

It Takes Two to Tandem

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For Nev
Thank you,
for never giving up on anything

Part One

JOGLE

(John O’Groats to Lands End)

The Journey through Great Britain

Preface

The riding is easy. I appreciate the comfortable start to this expedition. The narrow road is relatively flat, traffic is virtually non-existent and the only weight borne is our own.

I glance down at the tandem’s name printed audaciously in silver text, along the thick, black, bottom tube, directly below me; **‘Fandango’**. The tune from Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” jingles in my head. *‘Scaramouch, Scaramouch, will you do the fandango?’* At this moment our Fandango is light and lively. I wonder, *‘Over this journey will our Fandango resemble the romantic ‘dance of friendship’, or will the branding be synonymous with alternative definitions; ‘a quarrel’, ‘a big fuss’, or the more hopeful, ‘brilliant exploit?’*

We are together, albeit one behind the other. Having now begun this great adventure; we are committed!

Thurso – John O’Groats

Day One

Wednesday, 6th June 2007

Getting Started

Wow! You’re here already. You must have ridden like a mad man?”

I had an inkling Nev would be waiting. He is always keen for a race. The challenge to beat me, travelling the same route by public bus, would be impossible for him to resist.

I had left the hostel in Thurso before Nev. The excuse of a bus to catch had let me off assisting with the last of the tandem reassembly. Anyway, Nev knows I am virtually useless when it comes to knowledge of bicycle technicalities. I have never had the desire, or the need, to be involved in the maintenance of the mountain bikes we usually ride. In fact I have rarely even used a tyre pump. There has been this unspoken agreement; whenever we returned home from a ride, usually near dinner time, Nev would wash the mud from both bikes and attend to any minor maintenance, while I attended to the children and meal preparations. He has always graciously responded to any comment from me, such as that my tyres seem to need some air, with a trip to the shed, pump in hand. So I left Nev tinkering with his links and screws and Allen Keys.

I changed into my Lycra cycle pants and top. A fluorescent yellow jacket, which a friend has kindly lent to me, adds warmth and a 'visibility layer'; not that I need to draw attention to myself on this part of the journey! For extra warmth and modesty on the bus ride, I have covered the Lycra knicks with new, beige, lightweight trousers; the first item of clothing I have ever purchased that is beige in colour! If I bump into Scottish comedian Billy Connolly while I am travelling through his homeland, I am sure he will be able to throw out a string of tandem jokes, and no doubt he will also jest about one of the riders being a member of the 'beige brigade'! (He coined the term, to identify the age-stage of women over 50, who are unable to make up their minds about the colour of a clothing purchase). My beige trousers though, are well cut, trendy après-ski wear. Always on the lookout for a bargain, I grabbed them from the 'end of season sale rack'. When I stepped outside the poky in-store changing room, and asked Nev for his opinion, he responded quite sincerely, but with just a trace in his tone of um, not so sure, "They make you look as if you have no backside."

"Wonderful!" My delight that they must be perfect changes Nev's expression to one of 'I must have missed something' as the purchase is made.

Fashion magazines espouse that the right attire can create a high degree of confidence. I'm not experiencing that spin off. Standing here with my Lycra disguised, I might be dressed for the part, but internally I am a tangled knot of nerves. I've been at the bus stop for what seems like ages. A constant stream of negative thoughts flows through my head. At this point I am not sure what is going to be the biggest challenge for me. Will my limb muscles be sufficiently honed to achieve the distance? I will be spending six weeks in the sole company of my husband, which in itself is likely to present some challenges. Nev will be my Captain; will he suffer silently through any of my weaknesses? My biggest fear though, is in relation to a condition that I had hidden from everyone for a number of years; not even daring to admit to myself that I had a problem. I'd braced myself recently, faced the fact that I had a problem and made Nev aware of my 'irritable bladder'. I hadn't intended confessing to this physical annoyance so early in my story, but how I was going to cope with urgent and frequent urinating, had been troubling me during the preparation for this trip.

