



**Not much goes on in France's massive midriff, the Massif Central, but it's a paradise for cyclists: rolling countryside, quiet roads, the odd cow, and not much else. David Bradford relives a short biking break in Corrèze with and without his cycling shoes**

Words Dave Bradford Photos Dave Bradford & Corrèze Cycling

**G**oing abroad on a cycling holiday might seem a daunting prospect if you've never done it before. I remember well — for all the wrong reasons — my first trip to France, back in 2004; it was a disaster of disorganisation and unpreparedness, played out in the hottest summer the Continent had experienced for decades. Suffice to say, my brother ended up wearing boxer shorts on his head to fend off the sun and one of our pals cried for his mummy when we got lost in a remote area best known for its forest fires. We've grown inestimably more sensible since then [yeah, right — Ed], and our cycling

pilgrimages have become far better-planned affairs. In fact, our most recent voyage was hugely enjoyable and blunder-free... almost. Rather than flying to Nice, hiring clapped-out bikes and tethering heavy camping gear to the frames — which was our harebrained scheme in 2004 — we decided to minimise the logistical burden. In doing so, we opted to let a specialist cycling tour operator take the strain. We found the perfect venture: Corrèze Cycling, which was set up by British couple James and Sam Parry in 2010. It is based in the rural hamlet of Chateaurut, in the department of Corrèze, in the Limousin region. It's



roughly in the middle of France, within the Massif Central — an area known for lots of cows, lots of space and not many people or cars. Ideal for cycling, then.

James and Sam fell in love with the area while on holiday; both had become disillusioned with their hectic lives in southern England — too much work, too little play — and yearned for a new beginning and a change of pace. They found a suitable property — farmhouse and adjoining barn with several acres of land, including a lake — and made the bold move, relocating with their two young sons in 2009. James was already a keen cyclist, so learning the local roads was a labour of love; he would be the tour guide for visiting cyclists, while Sam would take care of hospitality duties.

For me and my cycling mates, the attractions were multiple: everything we could possibly need would be provided — a comfy place to stay,



Base camp never looked so good



Workshop allows for safe stowage

Left: James and Sam Parry

home-cooked food, a workshop to store our bikes, a guide (James) to show us around, and even a pick-up service (James and van) for getting to and from the airport. We had also noticed with glee that a four-course evening meal with 'unlimited wine' was included in the price.

### And they're off...

Our group comprises me, my brother Matt and our friends Alan and Simon. We are basically fair-weather cyclists who treat these jaunts abroad as a bit of summertime fun and a recovery break from running (we're all club runners); we enjoy challenging each other on our bikes but don't kid ourselves that we're fast enough to race anyone else. We're fairly typical customers for Corrèze Cycling; you don't have to be seasoned racers or super-fit sportive-doers to have a good time here. James tailors routes and distances to suit fitness levels, and

### James Parry

Corrèze Cycling (guide)

"The final day, with its Tour de France finish at Super-Besse, was one of the most memorable of the season. David and Matt had forgotten to pack their cycling shoes in the bus before setting off but I persuaded them to attempt the first col wearing their casual loafers. It didn't seem to make much difference to these heroes, and we ended up doing the whole route! It was a truly great day out: beautiful scenery, challenging cycling, fantastic weather and good company — plus a great lunch and a few beers at the day's end."

the emphasis is on enjoyment rather than performance.

We land in France at about lunchtime, and by the time James has driven us from the airport (about an hour's journey) and we've unpacked the bikes, there's just time to squeeze in a 20-mile 'acclimatisation' ride before supper. It is a chance to familiarise ourselves with the terrain and freshen up our legs for a full day's cycling tomorrow. There's an important (albeit obvious) rule to remember in France: ride on the right-hand side of the road and look left first when emerging from junctions. Once you get used to that — which honestly doesn't take long — you're free to wonder at the delights of traffic-free roads and the bucolic glories of central France. The scarcity of traffic dramatically increases the fun; on this first outing in Corrèze, we ride for 90 minutes and are passed by no more than half-a-dozen cars. **12**



Another striking difference compared to cycling at home is the noise — or rather the lack of it. Corrèze offers a phenomenon that simply doesn't exist where we live in South-East England: silence. Apart from the distant bark of a dog or faint jangle of a cowbell, nothing, literally nothing, registers on your eardrums. It's eerie at first (pun intended) but mysteriously soothing thereafter, like a soundtrack composed by friendly ghosts. The calming effect is never more noticeable than while lolling around the grounds of Corrèze Cycling — a huge garden complete with swimming pool, sunbeds, hammocks and a fishing lake. The temptation to rest for a day with a good book is immense; it's almost a shame the cycling is irresistible.

On our first full day in the saddle, James guides us on a spectacular 60-mile tour of the local area. The scenery is a lush green mixture of woodland, meadows and valleys, with plenty of distractions from the pain of exertion. Our biggest climb of the day takes us up to an altitude of about 700m, which is *pas de problème* by French standards but *très grande* compared to the hills we're used to training on in southern England. Before we departed, a friend who'd cycled in this part of France warned me: "It's really tough, and deceptively so — there are no massive climbs but it's constantly up and down." He's not wrong.

