

Europe – Part Two

The Loire, the Vendee, and the Long Road to Lisbon

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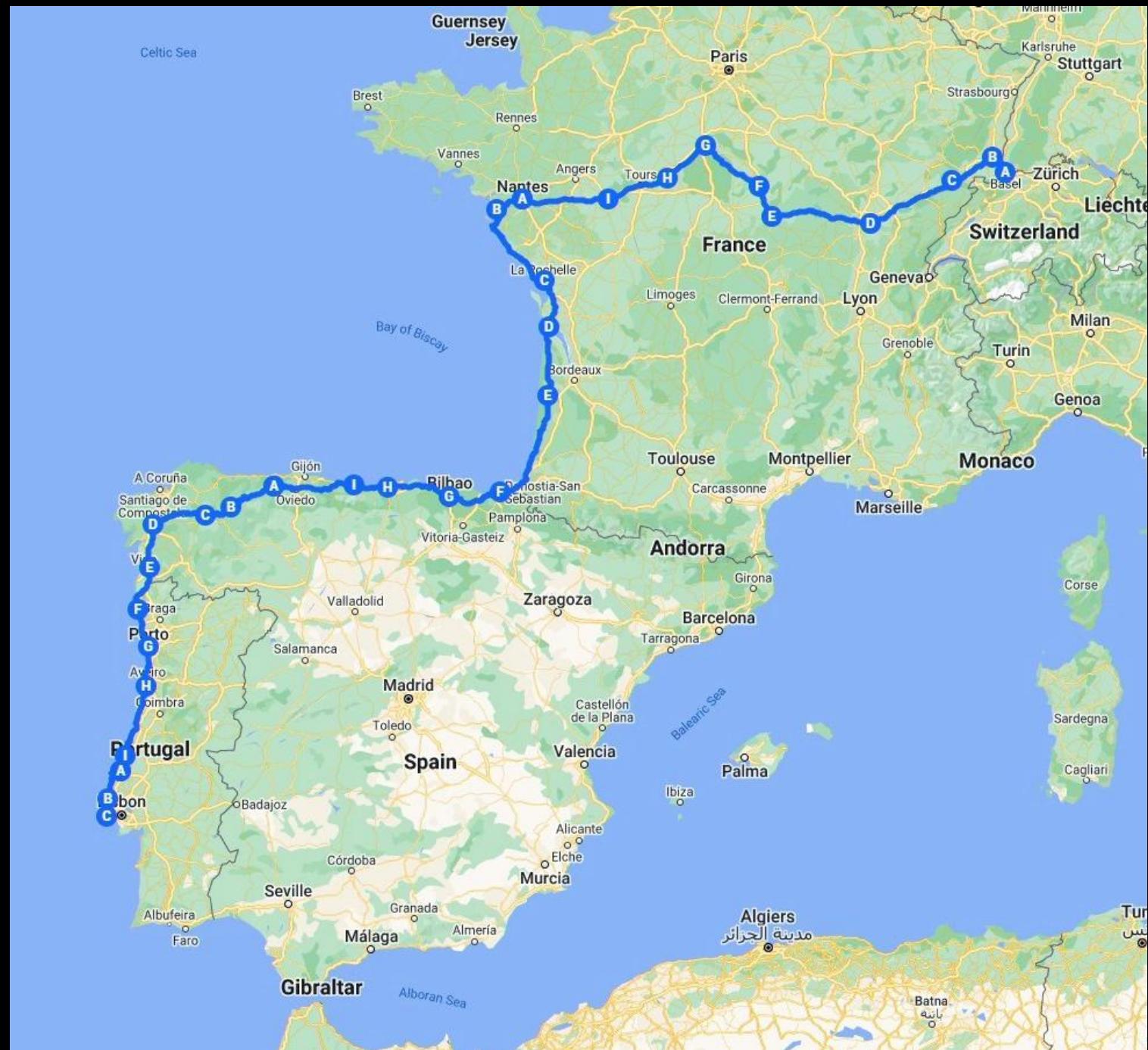
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Thank You

I am incredibly grateful for the kindness and random acts of generosity I experienced during my cycling trip in Europe. It was truly a humbling journey.

My sister, Amanda, played a crucial role in documenting my travels by organising my journal entries and photos. Without her efforts, there would be no record of my adventures.

I owe a great deal to my friend, Val Abrahamse, for managing my personal and financial matters back home while I travelled the world. Her conscientious efforts made it possible for me to pursue my dream.

Additionally, I want to give a shoutout to Carlos, who graciously accommodated me during my stay in Lisbon. Thank you!

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Europe – Part Two

The Loire, the Vendee, and the Long Road to Lisbon - A Cyclist's Pilgrimage

Prologue

There are journeys that begin with a map, and others that begin with a feeling. Leaving Budapest, I wasn't chasing a destination so much as a direction — westward, toward the Atlantic, toward a horizon I couldn't yet name. The train rattled through the night, and by the time I stepped onto the platform in Basel, I felt suspended between worlds: the one I had just lived, and the one waiting to unfold beneath my wheels.

Budapest to Basel (By Train)

My last morning in Budapest began with clean laundry and a final wander through Budapest's markets, the city humming with its usual confident energy. PC walked beside me, newly reunited with his passport, and together we threaded through the familiar streets one last time. Back in my room, I performed the ritual I knew so well: folding, sorting, tucking memories into panniers as if they were talismans.



The train to Basel was a patchwork of improvisation — it took jumping on and off to manoeuvre my bike from one train car to another like a circus performer, and trying to sleep upright while the train clattered through the dark. It wasn't restful, but it was movement, and movement was enough. Somewhere between Hungary and Switzerland, I felt the quiet certainty that the road ahead — whatever shape it took — would change me again.

CHAPTER 1: FRANCE

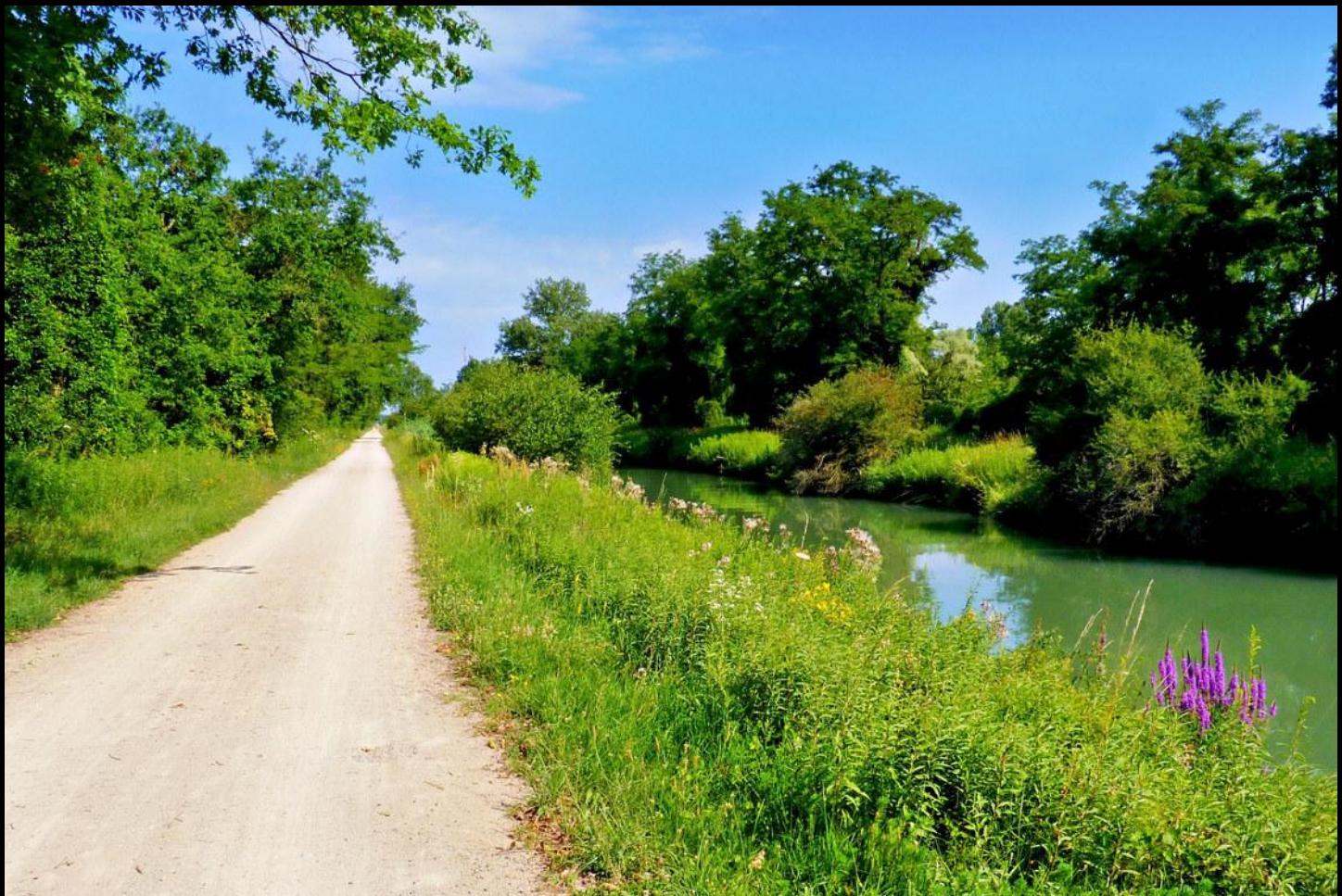
1,901 Km – 23 Days

Basel to Mulhouse (50 km)

Basel greeted me with a kind of cheerful confusion. Three countries meet here, and stepping out of the station felt like walking into a cultural crossroads with no signposts. I wasn't entirely sure which nation I was standing in, but the city's charm was unmistakable — cobbled lanes, elegant facades, and a sense of order that made me want to linger.

But the canal was calling.

I slipped onto the path along the Rhine Canal, where forests leaned toward the water and ducks paddled with enviable calm. The route was so well marked it felt like being gently guided by an invisible hand. I reached Mulhouse earlier than expected, wandered its streets, and stocked up on bread and cheese — the cyclist's holy sacrament.



The campsite was a small delight: Wi-Fi, hot showers, and a pizza stand that felt like a gift from the pizza gods. After the sleepless train night, I crawled into my tent long before the sun finally surrendered at 9:30 p.m., grateful for stillness.

Mulhouse to L'Isle-sur-le-Doubs (80 km)

Morning in Mulhouse arrived with soft light and the last of my bread and cheese. I packed quickly, eager to return to the bike path that felt like a secret whispered only to cyclists. Unlike the Danube's busy caravan of riders, this canal route was quiet, intimate, almost meditative.

Barges drifted by like slow-moving dreams. Lockmasters' cottages appeared at intervals, each one framed by gardens so charming they looked painted into place. But the locks themselves were less poetic — boats queued, engines idling.

By afternoon, the sky darkened. Thunder rolled across the valley, urging me to hurry. I pitched my tent near L'Isle-sur-le-Doubs just as the first heavy drops fell, then sat inside listening to the storm drum on the flysheet. Dinner was my bread and cheese — until the rain eased and the scent of pizza lured me out. I dashed through puddles, bought a steaming pizza, devoured half, and saved the rest for breakfast. A small triumph in a day shaped by weather and water.







