

GAVIN'S BLOG



- In September 2008 I am planning to cycle 1500 kms across France and Spain, from Le Puy to Santiago de Compostela, along one of the old pilgrim routes. It was all started by a remark made by my daughter, Laura, who was moved by the sight of children begging for water in Kenya, while there last Christmas. I resolved to try to do something, and have been delighted by the response from friends, who have agreed to join me for a part of the journey, and together we are going to try to raise money for a water project in Zambia, administered by Oxfam.
- Between us we are planning to raise £35,000. This will form a substantial part of the budget to provide water for some 15,400 people in the poorest western districts of Zambia.
- Regular updates of progress will be posted below as we receive them.

The Blog

6th Sept 2009: HELP navigators required!! All went well initially as Gavin departed on Thurs with an uneventful journey down to Southampton to catch the ferry. Just a final check of the ferry tickets before boarding. Oops—wrong port, should have been Portsmouth. Frantic cross-country dash ensued with speed cameras working overtime and all traffic police leave cancelled!

Gavin has completed the first stage, Le Puy to Saugues without a hitch, although a huge, long, steep hill provided something of a challenge for legs not yet fully into the swing of things. The 14km downhill run thereafter was fun though.

Tuesday 9th September: Arrived in Conques on schedule, and met up with Bella. Laura on her way, having picked up the car in Le Puy, and due to arrive later in the evening. Gavin is now off the Massif Central, having enjoyed a 24 km downhill run! The Auberge in Conques looks amazing, as though it hasn't changed since Roman times, and the landlady looks as though she hasn't changed since roman times as well!

Friday 12th September: Laura writes "Arrived in Le Puy, where I picked up the car and had an even longer drive to catch up with Dad and Bella, who had arrived in a town called Conques. Conques, I decided, as I was driving along precarious country roads late that night, was surely not so much a village as a myth. And I have to say that arriving there, eventually, did nothing to dispel this impression. It's a fairytale of a place, a stack of crooked houses that appear to have grown organically from the cliff face they're perched on. We stayed in a particularly crooked house run by an ancient, completely mad landlady called Madame Bony. In the morning she accosted me in the hallway, en route from the shower, and took me into her kitchen for coffee and apple puree and stories of her dead husband, Albert.

The journey since then has been only marginally less strange. Yesterday we came along the Célé valley, which again, is straight out of a fairytale. Lots of pretty villages; churches and chapels in varying states of dilapidation; quite a few houses perched on precipices or actually built into the gorge, using the cliff face as one wall. Halfway along the valley, tucked in underneath a slightly overhanging rock face, we came across the Musée de l'Insolite (Museum of the Unusual). It's run by a guy who has been collecting strange objects and detritus for 29 years, making odd little sculptures and displays, to create quite the weirdest museum I've ever seen. Tried, perhaps ill-advisedly, to get into a discussion with him about Art Brut, but, unsurprisingly, he doesn't like labels.

We are now in a town called Cahors, and continuing on to Moissac today.

Friday/Sat Sept 19/20, Peter Woodfield writes:

Days of contrasting fortunes. Bella, on her last day, decided the simplest way to climb the best part of 3,000 feet in 16 miles while crossing the border into Spain was up the road. Gavin and Nick decided to go off road, adding a further 1,300 feet of ascent. Nick in particular thought it was his best day, especially the descent into Roncesvalles, where Bella had been waiting patiently for the intrepid duo.

Meanwhile.....Peter and Markie were heading to Stansted to stay overnight ready for the very early flight to Pau. Ryanair had other plans and they left almost six hours late. To cut a long story short, the only option - with three hours between arrival and checkin and no means of getting to their hotel quickly - was sleep on the terminal floor with Peter using his bike as a pillow! (Sadly no pics).

Gary and Lorna also arrived for the same flight at Stansted sleep-deprived, Gary driving from Scotland via Winchester to pick up Lorna, dismantle bikes etc.

