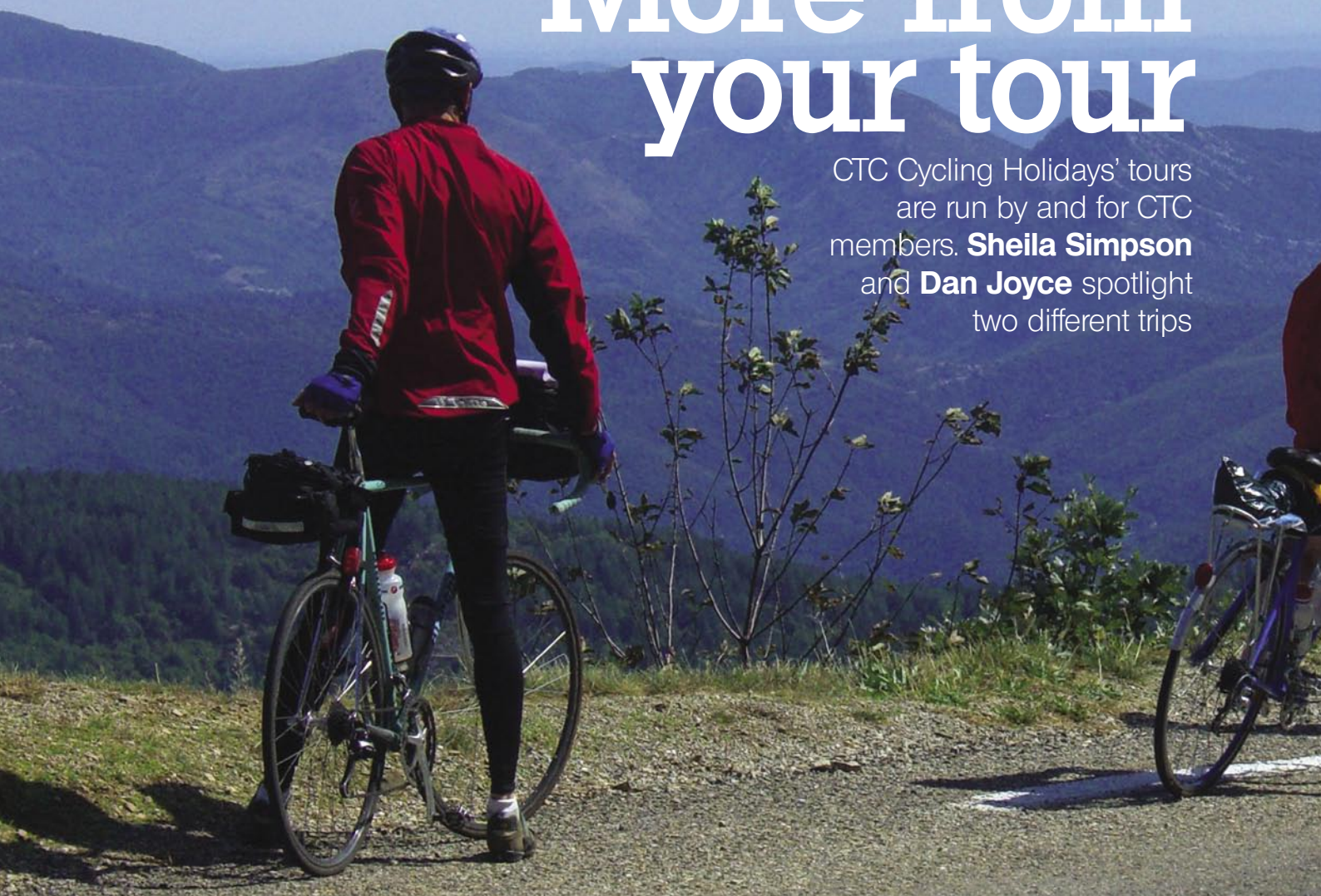


# More from your tour

CTC Cycling Holidays' tours are run by and for CTC members. **Sheila Simpson** and **Dan Joyce** spotlight two different trips



## **The Manche to the Med: Sheila Simpson**

Classic rides cross countries and require planning, not to mention time, which my partner didn't have in 2003. So we designed a route on our doorstep – from the Channel (la Manche) to the Mediterranean. The aim was to get fit for summer, with the attraction of cycling south to the sun. We've been running our spring classic as a CTC Tour ever since, with just a few tweaks each year.

