

*'Twas the night before Christmas  
and all through the house  
Not a printer was moving,  
not even a mouse.*

*The computers were silent,  
they'd done all they could.  
'Twas the time now to stoke  
the fire with more wood.*

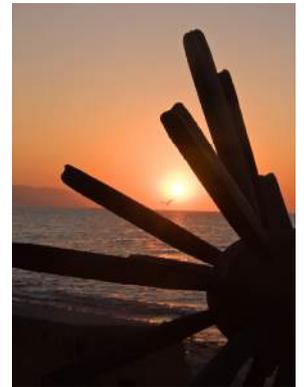
*The story was written,  
the tales had been told  
Of comings and goings -  
how the year did unfold!*

*So pull up a soft chair,  
get your specs if required,  
And read of our year  
and all that transpired.*





Our travels began in February, nicely coinciding with the worst winter weather for years at home. Having booked our flight to LA for the usual family visit, the airline came up with an offer we couldn't refuse - a week's cruise along the Mexican coastline south of California for an incredibly low price. Three days at sea and three days in ports promised a good balance of unwinding and exploring new ground. The ship offered non-stop entertainment of one sort or another, from gambling to dominoes, nightly shows in the theatre to daily workouts in the gym, walks around the deck (cameras at the ready) to enjoy gorgeous sunrises and sunsets, extensive sea and coastal views, plus unlimited eating opportunities! Wandering around the back streets of Cabo San Lucas, Mazatlan and Puerto Vallarta gave us a reasonably good view of those resorts, with excursions to nearby towns and watching tile painting, brick making and colourful costumed dancing balancing the picture. We even got to ride mountain bikes on dirt tracks deep into the heart of the countryside. It was an enjoyable mix of tourist fun and genuine travel, colour and creativity, traditional and modern, worth every photo!



With one exception, our excursions in March and April were a lot closer to home. Cycling up to Ludlow for the Tandem Club's long Easter weekend, we were treated to five lovely days of soft sunshine and mostly blue skies, with those special spring tones of green, yellow and pink pervading everywhere, and sheep with their lambs frequently lining the road to watch us parade by. A commitment to battle the body-rot of winter got us out on several local rides to see the daffodils, those wonderfully cheerful signals of rebirth that lull one into thinking that warmer weather might be on the way. This year, however, they brought an additional, therapeutic effect, as the exceptional excursion was Pat's journey back to LA for her father's funeral. Only two weeks after she had hugged him good bye in February, he went into hospital with pneumonia, and at 88 just didn't have enough body left to fight it. The silver lining to the cloud was that her mother had all of her three children with her for the first time in 13 years.





In May we treated ourselves to going on a cycling holiday organised by *someone else!* We had never been to Sardinia in our own travels, so we took this opportunity to put that Mediterranean island on our own map. In the company of several people we already knew, and others who quickly became friends, we traversed the middle of the island from west to east and back again. The terrain made for a rather hilly tour, but that in turn provided extensive views over the ever changing but rugged countryside day after day, profusely decorated by a wide assortment of wildflowers, providing very dramatic scenery.



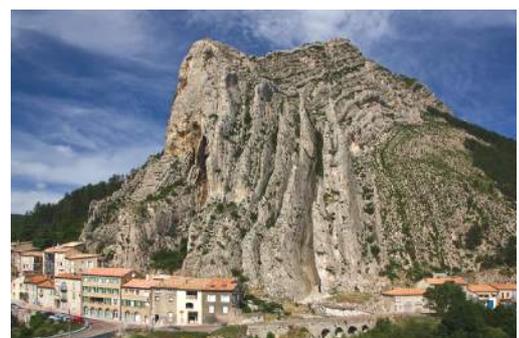
Villages clustered on top of hills or spilling down their sides were the norm, their roofs either red tiled or covered in pink stonecrop, and their facades a mix of rustic and functional.

