



Above: Colombia rewards low gears (p66)
Below: River launches happily ferry bikes



South America

Colombia pictures

Steve Gregson sketches out his latest trip through a country that's captured his imagination

Between January and March, Colombia is a fantastic cycle touring destination. My wife and I have enjoyed long tours there over a 28-year period. Barrancabermeja, on the historic Rio Magdalena, can be reached by air, river launch and even mini-train, so has been a focal point on three of our visits. It is a busy, vibrant city with a big heart. The riverside port area has food kiosks, small fishing boats unloading catches, and, if you're lucky, informal folk music jam sessions.

We left the city heading west, through cattle ranch plains, and caught a night's rest before the long climb through the Andean foothills. We rode past a new dam and through a well-lit tunnel before a fast downhill into Bucaramanga. Colombian mountain roads are generally built at 5%, making for relaxing climbs and descents; you can actually enjoy the scenery.

After another long descent into the Canyon Chicamocha, we took a spectacular cliff-side road into Cepita. We spent a couple of days exploring unmade tracks, all rideable, then it was back to the main road and on to San Gil via Villanueva. There, a helpful hotel-owner's son took interest in our trip and printed off photos of all the junctions on the complicated but traffic-free route. How



kind! The Colombians are so pleased to have cycle tourists.

After a week on quiet roads to the west of San Gil, we were excited to ride through the colonial villages of Barichara and Guane, where there are now boutique hotels. Lots of climbs and descents through Galan and La Fuente led us to the relaxing high-Andes town of Zapatoca. We met two other couples on the multiple hair-pinned descent – evidence of the improved security in the country. A final climb took us to Bucaramanga, where we found cardboard boxes, attended a concert, and packed for the flight home.



Right: Out of the 'hotel' and straight onto traffic-free routes

Low Countries

Largely bargy

Paul & Jan Hepworth boat-and-biked from Amsterdam to Bruges

OUR ACCOMMODATION WAS

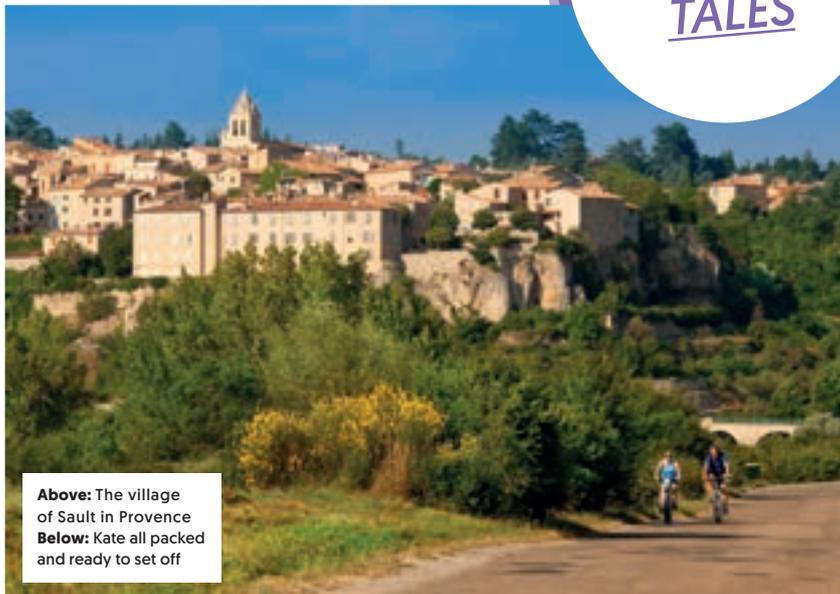
MV Fluvius, a former barge converted into a floating luxury hotel. Hire bikes were on offer but we chose to take our own. Outward travel was via the Hull-to-Rotterdam ferry and return from Brussels via Eurostar.

A typical day's ride was 30 miles, with Boat Bike Holidays' tour leader heading up a multi-national group. A volunteer 'sweeper' in the group brought up the rear. The option of self-led riding was also on offer. At the end of each day's ride we met the boat, which had travelled along the canal network as we rode.

The Netherlands and Belgium share a common system of numbering and signing intersections on their cycle networks. A daily route sheet listed ours sequentially, so navigating was a doddle. Much riding was through tranquil rural areas, with urban sections largely on segregated paths.

The final day had an option for sightseeing in Bruges or a local-led ride.

We went independent and headed to the coast at Blankenberg. Our route was closed at one point due to water-main repairs and we misread the detour notice, ending up on the main road to Zeebrugge Port, with only a painted line to separate us from thundering HGVs! But we quickly got back on track.



Above: The village of Sault in Provence
Below: Kate all packed and ready to set off

Left: Alamy



United States

An ocean road

John Scott cycled 700 miles down the USA's Pacific Coast

"How is a 52-year-old man supposed to be able to ride 100 miles a day for a week?" exclaimed Paul, my son, on hearing of my idea to cycle from my cousin's house in Portland to another cousin's in San Francisco. Only one way to find out!

It seemed a simple plan: leave Portland with the sun on my back, head towards the ocean, turn left, and keep going until a large red bridge comes into view. When I was actually there, I came to regret my laid-back approach to navigation: I got lost. A supposedly steady start became an epic ride ending in the dark when the road turned to gravel 12 miles short of the B&B.

Directions were easy once I could see water, and the following evening I enjoyed a magnificent view of the sun setting over the Pacific from my hammock. My cyclist neighbour on the campsite commented: "You Europeans are mad. You come over here and do 85-100 miles a day."

The vast expanse of the Oregon Dunes, the Avenue of the Giants, and the rolling Californian coast made for an awesome bike ride, as did the calorific all-American breakfasts and the consistent kindness of strangers.

France

A tour of France

*Inexperience didn't stop **Dr Kate Latham** from cycling from the Channel to the Med*

Yes, I should know how to mend a puncture. No, I should not have left my chilly-weather kit and shoes in the first *chambre d'hôte* after crossing the Loire, thinking this was the south of France. And by Nice, I was no better at getting up hills than I was at St Malo. But did I have a great ride? Yes.

Wearing my bespoke 'Brexit Non!' cycling T-shirts, I followed the France En Velo route through the small towns and *les beaux villages* of *la France profonde*. I took a month, so it was slow, but I saw France at its spring finest. The route was epitomised by cuckoos, cowslips, and noisy frogs.

Travelling solo there is permission, and sometimes desperation, to chat to the people one meets, even though I have only schoolgirl French. One lady *boulangere* telephoned her friend to come and meet me. I was offered places to stay and the chance to try a farmer's 'real milk' at a gîte down the road if I cared to join him...

I seemed to gain cachet the further south I went and was applauded for my solo-ness in Sault by a mixed group of cyclists just back from their Mont Ventoux ride. 'C'est possible pour vous, oui?' 'Non!', I replied and laughed. I'd been travelling with my usual mixture of 'pedal and push' as it was. I was blessed by good weather, but mornings were often cold and the Mistral wind really did blow – the only time I felt frightened on the bike.

I enjoyed the pedalling so much that I am planning Roscoff to Marseille next, with the aim of seeing the flamingos in the Camargue. If you see a 64-year-old pedalling – or pushing – heading south on a yellow road, feel free to shout 'Bravo, Madame!'



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