



Anne & Pete's epic holiday

The adventure began at Plymouth, catching an overnight ferry to Roscoff. Then, early the next morning we cycled off to see how our planned routes would work out.

We planned to camp for 12 out of 14 nights so we had tent, sleeping bags, cooking equipment as well as clothes, wash bags, first aid kit, tools and more, all in panniers on the two bikes. Just to make sure we didn't travel too light, we had a good length of power cable, adapters and a laptop and chargers for our phones and gadgets.

After twenty or so miles on roads to Morlaix, we picked up the old railway that is now a greenway. For the next day and a half we were to follow this to the heart of Brittany to find the Nantes Brest Canal.

It was a hot and dusty ride with three long inclines to climb and then roll down the other side. The scenery was fantastic and the old railway buildings had real character. Most were empty hulks, some were used as hostels but all seemed to be kept in reasonable repair. Once, these must have been really busy places.



We made it to Carhaix the first night and then on to Rohan the next day. Each evening we pitched the tent in a municipal campsite. They are brilliant; simple, clean and cheap with showers, hot water and proper toilets! We used pitches with electric hook-up which sometimes amused the person in charge and more than once we got it for free. In fact a couple of times we didn't pay anything at all because the campsite was open but there was no one in the office to pay.



The first part of the plan was to get to the canal and then follow it pretty much all the way to Nantes. We did find the canal on the second day at Gouarec but our route kept us on the old railway until the evening when we got to Loudeac where we had a short road ride to Rohan and camped at the side of the canal.



Alongside French canals the 'chemin de halage' are much more substantial than English towpaths. They are wide, well surfaced and excellent for cycling. The drawback is that they are totally flat so there's never any freewheeling, you pedal

all day long; and they are very dusty in dry weather so bikes, bags and riders get very dirty by the end of a day. A pack of floor wipes cleans up the bags and the bikes. The scenery along the canal changed from wide open flood plains to narrow, cliff-lined river gorges.



Castles, cliffs and wide open plains: the changing scenery along the Nantes Brest Canal

< Josselin and the chateau

approaching Redon >



< close to Pont l'Oust



Five days into the journey we got to Nantes. We left the canal a good way north of the city and eventually headed round the west side of the urban area to cross the river Loire on a ferry. Nantes has good cycle paths which are totally separate from the main roads. In fact, signs prohibit cycling on many major roads with totally segregated cycle lanes. The cycle paths are therefore very safe even in busy traffic. We soon worked this out and made our way to the suburb of Basse Indre and found the free ferry. It was simply a case of queue, board, cross and carry on; no fuss, just a boat going to and fro across the river.

Bac de Loire



There was a good campsite on the south side just a few miles from the ferry. The next day we set off from there into the Vendee and to the coast. The Vendee is very flat but after a couple of days we were cycling along right next to the sea, stopping for ice creams and coffee and camping in a wood for free one night.

Cycling along the coast was really good. The air feels so fresh, the path undulates without ever being too steep,



the view keeps changing and it goes on for miles and miles. We had a good dose of rain on the day we headed inland but even that day brightened up by lunchtime and we were dry when we got to the île de Ré bridge.



Riding on water is what the journey to Loix felt like. The long narrow causeway is just wide enough for two bikes to pass. It was an overcast day with a spit of



rain but very enjoyable nonetheless. One track led out to a deserted beach



Nine days after we began, our holiday destination came into view; the île de Ré just off the coast from la Rochelle. This group of islands is a cycling paradise with scores of cycle tracks to explore, visiting the towns and villages. But first we had to cycle over the bridge! Nearly two miles long and 190 feet high. Not nice in a wind.



where we had a picnic lunch.

After stopping for coffee at St Martin de Ré we found so many marked cycle tracks out of the town and still managed to find the wrong one



even with maps and GPS. Still the ride through the vineyard was fun and different.

Île de Ré is a wonderful place for a cycling holiday. This was our second visit. In the past we have cycled from one end of the islands to the other and back, a fifty mile ride in itself. There are dozens of cycle hire places and we found one who repaired Anne's broken gear cable.

La Flotte was our base for three days' rest. It's a busy tourist-trap port full of bicycles and tight roads with traffic. In the evening it's much quieter and a great place to go and find a galette or moules.



Some friends who were staying nearby came onto the island to meet up and have a meal and explore the local market packed with all sorts to eat and drink from the island. It's a riot of colour and aromas with cheeses, wines, fish, sausages, fruit and veg, all crammed into two tiny squares.

We found a good campsite within a short walk of the harbour and took a few days' break from travelling. Yet we couldn't stay off the bikes all that time and went out to explore the cycle tracks and the quiet roads that link the villages, pass through vineyards and on to empty beaches.



Three days quickly passed and it was time to pack up and set off again on our travels. We had to back track off the island, back over the big bridge and head north in the Vendée. We had 130 miles to do in three days to get to our pick up point for a return to the UK.

Our last three days were to be two rides of just over fifty miles and a shorter twenty mile run to the pickup point on the Sunday. As we set off from the île de Ré it was a glorious day for cycling; warm and dry with occasional cloud cover to give a break from the heat of the sun.



Long, straight, flat roads made up most of the journey. They were very quiet and we only crossed a couple of major roads all day. A gentle

southerly breeze behind us completed what was a fine day to ride. We made good time to the town of Mouilleron en Pareds in the north of the Vendée where we at last encountered some hills and some bends in the road. Our destination for the day was the holiday home owned by Anne's cousin and her husband who made us very welcome. That night we slept in proper beds for the first time in a fortnight. Bliss!



How different the next day was to be. We awoke to grey skies and light drizzle. After a good breakfast we packed up and were waved off into the gathering grey. Then the weather took a turn for the worse. We had fifty miles to do and no options. So off we went.



“Just like the Tissington trail” is what I had promised Anne when I showed her the miles I had planned along converted railway lines. The first old railway track started OK but soon degenerated into jungle. We spent an hour mostly walking in the rain through mud and long grass. Fortunately the other two trails were much better and very rideable.

Unfortunately the weather got even wetter.

Eventually we made it to the village of Ayrton with the last four miles on a busy N road. There, the campsite owners took pity and let us take over the games room. We ate massive quantities of pasta!



Sunday

dawned bright and sunny so our wet clobber had time to dry out before a short, very pleasant ride to the pickup at a motorway junction by Poitiers. The European Bike Express arrived bang on time at 10pm.



We dozed to Calais, crossed the channel, crawled round the M25, dawdled up the M1 and got dropped off at Leicester Forest East. It was so good we've already booked with them for our 2014 holiday.

530 miles, no punctures, a good holiday!

