

A Short Ride Out One Spring Day through Portugal and Spain

28 April to 8 June 2003

42 days

1881 kms (1175 miles)

Day 1 Monday 28th April Weymouth to Sherborne

We have often said that the only proper way to start a cycle tour is to ride out from home. Today we succeeded in doing this, though not without some doubts. When planning was in the final stages, a management responsibility, it was a lovely warm sunny day with sails all over Portland Harbour. He picked up the phone to dial Europcar but put it down again. The stoker was consulted and it was agreed to cycle to the airport instead. We were both happy not to use this unpleasant company which has the monopoly of one way hires from Weymouth. We also looked forward to a sunny spring ride through Dorset and Somerset on a better vehicle than their downmarket run down tin boxes.

When Monday dawned it was wet. The weatherman on the radio said rather gleefully that it was a long time since we have had a truly wet day and today was going to be it. And it was. All ways out of Weymouth are up, and up we went. It is never so bad once you are going and we were soon skirting Dorchester to the west. We joined the main A352 road to Cerne Abbas. This is one of the few A roads in Dorset where it is still a pleasure to ride a bike, even in the rain. We dripped into the café at Cerne for a rather late lunch.

Leaving the café it was not pleasant to put on wet waterproofs but the main rain seemed to have stopped. We passed the giant who for once was hiding his modesty in the mist. We could see his feet and assumed that as we could see nothing else he was still managing to keep it up. We continued our climb up to Lyons Gate and descended into the Blackmore Vale. We were no longer in home territory and were once again travellers. OK, we do sometimes come this way on day rides but it is quite different from the high rolling hills of West Dorset. Sherborne was welcoming on such a nasty wet day and we found our pre booked B&B just before the sky began to clear.

Before going to eat we spent a very pleasant hour with Sue and Reg Crang who live here and from where Reg cycles to join Cyclists' Touring Club rides. Coincidentally among the topics of conversation Laurie Lee came up. He was an important influence which encouraged us to travel. The title we have given to this trip was of course inspired by his superb book "As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning".

Day 2 Tuesday 29th April Sherborne to Bristol Airport

With cycle touring you certainly get the good the bad and the ugly and we had them all today. After our huge farmhouse breakfast we recovered the tandem from the stables and headed off up hill. We were soon deep into the country lanes. After yesterday's rain today was bright and sunny with a strong tail wind. Our first major obstacle was to cross the A303 which we did by tunnel which was easy but route finding afterwards was not so good. We are navigating this trip by a combination of GPS and maps printed from the computer using Map Source software. All of the roads are on the map, to a fault. Some of the smaller ones are barely passable by tandem and trailer and we found our way onto one of these. It rose so steeply that we got wheel spin on

the climb. The stoker did her best to ignore this level of total instability and the management did his best to ignore the stoker. We were lucky to get up because there was no possibility of pushing the tandem up that hill. Back on track we were treated to the sight of a peacock in full display. It was very beautiful and the stoker took pictures as we cycled by slowly. It all seemed a bit futile as there was no sign of its mate. There was also an abundance of wild life and the bluebells, while not up to Surrey standards, were almost at their best. Spring days in Somerset don't come much better than this and it was good.

Now for the ugly and slightly scary experiences without which trips like this would not be complete. Going along what seemed a remote country lane we approached some farm buildings. They were rather pleasant, on both sides of the road with the road going through what once must have been the farm yard. There were a couple of great big tractors outside the barn, one of which was being worked on by a mechanic. He was a blond man and he turned away as we greeted him. Not twenty feet from him on a scrubby piece of grass were two newly dead large black dogs. Both had been bleeding from the mouth and both were in a jumbled heap of limbs. We pedalled on quickly, shocked and pleased to be out of the place. Within half a mile walking along the lane we met two people with Chinese features walking along the road. All very bizarre and we were glad to be out of that place.

We bypassed Bruton to the west and Shepton Mallet to the east and took lunch in Doultling church porch. The stoker was marginally grumpy due to lunch being half an hour late. She blamed this on the management who, as usual, was taking his responsibilities very seriously and ensured not only a pleasant and dry environment for the stoker but also that we were beyond half way.

After lunch we had the long steady climb up to the top of the Mendips. There are few roads in this area and while they are pleasant enough there is quite a bit of traffic. Rain was also threatening though the visibility was good and we could still see the nipple of Glastonbury to the south west. The descent from the Mendips down into Chew Valley can only be described as a waste. Long, steep, windy and slippery. We went down with full drag brake on and by the time we got to the bottom it smelt like a burned out clutch on a lorry. Goodness knows what it does to the wheel bearings.

As we passed Chew Valley Lake we came across one of those statistical cycle paths designed by an idiot for fools. Firstly we couldn't get onto it because of the barriers. Secondly it required us to make two right turns across a busy road and thirdly it ran out just before the village where if it had continued it could have been of some use. Fourthly it was much quicker on the road. No doubt it will feature in Somerset's return of miles of cycle routes constructed.

From here it was a steady climb in busy traffic on tired legs to the airport. This was the bad bit and we had both really gone too far today. The B&B at the airport is motel style which suited us fine. We had already accumulated a good quantity of food and acquired a bottle of Côtes du Rhône so we enjoyed a pleasant meal watching TV.

Day 3 Wednesday 30th April Bristol Airport to Loulé

Having repacked our bags for the flight and set the alarm for 4.30am we slept fitfully. This was both because of the aircraft noise and also the fear that we would not wake up in time. As it was the management awoke before the alarm and we were packed and away by 5.00am. We cycled into the airport the back way, uphill, which took five minutes. I suppose if you build an airport on the top of a hill it is less distance for the planes to go. Tired stokers are just not considered. We divided the tandem into three parts and these and the trailer went into the oversize baggage check in. We then walked pretty well straight onto the bus and onto the plane. It was either perfect timing or cutting it very fine whichever way you look at it. Two and a half hours later we were collecting the bags at Faro. Due to poor organisation by the management we did not

leave the airport until 11am. Bits were needed from the bottom of bags and the normal smooth reassembly routine was not apparent. Nevertheless all was fine and everything worked as we put on shades and headed into the sunshine. Perhaps the most difficult navigation on any trip is that which gets you out of the airport area. This has to be done without either ending up on the local hyper space bypass or in the back of the inevitable trading estate. The management did have one minor hiccup today and the stoker enjoyed taking the photo of the locked gate at the dead end. The GPS did however work well and we were soon climbing into the hills above Faro.

Learning about a new country is difficult and the first thing we needed was a shady place for lunch. We ended up in a small grove of trees in the absence of churches, bus shelters or town squares. A long day was not planned but we went far enough to see that the countryside here is not as arid as we had expected or as flat as the stoker had hoped. It seemed much less developed than some coastal regions of Spain, rather like the South of France in the 1970's.

We freewheeled into Loulé, a medium sized town, and cycled round until we found a pension for the night. This was booked by the stoker in what the management takes to be fluent Portuguese. After a well deserved nap we went out exploring the cobbled streets and the maze of roads and passages not far from the hotel. We had dinner in a small bar and enjoyed the very friendly service and the huge quantity of food, all of which bodes well for a good tour.

Day 4 Thursday 1st May Loulé to Silves

Today is Labour Day, though how this occurs in Portugal is not clear to us as they seem to be mainly right wing catholics. Anyway like most sensible people they are happy to take a day off just as we do in the UK. The downside is that the shops seemed to be shut and having had our continental breakfast we needed a bottle of water. We bought this at a garage at about twice the supermarket price but that's life in all EC countries. Having covered all of the white bits in suntan cream we made our way out of town. Life seemed much better after a night's sleep and the quiet smooth road into the coastal hills was very pleasant. There was a lot of climbing before lunch to get to the small town of Alte which was full of locals having picnics in grand style. The stoker was very envious when she saw one group with a table with full table cloth, wine etc. We as usual went on till we found a very comfortable bus shelter in the shade. From here on into Silves it was mainly down hill and the breeze it caused was very pleasant. We have not yet fully got to grips with finding accommodation in this country. We cycled around the town, knowing that hotels existed but unable to find any. We chanced upon a residential and the stoker, in her fluent Portuguese, found us a very pleasant room in an old building in a quiet side street. The tandem was put in the outside courtyard. We spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the town with its cobbled streets and castle which dominated the higher parts. In the evening we again had an excellent meal in a restaurant and decided to go to bed early with a view to getting somewhere tomorrow before it gets too hot. The management thinks it will rain because of the herring bone pattern in the sky but we are both very dubious of this UK weather forecasting technique working properly here.

Day 5 Friday 2nd May Silves to Santa Clara-a-Velha

Even though we woke at 7am we still only managed to leave at 9am. It was a lovely morning with fluffy clouds but no threat of rain. We stopped off at the market for provisions and were soon making good time on the quiet roads towards the hills. In fact we were lulled into something of a false sense of security before the big climb started. The guide book waxes lyrical about the road to Monchique through the cork tree forest. It is indeed very beautiful with some wonderful views. It is also very long and steep and there was quite a bit of traffic. When we got there just before lunch time the attractive village was very busy with tourists. We decided to push on as we had a fair distance to go to the next place with any accommodation.

After leaving the village we found ourselves on an almost deserted road through the most beautiful wild countryside. We stopped for lunch which we ate in the shade of a cork tree overlooking a wide deep green valley. The management even “managed” a brief siesta. Most of the afternoon we were gradually descending with only the occasional climb. Due to poor steering the management hit a large fir cone and, thinking something had fallen off the bike, did a rapid stop. His spectacle box containing among other things his normal glasses was nowhere to be seen. The stoker looked forlornly over the steep drop at the edge of the road and the management was beginning to wonder whether it was even possible to get down let alone find anything which had fallen down there. At that moment the stoker saw the box in question still attached to the front carrier by its clip but at the bottom near the centre of the wheel. Tinged with the pleasure that nothing was lost was the thought of what might have happened had the box gone into the wheel. In the past the momentum of a fast moving tandem has destroyed almost anything it comes into contact with but after a recent accident in Weymouth we took this a bit more seriously than we otherwise might have done.

