

Rev'd David Munchin's Welwyn to Rome by Bicycle Blog

Sunday 2nd September: Welwyn to Canterbury

92 miles: 6 hrs 18 minutes: 3,501 ft elevation

So the first day's riding is done ... and sorry to anyone for whom these posts are going to be unbelievably tedious but I'm going to treat them as kind of a blog of trip - for myself as much as anyone else. So do feel free to block me if you are bored by cycle trip news.

So first great thanks to everyone who came to send me off at Welwyn - including [Susannah Underwood](#) for her very apposite sermon. The brief version is that I have arrived in Canterbury and am safely installed in the YHA - so if you don't do detail you can leave it there.

So the weather was terrific and the bike survived - though I had forgotten to apply any sunscreen so am a bit pink. Having said goodbye at home - what people didn't see was that getting changed in the church loo - typically my cycling sunglasses snapped, so had to go home and get spare pair.

The first discovery is that Canterbury is 90 miles rather than 80, which is quite a lot which a bike loaded with a month of underwear. That meant I missed evensong at the Cathedral by half an hour - but never mind.

The run into London I've done quite a few times so was uneventful. Crossing over London Bridge and then making my way along to Greenwich. Followed the Thames path out of London past some extraordinary post-industrial landscapes, which slightly belie the myth that there are no brownfield sites left to develop in the South East. However I quickly realised that the proper route was all for de tours and cycle paths - which means travelling too slowly, so am getting used to keeping sight of path while improvising a route of my own - in their case straight down the A2 as it's the road from London to Canterbury. What struck me about London was the vitality of its religious life - Anglican Church bells ringing, the sounds of Pentecostal music from an office above an estate agent in Deptford and the white robed family making their way to the 'Praise Embassy' as well as a glimpse of I suppose Hindu temple which was remarkable and vast somewhere in the Medway towns. Towns which otherwise I have to say are not terribly attractivestopped for lunch and there was a weight lifting competition in the high street. After that the extra 10 miles began to drag, particular as the A2 morphed into the dual carriageway from hell with trucks heading down to the Chunnel. After a horrible long hill Canterbury was soon upon me. Installed in St Anselm - appropriately named YHA room. His ontological argument has always intrigued me - obviously a rabbit out of the hat, but where is the logical flaw? So then

a potter into Canterbury for maximal calories per pound. And then an overly long FB Post.....

Monday 3rd September: Canterbury to Arques

To Dover: 22.7 miles: 1 hr 39 minutes: 1,588 ft elevation

To Arques: 42.6 miles: 2 hrs 49 minutes: 1,434 ft elevation

So writing this by probably the dimmest hotel light in the history of the universe at probably the duller hotel on the edge of an industrial estate in Arques, not the prettiest of French towns, but it is cheap - and far more importantly it is mine all mine including a bathroom. Which after last night in Canterbury YHA is a blessed relief. I really am too old to share a room with five other farting snoring males - not even public school prepares you for that. The guy in the bunk below I had spotted earlier - he was an old guy and I wondered whether he had mental problems and had been dumped in the YHA - I felt quite concerned for him. However after 6 hours of fishing things in and out of plastic bags - from 11pm - 5am I decided sympathy had worn out. So was pleased finally to be back on the road - quite cool and foggy as I left Canterbury this morning which was nice. I'm still not sure about my gps route - his route to Dover was 35 miles and I found a national cycleway one which was 18 so took that. It was pretty but up and down all the way - I have a feeling my guy doesn't like hills.- and with a laden bike it's hard not to agree - but the distance differences are so large.

So with that I arrived at Dover ferry terminal an hour early - it was rather nice circumnavigating it all on a bike - much better queues. It was a calm and pleasant crossing - during which my main activity was eating. Then followed the GPS of Calais hoping to catch a short cut as I got out of town - but couldn't find it so stayed on the trail. This was the best riding of the day, and as I say makes me wonder whether to just stick with this guy and all his detours. Any saw a later short cut which turned out not to be so great - didn't quite understand the French road classifications and might just have illegally done 5 miles down a motorway on a bike but then came the perennial problem of finding the actual hotel. Having just got off what might have well been a motorway, I couldn't very well follow the signs to Arques by going back on it. In this situation the only way to get to the actual hotel is to use the link on the phone - but you can't see the phone - so I turn up volume to hear barked instructions which works as long as there isn't noisy traffic around. Which is why I went the wrong way. But most frustratingly then I got a puncture retracing my steps still 5 miles out, which was annoying because I should have been there by then. Then this evening I broke the pump - which is decidedly bad news - tomorrow will start with a 3 mile de tour to Intersport.

So thought I would go and find some food - utterly famished and thirsty by this point - but a nice day thought I would stroll into town - but it was over a mile in hot sun - and there wasn't a lot there and supermarket was cunningly hidden - and then had to yomp the food all the way back. Knackered. So tomorrow it is on to Lille - and the route question is occupying my mind yet again. It's 70 miles following the GPS route I have, but creating a new one in Strava (let the reader understand) revealed it was possible to do it in 42 - so we'll see. Well anyway - alive and arrived if not quite as comfortably as one might have hoped.

Tuesday 4th September: Arques to Lille

46.3 miles: 3 hrs 23 minutes: 2,333 ft elevation

For cycling fans the season starts with the spring classics - that is a rather a hopeful name for the wars of attrition that take place in northern France and Belgium in March and April - granite faced men in appalling weather struggling up short but brutal cobbled climbs in search of glory - welcome to my world. So after a reassuring purchase of pump and spare inner tubes at Intersport I set off on today's ride - a comparatively short romp - yes I took the short route - of 46 miles. The shorter route took in some climbs but they were just about manageable - the problem is that you never quite know if the software is routing you that way for fun or because it's how you get there - some cyclists come here to do the famous cobbled climbs - and if I were just out on a ride without luggage I would do the same. But on this sort of long distance tour I could have done without the cobbles and without the climbs. But never mind - there is far worse to come and on far longer days.

I applied by sunscreen before drawing the curtains - and of course saw that it had been raining. Firstly the light rain was rather refreshing but gradually it got heavier. Until of course I finally caved in and put my rain jacket on. Then the sun came out. And so I boiled - never believe anything that claims to be a breathable waterproof fabric - there is no such thing however expensive.

It was obviously sobering to be reminded of far more terrible suffering here a century ago as I crossed the fields of Flanders - but I have to say the Kappelberg gave me some idea of true suffering.

It's strange how at some points you think you can't go another ten yards, and then you can do 15 miles without thinking about it - that was the run into Lille - suddenly the sun was out, the road surface was perfect, the going was flat - and raced into Lille - landing for once 100 yards from the hotel. This time I'm trying a mixed dormitory - very continental - and strangely cheaper than the all-male one. Though I think it will be mostly blokes. Certainly has that odour.

So the strange thing is much as you are relieved to have a short day riding - I was here by just after 1 - you are then left with 9 hours to kill. Thanks to those who recommend just the perfect restaurant - but I'm on a budget and have huge calorific requirements - so it's supermarkets. The good thing about hostels is that they are geared up for the backpacker and so have things like kitchens and washing machines. I was amused the other day to hear the self-supporting trans-American race described as an eating competition with some cycling thrown in - that is kind of what this is turning into. Anyway I spent a few hours down town in picturesque Lille. It is odd suddenly arriving in civilisation having been out on a tough ride.

So there's more rain forecast tomorrow - one piece of advice I need from [Daniel Alford](#) - (he'll now have to read all this post) is how the pros when they need to take their glasses off in the rain just look cool and lodge them in the vents of their helmets? Did that work for me? Obviously not just kept falling off, so had to stop and put them in rucksack. Just not fair.

Wednesday 5th September: Lille to Roubaix

62.3 miles: 4 hrs 50 minutes: 2,277 ft elevation

So the greatest one day cycling race of all is Paris - Roubaix - otherwise known as the 'hell of the north' for its long cobbled sections and traditionally appalling weather - with riders often coming in covered in mud head to toe. So it was Roubaix that I was first off to this morning. I was on a lovely canal path and wasn't going to come off it looking for the famous velodrome where riders do 1 1/2 laps at the end of the race. Looking back at the ride the speed on the cindered canal path was quite low - but it felt lovely and flat and as though the miles were ticking along quite nicely. Lovely being alongside the canal as well - and that was half the day done.

Emerged to a couple of short sharp climbs but nothing was too awful - slightly annoyingly the path took us on a forest track, which my bike isn't really geared up for - but we took it slowly and coped. The Belgians really are cycling mad and lots of them out even in the middle of the week - had to remember not to chase every Lycra clad young man on a carbon racer who overtook me whilst I was carrying half a ton of luggage, but old habits die hard.

Belgians often use huge concrete blocks on country roads which get a bad press when they feature in races but I found them perfectly smooth and more reliable than broken up tarmac. At some point the names of the winners of the Tour of Flanders were imprinted on the road - not sure where I was or whether I was near the finish - but I was riding on the same roads as Tim Boonen and Fabio Cancellara. It is really very rural and agricultural around here, and though done on basis of cheapest on [booking.com](#) I have ended up with a lovely big room, in a lovely farm house on a

sort of equestrian centre. Much more me than a busy dorm in a town centre hostel. Flemish is the one language I'll encounter of which I know not a word - it is obviously quite closely related to German from the printed word - and although I'm legendarily bad at languages, it is odd not being to say even a hello or thank you in the supermarket. Also Flemish TV is truly terrible.

Also the weather was perfect today - not a drop of rain, warm, overcast and no wind, with the sun coming out once I had finished the ride. Sadly looking at the forecast it seems just to have been postponed until tomorrow.

I am trying to come to terms with the fact that today was a very easy day. Perfect weather, easy distance, mostly flat, no mishaps - there will be very few days like this - and I know some will be just grim - every time the bike goes up hill the weight makes climbing unbearable, and there will be a lot of that. But there we are -nothing to do for it now except enjoy this beautiful evening.

Thursday 6th September: Roubaix to Namur

74.8 miles: 5 hrs 37 minutes: 2,011 ft elevation

It occurs to me writing this post for today that this blog is turning into a rather cycling obsessive velo-fest - and that many of you may wish to know something of the scenery that I have passed through, the cultural sights I have seen and the other experiences I have had.

Well sorry to disappoint you, but one thing I have noticed about this sort of thing is that you do gather a kind of tunnel vision. You get up, get some breakfast, get packed up and on the road. And then you just want to keep going and get to the next cheap hotel - where the first thing to do is check where the nearest supermarket is (google is brilliant for this) hope it's walking distance rather than yet more bike riding (yesterday was forgivable as it was such a beautiful rural location). And then sit and eat bread and pasta on your bed whilst watching the worst TV you can find (there's quite a competition in Belgium). So today I saw a very tall tower in the middle of a field, and cycled through some very impressive parkland which looked as though it might have belonged to a palace. And generally the countryside was very nice.

