



### ANDREW SYKES

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## Great Rides

# LE GRAND TOUR

**Andrew Sykes's** 5,000km loop around Europe last summer wasn't Plan A. It wasn't even Plan B. It was more of a Plan C. Here's how it unfolded

**T**he story began in the innocent pre-Covid days of 2019. My third book, *Spain to Norway on a Bike Called Reggie*, had been published a couple of years previously and, with book number four in mind, I was keen to set off pedalling once again. By early 2020 I was planning a six-week trip from the northernmost point of Japan at Cape Sōya to the country's southernmost tip at Cape Sata. I'd bought the plane tickets and a new touring bike. My research was in full swing...

We know what happened next. Even by early 2022, Japan still hadn't opened its doors to foreign visitors. Continental Europe had, so I came up with a Plan B, to cycle around the Baltic Sea, following the route of the EuroVelo 10. It lacked one key ingredient: my enthusiasm. The war in Ukraine also threw up logistical problems involving Russia and its exclave of Kaliningrad. However, with a ticket already purchased for the Hull to Rotterdam ferry for the evening of 2 July, were there other options? The most obvious was to turn right on arrival at Rotterdam, not left. Plan C was born.

### A CYCLE ROUTE ODYSSEY

Although I have a reputation as being (as I was once introduced at the Cycle Touring Festival) 'Mr Cycling Europe', there are many iconic routes in Europe that I have never cycled in their entirety: the Avenue Verte to Paris, the Vélodyssée along the west coast of France, and the Rhine Cycle Route to name just three. Could my Plan C be an opportunity to plug some of these gaps

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in my cycling knowledge? I pored over the map and attempted to piece together a route.

By turning right at the Hook of Holland I could follow the North Sea Cycle Route (EuroVelo 12) to Calais and the Vélomaritime (EuroVelo 4) to Dieppe. Here I could head south in the direction of Paris along the French section of the Avenue Verte, the route linking the British and French capitals. A route I'd never before heard of, the Véloscénie, connected Paris with Mont Saint-Michel, where I could rejoin the Vélomaritime as far as Morlaix in Brittany.

From there I could follow the northern portion of the Vélodyssée (EuroVelo 1) to Royan where the Véloroute Des 2 Mers A Vélo would take me to the Mediterranean via Bordeaux, the Canal de la Garonne, Toulouse and the Canal du Midi. The EuroVelo 17, called the ViaRhôna in France, could be followed from Sète to Andermatt, high in the Swiss Alps where, rather conveniently, the Rhine Cycle Route (EuroVelo 15) would return me to the Netherlands, the Hook of Holland and my ferry back home on 3 September. That didn't seem too shabby for a Plan C.

Was it, however, feasible? I had negotiated a few weeks of extra holiday from the school where I teach in order to set off at the start of July, but

I needed to be back in the classroom on 5 September. There was no renegotiating that.

Nine weeks. Assuming a day off every week, 54 days of cycling along a route that I estimated to be around 5,500km – just over 100km per day. I'd managed this in 2013 as I cycled along the Mediterranean from Greece to Portugal ▶

The Hull to Rotterdam ferry

