

BAB – Tour

23rd Aug – 2nd Sept 2001



Biarritz



Andorra



Barcelona

Contents

Credits

What went before

Day 1 & 2 – Getting there

Day 2 – Still getting there & Biarritz to Baigts-de-Béarn (near Orthez)

Day 3 – Orthez to Montréjeau

Day 4 – Montréjeau to Sinsat (near Tarascon)

Day 5 – Sinsat to Sant Julià de Lòria (near Anodorra Del La Velle)

Day 6 – Sant Julia de Loria to Manressa

Day 7 – Manressa to Barcelona

Day 7 – 10 Las Ramblas & Gaudi

Credits -

Who's idea was it anyway?

It is not for me to point the finger, after all he should not enjoy all the blame or all the credit.

The Route

The route had been predetermined and I was led like a short sighted man through the Fog by a blind-folded group who believed I was leading the way.

Fund raising

All the Companies who gave, and those people who came to the BAB GIG

Logo and Art work

Thanks to Richard Smith, for now not only have we been there, done that, seen the video, but also have the Tee shirts to prove it.

Training

Dorking and the surrounding area is a terrible place (MR for deciding hills were the best training)

Support

Mickey deserves many kind words I just find it rather hard to give them up to him easily.

Disclaimer

May it never be said that this was my idea, that claim is to be enjoyed by another of the riders.

Also observe that these notes are an impression of the events as I saw them, other members of the ride may have a totally different perspective to that of mine. (My short sightedness is usually restricted to my eyes and sometimes I am completely blind) Whilst all the best-laid plans are usually well invested in, there can never be the perfect plan, for if there were, excitement and surprise would cease to exist.

What went Before

SO we begin this recount on the day that the BAB was hatched, I forget the date exactly and the term BAB was still not born. In fact I can barely remember it for there where many times spent talking of the possibilities of an adventure involving challenge, physical endurance etc whilst taking in one of the more beautiful area's of the world.

Did we not meet in person for the first time at Thames Ditton (just four of the members at this time) to discuss some of the rudiments of a ride with proportions somewhat greater than we had previously considered. It should be mentioned that we had met before, many times, but under very different circumstances, usually social, what I meant was the first meeting with regard to this hair brained scheme.

The Brief

(already born to a mind) came in the form, "at the start a swim in the Atlantic, ride some distances, and at the end a swim in the Mediterranean".

After agreement of the challenge in principle we also agreed that we should research the all possibilities of this brief and set an approximate date so that we could move forward. (It could be proven, at this point, that early stages of organising such events are undoubtedly the most enjoyable. However read on to find your own proof)

A couple of weeks later and the rough cut version of the challenge & route where set, a fifth rider interviewed and engaged, the date virtually established. (virtue & virtually have nothing in common) also the earliest remembered mention of "Mickey". (the support or sixth non riding member)

Of course in satisfying the brief there was really only one route to be taken, and the fact that it was nearly the shortest possible was not an indication of our mean* worth, more it was satisfying the needs of all the riders.

Riders Needs !

Most scenic (for at least all of us)

Hardest Climb & Fastest descent (MR)

Best accommodation & Diet (JN & RP)

An excuse to buy a new bike (RS, JC & nearly JN)

To avoid systematic creation of calluses (JN)

No numbness in the extremities (RP, MR)

To slum it, with no preparation at all, to bibawak, to keep it simple, no route plan if possible (MR)

Support driver (MR) this appears to disagree with the above but is best to "Keep it in the family"

A knowledgeable, caring, practicable Support Driver (ALL) "not all things are possible"

A camper vehicle for the support, great idea! (JN RP)

The above not possible due to resistance from one rider, "Not too many comforts" (MR)

LOGO (Let Others Gather Orthodoxies)

The Title BAB was used to signify the Route from Biarritz to Barcelona, via Andorra (the other reason we choose this route was because of the droll if simple Logo)

No Turning Back

Travel arrangements where made and booked kindly by Mark Richards & BW interiors, so at this point there was no without a serious excuse or injury turning back.

