

Tour de France
2007 Pyrenees
to Paris.

Report by Ross
Cussons

On Friday the 20th July I joined my Emirates flight to Paris via Dubai to join a tour on the Pyrenees to Paris section of the Tour de France organized by Bikestyle Tours
On arrival at Charles de Gaulle Airport on Saturday 21st I was met by Terry from Bikestyle Tours who promptly phoned Natalie who picked us up and delivered us to a nearby hotel, which was to be our groups first night accommodation in France.
"Get changed and bring your helmet and pedals," was the instruction from Terry after I had checked in. Within a very short time I had met my

hire bike, supplied by Bikestyle Tours, screwed in my pedals, made a few adjustments to saddle height and was ready to hit the roads of France. As we were the last to arrive there were only two riders guided around the French countryside by Terry through some small villages over some cobblestones "on the wrong side of the road." What a wonderful way to forget about any thoughts of jet lag.

After a shower I met more members of the group with a beer in my hand. Then all of our tour party moved to the dining room for our first meal together. During the evening the arrangements for Sunday were explained. Bags to be down early to allow for a long day in our coach for the trip to Toulouse. Some of our party elected to travel to Toulouse on the TGV train to avoid the long coach trip. I thought it was a great opportunity to see more of the French countryside.

Monday morning. This is what we came for. After a short trip on our coach to Barbazan we unloaded our bikes and rode into the French countryside, heading for the route that the riders would be racing on in a few hours. However we had not allowed sufficient time and made our first contact with the Gendarmes, who had closed the road. After a bit of back tracking we got on to another road and made it back to the route. We had a quick snack at Bagnères-de-Luchon then began the climb of the Col-de Peyresourde. It was wonderful to be cheered on by the waiting crowd as we rode, made us feel like "real riders." Just inside the twenty kilometre kite a small group of us settled in to wait for the real entertainment to begin. With a number of Basques dancing on the road and harrying the controlling gendarme, collecting souvenirs from the promotional caravan and trying to communicate with a French family, time passed very quickly until the race went through. This was our first viewing of the race up close and personal, and while the leaders seemed to be going hard others seemed to be enjoying a friendly sociable ride despite the climb.

After all the race riders had gone through and the road was cleared by the marshals we headed back. The descent was hair raising as the surface was not smooth, so it was hang on and hope. From our agreed meeting place our coach delivered us to a hotel in Lourdes which was to be our home for the next three nights, with dinner included.

Tuesday was a race rest day, but not for us. Options for the serious riders were, 130km including Col d'Aspin and Col du Tourmalet; 100km Col du Tourmalet; or a shorter ride to Cauterets village. Not wanting to stress myself too much I chose the latter and with a couple of others of our group had a pleasant lunch in the mountain sunshine at Cauterets watching the chair lift taking people further up the mountain. The ride back to Lourdes, the way we had come, along a path that had once been a railway line was a wonderful way to finish the days ride.

The options for Wednesday were 110km Lourdes, Aubisque Soulor; 70km Bielle Aubisque; or coach and small van to near the finish on Aubisque. Once again taking the easy option I chose the latter. This option had it's dramas as the Gendarmes wanted to assert their authority. After much negotiation between Natalie, tour organizer, and Ari, our coach driver, and the gendarmes it was agreed that we could disconnect the bike trailer and push it by hand to a safe place and the coach could park in a nearby parking area. Those not riding loaded into the van and were taken to a parking area 6km from the finishing line. The plan was to

walk to the finish line but Lawrie asked that we be back to the van as soon as the race finished to get ahead of the crowd. Good plan, unfortunately others had the same idea. We took an hour plus getting out of the car park then another hour plus getting back to the coach. We had a very late dinner that night.

There was only one option for our riders on Thursday, 45km from the hotel in Lourdes to Pau for the start of the days 188km stage. We arrived in Pau in time to once again witness the promotional caravan. Following our arrival in Pau our bikes were loaded ready for travel to Bordeaux where we are to stay two nights. While waiting for the race start we walked around the tour village, watched riders registering for the day, bought souvenirs and joined the milling throng to try for a position to view the start. On to the coach after a lunch of what we had brought from the breakfast buffet at Lourdes we headed for Bordeaux. On arrival at our hotel we unloaded the bikes and stored them securely in the basement of the hotel. Dinner was not included so four of us headed to the restaurant area where we had a great three course meal at what we thought was a very reasonable price. It gave us the opportunity to see a small part of the beautiful city.

The Tour race ride on Friday was a flat 210km from Cahors to Angouleme. For us it was a day not to watch the Tour but to ride the time trial course that would decide the winner of the 2007 Tour de France. So we had to be ready for the coach early, load the bikes and on the road for Cognac. The ride was fairly flat with a bit of a sharp climb through Angouleme before the end of the section. After our ride we watched the finish of the Tour section both on the big screen near the finish line and on the race route before returning to Bordeaux for a pizza dinner in a small square where the kitchen was on the other side of the road.

Saturday's ride options were a difficult 120km ride or a moderate 50km ride to Cognac for the start of the time trial. Once again I chose the easy option. That was our last ride. Those who had brought their own bikes packed them up ready for transport and those who had hired bikes removed our pedals and packed them away. After watching some of the riders start their time trial we took the opportunity to walk among the team buses and watch riders, including Cadel Evans, warming up. He was pleased to hear Aussie accents as we wished him luck, hoping that he could make up the time to become race leader, unfortunately it was not to be. Then onto our coach to begin, the return to Paris after an overnight stay at Chasseneuil.

We arrived at our final hotel in Paris before our rooms were ready on Sunday morning. Our coach then delivered us near the Champs-Elysees and those of us who had bought stand tickets took our places and waited for the final arrival of the promotional caravan and eventually the Tour riders for the final stage win of the 2007 Tour de France. After a final look at the Champs Elysees and a wander among the riders, after the presentations, it was back to our hotel for our farewell dinner.

Bikestyle Tours is a well organized cycling tour group run by Lawrie and Natalie Cranley with the assistance of many others.

Ross Cussons