

Climbs that test the pros and tempt the rest

► **FRANCE**
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more Tours have been decided on the Tourmalet than on any other.

I had my own battle with the Tourmalet in the form of the sharp rock that ripped a hole in the casing of my bike's rear tire. A punctured inner tube is an easy fix, but a ripped tire casing could have ended my ride, and I was nearly 7,000 feet up the frigid mountain and miles from any bike shop. I folded a 10 euro note and some gaffer tape into the tire and hoped it would hold my patched-up tube inside as the wet chill seeped into my numbing fingers.

Even shivering in the mist on the Tourmalet is an unforgettable joy. My wife, best friend, and I had come to bike the most famous ascents of the Tour, which started in 1903. The route changes every year, but a handful of storied climbs are used over and over and draw cyclists from all over the world. We would ride five of them, arcing through France from the Alps to Provence to the Pyrenees. Four of our climbs will feature prominently in the 2011 race, which starts in Passage du Gois July 2, and finishes on the Champs-Élysées in Paris three weeks later.

Alpe d'Huez
Each of the 21 hairpin turns of Alpe d'Huez displays a sign with the name of a racer who triumphed here. The list is a who's who of the great riders from cycling's golden age of the '50s and '60s to the present. Americans Lance Armstrong and Andy Hampsten are immortalized. The road itself is a giant message board of sorts. Fans paint words of encouragement on the pavement, and giant letters spell out the names of their favorites. Alpe d'Huez is one part bike racing temple, and one part wild road party for fans. While Tour history is written here nearly every year, the fans lining the road turn the entire day into a carnival as they wait to watch the racers sweat up the 8 percent grade for over 8 miles. Fausto Coppi summited ahead of the peloton, the main body of riders, when the mountain was first used as a Tour stage finish in 1952. It has been the site of regular battles since, and is perhaps the race's most famous climb.

At race pace, any climb is difficult. But for a tourist stopping at the hairpins to take pictures while spinning up the hill in an easy gear with friends, Alpe d'Huez need not be torture. Stop and rest along the way and enjoy the Alpine views. Serious riders can time themselves against the greats. The fastest time is generally considered to be that of the late Marco Pantani's 1997 Tour victory, when he crossed the finish line 37 minutes and 35 seconds after starting in the little village of Bourg d'Oisans.

The summit of Alpe d'Huez is the ski resort of the same name. It's a sleepy place in summer, with deserted roads and shuttered shops. A few cafes remain open, and a shop sells Alpe d'Huez jerseys. The windswept quiet doesn't deter riders from celebrating personal triumphs. The day we were there a stranger crossed the finish line, and rode up to give me an exuberant high-five. He had taken well over an hour to make the climb, but it clearly wasn't his time that mattered.

The Tour hits here for Stage 19 on July 22.



PHOTOS BY LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Dusk in Luz Saint Sauveur, the starting point of two famous Tour de France climbs, the Col du Tourmalet and Luz Ardiden. Roadway graffiti on the iconic Alpe d'Huez climb, with its famous 21 hairpin turns, encourages the fans' favorite riders.

