

# The Long Haul

In the French Pyrenees lies the Lac de Cap-de-Long, a climb that few cyclists will know but, once tackled, few will ever forget

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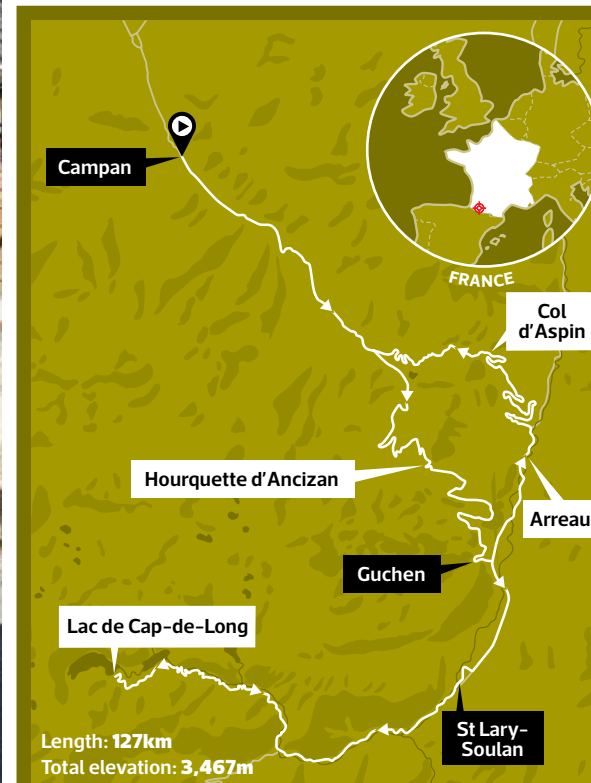
Far right: Jamie preps his bike outside his newly converted guest house in the Pyrenean village of Villelongue

Above and right: The village of Sainte-Marie-de-Campan, early in the ride, is in the midst of its annual 'scarecrow' celebration when *Cyclist* passes through

At this time of the morning, the village of Sainte-Marie-de-Campan is quiet, but it is alive with possibilities. The narrow road we are riding down opens out into the village square, and a signpost directs us to turn right towards the Col du Tourmalet, possibly the most famous climb in the Tour de France.

It is certainly the race's most visited col, having featured an astonishing 87 times in the 106 editions, and any cyclists visiting this part of the Pyrenees in southern France might feel almost obligated to test themselves against its *hors categorie* gradients. But not us. Not today.

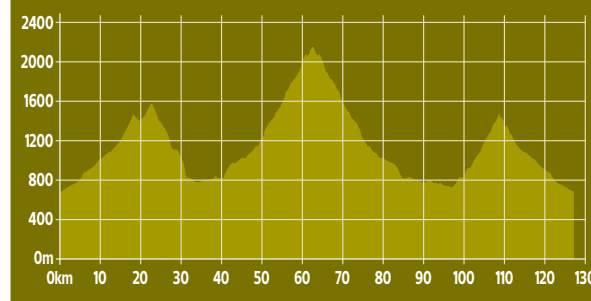
We have another climb in our sights – one that can match the Tourmalet for size and brutality, and for beauty, but which is little known to cycling fans. The Lac de Cap-de-Long has remained discreetly out of the limelight owing to the fact that the Tour de France has never visited its slopes. This is because it is a road to nowhere, a dead end built to service a dam, and so there are no tales of heroic breaks, dramatic rivalries or glorious stage wins to cement its legend in cycling folklore. Instead, we are here to make our own stories.



