

Life Cycle Challenge 2008: Lourdes to Casablanca in 10 days.



A Cyclist's Perspective

There were so many things that could go wrong. Would I be fit enough? Even if I were, how would I cope with the extreme heat? What if I suffered serious sunburn or got sunstroke? Would my bike stand up to the event? Might my asthma be triggered by the hot and humid conditions? Would my 48-year old body stand up to 10 consecutive days of extreme physical exertion? And the prospect of painful saddle sores? What if all of these issues combined at once? But before all of that, what if FlyBe refused to carry my bike on my initial flight from Newcastle Airport? At least I had a Plan B for that one.

So it was with some trepidation that I awoke on Weds 14th August to prepare to leave. I had not thought about the immediate problem that I was facing. It was bucketing down. How could my cardboard cycle box survive such wet conditions and remain usable for a second flight from Gatwick to Toulouse and two further return flights a fortnight later? After initial panic, I found a large sheet of plastic in the garden shed and wrapped the whole box in it. My worries of it standing on the airport runway at Newcastle

getting soaked and turning into a soggy mush were removed.

Getting to Lourdes involved flying Newcastle to Gatwick, changing terminals, flying Gatwick to Toulouse and then a coach for 2 hours to Lourdes. I met with all the other cyclists at Toulouse and the entire journey went without a hitch. We arrived at 2.00am in torrential rain to find that hostel was double-booked. The plastic sheet was again called upon and the only solution was for people to spread out on floors around the hostel and try to get some sleep. If we managed about 4 hours of broken sleep we were lucky. Not ideal preparation for what lay ahead.

The rain had just about passed as we woke on the Friday morning, and the main job was to re-assemble our bikes and ensure all kit was correct and fully working. Once done, we had the rest of the day free to experience Lourdes, which was that day celebrating the 150th Anniversary of the Festival of Our Lady, which commemorates the Lourdes Apparitions.



The prettier side of Lourdes.

There were a number of processions, Masses, prayers etc lasting until late into the evening. It was an impressive sight, although if you remove the magnificent church and the dramatic setting of the town in the foothills

of the Pyrenees, it was disappointingly rather tacky and over-commercialised; a bit like an over-religious version of Blackpool.



The magnificent Church of Our Lady

Our pre-event briefing gave us the bad news that we would be awakened at 4.00am for a 6.00am prompt start. Not ideal after another night of around 4 hours broken sleep on a tiled corridor floor outside the washroom. Still no doubt worse would be to come.

The Challenge format involves groups of 4, 5 or 6 cyclists of similar ability going off together in a group, with the slowest group starting first and then each progressively faster group following at intervals of between 5 and 8 minutes, depending upon the distance to be cycled each day. Each day's route would have compulsory checkpoints at around 50-55km intervals, which would generally take around 2-2½ hours of cycling, depending upon the terrain. Each involved a compulsory stop of 20 minutes to rest and take on essential food and fluids. These would prove invaluable, both physically to keep the body in shape, and mentally to break up the extreme distances into manageable sections.

6.00am arrived, very dark and unexpectedly cold, with a biting wind. This first day involved 196km (122 miles) up and over the Pyrenees to Huesca in Spain.



Poised to go – 6.00am and freezing with 1,300 miles ahead.

The Pyrenean scenery was spectacular, and the cool conditions suited me. The first checkpoint was at 1,474m (4,860ft), after a climb of 875m (2,950ft). A nice descent preceded a further climb to another pass and then a long winding descent through a ski resort led to a never-ending 24k ascent up to the 2nd checkpoint at 1,763m (5,800ft). The weather worsened at this stage with rain blown in on the gusty wind. Imagine Hartside Cafe on a damp November day. I found it chilly, but my Maltese colleagues were generally shivering uncontrollably. By this time, the lack of sleep was catching up and there were several worrying occasions where my eyes were closing whilst cycling downhill at speeds in excess of 30mph with sheer cliffs at the roadside. Not a good time to “drop off”, if you excuse the pun! Thankfully I managed to fight it off until the 3rd checkpoint which was conveniently adjacent to a cafe, where I had an espresso to try to waken me up. We heard that Day 1 had claimed our first drop-out with one cyclist suffering severe migraines.

