

Hunting the Golden Lion

a cycle safari through France

Martin Lloyd



Queen Anne's Fan

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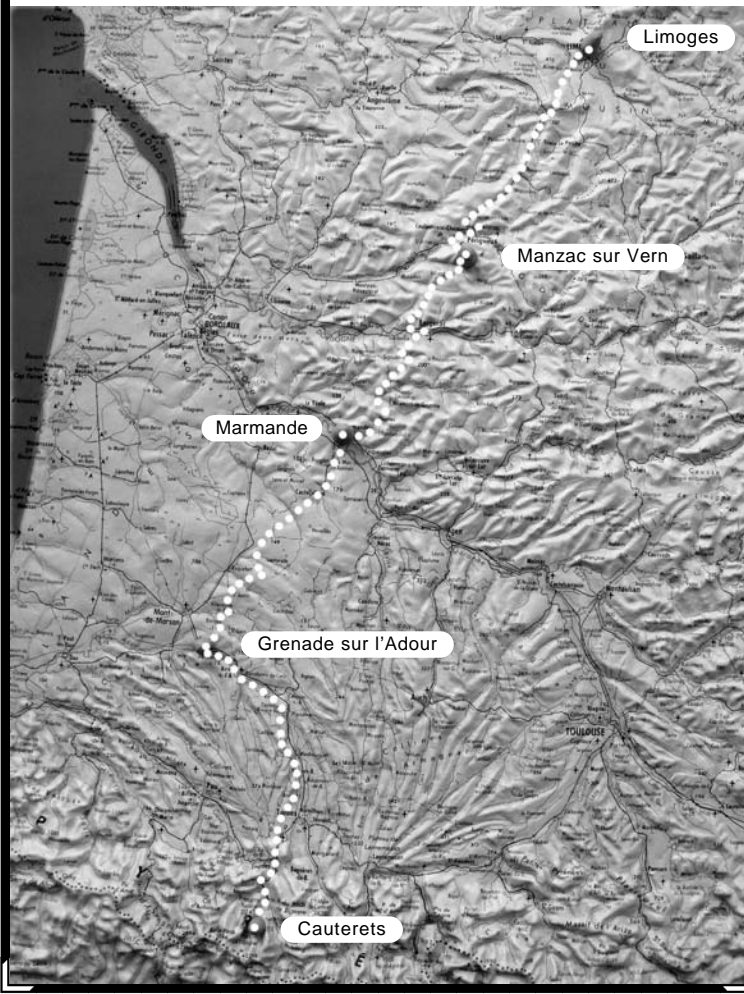




HUNTING THE GOLDEN LION



Cauterets – Limoges



CHAPTER ONE – PREPARATION

‘And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the end of my talk.’

Quick, whilst the audience is applauding, nip down the aisle, switch off the projector lamp, keep the fan running and wheel the projector up to the front otherwise it will waltz to the hatch with the vanguard of tea drinkers.

‘I am sure you have thousands of questions ladies and gentlemen. Fire away!’

They probably have but they have also been sitting in plastic buckets for over an hour and are gasping for a cuppa and a bit of abdominal massage. Ah, there’s always one.

‘Mr Lloyd, I know I speak for everybody here when I say that we have enjoyed immensely the fascinating slides of your bicycle travels. The question I think that must be on everybody’s mind is: England, France, Spain, the Far East; where are you going next?’

‘I am glad you asked me that, madam. The answer is: France, but with a difference. For my next book I am going to try to cycle through France and stay only in hotels called, ‘Hotel du Lion d’Or’. And the title of the book will be something like, *Hunting the Golden Lion – a cycle safari through France.*’

That was all very well but a few weeks later, at the end of another talk, when I had been asked the same question my reply had been: I am glad you asked me that sir, I shall be writing another book about passports but this one will be

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designed for family historians and the title will be something like, '*How to Read a Passport*'.

And all that had happened eighteen months ago. The slot that I had earmarked in my busy timetable to undertake the Golden Lion Safari was fast approaching. I would be setting off in about five weeks from now. I really ought to do something about it. Like, find out how many such hotels existed and where they were.

The telephone rang. I turned away from my computer screen. The text I was working on was neither Golden Lions nor passports, it was a cracking good dialogue for the sequel to the thriller romance that my readers were demanding.

It was John on the phone. MyMateJohn. One of those people whose brain is so remarkably agile that he can give a conversation only half his attention. So whilst you are talking to him about the carrots in your garden, he will pick up the magazine on your kitchen table, leaf through it and say, 'Have you ever been to the Isle of Skye?' A telephone conversation with him is like an excerpt from an absurd play by Eugene Ionescu. The magazine on your kitchen table is replaced by his broadband internet connection. Whilst talking to you he will be simultaneously surfing the ether on a totally unrelated subject to the one you think you are discussing and of course, you are hampered by not having his computer screen before you. At least with the magazine he does give you a clue by turning it around and showing you the photograph.

'How did the talk go last night?' he asked.

'OK. I need to try to find a new mains lead for my projector though. That won't be easy.'

'It's not standard then?'

'No, it's a thirty year old Rollei. They have a special three pin socket a bit like a kettle, but not quite. How was the cycle ride on Sunday? I'm sorry I could not make it, I just was too busy.'

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'And of course it was raining.' I hear his fingers on the keyboard. *Chock, chock, chock, chock.*

'Well that was a factor I took into consideration. My waterproof jacket has failed. It's about five years old now. They don't last much longer.'

Chock, chock, beep, chock, chock.

'There's one here, complete, for a hundred and twenty five pounds.' *Chock, chock, chock.*

'One "what" for a hundred and twenty five pounds?'

