



Longboarding from the Atlantic to Mediterranean

A solo trip by
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Introduction

Summary –

This trip was a solo, self-supported, long-distance skateboarding expedition; touring the Basque Country and Pyrenees that separate France and Spain. It spanned 16 days in July 2017, 14 of which were spent travelling by skateboard.

Aims –

- To successfully travel from Bilbao to Céret by skateboard.
- To be self-supported for the entire trip.
- To help expand and demonstrate the sport of long distance skateboarding.
- To show people what is possible in terms of long distance human-powered travel.
- To push myself out of my comfort zone in terms of travel and adventure.

Team Members

Why solo?

This was a solo expedition. I had had the idea of doing a trip of this nature for a few years after being inspired by the web-documentary 'Long Treks on Skate Decks' in which a trio of longboarders skated across south America and Morocco.

While I would have welcomed company on the trip, the niche nature of the sport meant that I did not know anyone suitable in terms of skill and fitness. I decided that this was not a reason not to do the trip, and so instead made it solo.

About me –

I am a 19-year-old 1st year student at Imperial studying Design Engineering. I'm a keen runner and gym-goer, but I've always liked and pursued more extreme sports like snowboarding and, in particular, skateboarding. I've also been camping and hiking regularly since I was 7 leading to a good outdoor experience. In addition to this, in recent years I have done a lot of budget travelling, giving me good experience of other European cultures, as well as the ability to live off little money, and rough it when needs be.

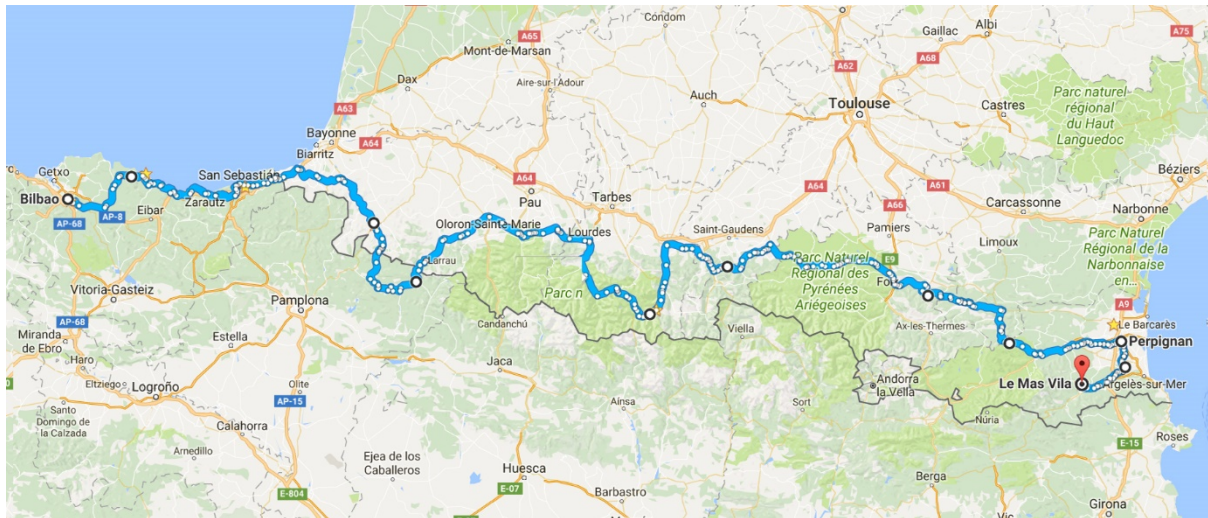
I learnt the basics of skateboarding at a young age. Then midway through secondary school I picked up downhill skateboarding/longboarding; skating at high speeds and slowing yourself down in a snowboard-like style by drifting. Recently I have become more interested in street skating, due to the urban environment of London.

The combination of my downhill skateboarding experience, endurance fitness, and outdoor navigation and survival, gave me the tools I needed to do this trip. Working up to the trip I improved my endurance fitness by running regularly and for longer (this culminated with my longest run being 18 miles, before I eased off the running to avoid injury). I did all of the route planning and travel organisation myself too.

Itinerary

Overall plan –

Initially I had much more ambitious ideas for the location of the trip – America or Canada. When looking at the distance I could cover with the money I had, and taking into consideration this was my first big solo expedition, I decided going a bit more local was a good idea. I wanted mountains, and warm and reasonably dry weather. Finally, I discovered the rest of my family would be staying near Perpignan for their summer holiday. All of this led me to choose the French and Spanish Pyrenees region.



