



● Jeff and Tom took the European Bike Express to their start in France



● Towpaths and canals became busier near London

TOWPATHS TO LONDON

Nigel Blandford cycled from Piccadilly station in Manchester to Piccadilly Circus in London

Starting from 7am at Manchester Piccadilly Station is normal for me, but rather than loading the bike on a train to go to work, I left via the back entrance to join the Ashton Canal.

The first day saw me end up in Stafford after a final stint on the Trent & Mersey Canal towpath. I hitched up with my Warm Showers host, and after a couple of pints and a tour of Stafford, retired to the sofa for the night. My host joined me for the first hour the next morning on my push through the West Midlands to Warwick. I was impressed by the long, straight canal paths going into Birmingham centre, and amazed at the two kayakers trying to paddle from Solihull to London in one go.

An overnight stay in Warwick was followed by an early start in order to reach my sister's house in Watford. It was a long haul along some variably surfaced sections of the Grand Union Canal, taking 14 hours. En route, I enjoyed a canal festival at Stoke Bruerne and took a shortcut through Milton Keynes on the Redways.

The final day was a short run into London on the Grand Union Canal. I passed lots of people living in barges – presumably as a way of overcoming property prices in the capital. The towpath was busy so I slowed to walking pace on the final section into Paddington Basin. Leaving the canal, I rode through Hyde Park, Green Park and the along the Mall towards Piccadilly Circus, before catching the train back to Manchester.

To Mont Saint-Michel

Jeff Mason and friend Tom took a short tour through northern France

We discovered Veloscenic by chance, after reading about it in a newspaper. It's a signed cycle route across northern France between Paris and Mont St-Michel, which opened in 2012. Not fancying central Paris, we two oldies alighted from the European Bike Express at Orleans in the early hours.

After 40 miles or so of cycling and a little help from SNCF, we joined the route in Chartres. The 'son et lumière' on the cathedral was an unexpected bonus on a warm evening.

Four days of 45-50 miles took us to

the south west corner of the Cherbourg peninsula. Next morning, we parked our bikes, gazed across to Mont Saint-Michel Abbey, perched in the estuary, and cherished our 5 Euro coffees.

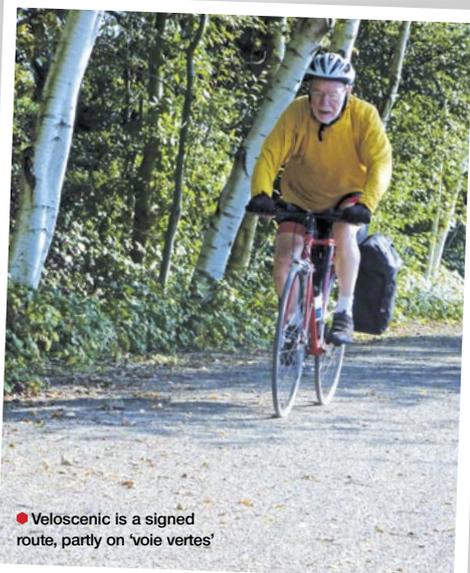
It was a truly enjoyable route: quiet country lanes, good surfaces, well-marked through towns (except Chartres), and with long sections of 'voie verte' along disused railways. Gentle climbs from Nogent to Carrouges and west from Bagnoles de l'Orne added interest as much as effort. Occasional red squirrels, jays, green woodpeckers, butterflies and

flowers enhanced the pleasure of the greenways. We were also blessed with sun.

As ageing travellers, we felt we deserved comfortable hotels and superb evening meals – another good reason for choosing France.

At Mont St-Michel, you can no longer cycle across the causeway, although you can park your bike for free and take a shuttle bus. But we were pleased to have completed the journey as far as it went, and the tourist experience as a way of ending a satisfying cycling trip didn't appeal. We took the Caen-Portsmouth ferry home.

For details about the route, see veloscenic.com.



