

Our Christmas Journey – 2012

We don't blog holidays but this is a journey of 1500 miles by Brompton, bus, ship, and even a car. We cycled on four islands and climbed on foot to the dizzy heights of 3718 metres.



Sunday, Monday and Tuesday 9th, 10th and 11th December 2012

What luxury, a 10a.m. start for a long trip. All our luggage for seven weeks was in our Brompton camper bags with the addition of a small day sack. We cycled past the back of the house on the Rodwell Trail, braving the sunny but cold morning in several layers of summer clothes. It will not be cold where we are going. The stoker carried much of the load on her electrically assisted Nano Brompton.

We arrived at Weymouth Pavilion in good time for the National Express coach to Southampton. We usually take the train which is quicker and more comfortable. However, weekend railway engineering work, a constant nuisance these days, would have meant changing from the train to a bus, with the carting of our luggage between the two.

The Bromptons were soon folded and with covers on put carefully into the bus boot with our other bags. Almost two hours later, after a couple of stops, we arrived at Southampton bus station. It does exist, near the railway station, though you would be hard pressed to find its location from any web site.

With the GPS fired up and the Bromptons reassembled we were soon on our way through the Southampton Christmas shoppers to the docks. Half the ride was on cycle paths, hurray. The other half should be incomprehensible to any civilised society and certainly much of the rest of Europe. Southampton needs to sort itself out. With a quick check at the dock gates we cycled on to the Queen Elizabeth departure terminal. Unlike Portland, that aspiring but sadly uninspiring cruise liner port, at

Southampton there was no aggressive challenge by uniformed nasties, no barbed wire and no routes blocked with barriers.

At the liner terminal we were delighted to see the Queen Elizabeth berthed alongside. We wheeled the loaded Bromptons into the waiting area and were soon called to check in. The staff couldn't have been nicer and were very complimentary about the bikes.



We pointed out that we were using the ship as a posh ferry and were corrected that it was a “very posh ferry”. They were amazed at how little luggage we had, and where were our posh frocks? Many of our fellow travellers carried suit bags and more hand luggage than our total luggage for seven weeks.

We had overcome what we expected to be the first hurdle with flying colours. Would we be so lucky at the security checkin? In a word, yes. Our bags went through the x-ray machines and we through the electronic arch. The bikes went round the outside. It is still a pointless exercise which in its whole history throughout the whole

paranoid world has failed to detect anything. But it has caused a great deal of inconvenience and delay for millions and generated a whole army of mindless pointless jobsworths who should be second at the wall come the revolution.

Once through security everything was easy. The ship is designed to cater for the elderly and disabled. Everything is on the level and the lifts are large. We wheeled our bikes on, luggage attached, to our “state” room on deck 4.

Our cabin, the cheapest available, was very nice, large enough, with en-suite facilities and an outside window with a restricted view of the outside world. The folded Bromptons fitted nicely into the wardrobe.

Everything onboard for the 2000 passengers can only be described as very fine. We will go on with a brief description but we would only find it acceptable as a high class ferry. The management, well known for being “left of field”, found it particularly difficult to cope. So let's deal with the good sides first. The service onboard, provided by a crew of 54 different nationalities, was superb. The food was excellent and the décor, all art deco, is lovely. Even though the ship was full it did not seem overcrowded. The gym was underused. Its “intelligent” cycling machines were great fun and severely taxed our fitness or lack of it. The pool with its naturally created waves was great and the jacuzzi a good place to relax after a ride on the static bikes. But there was a downside. Our

fellow passengers, most very elderly though some only in spirit, became wearing after a while. The ship's preoccupation with Norovirus, constantly squirting us with alcohol, was annoying. We would have preferred to take our alcohol by mouth, had it not been so expensive onboard, rather than through our already clean hands.

The entertainment, such as it was, was aimed at the worst of our parents' generation though we guess the musicians played some decent music in the crews' quarter where we could not go. The dress code is an outdated anachronism. But worst of all were the Americanisms onboard and the use of the dollar. The ship is supposed to be British even if it does belong to Carnival.

On the voyage we had two "formal" nights and on one of these we met the captain and ships officers. The stoker wore her long dress which the management had bravely bought as a secret present from Asda, spending an amazingly small amount of money. The management wore his "tuxedo". This was his light coloured 1990's classic Rohan jacket bought on Ebay for £13, white shirt, black bow tie, black trousers, and Shimano sandals. As a concession he wore black socks with his sandals. It all passed muster with the captain and, more importantly, with the head waiter. We think we looked OK, especially as it all survived being carried in the Brompton bags.