Today we enjoyed some of the best scenery we have ever seen in a non mountainous part of Southern Europe. It was so green it could almost have been mistaken for parts of Norway. As we descended below the level of the forest we came to round green hills that at a distance looked rather like some in Dorset. All along the way the roadside was a riot of colour with a huge variety of spring flowers. Some fields were mainly yellow and others blue. Agriculture seems to be in decline around here but the results at the moment are a pleasure to the eye.

Santa Clara is a little village about 5km from the largest dam and reservoir in Portugal, and it has rooms. We pulled in tired and dusty and enquired in a shop which advertised that they had rooms. They were full but madame contacted a friend who came down and collected us and took us back to her bungalow. The hospitality offered by this lady of mature years was excellent. Cake and apples to start with and then the offer for us to use her kitchen to cook our evening meal. She even insisted in doing some of the washing up which is normally the stoker’s job.

Day 6 Saturday 3rd May Santa Clara-a-Velha to Vila Nova de Milfontes

Rather than suffer too much in the heat of the day we decided to leave at 9am which meant getting up early. This also had the hidden advantage of being able to get breakfast over and done with before our landlady stirred. While she was extremely pleasant and hospitable this was almost to a fault. We were able to communicate after a fashion by using words from several languages but she would not stay out of the kitchen and let us get on with cooking. We continued winding up and down and through the rounded hills covered in grass and wild flowers. There was hardly a vehicle on the road until we reached Odemira where we got some bananas for lunch and had an ice cream. From here on into Vila Nova de Milfontes we were in a National Park. As is usual with anything touched by the tourist industry things immediately got worse. We had a long unpleasant climb out of the valley which they can’t be blamed for but the traffic became heavy and the countryside had little to recommend it. We suspect the designation of “National Park” may be a way of saying EC funding available. Vila Nova de Milfontes is however in a lovely situation and sparkled in the afternoon sun when we arrived. The town is a modern development on the north side of a sandy estuary running from the sea inland for about a mile. It is low rise with none of the unpleasantness of some holiday resorts. We checked into an apartment near to the sea for two nights having decided to have a day off by the sea. After establishing ourselves we went off shopping for the “weekend”. As usual it is difficult not to buy too much especially when the price for a bottle of wine starts at about 50p.

We had late dinner sitting on our balcony overlooking the sand dunes and the estuary. Waves crash here, which is what they are supposed to do and it felt almost like home.

Day 7 Sunday 4th May Rest day at Vila Nova de Milfontes on sea.

Just our luck - the estuary was shrouded in mist when the management got up. The stoker missed this spectacle as she is not an early riser at the best of times and decided to take this rare opportunity for a lie in. The odd thing about this place is that there are no seagulls. In Weymouth the garden type birds sing at dawn as they do here and about half an hour later the seagulls start to cry. Perhaps the local cliffs don't provide a very good nesting site, there would certainly seem to be plenty for them to eat here. It is a mystery.

As usual on a day off we lazed around, went for a walk beside the sea and generally enjoyed ourselves. On this occasion the tandem was not even looked at so if it breaks down this week it's the management's fault.

Day 8 Monday 5th May Vila Nova de Milfontes to Grandola

We set the alarm so that we could make an early start and do most of the ride before the heat of the afternoon. But during the night it rained and when the alarm went off it was overcast. Some might say, the stoker for instance, that we should have turned over and had another hour's sleep. The management however is not one to have his plans upset by a little thing like the weather. He also likes getting up in the morning. We managed to roll out at about 8.15am and most of the people we saw were workers or kids on their way to school. Most of the holiday makers were still in bed. The road out north had the possibility of being busy but was unavoidable. In fact it was not that busy for the simple reason that the surface was truly awful. It was by far the worst surface we had come across and we suspect that the Portuguese road makers have been taking lessons from Sustrans. At least half the roads we have travelled on have been good and the main problem with the other bad ones has been the sudden huge pothole or unmade bit. Of course you hit these when least expected and one needs to take a great deal of care. From this you will take it that we would not recommend any roadies reading this to bring their best wheels if they come training here.

So the first part of the day was a hard climb from sea level up to about 250 metres on roads not conducive to the stoker's bum or the management's equilibrium. This was also made worse by coming immediately after a day off. Once we got to the top of the big climb we crossed into a new administrative area and the road immediately improved as did we. The weather however then decided to have a go at us and it came on to rain quite hard. Nothing like the UK of course and even though it lasted about an hour we were dry within 15 minutes of it stopping.

The rest of the day was spent on very quiet roads. The terrain was still pretty much up and down and the countryside nothing special but it made for a very pleasant day's cycling. Reaching Grandola involved crossing the bypass by a long concrete footbridge and once there we booked into the first residential we came across - cheap and comfortable with all the facilities we needed. We bought food at the supermarket, ate it and went to bed. It had been a long day.

Day 9 Tuesday 6th May Grandola to Setubal

Time shifting the day appears to be working and we got up early. Winding up the shutters bright sunshine dazzled us. However the palm trees in the square outside the hotel were swaying in the wind and down in the square locals on their way to work were well wrapped up. As we left the hotel we soon realised why. It was very cold. We unlocked the tandem from the railings, this being the first hotel without a garage, and headed out of town. This small place has the most amazing ring roads. We crossed the inner one first (no apparent traffic) and then the outer one with a little light traffic. We think the local mayor must have been up for every EC grant going and who could blame him or her.

Once out of town we had a steady pull up and then a very gradual descent to sea level. The northerly gale was slowing us down a lot but the extra effort at least kept us warm. We had expected the first part of today's ride to be on very minor roads and the second part on a busy but unavoidable main road. As it turned out the whole route was on well surfaced wide main looking roads with little or no traffic. Cycling all day on flat terrain into a strong headwind is something we had not done since last year. We found it very hard and yet last year we had managed for several days on end often in much worse weather. The last part, 20km along a windswept headland, required great perseverance and the need for a rest in the middle in the shelter of a cork tree.

At Troia we just by the skin of our teeth caught a car ferry for the 30 minute crossing to Setubal. In fact we had to get on without tickets and pay at the other end which we were only allowed to do after a strenuous debate. It took some time to find our way around Setubal but we were lucky to come cross the Turismo who directed us to a very pleasant residential in the pretty car free cobbled streets.

The rest of the day was spent resting, eating and exploring the old town but not necessarily in that order.

Day 10 Wednesday 7th May Setubal to Lisboa (Lisbon)

It is not supposed to be a very long ride today with the idea of getting into Lisboa at around lunch time. At least the stoker was cheerful. On leaving the hotel she happened to mention to the receptionist where we were going. She had been getting more and more concerned about finding somewhere to stay as we get further north into less populated areas. The receptionist who, unusually here, spoke good English, said that we would have no problem finding good clean rooms in private houses.

The ride today was all in suburbia. We wouldn't want to do this every day but once in a while it is very interesting. Using the GPS to get out of a very large town like Setubal makes it fairly easy at least to keep going in the right direction. The inevitable heavy traffic for the first part of the ride was made worse because it was up hill to Palmela. We find most drivers to be very considerate to us even on busy roads. We were however rewarded with views south to the sea and north to Lisboa.

We took a diversion into a small working town. People live in ugly high rises at the edges but in the much older centre there were markets, schools and shops. The management idly watched the locals going about their business as the stoker went off to buy bananas and oranges.

For most road traffic Lisboa is approached from the south by motorway and crosses into the town by one or other of two major bridges over the River Tejo. We had planned to use a passenger ferry from Barreiro because we were not happy about riding along the motorway bridges. We also like ferries. There was however a minor problem finding it. The GPS mapping software, while very good in most respects, shows roads almost to a fault but not ferries. Our paper map at 300,000 scale had insufficient detail to show from where the ferry departs. So the management, using proven sailing navigation techniques in reverse, made a sea fall at a point he could identify and then worked down the coast until he found the port. It worked, just as much to his surprise as to that of the stoker. It did involve cycling through some of the less desirable parts of Barreiro and during the whole time we saw not one single sign to the ferry. Presumably most people arrive by train or bus or just know where it is.

Arriving in Lisboa after the 40 minute crossing we sat on the shore and had a pleasant lunch watching the comings and goings of the shipping. When we ventured inland to find a hotel we were not prepared even by the Rough Guide for what we found. It is described as rather like San Francisco with impossible gradients and trams. Not the ideal combination for a loaded tandem

and trailer but very interesting. We went to a cheap recommended hotel to find it closed and for sale. After pushing up and down a couple of hills and being quoted silly prices we settled for a central hotel a little above budget but very comfortable. It has the distinction of having perhaps the biggest room we have ever occupied in a hotel. We could need the GPS to get to the en-suite in the dark.

Generally we do not do cities on these tours. For a start we just do not have enough time. We did enjoy being in Lisboa though. It is well worth a longer visit to explore its cobbled streets on lots of levels, trams funiculars etc. Let's just hope that its next earthquake holds off till we are safely back in Weymouth.

Day 11 Thursday 8th May Lisboa to Casais dos Britos near Azambuja

We were not struck down by the next earthquake and managed to work out how to get down to River Tejo level. This had to be done of course without falling into tram lines. Just before we joined the roaring traffic the front mudguard decided to come loose. This was probably caused by rough roads and cobbles.

We joined the traffic for a couple of kms but chickened out on approaching a flyover. We diverted onto a side road which eventually came to a dead end. We lifted the tandem across a railway line onto a fine road which followed the river and was without traffic. It just went on and on parallel to the main road but divided from it by a concrete divider. Eventually it came to the Expo98 site and continued on through it on a signed cycle route. The scale and the architecture of this site is amazing. Huge buildings inspired by ships, stadiums, towers and domes were some of the features. It was a combination of London Docklands development and the Dome all in one. How the economics of it worked we have no idea but it got us about 15kms out of town without any real aggravation. For future reference it should also be possible to use this route to cycle into the city from Lisboa airport.

After this we were on major roads with the odd side road detour for the rest of the day. We tried to check into a hotel at Azambuja but it was full of pilgrims on their way to Fatima for 12th May. They don't do themselves too badly, these pilgrims, it looked a pretty flash hotel. The stoker enquired at the Turismo and got the kind of rubbish in the response which the management expects from tourist offices world wide. We ended up in a café asking for rooms. There was a wonderful one only five minutes away by car, the restaurant owner would be free in half an hour and would show us the way. The owners were a very nice young couple with a six year old daughter and had been working in London until six months ago.

