Pedalling fiction

Tim Krabbé's classic novel *The Rider* describes a bike race in the south of France. While the event may be fiction, the route is very real, as *Cyclist* discovers

Words **TREVOR WARD** Photography **JUAN TRUJILLO ANDRADES**

The Tour de Mont Aigoual features 'a real bastard of a climb', two windswept plateaus, three gorges and a descent that makes 'legs go wobbly with fright'. Its figure-of-eight loop is 137km long and features 2,700m of climbing in a far-flung corner of France. It's 'the sweetest, toughest race of the season'.

There's just one problem – the Tour de Mont Aigoual doesn't actually exist, except in the pages of a slim 1978 novel that has gained cult status amongst a certain type of cyclist. This detail, however, hasn't stopped me and my riding partner for today, Gerry Patterson, from measuring out the finishing straight as described in *The Rider*. This involves us dodging in and out of groups of strolling holidaymakers on the pretty main street of Meyrueis and counting out 250 paces from the second of two 90° turns that are separated by a small stone bridge over the river Jonte. The event may be fictional but its route is real, and tomorrow Gerry and I plan to cycle it in homage to a book that has been a big influence on both our lives.

Pain, joy, life and death

As well as being an account of a bike race, *The Rider* also tackles the bigger themes of pain, joy, life and death. Its author, Tim Krabbé, only took up bike racing at the age of 29, having previously been one of the top 20 chess players in his home country of Holland.

Although the event at the heart of the novel is fictional (or is it? See author Q&A on p131), a lot of the book is based

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on Krabbé's own experience as a modestly successful amateur. During the course of the Tour de Mont Aigoual, he recalls details from his own career as well as events from the professional ranks involving legends such as Merckx, Gaul and Hinault.

Add to this his existential ruminations on everything from nature (how we should embrace bad weather rather than flee it) to sex (specifically whether one of his rivals really did manage to seduce a woman in the crowd during a criterium or not) and *The Rider* isn't to everyone's taste. But I've read it about half a dozen times since it was first published in English in 2002, and the route and characters have become embedded in my imagination.

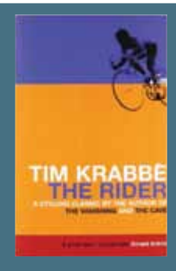
When I eventually located Mont Aigoual on a map – it's a southern peak of the Massif Central in the heart of the Cevennes National Park that has featured in the Tour only once – the next step was inevitable. I had to go and ride the Tour de Mont Aigoual myself.

Gerry is one half of 445 Cycling Tours, a company that includes the roads of the Cevennes on many of its itineraries. He and business partner John Helmkamf

Entering the spectacular ravine of the Gorge de la Jonte. Once there, Tim Krabbé saw swimmers below. All *Cyclist* sees are vultures above

Route of *The Rider*

Read the book, ride the course



To download this route go to cyclist.co.uk/60therider. Leave Meyrueis on the D996 along the Jonte Gorge. Turn right at Le Rozier, cross the bridge over the Tarn and turn right on the D907.

Turn right at Les Vignes, cross the bridge and turn right again. This is the start of the climb up to the Causse Méjean. At the top follow the road and bear right at the next two junctions. This will take you on to the D986, which leads back down to Meyrueis. Follow the D986 out of Meyrueis, then take a right signposted Lanuéjols. Follow this road on to the Causse Noir, before beginning a highly technical descent in to Treves.

From here, turn left and follow the signs for Camprieu and Mont Aigoual. After Camprieu, turn right on the D986 before taking the next left. Take the next left signposted for the Pra Peirot ski station. The route now continues to the Col de Perjuret (with the option of a detour to your right to visit the weather station at the actual summit of Mont Aigoual). At the crossroads marking the col, the route turns left and follows this descent all the way to the finish in Meyrueis.

To visit the Riviere monument, turn right and descend for 4km (it is on the right) but be prepared for a steep return trip back up to the crossroads.

The end of an 'intermediate sprint' in the Gorge de la Jonte

are both big fans of the book too, so they were the obvious choices as co-conspirators in my mission.

