

## Riding the Pyrenees with Adventure Travel Group

### 2007 Tour de France

By Lonna Ramirez

It was an hour into the first climb (Port de Bales) of our 10-day cycling trip. The group had split up, tackling the seemingly endless climb at their own pace. It was foggy and a little cold, but perfect for climbing. I kept hearing what sounded like dozens of people banging pots and pans somewhere off in the distance, but the fog was too thick to see where it was coming from. As I came around a switchback I saw the source: Cows, scores of them, with bells around their necks, grazing along the road and the surrounding hillsides. They were completely oblivious to cyclists, and several of us had to maneuver around a group of particularly stubborn ones that wouldn't budge from the road.



Port de Bales, an hors catégorie climb, was our first taste of climbing in the Pyrenees on the 2007 Tour de France trip with Adventure Travel Group (ATG), run by SDBC members and guides extraordinaire Gary Bezer and Lise Fleury. We'd be hearing the cow (and sheep) bells on most of the climbs over the next nine days. As hard as the climbs were, I always looked forward to the sound of the bells and coming across the grazing animals.

### Good People, Good Times ...

My husband Dan and I had dreamed of watching the Tour de France in person and attempting some of the epic climbs, and the ATG tour offered an ideal opportunity to do



both. The group included several members of our local San Diego cycling club, a father-son duo and a recently married tandem couple from New Jersey came along—she wore a veil on the back of her helmet every day and was photographed and cheered on by the French. Theirs was the only tandem we saw in the mountains (for good reason).

Another group member from Northern California had just finished an ATG Tour in Italy. Two Florida cyclists rounded out our tour group and were the strongest climbers in the group, even though there *are* no hills in Florida. They claimed they practiced on bridges, but I'm guessing they trained in an undisclosed location with Rasmussen.

Each morning we discussed the details of the day's route over freshly baked croissants, pastries and coffee. ATG provided directions, maps and highlights of the day's ride along with easier or more challenging options for the day. Throughout the day, Lise parked the van at various places along our route, offering water, snacks and transported jackets and other items to lighten our load on the bike. After our ride, we'd gather at a local café or bar to have a "recovery" beer and watch the Tour. We'd end the day with a group dinner that gave us a chance to try the local cuisine and wines. Gary and Lise chose restaurants that offered excellent food and great ambiance.

### **The Hills Are Alive ...**

Our tour began and finished in the city of Pau, and we spent three days in Luchon, St. Lary and Viscos—all great towns with charm, picturesque surroundings and great cycling.



Daily routes included some of the most beautiful and brutal climbs in the Pyrenees. We climbed four of the five cols of stage 15 a few days before the pros came through (we rode them over two days, while the pros knocked them out in one), and watched two Tour finishes and a start. We climbed Port de Bales (12 miles/3,888 ft), Superbagnères (12+ miles/3,838 ft), Portet d'Aspet (5+ miles/1,949 ft), Col de Menté (4+ miles/1,801 ft), Col de Peyresourde (9 miles/3,081 ft), Col d'Azet (5+ miles/2,034 ft), Pla d'Adet (6.5 miles/2,824 ft), Col d'Aspin (7+ miles/2,556 ft), Col du Tourmalet (10+ miles/4,160 ft) and Col du Solour/Aubisque (18.5 miles/4,091 ft). Most of these climbs had steep sections, many over 10%, and to do a few of these climbs was tough enough, but several in the same day at race pace like the Tour riders ... absolutely mind blowing.

With the exception of the roads along the Tour route (tons of RVs and campers) and the Col du Tourmalet (very popular with cycling tour groups), we had most of the climbs to ourselves. We wound our way up lightly traveled mountain roads, rolling over spray-painted names of riders from previous Tours. The scenery was spectacular, with green meadows, wildflowers and snow-covered peaks in the distance—it was like a movie set from “The Sound of Music.” We rode past waterfalls, waited for grazing animals to cross the road and had the satisfaction of looking back over miles of switchbacks from the top of the cols. As beautiful as it was, it was tough. There was probably a lot that I missed while I was staring at my front tire, slipping into a climbing coma on some of the more difficult climbs.



### **Partying Tour de France Style**

Watching a stage of the Tour is like attending a huge picnic, party, parade and sporting event combined—something that every cyclist should try to see at least once. As the riders are preparing for the start, the Tour caravan begins its drive of the entire course, with costumed people tossing hats and other samples at spectators amidst loud music. The caravan doesn't look out of place at the start or finish lines, but it's an odd sight driving along narrow mountain roads. At the stage 15 finish line in Loudenvielle, we



joined hundreds of people on the grass in front of the TdF jumbotron to watch the progress of the race. We saw Vinokourov get his last stage victory of the Tour before he was kicked out. Similarly, we watched the stage 16 finish on Col du Aubisque, where Rasmussen earned the yellow and polka-dot jerseys for the last time. And we were there to watch Team Discovery's Alberto Contador and Levi Leipheimer seal their positions on the podium.



At the start of stage 17 in Pau, we watched as a spectator booed the first Rabobank rider as he rode to the start line—this was the first day the team rode without Rasmussen. The rider stopped, angrily glared for 30 seconds, then circled back to the spectator and squirted him in the face with his water bottle. Across the way, a group of people dressed as giant hypodermic needles protested in front of television cameras. Tensions were definitely high at the start of this stage, but it didn't ruin the Tour experience. Several of us were close enough to the Discovery riders to get autographs from George, Levi and Popo. We were able to see all of the teams up close as they assembled at the start.



### **You Call That a Climb?**

Looking back on our ride, the miles didn't seem so significant—around 40 to 60 miles a day—but it felt like so much more. They were definitely some of the hardest—but sweetest—miles I've ridden. Everyone in the group improved as a rider, and all of us had different opinions about which climbs were the toughest (it was Tourmalet for me). And because most days included hours of climbing, nothing seems daunting anymore—an hour of climbing? A grade of over 10%? No problem, we did that for days.

Cycling together as a group also gives you an opportunity to get to know people a little better—whether it's because careers and lives outside of cycling are secondary, or whether people are more likely to let down their guard on a bike. It's hard to beat the friendships you develop through cycling. We all came away from the trip with memories of great cycling, shared pain (the good kind), scenery, food and new friends to call for a weekend ride or to plan future cycling adventures with.