Once we left the mountains and progressed into Spain the terrain became gently undulating and the weather warm and sunny. The last 4 hours were very pleasant and we arrived in Huesca after 10 hrs 11mins of cycling. We must have done around 2,250 – 2,500m (7,500 – 8,000ft) of ascent to add to

the 196k distance. The wooden floor of the Huesca Sports Centre might have felt basic on any other day, but was a pleasure to lie on after that.

Life Cycle Challenge has a habit of producing unexpected hurdles to overcome. The first was the over-booked hostel on arrival and the second followed at the end of this first day. Apparently that weekend was a fiesta weekend throughout Spain and the government had passed a by-law permitting only single cyclists to be on the roads over the holiday weekend. Some of our groups had consequently been stopped by police that day and so they were aware of our event and duly prohibited us from riding on the Sunday. Much discussion and diplomatic phone calls followed and the only realistic conclusion, given that we had deadlines and arrangements in every other town ahead, was that we would have to have the Sunday off and then cycle both the Sunday route and the Monday route together on the Monday. This would be close to 300k. As Alan gathered the cyclists to break that terrifying news, a final phone call reported that we had been granted specific last-minute permission to ride by the head of the regional police department, but only as single cyclists at intervals of at least 3 minutes. What a relief.

Day 2 to Alcaniz was a modest 142k (90miles) and generally quite flat, but being inland plains, it was very hot. To me, flat land generally means pretty uninspiring scenery, and so it was one of my less enjoyable days; flat, lonely and hot. At least it only involved 5h 40m of cycling and, uniquely, the accommodation was a sports complex with an (unheated) outdoor swimming pool and so a dip proved invaluable in cooling off the tired muscles. Sleeping was on a floodlit outside 5-a-side pitch, so some of us moved away to find dark corners elsewhere to escape the all-night bright lights.

A warm, muggy night, turned into a hot sunny morning for day 3 to Teruel. Another day of modest distance at 148k (94miles), but we had another mountain range to cross, the Sierra du Gudar, which proved sensational. These were not as high as the Pyrenees, but still involved several stiff climbs, two of which would each have been around 1,000m (3,300ft) taking us up to heights of 1,450m and 1,600m. Total ascent for the day must again have been in excess of 7,000ft, but the temperatures were 33°C. This produced a very testing day, which was made bearable by the spectacular scenery through the mountain sections. We reflected on how relieved we were that days 2 and 3 didn't have to be cycled together; it would have finished most people off, I suspect including me!



Lesser-known but beautiful Sierra du Gudar

Day 4 saw a 5.00am rise for a 7.00am start. 205k (128 miles) beckoned to Albacete. Another chilly, pre-sunrise start, became a lovely ride up a pretty valley. To me it was just a bit fresh, but to my Maltese companions it was perishing, and I had to loan a spare top to one of our group to stave off the cold. Once the sun rose, mid-day temperatures of 34°C presented a tough challenge over what then became rather monotonous straight roads. A puncture to one of our cycling group, conveniently at the entrance to a small village, provided a chance for a Magnum

Double-Choc at a local bar as a very welcome energy boost.

After a total of just over 9 hours of cycling we arrived in Albacete. Our base for the night was a Drug Rehabilitation Centre, a remote 20k out of town, but thankfully we were transported that distance on the support vehicles, as another 20k on a bike into a strong headwind would have been no fun on those bleak straight roads.

The only building in sight for miles, with bars on the windows, greeted us. It looked very austere and unwelcoming. Thankfully we were allocated 5 or 6 unused rooms, separate from the “residents”, two of which I discovered had 8 bunk beds in them. Only 2 beds had mattresses and I quickly nabbed one. Cold water only and no plugs in the sinks made getting cleaned up and washing clothes a challenge, but our cooks, with the camp kitchen available to them, produced a meal to be proud of, before we settled down to another too-warm night and a 5.00am rise to start to biggest day of all – 256k to Jaen (apparently pronounced “Haan” – best said with a good hockle!).

