

A four-day tour (and make-believe race!) in the mountainous Languedoc region of south-west France

Distance: 240 miles
Big hills: Lots
Challenge: ★★★★★
Picnic stops: Dozens



Beer and limping in Languedoc

David Bradford heads to France with five pals and a determination to prove that you don't need drop bars, a race licence or even common sense to enjoy a Grand Tour of the imaginary kind

Words David Bradford Photos Neil Gower (neilgower.com), Alan Velecky, Simon Thomas

There is too much snootiness in cycling. We're constantly under pressure to conform to others' snobbish fetters: hipsters and purists tell us we don't need gears and that steel is the only 'authentic' material, techno-fetishists insist we need electronic shifters and disc brakes, cyclo-fashionistas smirk at us for contravening their petty rules on sock length and jersey branding, and performance-obsessives scorn us for not recording every pedal turn on at least three data-logging devices. When did these zealots forget that cycling at its best is no more complicated than getting away from it all and having a laugh — ideally with a group of mates, preferably somewhere scenic and sunny?

Part of the problem is that we're all spoiled by modern technology; it's far better than we are. What I mean is, the bikes and kit available today — even at the affordable end of the market — are

plenty good enough to meet our demands on them even when we're trying our hardest. Our limiting factor is us, our skill and endurance, not our equipment. The cycling snobs know this, yet they strive for material superiority (perhaps they were spoiled as kids, who knows), so they invent arbitrary rules in a vain attempt to uphold the exclusivity of their clique. I decided, at around this time last year, that it was time to defy them: I would ride in the terrain of serious cyclists, in the sublime Pyrenees, but I would do so in a manner that would reflect freedom, not fussiness.

My first act of rebellion was a big one: I went against a cardinal rule of road biking — 'road bikes must have drop bars' — and bought a straight-bar bike. It had a lightweight, stiff, carbon frame and skinny wheels — all the advantages of a normal road bike — but without the merest hint of a curve to the bars. I've always found drop bars awkward and unnecessary; I don't like not being able to

Above right: A river runs to it: the morning's toil looms large

Top: Six pals messing about in the French mountains

Below right: The strict code of the cycle tourist being observed/embraced beside the river Aude in Quillan

get full purchase on the brakes while my hands are in a relaxed position (on the hoods or tops), and I don't race, so I've no need to get into a more aerodynamic position — riding 'on the drops' seems pointlessly back-breaking to me. But hey, I'm not making rules here; if you like drop bars, fine. I don't, so I went without.

Next up was the itinerary. My mates and I wanted to do our own thing, to take each day as it came, riding as far and as fast as the mood took us. So signing up to a guided tour or organised event wasn't for us. Instead, we booked flights to Toulouse, plus a couple of vans to transport us with our bikes once we arrived, and I phoned a former boss to ask whether his holiday home in Quillan, in the foothills of the Pyrenees, would be available for a few days in late September (this part was less an act of rebellion, more a jammy privilege, I admit). Within minutes it was all sorted: we were off on holiday, on our own terms.

Sometimes when cyclists accuse

others of 'taking it too seriously' or having 'all the gear, no idea', they're demonstrating a weird kind of inverse snobbery. Though they appear to be railing against pretentiousness, in reality they are having a dig: 'you're not good enough for that (bike, kit, whatever); that's for the likes of me, not you — get back in your place'. The fact is, most of us play a game of make-believe when we ride. We imagine ourselves as Tour de France heroes, duking it out with valiant bravery in pursuit of hard-earned glory. We know it's ridiculous — we're aware that hundreds of watts per pedal stroke separate us from pro standard — but we don't care. What matters is that we challenge ourselves and enjoy the faux-competitive environment.

If you prefer playing this game in full costume — a Team Sky kit, for example — good luck to you. I might prefer not to use my body as free advertising space for Rupert Murdoch, but I've absolutely no right to tell you that you've got 'all the



With the Col de Pailhères negotiated, the imaginary Grand Tour hits the pause button

'Pro schmo! Straight bars suffice just fine, thank you very much'



240 miles



STOP! THIS WAY...

