

– EXTREME GRANFONDO CHALLENGE HAUTE ROUTE ‘TRIPLE CROWN’ –

If you’re going to Europe to ride a bike for your 50th birthday, you may as well take in *all* the sights. That was the logic behind Adrian Rollins’ approach to the ‘Haute Route’ in 2015.

Even for the pros, three weeks of back-to-back riding through the high mountains of Europe would count as a hefty challenge. So it was with more than a little trepidation that, to mark my impending 50th year on the planet, I signed up for the Haute Route Triple Crown. The cyclosportive would involve riding 2,700km through the Pyrenees, the Alps and the Dolomites in just 23 days – climbing more than 60,000 metres in the process.

With good reason, the organisers of the Haute Route bill it as the “highest and toughest cyclosportive in the world”.

Taking the anxiety level up a few notches, there was a daily cut-off time – miss the cut, and you were out of the running to be an officially recognised finisher. Translated, that meant: no bad days!

For a rank amateur such as myself, it was the closest I would ever get to experiencing the life of a pro cyclist.

For three weeks, the only thing I had to concentrate on each day was hauling myself and my bike over some of Europe’s biggest mountains, and make sure I was in good enough shape to do it all again the following day. In many ways, it felt like the cycling equivalent of the rockstar lifestyle, except with completely shattered legs, an inability to stay awake after about 9.00pm, no sex and no enjoyable drugs (ibuprofen doesn’t count).

The original plan had been to just ride the Pyrenees. But my wife argued, with compelling logic, that if I was going to fly to the other side of the world to ride my bike, I should do the whole thing. I didn’t do the sums, but on a dollar per kilometre count, that seemed to make sense. All I had to do was convince my body that it was a good idea as well.

After 12 months of intense training (and endless fussing about equipment and nutrition), I made it to the start line in Anglet, a small French port on the Atlantic coast just up the road from Biarritz on 15 August to begin the biggest cycling – nay, sporting – adventure of my life.

The Haute Route is organised like a full Grand Tour (not surprising, since it is planned and run by many of the

people who had, at one point or another, worked for the company responsible for organising the Tour de France). Every morning there is a Grand Départ from the middle of a town; there are motorcycle escorts and outriders; there are time limits, feeding zones, Mavic support vans and a legion of volunteers who patrol every village and intersection the ride goes through... it’s a complete carnival.

Zooming through little mountainside hamlets lined with clapping locals, hurtling across village squares and through crossroads, all without barely having to touch the brakes, is exhilarating. So too are the views. To actually ride up cols I had only ever seen in late-night broadcasts of the Le Tour and the Giro was unforgettable – particularly because I probably took about three times as long as the slowest professional rider.

The Haute Route took us up and over many of the world’s iconic climbs – Tourmalet, Hautacam, Izoard... the highest mountain pass in the Alps, Col de la Bonnette, the Col de la Croix de Fer; the Furka Pass in the Swiss Alps; the Gavia and the Giau in the Dolomites.

All up, the 28 of us who embarked on the Triple Crown would climb what seemed like umpteen cols before reaching our destination in Venice on 6 September.

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Competing in the Haute Route for the three weeks is to be in a bike-infused bubble. Mentally, there is little down time. Virtually every waking moment is spent riding, or working on recovering from the ride you’ve just finished, or preparing for the ride to come. As a fellow Triple Crown, Howard Galloway, put it: “We were velo... we had morphed into cycling machines operating at a base level of consciousness whose overriding purpose was to turn pedals.”

As the three weeks unfolded and the kilometres mounted, the novelty of being a cycling ‘pro’ gradually morphed into a familiar rhythm: get to the end of the stage, quickly quaff some recovery drink, scoot to the hotel, book



– By Adrian Rollins



a massage, have a quick shower, get your gear ready for the next day, go to dinner and then crash in bed. But constant challenges and changes meant no two days were ever alike.

There is no getting away from the fact that this is an enormous mental challenge. Often people say they “find themselves” on such adventures. I can’t say that happened for me. What I did find was that:

- a) Europe has a lot of cows
- b) You have to be careful where you step in the bushes behind rest stops
- c) You are, in fact, able to get out of bed and onto a bike while still half asleep.

If you want to hone your capacity for doggedness and persistence, the Triple Crown is the perfect place to do it.