Another cool day-break greeted us on Day 5, but the rising sun soon made it pleasant. More straight, rather boring, roads for the first couple of hours but we could see mountains in the distance, as the Sierra Nevada beckoned. We knew we would be cycling all day today and we all tried not to push too hard. The temperature again rose to 34°C and at times it felt like we were cycling past an open furnace door. The scenery got steadily more impressive as we drew closer to the mountains, but lack of sleep was again haunting me, and I was struggling to stay awake as we cycled along some rather too busy roads. I had to resort to the espresso treatment again to try to avoid ending up in a

deep concrete-faced Spanish roadside ditch, or even worse, under an on-coming vehicle. It turned out others were suffering similar challenges.



The majestic Sierra Nevada

Minor bike issues again proved convenient, when one of my colleagues suffered a chain problem, handily in a village and only 50m from a local bar. A welcome chance for another Magnum Double-Choc energy boost, and drinks for those that needed them. No-one spoke Spanish, but Ray spoke some Italian, which is apparently interchangeable and quite easily understood. He explained that he had the following exchange with one of the locals as we left the bar...

“Why is that man white?”

“He’s English”

“Aaaah”

No more explanation needed! At least it confirmed that my Factor 50 was doing its stuff!

The length of the ride meant that we had 4 compulsory 20 minute checkpoint stops. Add that to the cycling and it adds up to a very long day. We arrived at the finish to be told that the evening’s accommodation was 3.6k away. So 256k became 260k (157 miles) and we eventually stepped off our bikes at 9.00pm, including a total of 11hrs 26 mins of cycling time.

It's difficult knowing how to approach 256k of cycling in one day. I just told myself that I would be on my bike for the whole day, and took each checkpoint section at a time, mentally ticking each one off as we passed, and only thinking as far as the next one. It worked, and I felt generally strong throughout the day and finished relatively comfortably.

The local sports centre and swimming pool provided spacious accommodation, but by the time we arrived the pool was long since closed for the evening. Once again cold water only was the order of the day and not a sink-plug in sight.



Another luxury hotel

We unpacked, showered, did our laundry the best we could using socks as plugs, ate and finally settled down to attempt some sleep on another hard floor at 11.40pm. We were the lucky ones. Our group had evolved into the 2nd fastest and there were 4 or 5 groups behind us. People were steadily arriving as we tried to sleep. The final group arrived at 1.40am and then had to do all their jobs, eat the remaining long-since-cold food - and then be up again at 6.00am to tackle another 176k. Those that managed that had my utmost admiration; more than 18 hours on the bike, followed by 3 – 4 hours sleep and then it all to do again. Not surprisingly, some were defeated by the pressures of this, and the day claimed the greatest single number of drop

outs, through a mixture of injury, fear of cycling in intense darkness and sheer physical and mental exhaustion. By the end of this, the most challenging day, 38 cyclists had become 27.

We had a comparative lie in until 6.00am on Day 6, before we headed off for 176k to Antequera. This one was hilly from the start as we headed into the heart of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Seemingly endless winding climbs and descents thankfully made less noticeable by the marvellous scenery. 176k seemed short after the previous day, but it was punishingly hot and with constant ascents and descents it was one of our toughest days.

We inadvertently made it tougher than it needed to be, by convincing ourselves that we'd taken a wrong turning and re-tracing our route, when in fact we were right all along. We added 15k unnecessarily, including two huge climbs. 176 hilly kilometres had just become 191 hilly ones! Tiredness plays nasty tricks at times.



No, those aren't knee-length socks!

Our final checkpoint was in a village where a group of English ex-pats and dual residents were drinking outside a bar. They told us temperatures had been hitting 40°C that day. They also told us it was 25k to Antequera. At least initially. They then decided it was 35k. And the first 15k was very hilly. They were

right about that, but it was actually 43k! And the final 28k was monotonously flat into the wind. We could see Antequera from about 10k away, but it just refused to come any nearer. It was cruel. Eventually after 10hrs 16mins of cycling we arrived. It was 8.30pm and getting dark. I think at this point I was at my most tired.

