

A loop around France (and other places!)

Riding the route of this year's Tour de France 24th June / 15th July 2022

Talk to any non-cyclist and chances are they will at least have heard of the Tour de France. This annual 3 week spectacle brings together the world's top road cyclists to battle it out for the honour of winning the yellow jersey and is by most measures the toughest and most watched sporting event on the planet. You also get the feeling that it may be sponsored by the French tourist office as it constantly passes through the most stunning scenery making it an almost artistic spectacle. This mixture of great beauty and immense challenge provides a compelling backdrop to the story of the race as it unfolds. As an amateur cyclist surely trying to ride the same route, to the same schedule would be impossible? The answer is that is isn't, you can and this is my story.

Pre-tour

Those that know me will tell you I absolutely love riding my bike. I'm not a particularly gifted cyclist but the simple pleasure of pedalling along helps me stay fit, supports my mental health and nourishes my soul. I love pottering along, looking at the world, appreciating the good I see and taking the occasional snap. I also love challenging myself, for example through the simple joy of trying to beat my time on the summer club 10's or by daring to dream I can achieve something bigger like riding Lands' End to John O'Groats as I did back in 2019. However what I lack in talent I make up for in terms of discipline and determination and so it was during the winter of 2020 that my mind drifted to the idea of riding the tour. As a roadie it just felt like the ultimate challenge and thus could be the ultimate cycling experience. So after a brief internet search and without much fuss I signed up to ride the 2021 tour with Le Loop. Le Loop run an organised and supported event that allows amateurs to complete the route of that year's Tour de France one week ahead of the professional race. The event exists to support a fantastic charity. The William Wates Memorial Trust (WWMT) has a mission to help the most disadvantaged young people keep away from a life of crime and violence to fulfil their potential. They do so by giving grants to charities that engage young people through the medium of sports, arts and education. Ride my bike and have the opportunity to give something back to young people not lucky enough to enjoy the advantages most of us take for granted gave me all the motivation I needed. Covid meant the 2021 event got cancelled and so I was now scheduled to ride in 2022. Come the end of November 2021 I started training in earnest. I had looked at the start date and outlined a plan to get myself prepared working backwards. The event would be all about endurance and managing fatigue and doing so based on multiple back to back days. This meant that on Jubilee weekend for example riding back to back 200k rides with a total of 10,000ft of climbing (no mean feat to achieve in Essex!). But also evenings on the turbo using Bkool where I was able to visit the 'virtual mountains' and rode many of the cols I would face in the summer. In reality there is simply no way to train for a 3 week event of this intensity so my focus was to arrive at the start in good enough shape to cope with the first 3-4 days and manage my fatigue so the act of riding the tour would build my fitness as I went along. I was disciplined and determined in training and did the rides, covered the miles and gained the elevation and flew to Copenhagen for the Grand Depart on Thursday 23rd June feeling prepared and excited but also nervous for what lay ahead!



Challenge accepted!



Packed and ready to roll!

Stage 1: Copenhagen prologue. 10 miles +175Ft

I met up with my fellow 'loopers' at noon for this gentlest of introductions to riding the tour. It felt a bit like the first day of school. Everyone united by a common purpose but harbouring their own hopes dreams and fears. Little did I know how much these people would come to mean to me by the end of this adventure. We spent an hour in small groups gently navigating the course, admiring the incredible cycling infrastructure and as a result the enormous diversity of people who ride their bikes as a practical mode of transport in a safe and efficient environment. This was definitely not a time trial for us and the gentle pace allowed us to take in the sights of the city from the royal palace to the little mermaid statue. At the finish it was coffee and cake and boarding coaches to head to our hotel in prep for the first real stage the following day



Enjoying the sights!



Ready to start my epic journey!

Stage 2: Roskilde / Nyborg. 115 miles +4016ft

Greeted with sunshine and fresh air the peloton were eager to get going on this 'flat' stage. As you will see 'flat' is a relative term when it comes to the Tour de France! After the daily briefing from the road captain we set off in small groups to the rolling countryside. You immediately got the sense that Denmark was fully embracing the arrival of the tour with numerous roadside tour decorations which gave the ride a really authentic feel. A couple of short cat 4 climbs woke up the legs but the day was nice and steady with sweeping views of the coastline and huge fields of poppies. A day to stretch the legs and fill the lungs. The pros would finish the stage by riding over the Great Belt Bridge but mercifully we were not permitted and thus spared the crosswinds they experienced. We got to admire it from our hotel until we crossed by coach the following day!



