

# France Phil Style

by Phil Giddins

*Phil Giddins from Perth WA couldn't wait until PBP 99 to return to France. So he went back last summer to refresh his French. Phil tells his tale, like only Phil could.*

*This is an account of a 4 week bicycle trip through France, culminating in the "Raid Pyrénéen", a Randonnée Permanente of 710km, with 18 mountain passes, 11,000 meters of climbing, and a 100 hour time limit.*

## **Mon 3.6.96 Aeroport CDG – Les Andelys 146km**

I arrived at Charles de Gaulle airport at 7am, and promptly left via le Mesnil-Amelot and D26, which takes one out of the airport, and into the country without involving any smelly motorways. The traffic cop at the exit told me "Ooka, Ooka, Ooka" as I went past, puffing and panting with my tongue hanging out. This puzzled me more than somewhat, but I figured either he didn't think I was worth an "Allez, Allez, Allez", or else he was politely indicating that I was riding through a red light. Who knows? The French are a mysterious people. A few kilometres from the airport, there is a village which has what must be the world's most perfect bowling green. You can see it as you come down the hill into the village, a stretch of emerald green grass so smooth and perfect that it must have taken hundreds of years of seeding and watering and rolling to bring it to its current state of smooth perfection. As you go past it, you notice the broken glass sticking through the surface, and realize it is the village slops pit, full of water with green scum growing on top.

The country here is mostly fairly flat farmland, with a few small forests and river valleys, and a lot of small villages. It's an ideal place for bicycle touring if you happen to be that way inclined. At Les Andeleys, I walked through town looking for a hotel. Les Andeleys is one of those towns that are a couple of kilometres long, and one street wide. After a couple of hours, I'd walked right to the end of town and back, and all the hotels are either closed or full. I noticed a small building just near where I first came into town. The sign on its door said "Hotel, Recommended by FFCT" (Federation Francaise Cyclo Tourisme). Well, that was what I was looking for in the first place.

## **Tue 4.6.96 Les Andelys - Lisieux 121km**

Next day was more of the same, fairly flat, open country, with occasional small climbs, and fine, sunny weather. I appreciated the easy riding, since a dog attack at the end of April hospitalised me, and put me on crutches for three weeks, and I was not in top condition. It still hurt to sit on a saddle for more than a few hours, and I was relying on this easy riding to get back into condition. Around midday, I passed a building proudly labelled "Hotel-Restaurant-Funarium" Surely that's not "Hotel-Restaurant-Funeral Parlour"??

At Lisieux, a tour group consisting of a lot of elderly, obese people was decanting itself from a couple of buses in front of my hotel. One of them was proclaiming loudly that they'd come away from the shopping centre, some of the locals had brought their barbies out on the street and were cooking sausages and selling them for a few francs a hit. Eventually, someone won, I'm not sure who.

## **Wed 5.6.96 Lisieux - Argentan 103km**

It's kind of hard to find quiet roads leaving Lisieux, but I eventually left on D182, which is a really neat road for riding bicycles. It goes up, it goes down, it goes up again, and it keeps on doing this till you get sick of it, then it stops. Later on, I passed a ruined Chateau. When I say ruined, I mean there was 2 gate posts. No gates, no wall. In a paddock well behind the gate posts, there was a pile of rocks. Close inspection showed some of the rocks were piled on top of each other and must once have formed part of a building. There was grass growing out from between the rocks, and trees growing from the top of the pile. There was also a TV antenna sticking out from between some of the rocks. People live in that?? Must be drafty in winter.

## **Thu 6.6.96 Argentan - Fougères 146km**

From Argentan, I travelled south through the Forêt d'Ecouvès. There are a number of roads through this forest, and a lot of gravel tracks. The gravel tracks have signs on them as follows: "INTERDIT AUX VEHICULES a MOTEUR. RESERVE CYCLISTES et PIETON" The meaning is fairly clear, and it's something to remember next time you're fighting for trail access. After that, I travelled along part of the 1995 PBP course to Fougères. The difference is amazing. After 3 or 4 days of travelling on back roads, where every corner opens up a new view of a village, or a forest, or a valley, suddenly you're back on a main road, and it's flat and straight and boring. During the PBP, it's not so bad, since there are crowds lining the route, clapping and cheering, which is very good for the ego, but when you come back and ride it without the crowds, you realize how boring it is.

