

PEDRO & DANNY'S EUROPEAN TOURS 2018

5 Countries Self Guided Tour

This tour took us into Netherlands, Belgium, France, Luxembourg & Germany.

Danny and I met up in Maastricht on Monday 16th July after he had spent a couple of days taking in the delights of Amsterdam and I a day in Brussels. The next day we hired a couple of bikes and had a look around town.

Day 1 Wednesday 18th July Maastricht to Liege. The start of the tour was from the Novotel Hotel where we collected our bikes and the instructions for the next 9 days. The bikes were of a robust nature complete with mudguards and lights but did have 27 derailleur gears as well as half-moon handlebars. After trolling through the mass of paperwork and instructions we set off on our adventure. It is hard to put into words what it feels like to commence riding not knowing what pitfalls may await you. We had only ridden for a few kilometres when we found ourselves, not lost, but unsure as to how we were going to get out of the back streets of Maastricht, when a chap on a bike stopped and asked, in good English, where did we wish to go. When he found out that we were a pair of septuagenarian Aussies doing a 550 km bike ride he told us that he was a reporter for the local newspaper and insisted on buying us coffee and doing an article on us. After coffee and a photo shoot he took us off along the streets out of town until we reached a point where we were able to continue to Liege along the Meuse River bank. All this time told us about the history of the war in these parts as well as the geographical points of interest. Many thanks Jerome for your assistance and hope that we might read your article some time. The rest of the day's riding was at an easy pace on flat tracks along the river. We did however miss a turning, but thanks to a passing motorist who with her GPS put us onto the right path for the remainder of the ride. We finally made it to our hotel, Ramada Plaza, without further problems.

Day 2 Thursday 19th July Liege to Namur. We were on our bikes at 8.15am and once again we made a couple of wrong turns on our way out of Liege but this time had to sort it out ourselves. We were then riding through an industrial

section of the city with many twist and turns which slowed us down. Fortunately the signage along the route was fairly good and we eventually found ourselves back on the Meuse River cycle path to Huy. The rest of the day's riding was along the river, until we arrived into Namur and our overnight stay at the Pip Ibis Namur Hotel. The weather over the past 2 days has been warm and sunny with a slight headwind.

Day 3 Friday 20th July Namur to Haybes. Danny advised that he was not up for the full distance 80km as he was a bit out of sorts so we agreed to take the train to Dinant which reduced the days riding to 50km. Leaving the station we were soon back onto the River cycleway to Givet where we had lunch before setting off on the leg to Haybes for our overnight stop. Half an hour before Haybes we encountered our first drop of rain, drizzle really, but not enough to warrant putting on our wet weather gear but it was still enough to make us damp. Arrived at the designated hotel to find that we had been relocated to another place further down the street. Checked in and after a good hot shower we were ready for a beer or two before dinner. The owner turned out to have his own micro brewery in the cellar. In the bar I noticed a sign for Stockport and asked the owner what the significance was. It turned out that Haybes was badly bombed during the 1st WW and that the English town of Stockport had provided financial assistance to help rebuild the town after the war was over. My interest was that Stockport was a town only 10 miles from where I lived before emigrating to Aus. Dinner was taken in the hotel we should have stayed at (Hotel Saint Hubert) before returning to the Clos Belle Rosa.

Day 4 Saturday 21st July Haybes to Charleville-Mezieres. We awoke to another warm and sunny day and set off on our ride back to the river bank to continue our ride to Charleville-Mezieres. Along the way I stopped to watch a local lad land a huge catfish from the river. It must have been at least a metre in length. Danny also had his moment striking up a relationship with two very tame and over-friendly goats to which he talked to until I caught him up. He must be getting fed up of my twittering. We also met a Dutch lady who was travelling on her own and carrying all her own gear and camping along the way. That night we stayed at the Hotel Kyriad. Charleville was also the recipient of money from Manchester who

paid for a hospital to be built. Today that hospital is still called The Manchester Hospital in memory of the generosity of the Mancunians.

