

## EPILOGUE

*'Many a trip continues long after movement in time and space have ceased'*

*John Steinbeck*

I have delayed writing this section until the dust has had time to settle – both literally and figuratively.

I must admit I have found this chapter rather difficult to write, not really knowing how to start and exactly what to include. This difficulty is encapsulated in the problem I have when asked to describe my experience to others.

Having finished the Tour, people's first question on seeing me for the first time is invariably:

*'What was it like?'*

This is inevitably followed by:

*'Did you enjoy it?' and 'Would you do it again?'*

With so much to talk about, (look at the length of this journal), do I?

- Give a superficial simplistic answer:  
*'yes...great...fantastic...marvellous...thanks for asking...lots of ups and downs!*  
and thereby minimise, and even trivialise, the whole essence of the experience
- Provide a more truthful answer along the lines of:  
*'Hard, harder than I had hoped and in reality harder than I had feared'*  
only for them then to conclude that I didn't really enjoy the experience, feel somewhat embarrassed for me and want to move on to another topic.....or
- Conversely, do I launch into a detailed resume of the whole thing and watch the questioner's eyes slowly glaze over.

Difficult, and if I get it wrong either way it results in an erroneous impression being given to the questioner. Obviously if you have got this far you are in the interested category, so here goes....

I will start by saying yes I thoroughly enjoyed the whole shebang; the planning, the anticipation, the actual execution and writing this post trip resume.

Obviously it wasn't all unremitting fun and *'jolly hockey sticks'*. To say that the actual execution was easy would be a downright lie. However, to imply that it was unrelentingly hard would also not be true, but overall it was certainly much much harder than I had hoped, and even anticipated.

I found the first two days particularly difficult – they certainly took it out of me (as per that photo taken on day 4, and that was taken after I had recovered a bit) and had the whole event been at that initial intensity I honestly don't know if I would have been successful.

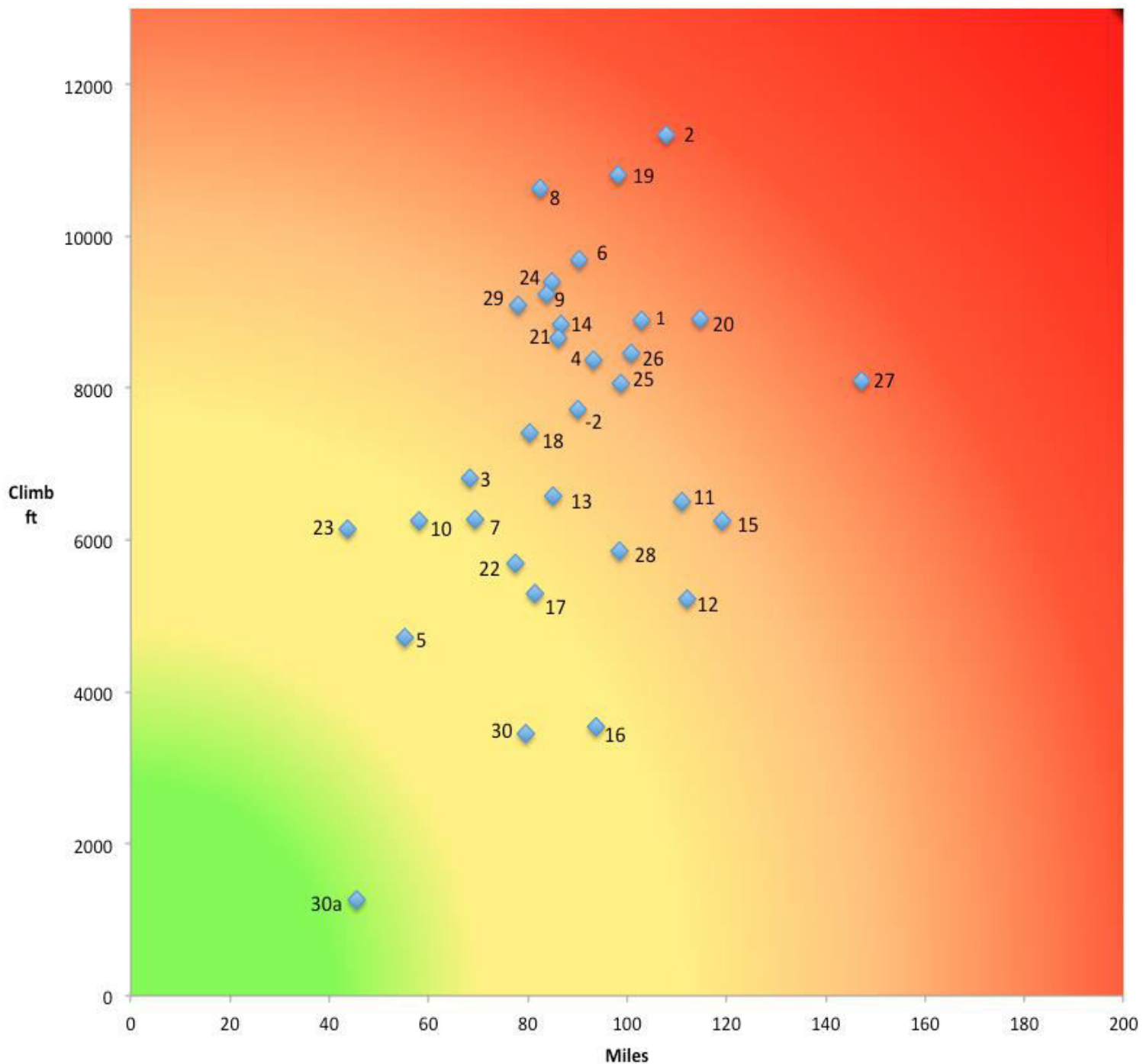
The 'difficulty' scatter plot I've created below (sad man) illustrates just how the first two days compared with the rest of the trip. I have plotted distance vs height gained and in