I had an exact route to follow with checkpoints to reach every day. However, as I only had 5 organised accommodations in the 16 days I would be travelling, the route was never completely set in stone. What I found during the trip was that conditions and circumstances would arise and these would also dictate where I went and when. The map shown above is a rough demonstration of the route I ended up taking; which is slightly different to the route I put forward in my trip proposal. In the end, I think I ended up covering about 1000km by skateboard.

Spain

Day 1 – flying to Bilbao

The trip began on the 13th of July. While I had been training throughout the last 2 terms at university (increasing my strength and endurance training steadily), the exam-heavy last 2 weeks of term and a trip to Bulgaria with friends had depleted me slightly. I also had a slight pain in my right knee from overuse and walking in the mountains while I was on holiday. This, combined with my nervousness for the trip, meant that leaving for the airport that evening I had mixed feelings about what was about to come. I knew that it could be a great trip but I was also a bit scared.



Figure 1 - Guggenheim Museum

I took the train up to London in the evening and slept in the airport to catch my 7:00am flight to Bilbao. I arrived in Bilbao tired, but on seeing the Guggenheim as I travelled to my hostel my spirits were lifted. I checked into my hostel then spent the afternoon exploring the city and finished it with a carb-heavy dinner to prepare me for the next day.

Day 2 – Bilbao to Lekeito (60km)

I woke up at 7 to make it first to the free hostel breakfast (probably waking the 6 Spanish girls in my dorm up after their night out). After managing as much free breakfast as I could take, I checked out of the hostel and headed out of Bilbao.

The climb out of Bilbao was horrible; the roads were incredibly steep and busy with tourist busses and traffic. There was no proper cycle path I could take either and it was difficult not to be worried for what the trip would hold. On reaching the outskirts of the city and the top of the climb, I had my first downhill which was fast but I handled it well.



Figure 2 - End of day 1

Heading towards the coast, the terrain became more mountainous. I stopped for lunch in Lebatsu and pushed uphill another 15km. The final stretch of the day was much nicer – going down to the coast I enjoyed lots of small ups and then long non-technical downs that I could bomb. I even had a pizza delivery motorbike offer to tow me.

Eventually, I arrived in Lekeito at around 5:00pm and after a long struggle with a bartender who only spoke Basque managed to check into my hostel. I had dinner on the beach and explored the small town, witnessing a great sunset before going to bed early.



Figure 3 - Sunset in Lekeito

Day 3 – Lekeito to San Sebastian (75km)

Waking up fairly stiff, I proceeded to demolish another free breakfast. Heading out of Lekeito I was travelling along some beautiful coastal roads – up and down with views of the ocean. I came across people bungee jumping off one of the bridges between coastal inlands.



Figure 4 - Coastal roads

Then I climbed up for a long time but at a forgiving gradient, before enjoying 10km of downhill. It was busy with traffic and cyclists – who gave me mixed reviews. The day then cleared up and I enjoyed skating busy but amazing roads through tunnels following the coast.

I headed inland before descending into San Sebastian. The skate had been easier than expected but on arriving in San Sebastian I was greeted by a very non-skater friendly city – steep roads with lots of stop signs and traffic lights. On finding my AirBnb, I then travelled down to the pier to have dinner with the sunset. I got the feeling that San Sebastian would be a very nice place to visit if you had lots of money to spend at the fancy restaurants and bars – but my salami and baguette were still pretty good.



Figure 5 - Sunset in San Sebastian

Day 4 – San Sebastian to Saint Jean de Luz + plus extra (60km)

Navigating out of the big city wasn't fun; I had to use a mix of large roads, alleyways, and bike paths. I hadn't had much to eat and I did not feel good skating over to Irun. It was a Sunday with lots of cars and people going to the beach so the roads were very busy.



Figure 6 - Coastal roads

I made it to Saint Jean de Luz before lunch after following a canal bike path that had wonderfully smooth pavement. This would have been ideal had I had accommodation there – however this was my first night camping. I decided to rest and have lunch in Saint Jean de Luz before moving on to find somewhere less busy to camp.

After sunbathing and having an espresso, I headed out of the busy tourist town. The road was super flat and I got into a good rhythm despite the 30+°C heat – I decided that an easy day tomorrow was a safer decision so pushed for another 30km. I realised that I was in France on a Sunday and had no food for dinner. Even supermarkets don't open on a Sunday.



