



▼ Day 1 at the campsite: it's a long road ahead...

NEED TO KNOW

WHERE WE STAYED

- Ayr Holiday Park
Tel. 01736 795855
www.ayrholidaypark.co.uk
- Cheddar Mendip Heights
www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk

HOW MUCH?

- Camper hire: From £630 a week, depending on month
- Fuel: £300
- Campsites: £280
- Total cost: £1840

MUST SEE / DO

- Keep riding
- Stan's Cycles, Shrewsbury

RAINY DAY OPTIONS

- Keep on riding
- Visit the pub for longer than planned

SPECIAL THANKS

■ Steve and Heather at Campervantastic (www.campervantastic.com), my amazing son, Tom, for coming along for the ride and my equally fantastic and super-organised wife, Amanda, for being our support team

For a full list of campsites, check out Glenn's excellent blog at: lejoguphill.blogspot.co.uk/

LE JOG with Bertha part 1

Glenn Martin, a 50-year-old MAMIL, explains how a VW California helped him achieving a life-long goal

Words and photos Glenn, Tom and Amanda Martin

Lands End to John O'Groats (LE JOG), travelling the length of Great Britain, is one of the big British challenges. Whether on bicycles, in buses or even on foot [no, that's madness - MP], a single journey in the UK spanning about 1,000 miles is a big achievement to tick off anyone's bucket list.

Having recently turned 50, I decided that, while I'm still of sound body and mind, I should attempt a meaningful personal challenge. Having recently resurrected my passion for cycling, and become a fully-fledged MAMIL (Middle-Aged-Man-In-Lycra), I'm now one of the many people you will see wobbling around the country on two wheels on Sunday mornings in embarrassingly tight fitting clothing.

So, cycling Land's End to John O'Groats seemed the logical choice to push my mind, body and spirit. I convinced my son, Tom (a keen cycle tourer himself), to join me, as well as my wife, Amanda, who agreed to drive along and support us.

“A lot of any physical endeavour is in the mind, and I was up for the challenge”

She initially agreed on condition that she could have a classic old Camper to undertake the journey in. Unfortunately, it quickly became apparent that there aren't many owners of these who would agree to lending us one for such a long journey. We also realised that, whilst it sounded idyllic,

the practicalities of an old Camper were not suited to the demands of what we had in mind.

This led us to the idea of renting a T5 California and, after a trip to a local dealer to see one for herself, Amanda was sold on the idea. We rented ours from a company called Campervantastic in London, who not only specialise in VW Campers, but are indeed also fantastic.

I planned a route using as much of the National Cycle Route as possible as these are largely quiet back roads or dedicated cycleways rather than major A roads. This resulted in a route of 972 miles, with a total of 11,000m of ups and downs (about the height of Everest).

As Easter approached, the excitement and trepidation grew. Could we really do this? Could I really

▼ All packed up and ready to go: the Martin family prepare for their bucket list adventure



▲ Day 1: St. Michels Mount in Penzance



▲ At Lands End mile post. Just 972 miles to go...



◀ Lunch: our motto is you can have as much cider as you like without worrying about the waistline

► Day 3: lunch at a pub on Bodmin Moor. We're not going to lie, the ride was hard, but sun and beer always lifted the spirits



◀ Day 3: a sign from above. Is it too early to call it a day?

▼ Another sign, this one encouraging and depressing in equal measures



▲ Our hired VW California was a sublime base camp for our 15-day voyage of pain, torture and sausage sarnies





▲ Ah bliss, the flatlands of the Somerset Levels. Thankfully, now dried out

▼ Our home for the night of day 5: Priddy Campsite



◀ More selfies, this time at Ambleside

▶ The beauty of Thirlmere and the classic sight of a load of sheep's backsides. This is what passes for a traffic jam in the Lakes



▲ Day 10: a great end to the day

▼ Selfie time – Glenn on Clifton Suspension Bridge



▲ As much of the route as possible was done on National Cycle Networks



▲ Day 7 and into Shropshire – no sign of Phil Collins on that bike though!

cycle 70-80 miles a days for 15 days? The most I'd ever done in a day was 60, but a large part of any physical endeavour is in the mind, and I was up for the challenge.

