

French Leave

By Dave Binks

The diary of a 4 months cycle camping trip around France during the Summer of 2001

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For a few years I had thought that there must be more to life than just getting up and going to work 5 days a week with a burst of cycling packed into the other 2 days, but had never really thought I could do much about it.

However, a thought suddenly occurred to me one day, and it wouldn't go away.

I had realised I had paid off the mortgage a few years ago, no one was dependent on me (even the cat had died!) and I wasn't getting any younger (as the lads on the clubrun demonstrated to me up every hill). I was also starting to notice people of my age developing life-threatening ailments, or even worse, dying and I thought "That could be me and I still haven't done many of the things I want to do."

Why not just go for it - now? why wait until it's too late and spend the rest of my life saying to myself "If only"? So I quietly started laying down some plans to do something about it. Being the Secretary of my cycling club and also involved in organising races etc meant I couldn't just drop everything and go as it wouldn't be fair on my clubmates. So over the winter I started getting others to volunteer to take over from me during the summer, and kept my diary clear for about 4 months or so during the next summer.

I knew work wouldn't agree to let me have a sabbatical (time off unpaid and still hold the job open). If I had told them and then broken my leg whilst waiting to go it would have put me in a difficult position as they would probably insist I take unpaid sick leave. So I kept quiet about it right up until 4 weeks to go. I was spot on, they said I would have to leave. This was no easy decision for me as it meant I was giving up 20 years service entitlement to things like redundancy, sick pay and holiday entitlements, but my mind was set - I was going!

My plan was to cycle camp around France, towing a small trailer for the luggage. I chose to use a trailer rather than simply carry panniers as I have had nasty experiences with rear wheels collapsing under the weight and strain when cycle camping and didn't want those problems again. It also makes handling the bike easier, both on and off it (ever had the bike turn upside down on you because it was top heavy with all the luggage?). Unfortunately there is a weight penalty to pay, as a trailer weighs more than a pair of panniers and the third wheel adds to the drag. But that was the decision I took, and I think it was the correct one, as I experienced no weight-related wheel problems. In any case, it wasn't a race!

After much studying of what was available and talking to lots of people, keeping my eyes and ears open for unbiased advice, I opted for the single wheeled "Bob-Yak" trailer. This hitches very quickly and neatly onto a specially modified quick release skewer on the rear wheel. It hinges vertically and horizontally, thus tracking cleverly behind the bike around corners and up and down potholes, but leans over with the bike so cannot tip over - a fault of some 2 wheeled trailers.

My tents were also carefully examined and I reluctantly decided that all but one were too heavy. Whilst the remaining one was OK for weight, it was far from new, wasn't particularly

easy (fast) to erect, and with only a narrow and low entrance, would be very uncomfortable in prolonged wet weather. Much perusing of the lightweight tent market led me to the "Solar" by Terra Nova. This has only one pole, forming a hoop from head to foot of the tent, gives tremendous access but can be shut right down in wet weather, erects fully in 6 minutes and weighs less than 2kg. The fact that it had been made in Derby was another point in its favour as I do try to buy British when I can.

However, a trial weekend before I went proved valuable as I realised some modifications were required. The small porch area needed a groundsheet, and better use of the space between the rear of the inner and outer tent could be made by putting a zip in the back of the inner to allow it to be reached from inside the tent. So out came the sewing machine and these were soon done. I also realised my cooking kit was not ideal, being too tall and unstable to safely use inside if necessary (yes, I know you shouldn't cook inside but sometimes you're forced to). Trangia came to the rescue with their very compact unit which is very low, impossible to tip over, and uses methylated spirits, a fuel which is both cheap and easily available in France.

I had also, over the winter, been building a touring bike specifically with reliability in mind and this was based on a Raleigh Special Products touring frame made from Reynolds "708 Touristique" tubing. It had relaxed frame angles for easy steering under load, an oversize top tube for lateral stiffness and all the necessary brazings.

A test ride with the loaded Bob Yak had proved my existing "light" touring frame - a Mercian made from Reynolds 531 double butted tubing was just not stiff enough to cope with the additional loads imposed on it by camping equipment. This had manifested itself in a definite "whippiness" that concerned me enough to reluctantly decide to spend some money!

On my journey numerous people asked me how much it all weighed, and I couldn't tell them, so I put it on the scales when I got home. The bike, with tools, two full water bottles, loaded front panniers (with food needed during the day and to also aid steering stability) and a small top bag on the rear carrier (cape, camera, chocolate etc) was about 25kg (55lbs) and the loaded trailer was about 20kg (44lbs). Total about 45kg (100lbs or 7 stones). The weight varied according to how much fuel I had with me, how much food I was carrying (as little as possible, but often quite a bit for the last few kilometres in the morning and evening before I got around to eating it).

Remember I was carrying food, cooking stove and fuel, tent and sleeping bag and mat in addition to clothes and some papers (book, diary, maps etc)

Hardly in the lightweight category, but I didn't want mechanical failures due to stress, and anyway, it wasn't a race.

One rather annoying thing about France is the fact that virtually all the shops close for up to 3hrs in the middle of the day, so you must buy your lunch before 12.30am even if you're not ready for it. If you're in a rural area (and most of France is one huge rural area!) you need to start looking for a food shop about 11.30am or risk getting nothing. This adds to your load until you sit down and eat it. The compensating factor is they stay open generally until 7.00pm so you can avoid buying your evening meal until arriving at your destination.

So where did I go?

Basically, by boat to Bilbao in Northern Spain then up into France. Oh, I nearly forgot - and I popped into Italy for lunch one day!

Wed 16 May

My final packing completed, I tidied the house (my neighbour would be coming in regularly to check everything was OK) and pedalled away at 11.00 am. I passed through Leicester City

centre via the marked cycle tracks. Clearing the outskirts, I went on, always trying to stay in the quiet lanes, through Countesthorpe, Walcote, Crick and Watford where I went the wrong way and ended up on the A5 for 2-3 miles which, fortunately, wasn't busy. I skirted Daventry and thought briefly about stopping at Badby YH, but it was a bit too early and too soon, so pushed on. Dodford, Newnham, a hard climb to Preston Capes, then following cycle route signs to Cannons Ashby where I passed the National Trust house, Moreton Pinckney, Thorpe Mandeville, Middleton Cheney (poor surface here) then Warkworth, Kings Sutton (bought food here) to my planned campsite at Adderbury for 7pm. My diary notes "It was further than I thought or wanted. Toughish day, not used to pulling the load, up and down, sometimes a bit steep, picnicked (mid afternoon) at Norton. Got showered on a bit, but not soaked." The campsite was almost deserted, with just a few caravans and no other tents in sight. After cooking my meal I strolled into the village pub and joined the locals as they watched Liverpool beat Alaves 4-5 in the UEFA Soccer Cup Final on the TV.
11.7mph, 71 miles.

Thurs. 17 May

Today was an awful day for weather right from the start. I awoke to the sound of rain on the tent and the wind battering the trees. It was also rather cold. It stayed like that nearly all day, with the wind being mostly a headwind for good measure.

An 11.00 am departure again, which I quickly realised was too late if I was to maintain progress throughout my travels, saw me riding off into the rain-swept lanes looking for a post office. Despite considerable thought, I had still packed too much and decided to post some items home. Items like plates (I could eat straight from the pot!) and a spare tee shirt and book too many. After a few hours I stopped in a tea room at Bladon, near Blenheim Palace, for beans on toast and a chance to get out of the rain and get warm, and again in another cafe at Wantage at the foot of the Berkshire Downs. The route had taken me through some nice villages, but the rain and cold had stopped me enjoying them. Whilst hiding from the rain in the café in Wantage I noticed I was very close to the Ridgeway Youth Hostel. I immediately decided I would stop there if it had room, rather than go on to Newbury and camp in the wet. A hard climb to the Hostel up the Downs (why do they call them "Downs" when they're actually "Ups"?) rewarded me with a welcome from the warden and confirmation that they had room, so I gratefully booked in for the night. The rain stopped an hour or so after I got there, but it was still cold. After washing out my wet clothes and hanging the still wet tent out to drip dry in the barn, I got chatting to a chap who was keen on long distance Audaxes (long distance cycle rides with a time limit). He told me how he had completed various rides across America, some taking many weeks to complete. On one occasion he said when signing in to the daily check points he had noticed the same lady's name appearing in the book just above his for some days and he realised he was getting closer to her every day. Eventually he caught her up on the road and surprised her by using her name when saying "Hello" even though they had never seen each other before!

47 miles, 11.1mph

Friday 18 May

Today was a much better day, being warm and sunny, often with a tailwind, and passing along a very pretty route through the Berkshire Downs and villages, then through Hampshire's famous water meadows.

An earlier start saw me taking snaps of the view from the grounds of the hostel before wheeling off into some delightful quiet lanes. My picnic lunch was taken sitting on a bench in the sunshine in the town square at Overton, before going on to New Alresford and a quick look around the Watercress Line Steam Railway station complete with engine in full steam. I

was in a good mood as I enjoyed the sunshine and finally felt I was going to enjoy myself after all (yesterday had left me in some doubt!). I couldn't resist another tea and cake stop before making my way the last few miles to the coast. The run in through the outskirts of Portsmouth was awful after being on quiet roads all day. The only town of any size I had passed through all day went through all day was Newbury, the old town centre of which was actually very nice. I finally arrived at the campsite on the shoreline at 5pm where I was relieved of £6 for one night's camping. After cooking tea and writing 2 postcards I strolled into town and a local pub for a pint. My hands were a bit sore by now as I was not used to the shape of the brake levers on this bike yet, but with effectively two whole rest days to recover it wasn't going to be a problem.

75 miles, 12.6mph average.

Saturday 19 May

Today was to be my last day in the UK for a few months and I awoke a little excited at the prospect! I packed and was away by 10.15, then rode the short distance into Southsea town centre where I bought another £50 in travellers' cheques as emergency cash should I need it. After an early picnic lunch I paid my £5 entry fee and went into the D-Day Museum on the seafront. Interesting, but at £5 it seemed a bit steep. By now I was killing time waiting for when I could make my way to the ferry and so I wandered around Portsmouth's very modern shopping centre. A final fish and chip supper in a café, then off I rode to the docks and the boat. I had watched the boat glide in earlier as I sat overlooking the entrance to the harbour and was impressed with its size. No Isle of Wight Ferry this one!

There were 2 other cyclists with their young child on board. Each adult was towing a trailer - one for the child, one for the luggage. Everyone came up onto the top decks to look at the many Royal Navy ships tied up in the docks and then watch the UK disappear. I have to admit to a feeling of slight apprehension as I saw the land disappear. What was I letting myself in for....?

I had booked to share a 4 berth cabin and was very pleased when I discovered I was to be the only occupant - Great!

Exploring the many decks during the evening I sat down and had a drink chatting to an older couple who expressed a great deal of interest in my plans. Unfortunately I was too tired to enjoy the cabaret going on in the main saloon and by 11.00pm I fell into bed.

6 miles

Sunday 20 May

The ferry trip lasts 36 hours, so there would be no bike today as we slowly moved forever southwards down the Bay of Biscay to the northern coast of Spain.

Today became rather a "long" day. I took the opportunity to have a lie in for a while before breakfast in my own room. As I was now unemployed and would be away for a considerable time I had to do everything to save money and so had brought with me from UK some cereal and milk for just this purpose. A stroll onto the sunny and bright deck was enjoyable, but you had to keep out of the cool wind. Already some of the young lads and girls were in their swimsuits sunbathing on the deckchairs! I bumped into the other cyclists who I discovered were due to meet their in-laws who were driving down to meet them in Spain. They would all then cycle camp around Northern Spain for 3 weeks. I had anticipated the need to kill time and settled down to read the paper and my book. After lunch I watched a movie in one of the two cinemas!

This wasn't just a normal car ferry, it was good enough for, and was indeed being used as, a mini-cruiser. The facilities on board included the two cinemas, a swimming pool, a multi-gym, lots of bars, various cafes and restaurants, all catering to different standards, and in case

you felt lucky – a casino! It seems lots of people actually come on the trip just to enjoy the facilities - returning on the same boat after a few hours in Bilbao.

The evening saw me in the main saloon watching the evening's free entertainment; mainly a floorshow based on the musical "Grease". Pretty good really. I fell asleep knowing I would be in Spain tomorrow.

Monday 21 May

We docked on time after what had been a very smooth crossing. It was by now, even at 7am, very warm and sunny. As the UK was still under the grip of the Foot and Mouth epidemic, disinfection precautions by the Spanish authorities caused disembarkation delays of some hours. Every vehicle and passenger had to undergo a wheels and shoes disinfection procedure, and with only 4 men doing it, one per wheel, this was a slow process. We even had to leave any UK dairy or meat products on board, for return to and subsequent disposal, in the UK. After about an hour I managed to get out of the port and headed for the centre of Bilbao. This was quite a culture shock - wrong side of the road, strange language, strange City with no map, and even at 8am, getting hot!

My rather rudimentary map told me the city straddled a long river and I needed to be the other side of it, so off I trundled, taking layers of clothing off as I did so, heading up river until I found a bridge that wasn't a motorway. I glimpsed the famous Guggenheim Art Museum on the way, but decided to come back next day to see it. Whilst coming back down the other side of the river I realised there was a bridge which would have saved me a few kilometres. This was a transporter bridge; the type that uses a short section of roadway suspended from an overhead gantry and is winched across, complete with stationary traffic, as is still in use in Middlesbrough in the UK.

Although I wanted to look around the City, I needed to find a campsite, so followed the coast road eastwards to a coastal campsite at Gornitz that I had spotted in a book. The campsite was found, some 18 km (11mils) out of the City and I was told I could pitch wherever I wanted. Although the site was well populated with large caravans and tents, they all appeared empty. This is a very common feature on the continent, where locals set up their camp at the start of the year and leave it erected throughout the whole of the summer, (and even over the winter) just using it at weekends and festivals.

So as it mattered not where I went, I pitched next to, and facing what I thought was just another empty caravan with awning. Being Monday I thought it was bound to be empty tonight – big mistake!

This was the only one occupied, and when the occupants returned later I realised they were the original noisy family from hell, complete with aggressive dog and there was I, only 10 feet away, facing straight at them! Oh well, I wouldn't be there tomorrow, so put up with it. 67km (42mils)

Tuesday 22 May

As it was a nice day, I washed out some clothes and hung them out to dry. A sea mist type of dampness seemed to pervade the air all day, keeping the sun and temperature at bay, but it was still pleasant. I walked the 2km into the village and then caught the local Metro train into Bilbao for a look around the City. The train ride was excellent, on time, modern, clean and popular, not surprising, as the 18km (11 miles) ride only cost 80p!

I spent the whole day in Bilbao sightseeing. A city map picked up at the Tourist Office suggested a route, with descriptions of the main points of interest, so I followed that all day. Without doubt the highlight was the Guggenheim Art Museum, a fantastic structure like nothing you've seen before, being all curves and polished titanium tiles - truly amazing. Had I

been interested in clothes I would have paid the £3 entry fee and viewed the Armani clothes collection (art?) inside, but didn't bother.

A fresh trout was bought in the market for tea later.

My neighbours really were very noisy tonight, but I was too tired for them to keep me awake when I went to bed. No bike today.

Wednesday 23 May

Today I continued to follow the coast road east. The north coast of Spain is very hilly and so was my ride until the last 10 miles when it eased a little. A picnic lunch at the fishing village of Bermio was taken as I sat looking at the large fishing fleet tied up there. The mistiness present in the air kept the heat down, but added to the humidity as I had a bumpy and busy run in to Guernica. This, art experts will tell you, is the small town flattened by the Nazis in the Spanish Civil War that preceded W.W.II. Pablo Picasso's famous painting commemorates the atrocity but I could find nothing of note in the town, so carried on without stopping. A hard climb out of the town towards Lekeito was very tiring and I soon stopped for a brew up on the way. That's the beauty of cycle camping, the nearest café is always only as far as the next nice place to stop!

Lekeito itself was another pleasant spot on the coast and I spent a little while enjoying the sea views and the sweeping coastline. About 6pm I spotted a camping sign at the small seaside town of Mutriku and grovelled my way up the very steep hairpinned road to it, and was pleased I did, as it had a lovely view over the sea and coast. My hamburger for tea went down a treat on what was a very quiet site. As I sat there I heard a noise that I thought was an electronic alarm of some sort sounding. It was just a single "beep" sounding every few minutes. I wandered around looking for what was causing it for a while before going up and going to bed.

It wasn't until some days later that I began to realise that it must be some insect or beetle causing the noise as it followed me around, re-appearing every evening. I don't to this day know for a fact what it was!

100km (60mls)

Thursday 24 May

I continued to follow the coast road all day again. Fortunately, it wasn't as hard a road today and actually got a lot easier as the day wore on. I reluctantly joined a "N" (National) road which stayed at sea level for quite a way as it literally ran along the coast, but was pleased to note the presence of a motorway running parallel had taken most of the traffic off it. My picnic lunch was bought and eaten in the seaside resort of Zarautz whilst sitting on a bench on the beach. Whilst the weather was as hazy as it had been for many days, it was still very pleasant, and, had it been the UK and August, the beach would have been nearly packed. But this was Spain, and May, so other than a few retired dog walkers and the seagulls, I had the entire beach to myself. I looked at the free swimming pool, but decided to give it a miss today! From now on, the main road got busier but I couldn't find an alternative route, so just got on with it. I had brought with me from the UK a copy of Lance Armstrong's book "It's not about the bike" which describes his battle with cancer. It also mentions his journey into big time bike racing, and makes particular reference to the first time he ever rode the San Sebastian Classic day race. He tells of a terrible time, poor weather and being laughed at by the spectators as he finishes many minutes down. So it was with great interest that I approached the outskirts of this large City near the French Border. A confusing jungle of main roads took me on a trip around the outskirts and past a "Decathlon" sports shop. Those of you who have visited France will be familiar with these shops. Think of a large supermarket, like Tesco's but stocked, not with foodstuffs, but all sorts of sports items,

including lots of good quality cycling equipment. A real eye opener to someone brought up buying bike bits in little shops in the back streets! I very nearly bought a complete new gear ensemble at the very low price it was being offered for, but decided against it, fear of not having the correct tools and those little bits and pieces needed to finish the job stopping me. I suppose there must have been a quieter way into the City than the multi-lane highway I used, but I couldn't find it, so took the bull by the horns and mixed it with the juggernauts for the final 2-3 miles down to the seafront. The descent down from the hills to the front was very pleasant as all the way down the sea and bay was visible. I had seen a sign for a campsite and was following the route up what was obviously going to be a very steep long hill when I rode straight past a Youth Hostel. I rode about 100yds further up the hill before common sense took over and I decided to stop there instead. I went into the City centre on the bike for a look around before my evening meal. San Sebastian I found to be a really nice place, more French than Spanish in atmosphere. The main road bridge over the river with a pair of truly grand statues at each end, and a magnificent Cathedral are just two of the features I remember. A local supermarket supplied the ingredients for my evening meal that I then cooked at the hostel. The hostel was nearly full of Yanks, Aussies and other British speakers, including the ubiquitous loud Dutchman, so we all had a good chat and exchanged stories whilst downing a couple of bottles of wine.

66kms

Friday 25 May

There was still a cool sea type mist until after lunch when it improved a bit, but I had already made my plans for the day. I left my panniers and the trailer at the hostel while I rode up the steep but short climb to Mount Igueldo which overlooks the city and bay. At the top is a small leisure park, with children's swings and small funfair rides. I ignored the "Closed" signs and went in anyway, as I wanted to see the view from the cliff edge. The view was indeed good, looking out over the bay and the small offshore island. I then picked up my luggage and rode through San Sebastian until I found the coast road again. There were good sea views from the cliff-top road, but I had to earn it as the road was used in the Vuelta d'Espagne (Tour of Spain) and the climb up out of Lexo was a tough one. On arrival at yet another fishing village, Hondarribia, I sat and watched fishing boats come ashore whilst eating my lunch. Here in the UK our fishing fleet is virtually extinct, but in Spain it appears to be very healthy, with what must have been 40 active boats tied up having unloaded their catch at the quayside. Some were still arriving and I watched with disbelief as 8 men got into one tiny rowing boat to ferry them ashore. The thing that made it unbelievable was that they were all, except the oarsman, standing up. Nothing unusual in that you say? No, except the reason they were all standing was there was no room for them to sit down! Talk about top heavy! It only needed one of them to wobble a bit and they would all have been in the drink.

I crossed the border into France at Hendaye without really knowing it. Obviously I knew it was there, but expected a little more than what appeared to be just a big truck spread across both sides of the road. Obviously this was where the truckers parked whilst their customs papers were stamped. There were certainly no officials to stop me, and in fact none on view at all! After a brief stop to change my pesetas into francs at one of the many Bureaux de Change, I continued along the coast road into the next town, Ciboure. The road was very busy with all the goods traffic having been channelled onto it, but as soon as I turned off into the town itself I was enchanted.

It's amazing what a difference just a few kilometres can make. Spain was always a little run down and unkempt, but almost instantly the affluence was noticeably greater, and the atmosphere chic and glamorous.

The town was obviously very popular with holidaymakers, and the narrow pedestrianised streets were full of tourists wandering amongst the many little shops all selling quite expensive bits and pieces that most people can live without. I got caught up in the free spending atmosphere and bought a coffee sitting in a pavement bar. There could be no doubt now that I was in France; the cost of the drink was nearly twice what I had been paying in Spain! My target today was Biarritz and although I tried to use quiet roads I kept getting brought back onto the N10, which was very busy. After a little unintentional detour I eventually found the campsite and set up shop. Camped near me were three lads from the UK who were biking partway home after being ski reps in the Pyrenees since last October and we chatted for quite a while before tiredness overcame us all.
88kms @ 16km/hr

Saturday 26 May

A lazy day quickly became a hot and sunny day. I lingered over a leisurely breakfast complete with boiled egg, and chatted again to my skiing friends before riding the short distance into Biarritz for a look around. Now I know why the millionaires go there – it's lovely. The town itself was very pleasant, with good quality shops, but not at silly prices, amidst tree lined boulevards. And the beaches! The sand was very soft and clean and was already fairly crowded, with lots of pretty young things topping up their suntans, all topless of course. And so were the girls, not that I took any notice of course! The world famous Casino was sited literally right on the beachfront. I could just picture James Bond wandering onto the soft sand in the moonlight with a pretty girl on his arm after winning a few thousand on the tables! Chic certainly is the correct word here – beautiful people in a beautiful place under beautiful skies.

After I had managed to drag myself away from admiring the beautiful people on the beach I did a little exploring, and found some lovely little coves which were very popular with the surfing set. Continuing my wanders I came across a Youth Hostel in nearby Bayonne, where I picked up a book with all the French hostels listed, just in case. Returning into Biarritz I was drawn to the sound of loudspeakers just off the front. I had stumbled across the end of an Audax of approx. 160 kms (100 miles). Unlike in the UK, where you only “pass” or “fail” the time limit, in France these are run like races, with numbers being worn, and individual times being allocated. The winner had completed the ride in 4hrs 31 mins – some going in a course that included a small mountain climb! Back at the site that night I enjoyed a long sit down and caught up on some postcard writing and more food. Phoned Jo Clarke in evening.

21 kms

Sun 27 May

I woke early, packed and moved off, this time leaving the coast that I had been following for so long, and headed inland, towards the Pyrenees. The (worse than) usual confusion in trying to find the correct road out of Biarritz on a map that wasn't good enough for City centres delayed my exit from the suburbs. I ended up going to Bayonne again before I found the way out on the road I wanted. Today became a very hot and sunny day and I wasn't used to it yet, so I really felt it. I rode shirtless for a while (something I very rarely do) but started to worry about sunburn after 1hr so put it on again. I had spotted a road labelled "Route Imperiale des Cimes" (which loosely means High Route of the Summits) the name of which promised a lot. However, it only delivered a lot of pain in the short but steep climbs. By the time I got to a valley road I had had enough and so followed that easier road to St Jean Pied-de-Port. I realised I was riding alongside a river and with the heat, I really wanted a swim, or at least a place for a paddle, but either couldn't get through the high hedge or down the steep bank. Along here I caught and passed three other touring cyclists. After a little confusion they

managed to tell me they were from the Czech Republic and were doing a three week tour. The speed difference (I was travelling considerably faster than them) and language barrier meant there was no real chance to chat, so I waved them goodbye and pressed on. A pizza and a coke in a café in Cambo-les-Bains (which seems to still be an active spa town) topped my energy for the final drag up the valley to the little town of St Jean Pied-de-Port. I decided the “Europ Camping” was the site for me and pulled in for the night. I was relieved of 34F for the night (£3.40), which was a lot cheaper than Biarritz that had been 76F (£7.60) a night. Oh joy! – there was a swimming pool! The locals all thought it too cold to swim as it had not long been filled and hadn’t been warmed by the sun yet, but to me it was great.

Unfortunately the pleasure didn’t last long as I managed to get a blocked ear when drying myself with the towel. Hoping it would clear itself, I rode the 2kms into town for shopping and a look around. I was surprised to find a "Citadel" type fortress town that dates from way back into the middle ages. A few years earlier I had undertaken a ride along the top of Spain that loosely followed the Pilgrims route to Santiago de Compostela, and I soon spotted the same “shell” symbol that denotes this was actually on the route. There was a reasonable choice of basic accommodation for the pilgrims and an office where they get their cards stamped. The cobbled main street in the old town and narrow bridge over the river made for some good photos.

The sun was burning so hot I was forced to find shade when cooking and eating my evening meal. I even had a short nap whilst writing this diary entry!

87kms @18.1km/hr

Monday 28 May

I had already decided that I would have a day on the bike without luggage, so, having had a good look at the map and worked out what I thought would be an interesting circular route, off I went. On my way out of town I popped into the supermarket for a few bits of food for the day, reasoning that as it didn't close until 7.30pm I would be back well before then to buy my tea. So at 10.30am I was away for what I thought would be a 60-70 miles ride. Having only just got into the foothills of the mountains I had forgotten how long the climbs can be, but the long hot climb for 2 hrs up the pass to Porto de Ibaneta at 1057m soon reminded me. The road actually goes over the border of France and into Spain, but is obviously not normally policed by customs officials, as I rode through a roadside customs check set up by 2 very bored looking Spanish officials. As I neared the top I caught and passed a pair of middle aged Italian women riding very ordinary bikes. A quick greeting, and words of encouragement both ways, and we all put our heads down again and got back into our little private hells. Just as I reached the top I also caught an elderly Dutch couple who had just ridden up on a tandem. Anyone who has ever met Dutch people knows just how friendly they are, and what good English they speak, and this couple was no different, so naturally we got chatting. Whereas I was just starting out on my day ride, theirs was half done, as they only intended to ride to the top, then straight back down again! The top of the pass was marked with a small but modern church, and I was intrigued to see the Dutchman pick up a small pebble and throw it at the bell hanging in a little tower standing beside the chapel. He maintained it was the custom to do this (perhaps it was only his custom, I don’t know) so I followed suit and pinged the bell also! A short descent brought me to the little hamlet of Roncevaux, where there is a still active Abbey. This is one of the recognised overnight stops on the Pilgrim route and a lot of history surrounds the place. I took a picnic lunch in the shade of the open air chapel, then continued my descent down into Spain and turned left to Arribes and left again for a circuit of Irabiako Embalse (which means Irabiako Reservoir). The road got narrower and narrower and very quiet with only horses roaming loose on the road for company. The road became a track, then a rough track, then a very rough track, and I started to get worried. Whilst I knew I was

riding beside the reservoir, I couldn't work out exactly where I was, and had to ask for directions at one point from the only couple I had seen for ages. It was with some relief that I finally emerged at the other end of the track, and the road became good again. I then had to climb 10km up to the Passo Tapia @1340m. I have a little ritual of always taking a photo at the top of a climb, with my bike beside the "Pass of" sign but was disappointed not to find one here. But there was a magnificent view, so that went into the camera instead! By this time I was starting to get tired with 100km on the clock and time was getting on. Another long, steep climb to Ochogavia forced me to abandon my plan to ride a complete circuit and opted instead for the shorter route back via Escaroz, Aribes and back to Auritz that I had passed through on the morning's ride. This road was still hard with lots of shorter climbs. What was really worrying me was that I had no Spanish cash with me to buy any food, and I was rapidly getting through what I had taken with me. Silly worry, really, as there were no shops to spend it in anyway! The final, mercifully short climb back up to Pto de Ibaneta was easy by comparison to what I had done earlier. A tremendous, long, hot descent got me back to the campsite for 9.15pm and too late to buy any food from the shops for my evening meal. Fortunately, I just managed to get a big sandwich at the campsite bar before the kitchen staff went home. A quick shower made no difference, the fast ride back and the heat meant I couldn't stop sweating for quite a while. It had been very hot and sunny all day, and I had got a little sunburnt, despite using sunscreen. I had been much too tough a day by far, and my ear was still blocked, so I went to bed vowing to get to a doctor in the morning.
171kms (105miles) @19.1kms/hr (12miles/hr) (8hrs 44mins actually on bike).