Figure 7 - Bus stop rest to get out of the sweaty heat

Skating across a bridge I saw an idyllic riverside camping spot. On finding the road down to it I accidentally stumbled upon a riverside rafting and swimming spot with a barbecue café. I was very pleased to have a burger at the café – and when I asked if I could sleep next to the river the owner said that it was fine. What had started as a bad day had turned into the best day so far.

France

Day 5 – Riverbed camp to Saint Jean de Pied Port (40km)

I woke up at 6.30am to set off. The first camp had been a major success and I had slept fairly well. However, I didn't have any supplies for breakfast, so headed off on an empty stomach.



Figure 8 - Riverbed camp at sunrise

After enduring some bearable hills, I stopped at a bakery for my first French pastry experience. I then headed into a valley. The road was super smooth, and slightly downhill, so should have been fast. Unfortunately, there was a strong headwind so it felt like flat or slight uphill.

Despite the conditions, I made to Saint Jean de Pied Port for 10.00am. If I had not had prepaid accommodation then I would have pushed on. Instead I treated myself to a rest day at the hostel. I washed my clothes, looked around the traditional medieval Basque town, and made myself a meal that wasn't sandwiches in the kitchen.



Figure 9 - Saint Jean de Pied Port town

Day 6 – Saint Jean de Pied Port to Oloron Saint Mary (90km)

I woke up early along with the hikers who all seemed to be doing the El Camino walk. I set off towards the base of the true to start of Pyrenees mountains; Col Bargugi would be my first pass.

Up until around 600m elevation, the gradient had been alright. However, after this the gradient was consistently above 10%; the highest was 13%. On reaching 1000m elevation I was greeted by one of the strongest headwinds I have ever experienced. It was so strong that I had to walk, and while I walked it blew my skateboard into the air. I finally made it up the pass and onto the other side of the ridge away from the wind.



Figure 10 - 1000m up the pass

The descent was incredibly steep too. I was wearing through my shoes very fast. Had I not had a big backpack it would have been one of the best downhill skateboard runs of my life. With the pack, things were tricky and I did fall once, but with only minor injury. I decided to hitchhike down to 700m elevation level as there were cattle on the road and I could not take advantage of the downhill.



Figure 11 - Crazy fast descents

The next pass was more manageable and I made it up then started to descend down into the valley which led to Oloron Saint Mary. It was 36°C and my eyes were stinging with the sweat when I arrived that evening. I attempted to have a wash in a public bathroom – after 10 minutes of cleaning an alarm started in the bathroom and the walls all started to spray water in a self-cleaning process. I grabbed all my stuff and, half-dressed, escaped out into the park.

I found a less busy park and pitched my tent behind some trees. The wind picked up and the sky clouded over; that night I endured my first thunderstorm.

Day 7 – Oloron Saint Mary to Lourdes (60km)

Due to the thunder and lightning I decided to head to Lourdes where I could find cheap accommodation and dry my equipment out. The weather was humid, but the roads were pretty good.

I made the 60km in 5 hours including breaks. This meant I was a day ahead of schedule and had the rest of the day to kill in Lourdes – I spent this eating and planning more of my route. I was wary about going up passes if it was going to be poor weather – especially if I had to camp at altitude.

I was sharing a room with an Indian software engineer who had a relative at Imperial and worked in London. It was nice to be able to have a proper conversation with someone in English.

Day 8 – Col du Tourmalet (80km)

I left Lourdes along the bike path system. It had hailed pebblestones the night before but I was still determined to go back into where the weather would be worse as this was going to be the highest pass of the trip.



Figure 12 - Bike path towards the mountains

The bike path was flat and smooth for about 17km through industrial towns. I then started to climb, the first section ended in Luz-Saint-Saveur. After this there was 23km of uphill to go with an average gradient of around 6/7%. I did 100m of elevation at a time; taking 2-minute breaks between the climbs. Higher and higher, the roads became smoother and less busy; the last 5km were in the clouds and I was soaked. I reached the top at the same time as a British cyclist who was curious about my trip – it turned out his son was at Imperial and on the triathlon trip in the alps! I had a coffee in the café at the top and got a visually challenged French man to take my picture.

I was now at the top of the highest paved mountain pass in the French Pyrenees, it was raining heavily and I had a long and steep descent. It was a wet, cold, and very sketchy downhill ride and almost fell numerous times; until I finally emerged from the clouds. The next part of the downhill was smooth, dry, and the perfect steepness for me to allow myself to bomb quickly and have fun.



