

## Lost in France

It was meant to be a challenge and for me, Lawrence Buckley and Companions Tam Comrie, Dave Hall and our driver and Housing Services Manager Lee Bostock, it certainly turned out to be. Cycling 300 miles from Sheffield to Paris was, in my own delusional mind, going to be an absolute breeze... and it was so to speak. The problem was the breeze was blowing the wrong way. It was going North and we were heading South, or at least once we'd zipped across the North Sea to Zeebrugge on the overnight ferry. The ride from Sheffield to Hull on day 1 was done in bright sunshine and with the wind behind us and was to prove to be something of a rarity over the next 4 days.



**The road to Hull: Lawrence, Tam and Dave head East towards Hull docks and the ferry port**

So as we docked in Zeebrugge we prized ourselves from our tiny 4-man cabin, which I have to say, once we'd inserted all of our luggage looked like the lost property department of rural railway station. Luckily the air conditioning had been set to 'TURBO-BOOST' to deal with the nocturnal emissions of 4 adult men and none of the snorers had been suffocated with their own pillows by fellow group members during the night.

Once off the ferry we began to get lost. The GPS we were following must have been French as it didn't like Belgium and kept wanting to take us back to the ferry port. It

was an omen. So we tried to use our maps and headed South. We ended up getting lost in Bruges within the first hour but on the positive side we passed right through the beautiful central square and the heart of what makes the city a destination for many tourists... and clueless cyclists from South Yorkshire.

Eventually the GPS decided to send us on a southerly route and off we went, like maniacs on two wheels trying to make up for lost time. The paranoia of an Englishman abroad began to develop as I noticed a big black cloud on the horizon, probably sent over from Northern France, I thought, to thwart our attempts to enjoy the ride through continental Europe. It eventually began to spot with rain near the French/Belgian border. But the expected downpour turned out to be a bit of wind and some fairly pathetic drizzle. Ha! Was that all they had? I thought.

After crossing the border into France we began to follow the van and let Lee's sat nav do the routing for us. Lievin and our Hotel was eventually reached around 9.45pm by three very tired cyclists and a driver whose sat nav couldn't find the address.

Like true athletes once we were changed we headed down to the high street in search of a kebab shop. So it was kebab and chips all round and everyone was happy-ish.

The next morning we had breakfast and set out on our longest leg of the trip. An 80 mile jaunt through the Somme. Just North of Arras disaster struck as Tam reported his gears were jammed. We stopped outside a Czech war cemetery and on a closer inspection it was plain that his chain had got

somehow been bent and he was going to need a new one. After a fruitless 45 minutes of trying to sort this out myself we despatched him and Lee to Arras in search of a bike shop with the phrase "Ou est la velo magasin?" planted firmly on their lips. An hour or so later we had found a bike shop



and a new chain was fitted. Eighty miles in the saddle, cycling into the wind and the odd shower of rain was a big ask but we were up to the task. That night we reached the hotel very late again and after another superhuman change of costumes we found a restaurant that was open. We ate and chatted and laughed and returned to the hotel to sleep like dogs, drugged with fatigue.

### Disaster strikes outside of the town of Arras: Err... I think that's called a chain Dave?

The next day, our final day, was supposed to be our shortest. By this time I was walking like John Wayne and Tam had had his 3<sup>rd</sup> puncture. A mere 56 miles lay between us and Paris. And if it wasn't for a missed road sign and waiting for Dave to catch up when actually he 'd got in the van, we would have been fine. Heading to Claye Souilly on the North East of Paris we jumped on the Canal de l'Orc



and witnessed the drama of two intoxicated French men arguing and then one pushing the other in the water. The aggressor then began to try to retrieve his soggy friend and had to be assisted by a nearby fisherman. Realising our life saving skills were not required we cracked on. This route along the canal was chosen as it has a fantastic bike path that was tarmacked most of the way into Paris.

At one point I stopped to see how Tam was doing and witnessed one of the best somersaults on a bike I've ever seen. Always use both brakes and not just the front one I thought. I gave him a score of 9.9 for his artistic interpretation and execution. Had he completed the triple salka and the half pike then he'd have had a perfect 10. He's such a show off!

In the end Dave didn't quite make it to Paris which left me and Tam to complete the journey. We clocked up 74 miles and got hit by a thunderstorm that soaked us to the skin and ended up cycling through the very centre of Paris passing the Palace de la Concorde and weaving in and out of the often static traffic and kamikaze

### More problems: Lawrence repairs the 3<sup>rd</sup> of Tam's punctures

pedestrians. We stopped to take a picture of each other on one of the bridges over the Seine with the Eiffel Tower in the background, too tired to make a detour to the tower itself. When we reached our hotel we were met by lots of our colleagues from other Emmaus communities who congratulated us on our achievement. It was over and weren't we glad. A sense of achievement was somehow overshadowed by the sheer fatigue we were feeling and what we did as relative novices to cycling is only just sinking in now. Would we do it again? Well, like childbirth, as the negative memories fade and we're left with the positives, it's a distinct possibility and it would be a shame to not repeat the journey and not learn from some of the mistakes we made this time. So it's definitely a 'maybe'.