

Andrew's 2015 Irish trip.

Six months ago I put a note on the Wheelers' website to let you all know I was planning a tour of Southern Ireland and were there any kindred spirits out there. I was ruling nothing in or out in terms of distance or itinerary. Well here I am, Andrew 'Billy no-mates' Whittaker, with two weeks to go and getting a little bit nervous.

Re-wind nine months to a meeting with an old mate whom I have known for well over fifty years and whom had been bored to tears with my cycling stories. "Go to Ireland, it's a beautiful country - the Wicklow Mountains and The Ring of Kerry" he said. Now this bloke didn't use words like 'beautiful', he was an accountant from the Midlands and they just don't talk like that up there. "But it's green for a reason" he went on and I'll be surprised if you'll stick it for a whole week" This was fighting talk so...

The route-planning has been great fun through the winter evenings with as many changes to the itinerary as there cogs on a triple-ring, but with a little help from an on-line cycle forum I've finally came up with something vaguely resembling a plan.

Although I shall start in the South-east corner (flying to Cork) I've decided to concentrate on the south-west and west coast. Making allowances for strong winds off the Atlantic I've finally settled on an average 70 miles a day with one grim, but potentially stunning, day of 120 miles if the wind and rain hold off. Have a look at Roundstone, Healey Pass and Killary fjord on Google maps and see what you think. I love some of the place names - Macgillicuddy's Reeks and Ballybunion for example.

I shall be travelling light, having exchanged my trusty Specialized Tri-cross and Van Nicholas (which served me well on previous trips to the Yorks. Dales and Moors; Dumfries and Galloway and the Highlands and Islands), for a lighter and faster Giant Defy. No rear rack is a sad loss - working out how to carry enough stuff to cope with variations in the weather has been a real challenge. Paul Simpson has very kindly let me his rear pannier, but I'm still not sure I've got it right yet and I'm running out of time.

Finally get all my accommodation sorted. I always feel it's so self-indulgent to spend a week on holiday on my own, so I go to great pains to minimise the cost: "Oh I see you're giving your hair shirt its annual airing" says my wife as I book a few single bedrooms courtesy of airbnb; beds in hostel dorms and a couple of reasonably-priced B&Bs. I drew the line at a very dodgy-looking town-centre hostel for £12, but check out Dromid Hostel near Waterville at 17 Euros a night. How much is that view worth?

20 May: Off to Croatia for a week so no cycling.

27 May I think the break from cycling has done me good. A thirty-five mile ride and feel OK. I need to get my fitness levels up so practice on the hill from Iden to Wittersham. The Kent county boundary up to the willow tree in four minutes, three times on the trot.

4 June On the way to Waitrose, my gear cable snapped so this was the cue to bung the bike into RM cycles for a good seeing-to. Many of the screws and knobs on this bike are a complete mystery to me so Roger has agreed to give me some lessons in maintenance. I never really understood how a Sturmy-Archer three-speed worked, but that's nothing compared to working out how to adjust disc brakes in the Arrival lounge at Cork International.

10 June: The bike has been tarted up and the seat-post mounted pannier is brilliant. Some allegedly waterproof overshoes have arrived in the post and I've also bought some "knee warmers" - God knows why - but at last it all seems to be coming together.

11 June Tenterden to Staplehurst via S. Vallenge hill then breakfast at work. Stood on the weigh-bridge thing in the warehouse to make sure my bike and box won't be over the limit. I've lost 4kg and can actually fit into my Maratona '14 shirt so that's definitely going into the bag - that'll impress the Irish!

Starting to worry about making sure I can clear my in-tray at work. That's always a good sign that hols are not far away.

12 June I practice taking my pedals on and off. Tomorrow it'll be handle bars and new Gator skins. New chain on and a few crunching noises but I'm going to stick with the gears I've got I think.

14 June Saddle wouldn't come off. It's jammed in. Finally get it out but some bits fall out as well. RM didn't tell me about them. Half an hour of faffing around and I think it's OK. Tyres on. I'll take some woolly gloves and use them to put on tyres without using levers.

More to follow.....