Figure 13 - Wet and cold at the top of Col du Tourmalet

After reaching the end of the downhill I pushed on for another 20km or so. I found somewhere to camp next to a lake and ate a dehydrated meal with cold water; which was better than expected.



Figure 14 - Sheltering before the rain starts

Day 9 – Col du Tourmalet to Saint Lary-Soulon (40km)

Although it had not rained in the night, I woke up to the sound of thunder. Sure enough, as soon as I packed up it started raining heavily. I set off after a cold porridge breakfast.

The 'road' I was supposed to follow according to Google Maps was actually a dirt track and so I had to walk a good 5km in the rain. I then had to climb a 1600m pass in the mist and rain – spirits were not high.

On descending the pass, the road became unpaved – it was virtually gravel. I had to walk bits and then try to skate it. I finally made it to the valley and some paved roads, I was wet from the torso down and cold. I skated along the valley to Saint-Lary where I thought I was supposed to have a Couchsurfing host. I didn't know where he lived or what his number was. So, I walked around with his picture asking locals – luckily the first person I asked knew him and gave me his number. I also discovered that I was 10km too far down the valley so had to skate back.



Figure 15 - The valley I was staying in

In Cadeac I managed to identify my host, who then greeted me with coffee, a warm shower, and a washing machine. After a great lunch and dinner, my host took me to a local bar where a live jazz duo was performing. Although I was very tired and did fall asleep, it was a good performance. On the journey back fireworks were going off in the valley.

Day 10 – rest day

Despite it being a rest day, I wanted to explore the local mountains. I hitchhiked further into the mountains and then did a short 15km hike. It was nice weather, which was a bit annoying, considering the day before had been so poor.

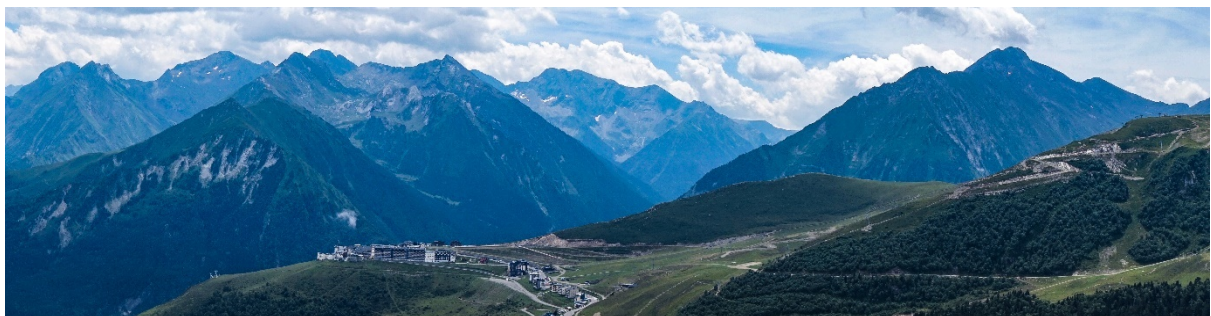


Figure 16 - Panorama from the hike

That evening I helped make dinner with the family and then got an early night. I had decided to skate through the valleys the next day, rather than up over another pass, because the weather was again not looking good.

Day 11 – Cadéac to Saint Giron (105km)

I said goodbye to my couchsurfing hosts and made my way out of the mountains. It was another valley situation where the road should have been very fast, but due to a headwind was quite slow.

After about 30km, I had made it out of the main mountains. I stopped to buy supplies as it was a Sunday and I did not want to end up without food later in the day.

The road I was then on was busy and there was not much of a view, but I was making good progress. After killing 50km of fairly easy, but unpleasant riding, I headed back into the Pyrenees. I was low on water, but luckily found a McDonalds. Since I was only 5km away from Saint Giron I waited in McDonalds, taking advantage of the free Wi-Fi.



Figure 17 - Saint Giron

When I did get to Saint Giron, while eating my dinner I met someone who was interested in what I was doing. He also happened to be on Couchsurfing when I told him about my trip, and therefore offered me a place to stay at his for the night. I gratefully accepted.

Day 12 – Saint Girons to Montsegur (85km)

I woke up and had breakfast with the stranger I had met the night before. Then headed off towards Foix. It was absolutely pouring with rain from the moment I started but the rain subsided after about an hour, and the rest of the 40km to Foix was pretty painless.



