

The ride

In the after glow of completing the great Victorian Bike ride and primed with the confidence boosting effects of a red wine or two I decided that joining a Copenhagen to Paris bike tour would be a grand adventure. Slowly thereafter it dawned on me that as a result of telling various people of the plan and by inviting my daughter Miranda to join me I was committed to the ride.



On Friday July 6; in Copenhagen we were introduced to the rest of the team and a short ride in the city out to the Little Mermaid statue and back to our hotel. Not a good start for me as I fell off on the cobble stones grazing an elbow and spraying a surprising amount of blood around.





There was a big difference to Melbourne in the reactions of the motorists. One who witnessed the whole event stopped his car in the middle of the busy road and got out with a roll of paper towels to attend to me. Meanwhile all the other traffic merely juggled their way around his car without any honking, tooting or shouting. Along our whole journey the motorists were amazingly courteous and accommodating of cyclists. Not quite so much in Paris, however.

That first night at dinner when we all did an introduction I discovered that virtually all of the other participants had done multiple long distance tours. A bit sobering to compare their experience with my situation of my longest one day ride to date being 70kms with a 2 hour lunch break in the middle. I was also the oldest participant bar one gentleman; however he was riding an electric assisted bike.



Next morning we set off on a 85km ride to Rodvig, our path out of Copenhagen including the extraordinary “bike snake” elevated bicycle path. Most of the journey was on dedicated bike paths quarantined from motor traffic.

On those city roads where we did ride with the traffic turning left entailed navigating the “Copenhagen Left” better known to Melbourne-ites as the “hook turn”.



After leaving the city our route was through the countryside of Denmark with little traffic, along the Præstø Fjord, one of the many fjords in the area that features salt marshes before leaving the Seeland peninsula and crossing over onto Lolland Island, the fourth largest island in Denmark to Maribo and a fresh local beer..



The beaches along the way were divided up into commercially managed blocks peppered with rental deck chairs and umbrellas. At least the ice creams



were available for the passing travellers.

Our last stop in Denmark was the port town of Rodby before a 45min ferry ride into Germany and then up and over the 1km Fehmarn Island bridge. It was blowing a screaming gale as we crossed the bridge.

The authorities declared that because of the 30knot cross wind it was too dangerous to ride the bridge and obliged us to walk the bikes over. Not a pleasant experience at all.



Once over the bridge the same wind continued to present a challenge and regardless of whichever way the trail twisted and turned the wind managed to remain in our faces.

Germany presented us with rolling hills through farmland; mostly cropping country with a preponderance of canola and maize before arriving in the very attractive town of Eutin. Unfortunately for us our arrival was not during their famous week long open air blues festival.

Much of the journey from Eutin to Lubeck in German was along the very busy with summer holiday crowds waterfront of the Timmendorfer Strand before heading inland to Lübeck. The beach completely divided up among companies renting out deck chairs and umbrellas.

Entering Lubeck entailed catching a compulsory free shuttle bus that ferries bicycles etc through the Herrin tunnel under the Trave river. The narrow tunnel is too busy with motor traffic to safely allow cyclists etc.





We really did appreciate Lubeck with its UNESCO listed Gothic architecture.

Next stop Hamburg, the second largest city of Germany which describes itself as the gateway to the world. A rather bold statement based on its large and very busy port. We had a well earned rest day in Hamburg. A day for sight seeing, relaxing and laundry.

By that stage we had settled into the rhythm of the ride and were comfortable with rides of 100kms or more on successive days.



Of the many highlights in Hamburg I was most struck by the war memorial based around the cathedral that rather than being rebuilt it has been preserved in its damaged state.

A memorial that acknowledges the suffering of the Hamburg populace and considers the plight of all participants in the war including the allied pilots.

In Hamburg and in some other places there are brass plaques set into the pavement. Each plaque is set in front of a home from whence someone was exported to a concentration camp or befell another example of persecution.



