



## **NUTS ON BENTS NEWSLETTER #1**

October 2005

Hi everyone - greetings from Turkey! Sorry it has taken us so long to get around to writing our first newsletter, but now that we have completed cycling through Europe and have started Leg 2 of our trip (Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan) a few days ago, we thought it would be a good time to give everyone an update on what we have been up to!

Since setting off on 31 July (which feels like a year ago to us!!) we have cycled 3500kms on our planned route for Leg 1 through Europe to Istanbul. We have travelled through the lovely countryside of North-East France, climbed over the Jura mountains into Switzerland, and then over the Alps into Italy, and then spent as much time as we possibly could in Italy (those who know Nic would know why!). We crossed Italy all the way from its north-western tip to the south-eastern tip, at the heel of the 'boot'. From there we caught a boat to cross the Adriatic Sea to Greece, and climbed over the Greek Pindos mountains and then finally arrived in Turkey.

The anticipation and excitement of leaving back at the end of July was soon overcome with the aching muscles and our new daily routine and lifestyle: get up, break camp, plan route whilst having breakfast, and go! After about 5-8 hours on the road (depending on terrain, weather and road conditions) we would make camp, freshen up, and get some fodder before flopping into bed! A completely new way of living compared to our lifestyles before we left. No more 9 to 5 Monday to Friday, and a fun weekend - the weather and local geography now dictate when we can have a rest day! On average we have been cycling 6 days a week, with a few sightseeing breaks in Italy and Turkey.

Time has quickly flown and the routine has become second nature to us. So much so that we often question the date and even the day of the week, let alone remembering where we set camp or what happened on a given day last week! Thankfully we are keeping a log-book to help with this!

Now that leg 1 is complete and we have eaten our way through most of Europe, we realised we hadn't made life easy for ourselves at the beginning of our trip. We not only planned a longer route than was necessary to cross Europe to take-in Italy and Greece, our route also climbed over four of the largest mountain ranges of Europe (the Jura mountains between France and Switzerland, the Appenines in Italy, the Pindos mountains of Greece, and of course, the Alps).

The fact that we were on recumbents (which are heavier than normal bikes and tougher to ride uphill) also made leg 1 more of a challenge. So progress through Europe was slower than we had originally planned, despite the nice smooth roads. Our level of fitness was certainly questioned and despite the amount of training we did prior to our departure no training session can really prepare you for 8 hours of cycling, 6 days a week!! However, over 2 months in, we now feel the terrain and extreme weather conditions (from 37 degrees in shade to freezing conditions of mountain passes) we have encountered have toughened us up ready for the more arduous cycling conditions of the next leg.

Comparing our performance now to that of the first two weeks, we can see the marked improvement: covering 50-60 miles a day now is no problem and we are tackling the ascents more aggressively with less need to get off the bike and push!

Every day is full - eventful and sometimes quite painful! We have so many stories to tell it's hard to know where to start: from the worrying incident of losing Sedef in Switzerland to the relief of descending down from the mountains (several times!). Some of the experiences have been rather unexpected and unwelcome like the time we woke up in the night in our nice warm tent to hear the snorts of wild boars sniffing and nudging the tent, getting soaked to the skin in sudden torrential downpours (so far one in each country bizarrely) and Sedef dropping something into a Greek toilet and having to fish it out with her bare hands! Another unforgettable experience was ordering fondue in Switzerland and receiving pork chops and green beans! Despite the word for fondue being the same in every language!! However despite the language problems we experienced so far, we have always been able to get by and communicate with the locals, something that we fear may change in Iran, where even reading road signs may become an arduous task. Our biggest achievement so far has certainly been the ascent over the Alps, in particular the Great Saint Bernards Pass. Mentally and physically we had been preparing for this way back in our planning sessions, so the reality of traversing them was always in our minds right up to the final ascent. The first part of our ascent took us through a long section of covered roadways filled with speeding cars and coaches. Fortunately for us the majority (sensibly! unlike some) took the tunnel through the mountain, leaving the road up to the col to motorcyclists, tourists and two nuts on bents!

After a hearty lunch we set out for the second gruelling part of the climb, complete with freezing fog, low cloud cover, wind and rain and 15 degree gradients around hairpin curves. Almost all of the mountain above us was hidden from view which meant that we could not see the big push - probably a good thing too! At times it seemed as if the road mysteriously ceased to exist in both directions above and below us, creating an unearthly sensation that we were floating in the air. We had no clear indication of how much further we had to go. Well apart from the GPS, the altitude meters on our watches, the advice from Anne Mustoe (who had completed this climb previously) and a group of motorcyclists who had just come from the top, we had nothing to go on and were practically helpless! :p We knew what Anne Mustoe must have felt like (as she mentions in her book) when having got to the point which looks like the summit, the road gently curves around, and

reveals the road crawling up another 500m over our heads around 10 more bends! However being somewhat prepared for this we struggled on and made it to the summit, which in true western style has a gift shop with plastic imitations of the mountain and "my son went up the Gt St Bernards Pass and bought me this" T-Shirts!

Once at the top the sense of achievement was immense - alas short lived as we were freezing and soaked to the skin, so much so that our hands and feet were going numb, and the night was setting in with predictions of snow. So once we had warmed up a little with hot chocolate and waffles we started the first part of the descent to get to warmer altitudes before the night! The descent was almost as arduous as the ascent, freezing rain in our faces, the numb sensation in our hands and feet, icy roads with hair-pin bends and very poor visibility. The descent was so steep that within an hour we had lost half the altitude we gained, and arrived at last in Bella Italia!

