

## Edwin Gruber's blog - cycle pilgrimage in support of the school, 5-30th September 2019

Sixty-nine-year-old retired teacher Edwin Gruber, a dedicated supporter of the Druk Padma Karpo School, set himself the challenge of pedalling 2,500 kilometres through France in 25 days as a sponsored event for the school and made a blog of his experiences and reflections.

Edwin set off from the Channel coast and followed ancient pilgrimage routes via the Atlantic Coast and the foothills of the Pyrenees to the Mediterranean. Edwin channelled his passion for education into purposeful action. Edwin invited people to sponsor him for each metre of ascent along his route, which was over 15,000 metres, or for the whole trip.

Edwin first visited the school in 2001, a few months before it opened, and was enthusiastic about its educational aims and philosophy. He took four groups of pupils from St Christopher School in Letchworth, where he taught, to Ladakh, on each occasion supporting the school educationally and financially, and he has organised fundraising events while working as a teacher. He was looking forward to the cycle challenge and hoped it would provide an opportunity to actively support the school again. Edwin said of his cycle pilgrimage "Like in life, the actual journey is more important than any final destination".



## Blog

### Planning - June 25, 2019

It is still just over two months until I will set off on my tour through France with a view of raising money for Druk Padma Karpo School in Ladakh in the Indian Himalayas. To me this is a really exciting project, as it will give me the opportunity to experience the natural beauty of many parts of France. At the same time, it will be a time to reflect on what really matters in my life. And as this time of appreciating beauty, reflection and gratitude for what I have in life is combined with the social action of raising money for a school that I really believe in, it is an absolutely exciting project and a marvellous challenge for a 69-year old retired teacher.

I will depart from England on the night Ferry from Newhaven to Dieppe on September 4, will then make my way towards Bordeaux and the Landes before crossing to the Mediterranean via the Pyrenean foothills. Once I set off, I will attempt to post regular updates of my journey.

### Plans are taking shape - July 19, 2019

Setting out on a journey can have a scary element, as one is entering into unknown territory where the terrain is unfamiliar and the path is not always clear. The more planning and preparation one can therefore do, the better. During the last week or two I have spent a lot of time finalising the routes I am going to take and then mapping them. On most days, I will cover around 100 km. The longest day will be in the Landes region south of Bordeaux, where I will cover over 150 km in a single day, but then the terrain there will be mostly flat. I expect the hardest days to be in the foothills of the Pyrenees, where, on several occasions, I will have a daily ascent of more than 1000 m. It will be important to go slowly and to pace myself then, but I am confident that, with confidence and perseverance, I will manage.

And I already look forward to the different landscapes I will travel through, the different people I will encounter, the different experiences I will have. I hope to be able to experience the whole journey with a sense of openness, awareness and a sense of wonder for this miracle of life we all share.

### 2 days to the start of the adventure - September 02, 2019

First of all I would like to thank all of you who have been so generous with your sponsorship. I have also been touched by some of the encouraging comments you have made on my fundraising page. After our walking holidays

in Austria, I have now been on my bike every day for the last week and I have gradually increased the distances. I feel now I have prepared as well as I can and I look forward to the challenges ahead.

I will depart from Letchworth on Wednesday afternoon and take the overnight ferry from Newhaven to Dieppe. On Thursday I will then be cycling the first 100 km of my route.

Wish me luck and good weather on the route. It will be lovely to share my adventure with so many of you.

### **The actual journey begins - September 04, 2019**



Leaving Letchworth



Arrived at Newhaven Town railway station

After an overnight ferry to Dieppe I am just about setting off on the bike. I came to the town centre waiting for daylight and the first boulangerie to open. After a good breakfast and some fruit from the vegetable Market, I am ready to set off.

### **The first day - September 05, 2019**

The body benefits from movement and the mind benefits from stillness (Sakyong Mipham)

This seems a rather relevant sentence to describe my first day's cycling. As I got going, the body started loosening up and the mind became calmer and clearer.

I set off from Dieppe with a steep uphill section but after about 30 km I got into my stride and felt less tired when I arrived at my destination than in the morning.

My accommodation being right out in the countryside, I walked out to the dramatic cliffs, where there was complete calm.

### **Difficulties September 06, 2019**



The first day post would not publish yesterday, as I had no Internet. Also I have not yet been successful in sending photos.

## **Challenging one's limits September 06, 2019**

Another day well completed, although it was challenging at times....

At Le Havre, after about 15 km through the port area, I had to cross the River Seine on a dual carriage way bridge that rises 62 m above sea level. When I realised it was potentially scary due to the narrow cycle strip and the really strong side wind, I got off the bike and walked across. Then I could actually enjoy the beauty of the views. And on two occasions after the bridge, when the route turned inland, it rose to over 120 metres with a strong headwind. I managed the challenges thinking how important it is not to limit one's challenges, but instead to challenge one's limits.

Wish me luck for tomorrow - 119 km and 1050 metres of climbing.

## **Over 300 Kilometres cycled September 07, 2019**

As I left Cabourg this morning, I was pondering what exactly it is that makes cycle touring so special for me. And as I was nearing my destination this evening, I concluded, that it gives me such a wonderful opportunity to strike a profound emotional balance: Being out in nature, seeing and appreciating its beauty, while at the same time having the opportunity to look within. Could I also achieve this balance at home, at work, elsewhere, in other situations? Certainly, but it is much easier to get distracted and sidetracked. Mindfulness is best developed when we are in harmony with our inner nature...

Today was very varied, but incredibly beautiful: After about 15 km along the coast (passing the easternmost of the D-day landing beaches), the route turned inland along a stunning cycle track through forest and along a river. And lastly, it got very hilly with a maximum altitude of 271 m.

And here are a few details about today's ride:

Distance: 113.8 km

Hours on bike: 6.39

Metres climbed: 888

Average speed: 17.2 km/h

Calories used: 3585

And now I will just go outside to look at the stars for a while...

## **Right direction September 08, 2019**

Should be there by Wednesday...



## **Towards the Loire September 08, 2019**

This morning I was thinking of my fundraising and the children in Ladakh that I am supporting with my ride. On one level, we are worlds apart, yet on another level, we are closely connected in so many ways, for example in our quest as human beings to find peace and happiness in a turbulent world. We need the same inner freedom and we all have the same struggle in realising that this inner freedom knows no limits other than those we impose on it or allow others to impose.

