

## Paris to London by Boulangerie

### *A tribute to Ed Ruscha*

In 1961 the artist Ed Ruscha drove from Los Angeles to Oklahoma photographing truck-stops and roadside garages en route. In his book *26 Gasoline Stations* Ruscha recorded this journey as a sequence of stark images, showing no more nor less than that there are 26 places to refuel between L.A. and Oklahoma. If Ruscha were to give up his car today, get on his bike and pedal from London to Paris he would also find plenty of opportunities to refuel. The 220 kilometer intercity route (via the Newhaven-Dieppe ferry) boasts more bakeries, boulangeries, patisseries and boulangerie-patisseries than you can shake a French stick at. As a tribute to Ruscha and to provide a doughy travel itinerary for sweet-toothed cycle tourists I rode for four days from Somerstown to the Marais, guzzling pastries along the way and photographing the evidence.

### *How many boulangeries are there between here and Paris?*

Though Ruscha's trip took him past 60 gasoline stations, he excluded most of them from his book on the grounds that they just 'looked too interesting'. He felt they detracted from the sense of the mundane that he was trying to portray. I too decided to be selective. Mostly I photographed the bakeries I happened to pass when I was feeling hungry - or at least those which made me feel hungry. But I was also on the lookout for facades that were quintessentially French, and for this I didn't have to wait until I got to France. Even the route from Bloomsbury to Newhaven was lined with 'French aspiring' boulangeries.



Patisserie Deux Amis,  
Judd Street, Bloomsbury,  
London  
Spanish Tortilla: £3.35



La Baguette Shop  
High Street, Newhaven  
'Pain de Choc': £0.60

### *Car for sale*

Docking in Dieppe at 11pm Friday evening, all the town's boulangeries had packed up for the day. There is something disappointing about a bakery that is closed, especially at night. As in the long-exposure images of the French photographer Eugene Atget (1857-1927), who photographed empty Parisian shop-fronts out of business hours, the deserted shelves signal that we have arrived on the scene too late. The moment has passed. Unlike outfitters and shoe shops, bakeries are not geared up for after-hours window shopping. Dark and deserted, there is nothing in their windows to drool over. Sadly, in the port of Dieppe my first genuinely French boulangerie had nothing to tempt me with but an eight year old three door family saloon, albeit in *parfait etat*. I didn't bother to write down the phone number.



Boulangerie Pâtisserie des Bateaux  
Port, Dieppe  
Renault Clio, 3 doors, year 2000,  
15000 kilometres on clock,  
perfect condition: € 6,000

Greater temptations lay ahead come Saturday. Boulangerie shutters were going up all over Normandy. The road to Neufchatel-en-Bray was flat, though riddled with distractions. Baskets bursting with croissants were easily visible in the window of every village bakery, even at speeds of 15 kilometers an hour. Needless to say, my progress was staccato.



Boulangerie Patisserie Nicolas Legrande  
Rue des Moulins, Ancourt  
Croissant: € 0.75

### *Ethical eating*

By mid-afternoon the croissants were gone, my legs ached and my eyes were beginning to wander. Crimson, green and purple confections shone out like sugary exhibits in a permanent roadside exhibition. French patisseries display exceedingly good cakes. Never mind the cakes though, in the afternoon sunshine entire shop facades looked good enough to eat. I gawped at tarts, sometimes through my lens, sometimes with the naked eye. The occasional proprietor noticed my attentions and seemed to be thinking - *'Aren't you going to but anything?'* and I began to feel uncomfortable, wishing I was invisible. Back in the 1930s American artist Walker Evans faced a similar dilemma when photographing passengers on the New York subway system. Not wanting to embarrass or disturb his subjects he rode the el-trains all day with his camera hidden in his coat so he could take his pictures literally 'from the hip', without being detected. As I was dressed predominantly in lycra, concealing my camera was not an option. I decided to tackle my ethical dilemma by vowing to give something back to everyone I 'took' pictures of. From then on I bought something to eat from every boulangerie I photographed. It would have been rude not to.



Artisan Boulangerie,  
Rue de Canadiens, Envermeu  
Tartes Fruit Fraise: €1.73

### *Neufchatel-en-Bray*

According to my guide book Neufchatel-en-Bray is famous for its cheese. By now though, two days into my journey, I am so engrossed in bread and cakes that I overlook fromageries right, left and centre. Yet even to my subjective eye Neufchatel-en-Bray seems to have taken this boulangerie thing too far. We're talking about a town the size of Brentford or Chiswick and I'll bet my breakfast that it has more bread shops than all of Hounslow Borough. Even on my early morning ride out of town I passed five that were open and doing a brisk trade (and it was Sunday).



Boulangerie,  
Rue Generale de Gaulle,  
Neufchatelle en Bray  
Flan Nature: €1.20



Boulangerie Patisserie,  
Rue Poissonniere, Neufchatelle en Bray  
Formule a €5: 1 sandwich, 1 boisson, 1  
dessert

### *You're going to cycle all the way to Paris?*

As I reached the outskirts of Paris the boulangerie landscape began to change. The road from Pontoise snakes past cake shops that have an altogether more metropolitan feel. They were less convivial, more businesslike. I was on the home straight, though no-one else seemed to think so. As the road layout became more confusing deeper into the conurbation my requests for directions - '*Is this the way into the centre of Paris?*'- met with a fusion of universal consternation and genuine concern for my sanity. *You are going by bike? Where*



are you parked? You are traveling like this? My passage into Paris was lined with incredulous Parisians. The people of Pontoise (35 kilometers out) were disbelieving. The people of Franconville (25k) were astonished. The people of Ermont (15k) were taken aback. The people of Enghien-les-Bains (10k) were concerned. The people of St. Denis (8k) were amused. The people of Clichy raised their eyebrows. As the histrionics died down I knew was getting closer. My final thought was that for a city that hosts the world's most famous bike race and Europe's smartest commuter-bike ('Velib') scheme, Paris seems surprisingly skeptical about cycling.



Moulin de Pontoise  
Boulangerie Patisserie,  
Pontoise,  
Pain Complet: €5.60



Tout, Artour du Pain  
Rue de Turenne, Paris  
Fruit: €1

### **Footnote**

To celebrate the end of the ride I spent the rest of the afternoon pottering around on foot on Rue Picardie, just a few meters from my hotel. I bought an apple from my local boulangerie *Tout, Artour du Pain*. Now that the ride was over it was time for a few dietary reforms. Half a dozen croissants a day and a couple of tarts isn't sustainable unless you're riding like the clappers for hours on end. But I can assure you that my four days of pedaling was not going to go unrewarded. Rue Picardie was home to not one but two shops

selling 'cups, trophies, medals and engravings'. I figured that after all my hard work one of these had to have my name on it.



J.P. Leconte  
Rue de Picard, Paris  
Coupes, trophies, medalles, gravure