
Strauss Annual Report & Travelogue 2014

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On the occasion of his 80th birthday, the renowned tenor-turned-baritone Placido Domingo was asked whether he might start taking life a bit easier now. His response was 'I rest, I rust'. We can assure you that during 2014 no sign of any rust developed in either of us! There's no time - it's been a busy year full of loads of good memories now stashed in the bank.

Though the first months of the year life were very Ledbury based, life was far from dull and quiet. A steady flow of theatre lighting and publicity distribution, local history work, Master's House restoration photo sessions, camera club meetings and competitions, cycle map creation and French tour route planning kept Pat well off the streets. In addition to serving as the support staff at home, Mike continued to spend most of his waking hours working on Upper Hall accounts, CTC tours accounts, ensuring our own finances stayed solvent, getting involved with directing peer-to-peer lending operations and keeping our growing collection of computers and printers running.

As the unusually wet but mild weather receded, the urge to get out on the bikes grew strong. Our first effort, a tandem ride in late February, was foiled by a puncture less than a mile after leaving town, but the Daffodil Weekend in March, the Cotswold Weekend in April and a number of local day rides in those months got the legs and lungs going again after their winter break. Fields of bobbing daffodils and prancing lambs made every outing an extra pleasure.



By early May, though, we were on the move, starting with a two-week cycle tour (with someone else leading) in Albania. The country, having only recently opened up to visitors, offered a fascinating mix of old and new, and we were always passing something of interest. Old timber farmhouses contrasted with high-rise concrete hotels; icon-rich old orthodox churches with ornate frescoed walls were a world away from the plain white walls of spacious modern churches, one of which was dedicated to Mother Teresa, who was born there; shawl-covered peasant women herding goats up and down stony slopes seemed the norm, until we met a younger man, leading his flock across a bridge, who asked if we put any of our photos up on the internet! For a place to explore, we gave the heritage town of Berat five stars; in contrast, the capital city of Tirana could have been left off our itinerary. The scenery, often dominated by towering mountains, was quite dramatic, roads snaking up into them and rivers rushing down from them - lots of stops for yet another photo, though cycling up those long climbs, at times on very stony surfaces, was hard work!



The locals were always friendly and happy to see us, the children eager to practice a few words of English. As we stopped in one village to check the route, a local invited us to his home for something to eat and to meet his wife and daughter - we made an interesting contrast of cultures and dress! Elsewhere we encountered a large gathering of old men sitting around tables outdoors, seriously engaged in a domino tournament! (We resisted the urge to ask if we could join in.) By prior arrangement, many in our group took pens and paper and various such items for the children in a school we visited. In contrast to the colourful range of supplies we spread out on the tables, their classrooms were absolutely barren - just a few desks - yet some of them were learning to speak English. Part of our contribution was several videos (they had a player) - what they'll make of *The Sound of Music* we'll never know!



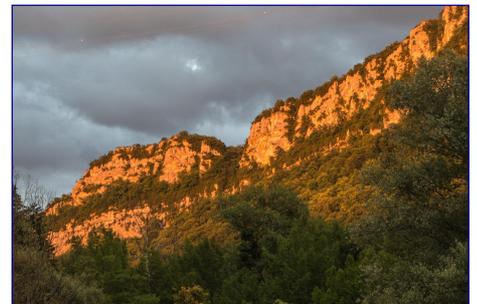
Home time after Albania was very short, as after a couple of days we headed off to the Welsh borders for the Short Cranks weekend. It was our turn to organise this annual gathering, but it did not start well. A failure to adequately communicate a left turn as we arrived resulted in Mike running into Pat. Bang! Whallop! Into the road - into a puddle, to be precise - she went! With a bit of time and a lot of help from passing policemen, she was eventually able to stand and walk slowly into the hostel where we were staying, but it took until the Monday, when we had to get back to Leominster to get home, before she could face getting back on the bike. Still, it was really good to spend time with such wonderful friends on our 21st reunion.