So the route's major diversion today was to avoid Brussels - and like most clergy with any sense in the last two years I skirted around Brussels - I'm slightly concerned that given this is a Eurovelo route I have been diverted about 30 miles north of the original francigena for no better reason than they decided it had to go through Brussels (as everything euro does). I once spent 8 hours in Brussels and had no particular desire to repeat the visit - although the Eurovelo app makes much of the sights of Brussels I found it frankly one of the most boring cities I had ever visited. So that is why the trace of today is divided up into 3 sections and there were two separate live track

sessions - I was simply avoiding Brussels.

The occasion of that visit was to attend a theological conference I think three years running at Leuven University - the oldest University in Western Europe and their Oxbridge. I enjoyed Leuven and it was a bit sad that having come to Belgium I went about 30 miles south of there. At the time I was sold the conference because it was so easy to get to - straight on the Eurostar to Brussels - and as I saw the suburban train lines running in, I did more than once think - I could be home in 4 hours.

But today's theme is cobbles. Again today had its share of forest trails and farm tracks - but nothing prepares you for cobbles. So a word about them. The winner of that famous one day race Paris-Roubaix I wrote about yesterday, is given a cobble as a trophy. The race is fairly flat but is known for its about 15 cobbled sectors of around 1-3 km. Now although they vary we are not talking here about the town centre cobbles that just make your car tyres gentle mumble. We are talking great hulking agricultural cobbled tracks through forests. Having ridden a few hundred yards today I have no idea how the pros do km after km. I tried everything I had heard on the TV - keep your speed up, bad move - I ended up crawling), stick to the crown, try and ride the drain at the side of the road (actually that often worked, but it's generally barriered off when the pros ride). But nothing prepares you for the pneumatic drill scale vibrations that assault your hands, arms and shoulders - utterly brutal. Oddly enough many of the cobbled tracks were tarmacked over after the war, but realising they were losing a unique piece of heritage and making it more difficult for bike racing to find enough (they are genuinely cycling obsessed the Belgians - the farmer I stayed with last night just dropped into the conversation that Tom van Asbroeck is a regular - though he wouldn't be in as he is currently riding in the Vuelta.) - they not only stopped the tarmac-ing but even started to build new sections - though they aren't as brutal as the old ones. But if you are on a fully laden bike and you want to get out in one piece, best to avoid.

Friday 7th September: Namur to Bastogne

80.8 miles: 6 hrs 29 minutes: 6,339 ft elevation

Ever since the BBC stopped getting its weather from the Met, and now rely on a man just outside Swansea with a west facing window, a finger and a tongue, their forecasts have gone from bad to worse - I'm not sure if you can blame that decision when you are abroad but the weather app has not been helpful in the past 24 hours.

So yesterday I was feeling smug that the forecast rain had not arrived and that there was a good forecast for the next few days. So when I awoke to grey skies and gentle rain I was not best pleased - and that the app had updated to say that is what I could

now expect for the morning. It's difficult to know what is for the best - the app says it'll clear up during the day, but you want to get on the road - and you dread that scenario of racing into the fading daylight to reach your destination because of some mishap during the day.

So I set off. Now a little gentle rain is not necessarily bad news for the cyclist - it can be rather refreshing. Indeed the real danger is not the water - you're pretty wet with perspiration anyway - it is the getting cold that you worry about. Well as I set out, I put on my rain jacket which did it's usual trick of holding the rain off for an hour.

Last night my military historian at hand - [Justin Lewis-Anthony](#) helpfully said - you're not going through the Ardenne? That so hilly and dense with forest that it was undefended in the war, because it was assumed Hitler couldn't get his tanks through. Well I thought the Ardenne were just a type of pate - but frankly it would indeed be easier to get a tank through them than bicycle. At first it was fine. I followed the river Meuse at a good pace - and saw a novelty - for the first time in 450 miles a Eurovelo 5 sign! So that money hasn't gone to waste.

However a few miles up the road, as the GPS climbed into the Ardenne - the bridge was shut. I asked the workman who said there was another one only 5km further up river. Great. When I got to that bridge I then faced another choice - Eurovelo signs beckoning me to carry on along a nice flat river path - or trace my way back along the river to join the gps - no choice I couldn't rely on the Eurovelo signs so back I went.

And then the climbing started. Pretty fierce and steep. But then a flatter section. However by this time it had really started raining hard. And I made the decision to pull over - I was absolutely soaked. The real danger now was that once I resumed I would get cold - and cycling muscles run hot - get cold and they seize up. It can be crippling. So perhaps it was just as well that I then came across the sort of terrain that every cyclist dreads. You climb - a not overly steep but long hard hill - you then fly down (though in the wet you have to be careful) the descent - into the next valley - where you hit a nice flat valley road - only to go straight across it and start ascending again. I must have gone over 10 hills and valleys. Long slow climbs and slightly terrifying descents. It went on and on. It was still raining.

Finally however the overnight stop Bastogne was in range and the sun even made an appearance. By the time I reached the hotel I was warm again. 81 miles on the clock. The moment i walked in the door the battery collapsed on all 3 devices - iPad, gps, phone, literally within seconds. I was only partially sure that this was the right hotel, having glanced at the name 8 hours previously. So I was relieved as the receptionist confirmed I indeed had a reservation.

Now I again booked the cheapest hotel but it was rather more expensive than usual - but I thought there is none cheaper and I'll be there for two nights. It is just wow! Bastogne is a lovely town. I must have looked quite a sight bedraggled, wet and filthy

as I arrived in the posh lobby. The room is huge and quite luxurious - there is an air conditioning remote control that you need a PhD to operate. But three things have made the past few hours perfect. I had a lovely warm bath - not a shower. The water was black as I got out. I've had one beer. No more but it was lovely. But then I went to Laundromat (I've never visited a Launderette in my life before you have to understand). I washed and dried all my clothes - even deciphering the French instructions successfully - and helping out a lost American. Do you remember the Levi's advert in the Launderette? Well it was nothing like that.

But now all my clothes are lovely and clean and not stinky. My only problem was that when I got back to the room the key card didn't work. The reception guy then rather abruptly told me he had given me a key and that he wasn't sure if they had a spare (for real?) Anyway we became friends again when after lots of huffing and Gallic shrugging he shamefacedly produced the key that had never left reception.

One other confusion is that Bastogne is in Luxembourg - but not the country - it's in the Luxembourg province of Belgium which is different.

Cyclists will probably be wondering why I haven't mentioned that Bastogne is the turn around point in the most geographically pointless of the spring classics - Leige-Bastogne_Leige. Well I'm not riding tomorrow (Alleluia) so I'll have a chance to say something more about Bastogne and its famous cycle race then.

Saturday 8th September: Rest Day: Bastogne

Pro riders on rest days in grand tours like the Tour de France still go out for a ride of about 50km just to keep themselves fresh I have to say on my first rest day, I have left the cycle locked away in the hotel garage.

It's been a lovely day in the picturesque town of Bastogne. This morning I wandered just out of town to the fabulous war museum which vividly portrayed the place this town had played in the Battle of the Bulge in WW2. As part of the German's counter attack they had more or less surrounded the town which they had earlier occupied - but the American 10th Armoured and 110th Airborne held out until relief arrived and the siege was broken. The suffering was terrible, especially as it was in the middle of the hard winter of 44/45, but the Allied victory meant that Germany's capitulation was thereafter only a matter of time. The town was more or less flattened in the fighting.

I hate words like 'immersive experience' but the museum did just that - placing you in three different 'sets' during the tour that provided vivid experiences of what the fighting was like.

Reflections upon the nature of war tend to be rather facile and unoriginal, but with that caveat here are mine:

At the entrance was a picture of several leaders including Mussolini and Hitler - they

both look frankly ridiculous (Mussolini on his horse especially so) - worthy of ridicule. Perhaps people made fun of them. They certainly didn't have much sense of fun themselves - and that is why we must value satire. Tyrants cannot generally bear to be mocked - and that is exactly why we must be free to mock them. And OK sometimes the humour will be cruel, and not to our taste - fine we don't have to watch it - but it is a vital tool in a functioning democracy. Perhaps if someone had said to Amin 'Come off it, Last King of Scotland, and Lord of all the birds of the air and fish of the sea, are ridiculous titles Idi, let's go and have a beer' then Uganda might have suffered rather less than it did. But no one dared. There are a few politicians around who are pretty ripe targets for comedy, I say go get 'em.

But what is frightening is the ability of such people to turn a population - 2% of Germans voted for Hitler in 1930 - 5 years later it was 45%. We must understand why good normal people in a civilised educated nation would do that. It is no good just blaming it on a deluded cruel individual - there will always be a few of those around. It has I suggest much to do with the politics of resentment - and again that is precisely what we see on the rise today.

But still I cannot see what is the point of invading and controlling someone else's territory against the population's will. Who does it profit? Does it really answer the resentments? Surely just all sides suffer and can't wait for it to be over? That is the logic of war - once you start there is a sense in which you just have to keep going. So the facile answer is don't start. Actually maybe that isn't so facile after all.

So the museum related this story through various narrators - the most moving of which was a 13 year old Belgium boy who was a keen cyclist and whose father ran the local bicycle shop. His father had promised him that once they were free - they would ride to the sea. But his father was killed in the bombing and never made good on his promise. When the war ended he rode to the sea, took over his father's shop and helped to ensure that the Liege-Bastogne-Liege bicycle race was run in 1945 as a sign of post war resurrection.

Liege-Bastogne-Liege is known as La doyenne - the old lady - because of the all the classic bicycle races she is the oldest first run in 1892. One of the five 'monuments' of cycling (the five great one day races) she is a coveted race to win, as riders tackle what I now know to be the gruelling terrain of the Ardenne. This year the men's race was won by Bob Jungels and the women's by Anna van der Breggen.

That race was won the most by Eddy Merckx - generally agreed to be the greatest cyclist of all time and certainly the greatest Belgian of all time. He was known as the 'cannibal' because he didn't specialise - he just wanted to win everything - and generally he did. Much has been written about the recent emergence of the UK as the dominant force in world cycling - and much soul searching amongst the more traditional nations of France, Belgium and Italy as to why their dominance has come to an end. However I have to say that Belgium is set up wonderfully for cyclists - with cycle paths on nearly every road. And I'm not sure of the rules of who gives way to whom, but it seems that every driver seems just to let the cyclist go first whatever the

configuration of the junction. Perhaps they worry that they might unwittingly run over the next Merckx - though a glance at me should probably tell them it isn't much of a risk.

Well that's enough pleasure for one day - tomorrow onto a new and very small country - Luxembourg.