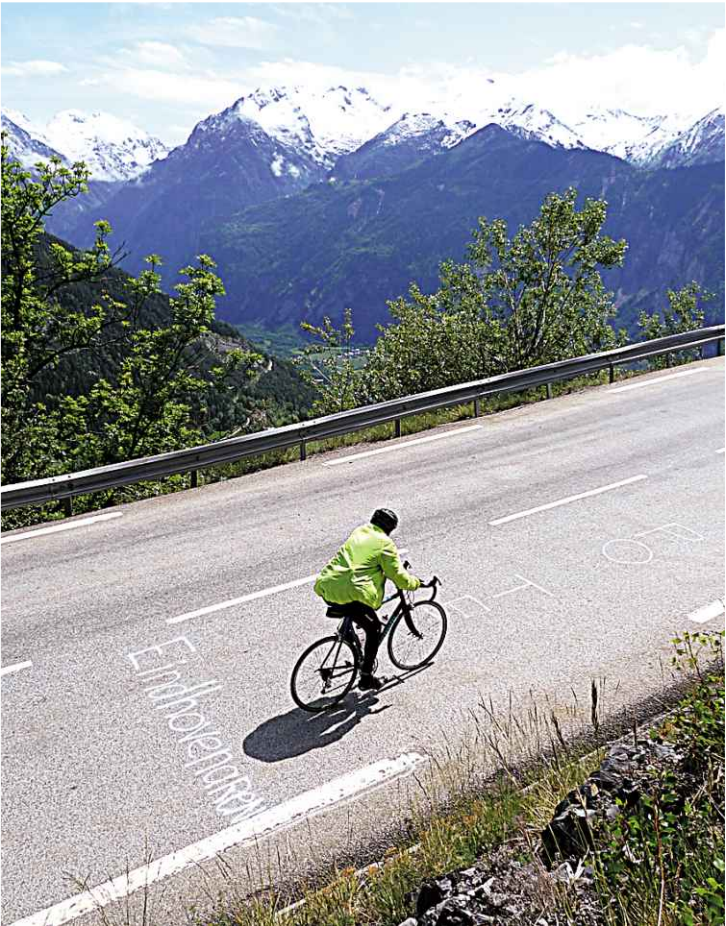
Col du Galibier
Not far from Alpe d'Huez, a climb far more fierce awaits. When the peloton tops the Col du Galibier next month, it will mark the highest elevation in Tour history with the finish line at 8,677 feet. (A new road over the summit takes riders higher than previously possible, bypassing an old tunnel.) Because 2011 also marks the 100th anniversary of the climb's first time in the race, organizers have included it twice this year. The 18th stage finishes on the summit, and the next day Galibier is crossed mid-race, heading for a finish on Alpe d'Huez. It's almost certain that the man in the yellow jersey after these two stages will win the Tour.

For cycling tourists, the Col du Galibier is demanding. From the pleasant little ski village of Valloire with its carved-wood animal sculptures in the traffic rotaries, the climb to the summit stretches over 11 miles at an average grade of almost 7 percent. Averages are deceiving on climbs, however. A few kilometers of relatively easy 4 percent ramps near the start means that riders will hit walls of over 10 percent near the finish. In between, the scenery is stunning. Lush green hills surround the road while snow-capped peaks frame the picture. Small stone bridges span crystal creeks furious with snowmelt.

When we summited in early June, banks of freshly plowed snow made the final few miles look like the middle of winter. Struggling up the pass would generate enough body heat to keep us warm, but that would make the descent even colder. For that reason, we parked our rental van at the top, and flew down the mountain first. As we readied the bikes, a team car from the Radio Shack squad, Armstrong's last team, unloaded as well. Four professional riders were there to train. Seeing the pros mount up was a sobering reminder that this mountain was not for the faint of heart.

The Tour's 18th stage finishes here July 21.

Mont Ventoux
Bédoin is a cycling town. The starting point for the climb up Mont Ventoux sees a regular parade of riders. The town boasts three well-stocked bike shops within a hundred yards of the square, and the Hotel L'Esca-



HIGH RIDERS
Try some tough Tour de France climbs through the eyes of an admiring cyclist on video at www.boston.com/travel.

pade provides a dedicated bicycle garage that can store a dozen machines on custom wall hooks. It's hard for a rider not to feel at home here among the tree-lined streets and sidewalk cafes.

The day started in the hot sun. An earlier shower had passed, and the summit poked at a clear blue sky. But Ventoux is famous for quickly changing weather. I was soon soaking wet from a sudden downpour, after which the temperature and visibility dropped as dense clouds enveloped the road. Visibility was so compromised I almost missed the roadside memorial to Tom Simpson, a British rider who died of heat stroke and suspected drug use near the summit in the 1967 race.

