

The Skirt of France: A Road Trip by Car and Bike



Viraj Parmar
Jessal Ladva

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Introduction

Those who have the courage to venture beyond the comforts of home will be rewarded by the vista of beauty in our world, enlightened by culture and philosophy and the feeling of accomplishment. The team, having had a mere morsel of the experience of adventure, were keen to go for seconds. The opportunity of satisfying our appetite was made possible by the generous award offered by the Exploration Board of Imperial College. However, having completed the tour our hunger for adventure only to grew to new levels.

Initial Ideas and Planning

Initially, the team consisted of 5 individuals who had bold ideas of touring Japan by bicycle, from the top to the bottom during the last long summer holiday that we as medics would experience. Lots of planning went into developing a proposal for the board, however our plans were flawed in that seeing as our collective expedition experience was small, it was quite a bold step to try such a feat in light of the high temperatures and humidity we would encounter at the time of our proposed trip. Furthermore, our research objectives were unlikely to come to fruition on account of lengthy ethical approval processes.

Our hopes were not completely dashed as the board suggested that a trip in Europe of a similar nature may be more feasible and so work began to plan a new adventure in Europe. The plan involved cycling across the most southern coast of Europe from Spain to Italy over 2 months. On account of the large numbers and equipment, we had planned to utilise a support car to aid those on the trip.

Luckily, the board were mostly happy with our plans and awarded us the support that we needed. However, as the time for the expedition closed in, members of the team began to lose their courage and dropped out from the expedition, reasoning that the costs of the trip would be too high

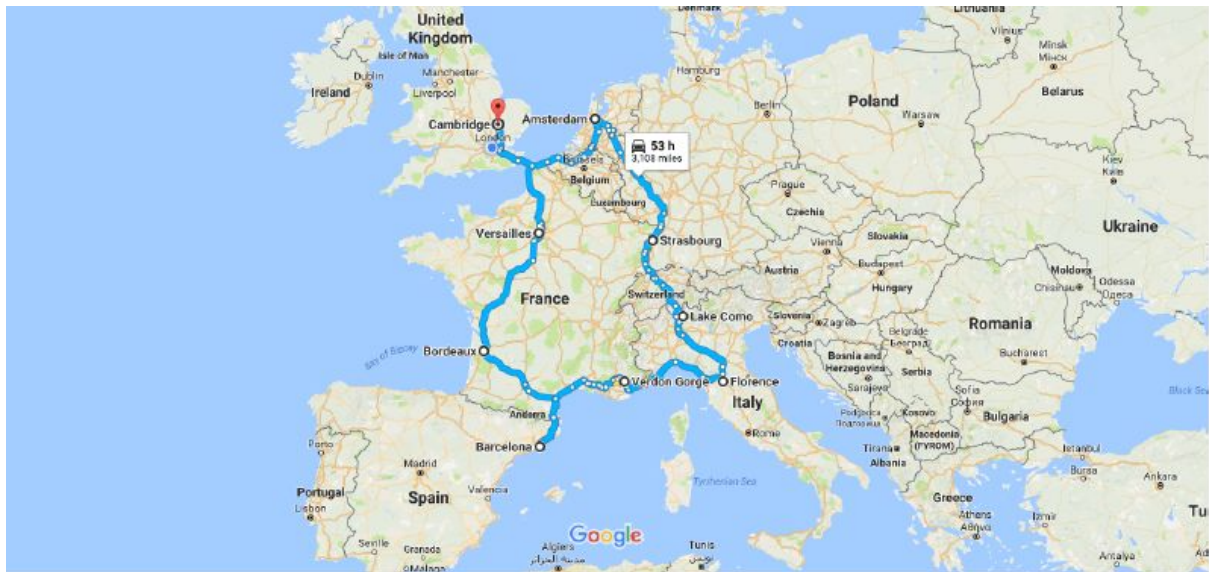
and the risk of terrorism in the South of France was too much. Only two remained brave and ventured out on the trip, vastly different to the plans that we had started with more than one year previously, but what an expedition it was!

Location and Logistics

On account of the extremely last minute drop outs, the trip had to be modified to enable the two of us to complete an expedition. Delays to the start of the trip meant that a period of less than three weeks was feasible. Alongside this, as more people dropped out, the cost for the trip for each individual went up, further limiting the extent of our trip. Hence, in order for us to make the most of the trip, both agreed that we would cover most of the ground using our car and explore each city along the way by bike. This method turned out to be fantastic, allowing us to cross more than 3000 miles and 8 countries in just 17 days.

