

## TWO FAT-BOTTOMED GIRLS ARE GOING TO GET ON THEIR BIKES AND RIDE!

Beryl, my dear old mum, died last summer from breast cancer. In her memory, Ellie and I cycled from England to Italy, setting out from Felixstowe on 16th August. At the same time, we wanted to raise awareness of breast cancer and raise money for breast cancer research. We hope that we can prevent someone else's dear old mum and much loved grandma from dying of this awful disease.

Alison teaches at the European School in Varese Italy while Ellie works at the Dynamic Earth museum in Edinburgh. We are very ordinary people and neither have done anything like this before.



We left Harwich on the overnight sailing on 15th August, landing in the Hook of Holland at 07.00 on the 16th. The Rhine meets the sea at a delta, so we cycled north to the old main channel of the river where it meets the sea at Katwijk Aan Zee. Then we headed inland, cycling alongside the Rhine on (mostly) traffic-free tracks until we hit Basle, 2 weeks later. We then have to climb 1600m in 3 days, taking in Aarau, Lucerne and Andermatt before inching our way to the top of the Saint Gotthard Pass at 2107m (6916 feet - for those of you who still work in pounds, shillings and ounces!). It's going to be tough and we may have to get off and push. But we'll get there! Then it's downhill all the way to Lake Maggiore and home.

This is a record of our journey:

### **Day 1** (14<sup>th</sup> August) by Alison

Well, the first day has gone more or less to plan. Apart from the nice security man at Malpensa Airport saying that there was a problem taking my bike to England as it was too big to fit through his x ray machine. Heart stopped beating while I contemplated cycling from England to Italy without a bike! So I had to take the bike out of the packing case so that they could make sure that I hadn't packed bombs down the stem of the handlebar, then they let it go. At Gatwick I reassembled my bike and took the train into Victoria station.

I met Ellie at Kings Cross, having cycled round Trafalgar Square and then we cycled to Liverpool Street Station together to catch the train to Manningtree. Ellie beat her mother hollow cycling up hills as they travelled to the first overnight stop on the trip.

**Day 2** (15<sup>th</sup> August) by Ellie

We had an excellent day with our good friends (and gracious hosts), the Loosers, in Suffolk. We were hardly given time to gulp our morning tea before being dragged off to church to watch the bell ringers at work. Janet is the captain of a local group. Then we met another old friend, Rob Duncan and his family for lunch. We decided to make it a no-cycling day to give us more time with Rob, so we spent most of the afternoon wandering through Constable country, and the Loosers drove us to Harwich port in the evening to catch our ferry (thank you very much!).



**Day 3** (16<sup>th</sup> August) by Ellie

We both had a very short and disturbed night's sleep, and no sooner had we dropped off to sleep when it was time to gulp down some breakfast before packing our panniers on our bikes and leaving the ferry. And that was when we hit our first glitch. We were so long departing after all the cars (Why is the loo always so difficult to find?) that the customs men had all decided that it was time to go home and had shut the huge metal gate to let us out of the port. So we smiled sweetly and they relented and let us through.

Bellringing

But what horrible weather! Just like an English November day. Cold, drizzling and windy. What a start! From the Hoek of Holland we cycled up the coast to the Hague, and that's where an elderly



man in a little red sports car decided to open his car door just as I was going past. Down I went. Great. Still, it wasn't too bad. I got a couple of minor bumps and bruises, but my knee is still very sore. Definitely too sore to cycle on it. And all before 11 o'clock in the morning of the first proper day! A change of plan was needed. We changed direction and headed for the station, 5km away. I got there using a combination of unorthodox methods. I sat on my bike and scooted myself along with my left foot for a bit, while mum cycled behind and pushed me.

Leaving the ferry

Good thing there are cycle tracks everywhere! Even so, we weren't very popular – taking up too much room for the other cyclists. From the station at The Hague, we took the train to Leiden, where we had lunch. I took the train on to our next overnight stop, Woerden, while Mum cycled it. I napped outside the station while I was waiting for her, and also got new brake pads fitted to my bike. Mum discovered that cities were very hard to navigate round when you don't have a street map. She went round the town a couple of times first, being constantly misdirected to the station by all the people she asked, but got there in the end. It then took us 2 hours to find we found our B and B. The worthy citizens of Woerden seem to love sending us off in the wrong direction.

