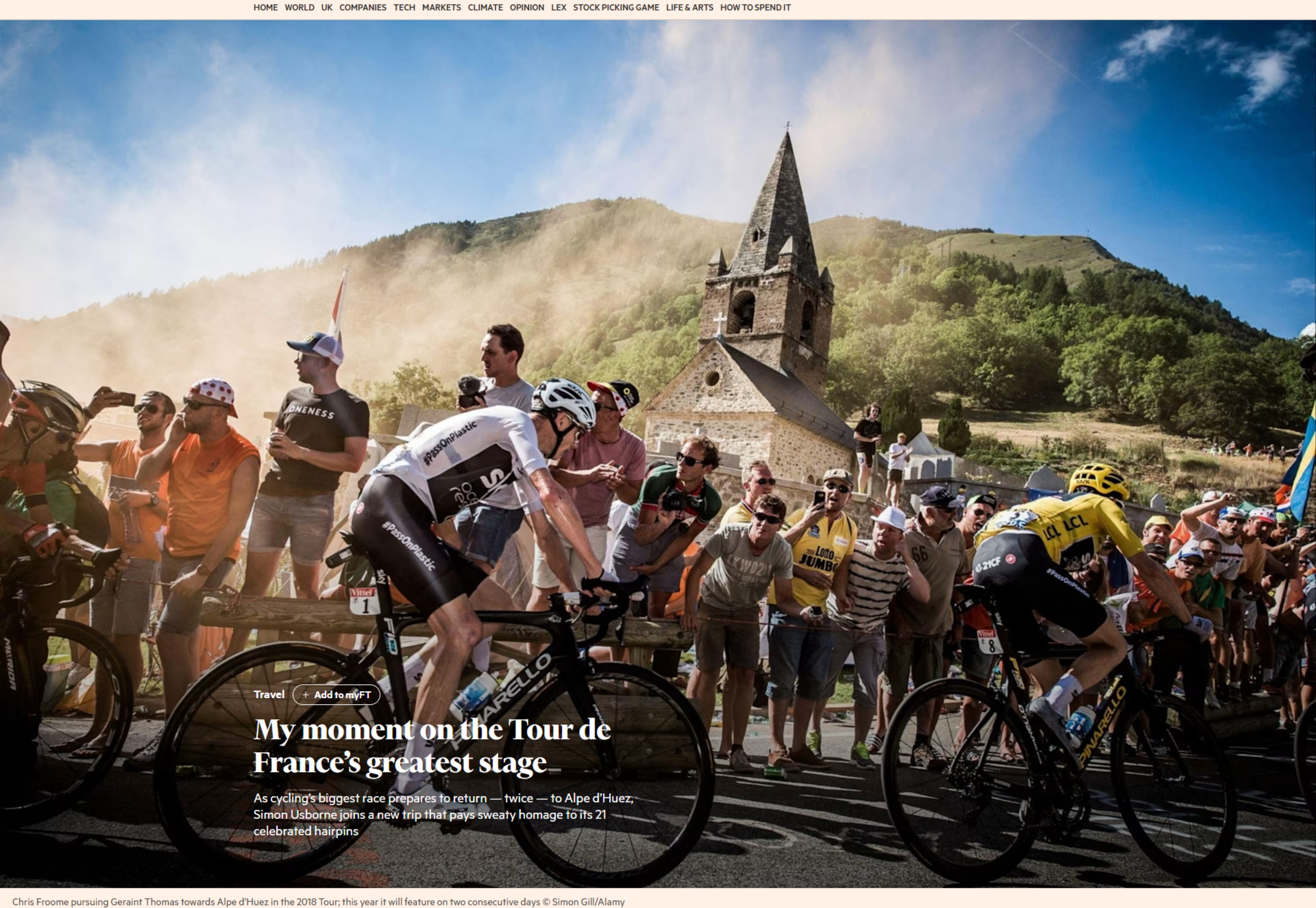

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My moment on the Tour de France's greatest stage

As cycling's biggest race prepares to return — twice — to Alpe d'Huez, Simon Usborne joins a new trip that pays sweaty homage to its 21 celebrated hairpins

Chris Froome pursuing Geraint Thomas towards Alpe d'Huez in the 2018 Tour; this year it will feature on two consecutive days © Simon Gill/Alamy

Simon Usborne

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In a small car park outside the French mountain town of Le Bourg-d'Oisans, I'm getting some last-minute advice for the cycling challenge I have set myself. Andrew Feather, a giant of the niche competitive hill-climbing circuit, has agreed to be my coach and paceman for an attempt to ride to the ski resort of Alpe d'Huez in under an hour.