## Dam busting

Follow *Cyclist's* route to the dam at Lac de Cap-de-Long

To download this route, go to [cyclist.co.uk/95france](http://cyclist.co.uk/95france). To give ourselves a warm-up before the climbing, we started our ride from the town of Campan, just south of Bagnères-de-Bigorre. From Campan, head south for 13km on the D935 and D918 (ignoring the turn-off for the Tourmalet) until you see a right turn for Hourquette d'Ancizan. Follow the D113 over the Hourquette d'Ancizan and descend to Guchen. Turn right onto the D929 to St Lary-Soulan and then ride onwards to Fabian. At the junction turn right, continuing on the D929 towards Lac de Cap-de-Long. Climb for 14km until you reach the dam. Return the way you came to Guchen, and continue on the D929 to Arreau. Turn left at a sign to Col d'Aspin on the D918. Follow this to the summit and then continue on the same road, descending all the way back to Campan.



### But first, another climb

With me today is Jamie Wilkins, a former cycling journalist (for another magazine whose name escapes me right now), who has done what many of us have considered doing at some point. He packed up his life in Britain, moved with his partner to the south of France, renovated an old farm building into a luxury guest house and now hosts cycling trips through his company Escape to the Pyrenees.

The new life obviously agrees with him. He's looking lean and tanned, and worryingly fast. He pleads that the time he has been spending working on the guesthouse has eaten into his training, but a glance at Strava shows him to be 13th out of 22,520 on the leaderboard for the HC-rated Hautacam climb, only a minute behind Thibaut Pinot. It's obvious I'll have to keep him on a tight rein.

Ignoring the turning for the Tourmalet, we continue straight on, heading south. Before we can even get to the start of the Lac de Cap-de-Long there is the small matter of another major climb to be negotiated.

The Hourquette d'Ancizan is a category one climb, rising to 1,564m over 22.5km. At just 4% average gradient it shouldn't prove too punishing but, as is so often the case, the stats don't tell the real story.

The climb officially starts at the town of Campan, from where we began our ride, but its opening phase of 13km



or so is really just a leg-stretcher, a mere *hors d'oeuvre* before the main course. We tap along gently, barely feeling the rise in altitude, until we arrive at a dilapidated-looking hotel in the village of Payolle, which guards a small bridge that takes us away from the main road and onto the narrow road to the Hourquette d'Ancizan.

This is where the climbing starts for real. It doesn't kick up viciously, but eases upwards inexorably, such that my eyes fail to register the increase in gradient but I begin to wonder why my legs feel so tired. It reminds me of something I read about boiling a frog. Apparently, if you put a frog in a pan of cold water and raise the heat gently, it will fail to realise what's happening and not jump out of the pan, right up to the point where it boils to death.

I've no idea if this is true or not, but I'm beginning to understand how the frog feels. The temperature on this July day is getting towards the 30s and the road is steepening increment by increment, slowly sapping the energy from my legs.

And what a road it is: a perfect strip of black tarmac, unblemished by painted lines, sweeping through fields

and woodland in lazy curves. By the side of the road on the lower slopes, families are camping among the trees, sitting out in the sunshine on deckchairs. They could be here simply for a holiday, or they could be establishing their spot for when the Tour de France passes this way in a few days' time.

This could also explain why the tarmac is in such good condition – it has been re-laid in advance of the Tour, and we are enjoying its pristine smoothness before the pros get to try it for themselves.

When Stage 12 of the 2019 Tour de France does eventually pass through here – in the opposite direction to which we're travelling – Britain's Simon Yates will lead a breakaway group over the summit of the Hourquette d'Ancizan on his way to a stage victory, while France's Julian Alaphilippe will hold onto his yellow jersey. But that's all to come. For now, the mountain is quiet except for the sound of my increasingly laboured breathing.

A clearing in the trees reveals a sharp peak in the distance. Then suddenly we emerge from the canopy into a wide basin, rich green in colour and almost

## Straight away my brain switches to survival mode, whereby it refuses to contemplate the full enormity of the task at hand



Left and above: The first major climb of the day is to Hourquette d'Ancizan, which will be the final climb of Stage 12 when the 2019 Tour de France comes through (in the opposite direction) a few days after *Cyclist* visits





treeless. All around us, boulders mark the turf like playing pieces in some mighty game of the gods.