## **Fri 7.6.96 Fougères - St Malo 102km**

The weather until now was fine and sunny. As I approached the coast, it got steadily more English, till everything was grey, with a cold grey wind from the North. At St Malo, they were having their grand championship criterium. It was due to start at 7pm. At around 7.30, the riders were still at the start line. I'm not sure if the race was officially started, but eventually the riders at the front started moving away and the others followed them, and the race was on! It was a longish course, I guess about 3 kilometres. I took a walk around it, and around the back.



**Sat 8.6.96 St Malo- Dol-de-Bretagne 40km**

At St Malo I met up with my travelling companion, who had been visiting his family in the Channel Isles. His ferry was late, arriving sometime during the afternoon. The temperature was down around zero, it was pissing down rain, and St Malo was full of Pommie yobbos looking for garbage cans to kick over. We left, and went down the coast to Dol-de-Bretagne looking for civilization. Rain continued. At Dol-de-Bretagne we found rooms above something I didn't think existed in France, namely, a teetotal cafe. We piled our wet clothes on and around the electric heater, opened the windows to reduce the resulting humidity, and went out to take dinner at a restaurant which was not teetotal. Nothing had burned down when we returned; everything was too wet. After dinner, we had a look at the 11th century church next door to the teetotal cafe. Like most 11th century churches in France, it was built a few years ago by unskilled labour specifically for the tourist trade. Any building in a French city which starts to look a little decrepit rapidly has its building blocks stolen to patch up the neighbours' houses. At 11 o'clock, the air raid siren went off, twice. At 11.20, it went off again. I don't know the reason for this, but I can imagine the Lord Mayor or Police Chief or whoever set it off, leaning on the switch, and mumbling "If I've got

insomnia, nobody sleeps!" all the way from "Zoomerzet". I deduced that they were English.

That night, I did a deed for which I will do penance: The tour group was mixing with the natives, and one of them mixed with me. "Bon jooer, monsooer" he said, "Polly voo..." etc. So I told him: "Pliz", I said, "We spik American, oui? More easy for you, more easy for me." You should have seen the look on his face. For this I will suffer in the hereafter, but it was worth it.

Next morning, I found the hotel had charged me 40 francs (\$10) parking for my bike!

**Sun 9.6.96 Dol-de-Bretagne - Laval 127km**

If you read the bicycle touring books about France, you'll find they describe tours through Normandy and Brittany, where we had just come from, and the Central Massif, where we were going to, but not in between. If you ride through that area, you'll find out why. It's dull.

**Mon 10.6.96 Laval - Tours 170km**

Just the same as yesterday, but with thunderstorms.

**Tue 11.6.96 Tours - Loches 57km**

First thing in the morning, my travelling companion pulled the pin and decided to go back where he had been. He had been having trouble with his feet, and he said he was

bored, but in fact, from the hints he let drop, it sounded like he had a little dolly bird tucked away in England that he wanted to get back to, and didn't want anyone to know about. Don't worry, Brett, male, I won't tell a soul. It took me until 1 o'clock in the afternoon to find my way out of Tours, which is a town much bigger than it needs to be. After that it was good fun, riding along the Indre valley to Loches, which according to the plaque, is where Joan of Arc met the king of France. He survived, she didn't. According to the tourist handout, the old town where the king lived, is still the way it was when he lived there, and this must be so, because there are historical inscriptions on the walls inside, saying things like "Elmer was here, 1945". I think this has something to do with the introduction of democracy to Europe.

### **Wed 12.6.96 Loches - Gueret 176km**

After Loches, the road was through flat marshy country, then rising into the foothills of the volcanic region.

