
Raid Pyrénéen

by Rod Marston

This is a story about the toughest Audax-style event I have ever done and my first Raid randonnée, a long distance non-competitive tour with normal overnight stops at two-star hotels.

I rode this Raid in south-western France between 21 and 27 June 2003, with fellow Audax Perth Region club member Ken Dupuy and 30 others mainly from Britain. We followed in the wheel tracks of previous “sterling” entrants Brian Hawes and Jimmy Benford.

Ken and I had the luxury of support provided by Graham Baxter Sporting Tours (www.sportingtours.co.uk), who took care of the entries, carnets (like a brevet), accommodation and transport of us and bikes, by bus, to and from the Pyrenees from England. Baxter’s also provided a back up car run by two cyclist volunteers which gave us food and water during the day, particularly in the mountains where often the bus could not get to us. Brian had also “tutored” us and helped in training, but the reality?

The Raid Pyrénéen is arranged by the Cyclo Club Béarnais in Pau, France, and the route, entirely in France, follows the border between France and Spain from the Basque town of Hendaye near Biarritz in the west, on the Bay of Biscay, to Cerbère in the east on the Mediterranean coast, again on the Spanish border. Many people do it each year, and we met some other groups of French cyclists doing it.

The raid can be performed anytime (though you would need a snowplough in winter), in either direction, with a time limit of 100 hours or 4.5 days. There is also a tourist option which can be completed within 10 days. As you can see from the bike label, the Raid Pyrénéen is about 720km long, climbs 18 classified cols (passes) many of which feature prominently in the Tour de France, such as the Aubisque (1709m), Tourmalet (2115m), Peyresourde (1569m), and Puymorens (1915m). These climbs add up to over 11,000m, which to me was rather like doing three Audax Alpine Classics of 200km (3,600m of climbing), one after the other, with a bit tacked on the front and



Spectacular scenery greeted the riders along the entire route. Here Rod takes a break at Garança Gorge.

back!

Sunday was spent sitting on a hot bus all day on the 10 hour auto-route (toll freeway) trip from Paris to Hendaye, then assembling bikes on arrival and going for a tune up spin on the right-hand side of the road before dinner. We started out at 9am the next day, remembering to look the other way for cars and exiting roundabouts right not left. It was cool and cloudy, which is often a feature of the Pays Basque (Basque country), and we skirted the sea before heading into the foothills of the Pyrenees. The first control was at Espelette after a couple of “baby” cols of St Ignace (169m) and Pinodieta (176m). We breezed into a service station for water and an attractive Madame immediately

pulled out the stamp for our brevets: we were some of thousands who pass through, but a few drinks were bought. Then navigational skills were immediately called into play with the need to follow some minor roads as described in the brevet, whereas some less “Audax-inclined” riders chose to follow an easier route on the D918 (busier) instead of going through a delightful little limestone gorge called Pas de Roland.

We got back onto the smooth, newish D918 which followed a valley southeast to St Jean Pied de Port for our déjeuner (lunch) of ham and cheese rolls, café au lait (flat white) and Perrier (mineral water, the original) at a roadhouse bar with many of the Brits on the tour. Ken was trying his “Essex



Ken and Rod, pleased to be at the summit of Col d'Aubisque.

French”, which worked, though most waiters know some English anyway. By now it was warmer, moving up into the high 20’s, and a bigger Col, the Osquich (or “Ostrich” to us anglophones) followed at 500m elevation. On to the second control at Tardets, with then just another 27km to go to the overnight in Oloron Ste Marie, near Pau, and the only three-star hotel on the trip, with cool beer, air conditioned rooms and a swimming pool. That was the ‘warm-up’ day of about 170km. We didn’t go too fast because the big days were to follow!

Given the latitude of the Pyrenees and the time of year, there was plenty of daylight, about 6.30am to 9.15pm - but who wants to cycle all day? We set out at 8 to 8.15am most days except the first. Two bidons for water was also adequate with the back up we had, the opportunity to buy or get refills at cafes, and some eau potable (drinking water) taps in village squares.

