13

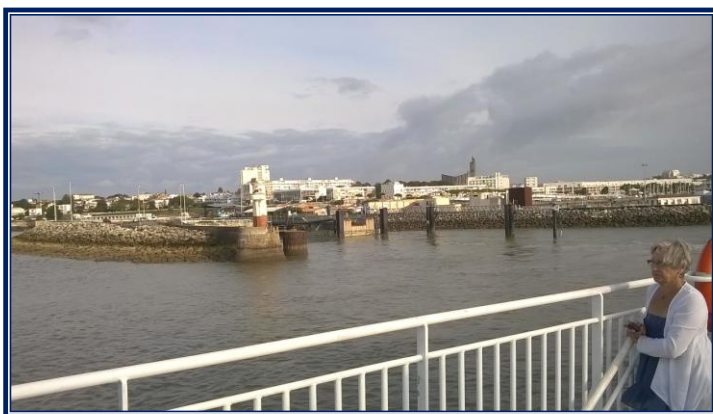
Royan → Lacanau-Océan

Saturday, 12 September

52mils/76km

We are now about half way down France and today will start Part 2 of our pilgrimage, mostly through the very sparsely populated area of Les Landes.

Despite anticipating rain, it is not – BONUS – however, we do think it is only a stay of execution. We're out of Hotel Les Bleuets and down to the ferry in good time. I love the feeling of crossing rivers on our rides. I am reminded of the chain ferry crossing at Sandbanks, always a favourite with me and also our crossing of the Gironde on Manche-Med. On that occasion we were further down-river, crossing from Blaye to Pauillac. Today, at the mouth of the Gironde, it will be a 30 minute crossing. In fact, at this point, the river reminds me of nothing so much as the immense James River in Maryland, although the James is even wider: well, we are talking America here.



View back to Royan as we leave on the ferry over the Gironde to Pointe-de-Grave

Back to the Gironde, I think of the cockleshell heroes, the daring marines' raid, executed from kayaks, on german shipping in the port of Bordeaux during the WWII. What an amazing, brilliant and bold exploit that was.

Today's ride will be flat, we know, and for that we are grateful. It will allow us to put some serious miles under our belts. In fact, we are making 15mph consistently on straight pistes cyclables¹ and roads, pretty well empty; to paraphrase another traveller on another trip; "we'm motorin'".

¹ Cycle tracks



Statue of St James at the basilica of Notre Dame de la Fin des Terres, at Soulac-sur-Mer. We are becoming very expert at homing in on representations of St James!

Soulac-sur-Mer is the first stop on the other side of the estuary and the Office de Tourisme books our room for the night at Lacanau-Océan. It is not that we cannot do it, we have upgraded our mobile technology considerably since we were last cycling in France but these offices achieve results so much more quickly

than ever we do – what’s not to like. We finally leave Soulac-sur-Mer at about 11.30am after visiting the basilica. The cyclists’ route loosely follows the walkers’ Voie Littorale along the eastern side of several large lakes.

Our lunch stop is Vendays Montalivet, unremarkable but for the fact that a group of five british bikers is taking a break at the only café/restaurant. They are jolly, ‘blokey’ sort of chaps best described as ‘seniors’, possibly reliving their mis-spent youth and we fall into that easy conversation of fellow nationals in a foreign land, swapping stories and all agreeing that being on the open road with a flexible schedule cannot be bettered. We all recognise that none of us will be able to do this for much longer, as age overtakes us. They also are heading for Spain but I doubt we will see them again, not one of them is riding a bike powered by anything smaller than a mini car engine.



Fecha: 12/09/2015



***The piste ahead –
Damian in the distance***



***the piste behind -
nothing***

The roads here are long, straight and mostly empty, an open invitation to any self-respecting frenchman to put his foot down – appuyer sur le champignon², as they would say – a lovely expression. We therefore decide that the piste cyclable may be quieter and more comfortable. We make great progress but I feel apprehensive, it feels isolated, and we feel but small, insignificant dots in vast tracts of unpopulated land, most of it not even worked – pine trees are the dominant feature. If we have a puncture here it will be uncomfortable.