Ready for the off!



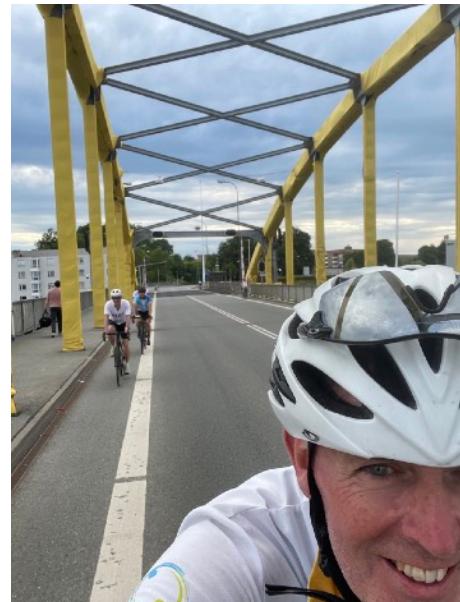
Joining in the Tour party fun!

Stage 3: Vogje / Sonderbord. 114 miles +4856ft

Another 'flat' day started with a delightful half mile climb out of Vogje from the off, tipping up to 7%. Thereafter it was rolling countryside again and more delightful views to take your mind off the efforts. Today was hotter and heading south most of the day meant a block headwind so we worked in groups to be more efficient. I spent time with a few riders over from the USA and chatting away with them also helped while away the time. As we approached the finish you could feel how the nature of the stage had been designed for the bunch sprint. Needless to say despite tired legs we all upped our pace for the final Km smash fest which we all instantly regretted as there was actually still about 8Km to ride to our hotel for the night! 3 stages in, feeling good!



A bad case of Tour fever!



2Km from the finish - alas 10Km from the finish 'fictif' !!

The day after was a travel/rest day. The Denmark 'Grand Depart' completed we now had a 10 hour coach ride down through Denmark, Germany, Holland, Belgium and finally in to France arriving at Dunquerke just in time to see the sunset over the beach that witnessed so many horrors and acts of heroism in 1940.



At the going down of the sun...

Stage 4: Dunkerque / Calais. 113 miles +6640ft

I woke feeling good and eager for the day ahead. After rolling along the seafront at the start we headed in-land to an area I knew little about and what a beautiful surprise. Small sleepy villages, swathes of cool secluded forest finally emerging into an area of wetlands with beautiful sweeping roads. Again the wind was against us so good team work helped us push along at a nice clip. We were also getting good at signalling and confidence was growing in following each other's wheels. After the lunch stop the nature changed with a few rolling hills and the first little switchbacks to enjoy as a foretaste of things to come. Talking of a foretaste of things to come today temperate hit 30c so the emphasis was on making sure to stay hydrated. Just before we turned for Calais and the final push I had my only mechanical of the tour (no, not one flat!) I encountered a small up-hill ramp and made a quick change down in gears. This caused the chain to slip over the cassette and onto the wheel hub. This in turn pulled the rear mech over and the result was it got jammed in a spoke. Instantly I lost momentum as the wheel locked and so I rapidly unclipped just in time to stop a comedy fall. Quick call to the Loop team and a mechanic was with me in 20 mins. Decided my bike needed base repair so furnished me with a spare bike so I could continue. The final section included a climb up Cap Blanc Nez (1/2 mile at 8%) but the reward was a fantastic view across the channel to the white cliffs of Dover. Quite a sight. Then the last 10 miles was a gentle downhill blast to the next hotel right next to the Eurotunnel terminal. The height of glamour!



A day of big sky and a close pass with home!

