

Day 1 Part 4

Joining a B-road with a sigh of relief, we began to head north-east. The weather was perfect. Bright sunshine and a bit of cloud with a fine tailwind. The road was what Mark euphemistically described as 'undulating', meaning next to no flat sections, but had no particularly intimidating hills, either. I had taken the lead and soon realised that, whereas Mark sped away from me on the flats, 'undulations', particularly pronounced ones, were more my strength, despite being loaded down with two heavy panniers. It was a bit of a relief, considering all the training that I'd been doing and the fact that Mark was somewhat heavier than me. It also meant that I could 'rest' a wee bit on the hills, a strange way of cycling, but somehow effective.

We stopped for a lunch in a place called Relebbus. You really have to give the Cornish the prize for wacky place names. Devon has Crapstone and Dog Village and my personal favourite is Cockwood, where I would dearly love to live one day, just for the titillation I'd get telling people my address, but Cornwall takes the cake. In the few hours that we'd been cycling, I'd seen signs for Goldsithney, Cockwells, Ludgvan, Crowlas, Tremethick Cross, Cripplesease and let's not forget Mousehole. There was also the less exciting, but somehow enticing, Paul. Now I know that this is simply due to my unfamiliarity with the Cornish language, a tongue that is slowly making a comeback after having been pretty much extinct, but if you don't titter at least once when you see the sign to Tinner's Bottom, then you've got to lighten up a bit. Then again, I am the sort of person who goes out of my way to get on the Piccadilly Line just so I can hear the conductor say Cockfosters.

Lunch consisted of cheese and lettuce sandwiches, carrots, oranges, and chocolate beet cake. I bet Mark that he couldn't guess the secret ingredient of the chocolate 'beet' cake, but he demurred, saying that he was too full from the sandwiches, although this might have been because the icing had melted into a beige butterscotch pool at the bottom of the ziplock bag, making it look a little bit less than appealing. But, oh, chocolate beet cake! I'm afraid Mark really missed out. The more beets, the better - how many times in life do you get to say that? You just can't beat it and that's a fact. A truly spectacular cake, and not only when you've been cycling all day.

Shortly after lunch, I experimented with getting us lost for the first time outside of a car park. I was using a 1:100,000 scale map, instead of the usual 1:25,000 or 1:50,000 Ordnance maps that I usually used. Somehow the jump from 1:50,000 to 1:100,000 made a big difference in terms of detail and scale. The 1:100,000s were fine if we were staying on B-roads for long stretches, but if I didn't concentrate, I could miss turns and struggled with more complicated rural route-finding. In this case, I thought we were somewhere on the map we weren't and we ended up going about 3 miles out of our way to correct ourselves, including a stretch up a steep hill on a busy road. When I saw the road we should have used connect to the one we were on, I realised that the detour, combined with long minutes staring at the map, cost us about a half an hour. As I waited for Mark at the top of the hill in the heat of the afternoon, I felt the heavy burden of the route finder on my shoulders, weighing me down much more than the three pieces of chocolate beet cake I had consumed.

A short while later we had more map troubles, this time trying to find the wonderfully named King Henry Ferry, voted one of the most beautiful ferries in the world. I had read somewhere online that taking ferries on LEJoG was cheating, as was pushing your bike up hills, but I didn't buy that argument. First of all, the distance spanned by the three ferries I planned to take was less than a mile. Second, my odometer didn't budge when I was on the ferry so whatever distance I was saving didn't count in my total, a total that was going to be at least 150 miles longer than the stated 876 miles from LE to JoG. Thirdly I didn't like get bossed around by some anal jerk on the internet and finally, I liked taking ferries, damn it!