Sunday 9th September: Bastogne to Luxembourg

59.57 miles: 4 hrs 35 minutes: 1,954 ft elevation

So today is the sort of day I imagined every day would be when I set out on this ride - glorious sunshine, but not too fierce in the morning, easy ride done by lunchtime, then potter around picturesque town.

Before today I might have wondered what was the point of Luxembourg, but today it is one of my favourite countries. As I left Belgium the route took me down various cycle paths in various states of repair. One of the problems of a ride like this is that it is never quite clear what sort of bikes the routes are suitable for. For one short section in Belgium this morning I walked because the cycle path was only really suitable for a mountain bike. This is also a result of longer routes like the Eurovelo ones inevitably being made up of joining together shorter ones - but the problem is that if anyone is going to do the whole thing, it needs to be navigable by a bike they're likely to use. If you are going over St Bernard pass you are (ironically) unlikely to be using a mountain bike.

Anyway early on there was the only proper climb of the day - but a nice steady one which gave a great view of the valley below - and then at the top I was in my fourth country, Luxembourg. Now it no doubt helps that Luxembourg is the second richest country in the world, but they've put quite a healthy dollop of cash into smoothly tarmacking the huge number of cycle paths across the country. This meant about 40 miles of traffic free, perfectly smooth tarmac, a few undulations but nothing to get worried about, and only pedestrians to avoid. The countryside is attractive, the villages immaculate, and Luxembourg City itself is a delight. A medieval fortress city it has stunning scenery, beautiful buildings, lovely parks, a good free art museum (tbh honest quite mixed - it made me laugh to see some very good art, filled out with some very bad art) - and as I discovered upon arrival their own version of the Munich Oktoberfest. Now I visited the Munich Oktoberfest when I was 19, and now have visited the Luxembourg version 32 years later. I think that the right was around. It was a nice hour to stroll around and have a couple beers, but I'm not sure Luxembourg is a very exciting city. I think if you are looking for thrills and nightlife, then you might look elsewhere - the villages were deserted.

Luxembourg in its modern form came into being as a result of Congress of Vienna in

1815 following Napoleons defeat. It gained full independence, I was pleased to see at the Treaty of London in 1839. It is the only Grand Duchy in the world, and the second smallest nation in Europe. I kept up saying Bonjour! As I crossed the border, but realised people were either swearing at me or not speaking French. But it didn't sound like German either. Upon arrival a little research showed that in fact the Luxembourgers have their own language (Luxembourges) though some consider it a dialect of German. The country is in fact officially tri-lingual with French and German speakers as well. So no wonder I was confused.

Monday 10th September: Luxembourg to Sarreguemine

77.9 miles: 5 hrs 31 minutes: 2,500 ft elevation

Yesterday I forgot to relate, that as always on these trips you meet people who are doing far greater distances than you are. So I arrived at the shared house in which I had an overnight room in Luxembourg to find a heavily laden bike parked outside. 'Where are you going?' I said, and the German man (who looked at least my age if not older) said 'I am cycling from Norway to Greece.' Last year he had run - yes run - from Germany to China. He explained that he had a normal office job in Germany, but when Trump was elected, hearing his rhetoric, and himself being married to a Chinese woman, decided enough was enough. He quit his job, wrote to the UN to tell them what he was doing and set off. He's become a sort of unofficial UN roving ambassador, and this year's ride is via all the capital cities where he is attending conferences and giving lectures (so he was due to give a talk in Paris two days after Luxembourg - which is just mad). I found him inspiring, if in fact a little mad. Now I would point out that the logic was his not mine - I am not in fact a fan of Trump - but all I am doing is reporting his motivation. However it was an apposite conversation, because today I was in border country — Alsace-Lorraine. I went through Schengen (of the agreement) and criss-crossed borders several time. At one point I was in Luxembourg, France and Germany within the same kilometre. Tonight I'm staying in Sarreguemine, a town where the river Sarre (or Saar) is the border between France and Germany and runs through the centre of town. To get to the supermarket from the hotel (200m) I crossed into Germany. I guess if you want to understand the history of Europe you might look at this beautiful border country - and in it, and in the battles between German and French, see that history in miniature - back to the days of the Gauls, the Huns and the Goths, and probably beyond. You begin to see where the Europeans are coming from when you travel this country. If there had been some sort of checkpoint at each spot, I could never have completed the journey in a day. The land is so criss-crossed with roads, railways, rivers, and paths that no border could be easily maintained. I went into parts of Germany where the villages were clearly French speaking and the tricolour hung from windows, but no

one seemed terribly bothered. The area was obviously generously prosperous and I am sure no one wished to repeat the conflicts of the past. One thing I am convinced of is that language is not determinative of culture, or social cohesion. Following these borders means I have been in many towns, cities, regions and countries that are bi and tri-lingual. And it plainly doesn't really matter. I can think of no more irenic and lovely city than Luxembourg - probably little bigger than Stevenage, and with three official languages.

Much of politics today is carried out in echo chambers, each side is determined to give the lines they have been taught to give, and not even to engage with what the opposition might have to say. At the risk of controversy I thought I would wade into the thorny debate about borders.

Let me assure my left of centre friends that I am no fan of current immigration policy either of the UK, or the US, and certainly no fan (probably more important) of the rhetoric that goes with it - swarming, overrun, etc. BUT I have to say that quite often when I hear us lefties grandstanding on Facebook (how brave) asking that we lessen borders and promote freedom (how nice) - I do want to ask 'What's the plan?' The countries I travelled through today are all relatively wealthy and happy with the lack of borders. But does that mean all borders should go? Is that the plan? Well in a ideal world probably yes -but I'm just not sure that is practical or sensible in the world we live in. So I think probably the left is going to have to come up with a plan that is sensible, humane, fair, and has the consent of the population - but that will include restrictions, and dare I say it, if you have restrictions and laws, then there will be detention or removal for those who transgress. I've probably lost myself a few friends, but it is one of those issues - like others in politics - where the two sides just argue past each other, and we end up more divided than ever. And just to remind you I am doing this ride for Syrian refugees (do remember to sponsor) if you think I've lost my heart.

So what was the ride like? Well we started off on lovely Luxembourgish paths, and then did a few miles in France one point on a path which would not even be classed as a foot path in the UK. But then I was in the lovely hills (yes hills Kathryn Alford) of Alsace Lorraine. As I passed the vineyards I mused on German wines. My generation has really never got over the gallons of Liebfraumilch and Blue Nun that came our way in the 1970s. So our tastes were pretty thoroughly Gallicised. I can count on one hand the times I have knowingly bought a bottle of German wine. Which is a shame because there are some delicate rieslings etc. - perhaps we need a new re-education in wine.

But then came a revelation.

Now I watch some odd sport channels so I don't know if the ad for Viking River cruises has made the mainstream - but it really upsets me. The boss begins by saying 'Let me philosophise a bit' ... I know I know, obviously I shouldn't expect much but it is a subject I have an passing interest in, And I wonder what is he going to say to add to the wisdom of Plato, Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, etc. and am always disappointed

when he says 'Be rich, give yourself lots of pleasure, spend money on a river cruise with my company, so I am even richer' I know I know what did I expect an ad for River Cruises to say 'Whereof we cannot speak let us be silent'?

But today I have a river cruise. First a few miles up the Mosel and then about 40 glorious miles up the Saar (or Sarre). It did occur me if I got on a river boat and put my feet up for a couple of hours the GPS trace would be the same. I didn't as it happens but pedalled along gloriously smooth flat (rivers are flat - who knew?!) paths - it occurring to me that Sarreguemines was probably on the Sarre (durr! Took about 20 miles) and therefore I was set for the day (the hotel is 50 yards from the river path). A lot of the Sarre valley is very heavily industrialised but the path clung to the river and so the industry whilst visible never really impinged.

I do therefore have reflections on electric bikes of which there were many but this post has gone on far too long, for which I apologise, so I will save those for a leaner day.

Tuesday 11th September: Sarreguemine to Obernai

74.3 miles: 5 hrs 10 minutes: 2,881 ft elevation

Today did not start off well when 100 yards from the hotel, by a busy road in rush hour Sarreguemines I fell off my bike. Don't worry the only thing which was hurt was my pride - I was doing precisely 0 mph. Cyclists will understand what happened - so we clip into pedals which are ironically called 'clipless pedals' - they work like ski bindings and were in fact adapted by the same guy. It sounds difficult, but once you get used to it, it is second nature - everybody falls off once, but then you never do again - after four years and countless rides - until today. So when we unclip we all have a preferred side which we unclip and put our foot down, leaving the other foot clipped in. Sometimes if you stop in a hurry you find the bike starts to lean the other way and you just pull it over to your preferred side - as I say it's second nature, until the bike is heavily laden with stuff, and I just went over. But as I say nothing hurt but my pride (particularly as it's then quite difficult to get the remaining foot unclipped from the pedal).

But after that the day got much better. Gloriously warm and sunny. Looking at the official Eurovelo route I saw that it did an enormous S - probably to take in Strasbourg the third European capital and also I guess to keep on river valleys. But as I've said before that is where the stitching together of local routes makes no sense over a long distance - if we're going to cross the alps then today's climbing isn't going to worry us. So I planned a route which cut 120 miles to 70. You worry a bit that it'll just be ugly or busy, but 50 miles is a big detour.

Happily I can say the ride was lovely and picturesque, the climbing fairly easy. I set out on the same river path as yesterday. We had left the industrial scenery of the lower Saar valley and today was just rural and beautiful - apart from maybe 5 miles of busy roads which were heading west to Strasbourg. Sleepy French villages and towns, this is

where brochures are shot. After the climbing there was another long stretch by a river, and then (sorry to railway buffs) the next best thing to a river path for the cyclist, a disused railway turned into a cycleway, that brought me close to my destination. Trains like inclines as much as touring cyclists and boats, so this was smooth and fast.

And the best thing of all was ending up in the idyllic town of Obernai - just utterly charming. And obviously a tourist destination in Alsace.

The room in the centre of town was - again the cheapest I could find - but not that cheap, and obviously relatively simple. I have to say I have fallen in love with it, and may stay here. It is rural French, shabby and delightful - tiny but with everything you could want, a simple bed, bathroom, and a desk to write your great French novel at (or a FB post) - in fact it reminds me of a writer's garret - with WiFi obviously.