L'Isle-sur-le-Doubs to Ranchot (110 km)

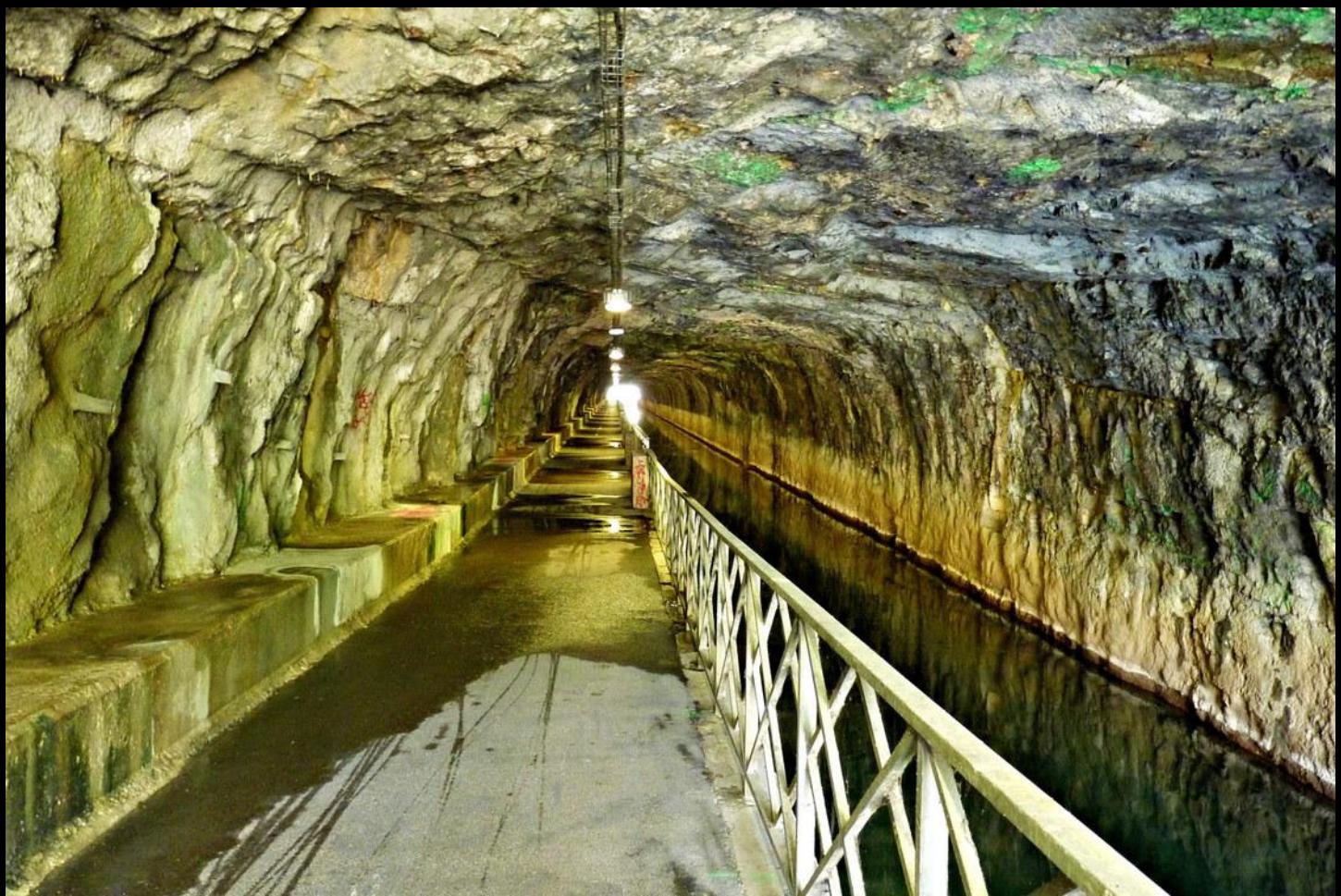
The morning mist felt like stepping into a dream. I lingered over coffee and cold pizza while waiting for my tent to dry, then set off along the canal once more. The settlements I passed were eerily still — shutters closed, no movement, as if the entire region had pressed pause.

Besançon rose ahead of me like a revelation. Its citadel — eleven hectares of stone and history — perched above the town with quiet authority. A tunnel beneath the fortress carried me through the mountain, and emerging on the other side felt like stepping into another century.

A sign told me Nantes was only 730 kilometres away. Somehow, that number made the Atlantic feel close enough to touch.

I found a small campsite in Ranchot, nothing fancy but fragrant with freshly cut grass. Dinner required a ride to the nearest village for bread — a small price for the pleasure of eating beside the river as evening settled around me.







Ranchot to Verdun-sur-le-Doubs (105 km)

Morning in Ranchot arrived soft and quiet, the kind of stillness that makes you wonder if you overslept the world. Most of the other campers had already vanished, their tents flattened, their cars long gone. I lingered, unhurried, letting the day unfold at its own pace.

The ride to Dole was a gentle warm-up, twenty-five kilometres of easy pedalling along the canal. Louis Pasteur's birthplace revealed itself in a cluster of medieval streets and the proud silhouette of the Collegiale-Notre-Dame. I wandered briefly, absorbing the hush of old stone and the faint scent of river water, then slipped back onto the path.

Rain arrived like an uninvited guest — not dramatic, just persistent, a steady drizzle that blurred the edges of the day. By the time I reached Verdun-sur-le-Doubs, I was damp, hungry, and ready for shelter. The campsite was a small miracle: five euros, a friendly woman at reception who spoke English, and Wi-Fi that felt like a luxury.

I rode into town for supplies — bread, cheese, chips, beer, coffee — the essentials of a cyclist's pantry. Verdun revealed itself in narrow alleys, stone bridges, and the quiet dignity of a place that has endured centuries of conflict and emerged from them all. Back at camp, I ate under a grey sky, grateful for warmth, food, and the simple comfort of being still.







Thunder woke me before dawn, the sky cracking open in bright flashes. It was clear I wasn't going anywhere. Rest days have a way of choosing themselves.

With the storm rumbling overhead, I surrendered to practicality: laundry, repairs, reorganising the panniers that had slowly devolved into chaos. Verdun-sur-le-Doubs, once a medieval border town, felt like the right place to pause — a place shaped by battles long past, now softened by time and river light.

I cycled into town between showers, practising my tentative French. "Bonjour," "Merci," "Au revoir." Judging by the amused expressions I received, my pronunciation hovered somewhere between earnest and alarming. Still, the ritual of buying a baguette and camembert made me feel momentarily local.

By afternoon, the rain eased. I sat by the river watching houseboats drift past, and fishermen stared intently at the water that refused to yield a single fish. My panniers were heavier with supplies, but my spirit felt lighter. Sometimes a day of stillness is its own kind of progress.







Verdun-sur-le-Doubs to Paray-le-Monial (132 km)

Sun returned with a vengeance — bright, warm, and full of promise. I set off from Verdun-sur-le-Doubs for Paray-le-Monial, about 130 kilometres down the path, early, skipping my usual coffee stop, letting the canal guide me through a landscape that shifted subtly from forests to vineyards.

The hills rolled gently, and I chose the country lanes over the official cycle path, craving the quiet rhythm of rural France. At one point, a grassy jeep track tempted me with a sign marked “rough.” It turned out to be more playful than punishing, a soft detour through fields humming with summer.

Houseboats dotted the canal, and then — a flash of home. A South African flag fluttered from one of the decks. I braked instinctively, calling out a greeting. The couple aboard looked as surprised as I felt. We exchanged a few warm words before the lock carried them onward, leaving me smiling at the unexpected connection.

By the time I reached Paray-le-Monial, hunger had hollowed me out. A mobile pizza stand waited at the campsite entrance like a beacon. I devoured a pizza that may have been ordinary or extraordinary — hunger is the best seasoning — and sat outside my tent as the sky held its light until nearly 10 p.m.



Paray-le-Monial to Nevers (115 km)

The day began golden, the sun low and generous. I followed the Loire, choosing the farm roads that hugged the river rather than the official route. Medieval towns appeared like mirages — beautiful, silent, almost deserted, as if the inhabitants had stepped out for a century or two.

Decize tempted me with its peaceful campground, but I resisted, stopping only for coffee before pushing on. Nevers rewarded the effort. The campground sat perfectly along the riverbank, offering a postcard view of the old town and its cathedral rising above the water.

I wandered into town, weaving through narrow streets until a Carrefour appeared like a modern oasis. I stocked up on a ready-made salad, fresh baguettes, and more coffee — always more coffee. Nevers felt like a place suspended between eras, its ancient houses leaning gently toward the present. I slept with the sound of the river just beyond my tent.





Nevers to Cosne-Cours-sur-Loire (90 km)

Grey skies greeted me, heavy and cold, the kind of morning that makes you want to burrow deeper into your sleeping bag. I finally forced myself onto the bike around 10 a.m., pedalling into a drizzle that felt more like November than July.

An hour later, salvation appeared in the form of a small pub. I ducked inside for coffee, warming my hands around the cup while watching the rain streak the windows. The rest of the day was a quiet battle — against wind, against dampness, against the creeping fatigue that comes from too many grey days in a row.

Cosne offered practical comforts: cash from an ATM, a SIM card for my modem, and a campsite where the rain finally relented. I ate my bread and cheese outside, grateful for the simple pleasure of dry air.





Cosne-Cours-sur-Loire to Orléans (124 km)

Bastille Day began with a headwind that felt personal. Gravel sections slowed me further, and I found refuge in a solitary pub for coffee before continuing on. Lunch at the castle in Sully was a brief, sunlit pause before the wind resumed its relentless push.

By the time I reached Orléans, the sky was streaked with the colours of evening. I treated myself to French fries and a beer, then settled into the campsite as the city prepared for its celebrations. Fireworks erupted around 11 p.m., shaking the ground with each explosion. I drifted to sleep imagining the sky lit with colour, each burst a reminder that summer had officially begun.





Orléans to Chaumont-sur-Loire (84 km)

Sun returned, bright and warm, reflecting off the Loire like scattered gold. I skipped breakfast — a consequence of too much chatting the night before — and didn't roll out until after 10. Twenty kilometres later, a pastry shop appeared like a blessing. I devoured something flaky and sweet, feeling instantly revived.

The villages along the Loire felt timeless, their medieval facades softened by centuries of weather and river light. I stocked up on supplies and stopped early at a conveniently placed campground. The wind had worn me down over the past days, and rest felt like the wiser choice.

That night, fireworks continued across the river — Bastille Day's echo — accompanied by distant music. I lay in my tent listening to the celebration drift across the water.





Chaumont-sur-Loire to Montsoreau (110 km)

Rain returned with a vengeance. I packed in a frenzy, stuffing wet gear into bags as the drizzle thickened into a cold, needling wind. The day was a long, shivering push through weather that felt determined to test me.

Amboise appeared briefly, its cave-homes tucked into cliffs like something out of another world. Tours offered a warm cup of coffee, a brief reprieve before the storm resumed. At one point, desperate for a restroom, I ducked into a wooded area — only to sit directly on stinging nettles. The shock was instant and fiery. I yelped, leapt up, and pedalled the last fifteen kilometres with a speed born of indignation.

