



Citrus fruits are everywhere in this part of Spain

Valencian hills

HELEN WHITTAKER WENT ON A SELF-GUIDED HOLIDAY TO SPAIN WITH CTC CYCLING HOLIDAYS

The roads are so busy and the traffic's too close! These were my thoughts as I cycled home from Manchester Airport after seven days of a centre-based CTC Cycling Holidays trip to the Valencia region of Spain. It was a self-guided holiday and the four of us were given detailed route cards each day. Though only 50km inland from Benidorm, it was a delightfully quiet area for cycling.

The roads around Cocentaina, where we stayed, were beautifully smooth, and when a driver did pass they gave us a wide berth. We cycled past numerous fruit trees – oranges, lemons, cherries, and the delicious Nispero, which is local to the region. There were vineyards, olive trees, and almond trees.

The villages we stopped at for coffee each morning were quiet, being well away from the hen parties, stag dos, and beach tourism of the coast. But on the day we arrived in Cocentaina, a small town with a monastery and an outdoor market in the village square, we encountered a flamenco party and were encouraged to join in.

There were options on some days for a shorter ride but we always took the longer one. The weather was cool for May but in some ways it was better for climbing the hills. It was a very enjoyable cycling holiday, and I would highly recommend this part of Spain for a great cycling experience.



Left: Pete Stott

AN EARLY-SEASON AUDAX

Phil Beed spent the first Saturday in March riding the Bois Ocaud de Printemps 100

This 100km audax doesn't start in France, despite its name, but rather just north of Portsmouth. Six of us made an early start, meeting up at Mick's Burger Van for breakfast before heading to the start of the event. Formerly known as the Lasham Loop, the ride heads north east to Liphook, across to Holybourne and Lasham, then back to Catherington via Old Winchester Hill. It's a nice route, keeping mostly to the lanes.

Just past Finchdean, we caught up with 7-year-old Sam Whitehead stoking his dad Paul's tandem. We stopped briefly for an information control at

Liphook, before heading on towards Holybourne felt difficult, probably because we were low on energy. Reaching the summit, we coasted down to the Golden Pot pub with lunch in mind. We ended up waiting for opening time; stopping earlier for a snack would have made the hill easier and avoided the wait. You live and learn!

Filled up with cheesy chips and beer, we set off on our homeward leg. Not far down the road, we felt the first spots of rain. By Alresford, we were back on home turf. The kilometres now ticked by quickly and the few remaining climbs were familiar to us. It was raining on and off, but never particularly heavily.

Old Winchester Hill was the last big climb, and at the top we caught Sam and Paul on the tandem again. They had passed us while we ate lunch and had clearly made good time. Twenty minutes later we arrived at the finish and tucked into sandwiches and cake. We had a great day. Chapeau to Sam on his first 100km audax!



7-year-old Sam Whitehead assists dad Paul on another hill



'Mountain' biking in Norfolk

Manche to the Med

ROLAND SEBER TOURED END-TO-END ACROSS FRANCE WITH WIFE **JULIE RAND**

The idea of cycling across France was a challenge in lots of ways. My unease in travelling far from home, as I have agoraphobia, was just one of them. But we had a target – the town of Sète, west of Montpellier – and a deadline: a TGV booked back to Paris in 11 days.

Following the River Loire south from Orléans and then the Allier through the Auvergne towards Le Puy, we cruised effortlessly past miles of empty waterways and fields of sunflowers, all the while thinking about seeing the Camargue's wild horses and pink flamingos, and the waves of the Med.

All was going according to plan until we hit the Massif Central. Daily mileage dropped and spirits with it. The low point came 50km from Le Puy when we realised we wouldn't make our deadline.

Our map didn't show stations clearly but we prayed that there might be one in the nearest town of Langogne. There was – with a train to Nîmes waiting to depart! It had room for us and the bikes, so we jumped straight on.

By the time we reached the Camargue, I was managing my anxiety and enjoying the trip. An unscheduled night on the beach near Montpellier (another story!) and a futile attempt to see the horses and flamingos later, we just made our TGV for the journey home.



PEDDARS WAY, OUR WAY

Alan Thompson and two friends explored Norfolk on mountain bikes

Jacko and Podge appeared from an overgrown and rutted section of the Peddars Way, arms and legs bloodied. 'Ah, Livingstone, I presume?' I nearly said, until I saw their icy stares. 'We could take this quiet road to Castle Acre for tea and cakes,' I suggested instead.

We'd come down to Hunstanton from Merseyside with our mountain bikes to ride the Peddars Way and catch some late August sun. Jacko, pushing 70, had some reservations about riding off-road after a lifetime on it, but had bought a nice Scott MTB off one of the lads.

We left the trail at Harpley Dams and followed quiet lanes through Little and Great Massingham, then rejoined the Way on old Roman road that took us to Castle Acre, where we visited the tourist sites – an 11th century Cluniac priory



and the 12th century Norman castle.

From there, we decided to head back north and leave the Peddars Way to braver, younger men. But at the village of Harpley, I noticed an off-road route through the grounds of Houghton Hall, which was built for Sir Robert Walpole. As we approached it, a large man wanted to know what we were doing. 'Admiring the Palladian architecture,' I said. He politely sent us back the way we'd come.

We weren't back on the road long when I noticed a bridleway heading over the fields to Anmer, which was followed by some more off-road to Fring. Eventually we reached the coastal village of Thornham, where we took liquid refreshment at the Old Coach House, sitting outside in the warm sunshine. We planned a way back to Hunstanton via the coast, stopping to admire the amazing empty beaches near Gore Point.

Next day, we followed the coastal cycle route to Wells, before another night at Hunstanton and a long journey home.

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