'Rollei 35mm projector and screen. It's in the States.'

'That's no good, and anyway, my slides are not 35mm, they are six by six. You know they are, you've seen them.'

Chock, chock, chock, chock.

'John.'

'Is it a Dual 66 your projector?'

'John.'

'Cos there's one here in Ireland.'

'John.'

'It's without its lens.'

'John.'

'What?' *Chock, chock, chock, beep.*

'John, what did you ring for?'

'I wondered how you were getting on with your golden lion safari thing.'

'Oh that. Well I should be doing it now instead of writing another novel.'

'What have you got left to do?'

'Not much. Find the hotels, work out an itinerary, work out a budget. The lot, really.'

'How long will the journey take?'

'I don't know till I've found the hotels. What I do know is that I will be paying for a hotel every night, so that will be expensive.'

'How many have you found so far?'

'About fifty six. I've been scanning through the Michelin and the Logis guides.'

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Chock, chock, chock.

‘There’s one here, *Hotel du Lion d’Or, Amboise.*’

‘Yeah, I’ve got that one, John.’

‘And Marmande, where the tomatoes come from?’

‘Yeah, I know about that one as well.’

‘There’s one here. Looks very nice. Oh it’s in Montreal. Do you fancy Whitstable on Thursday?’

‘Yes, let’s ride to Whitstable. It will give me an incentive to tune up the bicycle ready for my expedition.’

FOUR WEEKS TO GO

My bicycle does not need any tuning or maintenance. I use it all the year round and so have to keep it in running order. MyMateJohn displays an unhealthy fanaticism with regard to bicycle cleanliness, proudly washing down his bicycle after a rainy ride and polishing the spokes and vacuum cleaning the handlebar grips. Of course, he can do this because he has taken the precaution of buying two identical bicycles, both painted blue, so that he can ride one whilst the other is in the wash and nobody will know. Unless, of course, he thinks it will be really muddy in which case he uses his third machine, the mountain bike with knobbly tyres. He puts that through the car wash.

I clean my bicycle once a year and for a few weeks it is sparkling green. I even wax it. For the rest of the year it is a drab muddy colour with a frosting of powdered dust from the trails in the Peak District.

‘All you need,’ John says, ‘is a bowl of warm soapy water and a paintbrush. It doesn’t take five minutes.’

‘I keep my bicycle clean right where it matters – on the transmission. I regularly wipe the chain and oil it. That is what counts.’

‘But if you cleaned your bicycle regularly you would find all the things that were wrong with it and adjust them before they developed into big problems.’

‘But I don’t get big problems with my bicycle. I designed

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it to be problem free. Why are you slowing down?’

‘Something wrong with my gears.’ He fiddles with the lever, tugging at the cable with his fingers. ‘The lever keeps slipping a cog.’

‘You’ve probably cleaned it too much. A good dollop of clag in the mechanism is what you need. Why are you on your mountain bike anyway? It’s not muddy.’

‘The blue bike’s got a puncture.’

‘And the other blue bike.’

‘It’s in the wash.’

That is the trouble when you have more than one bike. You can postpone the required remedial maintenance by picking another machine off the pile. If, like me, you have only one machine for overseas touring, pootling about and shopping, then as soon as it goes wrong you have to fix it. Or walk.

So what does my bicycle need? This set of tyres has only done about a thousand miles, it will be good for another couple of thousand with no problem. I will put a new cable on the rear brake because it is beginning to feel a bit spongy and I might have some mountain work to do. What else? Squirt a drop of oil on the chassis of the saddle to get rid of that creaking noise. That’s it. I apologise if it sounds smug but that is the reward for having only one bicycle and keeping it in tip top condition.

THREE WEEKS TO GO

I start to do some serious map work. I take a map of France and mark on it in ink all the Lion d’Ors that I can find. Some are in the middle of nowhere and I need a large scale map to locate them on the small scale map. Some are in one guide book and not in the other. MyMateJohn gives me some that he has plucked from the ether. MyMateMargaret prints out reams from her computer, details of Golden Lions with photographs and rates and opening dates. The map begins to fill up but not evenly.

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If I am to go from one Lion to another I need the hotels to be within a day's cycling distance of each other and for me that means about fifty miles. They are not. Some gaps are two hundred and fifty kilometres.

My eyes are going funny as I try to decipher the town names on the map. At the opticians they admit that they have given me the wrong prescription so I have to order a new set of lenses.

'No problem,' the helpful girl says. Everything to her is 'no problem'.

'I'm going to France in three weeks and I will need them by then.'

'No problem. Come back here in an hour and they will be ready.'

'No they won't. I ordered glass lenses. They said it would take two weeks for glass.'

'No problem. Come back in two weeks. We will ring you when they are ready.'

'And then I will want to have the pair that I am wearing now, to be tinted to use as sunglasses.'

'We can do that. No problem.'

MyMateMargaret rings up with some additions and amendments to the list. We compare notes. This hotel is closed for the first two weeks of August, this one is closed for the last two weeks. Only a French hotelier would think of going away on holiday during the holiday period. This one has no restaurant in July, this one is closed on Mondays.

'Of course,' she says, 'it's the worse possible time to go. You will be there for the first of August when they all get in their cars and head for the sun and for the fifteenth of August holiday when everything will probably be shut.' I agree with her. I have to keep her sweet. She will become my lifeline when I am on safari. 'Have you thought about booking hotels?' she adds.

'I don't want to book. When you are cycling you never know how far you can get in a day. In my twenty years of

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cycletouring, on only one occasion did I ever phone ahead and book a hotel, and then I never reached it which I thought was dreadfully unfair so I don't do it.'

