
Strauss Annual Report & Travelogue 2015

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Vivaldi may well have found four seasons to write music for, but for us there are only two - busy and away! We've gradually become somewhat used to that, but this year things seemed to ramp up a notch, with more pots on the fire than usual.

January always brings lots of theatre lighting work for Pat, as the local am dram group (LADS) prepares for its panto. *Babes in the Wood*, however, required lighting actors moving around a dimly-lit, foggy stage without spoiling the



mood, and creating a scene where the junior chorus, singing '*We are Revolting Children*', looked just that! Recording the performances kept Mike well occupied, running two cameras on four nights, then putting various clips together to create two versions of the resultant video, one for each of the two sets of young 'stars' playing the 'Babes' glued Pat to her computer for many days. Woven in between all this, and continuing into the next months, were the many stages of organising a cycling Daffodil Weekend we

were to run at the end of March. But perhaps most noteworthy were the frequent photo shoots of the final weeks of restoration of Ledbury's Master's House, followed by hours and hours of Pat distilling two years of the team's photos of it for the numerous illustrated talks she and a colleague gave (with Mike as technical manager!) to local groups about the work that had gone into this historic building, as well as for the creation of many of the interpretive displays in the building.



When the Master's House finally opened in March, taking on the library, Poetry Festival and council offices, Pat breathed a momentary brief sigh of relief ... then she got busy giving guided tours and more talks! Theatre work rose



to the fore again, doing the lighting for a one-act play LADS entered for the Hereford Drama Festival, then in April for a long day of six plays in the next round of the All England Theatre Festival, hosted by our theatre. Rehearsals for a performance of *Peter Pan the Musical* came with some rather ambitious lighting requests, including creating a misty lagoon scene into which a huge crocodile entered, followed by Captain Hook's ship, all needing to be seen without spoiling the gloomy atmosphere. This ate up precious time she needed to spend on route planning for our French tour in late May. Google's

poorly-timed switch to a new interface was nearly the nail in the coffin, though, both of us struggling to find workarounds for the loss of familiar ways of working we had depended upon.

But somehow the routes were worked out and printed up, and on the 20th of May we were on our way to France for a month in the Poitou-Charente area, cycling from Tours through delightful Chinon on the Loire then west to La Rochelle on the Atlantic coast, with a day to cycle around the Il de Ré, continuing south to Saintes, east to Nontron then north via Chauvigny to Poitiers. The scenery was pleasant, if not remarkable, though, as usual, the company we were with added greatly to the holiday, whether by sharing the



experience of coming across something special along the road or through the general camaraderie around the campsite. Some of the highlights were: the numerous bands we found performing in the streets of Chinon; the blanket of white and lilac petals settling on and around many of the tents at one campsite; cycling around the dense network of waterways of the Marais-Poitevin west of Niort; the oyster beds and cycle tracks along the northern coast of the Il de Ré; totally unexpectedly coming across the Café de la Reunion (pictured on some place mats we've been using for several years); the Abbey and delightful streets of Brantome; the preserved remains of Oradour-sur-Glane, where one sunny Saturday the residents were rounded up and massacred by the Nazis, the town then being looted and



burnt - a tragic, poignant story; and photographing the buildings of Chauvigny lit up at dusk. On the other side of the coin, one couple had to go home on the first day due to a very painful attack of gall stones, Pat managed to lose her purse that same day and her phone three weeks later (both her fault!), we endured two worrying nights of torrential rain storms, and the very useful canopy we use to extend our tent space started to perish!

July is always a busy month, starting with a week of the Ledbury Poetry Festival (hosting poets, stewarding, going to readings and generally mooching around town and being very involved). A new young member at the theatre had made video recordings of Peter Pan and gone some way towards editing them, but the job of compiling the scenes and rendering them onto DVDs for viewing was waiting for Pat's attentions. She also set about making a replacement canopy for our tent, and we made hundreds of personally named badges for August cycling events. In the middle of the month we trekked up to the Lake District for a long-weekend reunion of the group we toured with in Kerala (India) two years ago, cycling through the stunning scenery (and grunting up the hills that come with it!) that Windermere has to offer on two days, then putting on our hiking boots and climbing over the lumps to Rydal on the third. Again the mix of super cycling and an equally super group made for a very special time, enhanced even further by a visit with a couple in Ambleside who introduced us to walking in the Lakes but we hadn't seen for several years.



