

LEJoG de Matt
or
A Canuck's Cycle Trip from Land's End to John o'Groats
by Matt Smith
3

Day 1 Part 2

My buddy Mark joined me on the train at Newton Abbott. Mark lives in Torquay with his wife Claire overlooking Torbay. It's a beautiful spot and, particularly when the weather is good, emphasises all the positives of Torquay, which, in many other ways, is a depressing city. Filled with a bizarre mix of conservative pensioners, heroin addicts, ESL students and chavvy vacationers from Liverpool and Glasgow, I've never found it surprising that John Cleese chose to base Fawlty Towers in the capital of the English Riviera. Nevertheless, perched 100 metres above the harbour with a glass of chianti in your hand and the Red Arrows painting the sky red, white and blue, Torquay looks pretty good.

Unfortunately, the first time Michelle and I visited Mark and Claire in Torquay, on a Saturday in late July, it rained so hard that I thought that Noah would only have 2 weeks this time to build his ark. Mark and I watched the dying moments of the Southwest strongman competition in the driving rain, while Claire and Michelle rather more sensibly had a coffee in a sheltered cafe. "Gotta love the southwest, eh?" Mark enthused sardonically, as a red-faced National Front member sporting tattoos on his arm that would spill over the sides of an A4 page tried and failed to sprint two railway ties 50 metres in the torrent. At least I got to see the Gleneagles, the hotel that run by the original Basil Fawlty, in its natural habitat.

For a guy who loves and hates his home town in equal measure, Mark has less need to hum and haw about his PhD project. This is because he has probably the best PhD topic I have ever, ever heard of, which makes him very likely the smartest guy I know. What the future Dr. Doidge studies, you see, is the sociology of football, but not just football: Italian football. This requires poor Mark to spend months on end in Tuscany watching football and learning all about Italian lifestyle and culture. The only downside to this ingenious project is that the club Mark chose to study is Livorno, regarded by some as the Liverpool of Italy, except without the success on the pitch. Still, I think this is more evidence of Mark's genius. Think of having to conduct tedious academic research studying a team like Fiorentina - it would be impossible. Mark gets to do his work in the only homely corner of Italy during the week and can get to Florence on the weekend in about an hour. Sheer brilliance, he has it spades.

LEJog de Matt

4

One of Mark's only regrets during his last research trip to Italy was that he didn't bring his bicycle. While he was scooting about the Tuscan countryside to attend festivals brimming with great food and beautiful women, he'd see Italian men zipping up and down the hills on their bicycles, sporting the most trendy gear and burning off their pasta carbonara. Possibly feeling slightly guilty that he hadn't been able to join them, Mark answered the email I sent asking if he wanted to join me for a leg or two of my trip with alacrity, so quickly that I thought that he might know more about the space-time continuum than a sociology student really should, and eagerly agreed to tag along for the first two legs, from Lands End to Torquay.

What Mark likely suspected, but many don't figure out until it's too late, was that the first few days of LEJoG were among the most taxing of the entire trip. Cornwall is hilly. Devon is even hillier. And, unlike in the Highlands, where, with some nasty exceptions, the roads gain elevation fairly gradually as they follow river valleys and the gentler side of mountains, West Country roads have an infuriating knack for finding the summit of hills in as few metres as possible. In other words, by going straight up, no matter how steep. And to look at Mark, and me for that matter, you would probably say that he was more suited for the middle of a rugby scrummage, rather than perched on the side of a 20 degree incline in the saddle of a 15 year old green road bike. Nevertheless, when the train pulled into Newton Abbott at around a quarter after seven, there he was, a little bleary, but also matching my excitement.

We had only cycled once or twice before, so I was slightly apprehensive about asking Mark to come along. I knew that we'd get along and that we were at roughly the same fitness level for pedalling, but I wanted him to have a good time and not waste one of his precious weekends. And, if I'm being honest, I didn't want to get lost and look like a fool. When I cycled with my friend Tindy, this was never really an issue, partly because of his generous nature, but more importantly, because Tindy couldn't read a map to save his life. When in London, where he first started cycling, Tindy basically followed his nose and sniffed his way from point A to point B, usually hitting points E, K, and Q along the way, but nonetheless getting to point B eventually. I recalled the first time the two of us cycled from Exeter to London. We had just finished getting lost in West Drayton, a depressing borough of outer London, and had reached the point where Tindy knew where he was and would lead us home to West Hampstead. An hour later, I felt as though I had cycled in as many directions as a bicycle wheel has spokes and was dizzy, not only from hunger and fatigue, but also from right turns, left turns and U-turns, all leading ultimately, but chaotically, to