I got a 'humph'.

Two things become apparent. One, if I do a complete circuit of France it will take me over a month and cost thousands of pounds and, two, I have a peculiar tingling sensation in my mouth.

'Go to the doctor,' says MyMateMargaret.

I go to the chemists.

'Fungal infection,' he says, and gives me some nice gel to rub inside my mouth four times a day.

TWO WEEKS TO GO

MyMateJohn rings up. He is jubilant because he has got seats in the grandstand for the finish of the first stage of the Tour de France in Canterbury... in five days time. Are we there already? Time is squeezing past me in the doorway without so much as an elbow in the ribs. The Tour de France this weekend? All those people? I phone up MyMateMargaret and explain the situation. She offers me two days asylum in a Tour-free zone. I grab my maps and notes and leave my front drive free for spectators to park on. For two days I make marks and annotations on the maps whilst Margaret coaxes Golden Lions out of dark undergrowth. Over in Canterbury a four hour caterpillar of obscene, fume-belching publicity vehicles crawls through the countryside, followed hours later by a ninety second burst of drug-fuelled lycra. It has nothing to do with cycling.

A buff envelope is waiting for me upon my return. I had forgotten my income tax return. I need to do my year's accounts, not this stupid itinerary. Two days of scribing and calculating, checking and cross checking piles of dockets and receipts. In the middle of it, the typescript of the next novel comes back from Sylvia, one of my readers. She loved it but, and this is why I use her, she has some pertinent

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observations to make. I find myself browsing through it. It wouldn't take a minute just to put it up on the screen and make the amendments. Then of course, I need to change the title because the working title I had discovered had been used about thirty times already. I start to doodle a cover. Hmm, that's not bad. In no time at all I have slipped across to my Macintosh computer and am plunged into Photoshop humming along with the Beatles as the book cover evolves through version after version until at about midnight I have a fairly presentable first hard copy. But I should be looking for Golden Lions.

On the way home from my talk at Orpington I suddenly have a thought.

'You know this Golden Lion thing?' Margaret nods, her mouth is full of chocolate. My chocolate. 'Well, the challenge is not to perform a circumnavigation of France.'

'Isn't it?' Crumbs of sticky chocolate splatter onto the windscreen. Some people have tinted windscreens; I have speckled.

'No it's not. The original observation was, if I remember correctly, that it was probably possible to cross all of France staying only in hotels called "Hotel du Lion d'Or".'

'Well that makes a difference.'

'Yes. The first is the uncertainty. It is "probably" possible. So if I fail it will not matter.'

'And the second is that you only have to cross France, not go all around it.'

'Exactly. I could go from Calais down to Bordeaux or somewhere. That would be crossing France.'

'How long would that take you?'

'I could probably do it in ten days. If the hotels are in the right place.'

They are not. I decide that the best chance of success would be to land in France at Dieppe and start at the Lion d'Or at Neufchatel en Bray. It is only thirty five kilometres

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inland on a good cycle track and it has the advantage that I know the hotel, having stayed there before.

‘How will you get back?’ Margaret wants to know.

‘I suppose I could carry on into Spain and visit Alan and Raquel in Bilbao and come home by ship.’

‘And miss my birthday.’

‘I don’t fancy trying to get back on a French train. I have bad memories of my scuffles with the SNCF.’

‘Well what was that coach thing that you used last time?’

‘Yes, of course, that’s the answer. Clever of me to think of it. The Bike Express. I could do it the other way around. I could go right down to Lourdes on the coach and then cycle back up.’

‘That would be more sensible. It would mean that as the weather got hotter, you would be moving northwards.’

Cauterets is the southernmost Lion d’Or in France. That is where I will start. Once I have decided to go down by coach then the date of departure is chosen for me by the coach timetable and seat availability. Things are beginning to fit together at last. But I still have that tingling in my mouth. I have to go and see the doctor. He prescribes a different kind of gel and books me a blood test for the Friday before I am due to leave. I will not have the results before departure. I hope they don’t discover something awkward. I imagine myself dozing comfortably on an air conditioned coach as I speed southwards into La Belle France, generously dispensing bubonic plague.

I don’t bother to tell the doctor about my athlete’s foot; one thing at a time. I just dig out the half empty tube of ointment that I had bought for the previous outbreak a couple of years earlier and apply it assiduously to my toe, morn and night. Margaret wants to know where I caught it from. I can only offer up my thirty year old wellington boots with the mouse-chewed lining that I had worn without socks to mow the lawn. I get another ‘humph’ and a sad shake of

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the head. I have now got fungus top and toe. I am rotting at both ends.

‘Have you booked any hotels yet?’ she asks.

‘I told you, I do not do that sort of thing. It never works.’

‘You’re a twit.’

‘OK. When I get near a hotel I will ring up the day before.’

‘What on? You don’t have a mobile.’

‘They have public telephones in France.’

‘My mum will lend you her mobile.’

‘I don’t want it. I don’t use them. I don’t know how to use them.’

‘Have you got any further with the itinerary?’

‘No, not really.’

‘What have you been doing today then?’

‘Well I had to deliver a book to Broadstairs.’

‘You could have posted it.’

‘I went by bike. It’s only forty two miles return. It was a lovely ride.’

‘But you haven’t got the time, Martin. You should be concentrating on this trip.’

‘Wait till you see the cover I’ve designed for my next novel.’

‘Oh yes, and when did you do that?’

‘Oh a couple of nights ago.’

‘When you should have been sorting out your itinerary. Have you thought how you are going to pay for all this?’

