

## Club Cingles De Mont Ventoux

It was a chilly 5 am and my friend Phil Roadley and I were heading out on our bikes in the pitch dark of rural Provence. We were heading out of the town of Bedoin on the start of a personal challenge called the Club Cingles de Mont Ventoux. The word cinglesa means fool in French and when you understand that we were attempting to climb Mont Ventoux 4 times in one day ( 20,000 + ft and 190 kms ) you'll probably agree that the name is appropriate.

I'd first read about this event several years ago in an issue of Bicycling magazine and stored it away in the ever-expanding list of events or races on my dance card. It wasn't in the original plans for this summer as I had once again had shoulder surgery last winter and planned to do the Trans Rockies MTB challenge with my friend Dave Barclay. However, this was not to be as my shoulder has continued to dislocate and is clearly not stable enough for any real off road riding.

I seem to have this craving for a challenge to set my sights on and thought of Ventoux as it is basically all on road even though one of the climbs is on gravel. At about this time, I happened to run into Phil at a bike route planning meeting for the City of Winnipeg. He knows me and asked what event I had planned for the summer. When I mentioned the Ventoux ride, he said that he'd be interested in joining me.

We ended up deciding to go at the end of August as Phil wanted to take in the Eurobike show in Germany before the ride. I'd never been to the largest bike show in the world and decided that I'd enjoy that as well rather than meeting up later in France. We ended up flying to Friedrichafen Germany on August 29<sup>th</sup> and went to the show for 2 days. For me it was the proverbial kid in the candy store as all of the major bike brands and accessories were prominently displaying. There were also some large European brands such as Lapierre and Decathlon from France, BH from Spain, Gazelle and Batavus from Holland, and Cube, Ghost, Wheeler, Bergmount and many more from Germany. What I found fascinating were the range of road bikes which I had sold over the years and which are still available in Europe. These included prominent ones like Colnago, Pinnarello and Bianchi but also De Rosa, Gios Torino, Thomassini, Olmo, Faggin, Basso, (not the present Basso but a prominent Italian sprinter from the late 70's) Moser, Rossin and Guerciotti. It's still a thrill to see Eddy Merckx and he was prominent in his booth. I met him briefly in France while prepping for the Olympics in '72 and he's still my all-time cycling hero. Two other more recent top professionals had great looking road lines and were busy in their booths (to a large degree they were there for photo ops with the dealers ), Maurizio Fondriest and Johan Musseuw. Musseuw's composite frames were very interesting in that they were made with a combination of both carbon and flax fibers. Maybe we will see Don Sissons starting a frame factory in his back forty with the leftovers from harvest.

We ran into Tim McDermott in the Rocky Mountain booth. Tim is a former Winnipeger who worked for me for about 13 years. He is now the head spec guy for the Rocky bikes. We got together with Tim and Randy McInnes from Rocky (he's the sales manager but was our sales rep for a number of years) and had a nice meal. Rocky was buying and food always tastes better when someone else is paying. It was fun catching up on old times.

We were staying 20 kms from the convention and intended to ride our bikes to the show as there was a secure compound in which to leave them. Alas, good old Air Canada threw a wrench in the works. We were late in leaving Winnipeg and had a very tight connection in Toronto. This meant that our luggage didn't make the connection. We were assured that they would deliver it to our hotel the next day. This didn't happen and I finally took a cab to the airport on the following day, only to learn that the luggage had been sitting there for over 24 hours. They finally delivered it to us later in the afternoon on the day before we were to leave. We assembled our bikes and went for a bike ride along Lake Constance. The riding was great with an excellent network of bike trails and bike lanes. Lake Constance forms part of the border between Germany and Switzerland. It appears to be about 200 kms around and based on what we saw, would make for a pleasant and rather gentle bike tour.

