

I surmised that the main roads heading towards Dublin would be busy, so I picked the R108, a secondary route through Naul and Ballyboghil which came out near Dublin Airport. This turned out to be another roller coaster, but still very quiet, which made the contrast even greater when I emerged onto the busy road into Dublin city centre. The ride into the city was made worse by extensive roadworks, but I was delighted to see that the works included the provision of cycle tracks and lanes, on the outskirts at least. The city centre itself was madness, not helped by the closure of one of the main routes over the River Liffey, which meant I was diverted well out of my intended way. I'd taken a large scale street plan of Dublin, but if you don't know a city at all, even that can be of limited help sometimes, and it's useless trying to follow road signs intended for motorised traffic.

In the end I found myself cycling along behind a young Irish girl whose bike can't have seen a drop of oil in years. She didn't need a bell; her bike could be heard squeaking and squealing along from way off. I agreed a swap with her. I would oil her chain and gear mechanism if she would show me the way. That got me through the worst bit, but then I found that the roads heading in my direction were all pedestrianised, so I got off and walked. At least that enabled me to see something of the city.

I finally found myself on the road to Bray and was able to remount. By now it was the height of the rush hour and the traffic was busy, to say the least. Fortunately, there was a continuous cycle lane or track along the road from the edge of the city centre way out into the suburbs.

Unlike in Britain, where cycle lanes have a habit of suddenly disappearing just as they approach an awkward junction (often relying on "Cyclists Dismount" signs as a solution to the problem), Dublin continues the cycle lane through the junction and says that vehicles turning left must give way to cyclists carrying straight on. I would be interested to know how many cyclists take a risk on this rule being observed! I tried it one or twice, and I was fine, but it was still nerve-wracking.

Bray is only 13 miles out from the city centre, but it seemed to take a long while to get there. I thought about finding a B&B in Bray, but chose instead to push on to Greystones, and if I couldn't find anywhere there I'd go on to Wicklow. I'd stayed in both Greystones and Bray as a child, and for years I'd had a mental picture of what both places had looked like. Neither bore any resemblance to the actual thing.

I didn't spot any B&Bs in Greystones so I was on my way out of the town when there was a loud bang from my back tyre. I pushed my bike onto an area of grass in front of some modern bungalows, and began to remove

the tyre. Having removed the inner tube - it looked as if it had exploded - I checked the tyre to find out what had caused it. There was nothing obvious, so I replaced the tube with one of the spares I always carry for just such a situation. I began to inflate the tyre and all was going well, when suddenly I saw the new inner tube pushing through a gash in the sidewall of the tyre. I was a second too late; the tube exploded just as I stopped pumping.

A resident of one of the bungalows came over to see what the problem was and to find out if he could help. When I explained he offered to run me in his car to the local bike shop (which had just closed) and then took me to a couple of B&Bs in the town (both full). Eventually I asked if I could leave my bike in his garage overnight and caught a bus back into Bray, where I began looking for accommodation.

What I hadn't bargained for is that a lot of people in Northern Ireland very sensibly head south for their holidays during the Loyalist marching season, and Bray is a popular destination. Every B&B was full, except for one hotel. This establishment had once been very grand, but that was clearly long ago. However, its prices had not kept in step with its decline in quality. Its clientele appeared to be people who came back year after year and probably hadn't noticed the steady deterioration.

The room I had was part of a much larger one which had been subdivided. I realised this when I heard someone in the next room speak and thought they were standing right behind me. I couldn't work out whether there was actually a wall, even a very thin sheet of plasterboard, between the two or whether the division was made by two wardrobes put back to back.

By now it was getting very late so I showered as quickly as I could and dashed out to find something to eat. The only place I could find open that late was a Chinese take-away, so that had to do.

As I say, it was Friday 13th!

I woke next morning to find that I'd had a surprisingly good night's sleep, but as there was no effective heat in the room my cycling clothes were still damp from washing the previous evening. I'd brought three changes of cycling gear so that if I wasn't able to wash them one night, I'd still have a fresh set for the next day. Unfortunately, my spares were the summer variety, and the weather was still far from summery, but now I had no choice but to use them. The damp ones went into a bag for finishing off that evening.

After breakfast I set off into the town to find a bike shop. The first one didn't have anything remotely like the tyre I needed, and the second one

could only provide me with one that was rather narrower than I'd have preferred, but it would get me on the move again. At least it had a Kevlar band to resist punctures.

My purchase complete, the shop owner made polite conversation. Was I touring round much of Ireland. "Not really," I replied, "I'm cycling from John O'Groats to Land's End." He looked at me strangely; I'm sure he thought I was taking the mickey, then he realised I was serious and broke into a broad smile. "Are you sure you're not in the wrong island?" he asked. "We don't get many people in here doing that" he joked. "The best of luck to you."