I suppose we should have known better but the five minutes turned out to be about 5kms steeply up hill. This caused not a little disruption of the normally good stoker management relations. We were however pleasantly surprised to be taken to a little restaurant in the hills and shown into a very satisfactory ensuite room.

Dinner was the best we have had in Portugal. It was served by Miguel, the son of the family, who is at uni in Lisboa. The food was beautifully cooked by his mother while his father manned the bar and barbecued the stoker's salmon. We were late to bed have spent much time exchanging views and information with Miguel. He gave us a Benfica Football Club keyring. Apparently there is some football match soon between Oporto and Celtic and Miguel wants Celtic to win as he is a Benfica supporter. The stoker mentioned that genetically she should be a Celtic supporter as are her Scottish cousins. As neither of us understand about kicking balls about we may have got this all wrong. The Benfica keyring is currently doing a splendid job replacing a broken buckle. We felt that we are beginning to understand at least a little about this fascinating country which is so pro British.

Day 12 Friday 9th May Casais dos Britos near Azambuja to Torres Novas

Another warm welcome in the bar this morning and a huge breakfast. The bar was full of locals on their way to work and they were all very friendly. So much so that we did not get away until 9.15am. The management, who has problems with words at the best of times, has been calling this place Azerbaijan from the dreadful prison in the Harry Potter books. It pleases him but it does seem a bit unfair when the people have been so friendly. Having reached the hills north of the roaring main road we decided to stay on minor roads at least for a while. The Rough Guide calls them rolling cork hills. We found some of them steep. In consequence we were well behind schedule when we had to return to the roaring highway. The pilgrims on their way to Fatima were a minor diversion as was the builder who whistled at the stoker. As for the pilgrims we find the concept of walking along a roaring highway for days without proper walking gear just plain stupid if not foolhardy. As the whole thing apparently started in 1917 as a people's protest against the then communist government it is even more odd. Sounds a bit like the Orange order marches in Northern Ireland though it possibly does less damage. Anyway they all look as miserable as sin and even the management singing "Onward Christian Soldiers" at them in a loud voice did not provoke them into complaining. It was not good for the stoker to be subjected to this tuneless rendition but she coped as usual.

We finally left the roaring highway and the footsore pilgrims at Santarem. Where the pilgrims went we don't know. The traffic went on the other side of the River Tejo or north onto the motorway. The quickest way for the pilgrims would also be to walk north on the motorway and one would hope that the pope would give a high level of indulgences if not total absolution for all those who attempt it.

We rolled on on quiet lanes finding a pleasant shady churchyard for lunch and a local café for a beer at tea time. We arrived in Torres Novas having had a good long day's cycling though we could have done with fewer hills and one or two clouds in the sky to keep off the sun now and again. Oh, and we forgot to mention some of the other things we saw. Ostriches, storks on nests and looking like herons, local ladies of a certain age mainly bandy legged dressed in black. One of these was seen carrying her shopping home in a bag balanced on her head. The management thinks that with a bit of staff training the stoker might be able to do this on the tandem. The stoker does not agree.

Days 13 and 14 Saturday 10th and Sunday 11th May Torres Novas to Cernache do Bonjardin

Leaving Torres Novas proved something of a problem. We were a little late because much to our surprise the hotel laid on a sumptuous breakfast. The management can be a bit precipitous and on this occasion failed to wait until the GPS had picked up the satellites. This process usually takes a few seconds but in the tight confines of this old town took about 3km in the wrong direction before he was prepared to admit he was wrong. Then of course he has the problem of being reluctant to retrace which on this occasion was a necessity. This minor hiccup sorted we continued much as yesterday in rolling agricultural country with lots of small vineyards. We descended into the largish town of Tomar and immediately came upon the Turismo. The management reluctantly conceded that the stoker should go in but was becoming a little unhappy when she was gone for almost half an hour. She did however emerge triumphant with a list of possible places to stay tonight. We consider this to be both an achievement for the stoker and an example to the many other tourist offices which have wasted our time or worse.

We took on supplies in Tomar and a little late in the day headed for the hills in the now strong sunshine. We climbed to a shady spot for lunch before descending at great speed into the valley of the Rio Zezere. By then we were in mountain scenery which was not only quite a change but very beautiful. We again came across pilgrims about whom enough said except that at least this

lot seemed to have chosen a nicer place to walk though why they stick to the road in such a lovely area is difficult to understand. After climbing out of the river valley we arrived at a residential in Cernache do Bonjardin and booked in for two nights so that we could have a bit of rest and relaxation and do the washing.

Day 15 Monday 12th May Cernache do Bonjardin to Estreito

We left after a pleasant break although we were glad to be away from the ants which also inhabited our room.

In an effort to be away early we awoke before the mist had cleared and cycled off at 8.15am. The management again managed to go the wrong way but made a quick recovery. The alternative route to Serta was not only on lovely quiet country lanes but went by an ostrich farm so the stoker could take some photos.

At Serta the stoker decided to buy some stamps at the post office, a very time consuming process. Still, we suppose she got some ethnic experience from it. The obvious way out of town and that indicated by the GPS was up a one way street the wrong way. Normally we cope well enough with this situation but on this occasion we took the proper signposted route. Not only did this take us about 4kms out of our way but also dumped us on a road on which cyclists, pedestrians and similar agricultural vehicles are banned. No alternative route being available, and retracing not being an option the management was prepared to consider, we went down the slip road and pedalled like mad to the next exit. Fortunately there was very little traffic and the road was probably just another way of using up EC funding which comes out of our taxes.

The net result of these three things was that we wasted altogether about an hour of nice cool temperatures and might just as well have stayed in bed.

From here on we headed up into the mountains and the forest. We had lots of climbing and were rewarded with some wonderful views. The road itself was both wide and mainly smooth. It carried the odd lorry but very little else and was a pleasure to cycle on. Come a late lunch and the stoker in particular had more or less had enough. We had also done a fair number of kms for a hilly area. We meandered on looking for somewhere to stay.

Bearing in mind that we had not seen even a small town for about 30km or a camper van for several days it can be taken that we were not in a tourist area. We toddled on to the nearest big village and asked in the bar about accommodation. Apparently there was none for 40km, which was not even worth thinking about. Camping wild was beginning to look like the only option.

We went into the shop which was also another bar to get supplies for camping. The stoker, whose Portuguese must by now be almost fluent, asked if anyone in the village would be able to put us up. Thomas, a regular at the bar, thought about it and said he might be able to help.

We went along to his house and he and his wife made us very welcome, putting us up in their guest room and giving us use of the kitchen. Over significant quantities of good local wine, taken mainly while Mrs Thomas was at the church over the road, Thomas told us about his life in Mozambique, Angola and South Africa before he came home to Portugal to live on a small pension. The only problem was that most of his English was very difficult to understand, rather like our comprehension of his Portuguese. It also reinforced a view we had formed during the past few days that to understand Portugal today one needs a map of Africa.

Before going to bed the management attempted to work out places to stop for the next few days where there should be proper accommodation. Living with the locals is OK now and again but if it becomes regular it can be stressful.

Day 16 Tuesday 13th May Estreito to Silvares

Perhaps we were a little ungrateful in the diary to Thomas and Mrs Thomas yesterday. They looked after us to the best of their ability. It was very interesting seeing how these pensioners lived and they were very kind to us. We took photos before we left at 8am and even by then it was very warm.

It was an extremely hilly day in the very hot sunshine. According to the GPS we climbed over 700 metres, most of it very slowly. The scenery was again magnificent and the mountain ranges in the distance are getting ever nearer. Eventually soon after midday we gave up the unequal struggle against the sun. We found some shade under a tree and had lunch and a sleep.

We went on to Silvares in the hope of finding accommodation. The sizes of habitations are very difficult to determine from the map and it was not listed in the rough guide. It proved to be a very large village and the stoker bought some meths at the chemist for our cooker. The shop assistant did not speak English but indicated a Residential (Guest House). We bought ice creams from a nearby kiosk and asked the seller for directions. He could speak good English and gave them accurately. Down the hill and up the other side on the left.

We found it with no trouble - a nice three star place with a large swimming pool. A young man was watering the grass and said they were closed until tomorrow night could we come back then? No we said, could he not phone someone and open up? No he said but gave details of two other places which had rooms. The first did not and the second was back down the hill and up the other side to a bar right behind the kiosk. During these ups and downs we passed local women doing their laundry in the river.

The moral of this story is that one should be very careful what questions one asks. Had we asked the man in the kiosk about rooms he would no doubt have directed us to the bar. We would by this not only have avoided two needless ascents at the end of the day but also the aggravation and worry that we might have to go on and find a place to wild camp.

Once established in a room next to the local dentist and above the bar the stoker saw a washing machine and an opportunity not to be missed. The management was also pleased because hand washing involves squeezing before hanging up which he particularly dislikes doing. Anyhow this was all to no avail because the madame of the bar decreed that the stoker did not have enough washing for an economical machine load. She was taken to the cellar and introduced to a hand wash sink with a built in wash board. Not only that but being of a certain age the stoker remembers that very dangerous device called a mangle. Of course they don't need one here because the washing normally dries quickly in the sun. But the stoker was just grateful that she wasn't taken down to the river.

Chores completed we went down to the bar to dinner. Madame had cooked a very nice meal especially for us. It was served in a kind of anteroom behind the bar which had a notice over the entrance which may have translated to refectory. The kitchen was adjacent behind a counter. It was very pleasant but the only thing is it is a bit difficult to linger over food here because meals are taken so quickly. Having finished our meal we had coffee in the bar. It was impossible not to be affected by the locals' enthusiasm for the football on the TV. Such is our knowledge that we have little idea of what's going on but it is just fun to be involved with the locals in the bar who are so friendly.

Day 17 Wednesday 14th May Silvares to Loriga

Staying in places like last night are what trips like this are all about. Not only did madame inquire about the stoker's leg but also gave her a big kiss before we left. She restricted herself to shaking hands with the management who regretted that her daughter was not yet up.

After a brief descent into the valley and crossing the river we were soon climbing into the mountains on local roads. We passed through several large villages. Interestingly the village streets are usually cobbled and riding on them is uncomfortable and hard work. Out of the villages the roads are normally tarmacked. What traffic there is are vans and small trucks. We get the impression that few people leave their villages by car and presumably most of them work and shop locally.