Stage 5: Lille / Aranberg. 101 miles +2448ft

This looked on paper looked to be an easier day and in my mind was always the moment where I hoped to evaluate my plan of reaching this point hoping not to feel too fatigued but also hopefully feeling the form beginning to arrive. In general that was the case but part of today was also about negotiating several secteurs of pave (the infamous cobblestones that feature in spring classics). The heat was dialling up and we enjoyed a good rolling start passing through agricultural countryside until at last we hit the first cobbles. The advice from the road captain was 'stay relaxed, crank up the pace and attack so you float over the crown'. Riiight! I followed the advice and the moment I hit the first cobbles everything started to vibrate. Even my eyeballs in their sockets! Maintaining momentum on that surface at the end of a long hot day was easier said than done but it was a really incredible experience which was even sweeter knowing I was still on the spare bike and not smashing my own to bits! In contrast we also encountered our first real stretch of 'tour-mac'. The pristine new road surface laid as part of the deal to have the tour roll through a town or district. Fantastic! That evening we



all swapped stories of heroism, compared the emerging bruises and blisters on our hands and marvelled at how some riders were still dutifully pointing out drain covers and other minor bumps in the road after such a bone shuddering experience! I was also chuffed to receive the 'Chapeau' award that evening. This is awarded to the rider who exhibited the best qualities on the day, be it helping others, riding well, generally being a good egg. It is awarded by the previous recipient and according to Ian, who made the award, he had seen me doing nothing but smile and encourage everyone around me. Mr morale!

Shake rattle and roll!

Stage 6: Binche / Longwy. 139 miles +9331ft

The longest stage of the tour. After a coach transfer to the start point in Belgium the truth is this was a bit of a dull stage to start. Initially on trunk roads over endless rolling hills we worked as a team to take turns putting our noses into the wind until eventually we reached the first feed stop on the edge of a reservoir. There is no doubt the tour organisers pick some spectacular locations for the battles in the race but you also get to see that linking these high points together requires them to transit the peloton along busy trunk roads which are not quite so inspiring. OK for the pros when closed, not so much fun when riding with normal traffic so we pushed through keeping safety in numbers. After the feed the nature changed as we started to enter the Ardennes. The only damp day of the tour, there were plenty of hills and mists which created a real atmosphere and teased sweeping views. Belgium is a fanatical cycling nation and we received plenty of encouraging cheers and waves as we went along and best of all the wind got behind us with one stretch of about 20 km where we were going full gas for what felt like no effort through the most beautiful landscape. The rain started to increase and then thunder and lightning followed meaning a dash for cover before continuing. The rain eased and the final run to the finish was punctuated by a final half mile berg which peaked at 16% to ensure the longest day really did finish with a sting!



Huddling up against the elements!



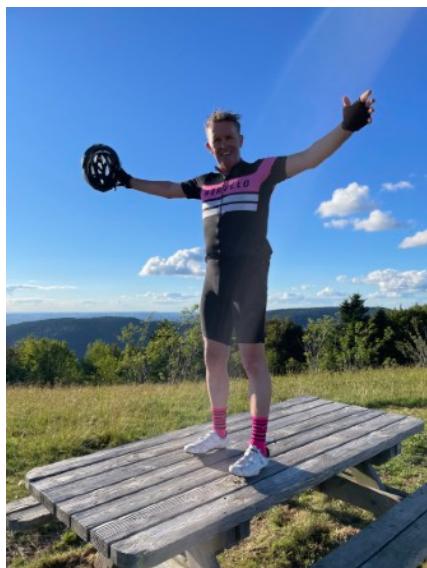
Teamwork makes the dream work!

Stage 7: Tomblaine / Super Planche des Belles Filles. 109 miles +8819ft

First mountain stage. Into the Vosges where I had never been before. I felt surprisingly fresh despite the previous day's efforts and the first half of this ride was another exercise in good team work and enjoying the changing nature of the scenery. Most of the ride was really just a warm up for the finale. After building through a couple of fairly steady cat 3 climbs we hit the main event. The climb to the Super Planche des Belles Filles. 7km at an average of 8.7% and I can tell you I felt every metre of it! The gradient is pretty steady and it winds through the trees until it reaches the ski station where there is a sudden ramp which is the usual finish point. Alas we got the 'super' version which means rolling along the road then kicking up on a gravel track to the very peak with a final 200m stretch that hits 24%. Gravel, gradient after 108 miles and a day of steady climbing was absolutely revolting but at the summit (unlike when the pro tour arrived a week later) I was completely alone except for one riding buddy and able to contemplate the most amazing view. Whatever direction I looked I could see for miles and miles and in the late evening light it was a very special moment. We just looked and hardly spoke. Simply no words needed.