Training stated in earnest (well most of us) Through the Dorking Hills, inclines of up to 18% and up to twelve hills to be ridden on each session (oh alright six). To Mark Richards' credit, "Train Hard on hills and the rest will just happen" was a true reflection of our training. The fact that Mark lived nearest to those hills was not considered as bias in anyway, he & Sarah provided the other necessary part of training, that of "Après Training" in the form of Tea, Food and other refreshments.

Fund Raising

The BAB Gig, with Reminesce, Broadway Cycles, BW Interiors & many unsuspecting supplier to BW

*Mean - (noun – average)

Day 1 – Getting there (Thursday 23rd August)

Off We set from UK circa Tolworth (BW Ltd) via a mini bus containing the power units and a van containing our selected mode of transport for the tour – MR - “ I’ve forgotten the tickets” ha ha. Checked in and presented our cycles to oversize luggage where upon we were asked to sterilize the Bikes, for Foot & Mouth purposes you understand, saddles where deemed untreatable. There seemed to be a willingness to comply with EU rules however upon dismantling the boxes it was decided, by a sympathetic official, that we would probably be riding the whole journey with only our front wheels touching terra firma hence the only rubber that received the treatment was indeed the front wheels. The Flight on British Midland was pleasant and uneventful enough, although the team was separated from one another probably for safety reasons. MR – “I forgot to let my tyres down?”, & “I am sure I heard the captian say this flight is going to Madrid not Barcelona”

Arrival at Barcelona airport was smooth and we were soon rebuilding the Cycles on the main concourse in view of a bar. The Spanish’s second most popular sport, we learned, is cycling and we received much un-publicised attention. However remember that we were under the scrutiny of these other persons who seemed (looking back) to be saying something to us perhaps it did not translate well. * **“Creo que está roto”** was what they said after the event.

In any case “the event” was initiated by one of the riders asking quite innocently “what pressure should I pump these tyres to”. Bear in mind that we had been training on relatively hard tyres, the theory for this is that the harder the tyres the less friction there is likely to be between the road and the wheels. (A good & just reason) This in mind, now that we were ready to get on with the ride, “extra hard” was on most everyone’s mind. “80 PSI but no more” went the retort.

At this stage I would like to point out that there had been several ETA incidents prior to our arrival in Spain, although none in the airport.

What followed can be put down to one of four proposals I shall now detail to you.

- 1) Tyre Pressure gauges made for cycles are not calibrated very accurately (+/- 3 PSI)
- 2) Miss reading of the pressure scales can be common in such poor lighting conditions.
- 3) Desire for advantage over fellow riders by reduced friction on the oncoming cycle ride.
- 4) Misunderstanding the units of pressure whilst on the continent

After MR had finished with the inflation device a full 10 seconds passed without incident, then the resulting explosion reached the inside of one’s skull and somehow delayed the thought process which manage to raise the question in the very back of everyone’s brain “ what the “f*?+=+*/k” was that.

The unexpected audience had grown from twenty or so drinkers to include a group of fully armed security guards, something beyond even our wildest dreams in terms of a welcoming party. (this story gets better every time it is told)

A Sign

This may have been a sign, didn’t someone say that “things come in threes”, I know “threes” are difficult “things” to quantify, questions spring to mind like can these “three” apply to the whole trip or just this first day of learning.

Anyway we proceeded on to the nice little transit train with luggage and cycles which would link us to Sant’s the main train station from where we were to catch a sleeper to Biarritz over night. We just missed the first transit train due to politeness over not wanting to crush everyone with our cycles and luggage and a little nervousness about whether we could fit on with our cycles. A wait on the platform watching the beautiful sunset, still 20° C, behind the distant hills (we thought they were mountains at the time) No problemo, ½ hour later we were trundling our way on the tracks towards Sant’s with plenty of space, with all of our a condiments. MR – “ what station do we get off at?”