Drawing a veil over the flight to Pau - where they picked up Gavin's car left safely unlocked in the car park - they met up with Gavin in Roncesvalles. Gavin looked impossibly tanned and fit, striking fear and trembling into all concerned! A couple of five-hour round trips to Bilbao airport later - to collect Keith and deposit Catriona - the Spanish adventure is ready to begin.....

We should not let pass mention of the hotel owners in nearby Burgete who appear to have taken Trappist vows of silence and whose smiling muscles have fallen into disuse.

It's also odd staying in a (very pretty) village with restaurants, hotels and a church but NO shops of any description.

Sunday Sept 21:

A mere 74 kilometres on the first day of cycling for the newcomers - and what a glorious day. Unbroken sunshine and some truly spectacular views that made all the effort of climbing more than worthwhile. We apparently covered more ground in the morning than Gavin had previously managed - and some of us paid for that in the afternoon as he took us off road and uphill in the hottest part of the day.

Peter's bike maintenance course proved to have been qualified success as he mucked up his gears. Thankfully Gavin knew how to sort it. The hostel was complete opposite with friendly service and a proper breakfast (which included pudding!!) First stop Monday will be the bike shop as Gary went so fast downhill while off road that his hydraulic fluid boiled over and now has no back brake and Gavin stuck his to the back wheel trying to keep up. Peter and

Keith wimped out and returned to the road - and felt all the better for it.

The highlight of the day was seeing a shaggy dog in Pamplona wearing panniers and looking just like a pilgrim, who it must be said come in all shapes and sizes and ages. You can understand why the walkers pack it in at 2 for the day with the heat.

Monday Sept 22:

Drama - Gavin blew his rear wheel up with the good citizens of Estella diving for cover as it exploded with the force of a firecracker, destroying tyre and inner tube.

The good news was it happened within 200 yards of the bike shop we had just used to get Gary a new back brake. The even better news was the saint in the shop delayed his three and a half hour siesta to get him on the road within 20 minutes, and he soon caught the rest of us slowcoaches.

Gavin said it was the best he could do to overturn 40 years of Keith's disbelief!

Lorna is feeling very neglected in this blog as she been cycling quietly and effectively with no fuss.

One moment of humour was Peter's attempt to buy six rolls with no money - but he managed to muddle through.

Onwards and upwards.

On reflection we realise how incredibly lucky we were that Gavin's rear wheel exploded when it did. Not only did it happen within 200 yards of the only bike shop within about 40 or 50 miles in either direction but also it took place when he was cycling slowly uphill. It doesn't bear thinking about had it happened when he was hurtling downhill on a rocky path.

The rest of the day's cycling was uneventful if gruelling towards the end. Lorna went like a bat out of hell on the flat after lunch doing her Rebecca Romero impression but was reduced to the granny gears for the steep hills. Lorna has been brilliant at spotting important items some of the rest of us have been trying to leave behind in the middle of nowhere.

One thing that has been very noticeable has been the quality an emptiness of many of the roads. Today we have been on a A road close to a motorway and in 40 miles we can barely have seen a dozen cars - apart from in Estella of course - which made the cycling much more fun.

The highlight of the day, apart from it being Gary's birthday, came at bed time when Peter,

fuelled by a modest amount of beverage including a seriously good Laphroaig, forgot which room he was staying in and thought he had been locked out of his room. He went confidently to reception to get another key. Unfortunately he got the key for Gary and Lorna's room, directly above his and Markie's room.

Lorna was shocked to see a third hairy arm come round the bathroom door but not half as shocked as Peter to see Lorna emerge from the bath in a bathcap and a towel covering all essentials. The look on his face apparently had to be seen to be believed. The trip has been full of laughs but that is leading the field at the moment.

Tuesday Sept 23:

Smaller distance today - about 50 kilometers - but still challenging as most of it was into the wind and much of it uphill. Gavin, Gary and Lorna did all of it off road - apart from a diversion into Logorno with Peter for a church visit and a coffee stop - Peter about 60% and Keith, whose bike isn't really suited to some of the off-road terrain, about a quarter.

