

Two tandems through France

Tim Jefferis took the European Bike Express to France with his family

With the kids older now and able to cycle themselves, my wife and I decided to head off with them on two tandems for our first cycle adventure as a family. We had purchased the tandems cheaply on eBay just months before. With adjustments made and panniers packed, we set off from our home to Leicester where we were to meet the European Bike Express coach. Everything went to plan: the bus arrived on time and after a restful journey (a rare thing with kids!) we cycled out into the morning sunshine at Bayonne.

Our target over two weeks' cycling was Saintes, about 300km to the north. We had left ourselves plenty of time and managed to average 50-60km a day, which both our children (aged seven and nine) seemed to manage with ease. Almost the entire route was on flat cycle tracks through pine forest

and we were never more than a few kilometres from a beach if the children decided they'd had enough.

We took all our camping stuff with us on the bikes and not once did we have any trouble finding a campsite. We quickly learned that the unusual spectacle of a whole family on tandems assured us a spot even if the site was notionally 'full'. The days quickly fell into a pleasant routine: lazy mornings on the campsite where we potted around and packed up whilst the kids explored, followed by a few hours in the saddle and then lunch. We'd stop at a beach at some stage in the afternoon and the roll up to a campsite as the day cooled off.

Highlights were the enormous Dune



du Pilat, at the base of which we spent a couple of nights camping; the beautiful Bassin Arcachon; and our last campsite, just outside Royan which, to the kids' delight, had an enormous water slide. We returned from Saintes on the EBE. This summer we'll do something similar in Spain and Portugal.

Pedalling every yard

Andy Rankin toured the Middle East on the only machine he had: a fixed-wheel road bike

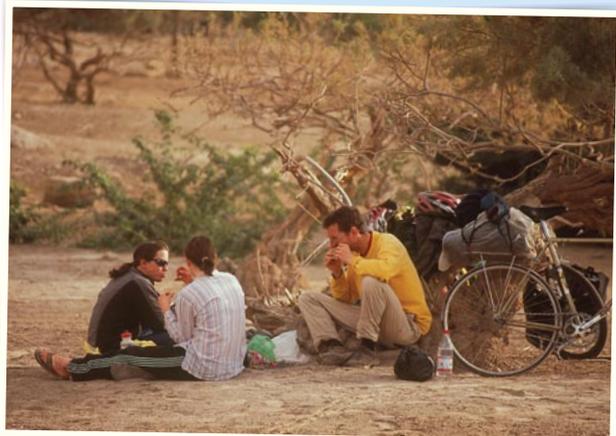
I didn't mean to go touring on a fixie. What sort of nutter would put a rack on the back of a track bike and set off across a desert? Fixed-wheel bikes belong on the velodrome, not the open road.

Slithering down a 5,000-foot pass into Beirut, wrists aching from being thrown forward onto the single brake, calves swollen from the effort of spinning my legs like tops, I began to question my decision. It's not the uphills that are tough on a fixed-wheel bike, it's the descents.

I made it, though. Not just down that long, winding pass, but back up again (mostly pushing the bike). Then over another range of mountains, south through Syria and down to the Dead Sea in Jordan, up again through madly wind-sculpted rocky desert to the Red Sea coast, across the Sinai, through the insanity of Cairo, past the pyramids, and down to the Nile.

I wasn't trying to make a point. I just wasn't organised enough to procure a more sensible machine before leaving. It helped to be travelling light. I had no panniers, just a small rucksack strapped to the rack with a change of clothes, light sleeping bag, bivvy bag and half-length sleeping mat. The others pitched their tents at night. I snuggled into the bivvy bag and drifted off under wheeling stars.

The bike was trashed by the time we reached Luxor – broken spokes, pannier rack cracked in three places, gashes in the tyres hand-stitched. But my legs were just beginning to get used to it. My companions had started from Cambridge and were heading over the Sahara for Kenya to raise funds for a charity that works with Kenyan kids – see www.downrightkenya.org. I waved my goodbyes and flew home.



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