So far it's been very pretty. Canals everywhere, with lots of weeping willows, water lilies, herons, ducks and rabbits.

**Day 4** (17th August) by Alison

While Ellie was hobbling round Woerden taking pictures of the castle and canals, I cycled onto our next stop. Perfect cycling weather: wind (more or less) at my back, grey skies (no sun burn) and the occasional shower to cool me off. I saw a house called "Martha's Lust".

Whatever did she get up to?

Perhaps it's better not to ask. Also a full sized replica Roman fort built in 2005 to commemorate 2,000 years after the Roman occupation. Black cows with white belts were munching in the marshes, flocks of greylag geese shuffled as I whooshed past.

The old water-side streets of Utrecht were fascinating: they must have been full of hustle, bustle, wheeling and dealing as the bargemen unloaded and reloaded their barges.



The Old Rhine at Utrecht

Now the warehouses have been converted into restaurants and shops, but it still has

masses of atmosphere. And a wonderful lady who insisted on cycling with me to show me the right path, instead of following what seems to be the Dutch national sport of misdirecting strangers. Ellie took the train to Rhenen which was the nearest she could get to our next overnight stop.

My beautiful, courageous daughter is making little of her injuries and managed to cycle 6kms today from the station to Wageningen without me having to push her. She is going to try and cycle at least some of the route tomorrow. On the way to Wageningen, we cycled through two towns which Martha might have lived in: Nude and Groin, but of Martha there was no sign. She must have been safely tucked up in Martha's Lust.

**Day 5** (18<sup>th</sup> August) by Alison

Wageningen is a university town, internationally known for researching and applying new techniques in Life Sciences. It is also full of flowers, students and bikes. It's built on the heap of moraine left over from retreating glaciers after the last ice age. From the town we freewheeled down to the Rhine to catch the ferry over to the west bank to continue our journey to Arnhem. This was the first of the many ferries we took across the Rhine, costing a princely 60cents, it carried us and our bikes across the muddy, turbulent water at an amazing angle – engines straining to stop us from being swept downstream by the water. There had been a lot of heavy rain last week and it was all being funnelled down the Rhine to the sea.

Later on we were to find stretches where it had actually been up over the banks.

We cycled on a few very quiet roads today which looked like patchwork quilts. Small stretches of surface had been replaced – a few yards here and there and all one of top of the other. But the new surfaces were all different colours: yellow gravels, black tarmac, browns and greys which gave a very pretty effect.

Our overnight stop was at a little place called Haldern. A town full of flowers: window boxes, towers, hanging baskets, flowers were everywhere. The frequent showers must be keeping the flowers lush and green!

Sten Haastrup joined us here – bringing his bike with him on the train.

Our hotel seemed to be the only eatery for miles around. The restaurant was packed out and the staff kept busy as the late shift started to arrive to eat at 22.00. As more bottles were uncorked, the noise level rose higher and higher, making it very difficult for anyone to get any sleep until the early hours.

### **Day 6** (19<sup>th</sup> August) by Alison



Loading Sand Onto A Barge

There is so much water rushing down the Rhine that the barges are having a tough time making headway as they fight their way upstream. It's rather fun to race them as we cycle past on the banks. In several places we've cycled through working sand and gravel pits. Under and over and round conveyer belts carrying sand and gravel round the quarry and loading it into barges. Can you imagine that being possible in the UK? There would be gates, fences, safety barriers and large KEEP OUT notices to stop the local youths from trying to load themselves onto barges and getting buried underneath piles of sand. And then their angry mothers would try to sue someone because their daft offspring had been stupid. Waterside Dutch houses are unrealistically pretty. Just a narrow path to separate them from the water with flowers smothering the outside. A pocket handkerchief of land with grazing miniature ponies, sheep and goats and a vegetable patch full of purple beetroot, blue cabbages and bright green, feathery carrots.

### **Day 6** (19th August) by Ellie

A couple of important pieces of news. The first is we've reached our fundraising target! We've got to £1000 So we have now raised the target to £1,600 – one pound for every kilometre we cycle.

