

A tall, multi-story building under construction on a rocky hillside. The building has a concrete frame with many windows. It is situated on a hillside covered in gravel and sparse vegetation. In the background, there are several red and white striped poles. The sky is overcast with grey clouds.

EXPLORE HOMAGE TO THE GIANT OF PROVENCE

PRODUCED IN ASSOCIATION WITH FIFTYONE

The three roads up Mont Ventoux are well known and riding all three in a day is a popular challenge. But did you know there's a fourth way by gravel? *Rouleur* went out to complete the set

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I'm suffering. The Giant of Provence is reminding me who's boss. Its granite hands are crushing my legs and a massive rock foot is pressing on my chest, making every breath a battle against the weight of millions of tonnes of mountain. But nothing weighs more heavily than unmet expectation.

This was always going to be tough – 183 kilometres and 6,020 metres of vertical ascent – but it wasn't supposed to be *this* hard. The goal was to bring good fitness and ride the challenge briskly, but enjoy it. I've done plenty of rides like this, and bigger, so I know how to train, plan and execute them. I felt great all the way to the end of an equally big training ride three weeks ago. But then, five days out, I fell ill and spent two days in bed with a fever, unable to keep food down. I still don't feel normal. Getting through this is going to take all my experience.

Mont Ventoux has three road routes to the top, from Bédoin, Malaucène and Sault. Combining these into one ride of 137 kilometres and 4,400 metres of vertical ascent is a famous challenge, the completion of which earns one entry to the Club des Cinglés du Mont Ventoux, which was created in 1988 by local rider Christian Pic. A decade later, the Challenge Galérien was officially recognised, adding a fourth ascent up a forest road.

At the time of writing, the Cinglés has been officially completed 20,744 times compared to just 836 for the Galérien. As well as the obvious extra difficulty of the additional 46 kilometres and 1,620 metres of ascent, the Galérien also comes with a logistical quandary – what to ride on a route which takes in both smooth tarmac and forest road. Back in the 1990s, it was regarded as a mountain bike ride. More recently, gravel bikes have taken over, but you still needed two bikes to avoid lugging

a compromised gravel bike around the asphalt climbs and descents, or trying to ride a beautiful featherweight racing machine on rocks and gravel.