Today's ride started in glorious sunshine through a marvellous landscape (see picture below), but it also had 200 metres of height gain in the first 9 Kilometres. Nearly all the climbing happened in the morning. In the afternoon, I had 60 glorious Kilometres along the Mayenne River. In Laval, a lovely medieval town, I was caught up in a triathlon with road blocks and huge crowds watching, but I negotiated that successfully as well. Tomorrow I hope to reach the Loire River around noon, so I can safely say I am leaving Northern France.



### **Crossing the Loire - September 09, 2019**

I woke up in the middle of the night and knew then that I was wide awake, so I sat up in bed and started reading in the Tao Te Ching:

Chapter 43

The softest things in the world,  
In time, naturally overcome the hardest...  
The benefits of actions without attachment  
Are rarely matched in the world

Chapter 46

Thus the satisfaction of contentment  
Is the lasting satisfaction

Deep in thought I went back to sleep and really woke up refreshed in the morning.

Today was a journey along 2 rivers: First I followed the Maine in a southerly direction, then the Loire in an easterly direction. And having crossed the Loire now, I have definitely left Northern France behind. While a few days ago sunflowers were in full and glorious bloom, the flowers here have faded. It is also much drier and the vegetation is definitely changing. I saw the first palm trees today...

My ride today definitely was defined by what I had read in the night. It was a good day in spite of poor riding surfaces, very cold temperatures in the morning (below 7 degrees for over 20 km), and a really strong side wind when I reached the Loire.

The most interesting wildlife I have so far encountered was a musk rat that scuttled across the track just in front of me and numerous squirrels (all red!). I have also seen a good number of birds of prey and, today, the first heron. I have been lucky so far to escape rain (in fact it rained heavily just after I arrived in Saumur), and if the forecast is right, it is going to turn warm and sunny from tomorrow.

The photo is of the famous Chateau in Saumur.





## Beyond the Loire - September 10, 2019

The airbnb I stayed at last night was called "en passant", that is "passing through". This is a very apt name for the whole of my journey, also.

I thought again, as yesterday, about action without attachment and of the importance of letting go. The pain we can't let go of will often become much more painful. And even the pleasant experiences we grasp and try to hold on to will turn to pain once the pleasurable experience has passed. Holding on to anything prevents us from experiencing every precious new moment in its wonderful fullness.

Today was my first day on this journey which was warm and sunny. The light was glorious, the scenery splendid and remote. Route finding was interesting, as both my cycle computer and the actual cycle route signage directed me towards unsurfaced roads on several occasions. Then I had to find my own route, which brought its own challenges, but in the end I got to Parthenay, a lovely medieval town, in good time.

Tomorrow evening I shall not be far from La Rochelle. By tonight I have covered more than a quarter of my projected distance (655 km) and I have climbed over 4600 vertical metres, which is, after all, nearly the height of Mont Blanc.

Picture is of Parthenay a beautiful medieval town.



## Early morning reflections - September 10, 2019

I have woken up rather stiff and sore after yesterday's 100 km ride and my host's kindness after I arrived here in Parthenay to take the time to show me every rampart and tower of the ancient town (I did 11000 steps!).

So I think the challenge today will be not to focus on this discomfort caused by external circumstances, and focus on what Matthieu Ricard writes in his book "Happiness":

Selfishness, or rather the feeling that one is the centre of the world - hence "self-centredness" - is the source of most of our disruptive thoughts.

He also writes:

There is a difference between ephemeral discomforts and unhappiness. These two levels of experience can be compared respectively to the waves and the depths of the ocean. A storm may be raging at the surface, but the depths remain calm. The wise man always remains connected to the depths.

Wish me the strength that I can remain connected to what really matters today.....

## Towards the ocean - September 11, 2019

In my accommodation last night in Parthenay, the following 2 messages were pinned up:

Do not judge every day by the harvest you reap, but by the seeds you have planted (Robert Louis Stevenson)

The secret of happiness is the alignment between what you think, what you say and what you do (Mahatma Gandhi)

And during the gourmet breakfast Alain made, we exchanged many ideas between like-minded people and agreed among other things that the sentence on my fundraising flyer "Like in life, the actual journey is more important than any final destination" is in fact quite similar in meaning to the Stevenson quote.

About half way through my cycling day, I met a most fascinating gentleman, probably in his eighties. He was on his bike and we shared our respective views on cycle touring. He told me that when he was my age, he still toured

everywhere on his bike, because on, as he called them, the small routes you can pay full attention to your journey and experience every moment fully. It was absolutely amazing to have my own thoughts of just hours before mirrored in this fashion.

More conversations followed and, I hope, several seeds were sown.

Much of today's route was signed as "Chemin du Poitou secret" (my translation: Secret pathways of Poitou). The region was remote, peaceful and quiet. And the second half of today's ride, the flat marshes stretching towards the sea, certainly has been my favourite part of the Pilgrimage so far. I saw a kingfisher from very close, and marsh birds like herons, swans and egrets.

So the first milestone is nearly reached. Tomorrow I shall reach the Atlantic and if the weather stays as warm as today, I might even see what the water temperature is like tomorrow evening.....

### **As vast and clear as a cloudless sky - September 11, 2019**

Matthieu Ricard writes in "Happiness" :

Imagine yourself sitting serenely, your mind as vast and clear as a cloudless sky, as calm as a windless ocean.

Experience this calmness. Watch your inner tempests subside and let this feeling of peace grow anew in your mind.

Understand that even if your wounds are deep, they do not touch the essential nature of your mind, the fundamental luminosity of pure consciousness.

I have experienced many tempests subside while riding through beautiful scenery on a bike. And on really good days, like yesterday or today, the storms and fantasy story lines do not even arise. The mind is can be calm and expansive...

Totally different landscape in the salt marshes at sea level - - 50 km from La Rochelle



Not quite as far as it was a few days ago



Sunflowers which were in full bloom further north are ready to be harvested here

## Remembering - September 12, 2019

Just after midday today, I joined the Velodysee Atlantic cycle route, which I had done some years ago and have called my favourite cycle route ever since. I could see why I love this route within minutes of joining it. It goes through amazing landscapes, is really rich in wildlife, is mostly traffic free and blissfully peaceful. The stretch of coastline just north of Royan, the Cote Sauvage, has no development on it at all and only about 4 access points for motorists. It is a cyclist's paradise and also an ideal place to contemplate the vastness of the sky and the ocean. So, after dropping my luggage at my accommodation, I couldn't resist going back to the coast and refresh with a quick foray into the water. It certainly was warmer than it ever gets in England.



