

# Long haul tour

Cycle engineer **Chris Bell** was going to tour the Balkans, then decided to cycle all the way across Europe back to Wales instead

**S**tudying the map of the Balkans, I began to see how the jigsaw of European countries fits together. Then I thought: why not cycle all the way home to Wales? I had planned to tour from the southern end of Albania to the northern end of the former Yugoslavia with a friend, Andrew. He couldn't take any more time off work, but I had another five weeks before I had to be back...

## Discovering Albania

We boarded the rickety old hydrofoil that connects Corfu with Sarandë in Albania, arriving in a torrential downpour. The next week, however, saw us cycling in blisteringly hot sunshine through some of the loveliest scenery imaginable: high mountains, rolling hills, mixed woodland, unpolluted rivers, and very little in the way of modern 'development'. The road surfaces varied from excellent to appalling, and I appreciated my fat tyres.

A former communist country, Albania was closed to foreigners until the 1990s. Life is hard there and many older people regret losing the securities and certainties of their communist past, even though they were so poor. Yet despite the lack of wealth even today, everyone we met was very friendly and helpful.

One night we stayed at a bar near Kokërdhok. After a delicious supper of fresh trout caught in the river by one of the sons, we conversed with a combination of sign language, our phrasebook and the little English the daughter had picked up at school. We got a fascinating insight into Albanian life before and after the fall of communism. We later discovered that we'd been given two of the family's own comfortable beds to sleep in.

As we travelled through Albania, we stopped to eat at roadside bars. Many of these were beside streams that had been dammed to provide pools in which the owners raised a few trout to eat, supplemented by produce grown on their own small plots of land. We couldn't cook anything ourselves as we couldn't find any methylated spirits for our Trangia stoves.

## Macedonian detour

On reaching Lake Ohrid, we took a detour through Macedonia. The lake itself is like an inland sea, with resorts dotted along its shore. We camped at an idyllically situated campsite and swam in the lake's clear, warm water. The site itself had seen better days. There were hundreds of caravans to rent, all in a sorry state of repair and many of them with tarpaulins tied over their roofs. There were lots of happy families there



nonetheless. Our high point in the town of Ohrid itself was finding a pharmacy that sold medicinal ethanol, similar to meths. Finally, we could cook!

The first cycletourists we met were a couple of Macedonians who were on their way to Albania. Their lack of luggage made us feel overloaded, but they were going to need Herculean strength to cope with Albanian hills without our low gears. Soon afterwards we bumped into a group of Australians who were cycling round the world. They had already been on the road for 18 months. Our own trip seemed rather easy by comparison.

We spent that night at a petrol station that the Australians had recommended. Above the shop were sleeping facilities, intended for long-distance lorry drivers. Just up the road was a bar, where we were bought beers by an old man who looked so poor that we felt quite guilty – but it obviously gave him pleasure and it made us feel very welcome. It wasn't the first time we'd noticed how the poorest people often seem to be the most generous.

### **The Croatian coast**

We crossed back into Albania for a couple more days of glorious riding, then passed into Montenegro and headed back towards the Mediterranean. The whole coast was a ribbon development of cheap holiday facilities, with lots of east Europeans enjoying themselves. We had difficulty finding anywhere to pitch our tents and eventually camped (with





permission!) in someone's garden, trying to sleep despite the noise of a nocturnal motorbike rally.

The Croatian coast couldn't have been more different. Most of it remains unspoilt, with only the occasional discreet building or tourist facility. We rode to the fortified city of Dubrovnic, following minor roads near the coast most of the way and only stopping to swim at a picture-postcard beach. Dubrovnic was impressive but expensive and full of tourists, so we moved on.

We felt much happier once we'd reached the Pelješac peninsula and discovered Žuljana, the first of several delightful seaside villages nestling around its own little harbour. Another wonderful swim was followed by a slap-up evening meal. Next day, the track to Podstup turned out to be one of the highlights of the whole trip.

The first 25km were just a vague dotted line on the map. The lady in the tourist office doubted whether we could get through with our bicycles, but we went anyway and were rewarded tenfold for our effort. The steep climbs and stony track would have delighted many a young, fearless mountain biker, so it was a very exciting few hours for us on our laden touring bikes. The scenery was virgin Mediterranean scrubland bordering the most beautiful blue sea imaginable, with pretty villages every 5km or so. The hot sun exhausted us but we stopped frequently to pick wild figs, grapes and pomegranates. Our progress was slow but that day ranks amongst the best cycling experiences I've ever had.

## Slovenian memories

It rained torrentially for two days in Slovenia and we endured one of the wettest nights under canvas that I can remember. We ventured off-road again, crossed a mountain and got lost amongst the endless forest tracks that bore little resemblance to those on our map.

We reached Ljubljana on one of the few roads that weren't closed to traffic due to the widespread flooding. Cold, wet and exhausted, we were glad of each other's company. But it was time for Andrew to fly home. I would be on my own for the remaining 2,800km.

