

Le Tour d'ARC – un bon voyage aka '2 punctures, 2 puddings and a paddle'

Members of the 2014 tour - Karen & Chris Waple, Jane and John Quinn, Wendy Sargeant, Liz Holt, Simon Hudson, Laurence Hewitt, Allan Hodson, Mandi Hodges & Dave Buckerfield, Paul & Jo Butler, and the 'mighty Rocket Ron' Reynolds.

The 2014 tour of Brittany was a 6 day trip with 4 days of cycling covering 170 undulating miles, off road and on road, starting and finishing in the beautiful port of St Malo.

Day 1 Portsmouth to St Malo

The trip started on Saturday when the group travelled down to Portsmouth and all gathered together at the port ready to embark on the Portsmouth to St Malo overnight ferry. We all headed to the passport control, all waved through except me and Jo who looking suspicious were called into the customs X-ray area.

Fortunately we had no guns, bombs or illegal drugs and were waved on our way into 'no mans land' and onto the ferry....or not! Just as we reached the ramp Jo realized she had left the passports in the x-ray area and I jumped on the bike and tried to head back to collect. A concerned member of security blocked my path and explained that it was not possible to go back and that he would 'try' and get someone to find them and bring them to us....I was calm as you would expect Jo not quite so and was heard to utter several expletives (sounding like the fashion chain FCUK). Several panicky minutes passed before we were reunited with 'les passports' and we were able to join the rest of the crew on the boat.

Once the bikes were secured in storage we all made our way up to the cabin deck and once we had all deposited our bags all made our way to the bar for the first of many beers of the trip. We managed to find a set of tables and chairs right in front of a big TV screen and sat and watched the European Cup final,

The match was heading for a victory for Athletico Madrid when suddenly there is a corner and it's a GOAL!!! Extra bloody time!!! We were all hoping that Real wouldn't equalize in the last minute so that we could go to bed.....but some of the group decided anyway to retire to their comfortable cabins but the die hards (and Allan & Ron who didn't have a cabin) decided to stay up and wait for the inevitable penalties.

Fortunately Real Madrid scored another 3 goals and spared us the 'extra' extra time of a penalty shootout and we all headed off to rest ahead of the start of our epic journey.

Day 2 St Malo to Hede 45 Miles

After a crossing that was almost flat calm, the ferry docked at 7:45am and we all disembarked in beautiful sunshine and cycled the short distance to the walls of St Malo to find somewhere to have 'le petit dejuner' while we waited for the short ferry ride to Dinard at 0930.

Once we had eaten our fill of 'croissant et pain', we assembled at the ramp for the short ferry ride across to Dinard and the real start of our journey.



The group was very well prepared with 3 Garmins loaded with the routes for each of the 4 days, and so it was a case of getting used to riding on 'the wrong side' of the road and following the maps guidance. Very quickly the group got into the peloton that would wind its way through the beautiful countryside of Brittany over the next 4 days.

The first day was to be off road following an old train track and canal towpaths of the 'Voie Verte' which we all thought would be a flat days cycling, but as we were to discover the route was more undulating than expected, with the second half of the route feeling that it was more up than down, but we were really just finding our cycling legs which was to stand us in good stead for the remainder of the trip. We headed off the track at lunchtime into the picturesque town of Dinan where we sat and had galettes in a lovely restaurant by the river. After lunch we headed back onto the track and on our way.



Day 1 seemed to have gone without a hitch when with the first hotel only a few miles away, Laurence had a puncture, initially he tried pumping it up, but very quickly realized that we had to change the inner tube. The group immediately jumped into action, Dave B, myself and Laurence stopping to replace the tube while the rest of the group 'buggered off' to the hotel and the bar!!



We were struggling with the complex task of removing the tyre, changing the tube, and refitting the tyre (there were only 3 engineers present after all) but fortunately we were 'helped' by an elderly French gentleman who in perfect French explained exactly what we were doing wrong. Dave was about to practice his French and thank him for his support (which sounded like the above mentioned fashion chain and off), but before we could say 'la plume de ma tante' we were up and running...well cycling anyway and headed off to the Hotel.