Ideally, we would have been riding in the company of Krabbé himself – now aged 73, he joined a group of Dutch riders to cycle the route as part of a 246km ride around the Cevennes in 2014 – but in view of the relentlessly masochistic tone of his book, it might be a lucky escape. He writes, 'Road-racing is all about generating pain,' and dismisses shifting down a gear as 'a kind of painkiller'. It's an unabashed celebration of suffering and a compelling insight into the psyche of a racing cyclist.

But the point of today's exercise is less about emulating the pain suffered by Krabbé, and more about celebrating a great work of literature with a leisurely ride and plenty of food stops. A sort of *hommage avec fromage*.

We aren't going to meet any of the characters Krabbé encountered – neither the 'pretty girl' he grows to hate in just a few pedal strokes as she cheers the 'journalistic cliche' of cycling rather than the riders themselves, nor the four old men in the village of Treves who acknowledge him as he murmurs 'Battoowoo Greekgreek' to them (a random phrase he invented during a race) – but it will be fascinating to ride the roads that inspired his musings.

Fresh meat

The first 20km section takes us along the Gorge de la Jonte to the village of Le Rozier. It's a fast, gently twisting descent between soaring pinnacles of rock. Krabbé refers to swimmers in the river to our left, but today the activity is airborne: groups of people at the roadside are scanning the skies with binoculars. A glance towards the cliff tops reveals several dark specks circling overhead – just a few of the 600-strong colony of vultures that has been resident here since 1981 (four years after the Tour de Mont Aigoual took place).

'The wall we have to go up is waiting for us across the river – a real bastard of a climb'

At Le Rozier we turn right, cross another river where swimmers and kayakers float in the crystal-clear water and swing into the Gorge du Tarn. By this point of the fictional race, there is a breakaway of seven riders. A spectator urges the peloton to go faster, prompting Krabbé to observe, 'Probably thinks bicycle racing is about going fast.'

Krabbé and the rest of the bunch are also apprehensive about the first challenge of the day: 'The wall we have to go up is waiting for us across the river – a real bastard of a climb.'

Sure enough, as we approach the village of Les Vignes, Gerry and I see the road zig-zagging up the rock face on the other side of the Tarn. 'Anyone still on his outside ring when the hill starts is in for trouble,' notes Krabbé, although

this was in the days before compacts. Gerry and I don't feel the urge to shift to the small ring until after the first hairpin, when the slope nudges 15%. (Krabbé completes the climb in a gear of 43/19. 'How about 43/20? No, on the first climb you can push things a little,' he writes.)

He recalls riding with Dutch pro Gerrie Knetemann and asking him what it's like to be dropped on climbs. Knetemann – who would go on to become Road World Champion the following year – replies, 'It's too bad, sure, but nothing to make a fuss about'.

I try to adopt an equally stoical attitude when Gerry – Patterson, not Knetemann – gives me the slip as we approach the top of the climb and the Causse Méjean, a vast expanse of emptiness where the wind whips up and a succession of *faux plats*, awaits to try to break our spirits.

Back in 1978, Krabbé painted a bleak picture of this high plateau, describing abandoned farms, empty houses and ghost towns.

Things don't look so grim today. Cultivated fields hint at an agricultural renaissance, Rouveret's golden sandstone buildings looks like a mirage floating on a sea of barley. But the remoteness of our location is inarguable – apart from a group of scouts in full backpacking gear, we haven't seen a soul since climbing up from Les Vignes.

With a headwind tempering our enthusiasm, we grind over the last *faux plat* and start the descent back to Meyrueis. While the riders in the Tour de Mont Aigoual would have been focused on the wheels or few square metres of tarmac in front of them, Gerry and I are able to enjoy the spectacular panorama of the Gorge de la Jonte that unfolds as the road swoops downwards for the next 8km. We stop at a bend for photographs. Opposite is a granite overhang with hundreds of metres of nothingness between it and the road upon which we'd started our ride.

