

Chapter 1

Are you not going to practise dad?

I had for years wondered what it would be like to ride a bicycle around the world, and I reached a point in my life where it was always on my mind, so I started reading blogs and books on the subject. Mostly written by middle-class university-educated young people, who seemed to have support networks and even sponsorship in some cases, and with maybe not a care in the world. None who were parents and spouses with the financial responsibilities that went with that. It wasn't until I dug a little deeper I discovered people of all ages and backgrounds, were taking on fantastic bicycle touring adventures all over the world.

There were people in their twilight years, people with disabilities far more severe than my own, and many who had sold everything they owned to set out with what little money they had, in the hope finding free accommodation and meals as they went. Some were hoping to find the reason for their being. There were people on unicycles, tricycles, recumbents, and all kinds of pedal-powered contraptions. I also read how going solo would be a much more significant challenge than going in groups or with a partner. I liked the solo idea a lot, as I felt I had a great deal of thinking to do. I wanted a challenge, but most of all, I wanted adventure. Once I got it into my head that I could do it, I was going for it.

I was never a regular cyclist and had never spent so much as a weekend on a bicycle tour. So when I told my daughters about my plan, they asked if I was going to practise. They thought it would have been a good idea to go on a shorter ride first such as length of the island of Great Britain, Land's End to John O'Groats. But it was important to me to set out as a complete bicycle touring novice and learn as I went. How much of the world I would cycle I had no idea, but I had no time constraints. I knew that once I set out, I would keep going until either something beyond my control stopped me, or I felt I had done what I wanted to do. Or I was tired, and it was time to go home — a Forrest Gump moment, maybe.

I didn't want to practice bicycle touring or have any bicycle maintenance experience. Still, I did have to prepare in other ways. I also imagined that going on a bicycle tour of a few weeks would take very little planning, and there would be few financial risks involved. But planning for a trip of what could be years, would be a completely different beast. Going self-supported and self-funded for years, while making sure everything else was covered at home, took a lot of organising. I had to write a will, the purchase a new passport with plenty of extra pages, have injections and treatments to protect myself from viruses and other illnesses. I also had to work out what gear and clothing I would need for the different climates and weather conditions around the world. The list of equipment I thought I would need was lengthy. I also had to consider how much space all that gear would take up, especially given that I didn't even have the bike or pannier bags at that point in the planning.

Choosing a bike was fun, but far from easy. I needed the equivalent of a Shire horse and not a racehorse. I needed a bike that could carry my 350-pound bulk, as well as

up to 100 pounds of gear. It would also have to be super strong to handle the rough treatment that I was going to give it due to my lack of experience, and also because I expected to be riding along not just roads, but tracks and the roughest of trails. I wanted a bike that would be easy to maintain and reliable, so after a lot of research, I chose the KOGA Signature Expedition bicycle, with Rohloff Speedhub gearing and a Gates Carbon Drive belt. As well as disc brakes, butterfly handlebars that would allow me to change posture from time to time to relieve pressure on my arms and spine, and pannier bags that were strong and waterproof, so I chose bags that had been created by KOGA and Ortlieb. They would suit my bike and provide the legendary protection that made Ortlieb famous.

A year after getting it into my head that it was something I felt I wanted to do, I told myself that I would give it one full year more before making that final decision. I wasn't the guy I was in my youth when I would take off on crazy adventures without a care in the world, I had a lot more to consider, including a wife and children and financial responsibilities. The following year on the first day of March 2017, I was sure it was what I wanted to do, so I called into the bike shop and ordered the bike I wanted. It was then a matter of waiting a few months for the bike to arrive, during which time I purchased the rest of the gear and made the final preparations. After what seemed an eternity, the day came when my KOGA Signature expedition bicycle arrived, and it was time to get everything packed. Camping gear, electronics, clothing for all conditions, medicines and first-aid kit, letters from the doctor to enable me to get treatment and medication on-route, passport, repair kit. The list went on and on. The bike and bags weighed 143 pounds. The total weight, including me, was just shy of 500 pounds, or 227kg. I thought it had to be a world record for a solo bicycle tourist.

