



A Cycle from Valencia

Valencia - Barcelona - Puymorens - Toulouse - Bordeaux / Rennes - Cherbourg

an album of landscape photographs from 1975 by Paul Malone

Maps showing the routes that were taken in the book and the locations visited

Notes to the maps

To make my way to Valencia I first had to take my bicycle on the train from London Victoria. At the time I was studying at Reading University but working at my holiday job in Warrington, Cheshire. I started the trip with a 3 day cycle ride down the A49, the B4000 and the A4 into London. This saved me the money having to take my cycle on the train and also prepared my fitness for the journey ahead.

These maps have been kept simple but I think there is enough information there to follow the route on more detailed maps or online. Many of the place names are retained in the Spanish; as are the French.

Both the English and Continental map scales are similar with the England trip being about 250 miles. The elevations have been left out but it is obvious from the photographs that this area through the Pyrenees is extremely mountainous!

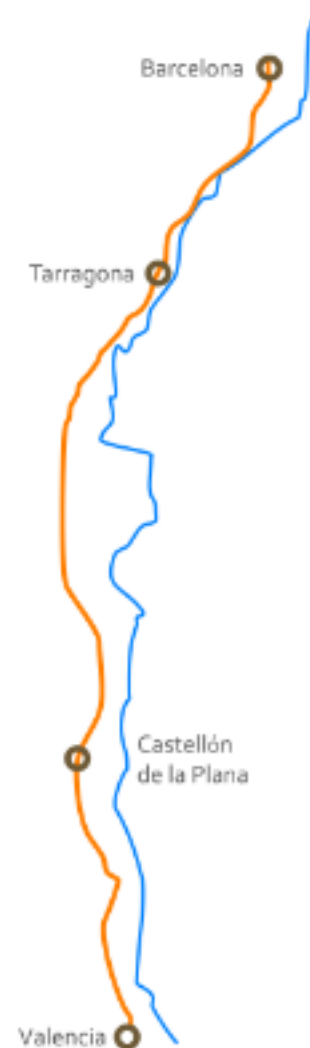
The coast from Valencia to Barcelona is mostly flat, as is the route exiting the Pyrenees to Toulouse and then on to Bordeaux. The weather towards the end of September becomes stormy in this part of France (the Bay of Biscay). Therefore on these one way trips I would take the bike on the train from Bordeaux to Rennes and carry on from there to Cherbourg for the ferry to England.

There is no map for the cycle ride from Southampton to Reading and the start of my student term. This would usually take a single day.

Warrington to London



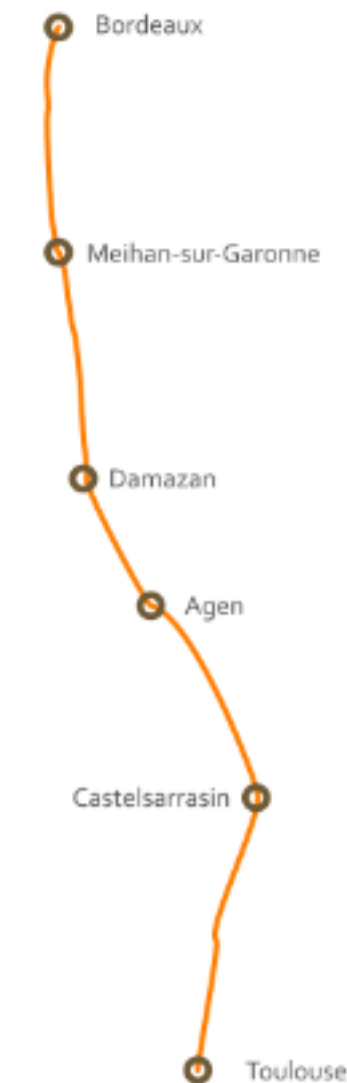
Valencia to Barcelona



Barcelona to Toulouse



Toulouse to Bordeaux



Rennes to Cherbourg



Introduction

In September 1975 I was between my 3rd and 4th years of my Fine Art course at Reading University. Every Summer holidays I would work at the milk bottling plant behind my parent's house. This was to earn money for the succeeding year at college and to treat myself to a 5 week cycling holiday abroad. The end of the Tour, and my arrival back in the UK, would coincide with the start of term.

I had done two previous cycling trips and so was developing a template that was fairly successful. I would cycle to London and board the train with my bicycle to a city in Europe, then cycle back to England. In this year I chose Valencia as it would give me a nice cycle along the coast and then a look at some of the spectacular scenery through the Pyrenees.

In 1973 I had done the same back from Florence and then, in 1974, Barcelona to Biarritz. This was to add to my travel experiences and to collect material for my art course. In making these earlier trips many hard lessons had been learned, especially when it came to the robustness of my bicycle! The one you can see in the photo was made from a scrap frame and new bits and pieces that I had customized myself.

Cutting down weight in terms of the pack was also a 'must'. This was especially so as on this trip I would be traveling through the High Pyrenees. From left to right in the photo is my tent, foam mat, rucksack with clothes, etc. and a water bottle wrapped in blanket material; soaked in water this kept it cool.

I only had 1 side pannier as my rear light was mounted on the right hand side. The grey-green bag on top had my camera, maps and items for the road. This was the first time I made a



The author: Preparing to embark. Warrington. September 1975

map holder on the handlebars so I would not need to keep stopping to check the route.

The plan was to cycle from Warrington, down the Severn Valley and across the Lambourn Downs and then into London. I intended to take my bike on the train from Victoria Station to Valencia. There would be time for a few days sight-seeing and then travel up the Mediterranean coast to Barcelona. After a few more days spent sightseeing, the tour would cut inland into the Catalan interior and North to cross the Pyrenees at the Col de Puymorens.

