

The Pyrenean mountains that host the Ariégeoise feature regularly in the Tour de France, and are habitually dominated by riders in yellow

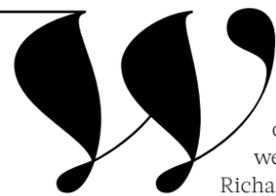
Hitting the plateau

With more than 4,000m of climbing, the 20th edition of the Ariégeoise sportive would test anyone's limits on a cool day. When *Cyclist* rode it, it was a scorcher

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Time is the last thing you want to be reminded of on a sportive that seems to go on – and up – forever



When the wired riders of the 1998 Tour de France went on strike in the Pyrenean town of Tarascon-sur-Ariège they did so because they felt they were being 'treated like cattle'.

Richard Virenque and his fellow peroxide blonde, EPO-reared, bovine rouleurs at Festina had been herded to the gendarmerie for questioning. Led by a bullish Laurent Jalabert, the peloton decided enough was enough by staging a sit-down protest the kind of which will soon be very appealing for myself were the roads leading us to the foot of the monstrous Plateau de Beille not hot enough for frying steaks.

It's the last Saturday of June and I've joined 4,600 riders on what is tipped to be the hardest Ariégeoise sportive in its 20-year history. Set up to celebrate the Tour's first visit to the area, the inaugural Ariégeoise attracted 455 participants. With breathtaking scenery, quiet roads and some 80-odd climbs in the area to choose from, it's not hard to see why it's grown. Even before we start the 163km route, I'm bowled over by the surroundings. The sleepy town occupies a basin at the convergence of five valleys at the confluence of the Ariège and Vicdessos rivers; looming above us an ancient round clock tower is primed to chime 8am.



'When we reach the town of Appy it's not so much an H that's absent but a CR'

It's show time – although I'm barely ready. A last-minute dash to one of Tarascon's art-deco long-drops followed by an inopportune dropping of the chain (my bike's, that is) has left me with grubby hands. It's contemplating these hands in the packed starting pen that I realise I've forgotten my gloves. Having selected to ride without a Garmin or speedometer too, I'm clearly going *au naturel* today. On the bright side no gloves means I won't be returning to England with savage tan lines across my digits: a day of unrelenting sunshine is on the cards.

Catalogue of climbs

After a flat opening section that's completely out of character with the rest of the ride, we hit the Pas de Souloubrie, the first of five major climbs. Spotting a chap decked out in Giro d'Italia pink but with an unsightly oil stain on his calf that resembles a backstreet tattoo, I decide that here is someone I should be able to shadow. Soon a group forms and we're working at a pace that, together with the heat, causes sweat to cascade down my forearms, making my hands slip on the hoods of my Cannondale Synapse. Another reason why gloves are a good idea.

I'd started the ride with a sore knee and tight lower back, and already I'm feeling pretty rotten. When we reach the town of Appy it's not

so much an H that's absent but a CR. Luckily the stunning setting is a distraction. We're on a verdant anti-clockwise loop that takes in peaks, plateaus, pine forests and the ruins of numerous Cathar castles before a climax of risible brutality: a 16km climb whose Tour stage winners habitually go on to top the podium in Paris. Each year the Ariégeoise alternates between this altitude finish at Beille and a downhill dash to Auzat at the foot of the nearby Port de Lers. For this 20th anniversary edition the organisers have barbarously concocted the most exacting route to date – with more than 4,000 vertical metres of climbing.

Momentary respite comes on a narrow corniche still in the shade of the morning ☺



The details

Sign up, get training, do it in 2015



What L'Ariégeoise

Where Tarascon-sur-Ariège, Ariège, Midi-Pyrénées

Next one Last Saturday of June (27th June 2015)

Distance 163km, 103km or 73km (2014)

Price €42 (early bird), then €52 (includes jersey, meal and insurance)

Sign up cyclospor-ariegeoise.com



☛ sun. I find myself latching onto a lithe old-timer and on the eerily wooded Col de Marmare we catch and pass Mr Pink before forming a group with a few others. One of them has the number 666 pinned to his jersey. ‘You have the Devil on your back,’ I quip. ‘It’s bad enough without him,’ he huffs back.