Yet again no hot water, but it reaches the point where you ignore it and just get on with it. I tried to get some rest, but once again many others were still to arrive and the noise and commotion made sleep virtually impossible. Even when everyone settled down for the night, communal facilities meant there would inevitably be disturbance. I had snoring in stereo to contend with at one stage!

Day 7 and the last day of Spain beckoned. 190k to Algeciras, adjacent to Gibraltar, and the ferry to Africa. We were told to expect another hilly day, as Alan reminded us once more that Spain is the second most mountainous country in Europe. The initial 2 hours or so to our first checkpoint were quite flat, but then we hit the mountains again and climbed steadily to the town of Ronda, high in the mountains. A delightful place, very Spanish in feel, perched on cliffs and surrounded by wonderful scenery. I made a mental note that I would one day return.



Ronda; definitely worth another visit.

We headed on only to be turned back by our own road team, advising us that their route was wrong. They had found a better one. We headed back down to the base of the valley and came to a military zone and the gates of an army camp. We called on Father Pierre to discuss the options in Spanish with the sentries and it turned out our intended alternative route was not a road after all; it was a railway line! And we weren't allowed through the camp. So back up the mountain we went. Eventually it was decided that the vehicles should take everyone back to the point at which they had each been turned around, otherwise significant numbers of us would run out of time. We had a strict cut off time that day with ferries to catch and vehicles to pack. Just as well, it would have been one monster of an additional climb, especially with time pressures.

The original route they'd decided not to send us on turned out to be a cracker. Superb scenery for miles; beautiful hillsides covered with millions of Olive trees and small whitewashed villages.



Real rural Spain – a delight

It would have been criminal if we had missed out on it. Of course it had its share of ascents and descents, but then it wouldn't be Spain without them! A spectacular way to finally say goodbye to Espana, which we'd already

decided translated into English as “There’s always one more hill”!

We had another night on a sports hall floor to look forward to after our 9hrs 12 mins of cycling, only this one was reserved and in use until 10.00pm. So we had to crowd into corridors and cram into changing rooms, until the main hall space became available. It was close to midnight by the time we’d loaded the bikes and kit onto the lorry and settled for another too-short night of attempted rest.

We were joined that evening by Richard Jones, head of main event sponsors HSBC Insurance in Malta, and 3 colleagues who were to team up with the rest of us for the Moroccan stages. It was good to see corporate sponsors getting involved at the sharp end.

Up again at 6.00am and off by 7.30 for the 9.00 ferry to Tangier. The sailing time is only 1½ hours but Spain and Morocco are worlds apart. The kit lorry had left on an earlier ferry so that it could be unloaded and ready for us when we arrived. The Moroccan Customs staff had other ideas, and they had only just been released for landing a few minutes before us. We all had to help the unloading exercise, watched by eagle eyed local youngsters, ready to pounce for anything worth having - if they could evade the Port Police keeping them back with dogs. After 2 hours hanging about, and reloading the truck, we set off in one large group through the mayhem of Tangier traffic. There appeared to be no rules; cars approaching in all directions, cycles, pedestrians, traffic police blowing whistles and waving and pointing randomly and traffic lights that we didn’t understand. In 40 years of cycling I have never felt so vulnerable.

We survived, although we were not entirely sure how, and gradually were freed of the urban sprawl and moved into the very

different rural Morocco. The poverty gap quickly became very apparent. Many peasant farmers tending scrawny-looking goats, trying to sell onions, melons or prickly pears from buckets at the roadside and local craftsmen with small roadside stalls of pottery, as shiny new Range Rovers and Porsche Cayennes drove past. The transport modes became more primitive as we moved towards the mountains. Horses, donkeys and battered old pick-ups and camper vans replaced the 4x4s. It was a practical lifestyle; we saw ladies sitting in the back of open top pickups, men standing on the rear of vans at 50mph hanging on by open doors and even a herd of sheep disembarking from the rear doors of a camper van. Anything goes in the world of sheer survival!