Advertisements for 'Tena' products portray smiling attractive women of middle age. In spite of the branding, it implies that it is normal for women to experience 'leakage', when they go about activities such as jogging and bike riding. It is suggested that 'anything' can be quite cheerfully achieved with a 'pad' to disguise true degeneration. I was determined that I would not become a 'Tena' lady. In fact I disliked those advertisements so much, I decided only a matter of weeks ago that now was the time to seek expert advice. In spite of various medical consultations, no physical abnormality was diagnosed, and I was left with the conclusion that the irritating urgency was something brought about through poor mind training. Evidently my bladder has developed a response to my giving in to its impatient demands, like a spoilt tantrum-throwing two year old! The more my bladder demanded, the sooner I gave in, and the pattern was set. So at this point I have not resolved the 'bladder rules brain' conundrum. I'm really not sure how I will cope on a sixteen day journey, sitting on a bicycle seat!

The wait at the bus stop is much longer than I expect. Instead of thinking of the sensible explanation - that I have arrived too early - I begin feeling apprehensive, concerned that I may in fact have missed my ride.

Two particular situations cause my bladder strife; when I am nervous and when the air is cool. Both triggers are affecting me right now. The sensation is prickly and burning, and the irritation warns that an urgent 'discharge' will be the only solution that will bring relief. The railway station, from where the bus is to leave, houses the nearest public toilet. I 'yank the door' in earnest, but the sign facing me through the glass informs that the station is locked until early evening when the daily train is expected. I have no option but to apply well-proven coping mechanisms. Firstly, to 'jiggle and jiggle' with my entire body squeezed intensely, especially the toes curled tightly - believe me, it works! Visualise the antics of a busting child, minus the hand clutching the nether regions, and you'll get the picture. This is the best

immediate solution. Reprimanding self-talk follows; *'You know you don't need to go, you went at the hostel. Focus on something else'*.

I am extremely relieved to be able to apply a 'distraction intervention'; the best 'toddler tantrum taming technique'.

I am joined by a couple of guys who arrive to wait for the bus. I have too much self respect to let my problem be publicly witnessed. Conversation is just what I need for my distress to fade into insignificance. They had yesterday completed the same journey that I am about to begin, albeit they rode from south to north. Yesterday they were too keen to finish their adventure and hadn't taken the time to linger at John O'Groats. They are therefore now returning in the comfort of public transport, to do some sight-seeing in the vicinity.

The day is cool for early summer and I have chosen to sit on the sun filled side of the bus. The heater is on too, and the warmth mingles with the heat of the sun radiating through the glass. A cloying stuffiness causes my head to drop to my chest, as the combination of warmth, gentle motion, and a little jet-lag, lulls me into a travel stupor.

The bus route meanders away from the main road. The travel is slow and each time I sense a reduction in pace with the subsequent lowering of gears, I force at least one eye partially open, and convince my brain to engage significantly enough, to try to identify if by any chance we are overtaking a 'sole tandem rider'. My narrow view is only of clusters of ancient stone cottages bordering the stretch of tarmac that defines a typical village road.

The only stop on this trip is to discharge a couple of passengers at the gate of a local major tourist attraction. The other passengers, the two men I had spoken with at the bus stop, chat together. They teasingly make fun of me as we alight at our destination. "We can see that you are going to be enormously helpful!" they chuckle. They had noticed my nodding head and ask "What use are you going to be on the back of the tandem, if you don't have the energy to stay awake on a bus?" I haven't even started my journey yet and I am already receiving the first of the many comments that will be flung at me on this trip, stereotyping the person on the back of a tandem as 'not pulling their weight'!

And there is Nev; waiting.

To be truthful, I am thankful that Nev, being fitter and stronger, had for twenty miles, heroically offered to ride the tandem solo. I had woken that morning, in Scotland, to the sounds of his tinkering with tools. Nev had, in our cramped first-floor bunk-room, for the very first time ever, begun resurrecting the machine which had been dismantled into numerous components to allow optimum packaging for our air travel. Any fault in his workmanship would likely be manifest over those first few miles, so Nev alone would be the recipient of any mechanical disaster or malfunction. More importantly, I could save my energy and avoid any backtracking.

I could begin at John O'Groats, our designated starting point. This also means I have the luxury of having to cycle only forty-six miles, on this, the first day of our adventure.

Nev's face is lit-up with the achievement of his win. His glowing expression is quickly replaced by a veil of concern. "Yeah; but I've done something! Don't know what, but at the moment I can't walk! Maybe pinched a nerve?" he calls, and to prove the intensity of his pain, he is limping cautiously toward me.