Reaching the campsite felt like crossing a finish line. I peeled off my wet layers and collapsed.





Montsoreau to La Possonnière (78 km)

Morning arrived reluctantly, wrapped in cold wind and low clouds that made the world feel muted. Crawling out of my sleeping bag took resolve I wasn't sure I had. The Loire Valley unfolded in rolling hills and vineyards, castles perched like watchful sentinels above the river. Under different skies, it might have felt romantic. Today, it felt like a test.

By midday, the wind had turned feral. Gusts slammed into me sideways, forcing me to grip the handlebars with both hands as rain stung my face. Each kilometre felt earned through sheer stubbornness. I pulled my cap low, narrowed my focus to the few metres ahead, and pushed on.

Reaching La Possonnière felt like stumbling into a sanctuary. The campsite was basic, but it offered what I needed most: a place to peel off my soaked layers and breathe. I crawled into my tent, listening to the wind batter the flysheet, grateful simply to be horizontal and dry.





La Possonnière to Nantes (92 km)

I woke feeling unexpectedly refreshed, as if the storm had wrung something out of me. The sky remained dull, but my spirits had lifted. Thirty kilometres in, hunger demanded attention, and I stopped at a café for a croissant and coffee — a small ritual that restored both warmth and optimism.

Then, as if on cue, the landscape shifted. Castles and forts rose from the horizon, their silhouettes dramatic against the grey sky. The Loire Valley, even under cloud, had a way of surprising me into awe.

Nantes, the last major city before leaving the Veloroute 6, proved elusive. The map promised two campsites; reality offered none. After circling the outskirts in growing frustration, I surrendered and booked a hotel — a rare indulgence, but a necessary one.

The city buzzed with life. I wandered its pedestrian lanes, watched locals linger over coffee, and found a map for the next stage of my journey: south along the Atlantic coast toward Spain. I washed clothes, sorted gear, fixed my internet connection, and tended to the small maintenance tasks that accumulate on the road. Two nights in Nantes felt like a reset — a chance to breathe before the coastline called.



Nantes to La Bernerie (95 km)

I set off early, bracing for wind but instead met with relentless rain. It followed me like a shadow, soaking through layers, dripping from my helmet, turning the world into a blurred watercolour.

The path traced the final stretch of the Loire, leading me to St. Nazaire, where the river meets the Atlantic. The bike path ended here — a quiet milestone, marked only by the sudden vastness of the sea.

A sign for the Vélocéan cycleway appeared through the rain, its small arrows promising a new direction. I followed them, drenched but curious, until I reached La Bernerie.

The campsite was quirky, a little rough around the edges, but it offered refuge. Setting up my tent in the downpour was a comedy of errors — everything soaked before the flysheet was even on. Once inside, I made coffee, changed into dry clothes, and felt a wave of contentment wash over me. Warm, sheltered, caffeinated — sometimes that's all a person needs.



La Bernerie to Port Bourgenay (113 km)

The day began with the same dreary skies and the same impossible task: drying anything. I stuffed my wet gear into plastic bags and set off, determined to make progress despite the weather.

The Vendee's cycle paths were scenic but slow, crowded with families enjoying their holidays. I felt like an interloper among their leisurely rides. When I switched to the roads, I braced for impatience — but the French drivers surprised me. They waited, waved, and passed with kindness. Their small gestures softened the day.

The route wound through canals and coastal forests, then into lively resort towns buzzing with summer energy. By the time I reached Port Bourgenay, the sun had finally broken through, and a tailwind pushed me along as if offering an apology for the past week.

The campsite was affordable, the terrain flat, and for the first time in days, I felt the freedom of easy cycling. The Vendee had its own rhythm — gentle, forgiving, quietly joyful.





Port Bourgenay to La Rochelle (107 km)

Sunlight returned in full force, warm and generous. I spread my tent out to dry, revelling in the simple pleasure of warmth. Breakfast was an unexpected delight — what I thought was yoghurt turned out to be cream, turning my muesli into a decadent treat.

La Tranche was my first stop, a lively seaside resort bursting with colour and noise. I wandered among stalls and merry-go-rounds, absorbing the holiday atmosphere before accidentally veering onto a cycle path that led nowhere. With no GPS or smartphone, I relied on my paper map and intuition—a combination that eventually brought me back to the right road.

The wind picked up as I approached La Rochelle, whipping my windbreaker into a flag behind me. I intended to ride past the city, but a charming, inexpensive campsite tempted me to stop.

The charm came with a catch: it sat directly under the airport's flight path. Planes roared overhead, rattling my nerves. The owner, delighted by my "impossible" itinerary, announced my journey to everyone within earshot. Suddenly, I was the centre of attention — hot, sweaty, and very much not in the mood for a photoshoot. Still, their enthusiasm was infectious, and I ended the day amused despite myself.

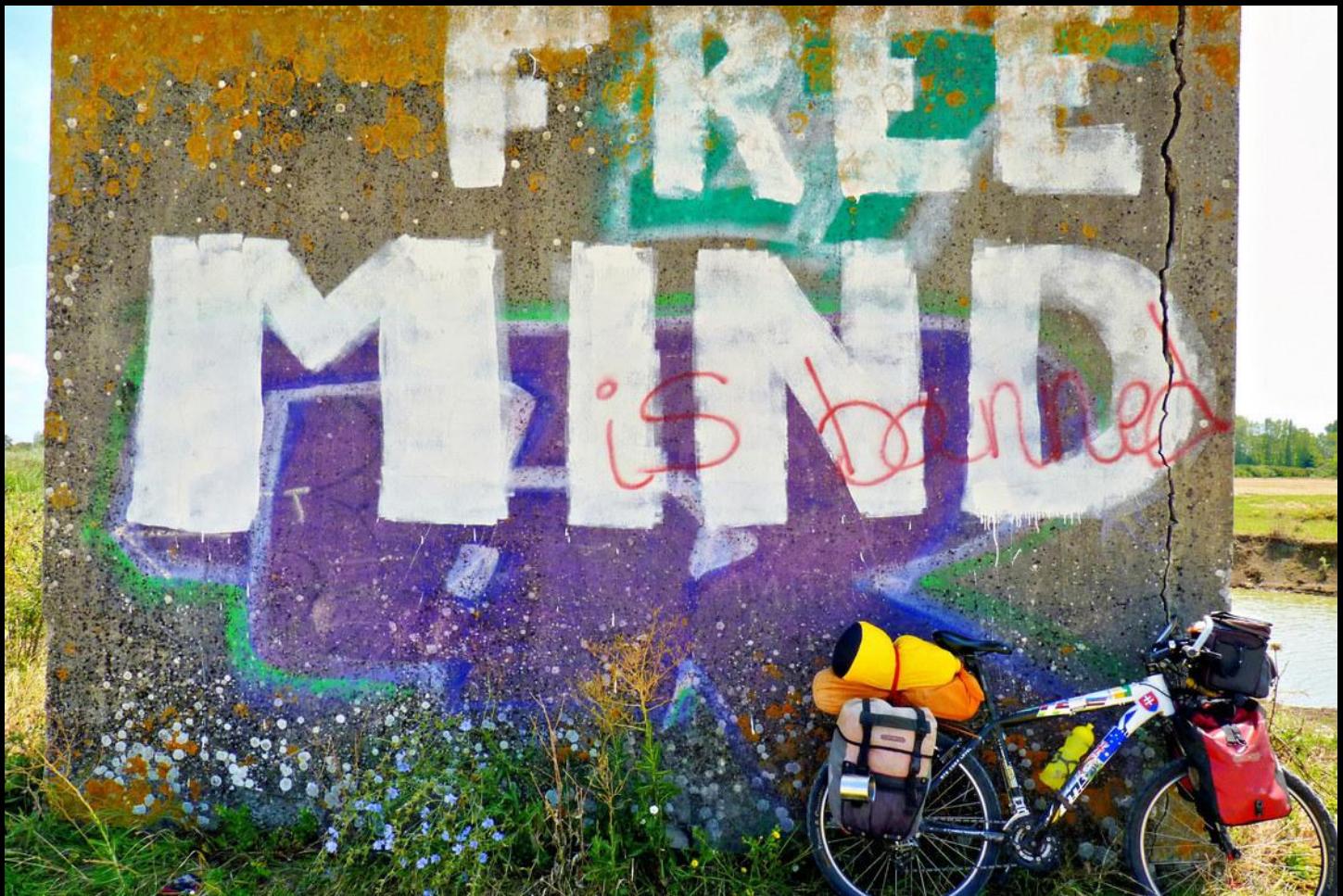


La Rochelle to Verdon-sur-Mer (113 km)

I started sluggishly, weaving through the city's busy streets until I finally escaped onto a quiet country lane. The wind was as fierce as the day before, pushing against me with stubborn persistence.

Eventually, I surrendered to practicality and took the highway — noisy, chaotic, but fast. Royan appeared like a reward, and from there a ferry carried me across the choppy bay to Verdon-sur-Mer. The thirty-minute crossing felt like a small adventure within the larger one.

On the other side, I grabbed a quick coffee and bread roll before cycling the last few kilometres to the campsite. The day had been long, windy, and loud, but the promise of rest made everything soften.



Verdon-sur-Mer to Gujan-Mestras (121 km)

The day began with a surprise: the Camino route. At first, I thought I'd taken a wrong turn — the signs felt too symbolic, too storied. But soon the scallop shells and yellow arrows confirmed it. I was riding along a pilgrimage path, surrounded by families on Sunday outings, while I pedalled with my fully loaded bike, feeling both out of place and oddly connected.

At the campsite, I met a Frenchman on his first cycling holiday — one of the few cycle tourists I'd encountered since leaving my group. We swapped stories until the sky opened and rain poured down, sending us scrambling to our tents.

The campsite's tiny store saved dinner: bread, cheese, and biscuits for breakfast. Simple, comforting, enough.

Gujan-Mestras to Farm Camp, Bias (91 km)

Rain hammered the tent all morning. By 11 a.m., I accepted defeat and packed up anyway, stepping into a world soaked and grey. The day was miserable — heavy rain, busy roads, poor visibility. Eventually, I found myself on a motorway, cars hissing past in sheets of spray.

I stopped early at a farm campsite, where a group of equally bedraggled campers huddled under a makeshift shelter, their children restless and their patience frayed. The atmosphere was bleak, but shared misery has its own camaraderie.



I pitched my tent in record time, nearly soaked through by the end. Thankfully, I'd stocked up earlier: sweets, crisps, and a ready-to-eat meal from Lidl. The campsite had no amenities, but inside my tent, warm food and dry clothes felt like luxury.

Farm Camp, Bias to Capbreton (91 km)

In the morning, I put on my last dry clothes, brewed a strong coffee, and set off. The rain continued, but staying put wasn't an option. I lowered my head and pedalled through it, each kilometre a small act of defiance.

Around midday, the rain eased long enough for me to find a supermarket. I stocked up, knowing I'd stop at the next available campsite.

Morning brought a hint of sunshine — enough to wash my clothes in the camp laundry and let them dry without fear of another downpour.