Tuesday 29 May.

After suffering for 36 hours with a blocked ear I only had one thing on my mind today – to find a Doctor! I managed to explain my predicament to the campsite owner and she was very helpful, and straight away phoned a local Doctor's to make an appointment for me. As she said to go straight there, and I was fearful of missing him, I didn't even have any time for breakfast or even a drink. I soon found the surgery, which was simply a side door into a large house, with only the tiniest of brass plaques to indicate it was anything other than a private house. On reporting to the receptionist, expecting to be told to go straight in, I was told to wait my turn. No different to the UK here then! After an hour's wait I eventually was summonsed in to see the Doctor. Once he had examined me and told me what I already knew, that it was simply blocked with wax (not the first time I'm afraid) he blew it out himself, with a syringe and hot water. Whenever I've had this done before, it's always been delegated to the nurse, so I was a bit surprised he did it himself. Oh what a relief when out it finally popped! Another surprise was paying the Doctor in cash, there and then. The 110 Francs (£11.10) charge was presumably the going rate on the French National Health, but I didn't care - I could hear properly again, and walked out with a relieved grin on my face. By the time I got back to the tent I was both ravenous and thirsty and finally got to eat breakfast and so sat around eating, drinking and resting for a while. Now feeling much better, I rode the short distance back into town for a proper look around. The old town had until fairly recently been a military barracks and still had the old Citadel where you can wander around. I'm sure I caught sight of the ghost of an ancient French Legionnaire. I celebrated my return to stereo sound by treating myself to lunch at a pavement café and washed it down with a beer. Beefburger, egg, chips, beer and coffee, all for £7.30 may not have been very gourmet, but it went down well. I found a bike shop and had a good look around. Once again I was amazed at how cheap the bikes were - even the ones with good quality equipment. Later, after catching up on some more postcards and when it was cooler, I went for a short ride around the local lanes, enjoying the warm evening air. A short swim in the pool before cooking my tea finished a pleasant day.

70km @19.8km/hr (46km on ride)

Wednesday 30 May

After the last few very hot days, I got up early, at 6am and left by 8.10am so as to get away in the cool, which did help. A short, hard little climb to 300m was rewarded with a fabulous view from the top. Shortly afterwards, I saw lots of eagles, buzzards or vultures (not sure which, not being any bird expert) in the fields and craggy rocks alongside the road. The view was over a pretty valley with lots of distant peaks in a blue haze, with snow capped peaks in the far distance. I stopped, brewed coffee and sat and looked at it. By now it was getting very hot again, and was midday, so bought some grub, then picnicked in the shade of a bridge beside a fast river for about 2 hrs in an attempt to avoid heat. Whilst sitting there, grateful for the local town planners who had placed a picnic table there (obviously a popular spot) I was joined by a van driver who was curious to know all about me. When I explained I was going to be away for about 10 weeks he wasn't sure whether or not to believe me! When I got going again at 3pm it was still a bit too hot, but carried on anyway. My destination that day was the large town of Oloron. I studied the map and chose the easier of two routes to get me there, finally arriving at 5pm at the "Camping Municipal". These are campsites owned and run by the local councils, and are normally excellent value and have good facilities. This was no exception. There were quite a few other cycle campers already there, of all nationalities. The site manager had deliberately placed us all together, realising that we had a common bond (or perhaps not wanting the car borne to have to look at us - I'm not sure which). Wandering around the local supermarket, I recognised a Dutch cyclist who was also camped on my site, and we soon got chatting. We decided to enjoy some beers and a meal together in a bar café overlooking the town centre. Whilst sitting there, we were often being deafened by the raucous din of the mopeds ridden by the town's youths. Anyone who has been to France will know how much this din spoils the lovely warm evenings. Some town councils have gone so far as to erect "No moped" signs, but of course, the youths just ignore them, and carry on anyway. It seems the first these lads do when they get a moped is to take the silencer off, as none of them even pay lip service to noise attenuation. They really do make life noisy in built up areas, as the sound just seems to echo off the walls and reverberate around the streets.

96km @ 18.3km/hr

Thursday 31 May

This was the day when I headed into the foothills of the Pyrenees, so I left early again and took the flattest route, using the main road (N134) as far as Herrere. Thankfully this main road wasn't too busy, but I was still pleased to leave and turn onto the D920 to the small town of Arudy. I found a seat in the town centre (there's always a seat in every town centre in France) and got the map out to carefully study it. I had to be careful as the choice of roads was starting to be limited by the terrain and I didn't want to end up trapped up a blind valley or on the wrong side of a mountain over the next few days. The small town of Laruns looked a good spot to spend the next couple of days. It was an easy ride up a gentle valley to Laruns, and I arrived at 11.20am. I felt as if I was really getting somewhere now, as I was surrounded by the high mountains, so splashed out on a coffee and 2 cream cakes in a small café in the town centre to celebrate! I was spoilt for choice when I looked for a campsite – there were 6 of them! I made my choice and pitched camp in the second one I looked at, then cooked a light lunch before ringing home for a chat and to check the house hadn't burnt down! Whilst sitting in the tent munching at lunch I was amused to see the farmer in the field next to me putting his VERY large bull out to graze. By gum, he was a big boy (the bull that is) and it seems he wasn't in a very good mood, for no sooner had the farmer let go of its nose halter than the bull turned round and snorted at the farmer. The look of fear that came over that

farmer's face was as good as the turn of speed he found when running back to the safety of the gate, followed only a few seconds later by the bull! Once safely the right side of the gate, the farmer looked over and saw me watching him, and we exchanged looks of relief at his escape. From then on, I made sure that when the bull was near the rather flimsy fence near me, I kept my distance from it.

Suitably refreshed, I decided I would take an unladen ride up the Col d'Pourtalet, the bottom of which was within sight of the campsite. The climb started up through a spectacular gorge, with high rock walls nearly closing onto the road both sides of the road, and a raging torrent coursing along the bottom. After a little steep section, the climb was pretty easy for most of the way (particularly without luggage), before getting a bit harder again. After an hour or so, I started to feel tired and by this time was almost up to cloud base level, so stopped ½ way up (1100m?) at a café beside a lake created by a large dam. I realised that this was the lower section of a skiing area, with large car parks and a cable car station heading up into the mist. A coffee was enjoyed in the warmth and some postcards purchased here. I could see absolutely no point in continuing up into cloud and mist and ever-colder weather, so turned back down the climb again. Just before the bottom, in the narrow gorge, I stopped to watch rock some climbers scaling the vertical cliffs and soon got chatting to another observer. He explained that both he and the climbers were all fire fighters undertaking a training exercise. The *Pompier*s as they're called, are expected to turn out and effect rescues of trapped climbers and tourists if necessary, and so need to keep their hand in. He also said he was a keen cyclist and told me that the climb up the Col d'Aubisque, which I was to tackle in a few days, was fairly easy. I said that what was fairly easy on a stripped down lightweight bike without luggage wouldn't be quite the same on a heavily laden touring bike. Time would tell! A shower and a big meal finished my day nicely thank you.

89km @18.6km

Friday 1 June

I awoke early, intending to tackle the Col d'Aubisque, but as the weather at high level was still unsettled, with dark clouds looming, decided not to tackle climb today. A rest day seemed a good idea, so I went back to bed and got up later. As soon as I started moving around, my legs had that "heavy" feeling, so it had been a wise decision not to go up today. The major city of Pau, famous for Tour de France stage finishes, was not too far, so I opted to go on the bus for a day's sightseeing. However, by the time I had sorted myself out, it was too late to make it worthwhile going by bus, and it was further than I wanted to ride (about 40km each way). However, the local tourist office pointed me in the direction of a bus that would take me to the train station at Buzy, further down the valley. I could buy a through ticket on the bus, which was operated solely to take passengers to and from the station, at a good price, so off I went. The little station at Buzy was surprisingly busy, the train on time, and I was soon in Pau.

Emerging from the station I noticed lots of temporary advertising banners, crash barriers and *Gendarmes*. I hadn't realised it, but tomorrow was to be a round of a major motor racing series, and the main road was being converted into part of the racetrack!

Pau is a very large place, and on a split-level. The train station is at the base of a long cliff, next to the river, but the town centre is at the top, so a free funicular (vertical railway) has been built to get you up it. I had a good wander around this lovely town. There is a lot of history associated with it, and many (French) royal connections, including a big Chateau on the cliff edge. Standing at the balustrade and looking southwards, the snow-capped Pyrenees could easily be seen, rising up from the relatively flat plain. This was a town I could happily revisit and spend some time in. The lovely warm sunshine and relaxed atmosphere was very pleasant. Some more postcards were written and posted before heading back to the station.

Being a large station there were many platforms so it was important to make sure I was on the correct one. Yes, this is it, but just to make sure asked the young lady sitting next to me, who confirmed it as she was awaiting the same train. My French is pretty rudimentary and not up to listening to loudspeaker announcements, but there was something about the one I heard that she didn't, so I asked her to check again. It was just as well I did - the train would come in on a different platform! Despite this, the train and bus connection worked well, and I was soon back at my little tent.

3kms

Saturday 2 June

The night was cold, but the day soon became a fabulous one. It was chilly at first when I got up at 6.30 and got ready for the day. I knew I would be doing some serious climbing in the next few days and had already short-listed some items I felt I could live without and so threw some unnecessary kit away. At 8.10am I wheeled away from the site and immediately and headed straight for the Col d'Aubisque, a name famous from many Tours de France. It was still a little chilly at the foot, so I started climbing in short sleeve top, long sleeve Helly Hansen thermal vest and a Gamex windproof top over it all. After about 20-30mins of climbing the Gamex came off. A bit later and the vest also had to come off in what was now warm sunshine. Bottom gear (28 x 28) was used most of the way, and I occasionally got out of the saddle, but that was to ease aching muscles, rather than because I was struggling. Other local keen cyclists started passing me as I climbed, and at about $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way up I stopped for a banana and photo stop. By this time the views were really opening up (in the valleys you can't see a lot because the trees tend to block the view). After about 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ hrs I finally got to the top, some 1709m above sea level. As is often the way, it was a bit busy at the top, and many other cyclists, all on stripped down racing bikes were already there. I got someone to take my photo beside the cyclist's memorial and then decided I deserved a coffee in the small café. Here I was, sitting in the warm sun, having just climbed a famous climb, sipping French coffee in a roadside café – it doesn't get any better than this does it? When I paid for my drink I also bought a postcard and the café owner then stamped it for me with his own little rubber stamp certifying I had cycled up the Col! I didn't know what to expect of the next bit of road but I was soon to be stunned by the beauty of the scenery. From the Col d'Aubisque, the road drops down about 500 metres before climbing up to the Col du Soulor (1477m). As the road drops, it follows the contour of the mountain and swings right, with the ground on your left falling away down into a valley way below. This was nice, but a little later – WOW! I had to stop and just sit at the roadside and stare at the view. What I had seen was the road sweeping away from me and continuing to drop, but not steeply. As it did so, it then swung back to the left, traversing under a massive rock that just seemed to sweep over the top of the mountain as if some giant hand had smoothed it over. The rock wasn't really a rock, it was the mountain, but the rock strata was so well defined in the bright sunshine, and it was not at all jagged, so it looked like one smooth curve. The road was but a surface scratch across its face as it continued its vertical sweep down into the valley. That view is etched on my mind and I can still see it clearly as I sit here typing this today. The road then climbs easily back up again to 1474m and the Col du Soulor where I stopped again in another café for a coffee and a sandwich. Sitting here in the sun I soon got chatting to a Belgian cyclist who spoke good English, and he told me about a place called Garvanie that I really must not miss. So I got him to show me it on the map and made a mental note to go there. Although the descent from there is truly tremendous, I took it slowly as I wanted to savour the view. The hairy descent eased off at the small village of Arrens, where I replenished my bottles using one of the still working village pumps. It never ceased to amaze me that, whereas we in the UK long ago ripped out all our public drinking fountains and roadside pumps, the French lovingly

maintained theirs. In fact, many are new, as was this one. It worked, not by pumping a side arm, but by spinning a wheel on the top. Out gushed the lovely clear cool liquid every time. A much gentler descent along a wider valley took me down on a well surfaced road to Argeles-Gazost. This was another name famous to me from its strategic position on the Tour de France, and I wandered briefly around the little town centre. Whilst it hadn't been cold at the top, it was much warmer down here in the valley at 463m and I once again found myself walking on the shady side of the street. My planned destination was Luz St Saveur, sitting literally at the foot of the Col de Tourmalet. It was quite a long drag up the valley, but this was helped by the view down from the road into the crashing river a few hundred feet below. Whilst toiling up it I was caught and passed by a long snaking line of club cyclists, all of whom spoke some words of encouragement as they slipped past. This friendly attitude was such a contrast to a holiday I had in Italy some years ago, when the racing cyclists totally ignored you if you had any luggage on your bike. Eventually I reached Luz St Saveur, and booked into the centrally located campsite where the owners were busy cutting the grass. There were no more than 6 other tents and caravans on what was a very large site, so I had my pick of places to pitch. I had been warned that a 2 days Bank Holiday was about to start and the shops would be closed for 2 days, so sought out the supermarket. Knowing that I would not move again until the Bank Holiday had finished, and therefore would not have to carry the food over the Tourmalet, I stocked up on provisions. Sausages and eggs for tea! When I phoned friends Jo and Dennis at home later, I heard that a 40 years old cycling colleague, Kevin Langham had been found dead at the roadside, seemingly dying from natural causes. I was shocked and saddened by this news, but glad that I had decided to have my day of fun now, rather than wait until it was too late.

68km @ 14.6km/hr

Sunday 3 June

I had planned that today would be a fairly easy one, so when I looked out of the tent and saw the weather heavily overcast with low cloud I was quite happy to turn over and lie in until 8.45. I was in no hurry, so took a leisurely breakfast and read my book until the sun started to burn through the clouds about 11.15 when I went for a ride. I had decided to take my Belgian friend's advice and go to Gavarnie. As you head South out of Luz St Saveur you ride beside a very deep, steep sided gorge, with a spectacular bridge spanning from one side to the other. This was the Pont Napoleon (Napoleon's Bridge) and I was already impressed before I spotted some movement at the centre of the arch. I was then seriously impressed – people were bungee jumping off it into the gorge below! I was quite tempted to have a go, but fortunately the feeling soon passed and common sense overtook me again and I continued my journey. The road took me further up the valley I had been climbing yesterday and the views were by now starting to get very beautiful indeed. A river coursed along beside the road and it really sparkled in the strong sunshine as it tumbled over the rocks. Ahead were snow-topped peaks rising from the green meadows and I got the camera out on many occasions. I started to notice warning signs about not getting close to the river because it was used for hydro-electric power generation, and as such, the level was likely to suddenly and rapidly rise without warning. This was to become a very common feature of mountain streams, because the French are great users of what is, in effect, free and very "green" energy. Gavarnie is a small village in the centre of a horseshoe of high mountain peaks that both surround it and close the valley. The village itself was very garish, being mostly set up for the tourist trade and sported numerous quick food cafes and trinket shops. There was nothing here worth stopping for, so I continued to climb up and towards the horseshoe. Very soon the road became a track closed to cars as it followed the stream uphill. I continued, passing the many pedestrians who had been evicted from their cars. Some were even on donkeys hired in the

village! After a while I had to dismount due to the track and for safety to the pedestrians. A short push got me to a grassy bank where I sat and ate my lunch. From here I could see what all the fuss was about. The beauty of the place was stunning in the warm sunshine, but what was spectacular was the waterfall that emerged from halfway up the rim of the mountain range. This came out in the form of a spout and then fell hundreds of metres into the valley below, obviously becoming the stream I had been following all morning.

I had been told by my Belgian friend the view was great, but it wasn't. It was fantastic and really impressive. I took a lot of photos. After I had filled both stomach and eyes, I had a look at the map and realised I could get around the back of the mountain rim by climbing over the Port de Gavarnie. So I returned back into the village and wheeled sharp left and upwards. I had spotted the sign at the foot of this climb that said "Route fermé" (road closed) but thought I might be able to get by as you often can on a bike. However, in this instance, fermé meant fermé! Snow completely blocked the road at about the 2000m height, some 9km into the 13 km climb up to the Spanish border. This road was so minor it's not snow ploughed, the council leaving it to nature to do it for them. A few cars were parked at the snowline, their occupants having set off to walk and ski from there. I have a photo of my bike wedged upright in the snow on the road with some people skiing past! A cool descent back down to Gavarnie was followed by a long fast descent back to Luz St Saveur, with quite a strong but reasonably warm wind blowing up the valley straight into my face. A small tent with clothes hanging out to dry near my tent turned out to be a young German couple, both teachers on 2 weeks leave, cycle camping along the Pyrenees from Perpignan in the East to Biarritz in the west. We soon got chatting as they both spoke excellent English – just as well, as my German is non-existent.

64km at 16.1km/hr

Monday 4 June,

Today was a Public Holiday, so, not wanting to have to carry food over the Tourmalet; I stayed another day at this campsite. Breakfast was taken with Lutz and Ulla (the German cycle campers I had met the day before) sitting outside their tent chatting - they both spoke excellent English. At 11am we all set off together for what turned out to be a lovely ride on a cracking day. Lutz said we must go to see the Cirque de Trumouse, the next valley to Gavarnie, which they had seen before (and I had seen yesterday). We climbed towards Gavarnie, but turned off onto a very quiet road before reaching it. The climb was easy due to what was for me, a slow pace, but I was glad of the company, so I was happy to pootle along chatting. The day was very hot and the sun strong as we climbed. A road off to the right went up to a reservoir behind a high dam, and as we were in no hurry we detoured onto it and climbed the hairpins to get up to it for a picnic lunch at 1686m. The reservoir was full, and the water a beautiful turquoise colour due to the traces of rock chemicals held in suspension in it. Some lads were swimming, but the water wasn't warm enough for us to join them. After eating our picnics (and a little snooze in the sun!), we dropped steeply back down to the minor valley road, turned right again and continued our climb up to the Cirque de Trumouse. The sit in the sun had done us no good and we all had the sags, so stopped shortly in a small bar for some Cokes. The sugary caffeine drink soon picked us up and we went onwards and upwards. The road after the café is actually a toll road, but free to cyclists (I think they should pay us for the effort needed to get up here!) and so even quieter than before. The Cirque was similar to the Gavarnie, but more remote and not as spectacular, and without the high waterfall or the numbers of people. Eventually the road ends in a car park as there is nowhere else to go unless you're equipped with ropes. We locked the bikes and walked across to a large statue of the Madonna looking Northwards down the valley into France and took photos

of the view and each other. The descent back to Luz St Saveur was like yesterday's, being long, fast and with a headwind. We cooked and ate our evening meals together and chatted until dark before going to our beds. A lovely day indeed.

63kms @15.1km/hr

Tuesday 5 June

I was expecting today to be tough and I wasn't disappointed. Fortunately, the day was also dry and bright but not too hot. A 7.15am get up gave me a chance to get on with the efforts, and I paused to say "Cheerio" to Lutz and Ulla as I left them enjoying their breakfast. I lightened my load by giving them my milk and a bottle of shampoo that was just too big to carry. As I had now finished reading my book about Lance Armstrong, I offered it to them, not expecting they would take it. It speaks volumes about their ability to read English when they didn't hesitate to say yes. I used a "hole in the wall" to get some cash and set off to climb the Col de Tourmalet at about 10.05 am. The instant I turned off the main valley road and into the Tourmalet road I had to go straight into 28 x 28 bottom gear (the lowest of my 21 gears). I only rarely and briefly managed to get out of it during the rest of the climb. This climb is the one even the riders in the Tour de France hate, and I was soon to realise why. It was just unrelenting for the next 18km (11 miles) and I sometimes had to get out of the saddle to keep up what little momentum I did have. The bike stability felt a bit odd and so I stopped and moved some weight into the front panniers from the trailer. Even though I did this only a mile or so into the climb, the sweat that was dripping from my face was non-stop and made everything wet. This readjustment of weight steadied the steering and made handling at low speeds better. After I don't know how long some workmen were clearing rocks from the mountain above the road and all traffic was stopped whilst they let the rocks fall onto the road. Whilst they were no larger than a football, these rocks landed with a solid thump onto the tarmac. One fell near one of the workmen on the road (who was watching) and he had to jump quickly to avoid it as it rolled across the road. If one fell on you as you went by it would probably kill you, and these were only small rocks! I took advantage of the enforced stop and ate some chocolate for energy whilst watching them. By a stroke of luck the road was in the shade. Had it been in the full sun I would have evaporated. The Tourmalet climbs from the West (my direction) along and up the side of a very long valley that is pretty much straight, so there are no views to talk about. All that can be seen is the mountainside on the other side of the valley, and a little distance ahead and behind. Boring really. Only at one point, where the road crosses to the other side of the valley does it become a little interesting, but other than the river crossing at that point, and a drab ski lift not long before the summit, there are no points of interest. A couple more short chocolate stops and I could see what must be the summit. However, seeing it is one thing, getting up to it is another! The last ½ km was really hard with a steeper gradient and a headwind to just "put the boot in" on a tired rider. Eventually, and after 2 hrs 25 mins actual climbing I was there:- the famous café featured in so many Tours de France photos, and the 2115m above sea level sign. The summit is literally the top of an inverted "V", no sooner are you up than you start to go down the other side, but I had worked too hard not to enjoy the moment. The wind was whipping over the top, so I quickly put a windproof layer on and took the usual photos of my bike next to the sign, and got another cyclist (who had come up from the other direction) to also take one with me in it. I was disappointed to see that the famous stainless steel sculpture of a racing cyclist had been removed from its position atop a high wall. As the bolts that fix it were still there, I assumed it had been taken down for the winter. I was probably correct, as I have since seen pictures with it back in place. A visit into the famous summit café was next on the agenda. The coffee and sandwich went down very well whilst I studied the many signed photos on the walls of the famous Tour riders who had passed through, albeit quicker than me! In pride of place on the

walls were two old racing bikes. By old I mean pre first world war, with very early gearing arrangements and other unusual equipment, no doubt state of the art in their day. The gearing on the one that seemed to have two freewheels of different sizes particularly intrigued me. My engineer's mind couldn't work out how it could work, as it looked as though the only way to pedal one of them was to pedal backwards! (I have since found out that I was correct – “normal” gear is pedalled forwards, driving through the smaller freewheel whilst the larger freewheel idles; “low” gear is indeed pedalled backwards, driving through the larger freewheel whilst the smaller one idles!)

I was surprised to see so many other cyclists here. I only saw at most 6 or 7 during the more than 2 hours I took on my climb, yet there were small groups appearing every 5 minutes or so, and even a lone lady and one veteran who had to be in his 70's. I got chatting in my schoolboy French to the old vet and he told me that the way I had come up (from the West) was the hardest. Most local cyclists come up from the East to the top, then turn around and head back down again the way they had come. Now refreshed, I ventured out again into the sunshine and that wind, but by now had cooled down and found it cold, so after another look at the still rather disappointing view, put my Gore-Tex jacket on for the descent and set off. After only a few hundred yards I had to stop again and put my gloves on due to the cold. The descent took me down through a ski station which, following the French tradition of these things, was extremely ugly. The buildings had been built in concrete with little sense of sympathy for the surroundings and stuck out like sore thumbs. By now I was getting very cold indeed, and had to stop again to pull on my leggings to stop my legs freezing. The descent was like the climb, not at all technical, and I gave the bike its head, relying on wind resistance to control the speed, which, with the continuing headwind and the battering effect of the front panniers, it did well. I only had to apply the brakes through the ski station areas for the safety of others. All too soon I was down in the village of Ste. Marie de Campan which marked the point at which one either had to turn right and climb again up and over the Col d'Aspin, or left to continue the descent. I had already decided the Col d'Aspin was the way for me, so turned right. By now it was much warmer and I stripped off back to my usual shorts and short sleeved top and sat on a wall eating some fruit, watching cyclists who had come down the mountain like me, but unlike me, were now putting their bikes into cars to go home. One chap wandered over and confirmed what the vet at the top had said about the comparative difficulties of the climbs up the two sides of the mountain. I felt a sense of pride in having done the hard side, although it was just by chance! I took the opportunity to ask about the forthcoming climb over the Col d'Aspin. I was unsure if I should attempt it that day, thinking I couldn't do another climb like the last without a night's rest, but he assured me it was much easier, and so, with plenty of time in hand (it was only 2.30 pm), off I went again, upwards. It was actually easy at first, and a tailwind helped as it slowly got harder, but never anywhere near as hard as the Tourmalet. The local cyclists had arranged for signs to be erected every kilometre with details of the road. The total climb, your current altitude, your distance from the top and the average gradient over the next kilometre were all on the sign. That sort of information is OK if you're going well, but I'm not sure if I would want to know if I was suffering! This was a much prettier climb than the morning, with the road passing through villages and forests and having bends to break the monotony.

It was on one of those bends that I saw another heavily laden touring cyclist coming fast down the other way. Seeing me toiling up, he stopped and came over to chat. He was Austrian, aged about 30 and like me, had packed his job in to enjoy a long tour. He told me he had cycled all the way from Austria, so had already covered about 1000 miles. We wished each other well, and carried on our own ways with me thinking what a great pastime is cycling. Here, on a country road, two total strangers, both in a foreign land, stop, solely to have a chat and then carry on again, their only thing in common the bike.

I was counting down the kilometres to go and was only about 1/2km from the top when I rode into cloud. The summit was an awful place to be on a day like that, cold, very damp in the cloud, and of course, no view! I did manage to locate the Col sign and a motorist parked in a lay-by came over and took my photo with bike and me next to it, but I didn't stay long - no point. I've since seen photos of the summit on postcards etc and realise it's a nice place in good weather. The Gore-Tex jacket and gloves were quickly donned again for the descent. The cloud cleared again once off the summit, but a haze prevented a clear shot of what was obviously a good view on the right day. A visit to the local Tourist office directed me to a campsite that was still closed, but fortunately I found the Municipal site (owned and run by the local authority and normally very good value) and set up there. The washing facilities were utilised as I rinsed out my clothes and showered. A short trip to the local supermarket and I sat down to cook a big meal. A short shower sent me inside the tent whilst I ate it, but it didn't last long. One of the problems when cycle camping alone is buying stores in very small quantities. Many toilets don't have loo paper, so you get used to taking your own, but you can't carry large quantities of loo paper as it's too bulky, and you can't buy it in single rolls. It's often only sold in packs of 4 and sometimes, even 8! I know I could buy a pack and throw away what I don't want to carry, but that's very wasteful. I explained this to the "Patron" (French for "boss" meaning in this case, the campsite warden) at the campsite and he took pity on me and gave me a single roll. A dull, cool evening saw me sitting in the tent digesting my tea and reading my book.