* I think its broken

Barcelona Sant's

After we had arrived at Sant's it took a little time to orientate ourselves but we soon found the main waiting area to watch for information about platforms, trains and their coming & goings, with 40 minutes to spare. We allowed ourselves to relax a little after all the hard work and realised we were working on an "empty", the solution was to procure one of the classics local dishes - McDonald's Espaniol. Applying our own local knowledge in such matters it was anticipated therefore that the duration for such a purchase would be minutes.

However local rules about queuing were not taken into account and this forage for food nearly turned into an ugly food fight and managed to be a somewhat lengthy fast food foray.

Mean while, if you can, cut back to the Main station and three of the team members looking excitedly at their watches, especially since 25 minutes before the train was due to leave, it was posted on the main board that platform 1 was now in receipt of this very train.

Between the three of us we **man** handled both luggage and cycles for the whole team in good time and soon found ourselves on the platform faced with another one of those tricky questions as to where our sleeping carriage was to be found. The train was wonderful to behold, big, powerful, clean and you just knew it would run on time and be very comfortable.

This question was the wrong question to be asking at this time, there was a much more important one we should have been asking, you see we were concerned with our nights sleep, a critical feature in the planned itinerary. We had, to be fair been raising this other important question, but without success, I think the first time this question was raised the rejoinder was "**no le possible**" & "**No le entiendo**". This occurred whilst frantically trying to fit five cycles into our sleeping quarters, perhaps one, maybe two cycles would fit in the quarters or even in the corridor of the train. But this train with corridors on one side of the train to leave generous seated cabins on the other would not allow the passage of humans and cycles in the same time continuum.

We were joined by two to increase our number to "team" status, luggage stowed along with fast cooling local dishes & warming drinks. The carriage had been found after some rhetorical questions being raised to the platform guards, which involved a lot of gesticulation. By this time the standard issue drinks has been spilt on the floor of the sleeper cabin. Now 9:50 and all that remained between us and securing our place on the ½ KM long train was the location of the guard carriage or mail compartment, you know the one. It's the place you can stow larger items of luggage or ones that just ought to be stowed elsewhere than your seating / sleeping area on an international train. After all there was no problem on the transit shuttle that brought us from airport to Sant's.

A good decision was made in haste for two stay with the luggage (and food) in the sleeper carriages the rest go to rear with bikes. That must be the place where they can store the cycles, a good 3 minutes at pace with a guard who seems to be intent on helping us to load the cycles. Along the way we met another guard who gesticulates that we are heading the wrong way, hence a turnaround to meet the honcho at the front who is all-important and knowing, or so we believe.

Its funny,... no amusing,..... no strange, how the mind works in such situations. We, perhaps we, perhaps the English, perhaps just me, tend to trust such decisions when made by citizens who work in these situations and you believe you are in their hands. But more importantly you believe its all going to work out, honestly. I may have lost you but stick with it, we were at this point flatly refused by this other official on the train, who kept looking at his watch repeatedly.

The three of us now took a seemingly critical decision to make for the rear of the train and three into five does not go to well especially when you have to try to ride the damn things so but we headed for the rear once more at as faster pace as is possible with 5 cycles and having lost confidence in the guard who seemed to be doing his bit and to his credit was still at our heels. We reached the end of the once believed international transport provider of delightful, comfortable international journeys and saw another guard who had the previous reputation for saying "no le possible" and the like.

We made early eye contact at our approach, with as much confidence as we could muster, a glance at the watches showed we had less than 2 minutes before 10:30 but then again they would not leave without us having loaded our bikes.

He eyed us remotely in between glances at the station clock and we started in earnest to communicate. It was all too clear very quickly that communication was not a function that either parties were going to have time to do, so the last ditch attempt (I've never understood where that saying came from perhaps ask MR) was to try to push the cycles past the in-communicating guard into what appeared to be an empty carriage with plenty of space. As push turned to shove we stepped back, probably just to gain strength for a renewed push and to our amazement the train inched (rather centimetered) out of the station, rapidly turning to metred out of the station etc., etc.,.