Damian map-reads us faultlessly back to a classified road after discovering that Office de Tourisme has booked our hotel at Lacanau-Océan **not** Lacanau, there is a difference. To anyone in a car, the difference is 8-10 minutes, negligible; to us on bikes it's 35-40 minutes at the end of the day – not quite so insignificant. Perhaps this is the

² Literal translation – press on the mushroom(!)

lesson to us to make our own bookings, we surely would not have made that mistake.

Les Landes is almost completely featureless, its Atlantic coastline long and straight for 169 miles; it is almost always qualified by the expression 'comme une flèche'³ which describes it perfectly. It is also almost exclusively devoted to holiday-making and holidaymakers. Now that we are 'hors saison'⁴ the holiday villages and camp sites, shut up till June next year, wear a rather dejected air. Where a few weeks ago, children would have been running around enjoying the sun and freedom, there is wall-to-wall silence.

By the end of the day we have covered 52 miles and past the 500 mile point. My average is now 9.5mph, getting better. However, a major domestic disaster has overtaken me. I have left my curling wand in Royan – oh no! Anyone who has heard our presentations will know that this is my one non-negotiable item and first item into the panniers when I'm packing. There is nothing for it I must buy another - and quickly!

³ Like an arrow

⁴ Out of season

Day 14

Lacanau-Océan → Lanton-Tussaut

Sunday, 13 September

32mls/53km

It's Sunday morning at Lacanau-Océan and raining – a full metal jacket day; waterproof tops, legs and moon boots, all set off by 'wiggy bands'. This was a term coined by us in the '80s, referring to Jasper Carrott's figure of fun and long before Bradley Wiggins' triumph in the Tour de France. They are luminous, yellow, Lycra ankle bands, held fastened with Velcro and, self-evidently, rotate to catch the motorist's eye. Their sartorial credentials are definitely questionable.

We are meeting Sue and Glen Palmer for lunch today at Porte de Cassy. They have a house near Bazas and are kindly making the journey to join us, having appreciated we don't want to make a detour. This is the perfect arrangement; a lovely Sunday lunch with friends and only a couple of miles to our night's hotel. All we have to do is cover 30 miles before 1.00 pm: it should not be a problem, we do that most Saturdays round the New Forest.



On this wet morning in the dog days of the season, the signs of autumn are all about, leaves are falling thick and fast; conkers, sweet chestnuts, acorns and fungi are all by the wayside, summer will soon be a distant memory. As we pass through Le Porge a christening is piling out of the church and we seize the opportunity to get our tampon. This takes quite 15 minutes as monsieur must go across to open up the former presbytery, which, from the fustiness which hits us, has been empty some time.

***Statue of St James
at Le Porge***



At least we will have the day recorded. At one time or another on this pilgrimage, we will have witnessed all the rites of passage in life: christening, marriage and funeral.

We arrive in Porte de Cassy, a small working port, only five minutes late, not bad, and meet Sue and Glen and share a happy meal with them. Next time Sue and I meet, we shall be back in Christchurch at our french class.



We part company and find our hotel. As is usual in France, Sunday night is a quiet day; the hotel restaurant is closed. We spend what is left of the day on domestic and bike maintenance tasks. Tomorrow we hope to make it to Mimizan and then possibly only one or two more days in France before the real test of Spain begins.

***Porte de
Cassy
All the
equipment
of a fully
working
fishing
port.***



Day 15

Monday, 14 September

Lanton-Tussaut (Baie d'Arcachon) → Sanguinet

30mls/49km

It has rained heavily overnight and the wind rattling the plane tree leaves makes a sad autumnal chatter. We make a poor getaway at 9.20am; today's destination is Mimizan but before that we must visit the Auchan at Biganos to buy a new fer à boucler⁵. There can be no better destination for this purchase than Auchan, a grand surface⁶ par excellence and monument to consumerism; my supermarket of choice in France. Everything seems better than we have in England though 'just different' is probably more like it. I make my purchase but it's midday before we are back on the road out of town, making it difficult to achieve 45 miles in an afternoon and we must visit the fountain of St Jean and the medieval statue of St James at Le Teich.

The Fountain of St Jean, is down a wooded, track way off route; it is actually more suited to VTT⁷ bikes but we press on; we may never come this way again.