I felt that the German people had succeeded in coming to terms with the crimes of the Nazi era but were having difficulty in acknowledging the sacrifices of their own war dead.

From Hamburg we progressed to Bremen through very fertile flat farmlands. Orchards, berry fruits and intensive livestock. Riding along narrow country roads we'd come up against enormous farm machinery, tractors with humungous tyres pulling giant manure spreading trailers and smelling appropriately. All along the way we were blessed with the smell of intensive agriculture, cattle, pigs, poultry, silage and abattoirs each had their distinctive odour signature.

Small villages and farm houses with richly decorated half-timbered houses characterized the region. Very little visible activity in many of these villages, in fact they often seemed to be closed, bordering on abandoned. A factor, I presume, of the same forces that are at play for agricultural communities around the world whereby as the smaller holdings become un economic they are amalgamated into larger farms that employ capital-intensive production techniques rather than labour.



Along with its historical significance Bremen claims to be the site of Brothers Grimm's tale of the animal musicians.



Enjoying harbour tour in Hamburg



Bright and early each morning one member of the support team would head off with a bottle of chalk dust and mark the trail for us. When I first heard of this system of arrows and cautionary symbols as our navigation system, I was, frankly, dubious and contemplated bringing my own GPS, maps and sat phone in order to rescue myself from the inevitable “lost in foreign parts” syndrome. I totally misjudged how well the system would work.



We unerringly (well almost unerringly) followed those arrows for almost 2000kms to the outskirts of Paris. Through cities, byways, roundabouts, highways and cobblestoned-paths the system guided us securely. Occasionally amusing us by comments chalked on the road surface.

Frequently one would be riding along thinking that they had not seen an arrow for a while and feeling a rising tide of “arrow apprehension” and concern that a turning may have been missed. Just as the tension nudged a feeling of time-to-turn-back the comfort of arrows would return. Somehow or another the marker of the day knew just the right psychological distance at which to place the next instruction.



After a hearty breakfast of breads, cheeses, cereals, fresh fruits and the usual hotel buffet of bain-marié eggs, bacon and sausages we discretely pocketed a snack for lunch and collected our bikes. Depending on that day’s distance we would be on the road between 8 and 9.30am. For those who needed or desired a lift, a ride in one of the vans was available.

Most days most riders would be off their bikes by 1 or 2pm, depending on how much time they devoted to coffee, photos and cake shops along the way.



Once all the luggage, passengers and spare bikes was loaded a van would find a safe spot some distance up the road where riders could top up their water bottles, collect a piece of fruit or snack bar or just have a pause and a chat before heading off again. There was no race, no

time table, just a muster time for the next day's briefing scheduled before dinner at the next hotel where our luggage would be awaiting us. As well as the vans along the way two staff members would ride the route keeping an eye out for trouble or challenges and lending assistance if required.

There was always time for a cuppa along the way and a well earned beer on

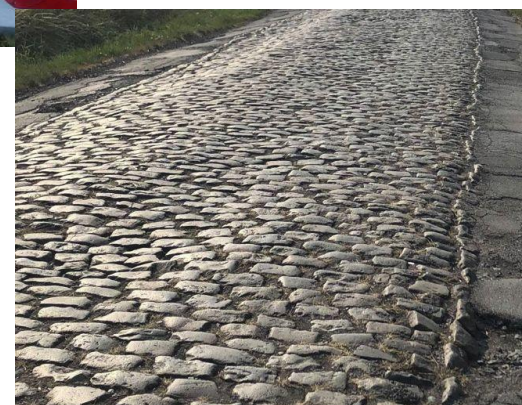


arrival



Also plenty of time on the road for photos, sight seeing and general levity.

Cobblestones however do not qualify as part of the general levity. Occasionally smooth, always picturesque but frequently gut, bike and butt punishingly horrid. Some cobbles had been down for hundreds, occasionally a thousand plus years and others they were laying as we rode along. Although I must concede most of the new ones are brick paving with the occasional long stretch ball-room smooth; a real credit to the paving contractors.