As we rise, the gradient peaks at around 8% or 9%, and after an unexpected descent of around a kilometre, the final few clicks of climbing brings us out onto a beautiful summit plateau with views that stretch over to the observatory atop the Pic du Midi de Bigorre, the mountain that towers above the Tourmalet.

It has been a truly beautiful climb and a great way to begin the day. Jamie tells me that he thinks this is one of the harder climbs in the area, which I find encouraging. It means we're going to smash the rest of the route. How foolish of me.

#### Lac de very Long indeed

A swift, fun descent off the back of Hourquette d'Ancizan brings us out onto the main road towards St Lary-Soulan,

## The road narrows, hemmed in by banks of soft-edged hills that obscure the epic scale of this climb

which is the starting point for the centrepiece of today's ride, the Lac de Cap-de-Long.

Similar to the previous climb, the statistics for Cap-de-Long are skewed by the introductory section of shallow climbing. Officially, the climb is 22.7km long at an average gradient of just over 6%, but the first 8km or 9km are gentle enough to be barely noticeable.

After a stop for espressos and energy-rich slabs of *mille feuille* in a patisserie in St Lary-Soulan, we head out on those initial few kilometres that represent the start of the climb, but which don't seem to count. They are so benign as to hardly register, but I still don't take any chances, sticking closely to Jamie's wheel and letting him do the lion's share of the work.

A junction next to a cafe represents the point where the climbing starts in earnest, and the effect is instant. The gradient tilts up to nearly double figures, where it will remain for much of the rest of the climb.

Straight away I'm out of the saddle and my brain switches to survival mode, whereby it refuses to contemplate the full enormity of the task at hand, but instead focuses on small, immediate problems, such as getting to the next corner.

The road narrows, hemmed in on both sides by banks of soft-edged hills that obscure the epic scale of this climb. To the left, a wall of greenery blocks the view, while to the right the valley drops away to a gorge choked with trees.

Jamie looks like he is out for a Sunday spin, and I can sense that he'd like to stretch those whippet-like legs



## The rider's ride

Argon 18 Gallium Pro Disc, frameset £3,599, approx £11,000 as built, [zyrofisher.co.uk](http://zyrofisher.co.uk)

Argon 18 loves to cover its bikes in meaningless phrases, for example 'AFS Argon Fit System', 'Optimal Balance' and 'Horizontal Dual System'. Most exasperating was watching my sweat drip on to a top tube emblazoned with 'Experience The Fusion'.

Thankfully the ride quality makes up for the verbiage. The Gallium Pro Disc is as stiff as a plank, which I was thankful for on the long climbs, but it's not too harsh thanks to the inclusion of 28mm Zipp Tangente tyres and a skinny 27.2mm seatpost.

The short head tube makes for a racy setup, but the Press-Fit 3D system allowed me to add a bit of height, and Argon 18 claims it is much more rigid compared to using standard spacers. Certainly the steering was crisp and confident.

The Sram AXS groupset was impeccable, and the 12-speed (10-28t) cassette married to a 48/35t chainset provided a huge range of gears. I would have sold my soul for a 32t sprocket, but I can't complain about the lowest 35x28 gear given that the bike weighs just 7.46kg.

Above and right:  
The descent off  
Hourquette d'Ancizan  
is on pristine roads that  
have been resurfaced  
in readiness for the  
arrival of the Tour







## At each hairpin I take the opportunity to stop, ostensibly to take photos but in reality to catch my breath

▶ and take off up the slope, but he plays the perfect host and we edge upwards side by side.

On and on it goes, with the temperature rising in step with our altitude, until eventually we emerge from the woods into a magnificent arena of rock-strewn mountains. The uplift to my spirits only partially offsets the realisation that the gradient is getting even more severe.

