

I've been armchair cycling all this week. I get an email every afternoon at work that tells me the Tour de France is being broadcast live, so I tune in through my desktop and pretend it is legitimate research (I work in finance for an arts organisation). It's great that there are so many UK cyclists in contention. I always enjoy a sport more when there is someone to cheer on.

My real hero of the Tour was an Italian called Marco Pantani (or Il Pirata on account of the bandana he habitually wore). He was the greatest of the mountain climbers and crazily fast on the way down. I got to meet him the only time I saw the Tour live. We were heading out to the start of the day's racing and spotted his team buses in a hotel car park in Morzine. Spotting Marco coming out of the press bus, I rushed up, shook his hand and told him, in my best schoolgirl French for some reason, what a fan I was. He looked suitably unimpressed, grimaced slightly and moved on. I swore never to wash my hands again, until the sports television announced Marco Pantani had withdrawn from the race that day due to having dysentery. I do hope it was a mis-translation from the Italian.

It was so much nicer to be a spectator than to have attempted the routes on two wheels. As part of our trip we drove up and down some of the famous passes that were not in the race that year, and the driving was hairy enough. We turned back from one of the passes, due in part to the snow on the road (in July).

Although nowadays my cycling is restricted to the bakery run on a Saturday, I was a cyclist in my youth - my first cycle-touring holiday being to the Netherlands. Naively we thought flat equals good, but failed to appreciate why the country has so many windmills. It didn't really matter what direction we went in, the wind was always against us. And the roads stretched for miles in front of us.

Actually, it was a great trip, lots of dedicated cycle paths and our very own traffic lights in towns. We did try to learn a bit of the language before we went, but were advised a few days into the holiday by a café owner that we spoke Dutch with a German accent. Until he overheard us

talking in English he had charged us 'German prices' and generously refunded us when he discovered our Scottish origins. We took his advice and stuck to English for the rest of our journeying.

I tried road racing when I was at university, at that time it was a fairly easy sport for women to do well in, and later on I cycled in the Manchester Velodrome. That was a fantastic experience not indirectly related to the lack of both traffic and wind. It took me a few turns to brave the steep sides but I quickly became addicted

The velodrome was also the scene for one of my great spectator sporting moments – Chris Boardman beating the world hour record in 2000. I expected the sight of one man going round in circles for an hour on his bike to be a bit dull, but not so.

Rumour had it that Lance Armstrong was going to attempt the record, but never managed it. Another more recent rumour was that the same man was spotted cycling in the Inverness area last weekend. How anyone could tell one cyclist from another I don't know, unless it was just the speed he was going. According to Twitter he was seen heading over the Kessock Bridge so should be up around Thurso by now. He may have been the most-times-winner of the Tour, but he never seemed to engage fans the same way as other great stars have. My current hero is Dutchman Johnny Hoogerland who was hit by a car during the race this year and thrown on to a barbed wire fence. He got up, finished the race and only then went to hospital for 33 stitches in his leg wounds. He got a polka dot jersey so his day wasn't completely ruined. Makes my attempt at the Fairy Glen hill seem rather pathetic really.