When we arrived at the l'hôtel 'Le Vieux Moulin', after a nasty little climb, we did in fact find the rest of the group in the garden drinking beer! They had of course bought us one.....well actually they hadn't as the hotel had run out of beer!!!! We were informed they had plenty of wine but Karen stepped up to the plate and demanded that more beer be sought and after a few exchanges more beer was obtained from a local hotel.....phew!!

We were the only guests in l'hôtel and they had put on dinner for us, and it was a perfect introduction to French cuisine and we were looked after and fed very well....the wine wasn't bad either! Allan had asked for a large portion of crème brûlée and was treated to a second pudding of his own (the 2 puddings of the title).



Shortly after the meal it was time to retire and rest ahead of Day 2. It rained heavily during dinner and in the night but that was as near to rain as we got for the whole trip, the sun does indeed shine on the righteous...and ARC!

Day 3 Hede to Vitre 46 Miles



After a good nights sleep and a continental breakfast, we all assembled outside of the l'hôtel for a team photo and then retraced our steps...well pedals back to the canal. As per the previous day the first part of todays route was 'au bord de le canal', and so fairly flat if not easy pedaling as we wound our way steadily towards the village of Betton, our lunch stop for the day. Arriving at the village Chris's sixth sense for biere kicked in and we very quickly found ourselves outside a nice French bar where we locked up bikes and headed in for a coffee.....or biere in the case of Allan, Chris, Dave, on oh and I think Wendy!



Heading out of the bar we needed to locate a nice supermarket to buy lunch. Le Carrefour was spotted by 'eagle eye' Karen and we headed in to buy, les sandwiches, du pain, du fromage, des chips et des fruits. Having spent 1.5 days cycling along idyllic canal paths we decided to eat lunch 'en le car-park de Carrefour', attracting many strange looks from the local Bettons 'les anglais sont fou n'est-ce pas?" We couldn't argue!

Once fully plenished off we set again toward our destination for today the town of Vitre. Well another day....another puncture! This time it was Rocket Ron who decided to ride over a drawing pin, bloody French and their drawing pins, they tried to stop Sir Bradley in the same way!! This time we were well prepared for a very quick pit-stop and tube change.....well not quite! Having removed Ron's wheel and removed the tyre I found there were 6 previous repairs on said inner tube! Flabbergasted I was about to express my surprise when Ron got out his new replacement tube which also had 6 repair patches on it! Ron assured us that in the 14 years he had used this inner tube it had never let him down (well

obviously it had 6 times)!! He was to repair the inner tube for a 7th time that evening!



As soon as the repair was complete Ron duly jumped on his steed and left us to tidy up saying that we would catch him on the next hill. Once sorted we headed off to catch the rest of the peloton. Without any further hitches we arrived at Vitre our destination for the night, at rush hour and school turning out time. We did get some admiring looks from the locals in our ARC cycle tops ☺

Once set up in the hotel we set off into the town for Dinner. Nobody had noticed that it was a Monday and everything closes in France on a Monday including the restaurants!! After walking up and down the high street we did eventually manage to find a nice Italian Restaurant that could fit us all in, and a good evening of decent food and beer ensued.

Since the whole town was shut we headed back to the hotel for a night cap and another fairly early night. I must add here that Mr Buckerfield ordered the largest 'single' brandy that I had ever seen (Dave did say if Mandi asked it was a single and that it was only €3 lol!)

Day 4 Vitre to Pontorson 46 Miles + trip to Mont St Michel

Well if the first two days were slightly undulating, the third days cycling was to be a little more so but nobody complained as we had all done months of hill training.....if only we had!! It was clear that Laurence was a real hill climber as was Simon and were both regularly found at the front of the pack on many of the hills. I must also add here that all of the ladies also showed a real predisposition to hill climbing and I think that Wendy and Lizzy in particular had secretly been doing lots of training!

The journey from now on was on road, and although one or two were a little concerned cycling on French roads on the wrong side of the road, there was nothing to worry about as French motorists are much more bike aware than English counterparts and advise if they think you need to move over slightly with one driver advising us to cycle à droite (sounds like 'a dwat' meaning on the right) which I must say sounded initially if he was being a little offensive!