We explored some beautifully lit coastal caves and a large round stone structure built by the ancients probably for ceremonial purposes, but Sardinia tends to display much of its 'culture' in the form of huge wall murals, some portraying scenic pastoral or local life scenes, a few depicting historical events and others seemingly making social statements. One town boasted several murals illustrating well-known cartoon characters playing with 'real' children.



Most towns and villages had something of interest to catch the eye (and the cameras), but the small town of Bosa, just south of Alghero on the west coast, was a gem. Its ever so narrow little roads, visually narrowed further by the tall, sometimes colourful buildings that rose from them, were often full of life, and its river, lined with disused warehouses and little fishing boats, presented some beautiful near-mirror reflections in the still waters of the early mornings. Having a free day to explore Bosa was a highpoint of the holiday.





Leaving no time for moss to grow, we headed off to the south of France at the end of May for our annual camping tour – three weeks in some of the most glorious scenery that country has to offer! Cycling eastwards from Orange through the Luberon in northern Provence took us up to and through no end of picturesque villages, rather a lot of them at the top of a hill, from which one could espy similar hill-top villages in the surrounding countryside. It is easy to see why Peter Mayle chose to live here! The eastern part is characterised by areas of ochre-coloured sandstone, where centuries of mining have left colourful eroded cliffs. We also enjoyed cycling through many narrow steep-sided valleys lined with huge rock walls and past colourful fields of poppies and lavender. One of the highlights was visiting a prehistoric museum of the area in which imaginative paintings, dioramas, diagrams and text very helpfully explained the formation of the earth and how the landscape we were cycling through came to look as it does now.



Cycling further east we reached the Verdon river and its Grand Canyon, arguably the largest and most spectacular canyon anywhere in Europe, its limestone cliffs rising up to 700 metres (2300 ft, nearly half a mile!) above a tiny ribbon of water below. It took us most of the day (and over 100 photos) to complete the 25km long corniche road, stopping at each hairpin bend to take in the most amazing views, either straight down or across to distant peaks or the vast limestone plateau sliced into by river canyons. The cycling was tough, but being immersed in this world of rocky cliffs and vast expanses of rugged mountains, with little sign of life other than some hardy wildflowers, a few mountain goats and a flock of vultures, was worth every push of the pedals. Even as we moved north towards sub-alpine meadows, strewn with tiny white and purple flowers, west via Sisteron to the base of Mt Ventoux, then through the descent of the Gorges de la Nesque, the scenery never ceased to impress, its rough exterior occasionally softened by scrubby greenery and delicate flowers.

For the seventh month we rested (in a manner of speaking...) then we were off to northern Holland for a week at a Tandem Club rally.



In stark contrast to wild, rugged, undeveloped, hilly France, Holland provided many miles of undemanding cycling, always near some sign of civilisation. We rode along several canals, on tracks through woods and on plenty of quiet normal roads, passing many pretty houses, interesting sculptures and vast fields of commercially grown flowers. Being a rally, though, cycling was only part of the fun. Every afternoon and evening there was something happening at the campsite – a steam organ in full flow, tasty little pancakes being prepared by the dozen, traditional Frisian folk dances, test rides of recumbent tandems, a cheese and wine tasting evening, tandem-based field games and a farewell BBQ. A boat ride through a specially preserved area of canals lined with traditional houses added a further dimension to our enjoyment of an area very linked to water. Being held during one of the driest weeks of the summer helped as well!



From Holland we went directly to the CTC's annual Birthday Rides, this year held in Northamptonshire, for a pleasant week of cycling around attractive places and scenic roads. Architecturally, the area around the small market town of Oundle is quite similar to the Cotswolds, but it doesn't suffer from the same overload of tourists and antique shops, giving it a



nicer, lower-key atmosphere. Other than attempts to capture all of the Harringworth Viaduct in one photo and the odd photos of attractive buildings or curiosities, our cameras stayed in their bags most of the week while we just enjoyed being with (and being cooked dinners by!) friends. The latter theme continued over the final weekend when we went into Lincolnshire for more visiting before heading home for almost three weeks of R&R (more a very concentrated period of frenetic activity trying to catch up on things on the home front!) before embarking on our final adventure of the year.