The night before the first day, my mum was feeling a bit upset and worried, as I had always been a little accident-prone and not scared of much, so I decided I would spend the evening with mum at her home in Cheshire and leave from there. My daughters also lived nearby, so I was able to see them too. I had already said goodbye to my wife, which I thought would be a good idea rather than let her realise I was gone when the lawns had grown three feet deep, and I promised her I'd phone each day if I could. I carried out the last checks on the bike to make sure I had everything and that it was all secure. I had no idea how the bike was going to feel with the bags fully loaded or how it would balance and handle. I also couldn't be sure that all the weight wouldn't buckle the wheels if I hit a pothole in the road, but I felt confident.

The street was dead with not a soul around. I said goodbye to my teary mum as she stood in the doorway in the dull early morning light. I mounted the bike, gave a last wave, and off I rode. Just one mile from mums, I stopped on a footbridge that crossed high above a road. I could roughly see where my youngest daughter Chloe lived and also the street where my other daughter Chelsea was likely fast asleep. It upset me, and tears welled up in my eyes. I felt my chest tighten as I said "goodbye, I love you" under my breath, before cycling on with the rain hiding my tears as they rolled off my face. I had no idea when I would see them again, and it upset me.

Less than five miles into my journey, I bumped into an old friend - Fran - who I had not seen for decades, he was crossing the same bridge but going the other way on

his bicycle to work. It was great to see him and chat for a few minutes. A little farther on, I passed a roadside café and the thought of a Full English breakfast and getting out of the rain for a few minutes was too hard to resist. I turned around and spent half an hour chatting to some bikers and getting stuck into a great breakfast. I cycled 24 miles in heavy and constant rain that first day to reach Yatehouse Farm Camping in Middlewich, where I eagerly set about pitching the tent and inflated the air mattress and pillow.

It was great to put everything together for the first time. I had previously set the tent up in the garden shortly after purchasing it to make sure it was complete and not damaged. I hadn't slept in a tent for more than 15 years. I also bought a gear-shed attachment which was a small extra room that clipped onto the frame of the main tent and added a lot of extra space. It was a space to keep wet clothing and the bike in out of sight when wild camping, and would also help keep the main tent area dry and roomy. I didn't have to use the gear-shed on the campsite because the bike had a place in a greenhouse locked to a table, and I left some wet clothing, including padded shorts draped over it.

The owner of the campsite spotted the sign hanging off the rear of my Ortlieb rack-pack, which had written details regarding my plans. He asked if I was cycling around the world, so I told him I hadn't ruled it out, but my thoughts were basically on just cycling wherever I wanted to. He went on to ask how far I had cycled, then burst out laughing when I told him it was my first day. I burst out laughing with him because I must have looked like I had been cycling for months. He then handed me a bag of fruit, which of course I accepted. He also said I could stay at the campsite for free, which was kind of him. I hadn't managed to pick up any food for the evening, and there were no local shops and nothing sold on the campsite. I was more interested in getting out of my wet clothes and into a dry sleeping bag and letting everyone know I made it through the first day.

The ground was soaking wet, so I thought it would be a great idea to pitch the tent under an old apple tree for shelter, which turned out to be a bad idea. During the night, rainwater would build on the leaves and branches before being released all in one go, sometimes followed by the apples, which weren't at all edible, just what remained from the last crop, rotten, and waiting for a rainstorm and a novice bicycle tourist to pitch his tent underneath the branches. I had drifted off quite quickly, despite the falling apples and rainwater beating down on my tent, but I soon awoke to what I could only describe as a feeling of someone pushing a long knife straight through my right thigh. I yelled in excruciating pain. A pain I had never felt before that jolted me so severely that I hurt my back in the process of sitting up too quickly in the restricted space of my sleeping bag. I was then feeling pain in my back and also a cramp in my left leg, which had just seemed to appear for good measure. Neither of those extra pains came anywhere close to what I felt in my right thigh for at least 30 seconds.

