



ESCAPE FROM ULLAPOOL

Phil Prosser's return from a tour of the Western Isles wasn't plain sailing

AFTER A WEEK of perfect weather on the Western Isles, we suspected our luck was about to change. When we woke to the sound of heavy rain on the tent, we knew it had.

It was a rough ferry crossing to Ullapool; the queue for breakfasts shortened remarkably quickly once we were out into the channel. As we went to the car deck to disembark, the news was that Ullapool was cut off: floods had closed both roads out of town. We found a café and whiled away much of the morning there, checking our phone from time to time for news of the roads.

When we could eat no more cake, we headed south to see if we could get through even if motors couldn't. A policeman reported seeing sheds floating down the road and doubted we'd be able to wade through, but we carried on undeterred.

We waded a couple of stretches of road covered with mud and rubble, with a foot or so of water flowing over them – our feet were wet anyway. We watched at another flood as a stranded motorhome was pulled free by firefighters to cheers from the stranded drivers on both sides.

We then waded in, able to pick our route and avoid the deeper stretches. Then we were across: the only two people to escape Ullapool that day!

D-Day to VE-Day

Earlier this year, Alastair Work made a pilgrimage across Northern Europe in his father's footsteps

The plan was to cycle from the site of the Normandy landings to the place where the German forces surrendered in 1945, following the wartime route taken by my late father.

He had been present at D-Day and at the signing of the peace treaty on Lüneburg Heath, which was also his 24th birthday. My intention was to arrive there on 4 May 2015, the 70th anniversary of both. I carried in my panniers his wooden replica of the memorial to that event, the original of which (all seven tonnes of it) currently stands in the grounds of Sandhurst.

I landed on Sword Beach (Portsmouth to Ouistreham) at dawn, with my Dawes Galaxy. It was clear, sunny, empty and still; no landing craft, no guns, no wire. I followed a meticulously-planned GPS route to Pegasus Bridge, Ranville cemetery, Caen and Falaise, all key sites in the Overlord invasion of Normandy. I stopped in a rural bar for breakfast and was detained by curious locals, keen to share family histories of that time.

For the next two days, I rode into the teeth of a headwind over the



undulations of Normandy and Picardy. Then my luck changed and a week-long tailwind helped me through the flat lands and generous cycle paths of Flanders, Limburg and across the Rhine into Northern Germany.

I broke a spoke in the Netherlands, but was so well-treated in the local bike shop in Venlo, who cleared their workshop for me and had me fixed in just 20 minutes, that it almost seemed worthwhile.

Arrival at Lüneburg Heath was an emotional experience: the objective achieved, 800 miles in 11 days, and the culmination of all that rhythmically-induced thinking time that you get if you ride for six hours a day, every day, on your own.



Around the Ring of Kerry

Frances A Wilson and her husband spent two days on Ireland's Iveragh Peninsula

Described as 120 miles of some of the most stunning scenery in the world, the Ring of Kerry is also the place to be on the first Saturday in July when 10,000 cyclists, the Irish Prime Minister and his bodyguard amongst them, take to the traffic-free roads for a charity ride. We didn't get a place on that but decided to ride the Ring anyway, as we were staying in Kenmare. Rather than complete the route in one go, we decided to take our time and booked overnight accommodation in Cahersivee, giving us two 60-mile days.

We set out from Kenmare in an anti-clockwise direction, climbing steeply up to the mountain pass of Moll's Gap. Having decided to bypass the hustle and bustle of Killarney in favour of quieter lanes, we found ourselves weaving around the horse-drawn carts bringing tourists up from the town to cross the Gap of Dunloe.

We rejoined the main route near Killorglin and turned west along the southern shore of Dingle Bay. There is a disused railway running alongside much of this section and it is hoped that this will soon be converted into a cycleway, as an alternative to



this sometimes busy road. After a sea swim at Kells, we arrived at our accommodation.

Cloudless blue skies and breathtaking scenery marked day two as we passed through picturesque towns and villages at the western end of the Ring. Another swim and lunch at Ireland's only 'beach bar' near Castle Cove were among the highlights of the trip, the white sand and turquoise water more akin to Greece than Ireland. From here it was a straight run along the shores of Kenmare Bay to complete the circuit of this wonderful peninsula.

A LEISURELY L'ARDÉCHOISE

John de Heveningham took part in one of Europe's biggest cycling events

THE ARDÉCHOISE cycling event is little known here. Of the 14,594 cyclists from across Europe taking part last year, only 28 were from England. It's set in the beautiful and hilly Ardèche region of southern France, with all rides starting and finishing in the little town of St Félicien. There is a choice of 12 signed routes, ranging from 125km with 2,500m of climbing to 619km with 10,775m of climbing. You can ride them in one to four days; on the final Saturday, over 100km of roads are closed for it.

In 2014, together with my son Antony and his partner Celia, we rode the principal 220km route, L'Ardéchoise, which visits the Gerbier de Jonc, source of the River Loire. We chose the tourist option and had time to explore decorated villages, take refreshment breaks, even to swim in mountain streams.

On the final day, free refreshments and musical accompaniment from bands, groups and choirs encourage you up the final hills and make it a festive occasion. An active participant throughout the week was 103-year-old Robert Marchand, holder of the world hour record (for his age group) of 26.925km, admittedly set when he was only 102! An eight-year-old was the youngest participant in the 50km L'Ardéchoise des Jeunes,

It's all brilliantly organised. Full details: www.ardechoise.com



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