

Riding a heat-wave

Amid a fierce and prolonged heat-wave, and later subject to some organisational chaos, my main summer mountain-bike trip of 2013 takes me from Basel in northern Switzerland to the lakes of Neuchâtel and Geneva, then further to the grand French Alps, the Rhone Valley and the Ardèche area of southern France; some 800 kilometres down the track. Intended as a trail adventure focussing on the Jura mountains, the journey partly morphs into a road tour - mainly because the heat persists into high altitudes and mars the prospect of strenuous riding above the tree line. An outcome of so much road riding is that I cover more distance and experience more regional diversity than originally planned. And while I miss some adrenaline activity, I still enjoy back-road territory that tourists normally bypass.



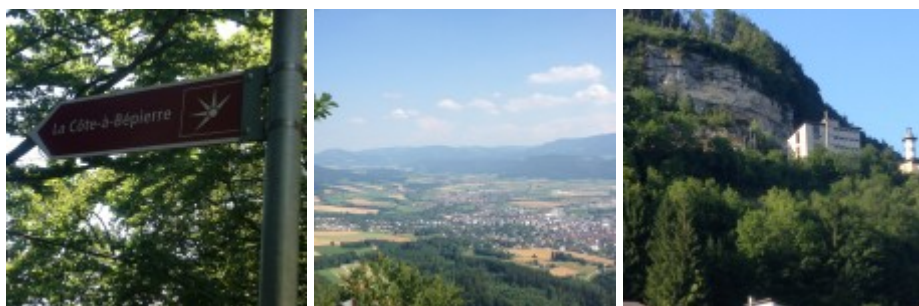
Saturday, July 20

The official Jura Bike trail starts at Basel's SBB station. Half an hour later, I'm in the affluent outskirts of the city and finding them rather gloomy. So are the financial prospects for this trip, as I soon begin to suspect: At a modest country pub off a gravel road, the waiter serves a small n/a beer to help me combat the freak heat-wave, and unapologetically asks for five Swiss francs. I try to kid myself that the high price is due to the proximity of Basel. On the ride's first afternoon, I easily make it to Laufen in a 35 kilometre loop through the woods. A slow worm crosses my path (or I the critter's) ten minutes before my route dives into the valley. I take a lousy photo, but I'm a reptile lover, so I still consider it one of today's highlights. Camping near the river and then taking a stroll, I meet a guy from Prague who is working here as a studio guitarist all summer and has been living in a tent for weeks. Curiously, his left hand dangles in front of his belly as if someone had recently assaulted it with a sledgehammer. I head into the village for a pizza and am treated to a local fiesta with alphorn blowers and a chanson singer - but Laufen's population isn't exactly out in droves to participate, so there's nothing much to watch. Rummaging for money to pay the bill, I wreck my first Ziplock bag and begin to question my reliance on these to waterproof my various valuables. Tent aside, that's about all I will have to say about my camping gear on this trip - none of which faces any serious challenges in the hot weather.



Sunday, July 21

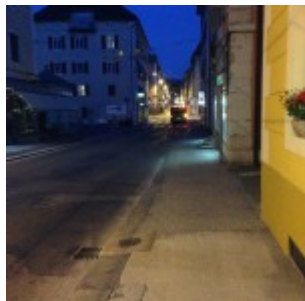
The Jura mountains are geologically distinct from the nearby Alps and are supposed to be Switzerland's coldest region... but perhaps that only applies in the winter. Today, the sun is sadist and the thermometer hits 34°C before lunch. Viewed impartially, there's a good mélange of terrain - some grueling uphill, some shady forest rolling, even some technically demanding passages. But I also endure a few brutally shadeless stretches of gravel road near the villages. For sheer heat exposure, these will soon be surpassed by the high, bare plateaus that are typical of these mountains. Soon, my courage is virtually dissolving every time the trail hits a bald spot. Water is a problem, with my two 0.75-litre bottles very barely lasting from one source to the next. Other snags are more comical: Riding through cattle-raising terrain, I discover an amazing diversity of gates and their shutting mechanisms. A couple of these almost defeat my meagre mechanical skills and usually poached brain - notably the DIY ones some farmers seem to favour. But in the end, I conquer them all (and I don't even liberate any cows, though the notion is sometimes very tempting). At a vantage point signposted *La Côte-à-Bepierre*, I meet two local bikers without backpacks who pity me for mine. We agree that we also deeply pity the hikers for the long hours they spend between watering holes. But whenever we're on roads, we pity the racing cyclists most of all, because they seem mentally unable to slow down and cool off. Which is virtually all we talk about. This heat experience is triggering a lot of mutual empathy - people salute each other with ritually pained grins when their paths cross. Despite it all, I manage to cover two stages of the official trail and roll into St. Ursanne well before evening, there to bathe in the cool River Doubs and chat to a couple of road cyclists from Germany. Each of them has packed about three times my base weight of just over six kilos. Among other things, they own a collapsible basin in which they wash their cycling clothes every night. I avoid mentioning that I don't intend to keep as clean as they do.