Woven through July were many hours of planning time, working out when we needed to be where, how we were going to get there and where we were going to stay during a five-week expedition on the Continent during August. There were four specific events we wanted to link up, so everything had to work together pretty much like clockwork. The first week was spent at our sixth Semaine Federale, the huge French cycling rally, held in Albi this year. The 'campsite' was a local airfield cum car rally circuit, the small tents such as ours lining the perimeter and the showers and loos far enough away that we often cycled to them! The weather was hotter than hot, up to 40°C (104°F) at times, but the ambiance was very sociable, and we kept to the shorter rides, taking time to rest in the shade. In addition to Albi itself, its old buildings taking on a mellow patina against the blue sky,



the towns of Cordes-sur-Ciel (left) and Lautrec provided great photogenic opportunities, as did vast fields of sunflowers. From Albi, three train rides took us to the south coast, where the sun shone less intensely, and on the following day we cycled to Montpellier to catch the Bike Bus to Beaune for an overnight. Thence followed an epic day of seven trains, taking us through the Alsace to Karlsruhe, just over the border in Germany, all working perfectly to plan!! As did three trains on the next day, transporting us right across the country to Passau. We were instantly impressed by the presence of so many ordinary

cyclists we saw riding around at all hours, and a wander around its very attractive old quarter late on the night of our arrival and again the next morning, including a memorable organ concert in the church, made up for the ordeal of almost not being able to get into the hotel we had booked!

Stage two thence commenced - cycling down the Danube. Crossing into Austria and using the riverside cycle paths as much as possible, we experienced a new 'freedom' - no one else to look after, no route-finding to have to do, very few hills to have to climb and time to stop and take in whatever caught our eye. There was also the pleasure of having the river by us for most of the journey. Linz, Melk (abbey pictured left), Vienna and Bratislava (Slovakia) each provided plenty of sightseeing opportunities, some unexpected, and dozens of photos; we could easily slip into Scheherazade's slippers with stories of our experiences! Only one challenge - Mike getting stung by a wasp ... on his tongue!! We were nowhere near any medical assistance that could help us on a Sunday, nor could we have described to anyone exactly where along the river we were, so we had to cycle on for 20km to a larger town with a hospital





where he could be treated for a swollen tongue and severe rash! Once that settled down, we rode on (against the doctor's wishes ...) a further 20km to our B&B for the night and enjoyed a wonderful meal while the rain pelted down outside!

We had been to Vienna before, but the combination of nearly 30 years of travels and faded memories allowed us to see it with fresh eyes. We certainly admired the myriad of elegant buildings that dominate the city centre, but equally enjoyed the colourful Hundertwasser House, a magical piece of fanciful but practical 1980s architecture. After a full day exploring the city by trams and foot, how better to spend an evening than at an open-air screening of a Norwegian ballet company's adaptation of *Swan Lake* - very artistic and totally unique! Bratislava

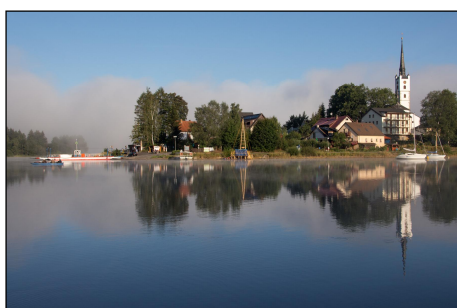
(right), the capital of Slovakia and our final stop down the Danube, was in some ways a slightly down-at-the-heels version of Vienna, many buildings lacking external maintenance. But the more we walked, the more we found to



appreciate of what is, after all, a slightly different culture, with various bits of 'street art' adding an element of fun to our wanderings. Our hotel there was the nicest of all we stayed in, its buffet breakfast more than enough to keep us going all day, and we enjoyed generous al fresco dinners in the old part of town, musicians serenading anyone within earshot.



Trains took us back to Linz from where we ground our way up a 'mountain' for an overnight stop before continuing into the Czech Republic for stage three - the International Tandem Rally at Frymburk on Lake Lipno, out of which flows the Vltava, a river brought to life by the composer Smetana in *Ma Vlast*. Fortuitous timing allowed us to watch several



kayakers tackle the fast moving current during a weekend event. Camped on the edge of the lake, we had a superb view of the small town with its iconic church tower and the busy little ferry that transported hundreds of cyclists across the lake during the week. A couple of misty mornings made it even more atmospheric. However, we soon realised how little cycling on the flat does for one's climbing muscles!! The area is quite hilly, though very scenic, and we were routed along some

stretches of road that hadn't seen any tarmac for some time, if ever, so we worked for our supper. The social side of the week was up to expectations, and for a spot of culture, we ventured by bus and train to nearby Český Krumlov on one day, walking our socks off to take in the fascinating architecture.