While in Ljubljana, I found the bridge where my parents first met on a Tito work camp in 1947. It was a strange feeling to realise that I was the direct result of that meeting all those years ago. My parents had never been back so I took lots of photos to show my Mum when I got home.

My first day cycling alone wasn't so bad. The sun came out and the scenery was breathtaking. I followed river valleys through the snow-peaked Julian Alps. Conveniently spaced cafés provided for all my energy needs. That night I stayed with friends in Lig, close to the Italian border, and had my first hot bath since leaving the UK – bliss! It was a perfect day.

## Visiting Venice

The busy flatlands of northern Italy were something that I had to endure if I were to visit Venice, so I pushed on and got them over with in a day. I met up with a Dutch cyclist and we pooled resources to cook ourselves the biggest feast we could manage on two small stoves.

Bicycles aren't allowed in Venice so I locked mine to a railing next to the overflowing bike park and hoped it would still be there in the morning. I found the hostel that had been recommended to me and was given a



(From top) Avoiding the coast road in Croatia made the riding harder but much more rewarding. From Slovenia, Chris was cycling on his own. Taking a break in northern Italy. The Italian-administered but German-language South Tyrol region was next



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bunch of keys that would let me into an apartment five minutes walk away. The room had three beds and I was surprised to discover that the other two were taken by a couple of young and attractive Argentinian girls. We all behaved ourselves, of course, but I couldn't help wondering why we'd been put in the same room.

Venice is well worth a visit if you're in the area, but everything is geared to extracting as much money from as many tourists as possible. I was relieved to find myself cycling through little villages again the next day.

## Western Europe

The rest of my trip was through more familiar countries but it was essential for me to maintain a daily average of 100km if I were to get home on time. The cyclepaths in northern Italy, South Tyrol, Austria, Switzerland and Germany made for easy cycling, and I made good time. Yet it proved far too easy to miss a sign. I got hopelessly lost a couple of times.

Near the Italian town of Trento, my path slowly deteriorated until I was carrying my bike through thick woodland to what I hoped would be a bridge over a river where I could rejoin the cyclepath. There was no bridge. Despite searching hard for a suitable crossing-point, the river was far too dangerous to wade across. So I was forced to retrace my steps and rejoin the cyclepath where I'd left it three hours earlier.

Later, when following a detour on the Rhine cycle-route in Germany, I came to a point where a most unhelpful cycle sign indicated straight ahead – even as the road forked left and right!

## North through France

I'd been looking forward to reaching France as it would be the first country where I could speak the language. But pride goes before a fall. At the first restaurant I stopped at I asked what today's plat du jour was, pretended that I understood the answer, and was led to a huge self-service counter piled with different salads. I was hungry, so filled my plate with as much food as I could fit on it. As I sat back, stuffed, the waiter brought me another plate with meat, potatoes and veg – the salad was merely a hors d'oeuvre.

Northern France is littered with reminders of the First World War, and the displays at cemeteries and battle sites taught me a lot about that terrible period in European history. All the more remarkable, therefore, to have found myself moving from country to country with only a road sign to inform me – I didn't pass a border control or need my passport anywhere between Slovenia and the UK. The European Union isn't perfect by any means, but it's surely better that we discuss our differences these days instead of killing each other.

## Back in Britain

My arrival back in the UK on my 60th birthday began with the nightmare of cycling off the ferry and through Dover. I wonder what European visitors think? Cyclists are expected to dice with death – what a grim welcome!

I later stopped for a cup of tea at a café in Hastings and there, on the next table, was the first newspaper I'd seen in two months. The main headline read 'Test That Predicts Prostate Cancer'. What a coincidence! The article reported a breakthrough in prostate cancer research – and my trip was raising money for just that.



Chris needed his passport for early parts of the trip, such as Macedonia (top), but countries such as Switzerland (second to top), Germany and France had no barriers

## Fact file Trans-Europe tour

**Distance:** Almost 4,000km/2,500 miles.

**Time taken:** 50 days (39 cycling and 11 rest days).

**Accommodation:** Camping (both wild and official), hostels and cheap hotels. My tent was a minimalist Terra Nova Jupiter bivvi (easy to hide), augmented by a Saunders Jetpacker flysheet when it rained. My padded bike-bag doubled as my sleeping-mat.

**Maps:** I bought 1:200k or 1:400k maps for the whole trip, in advance, from Stanfords.

**Bike:** A customised Dahon Cadenza folder – see Cycle, Feb-Mar 2010, but with further modifications.

**I'm glad I had...** 50mm Schwalbe Big Apple tyres and a Koobi PRS-Enduro saddle (for comfort). Basic phrasebooks (so I could say 'please' and 'thank-you' in 12 different languages).

**Further info:** There are more photos and information about the trip at <http://www.highpath.net/highpath/touring/europe>. The tour also gave me the opportunity to raise awareness and money for prostate cancer research – see <http://www.prostate-cancer.org.uk>.



Map & photography by Chris Bell