

Back in Europe – the beginning of the end

If there are any followers of our blog left then I must apologise for the increasing scarcity of the posts. One of our aims for this trip was to spend less time looking at screens and as the journey has progressed that aim has been easier and easier to achieve, but at the expense of putting fingers to keyboards and keeping up to date with what we're up to. Hopefully we'll have more time to complete the story once the bike has been parked up. An event that is now rapidly approaching.

But to briefly bring you up to speed. We left the States at the beginning of November and found ourselves on the Azores for a few days thanks to a well timed and well priced deal on a flight. From there we had the shock of not only returning to mainland Europe but also hearing that Trump had won the US election. You know how people remember where they were when they hear about a groundbreaking news story? For us the day of Trumpageddon took place when we were in Lisbon.



Sunset over Lisbon

As well as tiny coffees and tasty pastries, Europe is of course full of ancient history and for hundreds of years

pilgrims have been making the journey to Santiago de Compostela in Spain on what is known as the Camino de Santiago or 'The way of St James'. We decided that these routes would be a nice way to shape our journey north so we attached a scallop shell to the bike and followed the Portuguese Way up to Porto then into Spain to collect our certificate in Santiago itself. Then going against the flow of pilgrims we picked up the Camino del Norte to ride up to the north coast of Spain and along the bay of Biscay to Bilbao.



Collecting stamps in our pilgrims' passports



Santiago de Compostela

There are Camino routes all over Europe and in fact one starts in our home town of Bristol. A trail of yellow arrows can be followed up the atlantic coast of France, using the Velodyssey, Euro velo 1 cycle route and then into England for the final stretch.



Following the Velodyssey through France

So we're now just north of La Rochelle, half way up France. A

country that feels strangely familiar as the closest neighbour to England. Even though my schoolboy French doesn't extend far beyond the first few chapters of a Tricolour stage one text book it's still infinitely better than any of the other languages we've had to grapple with over the last two and a bit years. We can finally enjoy good cheese and great bread. Pain au chocolate for second breakfast. Vin rouge with dinner.



Tres bien

This last stretch has not been without its challenges though. The old saying of the rain in Spain falling mainly on the plane is a lie for the convenience of a rhyme. In fact the rain in Spain fell mainly on the tandem. The days are getting inconveniently short and the nights long and chilly. This does have the advantage of having more camp fires, though we've not learnt the French for marshmallow yet.



Pas de mallow de marsh?

Getting so close to the finish line it seems like everything is hanging together by a thread. Two tyres exploded in one day. A fork was left behind at a hostel. The stove splutters to stay alight and needs an overhaul. The rear hub on the bike has begun doing some serious complaining. The parts would take too long and cost too much to be sent from the manufacturers in California so we're trying to nurse it through to the end with a can of WD40 and some tlc.

Kirsty has cause for complaint too after a nasty bout of sinusitis was followed up by a persistent sore knee. Rattling along with a box of ibuprofen in her pocket is not ideal but seems to work. My nose has been running like a tap from a cold that has been hard to shift. Tempers are on edge as if we've not spent time apart for over two years. But we're holding it all together, just.



Another frosty morning

The question that is top of everyone's interrogation is now what will we do when we stop? For ages we've managed to put off giving a serious answer to that by saying the end was too far away to worry about it. But it's not now. The end is a matter of days and not many kilometres away. But our answers are still suitably vague.

Our lives have been incredibly simple since August 2014. Decisions have been not much more complicated than to pick a direction to ride in at the start of the day and to pick a place to pitch the tent at the end of day. In between we keep stocked up with water, basic food and cake and it seems to work out ok. 'What's next?' could be something a whole lot more complicated but hopefully not. Either way we need to give it some time to mull over and see what opportunities take our fancy.

To be honest what I'm looking forward to is adjusting back to a life off the bike one step at a time. Enjoying simple novelties like wearing a pair of jeans, cooking something in an oven, sleeping in the same bed two nights in a row or having a shave (actually that might be taking things too far). More than that though we can't wait to catch up with friends and above all spend Christmas with our families. Once we're

through all that then we can work out how to answer the 'what's next?' question.

For now we're enjoying the final few days of our journey. The last few evenings under the stars. The last few cafe stops. The ongoing hospitality of strangers. Beautiful winter scenery. Hopefully the last burst tyre. Soon we'll have the last ferry journey, then the last road back to where we started. And that will give us plenty more to write about. See you all soon.



Location for Kirsty's last birthday
on the road