Cycling in Cornwall & Devon – the “Big Bosses”

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Bowser in Mario, the Elite Four in Pokemon and all other video game big bosses elicit the same thrill, excitement, frustration and dread in gamers. They push your skill, persistence, ingenuity and willpower to levels that the rest of the game does not reach and reward you with the standout moments of satisfaction and accomplishment when you finally overcome their steep challenges.

“But that does that have to do with cycling the length of the UK?” I hear you ask. Well, riding from Land’s End to John O’Groats carries its own pair of big bosses to bring all of those same emotions to pass for the cycle tourer. They call them… “Devon” and “Cornwall”. These two counties are etched in the minds of many a rider from professional to first-timer and I am fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to carve a few pieces of my cycling memory whilst riding in these special places.

The ”Crying Bench”

The aforementioned professional cyclists may not have been brought to tears, merely exclaiming that Tour of Britain stages in Devon were some of their highest ever recorded power numbers; but there is a particular spot that has remained a focal point of riding in the extreme South West of the UK for me and those who have passed through Cornwall in my company. The Crying Bench.

Over a decade ago, as a 19 year old student at the University of Bath, I set off towards St Austell in Cornwall for a Sunday lunch with a friend (a student will go a long way on the promise of food!). Doing the 150 miles by bike and armed with no GPS but merely a list of road numbers (A39, B3181, etc…) taped to my top tube now seems ambitious in time for lunch but confident in my ability I set off South West.

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It was not the mist on the Mendip Hills, the headwinds on the Somerset levels or the hail on Dartmoor that finally brought the tears welling up but a nondescript hill, part of a seemingly never-ending chain of the things, in Cornwall that broke the camel's back of my self-assuredness. Fortunately, there was a bright blue bench right there at the side of the road waiting for me to slump on to and have a sob.

It has since become a reference point for Bike the UK for MS riders on our trips. "Look out for the Crying Bench," a point of common reference and empathy for those having a hard day, or week, as they tackle one of LEJOG's bosses. A physical tribute that no matter what level you ride at or speed you go, we are all feeling the same sensations and emotions, just like those video games. Not the pros, though. They just push more power numbers!

I can see the sea!

As any local cyclist will tell you, there is no flat road in Devon. Nowhere is more un-flat than Dartmoor. This has its drawbacks. When you are on a long hard day's ride, that rollercoaster of up and down can make the kilometres stretch out interminably. It is not all bad though. When you are racing your mates and have the upper hand each upward kick feels like you are working together with the double-digit gradients as dastardly collaborators.

One other positive of all of that up-ness is that when you crest the final rise and see what remains of the UK spilling out before you towards the coast then you can know that you are not far from your goal. All the more so if you have seen the north coast of Scotland in the rear-view mirror of your mind since departing John O' Groats. It's not all plain sailing from there though, despite the lack of altitude, Cornwall has plenty of big-boss energy left to test you with (see references to crying and benches above!).



“Welcome to Cornwall” …You must be kidding?!



As you cross the mighty Tamar River which divides Devon and Cornwall you can immediately sense that something is a little bit different. Not cream on top of jam on scones, not even the fact that finding a train station halfway up a hill is a bit odd (trains like flat and halfway up this particular hill is almost the exact opposite) but that the maths and logic of the route laid out ahead of you doesn't make sense.

Flash floods? Yes, but at the top of hills, not the bottom.

My record number of layers worn whilst cycling? Eleven. In June. In Cornwall, of course. When not a few moments earlier a single jersey was more than enough.

A bombastic, barmy, bonkers bundle of bicycling brilliance. The only way to describe a bike ride of any distance in Cornwall. And the final big boss of John O' Groats to Land's End can always say "well, I did warn you…" Crossing the bridge over the Tamar, where the sense of something odd emerged just as you passed the "Welcome to Cornwall" sign… and immediately turn the corner onto the daftest hill of them all!

Heading North

But what about if you are heading from Land's End to John O' Groats instead, for example, on our trip this July to raise money for MS? Well, as you emerge onto the city streets of Exeter you will have quite the realisation. All of that is behind you. You have unpicked that lock, solved that puzzle and persisted through that head-to-head. You get to enjoy that sense of accomplishment and satisfaction for that whole rest of the trip. And you never know, you might find yourself going back for more… Just one more level?

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