

# Young tourers

Eleven-year-old **Eleanor Holton** describes her family's French tour, while teacher **Dave Barden** explains the success cycle touring has had with his special needs pupils

## Eleanor Holton: Two weeks in Provence

**T**wenty hours after boarding the bike bus near Milton Keynes, we were deep in the south of France in the town of Orange. It felt like the middle of nowhere. There were four of us: my mum, my dad, me on my own bike, and my six-year-old sister on a tag-along at the back of my dad's bike. We were camping, spending two weeks cycling around the Luberon – a set of hills near Avignon – so we were loaded down with tents and sleeping bags. Our bikes had travelled in the European Bike Express trailer, while we went in the double-decker coach that towed it.

Next morning we got up early and packed our tents before anyone else in the campsite was about. We stopped at a boulangerie for breakfast (for the next two weeks, we practically lived on baguettes!) and then rode off toward the city of Cavaillon. It was a beautiful scene, with vast fields of golden sunflowers on either side and Mont Ventoux rising in the misty background. We were so entranced that we forgot we had put our camera down on the church steps of one of the villages. Ten kilometres later my dad and I realised and went back for it.

That evening we cooked scrambled eggs for supper. It was the only time we cooked anything during the holiday. The gas ran out for the stove and we couldn't find gas canisters to fit at French shops.

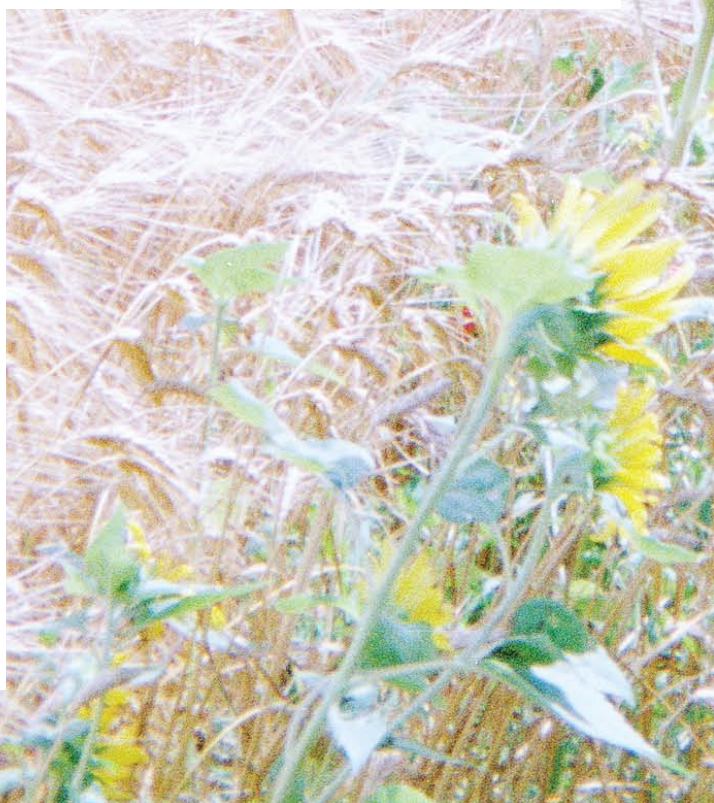
### Lavender fields

We had long been hoping to see (and smell) one of the famous French fields of lavender. We took a detour to a lavender museum, but the small plot of weedy grey lavender didn't impress us. That night, however, we stopped on a farm campsite in Oppède and we were pleased to discover that there was a lavender field a hundred times the size and beauty of the one at the museum.

After a hard day's ride, it's always satisfying to reach your destination, and that was how we felt as we entered Apt, tired and hungry. We got directions for a campsite from a

young man who also mentioned a 'slight hill.' He wished us 'bon courage' and we really needed it as we hopped on our bikes and started the struggle up the 500-metre high mountain! After a quick swim, we decided to look into dinner. Nothing was available. My dad and I had to go all the way back down to Apt, and race up again with dinner. I think that was the only time in the two-week trip that I almost passed out.

We were lucky enough to be in Apt on the 14th July, the French national holiday. The band was first, playing dreadful '70s music, but then there were fireworks. There were all different kinds: the kind that zoomed into the sky and evaporated into fairy dust, the huge ones that explode into hundreds of different colours, filling the sky with light, and more. We all stood there, transfixed, gazing up at the lit sky, until the very last firework had disappeared.











(Left) Eleanor rode her own bike, while six-year old sister Natalie travelled by trailer-cycle

(Below left) An empty camp stove made cafe and boulangerie stops essential



## The red cliffs of Roussillon

On our eighth day in France, we decided to go on a day trip and cycle out to see the famous red cliffs of Roussillon. There was a strong headwind, so it was quite a relief to be cycling without luggage. The cliffs were magnificent – the rockfaces and ledges sculpted by mining for ochre. Oranges, browns, reds and yellows were lit up by the setting sun. My sister, Natalie, collected lots of the ochre – mainly on her hands and shirt.

On our eleventh day, we began to make the loop back to the start. We set off early in the morning and rode solidly for a few miles before stopping for lunch (bread and cheese, as usual) in the rushes by the side of a canal. That day we ended up in l'Isle sur la Sorgue where, although the campsite was full and we hadn't booked a place, they let us stay because we were on bikes.

We camped on the playground while kids from all around played around us until about eleven o'clock. L'Isle sur la Sorgue is a lovely city, centred on an island in the middle of the River Sorgue, as its name suggests. After the dryness of the Luberon hills, it was wonderfully paddling in the cool, reedy water.

