

mental drifter

Brexit wasn't going to stop **Steve Melia's** long-anticipated, extended tour across Europe and back – but it *would* make it more complicated

When I retired, I promised myself I'd take a long tour through Europe. All my holidays have been in Britain or Western Europe for the past 17 years, as I stopped flying when I started working in sustainable transport. With time on my hands, I could dream of going further. By March 2022, two months before my 60th birthday, I was ready.

The idea was to ride through France, meeting up with some old friends and my father, who lives there, and then follow Eurovelo Route 6 to Vienna. From Vienna I would turn south, following Routes 9 and 8 along the Adriatic coast to Greece, before taking the ferry to southern Italy to start the long ride home.

I began planning all this before Brexit, however. The new rules have complicated travel across Europe and, as I would discover, unexpected events can complicate them still further. Due to the 90-day Schengen limit (see 'The clock is ticking', p41) my route was designed to reach Croatia as soon as possible. The sooner I could cross the Croatian border, the more time I could spend in Greece at the end of the trip. Or so I thought.

The weight I was carrying would limit my daily mileage but that was fine; I wanted to spend time enjoying the experience. Some of my cycling friends couldn't understand why I wanted to carry so much stuff, but washing a single pair of underpants every night for several months is not my idea of fun.

FIRST STOP: FRANCE

I bought a pair of giant 70-litre Ortlieb panniers for the rear and a 25-litre pair for the front. I was going to take emergency camping gear but the bike was already too heavy, so I took my chances on finding affordable accommodation. For all their faults, Airbnb and booking.com have made that easier. I also used warmshowers.org, a community of cyclists offering accommodation free of charge,

through Britain and France, but it became more difficult to find hosts after that and I eventually stopped trying.

I crossed the Channel from Poole to Saint-Malo to ride through familiar territory, although it had been three Covid-infected years since my last visit to France; the remaining Covid restrictions there were lifted a few days after my arrival. I had almost forgotten what a great country France is to ride through, with its dense network of quiet lanes.

From Rennes, I headed south-east towards the Loire, where I followed Eurovelo 6 for a few days before turning south. This was the famous chateau route at its springtime best. In Saumur I spent a night in a studio flat inside a medieval building, where I carried my bike up a spiral staircase that looked like the entrance to a dungeon.

As I left the Loire corridor to follow the Vienne south-east, the population density began to fall. I have passed through many quiet villages in France but the contrast was particularly stark here.

Sylvain, an old friend from Paris, planned to join me in Argenton-sur-Creuse, from where we would ride together for two days. He has helped me out many times over the years – and soon would again.

The day from Argenton to Guéret was tough. The ride from Saint-Malo had been fairly flat, but as the terrain turned hillier the heavens opened. The 80km ride was long enough for me with full panniers; Sylvain had not ridden a bike since the pandemic and found it harder. In the only town on the route, Dun-le-Palestel, everything was closed, including the big supermarket. As we ate peanuts and muesli under the canopy of its petrol station, my body temperature dropped to shivering point.

The following day the weather improved as we followed the River Creuse to Aubusson. The beauty of the valley reminded me why my father chose to retire here, though he sometimes found it too quiet. Like much of rural France, the bars close early and

Healthcare & insurance

Brexit actually made little difference to healthcare for travellers. The GHIC has replaced the old E111, and in theory provides similar benefits. My experience is only in France (and nothing very serious) but whenever I have tried to use either of those cards, the receptionists or practice managers have always said: "I have no idea what that is; you will have to pay the full amount." So the bottom line is, if you travel, you need healthcare insurance. It will not cover everything. No travel insurance would have covered the complicated dental treatment I needed.

For trips longer than 120 days, I discovered that it is almost impossible to insure your bike. I could have added it to the 'gold level' sports travel insurance I took out, but the additional premium would have been more than the bike was worth. Fortunately, the thieves who stole my phone and camera didn't take the bike!