In distance terms, that's nothing; we're talking 12km. But the D211 is no ordinary road. Between Bourg and the resort, it rises some 1,100 vertical metres in an unrelenting ladder of asphalt propped against the north side of the Romanche valley.

The climb to Alpe d'Huez is one of the greatest theatres in sport thanks to its 32 appearances on the route of the Tour de France since 1952. Legends have been born and dreams dashed on its 21 hairpin bends, where race leaders part crowds of more than 600,000 screaming spectators (according to the tourist office estimate, though no one really knows because it's free, unticketed and barely controlled chaos).

The lower section of the climb from Le Bourg-d'Oisans, rising to the church of Saint Ferréol, site of the infamous 'Dutch Corner' © Getty Images/iStockphoto

The ski resort of Alpe d'Huez, at the top of the 1,100-metre climb; in 1952, it was the Tour de France's first-ever summit finish © Benoit Pavan/Hans Lucas

I'm here in early June as part of Epic21, a new summer cycling camp based in the resort and designed to celebrate the Tour's pre-eminent climb. My host Xavier Schouller, a passionate French cyclist and the co-founder of the ski company Peak Retreats, accelerated his plans to launch the trip when the Tour de France announced the route of this year's race, which starts next weekend.

For the first time since 1979, it will include Alpe d'Huez on two consecutive days, the first up the notorious zigzag, before an ascent the following day over the Col de Sarenne, the resort's quieter back road. Crucially, the two Alpe d'Huez stages are right at the end of the three-week race, preceding only the traditionally ceremonial ride into Paris on the last day, meaning overall victory will almost certainly be decided here.

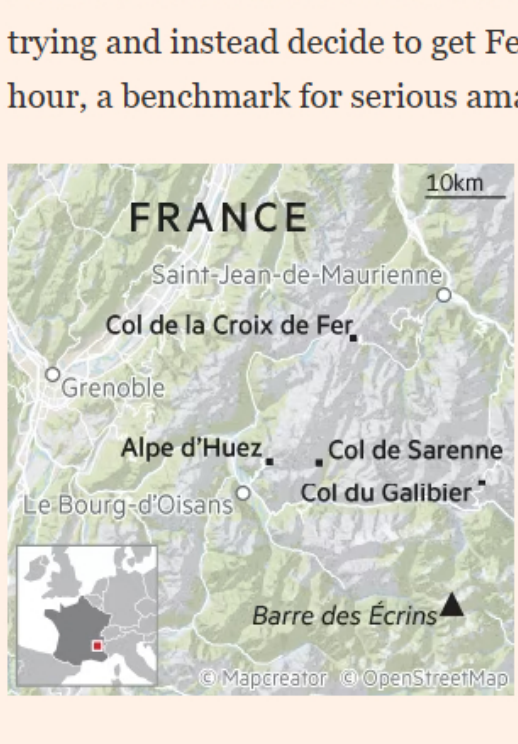
Feather, who is a corporate lawyer in Bristol when he's not floating up hills against the clock, has been recruited as the star cyclist for five days of riding. A multiple winner of Britain's annual hill climb championship, the 41-year-old gained wider recognition last October when he "beat" Tour de France champion Tadej Pogačar in his own charity climb up a mountain in Slovenia. (Pogačar gives more than 1,000 participants a six-minute head start, but didn't get close to Feather).

