



Fact File Channel hopping

Distance: 151km (day 1, 48km; day 2, 103km).

Route: Planned to ride from Dieppe to Calais. Cancelled ferries saw us starting in Calais instead and following Eurovelo 4 to Veurne in Flanders, Belgium via Dunkerque, then back again.

Conditions: Storm Amy was unkind, with biblical rain and fierce winds battled in coal-black night. On the second day we had headwinds. Largely traffic-free, open lanes meant no shelter.

Bikes used: Isen All Season Plus (Sam), 1980 Team Miyata tourer (Huw).

Maps/guides: Original maps were scrapped. Komoot and Google maps saved the day.

I'm glad I had... Wahoo ELMNT Roam 2 to guide us on the go. Sinewave beacon dynamo light for the ride from the ferry to Dunkerque.

Next time I would... Reproof my waterproofs.

Further info: en.eurovelo.com/ev4; discoverferries.com; dfds.com; leshuttle.com/uk-en. For general info on ferry travel, see cyclinguk.org/bike-ferry.



scuppered as we were led from the port and deposited into the black unknown of Calais.

Darkest before dawn

At this hour there was no traffic and no light. We had no idea where we were and no real plan of where to go, given that six hours previously we'd planned on riding from Dieppe to Calais. On the ferry, consulting weather apps, we'd decided that heading into the wind to Dieppe wasn't worth it but, with the wind behind us, a 123km ride to Bruges was achievable.

After 50 minutes and 15km, following flooded gravel paths and stung by incessant rain, we sheltered from the storm at a bus stop. A frog had a similar idea and was busy eating a worm. That's when we gave up on Bruges. Riding until daylight and finding an open café became our mission.

Ducks quacked at us from the darkness. We passed through woods, along quiet lanes and who knows what else in the darkness, riding hard and scoffing sweets to stay warm in the wet. Hypothermia began to set in and our battery lights gradual faded. Directions were messed up. With my dynamo light out front and Huw's fading rear light, we rode on until we spotted the blessed sight of a boulangerie with lights on and an 'ouvert' sign on the door.

There weren't just baked goods,

"We gave up on Bruges. Riding until daylight and finding an open café became our mission"

shelter and an oven's warmth but also hot, black coffee. Two cups, four chocolate-infused pastries and a large puddle beneath our plastic chairs later, we began to feel human.

Dawn was trying to break through the clouds outside. The

boulangerie's respite from the rain allowed us to check our phones. It turned out we were on the outskirts of Dunkerque – and there was a bike-friendly Ibis hotel with a room. Back in our 20s and 30s, Huw and I would have camped. Older and wiser now, we decided to hotel it.

It was the best decision we made. All the campsites we'd checked beforehand were closed. And the hotel staff took pity on us and let us check into our room at 9am rather than after midday. (Perhaps soaking, slumbering men in the lobby as residents eat their breakfast is bad for business?) Half an hour later, warm and dry at last, our snores rattled the windows.

Belgian detour

Waking in the afternoon, we spent our time in launderettes drying sodden clobber, eating galettes by the seaside and acting as tourists rather than tourers. It was a strange feeling for a weekend tour, where so often the focus is on the riding, rather than taking time to soak in the places you pass through.



Top left: Huw pushes on through Flandrian headwinds, regretting his lengthy lunch

Top right: Sam returning to Dunkerque, happily and mistakenly thinking that he's about to board a train

Bottom right: Sam at the book exchange near the French border, on the return leg