Day 5 Sunday 22nd July Charleville- Mezieres to Bouillon. This was not a day of rest and again we had difficulty finding our way back onto the correct section of the river cycle path. Thankfully we met up with the same Dutch lady who had found the same problem but between us we worked it out as she had some very good maps and we finally got on our way. Once again the going was fairly flat but gradually climbing as we were riding upstream of the river. We arrived at Sedan before lunch so decided to keep going. This is where we left the river and started on country roads. This was also the start of our climbing as we rode out of Sedan and finished up being directed to a farm track which turned into a very rough and rugged track which even though it was downhill it was impossible to do any speed. We arrived at Givonne after much climbing and had a welcome break for lunch. From here it was basically a 10km long uphill drag to the Belgium border before a great descent into the town of Bouillon for our night's rest at the Hotel de la Poste. This was a very posh hotel and we decided to eat out as the menu showed that the main courses in the restaurant were 30+ euros. The weather again was still sunny and warm. Bouillon is a very pretty town placed on either side of the river Semois and had a huge castle perched on the top of the cliff. As it was a fine day and Sunday it was packed with visitors.

Day 6 Monday 23rd July Bouillon to Bastogne. Today was the killer day. We commenced climbing 2 minutes after leaving the hotel up a long steep road which even gave one E bike rider grief as he had to walk the last few hundred metres. The rest of the day was spent huffing and puffing our way up long steep hills and occasionally having to resort to walking. On the bright side we did have plenty of downhills to help keep up the average kph. We eventually arrived at Bastogne after 75km and approx 1500metres of climbing and enjoyed a couple of cold beers before a shower and dinner at our hotel The Leo at Home. What surprised us both was that the villages we passed through today were deserted. There were no shops or pubs and though it was school holidays there were no people or children playing in the streets.

Day 7 Tuesday 24th July Bastogne to Sankt Vith. This morning we again missed a side turning which meant that we rode a few km before realising our error and had to return nearly all the way back to our hotel before finding the right way. Once on the correct route we were on a 25km railtrail which started off with a great asphalt surface to Gouvy where it ended and we were back on country roads and hills to Wilwerdang where we had lunch. At some part of today's ride we passed into and then out of Luxembourg. After lunch and a few more hills we arrived at the start of the Vennbahn. This is a 125km railtrail all the way to Aachen in Germany. The surface to start with was good but soon deteriorated to a rough gravel path. This slowed us down but we eventually arrived at the hotel Pip Margraff in Sankt Vith at 4.00pm after walking the last 200 metres due to having a flat tyre. This was when I found out that the repair kit supplied had only one patch and did not provide a spare tube. Fixed the tube and all was well for the start of the next day. Weather is still great with sunny skies and 29 deg. temps and light winds.

Day 8 Wednesday 25th July Sankt Vith to Monschau. We returned to the Vennbahn and after a section of the same gravel we hit lovely smooth blacktop so upped the pace. In doing so we missed the point where we should have turned off to go to the next night's town of Monschau. Fortunately we manage to spot a small finger sign pointing to this town so took off down a narrow path into a housing estate and as usual turned right instead of left. We soon realised our error and returned to find a great downhill that would have got us to our hotel in 10 minutes but as soon as we started down the hill I managed another flat. I therefore decided to walk the 2 km to the hotel. During this time thunder clouds had formed and light rain had started to fall. We just made it to the hotel when the heavens opened and it pelted down for about an hour. Having no more patches, I made enquiries about finding a bike shop only to be told that one was in the next town and that a bus trip was the only way there as to walk would take an hour at least. At this point my saviour turned up and said that she would accompany me on the bus to find the bike shop. This lady was also doing the tour but on an E bike and was Dutch so could speak the local language as well as English. We found the shop and duly got a new tube all fixed and ready to put

back in the frame on our return. I will point out at this juncture that we met many people along our route who were so helpful in guiding us in the right direction and it makes one feel so inadequate not speaking their language and they speaking English.

Day 9 Thursday 26th July Monschau to Maastricht. Our last day started with a slog up the hill that I had walked down the previous day back to the Vennbahn track. From here it was a gradual downhill slope all the way to Aachen. Again in fine weather we made good time on this stretch of 30km only to lose time finding our way through a maze of narrow streets in Aachen. Eventually we made it across the city and back onto country roads for the final 20km to Kirkerade where we were to catch a train back to Maastricht. This part of the journey seemed to take forever but we made it. Arriving at Maastricht station we then rode the few km to the Novotel Hotel to the end of an epic journey. We handed back our panniers to the receptionist, locked up our bikes then retired to the bar for a couple of celebratory beers before showering and getting ready for our last supper of the tour.

