



Strauss Annual Report & Travelogue - 2010 vol 3, no 12

Each December, as we sit down to write about the year about to end, trying to decide what made those 12 months unique can present a challenge. There are always new travel experiences to relate, but the bits in between usually follow a fairly predictable pattern. This year, however, brought more than its fair share of new experiences!

There has been no let-up of activities and involvements on the home front. Pat continues to do a lot of work for and at our local theatre: stage lighting, managing travelling companies, arranging front of house rotas, printing tickets and doing the in-house photography for the Am Dram group. Her camera club also keeps her busy: planning the annual programme, liaising with speakers and judges, doing the refreshments every week at meetings and of course submitting photos to the competitions. One of her photos was even chosen as best of the year – good judge!! In October she organised and staffed an exhibition of local photographers' work in a gallery in town. She is also busy with background preparations for a new 'Come Cycling' venture for Ledbury, a web-based bundling of various elements that might attract and make it easier for someone to come to the area for a cycling holiday.

Mike still lives in an endless loop of spreadsheets and paperwork – financial planning and reporting for the cycle tours programme, managing things for the Upper Hall estate and keeping our own finances above water. Being the in-house technical manager for all of our computers, scanners and printers (Pat pushes them to their limits; he has to service, repair or replace them!) also keeps him from getting bored. His one significant new experience of the year you'll read about shortly, but he's doing his best not to have another incident of that sort any time soon!

As we bundle up against a record snowfall and temperatures further below freezing than we've ever lived with before, we can look back warmly on another very full year, with lots of vivid memories and good times shared with good people, plus a few new experiences mixed in. We hope you enjoy reading about them in the following pages.

More importantly we hope that 2011 brings all of us more happiness than anything else, both personally and in the global sense. And a lot less rain!!

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More travel photos (and/or larger versions) on www.flickr.com/photos/psycle/sets





When starting to write this letter, looking out the window at trees totally whitened with snow and frost, our minds turned to the previous December with its unusually early snow and cold temperatures, nearly leading to a white Christmas. So concerned were we about icy conditions on the roads that we turned up at the Tandem Club New Year's gathering at Cheddar wearing boots and carrying walking sticks and bus passes! By day we clambered up and down the hills around the Cheddar Gorge area, then dined, shared stories, played Scrabble and did quizzes with the amiable company during the evenings. When that event ended, we headed deeper into Somerset to spend the weekend with camping friends who are ardent volunteers on the West Somerset Steam Railway. Aside from an enjoyable walk in the snowy fields near Wellington and a few more heated games of Scrabble, the highlight was a ride on that railway to the north Devon coast, followed by a nice gentle walk in full sunshine along the beach to Minehead. A super way to welcome in the new year!!



We arrived home just in time for the next, far more serious, snowfall, which set the scene for the rest of the month. Pat's involvement with setting up and running the lighting for the local Panto cut a deep path through the uncleared snow between our house and town! As the month drew to a close and we got packing for our annual California trip, looking forward to the warmer weather even more than usual, the snow had pretty well cleared, but a little flurry on the last Friday in January, with temperatures dropping to freezing as the sun set, was all it took. En route to the theatre, Mike slipped on a small patch of ice in just the wrong place and broke his ankle.



In a flash our travel plans collapsed, and our world was turned upside down for the next couple of months. Getting him to appointments at Hereford hospital, some 15 miles away, not to mention up the stairs in our apartment, presented some logistical challenges, but with the help of some very helpful neighbours all was made possible! He spent the first three weeks lodged on the living room sofa with his injured leg raised, laptop, internet and telephone connections all brought in, and a steady stream of papers moving between him and his desk. New ways of working had to be learned, but as his technique and confidence for hobbling about on crutches improved, so did his mobility, and with the aid of a neighbour's electric disability scooter he even got out to some events in town.



The unexpected time at home proved to have a silver lining for Pat. When not tending to the patient or running around like a whirling dervish doing many of the things Mike would have done had he been more mobile, she was able to get well ahead on route planning for our annual French camping tour, designing badges for various cycling rallies later in the year, lining up speakers and judges for the next camera club season, participating in photo competitions she thought she would miss, bringing together the various elements of a new Ledbury Heritage Trail map to a print-ready state and working with the new Ledbury History Research group. By the last Sunday of March he was happy to be left alone for the day while she went out with the local cycling group leading its annual daffodil ride – her first outing of the year. We had turned the corner!!