A notable feature in Denmark, Germany the Netherlands and Belgium was the respect and courtesy with which the motor traffic treated cyclists. Several times I saw a car come to a halt with the bumper just nudging onto the bike lane and

immediately select reverse and back up well clear of the bike lane. Not an action that I would expect to see at home. I suspect that a fundamental difference is that all motorists in that region have been, or still are, cyclists as adults. Whereas in Australia the vast majority of motorists would not have been on a bike since their early teen years.



Cycle infrastructure through the region is well developed with a view to encouraging cycling. Secure covered bike parking garages, thousands of kms of cycle paths, cycle bridges, elevators to move bikes to other road levels, roundabouts with segregated cycle lanes and traffic lights that give cyclists a few seconds start on the motorised traffic, all contributed to making our cycle experience safe and enjoyable.

It was quite a novel experience to enter a roundabout on the bike lane and have B-doubles and pantechnicons concede you the right of way.

The only blight on that system was the Dutch habit of allowing quite large and fast motor scooters to share the bike paths. The locals seem to deal with it OK but I found it quite un-nerving.



Day 9 we leave Bremen for Cloppenburg home to the largest outdoor museum in Germany. a reproduction of early farming community and buildings.



Our ride to Cloppenburg gives more exposure to German rural roads and villages. We pass roadside stalls with vending machines dispensing strawberries and other farm produce. Spotted cows, spotted pigs, spotted mini horses and although I did not see any, no doubt there were speckled hens.



Plenty of agricultural smells, the occasional obvious very affluent farm property and many villages so quiet that they seemed almost abandoned.

In southern Germany many roadside shrines all sporting large and often quite ornate crucifixes as their central and defining feature.

On our way to Coevorden we leave Germany and enter the Netherlands. Not much indication that we were in a new country other than the car registration plates. Mostly very smooth bike paths and some very narrow rural roads. On one such road we needed to negotiate our way around a garbage truck, a challenge that caused one rider some strife. He pulled over to the verge and put his foot down on the ground, unfortunately there was no ground and his foot slipped through the grass and down he went into the canal still clipped to his bike that followed him down. Very wet, very embarrassed and completely OK; much to the entertainment of the garbos.

Walking Coevorden's streets you can still see the 7 pointed star pattern of the fortified canal/moat that surrounded the 17th century city.



Our next stop is Kampen on the Ijssel a busy river port with a very impressive cluster of old buildings in the town centre.





Narrow roads, superlative bike paths, short patches of cobblestones and long wind-blown stretches on top of the dikes entertained us on our way to Kampen.

Extensive crops of wheat, corn, potatoes, canola, sugar beet and carrots flanked the open rural spaces. Other times we rode past houses with a boat at the back door and a cycle path to the front. Looked like a cycle path to us but to the locals managed to drive their cars down these narrow lanes.

Dozens of very attractive homes, any one of which would have warranted a stop and a photo in Australia.





On the twelfth day we enter Amsterdam after 110kms of easy riding mostly on waterfront bike paths. Not all of the ride easy, with some steep approaches to bridges, the occasional conflict with motor scooters and head winds.

The scooters, some of them quite large and fast shared what to us seemed to be restricted to bicycle traffic. On the outskirts of the city Miranda and I had our nearly terrorist incident. We were riding along in a string of three with a local in front, then Miranda and me in the rear. Suddenly there was a white explosion right next to the local rider who did well to stay on his machine. It soon became apparent that someone from three or four floors up had thrown at us a plastic bag full of frozen milk. A Stupid act that could easily have seriously injured or killed.





Having survived the milk attack we continued on into the city centre. Highlight of the ride was negotiating passage past Amsterdam Central Station. As we headed along within a heavy stream of bikes, cargo bikes, pedestrians and motor scooters with the ferry terminal on our right and the rail station to the left we met an equally frenetic stream coming the other way.



