

Day 1 - March 1st Weymouth to Athens

Although it should really start at day minus one, with much careful packing for ten weeks. We also had to break the tandem into three - it has high tech stainless joints in the frame - and put it into its bags together with enough packing to defeat the baggage handlers. Due to the intransigence of SW Trains in taking away what were excellent facilities to carry bikes we were forced to hire a car to get to the airport. Instead of the cheap mini we ordered Avis delivered a two litre limo, and the free upgrade made packing the tandem easy. So we were up at 5.30am and all locked up and out soon after 7am. Anne saw the sunrise over Portland Harbour, a regular and beautiful event which she usually sleeps through.

Before 11am we were unloading and thankfully dumping the car at Luton Airport. We were a little worried about the check in but need not have been as our oversize and unwieldy bags were taken with much good humour. The flight was on time into Athens and we were pleased to collect our three lumps of tandem from the oversize collection point by 7pm. You certainly don't get a free lunch on easyJet but it is difficult to fault the service. The flight was only £39 each including tax and the whole cost of getting from Weymouth to Athens for both of us was just under £150. Amazing, but then it is out of season.

By 8pm we had the tandem together and the bags on. Fortunately everything worked, which does great credit both to St John Street Cycles who made the bike and to the baggage handlers who took care of it. It was a good thing it did because we had ten miles of urban riding in the dark to get to Jennifer's flat in central Athens. Greek time is two hours ahead of the UK, so with the time zone shift it was quite dark. Athens is full of heavy traffic and densely packed high rise buildings. It is also hilly. In the dark it seemed pretty much the same as many other large southern European towns. We emerged from our back street route into the centre and were lucky to meet a local cyclist (the only one to survive?) who pointed us in the right direction. We found Jennifer's apartment block and were warmly welcomed to the top floor with its view over Athens towards the floodlit Acropolis and other surrounding hot spots. Jennifer, one of Anne's few remaining school friends, did a Shirley Valentine in the 1960's. Food, chat, wine and 1960's music were excellent and we eventually made it to bed by 3am. By the way, the tandem had its own place in the basement to keep it safe from "the Albanians".

Day 2 - March 2nd Athens

We can have a day off before we even start. We awoke to bright sunshine and by 11am had managed to have breakfast. Jennifer showed us the way down into the square and we hired a taxi to the Acropolis site. The cab wiggled its way through the streets for ages before letting us out at the bottom of the hill from which we walked up to the famous ruins in bright sunshine. It was not hot but very comfortable. The Parthenon and surroundings were everything that we expected. The proportions are perfect and the views over Athens wonderful. We were kicked out when it closed at 2.30pm and had a pleasant lunch in the sunshine at a pavement café. After a wander around a local market we caught the metro train back part of the way and then an electric trolley bus to Jennifer's. By now it was 5pm and she had a very nice lunch ready for us but we are beginning to drink too much already.

It is a special night in Greece tonight in preparation for "Clean Day" which is the Monday before Lent starts. The young people put on fancy dress and Jennifer's daughter Joanna brought her friends in to get ready. The young ones went out to eat at around 11pm and Jennifer made us some pizza with more wine and chat. We managed an extra meal today but I reckon we needed it on the grounds that again we didn't get to bed until 3am.

Day 3 - March 3rd Athens to Aegina

Not surprisingly we did not get up very early, emerging onto the street at about midday. After some photos and fond farewells Jennifer, who had looked after us so well, launched us into the seething cauldron of Athens traffic. Ken needed all the skills and guiles learned in 25 years of London cycling to cope with the nine miles to Piraeus Port. We were soon running red lights just like the natives, and, the length of the tandem permitting, weaving in and out of the traffic just like the motor scooters. When Anne had her eyes open she commented that Athens drivers were less inclined than British to endanger cyclists on purpose, which does not say much for the British motorist. Again the tandem performed perfectly and its good handling really came through. We were pleased to see ships in front of us and cycled slowly round the waterfront area till we eventually found the boats for Aegina. We bought a ticket at a kiosk and were directed to a small passenger boat and wheeled the tandem into the passenger cabin. It was due to leave at 1.30pm and certainly started its engines but they soon died and we were directed off the boat because it was "too rough". We then got a refund and bought a ticket for a car ferry which left at 2.30pm. And it was not rough.

Aegina is only about 20 miles from Athens and most of the way we could see the Parthenon on the sky line, but what a contrast. Aegina town came alive when the ferry passengers passed through, but once they had gone it was a quiet seaside place. There were several bars and we made the locals' day by cycling by. We went south along the coast road which was not too hilly and booked into a little hotel at the fishing village of Perdika. We think we were the only residents and had a marble floored en-suite room overlooking the sea and distant mountains. After watching the impressive sunset over the mainland we walked around the sleepy place and bought food from the supermarket for an evening meal. Marble floors make it easy and relatively safe to cook using our methylated spirit fuel Trangia stove. We had a very nice meal of soup followed by kidney beans and pasta washed down by the local Mytho beer. This, by the way, is strong and sweet, rather like the French stuff people bring back from booze cruises and infinitely better than Heineken which is the alternative. We finished with fresh fruit. The room and food cost us around £20 so it was pretty good value.

Day 4 - March 4th Aegina

Sometimes we manage to get things right and on this trip, rather than ride lots of miles on the first few days, we are taking time to acclimatise. When we awoke and looked out over the sea it was a lovely day, sunny with no wind. After paying we spent time chatting to the couple running the hotel. He was Greek and she a Geordie who has been here about five years. Apparently the tourist map which we got yesterday showed roads that didn't exist. I suspect it had been prepared by a marketing person trained in Peter Mandelson's office. We back tracked down the coast road to Aegina Port where we landed yesterday. Rather than move on to Poros as planned we booked into a hotel and, having dumped the luggage, cycled up to the top of the island to visit a mini version of the Parthenon. We then descended steeply into the main beach type holiday centre on the island. It was very quiet and we spent a pleasant couple of hours sitting on rocks beside the sea, eating and dozing and taking pictures of those dozing in the sun to embarrass them. We had hoped to find a minor road back along the coast shown on the map but, on making enquiries, the stoker established that the road did not go that way "because of problems with the mountain". It just goes to show just how much effort stokers are prepared to put into avoiding a little bit of a climb. Anyway it was all to no avail and up the hairpin bends we went. We did manage to join the coast road after the descent and had a very pleasant undulating ride back to the hotel. After checking the ferry for Hydra tomorrow we shopped and again ate in. We know from last year's experiences that it is worth taking advantage of opportunities to eat in because they may not

happen often enough. So we have only cycled about two thirds of our proper mileage today although it was quite hilly.

Day 5 - March 5th Aegina to Hydra

I said yesterday that we are starting slowly but I did not expect it to be this slowly. Those only interested in cycling should fast forward to tomorrow. We got up early to get the 9.10am boat to the island of Hydra. This quite large and comfortable ship stopped several times before we unloaded the tandem out of the side door onto the quay. I don't think they have heard of Zeebrugge here but on the other hand they are in and out within a few minutes. We knew Hydra was car free but were surprised to be told by the harbour policeman as we landed that it is also bike free. As we wheeled the bike along the quay we were approached by a room seller (no, Reuben) and booked in for the night.

As Hydra is motor vehicle and bike free we couldn't see any way to get the tandem out of the town. It is built around the harbour like an irregular amphitheatre and what with steps and narrow streets it did not seem worth half carrying the tandem just to use the five miles of road shown on the map. We did however walk about three miles along the coast in lovely sunshine and silence. We then did touristy things, looked in shops, had a beer at a pavement café, and had dinner in a taverna. We did wonder whether the tandem would fit onto the small hydrofoil type ferry to the mainland but then tomorrow is another day.

Day 6 - March 6th Hydra to the Peloponnese mountains

When one reads good books if the story is told in the first person you can be fairly sure that he or she got to the end. On the other hand if you read Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy they are more explicit so I will say that no one suffered today and we did arrive.

We packed quite early and went for another walk around the town. It is fascinating to see a modern society working completely without cars or motor bikes. The only vehicle we saw was a bin lorry. All supplies in or out come by boat and are taken onwards by donkey or handcart. Yet everything seemed to work normally. No car or related problems would certainly reduce the Weymouth CAB workload so it should improve the quality of life in Hydra.

The weather had changed and as we wheeled the loosely loaded tandem down to the harbour a gale force wind hit us. We were, of course, early for the 11am hydrofoil and we asked the harbour master if it would run, as there was a large ferryboat twenty minutes later which would take us on in only slightly the wrong direction. We were also worried about getting the tandem onto the hydrofoil. They are called Flying Dolphins and the superstructure is cylindrical like an aircraft with quite a small door. At the rear is an open bit which the crew use to tie up. We decided that a direct approach to the aft crewman was the best approach and while Anne relayed our bags into the cabin Ken ensured that the tandem was not lost over the side as it was loaded on board. We took our aircraft style seats for the 30 minute journey to Ermioni on the mainland. It was quite exciting as the hydrofoil headed downwind in large seas and then accelerated and rose out of the water. The motion was uncomfortable but it was a very fast trip and a small boat would have been worse.

At long last we are now properly on the road and climbed up into the hills towards our planned destination of Didima. After about ten miles we stopped for lunch in a village square. It still felt cold in the wind but there was no sign of rain. Soon after lunch as we continued onwards and upwards a passer-by came towards us with words of encouragement and tangerine oranges. The stoker accepted them without stopping pedalling, and she peeled them and we ate them as we went along. We don't doubt that the stokers' union will have a view on such actions. We carried on to Didima and arrived by 3pm. It was too early to stop so, having taken on water and made sure

that we had enough supplies if we had to camp, we continued on up into the mountains. We now had two hours of steady climbing. It must be a sign of our age but we are now down to a steady 3.5mph on mountain passes. I'm sure we used to do it quicker but the tandem is very heavily laden. During this climb an enthusiastic local stopped his car in the road in front of us and reversed back and offered us a lift. What nice people the Greeks are. We actually quite like mountain passes but even if we had accepted I am not sure how he could have carried us, the tandem and all our luggage.

As we passed through several villages without any sign of accommodation the stoker was becoming rather agitated. She had not experienced wild camping before and it began to look like the only option. We also think it is not permitted in Greece. With only about an hour to go until dark and the nearest possible accommodation over the hill and miles away we started looking for a suitable spot. With some difficulty we found a flattish spot about 300 yards uphill from the road and not visible from it. It was hidden by olive trees and sheltered from the strong wind by a large rock. We did our best to clear away large rocks and soon had our tiny goretex tent up, putting the bike bags under it to protect it a little from the rough ground. Dinner was no problem with onion soup followed by pasta and beans, fresh fruit and tea. Washing up was quite a problem as there was no water on this camp site or indeed anywhere else on the mountain as far as we can tell. We did our best to wipe the plates clean and with no light other than our bike headlight decided to get into our sleeping bags.

Day 7 - March 7th the mountains to Mili

It was not a bad night. The goretex tent is very cramped but it works well and we get no condensation. We have good three season sleeping bags and use self inflating thermal mattresses which always need a little blowing up to make them comfortable. It was silent during the night with hardly a vehicle on the road below. In the far distance we could hear a dog barking. After bread, jam and fresh fruit for breakfast we were packed and on the road with about an hour of climbing. At the top we could see the mountains which we will climb into tomorrow and they are snow covered. We then had a rapid hair pin bend descent almost down to sea level. We were soon into a fertile plain by the sea and cycling through orange groves. It would have been possible to pick them without stopping but we are just too law abiding. Anyway the stoker does not think it is part of her duties to go scrumping.

We stopped for lunch in a medium sized village called Drepano and shopped and then ate lunch sitting on a seat in the sun beside the village tap. Children came by on their way to school wearing masks, women brought plastic bottles to fill with water and tractors went by loaded with oranges. Everyone seemed to ignore the local one way system signs as we did. In the afternoon sun we pedalled on in increasing traffic to the large seaside town of Nafplio. We left as soon as possible and continued for eight miles around the bay before stopping at Mili. It was only 3pm but we felt we needed a room tonight and to go further would mean starting our next ascent into the mountains. With some difficulty we eventually found a basic but comfortable room which only cost £10. We then had a chance to do chores etc before our neighbours invited us for coffee and an exchange of language tuition. They are Albanian immigrant workers and are currently picking oranges. They are very nice people and obviously very keen to learn. That by a fluke of our nationality we have a so much better standard of living seems unfair and yet we are not going to give it up. It is difficult to reconcile this with the view of what we do with the apparent "economic asylum seekers" we have in the UK. We then walked along to the local café for dinner. Anne had a very poor meal which is not good for her legs or well being but we will try to make it up with tea, bread and jam.

Day 8 - March 8th Mili to Tripoli

The Greeks seem to be very nice and friendly people. The lady at the room helped us down with our baggage and then we went along the main road to the shops. Anne went into the shop while Ken entertained the local children who wanted to try out their English. After exchanging names the kids asked where we were going. When Ken said Tripoli they immediately said that no bus went that way. Realising their mistake they burst into laughter. So with all our water bottles full and enough food for lunch we went south looking for a minor road on the left. The main road was fairly quiet but we wanted to try the pretty route. There was some doubt about whether it went through because in the planning Ken had used a yellow highlight pen. This made it impossible to tell whether we would be going along minor roads or forest tracks. Still, nothing ventured nothing gained, and it was down hill back so off to the left we went. After a little way we stopped at an orange grove and asked a couple of workers about our plans. It was a very pleasant but complete waste of time. Laurel had no idea but took great interest in the map and Hardy was completely intimidated by Laurel. We honestly think that they had never seen a map before and had little knowledge of the area beyond where they lived. Some of those who have been on Ken's rides probably have thought much the same about him.

We went onwards and upwards and used the nearby railway line to confirm that we were going in the right direction. It was wonderful mountain country and, although we quite often saw people working in the fields, vehicles were few and far between. After about ten miles we came to a mountain village and the road zig zagged up so steeply that we were forced to use bottom gear (which is about a 20 inch wheel). It was at this time that we were deafened by dogs which were accompanying a worker leading a donkey loaded with branches. It took some time to be rid of them because the donkey track was straight up the zig zags and we were gaining height at about the same speed.

Soon after this we came across a large blue sign all in Greek but with the unmistakable circle of stars, the EC logo. The road became unmade and continued in this state for a further six miles. As we went up we came across surveyors planning the surfacing of the road and a tortoise at least 12 inches long crossed our path. We think the days of tortoises crossing the road could be numbered so we took its photo, tapped its shell in a friendly way and moved on.

We sheltered from the sun under an olive tree to have lunch and confident (sic) that he was near the top the management took his siesta. As we emerged into a large mountain and descended steeply he thought he was right but after only a few minutes we were climbing again and it was beginning to tell on the legs. When we finally crossed the pass we descended very gently into a flat high plain for the eight mile ride against the wind into Tripoli. It was now getting on for 6pm and getting cold. The weather we have had is hard to describe. When the sun shines it feels comfortably warm but in the shade or as soon as the wind blows and at night it feels very cold. The locals are all wearing winter clothes and have their central heating on. It is a harsh climate. As we gained the centre of Tripoli we came across the Arcadia Hotel. It is a B standard which is somewhat more highly graded than others we have stayed in but we booked in anyway. The room with shower, TV and heating cost £24 and gave the stoker the chance to get the washing done. We ate at a local coffee bar which was not ideal but we could not find a decent restaurant in our exhausted and hungry state. At least UK style fast "food" has not reached here. Its not often that we spend a whole day climbing but the scenery, orange groves, olive trees and snow-capped mountains made it worth while.

Day 9 - March 9th Tripoli to Stenmitsa

The stoker started off by having a bad hair day. Not only did she have a sniffle but she was also concerned that we had another hard day in the mountains with considerable doubt about where

we would be sleeping tonight. Some of it was also probably caused by the extreme heat of the hotel which at least made a good job of drying our washing. Once out of the hotel we went in search of methylated spirit (no, not for drinking but for the cooker) and the town hall. We found the meths at a chemist and we found the town hall in a degree of Greek confusion. Anne managed to extract from them a list, in Greek hieroglyphics, of hotels. Having decoded some of it she established that several hotels were on our planned route. This cheered her up no end and even the start of the first climb didn't deter her. Navigation out of this large town was quite tricky, but if one stops with a map in Greece, or even without, passers by are soon lending a hand. On this occasion a car driver stopped and gave us very satisfactory directions which included an indication of the steepness and the bends on the mountain roads.

We were soon experiencing these and some very short downhill sections were always paid for by even longer climbs. Again, like yesterday, the mountain scenery was spectacular but it was different. The orange groves and olive plantations were replaced by pine trees and mountain pasture. We even came across a stream with running water. Lunch was taken in the sunshine overlooking snow capped peaks which rise to 1850 metres. Rather than arrive late the stoker managed to keep the management awake and, after another hour of climbing, we were above the snow line and it became very cold, particularly in the shade. A puncture here would have been less welcome than usual. We probably reached about 1000 metres height on the road but do not have an altimeter. The descent was about five miles but relatively gradual which was reassuring because we did not want to lose too much height. It was also better taken slowly because it was easier to miss the odd patch of ice. Quite early, and about five miles from our planned destination, we came across a quaint but largish mountain village. Much to our surprise it had a hotel and we were able to check in provided we promised to leave tomorrow when they are fully booked. We enjoyed sitting in the sun reading and later, after eating, picking up our first lot of emails. It was a very nice end to the day.