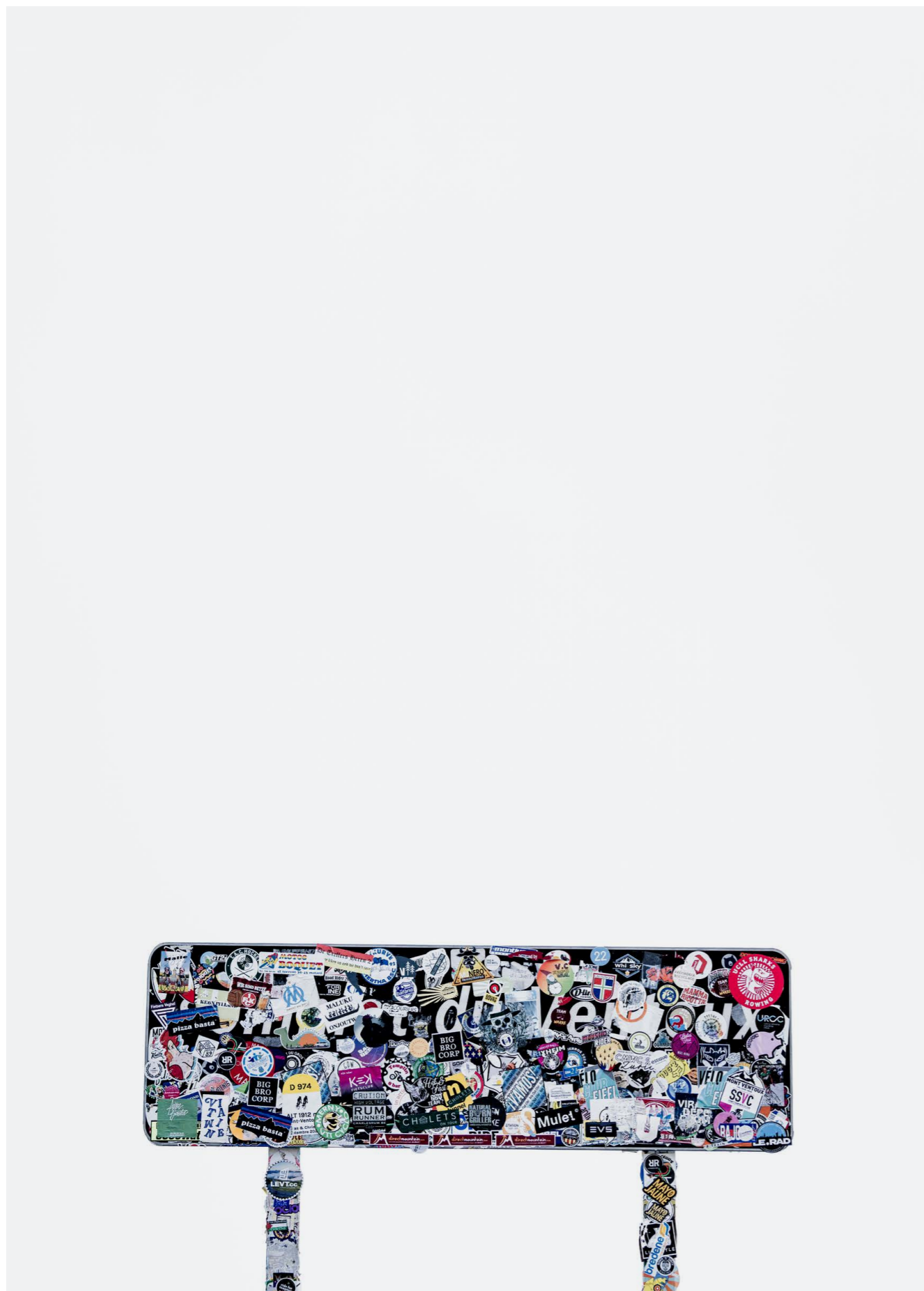
Enter the FiftyOne Sika, one of a handful of visionary, category-breaking bikes to emerge this year. It combines the lightness and performance of a pro-level climbing bike with comfort, geometry and positioning that's closer to typical endurance models, plus generous 40-millimetre tyre clearance for back roads, bad roads and gravel roads. Here then, is one bike to do it all. With a simple wheel change, the Sika can be perfectly adapted to all four ascents of Ventoux.

The brand takes its name from the legend of Tour de France dossard #51, worn to famous first overall victories by Eddy Merckx in 1969, Luis Ocaña in 1973, Bernard Thévenet in 1975 and Bernard Hinault in 1978. Since then, the dossard has been seen as a lucky number for Tour competitors.

When the Tour de France last visited Mont Ventoux in 2021, the stage was won by Wout van Aert, but the leading rider over the summit on the first ascent was Julian Alaphilippe and the French superstar wore #51.

Mont Ventoux is returning to the Tour in 2025 on stage 16 for its 19th appearance since debuting in 19... 51! The 172-kilometre stage is flat until the climb and goes up from Bédoin for a summit finish. Some riders say this is the hardest kind of finish that there is – after hours of rolling in a big gear, the legs are not ready for twiddling tiny gears up one of the hardest road climbs ever to appear in the Tour. Coming after the second rest day, the breakaway might hope to build enough of a gap to stay away, in the style of Eros Poli in 1994, but the inevitable rematch between Jonas Vingegaard and Tadej Pogačar – Ventoux is where Vingegaard first gapped





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Pogačar in 2021 and made him look beatable – is certain to mean that a scorching pace is set. It will be an unmissable stage.

It's still fully dark as I step out of the Hotel Albion in Sault at 7:30am and the horizon is barely diluting with more watery shades as I press start on my computer outside the tourist office 15 minutes later. Each town's tourist office serves as a waypoint – get a stamp on an official card (which can be downloaded) or take a selfie with the card outside each one and by the sign at the summit, then send it off to be ratified and gain your place on the website's roll of honour.

The order of the climbs is not mandated. The convention is to leave the ascent from Sault until last because its milder gradients up to Chalet Reynard are kinder to tired legs, but there is higher priority today – photography. I've planned the route to follow the path of the sun, so we're starting in Sault on the eastern side to get the morning light, then riding the two climbs from Bédoin to the south, and finishing with Malaucène to the west.

