

The bicycle path to Rome

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The path to Rome is never easy for an Englishman but is more difficult when setting out by bicycle from Paris with the mountains of Jura, Alps, and Apennines in the way. A casual comment over dinner on a cold February night had started it: "How about cycling from Paris to Rome?" We told a few friends, agreed some sponsorship, and then felt committed. Michelin maps on the kitchen wall were covered in pins as we continually revised our route. Buying new bicycles was our only serious preparation; they had lightweight tubing, front and rear panniers to distribute the weight, 18 gears to go up the hills, and cantilever brakes to stop on the way down.

In Paris we climbed Montmartre to look out over the city, collected our bicycles from the Gare du Nord, and waved goodbye to our hotelier, who, with a certain Gallic disbelief, described our supposed holiday as *très sportif*.

The value of low gear ratios

Our route took us through Burgundy to Dijon and Besançon and over the mountains of Jura into Switzerland at Neuchâtel. Then across central Switzerland to Interlaken and the part we feared most—the Alpine passes. The Grimsel pass was long but quite gentle, climbing 1585 m in 32 km to a height

of 2166 m, whereas the newer Nufenen pass was more vicious: 13 km of road climbing ruthlessly at almost a one in 10 gradient to 2479 m, culminating in a seemingly vertical wall of hairpin bends. Exhausted at the top, we could hardly believe, like Wordsworth, "that we had crossed the Alps" and we gave thanks for bottom gears with 28 teeth at the front and 32 at the rear. We had an 82 km freewheel down to Bellinzona and then Lugano, Como, Milan, and the hot, humid Po valley to Bologna. The Apennines seemed a mere bagatelle after the Alps, and after Florence and Siena we followed the old Via Cassia across the high, bleak southern Tuscan plateau and down into Rome. Success was celebrated with a lap of honour around the Colosseum and by surveying our goal from St Peter's.

In France we had kept to minor roads almost all of the time, although we could do so less in Switzerland and Italy. As the August weather got hotter so we would wake at 6.30, pack our tent, and be on the road by 7.15 and do 30 km in the cool before a well earned breakfast. Lunch was often lengthy, perhaps with a siesta, and then we would move on to our destination by 5 pm. In all, we had covered 1724 km in 22 days of cycling (including six half days and four rest days), averaging 89 km in a full day (range 50-164 km), and had overcome six punctures, four broken spokes, one kinked chain, and no accidents.

Crossing the borders

Our final challenge was to cross Europe again sans identification, sans cash, and sans rail ticket: 10 minutes before boarding the Calais train at Roma Termini we realised that one of our passports and train tickets had been stolen. How could we get home with the equivalent of just £15 in miscellaneous European currencies? Stumbling evening class Italian warmed the heart of the Roman ticket inspector, who found us couchettes and vouchsafed us passage over the border into Switzerland. As we lay listening in the small hours, hoping that the border police patrolling the train would not ask for identification, we fantasised about Buchan and Le Carré novels. The Swiss ticket collector was stereotypically efficient, accepted a Eurocheque, and probably would have taken any major credit card; by contrast the French guard was pragmatic, took all our remaining cash, made out a ticket to some tiny northern French village, and told us to stay on the train until Calais. Boarding the Dover ferry gave no trouble: while one of us waved a ticket ostentatiously the other slipped through in the confused mêlée. Dover customs, despite their supposedly vigilant defence of our national boundaries, waved us on, indifferent to the absent passport. There was no guard on the British Rail train.

Taken overall the continual changes in landscape and culture, the slow gradations of accent and architecture and food and flora, and the sudden linguistic changes at the great Alpine watersheds provided a vivid perspective of the unity and the contrasts of

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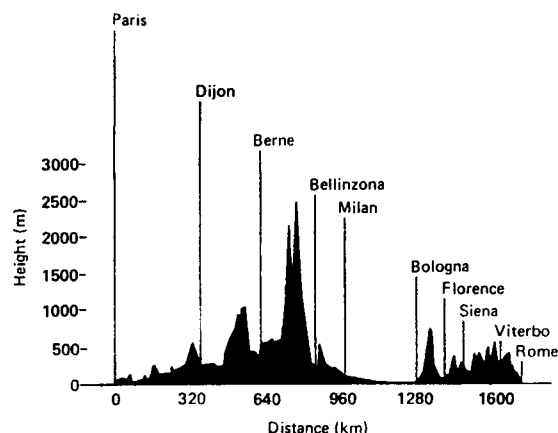


Nufenen pass, Switzerland

Europe. The roadsides provided a palimpsest of recent European history: in the mountains of Jura the roadside grave of a French resistance fighter "*fusillé par les Allemands 7/9/1944*"; the quiet and peaceful Commonwealth War Graves cemetery at Castiglione dei Peopoli, belying the long, hard fought Apennine campaign; and in Switzerland the sudden realisation that here was a country in which each village did not have a war memorial.