A cruise boat was disgorging tourists whose long term aim was to make the most of their few hours in Amsterdam and short term not to lose sight of their tour guide, jostled their way across from our right blending with ferry passengers rushing to catch their train. Add to the mix the counter flow of train travellers eager to catch their ferry all added to the challenge facing us foreign cyclists. Strangely enough it all sorted itself out without any observed incident and without us losing sight of our guiding arrows.

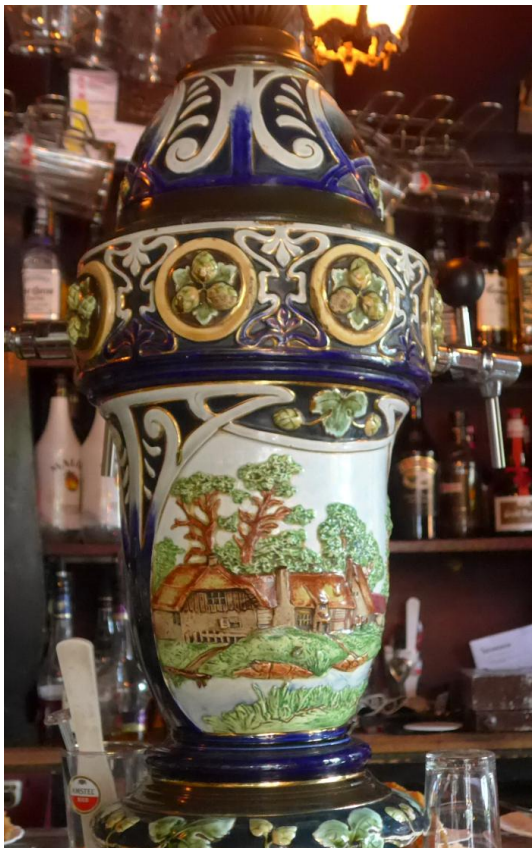


A free day allowed us to enjoy the city and relax with a city boat tour and try to get our heads around just how busy and developed this city was well before Europeans ventured into Australia..





House boats, canals, bicycles, old warehouses as homes, narrow streets, more bicycles, cheese and beer all coloured our impressions of Amsterdam. Especially this beer tap and stove in what was claimed to be the oldest continuously operating tavern in the city.



On the 14th day we left Amsterdam for Gouda via Utrecht.

Utrecht a stunningly beautiful university town and one where we found a free underground multi storied bike parking facility complete with parking attendants, bar-coded tickets needed to retrieve your bike and a bike travelator.

Outside our Gouda hotel a Lego styled cow constructed from enormous concrete blocks.



And this strange statue of man carrying a donkey. I have absolutely no idea what it was about but do know that the town hall was all about a display of power and wealth.



Downtown Gouda (pronounced something like G-howda) almost completely given over to showcasing cheese and peddling cheesy souvenirs on to the tourist.





On our journey from Gouda to Antwerp in Belgium we traversed the iconic UNESCO World Heritage Site along our route; the Kinder-dijk. Nineteen majestic windmills align to form a memorable and stunning sight



Here at last as we leave the Netherlands the most iconic vista of this magic landscape --- windmills!!





As we enter Belgium the only indication that we have changed countries is a chalk mark on the road.

More excellent bike paths, more canals, more small villages and still more windmills.



Our visit to Antwerp coincided with market day, flowers, fruit, cheese and colour. Colourful produce, colourful stalls, colourful people. Our bikes over-nighted in a chapel..





Our hotel was in an old hospice, Antwerp's first hospital, and included a preserved 13th century chapel. Some unthinking members of the tour caused much distress by moving their bikes off the designated tarpaulin and lent them up against the ancient and fragile woodwork of the choir.

Not one of the tour highlights!!



A short ride allowed a late start from Antwerp and head across marshlands towards Ghent.

Ghent in the Middle Ages was one of the world's richest cities based on the wool from these marsh lands.

En route we navigated the Schelde tunnel by taking the bikes down to tunnel level in the lift.