Wildlife I realise I have not been terribly good at, but today was perhaps a good day - though I have to say intensive farming means there isn't that much. Herons along the river quite common, a few buzzards circling, lots of those slightly exotic geese that look as though they have been punched in the eye (sorry not great at the ornithology thing), and near the end a couple of either Storks or Cranes - again not sure which, but massive great things in a field. Lots of people out walking their dogs, but comparatively few Alsatians which was very disappointing. Perhaps 4 or 5 - I was hoping to find a land where the shaggy giants were as numerous as the people, and roamed around in fields looking for cuddles from passing cyclists

Wednesday 12th September: Obernai to Thann

70.7 miles: 5 hrs 26 minutes: 1,473 ft elevation

So today has been a mixed day. Lovely and very hot - sometimes too hot in the Alsace. Resident art historian Justin Lewis-Anthony spotted I was going through Colmar - and as it was about half way - I stopped for a look around, a bit of kultur and a spot of lunch. The Unter Linden Museum in Colmar is home of the Isenheim Altarpiece, a piece I have loved for many years - it sat on Karl Barth's desk (obviously not the original). What I didn't know was the Virgin in the garden of Roses (see photo in next post) by Martin Shongauer which is in the Dominican Church there - so that was a discovery. We are more pro Dominican in the Welwyn team than ever with the arrival of our curate.

So before everyone tells me the million and one places - particularly in Italy - that I am going through and I must just stop and see, let me say it isn't all that easy stopping off in places. For a start you have a bike loaded with clobber, secondly you are sweaty and in Lycra (and no one deserves that) and it is also rather hard to get going again after lunch. Today's riding was medium - it was signposted as the wine tour, and it duly took us through several lovely small towns and villages and mile upon mile upon mile of vineyards. This was quite nice as the agricultural roads are well maintained but practically empty - it was the grape harvest and it was fascinating to watch, so the only

other traffic were little tractors for collecting the grapes which it was quite fun to race. The only problem is that whilst this was very pretty, grapes grow best on hillsides, so although there weren't big hills to get over, it was constantly up and down as you followed the contours on the sides of the hills. Now don't get me wrong, sometimes you need to climb, and you just get on with it, but today I always had the feeling that there was a perfectly good flat valley road to about half a mile to the east all the while.

So then came the slight disaster of the day. I arrived at the Hostellerie d'Alsace in Cernay to find that they had double booked. They claimed it was all down to booking.com but I've never had a problem elsewhere, and they were straight on the phone offering help - by the time I arrived I was tired, out of water, and very sweaty - rather than wait for the arrogant and unapologetic manager to do anything, I went back on the website and booked another room - annoyingly there were no other rooms in Cernay so it was 4 miles in the wrong direction and up a hill - an 8 mile detour ... but I was so ***** off that somehow I got the energy to zoom up there. However when I arrived all was well - I hadn't really looked at the place I was booking, suffice to say it was €20 cheaper than the other hotel - but it is absolutely lovely - on the edge of a forest, with a huge room and a terrace, and charming staff. It's out of town so that €20 will be spent on dinner as I'm not adding a 4 mile round trip walk to my day. Best of all the town has a laundromat so I got my washing done (they don't seem to have them in Switzerland which would have been ideal)!

So if you're in Cernay definitely don't stay at the Hostellerie d'Alsace, or better still do and leave without paying the bill - but I can recommend in the Hotel Floridor in Thann.



Thursday 13th September: Thann to Sissach

73.5 miles: 5 hrs 09 minutes: 1,283 ft elevation

Despite a puncture (not bad 2 so far, fingers crossed) today was a very good day. Had splendid three course meal of French home cooking last night, on terrace overlooking valley - and set off this morning after some overnight rain. It was probably the flattest 75 miles of the trip - quite a lot of it on riverside or train side cycle ways. I realise that this is probably the last of those sorts of days, as all around the Alps are crowding in and I have passed into my next country Switzerland. Switzerland is everything you imagine - quiet, clean, organised, cows with bells, cheese with holes, no cuckoo clocks as yet though. Also I went into a Lidl for lunch and came out alive. Presently staying at lovely BnB in Sissach just beyond Basel. The Swiss are really set up for bicycles and everybody seems to be out on them, lots of children either riding their own, or younger ones being carried by parents.

I crossed into Basel - as others have pointed out - expecting it to be like Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape* - up and down the barbed wire - instead there was a new elegant foot/cycle bridge and no sign of a border. The only difference is that the Swiss have their own currency, the Franc, which is exciting because for some reason lost in the mists of history - any fine of a rider in pro cycling is in Swiss Francs. Basel was the adopted home of the great 20th century theologian Karl Barth, after he fled from Hitler's Germany. As I cycled through the city I thought not only of him but also of another 20th century genius who made his adopted home for the early part of his life just down the road in Bern - Albert Einstein. It always makes me smile a wry smile that one of the reasons that the Germans never developed the atom bomb during WW2, was because they were suspicious of 'Jewish physics' well you won't get far without it.

Experts in either field will no doubt yawn at two such predictable heroes - and of course in both physics and theology there were many of other great names during that period, though I would still make a case for those two being pretty much peerless. The reason I thought of them together is that they were the 'big names' behind my own academic research, and I thought I might just say what that was in an attempt to cure your insomnia and also to explain why I thought of them together. At the end of the 19th century everyone was pretty much in awe of science and its achievements - particularly physics - and rightly so. Its benefits were all around for people to see, and the scientific method was a gold standard of academic rigour (the word is *wissenschaft* in German, which has a slightly different meaning but very similar). The only problem was no one had really said what the scientific method was (or when they tried to, it never quite rang true) - what they meant is that any study

had to be a bit like physics. Interestingly science had slightly changed its meaning in English but that is another long story. Numbers, equations, processes, mechanics, systems, - a fixed determinative world. You still notice it today in University courses - economic science, political science, historical science as opposed to economics, politics, and history - when you ask what the difference is, the answer is generally that 'we are taking a scientific approach to the subject' - whatever that means.

Now this was rather bad news for theology. Because it was quite difficult to be scientific about God. You couldn't do experiments or measurements on him, and if you try to get him to co-operate he'll probably not be coerced. The obvious answer was to study religion instead - you can be quite scientific about religion. You can count the number of people who go to church or who admit to having a religious experience. You can collect and process lots of useful statistics about people and their religion - it just won't tell you anything about God. It hadn't helped that Augustine had said a millennium and a half earlier, that science (*scientia*) wasn't worth studying, because it was wisdom (*sapientia*) that Christians should be interested in - and again the words don't quite mean what they do in English today.

Karl Barth said that theologians should stop talking about religion and start talking about God again. This was seen as unhelpful and retrograde. Furthermore he insisted right at the beginning of his great incomplete work the Church Dogmatics, that theology was a science. How could it be a science people asked when it didn't look anything like physics? Well Barth says - what you need to do in any study is to set out like David on his bike ride. You have a bike, some legs, a few bits of kit, and a vague idea of the route. But you don't set out with fixed rules, precise itinerary and an agenda. You need to improvise, to bend the rules, see how it goes, and adapt as you go along - in other words the scientific method isn't actually very methodical. This just wound up his critics - but Barth says there is one golden rule - along the way, you forget yourself, and you are faithful to the object of study - you let it or him or her tell you where to look next. Just like David is improvising his way to Rome - but he is still faithful to that goal - he hasn't (yet) decided at Munich would be easier. The gear, the route, the itinerary will all be improvised as he goes.

And of course you then realise that this isn't just applicable to theology - lots of things don't really need to look like physics - for instance when you study other people, when you are falling in love, when you are raising a family - you might be better off not always thinking like a physicist (doing experiments on dates is always a bad idea).

So what does Albert Einstein have to do with all this, particularly as he was a physicist? Well Einstein didn't just make advances in physics in the traditional way. What he did was make physics look less like the physics that people thought they knew - the physics that those other subjects were trying to emulate.

In ten extraordinary years Einstein kick-started the two great revolutions in 20th

century physics - quantum theory, and special and then general relativity theory. You'll be pleased to know I'm not going for a crash course on them - suffice to say that it wasn't just the difficult (though ultimately elegant and simple) mathematics that you had to get your head round. It was a new world which was counter intuitive. It wasn't very certain and mechanical - it was undetermined, it always depended on your viewpoint, it was uncertain, and sometimes measuring something changed it so you could never know what it really was, It wasn't all about objectivity, and mechanics, and push and pull systems. It was a wonderful but slightly chaotic world which Einstein opened up. And suddenly everything else didn't need to look like physics anymore, because physics began to look like something else.

Friday 14th September: Sissach to Buochs

71.5 miles: 5 hrs 26 minutes: 3,537 ft elevation

After asking how far is it, the cyclist will always ask to see the profile of any given route - a simple graph showing the ups and downs along the way. One needs to be careful with these, as the scale of each axis can give a very misleading idea of what the ride is actually like. If a ride of a 100 miles never goes above 200 feet it might look scary, but you know there is nothing on the ride that can really be described as a hill. Now the problem with the Eurovelo route I am following is that it is so long on one axis, and the other axis is so dwarfed by the St Bernard Pass, that it is hard to spot any other climbs on the way. And doubly impossible to spot its gradient. But this morning I knew that there was a proper alpine climb at the beginning of the ride, straight out of Sissach - so I was prepared, even if the first hour was pretty tough going - but then it was only an hour, and the reward was a glorious view at the end.



For a while then - maybe 15 miles - we were on cinder farm tracks. These are just about OK on a road bike - they're very like the chalk 'strada bainca' which will no doubt feature when we get to Italy, but over long sections like that it takes a toll on your wrists. Particularly so as coming down hill fast also takes it out on your hands as you have to keep pulling on the brakes. People always ask about your legs and bum after a long hard ride, but often it's your fingers, wrists and shoulders which ache more than anything. Anyway the last 30 or so miles were pretty flat and on tarmac. Down to the lovely city of Luzern, and then alongside the lake. It was enjoyable to

watch the rich and presumably famous roar up and down the lakeside road in their super cars - I'm sure they enjoyed it very much. There were a few spots of rain but nothing worth putting a jacket on for. A few miles later I reached Buochs and the hotel.

The hotel faces over the lake in one direction - and very close to a motorway in the other - no prizes for guessing which way the economy rooms face. Anyway I wandered into town and sat down by the lake there. The scenery is just what you come to Switzerland for - lakes and mountains. Truly stunning. The hotel is a little like Fawlty Towers. Shabby, a bit dirty, and with a charming host, but he cheerily explains that nothing really works - the elevator is broken but a sporting man like you will want to take the stairs, he said. The internet also seems to be broken, and I noticed the phone in reception was. The room is quite large, but for once whereas normally the TV is huge, this time it is so small it is difficult to locate it on the opposing wall, let alone watch a programme. Typically it's about the only time the BBC channels have been available. And tomorrow a rest day, which is lovely, but of course that means two nights in this particular establishment

Saturday 15th September: Rest Day on Lake Lucerne

Today was a rest day by Lake Luzern - marvelling at the prices of things in Swiss supermarkets - the landscape and inflationary prices remind me very much of Norway. I spent this morning sitting down by the lake, and came back to the hotel mid-afternoon to watch Simon Yates win the Vuelta d'España a few minutes ago.