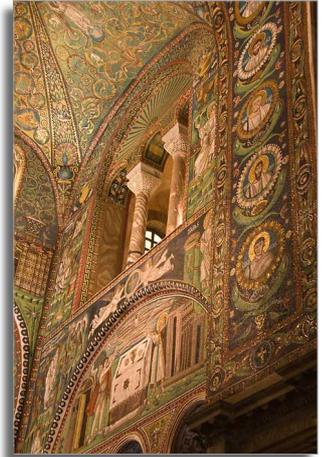




April came in like a lamb – what a change!! To celebrate the arrival of sunshine and milder weather, we borrowed a car and spent a delightful Sunday afternoon driving around the Dymock daffodil fields and visiting an outdoor sculpture exhibition. Mike was still using two canes for walking any distance, but he'd been building up strength on an exercise bike at our local hospital and was ready for the real thing. So off we went to Italy, extending a one-week fixed-base cycling holiday (organised by someone else!) into a wider ranging two-week experience. We spent our first three days in Rimini, progressing from walks around our hotel's pretty residential district near



the beaches, to a gentle ride around the sights of the town on basic just-useable bikes, to a full day on hired mountain bikes up into the nearby hills. The feelings of release and accomplishment were terrific!! Then we moved north a bit to join the tour group for a week based in the resort of Gatteo a Mare, located at the mouth of the famous Rubicon river (now only a little stream) and next to the port town of Cesenatico. Five days of cycling in pleasant countryside did both of us a world of good, and doing it on lightweight Italian bikes was a treat! The visual harmony of old hilltop towns, lush green pastures, blossoming orchards, roadside wildflowers and distant mountains was pure eye candy. We both got better at getting up the hills that always appeared late mornings and seeking out ice cream shops later in the afternoons.



Cesenatico's claims to fame are that it was the hometown of the renowned cycle racer, Marco Pantani, and that its canal was designed by Leonardo da Vinci. As might be expected, we paid a visit to the Pantani museum, but the canal, with its collection of historic fishing boats, their ancient coloured sails in full rig, set against a backdrop of beautifully preserved 14thC buildings, was easily the greater attraction. The occasional church or town square caught our photographers' eyes, but our day in Ravenna was the icing on the cake. We had been there 30-some years ago, but saw it now with far more educated eyes. In spite of drizzly weather and Mike's slower walking, we visited as many mosaic-rich buildings as we could 'til we dropped, marvelling at the meticulous craftwork of each and every one – walls, floors, ceilings and arches covered with tiny pieces of coloured stone, depicting complicated biblical scenes and intricate geometric patterns.



Our return journey coincided neatly with Iceland's volcanic eruption! Coming early to the conclusion that waiting for Ryanair to fly us home could mean a lengthy stay in the hotel, whose buffet offerings we had well and truly exhausted over the course of the week, we sought other



options. With two others from the tour group, we decided to try for a train across into France then north to the Channel. However, Rimini station staff wouldn't ticket us past Milan (the system was under a bit of pressure!). We took the 'bird in the hand' approach and paid up, arriving in Milan late afternoon. After standing in an 'information' queue for over an hour and hearing of hotel rooms going for 500 euros (if they could be found!), a bit of quick thinking and a generous dose of good timing led us to some ticket kiosks where we bought tickets for the last train of the day to the last station before the French border. Luck and perseverance got us a hotel there for the night and a train the following morning to Nice where, thanks to our little laptop and the internet, Mike had been able to pre-arrange a car hire. Gratefully three of us were able to share the driving, as it took us until after midnight to get to the Loire Valley. The next day's journey up to the coast was relatively easy, and Mike's pre-booking of our ferry assured us of a specific crossing, but lady luck still had



one more card to play. One of the chaps just happened to have the keys to a house in Portsmouth with him (an essential holiday item!), so we had free beds for the night and wound up getting home only one day later than planned!

May's two Bank Holiday weekends took us off to cycling gatherings in the New Forest and Shropshire. The weather wasn't brilliant, but the company was certainly up to its usual high standard! A highlight was watching a fully costumed demonstration of Roman centurions in battle. Very colourful, but seemingly rather inefficient!