### **Thu 13.6.96 Gueret - Royat 147km**

The road continues to rise after Gueret, and around lunch time I went through my very first mountain pass, the Col de Ceysat (1078m). I had been a little nervous about the mountains, since my lowest gear was 42x28, perfectly adequate for flat Western Australia, but everyone I spoke to about it said "You'll never ride in the mountains with gears like that, you need triple chain-rings, bloody amateur". Well I rode through the Col de Ceysat with two gears to spare, thinking the mountains aren't so tough after all. Then I went whistling down the other side of the hill to Royat. At Royat, the hotel locked my bike in the storeroom behind the bar. I asked if I should padlock it, and they seemed to find this amusing. Well I guess if anyone broke in there, they'd have other things to pinch than rusty bicycles. Royat turned out to be a tourist town. People who've spent 60 or 70 years stuffing their faces with too much food and drink, smoking too many cigarettes, and sitting on their fat backsides behind too many steering wheels go there to take the waters. It makes them feel better. It's depressing to walk down the main street of a town where every second building is a bar or restaurant, with all the customers sitting out on the pavement, and every face in sight is at least 60 years old and fat. Maybe I'll feel different when I'm that old myself, or maybe not.

### **Fri 14.6.96 Royat - St Flour 139km**

Remember that hill I whistled down to get to Royat? Well I started the day by whistling back up it. I had to put the panniers on with one hand while I held the bike with the other hand to stop it rolling away. Then 5.5km of 10% grade, completely cold, no warm up. All the way up I told myself, "If it doesn't hurt, you're not enjoying yourself", but that was no more convincing than it is now. After that, it was just another day at the office: volcanoes, mountain passes, river valleys, forests, villages,

spectacular scenery, ho hum. St Flour is one of the few French towns I've seen that seems to be designed primarily for motorists. These eaters of frogs' and snails' legs love their stinkmobiles, and tend to drive them whenever they're not riding bicycles, but their towns (at least the provincial towns that I've stayed in) seem to be designed around pedestrians. In the evenings, the towns come to life, with crowds of people wandering around shopping, eating and drinking at bars, and twelve year old hoons doing burnies up and down the main drag on their motor scooters. In St Flour, at 7pm, the shops closed and everyone jumped into their cars and shot through to the suburbs. The town was totally dead, just like an Australian town after dark.

### **Sat 15.6.96 St Flour- Aurillac 140km**

In France, on Saturday, everyone rides bicycles (except for the occasional social misfit). All morning I passed a constant procession of people on loaded touring bikes, people on VTTs, bike clubs sprinting on the uphill bits, whole families on three speed shopping bikes (this was out in the country, where the big hills are!). Eventually, I got lost, and when I found myself, Aurillac seemed to be down wind, so I went there.

### **Sun 16.6.96 Aurillac- Figeac 103km**

One thing I noticed about the French is their willingness to close the streets to traffic so they can be used for some other purpose. In Figeac, the street was closed so they could race model cars on it. They didn't just close any street, they closed the N140, which is a national highway. It makes sense, the N140 runs parallel to the river, so it's fairly flat (this is in the mountains, remember). Also, it's the widest road in town, and the best surfaced, just the shot for racing model cars on. The model cars didn't have mufflers. I left them to it, and went across the river to the old town to find somewhere to stay.

Figeac is a medieval city. It's been there so long, all its buildings have fallen down, and been rebuilt incestuously using each other's building blocks, so you can no longer tell where one building stops and another starts. The streets have a gutter running down their centre. I learned at school that this is so the peasants in medieval times could throw their slops out of the upstairs windows. I'm happy to report that this principle still applies in the 20th century. After wandering round this historic place till I was sick of it, I treated myself to a traditional French meal: beer and pizza.

### **Mon 17.6.96 Figeac - Villeneuve-sur-Lot 170km**

I followed the Lot down through more spectacular scenery and out onto the flat country to Villeneuve. Villeneuve means 'new town'. It was built in 1200 AD. The flat country is mostly vineyards, very interesting to wine buffs. I am not currently a wine buff, although in my younger days I was something of an expert on Penfolds sweet

sherry. Three bottles of that and you chunder in technicolour.