On our last day, we decided to do another day trip. We cycled up the dramatic range of hills, Les Dentelles, meaning lace. They actually looked like huge teeth rising into the sky, crooked but sharp. From the top, we could look out for miles across the valley of the Oudeze. Abruptly, the path ended, and a sign ordered 'Acces Privé!' We turned around and took one last look at the vast green expanse all around us, before riding the lovely downhill into the vineyards of the valley below.



## Fact File Two weeks in Provence

**ROUTE:** We planned to follow the signposted 'Luberon en vélo' route, starting at Cavaillon. Since it takes in most of the little hill towns, it can be quite hilly, so we often took detours in

the valleys. We went north from Apt on the Ochre bike route (Les Ocrens en vélo) to see the ochre hills and mines.

**MAPS:** We used IGN 50,000 maps, as well as the 'Luberon en vélo' brochure. IGN does a 'Carte touristique' for the Luberon National Park which features the bike route.

**GETTING THERE:** We took the European Bike Express ([www.bike-express.co.uk](http://www.bike-express.co.uk)) to Orange, riding from Oxford to meet it at Newport Pagnall.

**ACCOMMODATION:** We camped. The campsites were filling up by the end of July, but they always managed to find a place for us when we arrived on bikes. Look out for some excellent 'camping à la ferme', which are not always listed in the official guides.

**BIKES USED:** I rode an Islabikes Beinn, which was great for touring. My little sister was on a Burley trailerbike, on the back of my dad's bike.

**FURTHER INFORMATION:** there is a website about bike touring in the Luberon in English at <http://eng.veloloisirluberon.com>.



**Dave Barden: character-building tours**

**C**ycle touring can be a rewarding challenge for anyone. For the pupils at West Kirby Residential School, where I'm the Vice Principal, it can be even more helpful. All the children have either Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Asperger's Syndrome (ASD). Most youngsters with ASD have a fear of new, unknown environments and experiences. Cycle tours help them by giving them opportunities to work with others to overcome obstacles, develop self-confidence, increase

physical fitness and widen their expectations. So far groups from school have cycled well over 1,000 miles during five long-distance and shorter rides.

For more than 50 young people

these rides have been real adventures. They have all made friends along the routes, have overcome the daily challenges, experienced bad weather and tough terrain. Through this they have gained belief in themselves.

We cycle with an adult at the front and rear of each group, frequently reminding the pupils about safe road rules. We split into groups of a maximum of six, single file whenever traffic is on the road. To support the young people who cannot keep up with the others, a minibus meets the group at pre-arranged points.

We've found Sustrans routes very suitable for our school groups, as they follow minor roads and well-surfaced off-road tracks and the gradients are usually not too bad. A teacher rides any particularly challenging stretches prior to the whole group to assess dangers and physical difficulties. We would aim to cycle a maximum of 50 miles in a day.

**Our Irish adventure**

One of our first trips was a coast to coast ride across Ireland, from Rosstown in County Donegal to Belfast. Near the end, as we were riding on a track beside the River Lagan,

one of the boys caught up with me.

'Sir, I'm really sorry,' he said. 'I nearly did it all – but I will definitely do it all next time!' He'd only missed 20 miles but five of the others had done the full 250, and two of them were younger than him.

We had started four days earlier on a blustery, rain-swept beach. There we had met Kevin, who had in his van five boxes of slightly over-ripe bananas. Before we had set off we had sent out begging letters for sponsorship and support for our ride. Britain's most well-known banana company had honoured their promise and we now had enough snacks for our ride.

Our second day saw us setting off from Enniskillen to ride through the Sperrin Mountains near Gortin. A leg-achingly steep road was followed by a fast descent. The youngsters were instructed to 'stay left, single file!', and were soon shouting out speed readings to each other, excited to be coasting along at 35mph.

While we were cycling, the helpers in the minibus were setting up camp at a minor stately home owned by Lucinda and Dick. Set in rolling acres, it offered a swimming pool, a barbecue and fantastic support for us. In the warm evening sunshine the cyclists swam in the pool whilst the staff turned sausages on the grill.

On our fourth evening, after dinner and a requested treat of 'going for a little extra bike ride' along the shore track of Lough Neagh, our young cyclists were settling. I felt confident that after 60 miles that day, sleep would soon follow. Supporting staff needed a break, so I told them to drive off to a village pub, near Dungannon.

The locals went quiet as the three strangers entered, and as they ordered their drinks someone muttered 'they're Brits'. It made two of the staff – ex-squaddies – feel uncomfortable. But there was a quiz night going on and the staff were invited to join in. And when he learned that the newcomers were helping a party of special needs kids to cycle across Ireland, the landlord suggested that all of the quiz proceeds be donated to our sponsored ride.

We finished in Belfast on a bright Friday morning. Everyone was pleased with their ride.

**More big rides**

Two years later, Adam – the young man who had done nearly all of the Irish C2C – completed every mile of a more demanding ride from Cardiff to Holyhead. Four other youngsters, plus staff, rode with him. It was April and very wet. We camped on some sites near Brecon that needed tadpoles clearing before we could erect our tents.

Late last year pupils cycled the C2C across England. It was so cold and wet we opted this time not to camp but to use the Youth Hostel at Alston. The minibus and trailer shuttled the cyclists to and from start and end points.

On all our cycling expeditions the team votes for 'the cyclist and camper of the week'. It's not always the youngster who finds cycling easy, but someone who tries hardest to overcome their own difficulties. Last October our winner was Dan, an overweight 12 year old who has experienced lots of traumas in his life and has significant attachment disorders. On the first day Dan struggled to complete 12 miles, always at the back, with staff giving constant encouragement. On the third day he completed more than 35 miles and is convinced that he will complete the next ride. I'm sure that he will too.

"The rides have been real adventures and the youngsters have gained belief in themselves"

(Below) In Belfast on the Irish coast to coast. A Welsh end to end and an English C2C have followed

