«NORMALEMENT, MONSIEUR, ON NE PEUT PAS LE FAIRE»

"Normally, sir, you can't do that".

As cyclists in rural France, we found these words from a railway employee were music to our ears. How could a warning be so welcome, you ask? Because when my wife and I heard the magic word *normalement*, we knew that the rule against passengers taking bicycles on the same train was about to be broken, once again, in our favour.

But this magic word was not easy to come by. The price of getting to *normalement* was a long conversation through the grille of a railway wicket as I explained why we needed to travel with our bikes. The reason, of course, was simply that we were touring cyclists, and the bikes were our only form of transportation at the other end of the train ride. Unlike vacationing Parisians on their way to Brittany for several weeks, we couldn't afford to wait for one of the special baggage trains that would catch up with travellers the following day.

Patience was the key to these conversations. The rules were simple. Always be polite, but appear baffled. Shrugs and gesticulations, in the Latin style, are *de rigueur*. Refer to your wife who is travelling with you and, on one trip, to your two teen-age children, always hovering in the background - representing, as they did, an implied threat that the little dear ones will not otherwise find a room tonight. (Not true, of course. They could lay down bicycle rubber with the best of them). Always wear your Canada pin on your T-shirt so that you are not mistaken for an American. If the conversation is at an impasse, it is quite permissible to switch topics to the weather, the upcoming Bastille Day holiday or anything else that comes to mind, especially if other passengers are waiting in line behind you. Another gambit is to quote the station-master at Dijon who told us that it was quite in order to take our bikes with us on the same train. (In fact, the *chef de gare* at Dijon did say that on one of our trips, but any force this had with another station-master was very limited, especially the further we got from Dijon).

If we were still at an impasse after my polite opening moves, a carefully controlled exasperation was quite in order, because it had a wonderfully expansive effect on my vocabulary. It seemed that when I was under pressure, the adrenalin conjured up words and phrases long forgotten from wherever lie buried fragments of *Cours Moyen* and *Le Notaire du Havre*. "It is not I alone who has this problem, monsieur, we both have a problem. How is it possible that when we have done this before - and thereby increased our knowledge and love of your beautiful countryside - that we cannot repeat this great pleasure? We know that you will find a way to assist us."

Since the baggage train system was developed for reasons of efficiency - a god devoutly worshipped on European trains - sometimes it helped to describe how quickly we could leave our seats and rescue our bikes from the baggage car, once the train stopped. Or, if necessary, we could even stay in the baggage car with the bicycles, as though they were horses who needed calming or special grooming and might react badly to strangers.

But the main reason we could only survive if we had our trusty steeds with us was not a mere question of logistics. It was something much more important, yet difficult of definition. We discovered the universal law of bicycling: bicycles are passports to a very special travel status. By putting yourself on a bicycle - especially in a small group without visible means of support such as yuppie "sag wagons" and all the paraphernalia of organized tours - you enter immediately into an intimate world of the locality. And as if by magic, you cease being a tourist and become a guest. You are no longer an observer - you are a participant.

You are cycling along a quiet road in northern Burgundy and an old man approaches on a what some would describe as a "vicar's wife's bicycle", of ancient vintage. As he sees that you are wearing shorts and a helmet and have a few of the trappings of a sport cyclist, he flashes a