LEJog de Matt

5

Tindy's parents' place, in a manner quite similar to how a balloon finds its way to the ground when you let the air out of it. When I got us a bit lost in the middle of Devon, I think Tindy was happy that I could find out where we were on the map, let alone get us to where we were going without having to dial 999 or, God forbid, ask for directions. I knew Mark would be just as forgiving, but I wouldn't feel quite the same about it. If John Cleese was correct in saying that it was every true Englishman's goal to die having never been embarrassed, then I inherited at least that from my Yorkshire ancestors, that and an unhealthy passion for trifle and Yorkshire puddings.

I had a new reason for apprehension once Mark and I got our bikes off the train in Penzance and pointed our wheels in the direction of Land's End. Unfortunately, the train didn't go all the way to Land's End, and I was too cheap and stubborn to even consider finding some form of vehicular transportation to take me what I thought was the 6 miles to the southwest tip of Britain. My cause for concern occurred at the junction of the road that took us to Land's End. At this junction, and practically simultaneously, I saw that the distance to the start of my trip was actually 10 miles, not 6, and I saw Mark overtake me at the left turn onto the Land's End road and blast off into the distance, growing smaller every second.

I knew Mark was strong on the flats, but didn't really know how strong. As I struggled to keep up, pushing my suddenly heavy bike into what was a considerable headwind, I remembered trying to keep up with my buddy Rob Ewanuk, back in Edmonton. Rob was my weight-training parter when I was doing my undergraduate degree and could have made a living sandbagging people on his bicycle. This was because, though Rob was 5'11 and about 240 pounds, he was a phenom on his bike. Somehow, some way, he was able to channel all of his prodigious energy into his bulging quadriceps and down onto the pedals. While Rob had trouble keeping up with me on a run for more than a mile or so, I struggled to keep him below the horizon when we were on two wheels.

What the experience with Rob taught me was not only never to play poker with him, but also that different bodies are good for different feats. As I saw Mark make like Lance Armstrong, I pondered if he was a long lost cousin of my old friend Rob and strongly considered jettisoning some of the heavier items in my panniers in an a pathetic attempt to stay within a few furlongs of him. With burning lungs, I rejected this idea and instead prayed silently, and treacherously, that his tire might find a bit of glass on the road.

LEJog de Matt

6

With what felt like a Herculean effort, and some drafting off of a towering coach, I managed to catch up to Mark and reach Land's End. As we dodged tourists, souvenir shops and camper vans, I realised all of the sudden why people are so keen on getting to John o' Groats from Land's End: it's because John o' Groats is as far away from the tacky, cheesy tourist trap that is Land's End as you can possibly get without boarding a vessel piloted by someone you have to call Captain or taking a trip through the Chunnel. I didn't know yet if JoG was any better, but it could hardly have been worse.

I have been to some depressing, touristy places in my time. The worst I'd ever seen, though I hastily add that I never entered the premises, had to be Dollyworld, a mesmerising monolith of tat at the foot of the Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee, one of the prettiest places in the United States. I remember driving past it with my dad and wondering if any where on earth could top it for sheer cheese. Land's End doesn't, surely nowhere could, but it comes close. When you turn off the road to Land's End, you are first greeted with a car park chock full with petrol-guzzling people-carriers and tourists wondering just why they had to see this particular corner of Britain. Past that is a plasticky-looking hotel, the first in an endless series of shops and, finally, the sign that confirms for you that you have indeed found your way to the End of all Land, which is good when you consider what the owners of LE might do with a little more of it. When I was a kid, I always wanted to see that sign, to see how far New York, Sydney and Timbuktu were. Now, in the web-age, you could get a picture with a freshly-printed sign that indicated how far you were from your home town, whether it be Saskatoon, Sudbury or Swindon. Something about it was wrong. I didn't know why. Maybe it was the grumpy attendant, maybe it was the fact that no one outside of Duluth would care how many miles separated LE from your crappy Minnesota town or maybe it was simply too easy, but I didn't like it. Perhaps what really bugged me was that it felt so American in a place that should have been the last bastion of old world charm and taste. Not that Europe can't be tacky - they sell pope-on-a-rope in the dome of St. Peter's - but somehow the last thing on the rocky shore of Cornwall, an almost hopelessly traditional county, should be something real and authentic, something that sums up precisely just what Britain is all about. But sadly it isn't and I hoped that JoG was somehow different.