



Left: Sam reaching Calais much as he left it: in the dark – albeit without the storm force winds and biblical rain
Below: Sam loading his bike onto the LeShuttle van for the return home

The next day, we embraced this more casual style of riding. Stopping became de rigueur; it was Sunday after all. The forecast promised a tailwind into Flanders. We hoped to spot windmills and find a nice lunch spot, at which point the wind was meant to drop. We'd then return to Dunkerque for the afternoon train to Calais.

Leaving Dunkerque along its seafront, sand sheeted along the beach and kite surfers leapt to terrifying heights. With smug grins, we rode with the wind at our backs in dry clothing. Today was going to be a good day. I could just feel it.

Every time I ride on the Continent, I'm overwhelmed by the thoughtfulness of the cycling infrastructure. Being able to ride and chat without concern of motor traffic is a joy. In Département du Nord, there are wide open lanes that enable you to see and be seen for miles by other traffic.

Crossing a border you hope for a dramatic change, but the differences were more subtle. French road signs became Flemish. The cycling infrastructure became a bit more inclusive. By the time we arrived in Veurne's Gothic market square for lunch, weekend roadies were just as common as families out on laden

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e-cargo bikes. The wind failed to drop while we ate, and our detour to St Charles' Windmill on De Moeren (the Moors) began to feel foolhardy on full bellies. Chain-ganging back to Dunkerque, heads down and legs tired, we eagerly anticipated our train ride back to Calais. Fate conspired against us. There were no bike spaces.

Racing home

Our LeShuttle pickup was mid-morning the next day and we had a hotel booked and paid for in Calais. There was only one choice: we stocked up on Haribo and headed back into the wind. As dusk settled, the wind dropped to a stiff breeze and we could finally witness what we'd missed on our initial journey.

Along one stretch we waved at and were greeted by small groups returning to a tent village hidden within a forest. It looked like the aftermath of Glastonbury: battered tents and mud, mud, mud everywhere. Yet it was far sadder. These were the homes of people hoping for a better life that were under siege from the elements. Then we found fascist graffiti nearby. It put into perspective our grumbling about a single night in the damp.

Tunnel vs ferry

Ferries are the simplest, most regular and often cheapest way to reach France. Newhaven to Dieppe (around 4hrs) runs twice a day, and for a passenger and bike costs from £28.80/£57.60 (DFDS one way/return). Dover to Calais (~1.5hrs) has a minimum of 10 and maximum of 30 sailings each day, with prices from £30/£55 (DFDS). All services are easily bookable online, with good telephone assistance if plans change.

There are two ways for cyclists to use the Channel Tunnel: Eurostar and LeShuttle. At the time of writing, Eurostar is still not accepting oversized luggage, which includes bikes (folders excepted).

LeShuttle's cycle service uses a customised van run by an external contractor. Running from Folkestone to Calais twice a day, this £50 each-way service is the swiftest (35 minutes, excluding passport checks). Pick up in the UK is outside a Holiday Inn, while in Calais it's behind the Cliffo Siege D'Exploitation via some busy roads. Booking is not intuitive, requiring a hard-to-find form on the LeShuttle website, email correspondence and a

bank transfer. Last-minute bookings are not accepted.

It's a shame it's so difficult to book as the service itself is convenient (it even takes tandems!), and the drivers are knowledgeable, friendly and helpful.



As tiredness kicked in, we were left alone with such thoughts, pedalling squares as we strove to reach Calais. Brief episodes jolted us out of our reveries. A strange archery competition at Loon-Plage where contestants shot arrows at a pylon. A book exchange where there was no Dan Brown like in England, but Umberto Eco and Bukowski instead.

We finally arrived in Calais as we had left it: in darkness and tired. We were happy for the ride we'd had – and hungry, oh so hungry! 🍷