Effortless cruising

Finally, on the Thursday before Good Friday I was heading to Campervantastic in London to pick up our home for the next two and a bit weeks. It was a brand new, gleaming white, VW California SE, complete with optional bike rack, which was obviously a key requirement for us.

After a 30-minute introduction to the Van, I was off into the early Easter rush, heading round a busy M25 and M1 to pick up Amanda, Tom, the bikes and two weeks' worth of provisions. I soon felt comfortable in the Van, as promised, and found it as easy as driving a car, cruising along the motorways effortlessly.

Having accommodated lots of bags, boxes and three bikes (we took a spare), 'Big Bertha', as Amanda duly nicknamed the VW, was found to be very commodious.

We were soon heading through the West Country and, after the obligatory traffic jam on the A303 near Stonehenge, we arrived at our campsite near St. Ives just before sunset. Settling into our VW for our first night's camping, we were already smitten with what would be our hotel on wheels for the next 16 days.

Getting ready for bed was full of hilarity, as Tom – all 6ft8 of him – climbed into the roof bunk for the first time. Needless to say, we were concerned about whether it would

hold him, and how much the roof would bow downwards, but we need not have worried as the top bunk is designed to hold two full grown adults, or one large Tom. On the bottom bunk, Amanda and I had a good night's sleep, and found the bed remarkably comfortable, especially considering we're both over 6ft tall ourselves.

The next morning we had a cooked breakfast, making use of all the VW's facilities, and the fully-equipped kitchen Campervantastic had put together. We loved the way in which the picnic table and chairs stowed away in the side and rear door – just one of the Cali's many special touches.

Day 1: it begins...

We packed up and headed to Lands End. It was a clear and sunny morning and we couldn't have hoped for a better start. We met some serious-looking cyclists who said they planned to do the journey in eleven days, which is all very macho, but

soon started to feel the hills. At the 10-mile mark I urged Tom on, saying we'd just completed the first 1% of the journey. LE JOG veterans will all tell you Cornwall and Devon are the hardest parts of the journey, so we were pleased to be doing the trip this way round. The landscape undulates relentlessly with some brutally steep hills to climb.

After our first hard day's riding, it was great to roll into camp and have a ready-made hotel waiting for us for the night. This was something we rapidly took for granted, unaware of the many challenges Amanda had making sure this occurred like clockwork each night. We still hadn't perfected the nightly regime of arranging bags, food and equipment – this would take a few more days' experience. Clearly, we had to get organised.

Days 2 and 3: the west

The next day flew past and we reached Bude on another excellent sunny but windy day – especially over Bodmin Moor – with a great ride along the idyllic Camel Trail on route.

The good weather ended on Easter Sunday as we headed into the grey skies of Devon. We paused at Great Torrington for a snack and noticed what looked like a gigantic model village being built by the Great Torrington Cavaliers. Apparently, they build vast models every few years and then burn them down! Their current project will be torched later this year.

As the day progressed, Tom became very tired and unwell and asked Amanda to pick him up whilst I continued alone to our next stop at Bampton. Tom had

“ LE JOG veterans will all tell you Cornwall and Devon are the hardest parts of the journey ”

we felt happier with the 15 days we'd allowed. After the standard photos at the Lands End sign, we were off – next stop Newquay, with about 55 miles of harsh Cornish hills in between. Although Tom had cycled about 2,000 miles across the Baltic countries the previous year, he hadn't done much (any) training for this trip, so pretty



▲ Day 8 and Tom's back in the saddle after the arse fell out of his world. Here he's having his bottom bracket fixed at Stan's Cycles

▶ And here's Stan's Van – a dependable T5, naturally



▲ Evening entertainment generally consisted of dominos, cider and humour

▶ Day 9: the view across the Mersey to Ellesmere Port



gone down with a nasty tummy bug, which took several days to recover from, but at least having the Cali meant he could ride along with Mandy while he recovered.

Days 4, 5 and 6: riding solo

I was now riding solo, enjoying the trip down from Devon and across the Somerset Levels, through to Herefordshire and Shropshire. Somerset is largely flat, as the floods of early 2014 showed, but to escape the levels there is a 250m ascent up to the Mendips, with fantastic views from Priddy, which also has a super Camping & Caravanning Club site.

Pressing on through Bristol the next day was pretty straightforward. The city prides itself on being bike friendly, and so it was. I stopped at the Clifton Suspension Bridge and cycled across it to tick off the first of many iconic bridges of the journey. Then it was across the Severn Bridge into Wales.