71km @ 13.6km/hr

Wednesday 6 June

A dull day, threatening to rain, but it never did. I was packed and away by 10.15 am. posting 2 cards on my way out of the village, and set off to climb up the Col de Peyresourde (1569m). The climb started easy, but got worse. I encountered the same cyclist information signs I had seen yesterday. I suppose yesterday's efforts had taken their toll and I wasn't going very well today and I finally got to the top after 1 hr 45 mins of constant climbing up what was a pleasant road, bordered by trees and open pastures. There was a café at the top, but I didn't really need it, and so after a short photo stop, carried straight on over the top and on towards Bagnères de Luchon. I had been to this pretty spa town once before on a cycle tour from Bordeaux to Barcelona and wanted to see it again. I also wanted to get there before the 1.00pm deadline for the shops - I was out of food and needed food to make my picnic lunch. So a fast (15-20 minutes!) descent with streaming eyes got me into town with a couple of minutes to spare - just as the local bakers were getting the shutters out ready to close, phew! Lunch was taken sitting in the pretty park overlooked by the famous Thermal Centre Baths, hence the "Bagnères" (baths in the town name). Bagnères de Luchon often hosts starts and finishes of the Tour de France, and really is a lovely town. Plane trees line wide streets and well kept squares and colonnaded shopping malls remind me of Cheltenham, Bath and other genteel towns.

I had planned before leaving home that I would meet a CTC group of cycle campers at the city of Tours, some considerable distance north of me. As my calendar was telling me it was getting near the time I needed to start to head towards them, I then sat down and studied the map carefully. I decided I had already spent long enough in the Pyrennees, even though I had by no means exhausted all the places I wanted to go, but there's always another time, and just had to go north. I spotted a campsite on the map some distance north and headed for that. An easy ride gradually descending all the way took me away from the mountains towards the flatter lands northwards. The site was just outside the small hamlet of St Bertrand de Comminges. This was an impressively sited Abbey sitting atop a sharp hill, and was obviously a local tourist trap, being surrounded by car and coach parks and well served by

trinket shops. Whilst very historic, it didn't have any food shops - a high on my list of priorities, so after installing myself on the campsite, I had to ride another 4 kilometres to a nearby village and the supermarket. Frozen fish fingers, pasta and sweetcorn for tea was good that night!

83km @ 17.1km

Thursday 7 June

A long, boring, but not hard day. I left at 9.30am and headed for Lannemazan where I picked up the D939 which I then followed Northwards nearly all day. I made good progress after Lannemazan, as it was a slightly dropping gradient. I stopped at the small village of Galan to buy my food for lunch, but the only shop had a very limited choice, selling basically only a little fresh bread, some tins and the local newspaper! A study of the map showed it was going to be a quiet ride (i.e. not passing through anywhere much larger), I didn't want to risk blowing up later, and beggars can't be choosers, so I made do with what little choice they had. I continued heading North, running along a gentle, wide, valley across vast arable farms. There was little of interest to look at unless you like large fields, but at least it was easy, and the going was good. Looking for somewhere of interest, I bore left into the little town of Mirande where I had my lunch sitting in the shade of the bandstand in the town square, brewing a coffee on the stove to wash it down. Whilst enjoying my lunch I was approached by a curious Frenchman who wanted to know where I was going. After a little pleasant chatting he revealed he also would like to tour France by bike, but admitted anything longer than a 5km ride gave him a sore backside and tired legs!

I had spotted on the map a campsite at Montesquiou and decided I would stop there and so only have a short day's riding. This was an old but tiny village, and having asked for directions, headed to the campsite, some 3km out of town. It was a lovely site, having a swimming pool, well shaded and in the grounds of a genuine Chateau and I was looking forwards to a swim, when I discovered the site fee was FF100 (£10)! OK if there are 3 of you with a car and frame tent, but for 1 cyclist with a tent smaller than a car, an extortionate price, so I moved on. Very soon after leaving the site I nearly hit a deer that leapt from the hedge into the road in front of me. I don't know who was the most surprised, the deer or me.

Certainly, though, it's reactions were quicker than mine, as it sprinted away at top speed almost before I realised what was happening. Fortunately, it's mate, which I could hear crashing around in the hedge, didn't follow it onto the road.

Not too far away was another campsite at L'Isle de Noe, so, having bought my tea, off I headed, only to find it was too early in the season for the site to be open. I reluctantly decided to head on towards the city of Condom (yes, really), where another site was listed, but to stop at the first site I came to en-route. The same mix of boring, and now, in the late afternoon sun, hot roads followed until I was about 20km from Condom, when I spied a campsite sign. This was a small site at the edge of a tiny village, and nobody else was in occupation. I was getting quite excited until I realised there was absolutely no security, not even a rudimentary fence, but worse than that, only cold showers! I still felt OK, so pressed on the last few miles into Condom and the large, well maintained Municipal campsite, arriving about 7.30pm on what was now a very warm evening. Rain was obviously not a frequent occurrence here as the ground was like rock!

Altogether too long a day with 152kms (90 miles) covered at 20.3km/hr and 7½ hrs in the saddle. Whilst writing up my notes that night, I noticed that I had now ridden over 1000 miles (1669 kms) since leaving home.

Friday 8th June

The day started easy but got harder and boring.

Got up at 8am, and was away by 10.30 - not rushing. I stopped for a quick look in and around the Cathedral in the town centre. I couldn't resist the temptation to buy some postcards with the name of the town (Condom) emblazoned across them to send to friends. The name was obviously no problem to the local entrepreneurs, who had printed postcards with a large condom pulled over the top of the Cathedral spire! I set out on the D931, which fortunately wasn't too busy. Unfortunately though, it soon became a rolling road - pretty tiring on a heavy bike as the downhill rests never last long enough to give sufficient energy for the next steep uphill drag.

My picnic lunch was taken at Laplume before heading into the large town of Agen. Normally I avoid the towns, but this one was slap in the middle of my route and any detour would have been considerable. Normally there is some redeeming feature to a town, perhaps a nice Cathedral, or pretty square, but I couldn't see any, so quickly sought the correct road out of town. Finding the road was not so easy and I ended up in a street that went under the railway via a steep narrow underpass. No problem except for the large "No Cycling" sign at the entrance to the underpass! Whilst stopped and puzzling over the map, an elderly man approached me from a nearby house, offering assistance. He happily told me the way to go, looked closely at my trailer, and then beckoned me to follow him into his garage. Curious, and hoping I wasn't about to be mugged, I locked my bike and followed him inside. He had already told me he did a bit of cycling and like me, used a trailer. When inside he pulled back a sheet and there was his home made 2 wheeled trailer. Nothing very impressive, but he quickly explained that 2 years previously he had cycle camped around France towing the trailer behind him. The loaded trailer weighed 60kg (mine including the bike was "only" 45kg, but I was a little younger than his 67 years of age! Any doubts I may have had as to the veracity of this tale were quickly dispelled when he showed me a large poster on the wall. This was a full-page press article about his ride, complete with photos and maps. He had totally circumnavigated the whole of France, covering 5700kms (3500 miles) in 4 months. He did however, admit that he had not gone into the Alps or the Pyrennees, but at his age I'm not surprised! We had a good chat, I took his picture next to the map and press cutting, and he waved me off. I hope I'm still as fit and active at his age!

The ride from then on was hot, and the continuous rolling roads made it hard work, not helped by the scenery being very boring - open fields and wide horizons.

I eventually arrived at Fumel, my destination for the night, at about 6.30pm and found the campsite, which was right on the banks of the River Lot. Not however, before unnecessarily climbing up the steep hill into the town, before realising the site was at the bottom of the hill!
105km @ 19.7km/hr

Saturday 9 June

When it rained in the night and was still going at 9.30 I just turned over and lay in bed until 10.15 and decided I would have an easy day.

Fortunately the rain eased, then stopped. After breakfast I rode into town and the supermarket for some food shopping. Having returned and enjoyed a snack lunch I was just writing some postcards when 2 cycle campers rode into camp and past my pitch and in poor French smiled at me and called out "Bonjour". I watched them set up camp and then sauntered over to chat. They were English, from York, and on their 2 weeks annual holiday following the course of the River Lot. I needed a new chain and tyre and so returned to town and the bike shop (which had been closed when I was there earlier). No tyre, but a chain was purchased and I fitted it back at base. Maryanne and Andrew had already floated the idea of a meal out that evening, and so, having asked the site owner for a recommendation, we went off to find the

local "Relais Routier" - truck stop restaurant. A very pleasant evening was spent chatting over the very French meal washed down by a bottle of wine. A giggly ride back in the dark to the campsite finished the day.

27kms

Sunday 10 June.

Another easy(ish) day.

It rained again in the night and as I still didn't feel ready to move I needed no further encouragement to stay another day. After a little local food shopping and another social chat with Marion and Andrew I set out for an easy ride to follow the River Lot for a while. Whilst the roads were virtually flat the poor surface made for hard cycling and the overcast weather wasn't brilliant. I also started to struggle with "heavy legs" and started going slower. I came to a little village called Luzech, which sits in the neck of a loop in the river. At this point the river passes each end of the main street which is only 200m or so long. Only 200m by road, but 4km by water, as the river winds along 4km before it gets to the other end of the street! I studied some old plaques and photos on the wall, looked at the width of the street and the central strip running along it, and realised that at some time in the past the main street was in fact a cutting where boats could short cut the loop. I assume the need to maintain the cutting and lack of present day commercial river traffic made the cutting uneconomic and it had been filled in again. In order to enjoy the view, I climbed a few metres uphill to a hairpin bend, from where I could overlook a bend in the river complete with a weir creating white water. Lunch was taken as a picnic from this viewpoint.

The little town of Puy L'Eveque was particularly interesting. This was built up the side of, and on top of, a small cliff beside the river and was very old. The English had a garrison there for some 80 years in the Middle Ages and evidence of their occupation was all around in the architecture still evident in the narrow alleyways and old stone buildings.

My legs still felt stiff, but started to loosen up a bit when I found a few small rolling hills on the way back. Just before I got back, my route passed last night's restaurant and I saw 2 cycles propped up outside, recognised them as my dinner companions, and stopped to join them in a coffee.

On ringing home later I found out that Kevin Langham's death a week earlier had been due to natural causes.

90km @ 20km/hr

Monday 11 June

As Maryanne and Andrew were continuing eastwards whereas I was going northwards, it was time to say farewell. It was very cool at first and I was wearing warm leggings and a windproof top for the first ½ hour or so until the sun came through. The D656 road wound through some lovely wooded areas as I headed to Tournons and lunch. As usual I found somewhere to sit in a shady spot in a small garden in the town centre and eat my sandwich and fresh fruit. The narrow streets between the soft sandstone buildings of the old town beckoned me to explore them, and I soon found my way up to a high point. There was a viewpoint complete with ceramic circular map laid on top of a circular wall and I spent some time there taking it all in and spotting the highlighted points of interest on the horizon. On returning to the bike and trailer I saw another cyclist looking at it with interest. Asking him, in my poor French if he would like to have a go on it, he looked at me and asked, "Are you English?" Don, from Stoke on Trent, was working locally as a holiday camp courier/entertainer and this was his afternoon off. With both of us grateful for the company, we rode together to the ancient town of Domme, overlooking the River Dordogne. As we approached it, the road swoops down before climbing back up to the fortified gates, and we

stopped to admire the view. Whilst stopped, a local gardener drew us into conversation, in French, and spoke with feeling about how the local councillors were “ruining the town”. Don listened intently, nodding and grunting in all the appropriate places, obviously enthralled. Funny really, as he didn’t speak French!

The whole town is surrounded by a fortified wall, and with its position atop a high cliff beside the river, was well placed to protect itself from invaders. However, the walls and gates didn’t stop us, and we were soon eating an ice cream and drinking coffee in one of the many café-bars. Don kept saying I should return with him to his campsite where he would put me up for the night. At first I resisted as it was a bit out of my way, but eventually thought "Why not?" and agreed. The ride to the site, some 15 miles away, was a bit tough, and trying to keep up with him (he was on a totally stripped down bike compared to my heavily laden one) I "blew up" and had to stop for a chocolate bar before we got there, much to my embarrassment! The site where he worked was very upmarket, being a large site laid out in the grounds of a Chateau. The tents were enormous static affairs, complete with refrigerator, oven, camp beds, electric light etc, and also mobile chalets/well appointed caravans. I chose the latter and showered and changed whilst Don cooked a meal. With a shower, change of clothes and a good meal inside me, I soon felt better, and it was gone midnight before we finished exchanging stories and turned in - Don back to his large tent and me to the luxurious bed in the chalet.

98km @ 19.8km/hr

Tuesday 12 June

Yesterday's warmth during the day turned into a cold night, even getting to me in the caravan chalet, and I had to pull an extra layer over the bed.

By the time I had breakfasted and packed in the morning, Don was busy at his duties. Today he was to lead a cycle ride around the local lanes, and he was busy adjusting saddles and pumping tyres on his own stock of hire bikes when I said “Cheerio and Thanks”. I thought what a lovely way to spend your summer, making peoples’ holidays more interesting, in lovely surroundings and in warm sunny weather!

By this time the day had warmed nicely and I set off, wearing the usual shorts and short sleeves, into the confusion of the local lanes. Certainly confusing to me as my map wasn’t really up to the job, and despite Don’s instructions, I had to do a bit of head scratching and navigation by the sun. However, I soon managed to find my position on the map. The D710 then took me northwards to Belnes and Perigueux. There was quite a climb after the village of Le Bugue and when I stopped to look at the map (not for a rest – honest!!!) was pleased to see a lake a few hundred metres off the road. This, I thought, looked just right for my lunchtime picnic stop. Despite being not far from the road, I couldn’t hear what little traffic there was, but the sun was so hot I very soon had to move into the shade. I thought about a paddle, but the lake bed looked just too soft and muddy.

On arriving at the large town of Perigueux at about 4pm I decided their large riverside campsite was good enough and booked in. I was in need of a new English language book to read and also some more cooking gas, so headed along the riverside cycle path into the town. However, I soon found the contrast between the quiet lanes and small villages I had been in for days too much, and that, together with the heat between the large buildings, encouraged me to quickly leave again after buying a book and the gas. I’m sure there were some very interesting places to explore, but I was in no mood to do it today. I found a “Decathlon Sports” supermarket on the way back to camp and spent a pleasant 1/2 hour in their air conditioned aisles looking at the bike bargains. A fresh trout was bought and cooked for tea, and then I settled down for a rest and to read my new book before turning in for the night.

84km @ 20.3km/hr

Wed 13 June

I had packed and was away by 9.30 and rode off through the busy centre of Perigueux. Although it was cooler, the Roman City centre was spoilt by the amount of traffic and still did not appeal, so I passed through without stopping except to buy a loaf and find the D939 northwards. The road was quiet and fairly easy, passing through pleasant countryside and I was soon at the pretty town of Brantome, where I could see a large Chateau sitting beside the pretty river complete with fish in the clear water. A small park gave good views of the Chateau, which was placed just the other side of the river. A pretty watermill, complete with mill wheel still intact, had been converted into a small restaurant and there was a reception for what looked to be a wedding in full flow. The smartly dressed gents, and the pretty ladies dressed in summer dresses were wandering around in the warm sunshine, glasses of champagne in hand, and it almost looked like a film set! The hanging flower baskets made the whole scene very pretty indeed. Whilst doing some food shopping in a small shop in the town, I bumped into another English couple who were also cycle touring, but sadly for them, were nearly at the end of their holiday. I then got onto the D675, and climbed up and away from the river valley. Lifting my sweating brow, I noticed what was obviously a large memorial in a field beside the road. Intrigued, I stopped and wandered over to see. It was a lovingly kept, clean and tidy memorial to local resistance fighters executed by the Nazis during their occupation of the area in WWII. Unfortunately, this was not to be the last such memorial I was to encounter – many in tiny villages and backwaters. When one sees this type of thing, it makes one realise how lucky we, in the UK, were never invaded when a nation went mad. The hills, like the temperature, started increasing and I was pleased to find a small park in Nontron to eat my usual picnic lunch. I then headed northwest on D75, which was easy cycling until turning north on the D65 to Montbron. The heat was now starting to make me sleepy, so I found a shady corner of a field for a snooze. The village of Montbron itself was an uninspiring place, but a quick visit to the local Tourist Office confirmed that the campsite marked in my book was open, and off I went, stopping only to buy my evening meal en-route. The site was delightful, comprising small man-made clearings in a mixed forest, and complete with pretty lake. Facilities were very good and even boasted a spin dryer which was so good my clothes took no time to dry after being washed out. The Dutch couple that owned and ran the site were very friendly, and of course, excellent English speakers! I joined them in the bar for a drink after my meal. However, he fancied himself as a singer, and was into entertaining his regulars from the surrounding farms and villages. Unfortunately, the volume of his singing was greater than his ability to sing, and it wasn't long before I sought the silence of my tent and the softness of my Thermarest camping mat.

92km @ 18.8km/hr

Thursday 14 June.

After a cold night I awoke to a cool morning, so didn't rush out of the warmth and comfort of my sleeping bag. The woods surrounding my little clearing were full of chattering and singing birds as I ate my cereals and banana, and dried fruit – my staple diet for breakfast most days. By the time I was ready to leave, about 9.20, the sun was pushing through the tree cover overhead and it started to warm up. I headed north as usual (remember I was still on my way to meet a CTC party near Tours, still quite some distance away) following the D16 towards the town of Confolens, reaching it late morning. I found this a pleasant town straddling the River Vienne that was also making its way north for a rendezvous with the mighty River Loire. I didn't know it at the time, but I was soon to return here with the CTC and stop in the local campsite for what would turn out to be a memorable time in more ways than one. The town square took my fancy, and in particular, a little café, where I sat for a while drinking

coffee and writing postcards in the warm sunshine. The river here is quite wide, and an ancient bridge with cobbled surface, now closed to motor traffic, made its way across the river. I really wanted a picture of this and spent quite a while trying to find the best angle, but still failed to do it justice. As is often the way, the sun was in the wrong direction, but I couldn't afford the time to wait for it. The local Co-op supermarket (yes, they have them in France) provided the ingredients for lunch and I sought a quiet spot to eat it. On studying the map I spotted a small lake only just off my route and thought I would see what it was like. It turned out to be actually beside the road, but it was extremely quiet, as was the road itself, and I realised it was both pretty and deserted, so for the next hour or so I sat there all alone, eating and sitting on my Thermarest which I had rigged into a chair using the special adaptor I had bought before leaving home. This chair adaptor was probably the most used accessory I had with me, and I spent many hours sitting on it over the length of the trip. Now rested and "complet" (full) I then headed off for that day's destination – Montmorillon. I followed the D729 until the last 9km when I sought out a little lane that would take me beside the river for the final run into town. Unfortunately the views, which were not very good as the river was mostly obscured by high verges, were definitely not worth the very bumpy road surface I endured to reach them. What was worth the effort though, was the municipal campsite in Montmorillon - very well maintained, and a bargain at just FF11 per night (£1.10). I found myself pitching beside a young English couple enjoying a (car borne) canoeing holiday and spent the evening chatting and talking bikes, as they were both also cyclists when not canoeing.

I decided I needed to do a little bike maintenance, as I had started to get sore hands from the 'bars. I had already put this down to the handlebar tape on the bike curling up, so fitted a new roll, which did the trick. I had also noticed that the chain was jumping when on the middle chainring. This was the one I was using most of the time, so was getting a lot of use, and after investigation realised some of the teeth were nearly worn away. Knowing it would be some time before I could get another to replace it, I simply rotated it 90 degrees around the crank so that the less worn teeth took the pressure of pedalling, and this cured it temporarily. My English neighbours said they had seen a good cycle shop on the outskirts of Poitiers, and could even remember where it was, so I made a mental note to visit it before long and replace the ring with a new one.

104km @ 21.4km/hr

Friday 15 June.

Today was a much cooler day, mostly overcast with eventually some showers. I was away by 9.20, stopping to buy grub and a new map on the way out of town. I had, years before, realised the best place to buy maps of an area is in the area itself, as there is often a better choice, and you can be certain you will use it. They're also cheaper as there is no importer or shipper's profit on them. Had I attempted to buy maps before I left home I would have had to carry another pannier just to carry them, and had to take a bank loan to buy all that "might come in handy". As I rode off a map, and was certain I wouldn't need it again, I posted it home. I couldn't bring myself to throw them away, as

- a) I'm too tight, and
- b) They come in handy later when tracing my route and labelling the photos.

I continued to head northwards, along mostly flat roads, with just the occasional steep descent into a river valley and consequent climb out again. The D5 eventually brought me to the very picturesque village of Angles-sur-L'Anglin. As I approached this village I descended down a slope towards the river and the bridge across it. High on the low cliffs on the opposite side, and overlooking the river was an enormous ruined castle. I was already impressed when I reached the bridge at the bottom, when I was bowled over by the view from its parapet. The

ancient bridge over the crystal clear river looked out over an old watermill, complete with wheel still intact, and was shadowed by the enormous flanks of the castle. This was truly an impressive sight and I took more than one photo. The very steep hill up past the castle gave good views of the walls and ramparts. I later found out the castle had been fought over by the French and English, with the English finally taking it by cutting a new route up from the cliffs below. The rest of the village was just as pretty, and I was in no hurry to move on, but eventually had to. Lunch was another picnic, taken in a small park beside the same river but downstream at Lesigny. Pressing on to Descartes I got a little lost picking up the correct road to Civray-S-Esves, eventually getting to my destination of St Catherine de Fierbois at 4.30pm. By now I was a fair way up into France and only just south of the large city of Tours. Tours is famous for its location on the River Loire and also, for cyclists, its big bunch sprints at the end of stages of the Tour de France. It was here that I was to meet up with a group of cycle campers from the CTC (Cyclists Touring Club) with whom I would spend the next 10 days or so. The site was very commercial, and was very busy, with bars, discos and children's playgrounds. That, together with what was now light rain, spoilt a nice day. I soon found where I thought the group was pitched, although they were all still out on their bikes. I could have been wrong, but seeing twenty tiny lightweight tents with not one car in attendance, it was a fair bet to be their pitch, so I set about installing myself amongst them. The food shop didn't stock anything smaller than family sized portions of grub, and hungry though I was, even I couldn't eat those portions, so off I rode to the local town some 6kms away to buy tea. A heavy shower on the way back had me sheltering under a tree for 5 minutes, but it soon passed over. On returning to the site the others had now arrived and introductions were made, both to the members of the party, and the midges that were making their presence felt in the damp air.

123km @21.3km/hr 2395km total

Saturday 16 June

A day of dead legs, showers and winds.

The tour leaders, an American couple, Pat and Mike Strauss, both now living in the UK, decided a general introduction was in order, and each member of the party had to say a few words about themselves "to break the ice" and so we all gathered around for a few minutes. Pat and Mike are regular CTC tour leaders, and many of those present had been with them many times before. In fact, three were presented with specially printed tee shirts to celebrate something like 20 tours with Pat and Mike! One remarkable pair was on a tandem, and they were identical twin brothers, one of whom was totally blind. Naturally, he was the "stoker" and sat on the rear, but judging by the "bottle end" lenses in the spectacles he wore, his brother wasn't much better. I took a mental note not to get in front of them on any descents! By the time we got away it had rained, then stopped again, but the sky was still threatening. Today was to be a luggage free "out and home ride" and I set off with a small group who's pace I estimated I would be happy with. I did actually know one of them from previous cycling holidays and knew he was a similar standard to me. What a shock I got when we set off at a breakneck pace! I couldn't believe how hard they were all going, and before too long I had to sit up and let them go. This upset me as generally I ride quite quickly, and others can find me a bit quick. As I watched them disappear up the road I began to think something wasn't right, a feeling that grew stronger as the day wore on and I started to really creep along on my own into what was now a strong headwind. I began to realise that I was basically just overtired, having been on the go for about a month without any real break. I turned away from the suggested route, as I particularly wanted to visit the town of Chinon and its massive ancient Chateau overlooking the River Loire. The road followed the river and was virtually dead flat, but still with the headwind. When a heavy shower came over, I sheltered under a

tree and took the opportunity to eat some chocolate in an attempt to boost my sagging energy. Arriving in Chinon in time to buy some food, I sat down on the riverbank to consume it and admire the Chateau in all its glory on the opposite bank of the River Loire. Unlike many Chateaux, which are really just grand houses, this one is a proper castle, built for war, and truly massive. Whilst enjoying my picnic, a group of middle-aged Dutch holidaymakers, all riding very ordinary bikes arrived and sat down close by. I quickly found out they were touring, stopping overnight in small hotels, but with the aid of a van to carry their luggage. I couldn't help but think how unlikely it would be to get a group of UK non-club cyclists undertaking such a trip with the British attitude that "only poor people ride bikes and anyway, it's too much hard work".

After lunch I continued, still on my own, southwards away from the river, to the small town of Richelieu, named after the famous French cardinal. Here I met the rest of my party and joined them for a coffee in a street-side bar. Richelieu was built in the 1730's as a "model town" to show what could be achieved by town planning and a formal plan defined the streets and the other necessary services (drainage etc) were designed to suit, rather than the other way around. The layout was very formal, being based on pleasant squares and streets all laid out at right angles to each other. Entrances to the town were through archways with gates through the surrounding high wall, and these gates could be shut at night for security. The architecture was not all identical, but having all been designed and built within a relatively short period, was all of a similar style; quite stylish and very easy on the eye. By the time I had finished wandering around, everyone else had departed, and I set off to ride back to the campsite alone, being forced to shelter from a couple of short but heavy showers on the way. Arriving back, but still feeling very jaded, I resolved that I would take it very easy over the next day or two in the hope I would regain some energy.

106km @ 20.7km

Sunday 17 June

A mixed but very easy day.

After yesterday's showers I was glad it was dry when packing the tent ready for the move to La Roche Posay. In fact it was pleasantly warm, but unfortunately it wasn't long before the showers started again. As usual, I stopped early to buy a small loaf of bread in the old town centre of St Maure, the nearest town to last night's campsite. A very quiet but painfully hilly little lane through Coteaux on the way to Sepmes took me past little cottages built into the rocks of small cliffs and still being used as habitation. I didn't think anyone still lived in caves now, but these certainly looked the real thing to me. The road continued twisting its way through quite attractive scenery and I was surprised to see a large grass snake sunning itself on the road between the short showers. I stopped and moved it to the grass verge at the side of the road before it got squashed. When we reached the little village of Le Petit Pressigny (Small Pressigny) I stumbled into a small group of my party and all agreed it was picnic time. A bench in front of the Norman church wasn't big enough for us all, so when another shower came over I opted for a covered cycle shed at the rear of the church – not very pleasant, but at least dry.

Despite the food inside me, my legs started dying and I had to stop again after only a few more miles in a bar at Le Petit Pressigny's big brother, Le Grand Pressigny (Big Pressigny!). The caffeine and sugar in two Coca Colas didn't make much difference though, and I really grovelled the last miles to the campsite just outside the town of La Roche. By the time I arrived, the sky was ominously black and threatening and, with much rumbling of thunder in the distance, I quickly got the tent up. The rest of the party decided they were going to head into La Roche to eat in a restaurant, but as I was on a tight budget I started cooking my meal whilst they gathered ready for the walk into town. Within a few minutes, the heavens opened

and absolutely torrential rain came straight down. I just pulled the stove further into my tent and enjoyed my smoked herring whilst they all waited for the rain to pass. Unfortunately they had a long wait as I had completely finished my meal and it was starting to get dark before the rain stopped. I think most had abandoned the restaurant option and copied me by the time I went to bed. Knowing that tomorrow required no miles to be ridden, as we were not due to move on again until the day after, I promised myself a good rest tomorrow.