A trip into Centre Ville yielded treasures: a map of Spain, a new memory card for my camera, and an adapter for the campsite's power points. I sent home memory cards filled with months of photos, feeling a wave of nostalgia as I sealed them. Each image was a fragment of the journey — proof that I had lived these days fully.



CHAPTER 2: SPAIN

967 Km – 16 Days

Prologue

Borders are strange things. On maps they look sharp, decisive. In real life, they blur. One moment I was pedalling through the polished glamour of Biarritz; the next, the architecture changed, the language shifted, and Spain rose around me like a new chapter already in motion. No fanfare, no signpost — just a quiet crossing into a country that would ask me to climb again.

Capbreton to San Sebastián (91 km)

The morning broke bright and forgiving, my tent finally dry, my clothes no longer clinging with the memory of yesterday's storms. Packing up felt almost celebratory. I pointed my bike toward the border with the kind of optimism that only a sun-washed dawn can conjure.

The road curled along the coastline like a ribbon tossed carelessly by the wind. Biarritz shimmered as I passed through — glamorous, polished, almost too beautiful to be real — but I didn't linger. Spain was calling, and I was eager to answer.



The border itself was a whisper rather than a proclamation. One moment, France; the next, Spain — as if the land had simply inhaled and exhaled in a different language. Colours shifted. Architecture thickened. The air buzzed with a new cadence. Hills rose abruptly, as though Spain wanted to test my resolve from the very first pedal stroke.

San Sebastián arrived in a rush of noise and movement, far larger and livelier than I'd imagined. Yet amid the bustle, a small sign pointed toward free Camino accommodation — a beacon for the weary and the hopeful. Within minutes, I had my credentials, my Pilgrim's Passport, and with it, the sense that a new chapter had quietly opened beneath my wheels.

The Refugio closed its doors at ten, lights out by half past. The sudden hush felt almost monastic. I lay in the dark, amused at how quickly I'd been absorbed into the Camino rhythm — early to bed, early to rise, and grateful for whatever shelter the day offered. Dinner was four slightly stale bread rolls from my panniers, but after the long ride, they tasted almost luxurious.

Spain had welcomed me with hills, heat, and humble hospitality. I drifted to sleep feeling that something ancient had taken me by the hand.







San Sebastián to Mutriku (58 km)

Morning arrived with a gentle shove rather than a whisper. At precisely eight o'clock, the Refugio volunteers ushered us out the door with the brisk efficiency of people who have done this a thousand times. I blinked into the early light, still half-asleep, and sought refuge in a café where a croissant and coffee restored my will to live. And that was the first and last time I used a Camino Refugio - too many rules for my wayward personality. I laughed at myself peddling away.

My bicycle, however, had other opinions. The gears protested, the chain sulked, and the bike mechanic could only offer a sympathetic shrug before replacing my brake blocks — a small mercy considering the descents Spain had in store.

By midday, SIM card secured and cobblestones conquered, I finally escaped San Sebastián's charming grip. The Bay of Biscay unfurled beside me, a jagged coastline of cliffs and green folds that rose and fell like the breath of some ancient creature. The sun shone with theatrical brilliance, and the wind, for once, behaved itself. The climbs were steep enough to make me question my life choices, but the descents — oh, the descents—sent me flying like a kamikaze pilot with questionable judgment and excellent brakes.

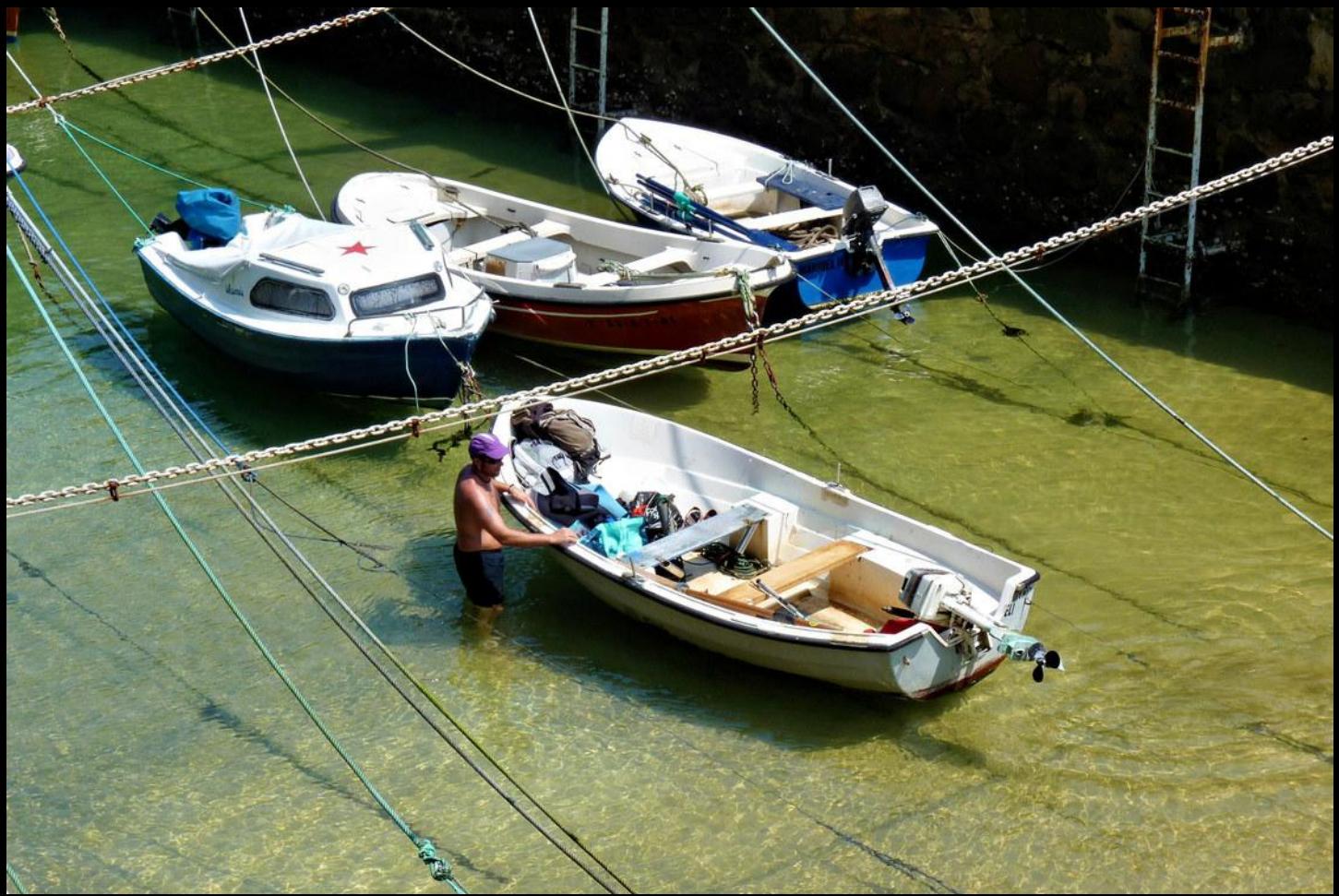
Spain, I quickly learned, is not a country that believes in flat roads. I stopped more often than I cycled, partly to catch my breath, partly because the landscape demanded admiration. Every bend revealed something new: a cliffside village, a church perched improbably on a hill, a valley that looked painted rather than grown.



By late afternoon, I reached Mutriku — or rather, I reached the bottom of the hill beneath Mutriku. The campground sat somewhere near the stratosphere, and the climb up felt like a pilgrimage of its own. But the reward was worth every sweaty pedal stroke: lush lawns, sweeping views, and a serenity that wrapped itself around me like a warm blanket.

I sat in the sun with my map, tracing the road ahead. Spain, it seemed, was a labyrinth of mountains masquerading as a country. The thought sent a shiver through me. Dinner was a rice dish that had been ageing gracefully in my panniers, followed by chocolate biscuits and a cup of coffee — a humble feast, but perfect in its own way.

As the light softened and the hills glowed gold, I felt the quiet satisfaction of a day well earned. The road had challenged me, but it had also given me beauty in return.



Mutriku to Bilbao (86 km)

Morning rose bright and sharp, the kind of light that makes even steep hills look innocent. I followed the Camino signs out of Mutriku, letting them lead me into a world of rolling green and quiet villages perched on improbable slopes. Walkers greeted me with warm holas, while sleek road cyclists flew past as if gravity were merely a suggestion. One even chatted on his mobile while climbing — a level of athletic arrogance I could only admire from a distance.

The road wound inland, climbing through forests and stone hamlets, each church standing like a sentinel over centuries of pilgrims. My granny gear earned its keep. More than once, I questioned my sanity, but the mountains answered with views that silenced every complaint.

By the time I rolled into Bilbao, my legs felt like overcooked noodles, and my knees were staging a quiet rebellion. The city's promise—its art, its food, its sheer Basque charisma—was far too tempting to resist. Two nights felt like the bare minimum. I dropped my bags and wandered out, swept up immediately by the elegance of old stone buildings and churches that seemed to glow in the morning light.

It was Sunday, which meant shutters drawn and streets hushed, but apparently that didn't apply to wine. At ten in the morning, locals were already swirling glasses of red as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Street artists filled the square with colour and music, while café-goers lingered over their coffee-and-wine breakfasts. I happily joined the ritual.

Then my phone buzzed. Ed—my friend from the UK—was on his motorbike and heading my way. The timing felt like a gift. I immediately booked an extra night.