Entrance to Ghent marred by very unfriendly cobble stones!!



On the way we paused for a cuppa complete with a timer for the brew.



Saint Bravo's cathedral Ghent



Gent's St Bravo's cathedral is stunning inside and out and dominates the centre of the city.

A city that for the tourist compares with any other that we visited. St Bravo's and the city centre provide the sublime while the whale skeleton within the cathedral provides the ridiculous.

The day of our visit the centre was given over to the Ghent Jazz Festival, the streets packed with visitors, with music stages, locals in costume and with souvenir and beer vendors.

A good place to spend a week in July.









From Ghent to Bruges a relatively short ride through most attractive countryside and for much of the journey on paths alongside canals.



A feature of cycle paths, country roads and canals in this area were the long avenues of oak trees pruned to grow tall and straight. A most pleasing sight and one providing welcome shade on the hot days.

Next stop Bruges and its canals, beer, chocolate, beer, history, tourists, beer, teeth shattering cobble stones, spectacular medieval city square, tourists, beer, canals and tourists.



In Bruges we had a day off the bikes to soak up the atmosphere of this iconic city. A highlight of which was a very informative and entertaining walking tour. With its narrow streets and many canals it is easy to see why some label Bruges as the “Venice of the North”

The last stop on the tour was the "Beguinage" a 13th century closed town within the town reserved for members of a community of lay women.





Day 19 we left Bruges for Roubaix in France riding through farmlands with both large and small properties evident through country peppered with WW1 cemeteries. Hard to equate this peaceful and productive landscape with the horrors of trench warfare. Leaving behind also the celebration of a thousand plus beer brands that is Belgium.





Lunch stop on the road to France

Our first destination in France is Roubaix, made famous for the annual Paris Roubaix cycle race and the horrendous cobblestone sections of that route. We experience some of those stones and complete a lap of the historic Roubaix velodrome.



We left Roubaix for Arras following part of the route (in the opposite direction) that the Tour d France circus were to ride a few days later.

While we struggled to maintain enough momentum to stay upright on the legendary broken pave the Tour riders would storm over them at 50kph or more..



We soon discover why Arras gained its status as a UNESCO World Heritage site; stunning buildings, including the listed Hotel d Ville, and massive open squares and a underground tunnel complex in which 24,000 allied troops were hidden before the WW1 battle of Arras a decisive turning point in the war.

AT THE END OF 1916 THE NEW ZEALAND TUNNELLING COMPANY, COMPRISED OF FEWER THAN 500 MEN, HAD THE TASK OF CONVERTING THE QUARRIES UNDER THE CITY OF ARRAS. THESE MINERS FROM THE ANTIPODES DUG MORE THAN 8 KILOMETERS OF TUNNELS IN 6 MONTHS TO CREATE AN UNDERGROUND NETWORK OF ABOUT TWENTY KILOMETRES AND A BASE CAPABLE OF ACCOMMODATING 24,000 MEN.

RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN BY THE CARRIERE WELLINGTON, ALONG WITH LINKS ESTABLISHED WITH NEW ZEALAND AND THE FAMILIES OF DESCENDANTS HAVE RESULTED IN THE COLLECTION OF NUMEROUS ARCHIVES AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE NEW ZEALAND TUNNELLERS WHO WORKED IN THE FORMER CHALK QUARRIES BETWEEN 1916 AND 1917. THEIR VOICES WILL ALWAYS RESONATE THROUGH THE LETTERS AND TESTIMONIES HEARD IN THE BACKGROUND. TRIBUTE TO THE UNIQUE WORK AND KNOW-HOW OF THESE TUNNELLERS, THIS MOSAIC OF PORTRAITS IS AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN VISITORS TODAY WITH THE TUNNELLERS WHO HAVE FOREVER MARKED THE HISTORY OF ARRAS.

From Arras we headed for Amiens crossing the Somme river and passing many war cemeteries.