Internally my heart is pulsating with an incongruent mix of dread and elation. The thought pops into my head that *'we aren't going to be able to do this trip. In fact, we are not even going to start'*.

"Oh; no! Are you going to be okay?" seems the appropriate response; expressed with the level of sympathy I expect Nev would want to hear in such a dire situation.

What really is important to me though; is that if we were to be unable to complete this journey – at any stage – it will not be because of any inadequacy related to my health, fitness, or lack of ability! Calling the journey quits, because of an injury, would be better if it was incurred by Nev rather than me! I wouldn't be too upset! I have nothing to prove. I would enjoy the time travelling in the UK, no matter

what the method of transport! I know though, that Nev, who never ever gives up on anything once he has started, will be frustrated if his expectations of completing this cycling epic are thwarted.

To Nev, pain is a stimulus to be blocked out. 'Pain is weakness leaving the body' he says. It is a phenomenon of the weak that ordinarily, he would never give conscious thought to, let alone speak of. To see him 'limping', really is cause for concern! My immediate and inappropriate thought, of hiring a car and starting the journey in relative comfort, has to be put aside. I offer sympathetic expressions of encouragement to mask my true feelings!

We wander slowly around this very isolated part of the world that has been incorrectly classified as the most north-eastern point in Scotland! Why is that? We believed that the idea of starting from John O'Groats was because it is the most accessible north-eastern point in Scotland, in fact it is acknowledged as such. Now that we have travelled thousands of kilometres from Australia, we find that, in reality, the most north-eastern part, with a road connection, albeit gravel, is in fact Duncansby Head, and that is another two miles from here! Two miles there and two miles back is a distance just too great to add to today's scheduled itinerary. We quickly dismiss the option to ride to Duncansby Stacks, to see if they are as impressive as the Twelve Apostles – similar rock formations on the southern coast of Victoria, Australia.

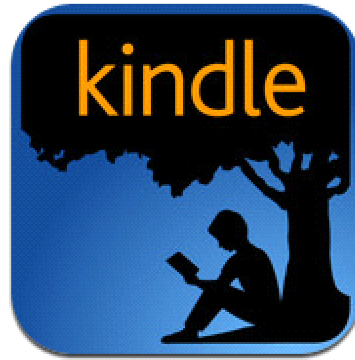
The isolation of this part of the world doesn't hold much interest for us. We visit each of the two John O'Groats buildings that are open. The toilet block; I am surprised I have been able to 'hold-on' for this length of time!

Our journey will be guided by the route details that we purchased from the UK National Cycling Charity (CTC). Included with the guide notes was the CTC End to End Record Sheet. We intend to collect an inked stamp to record stopping at each night's destination, and then at the end of the trip we will be entitled to purchase a T-shirt from 'CTC Merchandise', displaying the achievement. We drop into the John O'Groats Souvenir Shop, to receive our first official stamp; confirmation that we have indeed been here; proof of the legitimate start to our journey.

Never having been keen to part with money for 'tourist memorabilia'; we break with tradition and pay to have our photograph taken. A 'pictorial record' of the launch of our endeavour seems obligatory. 'End to End' is the text chosen for the signpost to mark this historic moment in our lives. Even though the distance of 874 miles is also displayed 'ominously' overhead, any apprehension is hidden as we smile broadly while standing astride 'the bike', distanced by the coldness of the steel frame, in correct hierarchical formation. Nev is at the front, ready to 'Captain', and me, in the subordination role of 'Stoker'.

The air is fresh; almost too cool. Our melancholic mood is mirrored in the dullness of the day, which reflects in the gloomy sea. Nev's physical pain has dissolved to mere 'discomfort'. He feels ready to start cycling! This is no fan-fare launch of an exciting adventure. Just two people in 'mid-life', setting out in trepidation, on a tandem ride that they are 'hopeful of accomplishing'

We hope you enjoyed this free sample of It Takes Two To Tandem you can get the full version at louisergeorge.com or at the links below:



About the author

Louise George was born in New Zealand and has called Australia home since 1999. She works full-time as an Information Systems Manager. Her favourite past-times are mountain biking on local trails, and travel that usually includes a few days of mountain biking or tramping. Louise is a wife, and mother of two adult children. This travel memoir is her first narrative of an adventure shared with her husband Nev. Louise lives in Adelaide, South Australia.

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