general the redder the area the greater the overall exertion required/expended. The TD day number is adjacent to the scatter plot point. Day 27 was a bugger too!!

As it was, whether I rapidly became much fitter or perhaps it was because it took me a couple of days to slip into *eat, sleep, ride, repeat*<sup>1</sup> –

I relatively quickly realised that despite the enormous distances still to be traversed, barring serious accident, illness, weather issues or mechanical failure, I should be able to do this; fingers crossed.

Scatter plot of distance vs height showing difficulty for each of my days on the TD



1. On reflection I think it should be *eat sleep eat eat eat ride eat repeat*

While acknowledging that avoiding all, or any, of the above caveats was by no means a given, the realisation that this was a 'goer' as it were really was quite liberating and lifted any lingering concerns I had about the associated, (largely self imposed), feeling of failure and associated element of embarrassment which would have resulted if I failed.

The fact that I 'knew' I was going to be able to do this certainly helped me get over the psychological apprehension I had about completing the Basin traverse, facing the relentless 4 hour climb up Marshall Pass from Del Norte, finishing the section from Abiquiu to Cuba and transiting the formidable CD Trail Alternate.

Beginning with the preparation; as previously detailed in my Madrid, Mt Ventoux, and TdF/Toulouse journals I thoroughly enjoy the planning involved. I find the thought required to pre-empt potential problems by formulating relevant responses contributes to the satisfying anticipation associated with this phase of these trips.

This time was no different.

Even though it entailed a significant time investment, the internet research I conducted proved very successful.

I gained particular satisfaction from sourcing/downloading or creating, and then uploading via Garmin Basecamp, the relevant GPX files onto my Etrex 30x GPS with all its associated foibles (I am still unable to access the saved track data).

However my internet activity covered not just the GPS/electronics aspect of the undertaking but encompassed the whole gamut of the trip; from bikepacking sites, previous attempt blogs/videos, various proffered kit lists, map purchase, bike set up, gear, transport logistics, sourcing the best OSM website for the background map, prestart accommodation through to the various possible options for return to UK after the finish.

I realised at the time that I really should also be considering the logistics of failure (for whatever reason) to complete this undertaking.