Everyone except Keith stopped in Navarrete for lunch which, like many other villages/towns, has a very attractive and well maintained mediaeval centre. The long siesta meant not all of us managed to see the reredos for which the church is famous. Still, what we did see outside the church was a four-dolphin fountain cast 125 years ago in George Smith's foundry in Glasgow!

Our target was the Hostal Rio Pedro in Santo Domingo de la Calzada. Unfortunately Markie, who has been doing a fantastic job checking all our baggage in each night, checked into the Hostal Rio, which was a total dive with every prospect of bed bugs. Luckily Lorna knew where we were laying our heads (but only after checking with the master booker back at base camp in Baddinsgill) and when she, Gary and Gavin arrived, the other three did a quick flit, not having used the facilities and no money having changed hands. It was the ridiculous to the sublime.

At least Markie knew which town we were heading for, which is more than can be said for Keith, who obviously had not been paying attention at breakfast. Having spent most of the day on tarmac he was well ahead of the rest of us and was already past Santo Domingo when he learned the error of his ways and had to retrace his steps.

The main road today was much busier but it was noticeable how every driver moved out wide of Keith and Peter even though they were in the cycle lane provided on every main road (Britain take note). The only exception was a van that almost took Keith out as the driver headed for the exit.

PS. The idea that Spain wakes up at 10 pm and everyone eats late seems to be a myth, certainly in midweek. Finding a table even at 9 can be a struggle.

Wednesday September 24:

Keith takes all the credit today as the only one of the five cyclists to stay off road for all 75 kilometres despite having the least suitable bike with the skinniest tyres. The rest of us decided that climbing a 3-mile 1-in-6 hill just before lunch was better done on road. It was as brutal as we feared. Keith kept going, ignoring falling off onto his helmet going slowly downhill. We were all amazed at his stamina, given he is the oldest youngster on the trip!

Gavin clocked up 1,000 kilometres today as we reached the southernmost point of the odyssey. Whether travelling slightly north of west rather slightly south will make any difference to the tan on our left legs remains to be seen.

We had a new challenge at our hotel in Burgos as the bikes had to be taken up to the boiler room on the fifth floor and only fitted in the lift vertically one at a time like a rearing stallion. The other challenge in what was a minimalist hotel was that the electronic key cards wouldn't open two of the rooms and wouldn't lock the other.

Central Burgos was reminiscent of either Prague or Tobermory depending on your point of view, but very attractive either way. The Gothic cathedral, the first in Spain, was stunning with beautiful clean sandstone and an infinite number of gargoyles.

Thursday September 25th:

Today was the first relatively easy day's cycling which some of us were very grateful for. We have left the rolling vineyards of Rioja behind and are on the Meseta, or the high plain, which is flat and exposed, very unlike the hilly wooded countryside we have passed through the previous four days. The vegetation has changed from green and quite lush to arid and dusty, with the harvest in weeks ago. Gary has been a fount of agricultural education for us. The other thing you notice is how much more the Spanish are into wind farms. We must have seen 200 turbines today.

So far this week we have been very lucky with the weather. Sunday was 28C in Pamplona at lunchtime and got hotter, making cycling hard for some of us. Since then it has been more overcast with a cooling breeze. Today on the Meseta we have been helped by an easterly wind rather than having to battle into the prevailing westerly wind on open land.

As a result after lunch we cycled faster and for longer than most of us have ever done before, allowing us to delude ourselves for a moment that we were like Bradley Wiggins et al. How he could cycle twice as fast as we were is almost incomprehensible. In fact we went so fast Gavin missed a key turnoff, with the result that he, Gary and Keith went off road up such a steep part of the Camino they had to walk part of it. Keith came off on the way down,

grazing his knee like all good peregrinos.