Madeira Wednesday 12th December 2012

Our first port of call after three nights and two days at sea was Madeira. After over two days confinement in the old peoples home we could not wait to be off the ship and on our Bromptons.



Surprisingly we found it difficult to accept that we were in a different climate from winter Weymouth. Even though it was warm and sunny we found it impossible not to take that extra jumper and of course our waterproofs. Consequently the sole Brompton bag on the stoker's Nanny was full.

Madeira is really a walkers island with, we understand, some serious

mountains. With only one day it was not possible to arrange journeying into the mountains. The ship of course could have done footsloggers, we expect the German cruise ships do. But many of our fellow passengers found it stressful enough getting onto the tour bus.

After much thought the management planned a short route along the coast to Camera de Lobos. Hills were unavoidable but we decided that there was little point in challenging the mountainous interior. After all we would only get half way up before having to return.

The ship had one last affront before we left. The staff tried unsuccessfully to spray us with Deet, the successor to DDT, before we left. Apparently over the years there have

been a couple of reports of people getting the dengue bug after mosquito bites on Madeira. Most of the elderly confused leaving the ship succumbed. We prefer, even in countries where there really are biting insects, to avoid spraying on our skin something which can disintegrate sunglasses.

It turned out to be a lovely coastal ride. We were berthed to the west of the main town and as we were going west it was easy to avoid the town centre. After the first kilometre or so uphill we diverted onto minor roads and were on a roller coaster ride beside the bright blue sea.



Even though we had had two days to become accustomed to the transfer to a climate ideal for cycling it was still a pleasant shock to the system. Shorts and t shirts were ideal and although we perspired a little on the ups it was never too hot and we did not feel cold on the descents.

For much of our route to the village of Camera de Lobos we managed to stay on the coast path. On the down side it was not signed or marked on our maps but on the up side cyclists are welcome, unlike in much of the UK. Much of the coastal path was within the suburban area but even here it was dotted with banana plantations.

As usual in this part of the world the bougainvillea was lovely and set within green gardens and mature palm trees. We stopped several times just to sit and stare. We were also looking for the possible secret place that Winston Churchill is said to have found here in his wilderness years.

Camera de Lobos is set in a deep valley within a broad inlet from the sea. The volcanic rock is of course black but looking from high above the contrasts of the blue sea, white houses and brightly coloured fishing boats was striking.



Fishermen Camera de Lobos

We wound our way down to the village and made for the seafront cafés we had seen from above. We were greeted by a lively noisy place. It would seem that Portuguese can only be spoken with gusto and there was much life here. Fishermen were preparing boats for the sea, testing engines and loading nets. Dogs were fighting and chasing the cats which were after the gulls.

It was a real breath of fresh air after nearly three days of confinement. While being ethnic it still served the few tourists, like us, who had made their own way. We were even given a code for the internet and dealt with three days of emails sitting in the sun.

We explored the village but soon realised that to continue in a westerly direction would

involve a very serious climb. Camera de Lobos does boast, like many other places, of having the highest sea cliffs in the whole universe but for us the climb to see them from above was a step too far.

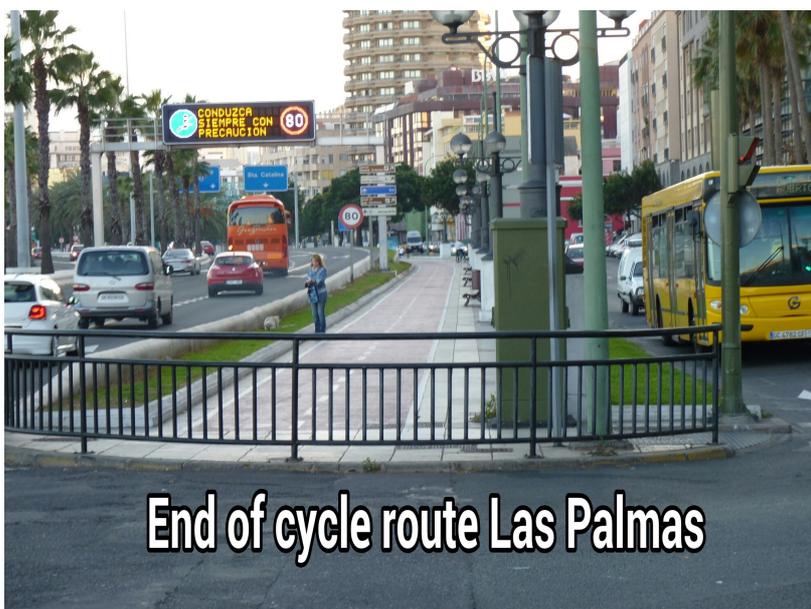
We retraced along the coastal path stopping off for lunch at a quiet little café set among the palms. At this point, while enjoying a very pleasant sandwich, the stoker was bitten by a particularly unpleasant insect. So far she has not come down with dengue and still thinks a few itches are better than disintegration by Deet.