The following arsenal of rebuke from my own mouth was not believed by the grey stuff between my abused ears, I did not take breath for many syllables or monosyllables until red in the face I caught up with MR and RP who were running along the platform trying to plead with a fast disappearing train guard.

Beliefs

Believers everywhere will appreciate the fact that some beliefs are easily taken on board. Imagine if you will the journey so far, you have witnessed only the whole facts. What has eluded you are some of the boyish things that boys do on a journey with only boys aboard.

Let me try to detail some of the foolish quarter tom's that had preceded the event of "two on a train + luggage & passports whilst and three on a platform + cycles left behind".

In the mini bus on the way to the airport – "I have not got the flight tickets" MR

At Heathrow Airport – "Oh no I forgot to let my tyres down" - MR

On the Plane – "This plane isn't going to Barcelona but Madrid" - MR

At Barcelona Airport – "I cannot find the train tickets" - The guy who over inflated cycle tyres

On the Transit Train – "What station do we get off at" - MR

Recap (10:31 p.m.)

Three riders + five cycles on platform 1 at Sant's Station Barcelona

Two riders, luggage for five persons, money, passports, fast cooling slow food, paddling in coca cola on a train bound for Biarritz.

Upside – One rider in both parties have a mobile phone.

Downside – Rider with phone on train is distrustful of rider on platform due to previous windups.

Call One is made from one to another, the words are clearly, confidently expressed as convincingly as possible.

MR – "Richard we're not on the train, you'll have to get off at the very first stop"

RS – "Yeh right O!"

The receiver goes dead

Call two

MR – "Honestly Richard we are still on the platform"

RS – "OK I coming along the train to find out where you're hiding"

The receiver goes dead

Mean while three riders and five bikes leave the platform back upstairs to the main hall.

Official looking train people are approached until we find one able to communicate in pigeon where we are all still fluttering a lot. We are informed that in about 40 minutes the train will be stopping at its first station.

Call three

MR – "Richard just get off the f...ng train at the next stop, honestly we are still at Sant's, you'll have to cab it back to here"

RS – "F...k, the train is slowing down now"

MR – "Good, get off with James with all the luggage and get back here ASAP"

RS – "Not Good at all I'm at the wrong end of the train looking for you, James is at the other end with the luggage, I'd better call him"

The line goes dead

Unbeknown to us at the time RS gets off the train before it has stopped to run up the platform to aid JC in unloading the luggage which is half way along a carriage at the front of the train. As Richard comes to the front of the train where a small pile of luggage is already assembling he dashes onto the train pulling luggage off the train which James has deposited near the door. James jumps off the train as it starts pulling out of the station, Richard is still in the compartment dragging the last of the load towards the door. Just like the movies Richard leaves the train weighted with bags just in time to land on the last few inches of platform.

RS – "That was a short stop for such a long train"

JC – "Lets go and find a Taxi"

Unfortunately the stop at which they left the train is not a main station but rather a little local one which had a red light to stop the train from crossing another line. Hence very little chance of a Taxi especially at 11:00 p.m.

Back in Sants

MR & RP have gone in search of a car hire office so see if we can get back on track to Biarritz, whilst revisiting the slow food place (RP admitted to having some local currency for just such occasions). JN is left to protect our only other mode of transport that we know we can rely. In between sleepy moments on his own Jon keeps hearing angry exchanges in Spanish and on a waking moment looked across the main hall to locate their source. The sounds came from a security guard shouting loudly at vagrant types whom he was trying to remove from the building. As it turns out this highly efficient station closes at midnight and all bodies have to vacate the building. On the security guards first visit to JN he left in no doubt that JN is a mute who is able only to shrug his shoulders and point at five cycles repeatedly. His second visit is more determined but no more successful. JN is hungry and alone but suddenly a friendly guy (The American translator David Glatz) approaches. David has noticed us all earlier before the unfortunate breakup of the group, he is brought up to date immediately by JN and sympathies are exchanged. MR & RP return to the scene, the food is consumed faster than it was served.