Biggest climb today, the Charente bridge at Rochefort



One of my favourite stretches for cycling - mixed forest in the dunes, traffic free and the sound of the waves in the background



Vast sky and clear sea



## Nearly 1000 km cycled! - September 13, 2019

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "Adopt the pace of nature. Her secret is patience."

I had to really be patient this afternoon when I started struggling with the heat and tiredness. Maybe I had enjoyed a leisurely pace too much this morning before it got really hot. Maybe I had underestimated the route, thinking that near an estuary it would be flat: In fact, the 30 Kilometres after Royan were probably the steepest terrain I had encountered so far. And maybe I expected smoother road surfaces. The rough terrain made the going quite tough at times. Anyway, I was patient when I got tired and, in the end, I got here without difficulties.

And on the way, I forgot any struggles as well, as I was totally absorbed in the landscapes I passed. For about 40 Kilometres, I was totally on my own, surrounded by water, fields, amazing vegetation and birds, lots of birds. I felt strongly reminded of Einstein's sentence (not the one when he was supposed to have said that all his best ideas came to him while he was riding his bike): "Look deep into nature, then you will understand everything better". I felt very privileged for having the opportunity to pass through such a variety of amazing landscapes. Especially the last 3 or 4 days have been quite amazing in this respect.

When I arrived here, I picked up Kahlil Gibran's 'The Prophet' and opened the book in the chapter on Beauty:

"Beauty is life when life unveils her holy face.

But you are life and you are the veil.

Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in a mirror.

But you are eternity and you are the mirror."

I want to beat the heat tomorrow with an early start. I have to cross the Garonne estuary on a ferry, which leaves at 0715 about two Kilometres from where I am staying. But at 0715 it is barely light here.....

And after cycling 2.3 km tomorrow morning, I will have completed the first 1000 Kilometres. Not bad for 9 days!!!

!



Morning departure from the sea for more inland cycling. Back to the Atlantic Coast on Monday



Vineyards stretching out to the Garonne estuary



Tidal fishing platforms in the Garonne estuary

## Challenging one's limits - September 14, 2019

Right from the start of the planning stage, I had regarded my current trip as a big challenge. Until I reached La Rochelle, the route was completely new to me, which, of course, added extra challenges. When, on Thursday, I joined one of my favourite stretches of cycling along the Atlantic Coast, all of a sudden I felt in the comfort zone and relaxed completely.

But maybe I had relaxed too much, as yesterday I struggled badly. So I was concerned last night, as today's route was longer and had more elevation than yesterday's. I think the result was that I was mentally fully prepared for a



strenuous day and I coped very well in spite of the fact that the early morning brought its challenges: I had to leave my accommodation an hour before sunrise and cycle to the ferry on a pitch black cycle track with my head torch on. After the amazing ferry crossing (see photo) I trusted my GPS, which took me on a series of rough tracks, with the result that I walked for well over a kilometer. And later on, when I once ignored my GPS in Bordeaux, I suppose a bit like an offended human, it stopped communicating and just told me for the rest of the day: "follow cycle track". But I got here without falling out with my GPS...

As I sat eating my lunch along the glorious cycle route between Bordeaux and Sauveterre, I was reflecting on the Gibran quote about Beauty that I quoted yesterday:

There is so much beauty around us, in nature as well as in human beings, and yet, too often, we are not open to seeing it. Now there's another challenge for me: Can I slow down, breathe deeply and perceive all the beauty around me with new eyes.....?!  
I will try that very consciously tomorrow.



On the early morning ferry at Blaye. I got here with the help of my torch on the cycle path in the pitch dark



Dramatic sky



I am glad I got up early!



Back to an old favourite - 40 km like this on a really good road surface east of Bordeaux

### **Pilgrims - September 15, 2019**

As I stepped out of my accommodation this morning, I met 2 heavily packed walkers who immediately asked me whether I was on my way to Santiago de Compostela. They were.

On arrival in Belin-Beliet (the town near which I am staying tonight) I read that the town had been an overnight stop on the Pilgrims' Route for a long time.

Today was an easy ride, short, a good surface and a tail wind. As it was also fairly flat and traffic-free (see the photo of the route I took this morning), there was plenty of opportunity for reflection:

On a Pilgrims' Route, thoughts will turn to the concept of prayer.

Kahlil Gibran says in "The Prophet":

I cannot teach you how to pray in words. And I cannot teach you the prayer of the seas and the forest and the mountains. But you who are born of the mountains and the forests and the seas can find their prayer in your heart.

Seeing the vast expanse of seemingly unspoilt forest today it is hard to believe that this environment of ours is endangered, but it also reinforced the determination to protect it in whichever way we can.

Matthieu Ricard quotes Seneca in his book "Altruism": To live is to be useful to others.

A pilgrimage like mine certainly reinforces this point and it gives many opportunities to attempt to transform oneself in order to be able to serve others more effectively.

And by the way, my GPS stopped sulking this morning and it communicated effectively again.



Typical village church



After 20 km on minor roads through lovely and remote countryside, I will be on this cycle route for the rest of the day. After the deciduous woods it is turning increasingly coniferous



Heather by the side of the route nearly all the time



My most interesting accommodation yet. Very remote in the forest



## First stage completed - September 16, 2019

After a 133 km ride today, I arrived at the Atlantic Coast near Moliets. In 12 days, I have cycled 1327 km, climbed just over 7600 m and spent roughly 72 hours in the saddle. I had never before cycled for 12 days without a rest day, so I feel I am ready for some shorter routes and - most importantly - routes without carrying all my luggage. I will be using a campsite here as a base, will cycle every morning, but will have some down time in the afternoons.

I am really touched by how much interest my adventure has created and how much support it has received. I talked at length about the project to my hosts last night and they promised to put my blog out on their social media pages. This morning I received an email from a Ladakh expedition participant, and he promised to do the same with his year group.

It is really quite humbling to see all this support.

My hosts last night are really quite amazing people. They talked about their love of India, about the vital importance of clear and complete communication, how one should take up every opportunity to say "thank you", even for small and routine things. Ludvine then shared that her credo is "caring is sharing". Wouldn't the world be a better place, if more people did just that!

