



ONE MORE CITY



Christine O'Connell and friends ride from Paris to Amsterdam, the second stage of a annual journey, in support of breast cancer research

PHOTOS: Dan Glasser



ON A DARK, mid-autumn morning, 30 intrepid Rapha Cycling Club (RCC) members gathered in a Paris café for a *grand départ* breakfast. Croissants consumed and ride leaders briefed, we headed out through the morning rush hour, direction Amsterdam.

Our plan: 630 kilometres, across three countries, in three days. A challenge for even the most seasoned of cyclists, over demanding terrain including the pavé of the famous Paris-Roubaix race and cobbled climbs from the Tour of Flanders. All the riders and volunteer support team looked resplendent in custom jerseys; designed by Maria Olsson and featuring flowers from the three countries we'd be passing through, they also bore an ingenious message about breast cancer awareness. It is October (Breast Cancer Awareness month), and it's not just about the bike.

One More City is an annual cycling campaign, supported by Rapha, starting from where the previous year's ride finished. The aim is to raise funds for a PhD student at Imperial College London who is conducting research into secondary breast cancer. Secondary breast cancer — the term which describes cancer that has spread beyond the breast — killed over 12,000 people in 2016 in the UK alone, but attracts only a small amount of research funding as compared to primary breast cancer.

The simple ethos of One More City is that the journey is never over; we are always progressing towards the next city, there are always more kilometers to do, more climbs to be conquered and more challenges to be faced. This is akin to the reality of anyone living with cancer, especially secondary cancer, for whom the challenge is ever present; there is always another treatment, another scan, another hurdle. And what started the previous year as four friends challenging themselves to ride from London to Paris in 24 hours has now turned into something much bigger than we ever imagined. The 2018 ride raised nearly £50,000 for Imperial Health Charity to fund ground-breaking research.

For many of us, Paris to Amsterdam was the highlight of last year, and we're already eagerly planning the next leg, Amsterdam to Strasbourg, in partnership with Velusso Cycling. Over 700km, five countries, four days, we envisage crossing several battlefields from both World Wars. >



TRIP HIGHLIGHTS:
Canalside cycling, Paris-
Roubaix pavé, Flanders
cobble, Antwerp's
'Underpass'



A personal journey

For me the Paris to Amsterdam ride had a special meaning, as I was diagnosed with secondary (or Stage 4) breast cancer in February 2018. This was after initial diagnosis and a successful treatment, or so I thought, in 2013. For cancer patients, five years is the point when you start to think, to hope, that the disease is well and truly behind you.

But cancer unfortunately doesn't respect milestones and in the case of breast cancer it will re-occur in 20-30% of patients. And when the cancer has spread to other organs, it is in most cases treatable but no longer curable. Patients will spend the rest of their foreshortened lives on some form of treatment. However the good news is that people are starting to live longer with secondary cancer but we're still a long way from it becoming a chronic condition like some forms of diabetes or heart disease. This is why I wanted to raise awareness and funds for secondary breast cancer — and if it could fit with my passion for cycling, all the better.

My diagnosis of secondary cancer came as a result of a seizure suffered while cycling into Soho for a meeting. I remember coming through Mayfair, but next I knew I was in an ambulance on Oxford Street. I still do not

Flower power: not just in the markets but on the specially-designed jerseys

know exactly what happened, but Strava tells me I had taken a rather circuitous route, and set a personal best on Goodge Street — in an ambulance. A scan revealed a brain tumour and bone lesions, and led to the diagnosis of Stage 4 breast cancer. But two operations, six Cyberknife radiotherapy sessions, 11 (and counting) cycles of targeted treatment and multiple scans later, I'm still here and managed 9,500km of cycling last year.

The 630km of the 2018 One More City ride was probably the hardest of that total. I had done longer individual days and there were no big climbs, but the cumulative physical and mental effect of three days of 200km-plus can't be underestimated. What got me, and many of us through it, was the collective spirit. We rode in tight groups of six to eight people; no-one was left behind, and we were only as strong as the weakest rider. We worked together as