***Fontaine St Jean.
I do not rate the
curative
properties
of its water for
skin complaints!***

The fountain is not hugely impressive and reminds us both of Portuguese



Fireplace in the New Forest. In medieval times it was always a halt on the pilgrim way, as the waters were said to be good for skin complaints, frankly they look now like a fast-track to raging acne. Nevertheless, it feels such an adventure and I realise I am lucky that Damian is willing to persevere and seek it out.

⁵ Curling wand

⁶ Hypermarket

⁷ Vélo tout terrain

We lose a lot of time at Le Teich, waiting, with a couple who are trying to arrange a funeral, for the priest to show up. Eventually he arrives and tells us he has just come back from walking his camino as far as Logroño. He's expecting to spend some time at home before returning to Logroño, planning to arrive in Santiago in early November. His earnest wish is that he arrives before the snow. Unfortunately, we fail to see the medieval statue of St James which has been removed to the Mairie, now closed for lunch; however, we do obtain our tampon.



We leave Le Teich at 2.00pm and the rain, which we knew was forecast, arrives. We are riding alongside the perimeter fence of a military installation where opportunities to pull over and don waterproofs are limited but eventually this is achieved in the shelter of some trees but not before we are soaked. Not for the first time I wonder what on earth I am doing when I might be at home in Bournemouth doing something useful like putting the garden to bed. Although we have a hotel in Mimizan booked it is 25 miles away and we won't arrive before 7.00pm earliest, suddenly a bed in Sanguinet seems a much better option. We fall into the tourist office just as she is pulling down the shutters and gratefully accept B&B at La Renardière a handsome 1930s building on the outskirts of town.



The wooded track to the St Jean fountain

Damian reinstates the signing!

Day 16

Sanguinet → Moliets Plage

Monday, 14 September

59mls/93kms

In its heyday, La Renardière was a handsome 30s style house; today it could benefit from a little bit of money and lot of TLC, however, Monsieur has been kind enough to do our washing so who are we to complain? The bathroom also has a super-efficient space heater – excellent for drying waterproofs.

It's raining again, we seem to have had a lot of the stuff this trip; the full top-to-toe ensemble is de rigueur. Sadly, my waterproof legs, bought for the Loire, have completely disintegrated. Much as I might think I can muddle through in the hope of no more rain, this is not sensible, if they catch in the wheels, I could come seriously unstuck, it's not worth the risk. We stop at SuperU for new 'legs', coffee, 'stickies' and general respite. That is the beauty of cycling, we can eat for France and England completely guilt-free, in the sure and certain knowledge it will all be worked off. The down-side is that we don't get away from SuperU until after midday. It will be another hard push to make Moliets-Plage before 4.30-5.00pm. Anything later than this and I begin to feel anxious: any ideas of exploring 'off-piste' dismissed out of hand.

The guide to the Voie Littorale tells us that we must not miss the Clocher Porche – the bell tower – at Mimizan. It contains one of the oldest representations of St James as pilgrim. Only metres away is a modern representation of the pilgrimage proclaiming (only!) 1000km to Santiago. We are just in time to catch the guide's explanation of the sculpture but as far as the statue of St James is concerned, he is recognisable only by his staff, his scallop is completely obscured.



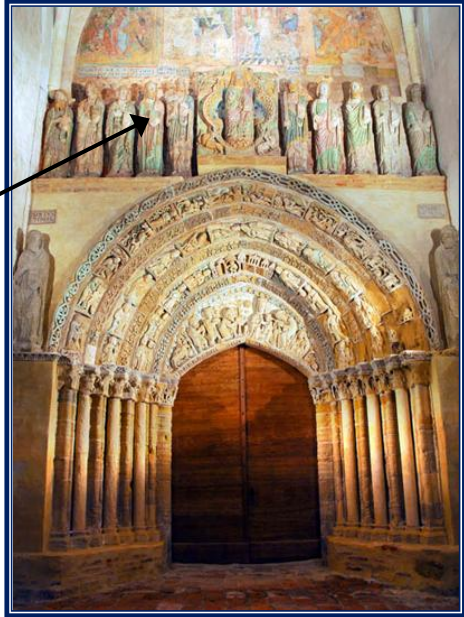
***Modern stainless steel
representation of the scallop shell
at Mimizan.***

***Oh good, it says
only 1000km to Santiago,
so that's a relief!***



*The 13th
century
clocher
porche,
Mimizan*

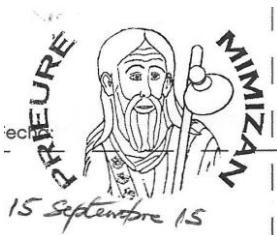
St James



We head back to the road and out of town, we have 30 miles to cover and it's 3.30pm but it will restore our average daily mileage which has slipped rather badly. Fortunately it's flat and we're speeding along until it starts to rain and once more we must do 'wets' routine. It is surprising and frustrating how long vesting and divesting takes.