This morning before I left my "trailer" (see yesterday's photo), I took note of 2 fridge magnets:

Happiness is not a destination, it is a way of life

And

If you love the life you live, you will live a life of love

It is such a privilege to meet extraordinary people. But then that maybe is the purpose of a pilgrimage.....

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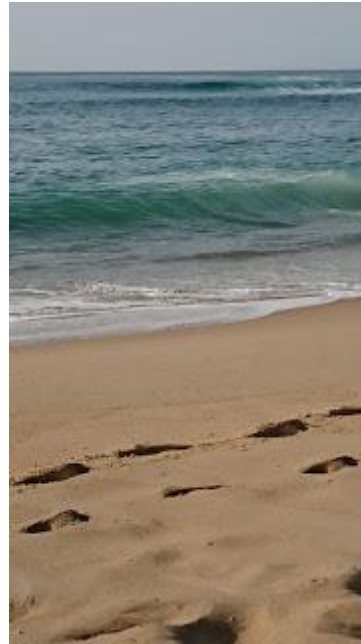
I have arrived at an area called The Great Lakes. Not as big as the Canadian ones, but fairly sizable still. I am now back on the Velodysee cycle route for the rest of the day



Still at the Great Lakes



Back on the Velodysee on the coast



Back at the Atlantic Coast

### **Equanimity when plans change..... September 17, 2019**

I got up bright and early this morning to be out on the bike at first light. But when I looked at my bike, I saw that I had 2 completely flat tyres. So 90 minutes of cycle repair and maintenance followed. I was pleased, though, that my reaction to this was: "It is a blessing that this happened on a day when I have no time pressure". Both tyres had 2 thorns in them, obviously from when I rode through a section of cycleway towards the end of yesterday's ride where the verges had been freshly cut.

I had a lovely 70+ km ride (see pictures) after completing the repairs, and in the afternoon I went for a proper swim. The beauty and vastness of this coast never ceases to amaze me.

I was also reading sections of the Katha Upanishad on the beach:

"In the secret cave of the heart, two are seated by life's fountain. The separate ego drinks of the sweet and bitter stuff, liking the sweet, disliking the bitter, while the supreme Self drinks sweet and bitter neither liking this or disliking that. The ego gropes in darkness, while the Self lives in light".

This image obviously can be found in all spiritual traditions.

I subscribe to Mathieu Ricard's Thought of the Week. This week's is a thought from Shantideva which has long been very meaningful to me and which I have quoted on many occasions:

To cover all the earth with sheets of leather -

Where could such amounts of skin be found?

But with the leather soles of just my shoes

It is as though I cover all the earth.

I have not got the book with me (nor any Internet to download it at the moment), but as I remember, Shantideva goes on to say, that there are beings who mean harm everywhere, which I cannot conquer, but if I could tame that

unruly mind of mine, that would be a bigger victory than subduing all external foes.

Every moment in life, it seems, we make a choice: *Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach, in meiner Brust*, says Goethe's Faust.

Which one do we follow from moment to moment?

It is getting dark outside and I will just spend a few more moments gazing at the disappearing red in the sky.....



Beautiful inland excursion, mostly on cycle paths



Nature reserve near where I am staying

### **Individually, we are one drop, together, we are an ocean - September 18, 2019**

I was thinking this morning of the incredible power we can create by working together. This was prompted by messages of support for my ride from Spain and France. And when things like this happen, it really brings home the idea that we and all the elements around us are interconnected. The same holds true, I think, of beauty. "If the path is beautiful, let us not ask where it leads" (Anatole France), but let us simply follow it, because it is the right thing to do.

I had another delayed morning start today, because there had been heavy rain and a thunder storm overnight and when I first stepped out, it was still thundering. When I finally left around 0900, I had a lovely woodland ride in the fresh smells you get after rain (see morning photo) and as it was cooler than normal, and also because I did not have to carry luggage, it was a very easy 90 km ride. The sun was out again in the afternoon and it was hot enough for a swim.

During these "rest days" I have a wonderful chance to recharge batteries before embarking into the Pyrenean foothills, and also for reading, contemplation and thinking. It is really important sometimes, I find, to focus specifically on what really matters in life. The three most important things for a fulfilled life the "Forest of Wisdom Upanishad" recommends, are to be self-controlled, to be generous and to be compassionate.





Completely different atmosphere in the woods after the overnight rain and thunderstorm. It is still grey and only 18 degrees



Signs to Compostela everywhere, I even saw a Rue de Compostele in one of the villages this morning



In the dunes

## Less than 1000 km to go! September 19, 2019

A cycle tour is not always purely fun. In addition to wonderful moments in breathtaking landscapes, we may face difficulties like rain, a strong headwind, mechanical issues like flat tyres, or we may get lost due to roadworks, poor signposting or the whims of the GPS (see one of today's pictures). But the essential point is that we need to have enough enthusiasm to keep going despite its ups and downs. We also need a sense of purpose and a feeling of making enough progress towards the goal we have set ourselves in order to remain positive and enthusiastic. And we need to persevere.

It struck me this morning, that this reasoning applies to everything we ever attempt, whether it is building a relationship or learning to meditate. The most important task, I suppose, then is always (or at least most of the time) to choose worthwhile goals that increase our own levels of happiness and satisfaction, while at the same time benefitting the world around us. To me the two go hand in hand anyway. A really worthwhile purpose always carries benefit to others. As I said before, we are all interconnected.

I went on a glorious ride this morning, taking in both inland routes and a favourite stretch of the Velodysee. Riding without luggage is just so much easier. I also really appreciate the fact that, when I stay in the same place for more than one night, I have more time to read and reflect after getting back from my rides. I have made - too - many resolutions for when I get home (I never make any on New Year's Day!), I hope I will be able to act on some of them. And I realised that I have less than 1000 km left in my challenge - 700 km of route from here to the endpoint, Sete, and about 250 km without luggage when I go exploring from places where I stay for several nights.

I have so far travelled a total distance of 1596 km.

And - I am still very enthusiastic, determined and positive about the challenge.....



Village centre near Mimizan



What to do when the GPS takes you down this route instead of the perfectly surfaced and signposted cycle route? This one is easy, you ignore it. Sometimes, though, it is not so easy....