So Tuesday was the first serious day (14.5km and 2 big climbs), first on the flats south for 10km to get back on the official route, then on the “good” (now narrow and old) D918 east through delightful woods, then south back into the mountains at Laruns. This place signalled the start of the 18km long Col d'Aubisque climb, which included some gradients in excess of 13%. As with all the big passes, we were to discover that at every kilometre there was a smart sign with

distance to go to the top, local elevation, and the average gradient for the next kilometre. We prayed for 4, 5 or 6%; but it was probably better not to know! At the summit we were out into the cooler mountain air, another café lunch stop, control stamp and secret control signature with aged Monsieur et femme (and wife) enjoying sun outside the café.

Bare mountains, sheep and cows with bells, but down we go on the D918 through two short tunnels to an intermediate col, and then a further drop of 1000m to a deep valley at Argelès-Gazost. This signals another gentle south ride up the shady Gorge de Luz, before a turn east at Luz St Sauveur to start the dreaded Tourmalet climb of 18km, up again. The first 10km out of Luz was straight, hot and steep, so we were stopping every 5km to cool off and water-up. It eased off after that but we ended up in the clouds at 5pm and a rest and refuel in the famous café with walls full of famous old Tour bikes, none of which had triples or any gears remotely like ours.

Then it was a chilly 17km downhill, past the grotesque apartment-block ski “village” of La Mongie, to our overnight stop in the old Pyrénéen village of Ste Mairie de Campan. We stayed in what was really a bunk house, three in our hot airless room in the attic, and only bread and jam for breakfast. This was an inappropriate prelude to another big day of 170km. This day started in lovely pine

forest and mountain pasture landscapes winding up an alternative and slightly higher pass to the Col d'Aspin (1489m), which was closed for resurfacing ahead of le Tour. Down our pass, past log trucks and dodgy boue (mud) on the one-car road, we headed into the deep Vallée d'Aure and the town of Arreau, for some “make-up” eats on French brekkie. Many towns now have by-passes and I had to back track to catch up with Ken in town, before we tackled the 18km long, but rarely steep, wooded climb up the Col Peyresourde, now on the D618 with some one-lane sections because of “Tour repairs”.

Back on with the wind jackets to descend to Bagnères de-Luchon (Le Tour '03 came here via Spain and climbed the two passes we did, in reverse) and fly north up the valley to an omelette-bread-salad and coffee stop at Chaum. Then a nice gentle climb through the trees and some drizzle to Col d'Ares (797m), down (one snakebite flat to me, scary) then up again with some fierce steep bits, including one with a memorial to a tour rider going down who hit the wall. Still in the mist we rode to the Col Portet d'Aspet (1069m), down to St Girons, then a long gentle ascent up the wooded limestone gorge to Massat. A “très fatigué” (buggered) day’s end at 8pm for us, and we were in the hotel up the street from the dinner/brekkie hotel, after another big day on the bike. Ken said that beers being alkaline combat lactic acid in the legs and I didn’t dispute that as we downed a few.

Thursday brought a cereal-attached petit déjeuner (breakfast) which was a welcome change, and then an easy climb of 600m to Col de Port (1249m). Dropping down through the clouds we entered the deep, craggy gorge of the Ariège river, famous for prehistoric sites and reminding me of the massive valleys of the Italian Dolomites. I had cycled there with Americans on a Giro d'Italia bike tour in 1999. We then got a fast drag along the main N20 road with some of the British road racing boys on the trip for the flat 26km to Ax les Thermes, another town proudly announcing, in a lit-up sign, that Le Tour was coming in July. Time for another omelette avec champignons (Ken’s French getting better, not sure about the accent), before the attack on the Puymorens.

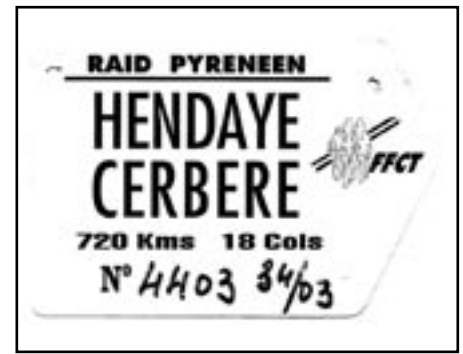
Today was now officially hot, 35°C, as we headed up the valley on one of the main roads into Spain and Andorra, complete with tunnel, banned to us. Lots of trucks, packs of Harley Davidson tourists and more Tour roadworks, plus near melting bitumen, so we had another stop at the appropriately

named village of l'Hospitalet. After that came the hairpins above the tunnel, cooler, but still an unrelieved grind to the top where our support crew supplied bananas and cake, no café open. Now we had entered the drier, barer and warmer Mediterranean side of the Pyrenees, and I felt no need for a jacket on the steep hairpin descent. Going down still gives lots of aches in the shoulders and arms, and needs full concentration, very few guard rails or walls to stop you, if straying...