On the day we left for Marseille, we had an early morning flight to Frankfurt with an 8 hour layover. We took the opportunity to take the train into downtown Frankfurt. We had breakfast and then walked around the old part of the city. I was interested to see that two different bike rental companies had bikes locked up

all over the downtown. To make use of one, you phoned the company with the number of the bike and your credit card number. They then gave you the combo for the lock on the bike. There were excellent bike lanes on most of the streets that we saw as well as separate trails in a number of areas. Winnipeg seems to be years or perhaps decades behind most European cities in this regard.

On the flight to Marseille, we got our first look at the barren peak of Mont Ventoux which stood all alone on the rolling terrain of Provence. The mountain was originally all forested but was logged in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries for shipbuilding. The white limestone at the top makes it really stand out.

We stayed just outside Marseille the first night. Our rental car had a GPS guidance system. Anyone knowing my lack of technical skills is probably shuddering right now but Phil mastered it quite quickly. Our hotel was really out of the way and it guided us literally to the doorstep. I think Lynne and I will have to consider this. Navigating while we are on a trip has caused some of the most stressful moments in our marriage and this would help. I'm sure many married people will agree.

The next morning, we headed up to the city of Avignon where we had a hotel in the old walled part of town. We checked in and then immediately drove the 40 kms to the town of Bedoin at the base of Ventoux. From there, we drove up the climb that is used in the tour and checked out where we would be descending to Malaucien and Sault where the other paved climbs begin. On the way up, we noted the gravel road climb which branches off after 7 km and ends up joining up with the paved road from Malaucien for the final 4.5 kms. We got out at the top and looked around and noted that it was quite windy and very much cooler than in the town below.

Ventoux seems like a Mecca for cyclists and we must have seen at least a 100 riders on their way to the top. This was on a weekday at the end of the tourist season. The riders ranged from obvious racers to cycle tourist enthusiasts and even some rather novice looking riders. We knew we'd have company on our adventure and vowed not to get caught up in chasing riders who were only going up once and going much harder than we would be wise to go.

Upon returning to Bedoin, we stopped at the bike store which is the official starting point for timed rides up the mountain. Phil needed a wiring set for his Sigma computer that was damaged on the flight. While there, we asked about the next day's forecast as we planned to do the ride then. The owner checked his computer and showed us that the forecast was for very strong winds of up to 85 kms then. He said that they would be even stronger on Ventoux. The name Ventoux comes from the French word for wind and we were beginning to understand why. He pointed out that the winds would be greatly reduced on the following day so we opted for caution and decided to wait till then.

On the next day, we went for a short ride near Avignon and then organized our gear for the following morning. We did wander around part of the old walled city. It is very interesting with the highlight being the Palace de Papes. This immense structure was actually the headquarters of the Roman Catholic church for about 100 years and 9 popes in the 13 and early 14 hundreds. We took a tour as it was within ½ km of our hotel. Other than that, we just relaxed and ate as we hoped for a very early start the next morning.

Our alarm rang at 3:15 am and we quickly ate in our room and headed off with our bikes and gear to our car. It was a 40 minute drive to the start in Bedoin and our plan was to be on our bikes by 5 am. We knew we were in for a long day and felt that it was better to ride uphill in the dark when we were fresh than up and then down in the dark at the end of the day when we would be very much more tired.

Everything went smoothly and we were actually on our bikes at 4:58. We stopped briefly to take our pictures at the starting sign by the bike store and then headed on our way. It was cool and we started in jackets. The first 5 km were somewhat gentle but as soon as it became steeper we peeled off a layer. We had decided to do the gravel forest road first and after a steep pitch on the tour climb we turned off at 7.5 km to a mixture of old broken asphalt and gravel. It's hard to get a sense of the grade in the dark but to give you some sense of it I can tell you that we were in our granny gears and going between 6 and 8 kms/hr most of the way. We were coming up from the south but this road heads to the west and hooks up with the paved climb from Malaucien. We then climbed the last 4.5 km on pavement and arrived at the top after

24 kms and 2 hours and 45 minutes. At the top there is a punch clock where we validated our Club Cingles passports. We would do this each time at the top. It was fairly calm and the sun was coming over the horizon but it was quite cool and we put on our jackets for the descent.