Day 10 - March 10th Stemnitsa to Olympia

The view from the balcony in the early morning was completely beyond the early morningness of the stoker. (Mind you, as mentioned before, she has hardly ever seen the sun rise over Portland Harbour.) We were above the clouds which is surprising as we must have been well below 1000 metres in height. The village was both below and above us on the mountain in the sunshine. Breakfast was included in the very low price of the room and it was full German which should mean enough to last all day. As we were the sole residents it didn't quite work out that way because we were too embarrassed to take very much of the left overs. We were however, despite this excess of food, on the road by 10am (that is 8am British time). We had about five miles to do on the main road before deciding whether or not to cut through the mountains on minor roads. For the first five miles the views from the main road were spectacular and we hardly saw another vehicle. We stopped in the next village to buy supplies. The minor road we would need to take went off to the left and descended in steep zig zags so we stayed on the main road. In doing this we had obeyed the number one rule of the cycle tourist, i.e. if in doubt go up and certainly never go down. All those who have ever been on rides with us will have benefited from this great piece of wisdom even if they had not been told about it at the time.

After a short descent on the main road we were into a pleasant river valley with a fast flowing stream, gradually gaining height again. We soon saw the first sign to Olympia at 70km and began a series of descents which required a combination of nerve, balance and stupidity. One realises for real that when the cameras leave the Tour de France riders as they cross the col, probably because the motor bikes with the cameras can't keep up, that the cut and thrust of the race goes on. There were also short stretches of climbs on the descent and on one of these we saw a man exercising his dogs. He overtook us in his van with his two dogs running behind at about 10mph. We were struggling to do 5mph. As we crossed the rise and overtook the dogs the van was

nowhere to be seen. A couple of miles later we saw it parked outside a taverna. It occurred to the management that this could be an excellent way of training stokers. They would push the tandem up the hills and chase it down on foot while the management has a pleasant pint in the sunshine at the bottom.

Before lunch we unfortunately came across the EC at work again. We had to travel several miles of road, fortunately mainly down hill, where major work was taking place and the surface had been removed. It was quite tricky and the tandem got covered in dust and wet cement. Because of this lunch was delayed until a pleasant spot was found at 1.30pm with 35 miles on the computer. The afternoon saw us out of the mountains and, although we had a couple of significant climbs which we found hard work, the drift of the land was down hill. For several miles we were looking out for somewhere to stay because we had heard that it was a holiday weekend here called Clean Monday, which is the equivalent of our Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent, and everything would be booked. We need not have worried, although the stoker had, because as we passed the ruins of the original Olympic stadium a car drove by, stopped, and the driver offered us a room. We accepted the offer gratefully. We had over 50 miles on the clock which is not bad for a heavily laden tandem, so we then relaxed in the flesh pots of this tourist trap.

Day 11 - March 11th Olympia to Vartholomio

When in Olympia one has to do the culture and we were, for us, up early for that very purpose. No later than 9.30am we were off down the hill on foot to the ruins of the site of the original Olympic games. We were impressed, not just by the site itself but by its atmosphere and its age. If you believe it, and we do, 2500 years ago the Greeks were having civilised athletic competitions and using buildings that would look better than most of those they have today, which around here compare well with Texas France.

Back at the digs the tandem needed looking at. The gears had badly over ridden the back chain wheel last night. Something was rubbing when we were climbing and we wanted to get rid of the cement deposits from yesterday. Just before midday we were on the road and pleased as usual to be out of tourist places. We skipped the planned route which took us into the hills inland and continued on the main road we had been on most of yesterday. This was a mistake as the traffic was heavy. We had only gone a couple of miles when the rear chain broke. We use Sachs chains because they survive better than Shimano and recently Sachs have introduced joining links which work well. The joining link had come apart, we think because the chain jammed into the wheel last night. Luckily we found the bits in the road 30 yards back and went through the messy process of putting the chain back together.

Back on the road again we attempted to avoid the traffic by diverting left but only ended up in Pergos town centre. The consequences of this were that we did not get out into the country again till 2pm which was very late for lunch. After this, for the next ten miles, we enjoyed some very pleasant cycling on flat land rather like that near the coast in Sussex. There was lots of agriculture going on and not many hills. We eventually had to return to the main road and before long were overtaken by a decrepit looking truck. The driver stopped ahead of us and offered us a lift to Patra some 100 miles north. We declined with thanks and he overtook us again and passed an orange down from the cab which the stoker accepted. He then overtook us yet again and got out for a chat and gave us a lemon. It was very nice but by this time we were finding his attention a bit of a nuisance and also upsetting our cycling rhythm. We ducked right into the next village which was off the road and waited for a few minutes for him to get on his way. Soon we turned off the highway and found a very pleasant hotel complete with all mod cons and even air conditioning. We went to a taverna for dinner and were shown round the kitchen area and asked to choose from the dozen or so pans of goodies. It was easy for vegies, though it was probably not a good idea as well as linguistically impossible, to ask whether the vegi dishes were cooked in a meat stock.

We enjoyed a nice meal and much wine, a good end to an interesting day even if it was not ideal from a cycling point of view.

Day 12 - March 12th Vartholomio to Argostoli, Cephalonia

Ken sat up till midnight last night to finish his first Harry Potter book. He often enjoys children's books. He thinks it is a shame that Hannah could not have attended Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. She would certainly have qualified for a place when she was eleven. Ken now only has one more book to last him till he gets to France unless he takes to reading the stoker's cast offs.

It was our first grey day and quite a surprise not to see blue skies and sunshine. It was a great pity for the local people who are on holiday. We were on our way to the ferry for Cephalonia about ten miles away. We left our luxury hotel and headed along the main street. In true Greek style road and drainage work was going on so they had taken up almost all of the road surfaces and left a series of big holes. It was quite a large urban area and, distracted by the road surface, the management went out of town the wrong way. This involved a change of route and increased the estimated mileage to twelve. We then came to an EC roadwork which involved a couple of miles of unmade road followed by a steep climb. This is the highest point in the area and topped by a very impressive castle. The views would no doubt also have been impressive if the visibility had not been bad. Here we saw the first signs of celebration with people in the streets and cooking going on at the tavernas. We asked at the top of the hill for the way out of the village and were invited to the celebrations. Here again, and nobody is being blamed, we took a wrong turning and ended up doing eight miles instead of about three. In danger of missing the ferry we did these miles in about half an hour which is not bad for a loaded tandem. We arrived at the ferry port, shouted to the crew to wait for us, bought tickets and boarded by 11.55am and the ferry left on time at 12. The boat was the size of small cross channel ferry and had a restaurant, bars and shop. It also had a sun deck with an empty swimming pool. We occupied this deck for the whole trip and only one other person came up and stayed briefly. The whole ship probably had fewer than 40 passengers on board. We had our picnic lunch but drew the line at a brew which could risk setting the ship on fire. The management then had a well earned siesta. We had both enjoyed the ride to the ferry. It is pleasant to get a move on occasionally.

We were on the ship for two and a half hours and enjoyed cruising along the coast of the island before coming into a narrow inlet and reversing into the quay. Soon after we arrived we came across a carnival in full swing. Children were dressed in costumes and there were floats built on lorries and tractors. The whole thing seemed to us to be completely disorganised but run with typical Greek panache. We booked into a harbour front hotel and from our balcony gained great amusement watching the traffic chaos caused by the carnival. The Greek response was to do U turns and three point turns with the police adding to the confusion by trying to direct. It did, however, seem much more good humoured than would have been the case in Weymouth. Later we went for a stroll through the pedestrian area of this modern town and then back along the waterfront. As usual at this time of day all the shops were shut. We attempted to buy two oranges from a street trader selling them by the kilo. He would not take any money for two great big juicy oranges. In the evening we again enjoyed eating out.

At this stage in the trip a little replanning has taken place. There are no direct ferries from here to Corfu in the winter so that is out. Instead we are going to cycle to the north of Cephalonia and catch a ferry to the island of Lefkas which is connected to the mainland by a bridge. We will then cycle to Igoumenitsa to get a ferry to Italy. This will probably increase the mileage slightly but should not take any longer and we will need to buy a new map.

Day 13 - March 13th Argostoli to Fiskardo, Cephalonia

Whatever you might think of Captain Correlli's Mandolin, and we liked it or we probably wouldn't have come here, his is certainly a most beautiful island. Today the sun shone again and we had a very pleasant breakfast on our balcony overlooking the harbour. In no particular hurry we packed our bags and headed in the general direction of the shops. We need a new map for a couple of days time but the map shop proprietor was still presumably sleeping off yesterday's celebration and was shut.

We crossed over the lagoon to go north using a bridge which survived an earthquake which demolished the town in 1953. It is one of the few older structures remaining. We then came across the British Cemetery which was unfortunately locked. It did not seem to be a military cemetery from the gravestones we could see from the gate. They were for the odd English seaman plus families going back several generations. We pedalled on north along the coast road which hung onto the side of cliffs, with at times steep drops down to the sea and equally steep rises on our right to the mountains inland. We were again climbing for almost all day which unfortunately caused Anne some discomfort. She is suffering stoically from the same problem which finished Greg Lemond's Tour de France career. She does not intend to let it stop her and the management are considering what can be done to make the stoker more comfortable. A constant spray of salt water to the rear end has been considered but declared impractical. A decent saddle to replace that heap of worn out dead animal provided by Brooks would also be considered a great improvement by the management but the stoker would not hear of it.

By the time we had climbed for 25 miles the stoker said that she was not sure whether it was her legs or bum which hurt more so she is probably getting better. It was well worth the effort. Cephalonia has some superb coastal scenery which goes on for 20 miles. It is not difficult to see how Louis de Bernière was inspired and we find it amazing that there were no adverts for Captain Correlli tours. There must be plenty of ruined villages in the mountains to visit and beaches for the fisherman with his dolphins and the Germans' call girls. We eventually descended to Fishguard (our pronunciation of the Greek word has to be as good as any other non-Greek speaker). It was the usual five miles of hairpin bends. We have found so far that there is less need to brake when turning towards the mountain than when taking the bends which turn towards the drop and this has speeded our descents, safely so far. By the way, the management is not frightened by the drop - it is just that the bends are tighter on that side. Fishguard is a large village from which the ferry goes tomorrow to Vasiliki on Lefkas. It was very quiet when we arrived and we found a closed taverna with a room. I am writing this sitting on our balcony only a couple of yards from the calm blue sea.

Day 14 - March 14th Fiskardo, Cephalonia to Lefkas Town

It was not sunny but pleasant as we meandered down through the village to get the 10am ferry. It was still sleepy but came alive for a few minutes as the ticket sales person arrived on her motor scooter. The ferry came in and lowered its front on the key and the two or three cars and a couple of lorries boarded. This type of ferry is a bit like a shovel where the front bit lifts to stop the water coming in. It made its slow way across to Vasiliki on the Island of Lefkas. Ken thought Vasiliki was a down market holiday place for the Brits but it seemed a nice enough little village at this time of the year. We bought a few things for lunch and made our way up the hill. The stoker had suggested an anti clockwise route around the island, the other way being mountainous. The stoker would have been mutinous had we gone the other way so we began her eight mile climb followed by a zig zag descent to the pleasant outskirts of Nidhri. We had lunch sitting on the quay beside a traditional Greek fishing boat converted to a yacht, which was in a very similar condition to its red ensign, washed out.

As we went on into Nidhri we passed the all too common tent encampments which we assume belong to the Albanians. We also saw them hard at work washing their clothes on the rocks near to the sea. The town itself is a ribbon development of about three miles. I'm sure it would appeal to some Brit holiday makers with its souvenir shops, bars and fast food stores. To us it looked like a western cowboy set for Hollywood except that there was nowhere to tie up the horses. We went on to Lefkas, the town at the north of the island and booked into a rather nice hotel. After doing the chores and having tea our next job was to find a map for tomorrow. A chart would have been no problem but a map was impossible. Even in this quite large town the local book and main newspaper shop only kept a map of the island. Apparently the tourist office keeps some but is only open in the summer. We bought the Sunday Times (can it possibly be written by Daily Mail journalists moonlighting?) and then saw a sign to the Public Library. We went there and the librarian kindly photocopied the only map she had which was to a scale of about 10 miles to the inch. In the UK every library has a full set of OS maps. This, we felt, indicates how insular these communities are in Greece. We went back to the hotel and had a very nice evening meal and gnashed our teeth over the Times although it was good to get some news after two weeks.

Day 15 - March 15th Lefkas Town to Kanalaki

We had a nice ride today and got some miles in despite the weather. According to the Rough Guide it is supposed to rain in March here one day in three. By rain we take it to mean putting on waterproofs and taking off specs. On this basis in the last 14 days we have had no rain. When we looked out from our balcony we saw the Greeks carrying or even under umbrellas. We thought the worst but we were wrong. As we pedalled out over the flat coastal area our pertex tops kept off what little damp there was. We were lucky that the main road to the ferry over to Preveza was quiet as we had no proper map so could not avoid it. We caught the shovel type ferry and were soon into large town traffic. Greek drivers in towns are very much better than British drivers despite an apparently complete lack of regulations. This makes it much better for cyclists. Added to this it is perfectly acceptable to cycle anywhere a tandem can go. This includes onto pavements and along pedestrian precincts as well as the wrong way up one-way streets and over red lights. As far as we can see nobody here, unlike in Weymouth, has "nearly been killed" by a bicycle. Though we can think of one or two Weymouth Councillors and Council Officers who would benefit from the experience.

In Preveza Anne managed to obtain a map so we no longer had to worry about the dragons. We went on along the main road passing a whole series of Roman and early Christian ruins and soon came to the beach. We went along beside the beach for some way and eventually found a bus shelter which was suitable for lunch. While we got the brew going it started to rain hard (for Greece). We were joined by a moped rider who sheltered from the rain. He wouldn't take any of our food and though friendly was quiet for a Greek. After a herd of sheep had crossed the main road followed by the shepherd as described in the bible the rain stopped and we went on our way. Just before the top of a hill after a stiff climb we were overtaken by a slow moving large lorry. As we descended the other side at 35mph we began to catch him up. He was being careful not to run away, something the management of this tandem has no fear of, so accelerating we overtook him and must have given him something of a surprise. Soon after this we turned off the main road down several zig zags and a 1 in 10 hill to the beach. It was wonderful riding right beside the sea but we were disappointed that nothing, including any of the many hotels, was open. After five or six miles we had a very steep climb lasting almost a mile back to the main road. Not seeing any hotel signs the stoker talked to a petrol pump person who pointed us inland to a hotel only five miles away. He also kindly phoned to see if they were open. Fortunately the five miles were flat and we arrived just as the rain began. The stoker had had a very successful day and is recovering from the attack by Brooks.

Day 16 - March 16th Kanalaki to Igoumenitsa

It was obviously tempting providence to comment about the rain yesterday. Today the locals are again walking about with brollies and the sky is very threatening. It is a great pity because this valley is surrounded by high mountains and in good weather the view would be wonderful. We had a few drips of rain as we left the hotel to find the post office and send a few Greek things back home. The post office didn't do envelopes so off we went in the rain searching for an envelope shop. Then back to the post office we went. We have a fair amount of faith that the parcel will get back to the UK but we have no way of stopping Parcel Force from stealing it if it doesn't stay with the GPO.

We were just on our way out of town when the skies opened complete with thunder and lightning. We immediately pulled into the first café we saw and sat it out. Property around here is not built for rain and torrents of it seemed to be coming out of every orifice. By soon after eleven we were on the local roads and enjoying the first few miles going from village to village. Eventually we had to go on the main road which, while not busy, is not nearly as pleasant as the local roads.

Just before lunch we overtook a pickup truck full of what we took to be Albanians by their dress. They were arguing loudly with someone in a car and we passed quickly by. Later, in the middle of nowhere, we saw half a dozen young men on the side of the road who looked most unGreek. The idea of these people being refugees, economic or otherwise, leaves an unpleasant feel when confronted face to face. I suppose that we are only about eight miles from the Albanian border. It would really be great if it were both possible and safe to continue north through the Balkans. Maybe one day.

We went on into Igoumenitsa, a rather cold and not very interesting ride, and bought our tickets for the ferry to Brindisi in Italy on the overnight boat. The tandem and its luggage, which is usually such a great asset, is a nuisance when waiting almost five hours for a ferry. There are of course no waiting rooms because no one normally needs them in this climate, but today feels cold. We found a little arcade and had coffee and left the tandem and looked at the shops. After the sun had set we went back to the café for an ouzo and by this time a friendly atmosphere had developed. Kids were playing football in the plaza and the hairdresser next door was practising on his mandolin. We left, with the tandem, for a restaurant and dinner, very nice, then found our cabin on the ferry. We have enjoyed being in Greece very much. The people are so very friendly and the cycling excellent. Cycle tourists need to see what is over the next hill but it would be very tempting to stay longer.