Another beautiful place

## The next journey of Discovery - September 20, 2019

I had read Pico Iyer's "The Art of Stillness" a while ago, but took it out again last night because during my time here stillness has been very important. The short book mainly describes 3 very diverse people for whom stillness at some stage of their lives became the overriding need: Those 3 people are Leonard Cohen, the Canadian poet, Thomas Merton, who became a Christian Trappist monk, and Matthieu Ricard, who amongst other things has worked as the French translator for the Dalai Lama.

Some quotes:

It is about stepping away now and then so that you can see the world more clearly and love it more deeply (Cohen)

In an age of speed, I began to think, nothing could be more invigorating than going slow.

In an age of distraction, nothing can feel more luxurious than paying attention.

And in an age of constant movement, nothing is more urgent than sitting still. (Cohen)

Heaven is the place where you think of nowhere else (Merton)

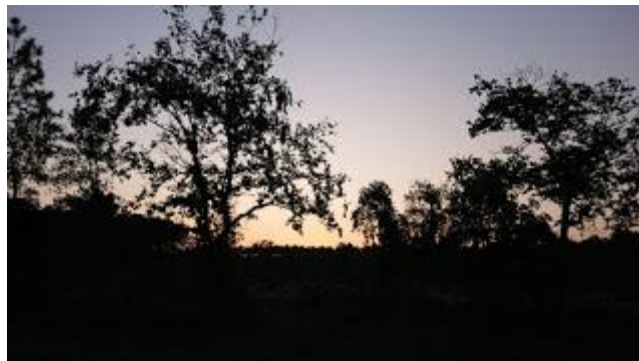
You don't get over the shadows inside you simply by walking away from them (Ricard)

Sometimes it is just so important to remember one's priorities again, and also to remember that it is not necessarily our experiences that form us, but the ways in which we respond to them. We always have choices, and I think we can make our choices more wisely, if we make them from a place of stillness and attention (maybe I should even say mindfulness here) rather than from a position of stress.

I hope I am well rested after my break here with just day rides to tackle the next adventure. With the exception of the first 20 and the last 30 Kilometres, the route is completely new to me and it promises to be particularly exciting, but also hilly and strenuous in the Pyrenean foothills. Tomorrow is forecast to be the last really hot day, followed by a very wet day on Sunday. After that, it looks fairly warm and sunny.

This morning I discovered some of the best scenery I have encountered so far by really going off the beaten track. I had set myself the task of riding mindfully and I succeeded quite well. Maybe that was why I was more aware of the beauty surrounding me.....

Just bade farewell to the Atlantic Ocean at sunset - a sacred moment, total stillness and surrounded by all the elements; sand, sea, air, the fire of the sun and endless space.



First morning here with a clear sky





And after sunrise



Another big lake discovered

### Leaving the Atlantic Coast - September 21, 2019

I had rain intermittently throughout the morning, a headwind for much of the day, road works that forced me to leave the planned route, and the GPS telling me twice to use unpaved roads. On both occasions I added a few kilometres by staying on the road.

But -

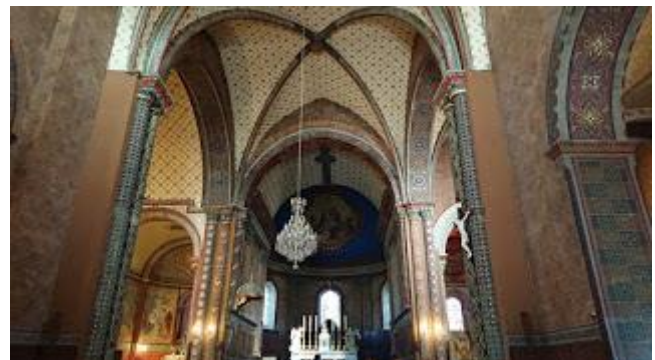
The rain kept the forecast heat away, the headwind was not too strong, a kind French gentleman pointed me in the right direction at the road works, and, on the whole, the GPS kept me on really scenic "petite routes", which were highly enjoyable. I had really nice conversations with a German cyclist, then a French rider joined me for a while on a green route, and in my accommodation, I just heard of the adventures of a French pilgrim on his way to Santiago de Compostela, where he hopes to arrive in just over a month.

Aire-sur-l'Adour, where I am staying tonight, even has a cathedral for the benefit of the pilgrims (see photo).

I think I had a very good day. Tomorrow may be harder, as the weather doesn't look good and I will have over 1000 m to climb.



Lots of beautiful village churches



Cathedral on the main Pilgrims Route in Aire-sur-l'Adour

### The biggest challenge yet - September 22, 2019

Challenging, hard, beautiful, wet, stunning, cold, exhausting, strenuous, satisfying, aggravating, exhilarating are all adjectives that fit aspects of today's 102 km ride.

It was raining without interruption, at times very hard, during the first 5 hours on the road. During that time it was

also cold enough to cycle in 4 layers. At one time when I got off the bike, the water was squelching in my shoes as I walked.

As the clouds started to lift a little in the early afternoon, I could first see how beautiful the scenery was. As for long periods I seemed to be the only person on the road, I was also really pleased with the route my GPS was giving me , until.....

Once more, it suggested an unsurfaced road of 1.2 km length. I turned back to take the alternative only to find out it was taking me in exactly the direction I had just come from. So I decided to take the unsurfaced road but to walk it. But after the heavy rain the clay soil soon completely blocked my brakes, so that I had to clear the clay off about every 20 metres. The only alternative would have been to carry the bike, but with the weight of the panniers, I did not consider this option. When I finally got to the end of it, I spent a whole hour clearing clay from both brakes, the chain and the gears just to make the bike rideable again. And then I got here, exhausted and exhilarated for having managed it all. And I was pleased to have coped with the 1090 metres climb. I certainly think I have earned a little sponsorship for all of today's varied efforts.

I was really grateful that due to the easier days at the coast I was both physically and mentally able to cope with today.

I am staying on a little organic farm in stunning scenery, but so remote, so the owner tells me, that the nearest small shop is 11 km away. I will have a chance to explore this area a bit more in the coming days.