We had decided to descend to Malauciene for the second climb. It was a fast and frigid ride down and we arrived at the town at about 8:30. We needed to get our passport stamped and weren't quite sure where to go. However, when we went into a small store and held out our passports to ask, the woman smiled and immediately got out a stamp and stamped them. Obviously, this is a regular occurrence.

Club Cingles (or the fools of Mont Ventoux ) started out as three different paved climbs and there have been about 2500 people who have achieved that over the past 9 years. About 5 years ago, organizer Christian Pic added the option of doing a fourth climb up the gravel forest road. This is the Galerian category and naturally Phil and I opted for this. We had hoped to be the first Canadians to do the 4 climbs but another Canadian beat us to it by doing it in July of this year. I'm not sure of the meaning of the word Galerian but Phil and I have decided that it refers to a fairly advanced case of madness or dementia.

The climb from Malauciene is 50 meters less vertical and 24 kms long so the average grade is almost the same as the paved climb from Bedoin. However, it seems to ride easier as there are a few stretches where the grade slackens from 9 – 11% and you have a stretch where it is 5 – 8% for a kilometer. This makes for an easier climb but it still took us 2 hrs and 40 mins. This was a comfortable pace but we knew we still had the hardest climb to come and about 8 more hours in the saddle.

After stamping the passport and dressing for the still-chilly descent, we headed back down the paved road to Bedoin. We had planned this order as we were able to arrive back at the car and get more food and any other gear we needed. We got to the car at noon so we had been going for 7 hours.

Phil had set up his mountain bike with 700c disc wheels. This allowed him to use a cyclocross tire for the gravel climb but he now chose to put on Conti racing clinchers for the final two climbs on paved roads. We had intended to drop off some of our warmer clothes but the coolness at the summit made us change our minds and keep everything as we still had 2 more descents. I guess we're not tough like the pros who make do with a newspaper in the front of their jersey for the descents.

The climb, which is often used in the Tour de France, is 22 km long and gains 1600 meters. This works out to a fairly pedestrian 7.5% but that's deceptive as the first 6 km are quite easy while the rest is all over 9% with some 11% sections. It is very unrelenting. The wooded section is also very narrow and picturing the tour caravan and all of the fans crowding the road makes for a very chaotic image. The tour coverage tends to highlight the last 6 km that are open and lunar-like with the tall white and red weather station standing like a beacon on the top.

For the treed section up to the 16 km mark, we didn't notice that the wind had picked up quite considerably. At that point you come into the open and reach a small ski station and restaurant called Chalet Reynard. We saw some pictures of Ventoux in winter and it appears to be so open and forlorn that skiing can't be too appealing with the Alps only several hours away. Many riders stop at this point for some rest and nourishment before carrying on to the top.

We could now feel the dreaded Ventoux winds that have been recorded at 320 km/hr at the top. As we continued up we were buffeted around on some of the corners but experienced no real problems. We stopped with 1.4 km to go to look at one of cycling's enduring shrines. It was at this point in 1967 that British Olympic medalist and World Professional road champion Tom Simpson collapsed and passed away. His last words to the people who came to his aid were "put me back on my bike". There is a beautiful stone monument and many cyclists leave flowers or some memento to honour him.

After a brief stop, I of course had to say to Phil " put me back on my bike" and we headed up to finish the climb and stamp our passport for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time. It was now almost 3:30 p.m. and it was fairly busy with car tourists and other cyclists. It had taken us 2 hours and 48 minutes so we had now been climbing for almost 8 ½ hours out of the 10 ½ hours that had elapsed since our early morning start. I want to mention that the

record time for an ascent of Ventoux is 55 min and 57sec by Iban Mayo. We could certainly go up faster if we were only climbing it once, but having now ridden it I find it astonishing that anyone could go almost 24 km/h up Ventoux.