74kms @ 19.1km/hr

Monday 18 June

A rest day for my tired body.

As today was not to be a “moving on” day I took advantage and lay in bed for a while, not emerging until about 9.30am, by which time some of the others had already left for their day's ride. A large and very leisurely breakfast followed by a chat with some of those still on the site perked me up enough for a short ride into La Roche Posay which is a nationally recognised spa town on the banks of the Gartempe River. The local waters here contain chemicals acknowledged as being very good for the treatment of eczema and other related skin complaints. Unlike in the UK, where we regard it as a form of quackery, the French medical profession believes in the healing properties of spa water and the town hosts many patients receiving treatment under the French National Health scheme. I learnt this by chatting to one of the campers on the site, who was undergoing a 6 weeks course. His wife was with him and she waited in their caravan whilst the ambulance called twice a day to take him for his treatment. The town itself was very pleasant, like so many small French country towns, and I spent an enjoyable hour or two wandering around before heading back to the campsite. The late rise and large breakfast had eaten into the day and it was time to eat again. I had bought plenty of food in town and spent the rest of the day just sitting around, eating, drinking soft drinks and enjoying a good natter with whoever was around. As the day was now warm and settled, I took the chance to wash and dry as many clothes as I could, and by bedtime, most were dry. Despite having done very little all day I still slept heavily, hoping my energy would return overnight.

4kms

Tuesday 19 June

I was all packed and away by 10.00, determined to take it easy again, despite having to move camp. I had already decided that I should stay with the slowest group all day, and so 4 of us stayed together all day. There were the two tour organisers, Pat and Mike Strauss (I originally wrote “leaders”, but as they never were at the front, “organisers” is a better description), and Rob, an elderly man enjoying his first cycle camping tour. Indeed, this was his first cycle tour of any description and, not being very fit, he had decided he should keep the weight down. And that is what he had achieved. I've never met anyone who could set out (and finish) on a 2 weeks cycle camping tour with everything packed into one large saddlebag. Talk about minimalist - his sleeping bag only had insulation on the top, the underside was open mesh, the logic behind this being that heat only went up, so why insulate underneath you? No padding between him and the ground meant he had to sleep on top of his clothes for both padding and insulation. His tent had no inner liner, so condensation was apt to drip onto him. His stove was tiny and he only had one pot. I could go on, but won't. To my mind I think he would have been better to get fitter and carried a little more; but he got round the entire tour, so how can I criticise?

We set out following the river, which passed under a high railway bridge. Something engraved on the wall caught my eye and I stopped to make out what it was. It was a horizontal line engraved with a date and a note that the river had reached that height when it

flooded. At head height it showed how heavy the flooding must have been as we were in a pretty large flat area. We were just getting ready to move off when someone spotted another mark and even earlier date, but this was about 10 feet higher still! Our route took us back through the lovely village of Angles Sur Anglin that I had passed through only a few days previous. I had taken the opportunity to urge the others in the party to take their time to explore this pretty village and was pleased to see that they did so. Today was a better day for weather than on my previous visit and so I took more photos after stopping in the village centre café bar. The stop was longer than planned due to someone having a puncture, but the repair was carried out at a leisurely pace in the warm sunshine. I insisted the people with me dropped down the hill past the castle to admire the view of the castle and windmill from the bridge, and whilst there we saw an artist at work with his oils and easel. Hearing our English chatter he introduced himself as also being English, living nearby, enjoying his retirement and selling a few paintings to supplement his income.

We meandered along, still following the River and eventually picnicking on a bench conveniently situated on its banks. The French really do encourage picnics by placing benches in some delightful spots. During the afternoon's ride, still taken at a very easy pace, we investigated the 1000 years old paintings on the ceiling of the church at St Savin. We finally arrived at our next campsite in Sauvigny at 7.30pm, where I again enjoyed another giant evening meal - all part of the recovery plan.

69kms

Wednesday 20 June

Today was to be an "out and home" day ride to the ancient city of Poitiers. I arose early and washed a lot of clothes before setting out for the day with Chris Hoyle, and old companion from Birthday Rides who was on the tour. As I still needed a chainring to replace the worn one, and I had been told there was a good bike shop just north of Poitiers we decided that was where we should head for. The day quickly became hot and sunny, not too bad for me as by now I was getting very acclimatised, but by now Chris was finding it hard going in the heat. On the way we could see in the distance the large buildings of "Futuroscope" - a large theme park based on the concept of all things futuristic and also famous for staging short time trial stages of the Tour de France within its large grounds. We had no intention of going in, unlike one of the party, who had set out at 8.00am in order to get his money's worth. Nevertheless, we were impressed with its size and very modern architecture as we rode by. We only had a sketchy idea of the bike shop's location, so had to follow our noses and instincts but we did know it was on a large road near a roundabout, so, by studying the map and a bit of luck, soon found it. Unfortunately it had shut for lunch 5 minutes before we got there! Suddenly realising the time, we quickly had to find a shop to buy some food for our own lunch before the shops shut (yes - small shops in France close for lunch). A quick dash down the road to the first shop we came to, and an assurance to the shopkeeper that we would only be a minute (he was already fiddling with the shutters) and we were served. Another little park, with bench conveniently placed in the now essential shade saw us tucking in to our sandwiches. The park was in beautiful condition, and the flower display was a wonderful backdrop to our feast. Whilst killing time waiting for the shop to open we wandered around and noticed what was obviously a modern amphitheatre built into the hillside the park was built on. It must be a wonderful spot to sit on a warm evening and listen to a band or watch a play. After a 1½ hour wait, the bike shop opened again and I was able to get what I wanted, at considerably less than the UK price for the same item! We took the opportunity to have a general look around and found many prices roughly the same, a few much less than we pay in the UK and none more.

Our return route was deliberately planned to go through the City centre of Poitiers, so we launched into the maelstrom of busy side streets and main roads, desperately trying to follow the "cycle route" we had been told about. Poitiers is a very ancient city, with many old buildings still intact and an interesting maze of little streets. They were obviously proud of their city as many buildings had plaques describing the history of the building, but I'm ashamed to say that Chris and I were more interested in buying an ice cream than sightseeing! City streets are very hot dusty places on summer afternoons and we quickly decided we had seen enough and headed out for the cooler country lanes and back to the campsite. There I changed the chainring and did some maintenance on Rob's bike for him. His gears and rear wheel were badly in need of some adjustment and repair. It was no bother for me, but Rob thought it was miraculous that I could do it in a field! As the night was young and I was in a good mood at my return of energy (I had been fine all day, so the rest over the preceding few days had done the job) I joined some others in a pizza and some beers in a pavement café in the nearby town before turning in for the night.

83km @ 19.1km/hr

Thursday 21 June

By now I seemed to have fully recovered from my exhaustion of only a few days ago, and I was feeling good again.

Today's route took us back to Confolens, the town on the river I had passed through earlier on my journey to meet the group. The day was again very hot and sunny all day. I was away by 9.45, taking a route that virtually followed the River Vienne all the way. I was with Chris Hoyle and his friends (nicknamed "the Men from the North" by the rest of the group) for most of the day. Whereas I couldn't keep up with them on the flat only a few days previous, I now rode away from them on the hills - a sure sign I was better. Just outside of the little village of L'Isle Jourdain our lunch was taken on the riverbank watching the water sparkling in the sunshine. However, we had to take care to sit well clear of the water as there were signs warning the level could rise quickly and without warning due to the hydro-electric works upstream. The French certainly know how to use their natural resources. The call of an afternoon ice cream was too much for me as we passed through the tiny village of Availle-Limouzine and I spotted two of our party sitting in a bar. These two were actually identical twins, but one was totally blind, so was stoking the rear of their tandem. I soon discovered not being able to see didn't interfere with his riding as his brother described anything of interest as they rode along. In any case, you don't need to be able to see to enjoy the wind on your face or the sun on your back, and the birdsong is still as sweet. Having already been through Confolens, I knew exactly where the campsite was, so chose a different run in to that suggested on the route sheet, but made the wrong decision - all I found was a steep hill and traffic! Tea consisted of a delicious Paella cooked on my little stove. Rumours went round the site that there was to be cycle race in the town centre that evening, so we strolled in for a look. Sure enough, the old town centre was closed off to traffic and excitement was building as the race, a "Criterium" - a hectic race up and down the streets with sharp bends, painful little climbs and sprints every few laps got underway. Someone had managed to get a programme and we realised there were 4 English lads competing, so started shouting for them, much to their astonishment and the amusement of the locals. What a lovely way to spend an evening, watching sport whilst downing a few beers sitting outside a bar on a warm evening! We thought one of the English lads was going to win, but he couldn't hold off a pair of more experienced local riders and had to settle for 3rd place, with his other English team mate coming in 2 places behind - not bad in a field of over 40 riders. When I said they were

astonished to hear English accents shouting for them, imagine their amazement when one of our party introduced himself as even being in the same club as one of them!

We thought the evening couldn't get any better, but it did. Retiring to the pavement café again, we heard the local brass band wandering down the street, playing at full volume until they arrived outside our bar. Here they stopped, turned the volume up even louder (or was it just because we were in a narrow street?) and played a medley of very French brass band music. Whilst sounding slightly disorganised to British ears that are more used to strict tempo, their music certainly was lively and it was impossible not to enjoy it. After a while the local police turned up and we thought that would be the end of it, but no, they just sat in their car enjoying the occasion before moving off again without interfering. At midnight we left them to it and walked back to the campsite, still with the music still drifting down the streets behind us. A truly enjoyable evening and one of the highlights of my time spent in France that summer.

88kms @ 19.2km/hr

Friday 22 June

For a few days I had noticed the lightweight airbed I was sleeping on (a "Thermorest") was losing air overnight, so I spent half an hour with soapy water trying to find the leak, but without success, so gave up and joined the others on the day's ride, another out and home one. The destination for today was the ruined small town of Oradour-Sur-Glane, where I was told there was a war memorial. The lanes that took me there were really pleasant, almost English in character, through broad-leafed woods, twisty, and dappled in shade. On reaching the modern town I joined the others in a café for coffee and a cake before seeking out the memorial.

Here on 10 June 1944, the local Nazi SS troops sealed off the original town and systematically murdered the entire population of 642 men, women and children. No-one was spared. Only 2 children were the sole survivors. One managed to escape unseen across a field, and the other hid in a pigsty. The town had been left, exactly as it was when the Nazis left, as a memorial to the victims. After they had finished their murderous work, the whole town had been burnt down, leaving only the stone and brick walls standing. In the town garage were the remains of cars being repaired, in many houses you could still see sewing machines, hand tools, knives and forks and other artefacts that had survived the ravages of time. Children's tricycles and adult cycles stood forlornly inside some houses. Even the church had been burnt, complete with the priest and others seeking sanctuary inside, all of whom had been killed. Bullet marks could still be seen on the altar. To walk amongst the ruins, see the bullet marks and read that "Here 60 women were shot", and "Here 35 children, including their schoolteacher, were shot" and similar notices sent a chill down the spine. It was obviously a thriving community as there are still the remains of the overhead power lines for the electric tramcar to take workers into Limousin, the nearest large town, and where many were at work when all this was happening. A nearby memorial lists the names and ages of all those slaughtered, all 642 of them. Some photos of the dead remained after the flames had died down, and they were on show in the little museum, together with other personal items. The Nazis later claimed weapons had been found, but there was no proof of this. After the war, the SS Commander in charge of all this had been caught, tried, found guilty, but then set free!

I rode back alone, lost in my thoughts.

My route back took me through the narrow lanes and steep little hills of Monts de Blond, an area with lots of small ponds and lakes and very pretty. The evening was very warm, and the sun was burning down so much I had to keep moving into the shade as I cooked my tea.

88kms @ 21.6km/hr

23 June

Saturday 23 June

A hot, sometimes boring day ride to Civray and Charroux.

On leaving Confolens our route ran alongside an old rail line, now used by a local tourist company as a "Velo-Rail" route. What's "Velo-Rail" did you say? Well we weren't sure until we saw one. Remember the old black and white action movies we used to watch where a simple railway platform on wheels was propelled along the rails by a pair of frantically pumping actors? Well, this is the cycling version! Up to four people sit on fixed seats across the platform, with the front pair pedalling like mad, a chain driving the wheels that run along the track. We were fortunate to see one with four middle-aged ladies sitting on it, approach a level crossing complete with miniature gates, and waited to see what happened. Simple! One jumped off and opened the gate while the other pedalled across, with a helping push from one of the passengers for good measure. After crossing the road, the gate was shut behind them, and off down the line they continued, all giggling like mad! The lone car driver on the road, forced to stop whilst the gates were opened, looked on with forced resignation and I was pleased that I was quick enough with camera to get a shot showing the whole thing.

An old village church in Civray caught my eye and drew me inside to view its fancy carved archways and wall painting. Having stopped, I sat in its shade and took a short rest and a drink. The rest of the ride was along somewhat boring roads, flat and with little of interest to catch the eye until I met up with some others of the party at Charroux. Here, being attracted to the truly magnificent old covered market - a veritable celebration of ancient oak timbers and wooden dowels, topped with a huge tiled roof, I noticed someone waving to me from the dark within. Approaching from the bright sunlight into the deep shade it took my eyes a few moments to adjust before I recognised the English artist we had met a few days ago at Angles-sur-Anglin. He was as astonished to see us again as we were to see him, as by now we were about 75 miles from our first encounter! He was sitting in the shade working on a painting of the view of the village framed by the beams of the market hall. I invited him to join us for a coffee in a nearby bar where we all had a good chat before he went back to his oils.

The ride back to camp was very hot as by now the day was a real scorcher. In the early evening an unfortunate incident occurred at the campsite when Pat, one of the more elderly ladies in our party, collapsed in a state of delirium. A doctor was quickly summoned and he diagnosed heatstroke and dehydration serious enough to require a hospital visit, so Pat was put into an ambulance and whisked off to hospital. Luckily, Confolens is big enough to have its own small hospital, which, by another stroke of luck, was only about 1 mile away and had a spare bed. As there was nothing more any of us could do for her that night (her husband Ken was with her) the remaining eleven of us decided a meal out would be really enjoyable. The evening was extremely warm as we strolled into town, where a lovely terrace restaurant overlooking the river and the ancient bridge was our venue for the evening. The meal was delicious, unhurried and remarkably good value for money at about £11 including wine and a tip for the delightful young waitress! Even the late arrival of Pat and Mike, our tour leaders, who had ensured all was well with Pat in the hospital, didn't phase them – they just kept smiling and serving.

93km @ 22.4km/hr 3001.7km total since leaving home!

Sunday 24 June

I had already decided that today I would take a rest day, and as the route for the main party went westwards from here on, whereas I wanted to go eastwards, we would also say our farewells. So as they were packing ready for the off, I strolled amongst them bidding "Cheerio

and happy holiday." Pat had been kept in hospital overnight, so after breakfast, Ken and I rode the short distance to the hospital to see her. She was connected to a saline drip and heart monitor but seemed not too bad in her private room. The idea was to get liquid into her and get her heart rate down, and that takes some time, so she wouldn't be released until later that day. After spending an hour or so with her and Ken, I returned to my tent and settled down to read my book. There I stayed all day, trying to stay out of the very hot sun and following the usual, rest, eat and drink formula I had now adopted on rest days. About 6pm I returned to the hospital and was shocked to see Pat had got worse. Her heart rate was up and she was being wiped down with damp cloths by husband Ken. I had already found out that the cause of her condition was simply that she had not been drinking enough in the very hot weather. It seemed she still hadn't got the message because the water jug beside her had hardly been touched. I felt a little awkward gently telling her off (she was old enough to be my mother!) and that she must take more liquid in by mouth, not just rely on the saline drip to do it for her, but nevertheless felt it necessary. I also wiped the damp cloth over her legs and arms. This caused an immediate drop in her heart rate as her body heat evaporated the water and cooled her skin down. It was seriously hot in her room, despite the windows being fully open, as there was just no breeze and the evening was still very warm indeed. We tried to get a nurse to bring a fan to cool her, but were assured there were none in the building. As it was Sunday evening, we couldn't even go and buy one, so Ken and I took it in turns to fan her with magazines for a while whilst the other continued to wipe her legs and arms with the damp cloth and this was definitely helping keep her heart rate down. I eventually left Ken with her and made my way back to the tent. On the way back I noticed the temperature on the electronic display outside the town hall was still reading 25°C and this was at 10.15pm!
7km

Monday 25 June

Good news today, Pat had improved overnight, both as a result of the drip and actively drinking more, and the hospital were going to release her later that morning, so I packed and moved off, going via the hospital again just to make sure all was still well, which it was. Ken was off to the local tourist office to negotiate a large taxi to take him, Pat and all their kit off to meet the rest of the party. "No cycling for two days" was Pat's strict instruction from the hospital. Fortunately the rest of the party was due to stay at their next campsite for 2 days and nights anyway, so this just fell right for them.

Before I left I wrote a couple of postcards and posted them to various people back home. I didn't realise it at the time, but one of the cards really worried the recipient. I put on the card that I had now left the group and was on my own again. I also added that one (of the group) had been admitted to hospital with serious dehydration. Unfortunately I had written the number "1" instead of writing "one", and the number was read as the letter "I", thus totally altering the meaning, so naturally he thought it was me that had been admitted! When I next spoke to him on the phone some days after he had received the card he was very concerned about my health, much to my puzzlement and it took me a minute or two to figure out what had caused the consternation. It's amazing how careful you must be when writing things down.

The weather was still very hot as I headed eastwards. Lunch and a 2 hour siesta were taken beside a lovely lake on the edge of Cognac La Foret. Like many places, I again had this stop all to myself with not a soul in sight. The day stayed very hot all the way through what was now quite uninspiring scenery until I reached Aix-Sur-Vienne at about 4.30pm. The campsite here was, by French standards, expensive at FF56 (£5.60) and rather crowded. The site was beside the river and had a bar so I spent the evening sitting at a table beside the river, with a drink, reading my book.

59kms @ 18.3km/hr

Tuesday 26 June.

After the heat of the last few days, I had decided to make an early start to try to minimise having to ride in the full sun. So I woke at 5.55am and was away by 7.15am. I had by now run off the edge of my detailed map and was reliant on a map showing the whole of France in one sheet. Whilst useful for forwards route planning, it was useless for cycle touring as anything much less than a dual carriageway road was too small to be shown. Any cyclist will tell you to avoid main roads, so I needed to get a better map. Having tried but failed on the previous evening, I had that task very high in my priorities for the day. The site was only just south of the major city of Limoges, so I decided to head towards it until I found a shop that was open (it was still early in the morning) and could sell me a decent scale map. The main road marked on my map was exactly that - a main road, and was busy with commuter traffic and heavy goods lorries all heading into Limoges, but I had little choice but to follow it. After a couple of abortive sorties into petrol stations and paper shops, I had started to enter the hubbub of the City's ring roads before I managed to get my map. By this time I was sick of the traffic (isn't it amazing how quickly you can become a "country boy"?) and really didn't fancy the ride into the centre of the large City of Limoges, so sat down and carefully studied the map to find a quieter road. Usually, large towns are difficult to find your way around, as there are so many roads and signposts to local places not shown on your map, and signs trying to direct you to the motorway or some other bike unfriendly road. Limoges was no exception, so after getting a bit lost for a while, I finally found a road I could identify on my map and let it take me far enough out of town until I was sure I could change direction and go around the outskirts without getting lost again. The D979 took me to Les Allois before dropping down to St Leonard-de-Noblat on the D65. My trip into the supermarket there for lunch grub encouraged me to buy my tea at the same time. That was fortunate because I wasn't to know it, but there was no shop open near tonight's campsite. In Peyrac le Chateau it was so hot I had to get out of the heat for a while and stopped in a cool bar for an ice cold drink of Coke. I had already spotted on my map a large lake with campsites marked and decided that would do fine for tonight's stop, so headed off towards Lac de Vassivieres. However, I hadn't noticed the height difference between where I was and the lake. The climb was only 250m in 8km, but with a heavily laden bike, and the heat, plus an empty stomach it caught me out and I "blew up" (cyclist vernacular for suddenly running out of glycogen which is how the body stores energy) on the climb. Anyone who has experienced this sensation knows just how unpleasant it is (trembling, shaking legs, light headedness, feeling of slight nausea and a feeling you can't go any further) and also that there is only one way to relieve the symptoms – eat! The top wasn't far, but I just had to stop and put some fuel (food) into the engine (me!) before I could get there. A pile of felled trees in the shade at the roadside was my hospital bed for a few minutes whilst I raided the food bag, and it wasn't long before the blood sugar levels returned to something more normal and I felt well enough to carry on up the hill. The Lac de Vassivieres is a massive lake and is a local beauty spot with various campsites around its perimeter. I decided the first one I came to was a bit pricey and so carried on to the municipal site just a few kilometres further on. Municipal sites are owned and operated by the local council and are usually good value, being cheap and adequately appointed without being luxurious. Many are subsidised as the council want to encourage tourists to stay and spend money in the area. This one was certainly cheap and was also virtually deserted, with only one or two caravans being occupied in a nearby field. There wasn't even anyone in the "office" - actually a shed, to take the money. Nevertheless, I made camp on a grassy bank overlooking the lake and made a coffee. However, the road which ran between the site and the lake was a no through road, and there was a constant procession (well – half a dozen – this

is rural France!) of cars turning in the circle at the end of the lakeside road below. I suppose it was only natural that the occupants would look at me and my little tent whilst they turned round, but I started to feel a little vulnerable. I dismissed the thought as ridiculous and went for a swim in the lovely clear water of the lake. However, the vulnerable feeling continued, and after swimming I quickly packed everything away again and moved back to the busier but more expensive site. Here were many more campers (safety in numbers!) the site was more secure and with better facilities and I felt much happier there. Another swim, this time from the sandy beach in my new campsite, was very enjoyable before cooking tea. The evening started to cool down and cloud over and out came the mosquitoes. I had been bitten a few times before, but these were more persistent and I had to get completely inside the tent and zip the net cover over the door to keep them out. Normally insects don't bother me much, but I was now starting to appreciate why many people take precautions against them as these French ones were capable of some enormous bites! A quick 'phone call back to the UK to see if all was well (it was) and I turned in for the night, looking forwards to a lazy day spent at and around the lake next day.

79km @17km/hr

Wed 27 June

Oh dear - a poor weather day.

Rain in the night and a drizzle heavy enough to cause the trees to drip woke me early, and a quick look out confirmed my fears; a heavy layer of thick, dark cloud was all around, and a poor day was in prospect. This threw me slightly as I had planned to spend the day locally, but wandering around a lake in the wet, or even worse, sitting in the tent all day, wasn't too enticing a thought. After a leisurely breakfast, taken inside the tent out of the drizzle, I had to make a decision what to do. I was now out of food and had already ascertained that there were no shops open nearby, it being too early in the season for the camp shop to be open. The nearest was 6 miles back down the hill into Peyrac le Chateau and I really didn't want to have to go back down there (I could still remember the awful feeling when I blew up yesterday halfway up it the hill!). The only other village big enough to have a shop was right around the other side of the lake, but that was about 10 miles away. I prevaricated for a while, hoping the weather would improve and my brain would work. Unfortunately the weather didn't improve, but my brain cells kicked in and I made the decision to move on. As time was now getting on, I rushed to pack everything away and set off at speed (can that description be applied to someone pulling a heavy camping trailer?) for the village on the other side of the lake, Royere-de-Vassiviere. I arrived in a state of sweat, with just 10 minutes to spare before the small shop closed for the obligatory 2 hours lunch break - phew! Sitting in the square nearby, sorting out where to store the purchased food, I was approached by a Frenchman asking where from where I had bought my Bob-Yak camping trailer, as he was impressed. Trying to explain in my schoolboy French that I had bought it mail order from a little shop in Suffolk was a little difficult, but I think he got the message. In any case, I wrote down the Bob-Yak name, so he could find it himself.

The drizzly rain continued as I dropped down and away from the lake, following very quiet, forested roads through Lachaud and on to Signal d'Adouze. The whole area was heavily wooded and there was much evidence of forestry work. In fact, many of the forests in France are owned and worked by the local community ("Commune") and these were no exception. Lunch was taken in a very modern bus shelter (no expense spared on my travels) sheltering from the drizzle. Parked nearby were some of the very large and powerful machines used by the forestry workers and I had a good look at them whilst their drivers were elsewhere eating their lunch. Forget any notion of rustic locals wielding their trusty axes in time honoured way as they felled the trees with cries of "Timber-r-r-r-r". These machines were like something

from outer space, devouring anything in their path. The same machine, operated by just one man, would fell a full-grown conifer tree, catch it before it hit the ground, hold it up, strip the branches off, and then cut the trunk into 6m lengths ready for transporting to the sawmill! I was getting quite cool as I sat there and only realised why when I noticed a sign on the side of the bus shelter indicating that my height above sea level was 960m - nearly high enough to be on the top of a Col. An easy 11kms descent took me down to the village of Sornac. The weather had improved a bit by now and on spotting a campsite sign, decided to have a look. The site was a municipal one situated beside a leisure lake with diving boards and beach areas and almost deserted. However, unlike like last night it didn't seem vulnerable, so I was happy to put my little home up there. I wasn't so happy though about the number of flies that seemed to appear from nowhere. Most were just ordinary non-biting ones, but there enough mosquitoes to make me wary of exposing unprotected flesh –particularly as the evening wore on. After my dinner I had a wander around the village. There was a large, modern building set in its own grounds that seemed to be a teacher training college, but other than that, the rest of the village was rather unattractive and rundown. It seemed it was only a forestry workers' village and obviously forestry workers don't get paid very well, despite the enormous machines they operate.

As the evening wore on the local youths started gathering at the lakeside nearby and the noise from their little scooters was quite intrusive for a while. As I settled down for the night I was quite relieved to see the local police drive slowly through the site, making sure I was being left alone - which I was.

57km @ 9.6km/hr 3206.1km total

Thursday 28 June

After yesterday's drizzle and murk, today became a much better day. It was still cool but at least it was dry. Clouds and sunshine required me to put a Gamex windproof top on for a while until I warmed up and then occasionally afterwards. Some gentle climbing on easy gradients meant I could, and did, take my time. The morning's ride was mostly on very quiet narrow roads through forests that rolled gently up and down. On arrival at the small town of Eygurande I bought and packed away the food for my picnic lunch. After that the forests suddenly stopped and the scenery opened out and I could see mountains ahead in the distance. I crossed straight over the RN89, once a very busy road, but now almost deserted now that the A89 motorway has been opened alongside. A very quiet road took me to Messeix. From here there was a long descent into the deep Gorges d'Aveze where I was looking forwards to the view. Unfortunately the heavily wooded hills all but totally obscured my view. Even where I could see, the opposite hillside was also heavily wooded so it was a bit of a disappointment. As I joined the road there were signs saying this particular road was closed, but as the alternative was a long way around, I took the risk that I would be able to get by on my bike and so it proved. There was a long but steady climb up the other side of the Gorge and I then found why the road was closed. The heavy rain earlier in the spring had washed away sections of the road leaving it too narrow for motors, but still adequate for two wheeled vehicles like mine, so I just rode past, keeping well away from the crumbling edge. No doubt someone would come and repair it, but not today as there were no workmen to say anything. After clearing the Gorge, the trees gave way to open fields in time for me to enjoy my lunch sitting on a bench outside the Marie (Town Hall) in the small town of Tauves. There had been a market earlier that morning, and the traders were in the last stages of clearing away. By this time I was getting into the Auvergne area of France and a long climb after lunch took me past an impressive statue of the Madonna perched atop a sharp peak. The sign said "La Tour

d'Auvergne" which, meaning Tower of Auvergne, was very apt as it looked out over a great area and could obviously be seen from many miles away. The nearby village of the same name was charming with almost a mountain village like atmosphere, with many of the houses being built from the local rock and obviously well able to withstand severe weather. I spent an enjoyable hour or so just wandering around here, and treated myself to an ice cream. I had been advised by one of the CTC tour members to spend some time in the town of Le Mont-Dore, and so I turned my handlebars in its direction. However a climb over the 1398m Roche Vendeix had to be negotiated first! It is my habit to take a photo of my bike, and if possible, me, next to the sign which is nearly always present on the summit of big climbs, but I couldn't find this one, so pressed on down the short descent into Le Mont-Dore.