‘I’ll use my debit card.’

‘Make sure you have enough in your account then.’

Good point. I transfer a huge sum of money from my deposit account to my cheque account. It is all that I can afford so it had better be sufficient.

ONE WEEK TO GO

The service on my van is due. I take it into the garage so that my six months pregnant daughter can use the vehicle

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with complete peace of mind whilst I am away.

The opticians ring. I collect my spectacles and hand in the others to have them tinted to make prescription-lens sunglasses. I hope that where I am going it will be bright and sunny.

'I've got a bit of shopping to do. I'll call back in an hour,' says I, knowing the patter.

'No problem.'

An hour later, Miss No Problem is explaining to me that they cannot tint glass lenses.

'But... but...' Why am I such a wimp? 'Can you make me a pair of plastic subscription sunspecs then?'

'No problem. Be ready next Thursday.'

'I need them on Tuesday. I am going on holiday on Wednesday.'

'No problem. We'll ring you when they are ready.'

Time to think about clothes. When I was in Help the Aged in Bexhill I bought a brand new cycling fleece in fluorescent yellow with reflective stripes. I have given it a few road tests in varied weather conditions and discovered that if worn with a thin layer underneath, then it has the magical property of keeping me cool in the heat and warm in the cold. I decide that this garment will be the kingpin of my wardrobe. I will take my cycling shorts, one pair of pyjamas, a cotton tee shirt, three pairs of pants and one pair of socks. For the hotel dining room I will take a pair of dark coloured, thin trousers and a hideously patterned silk shirt. The hideous pattern is essential. It means that I don't have to iron the shirt after washing because the creases won't show. On the bike I will keep a pair of waterproof overtrousers and my waterproof-jacket-that-isn't. I really ought to get another before I leave.

I do not need variety in my clothing because I shall be moving each day and only I will know that I am wearing the same clothes. It does not matter if I get bored with them.

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So... think this thing through. I cycle in shorts, tee-shirt and fleece. When I get to the hotel the first thing I do is put up my washing line and wash pants, socks and tee shirt. I then wash myself, put on black trousers, clean pants and silk shirt; no socks but use those cheap very lightweight sandals that I got from the market, and then go down for dinner. At bedtime, pyjamas on and into bed. I can wash the silk shirt when needed just before getting into bed because it dries in about four hours. In the morning, if tee shirt is still damp I can wear my pyjama top under my fleece instead. If the socks are still wet I can go without. As long as I have got rid of my athlete's foot, that is. I keep putting the stuff on my toe but it is not having much effect. When my pyjamas need washing I can wear the tee shirt. Or sleep in the nuddy.

Fine. Now where did I get to on my novel?

SIX DAYS TO GO

I am having trouble with the Loire. I need to cross it from south to north but the gap between Golden Lions in this direction is too great for my frail legs. If I wanted to travel east-west it would be no problem, the Golden Lions are positively prowling nose to tail along the river bank down to the sea. Perhaps if I veered eastwards towards Burgundy and then came westwards down the Loire valley, from Lion to Lion, to the Atlantic coast then I could turn northwards into Brittany and tack back eastwards towards Dieppe? The giant zigzag would add a week to my itinerary but it would solve the problem. I pull out some more maps from my box. The floor of my lounge is a battlefield of contorted maps, twisted in torture and pinned down by blood red slabs of Michelin guides, one of which is so old that it tells you where you can get the accumulators charged to power the magneto on your car.

MyMateMargaret has found a cycle track on an old railway line and it goes from Lourdes to Cauterets. Brilliant! That will be my first day, from the coach stop, nineteen

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miles up into the Pyrenees. The cycle track on the railway line is a bonus because it will be a gentle gradient and I will have to do it twice: up to the first Lion d'Or and then back down again in the morning for the mad dash to the next, eighty six miles away. If nearly twenty of those miles in each direction are on an old railway line, the job will be easier.

The garage is on the telephone about the van. It has had its service and it is ready for collection. I am only half listening as I tot up mileages on the maps. Twelve hundred? Is that kilometres or miles? Suddenly it clicks in. Twelve hundred pounds.

'Did you say twelve hundred pounds?' My voice is faint with dread and incredulity.

'Twelve hundred and thirty four, sir.' I suppose you get a 'sir' if it is over a grand. But he is still talking. 'And there is some work that needs doing on it.' How could there be anything more that needs doing? 'You need a new pedal box. It needs replacing urgently, it could fail at any moment and that will cost two hundred and sixty pounds, fitted. You also need a new clutch, that will be five hundred and forty and a new catalyser which is five hundred and twenty.'

I collect the hated van and the rest of the day passes in a cotton wool haze. In the space of a few seconds I have spent more than all the money I had put in my account to cover my expedition. What do I do now?

MyMateJohn phones up and I cry on his shoulder.

'You could buy a good bike for twelve hundred pounds.'

'I've got a good bike and I've just spent twelve hundred pounds, not earned it. What I haven't got is the money to pay for the hotels.'

'Put it on your credit card,' he says.

'I don't have a credit card.'

'What? Not any?'

'No. Never have had.'

'You could camp. Nobody would know that you had not stayed at the hotels. You could still visit them.'

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‘It would be cheating and I would know. If I was going to do it that way I could sit at home in my garden and write the book.’

‘Like H.V. Morton used to.’

‘Did he used to sit in my garden? I never knew that. Perhaps I could get a blue plaque put up.’

‘Or you could do it from the internet. Oh, I forgot. You haven’t got the internet either have you?’