Non cyclists may not appreciate what an extraordinary moment this is for British cycling. The three weeks Grand Tours of Italy, France, and Spain are the pinnacle of road cycling sport. A decade ago our interest as a nation in such events was minimal, with perhaps Chris Boardman the person who came close to capturing the public's imagination. We were simply not one of the great cycling nations like France, Spain, Italy, Belgium. Now this year we have won all three grand tours - Italy -Chris Froome, France - Geraint Thomas, Spain - Simon Yates. In 2017 Chris Froome had won the tours of France and Spain, so for a couple of months this season held all three titles simultaneously. Having not won it before British riders have won the Tour de France for 7 of the last 8 years. It is a phenomenal achievement as a nation.

So today having not ridden anywhere I thought I would share my reflections on.
....electric bikes.

You might be expecting me to say something dismissive or patronising about them, but I think they are great.

The first things to say is that if you able bodied and want to get into cycling for fitness or sport, then do not buy an electric bike. It might be tempting to get a little help up

those hills, but the weight penalty even on the best of them is massive. With a decent road bike and even some fairly minimal training it's amazing how far you can get - it's that progress that meant I went from 5 years ago puffing 200 yards up London road from the church to the Rectory to cycling this far now. Obviously for the elderly or those with some injury or disability if the only way is the electric bike then great, better than not getting out.

But I think electric bikes are great simply as a means of transport, and it is plainly clear here in Switzerland. Electric bikes have motors that assist you as you pedal - you can set them up in various ways, but they are set by law to cut out at 15.5 miles an hour. You can go faster but the motor will stop assisting you. Now I would be heartbroken if my average speed was less than 15.5 mph on my non-laden road bike during a training run, so these aren't about helping you go faster - they are simply a very convenient mode of transport.

In Switzerland I would guess more than half the bikes I have seen have been electric - given the mountainous terrain I'm not surprised. But I'm also guessing that I see as many people on bikes therefore as cars. And I would say half the bikes have a seat or trailer for carrying a child.

Aside from the fact that it's often nice to be doing something vaguely energetic in the open air, there are several reasons why electric bikes are an excellent alternative to cars for journeys up to around 5 miles. Firstly they'll probably be just as quick and you won't have to worry about parking at the other end. And if you run out of puff the motor will do it for you. You therefore don't have to arrive sweaty, wear strange clothes when you ride your electric bike - you can easily carry a basket full of shopping or other stuff, and you can take your child. As I say for most journeys under 5 miles that could make the electric bike the sensible option.

But some people will be nervous about cycling on crowded British roads - but that is where experience in Switzerland tells. Because of course once you reach a critical mass the situation changes - if half the vehicles on the road are bicycles and half of those have a child on board, and there are therefore far fewer cars the whole dynamic changes. And of course in Switzerland - and indeed much of the rest of Europe, cycle ways and paths and road layout have been designed to promote cycling. Now that would be an investment in the UK, but we already invest billions in road projects which per mile are probably a 1000x more expensive.

And this is not therefore anti-car - indeed it is pro car. If you are going 10 miles or more, carrying lots of people or lots of stuff then obviously you go by car - driving on far less crowded roads. But as we know the vast majority of car journeys are by one person, under 5 miles, and carrying a phone and a wallet.

It is clear that lots of post and light deliveries are done around here by electric bike - why not in the UK? When I was a child my dad had a loud annoying polluting moped

and then scooter, which kept going wrong, and he kept falling off. The electric bike is the quiet, green, reliable replacement for the vehicle that supplemented the family car.

One thing though - if you are on an electric bike, you do not need to wear aerodynamic Lycra, and you do not need to give me a smug grin when you overtake me on a hill - and that has happened more than once in the past couple of days

Sunday 16th September: Buochs to near Gurntellen

35.4 miles: 3 hrs 13 minutes: 2,769 ft elevation

Well until the very last mile today was an easy day

Just as well that I checked the route yesterday to find that very early on in the ride there was a ferry crossing across Lake Luzern. Lucky so I could check things like the times of the ferries and whether they ran on Sundays. According to Google maps (the villain of the day) it was a 19 minute cycle ride away. Good I thought - just time to get going and then have a little break. So I went down the hotel drive, onto the road for 200 yards - and then there was water. The whole thing had taken less than 2 minutes downhill. And I was now half an hour early for the ferry. Never mind. The ferry which I can imagine would take about 40 cars, crossed with precisely six people and their bicycles. Sundays are a day on which the Swiss do 3 things 1) go to church, 2) play in brass bands in national costume and 3) get out and have some exercise in the mountains. Some may very well do all three. The crossing took 20 minutes and was rather nice. On the other side the route hugged Lake Luzern to its end, crossing the valley floor and then beginning to rise gently into the Alps. Now the way I had split up overnight accommodation meant that I knew today would be a short day of about 32 miles. My research - which at this point I still believed to be as cunning as a Baldrick plan - had shown me a couple of other things. It was going to be difficult to find a supermarket in the mountain villages, let alone one that would be open on Sunday. Also unless it was a hard ride I would arrive at the guesthouse well before 2pm - the appointed check in time. I had also worked out that although the main roads went through the centre of the valley, the villages were on very steep roads on either side. I would want to ride up these as little as possible - but knew my guesthouse was about a mile from the main road. So

About 12 I noticed I was within just over 2 miles of the guesthouse, and had just passed a village with a nice looking restaurant. So I popped back into the village, took out a second mortgage and bought a nice large plate of food. I lingered over this until about 1 - when Google maps told me I was 30 mins from the guesthouse. They usually overestimate the time anyway. But still I was not ready to put my life in their hands and into Google maps route planning eccentricities (at least when it comes to bicycles). I got to within a mile or so of the guesthouse, and then said to Google maps

'over to you.' Well at first it looked good - I could either go a bit up or down the valley cross over the river and take a minor road to the guesthouse. Either way about 20 minutes, though down was apparently 2 minutes quicker than up. So I went down turned off onto a rough track - thought this will be OK for a mile, and ended up in a farmyard. Retracing my steps I realised the route that it wanted me to take, was up an incredibly steep rocky barely made up path. This would have been a difficult hike whatever, but pushing a bike it was really tough. However I had no idea how long it would be like that and the guesthouse was now within a mile. Well it was like that for very nearly the entire mile. It was long sweaty and tiring. It emerged 50 yards from the guesthouse - onto a beautifully tarmacked roadwhich of course was the other road up, the one which Google maps had said would be 2 mins longer.

Well at least I know which way I will be going down in the morning.

I knew of course that in that mile there would be a steep climb so I am now irritatingly 200 metres above the road I will need to get back to, to start climbing properly tomorrow - but that is the topography of such places. It does mean I am in a lovely hamlet on the mountainside in a charming guesthouse, with beautiful views and the sounds of cow bells clanging away.

Monday 17th September: Gurntellen to Bellinzona

66.9 miles: 5 hrs 46 minutes: 5,118 ft elevation

Well without the aid of an elephant I have done the thing that has kept me awake for the past couple of months - I have crossed the Alps! So let's start from the top. The day got off to a bad start - that church bell that seemed very quaint on the mountainside yesterday was very annoying when next to my room it resumed its full chiming routine from 6am - the hour at which also a very loud and overly-long Angelus was rung. Wide awake I had two hours to kill until breakfast. I had thought of asking for it a bit earlier, but I felt so sorry for the woman running the guesthouse that I didn't want to put her out. Sometimes I am ashamed to a man - it was she who showed me to my room, made my bed, cooked my dinner, and served me breakfast - her 'Mann' spent the previous evening getting drunk with his friends. Now who am I to judge, maybe they take it in turns, and tonight she is out on the piss with her mates - but I doubt it. Anyway after breakfast I was looking for a quick getaway - only to find that the bike had a punctured rear tyre (no. 3). So I changed it, whilst the 'Mann' - whose morning until then consisted of bird-watching, decided I was more interesting to watch - standing about 5 yards away and not saying a word, or trying to help. If he had a track pump in the garage, while I was using my little hand pump, then there is a special circle of hell reserved for him. I also should at this point, point out that I seem to have been bitten in every conceivable and some frankly inconceivable places

overnight.

So eventually I was on the road - a quick descent down to the main road and then the climbing began. I had done about a third of it yesterday, and this morning I completed it, it being broken into two main sections. The first had some fierce ramps but was more undulating - most annoying, though it couldn't be helped, was that though the cycle way was very good and clear, much of it was under repair, which meant several times getting off and walking around the works. Then there was a flat section through a town - where I got some spare inner tubes - and then the final third of the climb up the Gotthard pass began (Gotthard means 'God that was hard' in German). Here on in, the gradient was unrelenting, but just about manageable in the lowest gear and the lowest cadence possible - it was also exactly even. Alongside me drew Thomas from Dusseldorf who is cycling from Zurich to Florence. He was a great chap with English much better than my German, and we kept each other going until the top. I think had it not been a replay of 14-18, 39-45, 66 one of us - well certainly me - would have stopped for a breather - I'm not sure we were going much faster than walking pace - but neither of us put a foot down until we got to the top - job done. 3 hours give or take from the guesthouse. Susannah Underwood - you had one job - where was the cuddly big dog and the brandy?



During the last part of the ascent the road had turned to some innocent enough cobbles - but these became slightly less innocent as speed got up on the descent. Now I'm not sure I would say I would rather do the climb again but the first part of the descent was horrible. It was steep - steeper than the climb I guess - cobbled, with a million hairpins - I was pulling on both brakes as hard as I could most of the time, just to keep some semblance of control, as I was juddered to death by the cobbles (why?). As testament to this my legs feel fine this evening - I walked into town earlier, but my arms ache like crazy. Eventually cobbles gave way to gentler tarmac and I could enjoy the continuing plunge down the valley. It suddenly became fun. I thought I would stop for some lunch - pulling up outside a supermarket only to find it was shut for a 90 lunch break. I set off having unlocked the bike and got all my kit together again, only to find another supermarket 50 yards down the road open - so lunch it was. From there on it was about 30 miles of fairly flat roads following the spectacular valley floor until I ended up at Bellinzona the overnight stop. It's quite a large town and for one moment I thought Google maps might disgrace itself again - but no, once in the centre it gave me a nice direct 5 minute ride to the lovely guesthouse - lovely big room and with a balcony overlooking the valley - see video post. Tomorrow off to Milan - so [Becca Reynolds](#) if you want me to pick anything up and stuff it in a sweaty saddle bag just say so

Tuesday 18th September: Bellinzona to Bruzzano (Greater Milan)

76.5 miles: 6 hrs 05 minutes: 3,435 ft elevation

After the very literal high of yesterday, today was rather a mixed day. It started out OK with an early start and some flat ride across the valley floor - I knew there was a big climb to come early on in the ride - the last of the Alpine climbs - so it was pretty hard going for an hour but then it was done. Then had another puncture - and as I suspected the - technical details ahead - the valves of yesterday's inner tubes were too short - so was then down to my last inner tube - a worry that dominated the ride from then on in. There was a really short sharp shower of rain that is a feature of the mountains and lakes but a bus shelter (see photo) kept me dry and gave me a break for 20 minutes. So the good news is that I am in Italy (Justin Lewis-Anthony are you sure this is quicker than flying?) crossing the border at Como - this time there was a visible border with police etc. But everyone just sailed through. I have to say that the experience on the Italian side of the border, the road from Como to Milan is not great. It goes through some fairly heavily industrialised areas and is not at all pretty. There was also some pretty niggling climbs in it.

