
WHERE: South West France
START/FINISH: Bordeaux to Collioure
DISTANCE: 600km
PICTURES: Alamy (main photo) & Simon Smith



GREAT RIDES

A ROLLING RECOVERY

*Suddenly a widower, CTC member **Simon Smith** took his daughters on the family tour they had planned before their world fell apart. This is their journey*

In 2003, two years after we were married, my wife Nicky and I cycled 2,000km around southern India on a tandem. It was a joyous journey that I wrote about for *Cycle* (Feb/Mar 04). Eleven years later, in March 2014, we were planning a summer of tandem cycling with our two young daughters when Nicky was diagnosed with a brain tumour. She died suddenly. Our loss was absolute.

Grief is miserable. In the immediate aftermath of a death, it's just there, a constant. Gradually, you learn that if you occupy your mind fully enough with something else, you can take a break from it. Distraction therapy. So I decided to go ahead with our plans and cycle with Tilly (10) and Betsy (7) from Bordeaux to the Mediterranean, along the canals that cross France. Just the three of us. We would camp where possible, with kit in a trailer pulled behind our newly-acquired Thorn Triplet. We needed distraction. We needed to be by ourselves.

Mum's the unspoken word

My wife Nicky was funny and brave to her last conscious breath. As she was dying she told one friend, 'Phew, I think I have managed to get out of cycle camping.' We laughed. Nicky tolerated camping and she enjoyed cycling, but she simply couldn't abide a combination of the two. Living without toiletries, pillows, extra blankets, books, camping chairs, and hot water bottles was not a holiday for Nicky. For me, by contrast, the reduction of luggage to its functional minimum is almost an obsession.

I like to carry only what is necessary for sustaining life: warmth, shelter, and food. On this trip, I would break that rule. We would be carrying something extra, not practical but precious: Nicky's cremated remains. Even in death, my wonderful wife gave us a purpose, a mission to accomplish.

She told me that she wanted some of her ashes to be scattered on the sea. Her rationale was simple: 'The sea is everywhere,' she said. 'Put me in the sea and I'll be in all seas.' In life, she had often carried me; in death, I carried her. In a strange way, she'd be with us on the mother of all cycle camping trips too. We'd have laughed at that together.

The three of us set off from Bordeaux on a clear, bright morning, heading south east. In Creon, we were surrounded by a group of 20 or so British women on a cycling tour. They clucked over the girls and the 'Where's Mum?' question hung in the air. Eventually I told them. I always asked the girls before I told anyone our story, because the three of us would then endure the variable responses people have to grief. In this case, the cycling women emptied their panniers of various items of food: sausages, lentils, tuna, haricot beans. Food equals love for so many people.

Better together

We soon reached the canal. It was our companion for the next three weeks. I grew to love it. Like many canals, it is a feat of engineering that defies comprehension. It was flat and fast, even with a heavy trailer. On one day, we did 70km. Our destination



DO IT YOURSELF

› Grief sucks. There's no two ways about it. But cycling is great therapy – it's an occupation for the mind and the body. If you plan to cycle your way through bereavement, here's my advice: be kind to yourself. Don't plan too much, don't beat yourself up, have fun. Tell other people where you are and then forget about them. Be with your sadness. You can cry on a bike and people think it's the wind in your eyes. Talk to yourself, and keep a diary to chart all your journeys.





» that day was a campsite in Valence that was infested by mosquitoes. I was pleased we had a decent tent. The girls quickly adapted to a swift entry and exit of the inner bit.

We set off from Valence during a tremendous thunderstorm. Black skies were pierced by lightning, and monsoon rain fell as Tilly and I folded the tent. It was like packing up a kids' paddling pool. We set off for Moissac, hoping for good weather.

Moissac is a pretty town centred around the Pont Napoleon, which was built in 1856. Like the canal, it's another feat of engineering: the rivers here are massive. The Tarn at this point is easily 100 metres wide. How important those bridges are! Grand spans, deep foundations. Nicky was not a bridge builder. She sometimes put a moat around herself. Sometimes it did make her safe; other times it left her high and dry. I guess I was her bridge builder. I pondered this as I watched the kids making friends, the tent drying out in the evening sun.

As we went south to Toulouse, an English couple on another Thorn tandem caught up with us. There was much admiring of each other's bikes. John and Caitlin were lovely. They reminded me so much of Nicky and me when we rode around India. Tandems, of course, require collaboration and communication. To reap the benefit, riders must pull together. And the benefits

are significant: twice the power, half the resistance. Together, we flew into Toulouse.

Still waters

We set off slowly in the morning along the canal, then turned south towards a campsite. It meant climbing some hills similar in size to the South Downs, which I know well from living in Brighton. I regretted every pointless ounce on board – all except our special cargo.

At Belflou, we were rewarded with a beautiful site overlooking a picturesque reservoir built in the 1980s. Skeletal trees break the surface of the lake. I wondered about the houses and homes given up as the waters rose – memories of lives and loves that are solid but invisible from the surface. Despite this peculiar and unsettling feeling, we all dived in.

The next few days were hard. It wasn't the cycling, the camping or the combination of the two. It was the mothers. They were everywhere. Mothers wiping noses, brushing hair, cuddling and scolding. I watched them. Mothers: trusted, loved, wise and kind... and everywhere except with us.

