

FRANCE

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Saddle SURE

Following in the footsteps and cycle tracks of his hero T.E. Lawrence, **Todd Mauer** travels from Dordogne to Haute-Vienne stopping off at landmarks along the way

Nothing is written!” In David Lean’s 1962 cinematic masterpiece *Lawrence of Arabia*, T.E. Lawrence utters this iconic line to Omar Sharif’s Sherif Ali before venturing into the searing Nefud desert to rescue a lost Bedouin soldier under his command. Somehow, more than 50 years after the film was released, I find myself

chanting the same line over and over as a motivational mantra while labouring up a steep hill – my own private ‘Nefud desert’ – on a signposted 400-kilometre cycle route called ‘*Dans La Roue de Lawrence d’Arabie*’ (In The Wheel of Lawrence of Arabia) in the Dordogne.

Lawrence, of course, rescued his soldier, and I’m delighted to say I made it to the top of my hill.

I’m not certain if both acts qualify as equal demonstrations of the human capacity to overcome adversity, but as I crested my hill I was as chuffed as I was huffed.

If most people should ever happen to associate T.E. Lawrence with the bicycle, it’s unlikely to be a happy association. Lawrence’s 1935 death in a motorcycle accident while swerving to avoid two schoolboys riding bikes on



the young T.E. Lawrence, or 'Ned', as he was more humbly known to friends and family. The route begins in Castillon-la-Bataille, not far from the wine mecca of Saint-Émilion, and weaves primarily through rural lanes of undulating countryside to the town of Châlus in Limousin's Haute-Vienne *département*.

Enthusiasts of medieval history will find this portion of Ned's epic 1908 journey of particular interest. Not only does it take in several sites related to the Hundred Years War, but for this stage of his trip Lawrence was himself following in the footsteps of one of his martial heroes, Richard the Lionheart, who died laying siege to the castle of Châlus.

Although historians don't know the exact route Lawrence took on his ride, the almost daily letters he wrote to his mother and a school friend have survived, offering concrete details about the towns Lawrence passed through and his impressions of the places he visited.

A panel on the quay of the Dordogne river in Castillon-la-Bataille marks the official beginning of *Dans La Roue de Lawrence d'Arabie*. It was time to don my homemade keffiyeh headdress in Lawrence's honour,

and begin my adventure on the trail of one of history's great adventurers.

After leaving the placid, sparkling Dordogne behind, I pedalled just a few miles down the road to the home of one of Lawrence's intellectual heroes: Michel de Montaigne, the Renaissance philosopher. In his letters, Lawrence refers to Montaigne as 'the greatest one', and describes his visit to the site as 'a great privilege'.

The 19th-century Château de Montaigne – a surprisingly successful blend of neo-Renaissance and medieval architecture, with the philosopher's motto '*Que sais-je?*' (What do I know?) emblazoned over the main entrance – isn't open to visitors, but the fortified 16th-century circular tower that contained Montaigne's library and formed his main living quarters as he wrote his hugely influential *Essays* can be visited.

As I mounted the narrow stone staircase to Montaigne's library, I felt a thrill as I realised I was literally walking in the footsteps of not one but two of my heroes. The tower contains everything the extremely moderate philosopher needed: his own private chapel, his bedroom, and his vast library

an English road was etched into the collective cinematic conscious during the opening scene in Lean's movie. But for most of Lawrence's life, his relationship with bicycles was passionate, even joyful.

As a teenager, he embarked on multiple cycle tours in both Britain and France, culminating in 1908 in an incredible 3,200-kilometre tour of France, visiting castles for his Oxford thesis on medieval architecture.

On your bike

It's now possible to ride an official route covering part of the trail of

Above:
Saint-Front
Cathedral in
Périgueux

Right:
Todd at the
start of the
Lawrence route





The compensation for the hills was the varied scenery that revealed itself at the crown of each rise

containing adages from his favourite Greek and Roman philosophers, such as Socrates and Plutarch, inscribed on the painted wooden ceiling beams.

Conquering hero

While the verdant Dordogne and Limousin are nowhere near as forbidding as the Nefud desert Lawrence would cross later in his life, they did present one recurring challenge to the young cyclist: hills, or, as he called them, ‘ghastly hills’. As I was quickly discovering, the hills were no less ghastly for me than they were for Ned, and I was forced to

confront the reality that I was 28 years older than Lawrence when he conquered these hills, and – unlike Lawrence, who travelled lightly and slept in hotels – I was loaded with camping equipment.

The compensation for the hills, I kept reminding myself, was the varied scenery that revealed itself at the crown of each rise: lush valleys, clear rivers, small forests, glittering lakes and rippling farmland.

The scale of Lawrence’s cycling accomplishments was becoming painfully clear to me. After two full days of challenging cycling from Castillon, when

Above:
The castle
at Hautefort

I finally arrived in Périgueux I was humbled to discover that Lawrence had covered the same distance in one day. One day!