Coffee stop today was to be in Fougères, we found a nice little café, which we all sat down at, well except for John and Jane who decided to go and sit on their own at another café to get a 'decent cup of tea'!



They were joined shortly by Chris and Karen who wanted a better cup of coffee than that served at the original café!

A supermarket was found and supplies for lunch purchased, we decided to ride on for a while and find somewhere to stop for lunch a little later and eventually found a nice lay-by with 'les tables de picnique'. Suitably fed, watered and 'toileted' we set off on the last hilly section to Pontorson. We were very pleased to arrive at l'hôtel Ariane, which was also to be the host of 50 cyclists who were undertaking a ride from Guernsey to Paris return, which put our little ride into perspective!



Tonight the group was to split for the first time, one group heading to the coast to visit Mont St Michel and the remainder heading for a local restaurant. Couples were split asunder, John heading with the group to Mont St Michel (with Paul, Jo, Chris, Karen, Simon, Laurence Lizzie and Wendy) and Jane going with the remaining crew for a meal. Jane was now of course free to enjoy as much chocolate pudding as she liked without John (aka the Nutella Police) being able to intervene!

We all reassembled back at the Ariane for a night cap.

Day 5 Pontorson to St Malo

Well the last days cycling was upon us with a hilly ride north to the coast and then along the coast road all the way to St Malo via Cancale. It became clear early on that as well as the hills to contend with as we neared the coast the wind picked up and it was to be against us all of the way, and for the first time the peloton really benefitted from drafting closely behind the bike in front. A few hardy souls Paul, Allan and Dave took turns heading the peloton and others sitting in for the ride, Karen, Lizzie and Mandi appearing to be very adept at the drafting! Simon was also doing his bit heading a second peloton shielding a number of others and enabling the group to make the best progress in terms of speed of the whole trip. Chris at this stage was once again doing a sterling job along with Dave (in between spells at the front) of bringing up the rear and ensuring that no man or woman was left behind on the beaches of France!

Lunch stop was today in the picturesque coastal town of Cancale. We stopped in the town square next to the fountain 'Les laveuses d'huîtres de Cancale (the Oyster washers of Cancale).



After leaving Cancale it was just a case of heads down and pedaling the rest of the way which was as I regularly said 'flat from here' and eventually we wound our way along the coast to the beautiful town of St Malo and our last hotel for the trip the Ibis 'Budget', it was not as bad as it sounds!

Well that was it, four days, two punctures, two puddings and awell what about the paddle of the title? Well this was to be the highlight of the final evening. A short walk into St Malo, a lovely meal which Laurence kindly offered to pay for (not really, although he was presented with a bill for €1600 which caused much hilarity, not for Laurence though!), and then a walk back along the city walls to the hotel.....not before a hardy group of the ladies + Laurence decided to head down to the beach for a paddle!



Much to the amusement of the locals, Lizzie, Wendy, Mandi, Karen, Jane and Laurence kicked and splashed in the sea for a few photos and a video.

Well off to the hotel for a final nights rest ahead of the morning ferry back to blighty. Only a couple of weeks ahead of the D-Day celebrations we were making our own retreat from the shores of France, a little more tired than we had arrived 4 days earlier but fully refreshed and satisfied with a fantastic trip with great friends!

The return ferry was fairly uneventful, the group filled the time resting, eating, watching films at the cinema and just chatting about the trip. Many enjoyable moments filled the 6 days, hopefully some captured here but each one of us will have our own favorite memories but I think we all agreed that it was a fantastic trip and something to be repeated in some part of France next year!!

Once we landed at Portsmouth, we quickly disembarked and each made our separate ways to hotels, further holiday spots or just back up the M271, M3, A34, M40, M42, M6 back home. The trip was over but never to be forgotten. Every one of the group had performed fantastically well over the 4 days, but one special mention about Ron, I must say that if I can cycle as well when I get to 79 I will be very pleased! One final message of thanks to Karen for organizing the whole event, and to the friends of Aldridge Running (and Cycling!) Club that made the trip so special ☺

Role on Le Tour d'ARC 2015 ☺