Lorna, who was suffering from a stinking cold, and Peter retraced their steps and had a much easier time of it and also saw a cycling pilgrim first spotted at the bike shop in Estella three days earlier. He was memorable because he is carrying all his clothes, food etc in what can only be described as a baby carrier pulled behind with a guitar sticking up at the back.

We stayed overnight in Fromista, whose claim to fame is what is reputedly the finest Romanesque church in the world. We also had what Gavin reckoned was the best value meal in three weeks - 8.80 euros for three courses and wine!

Friday September 26th:

The start of the day in Fromista was interesting as we bumped into an elderly Belgian peregrino, who (probably) conned us out of a few euros but he told a very good story. He was pulling/pushing all his possessions using what can best be described as a yoke pulling the back end of a bike. Markie stayed on to look inside the Romanesque church, which more than lived up to expectations.

Cycling today was uneventful except we were again blessed with a following wind on the most exposed part of the journey. So we bowled along an empty A road (the blessing of a nearby motorway) for miles on end at more than 20 mph until Gavin made us turn around and cycle a couple of hundred yards into the wind - our speed more than halved!!

Lorna's cold meant she should have been in bed for a second day, but she cycled on uncomplainingly tho' did admit to feeling wiped out by the effort.

We stopped for lunch at an old Roman villa - fourth or fifth century - which is being painstakingly restored. The workman sitting on a cushion hammering the little mosaic tiles into place has been doing the same job for 27 years!! The underfloor heating system was clear to see. We were all very taken with the villa.

Today was the first time we have seen a pilgrim on horseback, which must be a nice way of travelling, albeit taking most of the effort out of the journey.

Sahagun, our overnight stopping place, is a fairly unprepossessing town. The level of tourist activity was such that our hotel bar was closed and was where we stored our bikes. Peter came across an Irish pub - so, remembering the exhortations of his very first sponsor, drank some Guinness.

Another excellent value for money meal in the town square, memorable for the waiter's hairdo, which looked as if he had spent considerable sums achieving the look Gavin has achieved effortlessly since leaving without a hairbrush three weeks ago!

For once we splashed out a bit on dinner, with the highlight being some cherry liqueur that was on the house. The cherries had the effect of eating a hot chilli - just explosive although

they were sweeter. How all of us avoided a sore head is a mystery.

Saturday Sept 27th:

The final day's cycling for Gary, Lorna and Keith was again made easier by the wind continuing to be behind us. Apart from a long stop at an excellent chocolateria, the only moment of note was Gavin gaily leading us (illegally) onto the motorway to Madrid and hopping over crash barriers to get us back onto the Camino as we came into Leon.

We clocked up 293 miles at an average of about 10-11 mph in the seven days since leaving Burgete, the heaviest weekly output.

We did comment on how much of a grind the Meseta must be for the walking pilgrims at this time of year, at least a week to 10 days of basically flat, arid and exposed countryside, walking close to the main road.

Tim Cornwell and Toby Metcalfe arrived for the final week from Edinburgh and Fochabers. Toby made check-in at Edinburgh with 1 minute to spare!

Leon has the most fantastic Gothic cathedral, with beautiful stained glass windows more reminiscent of Chartres and Rheims than our experience of Spain. While Gary, Lorna (still with bad cold) and Peter were there, there was a wedding taking place, which it seemed was open to all. The bride arrived in a 1930s Cadillac with white-walled tyres and the mirrors attached with what seemed like stirrup leathers to the spare wheels on the running boards - magical.

Peter had to buy a belt to stop embarrassing everyone by pretending to be young with the waist of his jeans halfway down his legs! The exercise has obviously done at least one of us some good.

Sunday Sept 28th:

Rest day, much appreciated by Peter at least ahead of some of this week's serious climbs! A brilliant decision as Leon's annual 10-day festival has just started and the place was throbbing. There was lots to see and do - the worst was listening to an interminable speech by the mayor (with about 1% being comprehensible). The best. Was seeing the wonderfully decorated wagons being pulled by bulls, oxen, horses and donkeys.