We had our ups and downs mainly up and as we went up the scenery changed from the rounded wooded hills to the craggy and rocky mountainside as we got higher. Unlike much of southern Europe there are many streams and rivers in these mountains. There are also villages at very high levels. The stoker has read the book and she says that the people were, until the last twenty or thirty years, living all over the hills and mountains and have only recently come into village communities. This may account for the many deserted stone buildings in the wild mountains and the large number of new houses in the villages.

Our ride today involved crossing two cols which is really excessive for people of our age and inclination. They both rose to over 900 metres and the first was particularly steep. In fact, based on her experience as a foot slogger, the stoker walked some of this while the management followed up behind at walking pace. Soon after the top of the first ascent we passed into the Serra da Estrela which is a national park. Fortunately, apart from putting up a sign, the authorities had done nothing else and things went on as before. The stoker says however that the main park office is actually in the park which is somewhat better than Dorset County Council's proposal to put the Heritage Coast office in Dorchester, ten miles from the coast, when anyone without an axe to grind, especially us, can see it should be on Portland.

After a pleasant stop between 1pm and 3.30pm in the shade to avoid the heat of the day we tackled the second col and found it relatively easy compared with the first. We were slightly disconcerted to be overtaken by one camper van (French). It was the first one we had seen in over a week and indicates that we are again coming into a tourist area. However one swallow doesn't make a summer, with any luck. Soon after we went over the top we came across a restaurant with rooms and checked in. We had not gone quite as far as we had hoped horizontally but vertically we had not done badly. Not only that, but being so near to the top of the mountain we had the most wonderful views from our very comfortable room.

Day 18 Thursday 15th May Loriga to Linhares

We are very near to the highest village in Portugal but even the management is not stupid enough to go there. It is not on our route and would involve a major extra climb to see what we see in many of the mountain villages through which we pass. In fact without the tourist hype what we see is probably near to reality which is pretty rural by British standards.

We did start with a climb out of the village which looked as if it was built in a dry cory if such things exist. After this it was down hill most of the way to Seia where the stoker went to the Turismo and the management acquired a battery for the stoker's computer. The management for once did the more useful thing. We went on in the ever increasing heat to the pleasant town of Gouveia where we had our lunch in a small park. It was not conducive to taking an afternoon nap so we carried on along the very small roads.

The stoker does not cope well with the afternoon heat and the bad, sometimes cobbled, road surface did not help. She does of course have every comfort, the most comfortable tandem money can buy, a saddle of her choosing and a sprung seat post. When she got hot the management even stopped so that she could put her head under one of the many streams of water which tumble from the banks and cross under the road.

Our destination could be seen for several kms away high to our right. It became something of a trial to get there but when we did it was very worthwhile. Linhares is a hill town perched on a large hill below the high mountains with a castle with two towers. We approached it up a zig zag road and made our way through the steep, narrow and winding cobbled streets to the bar. For once the management, despite his total lack of Portuguese, got us a room in an old stone house. The bar occupants reminded him a bit of one of the bars in the Star Wars films. It had every type of life, the good bad and the ugly, and it seemed a good idea to keep your wits about you and an eye on your wallet. The flies and the smoke were not very nice either.

We bought food in the shop and ate in and afterwards explored the village. It is certainly very ancient and what is happening here seems to be happening wherever we go. People seem to be abandoning the old traditional stone houses and building new concrete villas. Here they have done it by building new houses slightly higher up the mountain. The difference here is that with EC money they are trying, and will probably succeed, in building a popular tourist attraction. As John Betjeman said when asked about his regret for the passing of the steam train, at least I was privileged to see and ride on them before their demise. That was how we felt having discovered and walked on the old Roman road made of huge Asterix type stone pavings before it is fenced, labelled and walking on it is banned. The management has already been banned from taking the tandem on it.

Day 19 Friday 16th May Linhares to Pinhel

We wheeled out down the tiny cobbled alleys and streets to find a proper road down from the village. It being too difficult to ride the stoker took the opportunity to take photos. There were few people about, just the odd child on the way to school, and ladies of a certain age dressed in black going about their business.

Down in the valley below there was cloud and our descent from our hill village was very cold. This did not last because we had a bottom gear climb partly on cobbles up to over 900 metres. From here give or take the odd up we had a long descent as we left the Serra da Estrela country park. We passed through quite a number of very rural villages and having started taking photos the stoker continued. She took several of men on carts drawn by donkeys. Some enjoyed the experience while others looked less happy. She likewise immortalised innocent people herding goats through the streets and slow shepherds minding their own business in their fields.

Descending here requires much greater attention than normal and is quite slow. Where the road surface is just plain bad then it is impossible to go very fast and the strain on the bike is quite worrying though so far it is coping well. Where the surface appears to be good there are many pitfalls. The worst are just unpredictable big holes and we mean big. They can be 20cm deep and over a metre across. The consequences of hitting one even at 30kms per hour does not bear thinking about. On one fast descent on new tarmac we came around a corner and came across a large round manhole cover 10cm below the road surface.

We were sad to leave the park and the mountains after three days of wonderful scenery and interesting places. Once out of the park we were in countryside rather like the far south west of Cornwall. That is rolling heathland type countryside with many rocky outcrops. Although easier cycling than in the mountains we were again climbing and there were many ups and few downs.

Much to the stoker's delight the management declared a tea stop at eleven's. Unfortunately we could not find a suitable place and when it got on towards midday we decided to have early lunch instead. It was not as warm as it had been and we continued on to Pinhel immediately after lunch instead of waiting for it to cool down a bit.

Pinhel is a working town with an ancient centre and an interesting castle. It took us about an hour to find somewhere to stay, mainly because we cycled right past the sign directing us to the

Residential. We put this down to tiredness and having rectified that problem went out for a nice meal in a lively restaurant. The other customers were men working away from home who required a friendly atmosphere and good food which we all got.

Days 20 and 21 Saturday 17th and Sunday 18th May Pinhel to Freixo de Espada a Cinta

We pedalled back through the ancient town centre carefully following the GPS map through the maze of streets. We finally joined the highway by way of an over bridge and a slip road. Once joined the road was wonderfully smooth and almost devoid of traffic. It was too good to last and after a brief descent of a couple of kms the surface went back to normal. By now the scenery had apparently quite suddenly become mountainous with deep river gorges and rocky mountainsides.

We were bumping along at about 20km per hour downhill when suddenly we ground to a halt with a scraping noise from the stoker's end of the tandem. The management looked round to see the stoker leap off the bike at a quite spectacular speed for her, chasing the rolling trailer wheel. She did not catch up with it before it had rolled under the safety barrier at the side of the road. This disrupted its progress somewhat and it fell on its side at the very edge of a near vertical drop into the valley.

Having recovered the wheel and established that no harm was done to the wheel, stoker or trailer the management refitted it into the trailer and we continued with our bumpy progress. For the technically minded we have an excellent Bob Yak trailer to carry most of our luggage. It has a 16 inch quick release rear wheel fitted into horizontal dropouts. The whole incident probably occurred because the quick release got knocked and/or the management failed to check it was OK. He did however then check to see that the other more critical wheels were properly attached and made a mental note to do some maintenance on our day off tomorrow. He also considered that if the risk of losing important equipment over steep drops continues he may need to pack climbing ropes and a harness in future.

The middle of the day continued in a more tranquil manner. We had a long but nicely graded climb to a great height and even got near the local radar station. We then entered a town which is about as remote as they get in Europe these days, bought supplies and entertained the excited local children and dogs with our strange device for moving along on.

Leaving the town we continued on what passes in this part of the world for a high rocky plateau. We say passes because it was far from being flat except in the narrow usage of the word. In other words we had some steep climbs and descents on some dreadfully rough roads.

We emerged from the plateau as we approached the river Douro where it forms the border between Portugal and Spain. The Rough Guide mentions that this area has its own Mediterranean micro climate and indeed on the way up we had seen some very large plantations of almond trees. This had not prepared us for the scale of the almond cultivation in the river valley, a scale we have not previously seen even on the Med. It must be absolutely amazing at almond blossom time.

The management was so taken with the view that he declared early lunch, something almost unheard of. We had our picnic under the shade of a huge cork tree overlooking the river valley and mountains of two countries.

After lunch we had a 6km descent into the valley and began to meet Spanish registered cars mainly going in the opposite direction. The Portuguese clearly see nothing to be gained by having a smooth road surface for their neighbour's use. The management had worked out that the maximum and indeed minimum safe descent speed was 27km per hour which he achieved by extensive use of the drag brake. He did contemplate just letting the bike go and seeing

whether it would fly over the bumps. He discounted this idea both on the grounds of a possible stoker mutiny and that he is not nearly as dangerous as he was even a couple or so years ago.

We then began a long ascent of the Douro River valley. This started off by being at a very pleasant gradient high up and parallel to the river. We not only came across serious cultivation of almonds but also industrial vineyards. Our guess is that the Australians have got a foot in the door. Until now the many vineyards we have seen have been small and except for some truly awful wine in the Algarve the local red wine has been very drinkable.

The last part of the ride to Freixo de Espada a Cinta was hard in the over hot afternoon sun. The Rough Guide describes the town as having an "end of the world" feeling about it but we were only too pleased to see it. And we think they have been a bit unfair.

We tried to find an apartment for our day off and were unsuccessful. We settled for a very nice room over what transpired to be a very good restaurant. And on this occasion the management did check over the tandem and all the washing and correspondence were done in the sunshine. The quiet of this border town on a Sunday can only be compared to one of the outer Hebridean Islands. Not a shop open, no newspapers and religious noises from the church and some houses. Some of the bars and cafés are open but with few clients. The management managed to climb the high bell tower for an all round view but made a rapid exit at 11.55 not wishing to end up like Quasimodo.

Day 22 Monday 19th May Freixo de Espada a Cinta to Mogadouro

I expect if one looks back to last week we said how reluctant we were to start after our day off and if so likewise today. It was not until we had climbed out of Freixo de Espada a Cinta that we fully realised just how isolated it is and how much more isolated it must have been in the past. It was apparently used as a place that criminals released on licence were allowed to stay because it was so remote. Shades of Portland perhaps. I know that we climbed at least 300 metres and it felt like it when we looked back on the town for the last time. Once the main climb was finished we were still a long way from modern Europe. We passed several donkey carts being used for agricultural and daily business. We photographed them and they waved. Were we being patronising? Yes we were and we discussed whether we could be nicely patronising and decided that this was not possible. We will have the photos for our next slide show but we could not be part of their world and who is to say that ours is better?