However, if I am honest I elected not to formulate a 'Plan B' as it were. My reasoning being that by having a said 'Plan B' I would have lowered the activation energy necessary to be overcome if I wanted to adopt the bail-out option. If things went pear shaped I wanted to make sure that carrying on would be less of a hassle than having to organise things on the hoof as it were.

In this context the military aphorism *'time spent of reconnaissance is never wasted'* is very true and this was exemplified by my recognising that the Union Pass was no longer on the designated route whereas I missed the fact that the Gold Dust Trail while descending from Boreas Pass, the latter as a direct consequence of not having enough time to do a map appreciation of that part of my route.

Logistics worked well. The accommodation pre start was appropriate and cost effective. Even if the Calgary apartment was soulless it was functional and provided the appropriate time to start acclimatisation and the facilities for me to build and test the bike under field conditions, with time to effect repairs if necessary.

Staying at the 'Y' was an excellent choice and I am glad I had booked in advance otherwise I would not have found any room available. Meeting with fellow 'attemptees' and enjoying the craic was interesting, very encouraging if somewhat intimidating.

My entry visa research confirmed that, contrary to popular opinion, you do not need an electronic visa when entering the USA by land. It is also cheaper to purchase said visa at the border; so, much to the consternation of many of my followers back in the UK, I only arranged for a Canadian visa before I left the UK.

I have already touched on the British Airway/American Airlines baggage saga – again internet review proved very valuable – in this case it saved me \$195!! A really satisfying encounter that.

Bike choice was appropriate, fit and frame bags worked well. The creak associated with my supposedly spring loaded seat post, was very annoying and surprisingly heat sensitive. However as detailed the major bike related problems I encountered were the need for a whole new drive train by the time I reached Del Norte and the rear tyre's inability to retain pressure while traversing the Basin – both these issues were due to wear and tear and reflected the extreme environment and distances covered.

Obviously allowing superglue to wreck one's inner tube is patently not a good idea. But I'd thought about the need and, if the superglue mishap had not happened, I would have been able to cope seamlessly<sup>1</sup> with the leaking rear tube problem.

Perhaps I should have replaced the front and rear cassettes before I started but I am saying that only with the benefit of hindsight. Without having done it at least once, it is difficult to appreciate the bashing both kit and cyclists take on this ride.

I was not happy with my admittedly *ad hoc* map holder either; in contrast with my GPS affixing system, the rubber-retaining ring broke frequently due to the increased weight and higher centre of gravity associated with the map board.

With regards to kit I was generally happy with my gear choice.

Clothing was an area I have honed over the years and I consider all the items I took appropriate, perhaps I could have taken one instead of two merino tops and not brought the lightweight windproof/waterproof jacket, and relied instead on just the heavy duty one. That would have saved a few grams but if the weather had taken a turn for the worse (or had continued as per day 5) I definitely think I would have needed them.

Water carrying worked well, especially the platypus and filling it with iced water when at food joints with a multiple soda/coke dispenser was an excellent move. The 'Go' bottle worked well except for the fact that it leaks and bounced out of the individual handlebar bag on a couple of occasions, as it does not fit into a regulation bike bottle holder. It was reassuring having it as a back-up although I admit I also took some water purification tabs along as well. They weigh nothing and that additional reassurance in the event of the 'Go' bottle damage/failure was priceless. As mentioned above water was one of my major areas of concern.

1. Tyred joke there but nevertheless a joke!

Note the reference to handlebar bags above - unfortunately they did not work well. They retain water if it rains and allow things to bounce out when rough terrain is encountered at speed. The bear spray incident being a prime example.

My rucksack was definitely not up to the job. Within 6 days of the start both zips derailed (or whatever the term is used to describe it when zip teeth disengage inappropriately, independent of the moveable zip thingy). I have written the appropriate review on Amazon!!!

Despite being given a thoroughly over engineered brand new National Guard heavy duty rucksack (probably too bulky in reality but beggars cannot be choosers) this too was showing distinct signs of wear at the end and interestingly since my return one of the multiple zips has also disintegrated.

