

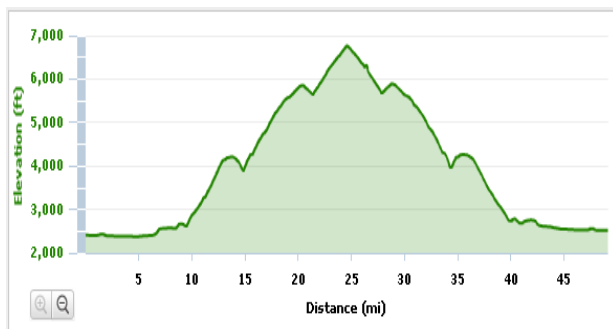
Cycling the Alps – A trip of a life time

It was almost two years ago when the discussion first started. It began as more of a joke, but as time passed, it became a reality, cycling the Alps. It's one of those things you think about, but never feel it would actually happen. Well after a year of thinking, Adrian Hulme and I decided to do it, and made reservations for the following year. The plan: five days of riding, following the routes from the 2011 Tour d'France from France into Italy and back. The mission: spend the 12 months prior, getting ready for what was expected to be a challenging trip.

The trip was organized by a small tour group called Enjoy Oisans in Bourg d'Oisans at the base of the Alp d'Huez in southern France. For Adrian, it felt like a family reunion. Being British himself, we were joined by the tour leader, his wife and brother, all originally from England, as well two other Brits and a couple from Australia. Turns out I was the one with the strange accent that didn't understand rugby or cricket. Our home base for the trip was out of a 500 year old building that began as the stables for a large estate.

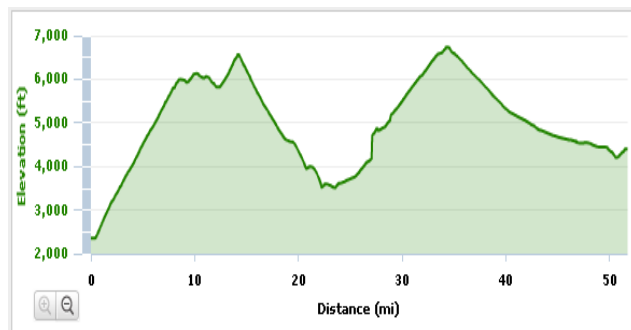
Day 1 - Col du Glandon Col de la Croix de Fer

The first day was a warm-up climbing to the Col du Glandon and the Cole de la Croix de Fer. At 2,067 meters (6,782 ft). This HC – "Beyond Category" climb rose 5,900 ft. over the 25 miles, winding its way through a river gorge with is crystal clear water being fed from the mountain snows. It didn't take long to realize we weren't in Ohio any more. Once we started to climb, it never let up, ranging from 5-12% grade. Part way up we stopped at a small café for coffee and to make sure everyone had their legs after the trip in, and then back in the saddle for the push to the top. After lunch at a restaurant at the top of the Col (mountain pass) we descended the 25 miles back to the base camp for dinner.



Day 2 - Bourg d'Oisans Alpe d'Huez, Sarenne, Lautaret, Briançon

The second day is when the fun began. We started with a climb up the famous Alp d'Huez. While it's only 7.5 miles from the bottom, it's a staggering 3,400 ft of climbing and another HC climb. The first 1.5 miles were 10-15%. The pro's do it around 40 minutes, but we had two goals: 1) Just finish. 2) Beat Cheryl Crow's time of 89 minutes. (Lance Armstrong's ex-girl friend). Adrian and I set-up positions at the back of the group to make sure no one attacked from the rear and completed the climb in 72 minutes. Take that Cheryl Crow! We may have been a bit intimidated by the fact that the one woman in the group completed the climb in 54 minutes until we found out that she was the current Australian Masters National Champion in both road racing and individual time trial. However, weighing in at about a buck 10, she didn't stand a chance on the down hills.



After a brief stop at a Cafe in Alp d'Huez, we proceeded down the back side of the mountain through a series of wild switch-backs, where we started the second climb of the day up to the Col du Lautaret at 6,600 ft. While not as steep as the ascent up to Alp d'Huez, it was still a continuous 15 miles of pain, averaging 5-8%, ending with an 18 mile high speed descent into the city of Briançon.



Our hotel for the second night was in the old city of Briançon, a walled city, surrounding the perimeter of the original 10th century castle, inside the moat. Yah, they have a moat and an entrance with a huge raised wooden gate. I didn't see a draw bridge. As we walked the narrow winding streets, you could imagine what life was like hundreds of years ago, and then realized that it was still a functioning city.



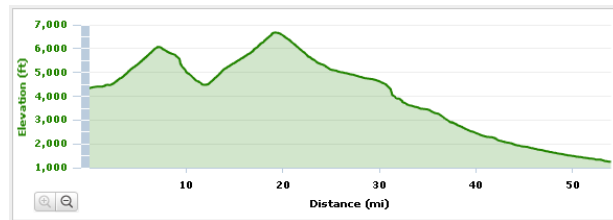


Day 3 – Briançon to Pinerolo

Day three started with a promise to be easier than the day before, but easy is a relative term. The day consisted of two seven mile climbs in the 5-8% range, which after the first two days seemed like riding through the flat lands of Ohio. We ended with a 30 mile descent across the border into Italy and the town of Pinerolo, flying down the long sweeping curves at over 45 MPH.