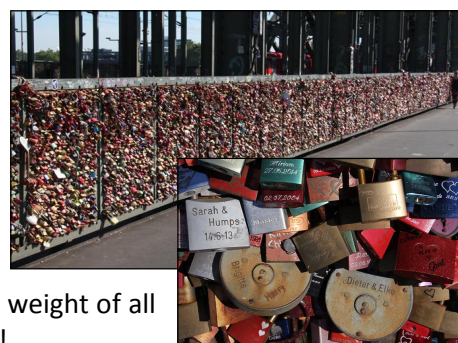


With four days in hand before our ferry from Holland to the UK, we had a challenging but beautiful cycle ride back to Linz in time for an ice cream before our train to Munich for a brief overnight. Sleep was indeed brief, as our hotel



happened to be located in the red light district, with flashing lights and thumping music going on all night! The girls below tried their best to get Mike to come down and see them when they spotted him in our window... We spent a busy day in Cologne ticking off places of interest, but the sight not to miss was the 'bridge of love', where over time couples have covered the railings of the 500 meter long railway

bridge with padlocks of varying sizes and colours, engraved with their names, to commemorate their visit, marriage, anniversary or whatever. However, the weight of all those locks is causing concern, and rumour had it that they might all be cut off!





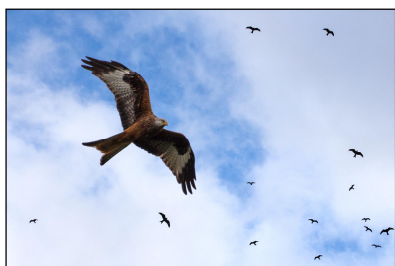
By the first Wednesday in September, we were back on home soil, though not yet headed for home. Faced with a sunny morning and a long wait for the first train, we cycled from Harwich to Manningtree, stoked up on a full English breakfast, then continued on to Colchester for trains to Hertford, spending the night with friends there before continuing by rail to Peterborough and thence by bike to Corby for our final 'event', a long weekend in Rutland at the annual Flying Gate rally. Though 'cycling past Rutland Water' doesn't have quite the same ring as 'cycling down the Danube', the part of the church above the water looked lovely in the sunshine, and we had a really good time wandering

around the countryside and socialising with yet another group of people we've come to know over the years. It was a fitting end to a remarkable five weeks away, having covered 1300km (800 miles) on the bikes plus another 3000km (1850 miles) or so on the trains. You'll have to imagine how much countryside we saw!

It didn't take long to get back into the cycle: Master's House tours and preparations for Christmas sales; theatre lighting, made easier by the purchase of some LED lanterns (which can change colour just by asking them to do so!) but more challenging by a couple of very demanding travelling shows; and planning our camping tour for next year. During September and October we got away to Lincolnshire and Derbyshire (making our way once again up the old Mam Tor road (right) in glorious sunshine!) for weekend gatherings and managed our one and only tandem ride of the year ... the one we were down to lead!



One of the highlights of late autumn was seeing the play *Beryl*, a superb piece of theatre from the West Yorkshire Playhouse depicting the life of arguably the most famous woman cycle racer of the 20th century. As part of the show



each of the four actors actually pedal bikes (in place!), clocking up some 10km each time. With most of her successes coming before we moved to the UK, Beryl Burton had meant little more to us than a name mentioned in cycling circles, but by the end of the performance we knew her well! On an early November weekend Pat was able to fulfil her dream of spending a day behind her camera at the Gigrin Farm Red Kite feeding station in mid-Wales. Unpracticed with photographing moving targets, her success rate was low, but a few photos

were worth keeping, and the experience was fantastic. Taking part in a medieval feast held at the Master's House, to celebrate the transformation of that building from a deteriorating, messed-about unattractive lump in the middle of a car park into the national treasure it has become, put the icing on the cake. Along with several others we made an effort to 'dress the part', dinner was served largely by candlelight, and local musicians playing period instruments provided the entertainment.



That's the executive summary. To relate the whole story would take a year. But then, it has taken that long to generate it. We can't help but feel lucky to have had such a wealth of experiences and to have been able to spend so much time in the company of good friends, plus the time we had in August to be just with each other. We're a bit behind in getting photos of our travels up onto our Flickr website (link below), though a healthy selection from the Frymburk week are up there, along with those of red kites that survived the delete button and a collection of many of the workers involved in the restoration of the Master's House. An effort will be made before the year is out to augment the collections, but for now, if you're keen to see more of the theatre photos, go to www.flickr.com/photos/lads-ledbury/sets.

It remains only for us to wish each of our readers a very enjoyable end to 2015 and a good start to the new year. We have enjoyed reading letters from many of you during the past weeks, and hope that you keep up the habit. Busy lives and distances make keeping in touch any other way a bit tricky!

Pat & Mike

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More photos (and/or larger versions) can be seen on www.flickr.com/photos/psycle/albums.
 Annual reports are on www.strauss.org.uk. Printed copies happily sent out upon request.

