

common feature. The bumps soaked up, time and again, by the trusty Norton Roadholder forks.

Agriculture in Limousin is on a truly industrial scale. The machinery replaces jobs and there is, and has been for many years, a general exodus of young French to the cities. Their empty houses are of no great worth, often decrepit, but appear ridiculously cheap to British retirees wishing to live the French dream. This pushes up house prices, creates large communities of English speaking foreigners, and in some places has taken over. Only once was I overtaken by a car and greeted with V-signs, and that was in the Limousin.

### **Le Dorat municipal camping**



Be warned, the winters here can be harsh, and the villages very remote. Almost predictably, the bar nearest the camping in Le Dorat is run by an elderly englishman, married to a french lady, and hoping to live like René in Allo!, Allo!

Day 3 started with a short ride to the tourist information office in Le Dorat where I told the young lady I'd been camping for the night and paid my dues. Like serving beers without taking money, trust is the norm in France. This was to be the day when I planned to reach Millau in the late afternoon and in time to find a campsite nearby.

Avoiding Limoges by way of a complex series of small roads to the south, the farmland gave way to wooded hilltops. With 410 miles completed since leaving Plouër I take a leisurely lunch at a beautiful bar/restaurant just outside Treignac . It is far better value to eat well at lunchtime as the menu deals are much more generous than in the evenings. Then back to the road which gets gradually higher, with steep plunges to valley bottoms and climbs, sometimes to 1,000 metres. This is the mountain region called Masif Central. My hand written instructions and map are being used to the full here. On one twisty road, heading towards the town of Laroquebrue, there is a sign warning of gravel on the road and no road markings. Without exaggeration, the gravel had been laid more than half inch deep onto the tar. Cars, which passed infrequently, had more or less cleared three tyre widths on the short straight sections, one in the centre and a

vehicle width either side. Of course, the rest was even deeper as a result. When taking corners, the tracks disappeared and gravel could suddenly be an inch deep or more. Grateful for some off-road riding experience, I plugged on cautiously. The mountain road continued in this perilous state for several miles, without sight of a workforce, before suddenly returning to normal. Gradually, as the day wore on, the going got easier.

At six thirty pm it was time to look for a campsite. Now on the main road heading to a large hilltop town called Rodez, I thought I'd probably find something on the outskirts. I could leave camp early and have a full day in Millau. Captain Scott didn't camp at the South Pole, so I'd follow his example. Coming in from the north, a tiny campsite sign on the Rodez ring road eventually led me to Rodez municipal camping on the south side of town. A very warm welcome from the manager, who told me not to bother with details, but to choose my spot and pitch tent. There's nothing worse than being pestered for documents and money when astride a loaded bike and completely exhausted. In true fashion, he only needed my name and the number of nights on the register before he shut the main gate at 9.00pm. Payment could be on the morning I left. The weather forecast was good for tomorrow, Thursday, with rain coming in on Friday. A check on the mileage indicator showed 548 miles completed.



**Rodez camping and still quite clean after 700 miles in France**

I was learning something else about the RAC route plan. An indicated total journey distance of 495 miles takes no account of the extra miles looking for campsites, taking wrong roads and back-tracking to attractive restaurants. True to forecast, Thursday was sunny and I completed the 50 miles to Millau for 10.00am. Ignoring the RAC route, the most direct and best signposted route including 10 miles of non-toll motorway.

The lady at tourist information suggested sites to view the bridge. A local herself, and old enough to remember the beautiful valley before the motorway bridge. Millau is charming, being at the bottom of the valley and with the river Tarn running through. I asked her if she preferred the valley without a bridge. Of course she did, but also adding that if you have to bridge the valley, it could not have been done in a more elegant and sympathetic way. To me, that said it all.

Objective achieved, but I still had to get home. The bike, parked in the main square with sun reflected brightly off the front mudguard, attracted more than a fair share of interest. Most common question 'How old is it?' followed by 'Is it an Atlas?' Some stopped dead, like the postman in his beige 'La Poste' van. He brought the whole central roundabout to gridlock while questioning me about the Electra through the window. It did look well, but I'm biased. After lunching with a couple from Norfolk on Hondas who had also been through 'that gravel' it was time to get some photos of the bridge in the sunshine. I meander back to Rodez on the RAC route.



**Millau Centre**



**Millau Bridge**

That evening in Rodez, and before the rain forecast for next day, it was time to check the bike for the homeward journey.

Large French supermarkets stock a fair range of oil and I choose a mineral 10/40 for topping up. I'm using about a pint every 500 miles. The gearchange is good now, making me wonder if the clutch is running dry. I put a small dribble into the primary chaincase and the same dribble comes out of the level plug. No problem there. Perhaps the water in the gearbox oil has quietly evaporated. At least half of the 2 litre oil bottle remains so I find room for it as I pack on Friday. No rain, but the clouds are building. My route back to Plouër will be on N-roads (Routes Nationales) where possible. Much simpler than the RAC route which covered six index cards, I can easily get all the route instructions onto one 6 x 4 index card.

