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TRAVELLERS' TALES



A taste of Italy

Bert Pearce and eight companions from Nuneaton CTC explored the heel of Italy

Blinking against the morning sun, we arrived at Brindisi's swish airport in the heel of Italy, where we were met by Spencer, our guide and host for our cycling tour of Salento. It was our first group fixed-base trip, as we wanted to kick back and have a leisurely cycling holiday. Our home for the week was a historic B&B (a 15th Century palace) in the old town of Nardò, a place where time seems to stand still.

In the afternoon, we collected our new

bikes and headed out of the small town through olive groves and vineyards. Even in early June, the temperatures were in the low 30s centigrade – bliss! We cycled along the Ionian coast, where Spencer took us through the protected pine forest of Porto Selvaggio and showed us historic watchtowers and ancient masserias (fortified farms) from the 15th and 16th Centuries.

We stopped for some great aperitivos at lunchtime, overlooking a tiny

fishing port of Santa Maria al Bagno ('the virgin Mary in the bath'), where at the end of WW2 many Jewish concentration camp survivors were given a new life by the Italian community.

Salento was like going back to the 1950s. We were struck by three things: lack of traffic and people; the great cycling; and the very low costs (beer and wine at well under 50 pence a pop!). We averaged 50-60km a day, with highlights including the wonderful city of Lecce, 'the Florence of the South'; the imposing castle of Copertino; the idyllic small island town of Gallipoli; and numerous stops off at interesting ports and old towns.

More information at www.cyclepuglia.doodlekit.com



Southern Italy offers great cycling country, good weather, and cheap prices



Pre-dawn light on the North Downs, only 30 miles from London but a world apart

Bivvy biking

IAN BROWNHILL MADE THE MOST OF THE LEAP YEAR DAY BY STAYING OUT ALL NIGHT

MAC PICKS me up at 7.30 on a mild night and we drive to the North Downs, as near to wilderness as we can get from London. I have 4kg of bivvy kit in my pack. Hopefully it will be enough to keep me warm tonight.

We do a cropped version of our usual route but it still includes some great downhill and long uphill. Headlights herald a mountain biker coming over the hill, then another and another. We say hello and part.

Back at the car, my willpower is tested. It would be so easy to head home. Mac drives off. I stay. Tonight is about getting out of my comfort zone. My pack holds just the essentials. No matches or lighter, just flint and steel to light the stove. No tarp, just a bivvy bag. A summer sleeping bag. No hip flask of whisky.

If I get through the night wearing everything I have, then I've brought the right amount of kit. If all else fails, I can ride 30 miles and be home. I cook tea, and then settle down for the night. With no clothes spare, I have no pillow. I rest my head on my arm, watching the stars and the leafless trees until I fall asleep.

I'm woken by birdsong and it's already light. I jump up, get the kettle on, grab the camera and take some photos. Then it's time to pack up and head into work.

Riding the trails alone in the morning is a great start to the day. It's ten miles to the station. The guard is friendly and my bike gets on. An hour later I'm at work. Showered and changed, I sit at my desk with a smile. I keep my little sojourn to myself. My colleagues would not understand.





Western Isles wandering

SARAH BROWNE & HER BIKE GO TOO WHEN HER HUSBAND TRAVELS ON BUSINESS

LIVING IN the north of Scotland, there are some great cycle rides from my bike-shed door. And I can travel further afield on my days off because my husband works all over Scotland.

One Monday morning, we drove to Ullapool and took the CalMac ferry across the Minch to the Isle of Lewis. From the ferry terminal, I stayed with the car until Achmore, southwest of Stornoway. Then I began riding to the standing stones at Callanish.

I cycled in the sunshine up the west coast, past ancient brochs, and took the moorland peat road back to Stornoway. As I neared the east coast, it began to rain hard. I was cycling into the wind so was glad to reach the hotel – even through I had to pay, as I don't share my husband's expense account!

The next morning, he was working on Harris so I cycled down the east coast to join him in Tarbert. I passed sea inlets and free churches and was overtaken by coal wagons and lorries carrying fish. I made it over the hill to Harris in low gear.

Wednesday morning took me down the west coast of Harris. I think it's the most scenic cycle route in the UK. To my right, the dunes topped by machair grass descended into an aquamarine sea, with the Isle of Taransay glistening beyond.

Before I reached Leverburgh, my husband turned up with the car. Time to go. We took the ferry to Uig on Skye, then the bridge to the mainland. We arrived in Inverness just in time for me to begin my night shift at work.

Stoking the Gridiron

Blind tandemist Fred Reid rode the Gridiron 100km randonée with pilot Robert Jacob

The Gridiron is a 100km randonée around the New Forest, named for all the cattlegrids it crosses. I was introduced to it thanks to an old tandem, built in the 1930s to race at the Olympic games of 1940. Those games never happened because World War Two. After the war, the tandem was purchased by Raleigh, and it wears their badge still.

In around 1980, the tandem was bought by a racing cyclist who had been blinded in a car accident but wanted to continue cycling. He died 20 years later, and a friend of mine rang me, offering the tandem as a gift. I couldn't say no.

I had some experience of tandem cycling as a boy. My father, HF Reid, was a member of CTC and a record-holding time triallist in Scotland between the wars. He bought a tandem and took my mother camping every weekend. Later, I appeared in the natty little sidecar. I rode on the back of the tandem myself after I went blind in 1952.

So I was delighted to be able ride a tandem again. Warwickshire is a fun county for cycling, with many secluded by-roads and charming old pubs. When my pilot, Robert Jacob, asked, 'How do you fancy the Gridiron, 100k around the New Forest?' I jumped at it.

It is now a series of flashbacks. I still smell the bacon roll I had before the start. I still hear the echoes bouncing off the trees at the roadside as we sped along. It was five and a half hours of sunshine with two stops for the tastiest tea I have ever had.

Robert said that it was entertaining avoiding horses, cattle, donkeys and sheep that wandered in front of us along the route. Several hundred people took part, so we were often part of a peloton. The tandem held up fine – nothing dropped off, and the gears worked perfectly throughout. **For more on the Gridiron, see wessexctc.org/grdetail.htm**



Fred and Robert also cycled the 100k route at the Heart of England Cycle Festival in Meriden in May



Robert Jacob: 'I have been piloting for Fred for two years. We live in Kenilworth, and cycle the lanes out towards Stratford and Solihull.'

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