The highlight was getting a beer. some red wine, a mineral water and some chorizo sausage for three people for the grand total of 3.50 euros. The chorizo was flambeed in front of us and Markie thought she'd mop up the juice with bread. Unfortunately they had used meths rather than brandy as fuel!!!! It was a great relief that she didn't actually enjoy it, Gary,

Keith and Lorna missed the festivities as they were on their way to the airport and home. They will be much missed.

Monday Sept 29th:

From the rowdy to the Gaudi. Today was a day of contrasts. We cycled just over 30 miles to Astorga, which appears to be the chocolate capital of northern Spain. The first 15 miles were as dull as we have seen, cycling close to the road past a string of industrial sheds. Markie took advantage of a spare bike to cycle back to meet us at Puente de Orbigo, one of the oldest and longest mediaeval bridges in Spain. It was also very pretty and possibly the source of inspiration for Don Quixote.

The afternoon's ride was stunningly beautiful - and quite tough. We reckoned Markie worked far harder than we did by cycling that stretch in both directions, even if overall she travelled fewer miles.

The morning was enlivened by Toby answering a call of nature while forgetting that they drive on the opposite side of the road in Spain. Tim's ears pricked up when he heard we were staying in a convent, asking how old the nuns were! (There was only one who even looked under 70)

It was the second day in a row we saw a Gaudi building, and they both looked like the inspiration for Hogwarts or a Disney cartoon-film castle. (Apologies to Gaudi fans.)

The clock over the town hall was fun with a couple of Punch and Judy characters striking the bell with hammers - but sadly not each other!

When we asked at the convent about where to eat we thought they said rowdy when in fact they said Gaudi. Rowdy seemed appropriate given three of us were reprimanded for speaking quietly with the door open. We just managed to avoid missing the 10.30 curfew. In fact we nearly got thrown out before we had barely checked in after Toby loudly announced he had taken his underwear (aka his padded lycra) off.

Tomorrow we climb more than 2,000 feet to about 5,000 feet, the highest point on the whole trip.

Tuesday Sept 30th:



Gavin and Peter at the official highest point of the Camino at 5000' after climbing almost 2000'.

Memo to Elaine: Gavin appears to have been wearing the same shirt for almost 3 weeks now. No wonder Peter is keeping his distance!

Today marked the return to the mountains - shorter daily distances but more effort. We failed to escape from the convent without another reprimand for being noisy, even though we were whispering.

We aimed to leave early to avoid having to climb to the highest point of the Camino in the heat of the day. We nearly managed it but after a nice, steady ride to a coffee break - where the lady behind the bar was for some reason reduced to giggles by our pronunciation of Kit-Kat - Gavin found he had a flat tyre. By the time that was fixed, we were firmly in the hottest part of the day.

Still, we all made it to the top at 5,000 feet without walking, even if Peter needed a lot of encouragement from Toby as they adopted the role of tortoises. Tim earned the soubriquet of Tigger as he bounded on ahead with sudden bursts of acceleration and cycling around while the rest of us were focusing on rest and recovery.

We all felt put to shame at the summit by a Swiss walker we had first come across at lunchtime the day before. He had covered almost 30 miles with his backpack and only wearing sandals, climbing more than 2,000 feet. We reached a peak of 1,525 metres, which prompted a lengthy discussion of the merits or otherwise of windturbines, which could be seen on almost every surrounding hilltop. Toby proved a doughty champion for them.

The descent was truly exhilarating, a drop of some 900 metres in fairly short order, requiring a couple of stops to enjoy the smell of burning disc brakes! Top speed was of the order of 35mph.

Elaine arrived today, much to Gavin's excitement. The car was not so excited! First of all a lorry scraped the front wing while Markie was in Leon minding her own business waiting to turn right. Then, at the airport, the keys got locked in the car, necessitating the assistance of a friendly policeman to break in via the small rear quarterlight.