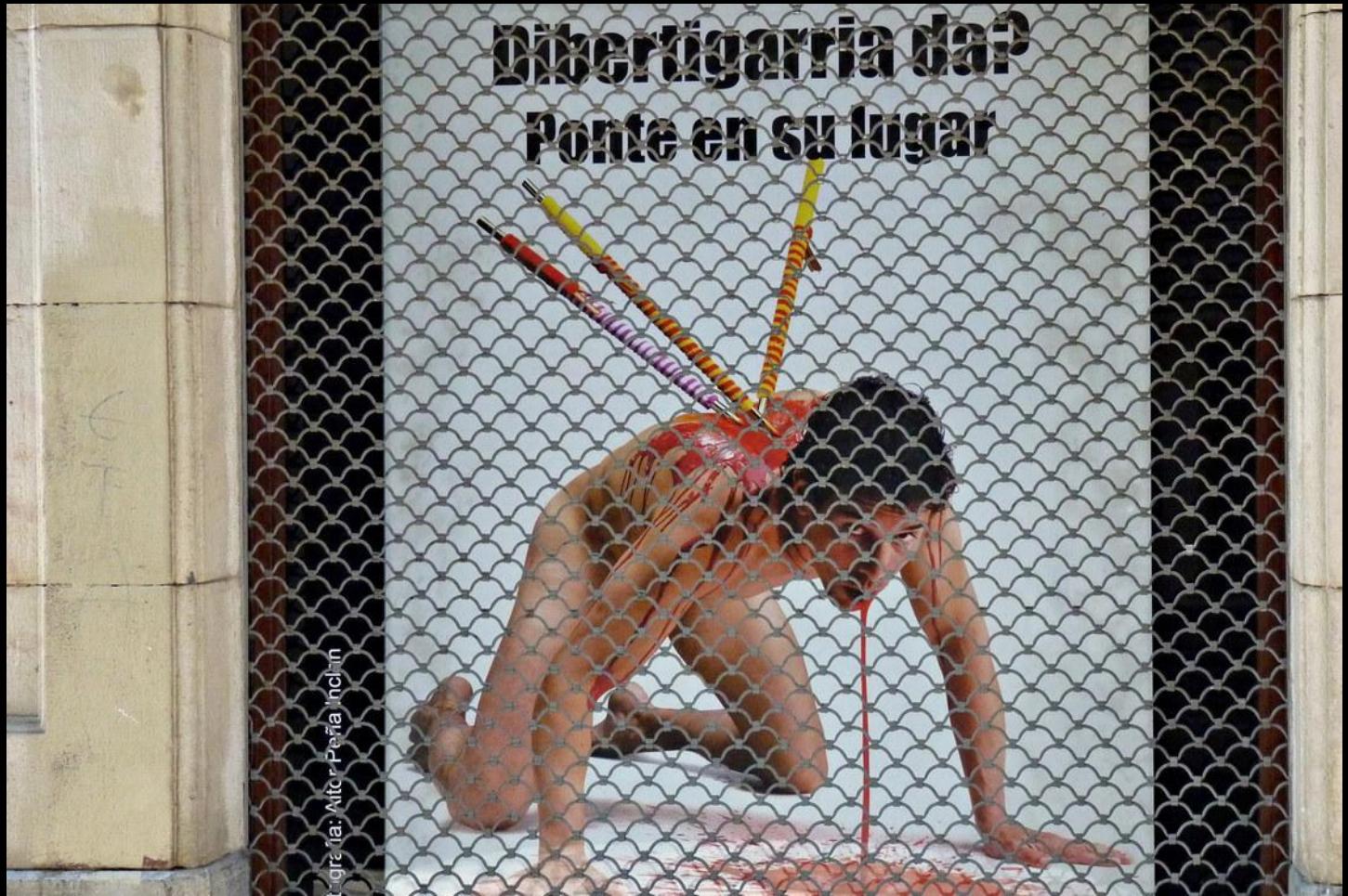




Divertigarría da?

Ponte en su lugar

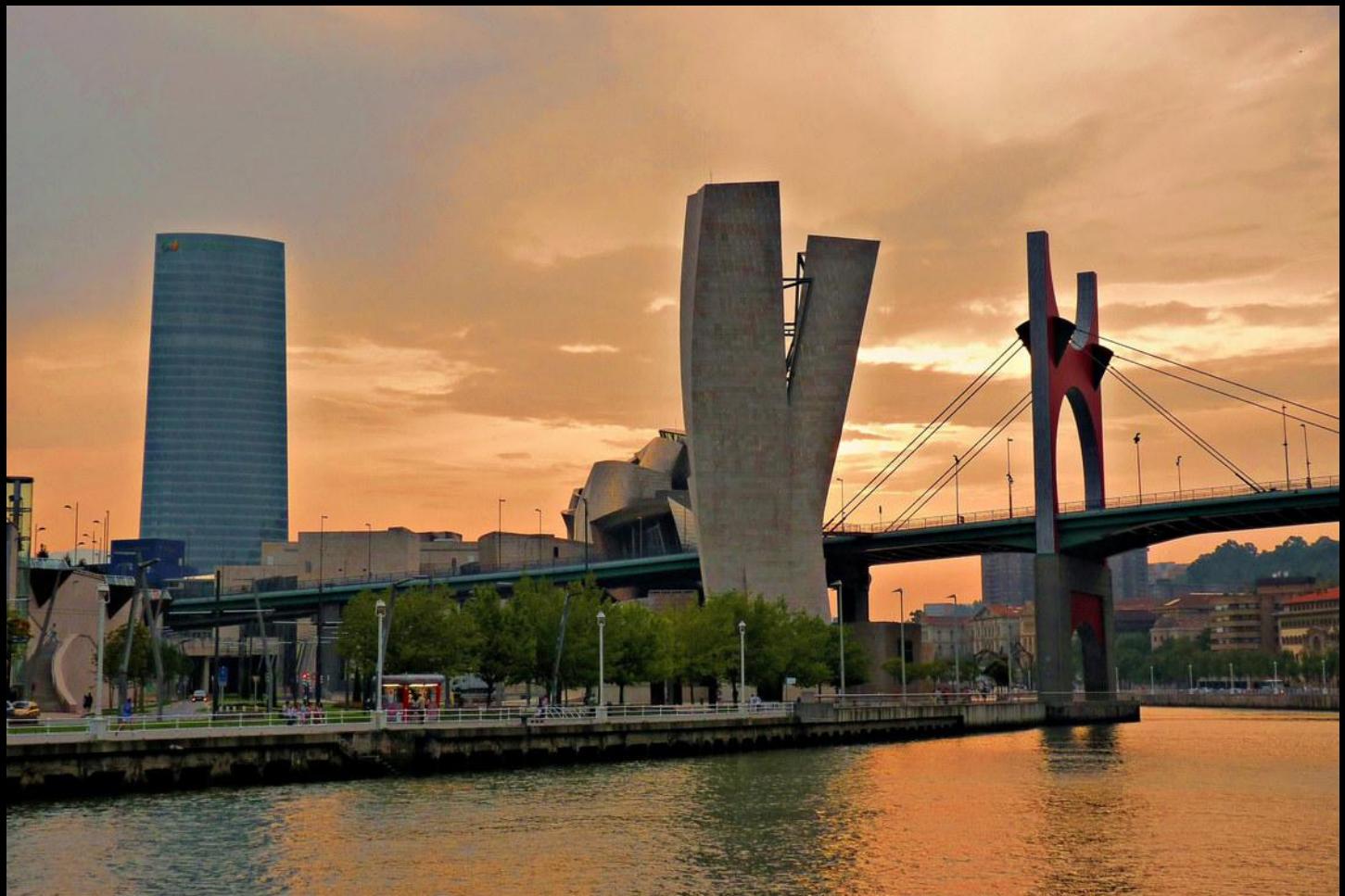
Fotografía: Alfonso Peña. Inclán



Bilbao

Ed arrived at midday, and the moment he swung off his bike, it was as if no time had passed at all. We slipped easily back into our old rhythm, wandering the narrow lanes of the old town, swapping stories, laughing too loudly, and sharing a bottle (or two) of Rioja. Bilbao felt even warmer with a friend beside me.





Bilbao to Laredo Camping (50 km)

Morning came with the soft clatter of panniers and the smell of instant coffee. Ed produced cornflakes from his seemingly bottomless bags, and after breakfast we set off—me on my bicycle, him on his motorbike, a mismatched but cheerful duo.

He lent me his GPS, though the device seemed determined to send me on a pilgrimage of its own. After a few kilometres of arguing with the chirpy digital voice, I abandoned her entirely and trusted my instincts instead. It seemed I couldn't even follow instructions from a GPS.

Ed, had already scouted a campsite by the time I caught up. It was barely midday, but he suspected more challenging hills ahead and decided to call it early. I didn't protest. The sky soon darkened, and rain began to fall in steady sheets. We retreated to our tents, listening to the soft percussion of raindrops as we swapped stories through the canvas. Adventure could wait; for now, we were dry, fed, and content.





Laredo Camping to Santillana del Mar (88 km)

I left camp buzzing with energy, pedalling ahead until Ed caught up, triumphantly holding bread and jam like a breakfast hero. We ate by the roadside, sun warming our backs, the morning fresh and full of promise.

We skipped Santander's bustle in favour of a quiet coastal road that clung to the sea. The views were spectacular—cliffs, waves, and endless blue. Somewhere along the way, Ed texted to say he'd found a campsite in Santillana del Mar. The hills between us were steep, but the scenery softened the effort. Camino walkers and cyclists passed with cheerful greetings, each exchange a tiny spark of camaraderie.

Finding Ed was easy. Together we wandered the cobblestone streets, admiring medieval buildings and stocking up at the supermercado for a well-earned feast.





Santillana del Mar to Llanes (60 km)

The morning sun was already fierce when we set off, confirming my suspicion that the day would be a scorcher. The Costa Verde lived up to its name—lush, dramatic, and relentlessly hilly. Romantic, yes, but only if you weren't the one sweating up its inclines.

Holidaymakers lounged outside bars, calling out, "Stop for a beer!" with enviable enthusiasm. Tempting, but I kept pedalling. Thankfully, the ride was shorter than expected. I tackled laundry while Ed roamed with his camera, capturing Llanes from every angle.

Later, I found a quiet bay where I sat with my diary, watching the sun melt into the sea in a blaze of gold and rose. A perfect ending to a demanding day.





Llanes to Nava (80 km)

Rain greeted us at dawn, a rude surprise after the previous day's heat. We packed quickly, gulped down cornflakes and coffee, and set off into the drizzle.

My map soon turned to papier-mâché, and somewhere along the way I took a wrong turn. But the mistake became a gift: the road followed a lively river where a canoe race was underway. Music blared, food stalls perfumed the air, and spectators cheered as I cycled past, as if I were part of the event. Their energy lifted me.

The detour settled my internal debate about staying on the coast or heading inland. Inland it was. I messaged Ed, and we agreed to meet in Nava. Sometimes the best decisions are the accidental ones.





Nava to Salas (85 km)

We started the day with croissants and steaming coffee—simple, perfect fuel. The ride toward Oviedo should have been straightforward, but the city had other ideas. Its streets twisted and tangled, and the road signs seemed designed to confuse. I circled the city more times than I care to admit, frustration mounting as the wind picked up and the clouds darkened.

By the time I escaped Oviedo's maze, I was exhausted. Later Ed phoned and mentioned he was in Sala, perched like a quiet gem among the hills, and I was happy to surrender to its charm, where we checked into a small room.

The town was delightful—cobblestones, an old church, and locals sipping wine and coffee at sidewalk cafés. After the chaos of the day, Salas felt like a balm.

Salas to Pola de Allande (55 km)

For Ed's final day, we chose a shorter ride, and it turned out to be one of the most beautiful stretches yet. The road wound gently through rolling hills, the climbs steady but kind. The mountains, which had looked intimidating on the map, revealed themselves to be far more welcoming.

Each ascent felt like a small triumph, and the descent into Pola de Allande was pure joy. The village lay nestled in a peaceful valley, a soft landing after days of effort. It was the perfect place to celebrate Ed's last day on the road—quiet, scenic, and full of that unmistakable Camino spirit.







