



Revolution

Around the due date of newsletter #12, we are in Aswan, Egypt. Though demonstrations have been very tame and quite disorganised, a revolution is definitely underway. Apart from a bit of tear gas floating in the hotel window, the biggest disruption to our life has been Mubarak's tyrannical decision to pull the plug on internet providers and mobile networks, leaving the country unable to communicate at not only a national level, but an international one as well.

We are completely in the dark: unable to read the news, e-mail or skype our families or do internet banking. Police close the road to Abu Simbel, flights in and out of Aswan have been cancelled, trains are on hold, the banks are shut, land-lines have been cut and the guys at reception say the government has also pulled the only English speaking television station, Al Jazeera, from the air. Many locals close their stores and while you were probably thinking we were right in the thick of it, life actually got a little boring.

It doesn't mean walking the streets of Aswan is any less of a hassle though. In fact the remaining hagglers have a few straggling tourists and me to concentrate all their efforts on. The cries for a taxi, a felucca, a horse and carriage; or a colourful souvenir on display in the souq are ten fold. So, it is an easy decision to sit in the solitude of our hotel room, overlooking an abnormally cruise-boat free Nile and cast my mind back six months to August 2010.

I remember passing quite unceremoniously from Belgium into France on a little back road. It was miserable weather and we had no map. We didn't have a clue where we were going.

Eat. Drink. Man. Woman. Get. Fat.

France [2033km; 17462m]

Somewhere on the path into Paris, we did pick up a road atlas and it helped immensely navigating our way into the French capital, where the vitality is as captivating as the diversity. At cultural attractions, you are cow-herded along some of the most celebrated works of creativity you will ever lay your eyes upon. And on the street, claiming a stool at one of the boardwalk brasseries allows you to watch Parisian life wander by: more often than not with a baguette tucked under one arm and a bottle of wine in the other.

Paris was the start of visiting a long list of travelling friends and Pierre-Yves generously gave up his apartment for two weeks while we planned the journey. We ceremoniously ate and drank the traditional staples as habitually as everyone else in the city, but after South America, a diet of bread, wine and cheese did nothing but expand the waistline.

Our journey onward to Morbier - where Sara & Sébastien culturally enlighten us with an amazing fondue made from local Savagnin wine and Comté cheese - is taken via one of our all time favourite French cycle paths. The Bourgogne Canal is a perfect bike touring destination. Beginners can move along the almost flat gradients at any pace they like and the hardened cycle tourer will just love the ease at which you can travel through serene rural countryside. While pedalling past monster walnut trees, heavily laden crab apple branches and dancing willows, you will effortlessly overtake canal boats decorated with geranium pots and brightly coloured enamel paint. They slowly make their way through the hundreds of *écluse* [lock] houses this waterway possesses. There are castles on crests to visit, bakeries to drool over, wine to sample and plenty of cheap municipal campgrounds to keep everyone happy.

After the Haute Jura, we briefly visit Switzerland and cross *Lac Léman* [Lake Geneva] to begin sweating off all the months of eating and drinking on some pretty tough Tour de France circuits. Maybe it was all the extra weight we had put on, but cycling to the top of *Col de la Colombière* would have to be the most thigh crunching, muscle grinding ascents we have ever done on a bitumen road. Tour de France cyclists may have no luggage, but we now have nothing but respect for those who bolt up this category one ride at lightning speed.

Champagny-en-Vanoise snuggles in on the side of the Rhône-Alpes known for some of the best skiing and snow-boarding in south eastern France. It is not bad cycling there either, but we most remember the region because of the warm welcome Olivier & Odile gave us. From here we weave our way back to Thoiry for more good-life indulgences with dear friends: Helen, Colin and the kids.

We continue our course in France along small roads; in between the ears of corn and drying sunflower heads; through cool forests until country lanes spit us out into vast sunny French farmland with panoramic blue skies. This is what makes this country such a great place to cycle in and enough reason to think very seriously about printing those "We love cycling in France" t-shirts.

Baptiste's memorable smiling face in Grenoble is a treasure to see as is popping in on Flo, Ernesto and Ana in Manthes. Our final port of call before taking the ferry from Marseille to Corsica is Nîmes. We met **Gerry & Shoko** for the first time in Singapore two and a half years ago, so there was plenty of catching up to do. In between all the chatter, there is also time for a fabulous ride out to Pont du Gard. Gerry's love of cycling has led to his website: [Cycling in Languedoc](#) which details plenty small route tours if you happen to be pedalling in the region.

