

## Les Dents de Bell

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Rucksackers are drawn to challenges involving extreme exercise. Despite the view of some Rucksackers that cycling is not within the remit of the Club, there is a growing interest in classic, long distance cycling challenges which test stamina, strength, determination (and sometimes route finding capabilities as well). Of course this is not new - the precedent was set by journeys such as cycling from hut to hut: Beudy to Craigallan, and on the way climbing the highest summits in each country.

A journey on two wheels can leave long-lasting impressions, just like journeys on foot. As Diemberger said: *'He who cheerfully surmounts hairpin after hairpin of a pass under his own steam, yet enjoys a great deal of pleasure in so doing, is totally involved with that 'mountain'; its summit is an aim which he has set himself, and when at last he gets there, great is his joy. It goes without saying that riding down the other side, free as a bird and motorless, is sheer delight. But that is not all of it. The cyclist has his 'why and wherefor' just as the mountaineer; though neither of them could explain it.'*

Here are some impressions of Paris-Brest-Paris (1250k – 781 miles, in under 90 hours) and, as every journey needs a story, the tale of Les Dents de Bell. PBP is the cycling equivalent of the Bob Graham round, except that there is a mass start and a cast of thousands.

Preparation for any ultra-distance event is part of the fun (or pain). This one involved long day and night rides, required to qualify for the event and useful for testing both equipment and body as well as finding out how one reacted to sleep deprivation.

It's crowded at the PBP start, but what a great atmosphere! Picture a floodlit stadium full of thousands of eager cyclists, streets lined with cheering crowds (the French love their cycling events). We are off at 10 pm. The cast of thousands breaks up into many large bunches, or in cycling parlance – peletons, a few kilometers from the start. Fast descents on the hilly country roads just outside Paris require concentration when in a large peleton. Suddenly I find myself alone, amazing considering the number of participants, and I remind myself to check the route - easy to get lost in these country lanes. Later I join various small groups, make conversation to help keep

awake, and meet people of all nationalities, on solo cycles, recumbents, tandems.

A lovely dawn uplifts the spirits, spectators in villages hand us water or juice and children cheer us on our way. But later, sunstroke is a problem – I feel quite ill but must carry on, and drink, drink. Geoff Bell catches me up and later lends a hat, soaked in water to keep me cool. Arriving at a control point in the evening, Geoff eats a meal, but the sunstroke has made me feel sick and I need a few hours kip first.

On the second day, Brittany is very scenic but hilly and hard work. At Brest the psychological effect of reaching the halfway point is like getting to the top of a big mountain but knowing the descent is still to be made. The sense of achievement is tempered with caution. Will I survive the return journey?

Leaving Brest, we meet six men from a Nice cycling club, retirees like the Rucksack Wednesday club, also long distance specialists. To the well-dressed French cyclist, Geoff's sandals and sun hat are the epitomy of the eccentric Englishman. We take advantage of the opportunity to practise our French conversation, it's amazing what Geoff remembers from his schooldays (I think he had been secretly practising). Then they notice that Geoff has no teeth. Great hilarity ensues and almost results in falling off the bikes. Many suggestions are made as to where and how the teeth had been lost (some rather rude) and nobody knows the truth to this day.

Days merge into nights, we stop for a few hours' sleep in a school gymnasium or stretch out by the roadside, it's surprising how much better one feels after 20 minutes kip. We remember to eat as well.

A few hours from the finish and a Frenchman (not one of our Nice team) is on his mobile phone, probably to his wife, saying 'my bum is so sore I'm packing in...'. Not far to go now and we know we'll make it. We meet the Nice cyclists again, having rested at different points in the night, and we decide to finish together. A few of us even find sufficient energy and adrenalin, knowing the finish is achievable, to race each other up the short hills of the countryside surrounding Paris. Back at the stadium, we celebrate: 1250 kilometres (781 miles) in 88 hours.

Looking back on the experience, what do I remember? As with the Bob Graham, long walks and expeditions, the hard slog, the pain and the sleep deprivation are not totally forgotten, but the memory of these fades as time passes. It is the lovely scenery, excellent support and companionship, the 'buzz', that remain uppermost in the

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memory, and I suppose this is why we carry on doing these long events, though we say at the time 'never again'. Our French friends reported similar impressions in their club journal, and they also wrote about 'les dents de Bell'. The set of teeth was never recovered.