



European Cycling Expedition 2015
Nicola McCallion and Timothy Wright

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1 Introduction

1.1 Aims and Objectives

Our primary aim was to promote cycling to those of all abilities. Although the team collectively had a wealth of outdoor experience, we had not previously embarked on a cycling expedition. Additionally, as one member of the group suffers from co-ordination difficulties, we wanted to promote cycling for the inexperienced and, encourage others to access cycling through adapted and unconventional cycles. We fulfilled this criteria by maintaining a blog; this blog had approximately 1000 viewers. We also publicised ourselves through the charities Charlotte's Tandem and Old Merchant Taylors' Society and through the Chiltern Bike Barn, who also did a full repair and assessment of the tandem bought.

Our secondary aim was to complete the 1680km cycle ride and remain amicable! We were put under an indordinate amount of pressure for reasons including the ill-health of one team member, extreme heat and eventual road accident. It is testament to the team's relationship management skills that we remained safe throughout and are still friends now!

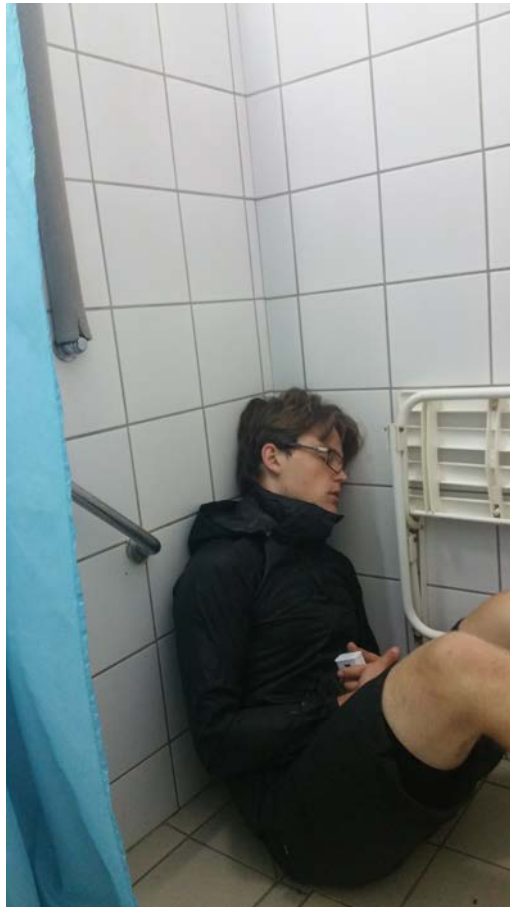


1.2 Expedition Team

Nicola McCallion has always been keen to access the outdoors. Through Girlguiding she completed Bronze, Silver and Gold Duke of Edinburgh expeditions and so had experience with expedition planning and execution. As a teenager she learnt mountaineering skills which allowed her to further her navigation and understanding of the outdoors. At university she has taken all opportunities to involve herself in outdoor activity and as a result has learnt various new disciplines including caving, lead climbing and kayaking. This allowed her to travel to various locations including Turkey (sport climbing) and Australia, Yorkshire and Wales (caving). Outside of university, she helped to plan and complete the Coast2Coast trail (309km hike) and has scaled many of the British mountains including Ben Nevis, Snowden, Scarfell Pike and Hellvelyn. She can now proudly boast of having conquered the endeavour of a cycling expedition; Nicola has dyspraxia and so is unable to ride a conventional bike successfully due to balance and spatial awareness issues. However, she can now access cycling by means of tandem. Allowing the Pilot to balance and steer the tandem, she is able to contribute to the physical effort of cycling whilst circumventing dyspraxia-related barriers. She is looking forward to taking to the open road again in further expeditions in her role as Stoker.



Timothy Wright is a particularly keen climber and cyclist with his cycling endeavours including frequent overnight weekend cycles and cycling holidays, in addition to daily commutes. His climbing and expedition experience include mountaineering in the Lake District and along the Franco-Italian border. He enjoyed the challenge of combining accumulated navigation skills and enjoyment of cycling through this expedition. He also speaks French fluently and was glad to have been able to put his linguistic skills to good use when difficulties arose.



