

Bordeaux 2015

Arrival

The group of 18 cyclists arrived at our hotel in the early afternoon on Tuesday and decided to explore the sights of Bordeaux. Unfortunately, there was a café bar next door so that sorted most of us out for the rest of the afternoon – but there wasn't much coffee consumed!

Dinner was booked for 8pm at a bar/restaurant close to the magnificent Bordeaux Cathedral. We elected for a set meal and washed the meal down with wine, beer and soft drinks - depending upon individual choice. Sue, our language specialist, proceeded to co-ordinate the ordering of food and translated the trickier items on the menu. The usual suspects proceeded to mix beer and wine with merry abandonment. Around 10.30pm the dedicated cyclists decided to head back to the hotel for an early night in preparation for a tough day tomorrow. Alan, Denis, Jim, Tony, Roy and Phil 1 headed into the town centre to have a couple of extra drinks. It became apparent at this time that Tony was having some difficulty with the language. Not French but English because whatever he said proved extremely difficult to understand. Denis was in his element. He sat across from Tony and delightfully said " Now I know what I look like when I'm pi**ed". The beer flowed for most of us though the odd coffee began to appear in the early hours. Tony and Denis decided to entertain us with an arm wrestle which Denis won by default in lieu of Tony raising his arm as he went for the killer push. It really was getting time for bed so the troops hit the sack at 1.30am hoping to make breakfast at 7.30am in the morning.

Ride Day 1 – Bordeaux to Lacanau Ocean

Everyone made breakfast in the morning although Jim was a little queasy so kept food to a minimum. There was an air of excitement in the dining room and all the ladies had determined looks on their faces. You could sense that they were up for a tough day ahead. Our cycle provider O2 Cycles was due to deliver the bikes around 8am and as we emerged from the Hotel Continental we were pleased to see the bikes across the street. The eighteen hybrid bikes each had a name sticker and Norbert and his colleague from O2 proceeded to set them up to our personal requirements. They were thorough in every aspect of the preparation - checking seat heights, explaining the gears, demonstrating how to use the computer, checking helmet fittings, providing high quality locks, baskets holding spare inner tubes, pump, puncture kits etc. However, as we began fixing our rucksacks onto the panniers we were a little shocked when it began to rain. After avoiding the short downpour we posed for a team photo and then were ready for the off.

The hybrid bikes were a dream to ride. The gears were slick, the saddles were comfortable and the overall quality of the bikes was excellent. It was a great start. Unfortunately, we had to commence with only 17 riders as Martin had reported that he was experiencing problems with his knee and wasn't making the ride but travelling down by train to meet us in Lacanau Ocean.

Jim guided us down to the riverside and through the city to reach the dedicated cycleway which follows the route of a former railway line. We had a few teething problems with rucksacks slipping from panniers but Phil 2, our technical baggage specialist, rectified the issues and it was full speed ahead. The route was clearly

marked and the cycleway surface was in good condition. It was easy to ride on apart from the occasional tree root making a bump in the tarmac. It took a while to clear the suburbs of Bordeaux but once we did we were travelling through countryside and wooded sections that gave some protection from the sun that was heating up as the morning progressed.

We soon encountered our first minor crisis when Denis discovered that he had lost his white Active Living drinks bottle. He was gutted that none of the cyclists following behind had spotted the bottle falling from his bike. We continued on to our first drinks stop at La Gare Loisirs, a former railway station converted into a café/restaurant, at Saint Medard. A welcome break was enjoyed by all with Joyce, Ray, Doreen and Denis trying out the bicycle stools to keep in trim for the remainder of the ride. Everyone was coping admirably with the pace at this stage with Doreen, Enid, Jean and Margaret up near the front and all the ladies travelling along comfortably at a steady speed.

The next leg of the ride took us into the village of Sainte-Helene where we stopped for lunch at a small patisserie. Sue's linguistic skills were in evidence again as she coordinated the ordering of baguettes, drinks etc from the charming French lady owner. She was clearly delighted that we had proceeded to clear out her bread supply and took her own photograph of the group sitting in the sunshine outside her shop. During the stop Ray and Phil 2 had become enamoured with a headless dummy at the shop front so pictures were taken with their new friend. We prepared to leave and members of the group visited the public toilets across the square before doing so. Elaine understandably refused to enter the toilet after Denis had eventually emerged giving a severe warning to anyone prepared to follow him in.

