

“The West Surrey Cyclist” - July - September 2011

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THE DANUBE DELTA (part 2)

By Derek Tanner

Our luck was in. They had a room and the credit card came out. In her haste to make the most of it Anne managed to pull the curtains down in the room before locking herself in the bathroom determined to use the entire contents of the supplied foam bath and shampoo. Meanwhile I refixed the curtain's Velcro fastenings. An excellent meal in the riverfront café brought a fitting end to a day that for a while had threatened to be a disaster. The 4-star breakfast was superb and provided enough spare food for lunch. It was Sunday and we were out on the quiet roads before 0900 hrs determined to make the 90km needed to get to Novi Sad in Serbia. There were some nice views over the river as we descended into the little villages before climbing back on to the plateau again. After Ilok, where we stopped for coffee, we elected to stay south of the river and crossed the border near Nestin. Again the border guards made a good play of officialdom before eventually stamping our passports and passing us on to a surly customs man for interrogation. At times like this it's safer to let Anne do the talking. From here the countryside looked a lot poorer and the amount of fly tipping on the roadside could have won an international award. At the end of the day we followed a couple of local cyclists over the bridge and into the town centre where we managed to check into some apartments listed in our guide. We used the internet facility in the room before venturing around the corner for our

evening meal.

Remnants from breakfast provided lunch again and a quick turn around the centre of town in the sunlight was a joy before heading back across the bridge and past the old fortress to rejoin the traffic. Coffee at Sremski Karlovki was an unexpected surprise. We had stumbled into the impressive old town cramped around the square, with a tourist information centre highlighting the nearby monastery-rich region of Fruska Gora. We were sorely tempted to take a few days out to explore the region. Another long climb took us back on to the plateau. This gave us big views across the flood plain as we cycled through orchards and vineyards, past a packing station and down the gorge and hairpins into Stari Slankomen. We decided to stop at a motel by the motorway on the outskirts of Novi Banovci, having covered 75km or more for the fourth day in a row. Getting an evening meal was probably the most difficult part of the day when the waiter, not trusting the deal I had made with the waitress in German, phoned his friend (an English teacher) for Anne to confirm it by relaying it back to his friend. Walking back to the motel we found a sign proudly proclaiming that this was the point at which funding for the “Danube Euro Cycle Route” ran out!

We had breakfast on the patio in the sunshine before setting off on a track across the fields, but all too soon we were on the main road with the buses on the outskirts of Belgrade. We resorted to the footpath on the final bridge into the town centre. The miniscule tourist information counter in the railway station was really helpful and, considering that we were in a capital city with the local signs written in Cyrillic alphabet, we were soon checked into the 5th floor “Monster Hostel” with the bikes safely resting on the wall at the end of the bed. Friendly enough with all the facilities we required, it was by design not the quietest night and Anne had to venture out in her nightie to complain.

A big electric storm came through as we sat in the restaurant that night and we were glad that we had decided to stay over an extra day. Exploring the massive citadel that stood overlooking the junction of the Sava and Danube rivers took most of the day before heading off to the St Sava temple. Started building in 1935 and still not complete it claims to be the largest orthodox church in the world, holding 12,000 people.

Getting out of town was a steady 12km climb mixing with trams and all manner of other traffic. After several 3km-long climbs we had done over 40km by the time we got to Smederovo, cold, hungry and tired, our first option for an overnight stop. We were revived by a roadside Serbian fast food restaurant where the owner helped us negotiate the Cyrillic alphabet menu. Moving on we were then accosted by a cyclist claiming that he was opening a cyclists’ hostel and touring service and wanted a photo of us to support his brochure and business plan. He then followed us up to the town centre church for more photos where we found two German cyclists touring through; he clearly thought it was his lucky day. After skirting around the back of a large industrial complex where we had to negotiate the unloading of half a dozen army tanks into the road, we were off across country again to check into the Hotel Duna just off the main street in the centre of Pozarevec. After spending half the night listening to the disco across the road and trying to catch a mosquito that persisted in flying around during quiet bits of the music, we found, at breakfast, that there were other cyclists - a German couple and a German on his own.

It’s a sign that things could get difficult when Anne starts taking an interest in the Route Management Plan. Her first move next morning was to refuse to check out of the hotel until they had booked a room in a hotel ahead, thereby committing us to a 87km ride to Golubec.