The route essentially involved skirting around the edge of France and stopping by in major towns and places of interest, thereby giving a whistlestop tour of the some of the greatest places in Europe.

(Map with locations)



Spending

Category	Pre Journey	During Journey	Cost per Day-from Total	Total	Cost per Day During Journey
Travel money card	£839.70	NA	£49.39	£839.70	£49.39
Food	£137.00	£196.93*	£19.64	£333.93	£19.64
Equipment	£526.24	NA	£30.96	£526.24	NA
Petrol	NA	£291.31*	£17.14	£291.31	£17.14
Accommodation	358.18	NA-Redundancy	£21.07	£358.18	NA
Ferry Cost	£188.00	£26.43	£12.61	£214.43	£1.55
Travel Insurance	£70.00	NA	£4.12	£70.00	NA
Dartford Tunnel	£5.00	NA	£0.29	£5.00	NA
Car Insurance	£250.00	NA	£14.71	£250.00	NA
Sightseeing	NA	£37.18	£2.19	£37.18	£2.19
Tolls and Customs	NA	£50.71*	£2.98	£50.71	£2.98
ATM	NA	£114.81	£6.75	£114.81	£6.75

Expenditure	Value
Total	£3,091.49
Funding	£1500.00
Team Members	£1,591.49
Individual	£795.75

The tables above show a breakdown of the money spent during the trip. Note that the breakdown of money used in each category for the during the journey section (starred) is not an accurate representation of the money actually used for these purposes as the travel money card was used to pay for these things when possible. The values represent the money spent using another bank card when the travel card was not accepted and when all the credit had been used. The travel money card was also used to pay for one of the campsites on arrival which meant that the total money spent on accommodation was around £400.

The table below shows the spending stratified for each day and for each person. This value is extremely useful for estimating the costs of such a trip when planning any future expeditions. It should be noted though that a significant proportion of the total spending of the trip was on equipment, even though the Exploration Board supplied some items (see next section). However, now that this investment has been made, the items bought will not add to the cost of future expeditions.

Cost per Day	Total	Per Person
Everything	£181.85	£90.93
Spent during Journey	£99.65	£49.83

Training

Considering that the initial plans for the expedition involved cycling up to 50 miles a day consecutively for several weeks, a significant training regime was required although the speed of progression was going to be sedate. The training involved cycling daily, and building up stamina for long distance. We had also planned a pilot trip beforehand to test how the logistics of the trip would work out and that all our equipment was functioning. Although, we didn't do the practice run, we would still highly suggest it not only for the reasons already mentioned, but also so the team can get a feeling of what the trip might be like and realise any weaknesses.

Equipment

Fortunately, the nature of our trip did not require much in the way of equipment. We owned the majority of equipment already and Imperial were able to fill in the gaps where necessary. Outside of this a few luxuries needed to be bought. The most significant purchase was a roof rack and bicycle supports which was expensive but a necessity.