At about this point we came across one of those roads funded by the EC. Wide enough to be a major A road but with virtually no traffic on it except, that is, the lorries taking material to the next bit being built. Seems like macro economics gone mad. The management had the thought of Neil Kinnock and all the other EC dignitaries turning up for the opening ceremony and cutting the red ribbon to release the first donkey carts onto the new road.

Anyway several large ups and downs later we had a nice picnic lunch in a green field with the usual wonderful views before making our way to Mogadouro. Here the stoker booked us into what must be the best hotel of the trip so far. We have a lovely room looking north west into the evening sun from our very large, pleasant, private balcony. The green fields in the foreground give way to the mountains behind.

We explored the ancient village and castle and returned to our room to cook on the balcony. Life on a cycle tour does not get much better than eating dinner on your balcony with a glass or two of wine watching the sun set over the nearby mountains.

Day 23 Tuesday 20th May Mogadouro to Vimioso

It was nice last night watching the sun set over the mountains but not so nice first thing in the morning cycling up them. Actually the mountains around here are quite small and the climbs are not too long with the views on the way up pretty good. This area is full of castles and watch towers on craggy peaks. We had not planned a very long day, probably our last in Portugal, which was fortunate because the stoker was not feeling very well. She had a headache which much to the management's upset affected her legs. In an effort to speed things along he exceeded the speed limit and broke the tandem's all time record by doing 86kmph (53mph). This of course breaks several rules. There has for several years been a dispute between the management and the stokers' union on maximum speed. Management maintains this is set at 45mph while the union maintains 40mph. The Bob trailer comes into this also because being North American it has a health and safety warning which among other things restricts its speed to 28mph. How stupid can North Americans get?

We planned our short day because navigation around here is far from clear. We happen to have two paper maps and of course the GPS and they are all different. The cautious option of crossing the border at the point which exists on all three maps not only involves extra distance but also what could be a nasty main road. By stopping and asking locally we think we have found a pleasant solution on minor roads but only tomorrow will tell. Anyway taking the afternoon off gave the stoker the opportunity to ensure that her Spanish is still fluent.

We have enjoyed just over three weeks in Portugal. The people have been friendly and it has been easy to find cheap, comfortable and clean accommodation. The road surfaces are on the whole bad but there has been so little traffic that this has not mattered much. The scenery throughout this journey has been superb and the wild flowers very beautiful. The green and luxuriant countryside is completely unlike any southern European area we have been to. Our only grumble, especially from the stoker, is that it has been too hot. We have only had one day when it rained and then there was not much.

Day 24 Wednesday 21st May Vimioso to Villardeciervos (Spain)

It was a very hot night but after a quick shower and breakfast we were on our way north out of town. The dubious road to the nice quiet border crossing existed and along it we went. It seemed a very remote area, presumably because in Franco's time the border was closed and it was a long way to anywhere in Portugal.

The stoker became very excited when she saw two donkeys pulling a plough in a field near the road and took a photo to add to her donkey collection. While she was doing it a tractor driver did a violent swerve while he did a double take on the tandem. There are lots of tractors as well as donkeys around here but the tractor drivers seem more stressed than the donkey cart drivers.

As we expected there were no controls at the border or in fact anyone at all. There were the derelict remains of what once must have been the border control building. There was also a rough track along the border through the pine trees which probably facilitated the marching up and down of men with guns.

The road surface changed colour on the Spanish side of the border but was much the same otherwise, i.e. wide, smooth and devoid of traffic. As this road does not show on two of our maps we assume it was of recent construction. The stoker says that both countries are trying to open more border crossings.

What was really surprising was that the scenery changed completely. In Portugal there were few obvious field boundaries, wild flowers are everywhere and huge clumps of bright yellow gorse dominate. On the Spanish side there are many more green fields and some are divided by stone

walls. The Spanish side looked much more efficient from an agricultural point of view. We did however miss the profusion of wild flowers and yellow gorse.

We cycled into the first town we came across, Alcanices, with a view to getting a hotel list. No luck on this score but people were different and it felt more affluent than Portugal. We continued on pleasantly quiet roads to lunch at the village of Sao Vitaro. This brought us back to reality. We established ourselves in the shade of the bus shelter and watched the world go by, mainly into the local bar/restaurant. This included the comings and goings of smartly dressed men. It also included the passing of a bullock cart and later on two cows making their slow way down the street on some business of their own.

Onwards further we skirted the edge of the Sierra de la Culebra National Park and had distant glimpses of snow on mountains far to the north. Our road continued through wild heathland and woods not unlike Dartmoor. The few villages we passed were small and most of the buildings of traditional stone construction.

We were lucky to find digs in a room above a bar. It is one of those traditional places of which unfortunately few remain. Our room has three large beds and a single bed in it and the bathroom is down the corridor. It probably could accommodate eight friendly people at a pinch. Dinner was served at 9.30pm to all those who wanted it at once. I think we like it here.

Day 25 Thursday 22nd May Villardeciervos to La Baneza

When we went to bed last night the masses in the bar were still watching the Celtic v Porto football match. Football is of little interest to either of us but the stoker has a family interest in Celtic and having been in Portugal we did cast a glance at the screen. We could not however keep our eyes open long enough to get the result but it looked as if Celtic were losing.

Bearing in mind the time the football watchers went to bed we did not expect them to be up in time to get us our 8am breakfast. They were a bit late but not too bad. We cycled off to the paderia for our bread and bought hot rolls and Danish pastries just as they opened at 9am. After that we were on the road.

It was a pleasure in the morning sunshine to get a move on on the well surfaced and still very quiet roads. Apart from the stoker's posterior we don't think we had realised just how rough the Portuguese roads were and how much climbing we had done. Wild life is still with us with plenty of storks in their nests, lizards and snakes on the road and birds of prey in the sky. We were, however, amazed when the most enormous hare crossed the road right in front of us. It was so large that at first we wondered if it was one of those tiny species of deer. But there was no mistaking. It is a good job hares that large are not violent to tandemers or we would certainly need to watch out.

By the time we had stopped for 11's and our Danish we had done pretty well a day's ride by Portuguese standards. We arrived on the outskirts of La Baneza only a bit late from the regulation (stokers' union rules) 1pm lunch and considering that the clocks go forward an hour in Spain that's not bad. We found a pleasant park outside a cemetery with a shady seat and spent a pleasant hour or so before going into town to find a Pension.

The stoker rejected the first place we came to because there was nowhere safe to store the tandem. We often have this problem in town but the proprietors often use a fair bit of initiative rather than lose a customer. This time they were unable to help and we moved on. The second place was a little better and although it was a bit of a struggle the tandem went through the building to the backyard.

Siesta time now takes place due to extreme heat outside. We were serenaded by politicians' lackeys driving around in cars with new labour type music playing in an attempt to persuade us to vote. Somehow under EC rules I doubt that we qualify.

The management was the first to stir at around 6pm and although he does not usually consider it part of his job went out to survey possible eating places and get in supplies for tomorrow's ride. This is a largish town but could not be more different from the holiday resort towns on the Med. There is no sign of fast food, burger joints or pubs. He saw no ethnic restaurants and not a single take away. The only sign of commercialisation was in the local church which charged by slot machine to light a plastic electric candle for the person of your choice. No doubt they would justify it by saying that the church had not burned down lately. But even to non believers like us it seemed somehow less worthwhile than lighting a real candle.

Day 26 Friday 23rd May La Baneza to Mansilla de las Mulas

In the bar at breakfast time the barman unfortunately had the television news on. First we were subjected to Tony Blair dubbed in Spanish apparently at a UN meeting. Perhaps all UK politicians should have this done to them. It might be an improvement. Then the stoker saw the weather forecast with temperatures of 30 degrees. She has probably been out in these temperatures almost every day this month. However, having seen it on television she was not happy. Fortunately or otherwise there has never been any comprehensive formal agreement on the stoker's working environment. We did however leave as early as possible.

Going east from La Baneza we were surprised to find ourselves on a cultivated flat plain. The furrows in the fields did not quite live up to the standards set by the Dutch but it could easily be mistaken for Holland. The traffic was heavier than we have been used to but hardly greater than on the quiet routes out of Weymouth at morning work time.

We are a little south of the planned route preferring to avoid urban Leon. This deviation required an extra degree of concentration from the management. Once outside the plan he navigates by GPS as usual but only has a 300,000 map as back up instead of a fully detailed 50,000 map. The altered route became very pleasant and interesting once away from the town. We crossed several shallow river valleys, tributaries to the large river Esla. They made a pleasant break from the bum numbing flatness of the ride. In these valleys we came across dwellings and wine cellars cut into the soft sandstone of the river cliff. In France they would be called troglodytes but we don't think there is an English word for them. Some go back into the hillside for at least 100 metres, we could see their chimney pots standing clear of the wild flowers, particularly poppies, which grow on the hillside which forms their roofs. While photographing we were welcomed by a local old man who gave us a lengthy explanation. At least that's what we think he was doing and in the end it was difficult to leave, though I think we achieved it without being rude. The largest number and best preserved of these constructions were in the village of Valdevimbre.

As we continued and crossed the River Esla the threatened heat began to set in and the shadeless plain was becoming inhospitable. The management was in no mood to give the stoker a break and despite her grumbles pressed on making all speed for Mansilla da las Mulas. This is a large village/town on the pilgrims' way to Santiago de Compostella and we thought there was a fair chance that it would have some accommodation. The fall back of a very hot and unpleasant afternoon ride to Leon was not required as we came across a pleasant one star pension and were well established by lunchtime. Unfortunately, perhaps because of the pilgrim trail, the standards of hospitality are lower than those we have come to expect.

Mansilla de las Mulas is interesting and we walked around the village. It must once have had a curtain wall enclosing all the habitation, some of which is still intact. The pilgrims' route out of town seems to be on the wrong side of the river, very odd.