1.3 Weather

During our expedition, the weather remained uncomfortably hot and sunny. It was mostly dry, with rain on only one day. The temperature remained around 32° as there was a record heat wave in Europe in July.

1.4 Food and water

Food and water turned out to be one of the biggest challenges we faced. We did not come across many towns on our expedition, so had to specifically add them to our route in order to be able to buy food each day. This was both because of the tandem's limited storage capacity and because our calorific needs greatly exceeded our needs on training trips (likely due to the extreme temperatures and increased elevation of our revised route). Regular water refill breaks were also needed despite having capacity for over ten litres on the tandem.

1.5 Transport

We took the train from London to Plymouth and the ferry from Plymouth to Roscoff. We took the train from Bordeaux to Florence. We took the train from Florence to Pisa and flew from Pisa to Gatwick.

1.6 Accommodation

We camped every night while cycling and then stayed with locals for the rest of the expedition, save one night which was spent in an Italian hostel.

1.7 Finances

Category	Total (GBP)
Transport	754.25
Accommodation	157.44
Food	328.02
Equipment	1309.87
Total	2549.58

Table 1: Breakdown of outgoing expenses.

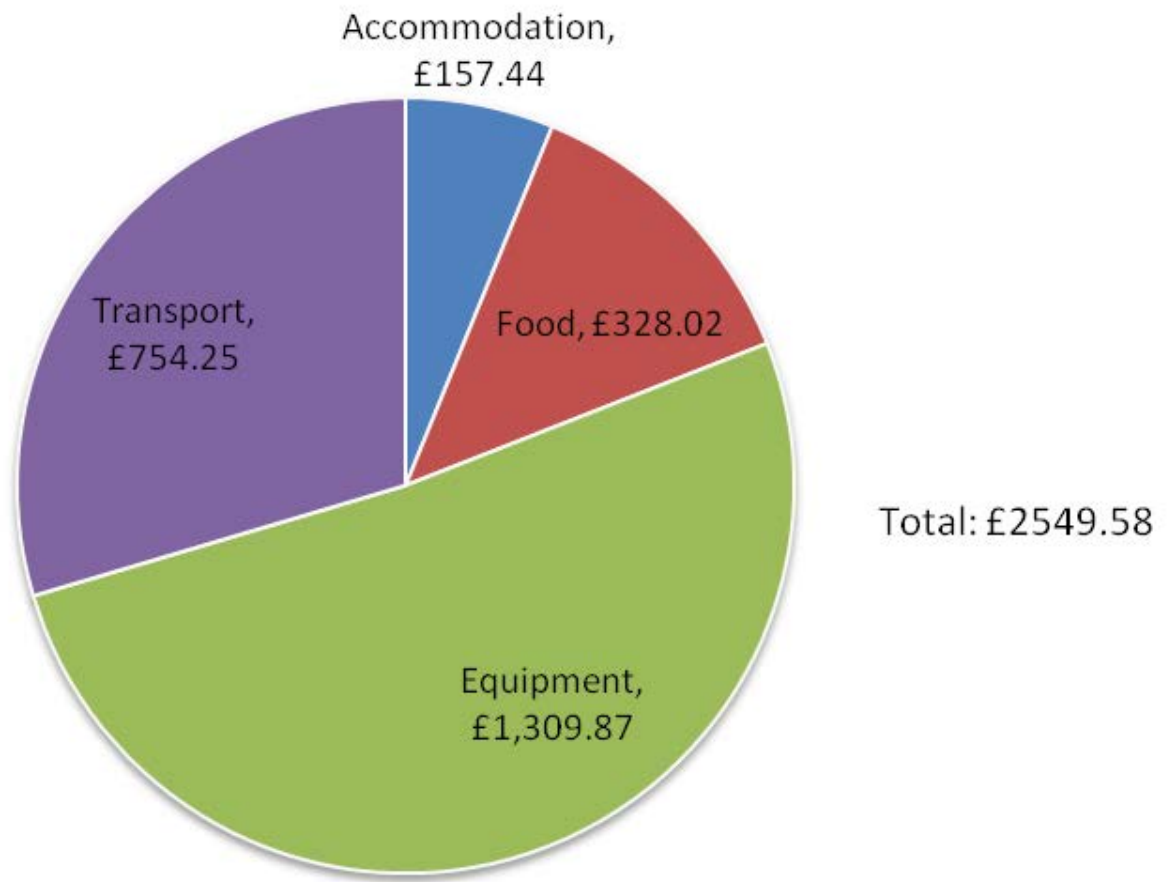


Figure 1: Chart of outgoing expedition expenses by category.

Source	Total (GBP)
Imperial College Exploration Board	-1000.00
Expedition members	-2549.58
Total	-1549.58

Table 2: Breakdown of expedition income.

2 Expedition Diary

2.-1 Day -1. Thursday 9th July. Distance cycled: 140m

Unfortunately, two of our team mates were forced to drop out of the expedition as a result of health issues. A third team mate, Nicola, had contracted Lyme disease immediately before the planned departure and so this delayed the start date. When she was well into her course of medication, the two remaining team mates intrepidly set out. Tallulah (our tandem) was fully laden and looking professional and we were optimistic about our chances of making it to Plymouth in spite of the rail strikes. We waved goodbye to our flat in Hammersmith and walked with Tallulah to the end of the road to pick up a prescription. Unfortunately, due to a clerical error, the GP surgery had not sent it through and so we cycled 140m back home again.



2.0 Day 0. Friday 10th July. Distance cycled: 12km