Into a valley bottom draining into the Mediterranean, I felt the need for a good steak, so we had a feed at an old railway station café, very pleasant and freshly cooked. Then we drifted on down, still on N20, for 20km to the Spanish border at Bourg-Madame, and hot weather again. What followed was probably as tiring as climbing big passes. We had to grind across a wide valley in full sun, and then up gentle, but tiring hairpins to the next summit at Mt Louis, a big ski resort but

also notable for a massive medieval fort. On the way we picked up a winding narrow gauge railway line, which tops the pass at Col del al Perche (1575m) then, like us, proceeds down the most spectacular gorge of the trip, Gorge de la Carança, for a 35km descent into our last Pyrénéen overnight at Prades.

After 175km on a hot Thursday we were ready for an air-conditioned night at Prades, an ancient hilltop town. But it was not to be, so it was with some relief that we continued descending the open valley on Friday towards our Mediterranean rendezvous. No significant climbs except on the coast to get back into the edge of the Pyrenees where they meet the sea. This is major beach resort territory for the French, but we were there just before the hordes descended from the north. It was very dry but there were heaps of vineyards and forts in lovely rock-fringed bays. Cerbere was only 95km from Prades but we got there with an hour



Bike plate: count down the cols as you go.

to spare to enjoy lots of beers at the final café and a welcome cooling dip in the azure waters of the Mediterranean. We had done the 720km distance and the 11,000m of climbing, without any breaks in the route; some entrants with inadequate gears could not complete the trip. I kept thinking of Brian doing the Raid with panniers and no triple! I had 30-52 on the front and 13-26 on the back, all needed and used.

PBP - Noble Risks

by Barry Stevenson

Some two years ago I caught the PBP bug and decided that I would like to do something special, something beyond my then current capabilities, and something that I would do only once.

Whilst thinking about the *audacity* of such a venture, I happen to come across a quote from the poet Scott and I modified it and put it up at home and work. It proved to be inspirational and, in the end, pretty close to the mark.

“Ninety hours of life, crowded to the full with glorious action, and filled with noble risks, is worth whole years of those mean observances of paltry decorum”

It has been two weeks since the end of PBP and I still cannot, for the life of me, remember the ride as a cohesive story. Rather it is a “blur” of people, incidents, events and scenery. So I would like to share some of them with you and maybe it will give a idea of my PBP experience.

- Geoff Bray’s fellowship - couldn’t have done it without him
- the kids giving ‘high fives’ on the move.
- “tomorrow night we sleep - tonight we ride”
- Remy at a small village coffee stop taking a photo of a sleeping Geoff and getting an address to send it too
- long lines for food at each control
- early morning fog - Friday
- watching the control closure times in the second half of the ride
- the volunteers and the people along the way
- talked by phone to Liam in Australia on his birthday - Wednesday
- Geoff, New York: “you guys are cycling gods”
- “are we lost? No, there’s an arrow”
- support people at Loudeac - thanks guys
- David’s courage
- took ages to get going after short sleeps
- flying down a narrow steep cobbled road through a village in the middle of the night
- getting to Brest - “we can just go home now”
- “they might be quick downhill but we keep overtaking them going uphill”
- the Mongrel Dogs - inspirational
- “Shane’s on fire”
- sore neck most of Thursday and Friday
- the view from Roc Trevazel
- the start - what a buzz - and it lasted for 223km before it settled
- the scenery, especially Brittany
- “I wanted to take Oppy on one more PBP”
- Team Australia - a great bunch
- met Jean-Philippe Battu in the scrum they call the start
- no flats!
- the support of Caitlin, Dom and Liam - rang them from the finish and they were more excited than I was
- the finish - it was euphoric

For me it was 88 hours and 58 minutes. Hard? Yes. Enjoyable? The jury is still out on that one. Worth it? Definitely! Why? Because it was “crowded to the full with glorious action and filled with noble risks”