It's a choice that I may regret later, but five kilometres into the ride it has already paid off as the sky to the east erupts into the most staggering sunrise I've seen in years. Rather than a new day beginning, the whole world could be ending in a tsunami of lava as the sun fires beams of red and orange across the underside of the clouds, split by the shadows of the distant southern Alps.

Entering the forest blocks out the light show, but the colour palette is maintained by the rich autumn hues. Here, the easy gradient doubles to a more purposeful six per cent which helps to mitigate the fresh morning air, chilly at around eight degrees celsius. I'm

comfortable climbing in a long-sleeve jersey with a gilet zipped up and wondering how cold it might be at the summit.

This side of Ventoux is genuinely easy, averaging under four per cent for the 19 kilometres up to the merge with the Bédoin road at Chalet Reynard, but when you're riding to power it's the speed that changes, not the effort and the Hammerhead shows 30 then 33, and briefly 35kph as the 'aero-optimised' Sika gets a chance to display its wind-slicing chops on a false flat.

Chalet Reynard is a name I know well from race commentaries and stage previews, but upon seeing it I can't help feeling "Is that it?" The absence of some architectural wonder is soon forgotten, though, as the trees fade away and the gradient gets serious. The real Ventoux, steep and barren, is revealing itself.

Cold cloud envelops me, everything, for around two kilometres and all views disappear. Happily, though, for my first Ventoux experience, the iconic weather station at the 1,910-metre summit emerges so as not to deny me. No one else is up here yet. I take the required selfie, pull on a jacket and gloves, and tiptoe back down the way I came into the wet, slippery descent.

Bédoin is six kilometres from the end of the forested steeper slopes. The gentle final stretch of descent is a chance to get legs moving again before turning around in the small town centre, pausing only to log a photo at the tourist office, and then warming up properly on the four per cent drag back to the forest.

This ascent is arguably the best known and most fearsome, and it's the one the Tour favours. The stats tell the story

plainly: nine kilometres averaging 9.3 per cent from the edge of the forest up to Chalet Reynard, then a further seven kilometres at over seven per cent to the top.

There are no cartoonishly steep ramps like those of, say, the Angliru, it's just relentless. I could have made it easier with a bigger cassette than this 10-28 but small gears produce small speeds and I've committed to a time goal simply by not bringing lights. FiftyOne describe the Sika as a high-performance endurance bike for ambitious riders, and this is an ambitious endurance ride.

My legs are now hurting a lot, somehow feeling more blocked than they did on the first climb, presumably a consequence of the illness and five days without riding. Experience tells me that on long days like this the suffering is not linear. Bad patches come and go. Stick it out and better sensations will arrive in time.

My stomach feels even more blocked than my legs, as if the flapjack I ate in Bédoin was really an entire Christmas dinner. I'm behind schedule on fuel and it's even hard to drink. Trying to force it leads to the food coming back up a bit in my mouth, but I know I have to stick at it or bonking will be inevitable.

Motivation to maintain my effort comes from chasing down a rider in the distance. I'm holding 280 watts and the gap is only shrinking slowly, so he's going well. When I finally reach him, just before Chalet Reynard, we chat for a bit. He's from nearby Orange and completed the three-route Cinglés himself last year, though today he's on a 130-kilometre loop with one ascent. He asks what I'm doing and I tell him. 'Ah,