At Villers-Bretonneux we visited the John Monash memorial to the Australian service personnel killed in the WW1 battles. The township displays many visible tributes to Australia with Aussie street names, and murals featuring kangaroos very prominent.

The local school quadrangle is decorated with Aboriginal-painting style motifs and a large overhead banner reads 'Do Not Forget Australia'.

The town hall facade features kangaroos flanking the "liberté, égalité, fraternité! sign. 2018 marked the 100th year anniversary of these battles.

Very hard to correlate the mud and blood soaked devastation of the Somme battlefields with the wide open and peaceful croplands of today. Just to stand amongst the headstones or read the endless list of names soon shakes ones emotion equilibrium to the core. I was completely overcome by the enormity and the senselessness of it all.



Amiens boasts a UNESCO Site Gothic Cathedral that rivals Paris's Notre Dame.

All along this journey we have been amazed at the size, complexity and beauty of the cathedrals and churches.



It is hard with today's mindset to comprehend how much effort and resources every town city and village invested in their places of worship. All built without tower cranes or digital design tools and over time scales that often meant that several generations would pass before completion



Almost where ever one looked there was evidence of gratitude for the foreign troops who fought to save these lands 100 years ago.

For some the museum to the life and works of Jules Verne the prolific author was an extra attraction in Amiens.

From Amiens our route took us by way of farmlands, forests and a small hills to Beauvais. As our expedition had progressed South the crops were further advanced and in better condition. By Beauvais most of the cereal crops had been harvested and the stubble baled or on rare occasions burnt. .

Beauvais cathedral looks spectacular but is in seriously bad condition. Large chunks of ornamental masonry lie scattered around the grounds, some serious steel works are visible up high tying it all together and inside very heavy construction works stopping the whole thing from collapsing on itself.

Inside an interesting mixture of medieval and modern, including digital, art works.



Probably much to the surprise of some Ryanair passengers Beauvais is home to one of Paris' secondary airports.

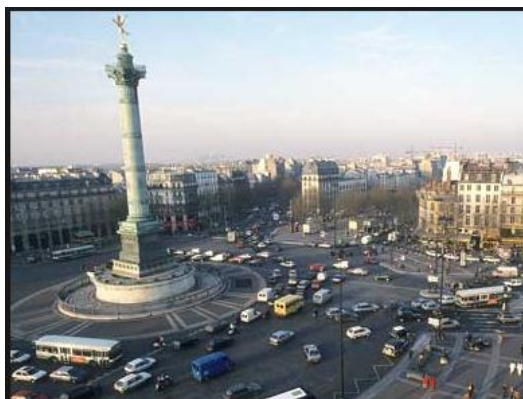
The ride into Beauvais was very hot and consequently the hills seemed steep and long. All of which made the beer on arrival most appreciated.



:From Beauvais we set off on the final leg to Paris. Some very pleasant forested paths with a few hills and not quite as hot.

As we approached Paris the ever faithful arrows ceased to be our guide thanks to a police prohibition on their use.

We all met up beside the Seine at Conflans-Sainte-Honorine where it is joined by the river Oise. From there in two guided packs we wound our way into the heart of the city.



We successfully navigated the Place de la Bastille and into the Tuileries gardens at Place de Concorde for the celebratory "we made it!!" photos.