So keep the donations coming! The second important piece of news is that we have picked up our extra, Sten Haastrup, so sponsor him too! Sten is brilliant – he is keeping us smiling even though every bit of us is aching: legs, shoulder, arms, backs... His favourite ploy is eye-spy:

“I spy with my little eye, something beginning with B”

“Bike!”

“Yes. Your turn.”

“I spy with my little eye, something beginning with S B”

“Sore Bum!”

My knee seems to be holding up pretty well, all things considered. I had two days on the train, then got back on the bike. We have now left Holland and have entered Germany, where there have been lots of animals, barges, power plants and identical bridges. It's all been very flat and smooth so far, but the days have been very long. Tonight we eventually arrived at Kaiserwerth, a place originally settled in the 7<sup>th</sup> century by a British missionary monk. This is hard work! I'm exhausted! Still, rest day soon.

**Day 6** by Alison

Not a pleasant day. The second we crossed over the border from Holland and into Germany, the sun came out and it's as hot here as it is at home. We cooked in the heat. (Honestly, some people are never happy!) We spent far too long in Wesel investigating some of the modern buildings including a hi-tech public toilet which automatically cleaned itself and its clients. The correct route seemed to be forever out of reach and we spent ages trying to get out of Duisberg. It has evidently grown enormously in the last decade and is now a mass of container ports, factories, storage depots and half built roads. No one has got round to putting up signposts to places other than industrial units and finding our way out was a nightmare. There was no one to ask and we were constantly in danger of being squished by huge container lorries. By four o'clock in the afternoon we were starting to feel edgy as there was still a long way to go and we were still stuck in Duisberg. Salvation was at hand in the form of a delightful young lady who showed us where the Rhine was hiding behind her office block and with huge relief, we sped off on the remaining 30km to our next overnight stop.



Post-war Buildings in Wesel

**Day 7** (20<sup>th</sup> August) By Alison

Ellie has a most impressive array of bruises, including a spectacular imprint of a pedal on her left calf.



Another Identical Power Station



Industry in the Rhine Valley

We are now entering the industrial heart of Germany, but you would never guess it from our path alongside the Rhine. Most of the land bordering the river is designated a protected area and there is a lot of wildlife. The only clues to the presence of all the industry are the identical power stations and bridges which greet us as we turn every corner.

You go under a bridge, past a power station, round a corner, look up and there's another bridge and steaming power station.

Exactly the same as the one you just cycled past. Are we actually getting somewhere as a result of all this pedalling or are we stuck in a time loop, doomed to pedal past power stations till the end of time?

We must have escaped the time loop as we ended up in Merkenich for the night: a huge industrial town serving the movement of freight on the Rhine. Merkenich wins the "Ugliest Place" prize on our trip.

Since the hotel was so close to Cologne, we hopped on one of the trains after dinner and scampered off to see Cologne cathedral. Stunning!

**Day 8** (21<sup>st</sup> August) by Alison

Having seen Cologne the previous evening by taking the train there, we then had to cycle through it as we followed our route alongside the Rhine. We were quickly learning that it took at least 2 hours to get through 2kms of city. If there are sign posts, they quickly disappear, leaving you in some hopeless housing estate full of unemployable youths.

But at least we had consolation of enjoying the view of Cologne Cathedral again.

As we finally managed to put the city behind us, the air was full of hot air balloons. Then squawks and squeaks filled our ears and huge flocks of ring-necked parakeets swooped past us. The colour of the birds and balloons were amplified by the grey of the city.



Leaving Cologne

As we stopped for our coffee break, it was obvious that parakeets weren't the only wildlife in the area. A cheeky little mouse had got into Ellie's pannier during the night and eaten her chocolate!

**Day 9** (22nd August) by Ellie

We made very good progress yesterday (after a lot of faffing about getting lost in Cologne) and easily covered the day's distance. Today is our rest day in the very pretty medieval walled town of Andernach. After wandering around with a complete lack of energy - how did we ever find the energy to cycle for the past 6 days? - we took a boat trip on the Rhine to see the world's tallest cold water geyser. This works when carbon dioxide being emitted from magma, forces a column of water 60m high into the air. Impressive stuff!

