Travellers' Tales

North through France

Martin and Gill Salter-Smith took a relaxed route north from Bilbao to St Malo

The dates for the European Bike Express didn't fit this time, so we caught the ferry from Portsmouth to Bilbao – a service that will sadly be withdrawn in September. From there we took the train to Bayonne. A little further on we picked up the Piste Cyclable du Littoral, a proper cycle path that weaves through varied forest for 250 kilometres to the mouth of the Gironde. Occasionally running next to quiet roads and often giving access to the Atlantic beaches, this gives fairly flat riding; even with camping gear I never used my little chainring. It proved an ideal route for Gill's recumbent.

Beyond the Gironde we said goodbye to the cycleway but found the second half of the ride even more enjoyable with the chance to visit typical French villages, markets and *patisseries*. The campsites here were smaller and more rural and on one we even shared a meal with the owners and their friends.

Ferries – plus a historic transporter bridge over the Charente at Rochefort – helped us to keep the line of the route as straight as possible, although watching an irreplaceable recumbent manhandled onto the roof of a small bobbing motorboat to cross the Bassin d'Arcachon was a heart-stopping moment. The free ferry across the Loire at Le Pellerin meant we didn't need to tackle either Nantes or the Pont St Nazaire.

A typical day's routine saw us up before six, leaving the campsite soon after seven, and riding until nine when we treated ourselves to coffee and pastries and a wander round a market. Then another few hours riding, reaching our destination in the early afternoon before the heat became too much. We arrived in St Malo after 500 miles and nine days, crossing the River Rance on a small ferry straight into the walled town. To finish, we stayed in a four-star hotel, enjoying hot crepes and local cider in bed while watching Match of the Day. Luxury is much better if you've worked for it!

Birthday riding

Mary Ann Hooper cycled to the 2009 CTC Birthday Rides, camping en route

I signed up for four days camping at the 2009 CTC Birthday Rides and spent three days getting there. The journey was half the fun. The rides were held in Oundle, 110 miles away from home in Watford. To get there I mainly followed Sustrans' NCN Route 6.

The first night I camped at the Old Dairy Farm right next to the Grand Union Canal. It would have felt more cycle-friendly if access from the towpath hadn't required getting my bike and gear up steep stone steps! The second night I sneaked

into the churchyard in the village of Arthingworth and found a perfect camping spot. When I went to the local pub for a meal, no one asked where I was staying, and I didn't tell them.

About ten miles north of Northampton, I left NCN 6 to head on quiet lanes across country to Oundle. From Geddington, I took a byway that degenerated into a bog, thanks to the depredations of all-terrain vehicles. It was difficult even walking with my heavily laden bike.

At Brigstock Country Park, I knew I was near the Birthday Rides. There were dozens of cyclists recognizable as Birthday Riders by their glowing fluorescent colours and knobbly knees. I found myself overtaking an old cyclist on a hill. That was a red rag to a CTC bull! He tore past me and made sure he kept in front of me the rest of the way to Oundle. We were both overtaken by a Birthday Rider on a tricycle, going like the clappers.

The Rides themselves were a cheerful melange of camaraderie, CTC traditions, unusual bikes, interesting events and pleasant cycling. I'll be back.