Once the original thigh pain stopped, I lay on my back, trying desperately to figure out what such pain could have been. It then happened again a few seconds later, and I struggled to hold my voice from waking other campers. I raised and squeezed my knee until the pain went away. It came back a few minutes later, and I thought I'd torn a muscle. It was all I could think of at the time that might hurt like that. I thought

I'd done far too much on my first day and had ended my adventure while still in Cheshire. I was feeling more than a little sorry for myself. I soon fell asleep but awoke a few more times during the night, mainly due to apples and relentless rain. If all that wasn't enough, I awoke in the morning in a large puddle of rainwater because my tent was in a dip. My first day had turned out far harder than I thought possible and all I could think about was my daughters suggesting I should have had some practice.

It was still raining as I set out, and the wind was coming hard at me, but even so, I still managed 28 miles. I was drained and achy and even a bit down due to all that had gone on in such a short time. I couldn't locate a campsite within reach, so I booked into a cheap hotel for the night out of the rain. I was able to wash and dry my clothes and have a nice hot meal. Being soaked to the bone was no fun at all, but only to be expected in England in the height of summer. My waterproof clothing didn't help much because it was the sort you would use on a fishing boat, thick heavy rubber. I was too big to be able to buy cycling or sports waterproof clothing, and the same was true of other clothing. I was unable to purchase regular cycling clothes, so I had to wear whatever I could buy online or from supermarkets. My shoulder width would result in long sleeves being halfway up my arms. I knew that being up to 5XL and built like a brick-shithouse was going to cause all kinds of problems as I progressed through my adventure. I found my size in Lycra padded cycling shorts online from China, but Chinese sizes seemed to be much smaller than UK sizes. Still, I forced myself into them and cut the elastic on the thighs so the shorts wouldn't cut off my circulation.

It was still like trying to get 350 pounds of sausage meat into a 200-pound sausage skin, which was not a pretty sight and the reason I would wear baggy shorts over the top to save peoples blushes, and my own. I could picture towns like those hosting a Wild West shootout, with mothers dragging their children and pets off the streets and closing the shutters as I passed through. Maybe a little exaggeration, but I had myself laughing at the thought. Soothing new-found muscles and getting into a big sprung bed that night was pure bliss, and I got to thinking just how lucky I was to be able to take on such a massive solo adventure. I felt that at some point, my muscles would settle in, the sun would shine, and I would become less embarrassed about how I looked in tight clothing.

The following day as I cycled along a canal towpath, I came across some young bulls that were stuck in the canal up to their middles, with the rest of the herd stood around unable to do anything but stare. I pedalled on at a good pace for 3 miles in torrential rain until I came across a pub. The manager knew who owned the young bulls and told me everything would be fine, so I continued on my way towards a campsite I had located. The rain was relentless, and I was still suffering sore muscles. I also had another feeling I didn't expect to feel so soon, which was a feeling of real freedom. I had everything with me that I thought I would need to see my adventure through. I couldn't afford to live in hotels and eat lavish meals every day though, and neither did I want to, but I was pretty sure I wouldn't have to go without food or a place to sleep too often, if at all. I also kept a wallet on a chain in my handlebar bag, containing a bank debit card and two credit cards, and I stuffed money into a couple of pannier bags.