A rejuvenated Jim took us back to the cycleway and set a rapid pace after the lunch break. Not everyone was quite so enthusiastic so after a few kilometres Jim had to be reined in to allow the peloton to re-form. He then took a back seat as others took it in turns to take the lead. It was getting hot in the afternoon sun as we reached the 50 kilometre mark. One or two in the group were now feeling the heat so the pace had to remain steady as we headed for Lacanau and our afternoon drinks break. We enjoyed drinks in the shade and the bar staff agreed to provide us with free water top ups from their cool water machine - a much needed boost.

The final leg down to Lacanau Ocean took us past caravan parks and along a few short stretches of road. It was on one of these stretches that Andy came a cropper attempting to fool about with Denis. Andy hit the deck tearing a hole in Denis' as he sought to stop himself from falling. Elaine patched Andy up but he had nasty looking grazes on his knee, hand and elbow. The last few kilometres proved tough going for a few cyclists, especially the wounded Andy, but most made it to our destination relatively comfortably. The newbies were delighted that they had passed the test on Day 1 and were clearly looking forward to the challenges ahead. We had travelled 70 kilometres and could finally park the bikes in the rear of the hotel and give our backsides a well deserved rest.

We separated into small groups for the rest of the afternoon with a few exploring the town centre while others headed to the beach. Waves were crashing onto the beach so bathing was strictly off limits but Alan and Jim ventured into the surf pool that was circulating around the sandy beach and back out to the sea. A few others paddled in the cool waters of the Atlantic.

We decided to eat in the hotel restaurant that night and the attractive bar staff set up tables for us. Martin had appeared following his train journey down from Bordeaux and we proceeded to enjoy an excellent al fresco meal. As the night wore on the

weather turned colder so we headed inside. The group began to disintegrate after 10pm leaving the usual suspects from the previous night joined by Harold, Phil 2 and Andy. There was the usual lively banter and considerable drooling (by some who shall not be named) over one of the female bar staff who had attended to us throughout the night. With lightning flashing outside and rain lashing down we decided against leaving the hotel. Lights began to be switched off as the bar staff made it clear that they were ready for home. We took the hint and hit the sack at 12.15pm thanking the bar staff for the freebie last round. We must be good customers!

Ride Day 2 – Lacanau Ocean to Arcachon

We set out early for the next stage of the ride. Jim and Tony encountered some difficulties finding the cycleway as we left the suburbs of Lacanau Ocean but we eventually found the route. The first section took us through pine forests that provided much needed shade from the hot sun piercing through the clouds. Riders at the back of the group engaged in singing excerpts from old songs while asking others around them to name the artist. Imaginary points were granted to the rider who came up with the correct answer.

After an hour or so Alan, Denis and Phil 1 decided to have a short blast through the forest before stopping near a camp site café for a drinks top up. Alan and Denis soon set off again with others gradually following. The early leavers motored through the forest for some distance eventually meeting up with Alan and Denis at a signpost where the cycleway emerged from the forest to meet a busy road. It soon became clear that the second group of 8 cyclists had been delayed. The chain on Margaret's bike had jammed and it needed a lot of effort before Ray finally managed to release it. Andy had also been having difficulties with his brakes catching on the wheel rim and slowing him down. The leading group contacted the second group by mobile phone to arrange a meeting point and it was agreed that we would reunite close to Biganos after lunch. Group 1 ate baguettes/sandwiches at Pretty Foodies, a roadside mobile café in Biganos whilst Group 2 dined on a three course lunch at a café in Ares. Unfortunately, it proved impossible to reunite the groups after lunch as the gap between the groups proved too wide so the groups continued separately on to Arcachon.

Group 1 continued with the pop quiz with the competitors being frustrated at not knowing who sang Uptown Top Ranking. Several hours later Phil 1 revealed that it was Althia and Donna who had sung the number 1 hit. The pop quiz was followed by a few movie questions. Harold baffled everyone when asking them to name a movie with a four word title that was the first that Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster did together. The group wasn't too impressed when the answer was revealed a couple of hours later as "Gunfight at the OK Corral" (five words Harold!). The final section of the journey into the town involved a section of road bounded in places by a rough path. It was on this section that Jean was involved in an accident. Phil 1 had lost his balance cycling over a piece of concrete as he transferred from the rough path back onto the road. Jean who was following close behind swerved to avoid him and fell into the road. She had hit her face on the road badly grazing her chin and bloodying her nose. A French gentleman driving a vehicle that narrowly missed her stopped to offer his help. He was a lovely man and he also provided us with guidance on how to find our hotel in Arcachon. A second Frenchman pulled up across the road on his Harley Davidson to offer his help which was reassuring to the group but his offer was

declined as Jean said she would be ok. She dealt resolutely with the accident and after the blood flow was finally stemmed the group was able to continue into the town.