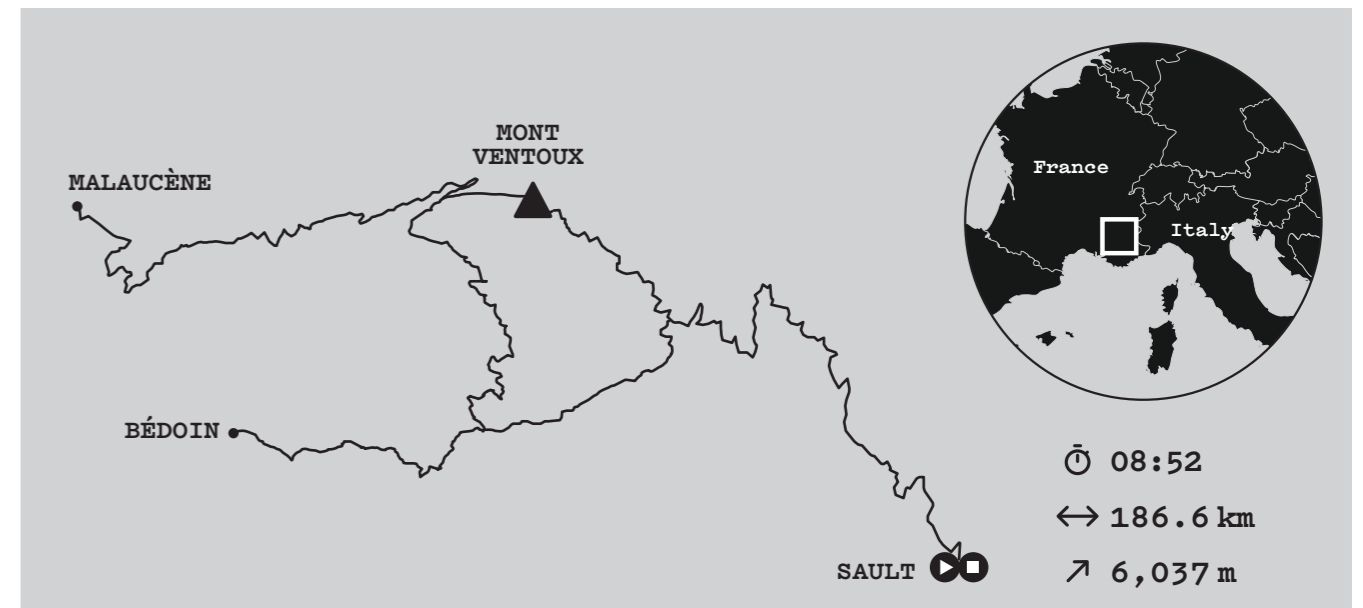
bon,' he says, and then tries to drop me! Following is a daft use of energy, but frankly I'm too competitive to let anyone gap me and as I sense him fade a little, I squeeze the pace and pull away.

By the time we pass the Tom Simpson memorial 1.5km from the summit, he's 200m back. I remove my helmet to pay my respects to Simpson but don't stop and don't leave a bottle. To be honest, I don't like this pseudo-tradition. Leaving empty plastic bottles on a mountain that is one of the windiest places in France seems like a great way to scatter them across the landscape. There are ways of respecting Simpson without disrespecting the mountain.

The same goes for the stickers mindlessly placed over the sign at the summit, rendering it illegible. I understand the compulsion, especially as many are tributes, but is it too much to leave the name visible? In fact, I add two to the uprights myself, on behalf of friends for lost loved ones. I hope Sarah and Charlie enjoy the view.

Back in Bédoin, the sun is out, so I change jersey as well as wheels. Zipp 303 Firecrests slot into the Sika in place of the 454 NSWs. They're shod with 40mm Zipp G40 XPLR gravel tyres, maximising the frame's generous clearance, and a 10-33 cassette. The new Sram Red rear mech could even take a 10-36 if needed and I hope I won't find myself wishing for it as I roll out.

Predictably, the switch to gravel tyres makes the bike feel sluggish on the road and the slightly extended rest at the base hasn't helped my legs either, because they feel like bags of wet sand. It's a relief when the gravel road starts, eight kilometres up the climb. The tyres are now where they belong and the



sensations are so different, as if there's less rolling resistance off road than on.

For a while, the dirt is hard packed and the gradient is a reasonable six per cent, so the Sika and I are flying along. Such terrain may be at the far end of its repertoire, but this endurance machine is doing a very good impression of a gravel bike.

After four kilometres, cloud rolls in, the grade kicks up and everything else drops: speed, energy, morale and the temperature, from 24 to 10 degrees. I'm getting tired, my stomach hurts, my legs ache and I'm cold. Stupidly, I left my gilet in my other jersey and I'm a long way from photographer James and the car, so I'm kicking myself. It's my lowest point yet.

I remind myself that getting to choose my adversity and discomfort is an immense luxury and look around at the pretty forest and the leaves in auburn and copper and burgundy picked out against the limestone trail. This is a ride I've wanted to do for a long time. Gratitude replaces self-pity.