Journal through Pictures

Versailles

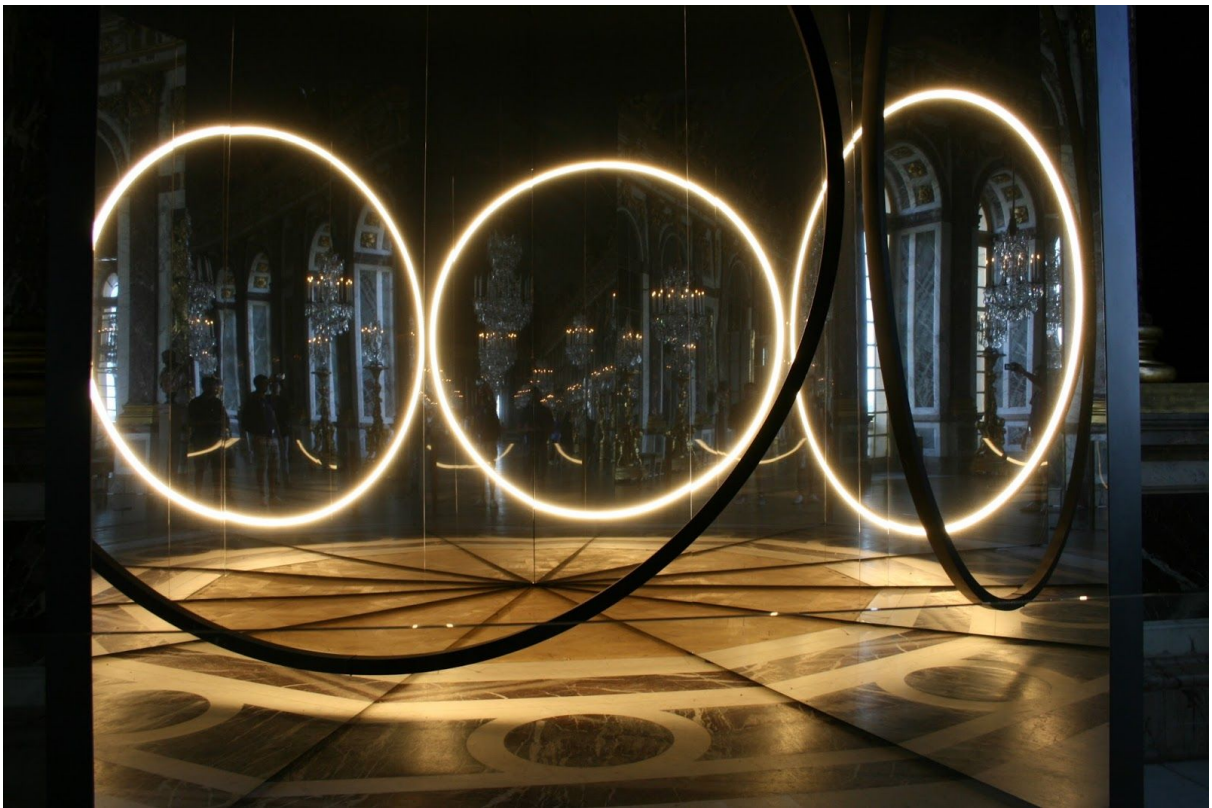






















Bordeaux





Barcelona















Verdon







Monaco











Nice





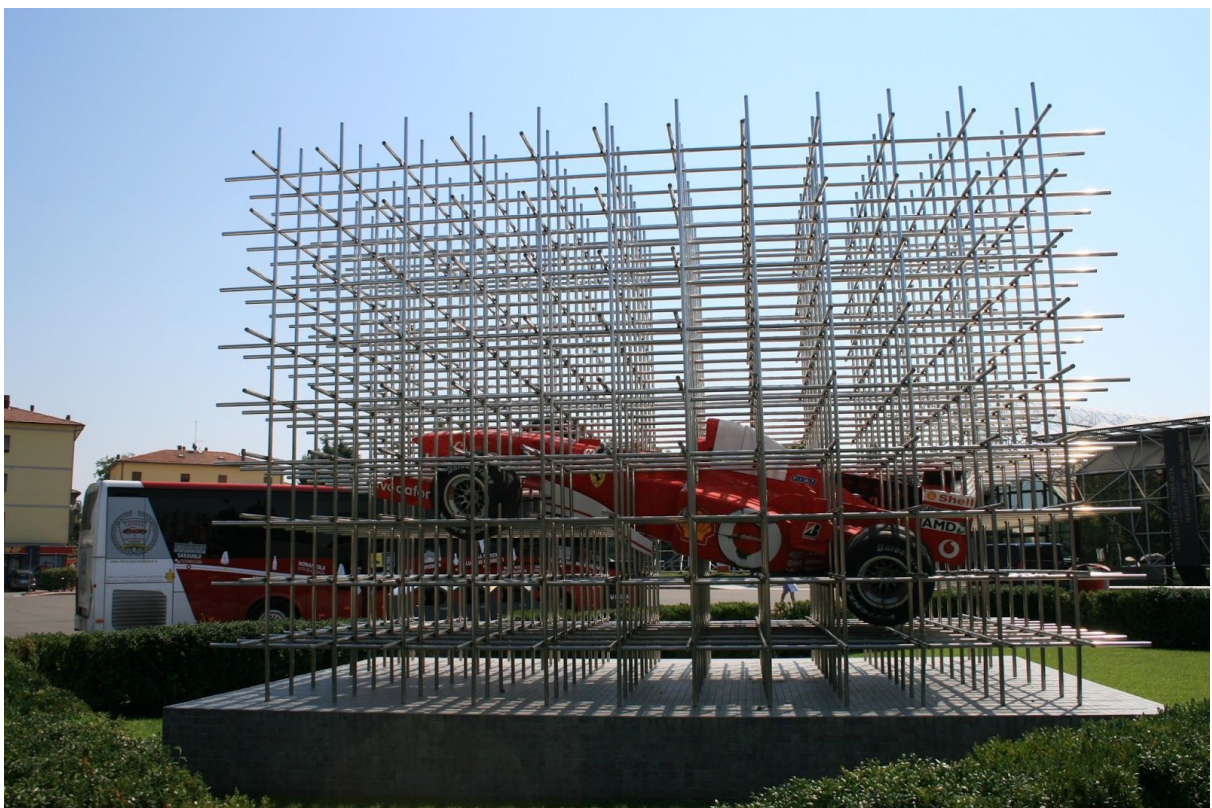


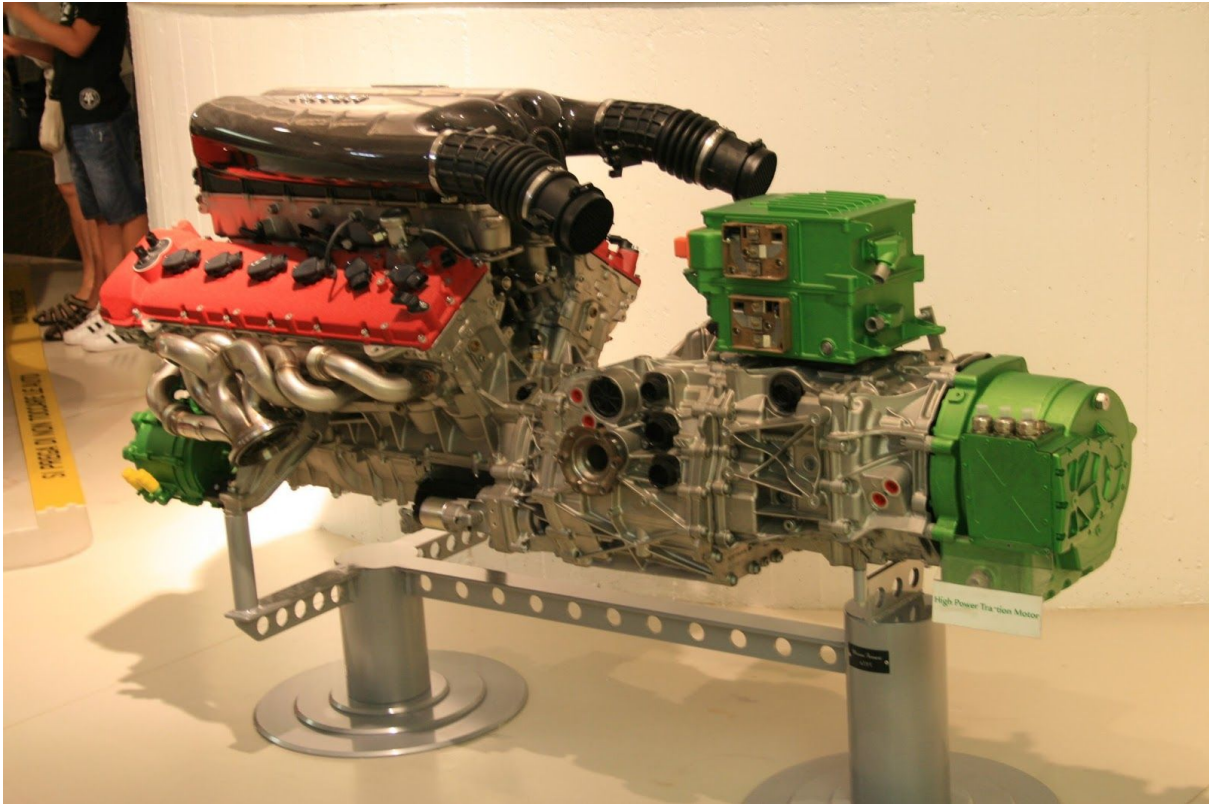
Florence





Maranello - Ferrari Museum







Lake Como







Switzerland



Strasbourg

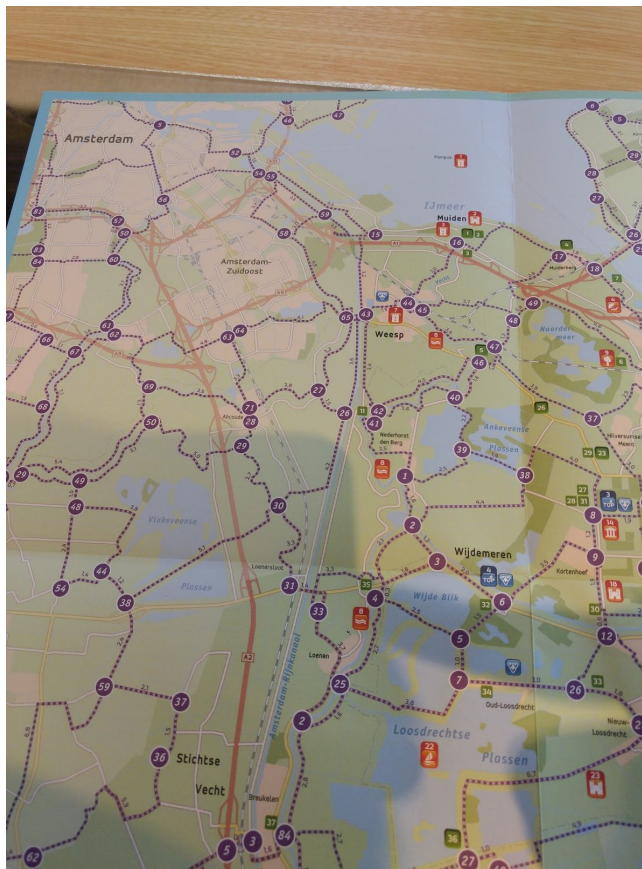








Amsterdam





Anecdotal Tips

Tolls and route planning

One oversight was the existence of toll stations along the major routes through each country. These routes can be avoided by taking side routes however the extra distance is considerable and so a lot of time is potentially wasted. The cost of tolls was not that dear but it was a cost nonetheless and should be considered when planning a route through European countries. It is important that when you approach the toll, you take the right lane as you can easily get confused and stuck in the wrong place. Luckily, we managed to guess the right one most of the time and when in doubt we followed cars of similar proportion and hoped for the best! Always keep some change and cash available in case you end up in a cash only booth as on some occasions we were left fumbling around in our wallets whilst angry Italians were queuing up behind us.