Monday, July 22

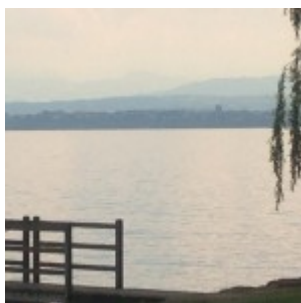
This is the day I finally fall out of love with my Sel Italia SLK saddle, which is a mystery, because I've been using it for years. There's not much else to say about that - just something I have to resolve when I get home. More immediately, baby cream is the only answer, but it's a feeble one. The official Jura MTB trail has a road bike counterpart, so it's no surprise to meet the Germans again in Saignelégier. The square outside the town's Migros supermarket provides no shade whatsoever, but the supermarket itself is air-conditioned Eden. Here, I establish a routine of eating (or unabashedly scoffing) white chocolate, a whole Camembert cheese and sliced ham for lunch. The German road cyclists are rather more health-conscious and purchase a huge melon. Fully expecting to meet again within the next couple of days, we part unceremoniously - and that's the last I see of them. The rest of the day's ride takes me into a thunderstorm, after which the heat-wave predictably reasserts itself within half an hour. I cross a plateau where cattle and horses roam semi-wild, but somehow fail to overwhelm me (the trail's official homepage suggests that they really should). Then I miss the signposting just outside La Chaux-de-Fonds. This results in a slightly scary hike up a stupidly narrow and rocky path, some 20 metres above a stream. Carrying the bike and almost slipping once or twice (which triggers minor rockslides), I consult my GPS app and find an exhausting, but tolerably safe way of reaching a road... short-cutting my way up a very steep, wooded bank and crossing a field of grass, still half-swamped by the storm earlier on. Fatigued and pretty much brain-dead by early dusk, I ride too far into town for camping to be feasible and am forced to take an over-priced hotel room.

There's an expensive steak and chips, paid for very grudgingly. Then insult is added to injury when the hotel restaurant closes before I can order a second coffee. Taking an evening stroll, I find La Chaux-de-Fonds to be something of a metropolis in the middle of nowhere – by no means sprawling, but important enough to feel immune to the surrounding wilderness and even a wee bit cosmopolitan. On the steps outside a bar, a tattooed man and a strikingly beautiful black woman appear to be having a deep, hopeless and complicated argument. The scene oozes with urbanity and will become the chief mental snapshot of my stay here.



Tuesday, July 23

On waking up, I realise the heat might defeat me if I don't go easier and modify my plans. So I decide to abandon the Jura trail with its sun-baked plateaus and head for Lake Geneva and the higher territory of the Alps. It is an over-optimistic scheme, as I will discover, since this insane heat-wave hasn't peaked yet and will completely offset the altitude effect when it does. But the very thought refreshes me amazingly, so I start the day with confidence. An hour's climb by road takes me out of town and to a wonderfully touristy spot called La Vue-des-Alpes – a hotel, a large car park with a snack bar, a coin telescope and no view of the Alps at all (obviously due to haze). I buy a coke and a mass-produced sandwich, food that only tastes acceptable in places like this. Then I roll down to Neuchâtel and the long, calm lake of the same name. The proximity of so much water offers the prospect of surviving this trip after all, and my plan to ride all the way to Lausanne today dissolves when I discover a legal camping site on the beach in Grandson. The rest of the day is rescheduled for bathing and recuperation. Later, after using the site's washing machine out of turn (there's a waiting list, but no one complains), I have a triumphant night discovering that my feather-light Six Moons Lunar Solo tent will very serenely resist battering rainfall and strong wind – another thunderstorm triggered by the heat. But my ears are much less indifferent, so I spend the midnight hour with plugs in them, watching a Blackadder episode on my smartphone, if truth be told. Such is the outdoor life.