Celebrating
the first
mountain
finish and
then
marvelling at
the beauty
and
quietness of
the moment.



Stage 8: Dole / Lausanne. 110 miles +7648ft

Another stage another country. Today we headed to Switzerland! A late finish and coach transfer the day before meant my prep for this stage was not ideal. There is not just the riding on the tour but the personal and bike admin needed, getting enough food and most importantly getting enough sleep to recover and by this point the tiredness was really beginning to bite. As a result I started tired and under fuelled and given this was

steady climbing throughout the ride with a couple of cat 4 and a cat 3 climb to contend with, meant I struggled a bit. The heat was again also playing a big part in sapping everyone's strength. However the effort was worth it for the finale. After completing the Col de Rousses (6.7km at 5%) and the subsequent rolling plateau you are greeted by the majestic sight of the Alps dominating the horizon with Mont Blanc standing out like a pinnacle. There then followed an amazing sweeping descent down into Lausanne where gradually the mountains began to approach and rear up and the crystal clear blue of Lac Leman came into view. As we rolled to the hotel you could do nothing but smile at such a glorious sight.



The majesty of The Alps reveals itself!



The Alpine vibe!

Stage 9: Aigle / Portes de Soleil. 75 miles 5948ft

The stage rolled out from the home of the UCI and in the early morning we followed the edge of Lac Leman. The views of mountains and water simply incredible. Having passed through Montreux we then switched up the hillside and followed an amazing balcony road to gain height before heading north along a vertiginous road on the edge of a gorge before emerging into typical alpine pastures where chocolate box vistas of wooden chalets and cows and their clinking bells in the fields were everywhere. A steady climb up to the Col de Moses (18.3km at 4.1% cat 2) was however very tough as the heat had risen significantly and no breeze meant things were stifling. I pushed on to the cat 1 col de la croix but by this point was really struggling. After a stop for food and water I tried to push on again but it was clear to me that my day was done. I was running on fumes and so took the broom wagon to the end of the stage. I was not the only one to take this option but I felt disappointed none the less. The next few days however would see me challenged in this way more than I had ever been before and how I worked through this adversity became one of my proudest achievements of the tour.

The following day was a rest day and it couldn't have come at a better moment. We were in a pretty ski chalet hotel in the resort of Morzine. Properly in the Alps now with the inspiring peaks all around. I managed to get a good rest, refuel, gently stretch through walking, get my personal and bike admin done (my own bike was repaired on this day and so I was able to test it out) and reflect on and enjoy the memories and achievements of the first week. I fell asleep with new resolve and ready to put my 'game face' on the next day.



Switzerland is stunning!



The terrain is getting serious!

Stage 10: Morzine / Megeve. 100 miles +7894ft

Heading north back to Lac Lehman the first leg was an absolute joy as most was downhill. Again we got the sweeping view of the lake from the other side with the backdrop being the Jura Mountains we had ridden through just a few days before. We were in the mountains so there was plenty of climbing but nothing outrageous (2 cat 4 a cat 3 and a cat 2). I felt refreshed and eager and the scenery was spectacular. Jagged peaks, sweeping valleys, sleepy alpine villages and cool refreshing rivers. The final act today was the climb to Megeve (indeed beyond to the Altiport) which at 19km long with an average of 4.1% hides the many sharper ramps contained. As I wound my way up this climb I felt my confidence grow, despite the stifling heat and on reaching the summit felt that I had started to gain that form I desperately hoped would arrive. At the top I drew a few breaths and enjoyed a still moment before doing as the finish arrow said and descending back 10km to the hotel (love those bonus miles!)



As you gain height the views just open up. Stunning!



Making progress on super smooth 'tour-mac'!