Another oversight was the fee when crossing into Switzerland. They charge for a sticker which allows you to make use of the major roads that cut through the country. Once again it is quite expensive for a sticker but is an equivalent of a toll.

Height restrictions

When driving a vehicle with equipment on the roof, remember to measure the height before you leave and watch out for height restrictions! Annoyingly, some of the toll stations had height restrictions, one of which we did not realise this was the case. As we approached, the bikes clattered into the restriction sign but luckily we still managed to squeeze under. Another problem we encountered was that because of the height of the car with the bikes on the roof, the sensors at the toll machines detect your vehicle as tall and so prints out the ticket about 1 meter above the top of your window. Hence, expect to have to climb out of your window to reach the ticket.

Driving in Europe

Driving in Europe can be daunting at first but you quickly learn what to expect as you go along. When you get off the ferry at Calais, you are automatically started off on the right side of the road so you don't need to worry as you simply follow the cars in front. However, the first major hurdle we encountered was the roundabout. It should be noted that it is a totally different experience going round in the opposite direction.

Most of the journey was on large stretches of motorway with the biggest problem here being cramp. The long periods can be testing and so remember to take breaks regularly and to keep hydrated. This latter part is easy to forget when you are concentrating on the road ahead.

Driving through populated towns is more challenging as the environment is completely different and your ability to flip all our rules of English driving onto the other side is really put to the test. The winding country and mountain passes were an absolute joy to journey on as the scenes are

absolutely astounding. Just keep your wits about you as often locals may come flying round a corner from behind a sheer face of rock making them invisible till the last second.

Cycling

Cycling in Europe is fantastic. The two wheeled approach allows for you to really engross yourself in the environment and experience the entire range that a country has to offer. There are specific cycle routes in most countries making life much easier and safer. This also increases the chances of being overtaken by old grannies as happened to us in the Netherlands.

Bikes are extremely low maintenance and free to run. They certainly are one of the best ways to explore towns but remember to bring locks with you so you don't have to worry about it being stolen whilst you eat your delicious Italian gelato. There are plenty of places to park your bike, often there are large areas with specific bike lock stands such as near the central station in Amsterdam.