Canals and cobbles: the best way to link two of Europe's best cities

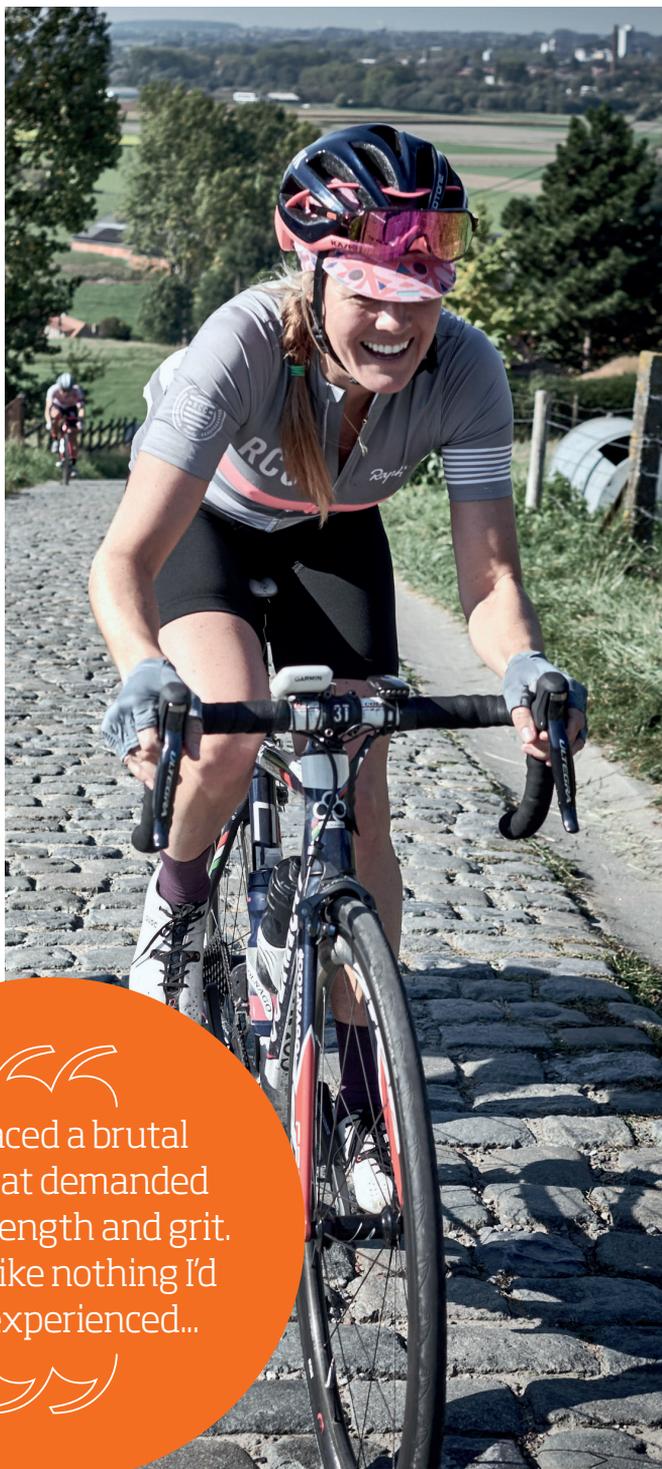
a team and, like any high-performing outfit, had our moments of strife but by the end had formed strong friendship bonds.

Day one was the longest, at 230km. The autumnal sun was shining but by the time we reached Cambrai, not far from the Belgian border, it was nearly dark. We'd traversed the suburbs of Paris, vast farmlands, the site near Compiègne where the Armistice for both World Wars was signed, and long canal paths. After a well-deserved meal in a family-run bistro, sleep was the only thing on our minds.

Leaving Cambrai the next morning, we were soon in Spring Classics territory, the prestigious one-day professional races that are some of the oldest in the sport. Paris-Roubaix, affectionately known as 'The Hell of the North,' is famous for its *pavé* segments, and being in the area it would have been a shame not to sample some. We only did one 2km segment, but the exhausting and bone-jarring experience was plenty for the morning.

In Flanders fields

As we crossed the border into Belgium, the architecture began to change and we passed through grand towns such as Tournai, with its two UNESCO World Heritage sites. We still had many kilometres to complete and the best was yet to come: Flanders. More cobbles too, though very different; smoother than the Roubaix cobbles, but far



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from flat. In fact gradients of 18-22% are not uncommon. Combine that with an ongoing mountain bike sportive and a classic car stalled out on the tightest turns of one of the toughest climbs, the Koppenberg, and we faced a brutal test that demanded both strength and grit. It was like nothing I'd ever experienced, and the only thing that kept me going was the fear I couldn't unclip without falling over. We all somehow managed it, and after a refuel in Oudenaarde, set out for our overnight destination, Antwerp.

As we got closer into the city, the road I'd reconnoitred two months earlier disappeared. Torn up, stripped back to the gravel. It was late, dark and, of course, this was when we suffered a few mechanicals and it started to rain. But a delightful, surprise entry into Antwerp soon raised our spirits. While riding the route previously, I'd been perplexed by the horizontal line across the river on my GPS; there wasn't a bridge or ferry in sight. This time, however, we discovered the art deco pedestrian/cycle tunnel – locals call it the 'Underpass' – that takes you into the heart of the historic central district, complete with gorgeous wooden escalators and lifts for bikes.

Cake-fuelled finish

By day three exhaustion had really set in. Muscles were aching, and thankfully we would spend the day on the flat paths of the

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Netherlands. In reality the challenge still didn't relent much, as open fields and harsh headwinds steadily took their toll. Countless bridges and ferries later – and after copious cake consumption at a local cycling café – we finally made our way into Amsterdam, re-grouping on the outskirts of the city before riding en masse to Rapha's clubhouse for celebratory drinks.

The ride was a great success though it taught us all a lesson about the hard work involved in organising a large cycling event. A few of us had beavered away for several months on all the logistics, and three volunteers generously gave up their time to drive support vehicles and keep us fed, watered and smiling. But anything is possible when you have the right people around you, and when you experience places on the bike you might otherwise miss, it's all worth it.

Now we look forward to October 2019 as the perpetual journey continues, from one city to the next; the challenge ever present, but spirits never dampened. Such is the magic of cycling.

FACT FILE

Going Dutch: sampling local cycle paths on the way to Amsterdam

- **MORE INFO:** to learn more about One More City and to support the ride, head to onemorecity.cc.
- **TRAVEL OPTIONS:** Eurostar (eurostar.com) runs regular, direct rail services to both Paris (2hr15) and Amsterdam (3hr55), from St Pancras.