It had been four days since leaving home, and I finally had a day with the wind to my back, and I felt good, even taking into account the bone and butt-shaking experience of cycling on mostly narrow dirt tracks that made up much of the canal towpaths of the last few days. I left the towpath at one point to cut out a large bend, and I cycled right through some beautiful wheat fields. I stood the bike in the middle and snapped an image that I thought would always remind me of my adventure, an image I thought would look good on a book cover too. That night I washed my clothes at the campsite and hung them out to dry, which turned out to be a waste of time because it rained all night. The next morning I had to beat everyone else on the site to the washroom dryers before starting on what was looking like a dry day ahead. If I hadn't made it to the dryers first, I could have been waiting hours in a queue that had started to build, and I might have had to set out with everything wet and weighty. A couple of kind women had set up their tent next to mine, and I was offered a nice brew before packing up and setting off.

Wild camping was something I was looking forward to, but I didn't expect to be doing it so soon. With it being August, I was sure I'd have had no trouble finding campsites. My problem was that I wasn't able to cover significant distances each day, so campsites were few and far between. If my range had been over 50 miles a day, I was sure I would have had no trouble at all getting to campsites. That first wild camping night was at the end of a very long and hard day, a typical day. I fought my first bumps and hills and ran entirely out of steam, with nothing at all left in the tank. I stood at the opening in a hedge that led to a farmer's recently cut field. I couldn't see anyone nearby, so I waited for the last cars to pass before quickly pushing the bike through and setting up my tent behind the hedge. It felt nice to get out of my sweat-soaked heavy clothing, followed by a scrub with a packet of baby-wipes, before diving into a dry sleeping bag. I attached the gear-shed to the tent and hid the bike inside, along with everything else I didn't need in the main tent area. When choosing a tent, weight, space, weather resistance and strength, were all critical factors, so I did a lot of research before selecting the MSR Hubba Hubba NX. Being extra-large, I decided on the two-person version for extra room.



Cooking was not on the cards at that point because I rarely cooked a proper meal at home when on my own. I would grab snacks or make something simple. Carrying cooking equipment would have meant less space in my bags. I could appreciate how nice it would have been for a couple of people to finish a ride, put a pan on and cook some simple food, then sit chatting for a while before crashing out for the night. Cooking a meal-for-one behind a hedge or hiding in the middle of a forest didn't sound like fun at all, it seemed more like a chore. Followed by washing the dishes and packing everything up, so I chose to purchase food along the way and see how I got on.

The next morning I was back on a towpath. It was often hard work when a towpath turned to a narrow muddy trail. I met my first bicycle tourist on the towpath – Lara - who had been cycling for days in the opposite direction to me. We had a great chat, and I was very impressed with her story. By day six, I was getting the hang of the bike and bicycle touring. I had made it to Banbury, between Coventry and Oxford, and I enjoyed another cosy night in my tent. I slept so well that night and felt so refreshed that I set out at first light the next day. I stopped at a grocery shop owned by a family of Sri Lankan Tamils who had fled Sri Lanka due to the wars a few years earlier. I had visited Sri Lanka with my wife some years back. We had a great stay and found the people to be friendly and helpful. The shopkeeper asked me if I would like tea or coffee, and I eagerly said yes to a coffee. I waited outside the shop for a long time, and I wondered what they were doing to make the coffee. It turned out it was the first cup of coffee they had ever made, and it was the best coffee I'd had in a very long time.

Before I knew it, I had passed through Oxford. The few hills I had encountered to that point, were not too severe that I had to get off the bike to push, but I did have to

stop a lot to catch my breath and rest. On the steeper hills, I'd try to count 100 pedal turns before pausing to rest. I'd push as hard as I could to make that 100 turns in the lowest gear. Just making it to the top of a steep hill was rewarding, but after pulling my tripe out going up, to spend only a few minutes going down hardly seemed fair.