We set off, once again waving farewell to our Hammersmith flat. A brief ride through Central London served as the official waymark of the beginning of the trip. We boarded a particularly packed train service to Plymouth and our travels began. In Plymouth we sat down for our last supper. It was going so well until we met Plymouth's most egregious resident: Steve the seagull. Our food had just arrived when we were accosted by his mighty wingspan warding us away. We shooed him off and continued eating thinking, naïvely, that we had bested him. Oh how wrong we were, just as Tim got up to refill his drink this great white demon swooped down, pilfering two of his peri-peri chips! Only then did the staff think to come and warn us of his infamy... in between fits of laughter. We made it safely to the port and were swept up with excitement on seeing the ferry and the great convoy of brother and sister bicycles boarding the boat. We took our "lounge chairs" and went off to sleep!



2.1 Day 1. Saturday 11th July. Distance cycled: 125km

We were woken at 7am by the bus load of school children on our ferry, having lost the hour of sleep. We went out on deck to be greeted by the French shoreline and watched as Roscoff neared. Upon arrival we pedalled into town to find a café for petit déjeuner and to review our journey. 30km later we arrived in Morlaix for lunch, after minimal troubles save slight issues adjusting to cycling on the right. We bought food for the next two days, knowing that it would be hard to come by on a Sunday. Although we had carefully planned out calorific intake, in reality our food needs were MUCH greater than anticipated. Getting out from Morlaix up a large hill proved difficult and indicative of things to come. It was a rough day up hill and down dale, especially with the oppressive heat. We did, however, manage a maximum speed of 70kmph! Throughout our day we were greeted by many smiles, waves, nods and bonjours from passers by and fellow veloistes. At one point in the afternoon, our spirits were rallied by a convoy of enthusiasts on vintage mobilettes. Only moments later, in true Shatner style, Tim decided it was time the shirt came off! After a very long and arduous day, we finally arrived at the camp site, just as the light began to wane. We cooked courgette and tomato pasta and managed to get through a large proportion of our jar of Nutella.