The geyser was first discovered by accident just before the First World War when some local entrepreneurs decided to drill down through the rock to try and find some naturally carbonated mineral water which they could bottle and sell. To their surprise, as they struck the water, a huge geyser spurted towards the heavens. Unfortunately the water tasted disgusting – too many salts were dissolved in it and the plan was abandoned. The well gradually stopped spouting water as the locals would throw rocks into it to start the geyser off and the whole thing was more or less forgotten until 2006 when the worthy burgers of Andernach decided to open up a new well and use the whole thing to attract tourists.



Andernach's Geyser

They've done a fantastic job, with a marvellous interactive information centre and a 30km self guided tour around the area to visit other sites of volcanic and geological interest.



Andernach also has some impressive mediaeval fortifications which have been well preserved and are worth a visit. Tomorrow we need to get to the town's only bike shop to get a new pedal for my bike. A small crack which appeared on the 4<sup>th</sup> day has gradually spread. Now I can see metal through it. Sooner or later it is going to fall off and it's bound to be somewhere really inconvenient, so we'd better get it dealt with now.

Mediaeval Tower at the Corner of Andernach's Town Wall

**Day 10** (23<sup>rd</sup> August) by Alison and Ellie

The river is changing colour!  
Definitely less muddy as the floodwaters drain away.

The Rhine Changes Colour



A Castle on Every Hill

This part of the river is very pretty, with a castle on every hill top and vineyards stretching down to the river on both sides. Was it the wine that made them so argumentative?

We've now done more than 650 km and all is going well so far. We made very good progress today continuing south past Koblenz, despite rainy and windy weather. Why can't the wind blow from the north and push us along? As least it's a warm wind, coming from the south and dries us off quickly after each drenching shower. We dived under the umbrellas of a riverside restaurant at St. Goar as the heavens opened again.



Vineyards on the slopes towards the river

Since it was more or less lunchtime, we decided to sit out the rain doing something useful – eating! St Goar was named for a 7<sup>th</sup> century hermit who used to haul bodies out of the Rhine. Well, at least he might have done. Some historians don't think he really existed. In 1245 inhabitants decided that it was a splendid site for yet another castle.

On we pressed, with the rain coming down every time Sten decided that it was dry enough to take off his waterproof trousers. My brand new waterproof jacket, bought especially for the trip, was as waterproof as a tissue.

Tomorrow we lose our interpreter, as Sten goes home tomorrow. Thank you for keeping us company, Sten, and for representing the boys, who are otherwise rubbish! After our rest day, we are full of energy and the next 600km to Basle should be a cinch.

### **Day 11** (24th August) by Alison

This was our last day of cycling with Sten. We said goodbye to him at lunchtime at Mainz and he headed off to catch the train back to Denmark. Thanks for your company and language skills, Sten. From now on, ordering dinner was an adventure – we were never sure of what we would be getting until it arrived!

Ellie was very subdued for the next 24 hours. Mum was no substitute for Sten!

### **Day 12** (25<sup>th</sup> August) by Alison

The Rhine has been up over the banks here, leaving the river side tracks a sea of mud. Cycling was slow, hard work and we had to stop several times to free the wheels, brakes and mudguards from a thick layer of mud.

To get our own back on the river, we decided to have a paddle to wash the mud off. You would have thought that after all that cycling, we would have become a little slimmer. But there is no sign of the fat bottomed-girls changing into slim-bottomed ones!



We're Still Fat-bottomed Girls!

It was also slow going trying to find our way through the industrial nightmare of Ludwigshaven and Mannheim. It was here that we met our only unpleasant person of the trip: he tried to knock us off the cycle path by cycling straight at us, yelling his head off. Strange man.



But at least we're out of the industrial mess of Mannheim and installed in the extremely pretty town of Speyer. The traditional houses here are timber framed. The area was already settled in prehistory and had its own cathedral in 1030AD. Many parliaments were convened here and the town grew in importance. Much of the old town walls are still standing and there is a wonderful town gate.