Andrew Feather, centre, briefing the Epic21 group as they prepare to ride up from Le Bourg-d'Oisans © Benoit Pavan/Hans Lucas

Andrew paces Simon Usborne on his hour attempt © Benoit Pavan/Hans Lucas

I'm one of a dozen or so other masochists joining Feather on the trip. Each day we decide which of the area's routes to tackle, heading out into the surrounding mountains in small groups with maps on our cycle computers. We then pant our way back up to Alpe d'Huez each afternoon to swap stories over drinks and carb-packed communal dinners.

The proposed climax is the chance to "Everest" the Alpe d'Huez road — that is, to repeat it more than eight times in a day, matching the altitude gain of Mount Everest from sea level. Yet with each daily ascent, I realise the folly of even trying and instead decide to get Feather to help me try to do it once in under an hour, a benchmark for serious amateurs.



"The first five hairpins are the steepest, you've got to find your rhythm," Feather warns me in the car park. I nod as I suck on an energy gel. "Ride yourself into the climb; you don't win at the start, but at the end if you're still strong." Taking up position behind him, I soon hit the long ramp to the first hairpin. Within seconds, sweat splatters on the handlebars of my lightweight road bike. Asking myself if "riding into a climb" should feel quite so hard, I call up ahead: "Perhaps . . . just . . . ease off a little bit?"

I try to enjoy the view, squinting through sweaty torrents. Great stratified cliffs rise above wild-flower meadows and forests. Snow still covers the peaks, melting in white-water cascades that rush down towards the emerald Romanche. Most of the time, however, my focus is Feather's bottom. About a third of the way up, and after two more requests for him to ease up, I settle into a rhythm that feels just about sustainable. He tells me the hour is still doable — just.

* * *

During a postwar winter tourism boom in Alpe d'Huez, enterprising hoteliers lobbied for the then unheralded road's inclusion in the Tour de France. Clotaire Collomb, whose father Joseph had opened a café in the village of Huez in 1902, had been eyeing up sites for a hotel. "He thought that it was very important for Alpe d'Huez to be known for something other than skiing," says Patricia Collomb, Clotaire's granddaughter and the current owner of the Grandes Rousses, which opened in 1956.

The hoteliers got their way, and on July 4 1952, the Tour's 88 riders, who had already covered 250km since starting in Lausanne that morning, turned off the valley road and up towards Alpe d'Huez. The climb to the resort, at 1,850 metres, isn't the highest in the Tour (that honour goes to the Cime de la Bonette, at 2,802 metres), nor the most frequently visited (that goes to the Col du Tourmalet in the Pyrenees, which has now appeared in 88 editions). But whereas those are mountain passes from which the riders rapidly descend, Alpe d'Huez was the Tour's first summit finish, setting the stage for competitors to push deep into the red in an uphill sprint for the line.

Italian cyclist Fausto Coppi on his way to winning the first Alpe d'Huez stage in 1952 © AFP via Getty Images

Motorbike TV crews — another innovation that year — captured the hairpin heroics of Italian star Fausto Coppi up close as he defeated French former Tour winner Jean Robic. Alpe d'Huez has gone on to be by far the most frequent summit finish, featured more than twice as often as its closest rival (the Puy de Dôme in the Massif Central).

When the Tour comes to town, fans swarm the roadsides, while helicopter cameras capture the spectacle. After a winning streak on the road by Dutch riders in the 1970s and 1980s, orange-clad fans clutching beers and firing flares began to descend on the seventh hairpin from the top, staging a raucous days-long festival at what has become known as Dutch Corner.

Marco Pantani, the Italian nicknamed "the pirate", was first through the throng twice in the 1990s, setting what remains a record time of just over 37 minutes (though he was kicked off the 1999 Tour of Italy after a blood test showed elevated levels of haematocrit). The two most recent winners have been British: Geraint Thomas won in the yellow jersey in 2018, then, after a daredevil descent of the Col du Galibier, Tour debutant Tom Pidcock stunned viewers with a solo climb to victory on Bastille Day in 2022.