Wednesday, July 24

The first part of the day is spent on paved road again. As I cross from Lac Neuchâtel to Lake Geneva, the majestic Alps come into sight for the first time, soon followed by the vast turquoise lake. The heat remains debilitating until I hit the beach in classy Lausanne. From here on, the sight of water exercises its psychological cooling effect – added to which, there's a shady, ungroomed hiking trail

smack next to the lake for much of the route to Geneva. It's flat, but rather fun to ride, negotiating roots, listening to the little waves and greeting dog walkers. On a rare hunch, I end the day's cycling in Rolle. That is fortunate because I'm later to learn that Rolle boasts the last camping site near the shore before you reach Geneva (illegal tenting seems out of the question in such a densely populated area). Supper, after a swim, is instant mashed potatoes with capers and tuna, unexpectedly delicious. Then I watch people party by the lake. There's a strong smell of barbecued meat and a semi-imagined one of booze and dope - all to the musical backdrop of reggae, presumably because this is a beach. Just before nightfall, a road cyclist turns up on his way north. Everything in his panniers seems dated and pitifully heavy, but he has covered over 200 kilometres of Alpine roads in a single day. He dines off noodles and canned beer, tells me I oughtn't to smoke, scoffs at my expensive drop seatpost, but shows some genuine interest in my minimalist packing system. The entire ultralight gear paradigm seems to have spent decades escaping his notice... which is a tad humbling, given his stellar performance today.



Thursday, July 25

I could swear the heat is getting worse - because it is. The last part of the road to Geneva is lined with quaint little villages, where I spend the last of my Swiss money on chocolate and cold drinks. I also take a break for some bike maintenance, lubricating the chain and fork. Then I roll into the city alongside two more road-bikers from Germany who are heading down the Rhone to Marseille. Geneva is incredibly affluent and immediately annoys me, so I ride on towards the French border, the route promisingly signposted for Mont Blanc. Just after Annemasse, I'm jubilant at my first coffee stop that doesn't break the bank - so relaxing my Swiss spending restrictions, I end up drinking three espressos. For the afternoon, I've got a track to Bonneville on my smartphone, plugged on a web portal as especially suitable for mountain bikes, though it transpires that someone mislabelled it. The only decent off-road riding today is by mistake, when I miss a turn and enjoy a trail alongside a little stream. Shortly after this, I have my first experience of blitz 'heat strokes' - an intense, full-body sensation of organic anarchy that comes without warning and lasts for about two seconds. From now on, I'm to endure these attacks about once or twice a day for as long as the insane temperatures persist. I treat them as omens to be ignored at my peril and search for shade immediately - drink, dump my pack and rest until I feel fresh again. For an extra treat, I put instant lemon tea in one of my water bottles. The result is a blast of thirst-quenching elation, quite literally intoxicating. But little is won, because I can never summon enough self-discipline to ration the drink, and so I usually end up cursing a prematurely empty bottle. Not today, however, because the road ahead is short. By late afternoon, I'm pedalling into touristy Cluses, where the promise of a swimming pool lures me to a legal camping site again. I manage to chat to a couple of other campers in a clumsy mélange of English, German and French. The topic, I'm relatively confident, is racing bikes, which seem at least as popular as soccer in France. Dress up as a cyclist and you might never be lonely here, but my lack of semantic stamina is pitiful today. Linguistically exhausted, I ride into town for a three-course meal... the trip's first decent dining event, courtesy of affordable French prices, but served by a waitress who unnerves me. Wearing thick layers of ill-chosen makeup, her main focus is on long chats with local clients, which she very unwillingly interrupts to serve anyone else. It seems I'm the kind of person she snaps at, so perhaps my lasting impression of Cluses is

soured by her manners. The best description I can offer is of a fussy Dutch seaside resort teleported into undeservedly magnificent surroundings.