I never really got to grips with the food issue, both in towns and when it came to deciding exactly what to take to get me through to the next resupply point. In this regard I found 12" long tuna subway 'sandwiches' very useful and I discovered the joy of 'breakfast pizza' (the culinary delight sold in Eureka and not just cold pizza consumed for breakfast).

I was struck by the variety of awful food available and the fact that it did not come in individual portions but instead in 'family sized' tranches. This made getting stuff, just for me even if it was for a nominal 3 days, difficult. Furthermore don't even think about trying to get fruit in the Family Dollar food store or general stores for that matter!

I found Hershie bar chocolate very pleasant, in slabs or as multiple individually wrapped small chunks with or without caramel bits in them. I used to eat significant chunks of it when I woke up famished in the middle of the night and in the morning. During the day it invariably melted into a gloop.

Conversely, despite having vast amounts of reasonably priced and invariably free refill aliquots of it, what the American do to their coffee is gobbingly awful. Essentially there are three options: black, with corn syrup or with half and half (milk and syrupy 'cream'). I dislike black coffee almost as much as I hate the taste after half and half has been added.

Similarly there seems to be a Continental wide inability to cook soft scrambled eggs. Instead they present a mass of yellow mush in which the eggs seem to have been simultaneously both fried and scrambled to oblivion before being left to cool to an annoying lukewarm temperature.

However by far the worst food purchase I made, but nevertheless still had to consume as I had literally run out of anything else, was that bag of yoghurt coated raisins.

Great thought I '*energy by the handful and both healthy and tasty*'. .....

Calorific      Yes definitely,

Tasty          No definitely not,

Healthy        No, not in any way shape or form – reading the label the white colour did not come from the yoghurt but rather the use of gritty Titanium Oxide colouring!!!

On the subject of labels it was interesting to see on lots of food, as a positive and therefore I assume more expensive option, the comments:

*GM free* and *we do not use Genetically Modified ingredients*  
as though this was a unusual and should be lauded!!

That having been said I still ate/drank EVERYTHING put in front of me as it was paramount that I minimised my weight loss.

I say everything but I admit I was fazed by the liquid bubble gum, which goes under the name of root beer in Canada and, as detailed on day 10, I was over faced by the dumper truck sized portion of cold bolognaise sauce and warm spaghetti. A curious combination which came after a bathtub sized portion of lukewarm soup in Elkhorn Hot Springs. The Pie Town/Toaster House green toxic cheese sandwich and pickle combo was another noteworthy failure.

Throughout, the journey presented highly varied and frequently spectacular, views. Seemingly every day I cycled through vastly different terrain, climate and flora;

- from walking through snow in bright sunshine curiously accompanied by the croaking of frogs while being watched by chipmunks, to crossing worrying deep icy streams and eating freshly caught trout,
- from being surrounded by absolutely nothing, with no extraneous sounds except the wind and the tyres on the gravel, cycling through the desert heat to hauling one's bike up 32% slopes, over football sized boulders while all the time acutely conscious of the close proximity of bears as evidenced by the huge amounts of fresh bear scat on the trail
- from cycling through industry ravaged mining landscapes to arrow straight sandy wash boarded roads.

I especially enjoyed wild camping in the desert. With no light pollution I was able to see the stars, milky way, satellites and meteors magnificently clearly. Although I did sleep in my inner tent as this kept me free of snakes, scorpions and other extraneous wildlife.

Obviously there were times when, during an interminable climb, I would round a bend and find that there was still yet more of this bloody mountain to ascend. At times like these the summit indicator on the GPS seemed to be moving away from me at approximately the same speed I was managing but these episodes were few and far between. Under these circumstances I usually had a snack and fell back on the army adages of:

*'You can't whinge you volunteered'*

and

*'If you can't stand a joke you shouldn't have joined'.*

Surprisingly it wasn't the hills which I found hardest but the times when the unrelenting adverse wind seemed determined (and nearly succeeded) to ruin one's day. I especially remember watching the clock tick down towards closing time as I inched uphill at the end of a long day towards the only food point for miles, (Atlantic City population 37), straight into a 40 mph head wind.