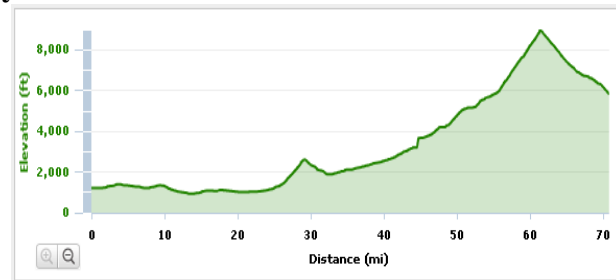
Day 4 – Rest day in Pinerolo

Day four was a rest day in Pinerolo. We needed to find a bike shop to fix a broken spoke on Adrian's bike and replace the brake pads we wore down on the back side of the Alp d'Huez. We planned ahead and brought extra spokes, but failed to realize you needed a special tool to change them with the way the spoke nipples fit up inside the rim. We spent 3 hours riding around town, trying out the three words in Italian that we know, using hand gestures and even resorting to drawing pictures to explain what we were looking for. Finally we found a hardware store and were able to take care of the problem.



Day 5 - Pinerolo Col d'Agnel Molines en Queyras

Day five will go down in the books as one of those rides you can say you have done, and will never do again. We rolled an hour early to ensure we had enough daylight, which should have been an indication of what was to come. The ride started with a bit of anticipation as the rain clouds moved in and we pulled out the rain gear. Fortunately after a few miles, the skies cleared and we were back to our normal perfect conditions, but rain wasn't the problem. Shortly after the start, we passed a road crew laying new asphalt, and it wasn't until some miles later that we noticed the oil and tar that covered the bikes and our back sides. By then it had dried hard and required solvent and some elbow grease to remove.



After a clean-up we were back on the road and started up what was described as a warm-up climb. A quick (45 minute) 8-10% climb up a winding set of switch-backs used by the local sports car enthusiasts to test out their Fiat's, Mini-Coopers and alike. While sitting back in the saddle, hoping to find a spot to shift out of the 28 tooth ring, we had to listen for the screeching tires and revved engines of the flying missiles. The one conciliation was when one of the fools over-revved and blew his clutch.

OK, funs over, now back to the climb. After a stop for lunch with a massive platter of pasta and salad (just what you want before an epic climb), we started a 50KM (30 mile) ascent to the Col d'Agnel, the highest mountain pass in the French Apls, topping out at 2,744 meters (9,000 ft). Adrian and I had no idea what to expect. OK it was 50K, but we had already climbed Alp d'Huez. How tough could it be, and the first 40K was a gentle 5-8%. It's amazing what you consider gentle after a few days in the mountains.



It wasn't until we came to a painted marker on the road (9K) left over from this year's tour that we realized what was ahead, a wall going straight up with faint outlines of roads zig zaging up the side. What started out as a casual ride turned into the most punishing 9K ever. Averaging from 14-16% with the only rest being the short spots in the switchback before the road kicks up again. With each turn, the hope of relief ended as the next section of road came into view, snaking its way up into the clouds. The only promise was the painted Kilometer lines, slowly counting down, four more to go, now three. If I can only make one more! By the time we hit the 3K mark, you could feel the impact of the elevation, the heart rate and respirations were racing and you had to stop to catch your breath. To look back was a tremendous sense



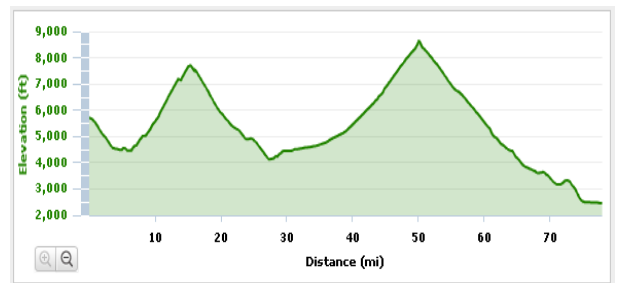
of accomplishment, to look ahead, the anticipation of the pain. At one point the road disappeared as we rode into the clouds, but with 1K to go, we broke through once again into the sunlight and could finally see the top. We made it and all we had to do was to put on some warm clothes for the 10K descent to our hotel on the French side of the mountain and our stay at the Hotel le Chamois.



Day 6 - Moline en Queyras Bourg d'Oisans

We made it. That is we survived the week to make it to the last day. The attack on the Galibier, the monster of the tour. But first we had to go over the Col d'Izoard, another seven mile "Beyond Category" climb with the last half in the 10%+ range. This wasn't an easy climb by any means, but by now, after a week of cranking out the hills, it actually felt easier.

Just over the Col d'Izoard, we stopped for coffee and raspberry tart before the descent back into Briançon at the "Refuge Napoleon", built in by Napoleon the third in 1858. Our definition of history is definitely different than the French. This is actually a newer building for the area.



The final stage, the last sprint was the climb up to the Col du Lautaret and an 8K push to the top of the Col du Galibier. This was nothing like a sprint, but more of a marathon. It started with 28K of 5% to the Col du Lautaret along the sweeping high speed turns we flew down a couple days before, much of which I didn't recognize. Must have something to do with the speed difference. Lautaret sits at the base of the Galiebir, and is the perfect resting point before the last 8K to the top.

Thanks to the Tour, the roads were perfect. Some still display the graffiti from left over from the hoards of fans that must have packed the narrow winding roads to the top. I didn't realize from the TV broadcasts how little room there is in many areas. One side of the narrow road is a rock wall and the other a sheer cliff. That might be one of the reasons the fans don't give the riders any room.



As we made our way up the Galiebir, we could see all the way back to Briançon more than 5,000 ft. below. A sign of another good days work, but a resignation of the fact that it's almost over. All that's left is the 50K descent down the mountain into Broge d'oisans.

Without a doubt, this trip was all that we hoped it would be. Great weather, great riding and the opportunity to meet a number of interesting people. The only negative of the whole trip was the nightmare of the three day return caused by a busted crapper on the plane. But that's a story all to itself for another day.

