

Get on yer Bike An Uphill Struggle

Rachel Escott

Six years after her last major cycling experience, and six years older. With the volcanic peaks of France's Auvergne region looming, Rachel Escott needed to get into shape to prevent her holiday turning into a waking nightmare.

When I proposed a holiday cycling, I was forgetting that, at 42, the six years since I last cycled seriously count! I recalled swollen knees and overworked shoulders and realised I had to act fast to stop my precious holiday turning into a nightmare.

As someone who swims every morning, can tackle a 15 mile ramble without moaning (too much) and, until recently, walked my six miles daily commute *by choice*, I consider I'm fit.

'Fitness is one thing, but it doesn't mean the muscles needed for a specific activity are up to it,' warned Michael Clark, Fitness Director at LivingWell. 'To prevent injury and boost your enjoyment of the holiday, you must get *those* muscles working efficiently.'

Chastened, I visited Nick Barratt, Personal Coach at LivingWell, London. Considering the difficulty of my goal, a Personal Coach seemed worthwhile. Nick ran through my medical and exercise history - and the problems I'd had. I ended with a flourish:

'Whether cycling, running or climbing hills, I've always suffered from a small lung capacity.'

Nick dismissed this as a myth. 'Gasping for breath is an indication of fitness - how efficiently your body converts oxygen into energy. We'll use weights, to strengthen your thighs, but also for the biceps and triceps.' He recommended mostly free weights. 'A better way to work both sides of your body equally. They take coordination and balance, so the tiny ligaments controlling the joints are worked too, which will help your shoulders when you're on the road.'

My reference to knee pain drew his attention. 'How often does it flare? On the up or down stroke? Where exactly?' I wondered if my age and worn joints would be too problematic.

'Not at all. But knowing this helps me decide what level to start you at, to avoid aggravating any problems.'

After a warm up, weights and stretching, Nick adapted the leg press to concentrate on the muscles round my knees. Immediately, the old pain kicked in.

'That's great,' he exclaimed, before taking down the weight and letting the pain ease. 'I now have a clear picture of the problem, and how to address it.'

It seems my quadriceps are too tight - from years of inadequate stretching and desk-bound work - so the tendons round the knee overstretch to compensate. Rigorous stretching and special exercises promised to substantially improve this.

I asked Nick why I didn't yet feel out of breath. 'Weights build muscle density, and muscles in turn work at a higher metabolic rate than fat, meaning your exercise session is more efficient'. The 'body fat' scales read my fat versus muscle ratio, and set a target of 23% fat. Nick handed me a heart rate monitor for the aerobic exercises, explaining that at my age I should aim to exercise in the range of 155-165 beats per minute.

GP Wendy Outwin agreed. 'Muscle density reduces as you get older, so exercise to strengthen muscle is good. Here, we can refer people to health clubs to get them exercising. But do it gradually. The worst thing is to see injured people who stop entirely.'

In February this year, Health Secretary John Reid announced plans to boost the training of doctors in Sports and Exercise Medicine (SEM) to 'prove our dedication not only to supporting an active lifestyle but to raising the profile of the benefits of healthy living.'

So the government approves my approach, but according to a DTI report, as many as 700,000 people in this country visited hospital A&E departments in 2002 because of sports injuries. Yet the National Cycling Strategy, launched in 1996, lists 7 major areas of health that can be improved by cycling, and concludes that the improved muscle strength, balance and coordination benefits joints and outweighs the risks from accidents. www.leedscylists.org.uk goes further, claiming 'cycling is a close to ideal form of exercise'.

Meanwhile, there were other important preparations ... clothes shopping!

The CTC information points out that synthetic materials 'wick' away sweat best - but all layers must be synthetic. I mention that I cool very rapidly when I stop exercising and learn that this is not unusual in women. The answer is to have extra layers to put on, and even carry spare tops so I can change into dry ones as soon as I stop. Such specialist clothes pack up small and wash and dry overnight, an added bonus for holidays. Cycle shops also stock another essential - padded knickers that, with a wrap-around cycling skirt, avoid all question of seams in awkward places.

Back in the gym, my holiday kept me focused. Nick's constant 'Great!' and occasional 'Don't stop till it burns', demonstrated the role of 'positive thinking'.

'Motivation is entirely personal,' says Michael Clark. 'It may be a specific date - a wedding or holiday - or a desire to keep up with the kids. Our guys need to understand *your* motivation and work with it.' He pointed out, with some restraint, that most people in the UK are not 'natural exercisers'. In fact, a national fitness survey by Allied Dunbar in 1992 found that 7/10 women and 6/10 men are not active enough to benefit their health. Michael says the remedy is to make training fun. 'A personal coaching session, even occasionally, can help you find variety and new challenges.'