Our February trip to LA wasn't so much cancelled as postponed to May. During our two weeks there, we did the usual rounds of visits to family and friends and enjoyed some much needed R&R. But we also managed to borrow two bikes and get out on three days for some local rides. Heavily developed Orange County doesn't have much real countryside, but a few cycle trails in the area did lead to some attractive pockets of relative peace and tranquility. One of the trails passed through some hills that have not yet been built on (a rare find!). Lined with beautiful flowers crying out for photos, they offered a fairly rural atmosphere for a mile or two. The second trail skirted a part of Newport Bay set aside as a haven for waterfowl and other bird life. Both linked up with a somewhat more urban path alongside what is fancifully known as the Los Angeles River. Being ninety-nine percent concrete channel and one percent trickle of water down the middle, it is difficult to think of it as a 'river', but cycling along it for a few miles provided nice views of the mountains, frequent sightings of herons and large birds of prey and a welcome respite from the wide, well-travelled roads.



We spent most of June in France leading our camping tour. Starting in Auxerre, we rode south through the beautiful Morvan area to Meursault, near Beaune in Burgundy, then east just into the Jura before turning north to the Loue river, then west following that and the Doubs back to Beaune. Things started out pretty well, with nice weather and a gentle route to the first campsite. But by day three the rain had arrived, and on day four (a very wet one, **and** his birthday!) Mike fell off his bike, his tyres slipping on a wet metal bridge. No bones broken, but a fair bit of skin scraped off one knee. Bandaged up by a local medic, he managed to ride, through the rain, to the next campsite on the lovely Lac des Settons. The following day one of the women on the tour fell and injured her wrist. She tried to carry on but had to give up and go home from campsite number three, her arm in plaster. In a strong headwind we moved on to



Lons-le-Saunier, doing a short ride on one day to see the lovely village of Beaumes-les-Messieurs nestled beneath a magnificent limestone curtain wall with a very impressive waterfall. But as the rain persisted, wet clothes staying wet and the TV news showing campsites in Nice getting flooded out, two more people abandoned ship with a leaky tent and bike trouble. They didn't see the character building side of such conditions ...! (It **was** tricky to sell with reports of hot weather in England filtering through!)



After a couple of hours staring at maps, we decided to skip the next campsite up in the mountains, redrawing the route northeast via Arbois. But it was cold there as well, loud music played until 2am and one more person headed for home! An indoor guided tour of the house where Louis Pasteur lived gave a few of us a respite from the elements, and we did learn quite a bit (considering it was all in French). The weather followed us north, blotting out all the good views and sending us into three cafes in one afternoon for lunch and hot chocolates! But as we reached Ornans the sun came out, and a warm, dry third week made tour leading tolerable again!



In typical Strauss fashion, we had barely unpacked from France before the Poetry Festival started. As expected, we enjoyed a good variety of poetry and music during the week and hosted two poets, one a Frenchman who came with his wife and grandson. He spoke a good smattering of English, but the conversations were a jumble of French and English to try to keep everyone in the picture. The other was Jenny Joseph, famous for her poem 'Warning (When I am an old woman I shall wear purple...)' . A fascinating lady who could talk for England! But it was a pleasure to meet her and give her a place to stay. We also got to meet the well-known BBC news presenter Michael Buerk. We had a very lively chat with him about his preferred occupation as a news reporter, the investigative side being more challenging and interesting than reading out the news in a studio! After we said our good-byes, it took a week before Pat would wash her left cheek ...!



The rest of July passed in a blur of the usual 'things to do' that fill our lives, then we returned to France for our first experience of the Semaine Fédérale. The event bears a loose resemblance to the CTC Birthday Rides we've been going to for years, but the French version draws about ten thousand cyclists compared to a few hundred. Massive fields were turned into campsites with seas of white caravans and camper vans and an area set aside for small tents. The facilities were a bit basic, with roofless portable toilet and shower cubicles and no hot water for a couple of days. There were no trees to shelter us from the sun or rain, the dining area was a 15-20 minute brisk walk away, and trying to find someone you wanted to meet up with was a serious challenge. But we enjoyed the week largely due to the atmosphere being so utterly imbued with cycling – not just because cyclists were always to be seen on the roads, nor just because the dining hall (converted from a large sports hall) was filled every night with the hum of hundreds of cyclists chatting away in one language or another, but also because many of the local shops and communities participated in the fun, putting out clever and colourful displays of bikes in their front gardens to cheer us on our way. A real highlight was the final day parade – over an hour of one cycling club after another riding through the town, some in each group wearing traditional costumes or something more lighthearted that depicted what their part of France was known for.