That night we stayed with my sister in Monmouth. I arrived later than I'd hoped, feeling tired and sorry for myself as I'd picked up a nasty, belligerent saddle sore. There's no magic treatment for this, I just had to grin and bear it, with the help of plenty of painkillers.

Meanwhile, Tom was improving, but still not quite ready for the saddle so the next day it was onwards through Herefordshire, mostly in the pouring rain feeling lonely. It was hard to keep in touch with the support team since I found my O₂ network unreliable in more rural areas, but I finally reached civilisation at Much Wenlock – a small Shropshire village whose claim to fame is that the modern Olympic Games were resurrected there in about 1860. Again, we were staying with friends and this was the only night we didn't sleep in the Van.

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Days 7 and 8: rock bottom(s)

After our night of luxury, and a bath, we headed north towards Nantwich and Tom was back on the bike. Hooray! However, only a couple of hours later, Tom's bottom bracket bearing broke. The only option was to call in our personal emergency service (Amanda) and head to Stan's bike shop in Shrewsbury.

Tom's bike was soon fixed and I also took the opportunity to invest in some expensive cycling shorts. This diversion killed our mileage target for the day, but it also allowed us to see the lovely town of Shrewsbury, which we would otherwise have bypassed.

The next couple of days were probably the low point of the whole trip, as we neared the halfway mark.

▼ Day 11: The bleakness of the Borders was made even worse due to driving winds and persistent rain



▲ Day 11 – Leaving the Lakes behind us, but certainly not the hills

Although we blasted through Liverpool with little effort using a 15-mile disused railway line, the stretch to Southport was slow going and, by the time we got there, we were drenched. Reluctantly, we gave into the weather and Amanda drove us on to the next campsite south of Lancaster.

I haven't mentioned much about the campsites, but we were never disappointed with what we found. The key thing you need for a cycling trip is good laundry facilities, especially a tumble drier, to warm and dry your gear in preparation for the next day. Though there isn't space here, all the sites are listed on my blog.

Day 9: The Lake District

Refreshed, we set out the next day heading towards the Lake District. It was raining and we had a long way to go before our next campsite in Keswick. Our first stop was in Lancaster, where I decided to buy a new waterproof top since my old one was past its best.

Sod's law immediately kicked in and the sun promptly came out as we hit the foothills of the Lakes, only to be delayed by the delightful country scene of a farmer and his small son driving their sheep from one field to another.

After a bountiful pasta lunch with friends in Kendal, we were fuelled and ready to cycle on through Windermere, Ambleside and up a massive hill to Keswick. The weather had remained excellent and we felt great.

We stayed at Castlerig Hall campsite, which was probably our favourite of the whole trip. It had superb views, first class facilities and a cracking little on-site bistro, which was a great end to a fantastic day's cycling.



▲ Modern communication at our disposal in the Border villages...

Days 10 and 11: Border country

The next couple of days through Cumbria and into the Borders was hard going, under largely grey skies with almost continual drizzle. We chose to take the Coast to Coast cycle route away from the Lakes before turning north towards Carlisle.

As we cruised into Scotland at Gretna Green we were desperate for food, water and warm coffee, which we found straight away at the 'Famous Blacksmith's Shop.' Whilst we'd never heard of it, we were grateful for the warmth and the coffee.

Suitably revived, from here we headed up towards Edinburgh on the B709, a beautiful road with lots of forests either side and, to be honest, not much else. It's a very beautiful part of the country, but desolate. We saw hardly any cars on the way to Edinburgh and camped at Eskdalemuir in one of the few, if not the only, campsites along this road.

The final part of the journey to Edinburgh was over the Moorfoot Hills. Normally, these give you a fantastic vista of the fine city, but sadly this time we were stuck in thick mist and fog, so could only enjoy the rapid descent into the lowlands after climbing up the hills for most of the day.

After the last stage, it came as a bit of a shock to hit the busy rush hour traffic of Edinburgh for the last few miles to Morton Hall campsite. It's only a couple of miles from the city centre, so is a great base to explore it, but since Tom went to university here, we had already seen many of the city's sights so made the most of the on-site pub as he went to meet up with friends. Tune in next month for the final leg of our epic journey...