

A true tale of the 1960's: Things they didn't tell you about a cycling holiday.

It was 1968, we were 14 going on 15 and Henry and I managed to get our parents to agree to us going on a cycling holiday together. We were to take the train from Reading, bikes'n'all, to Exeter and then return home via the English Riviera staying overnight in booked youth hostels. Trouble was for a two-week holiday you can't get a lot of stuff in panniers and a saddle bag. We had the minimum of everything and while our mums packed certain essentials, we surreptitiously left some behind. You know, the sort of things a teenager doesn't regard as vital. Soap is heavy, isn't it? However, Henry's mum did do a very 1960s things and supplied us with, yes, disposable underwear! What a boon. No 'orrible keks to wash. Good old Henry's mum.

So, courtesy of BR we arrived at Exeter Station and managed the first short journey westward to Steps Bridge YHA wearing our only 'normal' clothes. The following day it was shorts, tee-shirts and the underwear for the modern teenager. We set off for Salcombe, forty odd miles to the south, with the odd detour and our first taste of a nice local apple drink – which resulted in a bit of a rest and an afternoon roadside doze. That meant we had to get a-going to arrive at the next hostel at the allotted time. Trouble was, with all that furious pedalling, along came friction and perspiration. We arrived in desperate need of a wash and change. In a communal dormitory... It was highly embarrassing because, when the shorts came off, both of us had just a ring of brightly-coloured elastic around our waists and the top of each leg, with a few raggedy bits of J-cloth hanging off them and this was not a happy public exposure for sensitive lads. Much teasing from the other inmates.

Now we couldn't face that for each overnight stay. The rest of the paper pants went in the bin. The solution was for each to wash the one pair of proper pants each night. We'd find cleaning stuff in the hostel, surely. And we did. Vim.

Now adolescents don't have a subtle knowledge of such substances, or the virtues of a thorough rinse. 'Laundered' Y-fronts installed, we cycled the following day up the coast to the next stop-over, but life was getting increasingly uncomfortable. Vim is an abrasive. A corrosive substance roughly equivalent to sandpaper and Cillit Bang. The location of the next hostel is lost to memory, probably blotted out by the nightmare when we entered the place, both walking like John Wayne, with bums like mandrills glowing through our shorts. A cheese-grater for a saddle would have been more comfortable.

The rest of the holiday I must admit was accompanied by underwear that was only rinsed and gradually the crimson day-glo (literally) wore off. Arriving back home via Dorset and Hampshire, we kept the secret of the brief encounter from our well-wishing mums, but I can never again look at a red rear light on a bicycle without wincing.

Etienne Vestibule (real name withheld at the request of the author)

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