Stats for this Tour: 550km over 9 days riding

5263 metres of climbing

15 kph average speed & approx 40 hrs of pedalling.

Weather: Perfect, Sunny Skies, Light Winds, Temps 25/30 deg.

2 hours of wet weather.

Paris to London Guided Tour.

After a full breakfast Danny and I caught the shuttle bus to the station and climbed aboard the local service to Liege. After 9 days in the saddle I had decided that we deserved a bit of comfort so we were booked 1st Class through to Paris. From Liege it was the Thalys Express and as I had the Locus App working it

showed that our maximum speed was 309 kph for most of the journey. Our arrival at Du Nord Station in Paris was an eye opener. There were such large crowds of people standing around waiting to get onto trains that it was impossible to walk without dodging people. The queues at the ticket offices were long and slow but we eventually got our Metro tickets and found our platform for the train to take us to near our hotel. On arrival at which we found our room unavailable so decided on a beer. The television was showing an NRL game between the Tigers & the Bulldogs!!! That evening we found a cosy bar for dinner during which time the skies went black and rain began to fall. This quickly turned into sleet followed by huge hailstones. Within minutes the lights had gone out and the street gutters were flowing with ice. Cars parked close by were badly damaged by the hail. It was all over in an hour and we were able to walk back to the hotel without getting wet. The second day of our rest days was spent on Hop On-Hop Off buses seeing and hearing about the history and landmarks of Paris. In the evening we met up with the people who were starting the Paris to London guided tour. We met our guide Tamara (Tammy) who gave us a briefing for the next 6 days. She spoke 6 languages fluently and each session was in 3 languages as we had a mixture of Dutch/German, Italian and Australian.

Day 1 Sunday 29th July Paris to Cergy. After breakfast we were introduced to our bikes and after completing minor adjustments to saddle and handlebar heights as well as changing my pedals we set off on a grand tour of Paris. First stop the Notre Dame followed by a ride along the bank of the Seine to the Eiffel Tower followed by the Arc De Triomphe. We were supposed to ride the Champs Elysees but due to the finish of the Tour de France that afternoon it was closed to the public which had required the guide to rearrange her programme. From here we rode through a series of large parks before crossing the Seine again. Continued on through the outer suburbs of Paris before recrossing the Seine once more. Following the bank of the river for quite some distance our guide suddenly turned into a small park and told to lock up our bikes. Here was our special treat for the day, to view the peloton of the Tour de France as it passed by on its way to the finish on the Champs Elysee. After they had passed we all jumped on our bikes and proceeded to ride along the same route as the peloton and the remaining

spectators gave us lots of cheers as we passed by. Our next stop was a visit to a stately home. The Maison Laffitte before once more crossing the Seine and headed into Cergy for our overnight stay at the Novotel Cergy Pontoise hotel. Today we crossed the river Seine 6 times as it wound its way to the English Channel. The weather is still fine and sunny with the temps in the high 20s.

Day 2 Monday 30th July Cergy to Gisor. The ride today was through the Vexin Park travelling on a lot of gravel and dirt roads. Not a lot to see but the scenery was worth the ride. Our overnight accommodation was very small and unaptly named Hotel Moderne and we had to go out to a local restaurant for our dinner that night.

Day 3 Tuesday 31st July Gisor to Forges-les-Eaux. Today we set off at 8.30am as we had been advised that today was quite hilly. In the middle of these hills we arrived at Gourney-en-Bray where we stopped at a delightful coffee house and partook of the house special. Delicious apple pie and ice cream plus coffee which served us with the energy to complete the next set of hills and great country views. Arriving at our hotel at Forges-les-Eaux, which means it is a Spa town, and the hotel named after the town, had a great spa and swimming pool to soothe away the aches and pains of the day's ride. Dinner was a huge buffet affair and Danny and I polished of a nice bottle of local white wine. Again we were blessed with sunny weather but cooler which was nice for the hill climbing.