On our return to Funchal we would have had time to take the cable car up the mountain to do the famous dry toboggan run with the rest of the tourists. As it was we sat in the sun by the yacht harbour watching the world go by until the ship was ready to leave.

Gran Canaria Thursday 13th December 2012

When we awoke we were alongside in Las Palmas. We knew this because our cabin TV had live video from the bow and stern of the ship and we were definitely in harbour.

We have been to Las Palmas on a number of occasions. It is a large town with some OK cycle routes and two good beaches. It is, however, a real pig to get out of by bike. There are no cycle routes out which avoid busy roads. This is not too bad if you are doing Bradley Wiggins speeds but it is uphill and would take us for ever at 14kph.



The management decided that our best escape would be by bus. We cycled 4 or 5km along the prom to the bus station. Here we folded the Bromptons and caught the half hourly service into the mountains. It took us an enjoyable hour via suburban streets and then winding mountain roads to reach Teror on the bus.

Teror is listed in the guide book as having typically Spanish streets with wooden balconies and an ancient church. It has both but its main appeal is its mountain location. It is a real contrast to the tourist hot spots below us and not too many tourists had found their way here today.

We explored the steep streets which even reduced Nanny to walking before riding out of town down the valley. After a couple of kms we branched right onto the old road. A new bridge had been built across the valley but we traversed it going along to the horse shoe road to the end and climbing out again.



Our next step was to branch right again and take the even older road which wound up the mountain to a pretty and ethnic hilltop village. Nanny managed this climb well and the stoker had to wait a while at the top for the management. He says he enjoyed the climb, pedalling steadily in a low gear and enjoying the quiet and the views.

At the top we chanced upon a local bar with a restaurant. It was lunchtime but we did not really need much having now enjoyed the ship's cuisine for five days. Nevertheless we were tempted by the real Spanish food here. The proprietor, who did not speak English, was clearly delighted to welcome a couple of tourists. Perhaps few come to this lovely spot. It was difficult to resist eating and we didn't.

Replete and with the best wishes and goodbyes of the proprietor we started our long descent towards Las Palmas. A descent is best with full tummies. The road descended by a series of steep zigzags and the stoker found it very hard work with the Brompton dual pivot brakes. We have never understood why this technologically backward UK company with the best design in the world does not fit decent equipment, particularly mountain bike brakes. Steve Parry did it to the management's bike years ago, it is hardly rocket science.

Once into the urban sprawl of Las Palmas navigation was the key. The route is of course quite busy but we have always found Spanish drivers, in contrast to those in the UK, to be careful and considerate but above all patient. In fact in most of the rest of Europe overtaking cyclists on blind bends and summits, now the norm in Dorset, is unheard of.

It helped that it did not take us long to get down to sea level. It is much easier to ride fast in traffic and it is of course easier to ride fast if you are going downhill.

From here back to the ship we spent a very pleasant time wandering along the prom on the main beach enjoying the sun, sea and sand. Soon we were at sea again heading for even more food and Tenerife.

Tenerife and the ascent of Mount Teide on the outside **Friday 14th December 2012**

Five years ago we cycled on the tandem 2300m from sea level to the huge crater near to the top of Mount Teide, see <http://www.akweb.org.uk/canariestandem/week10.html>.

Very unusually, for it seldom rains here, we cycled up through mist and drizzle. When we got to the top the cable car which climbs to 3555m was closed because the cables were covered in ice. Walking that distance at that altitude was not an option and so even though we had the required pass to go to the top we packed and returned to the sea.