We fall into Hotel L'Océan at 8.00pm, much too late for comfort but beggars and choosers we do not even change, mindful that, out of season, establishments close if punters fail to materialise. In fact, Le Cave aux Moules is very agreeably busy and I have a bucket of moules marinières⁸ TO DIE FOR!

Tomorrow could well be our last day in France and then the fun really starts. I will be sad to bid farewell to lovely, lovely France where we feel utterly at home.



⁸ Mussels in wine, garlic and cream

Day 17

Moliets Plage → Bayonne

Wednesday, 16 September

39mls/63kms

Hotel L'Océan has been a great stopover and serves a generous buffet breakfast; we fill our boots.

Today the Spanish border is in our sights, more or less what we expected; daily average a little under par. The guide suggests we can use the piste all the way to Bayonne, the obvious advantage being traffic free, the disadvantage (according to Damian) is that it can be longer, circuitous, with a lack of signs. Nevertheless, we do use the piste through the pines and round residential areas of towns. We pass a couple of pilgrims on foot one of whom has walked 38 km by 11.00am; we've done 18 km on bikes – we need to up our game! We also pass a tightrope walker practising his routine.



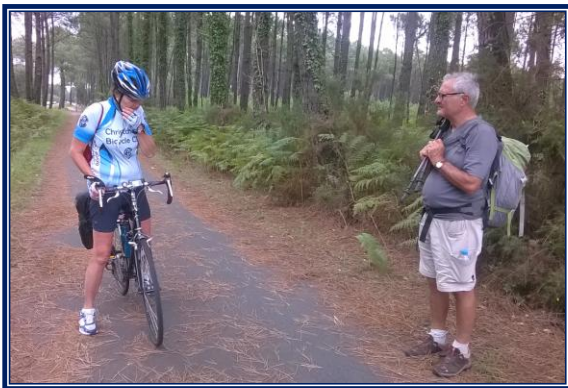
***The coast at
Moliets-Plage –
almost deserted***

The areas of Hossegor and Capbreton on the coast are rather more upmarket as befits the yachty types. There is serious money afloat in the port of Capbreton, although the town seems somewhat at a loss without its full complement of holidaymakers. We find an excellent bar with outside tables and Monsieur is happy for us to use one for our picnic lunch. This seems extraordinarily generous, we know several pubs in Dorset who would not countenance such an idea.

The lack of consistent signing means that we make rather a meal of exiting Capbreton but eventually find the piste and start the long run in to Bayonne, stopping several times for directions. Office de Tourisme finds a great, hotel, well placed for walking back into town. Hotel le Bayonne is über-chic, all glossy marble and chrome, the sort of

establishment where guests arrive pulling matching, wheeled luggage, not struggling in with two dusty panniers and 'helmet hair'; we feel uncomfortably conspicuous.

***Cycling pilgrim
meets walking
pilgrim – not sure
what I am thinking
about here; I seem
to be puzzled about
something!***



***Bridge over the river Adour; the two
spires of Bayonne cathedral just visible***

Our room is spacious, the bathroom a veritable magnum opus of riven slate and downlighters. Once changed, we feel better able to hold our own and head into town for sight seeing. We find the cathedral but it has just closed; we will have to see it before we leave tomorrow.

The riverside is packed with restaurants; it is difficult to choose – well, almost. I chose confit de canard, always my go-to choice in France, and Damian minced veal, which is NOT his go-to choice and, he admits, a mistake. We fall into bed, having not made the border today, it is but a short distance tomorrow.



Day 18

Bayonne → St Jean de Luz

Thursday, 17 September

18mls/28kms

We set a record today ... for the wrong reasons – 16 miles in total. At this rate we won't arrive in Santiago before Christmas. However, in our defence we cannot leave without visiting the cathedral and this is followed by a very difficult exit of the city with some wrong turns.