Days 27 and 28 Saturday 24th and Sunday 25th May Mansilla de las Mulas to Cistierna

It rained during the night, we heard it but did not look. It sounded like heavy rain but the tandem which was outside during the night was completely dry. We were pleased to see the back of the surly barman even though he did stir himself to heat the croissants for breakfast. It is all a bit of a dilemma. If there were no pilgrims we would get the usual high level of service but on the other hand if there were no pilgrims there may be nowhere to stay.

Last night's rain brought a complete change in the weather. It felt very cold as we set off with a significant wind against us. As usual we were in shorts and short sleeved tops and we put up with the cold for quite a way before we gave in and put on warmer tops. I think we must be turning into wimps as it was still around 20 degrees but we put it down to wind chill.

Today's route takes us on the quiet western side of the river Esla. It is more pleasant than the other, main road side but involved more complicated navigation.

The river valley is wide and fertile and EC signs abound indicating the level of subsidy pumped in. A huge amount has recently been spent on irrigation and farm access roads. Our route involved a steady climb all day but the gradient was such that we hardly noticed. The management, though now undoubtedly more prudent than he used to be, is still prepared to take the odd risk with navigation. A couple of times he took diversions not on maps or the GPS. The stoker knew that this was not wise and such diversions in river valleys can lead us into a bog or a dead end. On this occasion however they paid off. We did not need to try to float the tandem on a home made raft or something similar to avoid the cardinal sin of retracing.

At the village of Gradefes we came across an interesting ancient "monastery" and church. The inverted commas are because it seemed to be inhabited by nuns. We went into the church which was divided in the middle by a full height glass partition. The visitors' end had its own altar etc and at the other end behind the partition nuns were busy with their devotions. There appeared to be another altar at the other end of the building.

Anyway we were distracted by the sound of the horn of a travelling sales van. They still do that here. We were lucky it was the baker and we were able to get some more croissants to eat in the sun while we were entertained by the locals. This was of course almost certainly mutual. We watched one elderly gent wearing a straw hat, riding a chopper style bike and smoking a long cigar. This would have tended to turn our heads on its own but he was herding two very dirty Jersey milking cows through the village streets.

As we moved towards Cistierna the valley sides closed in and the mountains in front gradually began to dominate. The town is at the foot of the Picos Mountains which rise to the north east and are surrounded by steep foothills.

There is a choice of accommodation and we were lucky to find an apartment for our day off. This is nice because it means we have lots of room and some decent food. The stoker was particularly pleased because the apartment has a washing machine.

We tried to watch the Eurovision song contest on television but even with the limited distraction available in rural Spain and a total lack of any other English language on TV it still bored us to sleep just like it would in the unlikely event that we watched it at home. And we will probably never know the result though we hope Austria won.

Day 29 Monday 26th May Cistierna to Camporredondo de Alba

We were pleased that there was not a cloud in the sky when we left our comfortable apartment. It was still however very cold. Cold enough for the stoker to wear a fleece and the management a jacket. Our road east was supposed to be a minor route on the map but was nevertheless about the width of the average school playground. Fortunately there was as usual virtually no traffic by UK standards.

As we climbed out of Cistierna we were almost immediately in mountain scenery with snow covered peaks to our left and in front. We seldom look back but I expect they were there too. The road had obviously been upgraded some years ago and was now going through a further phase of expenditure which is a shame because it was fine before. We were waved through several sections by men with stop go boards. Labour costs must be exceptionally low here if this method is cheaper than traffic lights.

We came down into Guardo which was our first possibility for an overnight stop. It is an industrial town with little to recommend it to tourists and we turned left and made our way towards the mountains. At first we thought we had made a mistake when we came across, it was impossible to miss, an electricity generating plant complete with cooling tower and pile of coal. We found this odd because we knew the plant was on a watercourse supplied by reservoirs created by dams higher up. Presumably there is insufficient hydro power to meet demand. Mind you in this area that seems rather like "There's a hole in my bucket dear Liza". Along the lines of we need more electricity to run the factories. We need the factories to make the lorries to carry the road building materials to improve the roads. The roads need improving in order to carry these lorries carrying road building materials, because there is almost no other traffic. So why are the roads needed, the lorries and the electricity needed to build them, and the stink horn in a lovely valley? One has to wonder whether any consideration has been given to pumping money in in some more worthwhile way if that is what is needed.

Anyway, back to cycle touring, we decided to try to continue on minor roads and as a last resort come back to Guardo if there was nowhere to stay. (Does the management ever come back?) The stoker, in the absence of a functioning Turismo, went into the town hall and discovered that a village not a million miles away had two hotels. On we went in the now pleasantly warm sunshine, i.e. for once not too hot or too cold. We had a very pleasant picnic lunch near the dam with lovely views of the mountain and man made lake. The cooling tower was no longer visible and silence reigned.

The village with the hotels was just below the next dam up the valley and again in a lovely situation. The hotel we chose was built in the style of a mountain chalet and with very pleasant facilities. As we were settling in we heard loud trad jazz music coming from a large van. It was a travelling trader who obviously preferred jazz to the usual hooter. It was not until later when we went out to buy supplies in the local shop that we realised that the jazz van should have alerted us to a possible problem. This large village which was undergoing lots of building work had no shop. It was not really a problem though we were deprived of our late afternoon nibbles. It is a long time to wait until 9pm dinner.

Day 30 Tuesday 27th May Camporredondo de Alba to Cervera de Pisuerga

We are very happy today. We have had a glorious day's cycling. It was the kind of day we are lucky to get once a year let alone once in a short spring ride. We got up late which we blame on the hotel not serving breakfast till 9am. By the time we got going in bright sunshine the early morning chill was only just still in the mountain air.

We cycled out of the hotel with the barman bidding us a good journey and climbed gently up to the dam. To our right we had the clay tiled roofs of the village in the old river valley and to our

left the high mountains in the distance. At the dam we passed through a short tunnel and were soon almost in another world. We cycled gently along the undulating smooth road. The snow covered mountains to our north were reflected magnificently in the still water of the lake. We passed several ancient villages and all this time the passing of a motor vehicle was so rare that it became an event.

Eventually we left the lake and climbed steadily up to the col which led into the next valley. Just before we reached the top (1430 metres) we saw, winding up the valley below us, two large tourist style coaches. They overtook us just before the top and about 60 Spanish schoolchildren got out, complete with day packs and teachers. They were a cheerful lot and posed for our camera as they made their way up the steep mountainside. They were led by a teacher who carefully picked out a zig zagging path for them to follow. There were perhaps only another four or five adults in the group. Perhaps you don't need more when the kids do what they are told. We wondered if this was because the "little emperor" culture has not yet reached this country. This would avoid the need to negotiate with every single child, not only improving the safety and comfort of all but also letting common sense prevail.

Sometimes even hardship on such a day can be turned to pleasure. None of the villages we passed had shops and we were unable to buy supplies for lunch. Even a restaurant we passed did not have any bread to sell to the stoker. Lunch time arrived and we found a sunny spot beside the lake. Frogs were croaking, birds were singing and all was well with the world but we had no bread. At the bottom of the food bag we found half a packet of Portuguese dried noodles. The management had these cooked in only nine minutes on our superb tranguia and mixed with jam and banana they made a lunch hard to beat.

On the way down to Cervera de Pisuerga we passed the three star Parador Hotel. Paradors are state owned hotels claiming to be among the best in Spain. This one is in a lovely situation and seemed to have every facility and comfort. The stoker got the price and the brochure and at 100 Euros Bed and Breakfast for us both we were tempted. However it was a couple of miles up hill from the town which we knew had several hotels. We also needed to shop for supplies. It was hard to justify the extra cost when cheaper comfortable facilities existed or even to contemplate cycling two miles back up hill after shopping. One day we will stay in a Parador but it would seem it will have to be when it's the only option available.

We found a very nice hotel with en-suite facilities and enjoyed a very pleasant evening to wind up a wonderful day. Even the tandem enjoyed itself and became a talking point with customers in the bar where it was parked for the night.

Day 31 Wednesday 28th May Cervera de Pisuerga to Espinilla

After breakfast there was a meeting between the tandem management and the hotel management. Both being management they shared a common language but unfortunately it was neither English nor Spanish. The topic of discussion was the day's route and the hotel management had suggestions for a fine ride over the mountains which was not on our map. He made it clear that the road was good and that at least from the top it was downhill all the way. Realising that this management was a management after the tandem management's heart he decided to take this route. Meanwhile the stoker was carrying out her duties as befitting a member of the working class and paying the senora and making sure that the management had not left anything behind in our room.

When she heard of the change of plan she was not convinced. It is well known by management that it is a duty of the working classes to criticise the management. The stoker has had good reason gained over many years not to believe that routes not shown on maps are easy or even exist. She had of course never believed that a ride can be all downhill whatever the management said.

With adios and gracias off we went for our morning bread and then a pleasant 15km down the Rio Pisuerga valley before we turned north into the mountains. Although we were winding up on tiny roads through small villages the ride was still a bit of an anticlimax after yesterday. Well we suppose it had to be. As we got higher the surrounding mountains again had the odd patch of snow on the peaks but the vista was wider with rushing streams rather than lakes.

We climbed through the village of Barruelo which was a rail head and from the signs put up by the Junta we think once a mining town. It also had a rail museum with a very nice two carriage diesel multiple unit which looked a lot better than some of the South West Trains rolling stock. After this the gradient increased to bottom gear level and we passed through a couple of pleasant mountain villages with lodgings.

We reached the summit at 1363 metres and from here on as promised we had a fine new EC road which, as the hotel management had said, was vale for the tandem and certainly down hill. Here we left the Junta of Leon and entered into the Junta of Cantabria, coming across an amazing thing, a cycle lane. OK so the road is as wide as a major highway and there is plenty of room but one doubts the need with on average of one vehicle every 10 minutes. One suspects that the Spanish bureaucrat responsible has been a lot more astute than Dorset County Council. S/he has realised that building cycle facilities (and some for pedestrians and public transport users) can help in obtaining funds for the next hyper space bypass. It would have been more use if the lane had been twice the width on the going up hill side of the road with none on the down hill side. There is no way a bike descending at 60 or more kph is going to be able to safely use the down hill one and why should we?

We paused for lunch with wonderful open views to the peaks and down into the wide valleys and then descended into the little village of Espinilla. We booked into another pleasant little pension with a room overlooking the mountains and settled down for our siesta.

