

Bristol to Lübeck – The First 2 Weeks

16th to 29th August 2014

All bike rides have to begin with a single pedal stroke and on 16th August we finally turned the cranks and rolled away from [Roll For The Soul](#) in Bristol to begin our trip. It was a fantastic send off with a peloton of purple and gold LVIS jerseys escorting us to the city limits. There was even a stop for homemade fruit pies at Bitton to make sure we kept fuelled up for the day's riding.



The LVIS entourage

There hadn't been a huge amount of sleep the night before thanks to the send off party. A truly brilliant night out with so many friends making the effort to come along and say goodbye and video messages from those who couldn't make it. Thank you everyone who came along and all those who contributed to the gifts and e-card, we'll read it often.



Which way now?

The exit route from England took us out to Bath where a broken seat post clamp was the first challenge of the trip. A mechanical failure is always frustrating but we had to be thankful that it happened just half a mile from a bike shop and with support on hand from Kirsty's mum we were soon back on the road again. Better that these things happen now.

From Bath we left the last remaining LVIS riders and heading through the Two Tunnels (probably the finest cycle way in the UK (well done Mr Tully)) and emerging out the other side suddenly felt like a huge weight off our shoulders. We were now properly on our way and on our own.



The 2 Tunnels

A night in the tent overlooking Stonehenge, then through Winchester the next day with a good bench mark for impressive religious buildings being set by Winchester Cathedral. The next night was spent next to a cricket pitch in a village on the South Downs but the only bats on display were flying overhead. The groundsman even congratulated us on our choice of camp spot when he discovered us in the morning.

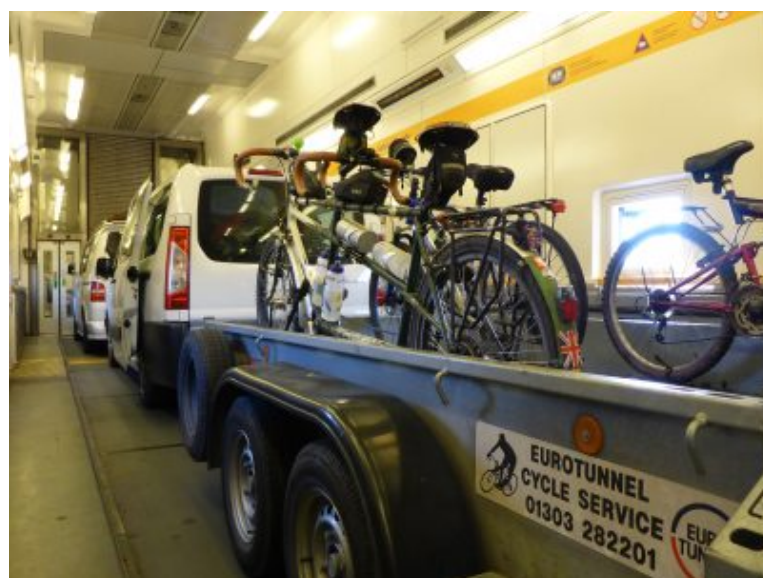


Haven't they finished this yet?

Rolling down to the south coast the next day for our first view of the sea and a stop in Brighton with our friend Rona and cat Puzzle which was a very pleasant evening of good

music, good food and catching up. We were then on our last day in England and it was a long day taking us all the way to Folkestone with our first proper climb of the trip over Beachey Head. Some people seemed to think we had packed light but gravity was telling us otherwise as we winched up the hills. At Folkestone I managed a dip in the sea before we dined out on a our last proper English curry for some time because in the morning we caught the train under the channel and into foreign lands at last.

We used the little known [Channel Tunnel Cycle Service](#) that is essentially a man with a minibus and a trailer that collects travellers from the Folkestone Holiday Inn, and you and your bikes(s) are driven onto the train and then deposited near the Carrefour car park on the other side. Joining us in the van were the Doyles who were excited to be on their first ever cycle tour though their target destination of Bologne was a bit more modest than ours. After stocking up on cheese, we headed out through Calais towards Dunkirk. Calais itself was surprisingly pleasant but almost always bypassed by the tourists making a beeline for the port.



Bikes on a train

Our first long, straight road of many took us into Flanders, thankfully with a beneficial wind behind us. Turning off the

main road at the end of the day we found the Dunes of Flanders and a vast stretch of sandy beach. After much hunting for good wild camp spot we relented and checked into a campsite that was mostly filled with 'chalet style' mobile homes complete with picket fences and well tended gardens.



Storm over the beach at Flanders

Next day we crossed into Belgium and the Garmin sat nav led us along quiet farm roads towards Bruges. I had hoped to rely mostly on paper maps but the network of small roads and cycle paths in the next few countries meant that we quickly realised that we'd need lots of detailed maps, so we reluctantly left it to the technology to guide us. It worked very well on the most part all the way into Germany with only the odd unnecessary scenic detour. We have full European mapping loaded into it so it should be useful for a good while yet.

Entering one Belgian village a car came past us honking its horn then swerved violently over the kerb and onto the cycle path before jumping back on the road. In the process the bumper detached from his trailer and was left behind but he didn't care as he'd done his bit to make sure that we knew that it was compulsory to use cycle paths in Belgium. I'd forgotten about that.



In Bruges

The narrow cobbled streets of Bruges were filled with tourists and horse drawn carriages, so we stopped for frites and mayo and looked at the main sights but didn't stay too long. The tourist information office sent me to an Indian Cafe instead of a Internet Cafe so we missed the chance to update the website.