Because of the ferry crossing, our cycling day was comparatively short at 112k, but this included a climb from sea level to Chefchaouen at 975m (3,200ft). Given that we had several significant descents in the route, the actual ascent must have totalled around 4,000ft. Once in the countryside, it was a lovely route with decent road surfaces, but some of the villages were very poor and scruffy and severe poverty was never far away.



Any chance of a lift?

The village of Chefchaouen was reached after a stiff final climb in very hot late-afternoon temperatures, and is a well-preserved historic

town with an ancient Medina and Mosque. It was much cleaner than other villages en-route, and clearly had significant tourist value. Our hostel for the night was probably the best accommodation we encountered on the whole Challenge, with cool marble floors, beds with mattresses and showers with hot water – at least in the few that worked. The sinks still had no hot water or plugs, but you can't have everything! Chefchaouen was unique on the Challenge, as the one evening where we would eat out as a group in a local restaurant. A table was reserved for 55 people in the Old Town, and it proved a dramatic backdrop for a traditional Moroccan meal of spicy soup and lamb stew. No alcohol of course; not because it is a Muslim country but because Life Cycle Challenge carries with it a strict alcohol ban. It was a very enjoyable treat after 8 tough days, but it meant another midnight finish, and Day 9 beckoned 5 hours later with 236k (148miles) to conquer.

We awoke well before sunrise as usual, and as dawn broke we watched a cow being walked down the main street outside our hostel. Never be surprised by anything in Morocco. The sun was just rising as we set off, disappointingly, uphill, as the road curved above the village. It was a spectacular route for 3 hours or so as we wound our way out of the mountains. Thereafter we encountered the most monotonous journey I have ever known. Flat, featureless, sun-baked plains, with nothing to see, and pan-flat, hideously straight, roads. Staying awake became a real problem again and concentration was difficult. Mentally this was my toughest point. With no distractions it was a real effort to keep pedalling, knowing many more hours of the same boredom lay ahead.

My cycling colleague, Ray, was clearly suffering concentration difficulties similar to me, as he managed to get in a complete knot as he tried to stop and ended up painfully

over his handlebars and landed chin first on the tarmac. A local car saw the accident and stopped to help. The occupants very generously offered us their only bottle of water to clean up the blood, which was drying quickly in his beard. He's a tough character, Ray, and after a quick rub he just got back on his bike and pedalled on. Thankfully, the next checkpoint was only about 20 minutes down the road, and even more fortuitously, the only doctor on the trip, Paul, a GP in Malta, was cycling in a group only 10 minutes or so behind us. He arrived whilst we were still on our enforced 20 minute rest period and was able to administer 6 stitches to Ray's chin in the back of the camper van - with no anaesthetic!

Occasionally, as we progressed, a shanty village or a tumble-down town would break the routine, or the smell of fire embers which the peasants were clearly using each night to generate warmth. It has to be said that some smells were rather less pleasant. As we edged closer to the coast, we saw many haystacks, which were curiously fully encased in a covering of mud; we assumed this was to protect the precious feed from depletion or fire risk from the sun.



Mud-covered haystacks lined the route

Farm animals were becoming greater in number and looked much stronger now, with more quality feed available, and some

irrigation systems in evidence. We even saw a couple of tractors, as opposed to donkeys.

We reached the coast north of Rabat, and passed through another city of madness, Kenitra, about 40k to the north. Viewed from the main street, it looked a very poor city, which seemed to be one huge market, with dilapidated buildings and dirty streets thronging with people, animals and battered vehicles. We were glad to be in a group, and were pleased to leave, and eventually reached the outskirts of Rabat. This was again a bustling city, where anything appeared to go, but with much wealth apparent, presumably generated by the extensive industry present in the city. What a relief. The last big day was over, after 9 hrs 23 min of cycling. A local swimming pool provided our accommodation, but sadly there was no water in it so a dip wasn't possible. The water shortage extended once more to the hot taps so another cold shower and laundry session followed.