2.2 Day 2. Sunday 12th July. Distance cycled: 95km

We rose at 10am, after a long, well- deserved sleep. Over breakfast, panic began over the dwindling food supplies. In isolation, this would have been a minor issue if it weren't for the fact that it was a Sunday. This rendered the whole country non-functional by midday. Nicola managed to barter for a baguette from the campsite owner and we set off in search of the one shop in the region that would be open this afternoon. Fortunately, after negotiating the huge hill out from the camp site, the day was mostly spent on the delightful canal from Brest to Nantes. After passing through Rohan (not home of the horse lords) we stopped



for a lunch of tabbouleh and cheese. We set off once more in search of the elusive open shop! It was located, not unlike many other things in the region, at the top of a huge hill. Our spirits were renewed however after a stint of general shopping (this included the purchase of some very yummy nectarines). We rejoined the canal path and continued on to our campsite. Nicola struggled to sleep because of a troublesome amount of sunburn (despite the ten hour, factor thirty lotion she had applied three times). In attempt to remedy this, she periodically doused her limbs in water. Tim was not best pleased when he woke to find that an unfortunate biproduct of this activity was a dousing also of his sleeping bag.



2.3 Day 3. Monday 13th July. Distance cycled: 120km.

Our day started early but well enough, with the first 30km continuing along the Nantes-Brest canal. We managed to pluck some amazing smelling wild mint at the canal side during one of our many snack breaks.

We reached Redon in good time and managed to pick up some supplies before deciding to get a few more kilometres under our belts before lunch. This was where we left the delightful canal path and our day took something of a turn for the worst. The route became hillier and less well maintained. This route culminated in some terrible paths that were essentially no more than fields before stopping in the most perfectly picturesque typical French field. The weather was beautiful, the food was plentiful and the sights were stunning so our spirits soared. We took to the “road” once more and the route continued to be as “cross country” as it had been. After a while, Tallulah took a fall while resting on a tree. Though we did not notice initially, she had taken some heavy damage. A short while later the chain came off and we noticed that the front chain wheel had been severely bent on the outer gear and that one of the links had broken. We decided that it would be OK to continue as long as we avoided the bent gear, so we kept on.



A little later we passed some very bizarre markings and indentations on the road along with some spray painted bollards and blocks obstructing alternating sides of the road. Soon after these oddities that were reminiscent of a post-apocalyptic gang's markings our broken link gave out and the chain split in two. Tim performed some stopgap repairs to the chain that we hoped would make it the last 30km to Nantes. A friendly French couple noticed our struggle and walked over to offer any help. They told us that the oddities we had seen were from a group of protesters up ahead that may be able to help us. We were warned that they would “seem odd but they don't bite” (Tim explained the verb *mordre* to Nicola...). As we cycled on carefully, the road began to look more and more like some dystopian zombie

apocalypse future, with abandoned, spray painted and often burned out cars. We soon came across what we can only describe as “the commune”. We were greeted by the oddest menagerie of humans and other animals, which included two goats and several dogs. They appeared out of the bushes at the side of the road and their makeshift hut, surrounding us. They turned out to be absolutely lovely people (and other animals) though! They immediately offered us some water and as soon as we explained our plight, they sent off someone to find their friend who was “good with bikes”. They sat us down and started talking with us about our expedition and the delights of England (though they did think Manchester was a London suburb...) as well as offering us bananas and milk. Their friend soon arrived and set to helping us remove the broken link from the chain before another appeared wearing a goat’s hide on his head, singing Bob Marley... we said our thank yous and swiftly left in a far better mood than before, with our chain holding out safely all the way to the campsite. We were greeted with a warm welcome and a free drink and Tim had the first shower of the trip while Nicola set to cooking dinner. We enjoyed a mint tea from the mint pilfered earlier before heading to bed for an early night as the tiredness set in.

