

RIDING INTO THE CLOUDS

Or why you need a good Pair O' Knees to ride in the Pyrenees

After a very enjoyable trip to the Alps in the summer of 2007 I had decided that I liked the idea of dragging myself and my bike up some of the steeper climbs that France has to offer. So over the winter months plans were hatched to try a few different climbs, but this time it would be the Pyrenees. So come July the intrepid four, that had conquered the Alps in 2007, once again headed south. Liz, my wife, and I flew down to Toulouse this year and then travelled across by road to the Hautes-Pyrenees and Haute-Garonne departments while Jane, my sister, and partner Alistair drove down from Eastern England via the Dover / Calais route.

After arriving in France our first stop was the town of Bagnères de Bigorre for a two night stop before moving on to Garin for the week. Bagnères de Bigorre is the district capital for the Hautes-Pyrenees department and was a stage finish for this year's tour. It is an elegant thermal spa town with many grand marble clad spa baths and lies at the foot of the Col du Tourmalet and the Pic du Midi ski resorts. While in Bigorre we took the opportunity to have a quick look at the Tourmalet in preparation of a visit with the bikes later in the holiday. It was a case of taking the easy way up to the ski resort of la Mongie, by car. After about 3 Km we drove into the clouds and slowly edged our way up the mountain through the ever thickening gloom. On arrival at la Mongie we decided to abandon the car due to the poor visibility, you couldn't see from one side of the road to the other, and walk a little further up the mountain. About 1 Km out of la Mongie and the cloud cleared. We had actually walked out of it into a brilliantly sunny day and as it was much nicer above the gloom we decided to continue to the summit. Now this was the Friday, 3 days before the Tour was due to pass, and just about every available space from la Mongie up to the summit was already taken up by camper vans eager for a "ring side seat" for the passing of the Tour de France.



The high point of the holiday. The summit of the Tourmalet.

Saturday saw the weather deteriorate with slow cloud and rain extending over the whole area as we drove across from Bigorre to the village of Garin, on the slopes of the



Aptly named bakery / shop on the slopes of the Peyresourde. It described my general state very well by the time I had climbed up from Luchon.

Peyresourde, for our weeks stay. The main reason for choosing Garin was its location on the Col de Peyresourde which was on the Tour de France stage from Toulouse to Bagnères de Bigorre. In fact the Gite we had hired for the week was only about 300 metres from the race route.

Saturday evening saw a slight improvement in the weather and a walk through the village saw the massing of camper vans in any suitable spots ready for next days stage. The Sunday morning brought much improved weather as well and Alistair and I decided to stretch our legs by attempting the cat 1 climb of the Peyresourde prior to the afternoon arrival of the Tour de France. First of all it was a quick warm up by descending to Luchon, 7 Km down into the valley. A quick U turn and then the climb started. I was

very soon down into my lowest gears but I was able to keep up a reasonable pace until Alistair and I reached Garin once more. By now the climb was starting to bite and as we passed through the village my general condition reflected the sign on the side of the local shop.

By now the crowds were starting to increase as more people assembled on the upper slopes and we continued to grind ourselves ever upwards to the summit another 8 Km up the climb. The final Km or so proved the hardest with several hairpins and bicycles, motorbikes, cars & camper vans all vying for road space so it was a great relief when we reached the king of the mountain banners signifying the summit. A quick rest and a photo opportunity then we were off back down the Col to Garin to await the actual race.

After wandering down to the roadside from our gite we found a nice comfortable spot by the river and awaited for the action to start. First of all it was the action prior to the race itself. That's the publicity "caravane" which consists of about 200 vehicles advertising everything from banks, coffee, opticians, cars and the national police! Many of them throw out free samples of their wares. Cloth caps, keyrings, bottle openers, coffee, musettes. We got the lot! The race, in comparison, was a bit of an anticlimax after the spectacle of the caravane. The cat 1 climb had split the field and several small groups of whippet like riders passed followed by the main bunch some time later. This group contained the sprinters, other assorted riders who had some sort of aversion to mountainous terrain and those who were just having a bad day at the office.

The only ways of really getting near the action at a mountain top (apart from parking up your camper about a week before) are either starting out really early and walking up or using the most obvious mode of transport. The bicycle! Our cunning plan for the next days stage was to get to the base of the Tourmalet at St. Marie de Campan (or as near as possible) with the car and then ride the 18 Km to the summit. We managed to get within about 3 Km of Campan and then it was the long 18 Km haul up one of the most feared climbs in the Pyrenees. After only a few Km it started getting hot, there was a constant stream of people walking from the village below and also many



Part of the tacky caravanne which precedes the race. Garin village on the Col



Alistair & Trevor on the Tourmalet waiting for le Tour to arrive.