Four more days at home then we were on the move again to France to lead our annual camping tour. Starting in Auxerre, the first fortnight's route was through northern Burgundy, taking in much of the Morvan Natural Park via a rather meandering route. This is a much-wooded area, with lots of lakes, rideable towpaths along canals and charming stone villages. Probably the most attractive town we visited was Clamecy, its town centre featuring many buildings of note, and from our tents we could wave to the boaters on the Canal Nivernais. Although Pat's back wasn't up to cycling every day, a short ride up and down that canal on our second afternoon there buoyed her spirits.



Weeks three and four, taking us through Dijon and into the Western Jura, proved to be quite a bit hillier. Highlights in that area were revisiting the very attractive village of Baume-les-Messieurs, nestled at the bottom of a horseshoe of vertiginous cliffs, and the dramatic scenery along the long, narrow valley of the river Ain. She who is happiest with a camera in her hand revelled in spending an entire day at a bird park in Villars-les-Dombes, persuading all sizes and shapes of her feathered friends, from flamingos and exotic parrots to vicious vultures (close enough to shake hands with...) and soaring storks, to pose for her.



Next stop - Yorkshire! We didn't bother to go home after France, just left the Bike Bus in Sheffield and spent a lovely summer's evening with cycling friends who escorted us the next day (he leading us up *all* the hills, she taking our luggage in the car!) into West Yorkshire. From there we trained/cycled to near Skipton for a gathering of the group we went to Kerala with in 2013. This reunion was cleverly timed to coincide with the Tour de France coming through Yorkshire, and we all made the most of that, watching the teams flash past close enough to touch on both the Saturday and the Sunday, then watching the rest of the race on the big screen in Skipton or cycling back to our hosts' house to do the same and continue visiting.





The celebration of the Tour was everywhere - massive yellow jerseys hung on buildings and draped on statues, cycle images of all sorts decorating many shops and businesses, posters and signs taking on French words. Bands entertained in the towns, crowds lined the

roads, people appeared in all sorts of fancy dress, and the advance motorcade lived up to expectations. Even Leeds rail station entered into the fun, painting its concourse with large colourful tyre tracks! The general atmosphere was 'two wheels good'!

The rest of July was a busy month at home: seeing lots of events at the Poetry Festival, making lots of badges for cycling rallies and filming tours of Ledbury's Master's House by the architect and site manager involved both of us. The latter, two perspectives on the massive restoration works of this historic building over the past two years, generated many hours of work for Pat later in the year, editing and enhancing the raw material into an informative DVD that would guide the viewer through the building and the work that has transformed it. She also participated in an assessment day run by the Royal Photographic Society for members of her camera club hopeful of obtaining a distinction. Though she hasn't had time to take things further, comments passed on her panel were very encouraging.



There's no keeping us away now from the massive French cycling event, the Semaine Féderale! For the first ten days of August we enjoyed scenic routes with extensive fields of sunflowers, thousands of colourful cyclists on the roads and a fantastic campsite camaraderie. Based on the attractive town of St-Pourçain-sur-Sioule in the Allier, we were only a half-day's ride from the spa town of Vichy, a place we'd never managed to visit before. Although the rides didn't take us to other places of special note, it was a pleasure to just get up each day and enjoy a pleasant cycle ride in our own time with no responsibilities for others, enjoying lovely views and passing dozens of delightfully decorated bikes along the way. They, and the mass parade of cyclists, many in 'local dress' on the final day, kept our cameras busy!



