

Cycling in France where yellow jerseys grow

Trevor Ward went for a spin in Cévennes mountains that form the setting for a fictional cycle race

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They take their mushrooms seriously in the Cévennes. After commenting on how delicious my plate of ris de veau aux morilles was, a neighbouring diner told me the story of a local mushroom hunter who guarded the remote woodland source of his fungi so diligently that he would bury his bicycle beneath twigs and leaves whenever he visited. One day he returned from the woods and couldn't find his bike and ended up walking the 30km home. If my plate of sweetbreads in morel sauce in the town of Meyrueis was anything to go by, it was a small price to pay.

As it happened, I was travelling by bicycle too, though my pilgrimage was more literary than culinary. I had come to this remote part of France on the trail of an event – a 139km bike race called the Tour de Mont Aigoual – that didn't actually exist, except in the mind of Dutch novelist Tim Krabbé. His 1978 account of this fictional race, *The Rider*, has become a cult classic among bike and book fans seeking something more original than the usual "burning thighs and bursting lungs" school of cycling literature.

Though the event is a figment of Krabbé's imagination, the route is very real. Using just his slim novel and Google Maps, I pieced together the figure-of-eight loop and set off on my literary expedition. The theme of the book is the suffering of the rider. Krabbé, a successful amateur cyclist himself, demands of one professional in his book that he should "suffer more, get dirtier; you should arrive at the top [of a climb] in a casket". He, like millions of other cycling fans, will no doubt be glued to the TV tomorrow to enjoy the suffering of riders, including Britain's Sir Bradley Wiggins, competing in the toughest one-day professional race on the calendar – Paris-Roubaix, also known as "The Hell of the North".

Krabbé – and Wiggo – would probably sneer at my efforts in this Paradise of the South. I had divided Krabbé's route into two parts, both less than 70km long, each preceded by a hearty breakfast beneath the vaulted ceilings of an ivy-clad château at the foot of the Cévennes mountains. Each would be rounded off with a splendid, four-course meal and a bottle of big, bold red, such as the Miratus from Domaine Philippe Nusswitz. I also planned to stop regularly to take photographs of the region's deep gorges, soaring cliffs and rugged plateaus.



The first 20km plunged into the Jonte Gorge, where vultures rode the thermal currents. A colony of more than 300 nesting pairs has been resident here since their reintroduction in 1981 after an absence of nearly half a century. A huge, winged carrion-eater circling overhead may be the last thing a struggling cyclist wants to see, but it certainly inspires you to keep pedalling.

From Le Rozier, the route turned right into the Tarn Gorge, where the river is wider and popular with trout fishermen, swimmers and kayakers. While Krabbé may not have been impressed by my sedate pace and selfie-stops, he would surely have lauded my fortitude when the skies suddenly darkened and a violent thunderstorm erupted as I started the six-kilometre "bastard of a climb" from the village of Les Vignes to the vast, sweeping Causse Méjean plateau.

The weather merely exacerbated the wildness of the environment. The Cévennes is one of the poorest and most neglected regions of France, the wool mills and felt factories of a century ago now abandoned and a landscape that has since been successfully exploited by the tourism industry for the benefit of walkers, climbers, anglers and, of course, cyclists.

After crossing the plateau, the descent back to Meyrueis through slowly evaporating clouds was thrilling, with a sheer drop of hundreds of metres to my right. Back in the warmth and comfort of the Château d'Ayres, I feasted on aligot saucisse – a creamy potato and cheese mash with herbed sausage – and moelleux au châtaigne, a "soft chestnut" cake. Chestnuts are almost as prized as mushrooms in these parts; the chestnut tree is referred to as l'arbre à pain, the bread tree, because of the versatility of its crop.

The next day greeted me with fathomless blue skies. There was time for a leisurely coffee at one of Meyrueis's riverside cafés before commencing the second part of the Tour de Mont Aigoual. Baskets of flowers garlanded the stone bridges while pastel-coloured shutters decorated the windows of the tall, tightly-packed buildings – many of which were warehouses or mills during the town's golden era as a major trading hub for silk merchants from Marseille and sheep farmers, mule traders and felt-makers from the highlands. Celebrated French writer Frédéric Mistral always bought his hats here, but the tourist shops now sell mainly quartz stones excavated from the nearby gorges or mushroom and chestnut-themed produce from local farms.

Mont Aigoual was still 38km and 1,000 metres of climbing away. Fortunately, as well as being relentlessly scenic, the road to it eases upwards at a benevolent gradient. (By comparison, the Alpe d'Huez climb – a staple of the Tour de France – gains the same elevation in a third of the distance)

The 1,567m summit is home to France's last functioning mountaintop meteorological observatory, where visitors can check out the weather forecast via the latest satellite imagery. Fortunately for me, the outlook was good, and the views outside stretched all the way to the Mediterranean.

A long, gentle descent on smooth, empty roads took me to the crossroads at the Col de Perjuret. I recalled Krabbé's description of a professional rider crashing on the descent from here during the 1960 Tour de France: "Rivière is floating there magnificently. All his responsibilities are behind him As long as you're flying like a bird you should make the most of it." Rivière landed 15 metres down the slope, broke his back and never raced – or walked – again. A three-metre high bas-relief sculpture marks the spot – one of many sombre monuments on remote roadsides around France commemorating incidents from its most famous sporting event.

Back in Meyrueis, it was only slightly disappointing to learn that Tim Krabbé himself – still a formidable rider at the age of 71 – had been here just two months earlier, leading his Amsterdam cycling club on a 245km circuit of the Cévennes. But I consoled myself with the knowledge that he probably wouldn't have thought I'd suffered enough to deserve my second bottle of wine with dinner that night.

Travel essentials

Trevor Ward travelled with 44|5 Cycling Tours (00 33 6 45 73 06 04; 445cyclingtours.com), which offers week-long tours of the Cévennes, including transfers to and from Montpellier airport, all meals and accommodation at the four-star Château d'Ayres in Meyrueis (00 33 4 66 45 60 10; hotel-restaurant-meyrueis.com) from €2,495pp.

Road bike hire is also available from VéloRoo (00 33 6 65 95 30 97; veloroo.com) from €183 a week.

Montpellier is served by easyJet (0843 104 5000; easyJet.com) from Gatwick. Trains run from London St Pancras, Ashford and Ebbsfleet via Paris or Lille (03432 186 186; eurostar.com).

More information

The Rider is published in the UK by Bloomsbury.