After about twenty minutes looking for King Harry's Ferry, I was wondering if the real reason ferries were banned was that you wasted too much time trying to find the bloody things. I didn't feel quite as bad this time about getting lost; the road was simply abysmally marked. It was almost as if they didn't want you to use the ferry at all. Bastards, I thought, as we circled around a busy roundabout trying to find the right exit. Once we finally located it, having gone up an undulation that perhaps pushed the term to the max, I saw why they might have wanted to keep it a secret and felt much better about ignoring that stupid ferry rule. It was a spectacular spot. The ferry crossed the River Fal, which was bounded on both sides by a thickly wooded valley. A flotilla of sailboats paraded by constantly and, though not necessarily beautiful, three large cargo ships were decommissioned upstream in the dark green water, emphasising the tidal nature of the river. There was something about these sorts of rivers I really liked. Embodying elements of both sea and freshwater stream, the River Fal seemed snug and cosy deep in its valley resting place, sheltered from the marine elements, yet briny and green at the same time. I could have gone back and forth for the entire afternoon.

And after getting off the boat and climbing the valley on the other side, which was so steep that I also contemplated ignoring the rule about pushing bikes up hills, I kind of wished I had. This was no undulation; just one mother of a climb. We passed two female cyclists in their twenties who were having a break in the shade of a hedgerow just as we exited the valley. They looked tired in the 4pm heat. We said a brief hello, expecting to see many more cyclists along the route, but, upon retrospect, both figured we should have asked how they were doing. I felt relieved when they arrived at the hostel we were staying at just before dark.

We were also starting to have problems of our own. Mark's front tire was slowly losing air, causing us to stop every ten minutes to fill it up. I thought about patching it, but when I looked at the tire itself, which was quite worn around the edges, I worried that taking it off the rim might further damage the tire to the point that the tears in the rubber would cause more punctures. Not the clearest logic, perhaps, but I had been out in the sun for quite some time. We were in the midst of a long, winding stretch that was way longer than it looked on the deceptive 1:100,000 map and still a ways away from St Austel, or Snozzle as the locals called it, which was itself 7 further miles away from Golant and the hostel I had booked.

Both of us had also run out of water, but all we seemed to come across in search of a refill were credit-crunched petrol stations. There's nothing more disheartening when you're dying for some H2O than an abandoned gas station. I recalled a similar situation in Provence with Michelle. It was our first day and we (meaning I) hadn't packed enough water for the 35 degree heat. Having climbed a dry, dusty hill, we came to the dry, dusty square of a dry, dusty village. Off to the side of the square was a large plastic vat filled with water. We rushed over, not minding the thousands of bees that buzzed around a nearby lavender bush, and took out our bottles. Just as I was about to down about a litre of water in one go, Michelle spied a hand-written note attached to the vat. It looked like it said 'potable' or potable, but it also looked like it said 'impotable'; the ink had nearly faded away in the sun. We looked at each other hard. There was not a soul around in the middle of the afternoon in the middle of town to ask. I shrugged and said, 'Well, it's not like we're in Bangladesh or something. This is France for Pete's sake. It's got to be fine, right?' Michelle, who was fast becoming a serious francophile, despite the hot, hilly cycling, couldn't imagine that the French would be so stupid to put a tank of bacterially-rich water in the middle of town and agreed to take our chances. We lived to tell the tale, but it was a lesson that I had a habit of forgetting at the most inopportune times.

Just as I was coming close to knocking on a Cornish farmer's door for some water, we finally came across a filling station that was open. I downed a bottle of orange Lucozade and a chocolate bar and immediately felt my stomach churning discontentedly, like a junior high chemistry experiment

gone terribly wrong, but at least I felt a bit less thirsty. So long as my belly didn't spontaneously combust, I was pretty sure I'd make it to Golant. Before we got to the hostel, however, we had to get to and through Snuzzle. This, unfortunately, involved a 3 miles stretch on a dual carriageway. There was no real way around it, barring adding another 10 miles to our journey, and neither Mark nor I felt particularly inclined to do that. We gingerly ventured onto the road, the A390, and poured our last energy reserves into staying on the rather narrow shoulder and avoiding any sharp detritus that littered our way. Mark's tire was still deflating slowly, but he kept up admirably. Just as we were going under an overpass, a sports car ripped by at what seemed like 200 mph, not bothering to get into the right hand lane. I hollered an expletive at it that sounded something like fastball, and Mark angrily ventured that the driver must have been coping with some form of anatomical inadequacy, and likely not a button nose.