The first half of the day was spent cycling through an area where “brown coal” was being mined in open cast. We could not resist a detour into the site that claimed to be the centre of Roman civilisation in central Europe. Not having time to take the full 3-hour tour, the curator would not let us leave until she had escorted us through the underground burial chambers to see the C3rd frescos - amazing! Then after a 30km slog through featureless terrain to the ferry crossing at Ram, suddenly the scenery changed and we were cycling through flocks of large white heron-like birds on the river bank. We were approaching the widest part of the Danube (5km) and in the distance the mountains loomed up marking the entrance to the “Iron Gates” gorge. In Veliko Gradiste, we were decoding the detail instructions in our German guide book, when we were overhauled by two young boys off on a weekend’s cycle camping trip. Going our way, they guided us the last 20km to our overnight stop.

With a mere 60km to the next hotel, we left again with prebooked accommodation in Donji Milanovik. We were in for a memorable day’s cycling. The old Roman fortress town of Castrum Columbarum was impressive and after we entered the Derdap National Park we were soon climbing through tunnels up to 2km long, interspersed with dramatic views across the river to Rumania. We took lunch at the site of the Early Neolithic village (circa 5,000 years BC) discovered on the banks of the river. A final big euphoric descent down into Donji killed the day when we found that we had a 1km climb at 14% back up to our hotel. Nevertheless the view from our room overlooking the river was amazing and the menu had an English translation. Over dinner the German cyclist from Pozarevac turned up. Expecting him to be ahead of us, he explained that the climbs through the gorge were too hard and he had been forced

to stop to spend a day in bed. Breakfast gave us a good taste of a previous communist era. The very butch waitresses were even still dressed only in underwear, white nylon coats and trainers.

(to be continued...)

FRENCH CYCLING TRIP

By William Lowries

(This online version includes William's photos which were not printed in the original.)

Day 1: William Lowries, Jonathan Barnardo and John Stanton decided that it would be fun to cycle round Brittany, carrying our own luggage, so we set off from Guildford at about 11am on Monday 25th April, en route for Portsmouth. It was a warm, sunny day and I had worked out a route on little roads basically just to the north-west of the A3. It was very quiet and pretty - we went via Elstead, Churt, Headley, where we had a pub lunch, then continuing via a lot of tiny places we had never heard of, and some steep hills, one in particular being apparently 20%. Mercifully it was short, but we were all having to get used to the effects of the panniers, which as well as slowing one down on the hills, also affected stability when cornering and standing up on the pedals. We crossed the South Downs near Hambledon, and it was soon after this that John Stanton, having needlessly attracted the attentions of a dog which chased him, slipped on some loose gravel and had a tumble. This shook him up a bit, but fortunately our MO pronounced him fit for further travel after a restorative cup of tea. His wounds were impressive but superficial (according to JB) and ***** painful according to JS.

Daily mileage 54.

Day 2: Arrived at St Malo around 8:15. Initially we had to use some major roads to get out from the town and across the river to Dinard and beyond. Soon we were able to get on to some much more local roads. These took us through beautiful, rural scenery, mainly flat and quiet. I got a puncture, which we fixed OK. Today we were cycling due west, round (or through) St Brieuc, and then pretty well due north to just beyond Paimpol. We had our lunch at Les Ponts-Neufs near St Brieuc, where we bought some filled baguettes from a shop. Navigation was fine until around St Brieuc when it got a bit complicated. However, John Stanton had brought his sat nav, (known affectionately as Doris, or Emily) which only had a battery life of about three hours, but was invaluable for getting us into and out of big towns, and bailing us out if we got lost. It did the trick on this occasion and we got past St Brieuc, via a cycle path alongside a motorway on a big scary bridge.



The next stage of the ride up to Paimpol was difficult because the only available routes were on roads which while not dual carriageway, were busy and not much fun with big lorries thundering past. We additionally had a headwind to cope with. Then suddenly the road would become a motorway and we were (it seemed) left to our own devices on little village roads, where there were few if any signposts. We asked directions and managed to understand enough to get us back on the right road and eventually ended up in Paimpol, an attractive port. I asked directions in the tourist information office where a woman with a very deep voice confirmed that our hotel was another 6km along the road north. We reached it with considerable relief at about 6.30 and were welcomed warmly, the bikes housed and we were very comfortable.

Daily mileage 84.