2.4 Day 4. Tuesday 14th July. Distance cycled: 0km

As intended, our rest day commenced in a sedentary way. A relative lie-in allowed us to assimilate sufficient energy to operate the on-site washing machine. As you can imagine, after 4 days of grime accumulation, our Lycra was in dire need of this. Nicola took her first (blissful) shower of the trip. In short, it was a morning of errands and general appreciation of French camping facilities! In the afternoon we headed into central Nantes with the intention of finding a bike repair shop for Tallulah. This proved to be more difficult than anticipated because, unbeknown to us, Bastille day celebrations were well underway. As this equated to an almost complete closure of commercial Nantes, our problems were destined to go unresolved. Disappointed, we could think of nothing better to do than indulge our WiFi desires leaching off an unnameable fast food McChain. Fortunately, this allowed us to check out the celebration schedule and promptly our day took a turn for the touristic! The main feature of Bastille day appeared to be the great firework show just before midnight. It promised to be something spectacular and so gave us a reason to hang around. Nicola forced Tim to wander around the cathedral with her. His enthusiasm for historical buildings (also his need to find a public loo) then took over and so we dashed to the castle. More importantly, however, there was also a maze constructed entirely of branches in the grounds. A short time after this excitement, we found ourselves anxiously awaiting the beginning of the display. Our auditorium of choice was a children’s play area; our seat of choice, the slide. The surreality of this quickly faded when the show began however! We were transfixed for almost half an hour by predominantly tricoloured flashes and a thoroughly Francophilic soundtrack. Thank-you Nantesienne taxpayers! Happily, we trundled home, being almost unaffected by the sardine-ing that we had to endure en tram. When we returned to the campsite, we discovered a critter had consumed all of our carefully concealed emmental. On closer inspection, we noticed that the emmental bag had retained the creature. Tim thought quickly: he grabbed the knife and gallantly swooped to liberate it from its polyethylene prison. Wildlife hero.



2.5 Day 5. Wednesday 15th July. Distance cycled: 25km.

This morning began with another late start in the lovely Camping Belle Rivière in Nantes. This was somewhat overshadowed by our grounding in the city. We tentatively cycled Tallulah to the nearest bike shop where we were told that the commune-ists had done a great job on the repair and that to replace the damaged gear was not possible. We, however, could continue on to Italy without it. We had a gratuitous consolatory picnic then spent the afternoon adjusting the route somewhat to compensate for the delays. Having planned our new route and stocked up on extra-protective suncream, we returned to the campsite and got an early night.

2.6 Day 6. Thursday 16th July. Distance cycled: 110km

Today was truly a day of mauration and misconception. Things began slightly earlier but otherwise as they had on previous cycling days. This was definitely to our benefit. With 50km completed and the temperature climbing rapidly, we sought a shady spot to cover from the midday sun. To our delight we stumbled upon an outhouse or barn of sorts. We desperately needed to hide Nicola's decomposing skin from the UV waves and so we took a long picnic, nap and observation of the cohabiting rabbits break here.

Once the midday heat had subsided, our journey recommenced. The afternoon ride was more strenuous than anticipated and so we took many breaks. Our first break was in a delightful village. Whilst eating wonderful patisserie bought from the local boulangerie, we were approached by a man who seemed very interested in Tallulah. He then went on to elaborate on his cycling experience (at least, we think. His regional dialect was a little challenging!) Our suspicions about the conversation topic were confirmed (... we think) when he heartily encouraged us to give his "calves of steel" a good squeeze. This description is at least how we chose to interpret this bemusing situation so as to cause the least trauma



to ourselves.

In this town, we also replenished our food stocks at a small yet adequate supermarket. We seemed to wholly amuse the owner with our antics, especially when we stashed handfuls of mustard taster packs in our helmets. We continued, contented with the glorious gastronomic yield from the break. Little did we know that this was merely the beginning!