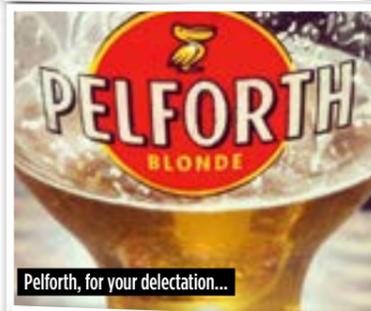
GETTING THERE
We flew from Gatwick to Toulouse with Easyjet, which cost £121 each return (including bike surcharge), and hired two Renault Kangoo vans (£252 per van including fuel) at the airport to transport us and our bikes to Quillan (a journey of about an hour).

ACCOMMODATION
We were lucky enough to have access to a friend's holiday home in Quillan at super-cheap mates' rates (thanks Andy and Jenni), but there are plenty of alternatives in the town and surrounding region; Google "accommodation in Languedoc" and take your pick.

EATING
Breakfasts were taken care of with delicious fresh croissants, pastries and bread from the fantastic Au Coin Des Gourmets patisserie, a stone's throw from our lodgings. There is a handful of restaurants in Quillan selling unfussy yet hearty food at prices broadly on a par with British pubs. Our favourites were Le Terminus (fairly basic but decent plats de jour); Bar le Palace (a bar with great riverside seating and a good selection of light meals); Pizzeria des Platanes (tourists' favourite for pasta/pizza); and La Galerie (pricier but excellent food).



Mountain memorabilia



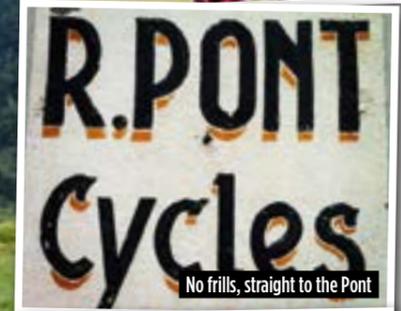
Pelforth, for your delectation...



The climbs just kept a comin'



No cover-up of bias in Quillan's favour...



No frills, straight to the Pont



Postcard from the Pyrenees

gear, no idea' — because I'm playing the same fanciful game with just as scant an 'idea' of what being a pro is really like. Just for the record, then, I bought most of my cycling kit for this trip from a running store's own-brand range: £10 per jersey and £15 for shorts (I'm still using them now, and have yet to notice any diminishment in my comfort or performance). To paraphrase another make-believe hero of the Tour, it's not about the stuff.

Yet my cheap kit and hairy legs weren't about to stop me from pretending I was a god of endurance with supernatural climbing ability. In fact, we all slipped seamlessly into the collective fantasy: this was not a casually-arranged holiday for a bunch of moderately fit pleasure cyclists, oh no, this was a prestigious stage race for mighty athletes, the inaugural Tour de Quillan. In our puerile minds, it would be a battle involving group tactics, decisive climbs, maverick breaks and daring descents... while during breaks from the deceit, it would involve cafe-hunting tactics, baguette-au-fromage breaks, photo stops, plenty of easy-riding chatter, and boozy post-race suppers.

Day one

On day one of our, um, race, I got a bit carried away with the role-play. We headed east from Quillan into the mountains and over the 1,432m Col de Portel, and my faux-pro aggression on the climb turned out to be seriously ill-advised. OK, I made it to the top first,

but the rest of the 60-mile ride was a deathly slog as I was reduced to a panting wreck, sheltering behind Neil, a scrawny 51-year-old who climbs like a mythical goat. It wasn't exactly humiliating, but the day could've been more enjoyable if I'd paced myself less dementedly early on. Would I do it differently next time? Nah, probably not.