I spied two bike shops that were shut for lunch which seems to last from 11.30 - 2pm. So still on that last inner tube. Ironically the 30 miles from the border to Milan was mostly one long retail parks and industrial estate - ugly, but just the sort of place you might find a Halfords equivalent - no such luck. The attitude to cyclists does not help - as soon as we crossed the border there was for the first time so sign of cycle paths or cycle lanes, just lots of impatient drivers trying to kill you and not many cyclists on the road. Interestingly Google maps this time decided that you just can't cycle in Milan - the 'cycle to your destination' option just disappeared off the screen. Probably wise. So I followed the walking route, eventually after a bit of struggle finding my way through the rabbit warren that is northern Milan. I was slightly despairing as the address I was given was just an anonymous block of flats - however I chose the place because of the reviews that said the owner was friendly, and sure enough within 2 minutes he turned up to show me the room, and was friendliness itself - and the room in a flat, is actually really well set up, and there is a fully stocked kitchen to which I was invited to help myself. I have to say the neighbourhood is pretty horrid, but there we are. So still no inner tubes - again Google maps came to the rescue - I walked a bit of the way into Milan - the first sports shop it suggested sold only fencing goods (bit of a niche market) but putting cycling shop in - took me to a shop where I gladly purchased three new inner tubes! Success! There was also a supermarket on the way back, and I had done my washing whilst out inner tube hunting, so took that down to laundromat for dryer (tell me if this domestic detail gets too much....) So it's been a long day - well over 70 miles with a little run around north Milan at the end, a rain storm, but I have had dinner and have clean smalls so what more could a man ask for?

Wednesday 19th September: Bruzzano (Greater Milan) to Piacenza

75.4 miles: 5 hrs 27 minutes: 584 ft elevation

Today is best described as mixed and ending with a true miracle....

It started off with a truly terrifying traverse of Milan. There are minimal cycle lanes in the centre, and a small group of gallant commuters so it was easy to get in with them - safety in numbers. However it was still a small group compared to most cities of this size, and clearly the log-jammed cars still dominate. But the small group still overflowed the minimal cycling infrastructure - it would be a brave person who takes on turning Milan into a cycling friendly city, but it would be better for it. In the centre they don't have cobbles - but huge flagstones - often the gap between them could swallow whole bicycles and their riders. And trams, and tram rails (just wide enough to get a wheel stuck in) - I hate trams, and who has right of way? Anyway just south of the city it all changed, a quiet road by the side of a canal turned into a lovely paved canal side cycle path that ran all the way down to Pavia, site of the battle of Pavia

1525. It was a decisive victory for the Spanish and forces of the Holy Roman Empire, over the French. The country side was at least countryside south of Milan - not very inspiring to look at as it was very flat, but that is no bad thing for the cyclist. We wandered along the Po valley following the meanders of the river. I should explain at Pavia I came to the end of the first GPS trace of some 1160 miles and swapped to the second which is 400 miles, and annoyingly stops 80 miles north of Rome. But we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Now the new trace seemed to be more and more tolerant of off-roading, which isn't great for me with a road bike. Cinder tracks, or the chalk roads (the 'strada bianca' from which the race takes its name) are fine, but these were getting very lumpy and bumpy. Progress was very slow. Water was running low - it was hot, and still a long way to go to Piacenza.

And this is when the miracle of Piacenza happened. Now I don't want you to think I have not come prepared for such eventualities. There are a couple of possibilities when this happens. Often you can keep an eye on where the track is going and just follow nearby roads on the GPS - there were no nearby roads. Or you can just ditch the GPS, and follow roads, even if a bit busy to where you want to go. However the main roads to Piacenza were quite a long way around. Furthermore the GPS trace I was now following became impossible - according to it, the person taking it, must have taken a boat down the river, because it sailed right down the middle for several miles. And then. Now it should also be said that for the first time I have seen signs for the via Francigena - and quite a few fellow pilgrims walking. This is the ancient pilgrim route from Canterbury to Rome which Eurovelo 5 roughly follows. Now it should be said that these are walker's signs so not always great on a bicycle. But they are comforting at least. But then there was a sign for a cycle way to Piacenza. It was perfectly tarmacked - it was way off the GPS trace. But I thought it's the best option I have. 15 miles tarmac, not a car in sight, straight into the centre of Piacenza. The miraculous bit? - well my bike GPS slightly annoyingly has every single minor path and track in existence on it, and some that don't seem to be there at all. But suddenly, of this cycling superhighway, there was not a trace. According to my Garmin I was cycling across fields. And it was clear this wasn't a new road, or new construction - but it was there, a lovely route into the centre of Piacenza. I really don't know how I would have got here without it. Piacenza is a lovely old town, just what you would expect of Italy. It's bordered to the North by the River Po which has limited its development - you just cross the bridge and you are straight into the old town.

Slight apprehension as I had arranged to meet the owner at the apartment at 4pm. No sign at 4.10 so I called and got a slightly alarming 'number not valid' warning, but just then she came up the road full of apology, and let me into a charming small apartment in the middle of the old town - lovely.....



Thursday 20th September: Piacenza to Ramiola

47.6 miles: 3 hrs 12 minutes: 1,178 ft elevation

Today has been a deliberately easy day - under 50 miles on flat roads, to get me to the foothills of the Apennines which is tomorrow's big challenge - the second major mountains of the week after the Alps on Sunday/Monday - so a lot of climbing tomorrow - but then all being well a rest day the day after. My GPS friend was much more road-friendly this time, and there was only a half mile of off road - otherwise relatively smooth very flat country roads for nearly all the journey.

Sod's law on the easiest day and coming to the nicest farmhouse b n b one could imagine, the only fly in the ointment was the late check in at 5pm. So I deliberately set out a bit late - further slowed down by the traditional morning puncture, caused no doubt by yesterday's off road activities. Also a bit wary of the roads today I wanted to give myself plenty of time. But again sod's law it was easy going all the way.

Took a reasonably long break at 11 at Fidenza - charming town - because I knew that I was now within 15 miles of my destination. I could walk it before check in. So I arrived in Fornovo di Taro at just after one - this was a couple of miles from the farmhouse but offered supermarket etc. So had a long slow lunch and a wander around town - but as ever in sweaty Lycra and a laden bike in tow there is a limit to what you can do.

So now am in this lovely farmhouse, which has a large downstairs kitchen and three rooms upstairs - I don't think anyone else is stayingbut it'll be an early start tomorrow. Bit of a walk to the supermarket but not having exerted myself too much that was fine. We're on the banks of the Taro River here with lovely views.

I very much enjoyed it when our book club read Eric Newby's 'Love and War in the Apennines' so I hope his story of wartime love and bravery will keep me going in the mountains. Do read it if you get the chance.

So a little reflection on Italian cycling to end with - Italy is of course one of the great cycling nations, and although the UK is dominant at the moment, we are very much Johnny come lately. There are of course some great Italian champions to this day, Nibali for one, but in this increasingly car dominated I wonder whether the glory days are gone for ever. I say this because although I've seen a reasonable amount of cyclists out - they are nearly all old - and I mean old, not my age, but 20 years on. Maybe it's just midweek - but I wonder whether it is increasingly thought of as an old man's sport. It was great to see them - often immaculately turned out in the kit of their favourite team, they either had gleaming new machines of carbon fibre, or gleaming vintage machines which looked magnificent. No doubt recreating the glory days when Coppi and Bartali battled it out for world cycling supremacy after the war. Theirs was an interesting clash because as well as both being great champions, their contrasting personalities represented two different notions of Italy as a nation: Bartali - southern, rural, traditional, catholic, - Coppi - northern, urban, scientific, hedonist, perhaps two visions of Italy which are still vying for its soul today.....

Friday 21st September: Ramiola to Santo Stefano di Magra via the Passo della Cisa
60.4 miles: 4 hrs 50 minutes: 4,859 ft elevation

My German friend Thomas on the climb over the Gotthard Pass said something rather wise in reply when I said that that would be the hardest day - 'when you look back you will remember it as the best day.' Well he was wise but perhaps wrong, today was one of the hardest days, but looking back on it, it may well have been one of the best.

I say one of the hardest because in fact neither the day over the Alps nor today over the Apennines has technically been the hardest - the long and rather wet 80 miles in the Ardenne was in fact the day with the most climbing - but the Alps and Apennines require one long hard climb with no chance of recovery. So I was rather nervous this morning contemplating crossing the second major mountain range on this trip, at the end of the week which had included the Gotthard Pass at the beginning. But at least once it was done, then tomorrow would be a rest day. So I started off early knowing that the day would start with 3 hours - 27 miles of mountain climbing. So to put it in perspective it was only half the height of the Gotthard pass - but on the other hand it

was starting at sea level, it was hot, and the up and down nature of the mountains meant that there were three separate peaks to be climbed at the top - culminating in the 1000 metre Passo Della Cisa. The climb itself was hard, particularly the middle third, but one thing about high mountain passes is that they are the only road available - which means as in this case they are well maintained and keep to a reasonable incline. So once about a third of the way up I hit the Strada Statale it was hard but not impossible going. Near the start of the climb I was thinking that I needed a pee (this is relevant) before things really got going - it was at that point that Matteo who had stopped at the side of the road, joined me. Matteo was a lovely Italian man cycling with a friend from Venice to Rome, but his friend had balked at the Apennines and decided to do that leg by train. Notably the only time I have ridden with someone else is over these two great mountain ranges. I decided the wee stop would have been delayed as Matteo rode alongside and we started chatting. Again we both probably would have rested more, but just like the Gotthard pass it became clear that neither of us wanted to be the first to crack. But it was not thirst, or hunger, or fatigue that caused our first stop after an hour - Matteo said 'I need to stop, I need to go to toilet' - the heavens be praised.

