

DETAILS

- **WHERE:** Southern England,
Northern France
- **START/FINISH:** Bristol to Paris
- **DISTANCE:** 400-450 miles
- **PICTURES:** Steve Melia and
Sergey Borisov / Alamy



Great rides

A RETURN TO PARIS

With a silver wedding anniversary to celebrate, **Steve** and **Sara Melia** cycled 400 miles back to where it all began: dinner on the River Seine

‘I’ve been offered a job in Paris,’ I said to the 20-year-old girl I had recently met. ‘I don’t suppose you want to come?’ She did. Eighteen months later I was proposing to her over dinner on a *bateau mouche*, the wide, glass-sided boats that cruise along the River Seine. That was over 25 years ago. Since then, we’d often talked of going back to Paris to celebrate our silver wedding anniversary. ‘I don’t suppose you fancy cycling there?’ I asked, when the time came. She lifted one eyebrow and decided: we were going.

There are many advantages to starting a long ride from home: you can leave when you feel ready; you don’t have the stress of bikes on trains or ‘planes; and from where we live, the first stretch towards the coast provides an ideal warm-up. The Bristol-to-Bath cycle path starts a few hundred yards from our home. I never tire of the sliver of nature it brings to the heart of the city.

We were heading to Poole, loosely following NCN25 along quiet ridge roads, plus one well-surfaced path into Blandford Forum and a rougher one into Poole. Cyclists must make an easier target than cars or vans for security searches at ferry ports. A serious-looking man

asked me: ‘Are you carrying any weapons?’ I always want to say something like: ‘I’ve got a rocket launcher in my left pannier; is that okay?’ But I never do.

NORMANDY LANDING

The climate of northern France has changed in the years since we lived there. As we left Cherbourg and began to climb inland, melting tar was bubbling on the road. Fortunately this was the bocage, the heavily-wooded rolling countryside that hampered the advancing Allies in 1944. The hedges have been left to grow, providing welcome shade from scorching temperatures.

The D-roads, even the ones coloured yellow on the IGN maps, were unbelievably quiet for a sunny August afternoon. St-Vaast-la-Hougue, our first stop, is a fishing port surrounded by fortifications, some built to keep out the English in the 17th century and some added by the Germans in World War II.

The fortifications multiply as you follow the coast road south east towards the long sandy beaches of the D-Day landings. One shell-damaged bunker bears a mural painted by a German artist with a message of peace. We have visited several museums along this coast

Do it yourself

FERRIES & TRAINS TO FRANCE

There are several routes from the Channel ports to Paris. From Bristol, Poole to Cherbourg was the best option, taking 4 hours 15 minutes with Brittany Ferries (brittany-ferries.co.uk), who also serve Plymouth to Roscoff and Portsmouth to Le Havre. For anyone starting further east, Newhaven to Dieppe may be better (dfdsseaways.co.uk). We returned via Eurostar (we don’t fly, for reasons explained in my book *Urban Transport Without the Hot Air*). Thanks to Cycling UK and everyone who signed the petition that saved us from having to pack bikes in boxes! Bikes booked in advance cost £30 per journey. (See p40 for more.)



THE FORTIFICATIONS MULTIPLY AS YOU FOLLOW THE COAST ROAD SOUTH EAST TOWARDS THE LONG BEACHES OF THE D-DAY LANDINGS





Utah Beach. There are memorials and museums along the Normandy coast

► over the years. A large new one has been built around a bunker at Utah Beach.

HISTORY LESSONS

The two World Wars and the events surrounding them still resonate today. Family histories are part of the reason. Sara's mother was sheltering in the garden when their house was hit by a doodlebug in 1944. My grandfather, who served in the RAF, was evacuated from Dunkirk according to my grandmother, who also told us he was descended from Austrian Jews.

After Utah Beach, the coastline is broken by a wide marshy estuary bordered by reclaimed land that resembles the Somerset Levels. A cycle route is signposted down lanes and sandy paths to Carentan, the first place with a bridge. At G fosse Fontenay, on the other side, an information board outside the church tells of another invasion that was nearly thwarted when young William, the future Conqueror, fled a rebellion amongst his barons. The board shows his route across Normandy, along with a dotted line from Ouistreham towards England marked 'Britanny Ferries'. I hope they searched him for weapons!

Our route rejoined the coast at Grandcamp-

Maisy, another fishing port with a beach and a wartime secret, discovered in 2006. Dan Sterne, whose father wrote 'The Cover Up at Omaha Beach', told me the story. Maisy Battery, the biggest defensive complex on this coast, was captured three days after D-Day and then reburied, physically and legally, by all the countries involved. Why, when nearby Pointe du Hoc was celebrated in Allied propaganda and has teemed with tourists ever since? The story, like Maisy Battery itself, is still being uncovered.

HEAT HAZE DAYS

Most of France was on official heat alert when we left the cooling influence of the coast. On the national weather map, Normandy was shown in fresher green, but the pharmacy in Le Molay-Littry was flashing 35 C when we stopped there late that morning. The only words I could extract from Sara that afternoon were: 'my brain's melted' and 'I might have known the last kilometre would be uphill'.

A gentle breeze brought clouds and more bearable heat the following morning as we climbed through the hillier, forested and picturesque area called (with a little exaggeration) 'the Switzerland of Normandy'.