Friday, July 26

I'm riding on paved roads too much, but I badly want to see Mont Blanc close up and have a curious sense of urgency about it. So I pause very briefly for a coffee and croissant in a seedy but friendly motor-bikers' bar en route, then catch my initial view of the mountain just outside Les Sallanches. It turns out that Mont Blanc will remain with me for hours, offering plenty of superior photo opportunities, but the picture I take on first sight is so special to me that I'm reluctant to replace it with a better one (so I don't). In the pretty little town, I squander an hour of precious morning riding time just sitting outside a cafe and admiring this vast, white boulder before continuing to the exclusive skiing resort of Mageve and onwards towards Crest Volant with its deserted chair lifts... this is where my thermometer reads 37°C at 1,300 metres of elevation. I then make a mistake by turning onto a promising trail that apparently leads down to Ugine. Before long, this unmapped track gives way to a half-dry stream, down which I am forced to carry my bike. I resolve to forgo further exploration and stick to road until I reach the valley. The reward is the breathtaking scenery of the Gorges de l'Arly, but the penalty is a red brick wall of heat as I approach the Ugine crossroads. In yet another show of whimpery, I take the flat, officially designated cycling path towards Lac d'Annecy, but stop off to camp in a field well before I reach the lake. My tent pitched in open mode and facing a mountain for my first sight in the morning, I download a few bona fide mountain-bike tracks for the next day. This proves an unnecessary move, because there's a network of excellently signposted hiking trails around the lake. But at least I fall asleep with a worthy mission mapped out.



Saturday, July 27

At last, I spend an exhilarating morning on wooded mountain trails again. A grass snake gives me a ridiculous time by looking willing to stay put for a photograph, but sliding into the undergrowth the moment I kneel down in the dirt to get close. The trees offer welcome shade, but the physical going gets torturous whenever they give way to a panoramic view. The compensation is a variety of terrain - knuckled forest tracks sometimes yielding to white gravel paths that remind me of Crete. As I emerge from the forest near Brédannaz, I'm almost certain the sun is consciously intent on finishing me off... my thermometer giving me an unbelievable reading of 43°C! But just a moment later, the

oasis of a bathing site appears and I catch sight of French parents huddling up in the meagre shade of a hedge while their kids enjoy the lake. Quickly, I drink a whole bottle of water before stripping and diving in. After that, I'm content to ride through the lakeside villages for a while. Outside a little café, I watch a pretty teenage couple purchase one instant lottery ticket after another, the girl busy scratching as the boy keeps returning to the counter for more. They are obviously getting exploited and probably not even legally, but I'm at idle peace with the world right now and therefore atypically non-judgemental... something that is about to change. Just half an hour later in the town of Annecy itself, commercial tourist hell burns red hot. Actually, it's a sweet and ancient town at heart, somewhat reminiscent of Bruges in Belgium, but completely devastated by the arts, crafts and kitsch mob - hooligans in smug, bourgeois disguise. The bustle is infuriating, and getting past the outskirts proves well-nigh impossible, because cycling seems to be banned in every meaningful direction. Accordingly, I make several false starts and yell English obscenities at drivers who honk at me. Over coffee at an awful burger bar, I phone Christa, who is due to head south by car tomorrow or the next day. I spend some time trashing Annecy, then we tentatively agree to meet up in Vienne, just south of Lyon, sometime on Monday afternoon. It's a plan destined to collapse, but since I can't know this, I decide to ride small country roads through the foothills of the Alps to the Rhone Valley. Before sundown, I make it to Rumilly, rather geared to spending a night in a hotel - but none of the natives I ask know of one. This is ordinary France, as I am to conclude. Though the road is actually rather charming and would be clogged with touring families in a country like Belgium or Germany, there's a surplus of even grander scenery in every direction, and I'm not on the fast route to any of it. So nobody ever comes here, and the good people of Rumilly get to keep their tranquil town square to themselves. No tourists. Not even me. I'm just today's stray foreigner, in and out like a customer who has entered the wrong shop. Ten minutes down the road, I pitch my tent.