The main reason I tried not to get off the bike to push up hills was due to nerve damage in my right side. Some years earlier, while working for a company in Infrastructure Services, I was part of a team installing a lane closure on the M6 motorway in Birmingham. While stood on the hard-shoulder, I heard a rumble and turned to see an articulated lorry crossing onto the hard-shoulder, just before it struck me down. I was lucky to survive, but I was left with permanent spine and nerve damage to the whole of the right side of my body. I was no longer able to carry out my role for that company, so they dismissed me on capability grounds. The accident had a considerable impact on not only my income but also my mental health in the form of PTSD and Situational Anxiety. I became unemployable in that line of work, and I would continue to need prescription medication for life. But me being the "Machine" which my daughters called me, I wasn't going to let being pancaked by a lorry hold me back for too long.

So the reason I tried not to walk on the road pushing the bike, was that quite often when I thought I'd lifted my right foot, I hadn't, and it might still have been planted firmly on the floor, and I would sometimes fall over. I had fallen over so many times that my wife found it funny. She said she couldn't help laughing because it was incredible to watch a 350-pound man floating to the ground like an autumn leaf. Over the years, I had learned to hit the floor as softly as I could. I would fall in ways that would give me the least amount of pain, much like a stunt man or martial artist would. Once, my wife watched in horror as I rolled about 15 feet along a footbridge before she burst into laughter with tears streaming down her cheeks, and I ended up laughing with her. I couldn't risk falling into live traffic if I stopped on the side of a hill, so each time I paused, I tried to make sure I was leaning left. The nerve damage meant that my right leg was also much weaker than my left, but thankfully no different in size. The beauty of cycling was that my left leg would help to keep the right leg moving and would take up any slack on the hard sections, while the saddle supported my spine. I was also aware that when cycling in France, I would still have to lean on my left leg, but would then be leaning into live traffic, and the thought of that concerned me a little.

But I was doing quite well, and much better than I thought I would. I did have pain the length of my right side, so I just kept the painkillers going. Due to my weight and spine damage, I chose the Rohloff Speedhub. The hub would allow me to change to gears without having to turn the pedals, which made it so much easier to get going again if I stopped, especially on a steep hill. Whether stationary or climbing, racing snake types would continually pass me at speed. One cyclist passed me as I rested on the side of a very steep hill and shouted, "You'll never do it". I laughed and wondered how he would have coped with the same hill if he had another cyclist sat on his crossbar, plus all my gear and a heavier bike. I was pretty sure there would have been tears, as that guy must have weighed less than 150 pounds soaking wet.

I awoke the next day in my tent to another dull rainy day. I packed up the soaking wet gear and headed out to make it to a campsite near Woodstock, just 22 miles

away. I arrived at the campsite to find tents were not allowed, only motorhomes and caravans. I offered to pay the motorhome pitch price, but still no joy. I was in real need of a place to stay, so I located a hotel five miles away. Once there, coaches were blocking up the car park back to the road, and I could see the reception area was busy. I phoned the hotel from the carpark so that I wouldn't have to wait in the queue and I knew someone would answer the phone. Booked in, and it was pure bliss to have a hot bath and washing some clothes, then almost somersaulting into clean sheets.

Using navigation apps on my iPhone and Garmin Edge Explorer 1000 took some working out. The Garmin turned out to be a complete waste of money for me, so it just sat in the bottom of one of the pannier bags in case my phone ever packed in. I couldn't get used to it, and I much preferred Google Maps and Maps.me. When people asked what route I was taking or how I mapped my route in advance, they'd be visibly shocked to hear I had no physical maps or any rigid plans at all. I would say "I'm going that way", as I pointed south. The lack of solid route planning could be scary to some. To me, it merely meant more adventure and an even more significant challenge. Those shocked expressions regarding routes, were nothing compared to facial contortions when they were made aware of how far I had planned on cycling. Some tried to hide their reaction, but many people couldn't summon the strength to hold back from looking me up and down. I was sure I caught one person managing to scan me from head to toe with just one eye while maintaining eye contact me with the other. Given my build, I must have looked a highly unlikely bicycle tourist. A bicycle touring friend of mine – Tim - referred to me as a "Viking on a bike", and a "rather large unit".