A few kilometres or so later, we decided to take a brief interlude under a fruit-bearing tree: fresh apricots all round! By this point, our water reserves were running low and so our next goal was to find a village, ideally one containing friendly locals or a public water source. On a primary cruise-through, the next village seemed to display neither locals nor water. Our hydration needs overpowered our desire to continue cycling and so after reaching the periphery, we decided to return for a more thorough search. Nicola saw a fountain in the church square and so we went to explore. After extensive investigation of this square, it was concluded that no such fountain existed. The most likely explanation was mirage. Concern for Nicola's sanity and increasing dehydration led us to the Marie. Tim used his boyish good looks and exceptional language skills to charm the receptionist into allowing us to take ten litres of water from the building. We appreciated the incredibly well temperature-controlled, UV-protective, dirtless palace we were directed to and we subsequently stayed in that bathroom for approximately forty minutes. Due consideration was given to pitching tent there and then, but after its feasibility was dismissed we gingerly exited the building.

Rehydrated, we continued towards the campsite, only to be perturbed by a flooded stream and some windfall floor fruit. After we had recovered from seeing what Tim thought was the carcass of a floorfruit-consuming animal, we gorged ourselves. This provided us with sufficient energy for the uphill slog to the campsite.



2.7 Day 7. Friday 17th July. Distance cycled: 90km

This morning was another early start but with our habitual breakfast of brioche and Nutella, we were soon underway. One early loo break in the middle of rural France had Nicola squatting at the side of the road just as a large tourist coach happened to be passing, so Tim ironically wet himself laughing. We stopped for lunch at midday with Tim's back and other bits aching just a bit too much, so we went into the supermarket to buy a sympathy lunch. For lunch we sat in a park under the shade of a big tree, marvelling at the youths revving up and down on their souped up lawnmowers. We decided there was a selection of food that needed eating up, so we had what could well be described as gratuitous amounts

of Camembert and Melba toast, leading to Camembert burps for the rest of the day (and night). We set off to complete the remaining 50km of the day and arrived at camp in good time. Here, we were greeted by a little fruit and vegetable stall. After stocking up on fresh vegetables for dinner, we headed for some very refreshing showers. On returning to our pitch (wearing only our towels) we found our tent missing, thanks to Tim having left the tent pegs! Luckily our friendly Dutch neighbours had salvaged it for us from the roof of their campervan. After making a slightly better attempt at anchoring it, we had a dinner of bread, cheese, olives and vegetables before climbing into the tent to sleep.



2.8 Day 8. Saturday 18th July. Distance cycled: 115km

This day was very tough. Both Nicola and Tim broke down in tears at points. It started badly with rain as we were getting ready in the morning. We also both were very tired and Nicola's sunburn had become crusty and sore. Having very little skin left on any exposed areas, moving to talk... and cycle became quite the challenge. At this point we were unsure why Nicola was burning so badly; we could only attempt to mitigate it through 15 minute sun cream breaks and covering up using all available garments. After a slow morning, we finally managed to set off, heading south once more. The route started badly, with very poor tracks until we finally reached Cognac. Morale was low so we had a quick picnic by the river for lunch before retreating out of the UV and into the air conditioning of a French betting (PMU) bar. We sadly did not grab a Cognac (don't drink and tandem, kids!) but we did grab an Orangina each to refresh before reviewing our route ahead. We stayed in this sanctuary for a few hours, in order to avoid the scorching midday sun, in spite of still having 70km to go. We eventually managed to drag ourselves away at 4pm, continuing slowly onwards. We became very quickly dehydrated and overheated, especially Nicola who was losing a significant amount of liquid through her burns. Once we were a little further

in, the last 30km were almost blissful! The sun was setting, and so the heat and light were lessening to a comfortable degree and to boot we were on a well tarmacked cycle path. We zoomed along at 30kmph though thanks to our delays earlier in the day, we didn't reach our camp until 11pm, forced to pitch up in the dark and enjoy Nutella and baguette for dinner.



2.9 Day 9. Sunday 19th July. Distance cycled: 16km

This morning started much better with us both getting a well-earned grasse matinée. Tim set off alone on Tallulah into town to buy supplies before everywhere closed for Sunday. It being a rest day allowed him to take some luxuries with the food shop, so breakfast included fresh figs, yoghurts and a local delicacy: the cannelé. It was an oddly satisfying cake of sorts that neither of us particularly liked, yet that we seemed to enjoy eating and went back for another: very much like smoking, we imagine. We showered and Tim hand washed the clothes. The afternoon was spent route planning and trying to figure out how best to avoid the sun's glare for the remainder of the expedition, as it was causing us very serious difficulties.