"You shall be free indeed when your days are not without a care or your nights without a want and a grief,  
But rather when these things girdle your life and yet you rise above them naked and unbound. (Kahlil Gibran: The Prophet)



Just stopped raining for the first time after 5 rather wet cycling hours, so I am having lunch. Lovely scenery and about 25 km to go



Where I am staying tonight - it is the absolute middle of nowhere

### **The First Views of the Pyrenees - September 23, 2019**

I woke up aching a bit after yesterday's efforts, so I was determined to take it easy with today's day ride. However, the weather was fine, the sun was shining and there were views to be seen.

I had planned to go to the city of Auch to shop for food and had chosen a route that looked interesting. At first I was

not too pleased when it rose quite sharply, but I could not believe my eyes when I got to the little ridge: I had the whole of the Western Pyrenean chain in front of me - crystal clear, although maybe 60 km away from me, as the crow flies. The following 5 km certainly were the most stunning of the route so far.

I was also really impressed by Auch, a historic city with an impressive cathedral.

Although today's ride was only just over 60 km, I climbed 801 m in total - so not a complete rest day...

And this afternoon, when I was resting at a nearby lake, I read in Matthieu Ricard's book "Happiness":

"And every difficulty can become the wicker which we weave into an inner basket that can accommodate all the trials of life."

I know I have mentioned this book before. It has been my constant companion over the last 18 days and I recommend it wholeheartedly. While it is written from a Buddhist perspective, I would regard it as valuable and uplifting for anyone trying to achieve a positive outlook on life.

I look forward to further exploring this fascinating area tomorrow.



Pre-sunrise view from my window



Snowy peaks in the distance



Cathedral in Auch



Relaxing in peaceful environment

### **500 km and £ 390.- to go to reach targets - September 24, 2019**

On this morning's ride I completed the first 2000 km of my adventure. This leaves me with 500 km to cycle to reach the original target of 2500 km.

When I set my fundraising target at £ 2000.-, I thought I was rather ambitious. But support so far has been brilliant, so I do hope I can reach 100% of that target by the time I reach Sete, my final cycling destination, next Monday.

Today's views were not quite as stunning as yesterday's, but I had a lovely ride on quiet country lanes through gentle forested scenery. The morning light was quite spectacular, with the morning sunlight highlighting the dark and threatening clouds, but, thankfully, rain did not materialise. I saw several red deer both this morning and



afternoon.

Overnight rain is forecast, but I hope tomorrow will be dry, as it will be a long day with over 1200 m of climbing. I will finish today's blog with an extract from Chapter 64 of Lao Tsu's Tao Te Ching, another faithful travel companion, from which I have drawn much inspiration during this pilgrimage:

Deal with a problem before it develops.

Take command of a situation before it spins out of control.

A journey of a thousand miles

Is launched with a single step.

Remain as unattached at the end as you are at the beginning,

And your expectations won't get the better of you.

Therefore the sage seeks freedom from desire.

In learning how to unlearn his conditionings,

He uncovers treasures that others pass over.



Brilliant start to the day



Came to Auch on a completely different route - view of old city from the river

### **Die Koenigsetappe - September 25, 2019**

In grand cycling tours the German name for the decisive and the most challenging stage is called Koenigsetappe. I had my Koenigsetappe today:

It was the longest of my tour (134.2 km), it was strenuous (according to my GPS I used up 5001 calories and climbed 1618, m, the most I had ever climbed in a day on the bike) it brought me to the highest altitude so far (I am nearly 500 m above sea level) and it came through some spectacular scenery.

However, I did not struggle anywhere near as much as I did last Sunday in the rain, and, at least at the moment, my muscles feel perfectly fine.

I had woken up this morning full of confidence and the sentence "every break of day has something to reveal" was right in my mind, so I really was looking forward to the journey.

The first stretch was by far the hardest, as it went up and down continuously. During that stretch I also added nearly 10 extra kilometres to my route, as my GPS took me to a long section of unsurfaced road and I had to retrace my steps.

As I got closer to my destination, the scenery got more and more extraordinary and I am sitting here now reflecting

on a very beautiful day. I think I am very fortunate to be able to be on this pilgrimage.  
I am, by the way, just about 30 km north of Andorra.....



I am a lot closer to the main ridge of the Pyrenees now



Arrived - view from my caravan

### **Another Highlight - a Day Surrounded by High Mountains - September 26, 2019**

To me it was obvious, that I could not come as close to the main ridge of the Pyrenees as I am currently, without actually venturing into them. So, this morning I took a route straight south, in the direction of Andorra. I followed 2 river valleys, so the climb was steady but not difficult and, when I turned round at an altitude of 710 m, I was only separated from Andorra by some 2500 m peaks and a straight line distance of about 8 km. As you can see from the attached photos, scenery and light were stunning.

Today was my last day trip without luggage, from tomorrow I will, not on the most direct route, admittedly, head towards Sete, my final destination. There is plenty still to look forward to: the fortified city of Carcassonne tomorrow night, reaching the Mediterranean on Saturday night, riding through salt marshes along the Mediterranean Coast and seeing lots of flamingoes and other birds on Sunday , and, of course, finishing a great challenge on Monday ..... Apparently, recent research has shown, that happiness tends to be more pronounced among highly energetic people in good physical condition. Also, according to this research, people "who have an attachment to something larger than themselves", in other words, who have a purpose beyond themselves, tend to lead more fulfilled lives. I am certainly really enjoying my challenge and the many meaningful conversations and exchanges I am having with a huge variety of people - and, ultimately, that this trip is benefiting children in a far away country.

I have just been outside and gazed at the incredibly bright night sky, thinking that we all live under this same bright firmament of stars.....



Another pre-sunrise photo, this time from my caravan



Out bright and early



Castle in Foix



Certainly in the mountains now



Highest point of my expedition - just over 700 m above sea level



Magnificent light



Afternoon walk

### Reflection after Looking at the Night Sky - September 26, 2019

Just coming back in after looking at the vast and completely clear night sky...

It defies any attempt to comprehend its sheer enormity. And yet, we are part of its vast grandeur.

If only we could spend a bit more time trying to contemplate and understand this, instead of closing down this glorious grandeur by focusing on the insignificant ego that separates us and our concerns from the much broader picture....



## **A Day of Inspiring Meetings - September 27, 2019**

I had a really lovely get together with Briget and Paul for lunch in Mirepoix today. For all with a St Chris connection, Briget is Barry and Joan Goodall's daughter, whom I saw last when she came on a Saas Fee trip as an accompanying adult. When she found out through the Old Scholars' newsletter that my route was passing near their house, she suggested meeting up. It was simply wonderful to exchange ideas and chat, and to experience a wonderful warmth and pleasure in each other's company.