The steepness necessitates some impressive engineering to get the road up the mountain, and about 7km on from the turn-off we hit the first of a series of hairpins, signposted ‘Lacet des Ecureuils’, or ‘laces of squirrels’. Who knew they even had shoes?

Shortly after we arrive at the Lacet des Myrtilles (laces of blueberries) and Lacet des Edelweiss (laces of edelweiss), each more impressive than the last. The hairpins fold over on themselves like the layers of my *mille feuille* (which is now weighing on my stomach slightly), with great stone walls and jagged castellations giving them the impression of a fortress. At each one I take the opportunity to stop, ostensibly to take photos but in reality to catch my breath. The relentlessness of the climb is beginning to wear me down, and even once we have breached the defences of the Lacets there’s still a long way to go.

Next we crawl past a glittering mountain lake called Lac d’Oredon, its water the colour of sapphires, and up



ahead our target comes into view. High above us, far in the distance, is the imposing wall of the Lac de Cap-de-Long dam. At 100m high, and holding back 67 million cubic metres of water, it is a gargantuan piece of engineering, but from here it looks like a tiny postage stamp pasted to the side of a mountain.

### Dam and blast

We inch forward, my legs spinning away at the smallest gear. With about 2km to go, the road plays a cruel trick. A short section of descent gives the impression that the punishment is over, but it only leads to the foot of the final obstacle – a flurry of four hairpins with a gradient firmly in the red.

Jamie whispers encouragement to get me over the last stretch. ‘Just three more hairpins to go... Only two more to go... Ok, last hairpin...’ And then it’s over.

The top is a dream, with incredible views to the east over Lac d’Oredon, while to the south lies an imposing barricade of mountains that form the border with Spain, and to the west, right beside us, is the vast, calm reservoir of the Lac de Cap-de-Long. ▶

Left: A quick stop in St Lary-Soulan provides a chance to take on energy drinks (espresso) and fast-acting carbohydrates (slabs of *mille feuille*)

Below: We’ll need all the energy we can get for the 22.7km climb of Lac de Cap-de-Long









