



To be a pilgrim

Tina Bettison speaks to Ann Bishop, who has just completed an amazing journey from France to Rome with her pair of ponies

The thought of going on holiday with your horse might appeal, but most of us probably leave it on the wish list. Not so Ann Bishop, who took it one stage further last September and took her horses (all three of them) on a pilgrimage following the Via Francigena through France to Rome to fundraise for the Alzheimer's Society.

Ann was born and raised in Rome and has many happy memories of her childhood there. So this journey had particular poignancy. Ann's mother developed dementia and she died in 2006. Her father has now been diagnosed with it too. So, raising funds and awareness of the devastation of dementia on families and carers was also an important feature of the trip.

Ann is no stranger to long distance driving. Her first pilgrimage following her mother's passing was to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Her Appaloosa mare, Pebbles, was her companion on that journey. Pebbles, Samson (a Welsh section C) and Captain Jack Sparrow (a gypsy cob) were Ann's equine team for this epic journey along the Via Francigena from Reims to Rome. Ann's close friend Francesca Sirrett (who has ridden the St James Way on horseback) also went along with Ann and they were supported by Ann's cousin with her son and his friend on bicycles. It must have been quite a sight for the locals to see Ann and the team drive into town.

Testing conditions

Ann and her companions set off from Reims on 1 September 2014 and planned to arrive in Rome by 26 October, staying in pilgrim hostels and wild camping along the way. The route through France was relatively easy,



Bespoke Bennington

For this journey Ann needed a carriage with specific capabilities. Serendipity was at work when Ann approached Bennington Carriages for help, as the team were working on a prototype of a new vehicle which could be used for pleasure driving, or a working vehicle on a smallholding. Ann snapped up the aptly named Versatile and Bennington's fitted it with side panels and a detachable extension to create additional storage for the food, water, medical supplies, grooming and camping equipment it needed to carry. A roll bar was also added to carry lights and a solar panel. The solar panel powered a battery for the lights, a USB port and cigarette lighter for charging Ann's iPad and a small fridge - www.benningtoncarriages.co.uk.



undulating but not too challenging following the Great Rift Valley, plenty of pilgrim shelters and plenty of grass for the horses. It perhaps lulled Ann and her travelling companions into a false sense of security.

As they travelled through Italy the route became, in Ann's words, 'gruelling'. "It was just constant climbing, at one point we'd climbed over 1,800m in 60km. At times there was very little grass for the horses. It was scorchingly hot; over 30 degrees on most days. The mosquitos and flies were a menace. Tuscany was particularly tough; really exhausting. Constantly climbing roads, and in some places we had to go into fields to get around roads made impassable by flooding. We got thoroughly soaked on several occasions.

We also had to contend with thick mists in the mornings so we couldn't start out until the mists had risen around 9am. We planned to only travel until about 3pm in the afternoons so the horses got plenty of rest. Occasionally, we had to keep going to keep clocking up the kilometres. But we would have short breaks through the day and make sure the horses had plenty of water.

The ponies were marvellous though and thank goodness for the Simple Systems feed we took with us. Simple Systems sponsored us with a supply of their Complete System at a reduced cost. It kept the horses going and despite the challenges they didn't drop condition at all."

It wasn't just the Italian terrain that caused Ann a few problems. Shoeing issues also threatened to jeopardise the journey. "At one point in the journey we realised that Samson had worn his back hooves very badly. Because the horses usually go barefoot, and they'd been shod especially for this journey, I hadn't anticipated this problem. I realised then he needed special shoes and I really thought our journey might have to be abandoned. However, as luck would have it, we managed to find a farrier at a local fair (he was doing an exhibition there). He knew exactly what was needed. He made the shoes, fitted them and we set off again the same day. In fact he made such amazing shoes, they are still on Samson now. And he wouldn't take any payment for them; he was so kind."

Serendipity

Taking such a journey really puts you at the mercy of humanity and you absolutely have to trust that the local people will help you on your way. Ann recalls some marvellous moments of hospitality and serendipity.

"In a number of places we struggled to find places to stay and the kindness of the local people was overwhelming. For example, in



Opposite page top: Leaving Bagno Vignoni early morning Tuscany pines. Middle: Tor di Quinto, the night of departure from Rome. Bottom: Crossing a wooden bridge over an irrigation ditch - the gateway into Palestro. This page from top to bottom: Another hot day in Tuscany. Going shopping, early morning. Pausing for pictures in St Peters, Rome, Italy

CHARITY DRIVE

Altopascio in Italy (11 October), it had been a miserable day travelling, wet and windy and we were cold, soaked through to the skin despite our wet weather gear and there was no room at the pilgrims' hostel. Finally, a lovely lady took us off to a village and into a bar where they all deliberated on where we could go.

Then this car just drew up and a chap got out; he wandered over and said 'come and stay

with my family'. He opened up his garden for the horses and gave us a bedroom to sleep in. They fed us and at 10pm made us a cake to take on our onward journey. The heavens opened, wind, rain, thunder and lightening but the horses were happy in the garden and we were safe and warm indoors. That was the kind of generosity we met; we were complete strangers and he opened his house to us.

The following day after we set off and had been travelling for an hour, I realised I had forgotten my rosary but it was too late to go back. Several cars passed us and then one passed and drew off the road. It was this lovely man and his family. They had found my rosary and driven after us to return it to me.

In many places we were given coffee and pastries and apples for the horses. People brought us food and wine and found us shelter. Their generosity was so heartwarming. But then I guess two women and three horses are quite a novelty among the pilgrims who usually travel this route."

Just go for it

So what advice does Ann have for would-be pilgrims and would she have done anything differently? "Definitely anticipate and

sort out the shoe issue. I'd had experience from the Santiago pilgrimage so knew exactly what to do with Pebbles' shoes – and she was fine. I would have had the boys shod earlier and tried out their shoes so it wouldn't be an issue on the journey. I did carry spare shoes for them, but I didn't have a good benchmark for Samson and his needs.

"As for someone thinking of doing a pilgrimage with their own horse – just go for it. It's a fantastic experience. The pleasure you get from living with them 24 hours a day and wild camping with the horses is different to anything you would experience here at home. Believe in the people you meet along the way. They are so helpful. You are never on your own."

Ann is still fundraising for the Alzheimer's Society.

- Donations are welcome through www.justgiving.com/802515Happydays-Memories
- To see more of Ann's journey on her blog visit: www.annbishop.me.uk or follow her Facebook page: www.facebook.com/annbishopviafrancigena

Left: Samson's shoes - Meyriat to Amberieu en bugey. Pebbles & Ann - Gites en Bois to Meyriat. Below left: Wet, cold, miserable crossing the Appenines into Tuscany. Passo di Cisa 1,800meters. Below: Rivoli mediaeval town with castle; next stop Turin