Soon I’m completely isolated on the zippy downhill after a welcome feed zone atop the Marmare. Given my preference for careful descending, this is no bad thing – something I’m reminded of when passing medics tending to one of only two hospitalisations of the day. I reel in a rider but instantly resent his sandbagging while we – I actually – combat a headwind on a deserted plain. Zonked, I’m unable to keep up with a returning group of riders as we drop towards Bélesta, the half way point of the ordeal.

Just when I’m seriously contemplating whether I might be earning lanterne rouge credentials, I’m joined by a cascade of riders whose approach to descending is in the mould of Peter Sagan. ‘Ouf! Attention!’ come the cries as I overcook a bend amid a screeching ☛

“Ouf! Attention!” come the cries as I overcook a bend amid a screeching of brakes’



The rider’s ride

Cannondale Synapse, £XXX.xx, cannondale.com

If you like your speed with a bit of sympathy, the Synapse is the perfect partner for long sportives. It’s stiff and light enough to race on (just ask Peter Sagan) but its main attributes lie with its comfort and handling. Having hired this bike for the Ariégeoise, my first chance to ride it came when the starter’s horn sounded on the day of the event, so I was nervous that I was going to have a tough time adapting to a new setup, but I’m convinced that the Synapse got more comfortable the further I went (or perhaps my brain just got more fried). This model came with Shimano 105 groupset, FSA triple-ring chainset and Shimano RS10 wheels – so not the highest spec you’d hope to find on a bike of this class – but I had no real problems with shifting or climbing, and when I hit the descents the Synapse’s well balanced handling made the fast bends fun instead of fearful.





‘Never have I endured such uphill hardship – not even on Mont Ventoux or the Col du Galibier’

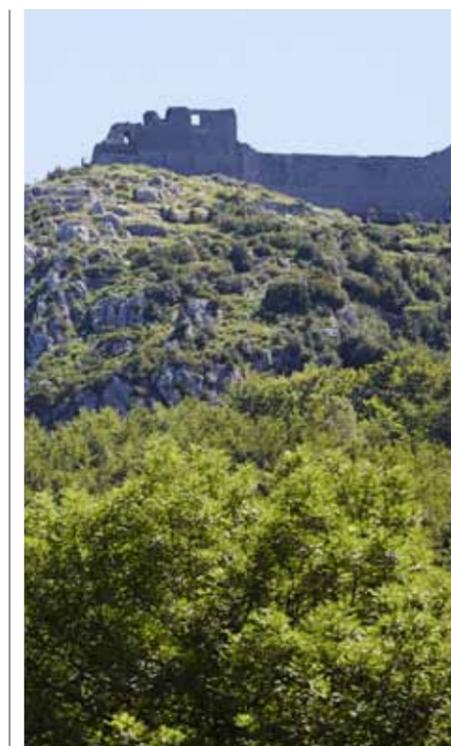
a road-side trestle table (despite the pre-race advice from Soren Kristiansen, the Team Sky chef, to ‘stay away from anything with bubbles in it’). I politely decline a glass of pastis – and then almost relent when I’m heartily informed there’s still another climb before Beille. Mercifully, it’s gentle, shaded and familiar – for, indeed, we have now completed our circuit and this is our second stab at the Souloubrie. An alternative descent over tight hairpins flattens out at Les Cabannes, gateway of the hurt locker.

Beille out

Days earlier I took to Twitter for some tips on how to survive the infamous Plateau de Beille and its consistently gruesome 8% gradient. Some answers were succinct (‘Pray’, ‘Taxi?’); some were playful (‘Borrow Cancellara’s motorised bike’); others both telling and topical (‘Train a lot. And get someone to backdate the advice’). The most honest came from fellow cycling journalist Daniel Friebe, author of *Mountain High*. ‘Beille is just very long,’ he said. ‘You’ll suffer horribly. But at least it’s shaded.’