This pleasant spa town was very different from the usual little places I had been in for so long. It had a wide, tree lined main street with rather grand buildings and lots of shops, some very up-market. A gambling Casino, complete with fountains playing accompanied in the background by the sound of classical music, completed the rather posh scene. The dress suited "goons" on the door were obviously strategically positioned to keep out touring cyclists and other riff raff, so I decided not to increase their wealth further and passed by.

There was a choice of campsites and I opted for the most centrally located one as I wanted to be able to stroll into town during the few days I planned to be there. Like most sites in France, the pitches were clearly marked out. Of course, mine was far too big for my tiny set up, being designed for an enormous 6 berth tent awning and car, so, to maintain some privacy, I pitched right in the corner! The usual campsite method of marking the boundary of the pitch is small hedges and although relatively recently planted, and therefore not very big yet, this was no exception. The usual idea in the UK is a free for all, with, at most, the roadway marked out and perhaps a numbered peg painted on the fence in the approximate position.

I splashed out on a bottle of red wine with my evening meal and then phoned home to ensure all was OK, which of course. My cooking stove was a Trangia, which is usually used with a methylated spirit burner, but I had decided before leaving home I would use gas as it was quicker. However, the adaptor required the use of a screw top gas canister, and France being the home of Camping Gaz, who used a non standard version of connector, these were not readily available - trust the French to be different to the rest of the world! I took the opportunity to ask Dennis to post my meths burner to the people I would be meeting in a week or two. Methylated spirit in the UK is £3.00/litre and only available in hardware stores and chemists, whereas it's only 60p/litre in France and easily available in supermarkets _ another British rip-off?

I was quickly asleep despite the air being much cooler at the higher altitude I was now at (1050m).

53km @ 17.2km/hr. 1050km ridden since leaving home.

Friday 29th June. A good day.

It was very cold in the night, and with hindsight I should have worn more clothes in the sleeping bag, but it's difficult to leave a warm spot for somewhere colder, even though you know it will be better in the long run! Being located in a steeply sided valley, it was about 8am before the sun hit the tent as it came over the hill, and there was an immediate and rapid rise in temperature when it did so. After breakfast I went into town to buy my picnic lunch grub and took the opportunity to take a quick look around the local market where I bought a sink plug (yes, even in France people steal sink plugs from the hand basins of campsites!). I finally set at about 10.40 for a day ride that was to see full sun all day and warm, but not too excessive _ just right for cycling. I had already spotted the famous "Puy de Dome" on the map and, knowing it was the scene of many a famous Tour de France hill top finish, set out to attack it. The whole area is one of extinct volcanoes and you can see evidence of them

everywhere _ even the Puy de Dome itself is the top of an extinct volcano _ shaped just like a walnut whip but without the walnut on top (it has a weather station and radio mast instead). It last exploded about 5760BC, so I felt fairly safe! So as I passed along the roads I could see conical mountains and circular, deep lakes all around. A climb up the past the Lac de Guery got me a 1282m "Col" sign before the long descent down to Orcival with its large basilica. Another short climb over the Col de Moreno (1102m) brought me to the foot of the start of the climb to the Puy de Dome, my destination. Just as I was getting into my "polka dot jersey" frame of mind I was stopped short by a road sign. Surely it couldn't be correct? But it was, and as plain as could be - "No Cycling" but cars were driving up and down it! I had to dismount to check it out. Yes, the sign was right, and to remove any doubt, there attached to it was a copy of the relevant regulation issued by the local Mayor in 1970 something! I could only surmise it must have been issued for safety reasons (people crashing on the descent perhaps?) but I really am not sure why. Interestingly, whilst writing this article, I saw in a recent edition of Cycling Weekly that someone claims to have ridden up there very recently. They either never saw, or chose to ignore the sign.

Disappointed, I sat in the shade of some trees at the base and consoled myself with my picnic lunch. Having then studied the map and readjusted my sights, I set out to return via a different route. The D767a took me to Laschamp and on to Fontfreyde, passing Lac Cassiere, the pretty Lac d'Aydat and the rolling D5 to Murol where there was a massive castle. Lac Chambon was good before I climbed to Besse d'en Chandesse. The latter was an interesting village with narrow streets between the granite built cottages. The D36 took me all the way back over an easy climb to a great viewpoint at Rocher de l'Aigle. A descent followed by a hard climb took me over the Col de St Robert at 1451m. There were good views all the way along this road, and what seemed only a short descent got me back into Le Mont d'Ore. Here I bought and then fitted another chain for the bike before booking another night at the campsite. 119km @19.1km/hr

Saturday 30 June

An easy day.

It was a bit warmer in the night than the previous one, but still awoke curled up into a ball in the morning. As I was already booked into the same site that night, I had no need to pack up, and instead made my way into town to have little poke around in the street market that sets up on Saturdays. It was at about 10.30am that I set off for a day ride, planning to go quite a long way south, but soon realised my legs had other ideas, so when I reached La Tour d'Auvergne I abandoned the idea and stopped for a wander around this interesting little village. After studying the map over a coffee in a streetside cafe I thought I should go up to see the view from the large, white painted statue of the Madonna that dominates the valley and overlooks the village. I managed to ride most of the way up the access track, then locked the bike and scrambled the rest of the way up. By now the day was very warm and I sat eating my lunch enjoying the view. Feeling revived now, the D129 took me to La Bourboule by way of the climb over the Col de la Soeur (1149m) and a final descent into the town. By continuing for about 2km was able to see the lake and dam before returning to have a better look at this nice spa town. It wasn't as large as le Mont-Dore, but was still quite class. The bike shop kept my eyes occupied, but I resisted the temptation to buy anything. I had noticed that my second pair of shoes, some cheap trainers, were starting to smell somewhat and so lashed out on some open toe sandals, the idea being my feet would stay cooler, and the smell would escape easier! On returning to the campsite, some repairs were made to my cycling shoes as the rubber soles were starting to come unstuck. After tea, I strolled into the town centre (in my new sandals!) and watched the sun go down and the locals going about their business and socialising whilst I drank some canned beer.

52kms @16.9km/hr

Sunday 1 July

Getting tired again.

Another warm bright sunny day again with only a few little clouds to break it up. I was packed and away by 9.30am, but turned down the valley towards Bourbourle again rather than face the climbs out of Mont-Dore. I follow the D922 southwards for a while, but this was not a pleasant road, being both hard and busy, so I left it as soon as I could. This took me again to La Tour d'Auvergne, but I didn't stop this time, preferring to follow the D203 as it made its way south. This was a delightful little road, making its way past small flowery fields, and little hills with lots of bends - a really good road on which to be riding a bike in the sunshine. I soon joined the D88, which was arguably even prettier than the last, to St Donat and on to St Genes de Champestre where I stopped in a little bar for 2 refreshing Cokes. Just before I stopped I had noticed a sign to the "Camping Municipal", and after my drinks, decided to check it out with the idea of stopping there and having an unladen ride in the afternoon. The site had obviously only just been opened as everything seemed almost unused, and at only 14.50 francs (£1.45) was very good value, so stop I did. I was the only one on the site, apart from another tent that appeared to be unoccupied. Its location gave me no fears for the safety of myself or my kit, and after installing myself and having my lunch, I set off for a local ride. More pretty roads took me south and to the village of Montboudif, where, a sign proudly proclaimed, the late President Georges Pompidou (1911-1974) was born and grew up. He truly must have been a man of the people as this really was a tiny place, and the little museum set up in his honour in the village centre was just about the biggest thing there even today! The little D679, complete with grass growing up the middle, took me through a thick forest and on towards the Gorges de la Ruue. Unfortunately, the forest was so thick that it spoilt my view along the valley, and I could only look across at the thick forest on the other side. This rather defeated the object of the circular route I had intended to do, so I went instead to Condat. Condat is in a valley, and a sign indicated that there was a viewpoint just a little way up the road that goes up the hillside. In an attempt to retrieve something from the ride, I went up what turned out to be a vicious little climb, made worse by the loose surface. The view was OK, but not stunning, and I'm not sure if it was worth the effort, but the camera saw action once I had managed to regain my breath. It was about now that I started to feel a bit hot and jaded, so on returning back down the steep hill treated myself to an Orangina in a bar. I think they must have seen me coming as I was relieved of 15fr (£1.50) for the little bottle of fizzy orange. But it did go down well! A few kilometres up the D678 I began to "blow up" and had to stop and eat some chocolate. Thankfully I hadn't left that at the tent. The next village of Egliseneuve took some coins off me as I bought, and immediately ate, a couple of sticky buns. These got me back to base where a big meal was quickly prepared and eaten. I then fell asleep in the warm evening sun on my camp bed until the "Gardien" (warden) arrived to take my campsite fee. This little sleep revived me and I took a stroll around the village. As was not uncommon, there were small memorials to locals shot by the Nazis during the last war; one in particular was to a man of 62. These poignant reminders always left me in thoughtful mood.

I now had finished my book and decided to go via the town of Issoire tomorrow. This, being quite large, was likely to stock a few foreign (English) language books, and it also was listed as having a campsite.

85km @18km/hr

Monday 2 July

It was rather windy in the night, made worse by the rather exposed situation of the campsite which was on the crest of a small hill with insufficient vegetation to break the wind before it hit my little tent, but fortunately there was no damage when I awoke. I was in no rush to get going, particularly after “blowing up” yesterday, and decided to pig out on a good breakfast to put more fuel into the tank ready for the day’s exertions.

A particularly tasty meal I had discovered was “Lardons” which are simply small pieces of bacon, which are easily and quickly fried. These are delicious and can be added to many things to spice it up, and so slipped some between a couple of slices of fresh bread, effectively making a bacon butty. This, on top of my usual cereal and fruit, really made me feel good. The strong wind was straight in my face as I set off eastwards to climb to Pont de Clamouze at 1333m. Unfortunately I could find no sign to mark the summit, so the camera stayed in the bag. This still being an area of extinct volcanoes, I detoured slightly to view Lac Chauvey, but it really just resembled a circular lake with a few trees around the perimeter, so didn’t linger for long. Despite seeming not to be making much progress into the wind, I was surprised to find myself catching and passing another cyclist who, unlike me, was not laden down with trailer and camping equipment. I have to admit to a little smirk as I rode past and cheerily bid him “Bonjour”. My lunch grub was bought in Besse and from there it was a fast descent nearly all the way to Issoire. My eyes soon spotted a lay-by with picnic tables (this is one of the great things about France – picnic tables in nice locations) and I settled down to eat. After only a few minutes a small van stopped and a couple emerged and started to dress up in white overalls. Intrigued, I watched as I munched. They didn’t look like painters and decorators, so what were they? Soon it became clear – they had come to gather honey from the beehives stacked up on the hillside beside the lay-by. The man seemed to know what he was doing, and took his time to explain to his female assistant what the procedure was, and soon the smoke gun was puffing into the hives (this is done to keep the bees calm). I had only ever seen this done on the TV, so was quite interested myself. I couldn’t hear what was being said (if I had been that close I would certainly have been stung), but it seemed simple enough, and after a short while, the honey combs were in the bag and they returned to the van and took off their protective clothing. I had made no secret of my interest, and they came over to show me the honeycombs before driving off again with a wave.

As I approached Issoire, I was still descending, and the heat of the day was going up as I sought the local “Syndicat d’Initiative” (Tourist Office) to enquire about local campsites. The Municipal site looked fine and I pitched there for 25Fr (£2.50). Riding through the town to the site I bought a new book to read and a copy of Sunday’s “Observer” newspaper and after a short stroll into the local market, spent the rest of the evening catching up on the UK news. 57kms, 20.9km/hr

Tuesday 3 July.

A tough day.

The night had been very warm and I slept naked on top of my sleeping bag, with the tent door open, only the mosquito netting between me and the rest of the world (my tent was facing a high hedge, so modesty was preserved). I set off about 9.30am, having scrounged a toilet roll from an English couple in a caravan (I’m not that tight - I had tried to buy a roll, but they always seem to be sold in packs of at least four, and thus far too bulky to carry on the bike). I had only just left the site when the front tyre softened. My first puncture! A thorn was the culprit. It was quickly removed and the inner tube changed - I would repair the puncture later at a more convenient time. The sweat was dripping from my face by the time I had pumped up the tyre again, and I was glad to get moving again and let the breeze cool me down. The day was to remain hot and humid with a full sun all day. Almost immediately on leaving Issoire, the road started climbing as I followed the D9, then D709 to join the D996 to Sauxillanges. I

stayed on this road all day, and it really was very quiet, with just the occasional lorry passing, all of which gave me a wide berth. It flattened off for a while, then the climb continued, getting harder as it went on. I passed over the Belvedere de Toutee with a sign telling me the height was 996m, so technically not a Col (1000m and above is the accepted definition), but what's 4m? I found a bar and enjoyed a cold Coke and chatted to a local lady before descending down to find a picnic spot. Again, a lay-by with picnic table, carefully sited in the shade (much too hot to sit in the sun) appeared as if by magic and my "repas" (lunch) was taken there. I was approached by an elderly man and we chatted for a short while. We briefly discussed the EEC and he was keen to know if I considered myself "European" or "British". Upon being told I had to say "British" first, he proudly proclaimed he was the opposite – he called himself a "European" first, then "French". I quietly wondered to myself who was being the most truthful! The descent continued to Ambert where I recharged the water bottles with fresh cold water. This was rather fortuitous, as the next 14kms were very hot and humid as I climbed 663m to the top of the Col des Pradeaux at 1196m. I had completely drunk one bottle just on that one climb. There was a slight breeze on my back, helping me on the climb, but also meaning I just got hotter and hotter. In fact it was so hot that I had to stop in the shade at one point, taking my shirt off to let the breeze cool me down a bit. A café at the top sold the most delicious cold ice cream I think I have ever tasted! By now the time was getting on, and after a short descent, the small town of St Antheme saw me pitch tent at 5.15pm. The heat and humidity continued to rise until a thunderstorm broke whilst I was washing out some clothes. The rain came on so quickly it wet my sleeping bag and other bits and pieces before I could get them under cover. After an hour's heavy rain, it stopped. It nevertheless caught me out again later when I strolled into the village for some shopping and in particular some mosquito spray (which proved to be useless!) and I had to stand in a shop doorway for a while. The evening was noisy, with lots of banging and crashing going on overhead, and it was very dull, but not enough to stop me fixing the puncture and fitting a new chain on the bike. The rain had woken the local frog (amphibian, not human) population, and for the rest of the evening, there were small frogs jumping all around the site. Some even came into the tent, so I had to search the inside of the tent (particularly inside my sleeping bag!) before zipping the tent up for the night!

81km @ 17.9km/hr

Wednesday 4 July

After last night's thunderstorm, I was expecting a fresher day, but it didn't start that way. My tent was still under siege from the army of small frogs. No doubt these had been invigorated by the heavy rain, and they all seemed to be making a bee line for me and my tent! I soon realised it wasn't me or my Terra Nova Solo tent they were interested in, it was just that I was on their route from a small lake to somewhere else, probably a breeding ground or something, as they detoured past and continued to make their way to who knows where. It was initially amusing sitting on the warm damp grass having frogs try to jump into my bowl of cereal – but not for long, and I soon had to move away and continue my petit dejeuner (breakfast) in peace elsewhere. I daresay I must have stood on a few as I packed up, but it wasn't deliberate, and in any case I reckoned they had a few to spare. By the time I left, the sun was coming out and the day was humid. Having changed my bike chain yesterday, but not having had the chance to check it was running OK on the old freewheel, and not jumping, I carried the old one with me for a few miles before realising I could safely jettison it, and so it went into someone's waste bin as I rode by. As soon as I left my overnight town of St Antheme, I began to climb for 5kms, then after a short flattish stretch, climbed again to the top of the Col de La Croix de L'Homme Mort (Pass of the Dead Man's Cross!) where I just

had to stop at the top and take a photo of the sign declaring the name. There followed a long (19kms) descent all the way down to Montbrison, where I went into the town centre to buy some postcards and food for lunch. I then headed south east on the D8 for a short while before joining the D101 to Rivas where I soon found a small fishing lake - a good spot to have my lunch.

I was having to plan my route carefully now, as I was making my way across to the Alps but wanted to avoid the major conurbations. So I took time to study my map of France to ensure I didn't end up doing unnecessary miles or towns. I had long ago realised the scale of maps I was using to ride every day were good for the actual choice of road "on the day", but were too large to enable long distance route planning, so every few days I checked my direction on a smaller scale map. This showed me I needed to head a bit further north before swinging eastwards to the Alps. I was technically actually in the Loire Valley and had to leave it, so it was another long climb up to and past the town of St Galmier. As I made my way round the outskirts of St Galmier I noticed some people in a park queuing at what looked like a small bandstand. Intrigued, I stopped and stared for a few moments before realising they all had large containers, which they were taking it in turn to fill with water from a spout on the side of the bandstand. I then saw a sign in French indicating that this was the source of the "World Famous Badouin Spa Water". No doubt there was a thriving industry elsewhere in the town bottling the water, but these people were simply cutting out the "middle man". Being a cynical sort of chap, I resisted the temptation to try its health giving properties and carried on up the hill. The humidity was quite high now, and I took my shirt off – a rare thing for me, but it was good to let some heat out and feel fresh air on my skin. There was little fear of sunburn as the sun was now very watery. My efforts continued and I climbed onwards and upwards through Chazelles-sur-Lyon. Here I turned into the road at the same time as two leather-skinned old racing cyclists out for a spin on their race bikes. I was astonished to find that not only could they not "drop" me, and remember I was towing a heavily laden camping trailer, I was able to do "bit and bit" with them for the next few kilometres (OK – perhaps they were just toying with me, but allow me my fantasy).

After a while, we got to the town of St Symphorien-sur-L'Oise, where I planned to spend the night at the campsite, so I sat up, let them go and had a look at the map. I wasn't sure where the campsite was, so continued into the town, where I spotted my cyclist companions just going into a café. I took the opportunity to join them for a drink, and to ask for directions to the campsite. They congratulated me on my fitness (but I suspect they were just very unfit themselves really) and told me that we had passed the campsite during our tussle on the road. I had been so intent on doing battle that I never saw the large campsite sign!

The gradient from the road up to the reception office of the campsite must have been 1 in 6 and I very nearly had to get off and walk the last few yards, but stubbornness kicked in and I just made it.

The site was typical of many, with lots of permanently pitched large tents and locked up caravans set up for the season, but with their owners not present. So although the site had few spare pitches left, there were only a few people actually there, so I had the facilities almost to myself as I settled down for the night.

77kms

Thursday 5 July

Anyone who knows anything about camping will tell you that there are at least two differences between modern nylon tents and the old cotton ones.

- 1 They are lighter, a very useful attribute when lightweight camping, but
- 2 They suffer from condensation inside, particularly in colder weather.

I haven't mentioned it before, but every morning has seen me awake inside a tent that has a fine layer of condensation inside. Not really a problem, but it does make you careful not to touch the cold damp walls with your bare skin when getting dressed (it's cold!), and you do have to allow the inside to dry before packing away.

However, for some strange reason, this morning the tent was bone dry, inside and out – even under the groundsheet which is often absolutely soaking. I still don't know why, but was just grateful as it made packing very quick and easy. I had now ridden off a couple of maps which I would not need again, so as I rode away from the campsite posted these and a postcard home. The morning ride was along a gently rolling road that fortunately seemed to nominally follow the contour line, so was fairly easy and then descended to St Maurice-s-Dargoire. Here a Coca-Cola was consumed whilst I studied the map. I needed to cross the mighty Rhone river, but also wanted to stay clear of Lyon as the last thing I wanted was to get embroiled in City roads and the horrendous traffic that goes with it. By careful route planning over the last few days, I had ensured I would not be drawn into Lyon by “helpful” road signs, and headed for Givors, on the western side of the Rhone by simply following the D2. A gentle descent brought me to the banks of this wide river, and I found a bench in a small park right beside the river to be a suitable spot for lunch. I really felt as if I was getting somewhere now, as once I crossed the river I would be getting near my next destination – the Alps.

A narrow, very long suspension bridge allowed me to cross to the eastern bank of the river. However, due to its length and the fact it was so narrow, motor vehicles couldn't pass each other, traffic lights had been installed to control their passage. This was fine, but of course, on a loaded cycle, I was only halfway across before the traffic coming the other way started across! Fortunately, there was sufficient space for us to pass safely by, provided both cars and I kept well in.

Once across the river I got a little lost trying to find the correct road for the next section. I specifically wanted to stay on the little roads, and as usual, the planners try to keep travellers on the major routes, so don't signpost them. I simply adopted my usual tactic of “if in doubt – keep going and sort it out later” and this proved to be the correct approach again. I soon realised where I was, and therefore how to correct myself and got back on route. I followed the D36 to Lafayette which turned out to be quite an easy road. I also saw two things of note – a local cycle racing club out training in a “chain gang” and we all shouted encouragement as our paths crossed, and another war memorial. This memorial was quite a large one and I stopped to read it. It seems there had been a battle between the local Maquis (French Resistance fighters) and the occupying Nazis, resulting in the deaths of 19 Frenchmen, and their names were all engraved here. The fresh flowers showed they were still remembered. My road turned south at Lafayette and I followed it to St Georges d'Espérance, where I got confused in the town, and very nearly ended up leaving on the same road I had come in on – that would have been bad enough, but I had climbed to get to the town! More signs of dark days here – a memorial to six English airmen killed in a plane crash in 1944. My recollection of history was good enough for me to recall that when the Allies invaded Normandy in June 1944, Churchill urged the Maquis to rise up against the Nazis to keep them occupied, and thus away from the invasion beaches, so allowing a foothold on the mainland to be established. And that is exactly what they did – hence the proliferation of memorials all dated soon after that famous date of June 6th 1944, “D Day”.

From St Georges d'Espérance I followed the D518 south to St Jean de Bournay. The ultra rapid TGV (Très Grand Vitesse – very high speed) trains pass through here on their way up and down the country, and I was in the right place at the right time to see one go by. I have to say that “Très Grand Vitesse” is no exaggeration – it absolutely flew by at nearly 200mph, an incredible speed to someone used to seeing our British trains trundling by on our Victorian tracks. I took the opportunity to buy my evening food here, then made my way up a slight

climb to Meyrieu-les-Etaings and my campsite. This was, by French standards, quite an expensive site and they took 60Fr (£6) off me, but at least it was a well-appointed site with toilet paper, plugs in the sinks and lashings of hot water. Having said that, so did the previous night's site, but it was only half the price.

I was camped beside a pair of young German girls who were using their new camcorder to record each other. There was also a small group of French lads trying to chat them up, but seemingly without much success. I was later to find out that the night would not be a quiet one!

99kms

Friday 6 July

Oh what a disturbed night I had.

My pitch was not far from the campsite games room which seemed to be the Mecca for every noisy youngster for many kilometres around and the noise went on for some time after I had laid my tired body down. However, at last it died down, leaving just the chatter coming from the French boys trying to chat up the two German girls in the next tent. I fell asleep before too long, descending down into that lovely black hole of unconsciousness that welcomes a tired body and mind.

Unfortunately, the sound of frantic shouting and much running around woke me again about 1.00 am. I lay there wondering what on earth was going on for some time, hoping it would settle down but to no avail, so I unzipped the tent and peered out into the gloom.

The two German girls had obviously fallen out big time with their hopeful suitors and a full blown row was in progress. I muttered something, but was too tired to get involved and crawled back inside. Eventually, at about 2.00am, peace returned and I fell asleep again.

Next morning all was revealed. The two girls were apologetic about the commotion, and explained that all had been well until they realised the video and still camera had gone missing, almost certainly stolen. I pointed

out a camera case lying in the grass not far away, but this was empty. I was sympathetic, but felt they were a little unwise to flaunt what was very expensive and desirable equipment in such an insecure environment as a

campsite, but kept my thoughts to myself. The Police were called but did not arrive until about 10.00am as I was about to leave. The obvious culprits were the French lads and the Police soon wandered over to interview them, and probably search their tents. I was expecting them to speak to me, but I could add nothing to the situation, told the girls as much and so wished the girls well before packing up and riding away, hoping they didn't think I had taken them.

The day was already getting hot as I found my way through a maze of "white" (very minor) roads to Eclose, Chateaufvillain then the D520 south east to Burcin where a can of Coke helped quench my thirst and provided a sugar rush. More white roads took me eastwards to Charavines and a lake where I enjoyed my lunch sitting on the bank. There were a few campsites here and I was tempted to have a short day, and stop the night, but on investigation they were all a little too crowded and so I continued. To the north east was Montferrat and Le Pont-de-Beauvoisin and the white roads took me to and past them. The heat and humidity was now building up and I craved an ice cream, but surprisingly, could not find a shop selling one, so made do with another Coke.

I followed my usual habit of finding a supermarket to buy my tea before making my way the final kilometres via Bridoire to the campsite at Lac d'Aiguebelette. In the supermarket the desire for an ice cream got the better of me again, but I couldn't buy just one – they were only sold in multiple packs. To my shame I have to admit I bought a box of "Solero" type ices

(lollies with an ice cream interior, all on a stick) and then stood outside and ate all three of them! I felt everyone leaving the shop was looking at me wondering who on earth this tramp pigging into three ices was, but it didn't stop me licking!

The campsite was beside a large lake and was almost totally occupied by Dutch people, and at only 37Fr (£3.70) good value. A swim in the lake before tea was really enjoyable, the water was just right, and the sandy shore was a paradise for the many children enjoying themselves. The fresh trout I had bought earlier was cooked and devoured in time to beat the storm clouds and gusty rain that came over as it got dark.

82kms

Saturday 7 July A rest day

It had rained heavily in the night and these turned into showers, some heavy, all morning. I wasn't keen to get soaked for no reason, so decided I would stay put that day, and spend another night here. The campsite was almost exclusively occupied by people from the Netherlands (they never refer to themselves as "Dutch") and so the night and morning had both been very quiet. Being from a crowded country, they are a nation well used to maintaining privacy and quiet. I lazed around all morning, but then took a short ride to the local shops to buy something for lunch - spaghetti! I took the opportunity for a little mechanical maintenance on the bike, and by about 3pm the day was brightening enough to entice me out for a gentle potter around the lake to visit the small village of Novalaise at the far end. There a cream cake shouted "eat me" as I passed by, so I obliged before returning back to my little tent. As last night, another swim in the lake was taken, but as neither the day nor I was as hot as yesterday, it wasn't quite as enjoyable. Before turning in for the night I rang home to check all was OK, which of course, it was, so slept soundly all night.

32km

Sunday 8 July. A short but "violent" day.