Day 17 - March 17th Igoumenitsa (Greece) to Cégliè Messapica (Italy)

Writing a diary is supposed to be the easiest form of writing because it is linear. However, it would be very tempting to jump to the interesting bits, but I won't. We set the Psion alarm for 6am and Ken thought the sound of church bells it makes came from the church in the village in which we were staying. He was soon disillusioned, realising that he was in a cabin in the bowels of a ship, and so turned over and tried to get back to sleep. Anne, for once in the morning, was made of stronger stuff and got up and showered. It was not, however, a very good idea for while the sleepy Ken felt OK despite his notoriously weak stomach, Anne was soon taking the morning air on deck to avoid the dreaded sea sickness for the first time in her life. We then discovered that we had got up an hour too early, due to the inability of the shipping line crew to agree on whether there was a time difference between Greece and Italy or not.

It had been quite a rough crossing and was blowing force six or seven as we entered Brindisi harbour. We went down into the bows of the ship and got off as quickly as we could to avoid the fumes. It is amazing what you see being carried. We followed one of those high roofed estate cars which had a live Greek donkey in the back. One hopes it had been allowed out during the

night but somehow doubt it had. We went into central Brindisi with a view to finding somewhere nice for breakfast but failed, so were soon on our way out of town on a quite busy but flat and straight main road. The sky was clear but it was still very windy, which for cyclists is much worse than a decent hill. At least with a hill you get the down. With a wind against you it is uphill all the time and that is why we have never been cycling in the low countries. We managed to get off the main road, and soon after had a bizarre confrontation with a car driver. A very elderly gentleman driving a Renault 4 almost as old as himself very slowly pulled out from a turning directly in front of us. Being used to this kind of behaviour by the geriatric classes of Weymouth and Farnham we turned a complete circle in the road to avoid him and continued on our way. He continued on his way completely unfazed by his action, perhaps he just didn't see us at all.

We found shelter from the wind in a field for our rather late picnic breakfast and then went on to our first town, S.Vito. It seemed dead after Greek towns and, after cycling round and around, we eventually found a supermarket to buy supplies. As we headed out of town the scenery became more interesting. We were surrounded by olive trees, small vineyards and what we think are cherry trees in blossom. There were however few orange or lemon trees and we missed the colour. We passed complexes of small buildings which looked like bee hives. We discovered later that they are called trulli houses. They are the traditional houses of this area and were constructed of stone without cement. They are warm in winter and cool during the very hot summers.

As we entered Ceglie Messapica we were cheered on by a garage owner. We asked about hotels and he directed us to one. This town is built on the top of a hill and we went to the top looking for the hotel. At the very top we were looking lost and a chap just locking his car offered to help. He was Mimmo Chirulli, the owner and chef of a nearby trattoria. He took us in and insisted on phoning one of the hotels which was closed. He could not get the phone number for the other one so took us in his car, leaving the tandem inside his restaurant. Having got us a room in the hotel, which we are convinced is shut, he then took us on a tour of the town. It is an amazing place with streets so narrow you would not expect to get a car through. Washing was strung between balconies and people sat in the sun. Returning to get the tandem we were offered cake and strong drink. Before descending the hill to the (cold) hotel we accepted Mimmo's invitation to go and eat at his restaurant tonight. We then took a nap in view of an expected late night to come.

The ride up the hill was very easy without the luggage and, having left the tandem at Mimmo's, we went for a walk around the narrow streets of the town. It had come alive with the shops open and many people, mainly men, promenading. Presumably the women were at home getting dinner and looking after the kids. Mimmo looked after us well serving lots of different vegetable dishes, the local wine, homemade gateaux, liquor etc. It was a feast and the atmosphere in the trattoria became livelier as more people came in and Mimmo played his accordion connected to an electronic backing machine. We rolled down the hill being careful not to slide on the slippery streets and collapsed exhausted into bed.

Day 18 - March 18th Ceglie Messapica to Massafra

We had to shout around the hotel to wake someone up so that we could pay and leave at 9.30am. The poor chap was very sleepy and eventually took less than the cost of the room because he had no change. We then spent ages trying to find a minor road directly west, without success. It would have been easier if the town had not been built on a hill. At some stage we just had to go down and choosing the road down was a lottery. We still had a very strong wind to contend with which never seemed to be behind us. It was interesting cycling as we were mostly in heavily populated areas so we were close to people working in the fields and we passed through several small towns. We were doing quite good mileage until lunch time when we stopped at a town called Crispiano. By now the wind had got to the point where it was rattling signs and blowing things around in the street. It was also extremely cold, especially as clouds had covered the sun.

We had a snack from our bags and then went into a nearby gelateria for coffee and cakes - excellent, and so cheap that the stoker has declared every day a coffee and cake day. This buoyed us up to go a bit further but we did stop early. Last night we had difficulty finding somewhere to stay and it seems that even largish towns here don't have hotels in the centre. So we thought we would take some time and establish how to live in Italy. We asked a Polizia Municipal woman about hotels and she directed us out of town. As far as we can tell that is where hotels are, on main roads. We found one about half a mile away and booked in. Much amusement was caused because we couldn't get the hot water or the heater to work, both essential after a day like today. We had three people sorting it out and now we are very happy.

We walked back into the town in the evening when everything becomes alive. It is an interesting place, built on the side of a valley and split in the middle by a deep ravine. This is bridged at the higher level and looking down one can see the caves which had been used as dwellings long ago but are now deserted. We had pizza in a local shop which had the atmosphere of a local chippy. It was fun with the teenagers helping us with their few words of English. We then went to a coffee shop to finish with cappuccino and cake. We both feel we have not done enough homework on Italy. Neither of us speak the language but seem to be able to do what we need by using a few words. What is more difficult is working out how things are done here and still cycling a few miles on the tandem each day. It has also so far been much colder than we expected but we are confident that it will improve. We are currently creeping up the heel of Italy's boot but once we start going down the foot it has to get warmer.

Day 19 - March 19th Massafra to Marina de Nova Siri

Last night's hotel was a bit of a shambles. First Anne had trouble getting hot water and insisted that the hotel had swapped over the hot and cold supply. Then we went down for breakfast and it was something of a very pleasant game to get a sufficient supply of cakes and coffee to support a morning's cycling. We eventually succeeded and left north on the main road, turning left onto a side road after a mile or so. This road went in the right direction but deteriorated into a track through farms. Ken's family have a tradition of being taken down roads with grass in the middle which finally end half way up a mountain. For Elisabeth and Hannah's benefit we comment that there is little grass in this country and none has so far been seen in the middle of roads.

We finally came out exactly where expected in the centre of a town called Palagiano. People were spilling out of the churches and across the road. We don't know whether this is normal for Sunday or because it is the first Sunday of Lent, but similar attendance in the UK would completely overwhelm the C of E. Again, by superb navigation, we found the correct road out and were making good time on flat country roads with the wind behind us. After a short convenience stop and the scrumping of a great big orange we got to the main coast road south. The stoker, who is bad tempered today, decided to become involved in navigation and became disgruntled (with some justification) when she was not listened to by the management, who thought he was on a roll with the navigation today. We joined the main road which though boring was not too heavily trafficked even though it was a dual carriageway. Soon, quite unexpectedly, we came across an ancient monument which was in the style of the Parthenon and indicated where ancient Greece ended and Italy began. It was deserted after a coach party left and we sat in a garden in the sun eating our picnic lunch. There is not much to be said for after lunch. We did 25 miles on the main road and found a very nice hotel not far from the sea. We still can't find a hotel with a TV with CNN but we got the Italian weather forecast which seems to indicate that it will rain tomorrow.

Day 20 - March 20th Marina de Nova Siri to two miles downhill from Spezzano

So as not to alarm anyone unnecessarily we were not shot at twice and while one of us was stressed beyond what was reasonable no lasting damage was done. It was grey and cold when we

started and we both soon put on warm clothes. Our first stop was at the supermarket across the main road. Supplies can be short in this country unless bought before midday. We then joined the main road for about 12 miles although we managed to avoid about half of this by using the service roads. It was along here that we risked being shot at the first time. The carabinieri had stopped a car containing two ordinary respectable looking elderly men. As we passed we were alarmed to see that they were holding what looked like submachine guns ready for use. We increased our pedalling rate, averted our eyes and passed as quickly as possible. The stoker, perhaps affected by the incident on the main road, again became involved in navigation. Uncharacteristically she strongly suggested we turn left down a very minor unsigned road towards the beach. Ken is always happy to go down such roads. When it deteriorated into a rough track he had to have his picture taken to show the kids the kind of roads he takes Anne down. He was naturally slightly disgruntled by the unfairness of this. As we progressed along the quiet coast road we were stopped by two carabinieri who held up one of those bat things that people use to direct aircraft at airports. We were not speeding at the time as we were only doing about 13mph and could think of nothing else we had done wrong, but even so one feels a bit guilty. These two were also carrying little machine guns but they looked a bit scruffy and were not being aggressive with them. We think they only stopped us because they were curious about the tandem but we did feel vulnerable trying to make ourselves understood when we have almost no Italian and were looking down the barrels of guns. Amusingly they let us go on our way with a mimed warning to keep our eyes on the tandem because there were lots of thieves about, which has not been our impression.

We took lunch on the beach at a lido which was completely closed. It was convenient because we used the bar to spread out our food and brew our tea with the Trangia. It was sheltered from the wind and pleasant for a grey day. We had done well with 30 miles up and were encouraged because soon we would part, hopefully for ever, from the main road to Reggio. We went west across the country along a river valley on quiet roads towards the hill town of Spezzano, which is 320 metres above the sea level at our lunch time beach. We gambled on finding a hotel at Spezzano. Finding somewhere to stay in this country at this time of year is a real problem. All the camp sites are very much closed as are most of the beach hotels. Even though it is very cold at night we would camp in an emergency but would need to carry food and water all day because the shops are closed in the afternoon. We have yet to find any accommodation in medium sized towns and now make for either very large towns or major road junctions. It has also been impossible so far to get a list of hotels so we just go on until we find one. So here we are climbing up about 250 metres in less than two miles. It was the very end of a reasonable mileage day and Anne had really had enough. We did manage the climb in absolute bottom gear with several stops only to find at the top that the town didn't have a hotel. We were directed four miles north, confirming this several times before going downhill with the drag brake on all the time. We found a pleasant hotel at a road junction and checked in. Had we not climbed up to Spezzano but continued along the low road another couple of miles from where our climb started we would have come across the hotel anyway. Just for once bad navigation, i.e. missing a turning, would have saved us five miles and the stoker being stressed beyond what was reasonable, but as we said at the start of today's diary no lasting damage was done.

Day 21 - March 21st Two miles downhill from Spezzano to Down Town Cosenza

We awoke to look out at a tractor going by, the driver holding a red umbrella over his head. It was raining. To be precise, very very gently by English standards but the TV weather last night had shown clouds with the sun peeping out. What they need here is Michael Fish and then maybe they would get it right. Breakfast was not included at this hotel and being a bit short of supplies we decided to try pasta with peach jam as a substitute for porridge. It was surprisingly very nice and we finished with fresh fruit. Ken then stupidly scalded himself under the shower and, being male

with a very low pain threshold and a very high need for care and reassurance, had to be treated with cold water and Aftersun. When we finally went to pay we discovered that the boys in charge of money had slothed off leaving several women to run the place, none of whom were allowed to take our money. The boys finally turned up followed immediately by the carabinieri so we paid and quickly moved on.

The best way to go would have been up the hill we came down last night but, in the interests of not retracing our steps, we went up the river valley a bit before climbing over the ridge at a different place. It was a longish and pleasant climb on a quiet road in rolling green pasture land. We even passed a herd of about 15 cows. We managed to get most of them standing with our shouts but that didn't keep the rain off for long. Soon after the top of the hill we stopped in the large hill village of Tarsia for bread. The narrow streets were paved in smooth cobbles and the balconies above our heads almost met. We were able to ride the tandem through most of the streets but eventually some steps barred our way. We then had to wheel the tandem backwards for 50 yards because it was too narrow to turn it round.

After the usual hairpin bend descent into the river valley on the other side of the ridge we now crossed the river and spent the rest of the day climbing steadily to Cosenza. To start with navigation was difficult because we were using the quiet side of the valley, and all the main lines of communication were on the other side. This is a ploy frequently used by cycle tourists but on this occasion it was not completely successful. We started out on a dirt road but over the 20 or so miles we were on it not only did the surface and width steadily improve but the traffic also increased. We ended up going past many cement works which were supplied by roaring lorries creating torrents of muddy spray. On the good side we came directly into the centre of town. It was an easy way in although it was through one of those areas where one would prefer not to get a puncture. There was scrap metal on both sides of the roads and the houses and tenements were very run down. The final sign was a tethered horse. Crossing the river to the centre we saw a sign and made straight for the Excelsior Hotel. It is very cheap by UK standards and is the kind of comfortable older style hotel we had expected to exist throughout the civilised world but it would seem not in Southern Italy. You will notice we have not complained much about today's rain. That is because however unpleasant it seemed today it was a hundred times less wet than in Scotland last year.

Day 22 - March 22nd Down Town Cosenza to Up a mountain a stone's throw from Amantea

Looking out of the window we were surprised to see blue skies. When we left the hotel Cosenza looked quite a different place from the wet and cold town of last night. It is a mountain town and surrounded by hills, something which we had missed as we passed the scrap processing area last night. We started to climb in the town itself and even did an extra half a mile or so up hill and down again before we found the correct road. Once we started up the mountain we had 14 miles of steady climb at 3.5mph around hairpin bends. It was very pleasant in the sunshine and whatever others may think, once we were into the rhythm cycling uphill was also pleasant. We passed through several picturesque mountain villages and the views in all directions were superb. At the top we stopped for lunch. The computer read 14.37 miles at an average of 4.1 and a top speed of 16mph. We sat on a bench at the summit which, unusually, was in a village and not cold, and got the brew going at a height of just over 3000 feet.

We prepared for the descent by putting on warm clothes, which for Ken even included socks. The first seven miles caused no problems at all except that we kept being overtaken by and then re-overtaking a bus. Then we came to a route option and, with a view to avoiding eight miles of main roads, we left the main road and put the fear of a fast descending tandem into the village loafers. We then went along small mountain roads with some ups and downs before we arrived in a large village. Here we should have turned left and gone down but, in the absence of any

direction signs and ever mindful of the danger of descending into the wrong valley, we turned right and went up. After a while we knew we were wrong but, according to the map, we were on a scenic route which would take us in the right direction. Ignoring the main signs to the local town we continued through the village and up a short rise before beginning a zig zag descent. At this point we saw a group of scruffy looking kids and two older women beside the road who did not respond to our greeting.

As we started to go down the quality of this minor road seriously deteriorated. After about half a mile the road stopped altogether, rather abruptly. A land slip had wiped it out. The management, although slightly daunted, walked to a high vantage point and seeing the road zig zag below him thought, wrongly, that if we could get below the slip we could go on down. He went exploring in the undergrowth and found a way down diagonally to the road below the slip and off he went. The stoker, showing her usual sound intelligence, was opposed to this move but had little alternative but to follow. Having regained the road we continued cautiously for another couple of bends, weaving in and out of the vegetation that had grown in the middle of the road and walking over a minor slip. We went around the next bend and were confronted with the impossible, the road ended with a sheer drop which we were not prepared to look over.

We walked back a couple of hundred yards to consider the situation. Looking over the wall at the edge of the road, several hundred feet below us, we could see the road continuing. At that moment we saw a white car climb up and, finding the road blocked, turn round. Given a little exploring and scrabbling Ken found that it was possible to reach this part of the road but it would take some time to carry the tandem and all our luggage down. Going back up the way we had come would be even more difficult. It was a lovely evening so we decided to camp where we were, pitching the tent on the road itself. Our little tent does not need guy ropes to stay up and there was no wind. The road, warmed by the sun, made an excellent smooth base for cooking and sleeping. We are not sure whether wild camping is allowed in Italy and if not whether camping on the highway would be the province of the carabinieri, the municipal police who deal with traffic, or the financial police because we had not paid a camping fee. It was a lovely spot high above and overlooking the town and the sea. As we watched the sunset it was spoiled by only one thing, we had been seen. The group of people we had seen on the road were higher up than us but not all that far away. Anne was worried that we might be robbed or worse and passed this fear onto Ken. It spoiled the evening. We ate the rations we reserve for just such an emergency and soon after the sun had set over the sea the light went. Here the diary writer realised that touch typing is not that easy when one cannot see the keyboard. We got into our sleeping bags because it was getting cold and there was not much else we could do. Then paranoia set in, as Spike Milligan wrote in "Silly Verses for Kids" which is sadly out of print. "It's the hole in your ear which lets in the fear, that and the absence of light." Every noise became magnified and we were both a long time before we slept, but in the end 14 miles up hill and negotiating landslides will put almost anyone to sleep.

