



Quarryside campsite at Banks, near Brampton

Northern England

Wall no barrier

Adam Edwards persuaded his partner to take her first tour

MY PARTNER JANE had never been on a cycling holiday. She'd only started riding on the back of the tandem the previous year, and she'd last been camping 20 years ago. So how could I get her to go cycle camping? The answer was history. Jane cannot resist old stones, and I'd come up with a zinger: Hadrian's Wall.

The plan was short cycling days, camping for at least two days on each site, and three days of rides without the bags. Highlights were South Shields Fort, with its gateway and barracks, and Chesters Fort, where we coincided with the Clash of the Romans – people hitting each other with wooden swords and wearing reproduction shoes.

At Vindolanda we saw actual Roman shoes, 1,900 years old, plus some remaining sections of the wall. Much of Hadrian's Cycleway is nowhere near the wall, however. It does take you past the Tyne, along the older Stanegate, through nice countryside, and up and down some impressive hills.

A hundred miles is a day's ride for some, whereas it took us ten. But going slowly, we saw unique treasures and learned much. On arrival in Carlisle came the vital question: would Jane ever do a trip like that again? Yes, she would. Success!

Europe

Long Johns, long journey

Neil Stirling and Ann Nicholson rode 3,000 miles across Europe from Istanbul to Cumbria

The long Johns had an unexpected role to play. But I'm getting ahead of myself. At the start, in Istanbul last April, our only plan was not to have a plan. We just wanted to cycle the breadth of Europe and experience its differences.

Everyday hospitality eased us along in searing heat. Chocolate was passed through a car window: "Energy, energy!" Workmen making lunch for six stretched it to eight. "We Turkish are very hospitable, no charge."

Bulgarian and Romanian villages seemed deserted by the young, who'd gone west, leaving children with grandparents. The countryside was resplendent with beautiful verges of wild flowers, butterfly nests, caterpillars emerging, birdsong, and a deafening frog chorus. Storks were nesting.

Shipka Pass in the Balkans was a real test: 1,190m of climbing, snow-covered peaks and a freezing descent. "You are two tough guys," observed the worst-dressed man I've ever seen – trousers hanging, elastic gone. Our ruffy-tuffy image was destroyed next

day when we told two teenage girls about the hospitality we'd received. "We can understand that," they said, "you two are so cute."

We left the Muslim call to prayer for Christian church bells, and swapped mosques for cathedrals. We passed through Belgrade, Budapest, Vienna, Mainz, Koln. Then we encountered the industrial cathedrals of the West: Audi, Bayer, BASF. It was a long and varied ride.

And the long Johns? I was refused admission to the dining room of a posh hotel by the maitre d' as I was wearing shorts. Decorum was satisfied by long Johns covering the calves. Ann said I resembled Max Wall.



Top: The Iron Gates on the Danube
Bottom: Budapest



Above: Rocamadour in the Lot department
Below: Another benefit of group tours



When in 'Rome'...
The pique-nique was invented in France

France

All fixed for France

*Lack of gears wasn't going to keep **James Palmer** from his French tour*

PROBLEM: I'D BEEN INVITED to stay with French friends on the Île de Noirmoutier in late August but had no touring bike. The alternatives were a road bike plus tiny rucksack or a fixie with panniers, lights, and mudguards.

No contest. I had doubts about my fitness but thought brains might triumph over brawn. Using Michelin's yellow 200-series maps alongside the maps.me application on my aging iPhone, I plotted a course using *routes departementales* ('D' roads), and *voies communales* ('V' or 'C' roads) and avoided crossing river valleys. I was concerned about my 50:17 gearing but decided that if it got too steep, I'd swallow my pride and walk.

Other than a light but persistent headwind, only the 36°C heat cycling to Noirmoutier and the long descents posed problems. The Passage du Gois was bumpy but cut a few kilometres on the second day, and six days spent on the island were delightful, pottering around the salt marshes with my French 'family'.

Returning home after over 500 miles and 6,000ft of climbing, the striking aspects of UK were the terrible road surfaces and the litter, both absent in France. Did I have to walk any hills? Yes, two – both within ten miles of home!

France

A Dordogne win-win

*Second prize in Cycling UK's Grand Draw changed **Roger Thomson's** attitude to touring*

After a less-than-wonderful organised tour 20 years ago, I wasn't keen to repeat the experience. Then, out of the blue, I had a phone call to say I'd won a cycling holiday for two in France: second prize in the Cycling UK Grand Draw!

The choices offered by Green Jersey Tours, who provided the prize, were many. I settled on a week in the Dordogne and Lot with my brother. The daily distance of 50ish miles meant that my occasional cyclists would need to train. So we did – sporadically.

When the date arrived, a handy flight from Exeter to Bergerac led to our collection at the airport and

provision of two bikes. The hotels, cake stops and restaurants were all great, as was the wonderful scenery, and Green Jersey made it all so easy.

I wish I could say the same about the Dordogne hills. Our lack of training rapidly became evident, as we trailed the other dozen riders. By the third day we seemed to get into the rhythm and our legs didn't feel so bad.

The advantages of going on an organised tour were clear: pre-planned route on quiet roads; pre-arranged hotels and restaurants; and, of course, carriage of all our luggage. In addition, there was a great deal of banter with a range of new people.

The only issue for us was not being sufficiently prepared for the daily distances, but that was our own fault. And we could have brought our own bikes, or at least our own saddles, to alleviate our aching rears. But overall, our free cycling holiday in one of France's most picturesque areas was fantastic. We're preparing for another tour in 2020!



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