It seemed best to stay on the main road through Snuzzle, so we stopped at a petrol station for some groceries to make our supper. They really had next to nothing, but we managed to get some milk, orange juice, tomato sauce and pasta. Not the makings of the best meal in the world, but I was so hungry I would have been happy with curried dirt. As I walked up to the till, helmet in hand and bandana on head, the rather dozy looking cashier asked me if I was on a walk. I glanced quickly at my helmet, wondering if people in Snuzzle routinely bumped their noggins into low-lying branches, and said, no, but I was on a cycle trip. She smiled lazily and handed me my change. Mark went in after me, not only wearing his helmet, but also a Giro Italia cycling jersey. No, he didn't need any petrol, but many thanks for asking.

With a bit more understanding of how St. Austel became Snuzzle, we made our way through town and onto the final 7 miles to Golant. We had to dodge, of all things, a 10K running race as we climbed up the steep hill, kind of odd for a Saturday night in late July, but certainly not the least salubrious thing you could get up to in rural Cornwall on a warm evening. After what felt like another hour of cycling, we finally turned down the rocky lane that led to the hostel. I had been there once before and the dreamy familiarity of a place you just barely know swept over me. The lane led for about a mile through some trees and then into a beautiful series of hilly pastures filled with horses and ponies. Golden light spilled onto the fields and beyond to the valley of Fowey. It was absolutely, unequivocally stunning. I turned to Mark to gush and saw that he wasn't there. I figured he might have got off his bike for the last little bit or was taking pictures of the gorgeous scenery and casually rolled down the last few hundred yards to the hostel. I checked us in, expecting him to turn up while I was at the desk, but by the time I had finished paying and commenting on the ales available at the hostel bar - a new and thoroughly welcome development since the last time I had been at a Youth Hostel Association facility - there was no sign of Mark. Just as I was about to wearily mount my bike to go looking for him, he rounded the final corner, walking his bike. 'Now the rear tire's flat as well,' he grunted disgustedly, 'I didn't get more than a hundred yards down that bloody lane.'

After apologising for abandoning him I hopefully asked if he had seen the beautiful valley and the horses. It had somehow passed him by.

Both starving and dirty and pretty damned exhausted, like many of our fellow hostellers, we decided to worry about Mark's tires in the morning. Golant, apparently, is a fairly popular spot for LEJoGgers, most of whom make it there on the first day, like we had. One guy, who was providing support for a group with his van, offered to help us fix Mark's tire, but Mark declined the offer, frankly pretty sick of the sight of his bike by that point. Instead, we showered, drank some beer from the all-too-convenient bar, and heated up our very basic, very bland, but very filling meal of penne and jarred tomato sauce.

After supper, Mark phoned his wife Claire to see if there were any cycle shops on the way to Plymouth. The only one was 7 agonising miles back in the wrong direction - in Snuzzle. While

Mark went over the days events with Claire, I had a seat in the lounge and listened to some other LEJoGgers who were banging away a fairly impressive number of pints of Cornish Tinner ale. They didn't seem overly fit and I wondered about the wisdom of quite so much beer. A couple of girls joined them and it soon became clear that they were all first-timers. One of them, apparently in a bit of discomfort wondered if it would get easier and her companion said that she thought it would; they would get fitter as they went along. I recalled my friend Becky, who drove me to choir practice in Crediton, suggesting something similar. 'By the time you get to the Highlands, you'll be flying up the hills! To me, this logic was barmy. Maybe it was my dingy pessimism, but I figured that it would get harder and harder and harder until I made it or gave up in a heap of mewling gortex. Another guy, who was on his 4th or 5th beer, chimed in about how good he was feeling. An older, wiser fellow who hadn't said much piped up for the first time, 'It's just the first day, mate, it's only Day One. We'll see how you feel in the morning.' With that, he got up and left for bed. So very true, I thought grimly, and headed up the stairs after him, feeling every square inch of my thighs as I trudged up, ever so slowly, the three flights to my dorm.