● Veloscenic is a signed route, partly on 'voies vertes'



● At the start in Pau. What could go wrong?

ESCAPING WINTER

Graham Hurrell and partner Chris swapped UK gloom for the sun of SE Spain



● Murcia has quiet roads, hills, valleys... and sunshine!

Pyrenees on a Chopper

David Sims entered this year's Étape du Tour on a 38lb bike with twitchy steering

If someone had told me a year ago I would be racing through the Pyrenees on a Raleigh Chopper, I'd have said they were mad. But this July, I found myself lining up with 12,000 other cyclists in the French city of Pau to take part in the Étape du Tour. The other 11,999 riders were looking at my bike: a Mk3 Chopper fitted with an 8-speed hub and a proper saddle.

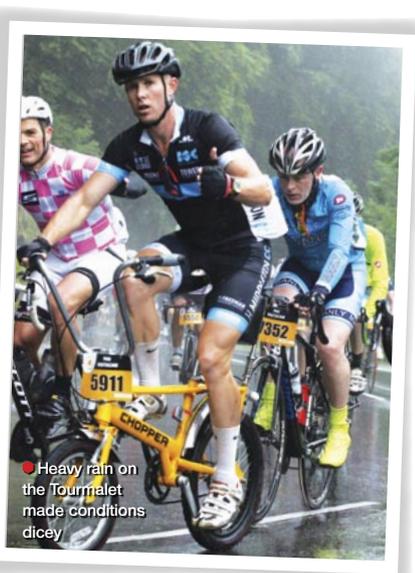
I tried to ignore everyone's bigger wheels and shiny carbon frames. Did doubt enter my mind? A little. This wasn't helped by the various ASO officials who said 'Tourmalet?', pointing at my bike and raising their eyebrows.

It rained on the Tourmalet. A lot. The 12-mile ascent at 8% gradient was made less arduous by the great support from other riders, particularly the British and Americans, many of whom I have kept in contact with since.

The main effect of the rain was on the braking ability of my 16-inch chrome front rim. My top speed of 46mph was made more exciting by knowing that my stopping distance was similar to an oil tanker's. The handing of the chopper on switchbacks, in pouring rain, was also a challenge. Twitchiness and light handling would be a gross understatement! I discovered that the

best way to corner was to turn my head to the exit line: the bike would follow.

My 8-speed Sturmey-Archer hub gave me just enough gears to tackle the steepest 12% ramps on Hautacam, the final mountain. The huge crowds on the lower slopes and the shouting of 'Chopper guy!' will live with me for a lifetime. The total day's riding was 95 miles and just over 4,000m of climbing. In doing so, I raised over £1,500 for the MeCycle workshop and café, an Autism Initiatives UK enterprise.



● Heavy rain on the Tourmalet made conditions dicey

BRIGHT SPANISH SUNLIGHT

twinkled off broken glass and tin cans littering the roadside, as the wind, howling through power lines, forced us to pedal hard downhill. Glancing at Chris, I realised that she too was enjoying this! We had decided to escape the darkest part of the year and had taken our campervan to Los Baños, Murcia. It was southerly enough to be warm without being on the busy built-up coast.

Initially, Murcia looked a barren moonscape. Cycling revealed that this apparently featureless desert had myriad hills and valleys. Over 500 miles, we climbed 35,000 feet. Murcia is an undiscovered, almost traffic-free, cycling paradise, with miles of quiet roads. What traffic there is is considerate. Lorries waited patiently as we climbed hills. We were chased down the road just once – by a piglet. Murcia looks like great off-road territory too; we saw several serious-looking groups of mountain bikers.

The province is peppered with orange and lemon orchards, vineyards, olive groves and almond plantations. The landscape of small mountains, deeply eroded valleys and little canyons, has a secret 'other-worldly' feel. Apart from the local Sunday morning club cyclists, you will have it to yourselves.

Tiny Los Baños, dominated by picturesque thermal spa hotels, has two campsites, with chalets to rent if you don't have a campervan.