Day 3: After a good breakfast we set off back through Paimpol where we picked up some provisions for lunch from a supermarket. We initially struggled to find the right road and did a few extra miles as a result. The French road signs are definitely not user friendly for cyclists. Often we seemed to find that the road you want is not signposted - until you have gone down a particular road, and then the road you want branches off that one. You seem expected to work it out by intuition. The maps are of limited help - not usually enough detail. The day started overcast and cloudy. Eventually we found the D15 which was the road we wanted and made good time. We had our lunch by a church in a town called Bégard. The road was pretty quiet, the countryside rolling, beautiful - well kept fields, houses and gardens. And lots of dogs, but always either on leads or chains or fenced up, fortunately as they all barked ferociously as we cycled by. The sun came out and it got warmer. We reached our place of rest about 4pm and I rang the bell and was directed in English almost as limited as our French to a big house a few hundred yards away. We were met there and showed round what was really a sort of farm house, with a lovely suite and there was a kitchen, and living and dining area downstairs, and also a large garden. Unfortunately, the lady explained that their restaurant was closed that day and we were wondering whether we could get a taxi to the nearest town (Morlais - 10km distant) or order a takeaway, when she returned to say they would provide a meal and bring it to us for €10 each, which we readily agreed to.



When the lady brought the meal it was fantastic! Huge slabs of very tender gammon, with dauphinois potatoes, and some sort of grain, plus a tart, and cake and strawberries, with a bottle of local cider and a bottle of wine. And although there were only three of us, they had provided portions for four, which we felt it would be rude to waste. We feasted gratefully in the spacious dining room.

Daily mileage 50.

Day 4: We had been instructed to frappe at the door for our breakfast in the morning so at 8am we duly presented ourselves and were rewarded with a (by French standards) lavish petit déjeuner served by the mother of this family enterprise in the conservatory off their front room. What a great place!

We set off about 9am and made quite good time until we reached an infamous town rejoicing in the name of Huelgoat. We had coffee here sitting in a café by a lake in the sunshine. When we left the town or attempted to, its infamy was revealed in that it led us on a circular tour of the surrounding countryside for about an hour. We were looking for the D14 and a town called Loqueffret. It is infuriating when you enter a town on the same road (the D14) that you want to leave it on, but all signs disappear. Anyway, we eventually found the right road after a lot of experimenting, but not before (I am ashamed to say) I had had a bit of a sense of humour failure over the issue. It's pretty hard work cycling anyway, but quite maddening when you find you've been going the wrong way for half an hour and you've still got a long way to go. Once we had found the right road, we made good progress, although the route was relentlessly up and down. We arrived at Douarnenez eventually, to be faced with a final big hill into the town. The town looked pretty from a distance and the harbour was lovely - a deep estuary full of classy looking sailing boats. The hotel was a town centre one and was fine, we were made very welcome and the bikes stored safely.



Daily mileage 70.

Day 5: A good breakfast in the terrace room which overlooked the valley. We asked the hotel man's advice about the route to Lorient and he said there was a disused railway line which would get us all the way to Quimper, which indeed it did. It was very easy, mostly slightly uphill, but very gentle and of course quiet. It was an enchanting ride, much shrouded by trees, but with glimpses of the countryside and some parts were more open. Old railway cottages etc remained although I don't think we saw any stations.

At Quimper we had a coffee and then struggled to escape the town's clutches as per usual. This time we turned to Doris and she came up trumps, although it still seemed a circuitous route. Much of the rest of the journey that day was a bit tedious. The day was overcast and the road was busy, though not dangerously so, and dull. We had our by now usual lunch of baguettes, cheese and ham in Rosporden. On leaving the town the signs had disappeared but I asked a local whose advice proved sound on this occasion. As we got closer to Lorient it started raining, but only briefly. Starved of local colour we detoured via the coast and completed our journey to Lorient via a number of beaches which in the overcast weather did not look inviting. Incidentally, one exception to the signpost condemnation was Quimperlé where the D765 to Lorient was signposted frequently and consistently. Again tonight of course a town centre hotel, but again a good welcome and the bikes were ensconced in a locked area (but open to the elements. Fortunately it didn't rain overnight). The hotel was not serving dinner so we went out to an Italian restaurant.



Daily mileage 70.

Day 6: After an even more substantial breakfast than usual, we headed off out of town eastwards using Doris to guide us, which she did and we were out on to more local roads quite rapidly. Throughout the day we managed to navigate easily, mainly because the roads were well signposted. Only once did we need to ask directions (in a florists shop) and these were again sound. We were on very small, quiet roads, and for this reason and probably because the weather was nicer, the cycling and scenery were much pleasanter than yesterday. We had our lunch in a pretty town called Colpo. We were all pretty tired by the time we got to our destination, Ploermel. The hotel was part of a golf complex - quite snooty and the reception was less welcoming than all our previous ones. Firstly we were told to go to another reception 50 metres away, where a bloke came out and quite peremptorily told us to move our bikes. Clearly they were an eyesore for their guests. Another man came out and showed us to our cabin/chalet, which was large but had seen better days in terms of décor etc. It had a hob, fridge, microwave and a few other very basic cooking facilities, but no kettle or toaster. The hotel restaurant was très expensive so we cycled back to the supermarché and bought pasta, bread, eggs etc so we were sorted for our dinner, breakfast and lunch the next day. We enjoyed our dinner of filled pasta, bread and salad, washed down with some beers and red wine. There was then a thunder storm and it rained quite heavily for a bit. When it stopped we went out for a short walk along the lake. The place is a little bit like Centre Parks, but not nearly as well kept.