It was the heat of the day but our sweaty condition and the brisk wind made it cool enough that we still put on our layers before heading back down the road we'd just come up. At Chalet Reynard the road to the town of Sault branches off to the east and we went down on a more gradual but longer descent. Sault is 28 km from the summit. The town came into view and we could see that it was built on a steep rise above the nearby ground. The French call this a bastide and these areas were chosen as they were easily defended. Here we were climbing Ventoux four times and we had to do this sharp climb up into the town to get the all-important stamp on our passport.

We'd been riding for 11 hours and I was hungry but at the same time I was feeling a bit nauseas. I had been liberally taking Succeed electrolyte capsules to avoid any cramping issues and I suspect I might have overdone it. In any case, I felt that the safest course for me was to just stick with water. The mere thought of the Gatorade in my Camelbak was enough to turn my stomach.

We headed up at 4:30 p.m. and found that the more gradual terrain was somewhat offset by the headwind we were facing. Nevertheless, we moved along at 12-14 km/h. This may not sound too impressive but it's probably the fastest we had climbed all day. We knew we were going to face the same steep finishing stretch so it was nice to be making relatively good time. We arrived at Chalet Reynard at 6:25 p.m. It had cooled considerably and we found a sunny and sheltered spot and put on some of our warmer clothes.

The winds felt even stronger than the last time and as we started up two separate groups of descending cyclists slowed to warn us about the "dangerous winds". There was nothing for us to do but continue with care. On some stretches, it was right in your face and we slowed to a walk. More problematic were the places where we were blasted from the side. Phil was in front of me and near the top I drifted back as the three hours without any nourishment left me feeling pretty empty. He pulled over to put on some more clothes and wait for the old guy with 100 meters to go and we reached the top for the 4<sup>th</sup> time at 7:20 p.m. The last 6 km had taken the same 55 minutes that it took Iban Mayo to climb the whole way from Bedoin. Somewhat humbling to say the least.

By this time there were no more cyclists at the top and only a few tourists in cars. We asked a British fellow to take a picture of both of us with both of our cameras. He said something to me about it being very impressive that we were able to ride up there. I was dying to tell him that we'd done it 4 times but resisted the urge. It was great to get that fourth stamp on the passport after which we put on all of our extra layers for the descent.

We were very cautious as we knew that the winds could be very dangerous on the downhill and we didn't want to blow it now with our goal in sight. In that first article I had read in Bicycling, the author had fallen and broken his collarbone on one of the descents and been unable to finish. I remember thinking that he must have been needlessly reckless. I now know better. It was scary on the way down, as you never seemed to know where the gusts would come from next. Once we got down in the trees it was much better and we rolled up to our car at 8:05 p.m.

It had taken us a little over 15 hours. We didn't set any records but it was nonetheless a very satisfying day. We had joined a very exclusive club. This was a difficult test that gradually wears you down. Phil and I had been together and completed a winter adventure race which proved to be the most difficult mental, physical and emotional challenge I have ever faced. We knew we could count on each other no matter what the task and that quitting was never an option. Thank you Phil.

As for myself, I'm looking forward to another shoulder surgery (my 3<sup>rd</sup>) so that I can continue to take part in the events I love. I'm going to have a more extensive procedure that means a longer rehab time. I've even promised my doctor that I'll take 6 months off my bike. That will seem like an eternity. It's scary to think but I will turn the big six-zero next May. That's why this event was so special for me as it may be some time before I can get back to something like this.

When I do, Phil and I may already have my next escapade planned. On the day after our ride, we were looking at a detailed map of Ventoux in another local bike store in Bedoin and we noticed that there was actually another gravel road going up the mountain from the north side. For now it's our little secret (don't tell anyone) as we want to be the first ones to do 5 different ascents in one day. We'd welcome some company. Mark it on your calendars for August of 2009. In the meantime, we will research an appropriate name. Anybody know the French word or words for beyond crazy?