To cheer me up I shall go into town and buy a new waterproof jacket and a pair of thin trousers. I jump on my bike. It goes like a bird. All the waterproof jackets are midnight black or camouflage green. I don’t want to blend in, I want to stand out. The light coloured and fluorescent jackets are not waterproof. No we will not be getting in any more stock before next Tuesday, sir.

I screw up my courage and go into one of those shops designed for the generation that transferred directly from pushchair to skateboard. Shoes have velcro straps and the trousers are held up by elastic string. Skateboarders can neither tie laces nor buckle belts – they never had to learn how. I find the pair of least unsuitable black trousers and am nonplussed to discover that the lining seems to have been fashioned from those net bags that oranges are sold in and attached to the elastic string is a toy plastic compass. Whilst I am standing in the queue, stoically waiting for the waif at the till to finish her dance, a Chinaman inspects the trousers folded over my arm. He pulls at the cloth and reads the price ticket. Perhaps he recognises them. Or maybe he’s looking for directions.

MyMateMargaret phones up. She dictates to me a list of addresses and telephone numbers of Lions d’Or. We check and cross check our lists. I explain my Loire zigzag.

‘If I cut north east from Bourges I can stay at the Lion at a village called Léré just above Cosne sur Loire. I can then pedal either down the towpath alongside the canal or on

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the minor road alongside the Loire to Sandillon near Orleans; then Candé sur Beuvron or Amboise – both have Lion d’Ors.’

‘I still think you should be reserving hotels. This is the holiday season. That hotel at Léré has only got six rooms.’

‘Well, I might ring them up and ask them if they have room at the moment. I mean, if they are already full for the day in question then there is no point going there at all.’

‘And what about the closing days? Some of them close one day a week. You need to think about that.’

Everything she says makes sense but I am still reluctant. MyMateMargaret says that it is not reluctance, it is stupidity, but she will look for the numbers for the extra hotels.

That evening I decide that she is right. I ruminate over my first hotel, Cauterets. I am sure to get to that one; the coach will be dropping me off less than twenty miles away. I phone up and book the hotel but don’t tell Margaret. Tension is good for her.

FRIDAY. FIVE DAYS TO GO

Nothing to eat from midnight and then I cycle down to the doctor’s. The nurse wants to take blood from my left arm. I tell her to take it from my right; they can never find the vein on the left arm. She fills up two pots full of blood and then I wobble faintly back up the hill for breakfast.

MyMateJohn is worried because I don’t have a mobile phone; he offers me one from his stable. I say that I will use the public phones so he offers me a French phone card. My pride forbids me from accepting it. Is there nothing he has not got?

There is something I have not got. I need large scale maps of the area north of the Loire in Brittany and Normandy. The two maps I am using still have marked on them the sunken river ferries and blown up bridges from 1944. I ask my friends who travel daily to Calais to get the required maps but those maps are not stocked because they

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are not local to Calais. Eventually I discover that I can buy them in Canterbury so I pedal off down the hill again. I would use the van but I am a little worried about that clutch pedal that the garage said might fail and which I cannot afford to fix before I go.

‘And what are you going to do about the freezer?’ MyMateMargaret wants to know. ‘It would be best to empty it and clean it.’ Why does she have to be so practical?

‘I can empty it but have you got any spare room in your freezer for my stuff?’

‘I can let you have one drawer. Will that be enough?’

‘It will have to be. I dare not ask John to store the stuff, he would eat it all.’

My freezer is full of fruit. Every September, our monthly ride takes us to the north Kent coast, into a network of hedged lanes. There, our cartographic trustee reverently unfolds the Treasure Chart upon which is marked with an X, the hedge full of wild cherry plums, Victoria plums and damsons. For this day in the year I put pannier bags on the front carriers of my bicycle as well as the back. We go down that lane on both sides like a vacuum cleaner. Polythene bags bulge with plums; damsons dribble down sleeves and are squashed under foot. Last year I returned with forty three pounds of fruit. Then I made jam. It takes hours. Mashing the stewed damsons to extract the stones makes me reflect that perhaps this is why nobody else bothers to pick them. The fruit that I can’t jam, I freeze for another day. That day has just arrived. I cannot, by any stretch of friendship, unload this lot on MyMateMargaret.

I have no time for refinement; put the whole lot in together. It will be mixed fruit jam: damson, apple, plum, blackberry. I empty the bags into saucepans for the fruit to thaw and pedal off into town to buy sugar. I abandon Golden Lions and for the rest of that day I make jam. I stew, I stone, I stir, I skim, I pour, I seal. At eleven o’clock at night I am proudly surveying fourteen beautiful jars of jam.

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As I clear away the empty bags I read the labels. I discover that what I had thought was apple was stewed parsnip. I have fourteen jars of mixed damson, blackberry, plum and parsnip jam. Oh well, MyMateJohn will eat it.

SATURDAY. FOUR DAYS TO GO

MyMateMargaret rings up early. She has found another cycle track railway line, a *voie verte*, the French call them, and it runs for the last ten miles of my eighty seven mile day from Cauterets. This impossible stage is beginning to look more and more realisable if the route starts and finishes on smooth cycle track. My spirits begin to rise. Perhaps I will not fail at this second Lion.

‘And you had better do a set of back up disks to give me in case your house burns down. I’ll be over this afternoon to collect them. How many hotels have you booked?’

‘Er... one. Cauterets.’

‘You’re hard work sometimes. Book the rest.’

I would do but I have not actually fixed the itinerary further than the third day. I avoid the issue by starting the process of backing up my hard disk to floppies. If you don’t know what that expression means it is not important. It just took me the rest of the morning, that’s all.