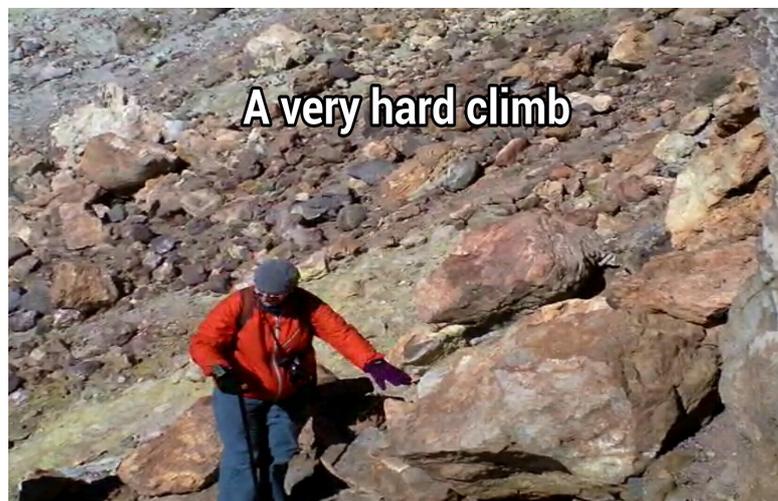
As our friends know we do not give up and on this trip, having again obtained the pass to go to the top, we were giving it another try. With only a day in Tenerife sadly cycling up to the cable car was not an option. We rented a car from near the liner port and it took us up to the cable car in under two hours. We were envious of the cyclists we carefully overtook on the way up.

It was a lovely clear bright morning and cycling up through the forest in the cool mountain air would have obviously been far preferable to sitting in a tin box. But when needs must.

We were soon out of the car and ascending to the top cable car station at 3555m. Once there we put on several layers of warm clothes and then presented our pass to allow us to go through the gate to climb the remaining 200m to the very top.

The route to the crater of Mount Teide took us to Spain's highest peak. From the gate we followed the rocky path which climbs steeply towards the summit.

We could only begin the ascent because we had a permit issued by the national park office, obtained via the internet. This was much easier than the process which we undertook five years ago. The altitude which made us feel dizzy and the strong smell of sulphur given off by the numerous fumaroles made progress difficult.



Wisely we climbed very slowly, making short stops to feel the island throbbing beneath our feet and breathe in the icy air. The path felt straight out of “The Lord of the Rings” as they approach the Cracks of Doom.



As the steep path switchbacks up the southeast slope it draws ever closer to the narrow lip from where we contemplated the mysterious crater. Here the sulphurous fumes snaked up and rocks beside the path were too hot to touch. Once at the top the yellowy-green depths of the crater conjure up violent eruptions of the past. The whole of Tenerife was laid out below us, right down to sea level in the north. On this lovely day we also thought that we could make out La Palma, El Hierro and La Gomera to the west, and Gran Canaria, Fuerteventura and Lanzarote to the east.

According to the stoker's trusty Smartypants GPS we had made it to 3732m, 14m higher than the mountain is supposed to be.





While the management gets no special credit for making the ascent the stoker showed great determination. She had never climbed at this altitude before and her dodgy leg made it extra difficult. This also applies to climbing up difficult steps and picking a safe way down.

Having taken and enjoyed longer than the two hours allowed by the authorities to climb the mountain we now needed to return quickly to Santa Cruz to catch the Cunard ferry for Lanzarote. Lunch was not an option but we had time for a beer on shore before going aboard. We refuse to buy alcohol on board at their silly prices.



**Lanzarote, Arrecife to Puerto del Carmen
Saturday 15th December 2012**

The Queen Elizabeth was in port before we awoke. We took advantage of a leisurely breakfast before packing our stuff back into the Brompton bags. The stoker did the check out and having surrendered our elderly confused cards we wheeled the bikes down the gang plank for the last time.

From the ship Lanzarote is perhaps one of the least attractive looking of the islands we had visited. This is a shame because it has a great deal to offer, is extremely varied and great for cycling.

There is an easy path from the port into the town of Arrecife and from there it is simple to find the coast path along the prom to Puerto del Carmen. As is usual in civilised places cycles share the route with pedestrians with no conflict at all.

As we continued along the prom for about 9km we renewed our good feelings about this place. It is far less busy than any of the other main Canary Islands and the coastal strip is less hilly. There was a Saturday market and car boot sale at Playa Honda with the locals mixing happily with the tourists. Local kids own the prom which is a welcome improvement on most tourist places.

We braved the busy tourist centre of Puerto del Carmen before making the short climb to our pleasant Christmas villa where we were expected. We will now attempt to run a Lanzarote version of Thursday Folders, who knows whether there will be any takers.