Stage 11: Albertville / Col Grandon. 65 miles +9390ft

Today was a monster day. The first HC climbs of the tour, Col de Telegraphe and Col du Galibier, ones I had never ridden and was excited to attempt. As expected it was an incredibly tough day to say the least as the heat and growing fatigue continued to exact a toll. The ride started with a run along the valley to a little warm up climb on the Lacets de Montvernier. A strip of tightly packed hairpins that seem to rise impossibly up a cliff face. It is only 2.5 miles long with an average of 7.2% but the speed at which you gain height and the views of other riders directly below you on the switchbacks makes it a memorable challenge. Come down from this then the run along the valley to the start of the Telegraphe (11.9km at 7.1%). Super-hot at the start, the climb winds through trees offering some respite from the sun but is continually challenging. As you round corners you catch glimpses of the valley extending out giving the impression the road is leading to heaven! The summit is marked by a big sign and a café where I grabbed a drink before the small descent to Valloire where the main event of the day begins. The Col du Galibier represented the highest point of the 2022 tour. 17.7km at 6.9% hides the fact that the first half is on relatively steady gradients around 5% but having climbed through the valley you hit the first switchback and the remainder is a relentless struggle to the lofty high point above. About 1km below the summit there is a tunnel but no such short cut for us. It's up and over. I reached the summit and honestly it was quite an emotional moment. The views are spectacular and give you great perspective on your significance compared to Mother Nature. There was a feed stop at the top. I ate something but within a couple of minutes was shivering uncontrollably. At >2500m I had climbed a lot and as a result the temperature had fallen a lot and after the previous hours exertions I was not in good shape. I wanted to descend but the team decided it would be unsafe for me to do so in my state so I accepted a lift to the finish. A grand day out none the less and one that is etched in my heart forever.



The roof of the tour and winding my way up the seemingly impossible Lacets de Montvernier!



Stage 12: Briancon / Alpe d'Huez. 75 miles +9685ft

You can't have too much of a good thing! Having finished in Briancon the day before we retraced our route firstly along the gradual grind of the Col du Lautaret to ascend Galibier and Telegraphe from the other direction. Many other cyclists on the route today but I found myself riding solo and felt quite alone at times. The views, changed by the morning light, were just as spectacular but the feelings I had climbing to the summit today were quite different. The descent off Galibier was a bit white knuckle as my brakes started making an awful racket (made a note to get them checked in the evening!) After rolling up to the Telegraphe and another sweeping descent it was another jaunt on a valley trunk road to the start of the longest climb of the tour, The HC Col de la Croix de Fer. At 23km long and averaging 5.1% it sounds like a long steady effort but the truth is starting from the valley floor in the intense heat the first few Km's don't drop below 8-9%. There is then a section of downhill along lofty roads before the road starts to ramp up again. Passing through the ski village of Saint Sorlin d'Arves the road continues to rise sharply and a set of hairpins are revealed that rise to the col high up in the distance. This was a tough climb but I absolutely loved it. A real challenge and after summing there is a beautiful gentle descent initially in an open valley and past a reservoir until it drops in to the tree line with a few sharp uphill ramps to remind your legs their day isn't over. The last challenge of the day was the infamous 21 hairpins of Alpe d'Huez but I had been on the road for a long time and the sun had set by the time I hit the valley so for safety reasons I called it a day. I've climbed Alpe d'huez before so I didn't feel like I had missed out but felt a tinge of sadness not to finish the day with a flourish.

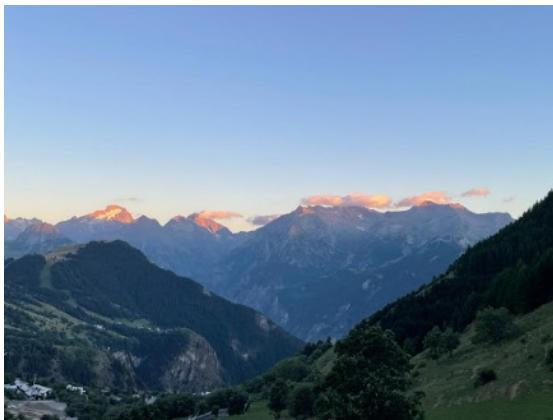


Quick revisit to Galibier and Telegraphe as you do then the glorious Croix de Fer. What a feeling!