Krabbé was a nervous descender and contemplates the worst as a car with German plates appears from the

Above: The Gorge de la Jonte is even more spectacular from above

Top right: in the Gorge du Tarn, approaching the tough climb from the village of Les Vignes

We stop at a bend for photographs. Opposite is a granite overhang with hundreds of metres of nothingness between it and the road upon which we'd started our ride

In his own words

Author Tim Krabbé tells Cyclist *about...*

...RIDING AND WRITING

I'm still riding and writing like hell. I was able to do a 246km ride in the Cevennes [in 2014] that incorporated parts of the [Tour du Mont Aigoual] route. I never saw myself as a journalist. I never had a job with a paper. I'm a writer – a fiction writer mostly – who did occasionally write for newspapers and magazines.

...FACT AND FICTION

How can you say so firmly that the Tour du Mont Aigoual was a fictitious race? Anything a writer writes about reality instantly makes it fiction. Words lie, no matter how you try. I did ride a race that day, on those roads – but protesting the fictitiousness of that Tour does not mean I have to say how hard I tried. Whether that race is fiction or not, or to what degree, is beside the point.

...PAIN AND SUFFERING

If you're going to be a cyclist, you have to suffer. Why do cyclists celebrate it? Because it's good bragging stuff. That is what Knetemann saw clearly – it's up to us writers! Or to eloquent riders like himself. Suffering comes in thousands of forms, and it's always different. Compare the suffering of winning solo to that of the weakest guy in a team time-trial. To speak about suffering is like speaking about wine – it's almost disrespectful to any particular sort of suffering or wine. The Dutch have the perfect word for it, *afzien*, which has a different, more specific flavour. I think it originated in Flemish cycling jargon.

opposite direction: 'At the window a lady in a cheap hat looks down at me in amazement. "The Tour of Causse Méjean was *wunderschön*, and then we saw a bicyclist by the name of Krabbé go hurtling into the abyss."'

Feed zone

At the bottom of the descent and after passing through Meyrueis, the 53 riders in the Tour de Mont Aigoual started climbing again, but for Gerry and me it's time for lunch on the outdoor terrace of a riverside restaurant. We are surrounded by tourists without bikes, of whom Krabbé observed: 'The emptiness of those lives shocks me.'

Krabbé discovered the route of Tour de Mont Aigoual in 1973 when he moved to the nearby town of Anduze for a period of 'cyclo-literary hermitry'. Anduze is also featured in the 1988 film version of another of Krabbé's novels, *The Vanishing*. On the face of it, this tale of a man's search for his girlfriend who disappears during a holiday has nothing in common with *The Rider*, except for the theme of suffering, which is notched up to unimaginably horrifying extremes. Another tenuous link is that the plot of the film – which Krabbé scripted and should not be confused with

After 10km on the Causse Noir, the road commences a steep, technical and frankly terrifying plunge towards the village of Treves

the saccharine 1993 Hollywood remake – unfolds against the backdrop of radio commentary from the 1984 Tour.

In view of what happens in *The Vanishing*, I'm slightly worried the Tour de Mont Aigoual might have a nasty twist in the tale. Gerry hasn't read the book nor seen the film, so I'm left to recall the story's dark conclusion on my own as we start the uphill slog to the second plateau of the day, the aptly named Causse Noir.

After 6km the road emerges from a forest into a landscape of rolling hills that ripple towards the horizon. 'Uphill or down, you can't sort it out, it drives you crazy,' observes Krabbé.

It is here that he sees the 'pretty girl' who dares to shout encouragement to the riders. Krabbé takes an instant dislike to her, speculating that she knows the names of all the famous pro riders but 'has no idea what a 43/19 is'.

This strikes Gerry and me as unduly harsh. It can't have been much fun for a 16-year-old girl to have been waiting up here on this rain-spattered plateau in the pre-Facebook age for a bunch of amateurs to go racing past.

After 10km on the Causse Noir, the road commences a steep, technical and frankly terrifying plunge towards

Above: The climb up from Les Vignes in the Gorge du Tarn boasts gradients that often reach double figures

Left and right: The rolling roads of the Causse Noir, the second plateau of the day. We didn't find any pretty female spectators like Krabbé did, but we did come across an impressive stag

the village of Treves. It demands fingers-on-levers concentration, although I dare to make brief glances to the deep, thickly forested chasm to our right.