We started writing this at the end of siesta. It is quite hard to live in Spain the way we are for any length of time without taking a siesta. Everything is geared around it. People get up early and indeed we try to be on the road by 8.30am which in itself is an hour earlier than UK time. Dinner does not start being served until 9pm so without taking a siesta it is very hard to get enough sleep. It may seem a waste of time to those on a couple of weeks holiday, especially when it is not too hot in the north of Spain to cycle all day. But it is really the only practical way for us to survive and enjoy ourselves on a long ride.

Day 32 Thursday 29th May Espinilla to Cilleruelo de Bezana

As we left the barman who had served our breakfast and released the tandem from the bottle store indicated what a good day it was going to be for cycling. The stoker considered not putting her fleece on until she realised that the first few kms were downhill. The Cantabrian authority is, it seems, developing the area for leisure activities. 8kms up the mountain is a downhill ski resort with about ten lifts. The ski slope altitude is about 1600 to 2100 metres and they do seem to blow some snow at lower levels. Probably not worth a trip from the UK for skiing but a good enough hill if one is here anyway.

Presumably in line with this policy they had constructed a wide red cycle track on the side of the road. We are usually very reluctant to use these "facilities" especially downhill. Apart from not being able to maintain a proper cycling speed we have in the past ended up having to retrace because we could not get a loaded touring bike through. However, for the first time on this trip we had seen quite a number of serious cyclists using the red path. Some were roadies but there were also a number of serious mountain bikers. The other users were cross country skiers practising for the winter on ski things with wheels doing frightening speeds. So we joined the others on the red path. We have to say that it was OK although we did not feel truly relaxed descending at 40 to 50kph. At least at that speed on the road one is fairly certain not to come

round a corner meeting an insurmountable and dangerous obstacle and even if one does there is room to dodge it. The amusing thing was that after we had been on the route for about 7km it just ended in some iron railings two metres high at right angles across the path. It was not difficult to get back onto the road but it was funny to see a vertical drop of a metre or more beyond the railings onto a minor road. Looks as if the EC road builders got their levels wrong.

We then went into the worky town of Reinosa. It is always interesting to look at the working environment of the countries we travel through. The Spanish exhibit a degree of buzz and energy in these towns which should worry competitors. It is pretty obvious that health and safety and pollution control are at nothing like the level we expect in the UK but they are not as bad as they were here ten years ago.

We negotiated the busy railway junction, got supplies from the supermarket and found the hidden minor road at the back of the mega junction with the inevitable EC bypass. For much of the rest of the day we were cycling up and down beside the Embalse Del Ebro, a huge lake. The wide blue water is surrounded by rolling hills which verge on mountains. The EC have not yet provided the funds to spoil the untrafficked minor road which runs between the villages. Unfortunately the signs at the side of the road indicate that millions of euros are going to be spent on "road improvements". Still we are here in time to enjoy it and we do. But after the superb rides of the last few days it feels a bit ordinary and easy, neither of which it is in reality.

At a junction where we crossed the main road to Santander we passed through the village of Cilleruelo de Bezana and noted that it had a couple of hotels. We went on a couple of kms and had a very pleasant lunch sheltering from the now hot sun in a stone bus shelter. We went on slowly now to Soncillo, our planned overnight stop, looking forward to our siesta. Not only was there no room in the inn in this pleasant small town but unusually for Spain there was no inn.

We retraced to Cilleruelo de Bezana. The management grumbled the whole way back and could easily have stood in for Marvin in Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy. Common sense does not come easily to him but short of cycling on all the afternoon he could see no alternative.

We don't often comment except in general terms about the places we stay. We will stay almost anywhere that fits in with our plan however many stars it has or how much it costs provided it is not completely unsanitary. However on this occasion we have a huge room with every comfort including a jacuzzi like shower. But there is an imitation wood grained floor which is too big for the room. It arches up and sits a centimetre above the floor in the middle. Walking on it is like walking on thin ice as it flexes up and down and makes cracking noises. We have tried placing bike bags in strategic places but it just arches up somewhere else. It doesn't take much to amuse us.

As there is a Spar shop opposite and we are finding it quite hard to get our peculiar dietary requirements in restaurants we decided to eat in. Having got the wine etc we went back to the room. When we tried to get back in the lock on the door broke, bits of lock flying all over the corridor floor. This left us locked out. We got the boy from the bar to come up and he got us in following much heaving with a big screw driver. It now remains to be seen whether the stoker in her perfect Spanish can negotiate us a discount because we can't lock our door.

Day 33 Friday 30th May Cilleruelo de Bezana to Espinosa de los Monteros

I suppose we should have expected it. After packing and removing the chair from under the door knob we went downstairs to find the place deserted. Even if we hadn't wanted breakfast we couldn't get the tandem out of the bottle store, it being locked in better than we were. The stoker eventually took the bull by the horns and called up the senora on her door intercom. She did then deign to come down and do but we were rather miffed when she served a couple of Civil Guards before us. I suppose it could have had something to do with their guns though they were of the

variety which looked as if they had never been out of their holsters. We left a note in our room comparing them with Fawltly Towers. It would have been fun to write it in lipstick on the mirror but lipstick is in rather short supply on these trips.

Off we went again to Soncillo and from there picked up the “main” road to Bilbao, 96kms. It soon descended by sweeping hairpin bends into a deep limestone valley fringed with huge fortresses of rock carved out by roaring torrents millennia ago. Spectacular scenery like this cannot fail to impress even after the high mountains of the past week or two.

After a few kms we turned off the road to find some signposted caves. There are many caves in the Santander area which it is claimed have been inhabited by man since the earliest times. We were directed to a gorge in the escarpment slope of the main valley and climbed up it via several hair pin bends. At the top we locked the tandem and walked along to the entrance to the caves. Unfortunately they were only open to the public at weekends and we think are probably rather like a smaller version of Cheddar caves with little real archaeological interest. This does not of course detract from the very impressive site of the cave entrance under the overhanging limestone cliffs with amazing and complex rock formations and outcrops. A church had also been built into the rock face complete with bell tower. Had we been able to go into the caves we could have gone back into the cliff for several hundred metres and there is an exit on the dip slope.

As we were about to leave we saw climbing up the valley a cyclist, not a particularly common sight for us. He arrived at the top on his Bianchi road bike and unlocked his Look pedal clips. He was prepared to take time out of his training run to show a couple of foreign tourists the attractions of his local area. What a nice gesture and something we will remember and try to emulate when we return home.

We went along the dip slope parallel to the main valley and behind the limestone cliffs and descended via yet another gorge towards the main valley. Someway down we stopped and ate our lunch in the entrance to a small cave. It was very pleasant indeed in the shade and when the time came we were reluctant to leave. This gorge is just one of several leading down to the valley. We saw perhaps five vehicles the whole time we were there and were able to enjoy the rock formations at our leisure and in silence. It would of course be impossible do something similar in Cheddar Gorge. The cost, apparently unacceptable to us British, is to stop access by private motor vehicles.

The cost to us was a very hot 15km ride to Espinosa de los Monteros. Our Spanish friend had told us where to find the hotel and we are glad to say it was in every respect the opposite from last night. Our room overlooks the busy town square and as we write this people are going about their early evening business and children are playing in the sunshine.

Days 34 and 35 Saturday 31st May and Sunday 1st June Espinosa de los Monteros to Ramales de la Victoria

In the restaurant last night there was something of a very good natured debate about who would let the tandem out in the morning. They don't do breakfast because there are plenty of cafés open. In the end it was decided that the “chicken man” would do it. This was a bit worrying because he wasn't there and it seemed that a bit of buck passing might be going on.

We were not sure whether a “chicken man” is of management status or if getting him up was a stoker's job. Rather than risking problems of etiquette the management raised him by intercom and he appeared dressed in a chef's uniform and cheerfully let the tandem out. As we were about to leave we had a few spots of rain and therefore adjourned to a nearby café for coffee. About this time ten or so local road club cyclists were heading off apparently undeterred by the weather.

We were soon heading up the valley without the need of waterproofs. It was pleasantly warm but without the burning sunshine we had come to expect. As we photographed the sign saying that the puerto (pass) was open we discussed the sense in riding up yet another mountain when we could just cycle into Bilbao. We were, as we often are, unanimous in the view that it would be a shame not to.

It was a very pleasant 12km climb on a zig zagging minor mountain road with most of the lower slopes shaded by trees. It was also fairly highly populated. All the way up at regular intervals were traditional Spanish fincas. They were all of the same plan being oblong in shape and on two levels. They are orientated north west/south east with a balcony at the south facing end. The lower level doubles as a barn and chicken coop and the upper level is for living. In times past, and possibly in some cases even today, cattle occupied this lower level. As the views became more spectacular we compared cycling gently up a mountain pass with what by some is perceived as being the cyclists' paradise of flat lands. There really is no contest for us. It is a mountain pass any day. We have no horrible head winds here and then there is always the down to look forward to.

We don't think anything could have prepared us for the view from the col. We came through a narrow cutting and there spread out before us was the vista. For the first time ever by bike we were above the clouds. Clouds lying as flat as the sea filled our panorama. To our left and right our mountain descended into this sea. In front of us and to both sides high mountains emerged from it like vast islands. It was breathtaking and at the same time scary. We were quite alone with our road winding down the mountainside and disappearing below the cloud. We were pleased to greet a couple of roadie cyclists who had slowly wound their way up through the clouds. It reassured us that down there below that impenetrable sea through which we were soon to pass was civilisation.

We now had some 40km of descent, losing all the height gained over the last five weeks, some 1100 metres. We went down a bit in the sunshine and just before we reached the clouds we stopped for a last look and restored ourselves with a doughnut. We were then in warm but clammy wet fog. It was eerie and very lonely on the narrow twisting road. It was comforting to see the next hairpin bend coming up on the GPS. The drag brake was firmly on and we did not realise how little we could see until we only just avoided a roadie coming up. We doubt he expected to meet a loaded tandem speeding silently down at 30kmph as he wandered onto our side of the narrow road. Mind you the management would have seen him a bit quicker if he had remembered to take off his shades.