Day 23 - March 23rd Up a mountain a stone's throw from Amantea to Pizzo

The adventure continues. Ken, thankfully unmolested by crooks and vagabonds, woke with first light. He turned over and went to sleep again but did eventually get up. The sun was on the other side of the mountain but still not on us so he did not wake Anne. He carefully lowered, carried and pushed the unladen tandem down to the road below. By the time this had been achieved the sun was on the tent and breakfast was taken. Apart from being a bit short of water we had plenty of bread, jam, cake, chocolate and fruit. After breakfast we packed. We can recommend camping on the highway, it is very difficult to leave anything in the grass, yet. When everything was packed we threw it over the edge, down about 30 feet. Unfortunately, by mistake, thinking it was the food pannier, we threw the bag with the Trangia in it down the drop. It came open and the invaluable Swiss Army knife was lost. Not only do we use it every day for cutting things but it

also has bike tools on it. We searched and searched but could not find it. We hope whoever eventually stumbles across it enjoys it.

Having gained the road we started our two mile descent. We were quite careful to start with not wishing to find another vertical piece of road in front of us. We went on down to Amantea, passing several fine hotels on the way, did our shopping and enjoyed a couple of cups of cappuccino and cakes before going on. At this stage we had completed a coast to coast of Italy but had no luck finding a shop with a tea shirt. We continued south along the coast on a red road but there was very little traffic. We enjoyed our lunch stop by the beach which gave Ken the opportunity to straighten the bent Trangia. Having left the main road six miles back we arrived at the busy little seaside town of Pizzo mid afternoon. Just as we were cycling up to the hotel the drive chain broke. Now I have no problem with the Germans and French doing all the engineering for the UK. In fact I think not having stinking manufacturing plants is a good idea. What I object to is when they can't make a decent product. Anyway we booked into the very nice hotel in the town centre overlooking the central plaza and the sea. Ken put on the spare chain, not having either the tool (having left it on the mountain) or the inclination to repair the old one. He did this in the afternoon sun in the piazza watched by the local loafers of whom Italy seems to have plenty. They are however always very pleasant and try to be helpful. We did wonder whether for Audax purposes sleeping on the road would count for points on a 36 hour ride.

Day 24 - March 24th Pizzo to Rosarno

It was a lovely day and the sun flooded in as soon as we opened the blinds. The Piazza below our window was already lively. People were delivering, moving things, repairing and of course just loafing. We enjoyed our breakfast in the sun watching the crowds. Being a town centre location it was possible to do the shopping before checking out which avoided the usual inconvenience of watching the tandem. Anne attempted to change some drachmas we had leftover into lire. For once she met a rude and unhelpful Italian and guess what he was a bank teller. Not only that but because their computer was down they could not do the transaction. We have not used the banks either here or in Greece, just the holes in the wall. If Anne's treatment today is anything to go by the banks here are much the same as those in the UK and best avoided.

We went on our way reluctantly, it would have been tempting to join the loafers in the piazza and stay another night but today's ride promised to be pleasant and we are looking forward to getting to Sicily. Today we cycled along reasonably quiet roads along a bit of the coast which sticks out westwards. We had more than our fair share of hills but the views were pleasant most of the time and occasionally magnificent even if it was a bit scary balancing the tandem along a twisting road with an almost sheer drop to the sea on our side. We took ice-cream in a town which appeared to be populated by mafiosi types doing very dangerous things in their cars for reasons we could not fathom. We had lunch in a one horse town where almost nothing moved except a young man who looked like the baddy in a western, doing wheelies down the main street on his motor bike. We reserve judgement on Rosarno but the way we came in stank and the people looked very down at heel except for a few who were driving very expensive cars indeed. Still, the hotel is very comfortable and we will be out of here tomorrow.

Day 25 - March 25th Rosarno to Messina, Sicily

Today promised to be mainly a transit day. The only feasible route follows the coast road all the way and that is how we started off. The hotel did breakfast which was a bit of a ramshackle affair. It did however have an exceptional point which was a very large glass each of freshly squeezed blood oranges. Getting a red liquid at breakfast was so unusual that we asked what it was bearing in mind that Anne does not like tomatoes.

Leaving Rosarno we saw no reason to change our original opinion of it, it is an agricultural industry disgrace. It brought all the nasty things we hear about companies like Monsanto to mind. The first few miles were on flat roads but then we climbed from almost sea level to 480 metres in about eight miles. It was not that interesting but we did stop to try to buy a chain link extractor tool without success. Still we enjoyed talking to the people in the shop. The climb was not very interesting but the descent was another one of those with huge views, steep drops and hairpin bends, wonderful. The management, much to the stoker's delight is, in his boring old age, very restrained on these big descents but on one occasion attempted with a degree of success to race a motor scooter. The stoker was not happy and not much good was done to the macho status of the scooter driver.

Down on the beach again we took lunch in the sun and paddled. We think it is a bit cold still to swim and so do the locals for we had the beach to ourselves. In fact, although we cycle in shorts, most of the locals are still wearing winter coats and find our mode of dress amusing. Still, those who ride tandems across Europe often get laughed at, mainly by those who stay at home. Soon after lunch we met, coming in the opposite direction, a couple of Australian touring cyclists. This is only the second time on this trip that we have even seen other cycle tourists. They had spent the winter in Barcelona and were on their way to Greece, doing our route from the South of France in the opposite direction. So we are not the only ones who prefer to avoid the Alps at this time of the year. It was also reassuring to hear that they had managed the ferry crossings without problems. We exchanged tips and routes and went on our way much encouraged. We arrived at Villa S Giovanni to get the ferry to Sicily and there was a long queue of vehicles which was moving quickly. It is a four mile crossing but there seemed to be at least five ships going backwards and forwards and even before one was full another was loading. The stoker went to the kiosk to pay and presented a huge value note only to be told to get on for free which we did.

Messina is another huge town with a distinct lack of hotels or anywhere else to stay. We suppose that the Italians just don't use hotels but it is very annoying for tourists. We eventually found one in the centre, bought a take away pizza, some cakes and beer (Fisher Birr Speciale from Alsace) and spent the evening planning our route through Sicily.

Day 26 - March 26th Messina to Fondachello

We left the city centre hotel which had been pleasant in itself but were pleased to leave the rather dingy area with its "Sexy Shop" and dirty streets. We managed to travel west one block away from the main route but eventually had to use it. As we emerged onto it we were very surprised to see an abundance of police. We were overtaken first by about 50 police motor cycles, not in convoy but weaving amongst the other traffic. Then we saw police in several types of vehicles including patrol cars, tiny mopeds and even electric golf buggies. The stoker reckons they were all off to church and noted that they seemed to be wearing dress uniform. Here that means that most of them had enough braid and decorations to pass for admirals in the UK. It is not a very nice thought but in Italy an alliance between the RC church and the police could seriously damage freedom and democracy. We went on out of town and it was not very pleasant for the first few miles. It was overcast and windy and the ever present litter in this disgustingly dirty country was blowing about in the strong wind. Even in the most attractive places one sees scrap cars and a dry river valley would not be complete without its full complement of dumped household appliances. Still, if one averts one's eyes from the litter around the wheels and looks up at the view it is well worth while. Once we were clear of the town we passed through a string of villages which almost merged. In some of these we travelled through the centre to observe village life and in others went along the prom to see the sea. As bikes here are not considered part of normal traffic no one objects if we cycle the wrong way on one way streets or on pavements. We are also not expected to stop at red lights if it is safe to go.

We stopped for a very pleasant lunch on a seat on the prom in one of these villages and watched the world go by as the kettle boiled, and the world looked at the tandem. We travelled on through the touristy area of Taormina but gave its Greek amphitheatre a miss. The town is built on a high plateau above the sea and to get to it would have involved a serious climb. As we had seen a real Greek amphitheatre in Athens we decided to miss out on this one. As we went on after lunch the sky got darker and eventually it began to precipitate. At home we would hardly call it rain but here we started looking for shelter. As luck would have it we came to a beach hotel, something almost unheard of in the parts of Italy we have been to, and checked in.

Day 27 - March 27th Fondachello to Bronte

There was not a cloud in the sky when we awoke and it was a pleasure to make early morning tea in the sunshine on our balcony. From the back of the hotel we got our first proper view of the snow covered and cloud capped Mount Etna. Having taken a pleasant breakfast in the hotel we loaded up and pedalled a couple of miles down the coast to the local village to buy supplies. What a contrast to Weymouth and Farnham. In the central piazza local farmers were selling beautiful in season fruit and vegetables direct to the public. At home I can't even buy fennel which grows like a weed here. Our local "green grocers" has never seen dirt on a vegetable and Asda's stuff has no taste. Perhaps if the UK farmers sold local products when in season they would make a decent living and we would have food worth eating.

We now started to climb away from the coast and to avoid larger roads took a chance with the map which for once worked. We were soon on our way towards the foothills of Mount Etna. It was by now very hot for the first time on this trip but as we went up it got colder. This time we were not climbing on zig zag mountain roads but just directly upwards. By lunchtime we had reached a height of about 2000 feet. It sounds higher in feet than in metres. We had lunch in the piazza, that is the loafer's square in Nicolosi. From here it is possible to climb by road and funicular railway to the summit of Etna at about 10,000 feet. We had no intention of going up just to come down on the tandem and being out of season it was not possible to do it by bus. So we carried on with our circular route in the foot hills and very pleasant it was too. As we climbed and descended we passed through countryside which was dominated by the black lava coloured earth and rocks. In some places little or no soil could be seen at all. By four-ish we made it to our planned destination. This is a large and busy town perhaps as big as Guildford called Adrano but there was not a hotel or even a room for rent in the whole place. We pushed on north to try and find somewhere. We did not want to go east but went the wrong way out of town so carried on. It was a tiring 12 mile climb to Bronte as the sun set. The views were now of mountains in all directions and when we arrived at our albergo after much help from the locals and little from the town signs we were rewarded by an outstanding view of the snow covered slopes of Etna. What a pleasant contrast with the tacky Bronte town of Howarth in Yorkshire which we visited last year. We have now been about two thirds of the way round Etna and, subject to the navigator getting it right, will now branch off west.

Day 28 - March 28th Bronte to Troina

When we left the albergo the view was dominated by the snow capped Mount Etna. It was to dominate our ride all day. It is not all that high at about 10,000 feet but it is unlike any other mountain we have seen. It actually looks like the pictures one sees of it. It is basically shaped like a shallow cone and where the snow is not lying it is black lava coloured. The snow lies in the hollows made when the lava ran down the mountain rather than in the patchy way snow lies on most mountains. We took photos as we left the hotel and lots more during the day. The surrounding mountains in this area rise to about 3000 feet as did we on at least two occasions. Having gone far too far yesterday we decided to take it easy today. Once out of Bronte with water

and food we were on good very lightly trafficked roads. It was hilly and at the end of the day we were about 1000 feet higher than at the start. We went very slowly and stopped often to admire the view. There is always something special about mountain country. It is pleasant to hear the sheep bells and to see houses and villages cling to the mountainsides in impossible places.

We stopped for our picnic lunch in the countryside near to a peak village called Cesaro. After the management's usual brief snooze we went onwards and upwards to Troina at almost 3500 feet. Looking lost near the town centre we were shown to a hotel complex. We are staying in a huge modern complex rather like an alpine ski resort except that there is no snow. Our room has a fine view of Etna. It is difficult for us as visitors to see how a mountain complex with no snow 40 miles from the beach could be viable but I suppose it must be. Like a lot of things on this island it is hard to see where the money comes from to finance them. As we have seen few EC flags here the obvious other possibility comes to mind. The hotel is not as cheap as the one similarly financed which I stayed in at Las Vegas but it is still towards the lower end of UK B&B prices.

Day 29 - March 29th Troina to Gangi

It rained last night as we walked back from the pizzeria where pizzas were off. They had excellent risotto among other things so we didn't starve. The rain was a bit of a shock, it almost wet my pullover. We also discovered that about three days ago the Italians had put their clocks on by an hour for summer time. So we are now back on Greek time which may or may not be two hours in front of the UK depending on whether the farmers have let Tony Blair put the UK clocks forward yet. While we are talking about things which one of us should have known about, the stoker failed to advise the management that the hotel had an indoor pool and also that cookers were banned in rooms. By the time he found out about these it was far too late to do anything about either of them. So we pigged ourselves on the buffet breakfast and got on the road. We managed to replace our lost knife with an Italian copy of a Swiss army knife. In the process we were shown a selection of knives including one which was a very dangerous looking weapon concealed in its handle, which flicked out when opened. We have not yet felt the need for a flick knife on this trip.

The weather today was perfect and we continued on the SS120, a main road but with almost no traffic. We are still amongst mountains rising to over 4000 feet but Mount Etna has now disappeared into the background. In theory it should have been an easy day as we started at about 3000 feet and finished at 2500 feet but that does not take into account that we went down to 1700 feet. It also does not consider that when Etna erupted it shot great lumps of mountain all over the place, many of which have to be climbed over or circumnavigated. So the normal procedure of climbing gradually up a valley and then crossing a col does not seem to happen much here. It was a great day's cycling. It is surprisingly green here and there are sheep and cows around, in the fields and on the roads. Life seems very laid back and it would be difficult to do things quickly even if we wanted to. We went into a bank to get some cash and change our last few drachmas. A very pleasant man served us. Cash was not possible please try the hole in the wall in the next town. That was no problem. Changing the drachmas took about 30 minutes and required him amongst other things to take a photocopy of Anne's passport. She didn't much like him doing this fearing that a copy of her passport photo would be even worse than the original.

For once we found a hotel quickly. We knew that the hill town only had one place to stay and passed it on the way through. This was fortunate because our wonderful SS120 skirts the town which rises an extra 300 feet or so above us. Two could get lost up there for ages looking for somewhere with a loaded tandem. For once the hotel was more like we expect, on the outside that is. It has a small rather tatty entrance hall and the concierge is a very elderly gentleman with a flat hat. Having checked in he then took us up two flights of stairs at his very slow pace and then had great difficulty unlocking the door because he could not see the lock. It reminded us of The Rocky

Horror show with him as an elderly Riffraff but this was unfair in every respect. He was extremely pleasant to us and the ensuite room was well up to the standards we have had elsewhere with the added advantage of the view over the mountains. Anne went shopping and we ate in. She found it rather different from when the two of us are together or she is on her own in the daytime. She felt invisible as a woman in a man's world. Not a pleasant way for people to behave or indeed live.

Day 30 - March 30th Gangi to Termini Imerese

Sometimes this diary is written under the influence of alcohol and this is one of those occasions. This is not due to a need to over indulge but a problem with the language.

We were back on the SS120 as soon as we left the albergo. There was a problem getting the bill because nobody was up. It must have been around 9.30am so presumably the Southern Italians think that is early. The road went on through the mountains in the quiet as it had for the two previous days. We started with a short descent but were soon on a longish up before a pleasant descent towards the hill town of Petralia. As usual there was a junction where the main road went around the town and the local traffic went up. On this occasion there was a yellow diversion sign directing all traffic up. Now the stoker, like other stokers we have known, has a strong aversion to ups which can be avoided. She leapt off and accosted an innocent passer-by. Was it possible to go via the low road by bike? He took advice from a friend and they decided that the road was closed because they were "looking for a bridge" but biciclettas could get through. It was fortunate for us that he had some English and that he was almost right. After all we have already once on this trip and on a previous trip come across closed roads that are really impassable.

We risked the low road and after several miles of completely traffic free roads we came across a short piece of road blocked by steel barriers. This is presumably the only way to keep the mad Italian drivers out, but it did not stop the intrepid English and half Scots cyclists. The road was only blocked because a few rocks had fallen down onto it from the cliffs above. We hurried by quickly on the perfectly reasonable grounds that none would fall in the few seconds we were passing. I think in philosophical theory this is similar to whether one picks flowers in the park or not. It is however much more fun because the adverse consequences are much worse should it go wrong.

We carried on down the valley, which was disconcerting because we were expecting to get to sea level today and descending into the bowels of the earth before yet another climb up to heaven was not appealing. In the end you have to go where the road goes so a longish day like today needs managing and for once the management did his job. Stops were properly planned on time and water and food taken. He also had a get out plan but this was not needed. After lunch we had a really amazing descent from another one of those towns which clings to a mountain crag. This was followed by a long traverse along the side of a valley, over a small col at the end and then down into Termini at sea level. Unfortunately the last mountain town had no accommodation so we had to descend to Italian sea level squalor. It was a shock after the mountains. These people are just about OK in the mountains but in town they can't cope properly. We came across a hotel but it was a bit expensive. We then cycled a further few miles to find something better without success and returned. The good thing was that on the way we managed to get a spare chain for the bike and replace the tools lost a few days ago. We also bought a few things to eat including a bottle of wine. This turned out to be sherry, hence the tone of the diary. I should record that today we did the longest ever mileage on the tandem fully loaded with camping equipment.