Day 4 Wednesday 1st August (my birthday-neigh!!!) Forges-les-Eaux to Dieppe. After a couple of hills we got onto a good rail trail which took us at a good pace all the way into Dieppe where we arrived at 1.00pm for lunch at a local restaurant. The speciality of this place was local mussels. Danny partook of the curried mussels, which were more like pippies they were so small, but the bowl they arrived in must have contained well over a hundred of them. Glad I ordered the fish and salad. After lunch Danny and I walked down to the beach(!!!) to view the English Channel that we were later to cross by ferry. I say beach but it was just a mass of large pebbles with a steep drop into the water. Danny could not help himself and had to go and dip his toes into the briny, but found that his delicate feet and pebbles did not like each other. After a further stroll along the seawall

and walking around the town we were back on the bikes heading for the ferry terminal. After eventually passing through customs/immigration as their computer decided to crash, probably because it could not cope with 40 cyclists descending on it at once. We had by this stage been joined by the self-guided group, one of whom was the Governor of Tasmania, and we were allowed to get on board the ferry. Dinner was partaken on the ferry and after a very smooth 4 hour crossing we arrived at Newhaven in the UK. By this time it was dark and after again clearing custom/immigration 40 cyclists set off in the dark, a new experience, in single file with all lights blazing to the hotel some 15 minute away. Arrived at the Premier Inn, checked in and as it was by then 10.30, we hit the sack. Today's weather was quite cool but warmed up in the afternoon but changed back to cold in the evening.

Day 5 Thursday 2nd August Newhaven to East Grinstead. For today's ride we had the option of a self-guided easy ride to Brighton then train to Gatwick then ride to East Grinstead, or take the train to Polegate and then do a hard hilly ride to East Grinstead. Five Italians chose the easy ride and the rest of us the normal ride. The bikes were transferred to Polegate while we caught the train. Leaving the station we endured another long climb out of Polegate to gain access to the 18km long Cuckoo Trail which was a dirt track with trees lining each side all the way along the track. This track then opened out onto the South Downs where the hilly section commenced. Half way along the hilly section we arrived at Mayfield and had lunch in Lily's cafe. There were more hills before we reached the Forest Way for the ride along a track similar to the Cuckoo Trail all the way into East Grinstead where we arrived at the Crown Plaza Hotel fairly worn out. The Italians should have been there to greet us, but not a soul was to be seen. It turned out that on leaving Newhaven they turn left instead of right and pedalled half way to Eastbourne before realising their error and so had to retrace their ride back to Newhaven and start all over again riding to Brighton etc which meant that they did not arrive at the hotel until 6.30pm.

Day 6 Friday 3rd August East Grinstead to Westminster, London. The day started with a ride along the Worth Way through wooded areas to Three Bridges where we caught a train to Coulsdon. Again, the bikes were transported on the 32 bike

trailer and the E bikes inside the van. From here we cycled through more parkland before stopping at Woodcote Park Golf Club for lunch. After lunch we rode through Morden Park, Walde Meadow and followed a small stream to Garrett Park before reaching Wandsworth Common and Clapham Common for an ice cream break. Next up was Battersea Park where we got off our bikes and walked across Chelsea Bridge from where we cycled through back streets to Westminster Abbey for our last photo shoot. It was then a walk across the infamous Westminster Bridge to our final hotel the Park Plaza Westminster Bridge Hotel for our last night of the tour. That evening we held a farewell dinner at the Greencoat Boy Pub in Greencoat Row where we all reminisced about the past 6 days and bade each other adieu before walking back to the Park Plaza.

Next morning Danny and I had breakfast before going our separate ways in London.

Stats: 370km of riding over 6 days

3300 metres of climbing

14.3kph average speed, approx 28 hours of pedalling.

Weather: Perfect, Sunny Skies with warm temps and light Breezes.

Stats for the whole trip:

950km of riding over 16 days (incl kms in Maastricht)

8563 metres of climbing

14.5 kph average speed and approx 70 hours of pedalling

Weather: perfect, sunny and warm, light winds and 2hrs drizzle
Copious amounts of water, beer and wine consumed.

Peter Holt (Pedro)