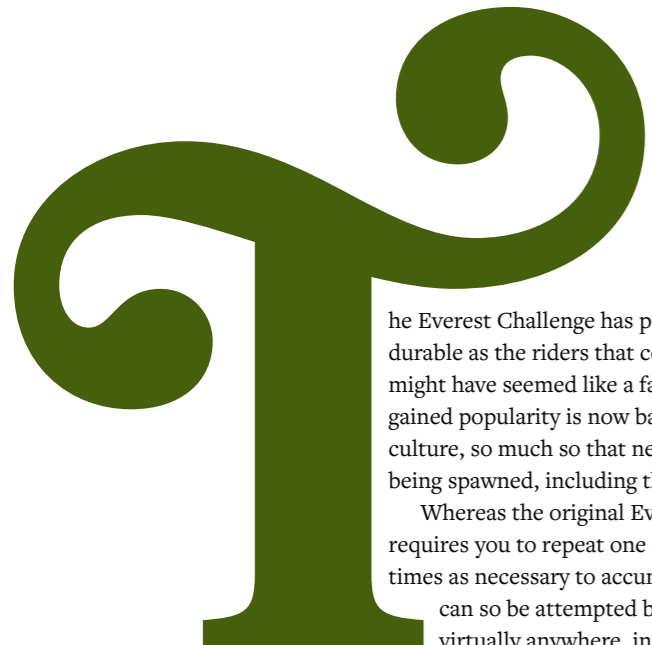


Big Ride: French Pyrenees Top of the World

Everyone knows about Everesting – repeating a climb until you aggregate 8,848m of elevation. Well, this one is different. In the French Pyrenees, *Cyclist* takes a roaming route to complete an Everest without doing the same climb twice

Words Jamie Wilkins Photography Chris Storrar



he Everest Challenge has proven to be as durable as the riders that complete it. What might have seemed like a fad when it first gained popularity is now baked into cycling culture, so much so that new variations are being spawned, including the Roaming Everest.

Whereas the original Everest Challenge requires you to repeat one climb as many times as necessary to accumulate 8,848m, and can so be attempted by virtually anyone, virtually anywhere, including virtually, a

Roaming Everest dictates that no climb may be repeated and therefore needs a mountainous area. It is as exclusive as the original is inclusive.

A side note: Hell's 500, the group that set down the rules of Everesting and the guardians of the online roll of honour, doesn't recognise a Roaming Everest, only a Roaming 10k. That not only requires 10,000m of ascent but also a minimum 400km distance, so maybe that can be next year's objective. For now, this ride looks tough enough.

Alone on Luz Ardiden, I keep an eye on my power numbers. Today will be all about managing my efforts and getting my fuelling right. I can't afford to blow up before the finish but, while this isn't a race, there is a clock running. The biggest and oldest clock, in fact, and it's about to chime the start of the day.

Luz Ardiden has a special corner at 4.5km to go. Having climbed for more than 8km through trees, you round a left into the famous upper bowl and a fantastic view is revealed. I've seen it before, but never like this. The peaks are honey-glazed in the first rays of sunshine. A short time later, at 2km to go, the sun breaks over the horizon and I gasp out loud.

This was planned. I knew what time the sun would rise and how long it would take to ride to this point. I wanted the first summit to be at sunrise. The next objective is harder to calculate: to be at the top of the final climb at sunset. The route is designed around it. Now I just have to ride it and hope that nothing goes wrong.

The west side of the Tourmalet from Luz-Saint-Sauveur stays shaded long into the morning in late season. At 19km

I'm lucky enough to live in the Pyrenees so I know the climbs around here well, and this ride is like a greatest hits

I'm lucky enough to live in the French Pyrenees so I know the climbs around here well, and this ride is like a greatest hits: Luz Ardiden, Col du Tourmalet, Hourquette d'Ancizan, Col d'Aspin, Col de Spandelles, Col de Soulor and Col d'Aubisque. It's a list rich in both scenery and Tour history. Boredom will not be the issue on this Everest.