Having rested well, I was packed and away by 9.00am, taking the west lake side road to Novalaise as yesterday, but the village was in market, so I had to walk through. A very steep (two arrows) climb up over the aptly named Col de l'Épine (apt as it was up through a pine forest), but mercifully only short (short by French standards that is – it was still 8km!). It really was very hard and I was soon soaked in sweat making me take my shirt off, despite it not being particularly warm. Good viewpoint on climb but no sign at top (987m) meant the camera stayed in the bag. A good viewpoint at the top of the descent, but there was too much cloud to see Aix-les-Bains, my destination, on the other side of the very large lake. A Randonnee was going to be held at Novalaise-le-Lac so there were lots of riders going to the start, all of whom greeted me as we passed. A quite easy (i.e. not too twisty) descent with a warm Gamex top on to keep the chill off, got me down to La Motte-Servolex, which sounded more like a car part than a village. I then got a bit lost on the cycleway route to Aix-les-Bains, which involved having to walk through another (long) street market selling what looked just like junk to me, but what's one man's junk is another's useful stuff, so left them to it. The lakeside main "N" road to Aix-les-Bains was very busy but a cycle lane made it tolerable. I had already decided I wanted to stay here, so looked at the campsites, the first of which looked full. The second was OK, but at 74Fr for a car and caravan seemed expensive, but I felt sure they wouldn't charge me that. Unfortunately the tent was up and I was installed before I realised there would be no reduction for a lone cycle camper. After a quick shower I then had to eat my lunch inside the tent as another downpour hit me. Fortunately, by the time I had finished my meal, the rain had stopped and the sun emerged again. A sunny ride and short stroll to the lakeside and town centre. The lake was very pleasant with lots of people beside, on and in it and I spent a while just sitting on the bank looking at all the goings on.

The town itself was pleasant and a car rally was on with about twenty Ford Model T's all lined up, all in good condition, including one British registered one. I spent a couple of hours wandering around before going back for dinner and then watched the sun go down over the lake and really enjoyed the warm evening and romantic setting.

62km

Monday 9 July – A mixed day

I was up and away again by 9am, but later regretted not spending another day at this lovely location. I was in need of another pair of cycling shorts, and had already spotted an advertising hoarding for a Decathlon store at Chambéry. However, Chambéry is quite a large place and it seemed to take ages getting through the outskirts to where the local Tourist Office had said the store was. I had almost given up when I finally found it. The shorts and a spare gas cylinder were quickly purchased and I set off towards my destination of Albertville. There was not a lot of choice of route here as the valley was quite narrow, and so I followed the easy (flat) main RN (Route Nationale – trunk road to us) for a while until it became too busy and I had been frightened a couple of times. The D201 ran just to the north of the RN, but it was much harder, passing along the lower “fingers” of the mountain as it came down to the valley. This meant I was climbing for five minutes and descending for two, then repeating it all over again – a very wearying task on a heavily laden bike with trailer. The climbs were slow, and the momentum gained on the descent was quickly lost, leading to much waggling of the gear levers. My usual good luck in finding a suitable spot for my picnic lunch left me, and I was forced to sit in a bus shelter out of the sun's hot glare. Obviously the buses are not very frequent as I was not disturbed during the time I was there. By 3pm I had arrived at Albertville and sought the Tourist Office for directions.

I was now at the next stage of my plan to meet another cycling group, and so I had to be at the correct site or I would miss them. The helpful lady in the office had told me the site was 7-8km out of the town, but I was pleasantly surprised to find it was only 3km outside. The site was pretty small and mostly empty, with a few retired people in occupancy of a few static caravans, and although I couldn't find the Warden, who I was told had gone to visit her husband in hospital, felt it safe to leave my trailer unattended whilst I returned into the town for shopping. Stocks replenished, and a new book to read, I returned to find the Warden puzzling over the strange little trailer tucked into the hedgerow on her site. The site was cheap but basic, with just one men's shower cubicle and no hot water save that in the shower. It was while I was in town that I phoned a friend in the UK who was getting worried as it was some time since he had heard from me.

For those of you who know your Olympic Games the name “Albertville” should be familiar as it was the host to Winter Olympics of 1992, the last time the Summer and Winter Olympics were held in the same year – they now are every two alternate years. Despite this being nearly ten years ago, the town is still very proud of its association, as visitors are constantly reminded and the souvenir shops still sell the memorabilia. I settled down for the night knowing I had another day's rest coming before I met my new companions.

88kms

Tuesday 10 July – A rest day

Before I left the UK I had arranged to meet two tours in order to give me a mental target and some companionship should I get lonely (which proved not to be the case). I had already met, and subsequently left, the first and was now about to meet the second. Kevin White, an ex-CTC Tour Leader had set up his own tour company “Bike Adventures” and one of his tours was 10 days cycling and camping in the French Alps. As this was with vehicle back up all the major climbs could be tackled unladen – a big advantage. They were due to arrive tomorrow,

so I was rather surprised to see a white van and large trailer pull in whilst I ate my breakfast. That this was indeed the van for the tour was confirmed by the logo written on the side, and so I introduced myself to Trevor the driver, himself a cyclist and CTC member. I returned to town for more grub and to reclaim my 1Fr deposit on my bottle of beer. However, reclaiming the deposit took almost as long as to drink the contents, but stubbornness set in, and I persevered until the coin was in my hand! I had erected my tent in the shade of the only vacant tree on the site, but Madame made me move it as she needed to mow the grass. A little later, a UK registered car arrived and Malcolm Osborne from Norwich got out. He was also on the tour, and had driven down with his bike in the back as he needed his car after the tour had finished. He was later to be very glad he had travelled independently as his health took a battering after he had eaten something that really upset his stomach. All the other participants were due to arrive by plane the next day. Just outside Albertville is the little village of Conflans, which claimed to very historic, so we both wandered up to have a look around before all of us chatted away until bedtime. Tomorrow I would meet the rest of the party.

10kms

Wednesday 11 July.

An easy day before the climbing began.

Knowing I had nothing in particular to do today, I took the opportunity to have a lie in before breakfast and the usual shopping trip for food. I seemed to spend more and more time in food shops these days, but that was more a reflection of my inability (or unwillingness) to carry much food with me, so my stocks were perpetually only just enough to get me to the next shop!

On my return from the shops, my fellow riders started to arrive in the minibus from Geneva airport, their bikes being carried in the trailer behind Trevor's van. The minibus was driven by Kevin White and partner Penny who were the founders of "Bike Adventures" - the tour company who were organising the holiday.

I had seen the holiday advertised before I left the UK and thought it would be good to meet them as they were offering 10 days cycling in the Alps, covering all the major Alpine road climbs. The accommodation was to be camping, but with vehicle support to allow unladen riding, and with breakfast and afternoon tea thrown into the deal. Leaving them to get themselves set up on the site and their bikes reassembled, I set out for a ride up the valley towards Moutiers. All was plain cycling along a lovely quiet road along the flat valley floor which wound its way between increasingly close steep slopes on either side until I was at Aigueblanche and still a few kilometres short of Moutiers. Here a road sign suddenly announced that cycling any further along that road was not permitted. Undeterred, I looked for the cycling route.

Undeterred I was; but successful I was not. I must have ridden a couple of miles up and down the sides of the narrow valley trying to find the cycle route, but eventually decided if Moutiers didn't want me to go by bike, I wouldn't go, so turned around and found a bar to buy a consolation drink and sandwich. It was whilst in there that I read in a newspaper that Chris Boardman had once again crashed out of that year's Tour de France - the event I was due to see next week at Alpe d'Huez. After leaving the bar I headed back down the valley and into a headwind, but on the other side of the river to vary the route. By the time I got back to the campsite, more tour members had arrived and the evening was spent eating and chatting to my new friends. I have to admit to a smug feeling when I explained to these people who only yesterday had been stuck all day in offices and factories why I was so suntanned! I fell asleep dreaming of the epic climbs I was about to undertake over the classic Alpine passes.

60kms

Thursday 12 July.

Today was the first "official" day of the Bike Adventures tour, so breakfast was supplied by them and eaten outside their small catering tent. I was pleased to note it was both adequate and with sufficient choice. Obviously it wasn't a "fry up", but most on the trip, like me, were more interested in fruit and cereals, so no problem. The tour included the services of a van to carry the luggage and so my trailer and main luggage bags were bundled in and I was away, carrying only a small rack top bag, into the Alps by just after 10.00am. The organisers had issued everyone with a route sheet, or you had the choice of riding with tour leader Kevin, who rode at the rear at the pace of the slowest. I elected not to wait. The route took me back up the valley I had ridden last night and I was soon at the foot of the Col de Madeleine (2000m). The road turned right and immediately started climbing up through the trees on its way to the summit. I had already looked at the road on the map and realised this would be a good (tough) climb, and so it turned out. The map showed at least 3 sets of double arrows (steep sections) along its 26km length. I enjoyed the climb, even though it took me nearly 2 hours, 2 bananas and 2 bottles of water to reach the top. I was "going well" and admit to taking pleasure in passing many of the other cyclists who were out on the climb. It never ceases to amaze me how popular cycling up mountains on the continent is when here in the UK most people couldn't even ride to the shops. The climb was hot and heavily wooded and there were very few places where any views were to be had, so I just kept going until the top was reached. The summit was quite busy with sightseers and racing cyclists which is very much the case on top of well known climbs in good weather and soon becomes the norm to experienced pass-stormers. The car borne sightseers look with awe at the cyclists, and the cyclists look self satisfied and with a quiet feeling of superiority at the motor assisted. The cafe enjoyed a steady trade of cooling drinks, ice creams and postcards. Anyone with an interest in "Le Tour" (de France) will have heard of the Col de Madeleine as it's often used by the organisers and is classed as an "hors Catégorie" ("above and beyond" the normal category of difficulty i.e. very hard) climb, and I totally agree with that description. Everyone has heard of Alp d'Huez, but that's only half the length of this brute. I'm pleased to say the views at the top were splendid, which was just as well as I ate my packed lunch and enjoyed the sense of achievement. Soon after I had sat down I was joined by a couple of Dutch cyclists I had passed on the way up and we sat chatting for a while like old friends. What a friendly sport cycling is!

The descent was very "technical" and great concentration was needed when switching through the zigzags. I didn't "push it", but still clocked up a maximum speed of 64km/hr (40mph) on the way down. Like the climb, the road was heavily wooded, so the opportunity to take photos of the views never materialised, and I was soon down 20km to the next valley and into the small village of St Martin de la Chambre. Without realising it I had passed the campsite and ended up in the village itself, but the delights of a café provided a consolation and some company as others in the group had done the same. Suitably refreshed, we toiled back up the hill a few hundred metres to the campsite where we were to spend the night. The site was well wooded and gave plenty of shade from the sun, and was quite busy, but not unacceptably so. One feature that was interesting was the owners had acquired some wooden carvings hacked, probably by chainsaws, from tree stumps and these were scattered throughout the site. Some had been painted, others left as naked timber, but all were pleasing to the eye. The tent and luggage was retrieved from the van and the tent was soon in situ. Included in the "package" with Bike Adventures was afternoon tea and cakes, so before showering I joined the others in the sunshine outside the refreshment tent, exchanging tales of our day up the mountain. My evening meal was cooked and more stories swapped before dark and bedtime.

Friday 13 July

Today we were to climb two interconnected Cols, the Telegraph and the Galibier, both regarded as monuments in cycle racing world. As usual, the day was warm and sunny and I set off at just after 10.00 having again stowed my kit in the van.

To get to the foot of the climbs it was necessary ride along the industrialised valley floor and the N6, for some 23kms to St Michel de Maurienne. Suitably warmed up but not wishing to push on too quickly, I stopped in a café with a fellow rider and topped up the energy levels with a cold drink and a cake before turning onto the hill.

Straight away the road went up and I climbed the 12kms to the top of the Col de Telegraph, taking 58 minutes to do so. The climb was hot and sunny, but also wooded, so views were few and far between. The top of this hairpin road was indicated by a sign (1570m) and I stopped briefly for my usual photo before dropping just 5kms down to the village of Valloire (1430m).

I had visited Valloire once before, in the summer of 1990 when I was on holiday with a lady friend and her young son. She was not a cyclist and was accompanying me by car. I would do a bit of riding, and then meet her for a coffee somewhere. As time was getting on, and we had to get to our accommodation, I had put the bike in the car and we were simply wandering around looking at the village. Unfortunately, I didn't notice the kerb was a bit uneven and I twisted my ankle as I stumbled. I heard a "click" but didn't know what it was until I tried to stand up again. I had broken a bone in the side of my foot! We had no time to try to find a hospital, so I simply hopped to the car and we carried on, eventually getting my foot plastered in the hospital at Annecy the next day. That put paid to any more riding, not just for the rest of the holiday, but also for a couple of months after I got home. Needless to say, I was careful this time!

Back to 2001, and time indicated a picnic lunch would be in order. I soon spotted some of my party sitting in the shade of a church doing the same. The Col de Galibier officially starts from Valloire but in reality it starts from St Michel de Maurienne as Valloire cannot be approached except by climbing over the Telegraph (two for the price of one!). Now with a bit of grub inside me I set off up the next 17kms to the summit. This was a much harder climb than the Telegraph and the pain started very soon. Unlike the morning's ride, which was hairpins nearly all the way, this one predominantly follows the side of the mountain, so is relatively straight for 9kms or so. This means it's hard as there is no respite until you reach the hairpins which start at the head of the valley. If I thought it was hard before, I had to rethink once I actually got to the hairpins. I thought I was struggling a bit until I realised I was catching one of our party who, due to a lack of sufficiently low gears on her bike, was actually reduced to walking the final few kilometres. The summit was finally reached, and I managed to find the energy to lean the bike against a pile of snow whilst I photographed the sign declaring the top at 2646m. This was a tiny area, but packed with cars and cyclists all enjoying the views and novelty of being so high. The descent is exciting and passes a tower dedicated to the memory of Henri Desgrange, the founder of the Tour de France. After a furious plunge to the junction with the N91, which is itself the top of the Col de Lauteret (2058m) (yes, you descend to get to the top of a Col!) you must either turn right and go down towards Alpe d'Huez and Grenoble, or left and go down to Briancon, which was my route. The 28kms descent to Briancon is continuous and exhilarating, with a speed of 60kms/hr (40mph) for halfway, then slowing to 50km/hr (30mph) for the final run in. It's on these fast descents that you really feel the air getting warmer, and with a temperature change of 1°C per 100m vertical rise, it's no surprise. Briancon, at "only" 1321m, felt positively balmy in the evening sunshine as the tents were put up. Unfortunately one of our party was already showing signs of food poisoning and had to be helped to erect his tent. The day's excitement

kept everyone chatting until dark and we all looked forwards to another epic day in the mountains tomorrow.

The story so far

It's 2001, Dave has quit his job and is enjoying the summer cycle camping in northern Spain and France. He has left Spain, spent time in the Pyrenees, joined and left a CTC tour near Bordeaux and has now made his way to the Alps where he has met another cycling group. They are accompanied by a van which is carrying the tents, so all are tackling the major Alpine Climbs unladen. Yesterday they climbed the mighty Col de Galibier and have camped in Briancon.

Saturday 14 July

The group breakfast was a chance to compare aching legs from yesterday's exertions and issue fresh challenges as to who would "fly" up the hills today. I kept quiet as to my fitness because I knew that as the week wore on, my companions would probably get tired, whereas I would, hopefully, stay the same. After all, I had been riding 60 miles a day for about 8 weeks now, pulling a camping trailer and so had a good base of fitness.

I had never been to Briancon before, and so took the opportunity to have a look around whilst doing my daily picnic grub shop. I suppose there might have been more than I could see, but I wasn't particularly impressed; it just seemed to be a central shopping street in a small town. I soon felt the lure of the first climb of the day and by shortly after 10.00hrs turned my wheels towards the Col d'Izoard. I could just have accurately said "...turned my wheels *upwards* to the Col d'Izoard" as that's exactly what happened. From the main road on the valley floor, even the road sign pointed skywards! I was glad I had popped into the shops first as there was no warm up, it was bang! – straight up the climb, no mucking about here!

The climb was pretty, with pleasant scenery, and even the tinkling of cowbells in the meadows – something I had heard very little of up to now. Perhaps the French don't go in for the practice more common amongst the German speaking Alpine farmers? This was a long climb, and as I knew there was to be another in the afternoon, controlled myself. I long ago worked out that the best way to climb was to settle into a nice rhythm in a gear I felt "on top" of i.e. that I was able to spin without a lot of effort. This still meant I was doing enough work to maintain a reasonable pace, within my heart rate, and seated on the saddle. Nevertheless, it wasn't long before my arms were shining and glistening with sweat in the warm sunshine.

Just as I approached the top, an hour or so after starting, I caught a cyclist towing a Bob-Yak trailer just like the one I had put in the back of the van this morning. I think he was German and I called out "Bob-Yak" as I passed him and pointed down to my rear axle, where the special trailer fixings were still attached. I was trying to show him I also owned one, but on reflection he must have thought I was daft! I knew the top was getting close as by now I was on the hairpins. The vast majority of mountain climbs end up with a series of hairpin bends to get the traveller over the crest of the hill, but as the road makers find these much more difficult to make, delay their manufacture as long as they can. I refer to these hairpins as the "final staircase" and am always glad to reach them, as it not only signifies the top is nearly reached, but also allows a change in pace as you sweep around the curves – steeper inside the bend, almost flat on the outside. The other indication of my height was the sudden increase in wind. Up until now I had been in the lee (shelter) of the hill, and any wind had swept way over my head, but now I was at the summit, it had come to find me, and find me it did.

The hairpins straightened out as the gradient eased, and I stopped to look back down the mountain and the other riders toiling away up the road (and a few plunging down in the opposite direction). The combination of wet clothes from sweating up the climb, and the cool wind, quickly had me delving into my bag for a windproof top. I was soon joined by a couple

of other riders and we all stood there grinning like idiots whilst the cameras were in action recording the scene.

There was a small museum dedicated to the Tour de France at the very top, but I wasn't bothered when we discovered it was closed. The Tour often goes over here, albeit a lot faster than any of us! I got someone to take a photo of me next to the tall monument at the top, which proudly stated "Col d'Izoard 2360m" before setting off down the other side. I was very surprised to find I had hardly got started when the road climbed again up past an area with loose scree on both sides of the road. However, that didn't last long, and I was off again. The road dropped quite quickly and I was soon out into a wide, pretty valley. Eventually I reached a deep gorge, with a fast river flowing along it and decided this would make a good lunch stop. I sat and munched my sandwich in a grassy field overlooking the river and watching the birds flying on their busy little errands. A bit more descending and I was into the small town of Guillestre, where some of the other cyclists in my party hailed me. They had found an ice cream shop, and the temptation to join them was overwhelming to a hot cyclist like me, and I was soon licking and slurping like the rest of them. I had taken the time to look at the route sheet before I set off in the morning and so knew the next climb was about to start when I threw my leg over the saddle once more. The climb of the Col de Vars was easier than that of the Izoard, but the word "easier" is a relative term – the Vars is still a major climb. Obviously, being a lot lower than I had been not long ago, the heat was greater, and I was soon melting as I set off up the hill which started right at the edge of town. The high Alps is ski-ing country and I found myself riding up through a typically unattractive ski-station just before the top. The road was under repair, and the surface was basically just rubble for 1 kilometre, but at the low speed I was riding, it was only uncomfortable, not dangerous, at least in this direction! By the time I reached the summit (2018m) the weather had started to deteriorate, and I didn't hang around for long. The onset of rain and a sudden drop in temperature gave a totally different feel to the day, and I pressed on down a rather bumpy, twisty descent until joining a main road and on to the day's destination, the campsite in Barcolennette. The evening was eventful, due to the cold shower (brrrr!) and firework celebrations for Bastille Day – the French national holiday for the start of the French Revolution in 1789.

111kms

Sunday 15 July

Not a good day today.

A cool and windy night had upset my normal "sleep of the dead" to which I had become accustomed on this trip, and I was in no rush to leave the campsite in the morning. In fact by the time I had been into the shops for some food for later, it was well after 10am before I got underway.

The road gently fell for miles, but the weather was not very promising, or perhaps I should say it was promising; but not promising anything nice!

The views down the valley would be good on a good day, but this was not a good day, and the short showers caused the cape to be on and off quite frequently.

By the time I had travelled about 10 miles I knew something wasn't right, and when I saw Penny (the tour organiser's partner) sitting in the van parked at the side of the road I knew what it was. It was with a grave face I approached her and told her I had to regretfully inform her of a theft. She looked appalled as I then went on to explain how someone must have crept into my little tent in the night, stolen my legs and left me with just some bits of string in their place. Eventually realising what I had said, and that it was a joke, she didn't think my little story funny, but then again neither did I as I tried to make my aching legs turn the pedals again!

The road continued down the valley, passing lakes and a small gorge, all of which would look great in the sunshine, but not today. My sandwich was taken overlooking a dammed lake and wrapped in a coat for warmth. The valley was obviously of geological interest, as there were a few shops selling various stones and rocks, polished and mounted for display and I found them very attractive, but couldn't contemplate buying one, as I would then have to carry it for months. I carried on struggling with my heavy legs until I reached the village of Chorges, where I spied some of the group sitting in a café so took the opportunity to stop again. The weather by this time really was threatening, and none of us were in a hurry to move, so I ordered a Croque Monsieur (toasted sandwich), chips and a coke. I didn't know it at the time, but this cured my leg problem, something for which I was soon to be very grateful indeed. More riders stopped and a party atmosphere started to develop as we sat eating, drinking, chatting and exchanging stories. Unfortunately, we sat a little too long, and by the time we had to leave, the rain had started in earnest and everyone that had them, donned capes and waterproofs.

We all set off together, like WW1 soldiers going "over the top" with a sense of trench humour about our situation. Within a short distance, our route turned right and immediately started to climb quite steeply up to the Col de Moissiere at 1560m. As we struggled up, the difference in fitness quickly showed and I realised my legs had been returned, as I found myself at the front. As we climbed up, so the rain poured down, both from the sky and from the upper parts of the hill and soon a mini-river was trying to wash my front wheel away. The surface was now a bit loose and bumpy, and I was getting wheel slip, made worse by having to ride out of the saddle due to the severity of the gradient. Another rider, Janet from the Wirral, a keen Audax rider, and so quite strong, was only a little way behind as I got to the top, and so decided I would wait for her. By now the rain was absolutely torrential, and my waterproof just wasn't up to the job, but was at least keeping some body heat in. This was no time for taking photos of the sign declaring it to be the top (the camera would have been soaked anyway) and we set off together, riding hard to try to keep warm as it was now cold. Both of us were starting to shiver, and so I told her to sit in behind me, and I "gunned it" as fast as I could for the next 16kms all the way to the campsite. Fortunately, Janet was strong enough to be able to follow and I didn't have to ease off at all, which helped with keeping warm.

"Keeping warm" is not really the right description, as it was more a case of "not getting too cold". After a while, we had to stop at a junction, and I glanced across at her, and, through chattering teeth, asked if she was OK. It was a stupid question really, as she was in as bad a way as me – soaking wet, frozen cold and shivering hard – and she said so, but with sufficient vigour to indicate she was not about to drop dead, at least not yet. She was suffering, but able to keep going, and so on we raced; me peering through the heavy rain, trying to stay out of the worst of the puddles and rivers which were now all over the road, and still read the route instructions in a plastic bag in the map carrier fixed to the handlebars; Janet glued to my back wheel, just gritting her teeth and wishing she was anywhere but here at this time.

More by luck than judgement, we stumbled into the campsite at St Bonnet en Champsaur, praying the van would be there with our tents and warm dry clothing. The campsite itself was in a village and had some rooms the locals seemed to use as a youth centre. As soon as we appeared, like drowned, frozen rats thrown onto the shore of a lake, people started to emerge from one of the buildings and dragged us inside. The earlier arrivals had beaten the rain, but realised we would be in a state and had prepared for our arrival by getting the caretaker to put the heating on. Was I glad to get inside! All the bags had been left in the building and our first priority was to get warm and we both started trying to find our bags with dry clothes in. Seeing us in such a state, the others had the presence of mind to tell us to just get into the warm showers first, then worry about clothes later. It's not until you get really cold that you appreciate what bliss a warm shower is! After coming round sufficiently to be able to think

clearly again, I pitched the tent in the still pouring rain and crawled inside. How pleased I was that by this time in my holiday I could get the tent up and be inside in less than 5 minutes. It was still pouring when I cooked my tea, and so, despite the potential dangers, cooked and ate inside the tent. It was 8pm before it stopped raining, and I ventured out again, just in time to see the van arrive. I was surprised to see it arrive so late, and even more surprised to see some of our party get out of it.

One of our party had been suffering with stomach problems ever since he had arrived at the start of the holiday, and so it had been decided he should be taken to the hospital at Bourg d'Oisans for treatment. The van had come straight to the campsite in the morning and deposited the luggage with the caretaker for safe keeping, then headed off to the hospital. Its return was delayed by a rock fall that meant a detour of 80 miles, so it hadn't got back to the site until after we had got in. Trevor, the driver then had to go out and try to find the rest of our party who were scattered like lost sheep in the mountains. These were the same people we had left on the climb of the Col de Moissiere. Unlike Janet and I, who had an extra layer to put on (waterproofs, although they weren't waterproof) these folks had taken no extra clothing with them in the morning, and also were not as strong. So they had decided to take shelter and wait for it to stop raining. As they had sat there, they had become so cold they were unable to think straight and were nearly hypothermic by the time the van found them at 8pm.

I've been cycling for over 40 years now and had some memorable rides, some good, some tough, and this afternoon's ride is up there amongst the tough ones.

98kms

Monday 16 July

After yesterday's awful weather I was relieved to wake to a dry day. It had been cold in the night, made worse by the fact I had still not fully warmed up before getting into bed, but a meal, some extra clothes and curling up into a tight ball had done the trick and I had rested properly. The day was cold as I ate my breakfast and put my still wet cycling shoes on. Fortunately, someone had discovered a clothes dryer and we had all made use of it so at least our clothes were dry. Dry there were, clean they weren't, but as we were all in the same boat, no-one cared. The tent was still soaking as I packed up and made my way into nearby St Bonnet en Champsaur for some lunch food, and I was actually quite glad to find we were soon climbing up the slopes of the Col du Noyer as this meant I would get warm. I was surprised to find myself overhauling one of our stronger riders as I made my way up what was quite a steep climb. What me surprised was that he was on a stripped down bike whereas I was on my heavy tourer, with a full pannier and top bag - after yesterday I didn't want to risk another freezing ride and had taken the precaution of taking extra clothes and food with me in the bags. My rate of climb both pleased me (the old competitive instinct is still there!) and also relieved me after the dead feeling I had experienced in my legs only 24hrs earlier. My late departure meant many of the party were already at the summit (1664m) and their presence together with the warmth of a café encouraged me to stop for a hot drink and photo. We set off together down a fast descent (me with my jacket on as it was still quite cold) into a lovely valley. Hurtling along the twisty road I saw some steel railings along both sides of the road as we entered Le Pin and took a quick glance at what they were protecting. I quickly shouted to my companions and we all retraced and peered over the edge of what I had realised was actually a short bridge spanning a deep gorge. It was as if the very earth itself had cracked as the gorge can only have been 2-3m wide, but about 15m deep with a small river rushing along at the very bottom. The tour leader joined us and admitted that he had passed over this bridge on at least 4 other occasions but had never seen the gorge. The long descent

continued and a short climb up past a reservoir brought me to my picnic stop at Corps, sitting on a bench outside the local Mairie (Town Hall). It was still a cold day and the low cloud on the mountains at about 1300m cut their tops off. I joined the others as we climbed easily up the Col de l'Homme (1207m) enjoying the views instead of concentrating on the climb. However, time was getting on, and by the foot of the Col de Parquetout (1382m) I had realised I would have to go on ahead to get to the supermarket before it closed or I would be hungry that night. The descent from the top was tricky as it wound its way down through the trees which were still holding the mist. Another climb up the Col d'Ornon (1367m) wasn't difficult, but the temperature was still low. A good descent got me onto the D91 where a right took me up to Bourg d'Oisans for 6.30pm and my night's stop. Aficionados of the Tour de France will know that Bourg d'Oisans is at the foot of Alpe d'Huez and with the Tour due to arrive the next day, the place was absolutely heaving. The Dutch cycling fans have adopted Alpe d'Huez as their spiritual home and the colour orange was everywhere. As a climb, Alpe d'Huez is not that difficult, it's just well known. The average gradient is 8.5% (about 1 in 12) but with some steeper bits of up to 12% (about 1 in 8), but at 12.8kms (about 8 miles) long, it still hurts! We were booked into the campsite and so had a space reserved for us, but those who hadn't booked weren't fazed by this, they just camped wherever there was space; on the roadside grass verges, roundabouts – anywhere! I was surprised to see that the local Police took quite a relaxed attitude to this, but I suppose they knew it was only for one or at most two nights whilst the Tour passed through. Whilst making my camp I became aware of some other English cyclists on the site, and amongst them was none other than Andy Wilkinson, a record breaking time triallist from the Wirral. I had met Andy at my club's annual dinner a year or two earlier so wandered over and spent some time chatting to him. For those wondering what records he broke, amongst the most famous are the Land's End to John O'Groats on both solo bicycle and mixed tandem. Tomorrow was to be a rest day and the day the Tour passed by on its way to the stage finish at the top of Alpe d'Huez, and so there was quite a bit of excitement as we went to bed.