One unexpected bonus of this journey was the camaraderie and bonhomie which gradually developed between the group of cyclists who all seemed to be progressing at more or less the same speed. This was a highly fluid group; frequently someone would draw ahead only to be caught next day or people you thought had dropped behind you popped up already tucking into some food at the next eatery, having cycled past in the dark.

- Rich with his Tennessee drawl and dry observations,
- Ko who'd built his own bamboo framed bike and was either powering through the night or seemed so spent he was about to withdraw,
- 'Butt Butter' Bob quite intense but very powerful,
- Marty 'I'm feeling great' Johnston who stormed past en route to Lima but who proved much slower than me on hills,
- Massimo the irrepressible Italian who made the same mistake as me and missed the Gold Dust trail and needed significant persuasion to return back whence we had come in order to ensure we did not downgraded on the Trackleaders website
- Philippe the Frenchman who dropped out with knee problems
- Gill and Leah two Amazons who ended up racing each other to the line and last but definitely by no means least
- Mark 'Where's Jerry' Goehring The friendly 6'9" giant who flipped over his handlebars (twice) and had to withdraw due to developing haematuria

Meeting up with Ko, Rick, Massimo and Philippe at an impromptu site while cycling from Abiquiu to Cuba was an unexpected pleasure and I enjoyed swapping some good stories and individually doing a brief 'bit to camera' explaining to Philippe's Go Pro just why we were here and what had motivated us.

Almost universally the people I met throughout the Trip were friendly, obliging and welcoming. It became quite a sport seeing if you could blag some food from formal campers if you ever ended up in a recognised campsite; something to recollect when/if you next met up with any of the above.

Rich and, I think, Marty managed a whole meal after moving out of the way of a vast SUV with attached pantechinon sized trailer when they caught up with the driver who had stopped at the top of the pass.

My personal tally was

- two beers when I camped in the backyard in Whitefish,
- a share of 5 freshly caught trout when we camped at Warm River campsite,
- two pulled pork burgers at Turpin Meadow Campground
- corn on the cob with left over steak and potatoes at the Stunner Campsite,
- a replacement, albeit out of date, can of bear spray and
- a tube of factor 60 sun cream from a chap, whose SUV had stopped where the road was impassable en route from Red Meadow Lake to Whitefish.
- The brand new slightly too big Nat Guard rucksack

Don't get me wrong I/we were not hunting for hand-outs but, after starting a conversation, once people discovered what you were up to, they wanted to learn about the event. Under these circumstances the food etc was almost like payment paid to watch/listen to the performing seal.

In addition to the interest generated in Canada and the US I was very touched by the concern expressed by people back home and the encouragement I received. It was interesting to learn from Jackie just how addictive Trackleaders' SPOT watching can become. I too had discovered this watching the race unfold in 2015 and 2016.

It was very pleasant arriving in the middle of nowhere at a food stop and in quick succession ordering food, plugging in my phone and/or battery charger, finding I could get reliable WiFi and then listening to the successive pings which followed as multiple Watts App messages came through.

Ria, my secretary, kept all my work colleagues fully informed of progress. Keith seemed especially interested in my progress.

I

particularly appreciated the phone calls I had with Jackie and Emma en route, unexpected but very pleasant.

On my return the

*'Welcome Home & incidentally let's try out Jerry's new birthday barbeque'* party went very well indeed. There were two major highlights; one was the enthusiastic rendition by Clive, Martin and Grossie of Clive's song<sup>1</sup>:

*'Like a 9 Stone Cowboy'*



*Clive, Martin and Grossie in full flow*

The second was the presentation from the 'Friday Gang' of a marvellous picture of me cycling along the banks of Jackson Lake in front of the Teton mountain range.

Suggested by AI and taken from one of the photos I had 'Watts Apped' back home.