Figure 18 - Bike path bridge

I bought lunch in Foix, before heading on towards Montsegur. After a bit of slow climbing, I had some fun, wide, open road descents that weren't too steep. I then left the main road and took the smaller road towards the castle. The quality of the roads decreased quite dramatically.

The pass up to Montsegur was a 1200m road, I then walked up the rest up to the hill castle. The weather at the top was terrible and misty – I could not see anything. However, it started to clear later in the evening. I waited for other visitors to leave and then set up my tent next to the castle; hoping to get an amazing morning view of the mountains.



Figure 19 - Montsegur castle after the rain had died down

Before I had finished setting up and packing things away, the rain and thunder started. I quickly grabbed everything I needed and chucked it into my tent, then inflated my tent airbeam from the inside. Where I had camped I was directly in a very strong cross-wind; the walls of my tent were being buffeted all over the place and the airbeam was only just keeping its shape.

Day 13 – Montsegur to Perpignan (120km)

Sleeping (not a lot) at 1600m I was wishing I hadn't chosen not to bring my down jacket. I woke up super early to catch the sun rise and to make sure that I didn't get caught camping next to the castle. After an alternative breakfast of peanuts and bananas as the sun rose, I made my way down the castle hill.



Figure 20 - Camping on top of Montsegur

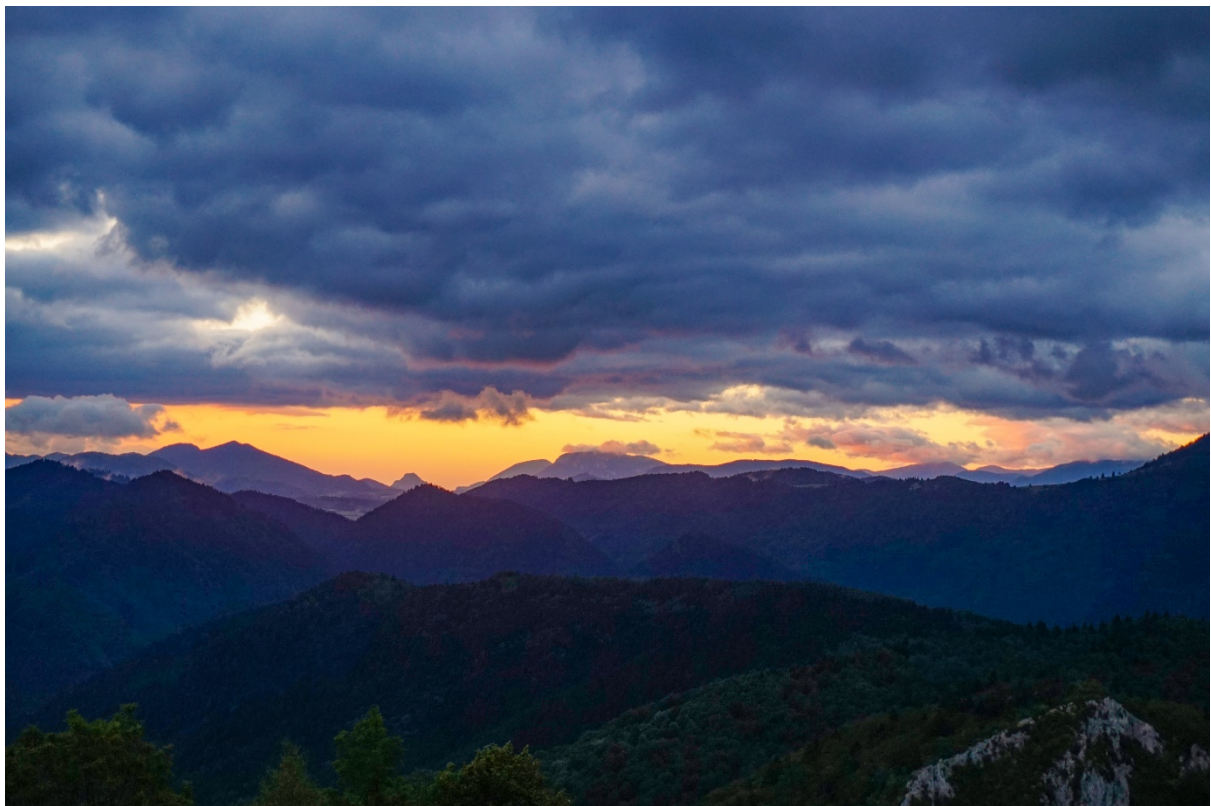


Figure 21 - Sunrise over the Pyrenees

Once again, I was greeted by a gravel road which meant I could not take advantage of downhill. As morning progressed I made it back towards bigger and better paved roads. After an uphill slog, I had

one of the best downhill rides of the trip, and then a couple of kilometres later, I rode the craziest downhill of my life. It was 6km of hairpins and sweepers with a view onto dry plains.