Now I am about to lapse into national stereotypes I warn you, and if this offends you get over yourself. Because Matteo was everything Thomas was not. Thomas was on his titanium disc braked bike with what looked like custom-made luggage, he didn't seem to sweat or get tired, just kept going at a nice even pace. Now it has to be said that that is the lesson I have learned in the past week - on road races with light bikes in the UK you tend to go as hard as you can up climbs - it's tough but climbs rarely last more than 20 mins. Climbing for 3 hours on a bike laden with luggage is a very different affair. You need to find a sensible pace and rhythm, and limit the amount of time you are 'on the limit' - if you can operate at 90% then you do that for as much of the climb as it will keep you moving forward. In every respect though younger, slimmer and fitter, Matteo had not really learnt these lessons. And in every other way he was the polar opposite of Thomas. He seemed to have slightly chaotic luggage, and most of his clothes seem to hang on the side of the saddle bag rather than in it. He was constantly active on the climb, not just eating and drinking (with food stashed in various random places), but taking selfies, getting go pro movie footage, answering texts and phone calls - admittedly on a deserted road at around 8mph. But also he would put great efforts into certain sections of the climb, powering away, meandering over the road to decrease the gradient, and after each effort semi-collapsing over the handlebars. So up the first climb his youth and fitness clearly showed as he led me up. But his uneven rhythm meant that I led up the second and third climbs with him clinging on begging that the top was just around the corner. He was good fun, and we got some nice selfies at the top - but also slightly terrifying.

And none of this changed when it came to the descent - we were now tearing into hairpins at 30mph - but Matteo showed no fear. Apart from the fact he went into every bend far faster than I would have dared, he was still taking photos and sending texts - this time I stayed a judicious 30 metres back. Unlike the Alpine descent this was the one cyclists love - fairly well maintained road, wide, with sweeping bends and hairpins - for 20 miles we hurtled down it. Matteo's friend had climbed a little way up the descent so he rendezvoused with him as I continued on my way.

The last 20 miles although they looked flat had a few niggling climbs in them. And one terrifying hairpinned mini descent which was so steep it was the only time I felt the back wheel start to go from under me.

Also much more in evidence were signs of the via Francigena - not just walking signs, but the occasional cycling sign (completely unreliable but hitherto not seen), and even a couple for cars. As well as a few places advertising themselves as pilgrims hostels. And some beautiful medieval hill side towns like Pontremoli. In researching the trip I had found quite a few via Francigena sites which were purely Italian, suggesting the route was from the Apennines through Tuscany to Rome, but of course it is rather longer than that (the clue's in the title). Anyway without too much bother I reached the town of Santo Stefano di Magra, and the very nice b n b which is literally 50ft off the route. Nice enough town but large enough to have stuff one needs for a rest day - huge supermarket and Decathlon sports store just opposite. The one crucial thing missing was that Google maps could not locate a launderette near bythis would mean splitting up the next couple of days quite badly in order to get the washing done in Siena (why else would one stay there) ... but a chat with a couple of locals revealed a facility a few hundred yards up the road.thank goodness



Saturday 22nd September: Rest Day

Today has been a lovely rest day, but therefore not the most exciting I am afraid. Perhaps I might give you an idea of what makes an ideal stop on this trip, and on what criteria I book things a couple of days ahead. So the first criteria is distance - at the end of a long day it is not welcome to carry on for another 20 miles just because you've slightly miscalculated the length of that day's ride. And also you don't want to go 5 miles out of your way - because that's 10 miles added to the total distance - do that every day and you're up 240 miles. After that comes cost - the cheaper the better. After that comes food - not frankly does it have a Michelin starred restaurant attached - but does it include breakfast and is there a supermarket nearby. Finally I like an early check in and good reviews and ratings. In other words very different criteria from what your average holiday maker might take into account when booking a trip. Oh and I always drop them a note to say that I'll be arriving with my bike, and I need somewhere to store it. Which is sort of why I've ended up in Santo Stefano di Magra - from my point of view ideal - just at the right point in the route, 50 ft from the course, cheap, breakfast included, nice room and nice host, and a town big enough to have a supermarket opposite, and - after local investigation - a launderette up the road. Ironically after all my worries about finding cycle shops along the way, today's photo shows that I am bang opposite a huge Decathlon sports superstore (French firm with branch in Stevenage) - at the value end of the market they are brilliant for cycle gear - it's ironic because for once I couldn't think of anything I needed - but after getting the washing done this morning, I did wander around and bought yet another inner tube even though I now have a stock, because it seemed rude not to. However Santo Stefano Di Magra with all due deference is otherwise not the most characterful town - so whilst I've had a wander around there wasn't much to see, and websites put all the tourist attractions a few miles away - now normally I would love a good walk, or a bike ride, ...but in this case that kind of misses the point of a rest day. So I've stayed around town. So with that rather boring post I thought I could at least reward the cyclists amongst you with reference to two races which I have been or soon will be near. The first 'monument' (5 top one day races) every year is also the longest - going from Milan to San Remo - won this year by an Italian Vincenzo Nibhali. Milan was a stop earlier this week. Not a monument - but one many think should be, though it is a much younger race - is the Strada Bianche which starts and finishes in Siena. I'm slightly concerned about this one - the name of the race and its USP refers to the white chalk roads that it uses. With my route finder quite keen on going off the tarmac I have a feeling it'll be quite keen on giving me a 'taste' of these chalk roads - also known for their short but often quite brutal climbs. They're a beautiful and historic part of the Tuscan countryside, but in the race I don't see many of the riders

carrying much in the way of luggage..... so I could do without it...but we'll see.....I go through Siena in a couple of days time.....

Sunday 23rd September: Santo Stefano di Magra to Altopascio

59 miles: 4 hrs: 636 ft elevation

Today was a nice easy ride in which I saw something I haven't seen since Calais - the sea! A little trip down the valley to the seaside town of Massa - and various other towns which form a continuous 20 miles or so of seaside development which I rode along with great pleasure. Then came inland, and started to work my way towards the Tuscan hills but still very much on the plain at this point, I reached the rather nice town of Altopascio. Although the town centre was rather nice, the directions to the b n b didn't look promising (again it was cheap) to a roundabout on the edge of an industrial estate. It is still a roundabout on the edge of an industrial estate, but actually the owners have created something lovely. The house is well appointed and has every facility a traveller could want, there is a balcony on which I am sitting to write this (obviously actually sitting on a chair on a balcony) and set in a lovely garden in which guests are invited to roam. There are gnomes on the gateposts but you get a lot of that in Italy. So all in all not too bad. Ministry is sometimes about sacrifice, and the biggest sacrifice for me is Sunday morning. Firstly Sunday morning puts paid to anything too wild on Saturday night. Obviously for female (and indeed male) clergy it can deviate unwanted attention - to the the question 'what are you doing Saturday night?' The answer 'I'm writing my sermon, why?' Is probably the most crushing reponse possible. They'll never ask again. But also as a cyclist it ruins any chance of taking part in cycling clubs - who nearly always (there is one honourable exception the North Norfolk Wheelers who go out on Saturday) have their main club run on Sunday morning. The main doors of St Mary's Welwyn church are designed to provoke - facing as they do down the High Street where on a Sunday morning I can only look on as cyclist upon cyclist goes past. After today I can confirm that Italy goes cycling on Sunday morning particularly at the seaside. There were hundreds of people out on their bikes - including huge groups of riders on club runs. Now I know that big groups of riders can sometimes irritate motorists. [Susannah Underwood](#) often complains that she is really exhausted as she has had to make several movements of 2 or 3 inches of her ankle in the country lanes to get round lazy groups of cyclists in her car. I feel her and your pain. However it is fast and enjoyable riding in a group of riders. So I thought I would offer a little apologia. For those of you - well it's all of you frankly - who missed my excellent study day on theology and cycling - the thing I point out first of all is that road cycling is a team sport. There is an individual winner or winners - but the riders work as a team. Once you understand that, the TV coverage becomes less

boring (you'll have to trust me on this), because you start to understand the tactics involved. The reasons why road racing is a team sport largely reflect the reasons why riding in a group of riders is faster and more fun. Firstly of course it is just nice and encouraging to do anything with your friends. Now of course I didn't know anyone riding today, but as long as you observe some simple etiquette riders are generally happy for you to join groups on the road. Do learn the etiquette though, it isn't being snobby it is about staying safe. I had a rather English etiquette dilemma today - it is clear that no Italian cyclist has ever stopped at a red traffic light. Now before you all cry out in horror, when I was riding on my own I observed every red light. However in a big group of riders on big clear junctions moving at 20mph plus, if the eccentric Englishman pulls on his brakes suddenly, all that is going to do is cause an almighty pile up. So I jumped some lights. Secondly, you are offered physical protection - in pro races from riders from other teams (It isn't a contact sport but in a sprint for the line it most definitely is) - and on the road from other road users. Thirdly in pro races if the leader has a puncture or a problem with his bike, then one of his team mates will give him his wheel, or if it's about the same size his bike. Now big groups won't stop if one person has a puncture, but there is an unwritten rule that if you see someone by the side of the road particularly in remote places, you ask if they have everything they need to get going again. Fourthly in pro races team mates will supply the leaders with drinks and food - again this won't happen on the road normally, but if you are really running low on water it's OK to ask someone who has plenty. Fifthly and most decisively you go faster because team mates offer you an aerodynamic advantage. Once you get above 15mph, a good proportion of your energy goes into over-coming wind resistance. Other riders 'cutting a hole' in the air before you enables the group to go much faster - and if you are organised each person takes a turn at the front to share out the effort. So at some points today on the sea front I was whizzing along in a group of riders. Indeed when I turned inland and was on my own I realised I was going to be very early to my destination, so took the last 20 or so miles at a deliberately easy pace.

Monday 24th September: Altopascio to Siena

57.4 miles: 4 hrs 11 mins: 2,274 ft elevation

Two evenings ago I had just turned the light to go to sleep - when my phone went 'ping' to say a message had arrived. The message was from my friends [Ellen & Jeremy Clark-King](#) who had obviously come across some of my posts. The message read 'Are you going to be in Siena? We're flying there tomorrow.' Amazingly I had just booked into a place 10 miles short of Siena, but I didn't really fancy an evening bike ride (I have only the most basic lights) through Italian countryside into Siena, so I hastily cancelled that booking, and changed it for one in Siena - just 5 minutes' walk from

where they had said they were staying. Jeremy and Ellen now live and work in San Francisco, though they are both English. We met when we were all students training together for ministry and Cuddesdon, a theological college just outside Oxford. Students were encouraged to form 'cell groups' - groups of friends who would meet up once or twice a year throughout their ministry for friendship and support. Ellen and Jeremy - along with 3 others were members of my cell group. I say 'were' sadly, not because we had any great falling out, but because they moved firstly to Canada, and another member of the group moved to Virginia USA (and I moved another 5 miles up the A1M), and so whilst we all remain friends (I hope?) meeting up as a group hasn't been possible for several years. Strangely when I get to Rome I am staying with another member of the group [Justin Lewis-Anthony](#) - so Alistair, Brian, and Steve, this may be the best chance we have! Extraordinary that they should be flying half way across the world exactly arriving at the town where I am cycling into. So in the past 48 hours we've been doing one of those races like they used to do on Top Gear - Jeremy and Ellen coming from San Francisco by two flights and a bus, and myself coming from Santo Stefano di Magra by bike (I won) - all we need is James May coming up from the Sahara by camel and boat. The ride today was fairly easy, as the roads left the plain and pleasingly followed the 'via della Chianti' through 'chiantishire' and upwards towards Siena. The road climbed 1000 ft in the 60 miles, but very gradually until a few miles out of Siena there were some fairly serious ramps up towards the beautiful city. So this evening we all met up - I have slight apartment envy (see photo to view from their window...) but we also had a great meal on what I now find out is their 25th wedding anniversary (a sweaty cyclist always improves these occasions). For me it has been a good preparation after over 3 weeks on the road, for returning to civilisation and remembering those things I was fast forgetting, like conversation and using a knife and fork.