Climbs one and two

It's 6.42am on a September morning when I roll out of my driveway. There's no moon so the darkness is profound and it's cold under the clear sky, but the stars promise a great day ahead. Riding south from my home in Villelongue, Gorge Luz provides a welcome warm-up, climbing a few hundred metres in the 12km it takes to reach the foot of Luz Ardiden. By the time I get there, the horizon to the east has gained a soft halo of light.

I'm riding solo today because, unsurprisingly, I couldn't find anyone up for joining me. I even put the word out to a few current and recently retired pros, but none were keen. Chris Froome read the WhatsApp message but didn't reply.

and some 1,400m, this is the biggest climb of the day, so I settle in, gilet still zipped up against the cold.

My energy level feels good but my legs are oddly tight already, which is bad. A welcome distraction comes halfway up when I ride back into the sun, the switchbacks begin and the view explodes across the sky, all within a minute. The mountains are at their best today.

At the top, with 2,700m climbed so far, I neck some food and drink and take a selfie next to the Géant du Tourmalet sculpture of Octave Lapize, the first rider to cross the Col du Tourmalet in the 1910 Tour de France. All being well, I'll see Le Géant again later, by which time I will likely look as puffed as he does with another three cols in the bag.

I zip up my jacket and fire into the brilliant, flowing descent. In Saint-Marie-de-Campan, the downhill ends at a junction where I swing right towards the Col d'Aspin. On the initial 5km, 5% drag towards Lac de Payolle, I hear a whir and look round in time to see an old boy on an e-bike come flying past. I jump on his wheel, but it requires too much precious energy to stay there, so I let him go. 🚲

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Previous pages: Entering the last switchback in the final 400m of the Col du Tourmalet's eastern ascent, with the ski town of La Mongie below

Left: The ski station of Luz Ardiden, where Tadej Pogačar took a stage win in 2021, is the day's first climb

Below: The sun rises over the Col du Tourmalet in the distance as *Cyclist* enters the final 2km of Luz Ardiden

Right: The bust of legendary Tour de France director Jacques Goddet smiles at the view from the summit of the Col du Tourmalet