98kms

Tuesday 17 July.

A rest day for me, but the others decided they would climb up the mountain to see the race go by. I had already decided that I would take a rest, so had a good lie in enjoying the warmth of the sun after it finally came over the top of the mountains and flooded the valley with its warmth. It had been quite cold again in the night, so I luxuriated in its warmth as I sat and ate my breakfast. I took the opportunity to wash some clothes as I felt I could rely on the sun to dry them before nightfall, which it did. I strolled into town and stocked up on a good selection of food for lunch, then returned and ate the lot – delicious! That's the good thing about cycling, it means you can eat (within reason) without fear of putting on weight as you burn it off as quickly as you eat it. I had already worked out that the bar on the campsite had a TV set and that it would be tuned into the live coverage of the Tour all day. So, when the others set off up the mountain, I set up in the bar, bought a beer and watched as the riders approached Bourg d'Oisans. When the time seemed about right, I then strolled to the edge of the road outside and watched the preceding motor cavalcade pass by. The progress of the riders themselves could be ascertained by the approach of the helicopter clattering overhead. This receives the pictures being sent from the motorcycle cameras and transmits them on to the TV stations. The transmission range is quite limited, so the helicopter has to stay close to the motorbikes and thus the riders. If any of you have seen the Tour live, perhaps you have had the same sensation as me when the riders do eventually get to you – a slight feeling of disappointment! After all the build up; the motorcade, the press on the motorbikes, the noise of the helicopter, the free junk being thrown from the advertising vehicles, the Gendarmes on

their big motorbikes, the sight of a lone cyclist, who is always much smaller than you expect him to be, and riding, seemingly quite slowly, close to the kerb and gone in an instant, is almost an anti-climax. Anyway, the locals all said it was a rider called Roux who was away on his own with the fancied German rider Jan Ullrich not far behind. The bunch, containing the American and race favourite, Lance Armstrong came through some 6 minutes behind. I waited long enough to see the main bunch pass by, trying to spot Armstrong, but it's nearly impossible to spot an individual in a bunch of up to 100 cyclists, all wearing multi-coloured bright clothing flash by. I had set my watch as the leader passed by, just to see how long it would take him to get to the finish and then returned to the bar to watch the final climb. I glanced up at the mountain as I did so, and you could easily see the route of the road by the white line of parked cars and motor homes lining the roadside all the way up! Despite being 6 minutes down at the bottom of the climb, Armstrong did what was expected of him (but not without a fight from his rivals) and caught not just Jan Ullrich, but also Roux, passing both and then taking another 2 minutes out of them, so taking the stage and the Yellow Jersey. It had taken just 39 minutes to climb the mountain. Remember they had already done over 100 miles that day, including two other major climbs, and this was their second week of racing - truly awesome.

My companions returned in dribs and drabs, saying how exciting it was at the roadside, but due to the crowds, they couldn't actually see much at all. I had to explain to them what I had seen from the comfort of the bar. Despite there being no fairy tale ending for the Dutch crowds, a party atmosphere developed in the town that night and a group of us watched a Dutch jazz band enjoying themselves outside a bar.

0 km

Wednesday 18 July

The organisers of our tour group knew that the roads would be quite busy today, with the crowd making its way home, and so had booked us in at the same camp again that night, so we were free to do our own thing again. After yesterday's good weather, we again got hit by rain in the night and much of the morning, so any plans for a morning ride were quickly revised until we found out what the weather was going to do. Fortunately it stopped around midday, by which time I had wandered into town with a friend and had mooched around in a cycle shop, but bought nothing. After lunch I decided I would ride the Alpe and see how long it took me. I had already ridden up this climb some years ago, but was far from fit at the time. I had also enjoyed a week's ski-ing at the top in the past, so was curious to see how much I could remember. The weather was still far from settled, so I took a pannier with me, containing a waterproof jacket. Whilst I wasn't going flat out, I was quite pleased with my time of approximately 1hr 17 mins to get up. I have to say my time was approximate, as I wasn't sure exactly where the finish line was, despite the race having been there less than 24hrs earlier – all signs of the race having been removed, either by the organisers or souvenir hunters. I think Armstrong doesn't need to worry about me as his time was some 38 minutes quicker than mine – and I had fresh legs at the start! I was certainly much fitter than the last time I rode up, as I never stopped, whereas the last time I had to stop for a few minutes rest. I was surprised to find I did remember bits of the climb and the town at the top. The former was enjoyable; the latter was not – just another concrete commercial centre built to accommodate the skiers in the winter months. The jacket was donned at the top as it was much colder up there (1860m) and I then set off to come back down again, but via a different route. I had spotted a quiet road leading up to the Col de Sarenne, which, at 1989m was actually higher than Alpe d'Huez, but overshadowed by its more famous neighbour. The descent from the summit was quite dodgy, with a twisty descent on a broken road surface, and I took it very easy indeed, not wishing to fall as it was very quiet and if I had been injured it would be some

time before anyone found me. This road brought me down to the main N91 road, where I turned right and descended more until got back to Bourg d'Oisans and home.
55kms

Thursday 19 July

The morning saw a very heavy dew coating everything and it was quite a wet tent that was wrapped up and loaded into the support wagon the tour organisers had provided. I was on the road by just after 10, having done my usual food shop. I was one of the last away but wasn't in the least bothered.

I followed the N91 main road downhill (the only choice is uphill or downhill!) along the valley floor for about 7kms to the D44 where I set about tackling the climb of the Col de le Croix de Fer (Pass of the Iron Cross). As was so often the way, the first bit was easy as it followed the river valley, but before long it started to go up for quite a long way to Le Rivier d'Allement. Surprisingly, there was then a sudden and quite steep (12½%) descent to cross over a small river. For much of this time I had been catching the other riders in my group, but as anyone who has tackled long climbs knows, it's much easier to climb at your own pace, be it fast, intermediate or slow, than to try to ride at another's, so I simply said "Hello" and kept going. By now the going was getting quite hard, and the day had also got hotter, so the sweat was dripping well as I climbed through two hairpin bends on my way to the top of a dam wall. I was quite pleased as I made my way up this section, when I found myself easily passing some other British cyclists, all on stripped down lightweights. I exchanged a few words of encouragement as I breezed past. I can't remember what it was, but probably "I'll be glad when we get to the start of the climb" or something equally discouraging! Got to get the psychological blows in when you can!

By now I could look down onto the surface of the large reservoir the dam wall was holding back, but still had to keep concentration on my effort as the road continued to climb. After a few more kilometres of effort, I passed the turn off to the left for the top of the Col de Glandon. With hindsight I should really have turned into the road, as the summit was only a short distance from the junction, but by now I was "on a roll" and had got the bit between my teeth and didn't want to stop. In any case, I was heading for the higher Col de la Croix de Fer at 2068m and wasn't interested in minor Cols like the Glandon at a "mere" 1924m! A final 2.5km got me to the top, where I was rather surprised to see so many people, mostly cyclists, standing around. I can only think they had mostly come up the other way, or had come up the Glandon, only sharing my route for the final stretch, as there hadn't been that many on my way up. By now the clouds had come over, totally blocking the sun and its warmth. This, combined with the height, made it rather cool and the jacket went straight on as I stopped. I was pleased to note I was the first of my party to reach here by some 5 minutes, so the legs were working OK. A cup of hot coffee and bite of chocolate helped revive me as I waited for my companions. Very soon, a tremendous commotion started just around the corner – it sounded like 1,000 bells all ringing. Intrigued, I grabbed the camera and went to investigate. It was indeed 1,000 bells ringing – each attached to a goat. A leather-faced lone goatherd and his dogs were desperately trying to keep control of the biggest flock of goats I have ever seen as he tried to get them from one side of the mountain to the other and over the road. Normally, goats, like sheep, stay together in a single flock, but this lot was so large it had split into smaller groups, each probably led by a more dominant goat with a mind of its own and this was giving the goatherd a problem. It must have taken about 10 minutes before they had all moved across the road and headed off to fresh pastures.

Knowing the descent would be cold, I wrapped up well, even pulling gloves on, and set off down to warmer pastures. The descent was indeed cold, and the road twisted and turned for some way until it got down to flatter land where hairpin engineering was not such a vital means of flattening the gradient. By now, my tummy told me it was lunch time, so when I saw some picnic tables at St Sorlin-d-Arves with a good view down the valley, but positioned out of the wind, I stopped again. The food and 500m or so lower altitude helped to warm me and before long I was off again. The road continued to plunge down, but at a more leisurely rate, and some road tunnels (fortunately four of the longer ones lit) held my interest right down to the valley and the main N6 road. I stopped to check the route details and Janet, my companion of the terrible day in the cold rain a few days ago, caught me. By comparison with the morning's efforts, the next 30kms were very easy, even though the road was gradually climbing as the main road followed the river towards that day's destination at Mordane. There was quite a lot of industry along the river side and much commercial traffic, but not enough to cause us grief. Our road took us through St Michel de Maurienne and past the foot of the Col de Telegraphe. We both looked at it as we rode past and remembering our ride up earlier in the holiday, smugly said "Been there, done that".

Our campsite at Mordane was rather exposed and the cold wind blowing up the valley, for which we had been grateful earlier as it helped us along, made tent pitching a bit difficult. It also stopped any sitting around admiring the view, not that it was very good anyway as the industrialisation was still much in evidence here. Mordane is at the northern end of the 13km long Tunnel de Frejus which takes traffic under the near 3000m Col de Frejus and into Italy. In fact we were only as the crow flies, some 6km from the border. I was glad for the warmth of my little tent and sleeping bag after a rather cold evening.

101kms

Friday 20 July

It had been a cold and noisy night and I was a bit sluggish in the morning. The cool evening had continued throughout the night, and as the normal noises of the day subsided, we had become aware of the noise from the heavy lorries trundling into the tunnel and the railway trucks rumbling along into their own tunnel.

The wind had brought with it some rain, and this, combined with the height, which was still 900m, explained the coldness and disturbed night. We huddled together around the breakfast tent, glancing up at the fresh snow lying on top of the higher peaks, not particularly looking forwards to the day. The wind made packing the tents away a bit difficult for the less experienced campers amongst us, and helping hands were offered and accepted. The low cloud and low temperature discouraged me from planning a picnic so I hoped I would find somewhere to eat out of the weather, but stocked up on energy bars and the like just in case.

Our tour leader had warned us to ensure we had spare clothing with us as we to climb over the Col de l'Iseran today, which at 2770m, would almost certainly be above the snow line today. I heeded the warning and rearranged my packing to free up a small pannier, into which, in addition to the usual jacket, I stuffed warm leggings and hat and gloves. I thought I was being a bit overcautious in also putting my Gore-Tex overtrousers in, but was later to be very glad I did.

After only a few kilometres I questioned why I was carrying all this lot, when the combination of the tailwind, a gentle climb and the sun breaking through made me take some clothes off! However, it was only a short interlude and the clothes went on again before long but not as many as before. Our route went east, towards the Italian border, but before long we turned off the N6 onto the quieter but hillier old road to avoid the traffic. By 12.15 I was ready for a short stop and seeing some others in a cake shop, joined them. The old road rejoined the main N6 for about 8kms, before we left it for good at Lanslebourg, turning left to

commence the climb to Bonneval. The next 16kms were, with one exception where we had a steep section, relatively easy. The tailwind and only having to gain 500m made it easy. What wasn't easy, though, was the thought of what was to come – the tough climb over the Iseran. By now, the snowline was ominously low, and at Bonneval-sur-Arc two of us decided we would stop and rest and refuel before tackling the major climb. A small restaurant did us proud and after a cheese and ham salad lunch washed down with a couple of coffees, I felt ready to do battle. An amusing incident occurred as we left the restaurant car park. We had to exit to the left and so I positioned myself to the left hand side of the right hand side of the road. This was done automatically. As I waited for my companion he stopped on the left hand side of the left hand side of the road, ready, like me to exit. He looked across at me and asked, in a puzzled way, where was I going?

“Like you,” I said, “I'm turning left, but you're on the wrong side of the road!”

This brought it home to me how much I had become acclimatised to riding on the “wrong” side of the road.

After less than a kilometre the real work started, and I had to leave my lunch companion to his slower pace than mine as the road kicked up. This was it, the Col de l'Iseran, on a bad day!

I glanced at my watch, trying to remember to look again at the top, and settled into whatever rhythm I could find, but the cold wind made it more difficult than it should have been. This was a hard climb and as it twisted back and forth, the wind was sometimes behind, sometimes in front, but always strong. The snow now lay in any shadowed area, and as I climbed, it crept out further and further, until it was fresh white everywhere. I was already wearing an extra layer, but had to stop before reaching the top to put leg warmers, hat and gloves on. I was as quick as I could be, but just the minute or so off the bike cooled me down considerably, and I was glad to get back on again and regain some warmth from my efforts. The last pull up to the summit was very cold and hard, and as soon as I got there, I headed straight into the welcoming café. Oh what pleasure it was to get in the warm. Some of the others were already there, not having stopped at Bonneval-S-Arc as I had done, and excited stories were exchanged of our individual struggles up this beast of a climb. I remembered to check my watch and realised it had taken 1½ hrs to climb the 935m from lunch, and it is only 14kms. A quick mental calculation put my speed at only 6mph! After sufficient hot chocolates and some pieces of cake, I ventured back out to the bike. The temperature was well below freezing and the wind chill and light snow blowing around made it a very unpleasant place to be, but not so bad that I missed the chance to get my photo taken beside the large summit sign. I look at the photo now, and shudder!

By now I was wearing everything I had with me, Gore-Tex overtrousers included and wished I had more to put on! The descent was very fast and very cold, the views were also pretty good, but it was too cold to keep stopping and fiddling with the camera, so I kept going down, hoping I would soon warm up.

The road took us through the skiing resorts of Val d'Isere and Tignes, but I wasn't interested in stopping and sailed straight through. By now I was on my own, and was following the road beside the Lac du Chevril, below which was our campsite, when I suffered an impact puncture, caused by a trench across the road in some road works. Although I knew the campsite was very close, I decided to change the inner tube rather than just walk the rest of the way. I have changed so many tubes over the years that I reckon I could do it blindfolded and was soon well into the task when I noticed a lady walking towards me with a large track pump in her hand and a smile on her face. There was no car nearby and the closest house was some distance away, so don't know where she came from. She said she had seen me struggling and thought the track pump would help. Well, I was a bit put out at this, as I wasn't struggling at all, in fact, I thought I was doing pretty well, but didn't like to cause offence by

refusing and once the wheel was back in the frame, used the pump to inflate it. I thanked her and continued, noting that she was walking back to one of the distant houses. How could she have got to me as quickly as that?

All became clear a few minutes later when I arrived at the campsite and started to tell the tale to a rider who had not long been in himself. He asked exactly where this had taken place, then laughed after I had said at the end of the road works. He explained that he, like me, had also punctured at the same spot, probably on the same trench and had also changed his tube, but had struggled a bit with his pump until he got the better of it. He, like me, was also dressed in long dark leggings and a fluorescent yellow top. The lady must have seen him stop and struggle, got the pump from the shed or whatever and set off, by which time he had moved on, only for me to take his place!

We were still at an altitude of 1800m, on a cold day, and the thermometer at the campsite showed 9°C as I cooked my evening meal. I was glad I had my own means of cooking as the rest of the party set off to find a restaurant, a task that was to take them some time. Just three of us stayed at the site that evening, huddled in the tea tent, with one of the cooks on for warmth, and chatted about the holiday and life in general.

92km

Saturday 21st July

It had been very cold in the night, with the temperature probably nearly down to zero, but I had taken the precaution of ensuring I was wearing plenty of clothes before getting into the sleeping bag, so had not suffered any adverse effects. Nevertheless, the morning still saw me wearing hat, gloves, leggings and two jackets whilst I ate my breakfast! Once the sun gained enough height to get over the top of the surrounding peaks, the temperature rose quickly, and it was soon warm enough for us all to pose for a group photo, with bare arms and legs, and big grins on our faces! There was still a bit of a chill in the air as I set off on the descent from Tignes to the lower part of the valley, but I still enjoyed the pretty scenery. I had looked at the map before departing, and had decided to take a bit of a detour if I felt OK, which I did. We were pretty close to the border with Italy, and I realised I could visit Italy and pull in another Col at the same time, so at Sainte Foy Tarentaise swung off across the side of the hill before I lost too much height, and headed towards the Col du Petit St Bernard. A short stop in a village store stocked up my provisions and I headed eastwards towards Italy. My detour took me through Le Chatelard which, situated as it was on the steeply sloped mountainside, meant the road was very steep in places, and the 12% (1 in 8) sign was much in evidence. The steepness at least meant the views across to the other side of the valley, and back up towards Val d'Isere were clear, and in the now warm sunshine, were beautiful. The tops of the mountains were topped with brilliant white snow, clearly silhouetted against the deep blue sky – fabulous!

Soon I had joined the N90 just below the village of La Rosiere on the main road as it climbs to the top of the pass. Once on this, the gradient became easier and my speed increased bit. A granite memorial at the roadside caught my eye and I paused to read its inscription. It seemed that in 1964, here, in this lovely spot, 16 children and their monitors were killed, but it failed to say why or how - whether a vehicle crash or snow tragedy I don't know, but it must have torn the heart out of many families at the time. I continued up the easy climb with little traffic passing, even though it was a recognised route from France to Italy, and for that I was grateful. Just before I got to the top, I was surprised to see one of our party coming the other way, having presumably just done what I was still doing. Had I known, we could have ridden together for the day. The gradient eased as I got to the top, and there, on a wide plateau, was the border, complete with Police and Customs officials. There was a barrier at the roadside, but like they always are, it was raised. The Italian Police were stopping a few cars, and all

motorbikes, but took no notice whatsoever of me or any of the other cyclists who were already there. I later realised they were only stopping the few they did because there was to be a “G8” meeting in Italy in a few days time and they didn’t want economic protesters disrupting the Heads of State Summit. I passed through the customs area and stopped in Italy for a picnic lunch in the shadow of a statue of a Pilgrim erected as a memorial to those brave enough to have walked over in times past. The reason for their journey was in the name of the pass “St Bernard” and also the hospice for weary travellers. After the cool start, it was glorious sitting in the sunshine in the early afternoon, but I soon had to retrace back into France as I had more descending and climbing to do to reach the day’s destination. Before I did though, I took time to enjoy the view across the snowy tops that stretched all around. At a height of 2188m, there weren’t many points higher.

My return back down the climb (all the way this time, not just halfway) gave a good aerial view over the large town of Bourg St Maurice, nestling deep in the valley. I had noted the distance at the summit, and it wasn’t until some 34 kilometres and about 15°C had been added before I reached the bottom – wow!

A right turn off the valley floor road and I was climbing again, this time towards the Cornet de Roselend and its 1967m summit. The first 10kms were both very hot and hard - the tailwind causing the former, the gradient the latter. I wasn’t sorry when it started to ease just after the point where there was a good view of Mont Blanc off to the right. It was still a good few kilometres away, but was unmistakable, standing proud of its neighbours, glistening snow on its peak. By now, the mountain had opened out into what was obviously a wide glacial valley, and the climbing was easy for the next 5km, only steepening again for the final 5km to the top. The top was a bit of a surprise. It’s quite normal to see a bit of private enterprise in the shape of a café or small family-run hotel, but not the many market stalls that were laid out for business on this one. By this time I was weakening and a couple of fresh peaches were bought and quickly consumed before the obligatory photo stop next to the summit sign. It was getting to be late in the afternoon, and the sun had lost some of its fierceness as I set about going down the other side. However, I had hardly started before I had to stop again. The view nearly took my breath away! Now I knew why the stall holders were there – it was obvious people just came up to stop and admire the view, rather than just to go from one valley to the next. Below the summit is the Barrage de Roselend, actually a man made lake, with a dam wall used to generate electrical power using the massive hydraulic power available. The water was a wonderful turquoise blue and the surrounding hillsides cloaked in trees and open grassy pastures just set it off a treat. I simply sat on the grass and stared, desperately trying to remember every detail. The photo I took totally failed to do it justice. A few years later, the “Etape du Tour” (effectively an amateur “race” that follows one of that year’s Tour de France routes and open to thousands of riders) came this way, and some of my clubmates rode it. I have to say that, whilst I’m sure they enjoyed the total event, it was, in my opinion, a waste to simply race over those roads, past that view, without stopping to admire it. The descent continued, and at one point, the route plunged down through a steep, heavily wooded hillside in classic style, hairpin after hairpin until the valley floor was reached. The road continued to descend, down through the small town of Beaufort where food was purchased, and on again to the campsite just outside Albertville, where at 7pm I came to a halt. This was the same site we had set out from some 10 days earlier, and so, for all the others in the party, was the end of their holiday. But not for me! To celebrate, we went for a meal to the nearby ancient village of Conflans. The evening meal was a pleasant social occasion, but represented poor value for money, and most importantly for a hungry cyclist, just not enough to eat!

126kms

Sunday 22nd July

As yesterday was the last day of the holiday for everyone else in the party, they had already started packing up, and some had even left for the airport before I woke at 9.00am. I had already decided that, for me, today was to be a rest day, so was in absolutely no hurry to get moving and enjoyed a leisurely breakfast watching everyone pack their gear and dismantle bikes into bike bags etc. As usual it was a warm and sunny day, so I made use of the sink and washed clothes and hung them out to dry, whilst chatting to the few who were still on the camp. As the day wore on, more and more were driven back to Grenoble Airport in a hired minibus. By mid afternoon there was only one or two of the tour organiser's team left on site, so I rode a few kilometres into Albertville for exercise, food and a coffee in one of the local cafes. A quick phone call home reassured me all was well, and I retired early to bed.

Monday 23rd July

Oh what a noisy night! Despite being almost deserted, the campsite still had occupants, and a French couple in their late 50's or early 60's occupied a caravan quite close by. We had exchanged polite pleasantries but that was all. After going to bed early, both I and the three people from the tour organising team were looking forwards to a good night's sleep, but at about 11.30pm, the French couple started to have a noisy row. It was warm, the caravan windows were open, and we were only separated from them by at most two layers of thin nylon, and as you can appreciate, the noise was hardly reduced at all by the time it reached us. At first it was pretty even, with both of them giving it some volume, but after a considerable time, she gave up and left him to just go on, and on, and on, and

After several attempts to just ignore it and go to sleep anyway, I was fuming and looked at the watch – 1.30am and they (he) hadn't stopped at all and my patience was broken. I worked out the French for "Please shut up – it's 1.30 in the morning and we need to sleep" and in my loudest, strongest voice shouted it out with as much vigour as I could. Instant silence – oh bliss! Why hadn't I done it hours ago? Next morning I never saw the man, just his wife, who just carried on as if nothing had happened. My cycling friends had also suffered the same noise as me and I suspect I only beat them to it by a few minutes, as one man reckoned he was on the point of getting up and bashing on the caravan door and giving them a good dose of English abuse! At least my way didn't cause an International incident.

By about 10.30am I was all packed and ready to begin the next phase of my long vacation – the ride home. I had reckoned it would take me about 2 weeks to get back, and, with a National Championship time trial to organise when I got back, today was the day I should be heading home. I bade farewell to Kevin, Gabby and Trevor the tour organisers, and also to Malcolm, who you will remember as the unfortunate who had been ill nearly all the time. Malcolm had retired, so other than the unpleasantness of being ill in a foreign land, his loss of time wasn't as disastrous as it would have been if this had been his annual leave. His plan was always to stay in France and move on to see some other folks, so he just carried on anyway. The usual supermarket stop for food stocked my provisions and off I trundled, with Bob-Yak trailer in tow once again. I had planned my route to go via the beautiful town of Annecy, but in this part of the Alps, there aren't that many choices of road, so I was forced to follow the main N12. Trevor had said to keep my eyes open as he thought there would be a cycle track, always better than a Route Nationale, and I did find it, but before too long it petered out. For the next few kilometres I was forced to fight for road space with the juggernauts on the main road until I reached Faverges. Now I'm quite a brave rider, but I really did not enjoy that stretch of road – very narrow, busy and noisy. The signs tried to take me around the bypass, but experience tells me town centres are friendlier to bikes than bypasses, and much more interesting, so in I went. I was proved correct, and the real bonus was I then picked up another cycle route. This was a beauty, following an old railway line, smooth tarmac, very gently falling down towards the beautiful Lac d'Annecy, where it skirted alongside the lake, just

occasionally being dissected by a road which would no doubt have been a level crossing years ago. The only downside was that it was popular with rollerbladers. Now I've nothing against them, they are doing effectively the same as me, exercise in the fresh air and moving along. The problem lies in the fact that they tend to take up quite a wide part of the track as, with arms swinging out and that strange sideways gliding motion, they move from one side to the other. Provided they see you coming, no problem, they just glide in a straight line as you pass by. It's when you approach them from the rear, and they don't hear you coming. A simple shout is perfectly adequate, but not much use when they are wearing headphones! Of the two, juggernauts or rollerbladers, I would still choose the 'bladers, so stayed on the track.

By now, my stomach was calling and I left the track and made my way across to the lakeside for a picnic. Lac d'Annecy is one of the most beautiful lakes in France. It's a wonderful turquoise colour, caused by the trace elements washed into it from the surrounding high limestone mountains, themselves very beautiful, and many clothed in trees. They have sufficient height and hot thermals (rising columns of hot air) to be very popular with hang gliders, and there are always a good number soaring way up in the air, their highly coloured wings causing stunning visual contrasts with the deep blue sky and small fluffy white clouds. A number of years earlier I had been here on holiday and watched as the participants launched themselves by the simple act of running off the edge of the cliff! I had been tempted to have a go myself, but fortunately, came to my senses before I had parted with any money, or broke my kneck.

The spot on the lakeside where I chose to sit had a small pontoon leading out from the water's edge, probably used by locals to reach small boats without having to wade into the water. I hadn't been there long before a young couple went onto the pontoon, stripped off and started sunbathing. Whilst they were wearing costumes, they couldn't have been smaller, and the young lady just didn't bother with a top at all. I suppose it's a British thing that, whilst I was the first to arrive and remained fully clothed, I was the one that felt a bit embarrassed!

