

## Perpignan to Bilbao cycle tour April 2010

Due to a series of cajoling and half promises between me, my step son George and my mate Matt we finally have ended up actually going touring by bike. Once we had all agreed and decided it was a good idea, George finally threw in the camping factor (as it isn't really touring unless you're camping) so his hypothesis went. So with true pins a map style we plucked a starting point of Perpignan (as it had an airport) and Bilbao as a destination (as it had a ferry port) as our starting point and destination.

So I thought it would be good to have brief account on the PW website to help me remember what it was like next time I decide to go touring.



30<sup>th</sup> March - Swange to Wandsworth

I find myself heading towards Wareham station armed with my £12 train ticket in order to get up to Matt's house in Wandsworth. Strangely enough the bike is much slower with 2 great big panniers attached and fighting a headwind although my inspired idea of having Spinachi's is already paying dividend's as head across the causeway in Wareham.

31<sup>st</sup> March - Wandsworth to Perpignan (via Standstead)

All in all pretty straight forward with no major disasters except the jar of instant coffee that I had hoped to drink in the mornings broke in my bag. However, a quick wash in the hotel remedied any unwanted coffee granuals and revealed that my new Ortleib bags were in fact water proof. Roast Duck breast of dinner all in all a very nice day although I could have done with a less 'cycling' out fit for going out to dinner.

1<sup>st</sup> April - Perpignan to Saillagouse

This wasn't going to be our original destination but the lure of hot spar stopped George in his tracks. The route today was basically uphill for the first 45 miles (not a typo 45 miles!). All in all a nice start with coffee and croissants in Perpignan to a nice plate de jour in Prades and another plate de jour in Saillagouse (which was quite interesting potato's in a cheese and ham sauce). First outing in shorts and short sleeve jersey of the year although by the time we got to the top it was snowing. Matt was feeling the pace a bit and was lucky enough to get a lift up the last 3 miles of the climb (to be fair Matt had been feeling a bit under the weather before we came out).



### 2<sup>nd</sup> April - Saillagouse to Tremp

First camping experience of the holiday and whilst I was tucked up super warm in my extra warm sleeping bag and John's very expensive tent George and Matt were altogether a bit chillier not surprising really as there was ice on the outside of the tent when we got up. Anyway out for a quick coffee and pastry in the local cafe as we're on our way. We're making good progress, as although there is a head wind 45 miles of climbing also results in a very pleasant amount of downhill. Stopped at the supermarket to get lunch and had just one 1380 metre ascent before we got to Tremp. Although this did have a rather unpleasant 1200m sub summit just the other side, ouch. However, we decided to stop at hotel tonight and rode past one on the way to Tremp. As we got further in land we noticed that hotels and set menu's were getting steadily cheaper. Tonight I had goat stew very tasty.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> April - Tremp to Heusca

Super climb out of Tremp, followed by quite a long day in the saddle without a particularly memorable lunch. Heusca's a funny old place described by Wiki as hard to get to, we found a cheap hotel and set about finding a bar to have dinner at. Just a general observation that Spanish bars seem to be dominated by football and smoking. Anyway we found a suitable looking place with the only grumpy Spanish person we came across George managed to order 12 mini bocconillos which turned out to be 12 small roles with various things inside. Matt and I had the 12 euro plate de jour menu which was good

enough but not particularly memorable. Whilst eating we managed to watch Barcelona destroy Athletic Madrid 4-1 not a good portent for the upcoming game with Arse.



4<sup>th</sup> April – Heusca to Pamplona

Well it should have been but for the ridiculous head wind. After deciding that we should press on as we had more or less caught up with the distance that we lost on the first day we picked our way out of Heusca with George's skilful map reading and amazingly handy handlebar mounted compass. It was rolling terrain with lots of interesting bird life and a rather amazing reservoir which we cycled across to have lunch in the sailing club. We arrived just in time to see Fernando Alonso blow up his engine whilst trying to overtake Jenson Button. Strangely enough that didn't seem to go down well with collected ensemble. Phrases like 'ultimo vuelta' followed by lots of general head wagging and tisk tisking. One Tortia and cafe grande solo later we were on our way. There was one more phrase that we hadn't taken much notice of up to now 'mucho vente'. Gee's mucho, mucho, mucho, mucho vente, ahh man, mucho vente.

