

# RETIRE GRACEFULLY - RIDE TO BERLIN

by Tony Ryan

Hard to believe I've just completed 6 years of retirement –  
Woohoo!!



For me, it's been absolutely fantastic, filling my days with the total pursuit of pleasure: fishing, fell walking with several ex-Provincial colleagues and motorcycling. When I go to bed I can't wait to get up!!

Those of you who know me will know that I've always been into motorbikes. I rode my first at 12 years old and the thrill's still the same each time I throw my leg over one, even now. I currently have five: a 1968 Triumph 650cc (single carb Bonneville), a 1981 Honda 500cc trail bike, a 900cc Triumph Trophy for distance work and a 1952 500cc Matchless under restoration which I owned when I was 17 and bought back for a ridiculous sum 3 years ago as a rusty total wreck!

The fifth is a 1997 Triumph Tiger 900cc, a superb powerful machine I bought off Ebay. Unfortunately the thing is huge (the size of a small carthorse) and my feet can't touch the ground!! Buying it was a real mistake and I'm reluctantly having to move it on. I definitely let my lust for it rule my head.

Anyway, on the night of the first world cup match, I attended my niece's daughters second birthday party in Coniston and ended up having a few pints with my wife's cousin's husband Mark, who's also into bikes. Mark said he'd never been to Whitby, so I offered to take him on his next day off (he's a mechanical systems engineer on submarines for Vickers in Barrow). After a couple more pints I said I'd always fancied a ride to Berlin!! The conversation changed back to the football and I thought no more of it.

A week later, out of the blue, Mark emailed me with Ferry details to Rotterdam and his available dates!! Obviously the drink had led me to a total commitment!! (A moral in there somewhere.)

Once over the shock, (for all my biking experience, I've never ridden on the continent before), I really warmed to the idea and started planning.

If you look at a map of Europe, the road to Berlin from Rotterdam is remarkably straight and direct and this is what put the idea in my head in the first place. The distance is only around 450 miles so quite do-able in a short period of time.

It's fair to say that the Berlin objective held no particular attraction for either of us, other than somewhere to aim.

The departure date (September 14<sup>th</sup> 2006) duly arrived and off we rode to Hull to catch the 9 p.m. overnight ferry to Rotterdam.

I was really quite impressed with the ferry service and our tiny, windowless, two berth en-suite, cabin. Unfortunately, Mark said I snored my head off and he was pacing the decks at 3 a.m. trying to sleep in a bar armchair!

We berthed at 8a.m. and off we rode. I was definitely apprehensive as I've never ever ridden a bike or driven a car on the opposite side of the road. Mark had a GPS system fitted to his bike (a BMW R1100S) and I was just happy to hang onto his exhaust system praying we didn't get split up.

Once out of Rotterdam we met the motorway and it was plain sailing straight across Holland, then into Germany where we hit the autobahns.

The plan was to ride about 300 miles the first day, bunk down then reach Berlin at lunchtime the second day.

Before we set off on the trip, people had told me that these autobahns are fantastic. No speed restrictions and we can go as fast as we like. What they didn't say was that there were about three thousand others in cars, vans and wagons doing exactly the same thing!! It was quite terrifying and, at times, I honestly thought I wasn't going to survive.

We held our speed the whole journey at between 95 and 110 miles an hour and covered a lot of ground fast, but these days you're nobody on a bike and some cars coming past me must have been doing in excess of 140 miles an hour!! They came out of nowhere.

My first serious incident came when I overtook a line of vehicles in the outside lane (nearside to us in the UK) doing my usual 95mph or so. I looked in my mirror to see a car snaking behind me and braking extremely hard to avoid smashing into me or the motorway barrier!! I immediately squirted the bike to pull away and get back into the middle lane. The driver then came past me and gave me two fingers.

Another time there was nothing in my mirror as I pulled out. Seconds later an angel of death in a 7 series Beema was six inches off my rear wheel!! Don't forget I was also doing about 100mph.

Fortunately, these unrestricted stretches are few in number and each is only about 15 miles long. I was extremely glad when we reached the relative safety of the 120km (80mph) stretches alive.

The first night we stayed in a little place called Braunschweig, which was quite comfortable and reasonably priced (about 40 euros) but after his experience of my snoring Mark refused to share and we had to have a room each!

Morning came and we set off on the last lap of the first leg.

The whole road from Rotterdam to Berlin was quite bland with nothing to see of any interest, (not that I dared take my eyes off the road) the M6 has more interesting views.

We finally arrived at the outskirts of Berlin passing signs to famous places like Wansee and found the road took us straight to the Brandenburg Gate where we parked the bikes and started our tourist bit.



We walked down to the Reichstag then to the site of Checkpoint Charlie, saw a bit of the wall and a very touching memorial site to the people killed trying to escape to the West (well over 200 lost their lives).



This took us to about teatime so we kicked the bikes up and went to find our hotel. Just then Mark's GPS system decided to fail and we had to revert to the low tech solution (a map) and it took us ages to find it. When we finally arrived, we realised we were in the middle of Berlins gay district!" Without a word of lie, Mark's room had a pink four-poster bed!! Didn't like to ask if it was the bridal suite.

The place was fine though and we had a few pints of really good German beer and a good meal before we crashed out about 9pm.

At 9am the next day we packed the bikes for the return trip. As I said earlier, the aim wasn't really to spend any time in Berlin, it was just a ride. We actually only had about nine waking hours there.

Unfortunately, I'd placed my one piece wet weather suit on the floor while I fixed my top-box to the bike then rode away and left it!

We'd decided to ride only 300 miles back before staying over and found a sister hotel to the one we stayed at in Braunschweig in a little place called Herne (also with good grub and beer).

On looking at the map, we realised we were quite near Arnhem and as we both remembered the film 'A Bridge too Far', we thought we'd go and have a look the next day.

Right by the bridge that was totally destroyed during the bombing, we found a little memorial garden with relics and photographs together with a guide who told us he was only 9 years old when the battle started but saw and remembered everything. His house was only two hundred yards from the bridge which was also totally destroyed (see pic of me and the guide). He was really interesting and brought the whole event to life.



As we were only about 30 odd miles from Amsterdam we thought we'd have a look at that as well, so off we went and spent a pleasant afternoon behaving ourselves in brilliant sunshine. A far cry from when I went there in February to celebrate my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday with some friends (and our wives!!).



It was then time to head back on the last lap to Rotterdam for the overnight ferry to the UK.

The return trip was totally uneventful and relaxed, apart from hitting appalling weather conditions about Ilkley in North Yorkshire and me without a wetsuit!!

Altogether, we did 1302 miles in just under five days, hurtling across two countries. It was a real experience and we got home in one piece.

Next year Mark's suggested we fly the wives down to southern Spain then ride down to meet them. (Hmmm.....) Watch this space!!

Ain't retirement grand!!

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