The 1,000km journey starts as we roll off the Portsmouth/Ouistreham ferry onto the Caen canal towpath, enjoying a spin in pre-dawn light with glimpses of eerily silent waterfowl. The 2010 group was peckish but breakfast wasn't far away: Mme Gondrée unlocked the door at Pegasus Bridge Café just as

we arrived and we ate surrounded by D-day memorabilia.

We continued on the path through Caen centre before taking gently rolling lanes to Falaise, where William the Conqueror's castle dominates the ancient town, and our first hotel. As usual, the group varied in fitness so, on the second day an 'A-team' was encouraged to detour to the Haras (stud-farm) du Pin whilst the main bunch lingered in Chambois, with its donjon and grisly wartime memories. By the end of the day, we were all saying goodbye to Normandy and cruising into the Pays de la Loire region.

### **Loire valley chateaux**

We awoke next day amid market bustle and had to fight our way out of the hotel through a mélange

of cheese, vegetable and cooked meat stalls. The A-team detoured to la Fresnaye-sur-Chédouet Cycle Museum, so we regrouped in Bouloire, picnicking around a fountain with a salacious dragon and mermaid.

The approaching Loire, with its prairie landscapes, marks an appreciable increase in temperature and we dawdled through this so-called Centre region for two restful days, exploring châteaux and mediaeval towns at Amboise and Loches. Between these destinations stands Chenonceau, a château that extends so far across the River Cher that it was used as an escape route from Nazi occupation to the Vichy zone during WWII.

Another street market, in Loches, roused us to face three seriously long





Photo: Sheila Simpson

## Let us take you there

Visit [cyclingholidays.org](http://cyclingholidays.org) or call 0845 045 1121 for a brochure.

**France, Manche to Med** (Ref: 1114), 15th-30th May, guide price £1345. Via Normandy, Loire, Centre, Limousin, Auvergne, Languedoc.

**France, Caen to Cannes** (Ref: 1144) 2nd-18th September, guide price £1480. Via Normandy, Loire, Auvergne, Rhône Alps, Provence Alps

### DO IT YOURSELF

While the **Manche to Med** trip books up quickly, you can follow the same route as an **Audax UK Permanent Ride: The Sea to Sea (Manche to Med) Brevet Populaire 1000**. It costs £10, Ref: SS01, from [audax.uk.net](http://audax.uk.net)

Also useful are **CTC Information Sheet 'FR1 France'**, and several sea-to-sea routes through France, all downloadable from [ctc-maps.org.uk](http://ctc-maps.org.uk).

Useful maps are: **Michelin 303, 310, 323, 325, 329, 330, 339 maps**. Also **Michelin Green Guides - Normandy, Châteaux of the Loire, Dordogne Berry Limousin, and Languedoc Roussillon Tarn Gorges**.

## Languedoc's gorges

After that we rode into our final French region, the Languedoc, with our first French gorge, the Lot. After a heady descent, this is a gentle riverside ride, a relaxing and sociable afternoon that ended at Estaing, on a major pilgrim route to Santiago. That night the welcoming Armes d'Estaing, crammed with hungry multi-national travellers, filled us all with real country fare and, at breakfast, huge old-fashioned bowls of coffee, which confused the few Brits hoping for cornflakes.

We climbed out of the Lot Valley into the Causses – 800m high plateaux, with a distinctive flora of narcissi and orchids in the spring. This is the gateway to the spectacular Tarn and Jonte Gorges, chiselled half a kilometre deep into the limestone by their powerful rivers. A heart-stopping descent took us to the Tarn confluence for an easy, wind-assisted ride up the Jonte, monitored by distant cultures rising from massive orange cliffs.

Our mileages were low on the last three days as we savoured success and the sights and smells of a Mediterranean climate. The last major barrier, the Atlantic/Mediterranean watershed in the Cevennes, was not a problem. Starting from Meyrueis, already at 700m, we climbed steadily to the Abîme de Bramabiau, a huge fissure and cave system in the cliffs. We then continued, through the Aigoual Forest, to the watershed at just over 1200m. From here, we had a dizzy 21km descent to le Vigan.

