



Andy on his 'mostly fine' road bike



Near Dunmore Head, Co Kerry

Ireland

An Irish odyssey

Gareth James spent five weeks circumnavigating the island of Ireland

MY TOUR AROUND the coastline of Ireland began in early June sunshine in Strangford, County Down. It included much of the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW), and I managed to visit 100 of the 187 WAW discovery points, which provided an insight into wildlife, natural features and local history along the route.

Each day featured stunning scenery, idyllic beaches and rugged coastlines. The joy of cycling was the ability to easily stop and soak up the amazing views as I made my way around the coast. Standout moments included reaching the summit of the Conor Pass, the Kilkee Cliffs view and the Ring of Kerry viewpoint at Com an Chiste.

I did the tour on my new Spa D'Tour, having retired my old Dawes Galaxy. The D'Tour performed well, with only two mechanicals: a broken spoke and a broken gear cable.

The welcome I received along the way was warm and generous, and the food was generally excellent. Almost all my accommodation provided convenient, secure parking for my bike, although amusingly in Belmullet, the bike was so secure that not even the staff could unlock the room. Eventually the hotel handyman cut the lock!

The first three weeks of my tour were dry and sun filled but the final two weeks were much more typical with a good deal of rain and wind. I finished my trip back in Strangford in pouring rain, having ridden 2,874km and climbed a total of 26,844 metres – three times up Mount Everest.

Spain

A rail-trail C2C

Vías verdes criss-cross Spain. Andy Crowe and his friend Ivan followed one from the Atlantic to the Med

There are more than 7,600km of disused railway lines in Spain that are being converted into *vías verdes* ['greenways']. I persuaded my friend Ivan to join me on the almost complete VV Santander-Mediterráneo, which crosses Spain to finish in Valencia. "It's a railway line," I said, "there can't be any climbs."

We escaped Santander by train, heading for the start of the *Vía Verde del Pas* in nearby El Astillero and passing breakers' yards, run-down factories, Stalinist housing blocks and incinerators. The *via verde* we joined ran through an alpine-style valley and was blessed with smooth tarmac and blue sky. But at the end it climbs over 1,000m in

the space of 12km. All those promises of a level route were broken by the mountains of Cantabria.

Once on top of the central plateau we had 750km of big skies, big rivers, countless tunnels and bridges, untouched forests and stunning local towns, each with its own Mudejar architecture – mostly Christian churches with fabulous Islamic brickwork and tiling. While cruise ship passengers are herded like sheep to Barcelona, we had historic gems like Oña, Soria, Catalayud and Teruel almost to ourselves.

On several days we were the only cyclists outside of the towns. My road bike was fine for the tarmac and light gravel but on some of the loose and shingly stretches where the VV had yet to be completed – perhaps 20% – Ivan's gravel bike was the better option.

We chanced upon a newly opened section of VV that didn't appear on any map and included a magnificent natural arch over the river. Two French cyclists alerted us to a film location from *Dr Zhivago*; David Lean apparently chose the area near Soria because it looked like Siberia. On some mornings it felt like it.

The last 160km of the VV Santander-Mediterráneo to Valencia uses the traffic-free VV Ojos Negros and VV Xurra – a good finish to a great ride. We dipped our tyres in the Med, with sunbathers wondering what these two old guys were up to.



(Above) One of the flatter sections in Cantabria
(Below) Andy at the end of the journey



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