



haul of pain

A 565km bike ride over the Alps with 11,000km of vertical ascent pits riders against Tour de France heroes. Is the downhill ecstasy worth the uphill agony? Rob Penn finds out.

The last 5km to Val d'Isère were hell. With every pedal stroke the pain deepened. An inner voice goaded me to lie down on the road in the dying light and slip into a timeless sleep. The other voice, the voice of Sam, the guide who'd been keeping an eye on me all day, urged me on: "Nearly there... Last hill... Final corner..." Delirious with exhaustion after eight hours cycling 148km, including 4,000m of vertical ascent, I limped into the hotel car park. Mark Neep, founder of the Alps-based cycle training and touring company GPM10, was waiting. "Well done. Massive day," he said, wheeling my bike into the garage. "Now get inside. Shower. Eat. Sleep. You've got to do it all again tomorrow."

A 565km, four-day bike tour over the Alps from Chamonix to Nice, crossing eight cols with 11,000m of vertical ascent, may not sound like a holiday. Well, it's not. It's a hard ride for serious cyclists in search of two-wheel nirvana, with the Tour de France at its heart. The route, via Megève, Bourg-Saint-Maurice, Susa in Italy, Briançon, Vars and Barcelonnette, includes some of the mountain passes of the world's toughest cycle race. You can't bend a free kick into the net at Wembley on Cup Final day or tonk a six over the Mound Stand at Lord's before a Test match, but you can pull on an *équipe* shirt and pit yourself against the Tour's heroes.

GPM10 provides a mechanic, two experienced amateur racers as "cycling guides",

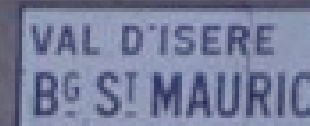
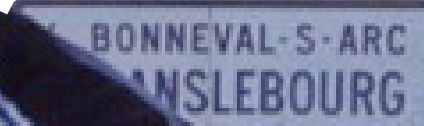
vehicle support, food and accommodation. You merely have to bring a bike and the willpower. "We normally insist all clients complete our Tour du Mont Blanc ride – a hard four-day test – before undertaking the more demanding Chamonix-Nice tour. That way, we know everyone can cope," Neep told me when I booked last-minute.

Meeting the other seven riders in our group in Chamonix, I regretted he'd made an exception for me. Garth, a 36-year-old investment banker, Gary, a 39-year-old builder and Nick, a 32-year-old commercial manager for the 2012 Olympics, looked, standing shoulder to shoulder, like an All Black back row. The lone woman, Liz, had represented Australia in triathlon. All were keen, experienced cyclists riding slick bikes. Over dinner, conversation ranged from replacing glycogen stores and cyclosporins to sleep patterns and physiology. I wondered if I should have left my dream to be "king of the mountains" in the ether.

On the first morning, we climbed Col de Saisies from Flumet – 16km of uphill, 720 vertical metres. Floyd Landis launched his "miracle charge" during Stage 17 of the 2006 Tour here, powering up on his big chain ring. I inched up in my lowest



Above: climbing the Col de l'Isèran. Below: Rob Penn catches his breath and the view at the top of the Col de l'Isèran at 2,770m.



gear, only mildly encouraged that Landis later tested positive for synthetic testosterone. After lunch in Beaufort we attacked the Cormet de Roseland, the climb (19km, 1,230 vertical metres) where Miguel Indurain “bonked” in 1996, ending his chance of a record sixth consecutive Tour victory.

Not that I shed any tears for the “Big Mig” as I lumbered up through the pine forest. I was too busy mopping the stinging sweat that ran in rivulets down my face. Ten minutes out of Beaufort, Sam caught me up: “Big climb, this,” he said. “Inexperienced riders tend to put their heads down, watch the front wheel, go too early and then fall off the bike halfway up. Take it steady.” As he pulled ahead at the first hairpin bend, the pain started in my lower back. A dull ache in the knees came next. When Mark drove by in the support car to take my helmet and replace the water bottles, my entire frame throbbed. “Pain is only weakness leaving the body,” he said with a flash of teeth. “We all suffer.”