PS. Alternative explanations re Gavin's hygiene. 1) Unlike anyone else Gavin hasn't broken sweat yet even on the toughest hills, so no washing required. 2) He brought a month's supply of identical shirts with him. 3) His panniers contain nothing but washing powder

Wednesday October 1st:

Today was always likely to be one of the toughest of the whole trip as we combined two days' cycling into one, including a vertical climb of some 2,500 feet. It has been worth every weary turn of the pedal.

O Cebreiro is one of the most beautiful places in the world all of us have ever seen. The sun is out and there is a 360 degree view of mountains with not a wind turbine in sight - a rarity for Spain and all the more welcome for that!.

There is an 9th century church, the oldest church on the whole route, with a chalice that is allegedly the Holy Grail. The church has been beautifully restored with an elegant simplicity that is in contrast to most Spanish churches. As one of our party said - if you couldn't find God in that church you wouldn't find God anywhere.

There is also an artists' community here and stone huts known as palozzas with thatched roofs. It is almost impossible to put the beauty of this place into words. Elaine played an absolute blinder booking us into here.

To say much else seems almost superfluous. When Gavin went to find out what was happening about the car they kept him waiting for an hour while they searched for a set of lost keys (which turned out to belong to another car) - Gavin's were in the ignition the whole time!! He is still none the wiser why he was kept waiting so long. A real comedy of errors. The window will be fixed tomorrow.

The morning's cycling was uneventful, except Peter found himself on the N120 for the eighth successive day! The fun and games began after lunch. Markie suggested Toby would cycle faster if his front wheel wasn't back to front. Gavin did the necessary and Toby - who had previously been generally the group's tortoise - shot off like a torpedo. He led us all the way up the 10 mile climb from Ruitelan to Pedrafita that was unrelenting from beginning to end with no respite.

(Markie's bright idea cost Toby a (10-euro) bottle of cava. A 3-course dinner with wine, bread and water cost us 8 pounds each. Amazing.)

The scenery was spectacular all the way up if one had the energy to look. So too was the infrastructure with flyovers on top of flyovers.

Toby the torpedo reverted to Toby the tortoise on the last 3 mile climb to O Cebreiro as his legs protested they'd had enough. Peter's foul-tasting blackcurrant electrolyte-restoring drink must have some of its claimed properties as he managed the last stretch better than the others having been the laggard on the main climb. Thanks Mr Spratt.

Gavin and Peter somehow managed the whole way up from Ruitelan to the top without walking - Peter in particular is not sure how. We all felt that it was as much a mental battle as a physical one.

It struck both Gavin and Peter today there are now only just over 100 miles and three days to go, which is quite a sobering thought.



It's been a hard day!

Thursday October 2nd:

Autumn arrived today as the mist rolled in around O Cebreiro, depriving us of yesterday's stunning views of the surrounding mountains. It certainly made us wonder what it might be like living there in the middle of winter, as the community is on the top of a ridge and completely exposed to any wild weather. It was also a sobering thought that despite yesterday's 13-mile climb we were still some 650 feet below the highest point we had reached the day before.

We had a leisurely start to the day as Markie went back to Ponferrada to get the window replaced - and we waited for the mist to lift.. Surprise, surprise - the salesman's promise of a 5-minute job suddenly became an all-day task. A bit of compromise and Markie was back by lunchtime.

One of the biggest oddities of O Cebreiro was listening to a tape of an Irish folk singer going on about Irishmen signing up to fight for Franco, Hitler and Mussolini.

With a vertical drop of some 900 metres today, Gavin happily led us back off road, tho' for various reasons he was the only one to avoid tarmac all day. Tigger had to attend to his Scotsman column on Spanish art and at one stage lost complete track of time, forcing him to sprint along the road to be reunited with his laptop to meet the Scotsman's traditionally early deadlines.