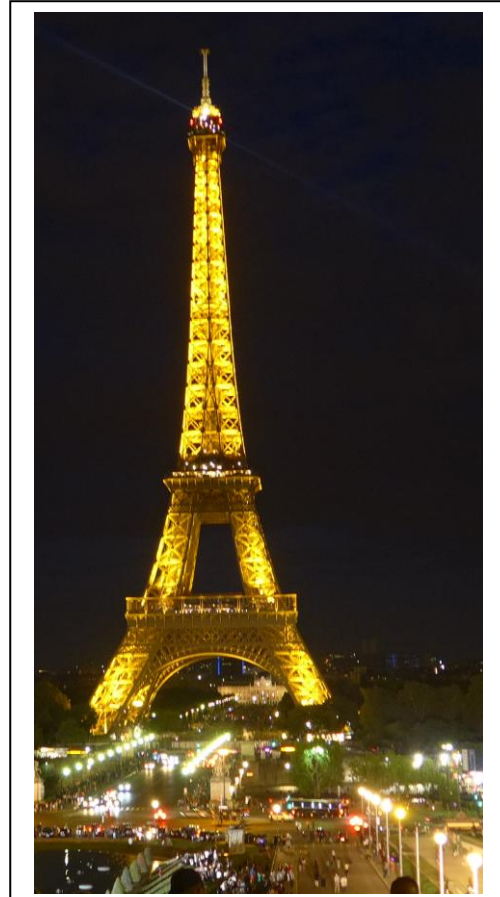
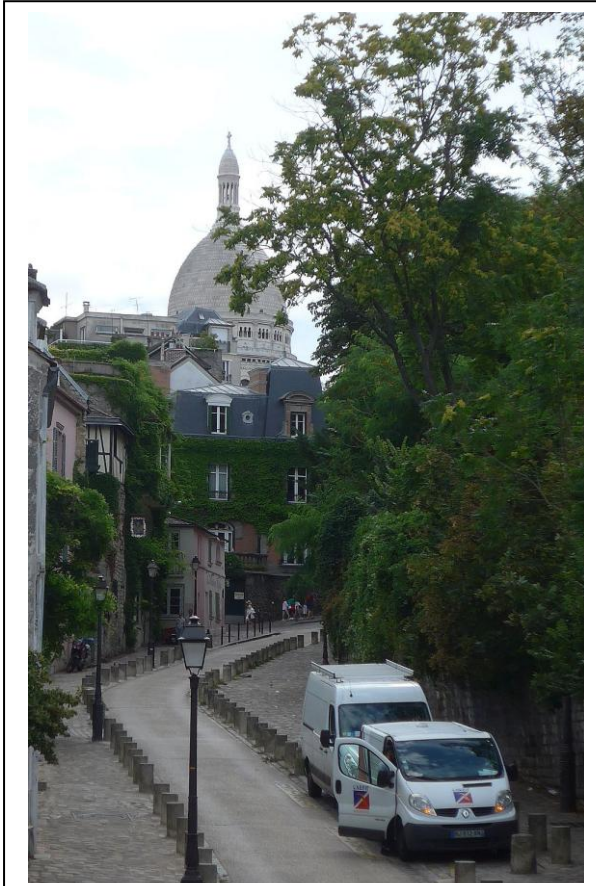
After champagne all round, much back slapping and congratulations we worked our way up the Champs Elysees to, for the last time, surrender our bikes and retire to our hotel.



And then there was Paris

After the ride Miranda and I enjoyed a couple of days as tourists in Paris. Paris, of course, is Paris and will always be there to be savoured and marvelled at. However one take home message that I have from our grand expedition is that the second tier cities and often equally rewarding to visit, equally exotic to the foreigner and much more tourist friendly; if only because there are relatively so few tourists.

A highlight of our Paris stay was a conducted walking tour of Montmartre a corner of the city that I had not visited before.



From Montmartre we walked all the way down to Notre Dame, there to be met by extremely long queues of tourists with almost nary a one sporting a hat in 37 degrees. Meanwhile just across the river was the church of Saint Eustache an equally valid tourist attraction with no queue.

For a few days prior to the tour starting I stayed with some friends in Southern Sweden and clocked up some training miles with them. Counting those days the tour comprised 6 countries, 4 weeks and 2122 kilometres.

I cannot thank Miranda enough for sharing this experience with me, for keeping me on track and for us coming through it all still being good father/daughter friends.

Thanks also to Jo and Richard of Alltrails tours for organising and promoting the tour.

And many thanks to all the others who shared this journey especially the cheerful, tolerant, understanding and helpful guides from ExperiencePlus.

And a big thank you to Susan for granting me the leave pass from husband duties in order to indulge in this adventure.