## By the numbers

Get 'em while they're hot

127

Distance of ride in kilometres

3

Number of Cat 1 or above climbs on the route

3,467

Total ascent in metres

71

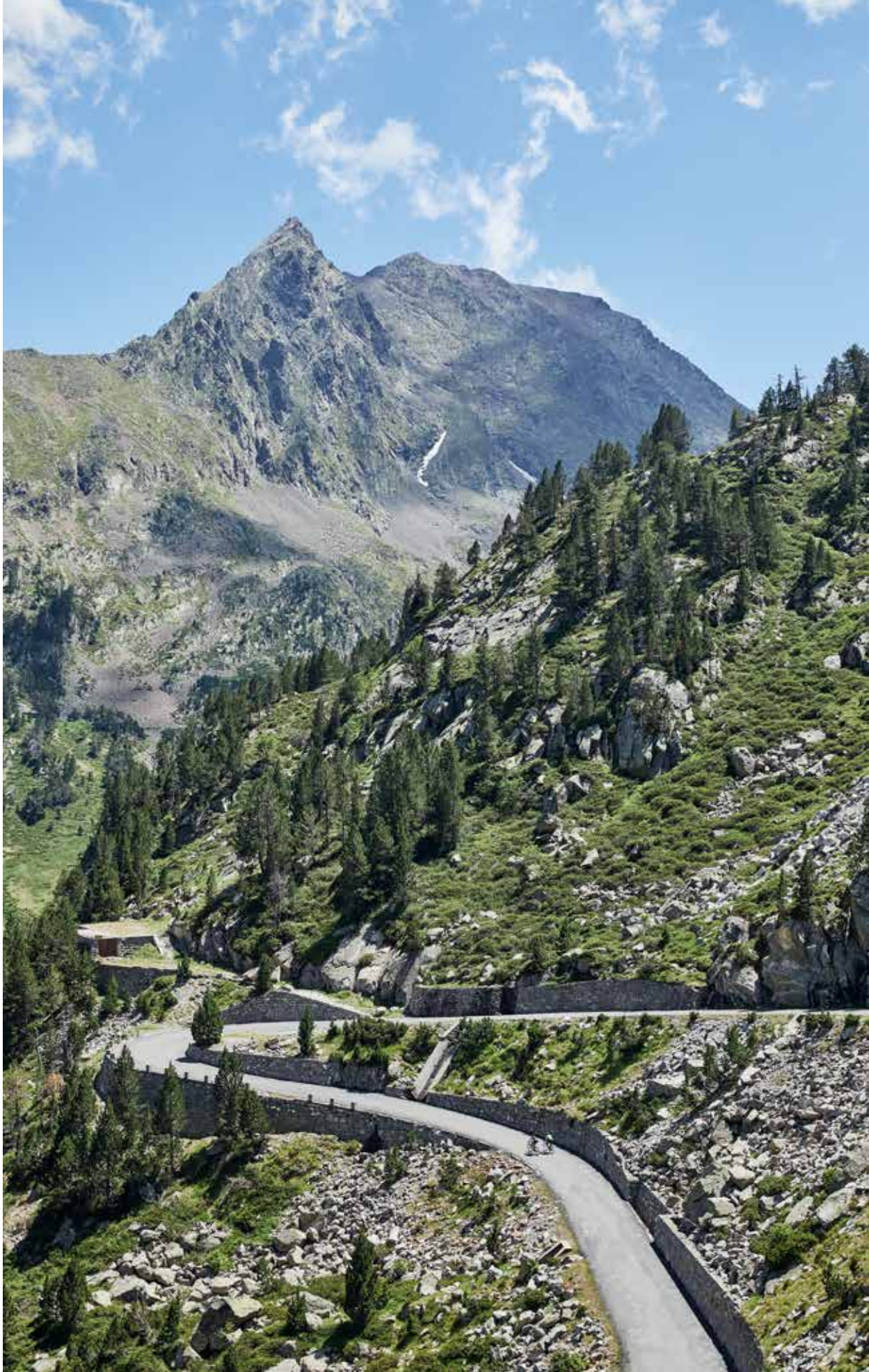
Number of times the Col d'Aspin has featured in the Tour de France

0

Number of times Lac de Cap-de-Long has featured in the Tour de France

67 million

Amount of water in cubic metres held by the dam at Lac de Cap-de-Long



Previous pages: Cyclist gets tied up in the Lacets des Edelweiss, a series of hairpins about 5km below the summit of Lac de Cap-de-Long

These pages: We're high on the climb now, and the slow crawl past Lac d'Oredon (below) means that there is only the final flurry of hairpins (left) before we reach the dam at a height of 2,161m

◀ All pain seeps away. We lie in the sun and gorge on a lunch of wraps, salads and salty snacks prepared by Jamie's partner, Kitt, before taking a jaunt along the top of the dam. Its size is incredible, and it's almost impossible to fathom the force of water that must lie behind it, testing its strength, seeking out its weaknesses.

All these musings make me feel a little nervous and it seems like a good idea to get off the mountain quickly. We mount up, and point downwards in the direction from which we came.

It's only on the descent I get a real idea of just how big the climb is. I expect to be down in a flash, carving through the bends, blasting down the straights and popping out again in St Lary-Soulan. But on and on it goes, each corner threatening to be the last, only to reveal more corners, more descent.

By the time we make it to the cafe at the junction, my back is aching from holding a crouched position and my

hands are numb from leaning on the bars. Jamie still looks as fresh as if he'd just woken from a good night's sleep, but I guess that's what happens if you're in the habit of knocking off the Hautacam in your lunch hour.

### The big finale

From here it's a long haul back the way we came on the main road to face the final challenge of today's route: the Col d'Aspin.