With the International Tandem Rally taking place in Brittany less than a week after this week ended, the idea of cycling between them sounded like a good plan. The distance actually meant covering over 200 miles of that by rail on one day, but we

had a great week making our way from one pre-booked accommodation to the next (*no camping!*), ranging from the delights of a small chateau, with dinner served in a baronial dining room, down to the basics of a bunk-bedded room in a gite d'étape, our evening meal consisting of 'savory slices' grabbed from a boulangerie that was about to close! Two lovely B&Bs were full of the artistry of their owners: one a painter, who showed us nearly all his life's work, and one an 80-year-old quilter, whose pieces decorated every wall in her house! Our plans gave us the flexibility we seldom have to poke our noses into places of interest we discovered along the way: an ancient archaeological site with a tall standing stone, tucked away in a wood; small out-of-the-way churches with elaborately painted wooden ceilings; a Roman amphitheatre; a large Cistercian monastery; and a church dedicated to children, its walls lined with 2000 marble votive plaques, most dating from the late 19th century. (See top of next page for photos.)



Our week at the tandem rally brought us into the company of many good friends and acquaintances with many miles of cycling on disused railway beds and alongside canals. The lay of Brittany's land meant we worked harder when we got onto roads, though we usually found something to stop and look at when we needed to 'ease the strain'. The scenery was pleasant, not crying out to be photographed, but a most enjoyable area of France to cycle in. What we missed was normal August weather! Though the days were generally clear, the sun seemed to be rather ineffective at warming us. For breakfasts we either stayed inside our tent or ventured out onto a nearby bench, once it caught the morning sun. Come evening we cooked and ate our meals well wrapped up inside the group marquee, though with many others doing likewise, it was very sociable in there!



We touched base at home for three days before joining the long weekend Flying Gate gathering in Mortimer country on the Herefordshire-Shropshire border. Based in Kingsland, not far from Leominster, the Friday and Sunday rides took us to many familiar places, including Berrington Hall, Ludlow, Pembridge, Shobden and Presteigne, but Saturday's ride took us 'to the stars'. The organiser had specially arranged for us to visit the Spaceguard Centre, a working observatory, just outside Knighton, which is the main source of information about near Earth objects in the UK. The hill we had to climb to get up there was something else (!!!), but it was worth it for the guided tour that explained the structure of the solar system and the threats to life on earth from asteroids and comets.



Except for a reunion of our French camping troops in the National Forest in early October, our comings and goings for the year came to an end, and we quickly settled back into our usual home-based activities. Pat's brief, to create with stage lighting the seedy, foggy atmosphere of Victorian London for our am dram's production of *Sweeney Todd*, provided an extra challenge! She has taken on three young lighting trainees to help augment the 'staff', as more and more travelling companies coming to perform in little old Ledbury want us to do their lighting. Mike immersed himself in preparing our US tax return and next year's budgets for Upper Hall and CTC Tours.

Pat's lighting activities aside, our local theatre has continued to provide us with a steady and rewarding stream of drama and music from lots of visiting companies. In particular, the satellite transmissions of live performances give us an enviable 'peep-hole' onto the stages of The Royal Opera House, National Theatre and The Royal Shakespeare Company. This year we were able to see the up and coming Polish baritone Mariusz Kwiecien's compelling performance of *Don Giovanni*, with innovative projections producing a very exciting 'set'. The full-scale 'puppet' horses in *War Horse* brought a powerful sense of artistic imagination to a very moving play. Christopher Wheeldon's choreography of *The Winter's Tale* created a ballet full of ruthless emotion and great physical strength; not a tutu in sight! The ballet *Alice in Wonderland*, with the delightful expressions of Sarah Lamb, superb dancing by all the cast and magical technological imagery, was a real treat to watch, and experiencing the mastery of Placido Domingo so up close and personal in *I Due Foscari* was a great privilege.

Sadly we've lost a lot of good friends and neighbours this year, and the world doesn't look any closer to peace than it did when we last wrote. Many, many people won't have a happy holiday season in their usual way. But we want to wish all our readers the best for the coming year and to say a big thank you for your cards and annual letters, which bring a cheerful start to our days at this time of year!

Pat & Mike



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

Annual reports are on www.strauss.org.uk. Printed copies happily sent out upon request.