Proper gravel riding – on MTBs

Train to Berlin. Plenty of bike spaces!

PATAGONIAN PATHS

John Lister and his brother used an old trading route to cross the Andes from Chile to Argentina

It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to spend two weeks cycle-camping with my brother in southern Argentina and Chile. Reality usually gets in the way of such fantastical plans. But we did it, and we took the chance to cross the Andes by mountain bike, using one of the old trading routes largely undiscovered by tourism. A few months have passed since the trip, but an extract from the journal I kept reminds me of the hard-earned rewards of such adventures…

'The dirt road became a forest path and we encountered a small group of people leading two oxen. The guy at the back introduced himself as Elias. He said he lived in the last house in Chile, next to the lake forming the pass into Argentina, and we could stay the night there. He would join us once his work was done. The heat began to build again, and the horseflies started to take an interest in our sweat-soaked bodies.

'We unloaded the bikes to cross a rickety wooden bridge. A small, fading, hand-painted sign propped against a rock told us we were on the right path. The river ran alongside us, deep turquoise waters. We were on the lookout for Elias's house, and finally we came to what seemed like the one. We broke out our cooker and ate. That was better!

'As dusk fell, Elias reappeared, his energy undiminished by the day's exertions. He led us into his self-built house. He was more than generous. He cooked on the wood-fired stove. We drank beer and heard stories of his life. He radioed through to the border police ready for tomorrow. We went down to the lakeside and took in the incredible evening light across the water… Heaven, or rather Argentina, was on the other side.'

The encounter with oxen

Being a cycle tourist opens doors – in this case to Elias's house

Berlin to Copenhagen

BAGGAGE TRANSFER MADE **PAUL & JAN HEPWORTH'S** 10-DAY TOUR ACHIEVABLE

Would Berlin to Copenhagen be rideable for two sexagenarians? Yes, if someone could carry our heavy panniers between overnight stops. Freedom Treks, whom we'd used last year, said they would. We travelled to our first hotel in Orianenburg, near Berlin, via a North Sea ferry and trains booked through Ffestiniog Travel. A large map of the route to Copenhagen was displayed by the hotel's bike shed.

With daily distances of 40 miles, we ambled by canals and rivers, through insect-biting forests, along coastal stretches, and up some mildly challenging hills. A comprehensive guide to the route and good signage ensured that we only got lost once.

A ferry took us from Rostock to Gedser, from where we hopped across several Danish islands by bridges or local ferries, finally reaching the famous Little Mermaid statue overlooking Copenhagen harbour. Headwinds hampered the latter stage of the ride, so we took a short train-assisted option.

Our route home began via another ferry, between Rødby and Puttgarten. An overnight stop in Osnabrück enabled us to catch an early Eurocity train to Amsterdam, and then retrace our route home. To reach the station in Hull, we used the riverside part of NCN 66.

Nykøbing street market

Carlingford to Omeath Greenway

ACROSS THE BORDER

Frances Wilson toured the Irish border counties, wondering how Brexit might affect them

From our bed and breakfast in Greencastle, County Down (Northern Ireland), we cycled a short distance and boarded the Carlingford Lough Ferry. Fifteen minutes later and we were in Greenore, County Louth (Republic of Ireland), having crossed the border mid-way. To cope with this situation, we could pay our fares in either Sterling or Euros.

On a glorious April day, we meandered around the Cooley Peninsula, first following the coastline and then parallel to the N1 Motorway, which carries the heavy traffic from Dublin to Belfast over the 'invisible' border. Approaching Newry, we needed to cross the Cooley Mountains, which

Carlingford Ferry at Greenore

form the spine of the Peninsula, to return to Carlingford Lough.

As we climbed, we were suddenly aware from the road signage that we were no longer in the Republic but back in Northern Ireland. A short distance later and we were back over the border as it twisted and turned through this hilly terrain. As we descended from the mountains, we were in the Republic, cycling through the small town of Omeath. Here the former railway has been turned into a greenway, and we followed it to Carlingford before a short leg on road to Greenore for the ferry back to Northern Ireland.

How many times did we cross the border? At least four but maybe more. How these will be policed post-Brexit is anyone's guess. Will we have to show our passports at every crossing?

Frank heading home with the wind behind him

Flash-dash touring

FRANK BURNS HAD A FEW DAYS SPARE FOR SOME SPONTANEOUS BIKE TRIPS

Take Alastair Humphrey's excellent idea of the micro-adventure, and add ingredients like spontaneity, guaranteed good weather, a favourable wind direction, and a comfortable bed for the night, and you have something I call the flash-dash. Let me explain…

Late one evening, hungry to ring some changes in my riding, I looked at the weather forecast for the next three days and discovered it was going to be fine, with the wind consistently blowing from the west. So how could I take advantage of that? Simple.

I checked the diary, got the green light from my wife, and looked westwards on the map. I took a train to the Peak District, spent a night at YHA Ravenstor, and then enjoyed two days and 267km cycling home with a tailwind all the way, stopping overnight at YHA National Forest to break the journey.

A second flash-dash saw me jump on the Thameslink at Bedford, which took me all the way to Brighton. With the wind still blowing from the west, I hugged the coast for 234km, all the way to Margate, where I was able to pick up a train to London.

A final flash-dash was a bus-assisted day venture, beginning in Buckingham, speeding through Milton Keynes on an old railway track, and stomping through the Bedfordshire countryside with the wind chasing my tail for 75km.

Spontaneity means better weather