On any other ride, this would be the main event, but today it seems like the dessert – like an extra treat at the end of a meal, or the unnecessary addition that tips you into nausea, depending on how you look at it.

From the town of Arreau, the climb is 12km with an average gradient of 6.5%, and on this occasion it doesn't play the trick of starting shallow only to smack you with steep gradients later on. It stays fairly consistent all the way up to the top. ▶

**I expect to be down in a flash but on and on it goes, each corner threatening to be the last, only to reveal more corners, more descent**







## Each sign tells me that the next kilometre will be just as steep as the last, if not steeper, maxing at 8.7%

📍 Sitting in between the Col du Tourmalet and the Col de Peyresourde, the Col d'Aspin has featured heavily in the Tour de France, having appeared 71 times to date, the last time being in 2018, when Julian Alaphilippe – him again – led over the summit.

Perhaps the most dramatic moment in the col's history came in 1950 on Stage 11. Italian legend Gino Bartali and Frenchman Jean Robic crossed the summit together ahead of the pack, but Bartali was brought down by crowds pushing for a better view. He in turn brought down Robic, to the fury of the French fans who kicked and punched Bartali, with one even threatening him with a knife.

Bartali went on to win the stage, but he ended up leaving the race in protest, taking the rest of the Italian

riders with him, including Fiorenzo Magni, who was wearing the yellow jersey at the time.

There are no such histrionics today. The climb is quiet, and I spend most of it peering around corners in the hope of seeing the next kilometre marker. They arrive agonisingly infrequently, and as they come into view I strain to read the average gradient to come, in the hope that it will offer some salvation.

No such luck. Each sign tells me that the next kilometre will be just as steep as the last, if not steeper, maxing at 8.7%. It's not until the final kilometre that it relents and the gradient drops below 7%.

Still, the views are wide-reaching, the worst of the day's heat is waning, and I have the ultimate incentive to help me push onwards to the top. I know that once I make it past the sticker-strewn signpost that informs me I am at the 1,490m summit of Col d'Aspin, I will barely need to turn a pedal again.

When we do get there, the sense of relief is palpable. Jamie and I shake hands, and I thank him for nursing me around today's route. The ride isn't over yet, but it doesn't really matter. There may still be 18km to go to get back to Campan, but every glorious metre of it is blessed with purest, leg-saving, life-affirming gravity. 🌸

*Pete Muir is editor of Cyclist and has no plans to sell up and move to the south of France. Well, not this year...*

Above: Nestled in the rugged wilderness of the Pyrenees, the dam at Lac de Cap-de-Long is a mighty man-made monument

Top right: The final climb to Col d'Aspin – 12km at 6.5% – would be the centrepiece of most rides, but here it is merely the palate cleanser after the blowout of the Lac de Cap-de-Long

## How we did it

### TRAVEL

The nearest airport is Lourdes, which means that Ryanair is the only viable option, so the flights are cheap but adding a bike to your luggage is pricey. From Lourdes it's about a 30-minute drive south to Villelongue. Toulouse airport is served by more airlines, but then you're looking at nearer to two and a half hours' transfer time.

### ACCOMMODATION

Cyclist stayed at Escape to the Pyrenees (escapetothepyrenees.com) in the sleepy village of Villelongue. Former cycling journalist Jamie Wilkins and his partner Kitt Blackman have done a beautiful job of converting an old barn into a guesthouse with four bedrooms, all en suite and all well appointed.

Home cooked food is delicious and plentiful, and there is a workshop and large garage for storing bikes. Guests can opt for self-guided or fully supported riding, and classic climbs such as the Tourmalet, Hautacam and Cauterets are all within easy reach of the accommodation.

### THANKS

Many thanks to Jamie for his excellent guiding skills and for resisting the temptation to drop me on the climbs – it showed impressive willpower. Also, thanks to Kitt for driving Cyclist's photographer around all day with saint-like patience, and maintaining a constant flow of tasty treats to keep energy levels up.