

LEJoG de Matt Day 12 Part 1 (otherwise known as The Big Lebowski)

Day 12 111.18 miles (891.48) - shouldn't I be there by now?

I set my alarm for 6:15 am, in the hopes of getting on the road by 7 am. Even if everything went as smooth as glass, today was going to be a mother trucker of a day. I had really hummed and hawed, thinking about the best way to get from Edinburgh to Inverness. Part of the problem was that there were only a few possibilities. I could go the road that jagged off to the west or the one which jagged to the east. I should have really flipped a coin, but instead I kept looking at my map and tracing possible routes with green highlighter until I didn't have a clue of where I was meant to go. Eventually I had decided on the eastern route, partly because I had secured a place to stay near Castle Balmoral in the Cairngorms. This resulted in a final free night's stay, but at the expense of a monster day on the bike - well over 100 miles into the high, high, Highlands. The proper job, as they'd say down in Cornwall. Unfortunately, I had told Helen, the cousin of Mary Carter, who was the outreach officer at the Centre for Medical History, where I worked - talk about six degrees of separation - the wrong date and it took me forever to get back in touch and update them on my itinerary. Finally, in Berwick, I had got through to her and let her know that I would be arriving a day earlier, but a whole lot later in the day. So, at pretty much the same time.

Ian and Penny were in the kitchen when I made my way down the stairs. They wore matching dressing gowns and looked, well, quite cute together. I had a couple bowls of granola, washed down with coffee, and gratefully accepted a massive packed lunch, including a 500g bag of dried fruit. I definitely wouldn't be slowed down by any extra weight, if you know what I mean. I felt well-prepared. The sun was shining and I felt optimistic as I posed for a picture outside the McKee's house.

I had printed off a series of google maps to get me from Colinton to the Forth Bridge. It seemed straight forward enough. All I needed to do was follow signs for the bridge and there'd be no problem at all. I headed down out of Colinton into a quasi-industrial area. There seemed to be a fair number of commuter cyclists heading in the same direction as I was. The signs seemed helpful and clear. There were a few Olympic running track-sized roundabouts, but I kept locked in on the Forth Road signs and was heartened by the other pedallers around. I wasn't sure where they were going, but the company was encouraging. I kept out looking for the bridge, a gigantic suspended span of iron, so big they had yet to finish its last coat of paint. Ian and I had spotted it from the hill the night before and I figured I must be getting close.

The road I was on veered west and soon the signs began to indicate Glasgow as well as the Forth Bridge. This seemed fine. I kept on trucking, happy to have found a cycle path that paralleled the road and feeling good, strong and ready for the Highlands. Then, all of the sudden, three things happened, revealing without a shadow of a doubt, that I was most certainly not going in the right direction. First, the bike path I was on ended, as they annoyingly do, I noticed the airport on my right, when it most certainly should have been on my left, and over the flattened airport landscape, I saw the arches of the Forth Bridge, not less than a mile away as it should have been, but a good 5 miles distant and with an airport blocking my way. Not good.

I looked at my silly google map and tried to figure out where I was and where I had gone wrong. I appeared to be coming up to a motorway that connected Glasgow and Edinburgh, the M8. The motorway did connect to the bridge, but I couldn't cycle on it. There had to be another way. The ink on my ridiculous maps had started to fade and the paper was creased and torn. I cursed not having a proper OS map, and the idiot who had taken it out of the Exeter Public Library. It seemed as though there was a secondary road further along a that might provide an alternative way, but it was unnumbered and I didn't know where it intersected the busy A road I was currently alongside.

I bumped along a dirt path that paralleled the road, the kind that hobos and hitch-hikers make with their heavy boots, as they trudge along major thoroughfares, looking for a lift. I saw a Range Rover take an age in heavy rush hour traffic to make a right onto a smaller road perpendicular to the major one. Perhaps that was the one I wanted. I waited for about five minutes for a gap in the traffic and made it through the lighter away-from-Edinburgh traffic. Half way there. Cars and lorries and vans sped past with 15-minutes-late urgency, more spilling off the motorway. I heaved my bike, loaded down with panniers full of fruit cake and dried apricots, over the barrier and waited. It wasn't going to be the safest crossing. I felt like a knob in the bright morning sun, someone out of his depth, putting himself in a stupid, dangerous situation, and all because I couldn't read a map properly. As I inhaled exhaust, I felt naked, exposed like a boob after a wardrobe malfunction.

Eventually, after what felt like hours, I sheepishly scuttled across and got on what I hoped was the correct road. It had plenty of traffic running in the opposite direction, suggesting that it was in fact a little short cut from the bridge. I went through a small village, turned the wrong way, retreated, turned the other way, and seeing the Forth Bridge loom nearer and nearer, felt again as if I was heading in the right direction. I pedalled vigorously, trying to get back on schedule, but my efforts

seemed to fall, well, flat. A depressingly mushy feeling was oozing its way into my tyres. Sure enough, I had a puncture.