

WHY DON'T YOU FLY?

Back door to Beijing – by bicycle

Christopher Smith

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Own up – I always enjoy reading long-distance cycle touring books and *Why Don't You Fly?* is no exception.

The author reaches a stage in his life which I think many people do, 40-plus, no family ties, and enough money in the bank to relish the dream of escape from everyday humdrum life. He was already an experienced traveller, having hitched around Europe and parts of Africa and Asia while on uni holidays, and later driving coast-to-coast across America. He went on to take a job as a lorry driver in Western Europe and the Eastern Bloc.

Living in Bewdley, near Kidderminster begs the question: did he ever ride the Kidderminster Killer or the Elenith, which passes through this town annually. There is no mention of being a club cyclist, but he cycle-commuted 24 miles a day for five years and when redundancy loomed, seized his chance to take off. After months of route planning and research he was ready, equipping himself with a top-quality Thorn expedition bike and Carradice panniers, he very nearly packed at the first hurdle: falling on the tramlines at Calais harbour, injuring his shoulder and knee – a hazard other cyclists have already experienced whilst on the annual Dieppe Raid.

The author plotted an interesting route through Europe, taking in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria to Istanbul, along the Black Sea coast and then south to Iran and Pakistan, where he looks forward to his first curry since leaving England. He is sadly disappointed, finding Pakistani food often thin soup with gristly bits in it. He decides to overwinter in India, and with a six-month visa rides down the west coast to the tip and back through the middle of the country and the west coast to Pakistan again. His quest for curries and satisfying food fulfilled, but the dreaded delly-belly weakens him. He quotes: 'Many western travellers gravitate to India on a quest for Inner Peace and to "find themselves".' India seems to have the opposite effect on him as a cyclist, his impotent fury and language directed at the majority of fellow road-users. The road surface in some areas elicits 'Why can't these people do *anything* properly?'

The thought of travelling alone for so long would daunt many people, but the opportunity to meet and stay with the indigenous population is more available to a lone traveller than a group, and as Chris realises, you can travel at your own pace, stopping when you feel the need rather than keeping to another's schedule. There are times when he meets other cyclo-tourists (some quite bizarre characters) and spends time with them but always seems glad when he's back with only himself for company.

Leaving Pakistan for the second time, and crossing the Taklamakan Desert he reaches China, which surprisingly turns out to be his favourite country, and despite the insurmountable language barrier, finds great humour and kindness from many people.

After repeated attempts to obtain a visa to cycle on to Vladivostok are denied, he finally flies home to a typical reaction which many Auks have received in the past. Village shopkeeper: 'Where have you been all this time?' 'I cycled to China.' 'Oh, really,' she said absently. A work colleague: 'China? By bicycle? Sad tw*t!' with a dismissive shake of his head.

Many travellers' bikes seem to be an endless source of trouble on a trip like this: apart from the inevitable wearing of tyres, tubes, chains and cassettes and a broken stay on a rear rack (10,000 miles before replacing the chain), the Thorn sailed through 16,500 miles of some of the world's toughest terrain without trouble, a testament to Andy Blance's design and wheelbuilding.

A well-written and enjoyable read, worthy of a place alongside your other cycling books. Author Chris Smith is now an AUK member.

Available from Amazon, Waterstones, Tesco, and all good bookshops, or you can order an advance copy with a free T-shirt from Pen Press Publishers Ltd, The Old School, 39 Chesham Road, Brighton, East Sussex BN2 1NB.

Visit www.cycleuktochina.com to view travel photos and excerpts from the book. **Tim Wainwright**