We passed several places of great note and beauty according to the signs but saw nothing. We didn't care. We were still overwhelmed by the experience we had at the top. As we came out of the clouds into the valley of the river Ason we were suddenly in grey civilisation. We had forgotten that cloud cover means no sunshine and took our lunch on a seat in a small village beside the river. For the last few kms we were back on standard EC roads and there was some traffic which we were not used to. We made our way into Ramales de la Victoria, a rambling place built along a main road. Much to our amazement we came across an open tourist office which not only had an advisor who spoke some English but also had one or two leaflets in English. After booking into a hotel we were caught by heavy rain while exploring the town and took shelter in a nearby meson (inn). We took advantage of their very pleasant tapas and some of the best house wine we have had on this trip.

Sunday was our day off and generally does not deserve comment. However on this occasion we managed to book on a guided tour of a nearby cave. We walked 2km up the mountain on an ancient path to the unobtrusive cave entrance high up on a limestone crag. We were met by our guide who took us and another eight or so people through a door into the mountain. We had just a few torches and with these were shown the ochre cave paintings and the rock formations a hundred metres or so within. It was very atmospheric and appropriate to see these paintings and

rock formations with just torches. It was a far cry from the Cheddar Gorge caves and we felt privileged to see the paintings. We were perhaps selfishly glad that they were not being spoiled for future generations by over exploitation.

Day 36 Monday 2nd June Ramales de la Victoria to Bilbao

The hotel we were staying in is closed on Mondays and when we got up there was no sign of life, staff or other guests. We packed and went out to breakfast to a local pasteleria. This is something we should have done more often. It opened at 8am and immediately put croissants, plain and chocolate, together with other nice buns into the oven to cook. By the time we had finished our first cup of coffee they were ready. What a nice way to start the day.

I think we had more or less accepted that today would be quite hard and the roads busier than those to which we had been accustomed for the past five weeks. We left downhill on the main road to Santander and then turned right to climb 350 metres over the hills towards Bilbao. It was not very busy and the climb was pleasant and the gradients easy. Soon after crossing the highest point we came across large road side signs indicating "Mountain" cycle circuits and restricting traffic speeds. We also saw a good number of cyclists on road bikes with the inevitable colour co-ordinated strip. We reached the conclusion that these were circuits planned for road racing Tour de France style and these people were out training. And it was a cloudy Monday morning.

Rather suddenly about 20kms from Bilbao we came across large areas of habitation and industry. I suppose we should not have been surprised but we were. We found a quiet seat for our lunch and after that had to contend with much more traffic. The road into Bilbao is mainly downhill and follows the river valley. Work seems to be being done to put in a motorway style road parallel to the old main road which we were on. Where this was completed our road was not too bad but otherwise it required a good deal of nerve to cope with the lorries. It would have been much more unpleasant going the other way, uphill. Our ordeal was over in about 90 minutes, it would have taken twice as long going uphill. The management did investigate an alternative route and he did admit it may have been possible but very hilly indeed with serious navigational problems. When we come again we will seriously consider taking the FEVE, the narrow gauge railway which carries bikes out into the countryside.

On arrival in the town centre we made for the spectacular Guggenheim museum. It is an easy landmark to find and we expected it to have a nearby tourist office with a hotel list. We found the office all right but were amazed to find that it is closed all day on Mondays. I suppose after all our rude comments about these offices it was appropriate but one does wonder why. We fell back on our old standby for finding small hotels in large towns - make for the railway station. It nearly always works and this occasion was no exception. The management did the business this time leaving the stoker in charge of the machinery while he investigated on foot. Our hotel is central, pleasant and not expensive and has a garage for the bike. If the stoker did not know how lazy the management can be when it comes to finding accommodation she could be worried about her job being downgraded.

After siesta we wandered off to the shops and were almost bowled over by the London level of crowds making for the buses and trains to go home from work. We were also surprised to find a fully functioning food supermarket on the sixth floor of a department store. Going out to eat it was also much easier here to get vegi food which was pleasant for a change.

Days 37 to 40 Tuesday 3rd to Friday 6th June Bilbao to Ryde, Isle of Wight

As a cycling diary there is little to say for these four days. While in Bilbao the bike stayed in the garage. This was mainly because it was quite difficult to get it out as it would have been useful

for getting around town. As usual in Spain traffic management and discipline in the town can only be described as rudimentary. It would certainly have been quicker getting about by bike and could well have been safer than using the facilities provided for pedestrians. There were also cycle routes along the river.

Bilbao has a very nice feel about it. We spent our first day exploring and just generally lounging about. We thought we deserved this after having achieved the first objective of this trip by arriving before our booked ferry leaves and with two days to spare. We are not all that happy about having a booked ticket home. Even though we tried not to it was inevitable that we tended to get ahead of ourselves in Portugal which was a shame.

The jewel in what may become Bilbao's crown if they ever finish the rebuilding is the Guggenheim Museum. We spent a complete day there and had a great time. The building is spectacular and also truly functional as an art gallery. In this case form not only truly follows function but is uplifting. It is just what our own forebears did with the museums in London in the nineteenth century.

We left early for the boat on Thursday. No point in having come all this way and missing it for the sake of an extra half hour in bed. The ferry port is about 12kms from the town centre as the crow flies and in this case it would probably be better to be a crow. The Spanish are great at building EC roads but quite incapable of providing transport links in any civilised way. There is a badly publicised main line rail link from the town to the ferry port but like most mainline trains in Spain does not take bikes. Unfortunately the narrow gauge FEVE railway which does take bikes does not go to the port.

The west side of the river is criss-crossed with hyperspace bypasses and other main roads which are not conducive to cycling. The east side is better but it was not clear whether there was a river crossing to get us to the ferry port. We were assured by the Turismo that such a crossing existed by transporter bridge which operated between 10am and dusk. Despite the management's misgivings at trusting information from such a source we set off hopefully on the east side. It was a bit industrial and docklandish but perfectly do-able and quite good fun. The Turismo were on this occasion right in almost every important respect. What they did not realise is that the transporter bridge, the oldest in the world, is open all the time, running back and forth carrying six vehicles each time. Still, they only live there and they don't actually go and look. It would be an affront to their profession to do such a thing.

The P&O ferry is just that. It does what it says on the tin and rattles its ponderous and expensive way to Portsmouth. It arrived on time in Portsmouth, no doubt operated by its computer program to use the minimum of fuel. One day someone will no doubt put on a fast ferry but until then we have to continue to put up with what we have. Still I suppose it prepares us (slowly) for the UK's crumbling transport infrastructure.

After disembarking at about 5pm we were soon battling with the Portsmouth Friday rush hour traffic on our 30 minute ride to the catamaran for Ryde on the Isle of Wight. We coped with the traffic in the evening drizzle and were soon cycling down Ryde Pier trying to ensure that our wheels did not slip between the planks. We booked into a pleasant little hotel almost opposite the pier and enjoyed an English chip supper for the first time in more than six weeks.

Day 41 Saturday 7th June Ryde, Isle of Wight to Swanage

We thought we had a fairly easy relaxing day ahead. But it is so easy to be wrong. We ambled down to breakfast and packed slowly. The management had agreed to a late start, giving the stoker time to chat with two elderly fellow guests in the hotel. They had come to the Isle from Northern Island to take part in a draughts competition. The stoker, always keen to communicate, was clearly preparing herself for our next expedition in August.

We have slagged off with justification the tourist information offices of almost every nation in Europe. It has to be said however that the Isle of Wight office in Ryde managed to come up with a map of the circular cycle route around the Island. Apart from the general outline shape of the Isle it is pretty but inaccurate, being the product of the usual mentally subnormal council design department. We roughly followed the route from Ryde to Yarmouth via Cowes. It is in the main well sign posted, pleasant and on road. There is no mention of Sustrans, which could account for it being easy to use with a proper bike. It actually feels as if it was surveyed by an adult who enjoys riding a bike. Having said that both Cowes and Yarmouth are cycle unfriendly and it is best to ignore all signs and just go the obvious direct way.

We visited Newtown Harbour on foot, had a nice lunch in a pub and an ice cream in Yarmouth. We boarded the Dorset Belle at the pier head at 4pm looking forward to a relaxing cruise to Swanage as promised by their management's various emails to the stoker. "Sorry" said the boat driver "we are only going to Bournemouth and Poole as we did not pick anyone up from Swanage this morning". The stoker was unable to change his mind so off we went to Bournemouth.

We disembarked with difficulty and were soon cycling the five kms along the Bournemouth promenade towards the Sandbanks chain ferry. It was the first time we had cycled the prom and it is very much recommended. In fact we especially recommend that Weymouth Council take a bus load of their high and mighty to see it and ride it. They are a bit slow but it might just percolate through their dull heads that cycle friendly facilities don't result in death and destruction. They can even be a tourist draw. We can dream.

Having crossed the ferry we were back in real Dorset and it felt great. As we approached Sandbanks cycling towards us was Alan Beesley, one of our local CTC members. He and his wife Ann had very kindly offered to look after us on our first night back in our own county. A mobile phone call had alerted them to our diversion to Bournemouth and he had cycled out to show us the way in.

Day 42 Sunday 8th June Swanage to Weymouth

Over a lovely meal last night we discussed Alan's plans for his forthcoming ride from Lands End to John o'Groats. We were not away very early. For a start Ann's fine breakfast was not something to be rushed and pleasant conversation also tended to mitigate against an early start. We were however soon climbing out of Swanage and past the familiar ruins of Corfe Castle. For once we took the main road to Wareham rather than the lovely but rather longer route to its east. From here we were into the quiet lanes of our part of Dorset. We saw many cyclists of all sorts and most greeted us as cyclists have done for the past six weeks. There is always the odd one who looks the other way but then you always get people who can't cope.

We stopped for our now regular picnic lunch in a bus shelter at Woodsford. We prefer church porches but not only are they more difficult on Sundays but the wind, now strong, was in the wrong direction. Just as we had got the kettle on Ted, a fellow club member from Bridport, came by. We hadn't met him before but had many mutual friends. The usual conversation of cyclists went on and the rain came down.

Right on cue the skies cleared as we packed the Trangia and we were off on our last leg. One more big climb over the downs and there set out below us was Weymouth Bay with Portland in the background. The strong wind was flecking the sea with white horses. The sea was Mediterranean blue but far more beautiful. It was also for us our first sight of home. Our last climb of the trip was up onto the Rodwell Trail, the disused resurfaced railway line to Portland which took us home.