



Clockwise from top left: Camping near Dangu, France, on the Avenue Verte. Grand Colombier, with the River Rhône in the foreground (France). Boardwalk on the Vélodyssée near Talmont-Saint-Hilaire, France. Canal de la Garonne, near Meilhan-sur-Garonne, France. Crossing the Viaduc du Parfond de Gouët, near Pordic in Brittany. Voie Verte Roger Lapébie, near Créon, east of Bordeaux

but it had left me bereft of energy as I trudged through the heat of Andalusia in the final week of the tour. Ten years later? I was sceptical, and as the date of departure approached I was increasingly concerned that I had committed to what seemed like a doomed cycling plan. Might a Plan D be needed? No. Just a slightly modified Plan C.

TRAFFIC-FREE TOURING

Combining carbon-friendly modes of transport to travel longer distances needs to be championed, not shunned. With this in mind, I decided that in order to make my epic journey a more realistic endeavour, I would allow myself to take a maximum of 10 trains, each of no more than 100km. It was a wise move and my journey was no less epic as a result. My average daily ride would now be a much more cyclist-friendly 80km per day.

To cut a longish story short – you’ll be able to read all the details in the book that I’m currently writing – I arrived back at the Hook of Holland on the afternoon of 3 September, just in time for that ferry home. The trip had gone to plan but, as with every cycling adventure there were highs and lows, surprises along the way and challenges that had to be overcome. That’s what makes our chosen method of travel so enjoyable.

As I was following named routes, perhaps 80% of the journey was traffic free. That figure was probably closer to 100% in the first week or so of the trip as I cycled along the coasts of the Netherlands and Belgium. It was a gentle introduction to Le

Grand Tour, a ride where the vertical challenges wouldn’t really kick in until I entered Switzerland and headed in the direction of the Alps.

Even when I arrived in France, most of the cycling was well away from major roads, with cycle paths adopting the narrow lanes of the French countryside if there wasn’t a disused railway or canal towpath at hand. The French cycling authorities have done a commendable job in recent years in developing their medium- and long-distance cycling routes.

Along with their distinctive – enticing even – names (La Scandibérique, La Vélo Francette, La Route des Grandes Alpes...), each has unique branding, is well signposted and has a wealth of information available online via dedicated websites. The national website, **FranceVeloTourisme.com**, is the best place to start your planning.

LA BELLE FRANCE

Cycling south from Dieppe along the Avenue Verte, I thought I had discovered a disused railway line that couldn’t be surpassed in terms of what it provided for the travelling cyclist. Aside from the quality of the route itself (no potholes here), there were regular opportunities to pause and eat in the cafés that had moved into the disused railway stations, often having basic bicycle maintenance facilities available. Yet the experience would be repeated over and over again as I continued on my long loop around France.