As we were heading downhill on a particularly difficult section Toby decided to display his renowned jumping skills, which worked to perfection on the first jump on the second he severely gashed his leg with his pedal and proudly displayed the blood pouring down his leg. When cleaned up it turned out to be little more than a graze. Peter, who had never done that sort of riding before, concentrated on staying upright and just about survived. Elaine, who had carefully avoided the previous day's climb, made it look all too easy, though Toby didn't seem to find it too difficult to persuade her to revert to the road at the end of the day.

Our destination was Sarria, a dull town at first sight. In fact, the old centre, which took a lot of finding, was absolutely delightful and we had another fantastic value for money meal - and the wine was even drinkable. The unshaven patron was good value and the atmosphere terrific. How the bars/restaurants make a living charging 8 euros for a 3 course meal with wine and mineral water is beyond us.

Friday October 3rd:

The penultimate day and - according to the main guidebook for cyclists - potentially the hardest, though we are not quite sure why as we are out of the mountains. The day got off to a bad start when Toby, who has been gagging for eggs and bacon all week, saw the boss of the hotel being served with 3 fried eggs and 6 rashers of bacon, together with banana and kiwi fruit (on a separate plate). All we had been offered was toast!

Things got worse when we eventually gave up waiting for Tim, who was pursuing more art scoops. But the nadir came when we (Toby and Peter anyway) were panting and puffing as we pushed our bikes up an over-sandy steep path. It was at that moment that Elaine chose to regale us with a story of how an Argentine friend of hers died of a heart attack cycling on the flat streets of Buenos Aires. It was not what we needed/wanted to hear.

The off-road was so steep and rough that we only covered 5 kilometres in the first hour - and not for want of trying. So a quick coffee stop didn't meet with Gavin's approval. Elaine, Peter and Toby were duly banished to the road as the least likely to cope with the speed required to make any sort of progress.

Embarrassingly Gavin and Tim beat the others to lunch at Portomarin where the whole town

had been moved to make way for a reservoir. That was partly because Toby kept stopping to sample the roadside blackberries or to take off or put another layer (never less than two and often as many as four - by contrast Gavin and Peter rarely wore more than one or two. It must have been something to do with weather in Fochabers.)

Still, Gavin and Tim - who was being very Tiggerish by surging ahead of the others at various points of the day and then coming to a halt - missed a glorious long descent that essentially didn't need brakes and culminated on a bridge high over what must have been the river's original path. It was unclear whether the startlingly bright green hundreds of feet below was grass, moss, algae or some other vegetation.

Just before that descent, as we climbed through the town of Paradela, we were overtaken by three lycra-clad Italian pensioners. Elaine said that if we too bought lycra we would go that fast. That apparently was like a red rag to a bull to Peter, who took off up the hill and soon left the lycra well behind.

After lunch Elaine swapped her bike for the car while the others continued off road. That proved a worthwhile decision as not only was the route very pretty and well away from the main road, but it also a good few kilometres shorter than going by the road. Elaine and Markie walked back along the Camino from our overnight stop in Palais de Rei to meet us, which was a great encouragement as we thought we had further to go.

Our worst doubts about the cyclists' handbook were confirmed when we headed for the restaurant that was supposed to provide the best food on the whole route. Not only did the patron seem unwilling to feed us, the whole place stank of stale deep fat fryer oil and we beat a hasty retreat. We soon found somewhere offering the usual good value and with bags of atmosphere.

Saturday October 4th:

"I am hot," said Elaine as she cycled into Casanova, having minutes earlier ridden past Cafe Bonka!!! Luckily Gavin was a few kilometres behind, having had to fix his third or fourth puncture of the week.