Speyer Cathedral in the early morning

We would have loved more time to explore this lovely town, but tomorrow is going to be a long, long day and we need to get an early night tonight and a quick getaway tomorrow morning. Pity! Maybe we'll come back one day and cycle the whole route again. And then we will take twice as long and look at all the things we've only given a passing glance to on this trip.

The Town Gate at Speyer



**Day 13** (26<sup>th</sup> August) by Alison

The cook in our hotel was on holiday so we had to forage for ourselves for breakfast. No hardship when the bakery two doors down was open at 5am and the chocolate pasties were still warm from the oven. Yum yum! I went out for supplies, leaving Ellie snoozing. The scent of warm pastries drifting round the room and my appreciative munching noises got her out of bed faster than any alarm clock!



We nipped in and out of France today – our fourth country on the trip. It's great fun going from one country to another on a ferry for the princely sum of 1 euro. And once it was even free! You could tell that we were in France from the trees smothered in mistletoe. Why does mistletoe grow so well in France? Is it because they are such good kissers? Or are they rotten kissers so they need lots of mistletoe to have lots of excuses for practising?

Mistletoe-covered trees in France

We stayed the night in the appropriately named Gasthof Blume – it was covered in flowers. The owner's grand daughter proudly showed us her bike. For two pins I think she would have joined us on our trip!

**Day 14** (27<sup>th</sup> August) by Alison

I'm obviously not very good at sums. When I was checking the route last night, I found to my horror that we were scheduled to cycle 130km today. Oh no! For most of the day, everything went well: plenty of signposts, good surfaces to ride on.

But then the weather started to misbehave. For most of the day we could see black clouds dumping rain nearby. Then it started to dump it on us. We were soaked. Nothing to shelter under – just acres of maize fields.

Slowly, slowly, we kept pedalling. The sky got darker and darker. Just as we could pedal no more, we saw the town sign of our hotel: Rust. We felt as if we had rusted in the rain. That night I cut holes in a black bin liner in a desperate attempt to have something that might keep me dry.



Good surfaces to ride on

**Day 15** (28<sup>th</sup> August) by Alison

I had a visitor last night. I woke up to find Ellie carefully tucking in my duvet all around me. She was fast asleep. What a kind thought she must have been dreaming! The only trouble was, I was much too hot and so as soon as she had gone back to bed, I threw the duvet off again.

We've been nipping in and out of France over these last three days but tonight is our first overnight stay in France. We're staying in the little town of Ottmarsheim in Alsace. The waiter at the hotel won the prize for "Dimmest Person On The Trip". Despite poking his tongue out of the side of his mouth as he concentrated on writing down our order – three times, as he kept getting it wrong – Ellie still had her starter after her main course! We've now done 1150km! Unbelievable! And tomorrow we'll be in Basle.

**Day 16** (29<sup>th</sup> August) by Alison

We are luxuriating in the lap of luxury in the Hilton Hotel in Basle - courtesy of some of the Hilton Honours points that Colin has accumulated over the years. We feel a little underdressed in our sweaty T shirts and cycling shorts! To their credit, the staff at reception didn't turn a well-groomed hair when we stumbled in after cycling 90km and climbing 680m. We will spend our second and very well deserved rest day here.

Now we have left the Rhine behind and are following another old route - the Via Francigena which is an old Pilgrim's trail from London to Rome. (Though I think we might call a halt before we get to Rome!)

The weather is still not being very kind - it's so cold, with a strong wind. And of course Sod's Law is working so that no matter which direction we are going in, it is always in our faces! But Meteo Swiss has promised us blue skies for our attempt on the Alps.

Ellie is doing brilliantly, despite having to cycle with one wrist strapped up - she seems to have a trapped nerve, which might be the result of being knocked off her bike on the first day. It means that she is having to cycle one-handed as much as she can, and she has problems using the brakes. I daren't think about what will happen when we are descending to Airolo after the San Gottardo Pass.

Keep following us - we are almost there. 1260kms down with only (!) another 350km and 1500m to go.

**Day 17** (30<sup>th</sup> August) by Alison

Where does our energy disappear to when we stop cycling? We were both keen to see Basle, but it was very hard to drag ourselves around, we were both just so tired. I'd never looked around Basle before - we'd often driven through it on the way to and from the UK and I was surprised to discover how pretty it was. But don't stand still long to admire the view or you'll get squashed by a tram!