This evening in Carcassonne, I just came back into my room from a wonderful conversation about shared values (in French!) and a really lovely meal to which I was invited by my hosts.

Today's route was interesting, starting in the mountains, but getting ever further away from the high peaks. And the fortified city of Carcassonne, of course, is a Unesco world heritage site and well worth visiting.



Mountains are crystal clear this morning



The Medieval city of Mirepoix



The old city of Carcassonne

## **The most Spectacular Scenery? September 28, 2019**

I expected a pleasant ride today rather than a spectacular one, but as I got closer to the coast, the scenery got hugely varied and rather spectacular (see photos). After about 10 km through a mini-gorge, I started climbing to a series of cols, the road lined by vineyards and Mediterranean trees and shrubs, with rocky outcrops in the distance. Then, from 270 m up, I had my first views of the Mediterranean and then was surprised to get great views of the Eastern Pyrenees. I expected the day to be exhausting, as I had nearly 800 m to climb on a 118 km ride, but I suppose my utter fascination with the scenery took any tiredness away.

I have now cycled a total distance of 2407 km, which means I will travel well over 2500 km, if I can complete the last two stages (according to my GPS, I have 161 km of route left).





The landscape and vegetation are turning much more Mediterranean. And, at 1100, it is hot already



And a picnic bench for lunch in an ideal position



2341 km completed



Another spectacular viewpoint after the last big climb to. 250 m - it is mainly down hill towards the sea now



First view of the Mediterranean from quite high up



Arrived at the Mediterranean

I am actually quite close to the Spanish border, so to the far left of the right hand photo is Spain, the mountains are the Pyrenees again.

## **Some extra (possibly useless) information - September 28, 2019**

With just 2, mainly flat, days to go, I thought I would do some summing up of the journey so far:

I have been on the bike for 134 hours.

My total climb so far has been 15436 m. This is the equivalent of climbing from sea level to the top of Ben Nevis 10 times.

Or, if you want, climbing from sea level to the top of Snowdon 14 times.

My GPS tells me I have used up 75200 calories.

I have so far (I may not on the last 2 days) reached a top speed of over 40 km/h every day, with a top speed of 58.7 km/h on day 4 in Normandy

My average speed on the days with luggage has been just over 17 km/h, on the days without luggage about 2 km/h faster.

And after these useless facts and figures some deeper thoughts from Kahlil Gibran:

"You would measure time the measureless and the immeasurable.

Yet the timeless in you is aware of life's timelessness,

And knows that yesterday is but today's memory and tomorrow is today's dream.

Who among you does not feel that his power to love is boundless?

And is not time even as love is, undivided and paceless?

But if in your thought you must measure time into seasons, let each season encircle all the other seasons,

And let today embrace the past with remembrance and the future with longing."

And:

Nothing ever becomes real until it is experienced (John Keats)

I am really grateful for all the experiences I have had..

## **Nearly there..... September 29, 2019**

Due to several detours, mostly because my GPS tried to send me on unsurfaced roads, today's stage was rather longer than planned and I have now cycled a total distance of 2541 km. With tomorrow's ride, I will get over 2600 km in total.

I had never cycled such a distance on a single tour before, so I was a bit wary of setting the target, but, of course, I am now thrilled to have achieved it.

Today's was an interesting but slightly mixed stage: While I had plenty of quiet cycle paths and minor roads with superb scenery (see pictures), I also had several longish stretches, albeit on cycle paths or lanes, next to noisy and very busy roads, which, after the solitude of recent weeks, was a bit of a shock to the system.

I will get back to known territory tomorrow, so I know that the last 30 km of my pilgrimage will be on cycle paths right behind a series of beaches.

Apart from the exhilaration of completing the challenge, there is also a certain sadness that it will be over tomorrow.

For myself, I certainly hope that I will be cycling in France again.

And I have some other hopes, too:

Maybe we can all, at least at times, challenge our limits, try something new, reach out to others, share adventures and draw inspiration from each other.

For me, having had the specific task of raising funds for a cause I really believe in, has given extra meaning to the challenge. I hope that I have been able to convey my view, that life is most fulfilling when it has a purpose beyond oneself.

I feel very privileged to have met so many wonderful people on this journey, and those meetings have reaffirmed my belief in the basic goodness of people, even though listening to the news one might be tempted to think otherwise.

And thank you for sharing my journey through following my blog.

I will certainly blog again over the next few days to report on the last stages.



Mont Canigou (2700 m), easternmost high peak of the Pyrenees - possibly my last view of the range



Clearly the last Pyrenean view of Mont Canigou (2700 m)



Wonderful place for a lunch stop



The road is between 2 parts of a huge lagoon. Flamingos and pelicans in the background.



Flamingos a bit closer

### **Never give up! - September 30, 2019**

As I had a shorter route today and my train from Sete to Toulouse was booked for 1630, I decided on a last exploration at the Mediterranean: I had read how beautiful the nature reserve Les Orpellières was and as I was staying only 10 km away from it, I decided to ride there to explore it and to combine this exploration with a - probably - last swim of this summer. The reserve was stunning, there was 1 car in the car park when I arrived and 3 when I left, so it was wonderfully peaceful, a cloudless sky and the most amazing clarity: I could not believe it at first, but I could still see the Eastern range of the Pyrenees, even though I had ridden 140 km away from the mountain chain.

After that, I had a leisurely ride to Sete, not without adventure, as my GPS took me through another nature reserve with a track not wider than 30 cm. Some walking and lifting the bike over a barrier was involved. I came to the conclusion that even with GPS, one needs good orientation and the confidence to use it on those adventures. So I have completed my ride, but -

There is no such thing as completion, there are only stages in an endless progression and  
There are no final outcomes, as nothing ever stays the same.

I think I have kept my attention and awareness well during the journey, although I certainly could have been more mindful at times. I have had very valuable time for reflection and I have really enjoyed my reading. I read a



conversation between Faust and Helena (Goethe: Faust, Teil 2, 3.Akt)

Faust: Nun schaut der Geist nicht vorwaerts, nicht zurueck,

Die Gegenwart allein - - -

Helena: ist unser Glueck

It is amazing how the same themes appear from different sources.