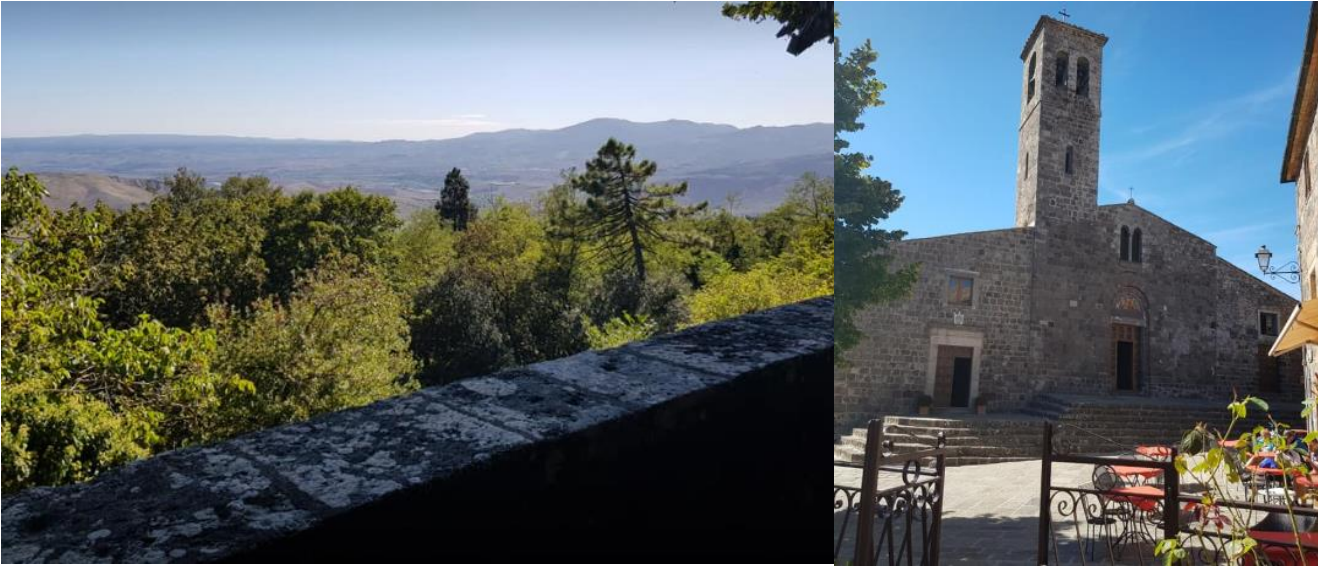
Tuesday 25th September: Siena to Radicofani

45.7 miles: 4 hrs 1 mins: 3,668 ft elevation

Today I've been having problems with wind yes I'll feed you the easy lines and you can knock them out of the park ... meteorological rather than gastric. So today there has been a really strong and gusty wind from the East all day, particularly up here in the hills. Wind is one of the cyclist's worst enemies. Hills by comparison are easy. You can see a hill, you know when it is going to end, there is even a sense of achievement when you get to the top of Boxhill or whatever - none of these things is true of wind. It is strength sapping and soul destroying. And as I found out today, when you have a load of luggage on your bike, it acts as a kind of sail, and you keep getting nearly blown off the road or into the path of incoming traffic. Sometimes today it was so strong I was pedalling downhill. Also I knew the temperature had dropped - which was fine because 22 is much better for cycling than 32, which it has been, but the strong wind meant for much of the day it was positively chilly.

It's a shame really because in many ways today was an ideal ride. Short - 46 miles, through beautiful Tuscan countryside, and although I knew it had quite a bit of climbing that wouldn't be too bad in a ride that length. Actually the climb at the end was the best part of the ride. The road had been rising slowly, but then I turned off the main road (which now is signposted 'Roma' which is rather encouraging) and there was a steep 5 mile climb up to the extraordinary mountain village of Radicofani. From miles away I could see a fortress perched up on a mountain top - and I thought, no I can't possibly be heading up there - but I was, right up to 2600 ft. It's like a mini Siena in its style of architecture, but right on top of a mountain with just the most amazing views around. It's the last really hard climbing I will have to do, though it is hilly all the way to Rome - and the first time I have been able to end a ride at the top of a mountain and stay there. In fact now I look at the map the road to Radicofani is just a detour from the main road to Rome which I will rejoin tomorrow - but I'm rather glad I didn't bypass this lovely place, even if the climb was hard.

I'm in a slightly eccentric little house on the corner of the main square opposite the church. It's lovely and quaint, but nothing has been updated since 1947. I love it, but if I don't blog tomorrow it'll be because the cooker, one of those hot water heaters over the bath that is illegal because they often explode, or indeed the bathroom chandelier, has killed me



Wednesday 26th September: Radicofani to Viterbo

48.8 miles: 3 hrs 23 mins: 1,795 ft elevation

I'm sorry if you were following my on live track today, but there is a little glitch in the system. So 17 miles after starting I came to the end of the GPS trace, which rather startlingly stopped 85 miles north of Rome. However when you switch from one route to another, live track gets in a bit of a mood, and won't start again - hence there was only live track for 17 miles - however you'll also see another Strava upload (2 for today) which shows the further 32 miles to Viterbo. So ironically near the end and near Rome I was for the first time cold on this ride. I put on an extra jacket, but even so as I descended from the hill town of Radicofani it was absolutely freezing. Again not helped by the infernal wind, but more of that in a moment. So today was not the longest or hardest ride, and was through, again, nice Tuscan countryside. After the first long cold descent it was quite pleasant to come to the last couple of climbs on this ride - nothing like previous adventures, but 30 minutes is enough to get warm and get the muscles properly warmed up. But again the whole day was slightly ruined again by this infernal wind, particularly as today was mostly at a bit of altitude. Particularly as I passed Lake Bolsena and the gusts blew across the open road it was quite a job to keep the bike on the road, Sometimes I slowed to a snail's pace just to deal with the cross winds. However I survived, and I do hope it drops a bit tomorrow. So now I'm in Viterbo - this is a very attractive walled mediaeval city, of which I have posted some pictures.



Thursday 27th September: Viterbo to Rome

52.5 miles: 4 hrs 01 mins: 2,589 ft elevation

So today has been a good day! Arrived in Roma. Left Viterbo just before 9 with the blessings of my very nice b n b host. For the second day running and the second day of the entire trip it was chilly enough to wear a long sleeve jersey. But the wind had dropped, and the sun was out - according to my host in Rome it is one of the clearest days he has seen. Anyway as soon as I left I had route paranoia and had to check several times I was going the right way. I was now relying on a route planner called Strava rather than an actual route - and I could see two places where it was going to take me off road, and had thought that in each case I would see how it went both times it was interesting. There was a climb early on - nothing too daunting but enough to get the legs warmed up. Then came the first off road bit - on chalk roads. The roads themselves were not too bad - though had to be taken at a slower pace - but then at one point they tried to lead me over a fenced up field - luckily I was able to plan a little detour without too much trouble. Then came the second and larger climb of the day - not too bad, in fact feeling rather good by this point. And was pleased to see a car and three cyclists slowly going ahead of me - I thought in my moment of pride I will race past them and then stop at the top and gloat (that's the way my mind works) - but then I realised that they were going slow because running in front of them was a stray dog. Now it quickly became apparent that although he looked a bit of a hard nut, the dog was rather friendly, but just wanted to run with the leader of the pack - I was now with my overtaking manoeuvre, the leader of the pack - and the dog was making a nuisance of himself running alongside. So the triumphant stop

planned at the top of the last climb, became a speedy down hill romp to lose the dog. Once down the climb I came to the next possibly off road section at Lake Bracciona - going along the top of the head land to avoid the descent into Trevignano Romano. So again I looked at the road, and it was nicely tarmacked so I sped along it. The problem was it was tarmacked for precisely 2/3 of the way, ending abruptly at a hill top cross (what happened to the reforms of Josiah?). Not only did the tarmac disappear, but the path became a rocky track, barely navigable by foot. It was too late to go back, so it was a mile slow walk. However after a brief descent it was time for a break, knowing that the climbs and off road sections were done, and there were only just over 20 miles to Rome. Obviously this was a good place to be, but I have to say the fine weather (off with the long sleeve jersey at this point), good tarmac, nice sweeping road, and beautiful landscape around the lake made it about the best riding of the trip. Just great. The last 20 miles into Rome were all they should have been. Sweeping past Roman traffic jams, good roads, bright sunshine, and a great route into the city, which seemed to avoid the hustle and bustle until the last couple of miles. I had luckily carefully plotted a route right to Justin's door, so the navigation was actually relatively easy. I was there just after 1.52 miles done today, 1500 for the trip. So then after a grateful unpack and a shower, I headed out on just the best walking tour of Rome - my thanks to Justin Lewis-Anthony who was just the best guide around the city. It was four hours we were out, but just wonderful - and some great views over the city, which I have posted. And so I am here in Rome. So before I completely lose your attention, I want to say a little bit about raising money for Herts Welcome Syrian Families. To be honest with you I was a bit reluctant to have this ride sponsored - I was worried things could go wrong, and I didn't particularly want the responsibility - however I realised that it was too good an opportunity to miss. And it was not me but members of St Mary's Welwyn who suggested HWSF. However at the end of the ride I can say what an inspired choice it was. So I learnt a lot on this ride. Mostly what I learnt was this - I had money, technology, a certain bed every night, a passport. I was in touch with loved ones as often as I wanted or needed to be. I could navigate my way to a supermarket, a laundry (v important), a hotel. I was never stopped at a border. I had a fantastic carbon fibre bike. And I enjoyed the whole experience, and it was certainly a terrific rewarding thing to do. But here is the rub - at times it was tiring, exhausting, frustrating, isolating and lonely - and if I hadn't had all those advantages it would have been grim. And I had a destination and a home to return to in good time. So I can only imagine what it must be like to be in the situation those Syrian families have found themselves. It doesn't matter about the politics - those families need our help and our care. So if you haven't already given please give - you can do it though following the links on the church website - www.welwyn.org.uk - it

would be great if you could. Now it's time for more beer and more food so I will take my leave