As threatened, MyMateMargaret turns up later in the afternoon. We go down to the town and try to buy me a waterproof cycling jacket. I can find nothing suitable.

‘It doesn’t matter. I can use my present one.’

‘You mean the jacket that you packed away when it was still wet and which then grew blue mould on the collar?’

‘Yes, but it still keeps out some of the rain.’

‘But your neck came up in a rash of spots.’

She has a habit of remembering trifling details and then resurrecting them at inappropriate moments. I turn and squint through the window of the building society.

‘Come on, three o’clock. I’ll buy you coffee.’ I thought

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that was generous of me.

‘Why did you look in there?’

‘To read the time. Building societies and estate agents are the only high street shops which display clocks; all the others want you to forget the time and keep spending so, no clocks.’

‘What will you do in your hotel room in France? How will you know when it is time for breakfast or dinner if you have got no watch?’

‘I always have that problem. About twenty years ago you could walk down a street and read the time from a dozen digital dashboard clocks, but they don’t make them that bright any more.’

She steers me towards the jewellers. I start to panic.

‘Look in that window. There is a watch there for fifteen pounds,’ she says.

Am I relieved!

‘I’m not spending fifteen pounds on a watch.’

‘You don’t want breakfast then? What about that one? Eleven pounds.’

‘I haven’t worn a watch for ten years.’

‘How do you know it’s ten years?’

‘I still buy calendars. Do you want coffee or not?’

After coffee we visit that old stalwart, the Help the Aged shop. There, in a glass display case, I see an electronic watch which I buy for three pounds. And the money is going to a good cause – I hope to be aged one day.

Back home on my kitchen table, Margaret lays out the survival pack that she insists I take with me. What price peace? I can always sort through it after she has gone and discard anything I do not want to take.

I try booking hotels. My telephone seems not to want to communicate with France. Every number has to be dialled three times. I discover that you must not pause for breath whilst dialling otherwise the exchange doggedly goes back

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to its knitting. This is rather ironic when I remember the trouble everybody in our office used to experience thirty years earlier when trying to telephone Paris from London. It regularly took three hours to find a line and then it had the audio quality of two baked bean cans and a length of taut string.

My idea of a zigzag down the Loire is aiming for success but I cannot contact the hotel at the western end until Monday night because it is closed and the hotel at the eastern end does not open until the morning of the day I leave the UK. But then, as I explain to a tooth-sucking Margaret; it does not matter because they are a week into the safari and I will be able to phone them from France.

'You ought to book La Fresnaye because they have only three rooms. And try Tourny – it should make your crossing of the Seine easier.'

I ring La Fresnaye and speak to a bemused *patronne* who assures me that there is no need to book, they will have space even if they have only three rooms. It is only later that I discover the import of that assurance. I am less successful with Tourny.

'Is that the Lion d'Or at Tourny?'

'Just a minute.' There is a scuffling noise followed by the yelping of a dog. 'Allo?' another voice says.

'Is that the Lion d'Or at Tourny?'

'Yes... Probably. What do you want?' The voice is heavy and lugubrious.

'Have you got room in August?'

'No, not really. We stopped doing the hotel months ago.'

SUNDAY. THREE DAYS TO GO

I give up trying to talk to French hoteliers and instead I concentrate on practical things. I weed the carrots and beetroot and mow the lawns. I start to cut the hedge but the electric hedgetrimmer is blunt and worn out. I should have replaced it but I was probably writing a book instead.

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MyMateJohn comes around for a cup of tea.

'You are not allowed to eat cake are you?' I ask as I cut two thick slices of Mrs Baker's fruit cake.

'No,' he admits as he takes a bite from the thicker slice.

'Have you done your bike?'

'Nothing to do on it.'

'What about those pads on your handlebars?'

'What about them?'

'Well you could get some handlebar tape. You know, the proper stuff and wind it around neatly.'

'What I've got works all right.'

'But it's pipe lagging.'

'I know. The plumber left it behind.'

'Well it's not the right stuff for handlebars. It will break up and fall off.'

'That's all right. I can easily replace it. I've got a shed full of it.'

He sighs and rubs his forehead with his hand.

'You could clean your bike,' he suggests.

'Oh don't start that again. By the way, I shan't be at the Manciple's Garden Party on Wednesday. Can you give my excuses?'

'Where will you be?' He licks the cake crumbs from his fingers.

'If all goes according to plan; in darkest France.'

'Are you sure you don't want one of my mobile phones? Or a phone card?'

I am touched by his concern and generosity but don't show it. I'm a man. We are tough, us men.

'There is something you can do for me if you want to.'

'What is that?' he asks, eyeing my portion of cake.

'Do you want to read another of my novels? It's just come back from a reader and I thought it would be interesting to have it read by a man.'

'Yes, I'll do that. I enjoyed the other one.'

'You might not enjoy this one. It's more romance and

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less thrill. So far it has been read by five ladies.’

‘I don’t see why I should not like it. It was written by the same bloke. I think you’ve hit on a new genre – the jolly good read. It’s traditional story telling.’

‘I hope so. Anyway, do your best but don’t struggle. I mean, if you can just get to the end of it, that would be an achievement.’

‘Have you got it there? Shall I take it with me?’

‘I’ll bring it round. I need to revise it first and put the corrections in from my last reader.’

It is one hundred and thirty five thousand words long. I finish working on it at one o’clock in the morning. No time for Golden Lions, and anyway, this is more fun. I fall into bed. Tomorrow is another day.

MONDAY. TWO DAYS TO GO

I wake up with the idea that I have some jobs to do. Just as I am working out what they are the postman drops a letter through my door. It is from the RNIB. I recorded *The Passport* as a talking book for them some months earlier. It was hard work but fun. Now they want me to do *The Trouble with France* and *The Trouble with Spain*. Those two will be a challenge. I start to practise voices for the characters.