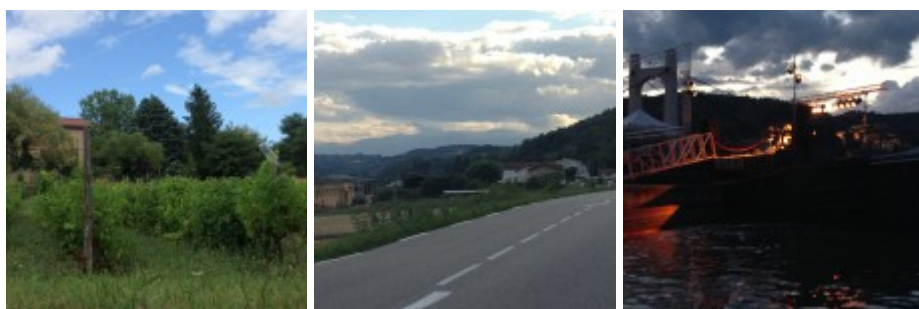
Sunday, July 28

I'm getting into the swing of these much lower mountains with their craggy little gorges as I encounter the Rhone for the first time. For lunch, I resolve to polish off one of my expensive freeze-dried trekking meals, purchased as emergency food for the Alps, but neither necessary nor at all enjoyable. The culinary experience is not worth relating. There's a paved cycling path along some stretches of the river, but it doesn't seem particularly well known. The only other leisure seekers I encounter are boat people and anglers. Botheringly, the clouds are starting to look ominous - in tune with the forecast I have been trying to ignore. As a result, I don't get very far. As the first of several rolling thunderstorms strikes, the safe haven of a camping site emerges and I decide to stop at its restaurant for coffee, waiting for the rain to cease. As it happens, I don't get to leave Gelignieux for another 20 hours. In the literally relentless downpour, I'm forced to admit that brushing off manufacturer's advice is bad policy - I should really have seam-sealed my tent, though the small leaks are manageable. This cockiness shall be rectified when I'm back home. In the evening, I violate one of my most sacred principles by letting a teenager scrounge a cigarette off me without asking for his age. For lack of anything else to ponder until the following afternoon, the omission bugs me beyond proportion.



Monday, July 29

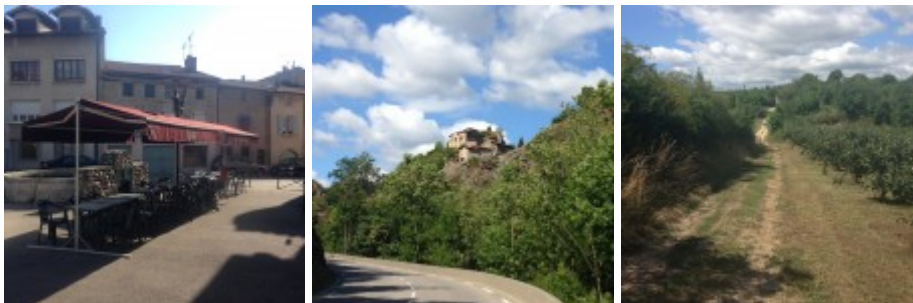
By time the rain finally stops, it's one in the afternoon and I feel pushed for time - so I average 20 km/h for the 105 kilometres to Vienne (not hugely athletic, but quite a bit faster than usual during this trip). As their foothills get progressively flatter, the real Alps are a mere shadow back in the Northeast... but the venerable Massif Central is already gracing the horizon on the western bank of the Rhone. Mountains behind and mountains ahead, I roll down into Vienne and instantly like the place for its 19th century architecture and lush surroundings. Yet despite Vienne's attraction and wealth of Roman ruins, the only hotel I can find is a large, chain-owned antiseptic box. I deem the building physically impossible to enter, so still firmly planning on sleeping in a real bed tonight, I continue down the river to Les-Roches-Condrieu. There, in the nick of time before dark, a much smaller and prettier hotel offers affordable accommodation but an exorbitantly priced menu. I quickly scatter my gear around the room (some of it still needs to dry out) before heading off in search of cheaper food. There's an alternative culture festival on the banks of the Rhone, with a folk group using a barge as their stage. Still wearing my sweaty, synthetic bike gear and thus blending in rather badly, I devour four crêpes at a stall and listen to the music indifferently, though an arty atmosphere I might otherwise find pretentious makes a pleasing change tonight. After the concert, a series of short films is shown. One is a collage of English-language footage of America's civil rights and Black Power leaders in the 1960s. The black Frenchman sitting next to me asks whether the film is about Africa, so I explain, reciting names like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. He doesn't seem to recognise them, and it takes me a while to realise that this really isn't his history at all. He just shares the colour of his skin with the foreign men on the monochrome screen, who spoke a different language to another generation. Quickly, he loses interest in the topic because my French is too clumsy.



