

Trans Europe Express

Garry Wiseman and Catherine Greenwood explored Europe by Bike Express and tandem

We hardly qualify as fit or experienced cyclists: a mile a day to work, and never more than a picnic in our panniers. Imagine Catherine's reaction when I proposed months of touring eastern Europe, on a tandem, laden with equipment... plus a guitar and violin!

Catherine's creative navigation (you have to have something to do, on the back!) proved to us that, even across the Midlands, back-road Britain is still a cyclist's delight. The luxury Bike Express coach (it's wonderful – don't fly!) allowed enthusiastic conversation with other cyclists, from the adventurous to the downright eccentric.

Dawn at Montpellier, and we alighted with no map and no plan of action. We grew to like it that way: routes and destinations became the whim of the day.

At the Italian Adriatic coast, we took an overnight ferry and awoke in stunning Dubrovnik, happy to find that bicycles were about the only vehicles allowed within those ancient walls. After a few days of rest and music, we headed northwards, island-hopping the Dalmatian coast by ferry. It's delightful, cheap, and a piece of cake with a bike – although 'two people, one bike, please' frequently confused the ticket offices.

Camping wild and tent-less allowed quick, early-morn getaways. Picture-postcard Slovenia provided plenty of beautiful sleeping-places – till we heard that a third of Europe's bears live there!

The sight of the Julian Alps frightened the life out of us (trailer and instruments weighing about 30kg), so we cycled round them. Beyond a remote border post, we hit a lost corner of Hungary: nobody spoke any English and they appeared yet to discover the car – heaven. A red-faced man, merry on rakija, had tears of laughter streaming down his face at the sight of two on one bike!

We often had tears of laughter too. Our love of tandems began three years ago, after acquiring a cheap Chinese number on eBay. Now we're hooked: tandems hold the key to a truly shared cycling experience.



Sea to sea

Pat and Eddie Stephenson plotted their own coast to coast route, east to west

We rode the 10 miles from our home to Carlisle station to catch the train to Alnmouth via Newcastle. On our first train we shared the bike spaces with two tandems and one other solo, which was good, except we held the train up by about ten minutes while they loaded the tandems on board. Once back on two wheels we followed the NCN Route 1 (Northumbria Coasts and Castles) northwards to Bamburgh, calling at Craster for crab sandwiches.

From Bamburgh we continued on route 1 north as far as Fenwick, where we headed west and inland towards the Cheviot Hills, briefly joining the North Pennine Cycleway (route 68), for the last few miles towards our night stop. We stayed at Milfield north of Wooler for two nights, taking in some more local cycling mixed with gliding for Eddie.

Then on the fourth morning we set off again to continue our C2C, this time leaving the formal cycle routes behind by heading into the Border Hills. We crossed the border into Scotland in light rain before passing through Kirk Yetholm, Town Yetholm, followed by a highly recommended lunch stop at the pub in Morebattle. Suitably refreshed we continued the gentle climb past Hownam. The sun came out and gave us a superb ride through wonderful scenic, traffic-free roads to Bonchester Bridge just south of



Hawick, where we had an overnight B&B stay.

On the final day we continued our ride through some more stunning scenery along great traffic-free cycling roads, which run alongside the former Waverley railway line. After what seem like days of steady uphill climbs we were rewarded with a fantastic downhill run into Newcastleton for morning tea. Our final stage was to head for Rockcliffe, where the River Eden flows into the Solway Firth. We crossed back into England as we passed over Kershope burn, keeping to the high ground as long as we could. We enjoyed fine views of the distant Pennines and Lakeland hills before rolling into Rockcliffe after 132 highly enjoyable miles.

End to End to End

French cyclist **Claire Carvallo** and her friend **Christophe** did a double End to End last year

As training for Paris-Brest-Paris, my friend Christophe and I had decided to use our six weeks of holidays cyclo-camping in the UK. We settled for a Paris-Land's End-John O'Groats-Durness-Dover-Paris itinerary (about 2,800 miles), most of it following the CTC-recommended routes. We thought that this way we would escape a potential heat wave in France.

Obviously we succeeded in that respect, because we had never cycled under so much rain in our entire lives. Some days it rained continuously, and the first day without rain came about three weeks after the beginning of the trip. We arrived in both Land's End and John O'Groats under heavy rain, with a strong head wind, in very thick fog, which made us believe that the two places were very similar!

We were very impressed by the number of cyclists riding LEJOG, each at their own pace, but always in a way that would make it challenging. We enjoyed the spirit of solidarity and mutual help amongst all cyclists, true sportsmanship in our opinion. Throughout the trip, numerous people helped us, by letting us camp in their gardens, offering a shower, some coffee, or even a beer...

We appreciated the diversity of the UK: while we had our share of narrow, winding and sometimes very steep roads in the south, the north of England and Scotland offered us long, steady climbs in very remote areas, with beautiful unobstructed views of wild hills and mountains.

Cycling through the Grampians and Highlands was definitely a highlight. Thanks to the flatness of Lincolnshire and Kent, and to some last minute sunny days, we were able to finish our trip with large mileage days and to catch our ferry back to France from Dover.

Two weeks after we returned to Paris, I was able to complete PBP, mostly in the rain, but feeling great almost all along!



Escaping the city

Terry Ratcliffe and friends **Dave** and **Bob** explored canal towpaths around London

The Grand Union and Prince Regent canals form a semi-circular arc around the outskirts of London.

We decided to follow them one summer's day, using a route devised by CTC Right to Ride Rep (and CTC Councillor) John Meudell of Dorking.

Start point was Dave's flat in Paddington. We were up at 6.30 to take tube from Earl's Court to Richmond – you can take your bike on the underground before 7.30. The roads and the tube were very quiet and the sun was shining. At Brentford, we got onto the canal towpath. There are some fiendishly designed gates along here, which just about allow the passage of a bicycle. It was easier to swing out over canal holding the bike in one hand and the corner post in the other.

You really don't feel like you're in London on the towpath. It's quiet enough not to disturb the herons, standing stock still, and we didn't disturb the anglers we encountered. We remembered to turn right along the Paddington Spur – otherwise you continue all the way to Birmingham! The aqueduct across the North Circular road at Alperton is memorable sight. We completed the 35km to Paddington Basin (Little Venice) by 1pm and stopped for a pub lunch.

We failed to get a lift on a narrow boat through Maida Vale tunnel but easily found the canal again to take us



'underneath' Regents Park Zoo (the canal is in a deep cutting) to past Camden Lock. From Camden the canal drops progressively, twisting under narrow arches and around locks, which can be tricky, on its way back to the Thames. The Caledonian tunnel meant a detour through the centre of Islington.

The trip to Tower Bridge was uneventful but, after crossing the bridge, we had to negotiate crowds and traffic. Once we reached St James's Park, Green Park and finally Hyde Park our journey was most agreeable.

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