Team Sky part the crowds at 'Dutch Corner' in 2013 © Alamy

Tour debutant Tom Pidcock crosses the finish line to win stage 12 in 2022, the last time Alpe d'Huez featured in the race © Alamy Live News

"I just remember riding into a wall of people, all screaming at me and making me go faster," Pidcock tells me via Zoom before my trip. The win announced the youngster as a tour contender who will always be associated with the climb. "That Christmas, every single person in my family bought me some sort of Alpe d'Huez memorabilia — calendars, key rings, bloody everything," he adds.

Feather, who weighs just 63kg when he's race fit (I'm an awkwardly assembled 88kg), has previous here too. In 2022, he clocked just under 38 minutes up to the entrance to the ski resort, putting him in the top 10 according to Strava, the ubiquitous fitness app that cyclists use to record and compare rides. (The Tour finishes a little higher, where there is space for team trucks and grandstands, so the times are not directly comparable.)

While obviously completely pointless, gunning for an hour seemed like a good way to honour a mountain steeped in legend and find my own place in the Strava rankings, which include almost 200,000 names. Feather credits the app with supercharging the Alpe's draw, giving amateurs an easy way to measure their efforts. "Add to that the prestige and the history, and it's just such a true test," he says.

Cyclists round one of the 21 hairpins; the easing of gradient at the corner provides momentary respite © Benoit PAVAN / Hans Lucas

Simon hangs on behind Andrew as they near the top of the climb © Benoit Pavan/Hans Lucas

Pidcock, who is preparing to return to the mountain for his fourth Tour de France, also advises me to save a big push for the top, while "recovering" as I round each hairpin, counting them for motivation as I ascend. I forget all this on the road, where by now I'm just focusing on turning the pedals. Several times I tap my shifter in search of an imaginary lower gear. Feather does his best to gee me up.

Lifting my head, I can see the ski resort up in the distance. The Grandes Rousses now stands as a testament to Collomb's coup, which is still paying dividends. "Without cycling we would have to close all summer," says Patricia, who first pedalled up the Alpe herself on an e-bike two years ago, aged 60. She says demand kicks off in early June when thousands of Dutch cyclists roll in for a charity ride, then peaks during other summer events such as the renowned Marmotte amateur sportive.

I'm staying in the middle of town at Le Cristal de L'Alpe, a bike-friendly apartment building. We wolf down dinners at L'Authentique, a restaurant that opens just for us with a brief from Schouller not to skimp on portions. We also make good use of Cycle Huez, the resort's only dedicated bike shop. Oliver Lamb, a British former cycle tour guide, opened the doors in 2011 and hasn't looked back. "I think it's the history more than anything that makes this place unique," he says in his workshop, where he maintains a fleet of rental bikes.

Flags flying in Alpe d'Huez depicting the yellow, green, white and polka-dot jerseys of the Tour de France leaders © Benoit Pavan/Hans Lucas

An hour — or so — after setting off, Andrew and Simon arrive in Alpe d'Huez © Benoit Pavan/Hans Lucas

A lot of the initial chat among the Epic21 group is a little geeky. We discuss personal bests and compare crank lengths (note: shorter pedal cranks are in vogue). But as days pass, all the talk turns to the joy of pedalling through such captivating landscapes. At one point I swap notes with another rider on the fauna we observe during a long slog up the nearby Col de la Croix de Fer: swallowtail butterflies, crag martens, marmots and a lone wild boar. I hear cuckoos on the stunning ascent to the Col de Sarenne, from where the road continues into the top of Alpe d'Huez. It lacks the prestige of the steeper, more famous climb but is a much calmer route.

We all find ways to test ourselves. One day I take on the breathtaking ascent of the Col de Galibier, shivering in almost sub-zero conditions at more than 2,600 metres before descending to a refuge for a hot bowl of soup.

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Back on the 21 hairpins, I'm trying to shelter from a headwind behind Feather as we approach the last bend. After the turn, a straight rises up past Lamb's shop. I sprint past his door and the virtual Strava finish line as we continue on up to a metal arch that marks the Tour de France finish. I can't speak as I unclip my shoes, slumping over my bars as I suck in the thin air. "That was a good effort!" says Feather, who doesn't appear to be sweating at all.

I look down to my computer to check my time for the Strava segment: 1h:02m:39s. Perhaps I'll try again one day.