And last night I revisited wisdom from the Dalai Lama:

"True change is within. Leave the outside as it is"

"There are only 2 days in the year when nothing can be done. One is called yesterday and the other is called tomorrow. Today is the right day to love, believe, do and simply live".

"We are but visitors on this planet. But if we contribute to other people's happiness, we will find the true goal, the true meaning of life"

And one of my favourites, which I had hanging up in my office as a poster for years:

"Never give up. Develop the heart, be compassionate.

Work for peace in your heart and in the world.

No matter what is happening,

No matter what is going on around you,

NEVER GIVE UP"

Wish me luck for the long journey home tomorrow.....



Last swim of the summer



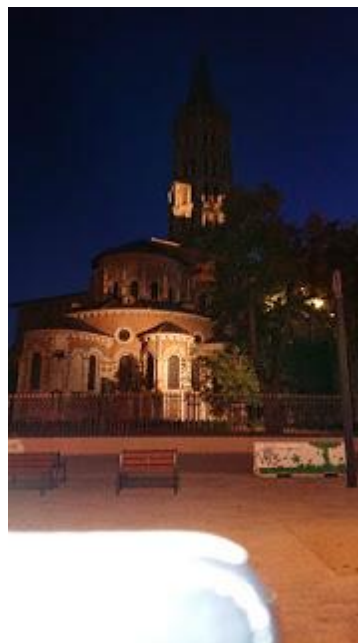
The final destination, Sete, is in sight. Just 15 or so km along the beaches, and I will be there.

Sete





I have arrived



Basilica in Toulouse - on the way home now

### A few finishing reflections - October 01, 2019

Just a few finishing reflections about the completed pilgrimage, written on the train to Paris, while going through some heavy rain.....

Overriding feeling: gratitude

- for the many wonderful people I have had the privilege to meet on this journey, like Ludivine, Anne-Marie, Alain and many others
- for the love I have received and am still receiving from so many people
- for the things I have done and am still able to do
- for life itself

Highlights of the journey:

- the people I have met
- the wonderful landscapes I have experienced
- the wildlife I have encountered
- the many serene and peaceful moments I have had in often solitary landscapes

The most peaceful moment:

- probably sitting right by the water for the sunset on the Atlantic Coast

The music that moved me to tears on several occasions: (I am listening to it again just now)

- Elina Garanca's album "Meditation"

What really touched me:

- that so many people followed my blog
- the many uplifting and encouraging messages I received

The most meaningful literary image: (Goethe: Faust, final lines)

- Alles Vergaengliche

Ist nur ein Gleichnis

Das Unzulaengliche

Hier wird's Ereignis

Das Unbeschreibliche

Hier ist's getan

Das Ewig-Weibliche

Zieht uns hinan

My hope:

- that I can carry the determination to make myself useful into the coming days, months, years.....

Thank you all for following my journey.

## **Home again - October 02, 2019**

Back home after a long train journey through France into Paris, then on Eurostar (delayed) and to Letchworth (delayed again). I arrived home just before 2200.

Thank you again for supporting and sharing my adventures. I am really quite thrilled that I have - nearly - reached my fundraising target of £ 2000.-. I am still hoping that I will reach - or even exceed - it in the coming days and weeks.

You can find my donation page on:

<http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/fund/edwingruber-cyclepilgrimage>

And I also hope that I have been able to inspire a few friends to:

- challenge your limits
- never give up
- explore the wider world that deserves to be seen
- explore the vast recesses of the mind
- be compassionate

I do feel privileged to have been able to complete this journey through both inner and outer landscapes.

Thank you again for your support

All the best

Edwin

## **A few Afterthoughts – just over 2 Weeks after Completing the Challenge**

Again, I have returned to Shantideva:

All the joy the world contains  
Has come through wishing happiness for others.  
All the misery the world contains  
Has come through wanting pleasure for oneself.  
Is there need for lengthy explanation?  
Childish beings look out for themselves,  
While Buddhas labour for the good of others:  
See the difference that divides them!

It has been great to be back home again, to share tasks around the house, to help our son move into his new house, to look after our granddaughters.

But looking back, I am hugely grateful that I was able to complete my challenge, as it gave me the opportunity to connect with many people on so many different levels. And I always find that, while involved in challenges, one gains a different, a wider perspective on what is really important in life.

A few days ago, I also received feedback from Druk Padma Karpo School about my pilgrimage:

“Dear Mr.Gruber,

Warmest greetings! from the high Himalayas. We at Druk Padma Karpo school are heart melted and emotional to see you make such sincere and heart rendering efforts for our school. Words are falling short to express our profound love and gratitude for the tough challenge and pain staking efforts, selfless taken up by you. Please feel our sincere energies on your front.”

I was hugely touched by this message. Maybe, across the globe, a few seeds were planted through my efforts. And maybe Robert Louis Stevenson’s sentence which I quoted earlier in the blog (just to remind you: “Do not judge every day by the harvest you reap, but by the seeds you have planted”) could apply to the way we live our whole lives. If

we can get our motivation right, and through our thoughts, words and actions can wish for and bring about happiness to others, then we will lead happier lives.

If you have followed my adventures and my blog, you may also be interested in learning more about Druk Padma Karpo School: On the school website there are several films about the school under <https://www.dwls.org/videos.html> . The first of those listed, which is 10.28 minutes long, I think is particularly good at conveying what the school is about. I think it explains very well what drew me to the school from the moment I first heard about it.

Another film worth watching might be the film “e2 – The Druk White Lotus School”. This film was made in 2007, so is slightly dated, is 25.39 minutes long, but it shows relevant details of the construction of the school and discusses its philosophy of sustainability. The narrator might also be interesting to some people: Brad Pitt.

Another huge “thank you” goes to all my sponsors again. When I put my target at £ 2000.-, I thought I was hugely ambitious, but I am nearly there, so that is thrilling as well. The fundraising page on <http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/fund/edwingruber-cyclepilgrimage> will be kept open for another couple of weeks to possibly reach the target. I am currently on 94%.

I will conclude with Goethe’s “Faust” once more:

Nur der verdient sich Freiheit wie das Leben,  
Der täglich sie verdienen muss

(In my own, free translation: Only he deserves freedom and life itself, who has to earn them daily)

Let’s hope life gives us the opportunity to earn our freedom and a life full of purpose during every day of our existence.

Again, thank you all for your support

Edwin