



Europe & Middle East

Riding to Iraq

London GP **Ibrahim Hassan** rode to his birthplace in Iraqi Kurdistan

IT WAS MY dream to cycle from London, where I live, to Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, where I was born. I left our house on 13 July and arrived in Erbil, the capital city of Kurdistan, on 19 September.

My route took me via Harwich, the Hook of Holland, and then along the River Rhine through Holland and Germany. I followed the Danube to Serbia, then diverted into Bulgaria and through Turkey until I reached the Iraqi border. Initially, I rode on cycle tracks and country lanes. Later I had to use main roads; in Turkey I used the hard shoulder of A-roads.

I enjoyed every minute of the 5,500km journey and never got bored. I met people from all over the world. The most fascinating couple, whom I met twice in Turkey, were from France. They were walking from Paris to Esfahan in Iran, a distance of 7,000km.

For every seven days of cycling, I rested a day or two. I was lucky in that I had friends and family in most of the cities where I had my rest days. Navigation was straightforward. I never needed my paper maps, just my Garmin Edge 800 and Google Maps.

In Erbil, I saw the prime minister of Kurdistan and his deputy, plus a few political figures. I suggested they create a national cycling day in Kurdistan. My message throughout was to promote cycling culture worldwide – and specifically in Iraq. My bike is now housed in a museum in Erbil to inspire my people. ▶

France

Corsican cols

Jeremy Chandler spent a week with the Club des Cent Cols on the mountainous Isle of Beauty

As its name suggests, the Club des Cent Cols is a French cycling club for those who love the romance of the high peaks. To join as a full member, you must have climbed at least 100 mountain passes ('cent cols'). I signed up for a week's holiday with the club with some trepidation. Would I be able to keep up with those wiry Frenchmen and women on Corsica's 10% slopes? And would I be able to understand a word that was going on?

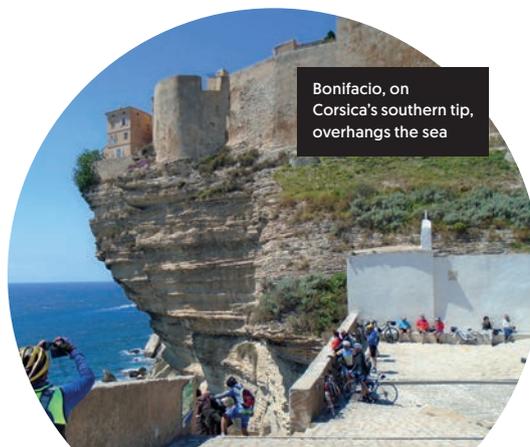
I needn't have worried. There were wonderful days of riding, for the most part in perfect cycling weather. Most days we cycled in small groups, through groves of olives, vines and orange trees. On the climbs, there was a constant fragrance from the Corsican maquis: lavender; sweet-smelling cistus; and the slightly curry-like perfume of immortelle flowers.

Of course, there were some bad moments too. On the second day I had a silly fall on the flat: a moment's inattention, one hand off the bars, some gravel under the front wheel, and down I went. I received lots of

tender attention from the other club members.

Two days later, we had a monster of a day crossing the Col de Bavella, which is one of the most celebrated in Corsica. On the descent we were buffeted by icy winds, which sent the bike ricocheting across the road. I have rarely, if ever, felt so cold.

For the most part, however, it was blissful. There were amazing landscapes with villages perched impossibly over the valleys, some spectacular descents from the high hills down to the sea, and convivial company from the other CCC members, both on the rides and in the evenings.





The Mull of Galloway is the southernmost point of Scotland



Kent

Bivvying in the Garden of England

Bikepacking needn't be exotic. Eoghan McHugh went to Kent

TWO DAYS TO spare and nothing planned. I didn't want to spend much money. I did want to ride my bike. So: a bikepacking adventure in nearby Kent.

I left early one morning, setting out from Mid-Sussex to the coast, which I followed over the county line. In Dover, I turned north and climbed hill upon hill, eventually finishing the day's cycle with a cup of tea at a pub in Sandwich. Outside of Sandwich, I set up camp between two rows of apple trees in an orchard.

The next day, I pushed north, following the coast as it wound into Ramsgate. I found Dumpton Gap, descending down it to the esplanade in Broadstairs and the Viking Coastal Trail. Down at sea level, I pootled along on this wide, well-paved walkway with hardly a soul to share it. To my right, beautifully calm sea; above, cloudless summer skies.

Herne Bay to Whitstable was buzzing. There were loads of people out and about, and a great atmosphere. That stretch of towns was idyllic. They're historic, well maintained, and have great looking shops and restaurants.

From Whitstable, I turned inland and started the cross-country cycle home. I'd managed quite a bit of Kent, covering 250 miles over the course of the weekend.

Dumfries & Galloway

Roadies on tour

Former racer **Martin Coopland** made the most of the empty winter roads in Galloway

My friend Graham and I have been cyclists since our teens. Committed racers, we once looked down on saddlebag-carrying, cape-wearing CTCers. Forty years later, our competitive urges have waned and we appreciate the finer elements of this cycling life.

Our most recent trip took us to Dumfries and Galloway on roads we've ridden in the Girvan stage race. We left the car in Wigton and set off under grey skies. The roads were ours for the weekend, shared only with a strong south-westerly. We took to riding bit-and-bit to ease the burden.

The Port William lifeboat station was supposed to be our coffee stop. It's the place to be in Port William

– except on that January weekend. Lunch was bread rolls on a bench.

The skies brightened, the wind freshened, and we continued our work. A miscalculation just before the Mull of Galloway saw us struggling up a muddy farm track, where Graham – Carradice Longflap notwithstanding – secured a Strava KOM!

Turning north, we flew wind-assisted to beautiful Port Logan and the palm-tree-lined driveway of the Logan Botanical Gardens. It was like riding the Promenade Des Anglais at the end of Paris-Nice. Rolling into Portpatrick, the daylight failed and my dynamo started to earn its keep.

Morning brought warm winds and bright skies as we climbed out of Portpatrick and cycled the periphery of the North Rhins. Stranraer supplied coffee and cycling magazines in a bright café. No Cycle magazine here, just reviews of £10,000 rocket ships.

North into the hills and the scenery changed. The verdant, Beltie-filled fields of the Galloway coast were replaced with open hillsides, sheep, and wind turbines poking into the clouds. From Barrhill, we headed for the finish. There was no tightening of toe straps this time, just good company and endless empty roads.



With the café shut, lunch was bread rolls on a bench



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