Consider this: the roads in 1908 were, according to Lawrence, ‘almost uniformly bad’; he was on a three-speed Morris bicycle dealing with frequent punctures; he had no sun cream or mosquito repellent; he also had to navigate with only maps and a compass; and as Lawrence was riding before cars frequented the roads, there was no need for people to pen in their dogs, which meant he was frequently chased by what he called ‘beasts the size of a small donkey’.

I was torn between feeling shame at my own lumbering performance, and marvelling at Lawrence’s cycling prowess. While Ned would certainly earn

the ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ epithet, I was beginning to think he also merited a moniker heralding his impressive Gallic cycling achievements. ‘Ned of France’, perhaps? ‘Lawrence Armstrong’? ‘Brad-T.E. Lawiggins’?

Medieval mission

The ride in and out of Périgueux is the longest flat stretch of the entire cycle route, and is primarily on a dedicated cycle path which follows the sedate, meandering Isle river. The paved greenway, frequently shaded by rows of plane trees, provides a pleasant leisure opportunity for the residents of Périgueux, and on the day I passed through it seemed that half the town’s population was either cycling, running or strolling along it.

Lawrence, who was on a medieval quest and thus had a one-track medieval mind, spent the night in Périgueux but was disappointed by Saint Front Cathedral which had been restored in the Byzantine style in the latter half of the 19th century. “More curious than beautiful,” he lamented to his friend, “and quite spoilt by restoration”.

For my part, I found the cathedral rather majestic, particularly with its gaggle of bone-white domes and turrets reflecting off the morning sunlight of the Isle.

After Périgueux, the route leaves the Isle and roughly follows its snaking tributary, the Auvézère, as it slithers through sloping farmland towards the lovely village of Hautefort.

Lawrence was drawn to Hautefort not because its castle is stunning – which it truly is, commanding a spectacular view of the surrounding hills – but because Richard the Lionheart laid siege to the fortress in 1183. Richard was on campaign subduing rebellious Limousin nobles at the time, including at Hautefort the Occitan baron and troublesome troubadour Bertran de Born.



Above:
La Place Attane
in Saint-Yrieix-
la-Perche

Lawrence was disappointed at the fact that the majority of the medieval fortification had been destroyed and replaced with a Renaissance castle. He complained in his letter: “Hautefort, the castle of Bertran de Born, burnt, so the butler assured me, by the English under Charles I and only rebuilt in the xvii cent: quite so: the gateway is supposed to be B. de Bornish, but that’s all rot.”

Below:
An effigy
of Richard I
in Châlus



Perhaps to prove an architectural point for his thesis, Lawrence nonetheless took a photo of the drawbridge, which has survived. I’d brought a copy of Ned’s photo along with me, and was excited to be able to duplicate it, which meant I could once again stand literally in Lawrence’s footsteps.

Lawrence didn’t mention visiting Jumilhac-le-Grand on the northern limit of the Dordogne *département*, but its late-medieval castle is an imposing and striking jumble of defensive towers he would have found hard to resist. We do know he visited the pretty town of Saint-Yrieix-la-Perche, as he succinctly graded the 13th-century Tour du Plô in picturesque Place Attane as “good”. He was not so fond, however, of the town’s dogs, complaining that 100 howling canines woke him four times in the night.

A lasting impression

The small Limousin town of Châlus may mark the end of *Dans La Roue de Lawrence d’Arabie*, but it’s more famous for marking the end of Richard the Lionheart, which is precisely why Lawrence



went there. Today, of course, there's no sign of the royal blood spilled at Châlus, and much of the castle has fallen into ruin. In fact, when I arrived at the castle gates at the end of my ride, I was stunned to see that the fortification was closed.

A local informed me that the castle had recently been sold, and was awaiting the arrival of its new owner. I cursed my luck. After hundreds of miles of difficult cycling, the symbolic

culmination of my ride was just yards away, but cruelly locked away behind castle walls. What was I to do? Or rather, I asked myself, what would Ned of France do? What would Lawrence Armstrong do? What would Brad-T.E. Lawiggins do?

Clearly, I had no choice. With a nod and a wink from the local who sympathised with my plight, I scaled the outer wall, just like a lion-hearted, lycra-clad English king of yore. Happily for me,