Day 31 - March 31st Termini Imerese to Palermo

Just as yesterday we noted that the diary writer was under the influence of alcohol, today we note that that person is bad tempered. This is not because of a hangover but that we have to cycle about 25 miles into town. To start with we again negotiated the narrow and steep streets of Termini before taking to the coast road. It had its ups and downs but after the mountains was an easy ride. The traffic was light and for once seemed to be using the parallel motorway. The views over the sea were also pleasant. Rather than go right into Palermo, which is a large town, we wanted to stop somewhere pleasant for an early lunch. Unfortunately we were already into the town squalor before we started to look. We went to what could have been a pleasant harbour for fishing boats but could not find anywhere which did not stink. This was not a rotting fish smell but related to litter and other mess. A little further on we found a promenade kind of place that was reasonably clean. We would have eaten on the beach but it was deep in litter and dog excrement. It is an unpleasant thought that this may be a bathing beach for visitors in a couple of months time. As there are no tides one wonders how they get rid of the mess.

We went on in past the yacht harbour and felt slightly homesick seeing the boats being prepared for the season as they must be doing in Weymouth now. We tried a couple of hotels and checked into one near the port. Its room cards say "i nostri servizi" which is about as far from the truth as you can get. First even finding the hotel is difficult. Then, despite having a perfectly good rear yard which we can see from our window, they have nowhere for the tandem. This is the first time that we have had a problem, most hoteliers are only too pleased to store it safely. Then we ask for a national hotel list to plan Sardinia, which we know that every hotel has. They say they don't have one. The only helpful people in the place are the cleaners and they are also the only women. Over the past couple of weeks we have come to doubt many of our preconceptions about the Italian men in the south. It seems to us that men who have such a poor regard for women stand no chance of being good lovers. There are also other signs that this is the case which vary from the high carbon monoxide levels in the cars they love to the layout of hotel rooms. I said I was bad tempered.

We went down to the port and booked our tickets to Sardinia for tomorrow night and spent the rest of the afternoon loafing and doing chores. Things got better. In the evening we went for a very pleasant meal at a local ristorante. Returning to the hotel we put the tandem in the private garage next door and it was much admired and made safe by the friendly garage staff.

Day 32 - April 1st Palermo

A day off, leastways until we get the night boat to Sardinia at 7pm tonight. We made it down to breakfast just before they closed at 9.30, enjoying having a little bit of a lie in. After packing and attaching the bags to the tandem we took to the streets of Palermo. We enjoyed visiting the flea markets and loafing in the loafing square while writing postcards in the sun. Eventually we had a pizza and bought supplies for the boat and also tomorrow as it is Sunday. We saw in the distance another tandem but it was going too fast to catch on foot. We retrieved our tandem from the garage where the same friendly attendant as last night refused to take any money, and boarded the ship. We were then, for the next hour or so, given much free entertainment by the loading procedure. It could only happen in Italy and it would be untrue to call it organised chaos. It was just chaos. Lorries manoeuvred on then off then did a circle of the harbour and tried again. Longshoremen argued and shouted and appeared almost to come to blows and we and the onshore loafers just watched. The ship left more than an hour late and right up to the moment we left people and vehicles were still arriving and boarding. One has to say that the boat, its cabins and equipment have seen better days. It bears a strong resemblance to the Havelet so we hope the rust bucket gets us to Sardinia without mishap.

Day 33 April 2nd Cagliari, Sardinia to Sardara

The ship did arrive without mishap and only about half an hour late. We were really pleased to be cycling again by about 9.30. Again navigation in Sardinia is going to prove difficult because there are few minor roads which go in our direction. Many of the major roads are dual carriageway and while they are not heavily used are boring to cycle on. We excelled ourselves coming out of Cagliari by ending up at the local amenity tip. We would have carried on through it but came to the most enormous puddle and were for once unanimous that we should go back. We soon found the right road and continued on minor roads for the rest of the day. It was very pleasant on the flat lands with the wind behind us. In every village we passed through the town piazza and surrounding streets were full of people parading. We stopped for cake for elevenses and Anne joined the queue of woman buying cakes for Sunday lunch. We had a pleasant lunch at the edge of a field of artichokes, the supply of which seems to outstrip demand in the local markets.

After lunch it felt as if the whole world were asleep and the stoker said she was. Although we had done a good mileage we would have liked to go further but stopped early again because of doubt about finding somewhere to stay. We found a very comfortable one star hotel with its own ristorante pizzeria. Prior to dinner we spent most of the rest of the afternoon route planning. It had been a nice slow day.

Day 34 April 3rd Sardara to Ghilarza

We left early to get some miles in today because the problem with finding somewhere to stay yesterday had put us a bit behind schedule. We are nearly as bad as the US tourists who know it is Monday because they are in Rome, but that's the management's fault. It was overcast as we made our way out of the back of Sardara. This is always a dodgy business navigation wise but this time it worked. We stayed on minor roads all day and saw little traffic. Minor roads around here would pass size wise for major roads in the UK. No doubt they all met the EC standard so as to get the grant.

After about 15 miles we stopped for supplies and elevenses. This took about an hour because all the cake shops seem to shut on Mondays, presumably exhausted by supplying cakes to most of the population for Sunday lunch. The management was not pleased by the delay but nothing could be done. Here we felt a spot of rain which was surprisingly disconcerting. Not being aware of what to expect of the weather and with a heavy sky we were apprehensive. We pedalled onwards and upwards to a late lunch, finding a nice seat in a village centre and watching the world go by very slowly. Late lunches are preferable in village squares because by about 1.30pm most of the loafers have loafed off.

Just as we were packing up a very affable Frenchman, seeing the tandem, stopped his car and came over for a chat. Ken's bad French seemed to work and we had a pleasant conversation which included route advice which we were glad we took. By now the sun had come out and we headed down hill through the mountains. They were nothing like as high as those in Sicily but the rock formations and deep valleys were very attractive. The fields here are full of wild flowers so we think that not too many chemicals are being used by the farmers. We passed sites of round houses used by the ancient inhabitants which are similar to the brochs we saw in Scotland last year. We also saw what we think were signs of caves which used to be inhabited. It was about here that we heard our first cuckoo. Anne considered emailing Terry Wogan with this information but we thought it was probably no earlier than in the UK so she didn't bother.

We now passed by, on some new roads not on the map, some really major engineering work to construct a huge dam. This will presumably lead eventually to the whole valley being flooded.

It was well worth seeing and we would have missed it had we not talked to the Frenchman. We pressed on to Ghilarza, the last ten bum numbing miles being on a high flat plateau at about 1000 feet above sea level. Following the usual difficult search we went an extra mile and found another nice hotel with a ristorante. It was a good day with lots of quality miles finished off with a good meal and chat with the hotel owner, who was not impressed with our daily mileage.

Day 35 April 4th Ghilarza to Ozieri

Anne is very pleased with Sardinia. Ever since we have been in Italy she has been invisible. The only way she could avoid the invisibility was to proffer money. As she does most of the spending of money while Ken is left loafing and minding the tandem she was able to become visible for short periods quite often. In Sardinia she has become visible most of the time. When we are together people look and talk to both of us and not just to Ken. It is interesting that Sardinia is also much cleaner and more civilised than Southern Italy and Sicily. Perhaps this is because the people here allow women their visibility and they, in turn, contribute to having a better cleaner environment.

Today we had about a third of the day on the Super Strada. It is unavoidable but not too bad. Most of it is high standard dual carriageway but very little used by English standards. As they don't have large supermarkets neither do they have the juggernauts that go with them. We got off the super strada whenever we could and using the local roads was like taking a step backwards in time. There were sheep on the roads and the tiny three wheeled trucks which the farmers use. We went along beside beautiful avenues of trees planted by previous generations to shade travellers from the sun. We wish we had done more homework on Sardinia and in particular its geology and archaeology. The land seems to be divided into fairly flat plains at different levels. At the change of each level are steep climbs or descents. On the plains there are high sugar loaf type hills or even mountains rather like the outcrops on the Somerset levels. The rock is soft and wherever there are cliffs there are caves, many of which look as if they were lived in in the past. There are many archaeological features marked on the map and these include tumuli, sometimes called the graves of the giants, and the round stone houses like the one we saw yesterday.

Today we had no sun and put our jackets on for the first time for a couple of weeks. As usual the rain picked on us at the worst time. Most of the time there was so little that at home we would not have bothered with waterproofs but we got a slight wetting while we ate our lunch. We had come off the super strada and found a quiet place away from the slip road. First we were again pestered by the carabinieri. They obviously cannot cope with anything out of the ordinary and drove by slowly looking and then did a U turn and did the same in the other direction. We found this intimidating and for once had some sympathy for some of the English football supporters who may have been subjected to the same type of treatment. Anyhow the rain got us on our way and then stopped. At four o'clockish we stopped at our planned destination. We were there but the hotel was not so we had another ten miles to do. We enjoyed the first bit which was mainly down through a beautiful green valley but as we started up the other side the rain came down properly as it would in Manchester. Luckily we found the hotel quickly and soon had a brew going. Another great day's cycling even if it was ten miles more than planned.

Day 36 April 5th Ozieri to Tempio Pausania

We had blue skies when we awoke but by the time we had breakfasted, paid and loaded the luggage clouds were beginning to build. It was disconcerting and quite unusual to have a three mile descent to start with. It does not get the legs working and when the road turned up a bit we didn't like it much. The roads were wet and the countryside very green. Either we have got used to the more barren environment in southern Europe or this place is nearly as green as England.

We were on a road which the map said was of “local importance”. It ran parallel and about five miles away from a road going in the same direction which was of “National Importance”. Our road, which was nice and smooth and wide, only seemed to have the odd vehicle on it and this lack of traffic and undulating agricultural countryside made for fine cycling. We stopped at a village called Oschiri for supplies. It was full of locals shopping but we took some time before we discovered the door to the local self service shop. They do not seem to believe that it is necessary to say what is behind each shop door. I suppose the locals all know and strangers are rare. We attracted the usual attention from the locals and as usual buying the few things we needed took ages.

The next leg of today’s ride took us up into the mountains. It seemed a long time since we had done a long climb and this one started at about 450 feet and went up to 2000 feet in about eight miles. Nothing like as severe as some of the climbs we have done but we did not really start off in the right frame of mind. We passed a very pleasant lake at the bottom and then started up the valley. It was steep 3.5mph stuff to start with but soon flattened out to a steady 5mph. After Sicily it was very nice just to wind up the side of the valley to the pass at the top. Other traffic was almost non-existent and we reached about half way before we stopped for our picnic lunch. We could still just see the lake at the bottom but we enjoyed being high in the mountains again.

Crossing the pass took us into a new valley with a different atmosphere from the one we had climbed up. It was flatter, less mountainous and there were more people about. We went down a little to Tempio, a fairly large town, to look for a hotel. We knew that four existed but none of them were signed. We eventually came across one in a square but found it only by chance. It did have a sign at the front but it was in stone letters at waist height about ten inches high. It was the credit card signs on the door which attracted our attention. The stoker, having established that it was the most expensive of the four, went in to ask for directions to the others. This set off a round of negotiations and she managed to obtain a room which ideally suits our purpose at a more reasonable price. OK so we don’t have a TV or a fridge but the TV here is Eurotrash and they don’t get CNN. Even the Irish get CNN. And who needs a fridge in this temperature? What we did get was a large comfortable room with all mod cons and air conditioning to dry the washing. We went shopping for supplies and soon after we returned the storm which had been building all day hit. We are very worried about whether the hotel building is up to rain and hail but are glad to be inside.

Day 37 April 6th Tempio Pausania to Bonifacio (Corsica)

When we awoke and looked down the valley we seemed to be above the cloud cover. By the time we left the hotel (with dry clothes) the sun had come out but it still looked stormy. Without a clue in which direction to go when we left the hotel we went up hill and continued steeply up until we reached the top. We were then of course reluctant to come down. We asked for directions and the person we asked got into his car and said follow me. This is typical of the kindness many individual Italians have shown us. After about a mile we were back at the hotel only this time at its rear door. A further 100 yards and we came to the signs putting us on the main road. We were soon mile eating down hill on the Super Strada. The pink road menders’ houses seemed to appear at close intervals, particularly on the descents which were frequent. We wondered what the road repairers do. As the road is so good and the traffic so light we guess that some of their responsibility is stopping the undergrowth encroaching on the road. At lunchtime we had reached the sea and the sky looked very threatening indeed. We were lucky to find a beach pizzeria well and truly closed but with chairs and tables under a shelter. We enjoyed lunch but couldn’t help compare this clean quiet beach with the stinking mess near Palermo on Sicily.

It was now uphill except for the last bit to the ferry and we managed to dodge the rain and arrived at 2.45pm. We had expected to have to wait until 5pm but a new company, Moby Lines, had

started a service and had a boat going at 3pm. We boarded with the other passenger. Seriously I doubt if there were more than ten people on board this ship big enough to take at least a couple of hundred people and 50 cars. It was a rough crossing which took an hour and Ken was glad it took no longer. The exit from Santa Teresa is tight but the entrance to Bonifacio is impressive. The ship approached the steep layered cliffs and we could see the fortified town on top. We went through a gap in the cliffs which seemed hardly wider than the ship.

On leaving the ship we made for the top of the town, where else would we go, and it was at the very limit of our climbing ability in our lowest gear. We found the tourist office open and obtained the hotel lists and other information and booked into a hotel nearby. It was such a contrast to anywhere we had been in Italy. Having settled in we enjoyed exploring the town and, being hungry cyclists, looking for somewhere to eat. We are pleased to be moving on but we enjoyed being in Italy. It is certainly a very unsophisticated country of extreme contrasts. We had some excellent cycling particularly in the mountains and on Sardinia. It would, we think, be a great place for the higher mileage light weight tourist like Audax riders who would have smooth roads with little traffic and more options for somewhere to stay than we had.

Day 38 April 7th Bonifacio to Propriano

We went down to breakfast this morning. It was a waste of time really, no croissants. When they were little the kids would have given very few marks for bread and jam but the coffee was good. None of your wishy washy cappuccino but good solid French working coffee. We went on down out of the fortified town and turned left and took the only road. Fortunately it was not busy and the views were varied. It ran along the coast but sometimes a way inland. Again we have another change of scenery. It is quite different from Sardinia with very little green agricultural land and lots of heath and mountains. Later in the morning we climbed steeply along a winding road overlooking the sea which reminded us of the Outer Hebrides and especially Harris. It was a pleasure to be cycling here in the sunshine at 17 degrees with little wind. On Harris last year it was very cold indeed, windy but very beautiful.

Just before lunch we started a serious climb into the mountains. After we had done about a third of it we found a sunny spot beside the road, and even had long enough for a slight doze. The rest of the climb after lunch was not good but a very long fast descent almost made up for it. In mid afternoon we arrived in the seaside resort of Propriano which was dominated by a huge car ferry. We went down to the ferry office and booked our tickets on a boat for Nice tomorrow night from Ajaccio. That way it doesn't matter what time we get to Ajaccio tomorrow. We then had the pleasure of being able to choose a hotel in which to stay and the price we wanted to pay. We wandered along the shopping street. The shops here have normal windows and signs above so after the last few weeks it is shopping made simple. Even so the French map suppliers are still as incompetent as ever. A shop keeper explained that they would not supply him with the map of the French mainland which we could not get in London because Stamfords were also out of stock. This is a real nuisance because we could end up in down town Nice on Sunday morning at 7am without a map. We ended our wander in the evening sunshine walking along the beach eating one of those delicious French cakes.

Day 39 April 8th Propriano to Ajaccio

Ken went to the boulangerie this morning to buy bread and croissants for breakfast. He felt quite sad because getting the bread and croissants was always his daughters' job when they were little and now they are both grown up. Having retrieved the tandem from its nighttime resting place, under the stairs in the Hotel Claridge, we were on our way around the bay and up hill. It was a nice day to climb to a col at about 1800 feet (583 mts) in seven miles and much perspiration it caused. We were rewarded at the top by wonderful views of the snow covered peaks between us

and the sea. We then had a pleasant gradual descent into the valley down to about 700 feet (238 mts). Soon after this we took lunch beside a stream. Yes, there is real water in the streams here. We then started our second climb of the day and at 4 o'clock we crossed the Col de St George at about 2300 feet (753 mts). Being old we normally draw the line at one col a day but we have a ferry to catch and the horizontal mileage looks about right. This time the descent was very fast and about ten miles long. We reached what appears to be this tandem's maximum velocity at 46mph on a smooth wide straight road. The stoker was only mildly upset and mainly because she was worried that her glasses might blow off. The last five miles or so into Ajaccio were in the heavy traffic which we always have to endure getting into town centres. We took some time to find the dreaded Nice map and even here were unsuccessful. It didn't help that the bookshop was run by the type of people who just did not want to be helpful. We managed to get a map of part of the route but not the first bit. Having eaten in a restaurant we boarded the ferry to Nice and were asleep in our cabin before she sailed.