### **Tue 18.6.96 Villeneuve-sur-Lot - Mont-de-Marsan 135km**

At this stage, I had in theory completed my preparation, and was now resting and recuperating quietly on the flat stuff, before my “trial” (as the Cyclo Club Bemaïse quaintly puts it) in the Pyrenees.

### **Wed 19.6.96 Mont-de-Marsan - Dax 95km**

This was a quiet day through what the map describes as “forest” but which turned out to be a softwood plantation. It was very quiet and flat, with lots of cyclists. Dax is another one of those places where fat old people go to take the waters. In Dax I did another awful thing. A Frenchman asked me for directions so I told him. “If you go down this street you will come to a place where you do not wish to go. If, however, you go down this next street, you will come to another place you do not wish to go, but it is not the same place as the other one. I strongly advise you to take this third street, which will not take you anywhere profitable, but which you will find morally uplifting, and enlightening. If this is not to your taste, there is another street...” The Frenchman backed away, smiling profusely, and saying “Merci, merci”, or was it “Mercy, mercy”. I learned how to do this by asking French people for directions.

This close to the border, the TV was showing some Spanish channels: replays of the day’s bullfights. I had a good look at it, and arrived at some conclusions about the sort of sub-human Neanderthal that gets its jollies from “bull fighting”. At 11 o’clock, someone let off the air raid siren. Is this some sort of custom in small French towns?

### **Thu 20.6.96 Dax - Cambo-les-Bains 77km**

I crossed what used to be the English/French border (there’s a lesson here for Northern Ireland), and headed into the foothills of the Pyrenees. Cambo-les-Bains is yet another one of those places where fat old people go to take the waters. If I can figure out how to put warm, muddy water into cans, I can sell it in France, and be a millionaire.

### **Fri 21.6.96 Cambo-les-Bains - Hendaye 45km**

Before I left Cambo-les-Bains, I packed all my non-essential gear (thongs, evening dress, etc.) into one pannier, and mailed it to myself c/- the Post Office at Cerbère. Since I didn’t know the Cerbère post code, I had some trouble convincing the Post Office staff that Cerbère was actually in France, but after I showed it to them on the map, they agreed to take my parcel.

Then I went straight down the highway to Hendaye. In retrospect, staying at Hendaye was a mistake. I wanted a complete rest day before starting the Pyrenees, which meant staying at Hendaye on Saturday and Sunday nights. Might as well stay there Friday night as well. But Hendaye turns out to be a very expensive place to stay. If I do this again, I’ll stay up the coast at Ciboure, and ride the extra

ten km down to Hendaye before the start. Dinner in Hendaye was unbelievably expensive, unbelievably foul, and came in very small serves.

### **Sat 22.6.96 Hendaye 114km**

I rode the first 50km of the Pyrenees course and back, including the Col St Ignace, twice. This Pyrenees ride was starting to look really easy! Dinner at Hendaye was steak, chips, and a plate of ice cream, price \$50.

### **Sun 23.6.96 Hendaye 0km**

No riding. I sat beside the harbour and watched a gentleman in a green wet suit (or a wet green suit) with a big, expensive catamaran with a hole in one side. When the tide went out, it sat quite nicely on the sand, when the tide came in, half of it floated, and half of it didn’t. He collected some friends and helpers to salvage it, and they conferred at length, finally deciding, like true Frenchmen, that the best thing to do, under the circumstances, was to go and have a really good lunch, which they did.

### **Mon 24.6.96 Hendaye - Laruns 196km**

First day in the Pyrenees was fine and sunny, and fairly uneventful, with some big hills, and the mountains looming bigger and bigger in front. I chickened out of riding the Col de Marie Blanc. The entry form showed this one as an optional extra, so I ticked the box that said “oui”, but the brevet card clearly said “go around, not over”. It also said a few things about “les amateurs des cols” which I guess means me. I stopped the night at Laruns, at the foot of the climb to the Col d’Aubisque, the first major climb.

