

NEW YEAR PROMISE

Five photographs, linked by the word 'promise', tell a story about cycling, golf, Portugal, and a New Year's Eve idea that began as a casual commitment. The chain of, climbs, people, places and memories, were held together by simply carrying through on our promise.

01 - THE CHALLENGE

In 2014, Sue and I made a decision that received remarkably little thought.

Even in the days that followed, I continued to minimise its size and shape by using one of my favourite throwaway lines.

"Well, how hard can it be?"

Four months later, that lack of thought appeared to demonstrate a level of naivety normally associated with someone much younger. Really, much, much younger. Now, with the benefit of the distance that time offers, the same decision can be viewed rather more positively.

It was, in many ways, life-changing. It remains an experience I return to whenever I try to explain the importance of taking on a challenge.

The idea arrived on New Year's Eve. We would play one hole at every golf course in Portugal and cycle between them.



A cycling cleat locked firmly into the pedal. Had we used cycling shoes rather than trainers, we might have found a little more power for the long climbs through northern Portugal.

01 ○————○ 02

02- PLANNING

At that point, we had not stopped to consider that there were 74 golf courses. Nor did we realise that the journey would take us more than 1,500 kilometres.

I would like to say that the suggestion came from someone who had enjoyed one celebratory drink too many, someone full of bravado and perhaps one card short of a full deck.

It did not.

It was my idea.

For much of the challenge, I wished Sue had talked us out of it.

On paper, it appeared simple enough. I knew someone at most of the golf courses, so gaining access would not be difficult. At each venue, I would borrow a set of clubs and play the signature hole with the owner, golf director or professional. Sue would document the journey through photographs, and I would add a few words.

We gave little thought to the cycling. Neither of us had ridden a bicycle for almost twenty years, but once again we rallied around the phrase, "How hard can it be?" After all, as the saying goes, you never forget how to ride a bike.

It might not have been a problem had we kept the idea to ourselves. We could have backed out. Unfortunately, we were with friends, and the couple of drinks I had consumed loosened my tongue just enough for me to tell them.

They responded as friends often do.

"Great idea," said one.

"We will join you for one of the cycling stages," said another.

A date was set for the beginning of March. The idea had escaped into the world and, from that moment, it became much harder to quietly forget.

Sue and I are not comfortable with breaking promises. That was not part of the value system passed down to us by our families. We could either follow through or disappoint the people who had, until then, placed a certain amount of faith in us.

So, Golf and Ride 2014 was born.

There were several practical issues to resolve before either of us placed a foot on a pedal. To begin with, we did not own bicycles. There had been little reason to do so. We were both in our fifties and probably not as fit as we might have liked to believe. There was no established route to follow and no one to consult who had previously attempted anything similar.

We also knew very little about fundraising.

Work presented another complication. Finding the time to spend up to nine hours a day on a bicycle or golf course was not straightforward. On more than one occasion, I joined a meeting from the side of the road using Skype, with headphones in and the camera switched off. I would sip an isotonic drink, make notes and prepare myself for the emails that would need to be written early the next morning or late that night.

At one stage in the planning, it occurred to me that instead of buying bicycles, we could simply donate the same amount of money to the not-for-profit and reasonably claim to have made a useful contribution.

It was an attractive argument.

Then, as if by fate, I came across a familiar thought: the most meaningful gift we can give to a charitable effort is often our time.

That rather inconvenient sentence ended the discussion.

By February, we had still not spent any meaningful time on a bicycle. Our minds, however, were beginning to prepare. Almost every evening for several weeks, we planned a route that would take us from one course to the next. Then came the timings. When would we arrive at each course? How long would the golf take? When would we need to leave to reach the next destination?

The difficulty was that we had no idea how far we could cycle in an hour.

This was a fairly important piece of the jigsaw.

We rented two bicycles and went for a test ride. By then, we had calculated that an average day would require us to cover around 70 kilometres. What we did not know was how long those kilometres would keep us in the saddle.

Our early estimate of 23 kilometres per hour was soon revised to 15. This was before electric bicycles. It was entirely pedal power.

We had overlooked the hills of northern Portugal and Lisbon, the weight of the bicycles and the amount of equipment we would need to carry. There were computers for work, cameras for filming, personal items, spare clothes and shoes. The luggage alone weighed around 15 kilograms, and the bicycles were almost the same weight. Each fully loaded bicycle was close to 30 kilograms.

We were not simply going for a pleasant Sunday ride.

The test confirmed what should already have been obvious.

We were grossly underprepared.



Scott, Tony and Sue prepare to leave Estádio Nacional do Jamor at 8.00 am on the 8th of March 2014. The first four kilometres included some of the steepest gradients of the entire Golf and Ride journey.

02 ○————○ 03

03 - GETTING STARTED

Our training regime started with a daily walk up and down a hill close to our home. It was not the type of preparation that would feature in a professional cycling programme, but it was what we could manage. More importantly, it began to build the stamina we would need.

I often say that success should not be judged only by the result, but by who you become while pursuing it. We repeated that thought frequently in the days before the start and even more frequently during our first few days in the saddle.

The adventure began on Saturday, 8 March, at Estádio Nacional do Jamor, a nine-hole golf course in Lisbon. A regulation par on the ninth hole, completed in just a few minutes, proved to be the easiest part of a day that would take us to five golf courses.