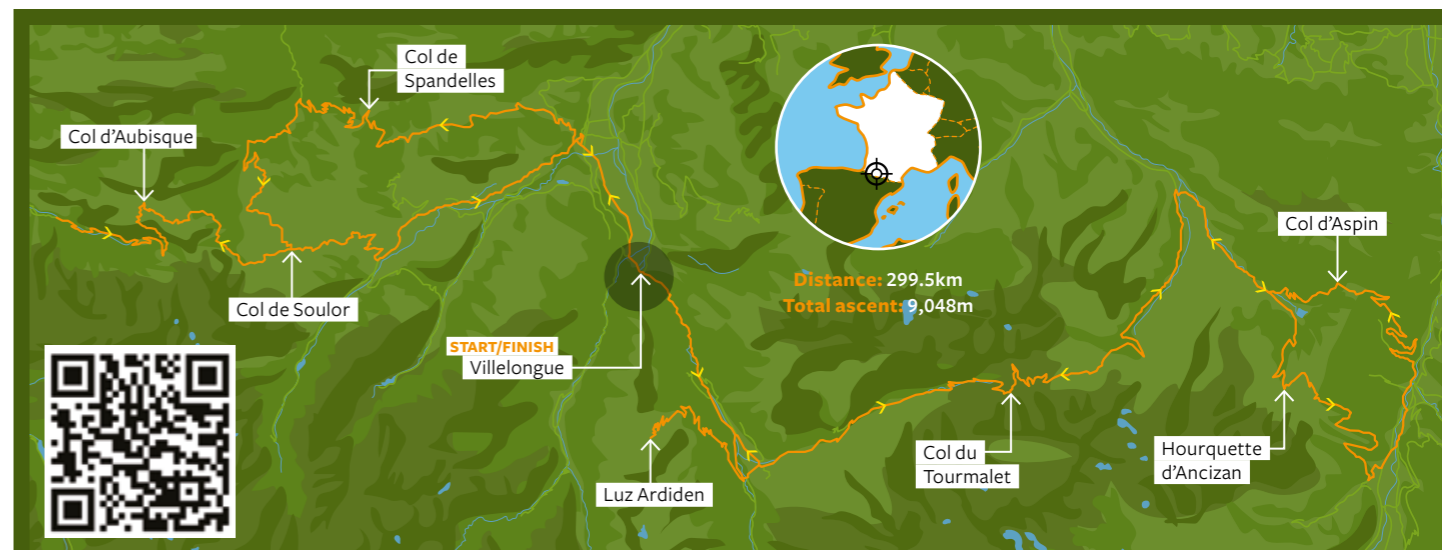


The peaks are honey-glazed in the first rays of sunshine. A short time later the sun breaks over the horizon and I gasp out loud



Far left: The iconic view from the top of Luz Ardiden, with 4km of road folded into the upper bowl, looks even more beautiful in morning golden hour

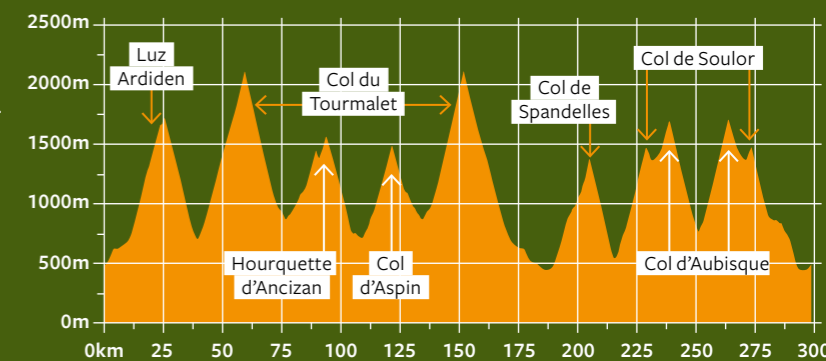
Left: The statue of Octave Lapize, first rider over the Tourmalet on its Tour debut in 1910, was recently repositioned and now enjoys an even greater view



Big day out

Not your average weekend club run

To download this route go to cyclist.co.uk/159everest or scan the QR code. From the start point at Escape to the Pyrenees guesthouse in Villelongue, the route heads south to the climb at Luz Ardiden, then east over the Tourmalet, south over Hourquette d'Ancizan, north over Col d'Aspin and back west over the Tourmalet. After a 42km breather to Argelès-Gazost, it's west over the Col de Spandelles, south to the Col de Soulor and west again to Col d'Aubisque, which is descended and climbed again from the other side. This only leaves another bite of the Soulor before the descent to the finish. Easy.





I ride back into the sun, the switchbacks begin and the view explodes across the sky, all within a minute



By the numbers
Big ride, big stats

9,048
Total ascent in metres

299.5
Distance ridden in kilometres

13:35:53
Total time in h:min:sec

10
Different climbs climbed

2,115
Highest point on route in metres (Col du Tourmalet)

11,014
Kcal burned (from power data)

1,087
Grams of carbs consumed on the ride



Like this kit?
Scan the QR code above or go to cyclist.co.uk/159gear

Above: With 7km to go on the eastern (Campan) side of the Tourmalet, the view back down the climb is immense

Left: The statue commemorating Eugene Christophe in St Marie de Campan, where he welded his own broken fork in 1913 after walking his bike 10km down the Tourmalet

Right: The summit of the Col d'Aspin is pretty but barren. The cows didn't seem impressed at Cyclist's endeavour





I turn around and face the climb that I have just come down, and a strange thing happens. I feel really good

Left: Gallery tunnels 6km from the top of Tourmalet provide some respite on a hot day before the steep ramps through La Mongie

Below: Llamas are a surprising sight on the upper slopes of the Tourmalet to first-time visitors

Right: Dropping down the Tourmalet towards Luz St Sauveur, with a long way still to go



The rider's ride

Factor O2 VAM, £12,200, factorbikes.com

With this generation, launched in 2023, the O2 VAM has matured from being a pure climber's bike to more of a GC-style all-rounder. That is to say it has become much more complete – stiffer, more aero – without losing its best attribute of lightness. As you'd expect for a bike that weighs 6.2kg, it climbs brilliantly and much faster than before thanks to the radically light Black Inc 28/33 wheels, which come in at just 1,146g.