Everyone rose with renewed vigour on Day 10, our final day. We all knew that surviving Day 9 meant we were as good as home, as this final route to Casablanca was a mere 97k. This seemed nothing after the previous nine days, but it is still equivalent to cycling from Newcastle to Carlisle! That shows how perspectives change; 6 weeks earlier that would have seemed like a major undertaking.

Rabat in the early morning is just as busy as Rabat in the early evening, and so we were led as a convoy to the coastal road that would be our route to Casablanca. We set off along the fairly scruffy beachside road, with many locals fishing in the Atlantic waves using makeshift fishing rods. It was a largely flat route through some busy, quite affluent holiday towns and some busy and rather rough residential towns. In between these settlements the outlook was pretty

monotonous until we reached the industrial outskirts of Casablanca.

Our 2nd checkpoint, adjacent to an outdoor swimming pool blasting out Muslim music, and a football pitch with not a single blade of grass, formed the stopping point where we all gathered and waited for everyone to arrive. A triumphant Police escort had been arranged for the final 10k to the centre of the city and the King Hassan II Mosque that was to be the dramatic official end to our Challenge. This was a tremendous experience. Many of our group that had dropped out earlier due to injury or fatigue re-joined us for this finale. Some wrapped themselves patriotically in Maltese flags and we were cheered, clapped, tooted and waved at for the whole time.



Delight as the end is in sight

The arrival at the Mosque, which is the 3rd largest in the World, with its 650ft tower and 5 acres of marble and mosaic, felt somewhat surreal. A masterpiece of a building that cost \$1 billion in 1993; appropriately impressive and imposing, with 50 cyclists and the support team, hugging, cheering, crying, dancing, waving cycles above their heads and photographing each other.

There were mixed feelings of elation and anticlimax as we realised it had all come to an end. 10 days of sheer determination, commitment and teamwork was over. But what an experience. It was certainly a tough

challenge. But, thankfully, not as tough as I had mentally prepared myself for. My training meant I had arrived fit enough to handle it, and so it became more of a mental test, with a prayer that the factors outside my control wouldn't intervene. I managed to coax my rear end through relatively unscathed, and my Factor 50 prevented all potential sun-related issues. Temperatures were high, as feared, but the prevailing winds, and the breeze generated by cycling, meant that the occasions where it became difficult were quite rare and relatively short-lived. Food and fluids were maintained by superb back up support, and with all of that in my favour, I was never realistically going to fail. Once I got through the monstrous 260k of day 5, I was confident that, barring injury or cycle failure, I'd be one of the successful finishers. Others were not so fortunate, and a total of 12 cyclists failed to complete the Challenge for a variety of reasons. This was the highest number in the 10-year history of the event and so perhaps outlines the severity of this Challenge.



Mutual congratulations from Alan and me at the finish.

The event is surely unique. To have so many people giving up so much time and effort, unpaid and raising funds for the privilege, to support 38 cyclists putting themselves through such a physical and mental challenge was incredible to be part of.

Our flights home took us via Madrid. In true "Life Cycle" style, our arrival there was greeted with text messages of the latest crisis. Our support truck was returning overland back to Spain with everyone else's cycles and kit, and had left Casablanca earlier that morning. They had stopped for a meal before reaching Tangier and when the vehicle was later examined by the Tangier Customs, it was discovered that 9 teenage "illegals" had broken into the back of the truck and hidden away amongst the cycles and equipment. The driver (who is in the Maltese Army) and his companion, had both been arrested by the Moroccan authorities as traffickers and had their passports confiscated.

Once more, diplomatic assistance was called upon and we were relieved to hear later that day that they had both been released to continue their journey, and that the driver's army career would not be jeopardised. It's never dull on Life Cycle!!

We could then relax to enjoy Madrid and it was wonderful to spend 16 hours or so in that fantastic city. A pavement café with a relaxing coffee and a beer, overlooking the Plaza Mayor. Simple pleasures, after 14 arduous days, and a delightful end to the trip.

I have been overwhelmed by the support of family, friends, colleagues, clients and others in sponsorship, and I am delighted to have raised close to £4,000 for the renal charity founded by Alan Curry. My heartfelt thanks to everyone who kindly donated to the cause.

David Armstrong