Stop! Focus! Golden Lions are on the menu today. But I could do with a bit of exercise. I jump on my bike and cycle the corrected typescript around to MyMateJohn’s house. Nobody at home so I leave it in a polythene bag on his doorstep. As I cycle back I notice that it is the day for the recycling paper collection in his part of town. I have a feeling of dread but do nothing about it.

The secretary of the Marden Society rings up to remind me that I am giving them a talk tomorrow night. As if I had forgotten! I take a quick look in my diary. It’s a forty five minute dramatic presentation which I do straight from my head. It is not written down anywhere. If I dry up, or lose

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the thread, nobody can help me. I have nothing to fall back on. I have always found abject terror to be a great stimulant for concentrating the mind. Perhaps I should run through it once before I go.

Margaret has found me a couple more Golden Lions around the Loire. This will be a piece of cake. I try phoning Sandillon which is now the kingpin of the Loire zigzag but all I get is the answerphone. I think this idea of booking hotels is daft. Why don't I just ask them if they will be open during the period in which I think that I will be in their area? Then I can book them the night before. I speak to the hotel at Ingrandes and they happily agree that they will be open for me and will have no problem providing me with a room whenever I turn up. Now that was easier, wasn't it? I should have thought of this way of doing it earlier.

MyMateMargaret phones up to enquire progress and to remind me to empty the fridge and freezer tomorrow and bring the stuff to her on the way to do the talk at Marden. I tell her about my new hotel system. The silence at her end of the line is cathedral-like. She must have fainted.

TUESDAY. ONE DAY TO GO

At last, I get through to Sandillon.

'Is that the Hotel du Lion d'Or at Sandillon?' The line is atrocious but I think she gives me a qualified 'yes'. 'Will you be open in the first two weeks of August?' I enquire.

'Yes, monsieur.'

'I cannot say exactly which day I will arrive but it will be some time during early August.' I decide spontaneously that this lady should share the excitement of my great adventure. 'I have chosen your hotel because I am cycling right across France, from the Pyrenees to the Channel coast and I am going to stay only in Hotels du Lion d'Or.' When put like that it makes my choice sound quite gracious.

'*En effet!*' she responds magnificently. 'That, monsieur, is an incredible undertaking and I wish you every success.'

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‘Thank you mademoiselle.’ This is rather forward of me but she sounds quite young.

‘It is such a shame that we will not be able to take a part in your success.’

I am trying to think of the French term for ‘reflected glory’ in order to make an appropriate conciliatory remark when her words suddenly hit home.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, firstly, we are full for the month of August.’

‘What, for the entire month?’

‘Yes monsieur and if we were not, we would be of no use to you.’

‘Why not?’

‘We’re not called the “*Lion d’Or*” anymore. We changed our name over two years ago.’

The French have a word that begins with M. I use it on every pedal beat as I pound down the road to Otterstone’s. I urgently need some large scale maps of the area north of the Loire. Will I have to thread my way through the *bocage* of Normandy? What are the hills like in Brittany? I recall the labouring groan from the French coach on our school trip to St Malo forty years earlier. On my bicycle, I am the motor.

The great advantage with these enormous bookshops is that you are not really expected to purchase books in them. Proper book buyers go to a shop where the assistants are polysyllabic and can do joined-up handwriting. But here, you can drink coffee and lounge about on a sofa to read the newspapers. In my childhood summers I loved to get around a book and curl up in the sun; now I can sit and watch the cheap covers on the ‘three for two’ offers do the same.

I make a beeline for the maps and pull out several that I need. I am not going to buy them of course, just consult them. I don’t like the look of Brittany and Normandy. Oh yes, there are some beautiful cycle tracks where there had formerly been railway lines but they are all going the

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wrong way. Some of my day mileages are easily stretching into the seventies.

What's the time? I look about me. Of course, no clock. I must remember to take that confounded watch with me. Pedal home. Lunch from the fridge and then empty it. Leave milk for breakfast tomorrow, oh and the bread. Get my stuff together for my talk tonight, load the van. Perhaps I should put my bike in the van now? Yes, good idea – it will save messing about in rain in the morning. Dump the cycle bags in the hall ready for packing tomorrow.

I run off a couple of copies of my itinerary. One for MyMateMargaret and another for her mother to show her friend Pat down the road. It is a beautiful piece of work, listing towns and roads with mileages and names and addresses of the hotels and the dates that I will be reaching them. It is a greater work of fiction than the typescript of my novel that MyMateJohn is reading for me.

The freezer! I pad a cardboard box with newspaper and stack bricks of frozen food into it. Choc ices? Am I really going to save nine choc ices? I eat one and throw the remainder in the rubbish. Funny, I've still got that fungus in my mouth; and my athlete's foot is still raging. Sort of foot and mouth disease.

I drive straight to MyMateMargaret's house and fill up her freezer. I really appreciate the generosity of her gesture considering that the last time I opened her freezer I forgot to close the door and when she came home she had to throw everything away. But good can come of ill – at least it means she has now got room for my stuff. Must make sure I close the door properly.

'How is the fungus in your mouth?' Margaret asks.

Why are women so morbid?

'Still there, but going down. I am more concerned about my foot. I keep putting the stuff on but it doesn't seem to make any difference.'