### **Tue 25.6.96 Laruns - La Mongie 130km**

I started early, at 7am, in light fog, which soon cleared, leaving the weather cool and overcast, with no wind. I was in high spirits as I went up the hill, even though the road got steadily steeper. About halfway up, there’s a section of about half a kilometre which is signposted as 13% grade. It didn’t seem to get any flatter after I’d passed that section. At the ski resort of Gourette, about two thirds of the way up, it was pouring rain, and the temperature was dropping rapidly. I wanted to stop for a hot drink, but the worthy burghers of Gourette had all shot through, probably down to the beach to go surfing. I reached the pass at about 9am. I was soaked to the skin, the temperature was down around freezing, I was inside a cloud, with visibility down to about 2 meters, the place seemed totally deserted, and the bloody road was closed.

This, the highest point of my trip so far at 1709 meters, was the low point of the ride. There are plenty of “road closed” signs on French roads. On a bicycle you just ignore them; at worst, you might have to walk around some earthworks, but generally, French road crews seem perfectly happy to stop their bulldozers to let a bicycle go through a closed piece of road. I thought this one might be a bit different. You can’t walk round if there’s a vertical cliff up on one side, and a vertical cliff down on the other

side. I'd already passed a couple of rock slides on the way up the hill, and I figured if part of the road had fallen away, then what with the steep grades and low visibility, I'd go into the hole before I could see it, and spend a long time going down, wondering when I was going to hit something to go splat on. With the cold and wet, I didn't have the option of waiting for the road crew to turn up and asking them if it was safe. There are buildings at the col, and people live there, and sell souvenirs and meals and so on, but at that hour, they were probably still in bed, bashing their dear little pillows and snoring in French. I decide to go back to Laruns, then north to Pau, and try to get a train to Cerbère, pick up my pannier, and go home. I was so dispirited, I didn't even bother to bang on doors and try to wake anyone up. Going down the hill turned out to be nearly as bad as coming up it. My hands and feet were totally numb. I had to squeeze the brake levers with my whole hand because the fingers didn't work individually any more. I felt as if I was about to fall over the handle bars, and I kept thinking "My God, did I ride up this?" In the cloud, it was totally still and quiet, and every time I squeezed the brake levers, I could hear the whole poor rusty old bike creaking. All I could think was, "If anything fails, I'll be airborne at the next hairpin". When I got to the base of the cloud, it not surprisingly started raining again.

I stopped at a bar at Eaux-Bonnes, a couple of kilometres before the bottom, and ordered hot chocolate. The barman didn't seem surprised when I took off my gloves, and dipped each finger separately into the hot drink. If I could have undone my shoe laces, I'd have dipped my toes in the cup too. Continuing down the hill, I started to pass cyclists in 2s and 3s going up. By the time I got to Laruns, I'd passed about 20 of them. I told each one "Bonjour". Some of them said "Ulloo", some of them totally ignored me and everything else. None of them laughed at my accent. I deduced they were English.

At the town square in Laruns, I stopped to check the way to the nearest railway, and spoke to one of the cyclists heading the other way. Guess what? They were doing the same ride as me. They'd started two hours behind me the previous day, so I hadn't seen them. Now that I'd turned back, they'd caught up to me. They'd signed up with "Sporting Tours", an English firm which runs bus trips to major cycling events, plus accommodation, plus, when you do the ride, the bus comes along behind, picking up bodies. I went along to the bus, which was parked just out of town, at the foot of the climb, and casually mentioned to the organiser that the pass was closed. From the expression on his face, I could see visions of cash refunds flashing through his mind. He quickly ducked away to the nearest phone and called the roads people. The road was closed on the other side of the pass for 48 hours for road-works. Probably making it pretty for the Tour de France, which was due through here in about 2 weeks. I hung round for half an hour or so, till everyone had started up,

and no one had come down, then I tagged along with the tail-enders, and went back up the hill again.