Stage 13: Borg d'oisans / St Etienne. 132 miles +6230ft

Leaving the alps. The day started with the descent from Alpe d'Huez and it was absolutely no fun despite the beautiful early morning views on the way down as my body ached and much concentration was needed to

simply stay on the road! Once we hit the valley floor the next section was a lovely gentle descent out of the mountains. As a transition stage there were many stretches on busy roads and as we made our way across the valleys and through Grenoble the heat and headwinds really kicked in making the day feel like a bit of a slog. The tour says it was a flat day but with 6000+ feet of climbing I beg to differ! As we neared our destination the endless fields of sunflowers started to appear which helped bring a smile to my face but the truth is I had a sinking feeling when I arrived at the hotel. I was utterly exhausted from the relentless miles, the heat and from the accumulated lack of sleep. I showered, I ate and hydrated and got a massage but I fell into an anxious sleep that night about the next day.



Dawn depart from Alps d'Huez.



Sunflowers.... Millions of sunflowers!

Stage 14. St Etienne / Mende. 25 miles +2894ft

Riding the Tour de France route was taking its toll. I was determined to get to the end but knew that fatigue and exhaustion was beginning to cast doubt in my mind as to whether I was up to the challenge. I struggled to get out of bed. I struggled to eat breakfast I was so anxious about the day ahead but almost as if an automaton, I rode off from the hotel to start the ride. I hadn't been riding more than 5 minutes when the road turned right and we were faced by a short but very steep (maybe 16-18%) gradient. I got half way up and then stopped and unclipped. My mind was telling me no, my heart was pumping out of my chest and I felt terrible. I assured the road captain I was ok and would follow on and so the peloton rode off. I remounted and rode on but I was already aware that whatever happened today was going to be a challenge. I rode on solo – resolutely determined to get to the first feed-stop and re-group. The ride however was painfully slow and by the time I eventually arrived the rest of the team had already ridden off and I sat feeling dejected. Our road captain, Emily Chappell who knows a thing or two about endurance cycling, sat with me and asked me what I was thinking. The decision was clear to me. I had struggled physically but for the first time in my memory I hadn't loved riding my bike. I couldn't contemplate falling out of love with my bike so I knew I had to make a decisive move. I had to abandon today and try to recoup my energy for the remainder of the tour. I didn't feel bad about that decision. In fact I felt good. Despite the stress I was under I was able to make a clear decision based on evaluating both my physical and mental state and considering my longer term objectives for the tour. My bike was loaded and I climbed in to the back van where I promptly fell asleep and remained so for the next 4 hours! That evening after eating I sat outside in the cooler night air and really thought about my plan to complete the tour...

Chapeau indeed to anyone surviving in this heat!



Stage 15. DNS

Planned as a flat day but still more than 100 miles and with temperatures forecast to hit 40c I decided I needed a rest day. I wasn't the only one. Myself and two others made a later start and after breakfast took a cab to the next hotel. Not short and not cheap but it meant we got there early afternoon and as the following day was an official rest day it allowed us to rest, get some good food, get our laundry done early and start to claw back some energy and refill the tank. I had come to the tour to ride the whole route. This decision sacrificed a stage but I figured it was a good decision to save the remainder of my tour. As Emily would say at the end of tour party, 'It isn't about riding every Km, it is about the experiences and the memories made on the ride you make that you will remember'. The following rest day I could already feel my strength and determination returning. It was a lazy day and I spent a lovely couple of hours in the centre of Carcassonne enjoying a relaxed al fresco lunch before heading back to get ready for the final week of the tour.



A day to rest and repair!

Stage 16: Carcassonne / Foix. 97 miles +6030ft

The forecast for 40c + temperatures meant we started earlier today and we started edging our way into the Pyrenees. A cat 4 and cat 3 to warm the legs up were followed by the Cat 2 Col de Lars (8.3km at 7%) and finishing with Cat 1 Mur de Peguere of 9.3km at 7.9% which include ramps up to 18%. The start was great – we rolled along and made good progress but the heat picked up and we slowed down. After the Lars I was struggling on the Peguere so took a boost from the back van to the top. On the way up my riding buddy Lynn was standing off her bike about 1.5km from the summit. We pulled over and although I couldn't face riding I

suggested we walk the final 1.5km of the climb together. It was emotional. We had spoken in the first few days about looking out for each other and we had spent time doing just that throughout promising to make sure we both made it to Paris. So we walked together and made it to the summit. Simple acts of unity and determination can be a turning point for your morale and conviction and as much as she thought I helped her she helped me just as much. After a drink and stretch we both remounted our bikes and enjoyed the sweeping descent to Foix some 20 km away and the end of a memorable day.