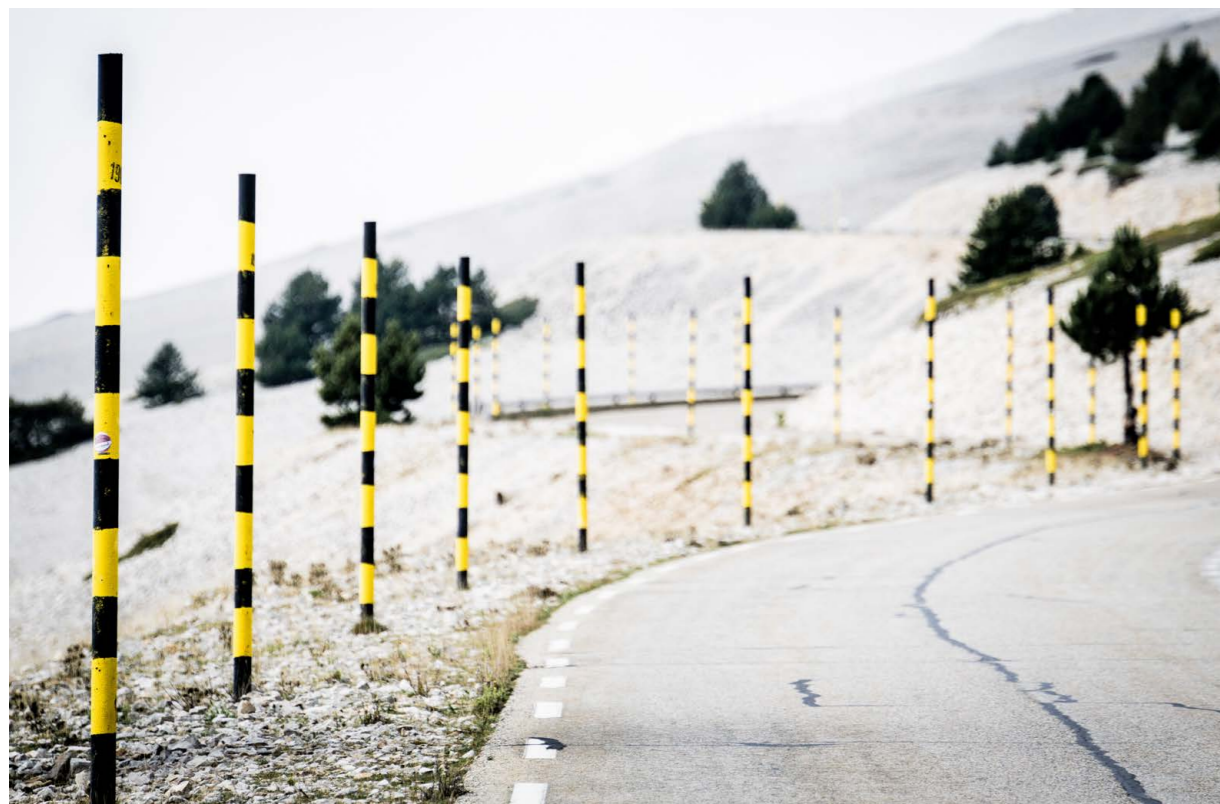
In places, the gravel is deeper, to the extent that 40mm tyres are only just big enough to roll over it without sinking in. There's no opportunity to zone out and

simply turn the cranks; line choice requires my full attention and every pedal stroke requires planning and technique to get maximum traction.

After exactly one hour, the trail levels out and, two kilometres later, meets the Malaucène side four kilometres from the top. I grab warmer clothing and a Coke, then stretch and swap the wheels back. This time, boosted by the faster tyres and surface, I feel refreshed and tap up to the summit decently. One to go. That sounds better than the actual stats of the Malaucène climb: 21.5 kilometres in length and 1,570 metres of vertical gain.

When I get back to the junction with the gravel on the descent, the road is suddenly wet and I soon ride into the heavy shower responsible. On a long, open section I hit 78 kilometres per hour with my rain jacket flapping like crazy and raindrops stinging my face. The FiftyOne, by contrast, is unflappable, giving only confidence. The spray from the road is ice cold on my legs and it's an immense relief to get back on dry roads and into sunshine lower down.

Malaucène is a good-looking town, full of cafés and bike shops. In the afternoon



sun, with a surprising number of cyclists around for so late in the year, it's an energising vibe. There are no calories in vibes, though, so I force down another flapjack before pointing the FiftyOne back uphill. Once more with feeling.