### Tower ridge

The sightseeing highlight of the first day is the Tours de Merles (Towers of Merle), an impressive fortress dating back to the 12th century. Unfortunately, the best spot for viewing it is halfway up the six-kilometre climb which lies between us and lunch. Call me a philistine, but there's no way I'm stopping. Meanwhile, Simon, the history-hound



Tours de Merles: almost worth stopping for



Argentat: too good to leave in a hurry...

### Our trip

Length of stay	Four nights
Days cycling	3.5
Total distance cycled	165 miles
Highest climb	1,426m [Col de la Croix de Saint Robert]



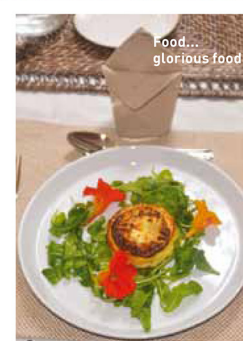
...so beer pressure wins the day



Alan's in a bit of a rut



Many rivers to cross



Food... glorious food

of our group (polite way of saying 'oldest'), is having no such qualms. He is soon off the bike and taking photos, snapping up an unscheduled rest and a memory card full of images to bore his family with when he gets home — doubly cunning!

The pace is never frantic, but we're feeling satisfyingly fatigued by the time we reach the 50-mile point. Right on cue, a row of riverside cafes comes into view as we cross the Dordogne river at the delightful little town of Argentat. An exchange of glances confirms the consensus: it's time for afternoon refreshment. The only problem with resting is having to get

### Simon 'RidgePanther' Thomas

"My happiest moment was discovering Matt and Dave had forgotten their cycling shoes and would have to tackle Super-Besse in flimsy deck shoes. At last a chance for me to attack! Alas, it was not to be. I'll have to hide their pedals too next time."



Just grinning and spinning in the rain

moving again afterwards, especially when you know that most of the next 10 miles is uphill. After savouring a cold beer, we bid a languid farewell to our picturesque oasis and remount for the final push for home.

The last climb of the day is also the most gruelling, and Alan is the first to crack. Having finally reached the top, every drop of energy spent, he tragi-comically drops his bike at the roadside and collapses into the ditch — cycling's equivalent of waving a very large white flag. We lob him an energy gel and after a few minutes coax him out of the gully and back on to his bike. Thankfully, the final few miles are mostly downhill, and we make it back to base feeling tired but exhilarated. Sam welcomes us home with coffee and freshly baked cake — and news that dinner is in the oven. You can't ask for more than that!

Our evening meal surpasses all expectations. We are treated to a lovingly prepared four-course banquet; everything is cooked on-site by Sam and 'food miles' are kept to a minimum, as produce is sourced either from the vegetable patch in the garden or the local market. Sam is an accomplished chef who's passionate about food — and we reap the benefits. Every course is delicious, as is the wine — which keeps flowing until we remember that there's another day's cycling tomorrow. After the meal, we relax for a while in the spacious guests' lounge, but it isn't long before the day's exertions catch up with us and we retire to bed.

The next day, we discover why this region is described as "the Lake District of France": it rains, drizzles, then rains some more. After an extended breakfast, we give up waiting for the sky to brighten and head out regardless. I'm a wimp when it comes to wet-weather cycling; I just don't enjoy it, but I have to admit that it's more tolerable here than at home, with fewer cars and trucks kicking up spray in your face, and fewer potholes to dodge. Conditions get worse the longer we ride, though, and before long it's pelted down. The experience isn't entirely unpleasant, but I'm glad to get back to dry off and warm up. Simon is less bothered by the rain; he stays out and does a further 20 miles — still grinning when he gets back.

### In the tyre-tracks of legends

The next day we awake to the sight we most feared: raindrops streaking down the windowpanes. This is our final full day of cycling, and James has promised to drive us into Auvergne, the region that borders Corrèze to the east, to ride some of the roads used in stage eight of the 2011 Tour de France. We pack our bikes into the van and make the hour's drive to our starting point, in the ski resort of Mont-Dore.

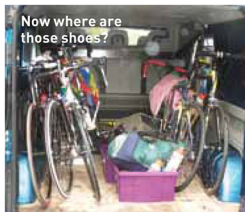
On arrival, we unpack the van and make an alarming discovery: **12**



*pas de chaussures!* We've forgotten to pack the box containing two pairs of cleated shoes, Matt's and mine. What now? A frantic hunt around Mont-Dore for new shoes (or flat pedals, at least) proves fruitless, and the nearest bike shop is more than 30km away. There's no way Matt and I are giving up a day's top-notch cycling as a result of our own feeble-mindedness. We'll just have to make do and use what we're wearing: on Matt's feet, a pair of retro Asics sneakers; on mine, even-less-appropriate tan-coloured deck shoes made from fake leather. We'd better just hope cycling's fashion gendarmes don't catch up with us; they'd throw away the key.