Daily mileage 64.

Day 7: Our only DIY breakfast today - poached eggs which made a change although they are not quite the same without toast. We set off for St Malo along roads which initially seemed very hard cycling - just up and down. As soon as you'd climbed one crest you could see the road dipping down and then rising up again. It was very difficult to get much of a rhythm going. After a place called Plélan, we turned more northwards and the roads began to level out. We stopped for lunch in Bécherel which seemed to be the French equivalent of Hay on Wye - all bookshops, and there seemed to be a book fair of some sort going on with a big tent in the square. On leaving Bécherel we nearly went back the way we came by mistake but fortunately realised in time and were soon on our way on the D27 going

towards Dinan. This was a very fast stretch of road - basically flat, with some downhill bits, and I suspect the wind was now at our backs for a change. We left this road after a while as we had no desire to find ourselves in Dinan itself. We skirted round and in the process approached a town called Pleudihen where we were confronted by Route Barrée signs. We had encountered these several times and always ignored them and found there were roadworks which could easily be circumvented on a bicycle. On this occasion however, as we approached the town, there were barriers across and people charging for admittance. As we approached we were shouted at in French. We attempted to explain that we simply wanted to get to St Malo and were Anglais etc etc, which all seemed to enrage this officious gent. He eventually gave up and we went through and on being shouted at further by some firemen, we walked the bikes. Then we realised what was going on. It was a carnival procession - coming straight towards us! Fortunately we were able to get on to a side street and avoid it, along with some comedy cyclists dressed in drag. Jon found this so amusing that he promptly fell off his bike. However as he was scarcely moving at the time he protested that did not count as a proper fall. The judges have since ruled on this and agreed that it counts as ½. We escaped the barrier at the other side of the town without any further discussion and continued on our way. We concluded that it was all the fault of the signpost people - again. They should qualify what they mean by Route Barrée, whether it is merely a road works or a comedy procession, ie: whether it applies to cyclists.

We stopped further along for coffee and excellent chocolate crêpes, and then completed the run into St Malo using Doris. Our hotel was in the old town, and we were on the third floor. Our bikes were allowed into the hotel, virtually blocking the fire escape. However, in the first and only failure, there was one double bed and one single. In deference (presumably) to my seniority, I was allowed the single and Jon and John shared the double, which didn't seem to bother them. As the hotel was not serving dinner, we went out and had an excellent meal in one of the hundreds of restaurants in that part of the town.

Daily mileage 76.

Day 8: We bought our breakfast in a take-away pâtisserie in the town and also bought some provisions for lunch on the boat. The journey on the ferry was long and somewhat tedious and it got rougher as the journey went on. We arrived in Portsmouth and made it to the station just in time to catch the London train which got into Guildford at about 8:15pm. Incidentally we got talking to another couple on the train who had been cycling round Normandy (much flatter apparently). They had had a similar experience to us with the carnival - but had carried on and found themselves in the middle of a cycle race and were cheered as they came up the high street.

Total mileage was c470 miles, an average of 67 miles per day, and at an average rolling speed of 12.6mph.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

JULY 3rd: Farnham Charity Bike Ride, ...

JULY 17th: 100 mile and 75 mile rides (option of a led ride or use route sheets). Pirbright Hall car park, 8.00am start. £2 (Roger Philo 01483 233381)

AUGUST 21st: Tour of the Hills 115 km, start 10.00am, Tour of the Greensand Hills 52km, start 10.30am, Shere Village Hall (Don Gray 01483 810028)

SEPTEMBER 18th: Freewheeling and pace judging competitions, Seale Craft Centre 10.45am (finish by 12.30pm) (Dane Maslen 01483 721856)

SEPTEMBER 18th: CTC Cycle Champions Women-only sportive ...

OCTOBER 29th: AGM, Bird in Hand, Mayford Green. Coffee at 10am. More details in the October magazine.

To find details of all these events go to: <http://www.westsurreyctcda.org.uk/> and click on DA Events.

For the other events, ...

**Deadline for next issue: September 1st. Get your cycling stories in to the editor now:
claire_hooper2003@yahoo.co.uk**

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Web page by Chris Jeggo. Last revised: 15 January 2014.