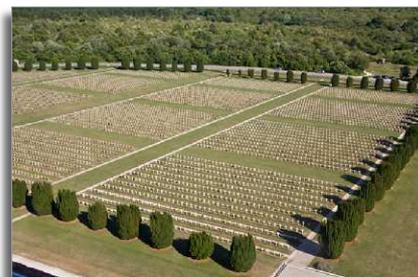
The event was held in Verdun, a scenically uninspiring area but one of the most important battle grounds of WWI. Our knowledge and understanding of that chapter of history was greatly enhanced through visiting museums, vast cemeteries, trenches and villages that had been obliterated by the shelling. The ossuary, a repository for millions of bones gathered from the nearby fields, was a sobering experience on its own.



Luxembourg hosted the International Tandem Rally the following week. With fewer than 400 participants, the feeling of that event was wholly different. Everything was much closer to hand, we knew lots of people there and we could understand a much higher proportion of them! The general atmosphere of the towns and countryside was also more alive: houses looked more cared for, wild and cultivated flowers were more abundant, and there was more artistic creativity in evidence. It almost seemed as if the heart and soul of Verdun had never really recovered after the war. A two-night stop in Ypres in Belgium on the way back to the channel port reinforced this thinking. This town, though similarly levelled by the war, had rebuilt itself to its former glory, nearly brick for brick. Following the very moving Last Post ceremony at the Menin



Gate memorial, we walked around the arches reading some of the lists of 55,000 names inscribed in the walls – just over half of the Commonwealth soldiers who died in the Ypres Salient without graves. The whole experience was a bit numbing. ... as was the interim day cycling from one war cemetery to the next in a light and not-very-warm drizzle! So much for summer ...





We had two days at home to dry out and repack, then took a series of trains down to Cornwall for the CTC's Birthday Rides. The drying out part was a waste of time, as we got soaked cycling from the rail station to the headquarters! We successfully cadged a room to keep from having to put our tent up that night in the rain, but, ever hopeful, set up camp the following day. Alas, foul weather plagued us on and off all week, relenting enough for us to go on rides only twice. The area is known for its old tin mines, and we did achieve our goal of wanting to see some of those. However, we had to dodge puddles and rain showers just to read the information panels, and the photos we tried to take of the remains of several mines aren't really worth looking at. Our luck was only marginally better on the day we visited the Eden Project, giving us a little time for a reasonable walk around the external areas, photographing a few of the beautiful flowers, before seeking shelter in the climate-controlled domes. Those were very interesting, showing a variety of plants that grow in different temperature zones and how simple housing was designed to deal with some of them. Fortunately the sun emerged for the day Pat did her mistress of ceremonies bit (3rd year running!) at the birthday cake cutting event, held in the grounds of Pendennis Castle in Falmouth, and we did a pretty good job of making the most of the generous hospitality of longstanding friends – lunch in the shelter of one camper van, dinner in another ...



By September there was no end of things waiting for our attention nearer home. However, they had to be crammed into the first three weeks as, by popular demand, we had agreed to lead a tour around New England to see the fall foliage. This being the fourth time we had gone there with a group, and already knowing all but one of the 18 people who went with us this year, we enjoyed our three weeks in an unusually relaxed manner. From Salem we rode north up the coast and into New Hampshire as far as North Conway, then over the Kancamagus Highway. We had expected the last two days of this section to be a highlight of the tour, but the cloud of precipitation that had been following us around all year gave us very wet and miserable weather, chilling us thoroughly. The weather improved greatly as we continued north along the beautiful Franconia notch cycle path into Vermont, staying so for four days. Our scheduled free day south of Stowe was another wash out, though we were staying in a wonderful inn with excellent home cooked meals and plenty of space for the group to congregate. As we continued south into northern Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire, sunshine and warmth became more the norm, showing off the trees in all their glory. Most of the routes were repeats from previous tours, but seven years of changes locally, plus the memory-overwriting effect of so many other experiences we've had in that time, kept any traces of ho-hum or deja-vu at bay! More detailed maps also enabled us to venture onto more minor (often dirt) roads. We enjoyed the characteristic architecture and landscape with a nice mix of familiarity and freshness. Autumn colours and the harvest theme that comes at the same time appear in many places on this planet, but in New England we were surrounded by them day after day.



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