Due to my lack of bicycle maintenance experience, I was expecting to learn the hard way. However, I wasn't expecting an annoying loud clicking noise coming from the area between the pedals and the rear wheel. I made a phone call to the dealership in Tadcaster North Yorkshire, from where I purchased the bike. I informed it was more than likely just part's settling in, which I agreed was entirely possible, but I had my doubts. I had become so used to the bike in such a short time, that it almost felt a part of me, though my butt was having a tough time on the Brooks B17 leather saddle. Sitting on that brand new saddle was like sitting on a brick, with painful chaffing and sores continually bleeding. Not being used to sitting on a bicycle saddle for very long, I thought it was all I could expect.

I was pottering along the road and taking everything in, when all of a sudden, I found myself getting off the road as fast as I could in panic. A truck brushed past me, and I felt one of the vehicles loose straps swipe my arm. I managed to hold myself together as I darted off the road and took shelter under a large oak. Dramatic as that sounds, it's hard to explain the PTSD and situational anxiety I was suffering at that time. Years earlier, I was taking three different prescribed mental health medications which I felt they were turning me into a zombie. I would feel permanently stoned, and I didn't like it, so I stopped taking all three and told myself that I needed to deal with whatever it was that was going in my head. I was aware at the time that to go cold-turkey would hurt, but I still did it, and after a few months of feeling sick and upset, I started to learn to cope as best I could. I stood under that oak tree with my enlarged heart pounding out of my chest. I was shaking like a leaf and couldn't get my breath. I just stood there staring out at the chaotic traffic as I focused on the tiny hard-

shoulder and on just how narrow the road was. I started to see lorry after lorry flying past at high speed, and rainwater spraying up into a heavy mist. I seemed to focus in on every little thing, yet moments earlier, I was riding along like I didn't have a care in the world. While stood under the tree, all the feelings and images of the night of the accident came flooding back. I knew that cycling in traffic would be hard, but I knew that if I wanted that adventure, I would have to fight that mental state and my physical limitations. I gave myself a talking to and continued on my way. By putting myself in traffic on a bicycle day after day, I hoped that my adventure would help cure my condition over time.

At just over a week on the road, I was ready to take on my biggest range of hills, the Chilterns. I found a campsite in a Wallingford, south of Oxford. It was the perfect time to call into a bike shop to get some professionals to look at what all the clanging and grinding was. The noise had become so loud that people standing by the roadside would look to see what was coming. A bike built to take me around the world, might not even get me out of the UK, I thought. The staff at Rides On Air bike shop got straight to work on the bike, stripping the pedals and cleaning out the bottom bracket. The reason they went for that area rather than the rear of the bike or the Speedhub, was because I told them that the dealership had told me it was likely the bottom bracket. They found nothing wrong with the bottom bracket, made me a great cup of coffee, and didn't even charge me for the work.

The next morning all seemed well as I cycled out of the campsite and onto a muddy farm track. After a bumpy and wet start to the morning, I eventually got on to some excellent, but wet roads. Eight miles later, in torrential rain, I found a café that served a full English breakfast, and it was just what I needed to warm and cheer me up. While I waited for my breakfast, a man with his son approached my table to ask about my adventure. He pointed at my bike and asked if I did any camping. I said "yes I did", and I looked over to the bike and pointed in the direction of where I had strapped my tent, to my horror it wasn't there. I couldn't believe it as I dashed over to the bike to be sure.

It was wet that morning, so I just strapped the damp tent to my rear rack underneath the rack-pack, in the hope the weather would brighten up and dry it out. The strap had come off, and the tent had fallen off during the eight miles to the café. And just as things couldn't get any worse, my stunning looking breakfast was on the table. I didn't have time for breakfast, I had to find my tent before someone else did, so I grabbed the black pudding and bacon and started back towards the campsite. Soaking wet, I continually scanned the road ahead, including the hedgerows and ditches. Just half a mile from the campsite, I could see a red lump in the middle of the muddy farm track, it was my tent. I couldn't believe it. When setting out that morning, the farm track was bone-shaking. I slipped a few times, ending up with the bike on its side. There was lots of thumping a banging as I rattled along the track, so I didn't notice the tent falling off and hitting the ground. After that mishap, I made sure to always put wet gear in the string net shopping bag I had, and loop the handles of the bag over the seat post.