Not far out of Bruges we found a beautiful avenue of trees next to a canal which made for a great place to spend the night. More quiet farm roads took us into the moated town of Sluice. Unknowingly we'd entered the Netherlands but there was no sign to tell us, not even a flag but I guess that's one of the joys of travelling in the EU. From here we would be following the North Sea Cycle Route which was well signposted and, if we wanted, could take us all the way to Bergen then back down through the UK.



Canal side camping in
Belgium

It should have been no surprise that the cycle routes in the Netherlands would be very effective and they didn't disappoint. It would only take a complete rebuild of the entire infrastructure network and engendering a culture of using the bike as the primary form of transport for all generations and cycling could be as popular in the UK. That and putting the whole country through a Corby Trouser Press.



Riding over a dyke

A night by a beach and cooking dinner in the dunes went well until the the wind turned and sand blasted the entire meal. I crunched through it regardless but Kirsty wasn't so keen. Riding on wide paths away from the cars became the norm but occasionally we strayed onto a road by mistake and the drivers immediately took it in turns to shout at us.



We crossed enormous dykes, saw plenty of windmills and wind turbines making our way up towards Amsterdam. On our run into the city we found ourselves by the side of a rowing lake that happened to be staging the World Rowing Championships. It all seemed very low key compared to when Kirsty and I volunteered at the same event in Eton Dorney in 2006 so we could watch some of the racing without a ticket. In Amsterdam we were staying with Jon, a University friend of Kirsty along with Lisette and baby Mia. They had all been unwell and we were warned that we may leave with an unwanted gift but we were willing to take the chance on the promise of a bed and shower. We parked the tandem and borrowed Jon and Lisette's town bikes which were much easier to pedal through the streets and over the canals. To the casual observer the mass of careering bikes looks like an accident waiting to happen but, much like the Italian traffic system, as long as you continue in the direction you want to go with enough conviction everything else seems to move round you. It was great fun and by far the best way to see Amsterdam.



Jon, Lisette and Mia in Amsterdam

In the morning we loaded up the tandem again and crossed the city to meet Eric at his specialist touring bike shop. Despite being shut that day we had arranged via email for him to open especially for us so we could pick up a new USB charging device for our dynamo hub (the 2nd hand eBay version I'd bought had not worked properly since day 1). Having ridden over 200,000km through most corners of the world he had plenty of advice for us and also gave us a suspension seatpost to replace the temporary rigid post we'd bought for Kirsty in Bath. It wasn't the right size but maybe we could get something to make it fit.

We had decided to try to get to Lübeck in North East Germany by the following weekend so that we could meet up with Kirsty's Sister and family who happened to be on holiday there. Google had told us that it would be around 550km and mostly flat so while sat in the comfort of Jon's flat this seemed entirely reasonable to cover in 5 days.



Pan flat roads should be a cycle tourists best friend but, much like a time trial, the tedium of being in the same gear without the need to adjust position left us aching pretty soon after leaving Amsterdam. 20km stretches of dead straight, featureless roads did nothing to boost morale so we were glad when we reached our target for that day and could get the tent up and stove on. The donated seat post was fitted using some shims made from an old drinks can. This was the third life for that particular can as after storing a high energy drink it was then home to a family of ants before finally making it into the frame of the tandem.



It was a damp and slow start the next day so we turned off the road soon to get free Wi-Fi and coffee at a supermarket. On

the 2nd refill the staff felt sorry for us and brought out cakes too. Back on the bike and the bouncy seatpost seemed to be holding up and helping with the comfort levels. We leave the Netherlands as subtly as we entered and the only clue we're now in Germany is the reduction in the number of cycle paths and the Audi's that fly past don't seem to mind that we're riding on the road. We camp next to a small lake and I regret not swimming in the morning unlike a local who turns up to take in a lap in the mist.

There are now a few gentle undulations, enough to need a change up or change down of a gear or two and the riding is a whole lot more enjoyable as a result. We're on a Megalithic trail and there are 5000 year old tombs every few miles to look at. Before finding somewhere to camp we always need to stock up on water and that night a local fire station agrees to fill up our bottles. I guess fire stations are always a good place to look for water. Our campsite that night is at the base of a huge wind turbine which lulls us to sleep with the swishing blades.



Wind farm at dusk



Lakeside wild camp

The fourth day of our cross Germany challenge takes us into Bremen. Every km ridden in a city takes at least twice as long as rural km -longer if the cafes are tempting. We work hard up till lunch and the bike is moving well. While eating our sandwiches another cycle tourist comes past, he is from Sweden and is riding from Hamburg to Barcelona. When we tell him we're on our way to Sweden he says he hopes we get a 'British Summer'. Not as bad as it sounds as it's their phrase for an Indian Summer.

Next day we have just over 100km left to Lübeck but we have to cross Hamburg. It's a huge industrial port and we find ourselves in amongst chimneys, cranes, freight trains and having to cross numerous bridges. At one point the whole place smells of burnt clutches, then fresh bread, then vinegar. A combination of the Garmin and Google maps gets us through eventually then it's a case of counting down the kilometres.



Sidings in Hamburg

By 4:30 we are at our destination in Bad Schwartau, the home of Doerte who is Kirsty's brother-in-law's sister, and her partner Björn. After a shower we are driven to Kiel to meet up with Kirsty's sister Karen, brother-in-law Uli and the nieces and nephew. Along with Uli's parents Heinz and Gisela they give us a fantastic welcome making the effort of the last few days well worth it.



Kirsty's sister and family

We've gained a lot from those five days being stronger in body

and mind but we've also learnt that it's not the way to ride on a long tour. We didn't have time to stop much and ended each day too late to be able to enjoy where we were. Some time in Lübeck should allow us to sort a few bits and pieces out, rest up and then continue north to Denmark but at a much more leisurely pace.