Group 2 meanwhile had strayed off the route on the outskirts of Arcachon where the signage had been unusually poor. Sue had attempted to obtain a lift on a fire engine but failed to convince the fireman that it was worth risking his job for! With both groups finding it awkward to locate Le Dauphin hotel it was no surprise that they reached their destination within about 15 minutes of each other. Each group had covered around 90 kilometres on the day dependent upon the deviations in their route. The hotel was a fine looking building with a swimming pool at the rear and Tony, Alan, Jim, Ray and Phil 1 took a quick dip before changing for dinner. A fine meal was enjoyed in a nearby restaurant with several members of the group indulging themselves with a variety of excellent seafood dishes. Some members of the group headed for bed after the meal while others headed for a seafront bar/restaurant to end off the night.

Ride Day 3 – Arcachon to Bordeaux

Martin joined the group on the final leg of the journey so a full complement of riders took part. Most of the group were feeling pretty good ready for the final journey though one of the ladies reported that she had a blister in a rather uncomfortable place!

We set off around 8.30am to cycle down to the ferry that would take us across the bay and enable us to pick up our planned route back to Bordeaux. The boat operators were clearly well used to loading bikes on the small ferry boat and succeeded in placing all 18 bikes on the roof. The bay crossing took about half an hour and we were then able to begin the cycle back to Bordeaux. It took a little while for Jim and Tony to guide us through a network of roads that would eventually take us on to the dedicated cycleway. It was soon apparent that it was going to be a very hot day. The route initially took us through woodland before meeting open countryside. In the blazing sunshine several members were finding it hard going but the group stayed together travelling at a steady pace through to lunch in the village of Le Porge. Some chose to dine on baguettes from a local patisserie, the Pain Du Lac. Others enjoyed a sit down meal at the Pick-up café nearby. Both groups stood in silence for 1 minute at 1.00pm in memory of the people who had lost their lives in the recent terrorist incident in Tunisia. The group in the café were gratified that some local French people in the café joined them in the minute's silence.

The group reunited at the café and as we departed a comical member of staff sounded a klaxon horn to highlight our departure. The ride became tougher and tougher in the 40 degree afternoon sunshine. Regular water stops were taken and rehydration tablets and sachets proved a godsend for those who had them. There were few opportunities for water refills as the flat, linear route involved long sections of open countryside. When we reached a small enclave of properties Denis used his French language skills to obtain water refills from a young French guy who appeared to be recovering from a late night party the previous evening. "Scuse can we have some water" seemed to work well as the bemused young man ran back and forth to the tap as we each availed ourselves of the chance for a water top up.

During the latter stages of the ride it was decided that we would split into two groups allowing those riders who wished to travel more quickly to move ahead. We had now rejoined the cycleway that we had used two days earlier on our way out of Bordeaux

and so agreed to reconvene again for a drinks stop at the station café we had attended on the way out. This provided much needed respite from the blazing sun which was not cooling though we were now getting into the late afternoon. After drinks and a fill up of water we had a group photo on the old train engine before setting off in two groups.

The last section of the ride was proving tortuous for most of us on the long stretches of straight cycleway that seemed to be never ending. A few cyclists were beginning to display signs of severe heat exhaustion. Sue, who was in the second group, was lying flat on her back at one point when an ambulance driver waved as he went past. Her hopes of a lift into the city were dashed, however, when the ambulance failed to return for her. Both groups gradually eased their way into the city to finally reach the Hotel Continental having completed around 95 kilometres on the day. The second group had arrived around 7.30pm with Alan, Enid and Doreen from the first group arriving shortly afterwards as they had toured the city trying to find the hotel. Elaine reckoned that her Garmin showed that she had cycled just over 157 miles during the three days. Others may have done more dependent upon how often they strayed from the intended route! It was a fine achievement given the difficult weather conditions. Everyone was able to let their hair down on the final night in the beautiful city of Bordeaux. We had split up into smaller groups for our meals but met together in a bar close to the hotel to end the night. It would be the final time that some of us would be asked to leave a bar to allow the staff to close down. It was 12.30am and kids were still playing football in the square outside the bar. Denis failed to impress us with his football expertise as the bewildered kids watched him blundering around the square attempting to show us his dribbling skills.

Homeward Bound

The following morning we packed our rucksacks for the final time and headed for the airport. We could take satisfaction from our achievements over the three days of cycling. It had been a great experience. Before we boarded the plane we offered our thanks to Jim for his outstanding work in organising the cycling holiday, to Joyce for the research she had conducted to assist Jim in his preparation and Sue for using her excellent French language skills to help us before and during the trip. That's it until next year!