I had mechanical problems and was late at our first coffee stop next day. Everyone was enjoying a break but nobody had looked over the nearby wall. When they did there was excitement and horror: the Cirque de Navacelles is a 300m deep hole in the ground, 10km across by road. It was lunchtime before we climbed out the other side.

The day ended with another epic descent, to the Devil's Bridge at the foot of the Gorges de l'Hérault, and a splash in the hotel pool. Ironically, our final dash to the Med was the only day with full cloud cover. We took a quick look at the beach, flamingos and avocets showed up on cue, and so did our transport: the European Bike Express.

cycling days. The first is the flattest part of the tour, through the remote Brenne Regional Nature Park, 'land of a thousand lakes'. Our overnight stop was Argenton-sur-Creuse and this was Saturday in lively small-town France, time to sip a few beers at the café on the crossroads, watch the fun, and fortify ourselves for the holiday's toughest ride next day – 108km, 1,721m of climbing, and a height gain of over 600m.

### 100k days

We started out early and made good progress until we left the Centre to enter Limousin. As the terrain became lumpier and lovelier, the climbs inevitably split us up. We regrouped at Dun for coffee, at a riverside picnic spot for lunch, and finally beer at Bourgneuf, a

In the mountains of Languedoc in southern France, with a freewheel down to the Mediterranean to look forward to

town in fête with folk dancers in local costume. We absorbed the atmosphere and lingered longer than we should have before crawling the final 24 miles to Lac Vassivière.

The prospect of a second 100km day seemed daunting but this time the height gain was insignificant. We climbed onto the Plateau de Millevaches, with glimpses of extinct volcanoes on the skyline, and freewheeled to Meymac, to pack in calories with a full workman's lunch. Then we ground out of town and crossed the Dordogne – for many riders their first exhilarating experience of an 18km descent – followed by a gruelling climb to Mauriac in the Ardèche. Here the Ecu de France filled us full of wine and a magnificent meal. The next day was a recovery day.



## North Wales mountain biking: Dan Joyce

We were riding high above breaking waves and matchbox cars and buildings on a restricted byway that forms part of the North Wales Path. At around 350 metres this wasn't mountain biking by the geographical definition, yet Snowdonia's foothills fall sharply down to Conwy Bay and the sense of height was profound. The path felt a world apart. Weather-wise it was. Up here, dark clouds hunkered close above sheep-shorn grass; down there, a shaft of sunlight sailed over the sea to illuminate the sweep of the Great Orme.

Tour leader Paul Rogers had cautioned us about the weather. 'It can be nice in the valley but change completely in minutes up in the hills. Make sure you take a decent jacket today.' We had. And he was right. It was a jackets-on, jackets-off morning, with late summer sun alternating with cloud, wind, and torrential showers. By the time we reached the Bank-Holiday-busy seafront, with a blistering descent of Conwy Mountain behind us, it was warm enough for short sleeves.

There were 21 of us on this four-day CTC tour: two leaders, two assistants (as a CTC Trail Leader, I was one), and 17 guests. All were CTC members, as you have to be to join a CTC tour. Several had joined specifically to book this holiday, which they'd discovered online.

### 2,000-year-old trail

We were based at a bunkhouse in Llanrwst. The plan for the first day was to ride to, and do, the Marin Trail in Gwydyr Forest, plus a bit extra. To accommodate different abilities we would split into two groups, keeping in contact via walkie-talkies. The faster group would also ride some of the Sarn Helen, while the easy group would splice in some tarmac sections.

The Marin Trail begins with a long, long climb, after which there's a mix of singletrack and forest fireroads, with some great views towards Snowdon in the west. The trail itself is chopped up in places, in need of repair, but no one had anything

(Clockwise from main picture) Lunch at Llyn Crafant. Ray chasing Mick on the Marin Trail. Keith's leg, Brian, John, Lexi, Mike, Mick and Paul at Llyn Glangors. (Opposite) Mick on the Marin Trail





other than minor stumbles.