The evenings were the most difficult. At the Carcassonne campsite there was evening 'entertainment', funnily dreadful to match the Disneyland nonsense of the castle itself. If Nicky were there, we'd all

have been dancing to the music: 'Ooh blah di, ooh blah daa, life goes on, la lala lala lala la'. It wasn't the only time I'd get the kids into bed, read them a story, then finish the bottle and quietly weep.

South to the sun

The following morning, we had to make a big decision. Go north as planned to Sète or take advantage of the time we had created by our swift progress and head south toward Spain?

'Girls?' I asked, 'What do you think?'

'South! Further and further, Dad,' came the unanimous response.

I gave the girls as much control as I could. Every day, maps were pored over, distances to and the relative merits of campsites were considered. 'Does it have a pool? How many water slides does it have? Let's go there then.' We cooked on our Trangia most nights, rice or pasta, sausage, courgettes and tomatoes in a red wine sauce. Good enough.

Cycling can be like meditation, and I believe that it become so for the girls. As we rode, we sang, made up fanciful stories with the same ever more ludicrous yet familiar characters, and we talked and talked. But there was also silence. Over those weeks, we became comfortable with that silence. We knew we were changing, becoming different, stronger, and better able to cope. We coped with each other, our roles, our little campsite jobs, and individually and collectively with our grief.

Further south, the canal became quieter

AS WE RODE, WE SANG AND TALKED. BUT THERE WAS ALSO SILENCE. OVER THOSE WEEKS, WE BECAME COMFORTABLE WITH THAT SILENCE



and cut through rock. Plane trees gave way to pine. The sublime smell of pine forests in sun filled us with the realisation that we had somehow quietly entered the South of France. The path beside the canal had become a muddy, rutted path.

These canals are a well-worn route for cyclists, and we met many folk along the way. Everywhere we went, the bike caused much amusement. In a country as obsessed with cycling as France, it was great to be astride the subject of so much admiration. Not so lucky were Steve and Rebecca, a young couple we'd seen occasionally en route. They had bought cheap secondhand bikes for their grand tour, and the rutted path had given them mechanical problems that they couldn't fix. They were at a loss, but with the right tools and bit of tinkering, I got them back on the road to complete their holiday. Thanks were wine, food and great company as we joined them for a night and free-camped in a vineyard.

We sailed through Narbonne and reached the coast. With the sea on our shoulder, I was thinking more about the purpose of our journey, our little mission. We had come so far, dealt with joy and adversity, and were more of a team than ever. If nothing else, this made me more comfortable with beginning to say goodbye, even if I was not quite ready

Final farewell

We arrived at our final camping spot a few kilometres north of Collioure in persistent rain. It became heavier and heavier all day. >>>

- **Opposite**
Following two canals meant a largely flat route, making for easier progress on the triplet
- **Top**
Time out for Tilly and Betsy beside the canal
- **Bottom**
Tilly does the cooking at La Réole

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● **Left** Toulouse, where the Canal de Garonne and Canal du Midi meet
 ● **Below left** Toulouse was also one of the places where the heavens opened
 ● **Below** Singing, telling stories, and making faces on the journey south



I, WE, WILL ALWAYS GRIEVE FOR HER. IT WILL NOT END. THIS BEAUTIFUL BIKE IS A WAY FOR US TO SHARE THAT EXPERIENCE AS A TEAM

» It was grim, and I was convinced we'd be flooded. At 1am, I was out in the rain in my pants, bailing out our pitch as a sailor would his dinghy. I finally resorted to clearing a discreet channel that diverted the rainwater. Unfortunately, it sluiced through the neighbouring pitch. Little was done for Anglo-French relations that night. But morning brought the sun and all was forgotten.

The journey was behind us now. Our trip was almost done. That night we completed our mission.

One of the hardest things to endure about losing a partner is the sudden disappearance of any physical presence. Nicky was the most graceful creature I'd ever met. Perfect. Often while she slept, I'd lie beside her scrutinising the rise and fall of her body. Now when I walk or ride the South Downs, I see in every hill and vale a shape that reminds me of her.

She wasn't in France, though. The craggy Pyrenees didn't remind me of her, nor the rocks around which waves broke. So I'm pleased we decided to sprinkle her ashes there. She wasn't there; she is now. In the evening sun, in the stretching shadows of the church of Notre Dame des Anges, the three of us stood and watched as a set of waves washed up and took her away. She's there now, as she wanted: a part of the great, singular, connected sea.

So this part of our recovery is done. I've come to realise that it's not the destination but the journey that matters. I, we, will always grieve for her. It will not end. This beautiful bike is a way for us to share that experience as a team. Moreover, we celebrate the present as we discover more about each other, as Nicky and I did all those years ago in India. The girls, who were nothing short of wonderful, have already committed to the next part of the journey. ●

Fact File: A JOURNEY THROUGH FRANCE

DISTANCE: 600km in total, between 20km and 70km per day.

ROUTE: Bordeaux to Collioure along the Canal du Midi and Canal de Garonne.

CONDITIONS: Largely flat beside the canals, occasionally hilly to get to campsites. Surfaces sometimes rough.

BIKE USED: We were riding a Thorn Me 'n' U2 Triplet. It's a great piece of kit, steel framed and well spec'd.

EQUIPMENT: Ortlieb panniers front and rear. A trailer carried most of the bulky kit. I cooked on a Trangia

NAVIGATION: I used an app called AlpineQuest for mapping.

I'M GLAD I HAD... A solar PowerMonkey to charge my smartphone, and a big spare battery.

MORE INFORMATION: Simon's blog is levoleuretlevelo.co.uk

ACROSS FRANCE