If one moment can sum up the emotion of riding the tour....

Stage 17: St Gardens / Pyragudes. 66 miles +9860 ft

Pyrenees proper today. A trio of cat 1 climbs and a cat 2 so despite taking the light option to cut a few corners there was still some serious climbing today. Today was heaven and hell. The Pyrenees were at their pastoral best. Elegant and graceful peaks with quiet roads that seem to open stunning views at every turn. The climb to Col de Val Louron Azet (7.4Km at 8.4%) was stunning. One of those roads which keeps you guessing as to how you could possibly get out of the valley until the last turn. Reaching the top you then had a great view to the summit of the Pyragudes across the valley and the airstrip made famous in the Bond movie. After descending the final feed stop was next to a crystal clear lake at the valley floor. The final climb I decided I would save for another time as this was also the finish point after making the climb and so my day was done. Saving a bit more to ensure I could see the tour through.



The joy of a summit moment and a postcard for the Pyrenees!

Stage 18: Lourdes / Hautacam. 61 miles +8537ft

I came to ride Le Loop to make memories and have amazing experiences. It was the last day in the mountains and the final climb up Hautacam was one of my 'bucket-list' goals. I took the light option again but still needed to overcome the Col de Spanelles (10.3km at 8.3%) first. The ride was stunning with absolutely beautiful views in every direction and getting over and down from Spanelles I did with more strength and confidence than any other Col so far. Once down in the valley the temperature at the final feed stop registered 42c. I was in the shade of a tree, pouring water over myself to try to cool down and trying to think clearly about this final mountain challenge. I was tired and hot and every fibre of my body said stop but somewhere deep all I could think of was this desire to conquer Hautacam (13.6km at 7.9%). After 30 mins respite and giving myself a stiff talking to, I mounted my bike with a plan to ride the first 2km and re-evaluate. Other riders who had completed and were on the way down shouted encouragement and gave me strength. It was tough but I made it to that point, evaluated and decided to push on another 2km and so it went on until after battling with some stiff ramps I crossed the cattle grid which I knew signified the final stretch. I can't remember a time when I've been more focussed and more determined to achieve something as the next 20 minutes and rounding the final bend to see the finish line all the emotion came out. Hautacam is special. It is one of those summits where you can see all the way to the valley below and perhaps it was that ability to scale your achievement, or the fact that one of the other riders was there and gave me a huge cheer and we hugged as we both realised what we had

achieved, that meant I etched this memory firmly in my heart. It was a magnificent feeling and a moment that confirms that if you put your mind to it, you can achieve anything.



The intense heat, the beauty and brutality of the mountains but this moment at the summit of Hautacam was special.

Stage 19: Castelnau / Cahors. 115 miles +4362 ft

Leaving the mountains this was none the less another tough day. The gentle downhill from the start and a growing sense of elation that we might make it to the finish meant the first leg of the day was full on. Working in chain gang style we powered through the first 90km at a rapid pace. The countryside whizzed passed with the boulevards and their attending cathedrals of trees above providing a perfect corridor of advance. Throughout the tour groups of riders can join for a few stages here and there and their fresh legs and enthusiasm are welcomed but at this point we were now down to the hard core of riders who were doing the whole thing. We started with about 50 of us but we were more like 20 now after Covid had taken a heavy toll. In the mid-section of the stage the rolling hills and increasing heat convinced us to start easing efforts and despite the glorious countryside views the mood quickly turned from joyful exuberance to gritty determination to survive. Arriving in Cahors I was more grateful than any other stage to see the finish line and our hotel. Unclipping from my bike I started to believe for the first time I was actually going to make it to Paris. I was hot and exhausted but you couldn't wipe the smile off my face. That evening over dinner I received another award. Each day Emily awards an arrow (the things we follow around France to navigate the route) to the rider she

deemed to have earned it through their effort or attitude etc. When making her announcement I wasn't really listening (too busy stuffing my face!) but then she talked about the rider who despite set-backs and exhaustion has persevered and shown dogged determination. She cited this riders plan to take on Hautacam in bite size pieces and at that point I knew she was talking about me. I really didn't expect this but was totally humbled. Again at the after tour party in her speech she would talk about the impact your efforts will have on people. Those that will ask and listen to your exploits and acknowledge them but maybe more importantly those who don't ask but hear about your achievements and are inspired. Perhaps this was what she meant but it was an important lesson I learned that your actions have impacts without you ever knowing. Be your best self... always!



