

## Totally Eclipsed: part two

*Chris James, Danial (Hybrid) Digam and Terry Dickerson went for a week tour in Europe and watched the total eclipse into the bargain. Part two of this multi-part adventure sees the intrepid threesome getting caught-up in eclipse fever.*

Now, where were we? Ah yes in Montorf-les-bains in Luxembourg and just about to cross into France. Chris sprinted past me to take the country sign as we crossed the border. From a cycling point of view, France could not have been more different to Germany. In Germany we cycled for over 100 km on traffic free cycle paths, but in France cycle paths have not yet been invented - and good for them. The French still have the quaint notion that bikes should be allowed, and even encouraged, to go on roads. And what roads the French have - lots of 'em but of variable quality as we found out. A blue line on a French map indicates an AutoRoute (but watch-out for rivers!). A red line is a major trunk road. Yellow are even smaller roads. Now all the blue, red and yellow roads can be guaranteed to have a tarred or concrete surface. White-lines on the map are another thing altogether - all you will be guaranteed is a right of way. Mind you, white roads are mostly made-up roads and are of good quality, only a few are a bit rough. The problem is you cannot tell from the map which are good and which are less good and which are all but gone.

We had a choice, this white road or that white road. Let's take the white one I said, and so we did. The road quickly deteriorated into a farm track with boulders the size of tennis balls scattered over it. A catastrophic rupture of a torroidal gas bladder was inevitable so it was a surprise that we did not get one until over half of the 3km had been covered. It was Chris that has succumbed to the puncture! He quickly repaired it though and we were on our way. Back on to proper roads we started going up hill. A very fast decent followed, my bike felt a bit unstable so I took it easy; even so I reached 72km/h. After getting some money from a bank we started to think about lunch again. The area was obviously a coal mining area and it looked a bit grim. We passes through a few seedy grim looking villages, most seemed to have small coal trucks on display on the village green. A screech of brakes brought us to a halt at an ordinary looking café/bar. The long awaited lunch was about to be served. Steak, frits et vin rouge - another long lunch.

Eventually we dragged ourselves from the table and out to the bikes. Lunch hung heavy and the going was slow. Our next choice of route was not far away, we could go along the main(ish yellow) road or along the slightly longer back roads. The longer nicer route it was then and off we went down a well-surfaced road. Turn left and over the river the map said so we did. A substantial stone bridge spanned the river suggesting a good road. However the road quickly disappeared and it turned into a muddy farm track. Apart from losing traction on one of the hills we made reasonable progress. But worse was to come, the farm track turned into a footpath. We could see the remains of a ancient cobbled road in a number of places we were getting worried that we were on a 'road' to nowhere, but we cycled on. At least there were no more muddy uphill, but the holes and ruts ment slow going anyway. Deep muddy puddles were the next obstacles to pass. And on we cycled. The sigh of relief was almost audible when we saw our first house on the edge of the hamlet. Back on proper roads we started to make better progress, even so we were getting worried about not doing the distance to get to the next large village and finding somewhere to stay. But we needn't have worried, at least at that stage. The next large village was a bit naf, and we thought it beneath us to stay there the night. The map said the next habitation was a village on a hilltop and it had a château - touristy I thought and persuaded the others that we should head there, as there would be lots of places to stay. The name of the village was Montmédy and the ride there was a fabulous run along the side of the valley. In the distance Montmédy looked very attractive in the early evening light. But the bad omens were there; in particular the fields were packed with tents. Montmédy was very nice indeed but for the fact that the town was packed full of tourists and there was no room at the inn. At this stage the weather conspired against us, and the heavens opened. We cowered in a flimsy bus shelter and felt a bit miserable. What should we do push on in the rain and get soaked, possibly not finding anywhere to stay? Or should we sit-tight and wait for the rain to stop and run out of daylight? Luckily the rain eased and I went off to buy some bin liners as a precautionary measure. I spotted a town marked on the map with a large factory, it was only about 14km away and we had time to reach it. The hope was that tourists would avoid industrial towns and we would have a better chance of finding a hotel. As it turned out the factory was a brewery and the town housed the European museum of brewing! The place was packed and our only choice was to sleep rough. Out came the bin liners and the tape and Dan and I started building a tent of sorts - and man was it crap! In the mean time Chris had wandered off, he had found a large wooden table and he came back to expound its virtues. After a project management meeting the tent and the table were combined to form an extremely bad shelter. By now it was dark, I sent the two others off to find some food while I finished off the shelter. They were back half an hour later sans food because everything was full up or sold out. We crawled into what we called home and tried to sleep. The night passed slowly without proper sleep and we were cold into the bargain, the only saving grace was that it did not rain during the night.

Today was eclipse day. After a hearty breakfast (or was it a very early lunch) we headed off to a hill top to watch the big event. We got to the hill 2 hours early and waited expectantly with the rest of the sky watchers. We sat by the road on a grassy verge and ate a lunch of bread, cheeses, ham, tomatoes and fruit. But what was happening in the sky? The sky had patchy cloud and first contact could be seen clearly. As the sun became more covered ... *Next part next month.*