Cycling in the Alps is not just about conquering pain, though. For every revolution of uphill agony, there is a moment of downhill ecstasy to savour. At 1,968m, Cormet de Roseland was not a place to idle, even in September. We all conquered the mountains at our own speed, but there was a good group dynamic and several riders had waited for me. After a burst of aggressive eating, we grabbed helmets and extra layers of clothing from the car, zipped up and aimed our bikes down the road, 20km to Bourg-Saint-Maurice.

There isn’t a better way to descend an Alpine mountain than on a racing bike. I’ve tried cars, motorbikes, mountain bikes, mountain boards, boots and skis, but only a snowboard in fresh powder comes close to matching the spiralling high produced by the combination of speed, wonder at plunging through exorbitantly beautiful landscapes and fear of kissing Joe Tarmac at 80kph.

At dawn on day two, I felt like I’d been a tackle bag for the Western Samoan rugby team. Col de l’Iseran above Val d’Isère, one of Europe’s highest paved roads at 2,770m, was for breakfast. A remote pass in the Tarentaise region, it’s only been included in the Tour seven times – partly because, in the early years, it was thought riders might encounter bears, and partly because of the weather: during the 1996 Tour it was snow-bound. In 2007 the *peloton* did speed this way and the names of the leading riders, freshly painted on the road, grew thicker as we climbed, while the air became thinner.

As a key part of the Route des Grandes Alpes, the road from Lake Geneva to the Mediterranean that first opened the mountains to cycling and motor tourism in the early 20th century, there were plenty of cars and motorbikes crossing Col de l’Iseran. However, this being France – rather than, say, the A24 to Dorking – the drivers yelled encouragement, corroborating the theory that a Frenchman will support any cyclist with a look of excessive pain on his face.

Down, up – there’s not a flat kilometre between Chamonix and Nice – and down again into Italy, through a scented pine forest to Susa where we ended day two in time for a power nap before dinner. When you’re in the saddle all day, burning over 300 calories an hour, eating takes on a new dimension. While riding, the emphasis is on continually absorbing carbs – snack bars, power drinks,



Above: hairpin bends on the steep descent from Col du Mont Cenis to Susa in Italy.

bananas – and eating feels like fuelling the furnace. In the evening, however, you’re eating for tomorrow and the

rich, high-carb cuisine of the Savoie region is a cyclist’s dream diet. In the Ristorante Stazione, we fell on beef ravioli, veal steaks and Dauphinoise potatoes, ice cream and local cheeses like hyenas on a fresh kill.

The *premier cru* pass on day three was Col d’Izoard (20km, 1,200 vertical metres), an *hors catégorie* climb above Briançon that regularly features in the Tour. The landscape alone is part of the race mythology. At the summit – a notch in the rock above the ancient oak forest that leads to the bleak, wind-chiselled rock stacks of the Casse Déserte – stands a monument to the great Fausto Coppi. *Il campionissimo* crossed the Izoard alone, in yellow, in 1949, and went on to win the Tour.

Entering the Alpes-Maritimes, the geology and flora changed dramatically: gneiss and pine trees gave way to limestone and larch. The sun grew hotter and the air drier. Flying down from the Col de Vars on the final morning, I smelled the Mediterranean for the first time and underwent something of a transformation myself. Winning up the final climb (32km, 1,196 vertical metres) through the Gorges du Bachelard, the pain – the aches, stabs, stings, tweaks, throbs and pangs that I’d come to know – dissolved away. When the Col de la Cayolle finally came into view, as the road rose again for the final ascent, I thought: “I don’t want this climb to end.”

End it did, though. The final 120km, with the exception of a short clamber through the outskirts of Nice, were downhill: a fittingly breathless finale to our ride. For the first time we rode as a team, taking turns to slipstream. In warm sunshine, averaging over 40kph, racing a train beside the dashing white water of the Vars river, we sped out of the mountains and down to the shining sea. ♦

FULLY EQUIPE’D

Rob Penn was a guest of **GPM10** (07831-189 075; www.gpm10.com), which offers a Chamonix to Nice tour, including airport and luggage transfers, four nights’ accommodation, all food and (non-alcoholic) drinks, but excluding flights, for £695. Dates for 2008 are Sept 11-16 and 18-23. **EasyJet** (www.easyJet.com) flies to Nice from various UK airports, from £47 return plus £33 per bicycle. **British Airways** (0844-493 0787; www.ba.com) flies from London Heathrow to Nice six times daily, from £113.

ROB PENN (3)