The volcanic peaks and plateaus of the Auvergne lie 450 kilometres south of Paris. Rarely less than 2500 feet above sea level, the air is thinner - and cooler - than expected. It is green and fertile, sparsely populated with narrow and quiet roads, while June and September are particularly good times to cycle. We based ourselves in Murat, a medieval town which can be reached by train, although the best way is to fly direct to Lyon, then hire a car for the 3-hour drive.

Murat today appears dedicated to regional foods and the outdoor life - the cycle hire shops are found close by displays of excellent local *saucisson* and cheeses to picnic on. The tourist office offers way-marked routes for different abilities and although they often follow the contours of the valleys, all include some steep, if short, climbs, so I blessed the painful 'spin' sessions back home.

The deeply un-'pc' *Maison de la Faune* is a museum of stuffed animals, but once over my squeamishness, was a great guide to the wealth of wildlife here. In late June the mountain meadows were full of spring flowers, attracting a huge variety of butterflies. Like confetti, we plunged through them along the tracks and into mixed woodlands of walnuts and chestnuts. We gathered wild strawberries and ripe plums for snacks, but didn't risk the yellow, feathery mushrooms, another local delicacy.

Short drives take you to the extinct volcanoes of Puy Mary and Plomb du Cantal, parts of which have cycle access. But I'd advise leaving these to the end of your holiday, when your body is honed and aerobic efficiency adjusted to the altitude.

I was privileged to discover the sometimes spectacular, sometimes gentle beauty of this corner of France by bike, plunging deeper into the wilderness than would be possible by car. Thanks to my preparations and Nick's advice, the cycling was without mishap. The old-fashioned atmosphere of the region imparted quiet relaxation even as we taxed ourselves physically, while the pool at the *Hostellerie Les Breuils* where we stayed - a homely Belle Epoque villa - eased the aches and proved the 21st century is invited in when it helps!

Information Box 1:

- www.lyon.aeroport.fr lists all the scheduled flights to and from Lyon St Exupery Airport, plus links to all the car hire companies with representation there.
- For a detailed driving route from Lyon to Murat, visit www.theaa.com/travelwatch/planner
- For train travel, routes, times and to book tickets, go to www.voyages-sncf.com
- You can hire bikes in Murat from:
O Petit Montagnard, rue du Faubourg Notre Dame, 15300 Murat, France. Tel 00 33 4 71 20 28 40

Loisirs Deux Roues, 34 rue du Bon Secours, 15300 Murat, France. Tel 00 33 4 71 20 06 54/ 00 33 6 30 79 56 98
- Find accommodation and Murat information at www.ville-de-murat.com/tourisme
- www.hostellerie-les-breuils.com lists the hotel's facilities and contact details.
- Detailed, accurate maps are for sale online at www.ign.fr/affiche_rubrique / Tel: 00 33 1 43 98 80 00, or www.navimaps.co.uk/ (English language site). For the Murat area, maps 'Serie Bleue No. 25350 - Murat/Neussargues' is the most detailed, useful if you are going far off-track; or the 'Serie Orange No. 2435 - Murat' is a smaller scale map covering a larger area, specially recommended for cyclists, horse riders etc.

Information Box 2:

The return to normal life can be abrupt, so the luxury of an 'In Style' weekend at the Hilton Hotel Lyon is a way to explore a more modern face of France and is a suitable reward for your strenuous holiday.

- For more information on the city of Lyon, visit www.en.lyon-france.com
- For details of the Hilton Hotel Lyon and to book, visit www.hilton.com. A *Hilton Weekend - In Style* and a *Summer Sale* offer are currently available.
- The Lyon Biennial of Contemporary Art is on 14 September - 31 December, www.biennale-de-lyon.org

Information Box 3:**The right bike set-up**

Getting the right bike set-up is crucial. If you're hiring one, get in touch in advance and reserve the frame size and other specifications you want.

- Women are, in general, smaller than men, and their legs on average are shorter. For comfort, hire a smaller-framed bike if possible.
- Use the adjustments to the handlebar height and tilt and the saddle position to get a comfortable reach to the handlebars. Women generally need the handlebars to be higher and closer in relation to the saddle than men. Get it wrong, and watch out for pain in the lower back or hips.
- The bones your weight rests on when sitting are wider apart in women than men. There's now a good range of wider saddles for women, and ones with dips and holes in the centre to prevent pressure. Tipping the saddle forward slightly can also help comfort. If you're hiring a bike, it might be worth taking your own saddle with you.
- Rear and front suspension softens some of the impact on joints and muscles. The reduced vibration means you're overall less tired at the end of the day.
- Cyclists' Touring Club www.ctc.org.uk

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