After this, the route took me through some amazing canyons and up a gruelling 12km uphill. At this point I was feeling weak, but on coming to the top of the hill I started my descent. I then proceeded to cover 40km of the remaining 60km without pushing at all – a tailwind and shallow downhill helped me along through the dry and dusty plains.



Figure 22 - Canyon roads

As I was travelling from 1600m all the way down to sea level in Perpignan, the rest of the day was fairly good going. It was hot, and at times when I needed to slow down, my shoes literally began to melt with the friction so that stones stuck into them. I pushed the last 20km with determination to make to Perpignan in time to organise some accommodation.

On arriving, I managed to sort free accommodation on Couchsurfing using the McDonald's wifi again; and enjoyed being cooked for in the evening.

Day 14 – Perpignan (rest day)

Due to the good conditions of the day before, I had managed to cover the distance of two days in one. This meant I had an extra rest day in Perpignan.

I walked around Perpignan, enjoying being a normal tourist, rather than a sweaty skateboarder for a change. I visited the castle and gardens, and made use of the kitchen to produce proper food (the previous night I'd had supermarket pizza cold).



Figure 23 - Perpignan from a rooftop café



Figure 24 - Street ft. black cat

I was now close to finishing, I could have finished the trip in a single day but then I would have been early and would have nowhere to stay in Céret. For this reason, I planned a route along the coast to add some more distance on.

Day 15 – Perpignan to Argeles sur-Mer (25km)

I left Perpignan late in the afternoon as I did not need to cover a lot of distance and would be camping in the evening. I skated over to the next major town and stopped on the way at a lake. The lake was perfect for swimming and sunbathing so I decided to spend the afternoon there.

In the evening, it was hot and dry enough that I could sleep outside on one of the benches by the lake. I was rewarded with a view of the reflection of mountains in the distance reflected in the lake water that evening as I fell asleep.



Figure 25 - Sunset reflections

Day 16 – Argeles sur Mer to Céret (30km)

I woke up as the sun rose; creating another great set of reflections in the lake. I showered outside as there was one set up for people who were swimming in the lake, then set off for what would be my last day of skating. This was just as well as my shoes were so worn out that only the insole was separating my feet from the ground.



Figure 26 - Benches make alright beds

The skate over started off on a large road which was the only way to get back into the mountains. On the first leg of the journey I was pulled over by an off-duty police officer and told that I was not allowed to skate on the road, and that I was crazy. I did not see what other choice I had, since there were no other roads, and argued that I had the same rights as a bicycle. After the police officer left me, I continued on my way, luckily without further incident.

Soon I found a bike path that followed a river, towards Céret. This made the last stretch of the journey quite easy and I arrived in Céret just after lunch. It was nice to see a town that I was familiar with. I could not turn up at where I was staying with my family until the next day. This meant I spent the day with town's senior population; sitting on a bench and people watching for the day.

After a celebratory dinner, I skated out of the town and up into the lower hills to find somewhere to camp. I found an empty roadside field and enjoyed probably the most comfortable camp of the trip – I was a lot more used to sleeping on hard, flat ground.

The next day I hiked up to where my family would be staying, and then awaited their arrival.



Figure 27 – Sunrise over the Mediterranean at my final camp



Figure 28 – My shoes were in a critical condition by the end of the trip

In review

The trip went very well and did not stray far from the original plan; which was a good thing. If I had the opportunity to do the trip again then there aren't many aspects I would change. However, I would like to try a more extreme location – though I think a partner would make this idea more feasible. I also think I could have covered more ground, as it was a more efficient form of transport than I had thought it would be.

Furthermore, as someone who is always looking to cut down on weight, I would have liked to have used lighter, and more compact, equipment. One thing about the trip was that the touring style of skateboarding meant I was always just trying to cover ground. This meant I didn't have the opportunity to skate the magnificent hills in a fun way; more of a functional way – which was something I regretted.

It was a fantastic trip that taught me a lot and let me experience and see some fantastic things. I would like to thank the Exploration Board and, in particular, Philip and Lorraine, for sponsoring the trip and trusting me with a concept for an adventure that was a bit alien to everyone. I am already I thinking of new ideas for the next adventure.