My energy feels good, boosted by a caffeine drink consumed on the last descent, and I only laugh when I throw up a bit in my mouth for about the fifth time. A flicker of cramp, on the other hand, gets a different reaction. "No. Fuck off!" I exclaim out loud to the stabbing pain down the inside of my left thigh. I add two electrolyte tabs to a bottle that already contains mix. It's unpleasantly strong but it does the job and I can keep pushing around 270 watts with no further cramping. In fact, my legs feel better than they have since the first ascent.

While Sault is clearly the easiest route, trying to rank Bédoin and Malaucène is futile; both are very hard, with long sections of double-digit grades. The stone roadside marker for 13 kilometres to go says the next kilometre averages 12 per cent. The next two stones say the same and, even pushing good watts, this section feels interminable, as if

I'm trying to ride up a giant, tarmac treadmill that's sliding down beneath my wheels.

When it eases to five per cent at the ski station of Mont Serein, it feels flat and I can click a few gears. The tempo lasts a while, past the end of the gravel road and onto the final section that is familiar from the third ascent. With three kilometres to go, the gradient kicks up to 10 per cent again and now I can feel myself fading. A well timed message of support from my girlfriend pings on my phone and it's just the lift I need. Let some watts go, keep turning the pedals. Breathe.

The observatory comes into view moments later, towering above me, talismanic, three switchbacks away. Reaching the top is deeply satisfying and the spectacular golden sunset that ignites behind me feels like a celestial reward.

The final descent begins in this glow and enters the shade, then the gloom of the forest at dusk. My adrenalin and energy fade with the light and it takes all my concentration to descend safely. It's fully dark within minutes of finishing back in Sault, but the challenge is complete and exhaustion is outweighed only by exaltation. ●



THE BIKE: FIFTYONE SIKA

Throw out your traditional bike categories, they don't apply to the Sika. FiftyOne drew on their custom-building roots to design a performance focused bike for real riders, free from the influence of pro rider demands. "We understand that many riders want a super-light, fast, confident bike that can take bigger tyres and has a real-world stack height," they say. In other words, pro level performance with endurance bike comfort.

Claimed weight for a size M frame is just 690 grammes and this size L on deep wheels weighed in at 6.9 kilogrammes. On a set of pure climbing wheels, that dropped to 6.4kg, putting the Sika among the lightest disc-brake bikes on sale. FiftyOne say that this lightness was achieved by selecting very high grades of carbon fibre, thereby preserving high levels of frame stiffness under power.

Key to the Sika's versatility is the 40mm tyre clearance. It isn't intended as a gravel bike, though. It's about enabling large road tyres for comfort on poor roads with some headroom beyond the currently popular 30-34mm sizes to make it future-proof. Other features also make it easy to live with: a T47 threaded bottom bracket, a universal derailleur hanger, and a round 27.2mm seatpost with a traditional external clamp.

FiftyOne's own one-piece cockpit combines an airfoil top section, a three-degree back sweep for a natural hand position on the tops, and flared drops for a more aero position on the hoods and more control in the drops while descending.

Aerodynamics have not been overlooked but nor have they been allowed to compromise lightness or ride quality.

The tube shapes are derived from aggressively truncated NACA airfoil profiles – like a D-shape with the sharp corners rounded off to a very precise radius – to reduce drag effectively without adding weight.

The Sram Red AXS groupset is perfectly matched to the Sika – super light and massively versatile. The new rear mech has a clutch to prevent chain slap and 36t capacity, making it ideal for gravel use as well as being brilliant on the road, and therefore perfect for a bike that might do both. The available gearing options are massive; this combination of 48/35 chainrings, a 10-28 cassette for the road and a 10-33 for the gravel gave me exactly what I needed. Braking, front shifting and ergonomics are all greatly improved from the previous generation and it's almost eerily quiet. The Zipp 454 NSW wheels aren't an obvious

choice for a big climbing day – the 353s weren't available – but they're light for their depth and performed very well.

With every kilometre, the Sika impressed me more. It was comfortable for nine hours, its lightness and stiffness really shine on steep climbs and the handling absolutely dazzles on the descents. FiftyOne use a unique steering geometry, developed over years of building custom frames and experimenting on their own bikes, and it's extremely effective. The Sika is perfectly stable at high speeds, yet carves eagerly around tighter corners – that's a neat trick.

FiftyOne Sika frameset:
€4,499 / £3,950

Complete bike with Sram Red and 303 Firecrest: £9,400

www.fiftyonebikes.com