At the point of finding my tent, I had travelled 16 miles in heavy rain to get to where I started that morning. I then had to start heading back for my breakfast, eight miles away. A few miles later, the rain became so heavy that every car that passed

created a wave that soaked me. I took cover in an old wooden bus shelter and sat there soaking wet, feeling sorry for myself and trying to use my phone's touch-screen with wet crinkly fingertips when a truck pulled up. The driver came over and asked if I was OK or if I needed a lift. I must have looked a sorry state as I sat there wondering if my fried bread had soaked up all the tomato juice and gone mushy. I told him about the café, and it turned out he was going the same way. I had no problem taking the lift because I had already made the trip once, and back, and nearly halfway back again, 20 of my fastest miles to be just four miles from where I started, so we loaded my gear and set off.

Back at the café, my breakfast had vanished. I explained my situation to the café staff, but all that came back were blank stares, and there was no way I was going to pay for another one. I had to keep moving in the hope of finding a campsite in the afternoon. The rain would not let up and just seemed to get worse. I had such a bad morning that I decided to book into the first guesthouse I came across, and what an excellent guesthouse it was. The lovely owners gave me a significant discount too because unlike the café workers, they felt a little sorry for me. They even put cardboard on the floor in their elegant kitchen so that I had a place to dry the bike. I had a nice hot bath and dove into the fluffiest of beds, but not before a burger and chips in the pub across the road.

The next day after a hearty breakfast, I was over the Chilterns. The hills where were stunning and much more fun than I thought they would be, as I thought they would be no fun at all, but the clicking noise on the bike was back. I found another bicycle shop and the staff made me a coffee and stripped out the bottom bracket. The lads at Pedal On in Tadley then gave it a good cleaning with no charge. As I cycled towards the coast, I passed through wheat fields, over rivers, past lakes and thatched cottages in tiny villages. There's nothing so lovely as the countryside in the UK. It was then time to attack my second and last big range of hills, the South Downs.

I took a less hilly section of the hills close to Winchester, and as it was getting late in the day, I decided to spend the night at Holden Farm Camping, which had some great views for miles around. I met a group of guys travelling on motorbikes who had all their camping gear in large pannier boxes. We set up our tents close together and got a fire going. They all had collapsible chairs that were lightweight and packed into quite a small space. I sat on the damp grass, wishing I had such a chair. We all went over to a pub, but it was closed, then walked to another and had to wait for ages for it to open, but it was worth it because we had a laugh and I enjoyed the company.



I was nearly at Portsmouth, where I would catch a ferry to France, and I was starting to feel a little nervous. I contacted the dealership to express my concerns regarding the noise the bike was still making. I asked whether it would be a good idea to bring it back up to the shop while I was still in the country. I was told not to worry, and even if I encountered problems, there would be plenty of bike shops in France that would be able to help. I fought with myself as to whether to cross to France or not. I started to think I should have stuck with a simple setup, cantilever brakes instead of discs, derailleur gears and chain instead of the Speedhub and carbon belt. A whole configuration that most bike shops could repair. Maybe I was feeling a little nervous and sad about leaving loved ones for months or years, or I was having second thoughts and looking for an excuse to stop and return home. After all that had already happened up to that point, and in such miserable weather, I even wondered whether bicycle touring was not my thing.

Just two weeks into my adventure, my feelings were all over the place. I saw arriving in another country with my bike as the actual start of the experience, and I wouldn't be returning for some time. I had to decide what I wanted to do, as the ferry to France was leaving the next day.