The Outer Hebrides, that long string of islands off the northwest coast of Scotland, had been on our list of places to go to for many years, and by organising a cycling tour for this September finally got there! Together with 26 others, nearly all veterans of previous Strauss Tours, we took a rather rough ferry crossing from Oban to South Uist, then spent most of the first week cycling north to Stornoway, near the north end of Lewis, then part way back for a ferry from Tarbert to the Isle of Skye.





In the south we had generally flat roads and a strong tail wind. The heather, thick on the ground and in full bloom, made progress with a camera a bit slow, as did numerous pretty little inlets and the views of the hills off on our right. Harris and Lewis brought more hills and a stonier landscape, making for more dramatic scenery and slowing down our progress even more! On a day ride from Stornoway we cycled through some of the emptiest countryside anywhere, passing isolated buildings in various states of repair and wondering how - or indeed whether - anyone could have lived in them. But there were lots of sheep! A hamlet of traditional 'blackhouses' was particularly interesting: very basic stone-built, thatched-roofed two-room huts, lived in until the 1970s, though with amenities harking back to a very different time.



Our carefully made plans nearly came to grief when a storm brewed up the evening before a needed ferry crossing between two islands. Having been warned by the locals that this ferry was very unlikely to run the following day, we had to talk our way early the following morning onto a different ferry (for which we had no bookings) to Skye and then on to our destination on the Isle of Harris. It was indeed a seriously wet and windy day, shutting down most of the Scottish Isles ferry system, but luck proved to be on our side, including having a well-stablised ferry for our crossing!!



Our second week, divided between the isles of Skye and Mull and some of the mainland to help join them up, produced more stunning land-scapes, more open roads, more hills, more sunshine and more sheep. As usual, rivers and inlets put water into our views most of the time, adding another dimension of beauty to the area. A high point (figuratively and literally!) was cycling over the Quiraing Road on the north end of Skye - another amazingly empty road, with not a shred of evidence of man's intervention, except for the road we were on that winds its way up to the clouds then drops over the edge to an awesome escarpment of jagged rocky outcrops, the result of a spectacular (and continuing) landslip.



Despite rumours to the contrary, we do have a home life!! Pat continues to spread herself between various, mostly local, activities. Setting up and operating the lights for a number of productions at our local theatre keeps her busy, and she was asked to do the photos of the spring production. Designing and printing tickets, programmes and posters in general is also in her brief. She took over the role of Programme Secretary of her camera club shortly before last Christmas, and has continued to do well in some of the competitions. The England's Past for Everyone history project she has been involved with for the past four years formally ended in September, and after countless rewrites, she and her census group produced a long analysis of their findings before that cut-off date. She continues to edit and print newsletters for its parent organisation and, fired up by a conference she attended, has taken steps to set up a new local history research group in the new year. Woven in there somewhere was all the planning of our tours, making hundreds of badges for events, designing a new cycle route map featuring John Masefield's connections with the local area, Poetry Festival involvements, including the production of their newsletters, and volunteering at the town's Heritage Centre. Mostly because of all of this, she decided that after 23 years of being on the national council of the CTC, the time had come to step down from her position as Vice President, chairing her final AGM in April.



Mike continues to be the strong glue that holds Pat, our extensive IT equipment and the threads of our home life together. Nothing really changed much for him during the year. His main responsibilities are still keeping our three computers, nine printers and other related equipment working, supplied and communicating with each other, rubbing every two pennies he can find together to produce two and a half, seeing that we are both well fed and wined (both figuratively and literally, as he has nearly all shopping responsibilities), managing the finances of the building we live in and helping to guide the CTC Tours programme.

We'll be ending the year with friends in parts of Somerset, then it starts all over again in January with just as full a calendar as this year's. We're grateful to be able to continue doing so many things in good health - long may it continue! We hope this letter finds you in equally good health and enjoying life.

*Pat & Mike*

PS - For more of our travel photos (and/or larger versions) , go to [www.flickr.com/photos/psycle/sets](http://www.flickr.com/photos/psycle/sets)