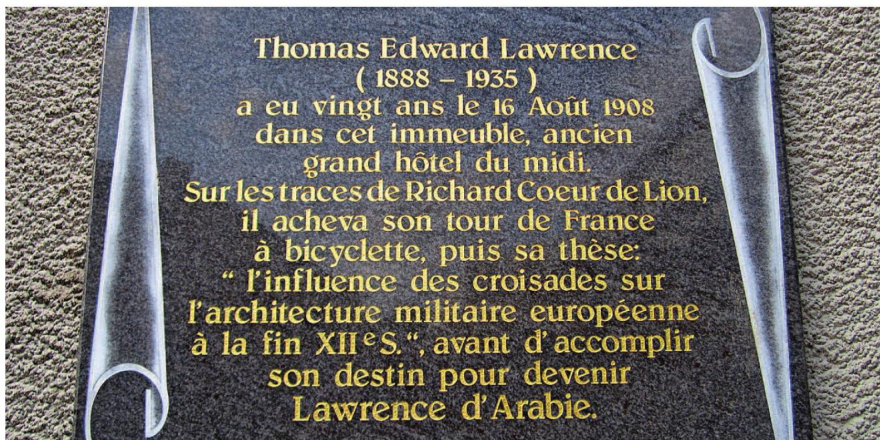
Above:
Cycling along the lovely Dordogne river

there were no defending soldiers to impale me with a lance or fill my neck with arrows as I landed on the other side, but to my chagrin I did discover that the castle was more than ably defended by a battalion of nettles.

Valiantly ignoring my stinging battle wounds as I surveyed the castle, it was immediately clear that a new owner was exactly what was required: the grounds were certainly in need of attention. Fortunately, I'd already visited a few years earlier, so had seen it in much finer fettle.

In addition to sections of the outer enceinte and parts of the 12th-century chapel – where a modest effigy of Richard lies in the open air, surrounded by wild grass and crawled upon by the occasional disrespectful wall lizard – the impressive circular keep from which the mortal crossbow bolt that killed Richard was fired remains very much intact. Since my visit the castle has now reopened, allowing intrepid visitors to enter

Below:
The plaque in Châlus dedicated to T.E. Lawrence



**Thomas Edward Lawrence
(1888 – 1935)
a eu vingt ans le 16 Août 1908
dans cet immeuble, ancien
grand hôtel du midi.
Sur les traces de Richard Coeur de Lion,
il acheva son tour de France
à bicyclette, puis sa thèse:
“ l'influence des croisades sur
l'architecture militaire européenne
à la fin XII^eS. ”, avant d'accomplir
son destin pour devenir
Lawrence d'Arabie.**

the restored keep and climb to the top to experience the view overlooking the village and the rolling hills that surround it.

After visiting the castle, Lawrence spent the night at the Grand Hôtel du Midi in Châlus, now an empty shop aptly called 'Chaput'; a nearby plaque commemorates his stay. It was 16 August 1908, which also happened to be Ned's 20th birthday. In keeping with his introspective character, Ned spent his birthday alone, but happy in his medieval musings. He wrote letters to his mother and best friend, and then tried to sleep in spite of the noise from the barking dogs in the hotel.

The next day, the seemingly indefatigable Lawrence continued his two-wheeled tour towards home in Oxford, where he later

earned a First for his thesis. For him, Châlus was just another stage on his epic medieval cycling quest, but it was in humble Châlus that Lawrence embarked on the decade in his life that would make him a major international figure.

The next year, his passion for medieval castles took him to Syria, where he covered 1,600 kilometres by foot and his love for the desert was kindled.

Of course, Lawrence would only truly make his name after swapping his Morris bike saddle for a camel saddle in the sands of Arabia. But for me, after a week cycling in his congenial and inspiring company, he would always just be Ned of France – the medieval-questing, castle-spotting cyclist huffing along on the hilly road to greatness. ♡



Château de Savignac-Lédrier

Francophile

Embark on your own cycling adventure in the south-west

Dans La Roue de Lawrence d'Arabie is divided into six stages ranging from 50-62km, clearly signposted and mapped in the detailed guidebook (in French) provided by the local tourist office.

GETTING THERE

By train: Take the train from Paris Montparnasse to Bordeaux (2hr 10min). SNCF offers regular trains from Bordeaux Saint-Jean to Castillon-la-Bataille, taking around 40 minutes. You can also drive from Paris to Castillon in six hours.

en.oui.sncf/en
bordeaux.aeroport.fr

By bike: Castillon-la-Bataille is a 56km bike ride from Bordeaux, most of which can be done on a dedicated cycleway called the 'Piste Cyclable Roger Lapébie'.
bordeaux-tourisme.com

WHERE TO STAY

Todd stayed in municipal campsites, but there is a large array of accommodation options to be found in this popular tourist area.
municipalcampsites.com



TOURIST INFORMATION: dordogne-perigord-tourisme.fr / tourisme-castillonpujols.fr / tourisme-grandepereigueux.fr

Département: Gironde (33); Dordogne (24)

WHERE TO VISIT

Château de Montaigne
Saint-Michel-de-Montaigne
chateau-montaigne.com
Guided visits to the tower last 45 minutes.

Château de Hautefort
chateau-hautefort.com
Online tickets cost €10.

Château de Châlus-Chabrol
tourisme-nexon-chalus.fr/chalus-chabrol.html
Entry costs €3 or €5 with a commentary.