Above par for Corse

Corsica [433km; 5500m]

Cycling in Corsica, out of peak season, is gratifying in many ways. Crossing the Haute Corse feels like being in the Peruvian Andes without the llamas and after Calvi, the road was just as tranquil. The pedal from this overly touristy town all the way to Piana is reason enough to add Corsica to your list of possible cycle touring destinations. Stunning coastal roads of easy 3-4% gradients wind you along limestone cliffs with the ruggedness of Oregon and California's shorelines mixed with Baja's desolation. The only downside in coastal areas is that wild camping is limited. If you are not into climbing then be warned, the cycling in the lower southwest region, from Chivari down, gets pretty intense with some seriously difficult sections averaging double figure gradients.

The beauty and the beast

Sardinia [503km; 5953m]

Sardinia too has plenty of undulating circuits that curl you up and down in fantastical swirls like the branches of the islands bountiful cork tree population. You will pass through little yesteryear towns brightening their concrete walls with elaborate fresco artwork. You can also coil your way up past ranges of barren orange and grey rock onto grassy plains where wild horses graze. There is astonishing beauty to behold. The beast is present too: deliberate rubbish dumping is beyond words.

You can keep away from this ugliness and the stress of busy highways often leading to tunnels by designing your bike route on back roads. [Sardegna Turismo](#) has an excellent [Cycling Guide to Sardinia](#) especially for this purpose. Before sailing off to our fifth continent via Rome and Palermo, we spend a couple of weeks pedalling around and the sentiment is unanimous: there are an abundance of appealing cycle paths to discover on this uniquely traditional island.

Into Africa and the waiting game

Tunisia [717km; 2067m]

Tille & Ains save our sanity during the very long and badly delayed ferry trip to Tunisia. After the initial "wow discovery-walk" around deck, the boat novelty wore off pretty much immediately and reality set in: we were going to be on this thing for more than 24 hours. At least we had forked out a bit extra for the comfort of a cabin.

The waiting game didn't stop there either, as we sat out a whole month in Tunis before receiving permission to enter Libya. Tunis has a certain charm, but living out of a hotel room for so long - albeit with internet and breakfast and wonderful staff - became pretty tiresome. Besides a couple of cool tourist attractions, our highlights were meeting **Nadia & Olivier**; Mohamed; and **Peter Sinclair**. And of course getting the stamp in the passport, relieving us of returning every couple of days to the Libyan Embassy's waiting room to sit and stare at the ceremonious portrait of Gaddafi sporting a pair of Lee Major sunglasses.

Nearly everyone we spoke to about our plans to cycle through Libya said it would be impossible, which demonstrates, if you really want something bad enough, you should at least try to make it happen yourself. Our 14 day transit visa for Libya is proof enough that what someone else believes to be unobtainable, may just be within your reach. Unfortunately, the embassy only gave the same amount of time to reach the border, which meant a very fast pedal to Ras Jedire and very little time to look around the southeast of Tunisia.

Battling against strong headwinds the entire way south, the scenery along the coastal strip varies very little from vast expanses of sand or never ending olive groves. We were glad to be amused by locals almost falling out of trees with excitement at seeing us and children delightedly pogo-dancing to a rhythmic chorus of "bonjour, bonjour". Grazing wild camels also lightened our heavy pedal as they pondered our presence with silly screwed up faces.

Our only detour was a visit to Île de Jerba and with the tourist season well and truly over, Houmt Souk is quite pleasant. Eight cycling days from Tunis, we pedal up to the glass immigration booth stuffed with a couple of computers, strewn bits of paper and three guys. One of them is obviously the boss and he is as arrogant as his questioning is ridiculous. He makes it almost as difficult for us to exit Tunisia as it is to get into Libya.

On a breeze and a prayer

Libya [1026km; 3962m]

Neither of us would rave about the pedalling experience in Libya, because in all honesty, it is not a brilliant cycle touring destination. Visa restrictions mean you have to fly through the country at a ridiculous rate and are not really conducive to seeing things properly nor adequately absorbing the culture. While Jeremy Clarkson would be ecstatic with the 7 euro cents per litre of petrol and the absurd speed-freak driving attitudes, I in particular, didn't enjoy having everyone pass me like their car was fitted with a turbo-charged engine. Until Libya, I was unaware that a Honda Civic was capable of rocking along at 150 kilometres per hour. I was also unaware that a country of such economic wealth could do so little about their litter problem.