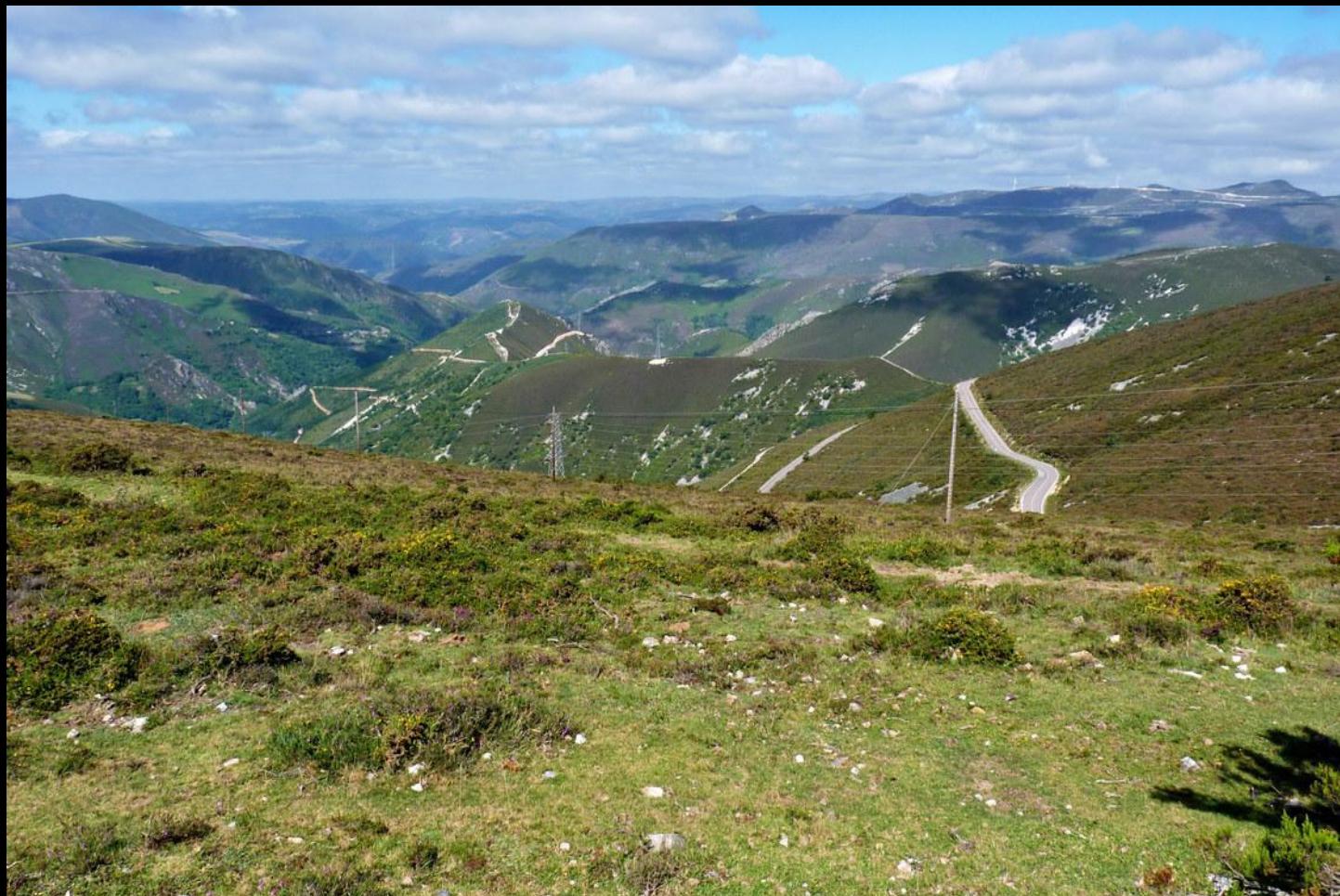
Pola de Allande to Fonsagrada (70 km)

Ed rode off toward London, and the silence he left behind felt heavier than my panniers. I turned toward the mountains, where the road rose sharply into a rugged pass. For an hour and a half I climbed, lungs burning, legs protesting, but the summit opened like a doorway into wind and sky.

The day became a rhythm of ascents and plunging descents — a rollercoaster carved into the earth. I lunched beside a dam shimmering in the sun, then pushed upward again toward Grandas, where a festival burst unexpectedly into music and colour. I lingered just long enough to feel part of it.

Wind turbines appeared on the horizon, tall and indifferent, signalling the fierce gusts waiting at the top. I climbed into their domain, then dropped into a lush valley where villages grew smaller and quieter, as if retreating from the world.

By the time I reached Fonsagrada — perched atop a final, punishing climb — my legs staged a full rebellion. I found a room, bought supplies, and surrendered to exhaustion long before sunset.







Fonsagrada to Lugo (59 km)

The day kicked off just as I had imagined, with the route winding down into a picturesque valley. The weather was biting cold, and I felt a wave of relief that it wasn't winter yet. Road signs warned of heavy snowfalls, and the sight of snow poles standing resolutely along the way confirmed that those warnings were no exaggeration. As I pedalled on, a steady climb opened up to breathtaking views of expansive wind farms, showcasing the immense valley stretched out below me.

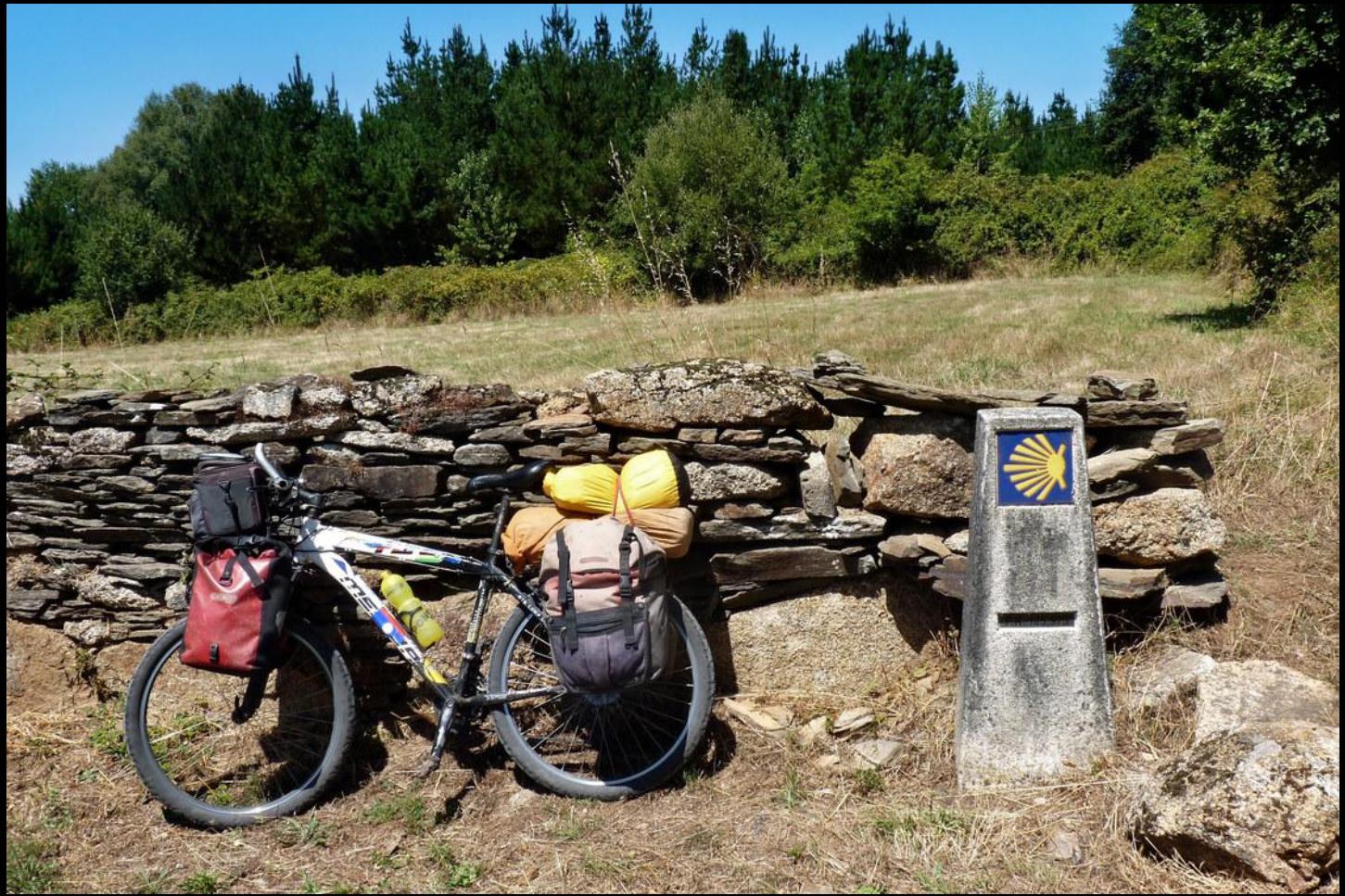
However, I couldn't shake my worry about my bicycle's front hub; all I could do was hope it would hold out until I reached Lugo. Despite my anxiety, the ride was exhilarating, with every turn revealing stunning vistas, and I felt a twinge of sadness when I finally rolled into the vibrant town of Lugo, a delightful surprise with its remarkable ancient Roman walls dating back to the 3rd and 4th centuries.

Arriving at my pension in Lugo, I found it conveniently located next to a bike shop. I quickly rushed over to have the cones replaced. In an ideal world, I would have opted for a full hub replacement, but the shop was either unable or unwilling to do so. Instead, they tried to entice me with a shiny new wheel, complete with rim, spokes, and hub—but at a price that made my wallet cringe. Paying 30 euros for the cones felt like a bit of a scam, to be honest.

On the bright side, the pension's owner was incredibly hospitable. He cheerfully lugged my bags and bicycle up the stairs for me, which was a huge help after that long ride. He even offered me access to his kitchen and washing machine—though, in hindsight, I wish I had taken him up on that. All in all, despite the hiccups, Lugo was turning out to be a memorable stop on my journey!







Lugo to Santiago de Compostela (105 km)

Lugo's ancient walls watched me roll out slowly, as if reluctant to let me go. The morning unfolded into one of the gentlest, most luminous days of the journey. The valley softened around me, the sun warm but forgiving, the road kind enough to let me breathe.

Berry season was fading, but I still found sweet remnants along the way. Sixty-five kilometres from Santiago, I merged with the French route and was suddenly surrounded by walkers, cyclists, even horses, all moving with the same quiet determination. Shops overflowed with Camino trinkets, and the air buzzed with shared purpose.

The crowds overwhelmed me at first, then comforted me. We were all heading toward the same ancient destination, each carrying our own reasons. I reached Santiago by late afternoon, found a campsite just outside the centre, and felt the strange exhilaration of finishing something vast — while knowing my journey was far from over.



I had planned a day of rest, but Santiago swept me into its history with the force of a tide. I wandered its streets, reading everything I could about the Camino, embarrassed by how little I'd understood despite cycling its routes.

By evening, the city had woven itself into me. Continuing along the Portuguese Way felt not just logical, but necessary — as if the road itself had whispered the next step.