Day 40 April 9th Ajaccio to Frejus (via Nice)

We were reluctant to leave our luxury cabin when the boat arrived at 7am. The crossing had started smoothly but became rough during the night but we mainly slept through. It is amazing what a day in the mountains can do to avoid sea sickness.

Mapless for the first 15 miles we headed south west down the Cote d'Azur. The sky was threatening and we had a strong tail wind. The traffic was even lighter than we had expected early on a Sunday morning and we soon found a marked cycle track which ran the length of Nice promenade. The burgers of Weymouth should take note. If one of the premier holiday resorts in Europe can do it why not they? Even though it was a grey day many of the locals were up and about. There were quite a lot of runners and soon cyclists began to appear. We stopped at a café for breakfast and enjoyed watching the comings and goings. By the time we were on the road again there were many cyclists, all on light weight racing type bikes. They came in groups, twos and threes and even the odd loaners and hardly any of them failed to acknowledge us. Sometimes it was bonjour, sometimes vite vite, and as the weather got worse and the hills bigger, bon courage. We really began to enjoy this ride through this famous urban tourist area. The beaches and scenery are very pleasant indeed and far from tacky.

We had a slight problem in Cannes. It was impossible to find one without paying. It was not the money which worried the stoker but the possibility of being locked in so that either the Gendarmes would be called to extract her and/or she would be turned over in the wash cycle. Men generally don't have this problem. After Cannes we followed the cliff road to St Raphael. It was a bit up and down but with no serious hills. Then it started to blow hard and rain and soon we were in full waterproofs. On a good day with a blue sea it would be a spectacular and fairly easy ride. It was certainly spectacular today with huge waves crashing over the rocks and sometimes even over the road. It was sometimes a job to keep the tandem on the road and we doubt if the salt water and grit has done it much good. Still, it was nice to think that even the rich and famous have bad weather sometimes and the servant of the owner of the Ferrari which overtook us probably has a big cleaning job on this afternoon. It puts a slightly different slant on the song "Where do you go to my lovely" when you see it like this. By midday most of the French cyclists had given up and not long after so did we. We found a nice hotel on Frejus Plage and enjoyed a lazy afternoon looking at the crashing waves while our things dried.

Day 41 April 10th Frejus to Cavalière

Can this be the South of France or have we been transported to Bournemouth? At least it is not raining I said to the friendly hotel manager and he said not yet in reply. Breakfast received 9 out of 10 on the French scale and would have got 10 if the croissant supply had been unlimited. We

reluctantly left along the seafront just as a local street market was setting up and soon came across a cycle path beside the main road. It followed the route of a disused railway called the “Train de la Pignes” and we used it off and on all day. Our friends David and Corinna, whom we are staying with tonight, had kindly told us about this by email so we knew what to look out for. The first half of today’s ride was beside the sea and flat and we made good time. Unfortunately the rain set in quite early and the road was busy. Although there were few lorries they are particularly unpleasant because most don’t have anything to reduce the spray they create. We were dumped by the cycle route facing the wrong way on a slip road to what David calls the “big roundabout near St Tropez”. It is one of the worst examples of being dumped by a cycle route that we have ever seen. Taking our lives in our hands we walked up the slip road and crossed a garage forecourt to get into three lanes of traffic joining the roundabout.

The next part of the ride was inland and up hill and at the summit before we went back down to the sea we found a very pleasant hotel with a restaurant. We took a very leisurely lunch French style and the chef even made us a vegi main meal. We whizzed down to sea level and through the seaside town of Cavalaire sur Mer. On the way out we saw the tell tell sign of Avenue de Train de Pignes. We followed it but at the end it went steeply up, something no train can do. Regaining the main road we found that the problem rested with Citroen. They had built a garage right on the old rail bed just before it crossed the main road. Having regained the railway line we followed it through two tunnels, sometimes on metalled road and sometimes on muddy track for several miles. It was very enjoyable and had the added advantage of being more or less level even though the road did some serious climbing. Following the detailed directions we reached David and Corinna’s flat only 20 minutes late at 3.50pm. They were sitting on garden chairs in the garage awaiting our arrival, having told their neighbours why rather than just being considered mad British. A warm welcome awaited with an excellent meal as well as such luxuries as a washing machine and being able to dry our wet clothes.

Day 42 April 11th Cavalière

A very enjoyable day off with Corinna, David and Doreen, though we do seem to be harbingers of rain as it rained nearly all day. We walked on the beach and did some car sightseeing, then had a special meal out in the evening. Thanks very very much.

Day 43 April 12th Cavalière to Lorgues

At least it had stopped raining as Corinna led us out for the first three miles on her own bike, maintaining a pace which we do not usually manage at that time of day. Here David and Doreen met us to say bye and bon route. The first part of today is back up the coast towards St Tropez and retraces part of Monday’s ride. However, Corinna took us on some quiet roads which were part of the old railway and then we did the part of the main road that we did not do before so it was not so bad. It also seemed a lot easier without the rain. We turned our back on the sea, which we will not see again for over three weeks, at Cavalaire sur Mer. Near St Tropez we negotiated the mammoth roundabout without a problem and made for the hills. We were making good time at Grimaud and the traffic was at last reducing. We picked up the Provence hotel list here but were reluctant to climb the steep hill to the town centre shops for supplies. We climbed onwards along the main road and arrived at the lovely little hill town of la Garde-Freinet at 12.45. All the shops had shut at 12.30 and we had not bought supplies for lunch. This caused much misery between us so to compensate we went into a rather nice little restaurant for pasta and beer for about the same price as a pub lunch at home, and it was much nicer than most of those.

As we left the restaurant and started our descent, suddenly in the distance were the snow covered mountains of the Alps. Only a few miles back we had been at the sea and to be near the mountains so quickly was a real surprise. Down in the valley again on very minor roads we crossed the river

Argens and the motorway and main road at Vidauban and were again climbing steadily, this time in a serious wine growing area. There had been plenty of racing type cyclists out all day and we even saw a couple of tourists. Around a corner came a couple of lads in smart yellow strips who gave us a cheery greeting and then behind them came another dozen or so in the same strip followed by their team car equipped with a PA system. We were given our own loud encouragement, and though neither of us are able to do a direct translation it was certainly something complimentary followed by "Bravo, Bravo".

We arrived in Lorgues to find the only hotel open but unpersoned. Things are much sleepier here than on the coast. As we didn't want to wait we went to the tourist office and found a very nice B&B instead. It is the first time either of us have done this in France but it is cheap and very pleasant.

Day 44 April 13th Lorgues to Riez

We are writing this while the dinner cooks, sitting on the balcony of our hotel with the little town on the other side of the valley and the mountains in the distance. We have read yesterday's Times and as far as we know are the only occupants of the hotel. It is very civilised here in Provence and, by British standards, very cheap.

This morning we overslept, or at least Ken did because he is responsible for getting us up. We had ordered breakfast for 8.30am and we were still in bed. But a quick shower and we were sitting at Madame's table with the best spread in France so far. Not only bread, croissants and home made jams but varieties of cereal, yoghurt, cheese, etc, an ideal start to the day. On the way out of town we dropped into the Tourist Office to say how pleased we were.

If the map is to be believed, and we don't like Michelin much. we started at about 1000 feet and climbed to about 2500 feet before going down to about 2000 feet. Anyway it was up and our very pleasant day off had not put us in the mood for it. Whether this affects progress is impossible to tell but it makes a change from our normal cheerful approach to our work. We are not surprised. Provence is so popular with those who spend a year here. Apart from being up we passed through several picturesque villages and small towns and in the countryside were mainly in sweet smelling pine woods interspaced with grape vines. It rained a little at lunchtime which upset the Manchester contingent and served to move us on a little quicker than normal but didn't require the use of waterproofs. After lunch we went down a few miles to the vast Lac de St Croix, about seven miles long and three across. It is actually a reservoir but it is hard to tell. Much of the backdrop is mountains and one valley leads to the Canyon du Verdon which the French like to compare to the Grand Canyon. Unfortunately on this trip we are going in the wrong direction to cycle through it. The final ride into Riez passed through fields of lavender which the road side signs indicated we should not interfere with. So now dinner is ready, the sun has set and the wine still half full.

Day 45 April 14th Riez to Banon

The stoker was not happy today. Things got off on the wrong foot. Her tea was delivered as usual but it tasted awful because it was tainted with methylated spirit. A tiny bit of it had somehow got into the kettle. She was very concerned that something dreadful would happen to her insides, but on realising that meths is only alcohol stopped worrying. We had a good breakfast and were soon on the road. Riez was OK on the face of it but somehow it did not have a nice feel about it and I was not sorry to be gone. We climbed up to a plain which appeared to slant down towards the Durance Valley. Unfortunately it was crossed at about five mile intervals by deep river valleys. In Italy or Greece the EC would have bridged them but not here so we had to climb down and back up. The final descent down to the Durance was pleasant with fine views to the valley. We were

soon down on the flood plain and making good speed to Oraison where we crossed the Durance and headed north. At least we would have done if some kind placer of signs had not decided to send us the long way round. So we looked on the bright side, perhaps the extra couple of miles we did avoided some steep ups and downs. The stoker needed convincing as we were climbing all the time and she was feeling tired.

By now we were getting into non touristy rural France. Most southern English cyclists who have not been here will not have experienced the pleasure of cycling along quiet roads with little or no traffic, passing occasionally through sleepy towns and villages. There are no roaring main roads to cross every five miles or so and plenty of space for cyclists even in the towns. The stoker was by late afternoon trying to go to sleep on the tandem. Each mile seemed like two and for once the management was considerate. He had planned a long day and we needed to complete the plan to find somewhere to stay. Banon had one hotel in the old French style - basic, comfortable and very very cheap. The stoker, having showered, took a nap but was not so exhausted that she did not wake up for dinner.

Day 46 April 15th Banon to Mollans-sur-Ouvèze

The stoker seemed to have recovered from terminal tiredness and was back to normal. Banon is built on a hill which commands four valleys and we spiralled down it only to find the entrance to the wrong one. We spiralled back up again and were soon on the right road and climbing steadily. It had rained hard during the night but this morning was bright though very cold. We were very high up but because to start with there were no mountains nearby it did not seem so. In one little village there was snow on the side of the road and then the stoker saw a "mile" stone which indicated that we were at 3000 feet. Cycling along at this height felt a bit like skiing. So long as we were in the sun and out of the wind it was wonderfully warm but in the shade it was very very cold. Part of today's ride was on minor roads even by the standards of rural France and eventually we had to do a very long and twisty descent into the valley. It was spectacular with the village and main road below and snow capped mountain above. It did however require great care on the narrow badly surfaced road with steep drops on the side. At the bottom we were in tourist world and managed to get a hotel list from the tourist office before moving on along another deep valley. Here we had a problem with the rear tyre. This is a technical bit which can be skipped if not interested.

The rear tyre started to "click" and reminded us of last year's tyre problems. A quick glance showed that the sidewall had begun to split. This year we have used Schwalbe Marathon 195 tyres on our mountain bike sized wheels. We carry most of our heavy luggage on the back because the tandem is easier to steer at slow speeds, i.e. climbing, that way round. We have Sun Rhino rims which have no buckles or imperfections. The brake blocks cannot touch the tyre and we use the drag brake as much as possible, especially on long descents. The tyre had done about 1500 loaded miles and about 100 other miles. While we would expect it to last longer, it has done three times better than any tyre we used last year. I suppose we have to accept that this is the best we will get from modern technology. Also if we swap the front to the back at about 1000 miles I guess it could increase the overall mileage per tyre to 2500.

So it had to be changed and we did it after lunch. It is difficult to imagine a better place to do cycle mechanics. We were on the bank of a fast flowing river in the warm sunshine with a snow capped mountain above. Stokers of course, by virtue of their standard contract, take no part in tyre changing. So it was the management perception that she took a nap. We carried on along the valley after lunch and had some largish ups and downs. We had not planned a long day so there was plenty of time to amble along in the sunshine and still arrive by 4.30. We even had the time and energy to walk around the ancient village in which we are staying.

Day 47 April 16th Mollans-sur-Ouvèze to Bourdeaux

The sun had gone as we rolled out this morning following a very large buffet breakfast. It is difficult to keep commenting on the quiet roads and wonderful hills and mountains around us but they are still here. Each day things change a little. For the past three days we have been passing through pine forests, grapevines and fields of lavender. The lavender is not yet in flower and the fields are a bit boring but the whole place smells of the stuff. Even the gents bog in one of the cafés smelt strongly of it. It would be amusing to hear the users' comments if a UK pub landlord put some in the pub toilet. As we went on today we passed more wide green mountain pasture and even through a large deciduous forest. It would be nice and shady in summer but at the moment the leaves have not started to come.

After we had done a fairly easy ten miles this morning we overtook, it has to be said going down hill, a lone French road cyclist. The French usually go past us on their lightweight bikes as if we were standing still. We were soon re overtaken and got into conversation with the rider. He was nearing the end of his circuit and live at Nyons which he pronounced "onion", but which we had been pronouncing like Lyon with an N. He is 68 years old and goes out on his bike three times a week which he said kept him fit. We had a job to keep up with him and for several miles were glad to take his wheel to avoid a slight head wind. By the time he had set us on the right road and we had shaken hands our average was 2mph faster than usual.

Tonight we are staying in a very pleasant little village about 1500 feet up in the mountains east of the Rhone valley. It is one of those old fashioned but comfortable hotels which has probably been here for generations. These days, unlike twenty years ago, the beds don't tend to sink in the middle and the plumbing works. Health and safety have also prevailed and there is at least some possibility of getting out in the event of a fire. I believe this type of hotel to be far superior to the chain hotels on the motorways, and long may they last.

Day 48 April 17th Bourdeaux to Les Ollières sur Eyrieux

The rain rattled on the hotel last night and I think both of us lost sleep considering what we might do if it were still raining in the morning. This just goes to show what wimps we have become. Last year we happily moved on in the worst weather and stayed in much more basic accommodation. However, when we looked out in the morning it had stopped raining but was still cloudy and cold. We were surprised to see that the mountains around us had a new covering of snow on top. We shouldn't have been surprised as they are high and even we know that rain falls as snow up there. We wheeled the tandem out into the cold. It had spent the night in the restaurant because it was apparently "too long for the garage".

The first part of the day we cycled around the valley of Bourdeaux with its ups and downs and then we went down into the Rhône valley. As we started the descent, and due to poor management, the chain came off when we changed into top gear. It managed to wind itself into an incomprehensible knot around the stoker's crank. Very painful. It took about 20 minutes of gentle manipulating and twisting to get it sorted and back on. That is the chain not the stoker who was happily climbing up the muddy mountain for reasons of her own. The Rhône valley felt busy after several days of rural quiet and even the small town of La Voulte sur Rhône where we crossed the river seemed busy. The Rhône itself was fast moving and wider than the Thames at Chelsea, most impressive and dangerous looking. Soon we headed west and climbed steadily for ten or so miles up the valley of the River Eyrieux. Here we ignored the planned route both because it goes miles too far north and worse involves several valley crossings. Ollières is only a small village but it has two hotels, several B&Bs and a gîte d'etape. We settled for a very pleasant B&B on the river's edge.

Day 49 April 18th Les Ollières sur Eyrieux to Arbrise near Fay sur Lignon

Last night we were directed to an excellent restaurant by the couple who ran the B&B and enjoyed our walk in the sun beside the river. The building we were staying in was unusual. It was constructed very substantially of stone and was on three floors. Our room was on the first floor and had been very well renovated with fine none creaking original wooden floors. At breakfast we asked about the building. It was the old village gendarmerie and our hosts were still in the process of renovating it. It seemed a pretty appropriate place for us to stay following on from our experiences in Italy. The tandem could have spent the night in the cells only they were full of building material. At the back of the garage, which was very large, were two doors marked rather like toilets, Femmes and Hommes. These were the communal lock ups and one wonders what stories they could tell, particularly about what happened here during the 1939 - 45 war. When we looked outside we could still make out the washed out Gendarmerie Nationale sign on the wall.

After some discussion, and we think against the advice of her husband, we were directed by madame to a cyclable disused railway track which ran for at least 20 miles parallel to our planned route up the river valley. It was a beautiful day with fine sunshine and just a few clouds. The fast flowing river was beside us either down in a gorge, crashing over weirs or spread out into lakes. We stayed on the railway line for the first eight miles. It was similar to most disused railways with a variable surface, easy gradients and some magnificently engineered bridges and embankments. We even found one very pretty little station converted into a house. We really enjoyed the eight miles but it was hard work and the parallel road was very quiet so we changed sides of the river and continued upwards. Unusually, we found a proper picnic spot for lunch today with a table on which to put the Trangia.

The stoker has been whingeing about her saddle for some days. Stokers do this. They are provided with the very best equipment which they themselves have specified and then they whinge. The management took a spanner to the piece of dead cow the stoker insists on sitting on and stretched it half an inch. This only served to confirm the management's view that a Brookes saddle is worn out as soon as it is worn in. The stoker was broadly satisfied with the adjustment but did feel she still needed a soft cushion to sit on.