Anyway 3 hours of 6mph riding including an admission from George that he needed Matt to resume carrying his panniers lead to an emergency meeting in very strange cafe on an industrial estate with an unusually well dress clientele. Turns out once they had got through the haze of cigarette smoke there was a church in the back and they were all attending Easter Sunday mass. We had two options for train carry on for 60k in a strong side wind or turn with the wind behind us and go to Zaragoza instead. So being the fool hardy person in the group I opted for the strong side wind route for about 1km. Until we saw sense and turned downwind for Zaragoza. What a good decision. We did the next 60k in 1 hour 40 minutes including a section of 16km (they have very hand signs beside the road) completed in under 20 minutes. Gee's mucho vente fantastic.

On arriving at Zaragoza station we had a very nice lady from the super Renfe intercity service help us. We found out that the only train that would take bikes was leaving at 6.25am and you couldn't buy advance tickets.



5<sup>th</sup> April – Zaragoza to Somewhere near Dima

As it turns out catching the train couldn't be easier it was evident that the man doing the bag checks didn't think three English blokes on bikes fitted the profile of train bombers and off we went to Vitoria-Gasteiz. It was a really good journey with everyone being very helpful and we had thought to get some pastries for the train trip further supplemented by some cafe grande solo's brought at Pamplona station which it seems is the centre for VW polo production in Europe. Anyway after a light breakfast in the square at Vitoria we pressed on. I started to suffer badly in the end I bonked just before we got to our campsite with Matt and George pressing on into the distance. I stopped and had 'plate du pitch and putt' not sure what was in it but didn't seem to have much effect. We all watched some bloke try a fruitless break away in the tour of the Basque country.

Anyway we did some 'off piste' camping in the national park and chose a lovely spot. So lovely in fact we all fell asleep at 7.30pm to awake at 9.00am the next morning.

6<sup>th</sup> April – Somewhere near Dima to Bilbao

This was a fairly short hop like the last day but all refreshed by cafe con leche's and jamon boccolilo's we pressed on to Bilbao. We took the scenic route in which included riding through a park on the hill side and in to a school yard. The Guggenheim in Bilbao is a spectacular building so we cycled down to it and stopped for souvenirs and a coke. The rest of Bilbao is pretty good too as there's loads of nice ships and an old quarter where people seem to bar hop and have the odd herbal cigarette (if you know what I mean nudge, nudge). It turned out that the campsite was about 25k's out of town which didn't seem too bad in a place called Sopelana. Turns out this is a bit of a surfing venue and nearly everyone staying there was under 25 looked ace for a family holiday as there were plenty of MTB routes plus surfing. Anyway we just stayed out enough to watch Barcelona destroy Arse 4-1.

All we had to do was get to the ferry by 11 the next morning.

7<sup>th</sup> April – Sopelana to Santurtzi

With Eddie's sage advice ringing in my ears (it's a blooming long way to the ferry you know). We set off at 8am after getting up at 7 to get the tents down. Gee's it was all going well we thought we could take the Bridge that had an N road on it as we had been riding along those all week. Oh dear turns out this is a motorway and all those people who had been bibbing us all morning were quite ride. So we turned off the motorway and ended up heading over this hill near Bilbao airport. After stopping to ask a man with a donkey the way and having one of those classic no Spanish, no English conversations we ascertained that we needed to go over the steep hill he pointed to.

After that it was plan sailing and all we had to do was irritate northern people by riding past them whilst they were queuing in their cars, relax on the ferry, and decide exactly which over priced and poor quality food or beverage we were going to have next.

8<sup>th</sup> April – Portsmouth to Swanage

After navigating our way to Portsmouth Central train station and then Bournemouth via Southampton Airport Parkway I managed to get from Bournemouth station to the ferry for the 8.20pm ferry. Not bad as the train got to Bournemouth at 7.57pm although it was a bit of a hectic ride along the prom (still enjoying those spinach's though!). The last part was riding to Swanage in the dark which was ace.

Just a few thanks to finish with.

Paul Dytham – you were right 26x23 was plenty low enough

John O'brien – for lending me the tent and the cooking equipment that I sharn't bother taking next time

Mrs J – for letting me go

George Holland – for reading the maps

Matt Baker – for being a good egg