We receive a call from our distant luggage tenders that all is well and they will be back in Sant's in around 45 mins. Meanwhile the third visit from the guard is about due but it is still only 11:45 p.m. This time the guard is not taking prisoners so we four walk towards the exit, now that we are moving the guard is like a frog with a fly on his tongue, he just will not let go. As he senses his success in getting us to move his empowerment is overbearing, his hand has now unleashed his baton which he waves around to exaggerate his gesticulations. By this time David Glatz has had enough and displays his array of Spanish expletives (up until then he not even given a clue that he could gesticulate as well as the guard in Spanish) this fuelled even more problems, guard number two joins the first. In Spain it seems not to be "the more the merrier", rather "the more the less individual gesticulation is necessary," allowing rest for the each guard in turn. The guards finally let go and walk to some other unsuspecting evacuee and we reach the exit only to find it was closed. The guard has intended this as a final show of their power over us. Things were now as bad as they could get. Things can only get better! And they did.

When the doors were unlocked they electronically slid back to reveal a massive square on which there was a full musical festival in full flow. A wonderful if expensive Hotel was found on top of the Station, they were only too glad to look after our cycles, put us up in rooms. We said our thanks to David Glatz who had offered to put us all up on the other side of town, we refused having seen the hotel and 20 minutes later RS and JC arrived laden with luggage. We all disappeared to our rooms, showered and swept out of the Hotel into the music festival each eating Chorizo and bread accompanied by beer and plenty of music. On the whole a quite satisfactory night after all.

Day 2 – still getting there 24th August

Where to hire a van from, Jon & Richard go shopping and locate a Hertz Mercedes Van large enough to accommodate 5 cycles 5 cyclists and 5 sets of luggage. Unfortunately it only seats three so in shift patterns of about 1 ½ hrs two riders sit in back. There are sauna conditions in the rear so the side door is wedged open a crack to air to circulate. With a certain amount of licence with regard to the speed limits we arrive 5 hours later in Biarritz (not bad).

A very quick introduction to Mickey our support driver at **Biarritz** Station Car Park and an even quicker handover of the hire van with some **loose** instructions as to where to return the vehicle to. Leave it to Mickey to sort out was the inflection which prompted a rather abusive retort to MR, the nephew, with regards to his overall lack of organisational skills with regards to being a drinker in a place where beer is brewed. Mickey had arrived the day before, he spent the night on the beach with crabs, a common occurrence apparently, whilst he waited for the tardy group to arrive.

Mickey has to drop off the Van at **Bilbao**, some 2 hrs away and over the border, He will not get back to the support car until late, so he sleeps his second night on the beach with more marine life. Whilst chasing around Bilbao a brown orifice of a place” he just makes it to the last train back to Biarritz and nearly misses the taxi due an empty stomach & a tempting restaurant, the taxis are closing up for the night after the aforementioned last train.

The team decide right away that we cannot forego the ritual dipping of the toes in the Atlantic ceremony, so we ride to a beautiful sea front, quite cosmopolitan with good surf. One member actually managed to make a full dip the rest settled for toes.

Day 2 - Biarritz to Baigts-de-Béarn 46 miles

So off we set 45.3 miles to **Orthez** and quick, we did not follow the intended route but headed along a more major road to get as far as possible as soon as possible. The roads were smooth as you would expect from a nation who invented the “tour de cycle”. We rode some 45 miles but did not reach Orthez in time 2 ¾ hrs later the light was fading and although we had lights front and back of the peloton when we saw this hotel we could not refuse its wares (**Photo**).

6.0 p.m. – 8:45 p.m. 45 miles (we did think of Mickey for a few seconds between us that night)

The accommodation – Le Relais de Baigts, The Sustenance 5 courses, and a sleeper house, £18 per night including the meal and wine with a bit extra for breakfast. The pool table did not get serviced, we were sat down. The first one to bed is MR, with JN RP and RS suffering one or two more drinks.



1st Night - Baigts-de-Béarn – Hearty 5 course Service

Day 3 - Baigts-de-Béarn (Orthez) to Montréjeau

The next morning, 3 S's (commonly know as Shi Sho & Sha) @ 6.0 a.m. Breakfast of black thick coffee, croissants, pay up. The owners are away to the market and cannot be delayed.