This is a long, difficult climb. An easy start masks the constant 10 percent grade that goes on for miles through the forested section of the road. Overall, the climb from Bédoin lasts just over 14 miles, all of it an unrelenting uphill push that averages 7 percent.

That nasty weather change

kept me from enjoying the long descent I had earned. My waterlogged shorts and light rain shell were no match for the cold that had settled on the mountain during my ascent. Just a couple of kilometers of frigid downhill had me shivering so violently I could no longer safely steer the bike.

I popped into the Chalet Reynard for some warmth, and was immediately surrounded by other riders who recognized my dangerous condition. While one embraced me in a futile attempt to calm my shivers, another said, "I'm a doctor. I'm sorry, but we cannot let you ride down. You won't make it."

And with that, others began peeling off my wet clothes, those NASA foil blankets were wrapped around my near-naked torso, and cups of hot tea and chocolate began appearing in front of me. Other riders were saving me from myself, and from the devilish treachery that is Mont Ventoux. Tom Simpson should have been so lucky.

Col du Tourmalet
"The Giant of the Tourmalet" presides over his summit in all his silvery, naked glory. The giant statue of a muscled, pantless Octave Lapize, the winner when

the Tour first visited here in 1910, has become a photo op for any rider who makes the climb. The sight makes even solo riders feel like someone has witnessed their triumph. You are never alone at the top of the Col du Tourmalet.

You are seldom alone on the way up, either. Even in nasty weather, the Tourmalet draws riders to its verdant slopes. Two ski areas punctuate the climb, and much of it is a "zone pasturale," a free-range area for livestock. The sound of rushing water is everywhere, with waterfalls and tiny streams around every bend.

The picturesque village of Luz Saint Sauveur hosts the start of both the Col du Tourmalet and Luz Ardiden and is the perfect place to spend the night. At the main traffic circle in town, head left past the patisserie for the Tourmalet, and swing a right by the Cave des Pyrenees cheese shop for Luz Ardiden.

My climb was halted briefly by the torn tire casing, but my fix held and I made it to the top, where a restaurant awaits opposite the giant. The wait for my spaghetti with ham and tomato was happily spent studying the race photographs, posters, and bicycles adorning the walls.

Not a single pedal stroke is required to cover the 12 miles back to Luz Saint Sauveur.

Stage 12 crosses the Col du Tourmalet July 14.

Luz Ardiden
For US cycling fans, Luz Ardiden is best remembered as the mountain where Armstrong crashed after catching his handlebar on the handbag of a spectator. (He recovered to win the stage and the 2003 Tour.) It would be a shame if that were the only impression the mountain left.

Breaking out of the steep slopes of the forested section, riders are greeted by a noisy waterfall and velvety moor. The road crisscrosses out of a valley dotted with stone farmhouses. A final switchback offers the best view of all the climbs, with the ribbon of roadway just conquered folding back and forth upon itself up the mountain.

At the Luz Ardiden ski station, workers repairing potholes directed me to the finish line: a simple white stripe painted on the asphalt parking lot. With no fanfare, no music, no announce-

If you go . . .

What to do
Thermal Spa at Barèges
Rue Ramon, Barèges
011-33-05-62-92-68-02
www.mountainbug.com/Library/Bareges%20thermal%20spa.htm
Just 10 minutes from Luz Saint Sauveur, a dip in the natural thermal sulfurous pool will soothe those aching legs after a tough climb on the Tourmalet, \$7.
La Route du Ventoux bike shop
Route du Mont Ventoux
Bédoin
011-33-04-90-67-07-40
www.francebikerentals.com
A well-stocked bike shop has you covered for parts and repairs, but what you are really looking for is a cool Ventoux jersey and souvenir trinkets. Carbon fiber road bike one-day rental \$40.

Where to stay
Hotel L'Escapade
Place Portail Olivier, Bédoin
011-33-04-90-65-60-21
en.federal-hotel.com/hotel_l-escapade-bedoin_4174.htm
Centrally located by the town fountain in a cluster of sidewalk cafes at the base of Mont Ventoux, Hotel L'Escapade has secure bike parking in a custom garage. Standard rooms \$55.