The descent would take me through Merens les Valles and, after a few days, to Toulouse. From here I would follow the towpath of the Canal du Midi to Bordeaux. The section from Bordeaux to Rennes would be traveled by train and then a short cycle ride to Genets at the start of the Cotentin Peninsula. A few days more exploring the estuary of the Mont St. Michel and then a day's ride up to Cherbourg to catch the ferry to England.

The camera was a cheap plastic one but I could load in slide film. It was not SLR and there were no focus, zoom or exposure settings. The exposures returned in square format, Only recently in 2023 did I have the time to scan and prepare the slides. As you can see from the photos the weather was very poor once I left the coast and there were very few tourists.

Addenda

As is often said, 'planning is everything' and in the case of this trip it certainly paid off. The previous cycling tours (see introduction) had been a substantial learning curve, the lessons of which were successfully incorporated into this one.

The primary lesson was to cycle with a bike that was up to the task and could carry the weight involved. Other cyclists I had met en route had the strategy of 'traveling light' but this required covering the necessary distance between overnight stays in one day. That was something not always possible in the course of a 5 week holiday and 'off piste'. Having a tent plus equipment meant that I could stay anywhere I liked and without having to check in to a hotel or hostel.

The second was to acquire a good map to scrutinize the terrain; unfortunately not so in this case... And last but not least; take enough money to enjoy yourself, have good meals eating out and stop in a hotel if you need a bit of recovery. Added to this is to carry a good book. It is well worth the extra weight and, at that time, could be swapped at the youth hostels once read.

One question I have been frequently asked is why I did these trips on my own. Well, the first trip from Florence to Reading was with a school friend. This was my first ever trip abroad and so did not know what to expect. Also, as it turned out, it relied on wildly optimistic forecasts of what was possible. But the real reason is that everyone I asked, if they would like to come along, thought that I was completely deranged. I did not mind though as I could go at my own pace and experience the environment on my own terms. On a static holiday this is not such an issue but with a tour there is always a balance to be struck between momentum and aesthetics.

Most of my non-camping nights were spent in youth hostels so there was never a lack of company. Even in the campsites my bike would draw attention and offers of a beer forthcoming. My Spanish and French improved no end; through necessity. Do remember that in those days there was no internet, no anything really, except pop records in English, so it was rare to find anyone who could speak it. This was especially so in the more rural regions of Spain and of course the French were, and still are, very proactive in preserving their linguistic culture.

Paul Malone: April 2024



Road B4000 : Lambourn Downs

In this photograph we are on the second day of the journey down to London. The road climbs on top of the Lambourn Downs on the B4000, one of the prettiest roads in England. The road first climbs a steep escarpment and then descends gently through the rolling hills and dry valleys of this chalk landscape. The fields are a mixture of arable and activities devoted to the horse racing industry.

I would usually stay with a student friend and his family in a farmhouse on top of the Downs. This photo is taken as I set off in the early morning. Ahead was a 7 hour cycle ride down the busy A4 into London. Once at Victoria Station my bike needed to be checked in before catching the late afternoon train to the Continent.

The journey across France took place during the night. Waking was to crystal clear vistas of the Pyrennes over which I would cross later in the trip. Entering into Spain everyone had to exit the train at Portbou and cross the platform through Customs. There was a further change at Barcelona to catch the railcar to Valencia. This passed through spectacular coastal scenery just before Sitges. The railway afforded views of the sea through the front windows as it careered between rough hewn tunnels.

It would take the bike a couple of days to follow on by rail before I could set off on the trip. So my first port of call on arrival in Valencia was the accommodation kiosk on the station. There was a surprisingly wide range of places to stay. This included an en-suite in the centre of the city for £0.70 per night. Who could argue?

When I arrived at the hotel the room was rather fine and voluminous, if a little sparse in furnishings. Consisting as it was of a single chair and a bed. The floor was decorative marble and there was a grand if nonfunctional fire place. I retired on the first night feeling rather pleased with the way things were going.

05:30 and I was awoken by the house-keeper with a trolley full of washing. The door to what I had assumed was my en-suite was in fact the hotel wash room. Now I understood the marble floor and the washing lines strung out from the balcony. Time to decamp for breakfast.

Valencia was a fine city to explore with a very relaxed atmosphere. Many of the central buildings had curved corners where they met on the squares, gardens and fountains. On the second day I explored the fine beach and walks along the harbour. I was intending to check out the art on the 3rd day but my bike arrived.



Central Valencia



Ermitorio de La Magdalena, Castellón

Re-united with my bike, I set off North along the coastal plain. Inland, there rose a sequence of cliffs and buttresses that were dotted with the ruins of castles and monasteries.

As you can see, the landscape was parched as befits late summer in Spain, but excellent weather for cycling and camping.

I had taken good care to maintain the mechanics of the bike prior to setting off and the roads were new and in excellent condition. I therefore was able to cover a great distance over this section of the route.

The road passed through, firstly, the suburbs of Valencia and then a string of small towns. These were of little interest in themselves but gave me an insight into how the country was undergoing development in the immediate post-Franco era.

As previously mentioned, this was late summer and it was evident there had been a severe drought. This is all that remains of the River Ebro, one of Spain's largest rivers. Just in the far distance can be seen a stretch of water but it was more like a series of ponds rather than a flowing river.



Rio Ebro: Amposta



The dry weather was not all bad news. Along this stretch of coast were series of extensive orange groves. Although not time for the harvest, the crops were in the last stages of ripening.

In the distance can be seen the start of the limestone mountain ranges leading in to the interior of Aragón. Appearing above the skyline is the beginning of a breakdown in the weather.

Orange groves around Oropesa del Mar