more taking the "easy way up" on their bikes. We even passed the "devil" sitting by the roadside. For those that don't follow the tour, the devil is an elderly German man who dresses in red tights, wears a devil hat (complete with horns), carries a trident and chases riders up the steeper parts of the mountains. But our encounter with the man himself thankfully passed without incident. By the time we crawled into la Mongie we had been forced to dismount several times by over enthusiastic gendarmes which was a welcome relief from the unrelenting gradient of the Tourmalet. Following a few near misses with official cars desperate to reach the finish of the stage and an unscheduled stop to allow the caravane to pass (but at least we got a few more free hats and other assorted "goodies") we slowly worked our way onto the upper and much more crowded slopes. The atmosphere was absolutely fantastic as we approached the top of the mighty Tourmalet. We were being cheered on by the massive crowds, given pushes to keep us moving and we were also offered drinks. It was just like being in the race itself and was the only thing that was keeping me

upright, pedals turning and moving forwards. We eventually had to settle for a nice grassy spot near one of the last bends before the summit where we were able to rest and await the tour. From our perch we could see right down the mountain as far as la Mongie and had excellent views of the race weaving slowly up the mountain.

Fired up by a couple of days watching how the pros did it left us hungry for more. Now it was our turn and we started with a 50K ride from St. Marie de Campan over to Luchon. 50 k isn't far, its only 30 ish miles but in between Campan and Luchon were 2 first category climbs, the Col d'Aspin (13 Km at 5%) and the Col de Peyresourde (10 Km at 6.6%). We started steadily, even managing to pass a few younger, fitter looking riders in the process. Things got progressively harder as we approached the summit of the Aspin and by the time the top was reached a well earned rest was needed. We didn't expect to be attacked by a herd of goats though. As we stood there posing for photographs several goats ran over with their long rough tongues hanging out and proceeded to give my arms and legs a good licking. Now I know several individuals (no names but you know who you are!!) who would have been extremely excited at this prospect. It turned out that there was nothing too untoward going on, for the animals just wanted the salt that had accumulated on my arms and legs from the heavy sweating caused by my morning's exertions. Clever goats associated sweaty lycra clad humans on two wheels with nice tasty limbs.

The descent of the Aspin was very picturesque. A steady ride through Arreau, and the flatter part of the road, passed relatively quickly before we hit the slopes of the Peyresourde. Another hard climb but at least there were no goats to greet us at the top. The descent to Luchon helped to cool us down before we headed back to the gite for a well earned lunch.



Trevor & Alistair take a short break after the ascent of the Col d'Aspin.

With the weeks holiday almost at an end there was one last monster climb still on our "to do" list. The Plateau de Beille lies to the south of Foix in the Ariège region and was about a 3 hour drive from our gite in Garin.

The 16 Km climb, with an average of 8%, starts in the small town of Les Cabannes and tops out at a small ski resort. Soon after our arrival we had the bike sorted out and went for an easy ride on the flat road back out of town to warm the legs up. The climb starts immediately on the edge of the town with the first Km being an "easy" 6.5% before getting into the 8 & 9% range. Again we started off at a steady pace respecting the task that lay ahead of us. It was one of the warmer days of the holiday and the sun was beating down on us as we winched ourselves up the mountain road. At 5 Km gone things were OK but hot. At 6 Km the heat was starting to get to me and I was slowly starting to drop off Alistair's wheel as we both struggled up. Then at 7 Km my bike decided that it had enough of all this climbing, decided that it wasn't going any further and promptly snapped its chain. On an 8% gradient you grind to a halt very quickly once the chain goes, and it took a few seconds to work out why the peddling had suddenly got easier and the bike was starting to tip over. By the time I had uttered several choice words (non I hope that would be understood by the locals), recomposed myself and fumbled to deploy the necessary attachments on my multi tool (the first time the chain rivet tool had been used in anger) a good twenty minutes had passed. By this time Alistair, who hadn't heard my gasps that my chain had snapped, must have been well on his way to the top of the plateau. My legs had also stiffened up so it took a while to get back into a steady climbing rhythm before I headed upwards in pursuit of Alistair. There was a brief panic at 12 Km as a herd of cows was crossing the narrow road, which by now was getting a bit "agricultural". Visions of goats, tongues and a licking frenzy briefly crossed my

mind but a gap had appeared in the bovine train and I summoned all my remaining strength and sprinted through the opening and carried on upwards. At least the view was worth the suffering when I finally reached the summit and the descent, following a brief rest, went off without any further incident

That's all the cycling taken care of but please don't ask about our "easy" afternoon walk to Lake Oo. Must have had a map reading error or something, for a nice and easy 3 Km walk turned out like (or so it seemed) a 3 Km vertical ascent!! At least the view was nice when we got there.



***Pyrenees meets Garonne.
The summit of the Col de
Peyresourde***



Looking back down the valley from Lake Oo.