Day two

The next day, we opened the wooden shutters of our town house lodgings to reveal grey skies and sheeting rain. In an instant my mountain-attacking bravado vanished and in its place appeared a steely determination to do anything but go cycling. This is another advantage of dismissing cycling-snob's rules: you don't have to accept the bonkers notion that biking in the rain is gallant and character-building. It's not. It's cold and uncomfortable. The hardier fools (see foolhardy) of the group headed out and proved my point: Alan fell off on a wet railway line, smashing down hard on several of his bony protrusions. His elbow swelled up like a giant testicle, while his hip turned a lurid mauve and he ended up looking like something conjured up in a Francis Bacon nightmare.

Day three

Day three provided better weather, and we managed to heave Alan on to his saddle so that the peloton start-list was complete for a magnificent 74-mile ride.

“When I reached the top, a gaggle of French tourists tore themselves from the vista to giggle at my demise”

Above: The enchanting vista from the Porte de Pailhères: Pyrenean panoramas are among the world's most beautiful

We completed a large, mountainous loop to the south-east of Quillan, taking in the 1,506m Col de Jau and the 991m Col de Roque Jalere. Shortly after the latter summit, we descended into the tiny hamlet of Campoussy for no other reason than that the most juvenile among us found the name funny (something to do with its sounding like a holiday resort for emasculated cyclists) and wanted a photo of the signpost. As though to confirm the connotations, a billy goat — very gruff as it happened — stopped us in our tracks and glared at us for a terrifying couple of minutes before we mustered the pluck to pass.

The penultimate day of the trip was thankfully another dry one, and we completed a brutal 70-mile loop to the south-west of Quillan which incorporated 4,270m of climbing. A large chunk of that uphill was accounted for by the 2,001m Port de Pailhères, a famous Tour de France climb where last year the young Colombian Nairo Quintana put in a fierce attack and reached the summit nearly half a minute ahead of his closest chaser — a lead that only lasted until the final climb, where Chris Froome opened a family-sized can of whup-ass and tore ahead to

take the race by the scruff of its proverbial neck. Conditions on the Port were evidently far tougher for us than they were for Quintana, as my average speed of 8.1mph doesn't cut much mustard against his astounding 12.3mph. But never mind; there's no place for GPS-measured speeds when you're pretending to be a big gun of bike racing; suffice to say, slogging my way to the summit, hell-bent on getting there before my mates, was thoroughly excruciating and beautifully pointless.

We looped back towards home before the final climb of last year's stage eight — I'd learnt from Quintana to avoid giving my rivals that opportunity. Instead, having descended the Port de Pailhères into an icy cold headwind and taken a quick warm-up break at the bottom, we turned right and made the short yet savage ascent up the zig-zagging, 1,673m Col du Pradel. By this point, my likeness to Nairo Quintana had improved to the extent that I was sorely regretting my crazed exertions on the previous climb as my legs began to beg for mercy (and cereal bars) while my rivals laughed and overtook. When I finally reached the top, a gaggle of French tourists tore themselves from the vista to giggle at my demise,



Bird's-eye rue: the chaps pose for posterity



Campoussy: population increase to two

muttering something to do with roast beef and hairy jambes pas comme Le Gentleman. Even the cows looked up from their grazing to clang their bells in what seemed a mildly mocking tone.

From here, it was downhill virtually all the way back to Quillan, which should have meant a relaxed effort and chance to recover — except that Simon senilely forgot his senescence, got his head down and churned out a relentless pace at the front of the group. All I could do was tuck in at the back and do my best to hang on. Arriving back in Quillan, I had to accept my game was up: I'd thrown away the GC and my only consolation was the riverside bar and a grand, Pelican-adorned glass of Pelforth — which, admittedly, has a very powerful consolatory effect; never before had a verre de bière tasted so good.

Day four

On the final day it rained, again. Did we heed the cautionary tale of 'Alan and the Giant Elbow' and stay indoors? No, of course we didn't — it was the last day and our final chance to savour the life-affirming (albeit rainswept) mountain roads. Besides, if you can't repeat mistakes and disregard common sense on a imaginary Grand Tour with a peloton of pals, all old enough to know better, when can you? **End**