

## TRACING THE ROUTE OF 'THE RIDER'

# Tour de force

Tim Krabbé's novel has cult status among cyclists who enjoy reliving the agonies of 'the toughest race'

Trevor Ward

**T**he Tour de Mont Aigoual is "the sweetest, toughest race of the season".

During its 137 kilometres, it loops back twice through the pretty village of Meyrueis, plunges through the Jonte and Tarn gorges and climbs over one of the highest peaks in the Cévennes region of France.

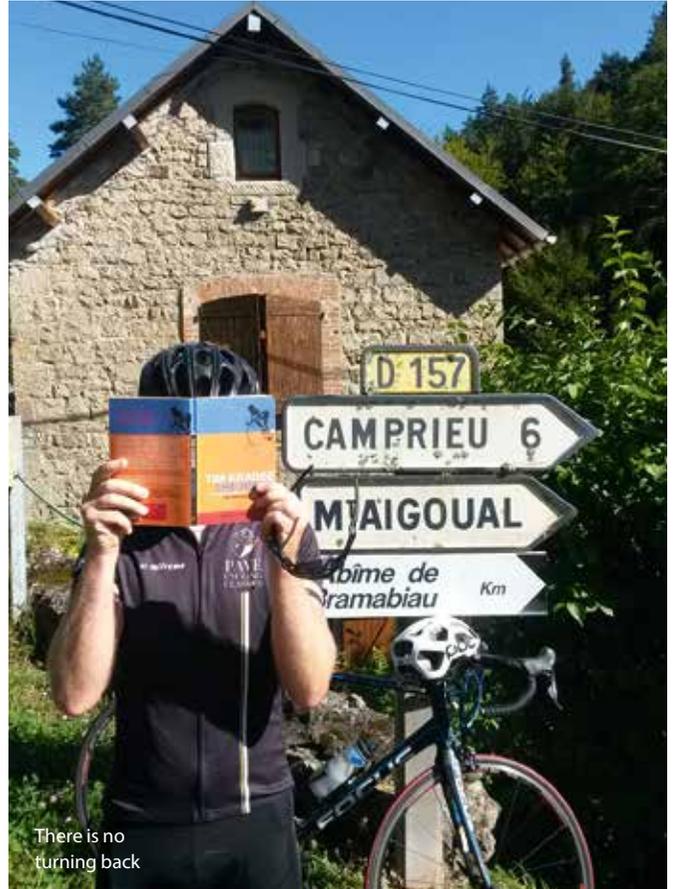
After reading about it, I wanted to ride it. There was just one problem: the Tour de Mont Aigoual doesn't exist.

It's the fictitious race at the heart of Tim Krabbé's 1978 novel, *The Rider*, which has gained cult status among cyclists and readers looking for something beyond the usual "burning thighs-gasping

lungs" school of cycling literature.

The *Rider* doesn't disappoint. Dutch journalist Krabbé wrote it when he was 35 after he had been enjoying modest success as an amateur racer for five years. Though the Tour de Mont Aigoual is a figment of the author's imagination, its route is real and his descriptions of the mental and physical suffering he endures during its 137km and 2,700m of climbing will strike a chord with anyone who has spent hours in the saddle, whether racing, training or in a sportive.

I was hooked before the end of the first paragraph when, referring to the tourists and locals sitting in the outdoor cafes, he observes: "Non-racers. The emptiness of those lives shocks me."



There is no turning back

"All the suffering turns to memories of pleasure, and the greater the suffering the greater the pleasure"

Photos: Trevor Ward



8311457

## ULTRA 900 CARBON ROAD BIKE

BTWIN ULTRA Evo Dynamic carbon frame  
Shimano 105 11-speed drive train  
BTWIN AERO 2024 wheels  
Shimano 105 brakes

£1599<sup>99</sup>



I've read the book at least half a dozen times and vowed one day to visit the scene of the 'race', even though it's in a relatively remote part of France not exactly steeped in cycling tradition in the same way as the Alps or Pyrenees.

I finally fulfilled my ambition after hooking up with Gerry Patterson and John Helmkampf at Cycling Languedoc who, like me, are confirmed fans of the book. Also like me, they had spent hours with Google Maps piecing together the exact route described by Krabbé.

At the risk of sounding slightly childish, I arrived in the village of Meyrueis as excited as if I was about to watch a stage of the Tour or visit the location of a favourite film. That's an indication of how much the book has meant to me. I'll concede it might not be to everyone's taste. Krabbé's ruminations on whether Jacques Anquetil really did switch his bidon from his bottle cage to his jersey pocket to make his bike lighter before every climb might be verging on the esoteric, but his descriptions of suffering are poetic:



Two's company on such a route



The hard yards seem never-ending

"After the finish, all the suffering turns to memories of pleasure, and the greater the suffering, the greater the pleasure. That is

Nature's payback to riders for the homage they pay her by suffering."

So it seemed perfectly fitting that the sky should darken and a violent thunderstorm erupts as we commenced the route's toughest section — "a real bastard of a climb," wrote Krabbé — that took us from the floor of the Tarn Gorge to the windswept plateau and abandoned farms of the Causse Méjean. For the next hour there was no shelter from the wind and rain, no peloton to hide in, we just had to grind through

the cold and discomfort. And even the thrill of the descent back down to Meyrueis was denied us because our hands were frozen and the road surface was slick with rainwater.

But by the time we started the long, 28km slog to 1,567m high Mont Aigoual, the sky was a fathomless blue and the low clouds had evaporated to reveal the rippling folds of the Cévennes mountains. Krabbé had been more concerned with winning the race than admiring the views, but the landscape — rolling hills and table-top plateaus punctuated with craggy gorges — is as spectacular as any Alpine range.

We arrived back in Meyrueis exhilarated and fresh. Krabbé would have been disappointed in us. In his book, he recalls riding with Dutch professional Gerrie Knetemann:

"You guys need to suffer more, get dirtier; you should arrive at the top in a casket, that's what we pay you for," I say.

"No," Knetemann says, 'you guys need to describe it more compellingly.'"



8290152

## ULTRA 920 CARBON ROAD BIKE

BTWIN ULTRA Evo Dynamic carbon frame  
Shimano ULTEGRA 11 groupset  
Mavic Ksyrium Elite S wheels  
Shimano ULTEGRA 6810 brakes

£1999<sup>99</sup>



**B'TWIN**  
exclusive to:

**DECATHLON**

Proud  
sponsors of  
Cycling Weekly

**Cycling**  
WEEKLY