

Day 2 - 69 miles (151.43 miles)

Hostel dorm rooms freak me out. They haven't always, but now they do. I remember spending my honeymoon hosteling through Scotland, Ireland and Northern England, primarily in segregated International Youth Hostel Association hostels. Yes, that's right, my honeymoon and no, it wasn't a shotgun marriage or one that gets you a visa to a foreign country. All I can say is that we were on a very, very tight budget. But, despite being constantly, well, frustrated at being stuck in chilly, crowded, all-male dormitories, I remember it being an, all things considered, not completely horrible mode of accommodation. And, during the decade or so between that and moving to the UK, I stayed in the odd hostel and my opinion basically stayed the same: a not completely horrible mode of accommodation that was easy on the wallet. This all changed during a cycle trip to London with my friend Tindy.

We had cycled to London in three days the year before, and stayed in a friendly hippy B&B in Glastonbury and a rustic and, at times, unfriendly farm house near Marlborough, adjacent to the Savernake Forest. We had slept the sleep of the tired cyclist both nights and, until we got hideously lost in dastardly West Drayton, west of London, the trip was relatively easy. The next year we (well, Tindy, really) decided that a challenge was in order: Exeter to London in 2 days, over a weekend in June, and staying for one night in the New Forest. It sounded great. The first catch was that no B&B was willing to put us up for only one night over a weekend. Annoyed at the meanness of this, I made a abrupt decision to look into hostels. I had only stayed in a few hostels since moving to England; since most of my accommodation needs were work-related, I usually stayed in B&Bs or even hotels, getting my costs covered. Those that I had stayed in were a mixed bag. While I had experienced a good night's sleep in Golant once before, on a walking trip, I had also stayed in a dingy hostel in Manchester, where a hoard of 20 year olds were celebrating a 2 year reunion from college, and where I woke up with the distinct feeling that someone was rifling through my bedclothes for the wallet I had buried under my pillow. The next day I learned that all the intelligent delegates to the meeting I was attending had stayed in the near-luxury accommodation at the University.

I knew someone from the New Forest, but didn't know her well enough to ask to crash, all smelly-like, with her family. I really should have. When we arrived at the hostel, after about 13 hours of cycling, I was completely exhausted and Tindy was quite a few degrees worse. We had taken the south coast route, meaning going up and down insanely steep hills at Sidmouth, Beer, Lyme Regis, Dorchester and seemingly around every turn we happened upon. Tindy's bike was making horrible noises for the first fifty or so miles, forcing us into Dorchester for a repair. Luckily there was a bike shop that was open and Tindy, as is his way, sweet-talked them into fixing it toute suite. The last twelve miles of our journey was gorgeous, winding up lanes in the New Forest that teemed with life - kestrels, lapwings, deer, even free-roaming horses in villages - but felt like about thirty. We found the hostel after wandering around a golf course and up someone's driveway, and it looked pretty good on first glance. It was an big old house with a nice garden that was bordered by forest, the New Forest in fact. We made it to our rooms and were happy to see that we'd be sharing our digs with other cyclists. They'd be certain to be quiet and go to sleep early. We had supper at a nearby pub, Tindy having a mint schnaaps night cap to help him get to sleep. Our bodies would be tired the next morning, but with a good night's rest, London wouldn't be too far away.

Our first mistake was hitting the hay before the children. Yes, the hostel also had camping accommodation and a few thousand kids were waging war on each other with full-throated abandon until it got dark, which, at this time of year, was about 11pm. Finally, and after much tossing, turning and tsking and tutting from Tindy, the cowboys and Indians were rounded up by their parents and herded in to their great canvas tents. That still left a full 8 hours of sleep - maybe not quite as much as we would have liked, but enough. Then, our roommates showed up. On our way

into the room I had noticed that the door had a rather idiosyncratic and disruptive way of closing. It would squeal for five seconds like a hog having one of his more sensitive whiskers plucked out, pause, and then slam shut with a ferocity that suggested higher powers at work. Tindy and I managed to figure this out after one or two visits to the loo and pulled it closed to avoid the terrible racket; our dorm-mates never did. Squuuueeeeeeeeeaaaaaaal-pause-BANG!!! Squuuueeeeeeeeeaaaaaaal-pause-BANG!!! By the time the last of our companions had returned from his umpteenth trip to trim his moustache or comb the nits out of his pubic hair or whatever the hell he was doing, I was ready to tie him up, drag him outside by his gonads and leave him for the children to devour. But, like a good Canuck, I did nothing.

Tindy continued to toss and turn and make loud exasperated sighing noises. I started to worry about him, partly because he had endured a more difficult day than I had, what with his bike's mechanical problems, but also because I knew he had a hellish time getting to sleep at the best of times. But our sonic nightmare was only beginning. One of our fellow inmates decided to have a midnight read of the paper. He was conscientious to the extent that he only used a wee reading lamp attached to his head, but had apparently forgot that the sound of crinkling, rustling newsprint, as he searched for the crossword or probably the personals, might disturb our attempts to render ourselves unconscious. Finally, he noisily stuffed it under his bunk and turned out the light. Ah, the silence we were craving desperately had arrived! It was sublime. It was heavenly. It was short-lived.

I'm not sure if it was a cacophonous snort or a percussive fart that was emitted first. They might have been released simultaneously for all I know (although this surely and mercifully would have caused the utterer to explode, I'm sure), but either way, a barrage of bodily function noises began and really didn't stop until the sun began to lift over the lofty heights of the New Forest. I was not only riddled with acoustic and, shortly, olfactory pollutants, but also a litany of worries that interfered with my sleeping like, well, a room full of farting and snoring cyclists. Tindy was going to kill me. There was no way he was going to get any sleep and, if so, how could he possibly have the energy for another 100+ mile journey? Adding to the farts and snorts were his exasperated sighs and the rustling of his sheets, which were even more distracting. How would I have the energy? My body felt so tired, but my brain was racing a mile minute. Maybe we'd be so tired when we finally dropped off that we'd sleep through our alarm and wouldn't have enough time to get to London? Maybe I didn't set it properly in the first place?

I seriously thought about leaving the room to sleep in the lounge, but was paralysed. Somehow staying still and quiet would lead to sleep. It had to. That, and the one time I had left a room of snorers, of the Italian variety, I was locked out of my dorm room and spent the night skimming stones into Loch Ness, inviting Nessie to come and put me out of my misery. No, the best bet was to stay put and try to relax. Count sheep, or count farts, count down from 10000 by sevens, something had to work. And, finally, ultimately, after what seemed like an eternity, I dropped off for a measly 3 or 4 hours. Tindy figured he got a couple of hours at most. And by the time we rolled into West Hampstead at 8pm and the loving arms of Tindy's folks, we strongly considered returning to the hostel the next day to burn it down.