After about 25 miles of up a route decision was required. To continue up the valley would not only take us some miles out of the way but also put us onto a main road for all of tomorrow. To turn left and make for a village in the hills in the right direction risked us not being able to find accommodation. So we went about a mile uphill past the turning to ask in a village shop whether Fay had a hotel. We got an emphatic yes and whizzed back downhill a mile. We turned right and started the eight mile climb to Fay except that at that time the management thought some of it might be down. We were now on country roads with almost no cars and going into the mountains. We reached the village about 5.30. It has three hotels and a gîte but we found that by sheer bad luck all of them were shut. Ken was cross at the time but has since discovered that the area is big in cross country skiing and that as the snow has now gone and summer visitors have not yet come this is the closed season. After making enquiries in bars while partaking of a little beer we found out about a B&B a couple of miles away. Reluctantly we made our way there and got the last room on the farm only just in time as we were followed in by somebody else looking for a place to stay. How lucky we were. The room is the best so far, in fact we have two - a bedroom and a sitting room so that we have spread the maps out for route planning, and a low ceilinged attic with three beds for children in it. We had dinner with the other guests and the family around the farmhouse table and enjoyed the conversation when we could understand it. Everyone is very nice to us and Ken is now much better tempered than he was when there were no hotel beds to be had.

We particularly enjoyed our cycling today. It is very pleasant to go along slowly, gradually gaining height, mainly in one low gear. It gave us time to enjoy the wonderful scenery. Our main worry is that having climbed all day we are at least 3500 feet and are in danger of getting above

the snow line or even of being snowed in. There could be worse places to be stranded but Ken would become impossible if his schedule were to be interfered with.

Day 50 April 19th Arbrise near Fay sur Lignon to St Privat d'Allier

We were very sleepy when it was time to get up and the stoker was asked why she had ordered breakfast for 8.30am. Despite being fluent now in written and spoken Greek and Italian without having had a single lesson she replied that 8.30am was the only time in French which came into her mind. The main reason for putting this in is to remind those taking up tandem management of the normal way a stoker exercises the brain. Breakfast became rather prolonged because it was again around the farmhouse table and much talking went on. Also one of the guests was an English woman married and living in France, who came from that great cycle café location Rowland's Castle. It would not have been polite to rush off. We eventually got away from the farm at 10am and it was gone eleven by the time we had stopped in Fay village for supplies. It had turned out nice again but at this altitude even in the sunshine it can feel cold. Although we went down from the village it was not for long and we eventually climbed up to about 4000 feet. Luckily it was just below the snow line as we at our great age are very sensitive about crashing on ice and snow. It was however very pleasant to be in an area with snow covered mountains again. We also saw for the first time a field with a few goats in it. About the only cheese you can get around here is goat's cheese and yet we hadn't seen any goats until now. We were beginning to suspect that they were importing the cheese and getting quantity discount.

Just after lunch we had a pleasant descent. It helps the digestion you know. Into the valley of the Haute Loire. We expect we will cross the Loire again when it is bigger though we hope the gorge it is in does not increase in proportion. Having plunged to river level we now had another spate of climbing up to about 3700 feet before a fastish down to St Privat. We are using a map we had when we toured this area five years ago and the village was ringed. Neither of us quite remembered the approach but once we were in the village it all came back. We booked into the same hotel as last time and the same room. It has a wonderful view of the church, town and valley. It had been a long day in the sun but route planning and eating and drinking had to be done before we got our early night.

Day 51 April 20th St Privat d'Allier to Ruynes en Margeride

Another wonderful day was promised by the blue sky when we looked out at 7.30 and it was pleasant going out to get the bread, pain au chocolat and croissants. We started by going down deep into the Allier Gorge. It was about three miles down and mostly in the shade so even with heavy application of the drag brake it was still very cold. By the time we reached the bottom the stoker wanted her gloves and the management could have done with his socks. However common sense prevailed and after about half a mile climbing in the shade we were then going up until after lunch. Again the scenery has changed and once we were out of the gorge we were in a high valley. The first village was called Vacheier which seemed to indicate that cattle are important up here. As we went on the few vehicles on this broad road became even fewer and we enjoyed the quiet at a speed which rarely exceeded 6mph. We stopped for lunch at a tiny village called Paulhac en Margeride. It has a pleasant little auberge in which we stayed on the night of the 9th May 1995, which was a special birthday. It is the kind of village where the chickens and geese are in the road. The few cars around are unlocked and are often left with their doors open. It also has the distinction of having been awarded the Croix de la Guerre. It is difficult for us to read formal French but our best translation of its history is that in early June 1944 the villagers and the French Resistance army ambushed two lorries carrying flour. During the next few days they held up in the village and with the help of the locals, two of whom were killed, defended it twice against the German troops. Between the 10th and 12th June the Germans sent in a very large force to clear

the area of the resistance. Every house in the village was systematically burnt down. It is awful to think that more than fifty years later we have the same thing happening in Chechnya and the Balkans. If it didn't work for the Germans in 1944 why should it work now?

After lunch, when the management thought it would have been better to sleep in the sun, we still had another hour of up before we got to our highest point today of about 3700 feet. At this point was a simple memorial for two resistance fighters who had died here on 10th June 1944. They were not named. As we continued the descent of about eight miles we saw several of these memorials. On one or two names had been added. In the village of Clavieres were a number of memorials and the graves of some of those killed. They all included references to others who had died here and were unknown. We ended the descent into a small valley of the river Margeride and then had a short climb to the very pleasant village of Ruynes. It was 4pm and we were eight miles short of our planned destination of the town of St Flour. Ruynes has a very pleasant hotel and St Flour is a noisy urban environment in which we had stayed five years ago. There is a climb up to St Flour which the Tour de France riders hardly notice but which would reduce us to 3mph. We had already done our "average" miles for today and mainly up hill so there was no contest. We booked into the very pleasant Logis hotel and had a couple of beers sitting in the sun and writing the diary. The chef de cuisine has even agreed to make us a nice vegi meal for dinner, which was the best we have had so far. It just goes to prove that stokers can have good ideas. It also goes to show that if managements take into consideration stokers' views it can be to everyone's advantage.

Day 52 April 21st Ruynes en Margeride to Condat

For the first time on this trip there were other English people in the hotel. Four to be precise. At least two of them could have been considered mad and a third was unreasonably bad tempered. On the whole we are probably happier getting along with the French. Today is Good Friday so we have happily cycled right through Lent. We did not get any hot cross buns with our breakfast croissants, neither did we notice any when we bought our daily bread in the boulangerie. If Asda sell them every day of the year it is not much to ask the French to do it on one day. We did rather miss them because so often in the past Easter has marked our first away weekend of the year and, on occasions, we have gone to great lengths to get the buns in the most odd places.

So we now had a few miles extra to do because we stopped a little early yesterday. But unlike the Tour de France on 16th July we had the opportunity to bypass St Flour. For the first few miles the scenery and the hilliness were not unlike Dorset. The main difference was that instead of Portland and the sea in the background we had snow capped mountains. It made a change from long climbs and descents to have lots of shorter ups and downs. After a while we emerged onto a high plain at about 3000 feet. We did consider whether we were becoming high plains drifters but the stoker objected on two counts. Firstly we could not be drifting so long as we had the objective of getting to St Malo. Secondly drifting would indicate that she was not pedalling which was just not true. It seemed easy to get some miles covered, we must be getting fitter.

By lunch time we were a good bit past half way. We stopped in a small village which had an excellent wooden bus shelter designed like a Swiss chalet. It was pleasant in the sun to watch the world go by. It was also interesting to comment on the rural myth that they need their cars when town dwellers don't. During lunch we watched at least four separate car journeys take place within the village, none of which could have taken more than five minutes. Petrol prices and car tax just have to be too low.

After lunch the plain had opened out into rolling countryside with few trees and the odd village. We ambled along in no hurry and took our pleasure in simple things. We passed a lovely waterfall and further on some basalt rock formations which looked rather like limestone pavements. At one point we startled a hare which bounced off down the hillside just like a tiny deer. At the highest

point there was a broad flattish watershed a couple of miles across and then we were descending into Condat about 900 feet down in seven or eight miles. We had covered part of today's route during our holiday five years ago but it was surprising how little we remembered. I think we may have had bad weather because today's views were exceptional. We did however remember that we did not like Condat much though we could not remember why. The problem was solved because when we got about a mile from the town we came across a new hotel built beside a lake and surrounded by hills and pine woods. Our room has its own balcony overlooking the water and as we write this we are sitting, still in shorts and shirts, with a beer, in the warm evening sunshine. Furthermore the stoker still had enough energy to walk around the lake. This cannot be right.

Day 53 April 22nd Condat to Meymac

It was pleasant to wake up and look out over the lake, and breakfast was a pleasant surprise. Two croissants and two pain au chocolat. Even the bill was not as bad as we expected. Even so while the stoker was fine, which was perhaps the most important thing, the management said that his muscles were a bit tight and in an ideal world he would stay at home and read the paper. No chance. We went down into Condat village and had difficulty trying to remember why we disliked it last time we were here. Anne seemed to remember that although there was a roaring fire downstairs, the upper floor of the hotel was cold. It seemed a pleasant enough French village with the usual shops so that we could buy supplies. It was slightly annoying to be signposted around the outside of the village to find the correct way out but otherwise it was OK.

After a short climb we had 15 miles on the flat or downhill and very pleasant it was too. We followed a river through a valley which was sometimes wide and flat with pastures and at other times steep sided within the gorge. It was heavily wooded and quite shady which was fine in today's warm sunshine. Eventually we had a final rapid descent into the busy little town of Bort Les Orgues. Although it was a nice town its position seemed most precarious to us. Directly above it was a huge dam which holds back water in a lake which is eleven miles long, the water being used to generate electricity. We just got to the tourist office before it closed and the very helpful man there gave us guides and a hotel list which confirmed that Meymac did have a hotel. We then had the less pleasant task of climbing steeply up for about a mile and then less steeply for another couple of miles. We were rewarded by some pleasant views of the lake and its backdrop of snow covered mountains which were extinct, we hope, volcanoes.

The rest of the day was not so good. The road was wide and although not very busy was a contrast to the past week or so of having almost no traffic. We were also now in undulating countryside and it is not really as exciting as being in the mountains.

Meymac is a pleasant little town and we managed to find an extremely cheap little hotel. As it does not have a restaurant we decided to eat in and, having done the shopping, got back just in time to avoid a violent thunder storm. A short time afterwards a very loud and frightening siren went off and then several cars went speeding past the hotel - presumably the auxiliary pompiers on their way to the station. If air raid sirens sounded like that I'm not surprised they scared people, it certainly made us feel alarmed. So as we relaxed and recovered over a glass of wine it was interesting to reflect that although today had felt easy, we had done well over our average miles and had finished up slightly higher than where we had started. It just goes to show what a few days in the mountains has done for our fitness. It was also much warmer at around 2000 feet than 3000 feet above sea level.

Day 54 April 23rd Meymac to Bujaleuf

Unfortunately the stoker made a serious error. She managed to find in a tourist office a leaflet in English about the Limoges region. This said not only was the region only good for timber and

cattle because the soil was infertile but that it was very green because it has a very high rainfall. Apparently it is the first place the weather hits after it leaves the Atlantic. After last night's thunderstorm we would normally have expected it to dry up and the sun to come out today. No chance, it rained all night and all the morning. We took every precaution to ensure that it stopped including double wrapping everything in plastic bags and putting on our waterproofs. It is the first time we had been so serious about keeping the rain out on this trip. It should have provoked a fine day but the stoker had already done the damage. She was quite reluctant to get up but after a couple of cups of coffee we were happy to be on our way.

We carried on on the wide road of yesterday but the traffic was light. There was an alternative route through the mountains for the first 20 miles but because of the visibility we did not take it. We climbed up again to about 3000 feet in the first five miles but after that, even though we had lots of ups and downs, we were going down more than up. Even though it was Easter Sunday morning there was no sign of any French road cyclists out. No wonder they cannot produce a Tour de France winner if they won't go out in the rain. After all, Greg Lemond won after overcoming an unnecessary gunshot wound and Lance Armstrong had testicular cancer to contend with.

We had lunch in the shelter of an old railway station which I think is a first on one of these trips. It was unstaffed and in need of some work but we found a seat and soon got the Trangia going. It was only served by four trains on Sunday and one of these stopped while we were there. The guard's door opened right opposite our shelter. Rather than the usual challenge in the UK of "you can't put that on here mate" or frequently something ruder we got a friendly "bon appetit". SNCF may be useless at bike carriage but at least they are polite. We went on and every now and then the rain stopped. By 3pm we had reached our planned destination, dictated by the presence of several places to stay, but we felt it was too early to stop. The Tourist Office was shut but we found a map which indicated beds in a village 10 miles on. We risked it and after a very pleasant ride along country lanes we took the best ensuite room in a very pleasant little hotel for about £10 each B&B. OK so the breakfast will be French and dinner will cost us another £20 but it is still pretty good value.

Day 55 April 24th Bujaleuf to Bellac

The trouble with staying in nice places is that it is very hard to move on the next day. Still it had turned out nice so we reckon that the stoker's ill judged reading has been counteracted by a major effort at rain avoidance. We eventually got away at 10am and were waved off by Jacky, or was it Dominique, we never did sort out the gender in the proprietors' names. Provisions were bought from the market in the square outside the hotel and we were almost immediately into country lanes. Often the best parts of a cycle tour are in the areas which on the face of it would not be worth a visit. There are few things here which normally attract tourists, no special sites of interest and hence few hotels and tourist shops. Yet we were surrounded for forty miles by quiet, green, rolling countryside.

During the morning we crossed several river valleys and stood on bridges watching the few fisherpersons. We passed several small villages but mainly only got barked at by dogs. We stopped for lunch in the town centre at Ambazac in the sunshine and not a single person walked by.

At about 3pm we had something of a dilemma and a decision had to be made. We had done our usual daily mileage but the next guaranteed hotel was eleven miles away along a main road. The alternative quiet route would have been nicer but it was further and we would have been unlikely to find anywhere to stay on the way. So we took the main road. Even worse a couple of miles along the main road we came across a nice little hotel but it still felt too early. So heads down and bums in the air we did the last ten miles at top speed. This pushed our mileage and average speed up to a level which would risk us being thrown out of the Farnham cycling group. So we made

it here to Bellac, a pleasant small town, and checked into a B&B. We have a room on the top floor which is so large that we have to shout across to each other and with beautiful views over the town and surrounding countryside. Not a bad day considering Ken reckons he has got a cold and the stoker thinks he is just trying to make her pedal harder as well as trying for sympathy.

Day 56 April 25th Bellac to Chauvigny

We had a very pleasant meal in a creperie last night and were both reluctant to get up for our 8.30 breakfast. Madame waved us off and we soon found our way out of town. It is unfortunate to be brought face to face with the realities of life. Bellac is a town which in the past has been based on income from its tannery. On the way out we passed the abattoir and found it sad to see the empty animal lorries going back to the farms. Towns like this always seem to me to have a smell of death about them even if they are in a nice situation. It is rather like Calne near Bristol which is based on the making of meat pies. I know there is no logic to this view, I am happy to have leather belts and shoes but I don't like the feeling. I also don't much like the French Bis roads. Today we were on one for a long time and I had forgotten that even though it was designated a D road it would be fast and wide. I should have remembered that back in the 1970's the French designated a network of perfectly pleasant country roads holiday routes and advertised them by showing pictures of a bison. I was even once given a brochure of them in the French tourist office in London. It was a stupid idea right from the start. Presumably it was an attempt to prevent the chaos which occurs here every summer because the whole country takes its summer holidays at the same time. What they are left with are rural highways which encourage cars into the countryside and ruin local communities. I expect they still exist because none of the bureaucrats have the courage to upset the motoring lobby.

So we had another good average and took an early lunch in a very pleasant little town called Montmorrillon. We were on the outskirts at exactly 12 noon and were amazed to see a long queue of cars emerge from a side road leading to a factory and head towards the town. They obviously take going home for lunch here seriously. In the centre of town we crossed the river by an arched pedestrian bridge which had once been the main river crossing and pushed the bike steeply uphill to the ancient church. We found seats nearby and had an early and very leisurely lunch in the shade as the midday sunshine was very warm.

We did another 15 miles on flat boring roads trying to avoid the stink of oil seed rape and decided to call it a day at 3.30. The land here still looks infertile and I suppose with the subsidy it is the best thing to grow. Yet again the EC seem to have a lot to answer for.

We again chose a B&B rather than a hotel. In Chauvigny we took a room in a large, very old and interesting house in the town centre. From a practical point of view we were able to do our washing in the launderette which was nice because the larger items had not been done since we left David and Corinna's over two weeks ago. We also had time to explore this ancient town which has a ruined castle and several fine chateaux, if that is not a contradiction in terms.

