

Cycling into the heart of England

BY ANNE GEORG, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD MAY 21, 2010



The countryside in the Test River Valley is gently undulated

Photograph by: Anne Georg, For the Calgary Herald

I reached the top of the cliff and thrust my fist into the air in the universal expression of victory. I'd ridden my bicycle up the longest, steepest hill I'd ever climbed and was rewarded by a vista overlooking the unspoiled coastline and the dramatic cliffs of Compton Bay on the Isle of Wight in England.

It was near the end of my second day of cycling with my guide Christopher Dawson of Cycle Tours UK. We'd traversed the Isle of Wight, visiting numerous historic National Trust sites. The conservation organization has properties throughout England, Northern Ireland and Wales and owns 10 per cent of the Isle of Wight, including Compton Bay. In picturesque Brighstone we admired original thatched-roofed cottages and visited an intact church built in 1190. In Newport we stopped by a Roman ruin, built around 200 AD.

By the end of the day, we'd travelled 74 kilometres and climbed 740 metres. Not bad for a middle-aged, moderately fit woman like myself.

When I first spoke to Chris about the bicycle tour, he asked me what I hoped to experience. I said I wanted challenge, but nothing extreme; I wanted to go to pubs, experience literary England and cycle along dramatic coastline and through pastoral countryside and the moors. Chris customized my trip so

I could have the quintessential English experience I sought.

Chris knows the highways and laneways and the 20,000 kilometres of official cycle paths throughout the U.K. like the back of his hand. He's been cycling around them ever since he was five years old and it's become a lifelong passion.

I thought it would be difficult to keep up with him. But like a true English gentleman, Chris made sure the routes we covered were within my ability. And he had our gear transported by car to the next location, so I never travelled with more than a small, sleek pannier and a water bottle. Even though Chris assured me the weather in England isn't as bad as it is reputed, he supplied me with a rain jacket — just in case.

On our first day out, Chris acclimatized me with a ride in the River Test Valley, near Winchester, where Cycle Tours UK is based. The gently undulating countryside is the setting of Jane Austen's novels, which she wrote around the turn of the 19th century.

Her house in Chawton is a museum and we poked around there, viewing the memorabilia of her life.

We cycled in temperate weather along charming country lanes with blooming trees creating a canopy above us. The air was redolent with the fragrance of blossoms from those trees, and the shrubs and flowers that form the hedgerows bordering the lanes. We passed by woods carpeted with bluebells and were serenaded by birdsong along our route. We stopped for tea in quaint villages and checked out an assortment of new wave of gastro-pubs that dotted the countryside.

We explored the layers of history at the Mottisfont Abbey and Garden National Trust site, including the Gothic remains of the original 13th-century Augustinian priory. The tranquil rural estate is set in spacious grounds alongside the River Test. The walled gardens house the National Collection of old-fashioned roses.

By the end of the day we'd cycled 47 kilometres, ascending a moderate 540 metres. I still had enough energy to explore the Lainston House Hotel property, where I was staying. The 17th-century country house stands elegantly on 25 hectares of parkland featuring five gardens, including a vegetable garden where some of the produce served in the restaurant is grown. I walked along the mile-long green avenue lined with lime trees, and wandered through the 12th-century chapel ruin on the grounds before lounging in my sumptuous room.

I was told that Lainston House was slated as a royal estate before King William II moved the throne from Winchester to Westminster in the 11th century. Indeed, I felt like royalty.

I discovered that meals in the hotel also cost a princely sum. So I meandered the short distance to a pub Chris recommended. The Plough is an informal gastro-pub in the nearby hamlet of Sparsholt. The menu offers traditional fare like pan-fried pigeon and black pudding, and more conventional dishes too. I sampled a delicious and affordable plate of mussels in a creamed sauce.

On our third day of cycling — after two lovely days — we woke up to rain. Chris was ready to give me

a break, but I insisted that we embrace the elements. This drizzle was not going to deter me from experiencing the desolate moors of Exmoor in Devon. What could be more British? So I donned the rain jacket Chris supplied and mounted my bicycle.

The dark, brooding skies enhanced the experience. A mist hung in the air, making the greens greener and the remote southern moor seem even more lonesome. We were the only ones on the road. Exmoor's protected wild ponies and scattered herds of sheep warily watched as we rode by.

We cycled a series of long, steep hills and by the end of the day, we'd only travelled 27 kilometres, but had climbed 580 metres. Along the way, we stopped for a bowl of carrot and coriander soup at the Royal Oak pub in Withypool, where R.D. Blackwell frequented while he was penning the renowned romantic novel, *Laura Doone* in the 1700s.

We didn't quite make it to our hotel, and drove the final 13 kilometres to Lynton-Lynmouth, a popular seaside resort in Devon. I was happy to luxuriate in the deep tub in my room at the 19th century St. Vincent House Hotel and to enjoy a home-cooked gourmet meal in the cosy dining room, prepared by an award-winning Belgian chef.

By the next morning, the rain had stopped. As previously arranged, while Chris tackled the challenging hills of the area, I parked my bicycle and slipped on my hiking boots.

I wandered along the coastal path on some of England's highest cliffs with fresh sea air and verdant ancient forests as my constant companions. All I'd packed to eat were a couple of cookies, so by the time I'd hiked four hours with nary a tea house in sight, I was famished.

I returned to Lynton-Lynmouth and followed the scenic Lyn River for about three kilometres to the National Trust tea house at Watersmeet for Devonshire cream tea. I arrived just as it was closing and cajoled the kitchen staff into serving me the traditional scones topped with clotted cream and jam. I devoured them in the lovely garden overlooking the river. It was divine and appropriately punctuated my consummate English adventure.

From pubs and Exmoor ponies, to Jane Austen and thatched roof cottages. I'd cycled the country lanes of England into the heart of the land. And it won my heart.

If You Go

■ Cycle Tours UK — Customized cycle tours

www.cycletoursuk.com

■ Canadian Affair charter — Flies from most major Canadian cities

www.canadianaffair.ca

■ Lainston House Hotel — Located near Winchester

www.lainstonhouse.com

- Bark House Cottage Style Hotel — located near Exmoor

www.thebarkhouse.co.uk

- St Vincent Hotel Guest House — Lynton

www.st-vincent-hotel.co.uk

- National Trust

www.nationaltrust.org.uk

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