Three towns where we stopped over the next couple of days – Villers-Bocage, Falaise and Argentan – were all badly damaged in 1944. Their central areas were rebuilt in the functional rectangular style typical of postwar reconstruction all over France, although a local stone, similar to Bath's, gives these three towns a bit more individuality. A surprising number of churches, ch teaux and other old buildings did survive, some still bearing bullet or shell damage.

The D26 descends through 8km of forest into Alen on, another battleground in 1944, although its medieval streets and ornate public buildings escaped the worst of the damage. In Alen on, we joined the V losc nie, the cycle route from Mont-Saint-Michel to Paris. For 67km from Alen on to Cond -sur-Huisne it follows a path along an old railway line, which was mainly well-surfaced apart from a couple of stretches in the middle around Mortagne au Perche. The tree cover along the verges offered welcome shade for us and the red squirrels but was often broken on one side or both, offering views across a landscape of gentle slopes, pockets of woodland, and cornfields glowing in the harvest sunshine.

CYCLE-FRIENDLY CHARTRES

I had booked accommodation on the coast and in Paris; between the two we had no firm plans and usually no problem in finding accommodation and somewhere to eat. R malard, a small town on the railway path, was an exception. It had several shops but

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Left: Grandcamp-Maisy: a fishing port that conceals a wartime secret

Above: The Arc de Triomphe. Cycling in Paris is easier now than it was 25 years ago

nowhere to eat on a Tuesday evening. We found a B&B where we could picnic in the garden. It was up for sale; after ten years the owners had decided the area was too quiet, which I could well understand.

After Condé-sur-Huisne, the Véloscénie continues, intermittently signposted, on roads and a few paths, which are quiet and scenic but not direct or flat. This was cycle tourism at its most rambling. We were travelling technology-free, so I had no idea of distances and had long since ceased to care.

The next day began and ended with two extremes: Nogent-le-Rotrou is a depressed and scruffy-looking town despite an impressive heritage of medieval buildings. The town centre is dominated by large free car parks, which seemed to exacerbate the problem. By contrast, Chartres, which had looked equally uninspiring when I knew it before, was now utterly transformed: its historic centre exudes affluence and beauty.

Our hosts ascribed this to a dynamic new mayor, elected in the early 2000s, who pedestrianised a wide central area, removing parking or putting it underground. Amongst the shops and restaurants full of customers, many people were cycling for transport. Chartres was the first place we had seen this. To showcase this transformation, intricate light shows are projected onto 24 historic buildings every night throughout the summer. The son et lumière show on the cathedral was magnificent.

Between Chartres and the Paris suburbs, the Véloscénie passes through the Vallée de Chevreuse Regional Park, a protected area that has expanded since

I used to cycle there with my local FFCT club (the French equivalent of Cycling UK). On a summer Sunday, it teems with racing cyclists on the roads and recreational riders on the cycle paths.

The Véloscénie branches at Saint-Rémy-lès-Chevreuse. The branch towards Versailles had only recently been designated and was difficult to follow, so we found our own way through the outskirts of Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, which has also grown since the 1980s. Back then we could cycle freely through the grounds of the Château de Versailles. Today you have to pay to enter the grounds and the gate was guarded by soldiers with machine guns.

PARISIAN ENCORE

Once you enter Paris from anywhere in the west or south, a network of paths and lanes now takes you to most parts of the city. It is more or less continuous, apart from roadworks and illegal parking. It is even possible to get around the Arc de Triomphe (which I would never have attempted in the 1980s) on the way to the Gare du Nord, our final stay and our point of departure.

Before leaving, of course, we had that dinner date on a bateau mouche to attend to. We clinked glasses to the past 25 years and to our good fortune. Paris is a beautiful city, especially from the River Seine. It was splendid when we were first here; it remains so today. We're lucky that General Choltitz disobeyed Hitler's order to destroy Paris as the Allies advanced in 1944. And we're all fortunate to be living now, so many years after that conflict.

Fact file

BRISTOL TO PARIS

DISTANCE: 400-450 miles approx, at an average of 30-35 per day.

ROUTE: from Bristol to Poole, we mainly followed NCN 24 and NCN 25. After Cherbourg, we followed the coast from St-Vaast-la Hougue to Grandcamp-Maisy before turning inland to Villers-Bocage, Argentan, Alençon, Nogent-le-Rotrou, Chartres, Rambouillet, and Versailles.

CONDITIONS: The weather was dry and hot, sometimes too hot. Surfaces ranged from tarmac to smooth gravel.

ACCOMMODATION: We used Airbnb in the UK and Paris. Otherwise, small hotels or chambres d'hôtes (B&Bs).

BIKES: Dawes Galaxy Plus, Dawes Karakum

MAPS: OS Landrangers: 172, 183, 194 and 195 and French IGN Top 100 (1:100,000): 6, 117, 126 and 118, plus the Ville de Paris cycling map.

I'M GLAD I HAD... No smartphone/gadgets; it was a technology-free break.

NEXT TIME I WOULD... Book a hotel in Paris. Our Airbnb there wasn't great.

FURTHER INFORMATION: Tourism in Normandy, <http://en.normandie-tourisme.fr>. Maisy Battery, maisybattery.com. The Véloscénie, veloscenie.com. The Bateaux mouches: bateaux-mouches.fr/en