We are on the road as the sun comes up at 7.0 a.m., its is a little Foggy and remained so until about 9:30 at **Pau**, when the sun burns through (**photo**). Here we stopped for a breather, refreshments at the square in Pau, this is an enticing medieval town, with gothic Cathedral, and a magnificent views over the valleys below from a tiered Promenade, below a river the **Gave de Pau**. At this point there seems to be a conflict of opinion, surveying the view from the promenade it seems apparent to one rider that the way from here is definitely south, this is in agreement with all but the route master suggests that we should head west to cross the river and then south. In truth there is little difference either way but remember we were five chiefs and no Indians so the team splits. One group made up of one wholly experienced orienteerer albeit one that does not need maps, one I'll follow you to show you that you're wrong and a pacifist. The second group are just ignorant of why the other two are leaving and hang around for a bit. Suffice it to say that everyone was right in the end even the one who was wrong, every body hates it when someone else is right.

By now the sun is warming up nicely for a perfectly clear day, we make a few small climbs and find a spot on the river where we dip our already wet bodies into crystal cold water. Mickey puts in a call to Mickey to see if he's catching up yet, and sure enough he is only minutes away. When Mickey arrives a new kind of challenge arrives. Diving into two feet of water from four feet of elevated rocks. The river is clear and shortly he discovers a far higher diving spot into about five feet of water & a six foot dive. It is decided that we all have to take the plunge from this new diving spot... Great fun, Richard Page does it somehow differently from everyone else (**Photo**) and is caught on film.

On with the ride, really warm now and on to Lourdes where we are longing for a rest from the heat. Lourdes is pretty but also a tourist trap, the shrine is very picturesque but there really is nowhere to stop in the shade, so onwards to find anything. We stop in a house that has a few light refreshments to offer, but mostly shade and water. We partake of the dried fruits and nuts and sleep in the yard in the shade. A short time later Mickey returns after a sortie to chase us back into the saddle. When JN stands he is struck by cramps the like of which we had never heard off judging by the noise he makes. He really could not move his legs, nothing seemed to shift them. When he was rolled over into a crouch, he is able to rise from his haunches to stretch and finally the cramps gave way. This fortunately was the first and last that the group suffered.

Onwards then, although we had not eaten, through villages so peaceful and quite, to where Mickey found another little stop for a short rest and food of cheese, bread, ham at town called **Ménilheu**, we think. A bridge jump into another river, this time really dodgy the only taker is Mickey. There were some youths here who sat and watched, smoked our cigarettes. JN cuts his foot slightly on glass & RS tends. A little bit of an eye opener climb here 15 miles from our destination of **Montréjeau** we turned left and started a climb up to **Capvern** we probably climb 5-6 Boxhills, our only comparator from 300 metres to 900 metres. James Coleman's gears start to play up he cannot get into the low gears but there's not much we can do he soon develops thighs like a Gorilla that has carried a Godzilla up the Empire State.

Mickey sets of on another foray ahead and finds a hotel that is really still living in the 70's. It is clean and friendly and after another large meal with wine, only 3 of us JN, JC, RS make it to the bar up the road, a Pizzeria the rest are safely tucked up in bed. Mandatory calls are made home to our wiser (non cycling) halves.



Pau



Cool Splash

Day 4 Montrejeau to Sinsat

Off to an early start again, James Coleman's bike is not changing gears properly, I try to make adjustments, but fail, the problem is I do not want to break anything or make them worse.