Tuesday, July 30

I forgot to mention that news from home is a bit bleak. Our car's exhaust pipe virtually fell off yesterday - and the verdict was to replace it. As a result, Christa's departure has been delayed until midday today. We agree that I should grab the opportunity of some riding in the Massif Central, but not venture too far west or south. So with time on my hands, I pedal over the river into Condrieu proper, recalling that I'm now officially in the South of France, being comfortably below Lyon on the map. As a matter of fact, the changes are quite sudden and noticeable in broad daylight. Olive trees and a pavilion outside a café bear witness to a Mediterranean lifestyle of good food and warm

evening air. But the most poignant sign is rather more mundane: a powerful smell of chlorine in the villages. It's in the tap water, in the cleaning agents people use copiously, seemingly all over their cars and pavements, too. Perversely, it's also a welcome odour to me - carrying memories of many other days spent near the southern edge of Europe. Is chlorine perhaps the defining smell of the South, I wonder? So many more wholesome contenders fill the guidebooks: garlic, lavender, pine resin, thyme... but those aromas are scattered treats, whereas chlorine is ubiquitous and assertive. The thought captivates me to the extent that I am mentally composing a light essay on the issue until I leave the road, turning off onto an unmarked forest trail with no particular care for its destination. For my efforts, I can afford to be sloppy about my route now, having the rest of the day to find my way back to locations that might feature in Christa's road atlas. So I'm off-road and in the shade for a couple of hours, on a track that fords half a dozen little streams and ends in a vineyard. Apart from a local with a dog, I don't encounter anyone in the woods, and when I roll into Saint-Julien-Molin-Molette to stop outside a cafe, I'm surprised that it is apparently a backpackers' teeming Mecca. The explanation is provided by a German woman with an enormous rucksack and a paper map she lends me: my itinerary has crossed the pilgrims' route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. For the first time during this entire endeavour, I catch sight of other long-distance mountain-bikers, who are probably also pilgrims travelling The Chemin, as insiders apparently call it. It would be fun to head for the village's *piscine*-graced camping site for some conversation about our different routes, but I'm wisely reluctant to impose my frivolously agnostic self on the spiritually motivated. So I ride on to Bourg Argental, where I purchase a ton of nutritionally hopeless food and pitch my tent near the River Déôme. Then I phone Christa, who has fallen prey to a two-hour traffic jam in Luxembourg and now plans to stop off in Burgundy for the night. Accordingly, we postpone our rendezvous until noon tomorrow, when I am scheduled to wait in Sarras, further south on the banks of the Rhone. For my evening entertainment, I watch a guy dig a hole in the sandy bank of the Déôme while a woman looks on. Both are very clearly excited about his mission... but it's one that remains a total mystery to me.



Wednesday, July 31

So there's a final, brief morning of cycling until this holiday is transformed into a car journey to the Cevennes and the sea - which is another story. The higher Alps draw very close to the Massif Central here, and I catch one more awe-inspiring glimpse of them as I cycle towards Annonay. A short text message confirms that Christa will indeed make it to Sarras on time, having spent the night near Cluny. That still leaves an hour or so for me to visit Annonay, about which I lack any information whatsoever, though I'm somehow convinced that it's worth a look. Perhaps I'm developing an instinct for rural France, because my hunch is accurate: Annonay is a proud little town on the Déôme river, a regional metropolis during the Middle Ages with echoes of its grandeur lingering everywhere, but not overly infested with tourists. It is also the largest settlement in the Ardèche department, which - as a signpost informs me - I have rather unexpectedly reached by courtesy of Christa's delays and the enduring heat-wave. Chickening out of sunstrokes above the tree line and confined to surfaced roads so much, this trip has covered a good deal more distance than I could have accomplished on rough mountain passes. And perhaps mere mileage isn't entirely to be scoffed at, either. For a brief moment, I am quite pleased with myself despite missing some of

my off-road objectives. I roll down into Sarras, sit down in front of a bar and order a coke. Then I get someone to take my photograph. Just as I'm about to mail it to friends and family, a young Dutch lad on an ancient hardtail stops off to say hello as a fellow cyclist. He is clad in a bandana, a t-shirt and torn black jeans. His luggage is a tiny leather rucksack and his destination is Spain. "No tent?" I ask, since there's surely no room for one in his pack and I wonder how he copes in storms. "Just the sky," he says. "Or whatever else I find." He's right, I realise. Shelter always crops up when you're his age and on the road - because anything will do and failing even that, you just delete the memory of a bad night. Later on in the car, we overtake him, riding out of his saddle and dancing around on his pedals like the first person in history to discover joy.