During his descent, Krabbé pulls his feet out of his toe straps in case he should need them as extra brakes, suggesting that all Dutch riders 'bear the mark' of Wim van Est, who survived a spectacular crash into a Pyrenean ravine during the 1951 Tour.

At the bottom we turn left in the village of Treves and follow the road into the wooded depths of our third gorge of the day, the Trevezel. Soon we are engulfed by rock and trees as the road starts climbing. It's a gentle gradient, but one that will rarely relent for the next 26km until we reach the summit of Mont Aigoual at 1,500m.

With not much of a view until we arrive at the chalets of Camprieu after 15km – where Krabbé wins 50 francs in the intermediate sprint – there's plenty of time to consider his formula for ascending: 'Climbing is a rhythm, a trance; you have to rock your organs' protests back to sleep.'

Krabbé reaches the summit in the leading group of three. From here it's 22km of mainly downhill to the finish, but for Krabbé the suffering is far from over. The wind is so cold he admits to 'crying out loud', which prompts the most oft-quoted passage from *The Rider*:

Crossing the bridge back into Meyrueis for the first of two 90° turns before the sprint finish and the end of the Tour de Mont Aigoual

'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.'

But on the way down, there's a reminder that not all suffering can be explained away in poetic niceties. We arrive at the crossroads at the Col de Perjuret where, during the 1960 Tour, Roger Riviere, the 24-year-old world Hour record holder, crashed while descending and broke his back, never to ride again. Gerry and I freewheel the few kilometres down to the spot where the crash happened. A handsome monument has been erected as a tribute to Riviere, who died from cancer aged 40.

We ride back to the crossroads and continue down the other side to Meyrueis, where the sun is starting to sink behind the jumble of towers, belfries and spires.

Spoiler alert

The Tour de Mont Aigoual ends in a tightly contested sprint finish involving 34-year-old Krabbé and a 19-year-old called Reilhan. Gerry and I have calculated the finish line to be near the town's war memorial, and Juan the photographer is keen for us to give the sprint full gas.

Juan isn't happy with any of our repeated takes. He wants to capture the essence of *The Rider*, a book all about pain and suffering. But on every frame he shoots the expression on my face is one of unmitigated joy.

The Tour de Mont Aigoual – ridden at a non-competitive pace – has been an absolute pleasure.

Trevor Ward is a freelance writer who regularly suffers for his art. The Rider *is published by Bloomsbury*

Do it yourself

TRAVEL

The nearest airports are Nimes or Montpellier, both served by flights from the UK. From either it's a two-hour journey to Meyrueis, with limited public transport options, so you'll either have to hire a car or book an airport transfer with 445 Cycling Tours (see below).

ACCOMMODATION

Cyclist travelled with 445 Cycling Tours, which offers fully supported tours from one day to two weeks in France, Girona and Mallorca, including the 'Tour du Mont Aigoual' route. The company provides airport transfers, luxury accommodation, gourmet meals and bike rental if required. Full details at 445cyclingtours.com.

Our hotel was the Chateau d'Ayres, a stunning, ivy-clad former monastery on a hill above Meyrueis. It boasts leafy gardens and two swimming pools, as well as an excellent restaurant. We can also recommend the Hotel Mont Aigoual in Meyrueis for a good-value, fixed-price dinner menu, and the pizzeria next to the river for a cheap, filling lunch.

BIKE HIRE

Our bike was provided by Cyrpeo, just two minutes from Montpellier Airport. It offers a range of Scott and Trek bikes for rental. Ours was expertly set up – including checking the telemetry of the gearing via a laptop computer – by former pro mechanic Marc Boyer. A Scott Addict 15 Ultegra Di2 costs from €56 (£48) per day. Details at cyrpeo.com.

THANKS

Thanks to John Helmkampf and Gerry Patterson of 445 Cycling Tours for helping to plan our trip. John also drove our photographer and supplied valuable local knowledge on wine. Thanks also to Café du Cycliste, which provided us with a Colnago V1-r on which to explore the local roads during a stopover in Nice. Go to cafeducycliste.com.