For once we left roughly when we meant to - of all the Spanish towns we stayed in, Palais de Rei probably had the least to detain us. Another reason for a prompt start was that there were around 70 kilometres to go, one of the longest distances all trip, and the plan was to do it all off-road, which generally requires at least twice as much effort to cover the same mileage as on the road. Apart from Elaine's unexpected interjection, the highlight of the morning was the stop at Furelos, which proved so hard to locate that Peter & Tigger started retracing their steps - 180 degrees in the wrong direction. We eventually joined Markie, who had found it, like everywhere else, first time and without fuss. Toby let his stomach rule his

brain and ordered a giant slice of tortilla, which turned out to be as good as it looked. The only problem was any self-respecting UK health inspector would have closed the place down months ago, such was the dirt in what might loosely be called the kitchen.

The afternoon proved a different kettle of fish. We still had 40 kilometres to go - and by the time we arrived it felt like 400 so tough was the terrain. Peter was the tortoise of the day as his legs almost gave up on him immediately after lunch and he got left way behind. The only way he caught up was by using the road to cycle down a long hill rather than stay off road. Perhaps the worst moment of the afternoon was at Lavacolla when we started the last main climb of the day, allegedly a total rise of some 250 feet. As we seemed to go round and round in circles up a never-ending series of steep inclines, all our hearts sank as we felt almost drained of energy. We only felt better when we reached Monte del Gozo 4 kilometres from our final destination when the last sharp climb was over. Certainly, Toby, Tim and Peter felt it was their most gruelling day and even Gavin said he had found it hard. The final ride into Santiago de Compostela at 7pm was relaxing with a real sense of achievement that the physical side of the mission had been accomplished with no serious injuries and that everyone had completed what they had committed to do.

That seemed particularly true for Toby, who had been told by the expert in his local bike shop in Elgin that there was no chance of his £70 Raleigh bike surviving the trip and that he needed to spend up to £1,000 on something more suitable. So Toby bought some panniers, and his trusty steed survived without needing a moment's mechanical attention. The cathedral kept itself well hidden until we were almost on top of it. But the full glory of its baroque design was apparent as we made our way into the square, where Elaine and Markie met us to share in our joy.. The interior was also quite magnificent, for once being in keeping with the scale of the building.

Some reflections.

A total of 13 people went to France and Spain, with France being very much a family affair involving four Marshalls plus a cousin. But it felt a real team effort, with heartfelt and regular support coming from those who returned home before the end. The logistics of organising rendezvous, bike bags and above all accommodation in Spain fell on the Marshalls, especially Elaine, whose choice of hotels, hostals and convents was faultless. She played an absolute blinder, all the more remarkable as several overnight stops had no web sites. The project couldn't have worked without Laura (in France) and Markie (in Spain) driving the car carrying all the luggage etc. Markie did a fantastic job - especially as she doesn't speak Spanish beyond beer, lemonade, please and thank you - finding the hotels, checking in the cyclists and their luggage and making sure we didn't get lost at the end of the day. That was in addition to joining us with excellent lunches after doing some of her own sightseeing.

There was a huge amount of laughter and good humour all round that made any problem evaporate quickly. Keith and Tim's addiction to their laptops/Internet meant it was probably a good thing they were cycling in different weeks. (From a purely Rotarian point of view, it was good to learn that Keith is doing sterling things at his club at Cookham near Marlow in Buckinghamshire where he is immediate past president. Marlow appears to be wealthier than West Linton, and it is probably easier to organise a fund-raising rowing regatta if you have a five-times Olympic gold medallist living on your doorstep!)

It is also true to say we enjoyed some good fortune in Spain. We felt something like 10 drops of rain in two weeks; apart from from Gavin's rear wheel blowing up, problems with the bikes were mainly limited to a couple of brake issues and punctures; we were blessed with a following easterly wind while we cycled for four days across the exposed high plains of the meseta, rather than having to struggle into the prevailing wind. All in all, a fantastic adventure that took all of us into uncharted territory. We all look forward to hearing from Gavin in due course how our efforts have borne fruit. The fundraising is looking very promising in terms of getting to the £35,000 target, which seemed amazingly ambitious when Gavin first spelled it out.