We are now drinking the old energy juice and isotonic drinks, of course it was forgotten that we should have been drinking this at least a day before we started riding to allow our bodies to hydrogenate or so we were told. This day, at least in the morning we rode our fastest and most sustained, we rode that morning at an incredible pace and did some 23 miles to Mane in just over an hour. Shortly after that however things started to change. After a further 13 miles we met Eycheil, only a little blip but still 10 times the blip of Boxhill and later that day **Prat Communal** where we climbed from 600 metres to 1249 metres to Cole de Port. Before Le Prat Mickey located a lovely haven beside the river, clear and refreshing to bathe our feet. Mickey sets off and returns with seasoned chicken with lashings of baguette a fine feast followed by snoozes of the highest order in the shade. A result James' bike is repaired by the most minor of adjustments. A little further around the corner Mickey & Mark found a spot to dive from. The climb to **Cole De port** was a good taster for what was to come tomorrow. **(photo)** On the way up evidence of previous cyclists on the Tour de France, the traditional writing on the road declared famous riders names as well as one persons love for another.

On the top the musical sound of Cows with bells and some cheeky Black horses who approached everyone looking for any scrap of food.

Great ride down the other side, lots of cars in the way though. Just around the corner at the bottom was our scheduled stop of Tarascon, but funny how your romantic imagination of a place name does not always serve as a credit. The town did not seem to have a lot to offer, in fact the hotel we first studied had a sinister appearance and a strange hunched figure at the door so after initial bargaining we rode on, with a little rain now falling, which was quite refreshing, to **Sinsat** and found a newly owned hotel **Belais de Beille** who where very friendly, served ice cold beer and a hearty turkey bolognaise with red wine and more rustic lashings of bread. The rooms where clean with crisp bed linen. Strangely each room has a sink and a bidet, no toilet, the showers and baths were communal per floor. We where now in a valley that runs all the way up to Andorra, no let up from here on in. Still only three of us have a couple of extra toddies that evening JN RS RP accompanied with the mandatory phone calls, before slipping between those crisp sheets.



Lunch stop at Prat Communal



1st real climb - Col de Port

Day 5 – Sinsat to Sant Julià de Lòria (near Andorra Del La Velle)

No breakfast available here, so it's straight on the bikes and head for Axes Les Thermes it's a slow steady climb all the way. RS and Mickey take the easiest way out, the nearest café with breakfast of croissants and coffee. The rest seek more rewarding calories in a cafe across the way made up of bacon and sausages and eggs. From here the climb is relentless and begins to steepen in places. Generally the best decision we made in terms of riding was made on this day, the temperature was over 30 degrees and at the height probably 35 or more in the sun. The idea was hatched that we should ride for 30 minute stretches and rest for ten, taking on water. Looking back it seems even now that this was too luxurious, but at the time it was a good pace to take sometimes you do not realize the damage you might be doing to yourself. Finally some the most picturesque views of the journey came into sight, but only when you turned your head to look back, it was then you realized how far we had come not only along but up (**photo**). One of those haunting sounding towns was on the Horizon (the Horizon being about 45 degrees up) **Pasa De La Casa**, which of course ended up being an awful place, actually a mining & duty free town the mines being serviced by the incessant trucks passing us on the way up. We found a littered spot on the side of the hill with Cows and their waste to go with it. Thinking we were at the top, Mickey performed a reconnoitre only to find another 3 miles to the Col.

This was the hardest and steepest bit, but once at the top the elation was worth it for now we could clearly see the pain had some gain to payback, some 35 miles into the days journey, 28 miles continuously up, and about 20 to go, all down hill. (**Photos**)

We had plans to stay at Andorra Del La Velle, however on passing this large town we could smell the human additions to the river and sought a more southerly place and settled for Sant Julia De Loria. The most lush Hotel so far en route, most everything catered for Bath, Shower, TV with Cable a good bar and the village itself was friendly and surprisingly cosmopolitan.

The restaurants superb if wanting a little politeness of the waiter. Best not dwell on the waiter but he had lots of people to show off to in the little street side boxes in which we sat to eat. The disagreement on the bill probably cost us more in the time it took to argue the matter, us being six grown professionals unable to take on board the complex price structuring of veal, fish and various other delicacies. Worse the disagreement between MS & JN about the finer points of how to agree to disagree on begging to differ.

A late beer for all of us whilst Mickey entertained us with stories of intrigue and how to remove, successively, trapped cars out of the sand lasted for at least one hour.