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‘What did the doctor say about it?’
‘I didn’t tell him.’
‘Where did you get the stuff from to put on your foot then?’
‘It was some I had left over from last time.’
‘That was two years ago. It must be out of date. Show me the tube.’
I fish in my bag and hand her a twist of ointment tube. She straightens it out to read the notices on the side of it.
‘Those expiry dates don’t mean anything really,’ I assure her. ‘Nothing to worry about. They often use Roman numerals – it isn’t that old. And in any case, medicine does not suddenly lose its effectiveness overnight.’
She looks at me with one of her exasperated expressions picked from the top shelf.
‘And how have you been applying this stuff?’
‘Rubbing it into my toe morning and evening.’
‘Since when?’
‘Every day for the last couple of weeks. I might just as well not have bothered for all the effect it has had.’
‘I agree.’ I am thunderstruck by her quick concurrence. Her idea of health control is to stuff me full of vitamin pills so that I rattle like a set of maraccas. She waggles the tube dangerously at me. ‘This ointment is not for treating athlete’s foot.’
‘Oh,’ says I, a little bemused, ‘no wonder it didn’t work. What is it for then?’
‘Haemorrhoids.’
‘I’ll give it to MyMateJohn then. He’s got piles.’
‘You’re not going to put that in the book are you?’
‘Of course not.’

‘I don’t understand why you had to get yourself booked to give a talk on the evening before your departure,’ she continues as we trundle through the Wealden lanes. ‘You ought to be resting.’

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'They booked the talk over a year ago. That was before I had sorted out this safari.'

'So it is sorted out then?'

'You've got the itinerary.'

'And the hotels are booked?'

'Yeah, most of them... Some of them... Well, those that matter.'

'And your maps are all prepared?'

'I can do that when I get home tonight.'

'At midnight? After a talk?'

'Oh look, there's the village hall. We've arrived.'

I do the talk. I have spoken to them before and they remember me. I can remember some of them. They are a lively group – interested and interesting.

'And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the end of my talk. I'm sure you have thousands of questions, so fire away.'

'Martin, what is your next book about?'

'I'm glad you asked me that Edith. Outside in my van is my bicycle and tomorrow morning I will be setting off on a...'

OH MY GOD, IT'S TODAY.

Breakfast. Any left overs, put in box to give daughter to feed her children with. Ring daughter.

'Izzi?'

'Hi Dad.'

'If I bring my van down then you can try it out. If you are OK with it then I will unload my bike and you can use the van whilst I am away. Is that OK?'

'Yes. Brilliant.'

'I've got to be at Dover for half past one so I'll be with you at about twelve.'

'That's fine. I'll work around what you want.'

'I'll ring you before I leave.'

Clean the fridge and the freezer. Bowls of steaming soapy water, towels everywhere. That bundle on the table I

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must remember to take with me, it is three meals' worth of sandwiches that MyMateMargaret has made for me. It weighs about fourteen hundredweight.

Right, sort the clothes and pack the bags. This cotton tee shirt is really thick and it is heavier than my pyjama top. Do I really need to take it? Why don't I just take two pyjama tops? Clever idea. Nobody will know that I am wearing my pyjamas as the layer under my fleece. Fling the tee shirt back in the drawer. Don't like the stupid lining in those trousers. Get the scissors and cut it out. Weigh it on kitchen scales. Seventy five grams saved. Every little bit helps.

Do the maps, no, wait a minute, what about your bloody sunglasses? Can't take the bike as it is already loaded so jump in the van and go to opticians. Ugh. Grey glass to match the silver frame – as if colour coordination mattered! Grey sunglasses is life trapped inside a black and white television. Brown would have been better, it's warmer. You've just driven past the chemist's. Get another tube of that stuff to put in your mouth. Turn at the lights. Sorry mate, thought you were picking your nose, not waving me across.

'Mr Chemist, can I stick my tongue out at you?'

'Go ahead. Hmm. It's not clearing up much is it?'

'Can I have some more of that stuff?'

'Not without a prescription.'

'Bum. What can I have?'

'This. It tastes of orange.'

'Great.'

What is this packet on the kitchen table? Oh it's MyMateMargaret's survival pack. Well I'm not taking all that with me. Let's sort it out. Butterscotch sweets? You can't suck a sweet whilst pedalling, you need all the space in your mouth for breathing. Discard. Rehydration sachets? *'Mix with half a cupful of...'* Where am I going to find a cup in the middle of the desert? And if I've got water to put in the

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cup why don't I just drink more water to rehydrate myself? Discard. Immodium, *'for diarrhoea'*. Well I don't want diarrhoea. Discard. Nail scissors? Oh come on! Discard. What is this sheet of aluminium foil? Am I going to roast a turkey? Oh it's an emergency survival blanket. It's France I'm going to, not the North Pole. Discard. Cough lozenges for a sore throat. In summer? Discard. That was easy. What am I left with? A small tube of Savlon. I'll take that.

The maps! I can't carry that lot. Do a scissors job on them. Just cut out the bits I need. *Snip, snip, snip*. Wait a minute. Number the bits for each day so that I know where I am. That's planning for you. What's the time? TEN TO TWELVE? I'm late. Leave the rubbish on the floor.

Stuff maps in bags. Change into cycling shorts and pyjamas. Lay out fluorescent fleece and bright orange scarf ready on bed. Better ring Izzi.

'Dad?'

'I'm running a bit late.'

'That's alright. Why don't I drive you to Dover rather than you cycle? It will save time.'

'Good idea. I'm leaving in five minutes.'

'See yer.'

Lock the back door. Check all the taps are off. Switch off boiler and timing clock on water softener. Put bags in van with bicycle. Lock front door. Sandwiches! You've left them on the kitchen table. Go back and get them. Lock door again.

I'm off.