1. See Appendix 8 - To be sung to the tune of Glen Campbell's *'Like a Rhinestone Cowboy'*





*Yours truly on the Waterbuffalo in front of the Tetons*

So to summarise the trip itself was all I had hoped it would be and more. It is difficult to highlight specific incidences which made the experience. The whole was certainly greater than the sum of its parts.

The journey was definitely a roller-coaster both in terms of geography/topography as well as psychologically. Overall I was struck by how often, immediately after a good/bad event had occurred, a bad/good event happened:

- Reaching the top of the Boreas Pass feeling great, only to miss the Gold Dust Trail, on the way down.
- Racing with no map, seemingly in vain, to beat the rain along dodgy tracks south of Cuba, only to come across Pie Town Toaster House 20k before I expected it,
- Staying in the cyclist-only accommodation and being very 'happy' having had a 'few' beers while visiting the microbrewery in Del Norte, only to discover the potential trip stopping need for both front and rear cassettes the next day
- Finding my rucksack was not up to the job only for the Motel owner to root out a robust new one
- Reaching the 1000k mark, realising there was still another 3400k to go, and then immediately spying a mountain lion.

Perhaps it was this variability I liked most - not knowing what was coming next.

Obviously I had the route plotted in the GPS and I had my map to back it up, with route profile for the first 17 days. But nothing prepared you for the views, the relentless hills, the camaraderie, the multiple glimpses of wildlife, the episodes of overwhelming tiredness, the weather (both good and bad), the variable food, the temperature in the desert, the falls, the highly variable road conditions, the mechanical difficulties, the isolation followed by the unexpected reunions in isolated hamlets, the interest of people back home in the UK.

I could go on and on.....some might suggest I already have!!.

In the same way as it was hard, much harder than I had hoped it was also rewarding, more rewarding than I had hoped and I am glad on both fronts.

If it had been easy it would not have felt such an achievement.

I am struck by how similar my feelings were after completing the Bob Graham Round, joining the Cinglés Club du Mt Ventoux and finishing the Tour Divide. Best summed up as a curious mixture of quiet satisfaction, tiredness and surprise that, despite the logistical and physical difficulties involved, I had actually been successful.

I don't know if that answers the questions posed at the start of this epilogue – If not I'm sorry but I think this it's the best I can do.

Those of you who are observant will notice that at the start of the Epilogue I quoted three questions frequently posed by friends and work colleagues. You will also notice that until now I have avoided answering the last one

*Would you do it again?*

I know for a fact that if you had asked me 10 seconds after finishing my answer would have been 'No!'

However I suspect that this journey is a bit like childbirth - after a long and invariably painful experience, while there is great satisfaction at the culmination, if it were suggested immediately after the birth that she has another one most mothers would give the same negative answer (although perhaps expressed more forcefully). However, in the fullness of time, that does not seem to stop some couples having multiple children.

In my case given a few weeks to recover and absorb the experience and memories I think in order to express my sentiments and answer that one I would need another Journal! Lots of other things to do yet and obviously time is running out!!.....

Let's just say let's see...

One thing I must say before I finally finish and that is how immensely grateful I have been to Jackie for allowing me to do this – I fully appreciate how it must have been back home not 100% sure of how I was doing or what I was experiencing. As I say I am very grateful for her letting me do this. I am just sorry she did not want to do it too but never mind.

Oh and by the way if you were wondering what was the relevance of the water buffalo reference right at the beginning. This is the name I think which is appropriate for my bike. I say this because apparently Lao Tzu (or Laozi), he of

*'The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step'*.

Fame, left home on long journey of enlightenment (admitted in a westerly direction) seated on the back of a water buffalo.

Appropriate I thought therefore to call my steer '*The water buffalo*', especially as it was frequently caked in mud; although you could say that that was a Laozi joke (sorry).

Thanks again for reading.

# BIKE KNOWLEDGE TO BEARD RATIO



RIDES



RIDES  
AND CAN  
FIX ACHAIN



RIDES AND  
HAS BUILT  
A BIKE  
FROM OLD  
PARTS



PROBABLY  
A WIZARD  
...NO  
NEED FOR  
BIKES