First things first, Hotel le Bayonne is everything an international hotel should be. We are up and packed, leaving the panniers in the luggage store by 9.00am a real achievement; in England we only stir from our bed POST three cups of teas. We head for Les Halles for the true french breakfast experience: this is system shock writ large but in fact the plan is false economy in both time and money – note to self: take the hotel breakfast however expensive it seems.



Bridge over the river Nive and a brief interlude of pannier-free cycling

It is the greatest joy to ride unpannied bikes, they feel as light as the lean, keen racing machines of the 'roadies' and we are able to whizz round the streets of Bayonne to the cathedral, heading straight for the Pilgrim Desk to get our tampons where we are followed promptly by a party of eight Korean chaps, two men and six boys – the pull of the camino is worldwide and from the most unlikely of places.



The cathedral is astonishing, all soaring gothic, as it would be, but that we can find no statue of St James is a disappointment. We head back to the hotel to collect the panniers. Now the fun really will begin in earnest, we have only a page of the Michelin atlas for a map; most unlike us but we were unable to find anything as detailed as the french IGN⁹ maps.



***Cathédrale
Sainte Marie,
Bayonne***

I have the utmost faith in Damian's map-reading capabilities. The piste starts well enough along the river but soon gives way to unattractive suburbs – think Wallisdown – commercial and functional rather than scenic, but then it gives up and we find ourselves on barely-made tracks alongside the perimeter fence of the airport. Something has definitely been lost in translation here!

Eventually we manage to leave Bayonne and are en route for St Jean de Luz, but now it's mid-afternoon and there is no way we shall make the spanish border by 'close of play'. We miss the piste again and find

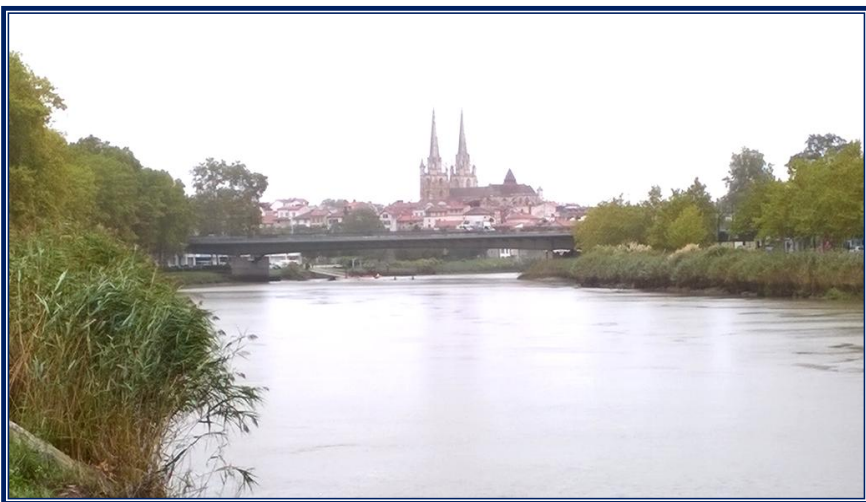
⁹ Institut Géographie National

ourselves on the long main road, running downhill into the town. It's a wonderful freewheel and quick, but we're getting scarily close to rush hour and the french are hurrying home to their 'apéros'¹⁰.

In St Jean de Luz, we fall into the Office de Tourisme who again find us a great hotel; we are showering by 6.00pm – result! This is much better.

The recommendation for supper is Chez Kako, a short walk away: it's a lively restaurant and definitely where it's at in St Jean. The diner at the next table is west coast american, scheduled to meet his daughter at St Jean Pied de Port on the French side of the Pyrenées, to embark on two weeks of walking the camino together. What a lovely thing to do; he reminds me of the dentist in the film 'The Way'. We have an excellent meal – steaks with interesting vegetables and chips to die for!

Bon nuit la belle France! Tomorrow, hola España and a Warm Showers night in Irura.



***Last view of Bayonne cathedral
The piste deteriorates badly from here.***

¹⁰ Evening drinkies - aperitifs

HELP FOR TRAVELLERS AND PILGRIMS ON THE VOIE LITTORALE



At Le Vieux Boucau

*On the piste cyclable
and in Bayonne*