Cultural treats

In France our relaxation was principally gastronomic, at its best in tiny restaurants ruled by an ever watchful Madame, with the classical cuisine of the Bourgogne becoming more Alpine as we neared the Swiss border. In Italy even small towns provided alfresco entertainment: *cinema sotto le stelle* in the village piazza; open air jazz in the Piazza del Campo in Siena; and the Bolshoi Ballet dancing in Bologna's Piazza Maggiore in tribute to the victims of the 1980 fascist bombing at the railway station. And always there were cultural treats: the great Gothic cathedral at Sens; late Picasso in Luzern; the Thyssen-Bornemicza collection in Lugano; the polychrome marble of the cathedral in Prato; and, perhaps most moving of all, the half cleaned ceiling of the Sistine chapel—five



Transect of our bicycle route from Paris to Rome

centuries of candle smoke and grime removed to reveal the fresh, vivacious, almost rococo brightness that Michelangelo had intended.

The material reward of our trip was raising £700 from sponsorship for an Indian leprosy hospital. For us the most important insight was that people can still travel across whole countries and over mountain ranges on the same routes as the travellers and pilgrims of old by using muscle as the locomotive power.

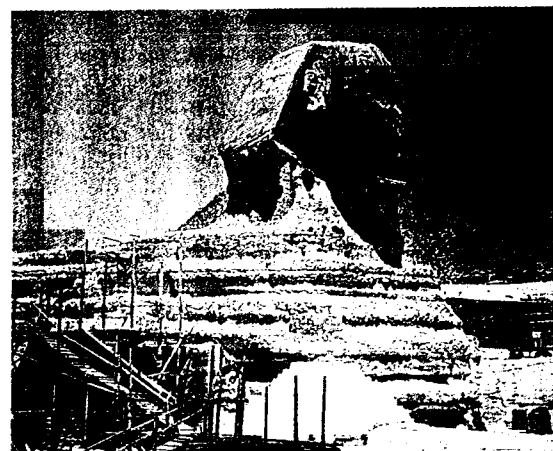
Swanning in the steps of Hippocrates

John Walton

During my postwar military service in the Royal Army Medical Corps I was familiar with the definition of "a swan"—an unauthorised and often totally non-military expedition. When serving in the Territorial Army at a camp in Germany many years later the commanding officer was asked by the officer in charge of movement control about the purpose of our journey to the Berlin Military Hospital. "A swan," he said; the officer in question, with just a ghost of a smile, wrote "duty."

But in the spring of 1989 the term acquired a new meaning when I had to confess to the governing body of Green College that for the first time in my six years as warden I would miss the May meeting because of an offer I simply could not refuse—to lecture on "the legacy of Hippocrates: a history of medicine and surgery" on a Swan Hellenic cruise in the Mediterranean. When the verbal approach from my friend Harvey White was followed by a formal invitation from the company, accompanied by an outline sketch of the itinerary, it was clear that this would be a most enjoyable experience for me and my wife. And so it proved.

For those who have never travelled with Swan Hellenic, the first and most abiding impression is one of efficiency and care and attention to detail. We arrived at Gatwick to be greeted by charming representatives of the company, who, as if by magic, had arranged a speedy check in for their flock of swans. Unaccustomed to this type of tour, what a joy it was to say goodbye to our heavy baggage and not to see it again until we embarked on MV *Neptune* in the harbour in Venice. As soon as we landed we were taken to Padua to see the famous anatomical theatre and other treasures. We returned to Venice in time to unpack and enjoy a leisurely meal before sailing down the Giudecca canal and through the lagoon with the landmarks identified by Harvey White in the first formal lecture of our tour.



The Sphinx at Gizeh

Delightful daily routine

Our cabins were comfortable, the bars and lounge were spacious, and everyone could be seated in the main dining room. There were sun decks fore and aft with comfortable loungers and a small swimming pool, where a buffet lunch was served each day. We enjoyed sun nearly every day with only one choppy sea towards the end of the cruise, so lunch on deck became a daily and delightful ritual.

All lectures were optional and could be heard either on the deck through the excellent public address system (especially when the talk related to a sight visible from the ship), in the main lounge, or through the loudspeakers in the cabins. There was no formal seating plan for any meal and so we were able to meet practically everyone at some time during the cruise. A family atmosphere developed as we all got to know each other. The food was of a uniformly high standard,

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