Daniel was two-thirds right: Beille is long and, for the most part, shaded; but its effect on me is beyond anything encapsulated in the adjective ‘horrible’. Never have I endured such uphill hardship – not even on Mont Ventoux or the Col du Galibier. Until now my whole day has been about getting to the foot of Beille in one piece – as if the final climb were a mere dotting of the i and crossing the t. But if this is the beginning of the end, it’s an end that still lies two hours and 1,785 vertical metres away.

One of those typically French pharmacy signs jeeringly informs that the temperature is still 34°C when I begin the ascent after some



Castles are a common sight along the route, but don’t offer much sympathy or support



Water stops are essential on the Ariègeoise when temperatures can nudge the mid-30s

of brakes. I watch as Mr Pink and the old-timer disappear into the distance.

Dead heat

There’s nowhere to hide from the midday sun and my tyres soften on an exposed road so hot it threatens to cook us all medium rare. Peaking at well into double digits, the aptly named Col du Tremblement’s tortuous 10 kilometres have me into the red from the get-go. Climbs are usually my forte. Not today. Thankfully there’s a water fountain in the pretty town of Montségur ahead of the scribble of switchbacks to the summit: a chance to rehydrate and peel off the redundant base layer clinging to my torso.

Beyond the castle-clad peak the road descends into a valley of true bucolic beauty: lush plains shielded by jagged cliffs and rolling fields of wheat worthy of the hands of a sword-and-sandalled Russell Crowe. My ears prick on hearing a couple of English voices on the small rise to another chateau at Roquefixade. After a

little breathless banter, the older of the two men diplomatically suggests I stick to my own pace (a touch slower than his). With 65km remaining, he has a point. And yet when I witness more participants loading their bikes onto a support van it’s with muted sympathy and not envy. I’m actually having a lot of fun.

The region has certainly taken to the Ariègeoise. Each passing settlement offers animated cheers from local supporters while every corner of every descent is manned by a volunteer urging even a slowcoach like me to take things easy. It’s not a bad idea because, on the next climb, I hit the wall. I need water and – after almost six hours pushing pedals – my first comfort stop.

At the next village a couple of overcooked Spaniards have taken off their shoes and socks and are lowering themselves into a trough of cool water into which the fountain flows. It’s so sweltering that I can’t resist two glasses of cold Coke offered by some animated locals from



serious charcuterie-themed refuelling. Ahead I spot a man wearing a red and yellow Catalan top. I dub my nearby pacemaker The Flame. When he starts to flicker (lack of oxygen or fuel, perhaps?) I begin to burn brighter. Reignited like a comedy birthday candle, he then sparks back to life before succumbing to the temptation of a man brandishing a hose. Extinguished by water, The Flame collapses over his bars before slumping on the side of the road. He's not the only one. The human debris littering Beille is extraordinary. Some riders – including a pair on a racing tandem – have even resorted to pushing their steeds uphill.

Meanwhile, demoralising waves of riders stream down the mountain at breakneck speed – sometimes encroaching upon my side of the road as if to goad. It takes a while for me to clock that these are those who have completed the flatter intermediate route, which also culminated with this climb where Marco Pantani (the day before that 1998 protest), Lance Armstrong (twice) and Alberto Contador all triumphed before the Belgian whippet Jelle Vanendert bucked the trend in 2011 by becoming the only stage winner not to go on and win the Tour. I ask a passing walker if we're near the top. She laughs: there's another 10km to go.