This trip would not be complete without the people we meet along the way from the locals to other world travellers, especially cyclists. The kindness of strangers also consistently surprises us and is always welcome. Examples are the offer of a warm bed and homecooked meal we received in France (sadly in the wrong direction), having a police escort off an Italian motorway after ending up on it by mistake, and the free goodies like food, drink and services offered to us. As other recumbent cyclists know, people stop and stare at the bikes, so everywhere we go we are greeted by large groups of locals all taking photos and even clapping at us and our bikes. On one occasion Sedef arrived at a town where a local festival was in full swing to find a large group of 50 locals waving and shouting her name! She was taken aback until she realised that Nic was in the midst of them and had gathered a veritable fan-club!

We have often been asked what we do to pass the time on the road - well we have compiled a list of our favourite pastimes for those who have wondered!

- Sing songs - Nic has a particular favourite he sings behind Sedef when he wants to get her to cycle away faster: "I know a song that will get on your nerves, get on your nerves.....", the only line in the song repeated over and over again in a variation of tones and pitches.
- Wave at passing motorists who beep and wave at us - sometimes dozens of times a day so that we find ourselves waving at beeping cars even when we are walking on the pavement! :p
- Examine roadkill - Nic has developed an acute (and very disturbing!) ability to tell not only the species of the animal but time and method of death, simply by the stench and degree of decomposition!
- Talk to each other, look at the scenery and try to spot funny signs - our favourites so far are: Arce-lik washing machines, Klity perfumes for men (and worryingly for women too!), Lady-man Fashions, Tour d'Arse sightseeing tours, and UFUK travel agents!!

Here are a few more lists to give you a feel for our pet hates and likes, and some other facts about our trip.

Simple things in life we appreciate: Descending out of the mountains, free bike help and free food, campsite signs, beeps and waves from friendly

motorists, beds, lovely scenery that make even the toughest climbs worthwhile, good coffee, a good hearty meal at the end of the day, and the fabled tailwind (though we are yet to encounter it!)

Things we hate/fear: H.I.L.L.S !, losing each other, dogs, drivers who think they own the road, constant relentless headwind, dirty clothes, hot drinking water in our bottles, the horrible farmer's tans we have developed (dark brown legs and arms, milky white torso and hands and feet), helpful locals who have no clue about the local geography sending you in the wrong direction, flies and mossies, dirty campsites with cold showers, bike troubles, hardshoulders filled with junk

Nuts on Bents prizes for Leg 1 go to:

Best campsite: Pisa

Best restaurant: Stars and Roses in Turin (ask for the caviar pizza!)

Best meal: 5(!) bowls of porcini pasta in Sutri, Italy - in one sitting!

Friendliest motorists: Italy

Best hardshoulders: Italy

Best roads: Switzerland (cycling lanes)

Friendliest people: Turkey

Most impressive sights/favourite places: Ornans valley in France, views in the Greek mountains, St Peters Cathedral in the Vatican, a farm-house we stayed in a quiet village in South Italy, Rome and Sienna, well Italy really (particularly the north, the south, oh and everything else in the middle as well!), the Meteora (enormous columns of natural rock formations) in Greece, Pamukkale (white limestone cliffs) in Turkey, oh and must not forget the tourist shop at Great St Bernard Pass :p

Best coffee: Italy

Worst campsite: Valenza in Fr, swarms of mossies and filthy bathrooms

Worst motorists: Turkey

Worst roads: Turkey

Worst coffee: Greece

Statistics:

Number of countries visited: 6 (UK, France, Swi, Italy, Greece, Turkey)

Total distance covered: 3500 kms (2200 miles)

Longest distance per day: 110 kms (70 miles)

Average distance per day: 65-100kms (40-60 miles) depending on terrain

Number of punctures: 1 (Nic)

Top speed: 80.1 kph (50 mph) (Nic)

Mountain passes: Jura (1046m), Alps (2470m), Pindos (1690m, as well as countless lower passes at 600-900ms)

Toughest day's cycle: The approach to Istanbul (the hills and stormy weather made us give up and hitch a lift for the first time since the beginning of our trip!)

Easiest day's cycle: 66 miles downhill after passing over the Alps through Great St Bernard Pass at 2400meters

Injuries: countless bruises and scratches, none serious

Macao scores end of leg 1: Nic: 22,098 Sedef: 22,940 (for the uninitiated Macao is a card game we are rather fond of)

Handytip for travellers: Barking at dogs baring your teeth to scare them away!!

One of the questions we often get asked is 'haven't we had enough'. Although hardly a week goes by when the pain and effort doesn't make us regret having started in the first place, the answer is still 'not a bit!'. We have come to love the 'who-knows-what-nextness' of our nomadic lifestyle, having our home and everything we need with us, seeing new places and sleeping in a different town every day, meeting new people (both locals and other travellers), and enjoying each other's company. All the hard work seems a reasonable price to pay for all of that!

You can follow our adventures in our online diary - which we update with news and photos along the way. You can access it at:  
<http://nutsonbents.mail2web.com/Diary/>

If you haven't already done so, it is not too late to donate to our charities. Please do so by following this link: <http://nutsonbents.mail2web.com/Charities/>

A big thanks to all our sponsors without whose help we would not have come this far!

So long....until the next newsletter!

Nic and Sedef

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