Day 57 April 26th Chauvigny to Richelieu

Some of the B&Bs here seem to have gone for a niche market. To compete with the hotels which are very cheap by British standards they try to provide something special. The most important thing for the cycle tourist is a comfortable room and a good solid breakfast at the time you want it. The B&Bs on the farms seem to do this but there appears to be a genre of town B&Bs in houses of architectural interest which provide very little. Last night we were in one of them and the madame obviously had some difficulty coping with two foreign cycle tourists. I think we were pleased to see the back of each other. She could return to her rather affected clientele and we could get going.

After the last couple of days on roads which were a bit busy for us we planned a route very carefully to avoid all main roads. This reduces our average speed because the roads are generally less smooth with steeper gradients and sharper bends and we get lost more often. We went out of town via the swimming pool and cemetery and were lucky to hit the minor through road first time. It was pouring down with rain but at least we did not have any spray from passing traffic as there was none. We needed to pass through a small town and cross the motorway to Poitiers. This gave us the opportunity to buy supplies for lunch. As we dripped into the shops we could see that the locals felt sorry for us. We were properly wet for only the second time on this trip but compared to last year in Scotland it was positively balmy.

We were soon out of town and back on the minor roads and the rain eased a little. By now we were on the lookout for a lunch stop with a little shelter. We found one in the shape of a very fine porch to a village hall. We had finished eating and were just making a second cup of tea when old people began to appear. They had a meeting which seemed to start at 2pm and for the first time on all our trips we needed to make room for them to get through. They were very nice to us and we tried to be to them but we did want to get on our way.

The afternoon was showery and when we were not going in the wrong direction we began to enjoy the benefits of quiet country lanes. As we neared Richelieu we were a bit apprehensive about whether it would have accommodation. We needn't have been as it is clearly a tourist attraction with several hotels and niche market B&Bs. As we came into the town we passed the huge chateau and then entered the oblong walled central area of the town. It is probably only two or three hundred years old and not fortified but it is still very attractive. This time we booked into a cheap hotel with our room outside the main building motel style. This gave Ken the chance to service the tandem a bit and to put much needed new brake blocks on. Somewhere along the line we had lost the spares we brought with us but the local bike shop sold us some loose for about a quarter of the price we pay for packaged ones in the UK. After a wet day we are sitting outside our room with some really nice charcuterie and wine and enjoying the evening sunshine.

Day 58 April 27th Richelieu to Cunault

We had an excellent breakfast which included not only croissants but also fresh fruit and all for 25 francs each. It was, however, raining again which was a real surprise after last night's warm sunshine. When it rains we double wrap everything in plastic bags. Our Karrimor panniers, which were not much good until we modified them, are certainly not waterproof. We keep important things like the phone and Psion in a waterproof bag intended for yachties.

We had another look at Richelieu today and found out a bit more about it. It was built towards the end of the 1600's by the rich of the time as an adjunct to the nearby chateau. Apparently the king gave his courtiers or cours a tax break until 100 houses were built. The cours of course never lived here. Why should they when there are so many more interesting parts of France? The village was however occupied by about 4000 people. It was not clear whether the occupants were the cours' servants or just opportunist 17th century squatters. Incidentally we like the French word "cours" and think it should become an internationally recognised word to describe the hangers on, the likes of Richard Branson and Bill Gates as the current kings of the world.

So we continued on in the rain on the white roads on our map until we were near to Chinon on the river Vienne just before it joins the Loire. Here we risked a ride down a road which was allegedly blocked by water. We are now sufficiently bored with flat roads that we try things just to make life a bit more exciting. Apart from a bit of gravel it was a good cycle route to the centre of the town, and we were suddenly again in tourist France. There were signs to all sorts of attractions, chateaux, wine tasting etc. Having looked we got on our way but the quiet roads were becoming more difficult to find. It was sad to see that alongside the wine tasting signs were directions to the local nuclear plant. Now I guess that over the years we have drunk a few bottles of the fine wine

from around here but even so that sign is a turn off. It seems however that the French wine tasters and drinkers are not put off at all. Unfortunately this is just another indication of the French being insufficiently concerned about the world environment.

Our environment was still very wet and we started looking for a café in which to buy lunch. Before we came across one we found a deserted municipal camp site. Even the ever present dormobiles had found it too wet. We had a long and pleasant lunch in the shelter of the veranda of the washhouse but as there was no sign of the rain easing we pedalled on. We soon came to the point where the rivers Loire and Vienne join. It is a massive piece of water made particularly impressive today by the speed at which it was running. We have never seen such a large fast flowing river. For the rest of the afternoon we followed the river bank on one side or the other.

Each river crossing took a long time but it was worth it for the view, even in the rain. Unfortunately, from a cycling point of view, this part of the ride was plagued by heavy traffic. There are minor roads nearby but it would not be possible to see the river from these. Perhaps we should have bypassed this area on this trip and saved it for a visit by Saga bus if we ever get old enough. Then maybe not.

After we had done more mileage than planned, and there being an apparent local shortage of somewhere to stay, we found a B&B in a scruffy looking house. It all turned out right in the end. The room was in a pleasant renovated part overlooking the garden and we were cooked a very nice vegi dinner. It is however still raining which just goes to prove that the old saying that Ken's mum taught him, "rain before seven clears up before eleven" only applies in parts of Southern England.

Day 59 April 28th Cunault to Angers

We didn't have far to go today so we had an extra half an hour in bed and breakfast at the decadent hour of 9am. It was a very good breakfast too, only lacking boiled eggs and cheese which we did not want anyway. We then entered into a very interesting conversation with madame. She had three rooms which she let for B&B, including one in the "troglodyte" which was being converted into a self catering flat. The troglodytes are caves or rooms carved into the soft rock of the river cliff. She thought they had been there since the 13th century and had been occupied as houses by the poor until the 1800s. Whether the rooms she showed us were natural or carved by people or a combination of both is not clear. We were, however, surprised to see that they were not at all damp, not even after the heavy rain we have had during the last two days. Also the original features which remained showed that the residents enjoyed a reasonable level of comfort. There were fireplaces and chimneys which looked as good as any in a modern house, but of course with no rear windows ventilation may have been difficult. The tandem rested in its own troglodyte shed overnight and even the stoker's saddle was dry when we left to continue following the Loire river.

In better weather it was even more impressive than yesterday and we were able to find some little used white roads which were very pleasant to cycle on. We stopped for our usual picnic lunch at a slipway mainly used by fishermen. We chatted to one who said he was catching small fish for the pot but when we left he was a bit disappointed with his catch. We think he may have said this was because the river was dirty being in spate following the rain. For the first time in several days the management had both the time and opportunity to put his new "petite casquette" (cycling hat) over his eyes and doze off.

After lunch or we should say by mid afternoon we were again drifting along the flat roads into Angers. It is a big town and the last bit in was marginally busy but easier than most. We are staying here two nights and having a day off tomorrow when our friend Marlies is coming down by train from Paris where she works to join us. We took some time to find a hotel because there is some event on here over the weekend and many of the rooms were booked. In the process we

came across one of the most bizarre roundabouts we have encountered on this trip. It is traffic light controlled but, depending on which direction you are going and where you come from, you can go round it either way. This works OK provided it clears every time the lights change but this does not happen. It is very funny watching cars meeting each other head on and both being convinced they are right but it must lead to the odd little crash. Perhaps the Maire here runs the car repair workshop.

We found a nice hotel near the station with rooms and an amazing thing happened. Not only is there a TV which works in the room but it has CNN. Needless to say we went to the boulangerie and charcuterie to buy food to eat in and watched the news, including pictures of Murrayfield completely flooded. It does however have one possible fault depending upon one's taste and/or maturity. The channel marked MTV doesn't work.

Day 60 April 29th Angers

Today is a day off. We got up very late and had a walk around the town before meeting Marlies at the station. After lunch we did the chateau which is not one of those big houses with pointed roofs but a proper castle. We also ate and drank and had a thoroughly enjoyable touristy time in the sunshine.

Day 61 April 30th Angers to Cosse-le-Vivien

Again it was a lovely sunny day and we said goodbye to Marlies after breakfast. After the obligatory photos she set off for a day's walking by the river and we carried on north. Angers is a pleasant town but we were pleased to be out into the countryside again. It is always easier to navigate into a town centre than out but this time all went smoothly and after three or four miles we were on tiny country roads. Most of the morning we followed the valley of the river La Mayenne which is only a minor tributary but is still a large river by British standards. By lunch time we were away from the river and had no need of shelter for our picnic on such an ideal day.

After lunch we continued in the lanes but had a bit of a mishap related to bad navigation and a dolmen. Ken, having taken the wrong direction in an effort to find the dolmen, did a turn in the road and clipped a flower planter with a front pannier. This caused the bike to fall and the stoker tumbled off grazing her knee and winding herself. There was only a tiny amount of blood and we were soon on our way again. A little further on we came to a "route barrier" which was just passable with the bike but, in deference to the stoker's injuries, we walked for about 400 yards which would normally have been ridden with complaints. The good side of this blockage was that the road for the next eight miles, which we would have bypassed on lanes, was empty of cars and we reached our planned destination of Craon before 4pm.

We idled into the nice little hotel only to be told that it was full. We were quite taken aback as this is the first time in the whole of this trip that a hotel has been full. We had a beer in the bar to recover from the shock and the woman who ran the hotel kindly phoned and found us a hotel eight miles further on. Unfortunately it was down the main road but when we reluctantly got going there was very little traffic. As we arrived much work was going on to clear up from a function. After something of a wait our room was ready and we were glad of a shower and some dinner.

Day 62 May 1st Cosse-le-Vivien to St Sauveur des Landes

It was a nice Hotel de la Gare which did us a good evening meal and excellent breakfast. According to the TV it was supposed to be a sunny day but it started a bit misty and did not look like clearing. We had a look at the disused railway track and found it had been closed in 1989

although it had carried little traffic of any kind for many years before that. It was now a footpath but not really cyclable and not going in our direction. We headed off on the map's white roads again and found almost no traffic for the first 20 miles. It was, however, rapidly turning into rolling country rather than the flatlands we have had for four or five days. We passed through a hardwood forest just coming into leaf but were disconcerted to see "private" signs. According to the map it was large, circular in shape and three miles in diameter. Every so often there were picnic spots but there were trenches round them to stop picnickers straying into the woods. It would seem that the French revolution did not change much here. It felt more like feudalism or the worst aspects of Thatcherism which are probably much the same. The only explanation may be that so few people come to the woods that there is no pressure on the owners to do the proper thing.

We reached Vitre at 12 noon as planned by the management, just before the tourist office shut. We are now just into Brittany but not the touristy part so there are few hotels in the country areas. The objective was to try and make sure we would have somewhere nice tonight. The very helpful young woman there checked all the possible towns and tried hotels for us without success. In the end she very kindly booked us a B&B in a little hamlet on our route north. We wandered off and took a leisurely lunch beside a lake before heading back into the maze of little lanes. Unlike at home the fields here are full of cows. The French were not stupid enough to admit that they had BSE so have been able to deal with it in a more reasonable way as well as stifle competition. It makes the countryside feel much different having animals about. It also smells a lot different with the muck being used on the fields, hopefully instead of the products of Monsanto.

By the afternoon the sun had come out and it was extremely warm. Rather than rush to our destination we stopped in a little village and had tea and cakes. By now there were plenty of people about. Being the 1st May it is Labour Day when theoretically no one works. The shops were shut but there were lots of people working in the fields and also much gardening going on. It was not quite like a Bank Holiday at home. We finally moved on and climbed the last hill to our B&B. It is a very pleasant old stone cottage but with all mod cons. The host was very welcoming and dinner is at 8pm.

Day 63 May 2nd St Sauveur des Landes to Beauvoir

It was a pleasant dinner chatting to our host and two visitors from Paris. Many of the problems are, not surprisingly, the same as at home - high cost of living, pollution, traffic congestion in Paris and no decent jobs in the provinces. Breakfast was good, even including yogurts and cake, and we were seen off with a good weather forecast. The stoker was cheerful. She could see home in sight and furthermore she has no washing to do as we have enough clean clothes now to last until we get home.

We were again into the quiet country lanes and everything was fine until we came across a road closed sign. We ignored it as usual but when we got to the road works it was impassable even without the bike. We attempted to follow the diversion but for once Ken was soon hopelessly lost. The signs disappeared, there were no obvious landmarks and the sun was not shining. For the first time in recent memory we retraced about two miles and eventually got back on track. Undaunted we continued on the tiny lanes and were fortunate not to come across our first field of oil seed rape until we had done 18 miles.

We had lunch in a little village before making for the Tourist Office in Pontorson and from there to a hotel on the way to Mont St Michel. We unloaded the luggage and went down towards the causeway road on a pleasant cycle path. As we reached the causeway we hitched on behind a group of English cyclists to get shelter from the headwind. Anne fell into conversation with a Geordie but it was probably easier to understand the French. It was quite difficult to speak English to strangers without throwing in the odd bit of French now and again though formal

communications between the management and stoker are still in the basic English both tend to understand.

Mont St Michel is the impressive tourist trap it has been since it was built. The only difference is that tourists used to be called pilgrims. The bottom bit was incredibly crowded and tacky but it became more pleasant as we climbed upwards. It is a very impressive place, far bigger and higher than St Michael's Mount in Cornwall and with views for miles over the shifting sands. The maximum difference between high and low water is supposed to be 15 metres and the tide can apparently come in over the sands more quickly than a horse can gallop. There was no mention of whether it would be possible to outrun the tide on a tandem if the stoker thought she was at risk of drowning. The management thinks there could be a good chance. We went back to the hotel after buying supplies and decided to eat in. It may be our last dinner in France for sometime but we would prefer to remember the nice meals in country places rather than the inevitable tourist rip-off here.

Day 64 May 3rd Beauvoir to Weymouth

We left over the new bridge which has been built since Ken was here last, towards the polders. These are the flatlands which surround Mont St Michel. In the several trips that Ken has made here in the past the polders have never been crossed successfully from side to side without ending up on the main road to St Malo by mistake. This time we had the best chance of achieving this feat of navigation. Firstly, it was misty and Mont St Michel hung atmospherically in the background. This meant that one was inclined to believe the map rather than one's instincts. Secondly, the IGN maps we have now are generally much better than the Michelin maps we used in the past. Thirdly, the previous attempts were almost always made when the crops in the field obscured the road junctions. We set off optimistically and for the first five miles we can confirm that we were definitely on the correct route. At this point, without doubt the map was incorrect and certainly bore no resemblance to the roads we were on. After a further three miles we came to a farmyard and continued on a green lane on top of a dyke for a mile or so and finally came to a minor metalled road beside the beach which joined the main coast road. This was a major step forward in the navigation of the area, the complete crossing having been achieved. However, much remains to be done on future visits to ensure that this can be repeated.

The next bit was a boring main road but not excessively busy. We had a rather cold picnic lunch before going down to the port at St Malo. When we planned this trip last year it was to coincide our return with the start of the direct ferry service run by Condor to Weymouth. This year they have decided not to start this service for another three weeks. They do, however, run a service to Jersey and another from Jersey to Weymouth so we could get home by midnight. But to achieve this one needs to be very rich. The fare from St Malo to Jersey is more than the summer fare to Weymouth and the fare from Jersey to Weymouth is almost twice that again. The logic of this defies us so we sent emails to Condor a couple of weeks ago asking for a reduction. They acknowledged the email but failed to reply. The clerk at the booking office in St Malo was extremely unhelpful so we paid up. This is therefore by far the most expensive of the seven crossings we have made on this trip. You would understand that we are now in the position of being unhappy customers and will do our best to pass our views on to as many people as we can.

Having presented our plastic and been ripped off we went for a quick cycle tour of St Malo. It is well worth a longer stay. About 80% of it was destroyed during the war but it has been rebuilt to resemble what it was. It still has cobbled streets and stone houses and is completely surrounded by its curtain wall.

We boarded the ferry which was something of a contrast to the more efficient operators in other countries. Condor seem to think they are running aircraft and one meanders through soulless corridors to end up in a crowded departure lounge with smoked glass windows. When the signal

is given one queues to board via a ramp which gets you back more or less to where you started. In Greece you stand on the quay with your bike, the Flying Dolphin roars up, is loaded and departs within ten minutes. Still, Condor are not the only ones to have this silly procedure. Just compare getting onto Eurostar trains at Waterloo with getting the train to Weymouth.

It was a bit of a shock arriving at Jersey. Cars were on the other side of the road and people spoke English. We put the bike into left luggage and went off for a meal. The semi vegi amongst us enjoyed fish and chips for the first time in more than two months and then complained of having over eaten. We loaded onto the big Condor catamaran and dozed off to awake to see the lights of Portland and home in the distance. We landed way ahead of the cars as soon as the ramp went down. We managed the hills home in high gears and at great speed. It is very nice to be home and just as nice to have done what we planned. It will take a few days to get back to normal before we start planning the next adventure.

Total mileage on the computer - 2196.3