The O2 VAM scampers up mountains as though gravity works differently for it, and its speed on the flat defies its category, feeling more like a true aero bike. And then there's the handling, which might be its best quality of all. No bike has ever given me such confidence descending and it has been responsible for a number of PBs on my favourite local descents. I couldn't have asked for a more appropriate partner in my Everest quest.





The Cirque de Litor – the huge bowl skirted by the Soulor and Aubisque – is always stunning. In evening golden hour, it’s off the scale

Left: The evening sun makes the final kilometres of the Col du Soulor even more spectacular

Right: The famous Col d'Aubisque balcony road with its precipitous drops. The corner in the background is where race leader Wim Van Est plunged off the road during the 1951 Tour de France before being rescued by a rope made of tubular tyres



Because it's there

A brief history of Everesting

The first

Appropriately, the first recorded cycling Everest was done in 1994 by George Mallory, grandson of the George Mallory who disappeared while climbing Mount Everest in 1924, and who was famed for responding, 'Because it's there,' when asked why he was attempting it. Mallory junior's Everesting was achieved by completing eight ascents of Mount Donna Buang in Australia, a climb of 16.6km at 6.2%.

The fastest

British women are at the peak of Everesting, with three riders – Illi Gardner, Emma Pooley and Hannah Rhodes – holding the four fastest times. Gardner's record time of 8h 03min 29sec was set in 2022 with 59 ascents of the Crowcombe climb in Somerset (0.9km at 17%).

The fastest man is Ronan McLaughlin, an Irish former pro for An Post-Chain Reaction and now cycling tech journalist (not for *Cyclist*; apparently there are other cycling media out there). His record time of 6h 40min 54sec on Mamore Gap in Ireland was set at an average speed of 19kmh – impressive when you consider that half of the 123km distance he rode was at 14.2%.

The most

Australian Jack Thomson, otherwise known as Jack UltraCyclist, knocked off 52 Everests during 2022 on his way to reaching his record-breaking target of riding one million metres of elevation in a single year. To save you getting your calculators out, that's an average of 2,740m of ascent every day for 365 days.



How we did it

Travel

Lourdes airport is a 25-minute drive away from the start point of this ride, with direct flights from Stansted and Dublin. Pau airport is one hour away and Toulouse is two, with easy trains to Lourdes.

rooms and plenty of local knowledge. Ride self-guided or join a supported tour. You could even recreate this route, though it's probably best enjoyed over a few days. Go to escapetothepyrenees.com.

Accommodation

Full disclosure: Escape To The Pyrenees is owned and run by the writer of this article. However, we're still confident in saying it's the perfect place to stay for riding in the Pyrenees. Located a short distance from the Col du Tourmalet, it offers great meals tailored to hungry cyclists, there's a large, well-equipped garage, comfortable

Thanks

Thanks to photographer Chris for putting in a super-long shift to get these incredible images and being great company. Thanks to Dhb for a superb set of kit to keep me comfortable from 6° to 36°C. Thanks also to Factor for getting the O2 VAM delivered in time, and to Favero for the Assioma Duo power pedals that provided essential pacing data.



Above: The Col d'Aubisque at sunset would be a good place to stop and take in the view, but there is still another 1,050m of climbing to be checked off yet

Left: The short climb back to the top of the Col du Soulor ticks Cyclist over the magic figure of 8,848m ascent

Climbs three, four and five

Hourquette d'Ancizan is fabulously pretty. It winds into a pine forest, past streams, log piles and fallen boulders the size of campervans, then out into a high valley overshadowed by a vast wall of peaks. It also takes inconsistent gradients – a Pyrenean signature – to new levels. Not only does it throw in some steep ramps early on, it then adds a kilometre of downhill, which explains why the climb feels so tough despite an official average gradient of 4.5%.