Tin openers

Just a small note on food preparation. If you choose to buy a significant amount of food stocks that are packaged in tins, remember also that you will probably need an opener if at some point you wish to devour those baked beans. It was surprisingly rare to come across a tin opener but other travellers were generally quite kind and willing to offer help when required. It was often the case that we would chat with other travellers and tourers along the way which would give us a chance to exchange stories and pass the time. Speaking to other travellers and locals too will often result in your learning of the best places to go and may even offer some gems not found in guidebooks.

Sick bags

If you are planning on doing some long distance driving, make sure that there is suitable sick bag within reach even if you don't suffer from car sickness. As we were heading along toward Florence, I suddenly came over with a bout of projectile vomiting. This caused significant distress as most of the windscreen was covered in a horrible gooeey mess, not to mention the suddenness of the event caused Jessal to almost jump out the car. Luckily he was driving at that point, and surprisingly he managed to not evacuate the contents of his stomach over the steering wheel. The dash was drenched including the pocket where we kept the ticket for the toll booths. Luckily it had dried off by the time we reached the next stop and most importantly I was feeling much better.

Games and Music for the Journey

It is advisable to have a list of songs that numbers more than 30 as after the first 2 hours you will undoubtedly get bored no matter how good your selection is. The radio proved to be dodgy at

the best of times and so it is not wise to rely on. Even when we did get some signal through the radio, the music selection was laughable but it offered a nice alternative.

Word games and games of a similar sort enabled us to pass hours by and at the same time adds a little competitive spirit to your journey.

Money, bank accounts and cards

When planning the trip it is important to consider how much money to take and currency you might need. The travel money card was useful as it provided a level of safety as if we lost it, we knew that we get all our money back. Unfortunately, it was not uncommon for the card not to be accepted for one reason or the other. In light of this, make sure you have back ups available. It is also important to keep a track of how much you are spending on a daily basis as it is quite easy to spend lots of money without realising. That is another benefit of the travel money card in that it has a limit to the amount of money on it and so when it runs out, it serves as a marker for your spending.

Camp Fires

Making camp fires was certainly one of the highlights of the trip but beware that in many european campsites, it is prohibited. In Strasbourg, we found this out in spectacular fashion, only having made the fire and cooked our rice on it already. The Inspector Clusoe character who found us, doubled his frequency of his campsite rounds and was sure to keep an eye out on our pitch.

Bats

If you intend to frequent campsite bars and games rooms, it would be wise to be wary of those that may not have been opened in a while. The campsite in Bordeaux had a side room where there was a relatively unused pool table. Jessal and I decided to pass the time at the billiards table however, having racked the balls up, we realised we had an unexpected companion in the form of a bat. The bat became extremely excited to have some new companions but shortly left, probably due to the fact that he was feeling left out from the game.

Hammocks

Swinging between two trees under the starry sky generates a feeling of such serenity that is hard to replicate. Ensure that you bring a suitable cover in the event that it rains as there is not a huge amount you can do once you have snuggled up comfortably inside your sleeping bag at 3 o'clock in the morning. As was the case in Barcelona, and I became suitably soaked. It was too much of an effort to do anything more than hope that my sleeping bag would provide me with some protection. To conclude, in wet and windy conditions, it is best to stick in the tent.

Footwear

Jessal inspired by some self-confidence and the fear of defeat, partook in a daring leap across a moat in order to fulfill his part of a gentleman's bet. Unfortunately, his dive was not as graceful as he was in defeat and consequently lost his shoe into the marshy bog. Once retrieved, the soggy and completely new coloured shoe had to be worn in order that the remainder of the day's travel be continued. This proved to be an absolute nuisance as each step was accompanied by a squelch and brought another odour to be dealt with alongside all the others brought by travel. Have spare footwear, and don't forget to tie the laces when embarking on any activity.

Resources

When researching and planning such a trip, the Adventure Cycle-Touring Handbook by Neil and Harriet Pike is an invaluable source of guidance. The book supplies you with a good basic understanding of almost everything you would need to know to tour any part of the world.

For guidance on driving around Europe, the AA provides helpful information about the requirements and gives some helpful advice.

The Exploration Board provided helpful guidance and have many expedition reports available detailing the adventures of those who have ventured before.

Acknowledgements

Jessal and I would like to thank members of the Imperial College Exploration Board for their support and guidance, without which this trip would not have come to fruition. In addition, all the team members provided help with the expedition, especially the planning stages and their efforts are duly appreciated.