The first two kilometres were extraordinarily steep. We were grateful that the television crew covering our departure had decided to film us as we reached the top of the hill rather than during the climb. The resulting footage suggested three reasonably composed cyclists beginning an ambitious journey. The third rider was our son Scott who joined the morning ride. It did not show the laboured breathing, heavy bicycles or immediate questioning of our life choices.

I had assumed responsibility for navigation and setting the pace. Both roles seemed logical during the planning stage. They became less popular once we were on the road.

More than once, I was asked why we were travelling in a particular direction and whether I could not have found a route around the hill in front of us.

Sue reminded me, on several occasions, whose idea the journey had been. She then suggested that I leave her alone so she could get on with documenting it.

Sue never had a puncture. I did.

She suffered from cramps at times, but her determination throughout the journey was remarkable. On difficult days, she often proved to be the person who kept us moving.

One of the hardest stages covered 110 kilometres between Vidago and Amarante, through the hills of northern Portugal. The road seemed to rise more often than it fell, and the weight of the bicycles made every climb feel longer. At one point, I suggested that we telephone ahead and explain that we would be delayed.

Sue kept going.

So we kept going.



Tony repairs the only puncture of the entire trip outside, less than 100 metres from our accommodation in Vidago, just before we set off on the 110-kilometre journey to Amarante.

03 ○————○ 04

04 - THE JOURNEY

On another day, the generosity of a golf course near Lisbon resulted in us leaving more than an hour later than planned. Hospitality is difficult to refuse, particularly when people have gone to considerable effort to welcome you, but the delay created a problem. We had not planned to cycle in darkness and had no lights on our bicycles.

As the daylight disappeared, we continued along quiet back roads towards our accommodation. We were tired, late and more than a little aware that we had not prepared for this particular eventuality. The stars and the empty roads offered some reassurance, although not quite enough to make riding in darkness seem sensible. We soon found a bicycle shop and bought some lights.

The days developed a rhythm of their own. We would leave early, cycle to the next course, change our shoes, play a hole, take photographs and begin again.

There were formal welcomes and hurried introductions, carefully arranged meetings and moments when we arrived later and more dishevelled than intended. Then we would return to the bicycles and continue towards the next flag on the map.

One evening in the north, we realised that we were unlikely to reach our planned accommodation. We stopped and searched online for somewhere closer. Sue found what appeared to be a modest monastery offering rooms for next to nothing.

It was only 14 kilometres away.

"We should be there in an hour," she said.

I pointed out that every monastery I knew of had been built at the top of a hill. This observation did not appear to register.

Almost two hours later, we reached an old wooden door. A person greeted us, handed over the keys to the entire monastery and said they might see us in the morning.

It was the word "might" that concerned us both.

We telephoned our son, gave him our precise location and told him where to start looking if we disappeared. Then, surrounded by the unfamiliar silence of an empty monastery, we settled down for the night.

We were rewarded with a good sleep and, the following morning, a wonderfully easy downhill ride back to the planned route.



After around 14 kilometres of climbing, we finally parked our bikes at the Mosteiro de São Cristóvão de Lafões, near Oliveira de Frades. We ate lightly, rested well and prepared ourselves for the road ahead.

04 ○ ————— ○ 05

05 - WHAT WE LEARNED

We had to learn a great deal. We learned to use Google Earth properly, to construct a workable logistics plan and to ask people for donations. We learned how to deal with saddle soreness, changing weather, missed turns and days when the next golf course seemed much further away than the map had suggested.

We also relearned that projects which stretch us are usually worth our time. We discovered that we enjoyed the challenge and, perhaps most importantly, that we could become more comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Golf and Ride lasted for almost three weeks. We travelled across Portugal, played at all 74 golf courses and raised close to €10,000 for the not-for-profit.

I also suppose I now hold the course record for the longest round of golf in Portugal.

It is unlikely to be challenged.

The final hole was played on the island of Madeira. I had spent a great deal of time there over the years, and it felt appropriate that this should be the place where the journey ended.

There was relief when the last putt dropped, but the feeling was not as simple as satisfaction. After so much preparation, movement and shared purpose, there was also disappointment that the challenge had come to an end.

Every day of Golf and Ride had presented a route, a destination and something that had to be completed. Then, suddenly, there was no next course to reach.

The money mattered, but it was not the only outcome. The journey created greater awareness of the not-for-profit's work and encouraged other people to offer their support. It also reconnected us with former colleagues and friends across the country.

What we had not anticipated was how much we would receive in return.

We shared a wonderful experience. We supported one another through some challenging days and enjoyed the good ones. We rediscovered people and places that had once played an important part in our lives. We also restarted our relationship with fitness, something that has continued to influence us positively over the decade since.

The original idea was to link golf courses together by bicycle.

What we created was a longer chain.

It connected places, people and memories. It joined a careless New Year's Eve suggestion to a cause that mattered. It reminded us that time can be more valuable than money and that the decisions given the least thought can sometimes have the greatest effect.

It also proved that "How hard can it be?" is not always the wisest question.

But occasionally, it is the right one.



The still waters of a lake in Tróia reflect the tranquillity we felt at the end of a long day in the saddle. Across Portugal, we watched sunrises become sunsets as the kilometres steadily clicked by during Golf and Ride.

[Words Tony Bennett] [Photographs Sue Bennett] [01 August 2026]