It was harder the second time, even though the rain had stopped. At the top, it was cold and grey and miserable, but there were signs of life in the bar. I went in, and found half a dozen cyclists, and a hot stove. Since about 30 cyclists had gone up the hill, and no one had come down, and there were only half a dozen at the top, the others must have gone on. Either the road was open to bicycles, or, in the fog, they had all gone down some bloody great hole. After a hot drink, and a sandwich, I followed them. It seemed that I was no longer riding solo, but now had about 30 others for company. The road-works turned out to be some guys with trucks, patching up the concrete strip along the edge of the road that stops the bitumen from sliding away into nothingness. They had a sort of wooden framework that looked as if it was made out of orange crates, with a sort of rope safety net on one end, and they pushed this out over the edge of the road. Then two fat guys stood on the end that was still on the roads, and a very brave guy crawled over the edge, and down into the ropes, and did his little bit of road fixing. When there were no clouds, the guy on the outside must have had a marvellous view from his office window, but I think I understand why they didn't want idiots in motor cars hurtling through the middle of their work.

After that, the next pass, the Col du Soulor (1474m), was an anti-climax, except that it had started raining again. One of the joys of the Pyrenees is that after busting a gut to get up to the top of a pass, you find yourself going all the way back down to sea level before the next climb, the next pass in this case being the dreaded Col du Tourmalet (2115m).

At Luz-St Sauveur, at the foot of the Tourmalet, the sun was shining, the grass was green, and the road, while fairly steep, was not heart breaking. Life was rosy again. This situation did not last long. Just to make the Tourmalet more memorable, some local sadist has gone up the whole length of it, putting up a sign at every kilometre with a picture of a bicycle, the distance to the summit, the current elevation, and the current grade.

You pass one sign, then after subjective hours of strain, you pass the next one. Only one kilometre!! To make it worse, the new sign shows the grade is now steeper. To make it worse again, a little mental arithmetic with the current elevation and the distance shows the grade is going to get a hell of a lot steeper before it gets to the top. By the end of the last kilometre, I was having dizzy spells and everything was turning black. This is nature's subtle way of indicating that you should slow down a bit. Well if I'd slowed down any more, I'd have fallen off. I was back inside thick cloud, and every time I wobbled to the edge of the road, all I could see below me was cloud. I wondered, if I wobbled too far and went over the edge, how far would I go down before bouncing? So I got off

and walked (or rather staggered) for the last 50 meters. This was really fun! At the top, everything was grey rock, and grey cloud, and the temperature was dropping rapidly. It was totally deserted except for four guys who'd been just ahead of me on the way up. We donned rain coats, woolly gloves, etc. and headed down the other side. A few kilometres down the hill, we came across the ski resort of La Mongie. At last! Some signs of life! There was a bar open on one side of the street, and a hotel on the other. Since it was about 6:30pm, I headed for the hotel, and booked myself in for the night. The other guys had their accommodation already booked at St Marie de Campan, about another 15 kilometres through the cold and fog. I had a quiet little chuckle about that as I stood under the hot shower. Feeling much more alive, I went downstairs, and took a seat in front of the fire, where I could see out the front window the procession of partially frozen cyclists coming down the hill with their teeth chattering, and their noses turning blue. One pair of guys went into the shop just down the road, and came out with a pack of a dozen plastic sandwich bags which they put on their hands over their gloves, to keep the wind off. I deduced that it was cold out there. "Ah", I thought, "This is a really tough ride". I pulled my chair a little closer to the fire, and ordered another beer.