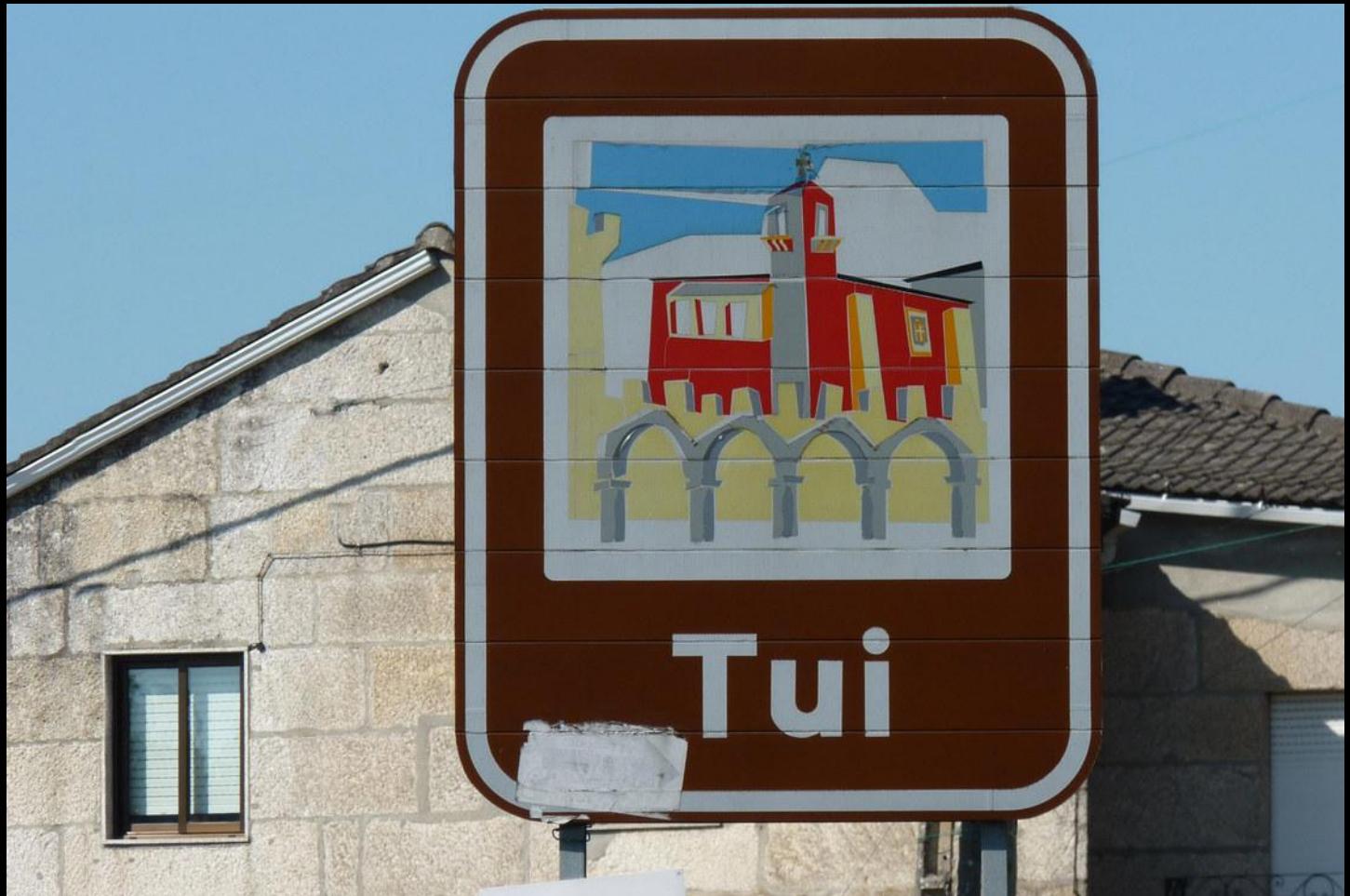
Santiago to Redondela (80 km)

The campsite buzzed with pilgrims swapping stories, and I lingered longer than planned. By the time I left, the sun was high and the day already humming with heat.

The road carried me through villages scented with wild aniseed, past vineyards glowing in the light, past statues and churches that seemed to watch over the passing pilgrims. I reached Pontevedra early but kept going, carried by momentum and curiosity.

Redondela appeared before midday, and a faded hotel offered me a room with a sea view for twenty-five euros. I accepted instantly. Some gifts don't need thinking over.





CHAPTER 3: PORTUGAL

570 Km in 10 Days

Prologue

Portugal greeted me not with fanfare but with a shift in light. The air thickened with salt and eucalyptus. The villages glowed white against the hills. The road bent toward the ocean as if it, too, had been waiting for this moment. I didn't know what Portugal would ask of me — only that it would ask something. Every country had. Every stretch of road had. But as I pedalled south, I felt a quiet anticipation rising in me, a sense that this coastline, this language, this light would mark a new turning in the journey.

Redondela to Viana do Castelo (95 km)

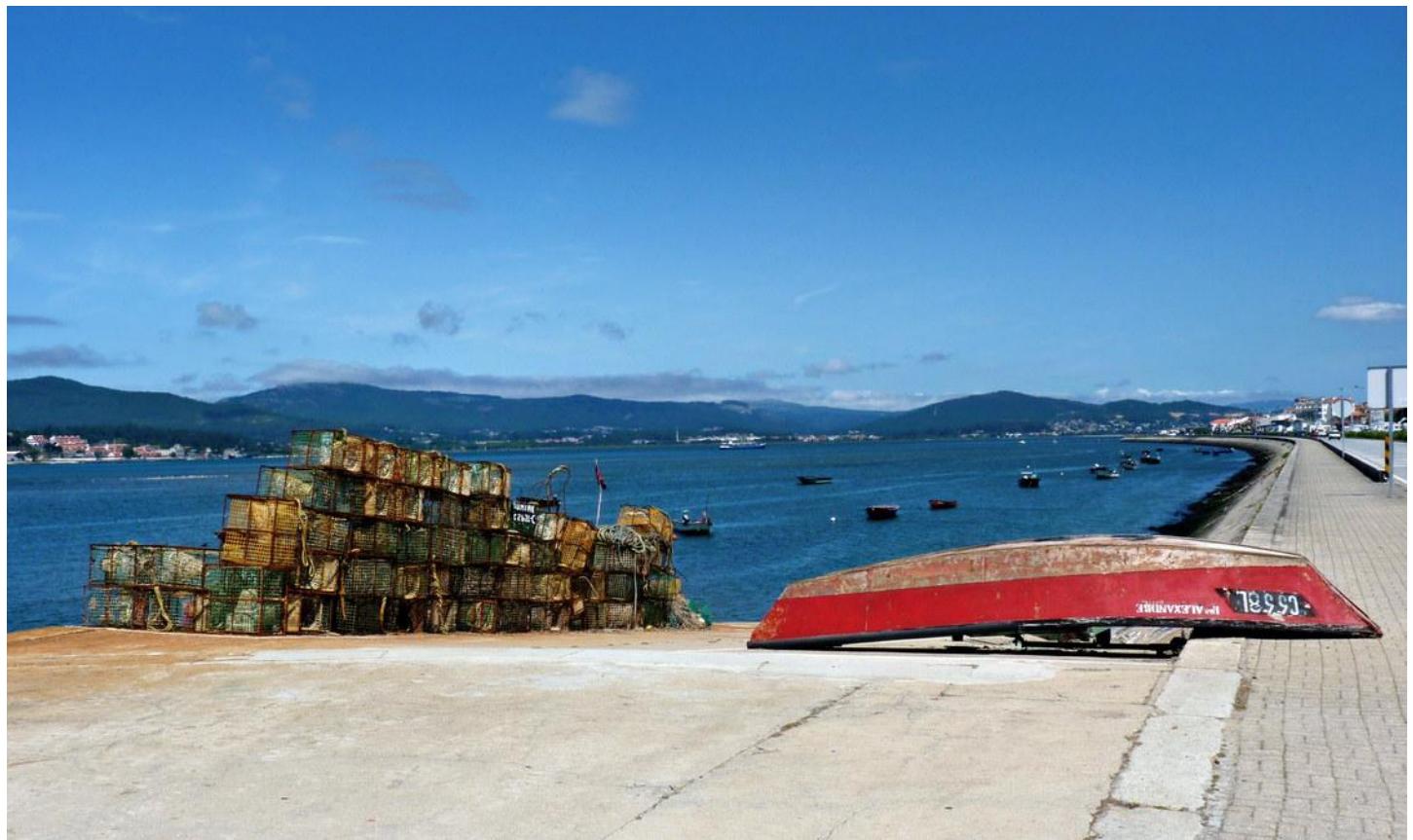
The morning opened warm and generous, the kind of day that seems to lean forward and whisper, Go on then — something new is waiting. Only thirty-five kilometres separated me from Portugal, and the tailwind nudged me along as if eager to see me cross.

Tui offered a final Spanish coffee, rich and comforting, before I rolled across the river into Portugal — a crossing so simple it felt almost ceremonial. Valença greeted me with cobbled streets that seemed to echo with centuries of footsteps. The coastline beyond was a dream: wide shoulders, smooth tarmac, and the Atlantic breathing beside me like a steady companion.



Peaches from a roadside stall became my lunch — sun-ripened, sweet, devoured in the shade of a tree. By the time I reached Viana do Castelo, the town was alive with festival energy, music drifting through the streets like confetti.

The campsite felt more like a whimsical farm, complete with wandering animals and showers housed in old horse stables. I laughed out loud at the absurd charm of it all. Portugal had welcomed me with warmth, fruit, and a sense of play.



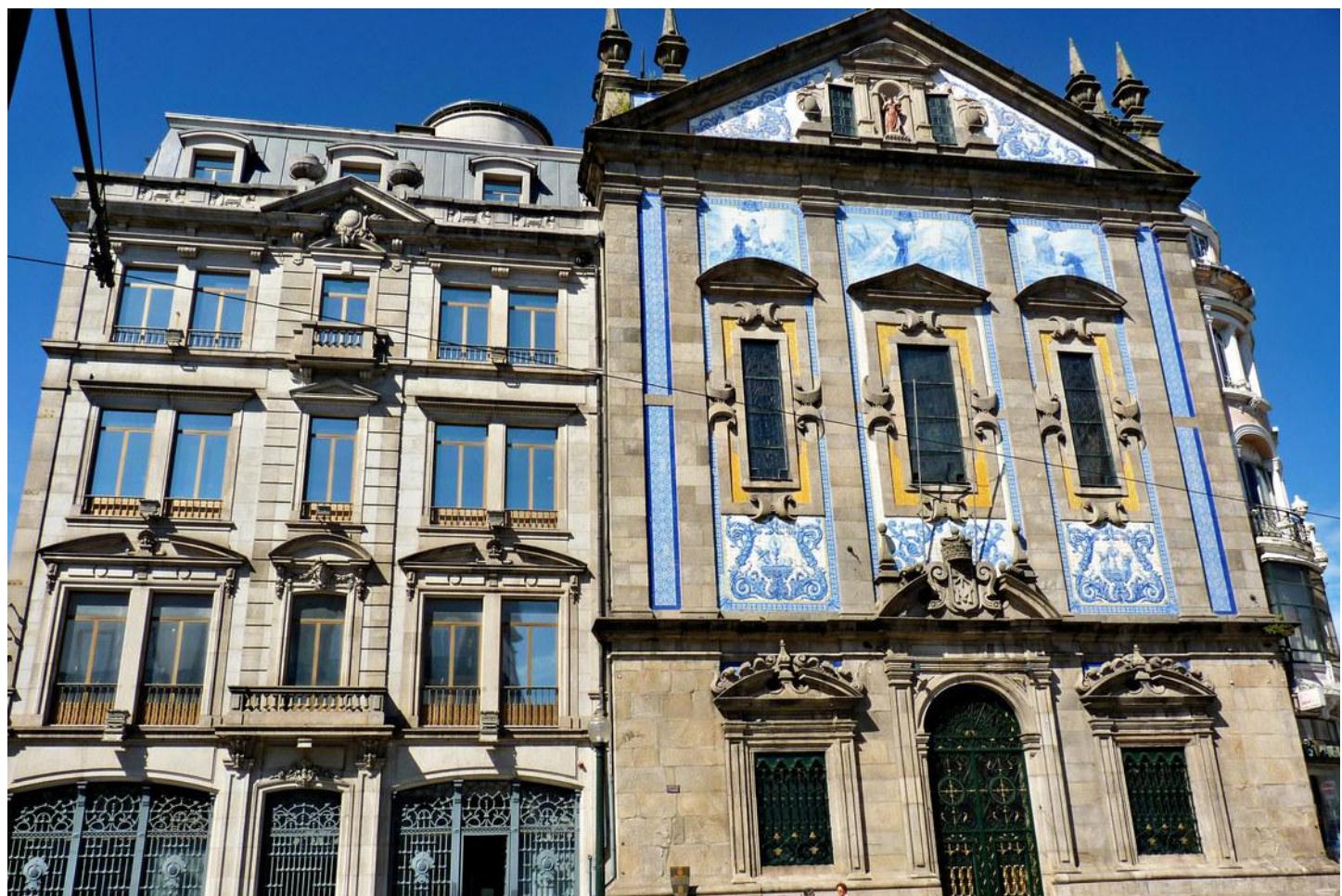


Viana do Castelo to Porto (70 km)

