

LEJoG de Matt - Day 2 Part 2

Despite the fact that the Golant hostel was full to the brim and teeming with cyclists, snoring, farting and any other threats to my beauty sleep were not a problem. Indeed, the only snoring I heard came from Mark, and it was not of the chortling, wheezing, strangling a duck variety, but more of a low, gentle purr. Certainly nothing that could keep me awake. We got up around 8:30, much too late in retrospect and given the fact that we had to fix both of Mark's tires. There was little for breakfast apart from the remaining chocolate beet cake, flapjacks and milk - coffee being the most-missed item, but we told each other that we'd stop for caffeinisation at the first opportunity, probably in Looe. Neither one of us felt marvellous, but we didn't feel awful either. Sore legs, and a bit bleary-eyed, but nothing more than that.

After we had eaten and gathered up our stuff, we headed out to an external building used as a classroom where our bikes were stored. The room had been stuffed with bikes the night before, but all of them were gone now, except for ours and another bike in the corner. I knew I should have set my alarm, instead of leisurely sleeping in. I had a look at Mark's tires. They were not only flat, but looked very old and worn, and I was a bit worried that the wears in the sidewall might cut into his tube if we blew it up too much. But, once I got started on removing them from the rim using my patented trick - a bit of water to lubricate things a touch - I saw that they weren't in too bad shape. While we were patching the tubes, a scruffy middle-aged man with a reddish beard entered the classroom and started to put his panniers on his bike. We didn't chat for a few minutes, in the traditionally laconic English fashion, but as the light mist began to turn into light rain, Mark commented that we might be getting a bit wet today.

If you ever want to start a conversation with an English person and don't quite know how to do it, there is one simple rule: talk about the weather. For a country that can experience the exact same weather in January as in July and where the entire range of temperatures for a year could easily fall within 20 degrees, they manage to talk about it a lot. Don't get me wrong, they get their share of weather and it does have a nasty habit of making a mess out of things, with flooding, spring tides, gales, droughts and the merest hint of snow rendering life in Britain completely intolerable, particularly if weather conversations annoy you. But I'm from Canada, and more pertinently, from Alberta, where the degree range in any given month could easily be 40 degrees; where three feet of snow can fall in May and tornados can crush grain silos like tin cans; where flesh can freeze in less than thirty seconds in January and burn in less than 15 minutes in August. We've got the weather, and yet it's the English that keep going on about it.

Still, it's a very reliable conversation starter and Mark's remark got the bearded biker talking. He wasn't doing LEJoG, but he was doing something quite similar: Lizard Point-Dunnet Head, the most southerly point in Britain to the most northerly, rather than the two furthest apart spots. He said that he'd done LEJoG numerous times and he was looking for a new challenge. This was a bit odd, considering 95% of the journey was going to be the exact same, but I just smiled and nodded. He didn't look particularly fit, and seemed to just be wearing a t-shirt sporting his charity - Kids Cancer Trust, I think - but I imagined that he was the type who would just keep trucking along come rain or shine until he got where he was going. Taking another look at him, I figured I might not look too much different by the time I got to JoG.

Mark and I finished repairing the bikes and got on the road at about 10 am, quite a bit later than when we were hoping, particularly because rain was forecast for later in the day. Mark decided to walk his bike up the half mile lane where he suffered his second puncture the night before. I didn't blame him and slowly pedalled beside him, dodging potholes and sharp-looking rocks. We found the steep road down to the Fowey ferry, and began descending into what was now steady drizzle. There was a sudden turn into the queue for the ferry at the bottom of the hill and I braked fairly hard

to make it, indicating to Mark where we were headed. He seemingly didn't see me in time and flew past, quicker than I would have expected. He made his way back up to me and said, "Now my tires are fixed, but I think my brakes are done. I couldn't stop at all on that turn."

I felt a shudder go through my spine. Dodgy tires and brakes? We had 70-80 miles to go today in fairly hilly terrain. This didn't bode well. As the ferry began to approach from the other side, I took a look at his wheels. "I don't think your front brakes are set. Did we forget to re-attach them after we replaced your tire?"

Mark looked down and groaned, "That might help. I can't believe I did that. I'm lucky I didn't end up in the river." He squeezed the brakes back into place and, sure enough, they worked fine.

I grinned. "I thought I was the only person who did things like that. You're doing my ego a world of good so far - sure you don't want to go on?"

Mark raised an eyebrow. I could tell he was a bit sore from the long first day, but I also knew that he loved a challenge and would have happily accompanied me if he didn't have to go back to work. We were a good team, I thought, although our combined bicycle knowledge was about on par with the average ten year old with a moderate learning disability. "I would if I could," he said, "But let's see how I feel after today. I'm already pretty wet."

I nodded as the ferry breasted the dock, and felt that water was already seeping through my jacket. We paid a ludicrous £3 for the five minute journey and shivered our way across to the other side of the Fowey River. I had taken the Fowey passenger ferry a few years before, but this one, for vehicles, had better views of the river. A beautiful white house sat on the opposite shore, with a dock leading to the water. Not a bad place to spend your days, I thought.

Our chill soon vanished as we rolled off the ferry and ascended the steep hill on the other side of the lush green valley. The trees gave way to pleasant farmland on the other side and we headed off on a quiet country road with a fairly strong southerly wind roughly at our back. With it, and our high energy breakfast, other wise known as chocolate cake, we made it to Looe quickly, passing a steam engine festival on the way, where serious-looking men puzzled over mini-replicas of famous engines. I wouldn't have minded stopping, but we both were desperate for a coffee; I could already feel my left eyebrow twitching in anticipation. The hill down into Looe reminded me a bit of a carnival ride; it felt as if you could get out of control any second, but somehow you stayed on the rails. It was very steep. Looe, Mark mentioned, was a popular holiday spot for Plymouthians, and despite the ever-increasing rain, it was chock a block with day-trippers. I was astonished that the town was serviced by a train and wondered, thinking about the very rural buses near Lands End, if Cornwall received some dispensation for ridiculously convenient public transport. Most people, however, seemed to be travelling by car, and it was as much of a relief to get off the bikes to escape the crabby motorists looking feverishly for a parking spot, as it was to have a break. We found a toilet and coffee - not in the quite the same place - and a decided to indulge in Cornish pasties, which were delectable, heating us up from the inside like spicy chunks of magma. We bolted them in the now solid and steady rain, beside a young couple who simply stared dully at the car park under the awning for a shut electronics store. "Quite the honeymoon," Mark said under his breath, "Shouldn't they be indoors somewhere?"

I looked around and noted that they weren't the only ones. It seemed as though Britons in the middle of the worst recession in years were eagerly embracing the 'staycation', despite the fact that the 'barbecue summer' Met Office promised was about as likely as a banker winning person of the year. The ones in Looe were a mix of the truly miserable - hunkering down from the rain in tea-shops, fast food restaurants, and under garish umbrellas - and the blithely unaware, marching

through town soaking wet with daft smiles on their faces, as if they were fully convinced that either the sun was on its way or they would gills in a matter of minutes. I wasn't terribly sure which category we fit in at that point, but would know without a shadow of a doubt in a few hours.