Pasa del la Casa – looking back



From the top - Going Down

Day 6 – Sant Julia de Loria to Manressa

Well rested and an idea to have a slight lie in (never a good thing) and a simple breakfast of coffee and sponge cake croissants. Still downhill for quite a bit! Should be easy today! If tempting fate is ever a problem, then consider the previous two statements and remember what a famous sports shoe manufacturer say “just don’t do it”.

Mostly good riding, colour changes from green hills and blue sky to Orange & Red rock, yellow brush on the hills and yet a blue sky. We follow the route down following a river which ever widens becoming a lake which is really a reservoir. **(photo)** The rivers then runs wide of our route, which was changed democratically, from a second day in the mountains to the more direct route of south to get us to Barcelona half a day earlier. It’s getting hot and perhaps just when we have a good lick of a pace we decide to stop beside a trickling brook. Here there is little shade around and upstream a gushing stream feeding the brook, where someone has constructed a Spa bath into which the stream feeds, excellent massage for any part of the body that can be presented into the path of the stream. **(photo)** Serious sausage and cheese is on offer and 2-3 hours of rest from the heat. (much too much rest)

We still thought at this point that the riding was easy. Immediately after lunch a five mile climb, we should have expected it from the maps. Then down hill again thinking the hard bit was over. However the hardest part of the whole journey was just about to start. For some reason the travelling just did not seem to stop that day, no distance seemed to be being covered. Was it the Cheese and Chorizo that we had all been plied with by Mickey, did we rest too long, village after village had no hotel to offer. Then it hit us, a warm afternoon breeze had whipped up and was in our faces, it was still hot and some more uphill climbs to add to the effort needed, some frightening tunnels which did not cater for cyclists with rushing traffic which tended to push you into the deep gutter.

Eventually Mickey won the day and found the only Hotel for miles around in Manressa. Things always look better after the 3S treatment and again tucker was deserved and relished and the rooms quite excellent if a little dated.



A Bridge too far



The Wash



Head & Shoulders



The elusive Uncle (upright)

Day 7 – Into Las Ramblas (Barcelona)

Thoughts now turned to meeting up with the girls, would they recognise our newly muscular and bronzed bodies. Muscular thighs and bronzed arms, legs and foreheads. We had worked hard and had left little work to do on this last day. What difficulties could there possibly be.

We passed the beautiful and mysterious La Puda de Montserrat, described as a wedge of a mountain range, or Serrated mountain, the place of a visionary monk (**Photo**) 40 KM northwest of Barcelona. Apparently 50 AD Saint Peter left an image of the Virgin here carved by Saint Luke, also alleged is the find of the Holy grail by the Parsifal. The place is full of deserted hermitages. PS we did not ride up these hills.



Montserrat (Serrated Mountains)

From here we began to get into Barcelona's suburban area's, at first busy roads, then busy dual carriageways, and eventually, without meaning to, fully fledged motorways. Now in England you do seem to get warning that the road is about to change into a motorway proper, just the colour of the signs turning to blue is normally enough, but not here. We end up riding along side cars, trucks and HGV's travelling at 120Km +, the noise is incredible. Every now and then we have to cross over junctions where joining traffic is travelling at 100Km minimum, we make a dash for it when we have to. I am sure that there are alternative routes into Barcelona, but we did not find them. We headed for the port, our only point of reference. There we meet up with Mickey, who leads us onto another more innocent road that should run us directly into Barcelona centre only to be stopped by police, so we back track and find a route into the centre plaza where the famous Magic Fountains are. From here its really easy going into Las Ramblas where we locate the Hotel Lleo. Mickey is along shortly after when we unpack, store the cycles and head for the bar before the girls. Mickey on an usual tight schedule departs to France to follow similar unusual exploits.

About an hour's of celebration on the local brew and we are received by our fairer halves.

Followed by busy tourist mode exploration of Las Ramblas, Tapas, The works of Gaudi, Olympic City & Magic Fountain, then home for rest.