Summit meeting

A series of out-of-the-saddle surges gets the blood flowing to my nether regions, which before my philosophising were reduced some

'My nether regions were so numb I had to stop to verify my bibshorts were on the right way round'



A mere finish line doesn't do justice to the sense of achievement that Felix feels as he crosses beneath it



kind of squelching alien hacksack so numb that I actually had to stop to verify my bibshorts were on the right way round. That's what this climb has reduced me to. Still, at least I'm not lying beside the road in the recovery position like this chap. 'Ça va?' I ask – to which he simply lifts his hand and gives me the thumbs up. Enclosed and psychologically draining, Beille is a real brute. It's not until I break through the trees 3km from the top that I spot the only building before the summit – a lonely cattle shed.

Meadows filled with frolicking wild horses and a vast Pyrenean panorama are visual payback for those claustrophobic kilometres. The wind's blustery but its cooling effects far outweigh any resistance to forward momentum. Cow bells jingle, upping my morale with the finish in sight. I muster the strength to outsprint another late arrival and cross the line after eight hours and 40 minutes in the saddle (655th out of 768 finishers). A hearty tartiflette with all the trimmings awaits our gel-swamped stomachs before the real treat: the descent.

Although the official finish is at the top, most people opt to freewheel back down to Les Cabannes – increasing (without too much effort) the kilometre count to 179. It's a joy to experience the hell that was going up in reverse, and I clock my fastest speed of the day at 80kmph.

At Carcassonne airport the next day I hobble up to a rangy figure with a bike box whom I recognise from the journey out. 'Ariègeoise?' I ask. 'For my sins,' he replies, shaking his head. 'It's my third time and by far the toughest. I forgot to change my gear ratio. I rode those bloody climbs with a 54-36. But at least I'm not two metres tall... You must have suffered terribly. I'm surprised you didn't get off your bike and pack it all in.' I was tempted, believe me.

But in the end the closest I got to a sit-down protest was when – on leaving Tarascon that morning – I stopped at the exact point besides the Ariège river on the outskirts of town where the 1998 peloton made its duplicitous stand. Minor drug quibbles aside, perhaps Jalabert et al were simply angling for a bit more rest after suffering so terribly in the wake of Pantani's record ascent up Beille just 40 hours previously. Having just toiled in their tyre tracks, I could hardly blame them. ❁

Felix Lowe is a blogger for Eurosport and columnist for Cyclist but will never look a hacksack in the face again



How we got there

Follow in our wheeltracks, if you dare...

TRAVEL

Cyclist flew London Stansted to Carcassonne (from £40 return) before hiring a car for the 1.5hr (100km) drive to Tarascon-sur-Ariège, via Foix. International flights to Toulouse-Blagnac (2hr/120km) are also possible, followed by bus or train. Trains run from Paris, too.

ACCOMMODATION

There are numerous hotels, guesthouses, apartments and camping facilities in and around Tarascon-sur-Ariège (see uk.tarascon-videssos.com). Cyclist stayed at the rural Centre de Montagne at nearby Suc et Sentenac: a no-frills but charming school-cum-hostel

with 68 beds located near Auzat, the finish town of the 2015 L'Ariègeoise (€25 per night with breakfast, €35 with evening meal; shared bathroom facilities. Visit pepsuc.net).

BIKES

Most of the entrants in L'Ariègeoise are from continental Europe, so it shouldn't be a problem to book a bike on a flight from the UK. Alternatively, hire a steed through the English-run VéloMondo in nearby Léran: Cyclist rode a 61cm Cannondale Synapse Carbon with a Shimano 105 triple chainset (from €35 per day; discount and delivery negotiable for groups;

must bring pedals. See velomondo.com).

THANKS

Thanks to indefatigable event coordinator Yannick Navarro for sorting all the logistics, making us feel at home and pointing out the exact spot where Marco Pantani went on strike. Thanks also to Craig Heritage of VéloMondo for the bike loan and local insider knowledge (his sick 17-year-old son still finished more than 300 places higher than Cyclist). Finally, a grand merci to Valérie at the Centre de Montagne at Suc and the chef at the La Petite Auberge de Niaux restaurant for the calorie-restoring cassoulet.