



John's touring bike is a pederac



'My departure was just the break that comedy was waiting for'

JOHN DOWIE

Cycling UK member and comedian John Dowie swapped stand-up for cycle touring. **Tony Upfold** spoke to him to find out why

As a former professional stand-up comedian, John Dowie should have impeccable timing. So why did he quit comedy just when it was about to become the new rock 'n' roll and end up cycling around the country with a tent? It's a question he has often asked himself. But, as his hilarious new book 'The Freewheeling John Dowie' reveals, he hasn't looked back since – except on the regular occasions he's about to be overtaken by a fellow cyclist.

As well as a comedian and author, John is a poet, playwright, musician, actor and director, not to mention a keen Cycling UK member and, by his own admission, an addictive personality. As he said: 'Once I get hold of something I like, I become fanatical about it – which is what happened when I bought a bike.'

That was in 2005, 33 years after John made his professional comedy debut at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and was given his first review ('Fatuous' – The Scotsman). Back in 1972, comedy wasn't the superstar-

making, mega-money business it is today. John gigged where he could in folk clubs, music venues, fringe theatres, universities and rooms above pubs. Things improved with the advent of alternative comedy in the 1980s but John packed in the stand-up routine in 1995 to work as a director and write for radio, TV and the theatre.

He said: 'It was as though my departure was just the break that comedy was waiting for. No sooner had I stopped than comedians were earning vast amounts of money performing in venues the size of small countries.'

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Meanwhile, after discovering the joys of cycling in 2005, John was taking the spotlight in a slightly more intimate venue – a one-man tent. 'I thought I'd just have the occasional bike ride once I took up cycling,' he said, 'but, addictive personality that I am, soon I was having rides before breakfast. Then I was riding my bike virtually every minute of every day. The more rides I did, the more I wanted to do.'

'Soon I was craving longer and longer journeys, friends, family and work all forgotten. In a very short while, I had sold my flat, bought a tent, and was riding my bike all the time. While former friends and contemporaries dined at The Ivy, I ate beans from a camping stove!

'I cycle slowly, more like a snail than a man, creaking along, my world on my back – or, rather, my bicycle's back – with no idea of where I'm going or how to get there. If you don't know where you're going, why rush?'

Now 65-year-old John, from Tunbridge Wells in Kent, has committed his story to print. Gems include his first long-distance bike ride, where he managed to get hopelessly lost – by several counties and about 140 miles – and ended up sleeping in a graveyard with his underpants on his head.

'The book is not just about my life as a cyclist. It's also about my life as a comedian. In one of those lives, starting off slowly then going rapidly downhill is a good thing. In the other, it's not. It would have been nice if, just once, I'd got them the right way round! It's the story of my life so far. I hope there are still a few more bike rides left – a few more hills to climb, a few more lanes to get lost in.' **C**

You can order 'The Freewheeling John Dowie' from bit.ly/unbound-johndowie. Cycling UK members can get £5 off by adding the code 'cyclinguk' at the checkout.