

Leeds to Liverpool

Robert Brown and three friends crossed the Pennines via canal towpath

After seeing the white mile marker with 'Liverpool 122 miles' embossed on it alongside the local canal once too often, Simon set us a challenge: cycle from Leeds to Liverpool in a single day.

At 6am on a sunny summer morning we set off tentatively from Kirkstall Abbey. Two punctures in the first hour meant we covered just six miles. At that rate we wouldn't be in Liverpool till 2.30 in the morning!

After Skipton, National Cycle Route route 66 finished and the surface deteriorated rapidly. 'Did you draw the short straw?' a burly mountain biker asked me, pointing to my tourer and overstuffed panniers.

Soon after Foulridge we joined NCN route 68. The going improved but then a bee flew into my mouth and stung me. A few miles later we stopped in Burnley, with me sporting a pout to rival Angelina Jolie's

and everyone feeling a bit jaded.

'I never thought I'd be so desperate to get to Wigan,' said Steve as we set off for our next target 20 miles away. The locks had begun to go downhill but so had the weather. As we enjoyed our first bit of gravity assistance the rain drops started to fall.

Wigan train station was our final escape route so when we left it behind we knew it was Liverpool or bust. As the sun set it was 9.15pm and we were still roughly one hour away. We still seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. Thankfully the city soon began to send out signals of its imminent approach, the first of which was a wider and smoother towpath.

Suddenly we were there: the canal abruptly ended. We had covered 128 miles. From here it was a two-mile spin on

tarmac to reach our final resting place, the hostel. Next morning as we cycled home from Leeds train station, Simon spotted a milestone which said 'Edinburgh 200 miles, London 200 miles'. Straight away he began to get ideas.



Portugal winter sun

Pete Ward took his road bike to southern Europe for some December sun

The cheap flight from Manchester to Faro lands on time and soon I'm out of the airport and driving through palm trees and warm sunshine towards my winter holiday destination in the south west Algarve. At the resort, I check over my bike, walk to the beach café and relax in the afternoon sun.

Next morning it's a glorious cycling day. It's warm enough for shorts and by half-past ten the arm warmers are coming off. I'm riding through orange groves on flat and rolling roads, through Lagoa to Alcantarilha and Nora to Bartolomeu de Messines.

Colourful Bougainvilleas grow around the cottages and there are roses still in flower. I pass the café where I usually stop for coffee. Last year I had seen one further on with a better view across the hills. I press on. I should have remembered: never pass a café! As I carry on it gets hotter. There's very little traffic. Arriving at the café with the view, I find it closed.

I keep riding, getting hungrier by the mile, especially over the steady long climb to the scenic Barragem do Arade, where I ride over the dam wall. As usual the water is low: they have had only two days of rain in the last two months. There are some ripe oranges on the

ground at the roadside. Being thirsty, I pick one up and leave 20 cents on a stone. The orange is delicious.

I stop at the historic small town of Silves, with its castle on the hill, and have lunch at a British-run café. I chat to a couple of German cyclists. Soon I'm winding back through Portimao to Vau. Back at the beach café later, with almond cake and a cup of coffee, I settle down to watch the breakers roll in. It's marvellous.

Pete has produced some route cards for cycling in the Algarve. Visit www.algarvecycleroutes.com.



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