Basle was really rather pretty!

Ellie had arranged to meet her friend Matt in Basle and he kindly showed us around all day. My first priority was to find a sports shop to buy a really waterproof jacket. We tested it by standing under a fountain. It worked!

**Day 17** (31st August) by Ellie



A slight change of plan... Well folks, the weather has defeated us, I'm afraid. We've decided we're not going to go over the top of the pass, as it seems to be lying under large heaps of fresh snow. Yes, in August! The snow is down to 1200m. Going down icy hairpin bends on bikes does not seem like a good plan. We've still got a good solid day of climbing tomorrow, but we will be skipping out the highest bit and taking the train. We don't like doing this, but there's no point being silly and risking our necks on icy mountain roads, with no cold weather gear.

Today was a very nice day, with a delightful ride round Lake Lucerne. It's a lovely place. Definitely the prettiest day so far! The only downside is that mum seems to have come down with a nasty cold/asthma. Adds to the challenge! Hope she's better very soon. Even if she isn't I highly doubt it'll stop her! Wish us luck!



A waterside church at Lucerne

**Day 18** (1<sup>st</sup> September) by Alison



Lake Lucerne is so pretty! By far the prettiest place we have seen so far on the trip. Oh! to have the time to go on one of the ferries that ply between the lakeside towns! We dallied over the last little bit of the ride around the lake – reluctant to leave the views and the relative flatness to start climbing. We finished the day at Goschenen, where at 1000m it is 3°C. Just imagine how cold it would be at the top of the pass, at 2100m! The mountains were so pretty in their shroud of snow.

**Day 19** (2<sup>nd</sup> September) by Ellie.

We took the train through the tunnel to Airolo and then freewheeled 1000m down to Biasca. The air is much warmer on this side of the Alps. We found a wonderful, secluded waterfall for our lunch spot.

Our lunch spot.



Only one day of cycling left! Can't believe it! We're in Bellinzona tonight. Tomorrow we cross the border, then head down Lago Maggiore to Luino. There we turn inland to Gavirate, then follow the cycle track round the lake to Bodio, our finish line!

## **Sunday, 5 September 2010**

We're back home! It's a very strange feeling after all the months of planning and the days of cycling to find ourselves at the end.

What do we do next?

Think about the trip, the good bits and the bad bits. Realise that without all of you out there to encourage us, our epic journey may never have happened.

### **BEST MOMENT**

Coming round a corner on a river bank to find a group of stark naked youths! They had just been rafting and were in the process of stripping off their wet suits.

### **WORST MOMENT**

Hearing a bang and looking round to see Ellie sprawled across the road. She'd been knocked off her bike on our very first day. A geriatric in a little red sports car opened his car door as she cycled past.

### **THANKS!**

Thanks to all of you who followed our blog and posted your comments, and to friends who sent text messages. They kept us pushing those pedals when we were wet, cold, tired, hungry and lost in the industrial wasteland of Mannheim! I think my favourite message was "Your mum would have been proud of you". It brought a lump to my throat.

Our warmest thanks to all of you who have sponsored us so generously. We have now raised an amazing £2053 to help men and women who will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year. (Bet you didn't know that 4% of breast cancer cases are in men!) Together we have made a difference to help people who are suffering from this horrible disease.

My thanks to Colin who never once said "You must be mad – don't even think about it!"

Our thanks to Sten Haastrup who cycled part of the route with us and kept us laughing even when every part of us ached.

And most of all, my heartfelt thanks to Ellie who was the perfect travelling companion. She never once said "Are we nearly there yet?" She never complained. Not even when a cheeky mouse got into her pannier one night and ate her chocolate. And without Ellie, there might not have been a trip at all. Right at the very beginning, before we'd even started cycling, we met up at King's Cross Station in London. I'd flown in from Italy; Ellie had taken the train down from Edinburgh. I said to her "Gosh, I'm terrified. Whatever possessed me to think that we could cycle across Europe? Let's just call the whole thing off." Ellie just looked at me and said "But mum, you can do anything!" And she was right. We can. And we have.

Alison

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