Surprisingly, there were few good wild camping opportunities too, especially if you follow the coastal route. And it is no wonder Gaddafi opts to put his tent up in the middle of a city: the accommodation is sad, dirty and outrageously expensive. So why visit Libya, you might ask?

Well, besides the genuine honesty and helpfulness of Libyan people, the answer to that is simple. Being in a country that hardly anyone else bothers to visit is just special; being somewhere that has not yet been tainted by the ugliness of tourism is a true privilege; being able to stand amid and applaud the most opulent and preserved Greek and Roman architecture of the ancient world on our planet is honourably humbling; and to visit [Barbara](#), the only [warm showers](#) host in the whole of the country, unquestionably unique.

There are plenty of other draw cards too. But even with prevailing south-westerly breezes pushing us along at tremendous speed and muttered prayers to keep us alive on crazy highways, our unescorted 14 days of travel in Libya came to an end before we could really see it all.

Cycling a revolution

Egypt [2204km; 5447m]

It was confirmed that efficiency is not high on the priority list in North Africa when we have to show our passports nine times in total, before we can cycle our way down the 200 metre drop into Salloum in Egypt. One of the worst hotel rooms in our travels to date, coupled with a surreal stoning in the main street of Sidi Barrany - all within the first 24 hours of entering the country - didn't look promising either. But then everything about turned and we fell for the authentic atmosphere of small northern towns, where people were curious and friendly. Pity the wind wasn't as agreeable.

Alexandria reflected a long forgotten British Colonial-era with its once grand hotels now faded and dusty. The backstreets and markets were far from exhausted with their daily bustle and colour. Cairo bubbled underneath the thick black smog that hangs low over the city everyday. It simmered with chaos; it is riddled with cheats, but away from the tourist haunts, it still manages to echo a genuine welcome.

A chance meeting with Günter, followed closely by Jason & Meghan helped make the Western Desert route from Cairo to Luxor the climax of our Egyptian tour. Stunning landscapes; middle of nowhere perfection and superb wild camping are a perfect combination for any two week cycle trip. Wrap that all up with some excellent companionship and irritating police and disheartening headwinds all seem a little trivial.

From Luxor onwards however, cycle touring lost its charm. We were not only annoyed continually by either police or hoards of children, but the towns en-route are a strong reminder of the sadness that seeps in when the whole world flocks to see and experience the same thing. Tourism has diseased these parts of Egypt with an insatiable greed. A leisurely stroll or simple shopping trip is just not possible; you will either find yourself fighting off the harassment or fighting for the right price.

Even so, curiosity has bitten us badly in North Africa. It has taken hold and there is something about this continent that enchants the travelling spirit. We are tempted to move on into Sudan and Ethiopia when Egypt shuts down for a few days, but that was fraught with just as many dilemmas. We figure we had better leave the exploration for another date. In the meantime, we are trying desperately to get ourselves to Suez, but coastal winds pulling us back to 8 kilometres an hour and buses now only running when they have enough passengers, means cycling through the revolution is going a little slower than we wish.

Still, we can put the time to good use by planning our next publications. Anticipate a detailed cycling tour•guide about Libya; a mini tour•guide to Egypt's amazing Western Desert; and of course more cycle touring news about the Middle East. There has also been something completely delicious baking in the oven too and you can look forward to loads of travel-smart recipes with plenty of tips & tricks regarding the travelling kitchen when we bring out our on-the-road cookbook. The art of travel cooking will not only be designed for cycle-tourers, but anyone who likes to self cater while on the move.

But before all that happens, the original plans are still in place. We will move on through Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and finally into Turkey: finishing another full revolution of our world tour in Istanbul by the end of April. We last cycled into this sparkling city in February 2007, in the snow. Lets hope the weather is a little better for the build up to our five years on the road celebration.

But until then, as our wonderful friend Jim Abraham would say: one revolution at a time.

Sonya and Aaldrik

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Special thanks again to everyone who helped us; inspired us; or in some way became a part of www.tour.tk:

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