Starting to believe!



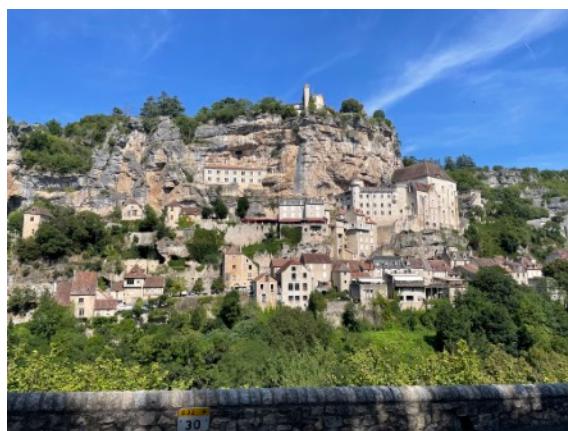
Calm before the storm!

:)

Stage 20: Lacapelle / Romacador. 26 miles +1348ft

The penultimate stage which for the pro race is an individual time trial but for us felt like a Saturday social ride with a spectacular finale. The mood was light and we rode through what felt a 'greatest hits' of landscapes. Hills, woodland, fields, sleepy village. The finale however was the dive into the gorge below the village built

into a cliff face before climbing up to finish in Romacador. It was short and sweet and on arrival we cleaned ourselves up ready to board the coach for the long drive to Paris.



Smiles that tell you we are almost there and the spectacular finale! Now? Paris! Allons-y!

Stage 21: La Defense / Paris. 56 miles 2480 ft

A fitting finale to an epic adventure. No real challenges today. A few lumps and bumps but we rode together and the sense of elation was never far from the surface. After skirting through the countryside we eventually turned toward Paris and on cresting a sharp hill was greeted with the sight of the city laid out below us. We rode on feeling the excitement build until we eventually passed a city sign telling us we had arrived in Paris and just a few minutes later we turned a corner to arrive by the Ecole Militaire in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower. Friends and family were waiting to greet us and there were emotional scenes as after 3 weeks, nearly 2000 miles and over 130k feet of elevation, several countries, numerous hotels and coach rides and much effort we reached our destination. After several minutes of catch up and photos we then pushed on to complete the loop with the push to the official finish line on the Champs Elysees after which we regrouped at the Arc de Triomphe for a few final pictures and to head off for a well-earned shower and post tour party.



Final thoughts.

It's been a few days since I got home. My body feels ok. No aches or pains and I'm enjoying being a few inches smaller around the waist! I am however feeling deep fatigue and tiredness. My body is constantly trying to switch me off so it can repair and when I am awake I find myself making repeated trips to the kitchen as it seems to want to eat for 3 people! I guess that is the body doing its thing. And that is something I learned. I think I trained and prepared well. Yes I was anxious at the start but I was also confident I had done all I could to be ready for the challenge. The body is capable of much more than you think possible but the critical component is the mind. Having determination, a clear plan and the presence of thought to adjust that plan when things inevitably go wrong so you remain focussed on achieving the bigger picture are key for an event like this. Indeed in life! I went to make memories and have amazing experiences. I can honestly say I achieved both way more than I could have hoped. The amazing scenery, the sense of achievement, the moments of quiet contemplation are imprinted in my heart and will last a lifetime. Above all we all need witnesses to our lives and for those 3 weeks I forged friendships in the intensity and adversity of the event that will stand the test of time. Those moments, those feelings, the highs and lows the joy and pain are all given meaning by the people with whom you share the experience. I'd finally like to thank my nearest and dearest for sacrificing so much to allow me to pursue my dream. It did not go unnoticed. The Le Loop crew for their unfailing support and enthusiasm, the riders I had the honour to share the road with... we did it! To Sudocreme – nothing more needs to be said about that! And finally to all friends, family, team mates and colleagues who sponsored me and shared words of encouragement. I and the WWMT are deeply grateful and humbled by your generosity.



Thanks for reading

Mike (Grand Looper 2022!!)