

**LEJoG de Matt**  
**or**  
**A Canuck's Cycle Trip from Land's End to John o'Groats**  
**by Matt Smith**

**Day 1, 25 ~~August~~ July 2009 - 82.43 miles**

**Part 1**

How's that for a start? I've already forgotten what month is. Not a particularly auspicious beginning. Oh well, let's not focus on the when, let's focus on the where because it's the where that's going to be important on this trip. Having said that, where my LEJoG started wasn't actually in Land's End, the place, due to prevailing trade winds, that all cycle trips from one end of Britain to the other are recommended to start, but in Exeter, where I've lived for the last 3 years and, even more specifically, in one of the two carriages of the itsy-bitsy, teenie-weenie train that goes all the way to Penzance, seemingly hitting every habitation in Cornwall boasting either a pub or a church along the way. In other words, all of them. It was about 6:45am when I caught the train and it would be 10:15 by the time the I got to Penzance, the town made famous by Gilbert and Sullivan, real-life pirates and the most south-westerly train station in Britain. Despite my early start, the morning was clear and sunny and, as the train trundled along the sea wall at Starcross, I realised how I might cycle the length and breadth of Britain and yet not come across a place as beautiful as my doorstep. Sailboats rested placidly on the blue, glassy water of the Exe Estuary, full to the brim at high tide. Avocets, egrets, and herons waded in the shallows, while swans swam, black-headed gulls swooped at each other and little terns dive-bombed the surf for minnows. The scene was so stunning that even the teenagers crowding the carriage, and babbling deafeningly about celebrities who had escaped my attention while I was writing my PhD, actually buttoned their traps and gazed intently out the windows for a few minutes. I thought much better of them all of a sudden, and realised that, when I was sixteen years old, the only place I'd be at 7 in the morning on a Saturday would be in bed, unlikely to emerge even if a category 5 tornado struck. They might have been noisy, but probably weren't all that bad.

Behind the gaggle of adolescents were a trio of cyclists, equipped, as I was, with panniers, odometers and, given the looks of them, thirty more years of cycling experience than I had as a thirty-five year old. It struck me then, how frightfully common LEJoG actually is. Thousands of people do it every year and hundreds were probably making their way up or down the country as I started my own particular quest. I imagined that, apart from feeling independent and free, I might almost be in a peloton of some sort, limping up to JoG in the pouring rain after two weeks of casual nods and staring up someone else's spandex. I would certainly not be the only Canadian en route,

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and possibly not even the only Edmontonian. LEJoG is such a powerful draw for cyclists around the world that, once my cycling parter Tindy had to bail on the trip, nearly all of my friends who enjoyed a ride in the saddle exclaimed that they would have joined me if they had the time or money. Certainly Mark, who would be joining me for the first two days, culminating in Torquay, needed very little convincing.

In some ways, it was a little like finishing a PhD. The comparison was not lost on me as this trip was my bizarre and possibly masochistic way of ‘celebrating’ the conclusion of my PhD in medical history. When you finish a PhD, as with when you complete LEJoG, even if nothing really comes of it in terms of life-altering or wallet-supplementing developments, people are fond of saying, ‘Well, at least no one can take that away from you!’ But when you attend the graduation event at your university, a good, but perhaps not up to Oxbridge or Ivy League standard, institution, and you see all the other PhDs donning silly hats and multi-coloured robes, you realise that, while it might not be a dime-a-dozen achievement, it is nonetheless relatively common. You acknowledge how really trivial it is when you see that guy, you know which one, and you marvel, with equal measures of disdain and admiration, at how such a nincompoop was let into an institute of higher learning, let alone leave as Dr. Dimbulb. Then, when the manic phase wears off, and you take a look at yourself in the streaky mirror of the Convocation Hall toilets, you begin to wonder if it is not you who are the real Dr. Mouthbreather after all. Then, and finally then, when you find out that that gifted Classics PhD, the funny, friendly, and charming one that you’d hire in a minute has ended up on the dole in Taunton, you really start to wonder just what the hell you’ve been doing for the past three years. Would I be feeling the same way in two weeks about LEJoG?

Well, I might, but the cyclist whom I thought would be my constant companions wouldn’t be. They got off in Plymouth, likely to cycle up the largely tame Tamar valley, perhaps looking for signs of Tarka the Otter. What did I know anyway?