The ride starts with the 6.3-kilometre, category-two ascent up the Col de la Croix de Saint Robert, which tops out at 1,426m. I attack it

with masochistic intensity, hell-bent on punishing myself for being a forgetful twerp. The names of Tour heroes — Sastre, Schleck, Gilbert — are still emblazoned on the road ahead, providing a much-needed distraction as my effort levels rise. To my surprise, my floppy footwear isn't causing a major problem and I'm able to pedal as hard as my lungs will allow. By the time I reach the summit, I'm making the kind of noise not usually heard outside Wimbledon's



Now where are those shoes?

## Alan Velecky (aka Al Grande)

"My best bit was the day it tipped down with rain. Having blown up and ended up lying in a ditch the previous day, I probably shouldn't have gone out at all. But after bike-taffing all morning, we finally took the plunge (literally and metaphorically). Drizzle turned to light rain, light rain to a deluge. But the more it rained, the better I felt: a truly miraculous recovery, which I attribute to the magical properties of Sam's cake!"



Wooded hills make for pastoral perfection



Look down and you'll see the stars



The fashion police don't venture up this high



Babbling brook à la Française

Centre Court on women's final day. Self-chastisement complete!

The twisty descent off the other side of the col provides a fantastic test of pluck and bike-handling: the road surface is velvet-smooth all the way but the strong wind, gusting us off-line, is unsettling in more ways than one. Alan, the best descender of our group, catches a group of touring motorcyclists, who sportingly wave him past. We regroup at the bottom, and say a quick 'bonjour' to a herd of

bell-clanging cows, before heading on to the charming small town of Besse-et-Saint-Anastaise for a scrumptious omelette lunch (€6 each). Once refuelled to our satisfaction, we make the short but brutal ascent up to the imposing ski station of Super-Besse (1,275m), which was the finish point of stage eight of Tour de France — won by Rui Costa.

### Taking the cake

There is yet more climbing to be done.

We drop down slightly out of Super-Besse, but then it's another drag up to the Col de la Geneste (1,372m), our second-highest summit of the day. Having covered a good 30 miles by now, the group has split, and everyone is beginning to tire, some worse than others. I am expecting the next 15 miles to be a simple saunter back down to Mont-Dore — oh, how misguided I am! The road is relentless, constantly up and down — no major climbs but tough little rises, each more draining than the last. It's like an unscheduled interval session on tired legs: brutal. When, for the first time, my deck-shod foot slips off the pedal, I kick my speedo sensor and have to stop and reposition it. Alan, who'd slipped back by a few bike-lengths, takes his chance, puts his head down and is gone. I shout after him but it's futile; his opportunistic move is without mercy — we have our very own tour scandal: speedo-gate!

Finally, I reach the twisty-forested descent to Mont-Dore, but it's starting to rain and the road surface is slick and slimy. Things get worse a few kilometres further on, where the road is being resurfaced and is covered in a layer of loose chippings which scrunch disconcertingly beneath our tyres. Matt catches up with me and goes past, flashing me an ironic grin; my descending nerve is weak at the best of times, and now it's disintegrating completely. I keep the brake levers squeezed and potter along the final few miles at a woeful pace; my sole aim is to complete this incredible day without crashing — we've had quite enough unexpected happenings for one day. The last thing I need is torn shorts and road rash to complete my shabby look.

We make it back to the van and rejoice at the fact that, although we left home without two pairs of shoes, the more important accoutrement was not forgotten: our daily home-baked cake, and this one is extra special: a huge apple and hazelnut *pièce de résistance* ("made with apples from our neighbour's tree," Sam tells me later). We're in carb-replacement nirvana as we wolf down the delicious treat. As we lie down exhausted on the grassy bank next to the car park, scoffing cake and washing it down with whatever's left in our drink bottles, we reflect on an extraordinary day. OK, so in an ideal world I wouldn't choose to ride 45 mountainous miles in footwear designed for loafing around on a yacht but, in surroundings as glorious as these, it takes more than sub-par equipment to spoil a day's cycling.

What's the key to a great French cycling tour? It's not about the bike, as Mr Armstrong so wisely opined, and I'm happy to confirm it's not about the shoes either. **End**

Getting ready to do battle once more



Energy drinks be damned!

## Holiday info

### How to get there

The closest airport to Corrèze Cycling is Brive (Aéroport Brive Vallée de la Dordogne), which is an hour's drive from CC HQ in Chateaufort. Bear in mind that you'll probably have to fly from London City Airport, which is slightly awkward to get to but which, on the plus side, is relatively free from the hustle and bustle of the Med-headed tourist rabble, in that it operates mainly business flights. We hired a large taxi to transport us and our bikes to London City (60 miles), which cost £80 each (return). We flew with CityJet for £150 each (return) — with no extra fee for bikes (up to 20kg). James offers an airport pick-up/drop-off service for an additional (but very reasonable) fee of £25 per head (return), and his van is big enough for a party of four with bikes.

### What does it cost?

Seven nights: From £529 Five nights: From £378

### What's included?

Prices include accommodation (based on two sharing), breakfast, afternoon tea, four-course evening meal with unlimited wine, use of bike workshop and laundry facilities, guided days out (as required), vehicle back-up.

### Website

[www.correzecycling.com](http://www.correzecycling.com)