Replenished, I moved on and made my way into the centre of Annecy, which is one of the prettiest towns in France, and often seen on Calendars. There is a very famous view of the old town, with an ancient stone tower with the river flowing past, and the whole scene is just crammed with flowers. And that's just how it is in real life, truly beautiful. The shops are under colonnaded arches and the whole town centre is just stunning. As I had been here before, I had no need to spend long looking and headed off towards my next stop. Whilst the route in had been very cycle friendly, I didn't find that to be true of the way out, or perhaps I just wasn't lucky as it took some time for me to find my road. The N508 was very busy and unpleasant and I left it as soon as I could at Sillingy and followed the lanes beside the main road, but it was quite hard going, with short little hills destroying any chance of a pedalling rhythm. It wasn't long before I had to rejoin the main road and the traffic again near Frangy where there was a lovely steep descent – great. Frangy was big enough to have a supermarket for my evening shop, so I stopped, and was tempted by a big ice cream (or two!) to help cool me down. There was a campsite here, but the day wasn't finished as far as I was concerned, so pressed on to Chene en Semine where there was a site marked on the map. The 4kms climb up into Chene was quite hard, but what made it even harder was the fact that I had to turn around and go back down again, as the campsite was on the road I had left earlier. At about 6pm I found the site, which was big, but almost deserted. There was a large school party camping there, but the site was heavily wooded and I could pitch in the shade of the trees some way from them, so they and their noise were no problem to me. After having had company in the evening for the last 10 or so days, it felt a bit strange to be alone again, but the evening was warm, the tea was soon cooked and eaten, and a gentle stroll set me up for my bed. Before I finally shut up shop, I added up my mileage since leaving home in mid May. With the 97kms ridden that day I had now ridden some 5158kms (3205 miles).

The story so far;

It's summer, 2001; Dave has quit his job and is enjoying the summer cycle camping in northern Spain and France. He has left Spain, spent time in the Pyrenees, joined and left a CTC tour near Bordeaux. He has left them and headed off to the Alps and another group and spent 10 days with them as they rode over many of the major Alpine Passes. Having completed that, he is now on the final leg of his trip and heading northwards towards the Channel. Yesterday he left Albertville and rode beside Lake Annecy before heading towards flatter lands. He has camped at Chene en Semine in a large but quiet site.

Tuesday 24th July

The night was comfortable as the campsite was basically in a wood and where I pitched was on a bed of leaves and soft twigs, so even off my Thermarest sleeping mat the ground was soft under knees. As usual it was another hot day as I left about 9.30am and followed the N508 to Bellegarde. Despite being a Route Nationale, the road was fairly quiet, as a nearby motorway had taken most of the traffic and the descent into the town was enjoyable. A supermarket supplied food for lunch. My road followed a gorge and was quite hard in places as it climbed and dropped along the contours but the effort was worth it as the scenery was interesting. There was some interesting civil engineering to be seen at Nantua where the nearby motorway was elevated onto a very high viaduct before finally going straight into a tunnel halfway up a rockface. I bought a cake in a shop and stopped to eat it beside a beautiful lake on the edge of town. The water was a wonderful turquoise colour and so clear that quite large fish could be seen swimming some way down. My destination for the day was Bourg en Bresse, which some may recall hosted the "Semaine Federale" some years ago. This is the French equivalent of the British CTC's "Birthday Rides" cycling rally, but multiplied 10 fold! The D979 would take me there and was quite acceptable and so I stayed on it for the rest of the day.

Acceptable it was, easy it wasn't. I had seen the Col du Berthiand on the map, but at only 780m didn't take much notice. After all, when I have pulled the Bob Yak trailer up the Tourmalet at over 2000m, what's a pimple like this? Well, it wasn't very high, but it more than made up for in difficulty. There were long stretches of 10% and it made me get out of the saddle for long periods and I was glad when I got to the top. Almost as soon as I got up, the road plunged down to Serrieres sur Ain where the road instantly climbed again. I couldn't face it straight away and decided this was as good a place to stop for lunch as anywhere and found a field to stop in. As I approached Cyzeriat the gradients started to flatten and the final run in to Bourg en Bresse was totally flat, but the heat of the day was now quite intense as I had a quick look around the town, which is famous for breeding prize winning chickens. My evening meal was bought for cooking later, and I couldn't resist buying a box of three ice-lollies (for less than the price of one in a shop) and sat down outside to eat the lot all in one go! I had my eyes on a campsite just north of the town and headed off along the main road to it, but the traffic was awful, so soon took to the lanes to Montreuel. I found the site easily as it was well signposted, but it was rated as a 4 star site (so expensive) something I didn't really need or want. So when they put out the "Complet" sign ("Full up") as I pulled up outside I was sort of pleased, except that I had now to find somewhere else. The chap on the gate said I would get in at the Camping Municipal at Mantenay – Montlin, a few kilometres further on, so that's where I went. This was much more suited to me, cheaper and less crowded. My evening was enlightened by a pleasant conversation with a Swiss couple also cycle camping and we compared notes and swapped stories before bedtime.

114km

Wednesday 25th July.

My Swiss friends strolled over for another chat before I left, and the man asked to try the trailer, so I quickly swapped his quick release for the special one needed to attach it and he had a short ride round to see for himself. I think he was impressed, as, despite the extra weight, it doesn't affect the handling of the bike once underway.

Close to the campsite was a very large stainless steel sculpture of a cockerel, commissioned by a local farmer and chicken breeder to celebrate the connection with poultry, obviously a major element of the wealth of the area. It certainly was a magnificent sculpture, very large and very shiny! The D975 took me through St. Trivier-de-Courtes after which I cut across to Cuisery via Ratanelle. Cuisery is the French equivalent of our Hay on Wye - everywhere there are second hand bookshops and shops selling out of date records. Of course, with this type of merchandise, the people that go with it are also a little "out of date" and there were quite a few characters and rather academic looking folk around. The easy, but rather boring, D933 took me to St Oroux-sur-Saone and after a picnic stop in some totally isolated woods, to Bey on the N73. The River Saone (hence the "sur-Saone" meaning "on the Saone") is a big, slow moving river and I crossed it at Verjux. As usual, the French take pride in their towns, and the good people of Verjux had taken some considerable time and effort to create a wonderful flower display in an old boat on one of the greens. After yesterday's inability to get into the campsite, I went straight to the one at Beaune (nearly getting squashed on the way by a large lorry!) arriving at 4pm. I was amazed to find I still was too late and had to continue another 6kms to Savigny les-Beaune. Here I got in, but it soon filled up behind me. Later on I realised the town was near the junction of two motorways and was obviously used as an overnight stop by people travelling long distances rather than just stopping locally. A young German cycle camper came in and pitched near me and we struck up a conversation. He admitted he should really have gone on another 50kms before stopping, but decided the heat was too much - it was pretty hot. My evening was spent eating, drinking and resting. 104kms. I had now ridden 5377kms since leaving home in mid May, 10 weeks ago.

Thursday 26th July

I was away by about 8.30 and it was already full sun and hot. The day just got hotter and hotter as it wore on, until about 6pm when the clouds came over a bit, but with it the humidity went up. I headed North West on the D2, climbing easily until Bouillard, when the gradient kicked up hard, but at least it was a quiet road. I took a left then a right through Antheuil and a descent to the D33. The next few miles were lovely, with a gentle fall along a pretty valley all the way to Gisse. After a hard climb up to Sombernon, where I bought my lunch and enjoyed an ice cream, I realised I was making good progress at last. My route then continued northwards on the D905 for the rest of the day. This was a pleasant road, with a good surface, and a gently falling gradient. At Grosbois there was a large lake, and unlike England, where the attitude seems to be one-one is to enjoy themselves, they were positively encouraging swimming in the lake! Vitteaux made a convenient water bottle refill point and the cake shop persuaded me to indulge my sweet tooth. Having stopped, I made a lunch stop out of it where a park bench was my seat. After brick, concrete and stone built houses, it was a pleasant change to see some half timbered houses starting to appear, and these became more frequent as the day wore on. I was obviously moving into an area where oak and carpenters skills were more common. An easy, and quite fast descent beside a busy rail line brought me to Montbard by 4pm. At first site, the 4 star campsite looked to be beyond my budget, but was surprisingly cheap at only 37Fr (£3.70) so in I went. I later realised why the site was cheap - the town itself was very dull, so perhaps they had to do something to encourage people to stop in the area. Despite having spent so long in the country that is the wine-making capital of the world,

I had rarely treated myself to a bottle, but decided tonight would be different. So by the time I had laid my (by now quite tiddly) head on the pillow, I had sunk a whole bottle of the local red.

106kms

Friday 27th July

The proximity of the campsite and in particular, my pitch, immediately adjacent to a fairly busy road meant I was woken early by the traffic noise, but this was OK as I needed a new map from Montbard before I could set off. My road from yesterday, the D905 was still my road today, and I was soon at Ancy le Franc. Had I not decided to stop at Montbard, Ancy would have been my next stop, and a pleasant place to stop it would have been. Although only a small village, the atmosphere and large Chateau gave a nice feel to the place. The ride to Tonnerre saw lots of ups and downs and I wasn't sorry to stop for a short food and rest break when I got there. I had noticed that I was near the Burgundy Canal, a 200kms long canal connecting the River Soane which flows southwards into the Mediterranean, to the River Yonne which flows northwards into the Atlantic and thus enables a boat to sail from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. The canal itself runs northwesterly in the Burgundy area, and after Tonnerre I found the road followed the canal for along way, affording good views of the boat traffic. Well it would do if there were any traffic, I only saw one boat! The name of the town of St Florentin sounded nice, but the reality was a lot different as it was very industrial, and had nothing of any interest to this lone cyclist, and I didn't stop. I left the D905 and joined the D30 on its journey north. My ability to find somewhere pleasant for lunch deserted me that day and the best I could manage was the porch of a deserted factory, but at least it was a modern one.

By now the day was again hot and humid and the climb out was very sticky and unpleasant, but the long descent down the valley to join the N60 where I turned left to Villeneuve l'Archeveque ("Bishop's Newtown" in English) helped to cool me. The campsite here was a bit strange. It was in the grounds of the local sports arena, and appeared to have no security or privacy whatsoever. The "pitches" were simply laid out beside the running track, and there was no gate or anything to keep out anyone who fancied poking around. There were no other tents or campers there and it took me very little time to decide I wasn't going to stop. Any lingering doubts I may have had were soon dispelled by the sign spotted on the way out warning about "The risks....".

I simply went into the local shop, bought my evening meal and continued to the Camping Municipal at Courgenay. Perhaps it was the overcast and rather dull sky which later turned to thunder and a few spots of rain, but this really did seem a dreary place, but at only 12 Fr (£1.20) a night, why complain? At least it was safe, with other campers in attendance. After tea I decided to have a wander around the village and perhaps have a beer, but my first impression was proven to be correct. The whole place seemed dead on its feet – there wasn't even a bar or café open to have a drink.

124kms

The story so far;

It's summer, 2001; Dave has quit his job and is enjoying the summer cycle camping in northern Spain and France. He has left Spain, spent time in the Pyrennees, joined and left a CTC tour near Bordeaux. He has left them and headed off to the Alps and another group and spent 10 days with them as they rode over many of the major Alpine Passes. Having completed that, he is now on the final leg of his trip and heading northwards towards the

Channel. Yesterday he rode beside the Burgundy Canal and has stopped in the Camping Municipal at the very quiet village of Courgenay.

Sat 28th July.

After the very dull and threatening sky of the evening I wasn't surprised to be woken in the night by heavy rain battering the tent, but none came in. However, the water container had fallen over in the night, which wasn't a problem as it had the top screwed on, but it had knocked over the milk carton and this had disgorged its contents across the outer groundsheet. Fortunately, the liquid had not soaked anything of any importance that I couldn't easily wash off, and I was able to wipe away the mess fairly easily, but it did mean no milk for breakfast. As breakfast was a major part of my energy source, I wasn't going anywhere without something inside me, so a banana, black coffee and energy bar were consumed instead. The local village shop was open as I rode by and so I stopped and had a bowl of cereal with milk on a seat before I continued.

Yesterday's scenery was not very inspiring, and today's was just the same, the wide, gently rolling hills with crops from horizon to horizon, very few trees and hedges and a few scrappy villages. The roads were very quiet as I made my way Perceneige, Fontaine Fourches and crossed the River seine at Noyen sur Seine. The river here was quite wide, but with no feature of interest, I didn't waste a photo on it. The D49 and D1 took me to Provins and a shop for food. This was actually quite a nice little town, and having a campsite, would have been a good place to spend the night, but it was far too soon, so I contented myself with a look around its cobbled town centre streets. Despite being only small, I struggled to find the correct road out, but did find a "white" (indicating it was a very minor road indeed) lane which took me to St Hillier and its church for my lunch stop. By now the humidity was getting very high and the air was very "heavy". As I continued, the sky got darker, and thunder started in the distance. Before long it was also flashing lightning nearby. I realised I was getting vulnerable to being struck as I was in the middle of a large open area, on a metal bike, and the highest thing for hundreds of yards. I was seriously considering getting off and lying down on the ground, but then spotted a small wood just ahead and to one side of the road. I got out of the saddle and sprinted as hard as I could, wondering all the time if there was going to be a very bright flash and loud bang, but just made it in time. Within seconds, the heavens opened and it was like someone had emptied a bucket above me. To say I was frightened would be quite correct – I was scared. However, the trees did their job and gave me sufficient shelter to avoid the lighting and get a waterproof on. I simply stood there for some 20-25 minutes wondering all the time if I was safe, until it passed over, and I was able to continue, albeit with my waterproof on. I can recall a Police car driving by at some time during that period and the officers peering out at me. I have no idea what they thought at the sight of this poor creature huddled against the trees with a bike and strange trailer attached. I would have needed to be a mass murderer before they would get out of the dry car in that downpour. By the time I had got to Beton Bazoches and ridden the dead straight D204 road to La Ferte-Gaucher, the sky had cleared, the humidity dropped and the air was fresh again. Storm? what storm?

My map had indicated the campsite at La Ferte-Gaucher would be a good place to stop, but it was a very unattractive place, filled with the sound of car horns celebrating a wedding, so I pressed on. Rebais came and went – nice, but no campsite, then the long uphill drag along the D68 saw me starting to "blow up" which called for an emergency snack break. The site at St Cyr-sur-Marne was OK, but at £7 a night (OK it was 4 star graded, but I didn't need all their wonderful facilities) and with another site only a bit further on at Ferte-sur-Juarre, kept the wheels moving. This was a good move as the town and the site were both bigger and better and the site was cheaper. Whilst pitching my tent, I was joined by an elderly Irish couple who

were also cycle camping and we exchanged tales of the road. After a large tea (the mini blow up I had experienced had told me I was getting low on reserves) I wandered into town. I was well into WW1 territory now (close to the River Marne) but was still shocked to see a memorial in the town to 3888 British soldiers with no known grave who had died in the area. All their names were engraved – a poignant site indeed.

115kms

Sunday 29 July

As I was settling down to read my book last night prior to falling asleep the night air was split with the sound of a large fireworks display over the town, but I never found out why.

Being Sunday, I had already decided today was to be a rest day, so lay in for a while, then had a leisurely breakfast whilst watching the Irish cycle campers pack up before they went to church, leaving their kit in my safekeeping. It wasn't until noon that they returned, so they were either very devout or had stopped somewhere on the way. They were in no hurry as their destination for that night was a hotel near Charles de Gaulle Airport (Paris) ready for their flight home on Monday. This brought home to me how I was making progress on my way back to the coast. My pitch was in the sun, whereas the one they had just vacated was in the shade and with a day of full hot sun in the offing again, I took the opportunity to drag my little home across to the shade. Not "hot bedding", but "hot pitching"!

It wasn't until about 4.30pm that I felt the urge to stop eating and resting and take a little exercise, so had a look at the map for somewhere to go of interest. I only wanted a gentle leg stretch, but got a bit carried away once I was astride the bike. I had seen a British WWI Cemetery marked on the map not too far away, so headed for that. My route followed the River Marne for a while before climbing up onto a ridge. At the top of the ridge were signs to Bois de Belleau - a WWI memorial site. I turned off the road and into the wood along the gravel tracks and noticed the artillery guns lined along the tracks that run through the middle of the wood. I quickly learnt that this was the site of a major battle in June 1918 between American and German forces, and so many men on both sides were lost that the French Government had declared the whole area a memorial to the fallen. I later discovered the wood had been won and lost some 6 times during the battle, which lasted for some 20 days, resulting finally in the Germans being repulsed. It was a strange feeling as I rode slowly through this beautiful broad-leafed wood that it had been the site of so much destruction, pain and suffering all those years ago. I returned to the road and round the back of the wood, the ground dropped away onto a flat plain. This plain was where many had been slaughtered as the Germans had machine-gunned the Americans as they tried to cross the flat land. I found the British Cemetery, which was relatively small, but still contained 130 men, including 5 from a WWII crashed aircraft. Only a few hundred yards away was the American one, but, unlike ours, the USA lock their cemeteries out of hours and I was just too late to get in, but it was very big, containing the bodies of the 1,877 Americans who died out of the nearly 10,000 casualties.

Also close by was the German cemetery and this was still open. It didn't look very big, with perhaps some 100 or so headstones, but upon investigation I saw two long areas across the back of the site. I was shocked beyond belief when I read that in these two "ossuaries" (bonepits) lay what was left of 8000 men. Obviously they must have been so badly mauled that it was impossible to separate one man's remains from the next, so they were all thrown into a common grave. The battle left such a mark on the Americans that they later named a WWII aircraft carrier the "USS Belleau Wood" in tribute. For their part, the French renamed the wood "Bois de la Brigade de Marine." (Brigade of Marines' Wood)

I found my route back to my tent quite hard after this, but whether it was the gradient and poor surface or my feeling of inner sadness sapping my energy, I'm still not sure about.

58kms.

Monday 30 July

By now I was near Paris, but really didn't want to get embroiled in it or its outskirts, so took time to plan my route. I could head NW and thus keep Paris SW of me and this is what I chose to do. The D3 ran in my direction and so I followed it to Etrepilly along rather boring open, rolling roads. More evidence here of WWI with a small British Cemetery containing the 131 men killed in 1914 clearing enemy forces from the village. The village shop in Ste Soupplets supplied my lunch food. The gradients started easing a bit here, becoming less rolling, but the heat was still very high, 32°C according to the thermometer outside a pharmacy. The D401 took me to the N2 where I stopped beside a large roundabout to check the map. Within seconds, an open top car pulled up beside me. Despite my very deep suntan, it must still have been very obvious I was British, as the young lady driver had no hesitation in speaking to me in English. Having established that I was OK, she revealed she was from Wolverhampton but had lived in France for some 12 years and was loving it. Having continued through Othis, I took my bike into a wood for a lunch stop near Plailly. Soon after I was aware of what seemed like a convoy of open vans towing large caravans along the lanes. I rounded a bend and realised it was a group of itinerants looking for a new site to stop. How did I know? Because the men from the first few vehicles were busy ripping out the posts and chains guarding the entrance to a large field so that they could get in.

They saw me looking and just glared back, defying me to do anything, which of course I wasn't going to do, outnumbered as I was and kept going. Daft I may be, stupid I'm not. I went a bit further north than I had intended and ended up in the Foret de Chantilly, an enormous wooded area north of Paris, popular with the rich who had built some enormous houses in the openings. By now I was getting desperate for water in the heat, and had not spotted any fountains or taps available to the traveller and had to resort to buying water (and an ice cream) in a shop in Viarnes. The D922 led me onwards through Asnieres sur Oisy to L'Isle Adam where I got a bit lost in the suburbs. The noise of kids shouting and screaming with pleasure drew my attention to an enormous swimming pool beside the river. It was obviously very popular in the heat and was packed. The heat was starting to get to me a bit now, and I didn't read the map correctly, which resulted in an unnecessary climb up a short but very steep hill to Parmain after which the road plunged straight back down again to Nesles-la-Vallee. But at least there was a campsite at Nesles and it was very suitable. The heat was still overpowering and even after a shower and a change of clothes I couldn't stop sweating. In conversation with a Frenchman camped next to me who had been listening to the weather forecast I found out it was due to remain just as hot for the next couple of days. After tea I set out to find a bar and a beer, but couldn't find a bar that was open!

108kms

Tuesday 31 July

Another rather boring day, with a headwind to make life tough but finishing off with a surprise.

As my neighbour had predicted, the night was very hot and sticky and I didn't get much quality sleep, so was reluctant to get up and it was 9.30 before I hit the road. The wind was in my face, quite pronounced and continuous all day as I continued my way northwards to the Channel and home. This, together with a "heavy legs" day meant a tough day. My road to Arronville, the D151, passed by a small stone monument that proudly declared this had been the landing site of the first hydrogen balloon flight in August 1783. My ride through Amblainville and Chaumont-en-Vexin was memorable by its lack of anything of interest - just

boring, large prairie like wheat fields with no hedges or trees and nowhere to shelter from the wind.

I was relieved to stop for some shopping in a supermarket at Chaumont, but gave up after an interminable wait for the check out and ended up just buying a loaf in the local boulangerie (bread shop). Yet more war memorials on the roadside, one in particular to the 4 crewmen of an American bomber shot down and killed on their first sortie over France in December 1943. I managed to get to the front of the food queue in Trie-Chaupelle and celebrated with a Coke, cake and yoghurt to lift my spirits. Still following the D105/D923 the heat was building despite the ever-present headwind and at Gisors I stopped to eat. The balcony of the Town hall provided a suitable spot in the shade and was the only time I was glad of the wind as it helped to cool me a little. I was seated overlooking the street, and had a grandstand view of a young lad on his bike riding 10 laps of the block. Whether he did this every day or was trying to impress me I don't know, but it provided me with some light entertainment. After lunch on the road to Bezu-St-Eloi the thought occurred that it might make life easier if the front panniers were moved to the rear of the bike. This I thought, would lessen my wind resistance in the headwind, but all that happened was the bike handling deteriorated, leading to a definite feeling of lack of stiffness in the frame so I quickly moved them to the front again. My legs were still not working very well as I turned off the main road at Bezu and passed a large Chateau at Heudicort. Checking the map I was relieved to see I only had another 16kms to go before I could stop – I really was having a bad day. Despite getting to Morgny, which was only about 4kms from my destination, a feeling of tiredness and drowsiness overcame me to such an extent that I simply had to stop in a field and sleep for 15 minutes. At last I arrived at Lyons-la-Forêt and dropped down off the plateau into the campsite. I was so relieved to stop I would have paid anything they asked, so the £3.80 fee was just a bonus. Tent pitched, I strolled into town for some shopping and to look around. I was astonished. After spending all day in the most boring scenery, this place was beautiful, with half timbered houses, flower baskets, an old circular covered market hall with open sides in great preserved condition and busy little shops and cafes all making for a lovely atmosphere. Much to my surprise, I found myself buying postcards for the folks back home and wishing I had taken my camera with me. Back at the site, a little stream running beside my tent provided the perfect place to cool a couple of cans of beer before I hit the sack.

72kms

Wednesday 1 August

Having not taken any photos of the town last night, I headed in as soon as I was packed, but the sun was now in the wrong quarter and much of the gay atmosphere had gone, but took some shots anyway. My destination for today was the coast and Dieppe in particular, so Tronquay then Vascoeuil soon passed under my wheels. The roads were getting less boring now and my legs were a bit better, but what really lifted me was the wind was less and sometimes even behind me! The temperature was cooler and I was starting to enjoy life again. A gradual climb up a pretty valley road through Elbeuf and a short drop down saw me stopping for food in Buchy. In a similar manner to Lyons-la-Forêt, this had not one but two open covered market halls built in a very traditional style and very picturesque. It was a bit soon to stop for lunch, so I rode on to St Saens and a seat in the main square. By now I was almost sure I could smell the sea (I couldn't of course) and started a bit of a charge for home, rattling off the miles as I went through Bellencombe and Argues. At about this time I had run off the edge of my detailed map and, being too tight to buy another for just one day, was relying on the one of the whole of France. However, at a scale of 16mls to the inch I had to feel my way a bit unless I wanted to ride on major roads (which I didn't). Dieppe is of course,

a major town, so well signposted, and I was soon in the outskirts, fighting through the heavy traffic and along the potholed streets.

My plan was to sail home tomorrow, but had no idea of ferry times, so headed straight to the terminal where I booked a place on the 11.45 Seacat sailing to Newhaven. £28 lighter I went in search of the Tourist office for campsite details, but being too hot, too bothered and too confused in this major town, soon gave up. Logic told me there would be a site along the coast somewhere and I pointed the front wheel westwards along the clifftops towards Pourville.

Pourville is in the gap in the cliffs where, in 1942, a small force of Canadian troops landed as support for the unsuccessful raid on Dieppe by Allied troops. There is a memorial in a prominent position beside the bridge on the coast road that records the gallant action where many brave men lost their lives and others ended up in captivity until 1945.

I was right about the campsites, there was a choice of two in Pourville itself. The first was close to the beach and very busy. I didn't even look to see if they had room or the price, I didn't want to stay there. The other site was a little way inland, in fact 4kms up a quiet lane but much more to my liking. A little bartering with the site owners got me a reduction on the usual price as I only had a tiny tent and no car and I was soon pitching beside a clear stream on some well kept grass. I needed food so returned to Pourville, but ended up almost in Dieppe before I found anywhere.

On my way out of the campsite I had noticed a small group of Dutchmen sitting drinking heavily, one of whom was getting a bit noisy, but took no real notice as they were no real problem to me or anyone else. However, when I got back from shopping, one of them had decided one of their cars ought to be moved, and he had tried to do it. In his drunken state this was not a clever move and he managed to reverse it into one of the many trees, breaking the rear windscreen and putting a large dent in the lid of the boot. His noise got louder and louder and more and more abusive to all and sundry, until eventually the site owners called the local Police who tried to calm him down. My camping neighbours, themselves Dutch, were appalled at this behaviour and when eventually the Police handcuffed and led away their fellow countryman they gave the Police a round of applause!

111kms

Thursday 2 August

There was no sign of last night's drunken Dutchman as I was packing away. Whether he was in a cell somewhere or sleeping it off in his tent I neither knew nor particularly cared. What I did care about though, was that this was to be my last day in France, and perhaps in sympathy a little light rain was falling as I packed up. The waterproof stayed on for only a short while as it was too hot to ride in and in any case the rain soon stopped. I had an hour or two to kill before I needed to be at the ferry terminal, so a wander around a street market allowed me to buy some local produce as presents for friends when I got home. In the queue waiting to be loaded were 3 other cyclists, two French just starting out, and one Briton on his way home. The French kept to themselves, but I soon struck up a friendship with the Brit. On board, we both headed straight for the restaurant and food as the sky started to blacken. Soon it was a full thunderstorm, with much bashing and crashing, but fortunately the sea remained pretty calm and the food stayed down. As quickly as it had started, and as soon as we got near to Newhaven, the storm stopped and the skies cleared again. My friend and I had been chatting and he said he would be catching the train at Newhaven to take him the 20 miles or so to his home in Haywards Heath, Sussex. I had not been looking forwards to the final slog back up through London to Leicester and realised I had an opportunity here. My sister lives in Croydon, South London, which is on the same train line as Haywards Heath and this would be a very convenient way of avoiding the busy roads. At Newhaven we both jumped onto the

waiting train (no booking of bikes on these trains) and within 15 minutes were away. By 3.15pm I was at my sister's, having negotiated the new Croydon Tramlines in the wet (heavy rain again).

22kms

Next day I caught the train from St Pancras to Leicester and was home.

I had been away since May 16, a total of 79 days, having ridden some 6,092kms (3785 miles) an average of 48 miles per day.

Low point – the day in the Alps when it poured and I got frozen.

High point – the view of the Col D'Aubisque in the Pyrennees.

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