The narrow, writhing descent commands respect thanks to a couple of sudden, sharp corners. At the bottom, I turn left to ride up the valley to Arreau and onto the Col d'Aspin. My legs are still more uncomfortable than they should be, and then it hits me – saddle height. I'd swapped to a more padded saddle, thinking my usual carbon saddle might be a touch harsh. I climb off and drop my saddle height by 5mm, kicking myself mentally for the error, but also feeling pleased that I've sorted it before the remaining six climbs.

Once over the Aspin, the upper part of the descent is great, but the gentler lower section has a headwind today and requires more energy expenditure than I'd like, even

I'm glad it's there. The fatigue is undeniable now. I'm still pretty certain that I'll complete the challenge, but I know it's just going to get harder and harder from here. The last climb could be a grinding, cross-eyed horror show.

In Ferrières, I get a boost when my good friend Duncan joins me to ride the first part of the Col du Soulor. I'd told him my itinerary, so he knew when I might be arriving and thought I could probably do with some support at this point in the ride. It's good to chat for a while and the distraction really helps to take my mind off how tired I am. When Duncan swings around with about 5km to go, I feel remarkably refreshed and can push on for the summit.

The Cirque de Litor – the huge bowl skirted by this northern ascent of the Soulor on one side and the famous Col d'Aubisque balcony road on the other – is always stunning. In evening golden hour, it's off the scale. It's 6.30pm and I've climbed 7,500m by the time I reach the 1,474m summit of Soulor and the pressure is on to get from here to the top of Aubisque, down the other side and back up by the time the sun sets. I swig a highly caffeinated energy drink to help me through the final part.

Reaching the top of Aubisque feels like it should be the finish. It's beautiful and the low sun gives it a sense of conclusion

hunching myself into as small a ball as possible. It repays me when I swing back onto Tourmalet and enjoy a tailwind for the rolling 4km first section. With around 12km to go it ramps up to 9% and stays there, but the extra effort of steep climbing is offset by just how happy I feel about my recovered legs as a result of correcting my saddle height.

By the col, I've covered 150km and gained 5,600m, a huge ride in its own right, but there's still so much to come. The summit is crowded now in early afternoon, with scores of people out enjoying the late summer sun. While they grab photographs, I grab plenty of food and drink and set off on the descent of Tourmalet's west side, safe in the knowledge that I won't see another climb for the next 42km.

Climbs six and seven

When Tadej Pogačar and Jonas Vingegaard duelled over the Spandelles in 2022, they did so in the opposite direction, which is more enjoyable both to climb and descend. From my direction there's no view until the very top and then the descent is very narrow and technical, with a high risk of oncoming vehicles using all the road. But today it's serving a purpose, linking to the Soulor and contributing 900m of ascent. The occasional steep ramps, which reach 14%, force me into my biggest 33-tooth sprocket.

Climbs eight, nine and ten

Reaching the top of Aubisque feels like it should be the finish. It's beautiful and the low sun gives it a sense of conclusion, but the computer is showing 'only' 7,800m gained. There's one more climb before the big clock in the sky chimes its last for the day. Buzzing from the challenge and the energy drink, I pitch down the rollercoaster descent.

At the foot of the Aubisque I turn around and face the climb that I have just come down, and a strange thing happens. I feel really good. Maybe it's the caffeine, maybe it's the realisation that I no longer need to conserve energy, but either way it has come at the perfect time. I need to get to the top fast if there's to be anything left of sunset.

I find I'm actually having fun, getting stuck into this epic climb, riding in the wheel tracks of 110 years of Tour history, winching myself out of the dark gorge and towards the warm glow of the still sunlit peaks above.

The sun is below the horizon when I enter the last two kilometres but I'm not too late. Rounding the corner by the iconic cliff-edge hotel reveals a sky erupting red and pink, a visual swansong as the day dies a theatrical death.

I've still got 34km to go, but my challenge is complete. The sense of joy and satisfaction is immense as I wrap up against the plunging temperature and drop into the descent that will take me all the way home. ☺

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