### **Wed 26.6.96 La Mongie - Massat 184km**

When I looked out my bedroom window in the morning, the slope outside, which had been green with brown rocks when I went to bed, was now white with brown rocks. I put on all the clothes I possessed, had breakfast, and headed down the road. When I got to St Marie de Campan, the bus party was part way through breakfast, and starting to spill out onto the road. I went into their hotel to get my brevet card stamped, since this was an official checkpoint. The woman running the hotel plainly thought I was one of the bus group, (a smelly cyclist with a brevet card, right?) but I foolishly went back out onto the road again before realising that I should have sat down with the late starters and had a second (free) breakfast. The next item on the agenda was the Col d'Aspin (1489m). At the foot of the climb, I was riding with a Cockney gentleman and his wife. They assured me that this climb was an easy one. "Quite flat near the top" were their words. I told them "Ho, Ho, Ho" (a merriment symbol). They sprinted up the next grade and left me floundering. It was not quite flat near the top; it was not flat at all. If it was easy, it was only in comparison with the previous day, and I was in no condition to appreciate it. At the top, there was a French yuppie with a Range Rover and a mountain bike strapped on the back. I made a smart crack to the guy I was riding with about how this fellow might have fun riding down the hill, but he'd have trouble getting back up. When we stopped to have a chat with him, we found that his idea of a good day out was to drive up the Col d'Aspin, then ride down to St Marie de Campan, then ride up the Tourmalet,

have a plate of soup at the top, and ride back again. He was a chubby little guy who didn't even look very athletic. Gaaaaahh!

Later in the day, we arrived at Bagneres-de-Luchon. While going through the town, we came across one of those stupid tourist things comprising a truck dressed up to look like a steam train, and towing three or four trailers with seats in them. This one was crammed full of plump, swarthy, teenage females. When they saw our group of cyclists, they started singing a song.

The song went:

Indurain, Indurain, Indurain,

Indurain, Indurain, Inuraaaaaaaaa-in

I deduced they were Spanish. It seemed a very simple song, but appeared to give them a great deal of pleasure. It did, however, have a remarkable effect on some of the English gentlemen I was riding with, causing them to dismount, and make extremely obscene gestures involving pointing to their genital members. This seemed to cause considerable amusement to the young Spanish ladies, who laughed and took photographs. I can just imagine them going back to school the next day and telling their little playmates how they "really gave some stick to a bunch of Froggy racers".

The English gentlemen must have found this stimulating, since on the next, fairly flat, section, a couple of them cranked the pace up to around 45km/h. Since they seemed to be enjoying themselves, I sat in behind, and didn't disturb them. Later, we stopped to take photographs of the monument to Casartelli. We waited around 20 minutes for the tourists to leave, but as fast as one carload left, another would arrive. I don't think a monument to a dead bicycle racer would attract that sort of attention in Australia.

At the hotel in Massat that evening, I ordered a ham salad. I got a large plate carrying two pieces of (cold) bacon, topped with a gherkin sliced very thin, and a pat of butter. Yum, yum. The French are a strange people.

### **Thu 27.6.96 Massat - Elne 227km**

I left Massat at 7am, in heavy fog. The hotel declined to provide breakfast at that hour, and no shops opened before 8am. Not to worry, nowhere in France is more than 5 minutes away from a restaurant. I was sure to find somewhere along the road to get breakfast. On the outskirts of town, I passed a hostel, with tents out the back. In spite of the hour, the fog, the cold, and the damp, the inhabitants were up for an early morning game of soccer. I said the French were strange. The Col des Caougous (947m) and the Col de Port (1249m) were magic places, the road winding gently upward through a forest, as the trees appeared through the mist, finally emerging above the tree line into brilliant sunshine, with the grass shiny with morning dew, and totally silent except for the tinkle of little streams running down the hillside, the songs of myriad birds, and the rumbling of my empty tummy. It

was over twenty bloody kilometres before I came to Saurat and found a shop that was open. I bought a couple of hot loaves of chocolate bread, and a cold slice of apple tart, and, like a proper bicycle tourist, sat down in the gutter to eat them. The hot chocolate bread really hit the spot, and the apple tart turned out to be made of more or less equal parts apple and rum. After breakfast, I proceeded down the road, wobbling happily from the effects of the apple tart, to Tarascon-sur-Ariege, and onto the N20 to Col de Puymorens.

When you look at the Col de Puymorens on the map, you think “this can’t be hard”. The N20 runs right across the pass, and the N20 is a national highway, and a major trade route between France and Spain. It carries semi-trailers, and road trains and god knows what. If there were any steep grades, the trucks couldn’t get through it. Well, there are no steep grades, at its steepest it’s maybe as steep as Greenmount Hill. The trouble is, it goes on for 50 kilometres. Immediately after Tarascon, the roads appears to be level. You notice your speed dropping, and find yourself going to lower gears, and you think, “Must have overdone it with the apple tart”, but if you attend to the elevations on the town signs, you see that you are climbing all the way.

