

## Urban night riding

Mick Nott describes a meandering nighttime tour around his home city of Sheffield

In the 1790s, Xavier de Maistre wrote a spoof of early travel guides called 'A Voyage around my Room'. He was fed up with people saying that the only way that travel can broaden the mind is to visit places afar and exotic. His point was that there is as much to learn from in your own backyard if you only opened your mind up to it and explored it for its own beauty and worth.

In this spirit, Sheffield FridayNightRide ([www.sfnr.org.uk](http://www.sfnr.org.uk)) sets out at least once a month on a Friday night to explore our city and its immediate surroundings for the pleasures of cycling, our city, and our companionship. In March we rode a 'Bounded Infinity' ride: 15 miles within

the inner ring road without repeating our tracks.

Forty of us followed a route that twisted, turned, rose, and fell through the inner city from glitz to gloom; commerce to industry; derelict to opulent; shops to housing; populated to desolate. It started a bit disjointed as we coped with traffic lights and give-ways but we soon became a snaking lantern parade, a flowing galaxy of cyclists.

Quiet backstreets and busy thoroughfares felt like wide valleys or narrow canyons. We disappeared into alleys and popped out of archways, materialising in another street at another level – like space-time travel. We marvelled at the variety of our



city and its people. In turn, we were a spectacle for others in town, who interacted with delight, shock, outrage, irritation, and fascination at the sight of us.

It did feel weird to be

continuously cycling and not getting very far, and revisiting the same places from different angles, directions and heights. But maybe Xavier de Maistre would have been proud of us – and you may like to try it at home.

## Le Grand Départ 2011

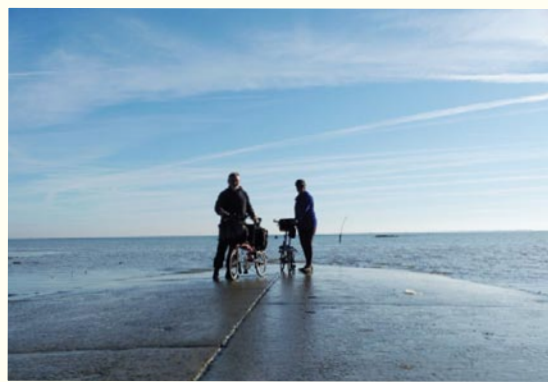
Anne Neale and Ken Read chanced on the causeway where this year's Tour de France starts

We discovered the unique and beautiful Passage du Gois almost by chance. This 5km causeway, only uncovered by the tide for three hours a day, will be the unlikely Grand Départ for the 2011 Tour de France.

We were in Rennes with a couple of days to spare, armed with two Bromptons, a netbook full of maps, and a GPS. We set about making a plan. We wheeled our bikes onto the Regional Express train to Nantes and folded them for the bus to Beauvoir sur Mer.

Sitting beside the pool at Beauvoir sur Mer, lazily translating the French guidebooks, we discovered the Passage du Gois, which gives access to Noirmoutier Island. We abandoned a ride down the coast towards La Rochelle in favour of exploration.

A 5km ride through board-flat countryside interspaced by salt pans brought us to the Passage. Anne wondered whether a lifejacket would be of more use than her cycle helmet. The only sign of a



road was the line of tall markers and refuge towers across open sea.

As the tide retreated and the road emerged from the ocean, we waited for the procession of cars to pass over before we followed at a leisurely pace. The wet, slippery road is elevated above the ocean only by a few centimetres. The refuge towers provided some reassurance as we progressed into the open sea. Several stops and many photo opportunities later we regained dry land on the other side.

Having got this far, an exploration of Noirmoutier Island was inevitable. Most of our route was on cycle paths away from roads. It was easy to forget where the land ended and the sea or sky began. It's a magic place, especially out of season, and full of wild life.

Our return followed the Tour roll-out route. We plan to go back to the Passage du Gois on 2nd July.

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