Before heading off in search of lunch, I watch as a steady stream of cyclists rides under the arch, stopping next to a podium installed for tourists. Each of us pauses for breath before hobbling on to the steps for a photo. Weeks before the Tour returns to arguably its most famous stage, there are no crowds, TV cameras or microphones. But, in a sport that gives anyone the chance to ride the same asphalt as the pros and marvel at their speed, we can all pretend, for a moment, to be champions.

Details

Simon Usborne was a guest of the Isère region (alpes-isere.com) and Epic21 (epic21.co.uk), which is taking place in Alpe d'Huez again from June 5-10 2027. Prices start at £721 per person for five nights' accommodation in a private bedroom in a shared self-catered apartment, a return Dover/Calais car ferry crossing, three-course dinners, itineraries and an event cycling jersey, or from £741 with transfers to and from Lyon airport rather than the ferry. Simon Usborne's road bike was on loan from Factor (factorbikes.com).

Lycra optional: four slightly more laid-back cycling escapes

© Dean Hearne

Slow cycling in Crete Founded in 2015, The Slow Cyclist has grown to offer trips to 14 countries that are, as the name suggests, the antithesis of the Strava-bothering approach to riding. In Crete, the five-night itinerary uses electric mountain bikes to reach feasts with local families (pictured above), a traditional pottery workshop and meetings with truffle-hunters, beekeepers and musicians. The guided group trip costs from £3,145, with the next departures in October or May, or it can also be done as a private journey; theslowcyclist.com

Along Spain's Costa de la Luz Saddle Skedaddle's trips run the gamut from suffer-fests on Tour de France cols in the Alps to mountain bike adventures in Peru. There's also a range of gravel-biking itineraries on traffic-free cycleways, dirt roads and 4×4 tracks, including a new trip to Spain's Costa de la Luz. Over a week, it takes in Tarifa, Vejer de la Frontera and Cadiz, via white-sand beaches, fishing villages and sherry bodegas. The guided, small-group trip costs from £2,195 or there's a self-guided version from £1,465; skedaddle.com

Tuscany, from Pisa to Florence Inntravel's self-guided week-long trip gives you route notes and GPS directions to navigate between two great Tuscan cities, via Lucca and Vinci. Distances are modest (averaging 34km per day), luggage is transferred between hotels and, outside the cities, its mainly on quiet roads and cypress-lined lanes. From £1,896; inntravel.co.uk

New Zealand in style Founded in 1966, Toronto-based Butterfield & Robinson pioneered the luxury cycling holiday, supplementing the riding with five-star hotels, fine wines and top restaurants. It has lots of European routes, but also goes further afield — its New Zealand group trip, for example, travels from Christchurch to Queenstown, staying in lavish lodges booked exclusively for the group. Eight nights from $17,995; butterfield.com

Riding past Lake Pukaki on Butterfield's New Zealand trip

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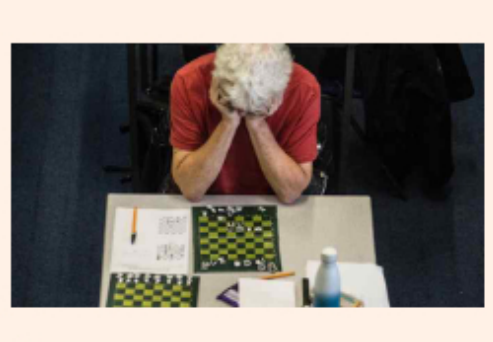

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Leopold Bloom 2 DAYS AGO
I can't wait for the Tour to start and see the pros tackle this climb - fitness to only marvel at!
Share Report

Ambu 2 DAYS AGO
Great essay. Thank you!
Share Report

Panhandler 3 DAYS AGO (Edited)
Enjoyable read. Set a goal, go for it, and enjoy the ride!

Incidentally, I accumulated a few pages' worth of KOMs on Strava but no longer have an account at all, and riding has been far more enjoyable since.
Share Report

Paysan2 3 DAYS AGO
Very enjoyable read.