We emerged from Gwydyr Forest by the Ugly House near Capel Curig. Crossing the bridge and turning down a side road, we met the slower group. Bryce and Mick from Matlock switched groups, to ride at an easier pace. 'I'm a bit slower up the hills these days,' said 66-year-old Bryce, who was grinning from ear to ear riding Llandegla's black route a couple of days later. 'I enjoy it but I wish mountain biking had come along ten years earlier.'

The remainder of the fast group rode over the hill to Dolwyddelan, via a climb like a rocky riverbed and a descent through moorland and forest. A short leg on the A470 took us to the foot of another up-and-over climb. This was part of the Sarn Helen, the old Roman road – now largely off-road – that runs north-south through Wales. After lunch we rejoined the Marin Trail, refuelling properly that evening with a table full of Chinese food.

### Riding in the clouds

Saturday dawned bright but with a threat of rain. The aim was to ride up into the mountains above Llanfairfechan and Conwy, with fish and chips by the seaside and an easy ride back via minor roads. The fast group would ride all the way, hopefully catching the easier group, who would have a car-assisted start from a hilltop car park.

From the valley, we climbed steeply into descending cloud that spat rain. But then we were on the roof of the Welsh coast, on sheepmuck speckled bridleways. Sweeping downhill on wet grass, great views opened up out to Puffin Island and Anglesey. At Llanfairfechan, the group split accidentally, several of us missing a turn and heading downhill instead.

'We didn't think there was enough climbing today, so we decided to add a bit more,' someone muttered ruefully when we rejoined the group. The walkie-talkies meant that we were not separated long, but it put paid to our hopes of catching the easy group. Not until Conwy did we finally rendezvous.

### Black and blue at Llandegla

On Sunday we were due to head down to Barmouth and take in the stunning Mawddach Estuary and the hills nearby. The forecast, however, was appalling. Plan B was a trip to a trail centre: Llandegla. Trail centres don't offer the same sense of discovery but they can be ridden in the sort of downpour that would make a day in the wild a misery.

The rain was bouncing when we arrived, so we waited out the worst of it in the café. I joined Paul with the easy group, as I'd only assisted with the fast group until then. We did the blue route, stopping now and then to get a breath, and also to discuss and demonstrate riding techniques. Everyone coped well, even commuter cyclist Katherine who hadn't been mountain biking before and who had hired a bike for the holiday.

When we got back to the café, most wanted to have another go after lunch. Paul didn't need me in the afternoon so I blitzed around the black route with his co-leader Brian, who had ridden it already that morning.

That evening's curry and beer gave everyone a chance to relive the day's highlights.

### Lakeside splendour

The last day rewarded us with blue skies and sun. We rode through Gwydyr Forest again, but then headed northwest to Llyn Crafnant, a serene mountain lake in a steep-sided valley. A small café there catered for walkers and fishermen – and a score of hungry cyclists.

From the café, it was a long singletrack road descent to Terifw, and then back to Llanrwst. People showered, packed and made their farewells. It was a great weekend of social mountain biking – 'one of the best I've had in the last 30 years', said one participant.

'That sums up why I organise these mountain bike holidays,' Paul later wrote, 'to put a group of strangers together, do some fantastic biking in a superb area, have more than a few laughs, making one or two friends for life along the way.'



## Let us take you there

Visit [cyclingholidays.org](http://cyclingholidays.org) or call 0845 045 1121 for a brochure.

**North Wales MTB (Ref: 1105 & 1142), 28th April-2nd May & 25th August-29th August, guide price £185. Running twice (in spring and late summer) this is the trip described here, which includes three evening meals.**

**Lake District MTB (Ref: 1115), 19th-22nd May, guide price £245. Three days of 'natural trails' mountain biking in the Lakes, based near Keswick, and aimed at fit, experienced mountain bikers.**

### DO IT YOURSELF

For details of Welsh trail centres, visit [mbwales.com](http://mbwales.com). CTC information sheet 'xw20 Off-road routes in Wales' has some details of natural trails – download it from [ctc-maps.org.uk](http://ctc-maps.org.uk).

Vetrebate Publishing's 'Wales Mountain Biking' (£15.95, ISBN: 9781906148133) also has route ideas.