Hotel de Londres
8 Rue du Pont
Luz Saint Sauveur
011-33-05-62-92-80-09
www.hotel-luz-ardiden.com/anglais/hotel-luz-ardiden.html
Hotel de Londres has a lovely terrace that cantilevers out over a rushing stream, and it's steps away from a fabulous patisserie. The climbs to Col du Tourmalet and Luz Ardiden begin half a block away.

Where to eat
La Ciboulette
30 Place de l'Horloge
Carpentras
www.carpentras-ventoux.com/FR/annuaire/restaurant.cfm?i_ref=252&i_sourub=6-restaurant-ciboulette-carpentras-provence
Roast duck filets beautifully plated in a warm atmosphere inside the medieval city walls of Carpentras, just a half-hour from Mont Ventoux. Entrees \$15-\$30.

Hotel Montaignu
9 Route de Vizes Esquièze-Sère
Luz Saint Sauveur
011-33-05-62-92-81-71
www.hotelmontaignu.com
Beneath the crumbling towers of the Château Sainte Marie an excellent dinner can be had, but don't be late: The restaurant is open only for two hours. Prix fixe menus \$17-\$24.

er, and no podium to greet you, crossing the finish line might seem anticlimactic, but it isn't. It's impossible not to thrust your arms skyward in victory, even if the only witnesses are the sheep beneath the ski lifts.

Stage 12 finishes atop Luz Ardiden July 14.

Lane Turner can be reached at tturner@globe.com.

Currents

App offers advance weather forecasts

Weather Trends International makes planning and packing for trips easier, as it provides forecasts up to a year in advance for more than 6.4 million locations in 195 countries. And it does so with more than 80 percent accuracy. The company's new website, www.weather Trends360.com, and iPhone app provide monthly, daily, and hourly forecasts, including projected high and low temperatures, and rain-fall and snowfall trends; a customizable e-mail alert system that delivers personalized weather information; a weather planner; and 14 global weather maps that track lightning, wave heights, UV indices, and sunshine hours. The full version of the app costs 99

cents through iTunes, while the website provides full access to all the information with a free membership. 610-807-3585, www.weather Trends360.com

Sleeping under city stars

AKA Central Park, a luxury property located a block from New York's famous park, offers guests a chance to sleep under the stars in the city's first "outdoor bedroom." Enjoy a five-star camping experience in the penthouse suite, which has a 1,000-square-foot wraparound terrace with a plush bed and a wood-burning fireplace. You will be treated to cocktails or champagne, midnight snacks like

gourmet s'mores and chocolate-covered strawberries, a state-of-the-art telescope for stargazing, an anti-glare e-reader loaded with fun fireside stories, flashlights, and outdoor music. The offer is good until Oct. 15, weather permitting. Rate: \$3,000 per night, based on double occupancy. 866-252-1999, www.stay aka.com

Biking and luxuriating

Massachusetts-based Great Freedom Adventures has launched four Northeast bicycle tours that combine "green" exercise with eco-friendly travel experiences. Explore the North Shore from Salem to Newbury-

port; central Vermont, including a dramatic gorge and the state's only national park; New York's Hudson Valley; or Block Island, R.I., on four- to six-day, fully supported tours. Bikers stay at fine inns and resorts, and eat gourmet dinners in each of the area's top restaurants. Daily activities include sunset sails, lobster bakes, kayak tours, or visits to wineries, gardens, light-houses, or historic sites. Tours include accommodations, most meals, guides, luggage transfers, and some activities; 18 participants maximum. Late June to early October. 508-545-1864, www.greatfreedomadventures.com

KARI BODNARCHUK



TODD MASON/AKA CENTRAL PARK

A block from the park, AKA Central Park offers guests New York's first "outdoor bedroom" with a fireplace and a telescope.