The road runs along a river valley fairly straight from north to south, with steep hills on either side. Eventually, the road starts to climb the side of the valley in a series of long slow switchbacks. At the south end of each switchback, you can look further along the valley, and far off in the distance, at an impossible height above you, you can see the traffic still climbing back and forth up the side of the valley. This is a soul destroying sight, but actually, that’s a different road. In fact, it’s in a different country, so you don’t have to climb up there. There’s a tunnel that goes under the pass. The tunnel is 4.8 kilometres long, the road is 12 kilometres and more fun. Thence south to the Spanish border at Bourg-Madame, and turn left along the N116 heading north-east. The N116 was a killer. It climbed steadily, there was a howling head wind, the country was flat and open, with hills far away to the left and right. Eventually, I stopped at a village too small to have a name.

A couple of other guys rolled in behind me, and we adjourned to a bar and engaged ourselves with cheese sandwiches and coca cola. The sandwiches were constructed of half a loaf of bread, stuffed with most of a Camembert cheese. Turbo power for the legs. While eating, we noticed a sign outside the window saying ‘Col de la Perche’. The route sheet showed the course as downhill all the way from the Col de la Perche to the coast. We had a good laugh over this, since we were in the middle of a wide, gently rising plain, running north-south, with snow-capped mountains to the east and west, particularly east, which is where the coast was. A couple

of kilometres further north, the road plunged into a sheer sided ravine, and plummeted downwards all the way to the coastal plain. The other guys stopped for the night at Prades, I continued on, and at Ille-s-Tet, finally found a railway station that was actually open for business. My original plan had been to arrive at the finish line at Cerbère on Thursday morning, then ride the 200km to Montpellier by Friday evening, and catch the train to the airport on Saturday. Since it was now 6pm on Thursday, and I had not yet arrived at Cerbère, this plan was beginning to look impractical. I changed my train ticket to leave Cerbère on Saturday morning, and arrive at the airport in time to catch my plane. Then I went to look for a hotel for the night. There were two hotels in town, one closed, one derelict.

I continued on to the next village, Cerbère. It had no hotel. At the next town, Thuir, there was one hotel. It was full. I carried on through Llupia, Trouillas, Mas Sabole, Bages and Montescot. No hotels. Most tourists, including me, complain about places being too touristy. It’s not until one leaves the tourist belt, and faces the likelihood of spending the night sleeping in a ditch, that one realizes the benefits of tourism. At Elne, I came back into tourist country, and found a hotel and restaurant.

#### **Fri 28.6.96 Elne - Cerbère 35km**

A short stretch straight down the main road, with only a few hills. I completed the ride in 98 hours and 5 minutes. Then, by the miracle of the French postal service, I was reunited with my trousers.

#### **Sat 29.6.96 Cerbère - Aeroport CDG 0km**

I had intended to get a train straight from the finish line to the airport, but due to a slight lack of organization, I started at 4:30am, and got a train from Cerbère to Montpellier, then another from Montpellier to Lyon, then another from Lyon to Paris, and finally arrived at the airport about 5pm

#### **If You Go:**

The passes are open from about June to October, but you can expect crowds in July and August. Start by writing to:

Cyclo Club Beamaïs,  
59 Avenue Louis Sallenave,  
64000 Pau.  
FRANCE

and asking for an entry form for the ‘Raid Pyrénéen’. It will probably take about 3 months to organize your entry. If you prefer an organized tour, write to:

Sporting Tours  
21 Manor Gardens,  
Pool-in-Wharpedale,  
Otley West Yorkshire LS21 1NB  
England

who run this tour twice a year (June and October), and provide the bus trip from London, hotels, two meals a day, sag wagon, and ‘Raid Pyrénéen’ entry for A\$1300, which is maybe twice what you’ll pay if you do it on your own account.