2.10 Day 10. Monday 20th July. Distance cycled: approximately 40km (we are unsure because the speedo was destroyed!)

This morning Tim had to telephone the local doctor's surgery to make an appointment for Nicola as, after a protracted conversation with the campsite owner and brief access to the internet, we established that she was suffering from a rare side effect as a result of her Lyme disease antibiotics. These were causing her to have an extreme reaction to UV radiation. This is why she was burning so excessively. We cycled into town and were seen swiftly and efficiently by the very friendly doctor who changed Nicola's prescription to reduce the side effects and wished us all the best for the remainder of our expedition. We spent the next few hours leeching off the free WiFi in the Office de Tourisme (in a bid to avoid, by that time, the midday heat) in the little town of Montguyon. Tim remarked that it felt like the kind of town you see in horror movies, where the innocent couple enter and find they are unable to leave because of supernatural forces. Little did he know how right he was.... We set off from Montguyon just before 4pm and started smoothly along the route départementale shared with many convois exceptionnels, large lorries carrying boats, homes and industrial supplies. We reached a nice downhill section and we were taking a break from pedalling, coasting at around 40kmph.

Suddenly, Tim lost control as Tallulah's front wheel started wobbling from side to side, Tallulah started to lean over one way and Tim overcorrected the imbalance; before we knew what was going on, we were both thrown onto the road. Tim had managed to survive without a scratch but Nicola was distinctly worse for wear, having landed on her elbow. Adrenaline took over, Tim carried Nicola to the bank at the side, before going back for the kit and Tallulah. After some swift on site first aid where Tim fashioned a sling and bandage for Nicola (with some backseat first aid from the injured party), a friendly local pulled over to see what had happened. He offered to take us to the doctor and hospital and even kindly took us in for the night, his partner having prepared a veritable feast for us for dinner. We spent a blissful night, nursing our wounds in a proper bed.



2.11 Remainder

The next few days were spent staying with the locals, visiting various medical establishments and generally recuperating and healing under their care. We left after about a week, heading for our flights from Pisa, via Bordeaux, Antibes, Milan and Florence.

3 Conclusion

We were disappointed to be forced to terminate the expedition early, as a result of the accident. At the time of the crash, we were just emerging from a period of low morale having solved the photosensitivity problem. We were primed and excited to continue with our expedition, and were subsequently sad not to have the opportunity to reach the figurative high of expedition completion after the low. However, the expedition did equip us with various relationship and emergency management skills. We hope to use these developed competencies to embark on further tandemming expedition in more remote places. This is under the proviso that we provide ourselves with more temporal flexibility to account for unexpected delays and emergencies. The unforeseen circumstances that arose on the trip could, for the most part, not have been predicted and so we have come to understand that unknown delays need to be factored in. We also acknowledge that both the Lyme disease symptoms and medication side effects significantly stunted our progress and made the expedition considerably tougher than anticipated. Overall, we now understand the importance of planning in extra time to allow ourselves to be in prime condition to undertake an expedition.

We hope to share these insights in the "lessons learnt" section of our blog. Additionally,

we will be presenting our expedition to a selection of Imperial College Students at the expedition society's evening talks. We hope through this we will be able to share our experiences so that other expeditions do not suffer the same fate as ours.

4 Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who made this expedition possible. We are enormously grateful to Imperial College Exploration Board for their support, advice and very generous funding. The Chiltern Bike Barn provided us with last minute bike repairs and equipment and advertised our blog to their customers. Charlotte's Tandems and Old Merchant Taylors' Society also kindly advertised our blog. Many thanks to Paul Arkley for helping us train and providing us with invaluable cycling advice and repair guidance and to Debra Wright for her support when we needed it most.