Fireworks had crackled until three in the morning, leaving the campsite wrapped in a strange, post-celebration hush. I woke to drizzle and grey skies, the world softened at the edges.

Sunday markets spilt onto the narrow coastal roads, cars inching forward as city folk hunted for fresh vegetables. The air smelled of earth and rain. Somewhere along the way, I earned my first flat tyre in Europe — a greasy badge of honour that left my hands blackened and my patience tested.

Porto rose before me like a revelation. The city shimmered with history, its tiled facades and steep alleys tumbling toward the river. I learned it was the birthplace of Port wine, which felt like destiny. Travelling without a guidebook meant every discovery was a surprise, and Porto was the best kind — unexpected, layered, intoxicating.





I spent the following day wandering Porto's heart, letting the city reveal itself piece by piece. The railway station dazzled with its blue-and-white tiles, each panel a story. The harbour was alive with the scent of fish grilling over open flames, seagulls circling like opportunistic thieves.

Holidaymakers crowded the beaches, chasing the sun. Fishermen cast their lines with patient hope, though the ocean seemed in no mood to share. As I scrolled through my photos, I realised how Portugal straddled two worlds — modern architecture rising beside crumbling, soulful buildings. And though the new was impressive, it was the old that tugged at me.





Porto to Ílhavo (88 km)

Breakfast at the hotel felt like a feast, and I set off along the beaches of Valadares and Espinho, where locals jogged and cycled in holiday spirits. The Atlantic remained icy, its waters a stubborn 15–17°C, daring only the bravest to enter.

Aveiro appeared at midday, all canals and colourful boats, but it was overflowing with tourists and devoid of campsites. So I pushed on to Ílhavo, where the only options were expensive hotels. I surrendered to comfort — a hot bath, a balcony view, and the quiet luxury of clean sheets. Sometimes indulgence is its own kind of pilgrimage.





Ílhavo to Coimbra (65 km)

The hotel breakfast was extravagant enough to fuel me for days. With only a short ride ahead, I pedalled lazily, letting the morning unfold. A friendly cyclist joined me for a stretch, chatting easily before we stopped to raid a fig tree — a small, sweet rebellion.

Coimbra rose steeply from the river, its medieval heart perched high above. I booked a room quickly — the campsite was too far from the city's pulse — and set out to explore. Cobblestone lanes twisted upward toward the ancient university, each turn revealing another pocket of history. Coimbra felt like a city built on stories.





Coimbra to Nazaré (100 km)

The ride to Nazaré felt strangely muted, as if the road had slipped into a quieter register. Beautiful, yes — but after weeks of dramatic landscapes, my senses had grown greedy. I arrived with a mix of relief and reluctance, slowing down as if my body knew the chapter was nearing its end.

The next day I did nothing, gloriously. The campsite buzzed with flies, driving me out for a ride, but the haze made photography pointless. Eventually, I returned, resigned to sharing my afternoon with the persistent little pests.





Nazaré - Óbidos - 42 km

Back on the bike, I felt the exhilaration of the open road as it wound its way along the stunning coastline toward Lisbon. To my surprise, the same guy I had met three days earlier stopped again, this time in a car, and we shared a quick chat amidst the salty air and crashing waves.

My first stop of the day was Caldas da Rainha, and I was almost tempted to call it a day right there. The town was a visual feast, bursting with colours and life, especially with the Saturday market buzzing in full swing. Cobblestone alleys were lined with charming cafes where locals enjoyed their meals under the warm sun, and the whole scene was inviting. But I pressed on, and I was glad I did—the majestic walled city of Óbidos soon appeared, perched high on a hill like a fairytale fortress.

There was no way I could pass this enchanting place without stopping. I treated myself to a rather upscale room that felt worth every cent. As I strolled through the narrow streets, I was captivated by the rich history that dates back to BC, and by the city's having changed hands countless times over the centuries. It's no wonder that Óbidos is celebrated as one of the seven wonders of Portugal! I lost track of time snapping an endless array of photos, indulging in delectable "egg tarts," and savouring liqueur from delicate chocolate cups. This day was a feast for the senses, and every moment felt like I was living inside a postcard.











Óbidos to Ericeira (60 km)

The hills rose sharply, and a fierce headwind pushed against me with theatrical determination. Yet every climb revealed another breathtaking view — cliffs, ocean, villages clinging to the land like stories refusing to fade.

By early afternoon, I surrendered to Ericeira, where a well-equipped campsite offered refuge. The wind howled outside, but inside my tent, everything felt still.





Ericeira to Cascais (50 km)

The road into Cascais welcomed me with a fine, silvery drizzle — a gentle reminder that not every ending arrives wrapped in sunshine. The air was soft, the world washed in a muted glow, and the ride carried me past the fairytale hills of Sintra. The Pena Palace rose above the mist like something imagined rather than built, its colours muted by the weather but no less majestic. It felt like a fitting final landmark — whimsical, improbable, perched between earth and sky.

As the drizzle eased, I wound through the last stretch of coastal road and rolled into Cascais, the place where my European journey would come to rest. Waiting there was something even more precious than a destination: an old friend.

Carlos and I go back decades, to our days at Syfrets Trust in Cape Town. Seeing him again felt like opening a door to a part of myself I hadn't visited in years. His wife, Melody, and her two beautiful daughters welcomed me into their home perched high on a hill, the kind of place where the coastline unfurls beneath you like a painted horizon. The room they prepared for me was spacious and warm — a luxury after weeks of tents, damp clothes, and the constant choreography of living out of panniers. For the first time in a long while, I could spread out, breathe, and simply be.

That evening, Carlos lit a fire for a true South African braai — a taste of home carried across continents. We savoured boerewors made by another South African who had settled in Portugal, the familiar flavours grounding me in a way I hadn't realised I needed. The smoke curled into the night air, mingling with laughter, stories, and the quiet comfort of old friendship.











The next morning, Carlos drove me and my bicycle to a local shop where it was expertly packed for its next adventure — a flight to Rio. With the bike safely stowed, I allowed myself a few blissful days of rest in Cascais. I wandered the waterfront, lingered over coffee, let the Atlantic breeze wash over me, strolled around the narrow lanes of Lisbon and felt the accumulated fatigue of Europe slowly dissolve.

Then came the news that lifted my heart: my sister Amanda would be joining me in Brazil. The thought of sharing the next chapter with her filled me with renewed excitement and lifted my heart. Europe had been extraordinary — challenging, beautiful, transformative — and I felt myself arriving at its end not depleted, but invigorated.

Before I left, I stood for a moment at Carlos's home, looking out over the coastline. Gratitude rose in me like a tide. His generosity — the meals, the laughter, the space to rest, the lift to the airport — had been a gift I could never have anticipated but deeply needed. I genuinely don't know how I would have managed without him.

Landscapes shape some journeys. Others are shaped by people.

This ending was shaped by both.



About this Blog

This blog post is a daily account and photos of my cycle ride in Europe. Europe is vast, with hundreds of different routes. The course described is by no means the best.

The distances

The distances in this post may not be the shortest between two points, as I tend to deviate from time to time. The daily kilometres recorded, however, were accurate according to my odometer.

Time of year and date

This post recounts my visit to Europe in July and August 2011. Many things could have changed since, and roads may now be in better or worse condition. Places where I stayed may now be upgraded or demolished. The hills may or may not have been as steep as described, but they certainly felt that way at the time.

Insurance

A travel insurance policy is necessary to cover theft, loss and medical problems. Some policies specifically exclude "dangerous activities", including scuba diving, motorcycling, and even trekking. I don't think cycling is considered dangerous, but check the small print.

Clothing

We spent most days in the saddle, so make sure you have good quality, padded cycling shorts. I cycle in ordinary sandals, but one can cycle in any comfortable footwear. Europe can be freezing one day and sweltering the next, even in summer, so be sure to pack accordingly. Personal toiletries should include insect repellent and anti-chafe cream. I recommend using a cycling helmet.

The bicycle

Any bicycle will do as long as you are comfortable riding it. The bike should be fitted with Tubus bicycle racks, something most bicycle shops can do. Panniers are expensive but essential items, and Ortlieb panniers are world-renowned. I recommend you fit Schwalbe tyres to your bicycle. Although pricey, they are the best, and you will seldom get a flat tyre. Ensure you know how to repair a punctured tube. A phone holder for the handlebars is convenient for navigation, as I use Organic Maps or Google Maps to find my way. Furthermore, I find a handlebar bag essential for carrying a camera and other essentials during the day.

Recommended further reading

Lonely Planet: The e-book is less expensive and a handy guide.



About the Author

Hailing from the vibrant city of Cape Town, South Africa, Leana's journey into the world of cycling began not with years of training but with a single bold decision. In 2005, driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure, she entered the Tour D'Afrique—a legendary mountain bike race stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. With little cycling experience, Leana purchased a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and set out on a path that would lead her the entire route from Cairo to Cape Town.

Returning home, Leana found that the rhythms of ordinary life could not compare to the freedom of the open road. The call of adventure proved irresistible, and in March 2007, she and her companion, Ernest Markwood, embarked on a journey that would evolve into a round-the-world cycling odyssey. Though they began together, the road eventually led them to discover their own unique directions—both in travel and in life.

Leana's travels have taken her across Africa twice, through the Middle East, Europe, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Her wanderlust then carried her to Ushuaia, Argentina, from where she cycled the length of South, Central, and North America over several years. Along the way, she explored many of the world's larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Today, Leana continues her adventures in Southeast Asia, ever inspired by the promise of new horizons and the enduring joy of life on two wheels.

Photo By Edmund Carter









There is an immense sense of freedom in carrying with you all that you need.