Somewhere between this and the touring options mentioned at the end is the St Malo - Nice route, I think pioneered by people connected with Saddle-Skedaddle. We have reached the Cevennes in three weeks over three years back and forth. There is also the option of heading up Mont Ventoux as it is en route.

Of course, there is a network of cycle routes across Europe - or in France particularly, you can just head off along the D roads from any channel port.
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DecemSol 3 DAYS AGO
Great read!
Share Report

Neil at home 3 DAYS AGO
I really enjoyed this read, you get a sense of the challenge, of dedicated people striving at the limits of riding, all blended with wonderful scenary and race history.
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Tai Tam 3 DAYS AGO
Respect
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Solution oriented 3 DAYS AGO
Excellent work! I have done this three times under race conditions (in my earlier years). Around an hour, even with fresh legs, is very good going indeed. I don't recall the hairpins giving too much relief though.
The col de la croix de fer is a psychological assault, with several sections at steep gradients, which are then paid back with downhills, in which you lose precious hundreds of metres of elevation, only to re-grind your way back up again.
This year's etape du tour was one of the toughest in a very long time https://www.letapedutourdefrance.com/en/news/discover-the-route-of-letape-du-tour-de-france-2026/158 and having completed several in the past, I opted for the UK South Chase the Sun last weekend instead. At the end of that, I decided I'd rather 8 hours in the French Alps than 13+ hours on English roads! 😁
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Ian T 3 DAYS AGO
It's a toss-up between golfers and Strava-ites as to who's the most boring.....
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+ **An_FT_reader** 3 DAYS AGO

Golden Nuggets 3 DAYS AGO
I guess Maml Bros doing their midlife crisis thing in the mountains of Europe is preferable to polluting Everest. Still, I'd much rather have an article about the actual TDF than this dreary self -regarding pap.
Share Report

+ **An_FT_reader** 3 DAYS AGO

+ **Panhandler** 3 DAYS AGO

HKSpolicywonk 3 DAYS AGO
Have done this climb dozens of times on Zwift, when preparing for my annual crossing of the Alps on MTB.

Would absolutely love to go there and do it "IRL". What a great article, it really captures the joy of suffering, and I'm not being sarcastic.
Share Report

+ **Boringjimbob** 3 DAYS AGO (Edited)

Tomin no Mori 3 DAYS AGO
It must be TDF season, time for the annual article on a maml going up an iconic mountain stage. Well written and enjoyable read.
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Oblivious 3 DAYS AGO
Thank you. Really enjoyed this.
Share Report

Vladimir Putout Again 3 DAYS AGO
Impressive feat Simon! I managed it in 1:09 when I was 87kg - sadly many years and a good 8kg ago!
Share Report

+ **Saynowt** 3 DAYS AGO

Ready Eddy 3 DAYS AGO
I do fear the climb will loose its magic if it becomes a ticketed event. Please don't let FIFA know!
Share Report

+ **Tim DevonG** 3 DAYS AGO

Sacro_Bosco 3 DAYS AGO
I don't watch it anymore since they binned off the excellent ITV TdF package.
Share Report

+ **Tim DevonG** 3 DAYS AGO

+ **Golden Nuggets** 3 DAYS AGO

+ **An_FT_reader** 3 DAYS AGO

+ **Paysan2** 3 DAYS AGO

Badabing 3 DAYS AGO
Great article, albeit there are more enjoyable climbs in that region that aren't as busy. The resort is also quite ugly. Croix de fer is outstanding for instance. Great article about this point here https://www.cycling-challenge.com/100-cycling-climbs-better-than-alpe-dhuez/
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+ **The hun** 3 DAYS AGO

Saynowt 3 DAYS AGO
Brilliant start to Sunday morn.
Excellent read. Thank you.
Share Report

Plato's musings 4 DAYS AGO
Guys: don't forget the Dutch charity ride going on to this hill :
https://www.allemooieborsten.nl/event-details/alpe-dhuzes-2026

Forget the name (all nice breasts), its a real deal
Share Report

Theoretician 4 DAYS AGO
Enjoyable, although I can feel my calves cramping just from reading it.
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