Paying my 16 euros for two nights, I leave Rodez and follow signs to airport and Brive. This is very much easier than my route south, because I'm following the well signposted arterial roads. There is an unwritten code to driving on these straight French roads. The speed limit is 55mph and you must drive at 55mph. If you drive at 52mph, like some of the English cars towing caravans, you will upset everyone. Crazy overtakes will happen and HGV's will tailgate you. If you keep to 55mph and someone comes up behind you, that is just too bad but acceptable until a suitable safe chance to overtake.



**Returning north - River Lot in the Masif Central**

Napoleon laid out the road network so that he could get his army swiftly to where it was needed with the guillotine taking care of objections from wealthy landowners. Trees lined both sides of the road to give the troops and horses shade while they marched. Today, the roads have been widened but often one side is still tree lined. Before the introduction of national speed limits, fatalities on these roads were notorious. Hidden dips, blind summits, speed and desperation to overtake led to some spectacular head-on's. Now, the fast boys are on the motorways and the laissez-faire use the N or D-roads.

It's possible to make good distance on these roads and I'm looking for a campsite after I've done 340 miles and after passing Poitiers, dropping lucky on a lakeside municipal campsite in the forest at Guesnes. I check in at the bar/cafe and meet the lady running everything. She books me in and raises her eyebrows on hearing my surname. 'Long lost brother to the President' I say. Apparently President Hollande is not loved in this region. I ask about a meal, having snacked on the way up, and she cheerfully offers melon starter and andouillette in an hour. I've seen melon for sale at the roadside and andouillette, a hefty looking sausage, is the local delicacy. Wikipedia advises 'True andouillette is rarely seen outside France and has a strong, distinctive odor related to its intestinal origins and components. Although sometimes repellent to the uninitiated, this aspect of andouillette is prized by its devotees.'



**Municipal camping – Guesnes.**



### **Good fishing, wood sculptures, and well laid out nature trails**

The fisherman have packed up and are in the bar when I return. I can see I'm the only one eating and my hostess is keen to please. A measure of Dubonnet goes into the scooped half melon – 'traditional' she says. Plenty of red wine with the andouillette, and a huge bowl of chips that would be enough to feed all the fisherman. They watch as I devour everything, save the chips. She's happy to keep the bar open so I can finish with a coffee, and then it's time for a quick stroll round the lake before it gets too dark.

One downside of the long straight roads is the extra time you spend listening to the engine. And then the time you have to wonder if all is well. And then the time wondering if the tone or performance has changed. And so on....For sure the left cylinder was cutting out on tickover, recovering when a little throttle was applied. I changed to a new pair of plugs and the improvement was short lived. The kickstart return spring had suddenly gone to about 20% of it's former strength. Strong enough to keep the lever in the near vertical parked position, but not strong enough to return it through the horizontal. Not a broken spring. I surmise that it has dropped off it's fixed retaining peg, done one revolution, and jammed. Nothing to be done except lift the lever with my foot after kickstarting, or use the starter motor.

I'm still lucky with the weather on Saturday morning, day 6 of my travels and 990 miles since leaving Plouër. I cross the Loire heading north for Vitré, the pretty fortified town I'd passed on the way south.

Arriving mid-day I spot a likely restaurant and squeeze the bike into a parking place nearby. 'Not a chance without a booking', says the restaurateur. Another is found and it is becoming obvious that Vitré is very



popular with the tourists. Taking time to look round in the afternoon, I can see why. Medieval streets survive and the great fortress is open for tours. Vitré was famous for its woven sail cloth which it exported worldwide. Sailing ships went out of fashion, and the town went to sleep for 150 years. Now the tourists love the original,

undeveloped, streets and alleyways devoid of high street brands and plate glass windows.



I leave mid afternoon and am gratefully back at Plouër-sur-Rance at 6.30pm. The tide is high, the sky is blue, and I'm down the slipway and swimming in the sea before the bike has time to cool down.

Only another 300 miles to home in Yorkshire. Checking the points while at Plouer I find they have both opened up by about 10 thou. Could account for the engine tone which I thought was indicative of too much advance. It seemed better after resetting to 10 thou, slightly less than the recommended 12 thou.

The rear chain needs hardly any adjustment. Norton designed a very effective automatic chain oiler system, driven by the oil tank breather, which is most generous in application. Not

so good for anything remotely in line with the rear sprocket. But not so generous as to worry the rear tyre.

Oil is topped up again but I now have more oil than wine and beer in the apartment. The remnants from Rodez, the classic 20/50 oil my wife brought, remnants of gearbox oil and for good measure 4 litres of Rotella for the Norton Commander. I decide to leave them all there, just in case.

I sail on the daytime crossing from St. Malo four days later. This time I guard the bike against overzealous crewmembers. At Portsmouth the immigration man looks at my passport, looks at my address, looks at the bike, looks at me – and thinks – you must be mad – all the way to Yorkshire on that!!

### **Postscript**

A 2,400 mile journey. No problems Portsmouth to Yorkshire, but I was grateful to break the journey at Oxford, home of my other daughter. The misfire at tick over has finally been traced to a faulty coil. Both coils were replaced during the rebuild, but sadly the quality nowadays isn't so good. The plastic HT terminations on both original Wipac coils were too broken. The kickstart return spring can wait till winter.