On some days there was barely a flat spot, while on others two summits would be separated by a long valley haul where joining a bunch was essential to save much-needed energy. Occasionally, the route went along a major road, at other times along riverside bike paths.

Just about every night meant a new town and hotel. Some days finished with a transfer – including, memorably, finishing the Pyrenees ride on the outskirts of Toulouse and dashing to the nearby airport to catch a flight to Nice in time to start the Alps stage.

Then there were the constantly shifting weather patterns that meant we experienced everything from baking heat to torrential rain, fog, snow and ice (sometimes all in the same day). On top of this, each week the character of the ride changed as a new influx of cyclists descended on the event.

The Haute Route is actually comprised of three discrete week-long events; this is what most participants sign up for.

For those of us doing the Triple Crown, it was almost like doing a stage race in which 90 percent of the peloton was replenished with fresh riders at the start of every week. It also meant that there was a constant cavalcade of new people to meet and be entertained by.

Aside from the spectacular scenery, the fact is that when you draw together 600 keen cyclists from around the world, you are bound to see some unusual and amusing sights. Like riders huddling in a narrow doorway at the summit of the Izoard in a vain attempt to shelter from a massive storm. Or the spray of excrement that showered a bunch as it hit a 200m patch of road on the descent of the Tourmalet that was smeared in a layer of cow manure.

Then there was the local spotted high up on the flanks of the Tourmalet riding a recumbent which had a door-sized solar panel strapped to the top – which would have made the next 20 kilometres of descending interesting. >>

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>> Alongside the weird and wonderful sights, there were the inevitable crashes as people explored – and occasionally exceeded – the limits of their ability.

Nestled in the heart of the Alps, the Col de la Madeleine is a challenging climb, but the struggle up is worth it for the glorious descent. Perfectly engineered switchbacks cut a sinuous path through the heavily forested flanks of the mountain before entering a deep and lush valley with sheer rock walls rearing up one side, and a sharp drop to a river on the other. It feels made for fast descending.

Unfortunately, beautiful as the climb is, the Madeleine also brought several badly unstuck.

As I came around one bend I flashed past a figure in blue and black lycra crouched by the side of the road clutching his right shoulder in the classic ‘I think I’ve broken my collarbone’ pose, with the motorbike medic just pulling up to render assistance.

A couple more kilometres down the descent, people were swarming by the side of the road where an ambulance had stopped. A cyclist had lost it on a sweeping bend and gone over the side. He had landed in the upper branches of a large pine tree and broken his femur. The rescue crews had to winch him down.

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Staying upright and healthy for the whole three weeks is a big part of the challenge, and just about all those who attempted the Triple Crown were at some stage forced to battle illness or injury.

Incredibly, just about all those who embarked on the journey in Anglet made it through to Vienna.

The Haute Route is not a race, but daily time limits mean it is not a cruise either. There are undoubtedly tougher one-day rides, but it is hard to dispute its claim to being the highest and toughest cyclosportive in the world.

AN AMAZING 50TH BIRTHDAY...  
**One man, many companions and a chance to ride the mountains of Europe – for Adrian Rollins the Haute Route was too tempting to resist. But he wasn't going to stop at one... nope the idea of the complete trilogy is what appealed: Pyrenees, Alps and Dolomites all served up in a span of three weeks!**



### The Haute Route – my top 10 tips

- 1. Sign up with an official tour operator.** (I used Sydney-based Will Levy and his Two Wheel Tours team, who were fantastic). You can book accommodation through the Haute Route organisers, but unless you don't mind wondering around a French ski resort for a couple of hours after finishing a nine-hour ride trying to find your hotel, only to discover the single room you booked is now also shared with two other sweaty cycling strangers, a tour company that looks after everything except the cycling is the way to go.
- 2. Pace yourself.** Each week begins with a frenzy at the front, as adrenaline-filled riders battle for a place near the head of the peloton. Unsurprisingly, the first day is when some nasty accidents happen. Hold a little back in the first few days, and you will make up plenty of places by the end of the week.
- 3. Carry a rain jacket.** Even if there is no rain, you can quickly get very cold on the long descents. A jacket and a bit of newspaper under the jersey can be lifesavers.
- 4. Don't dawdle at rest stops.** It is easy to waste a lot of time but top up your bottles, grab some food and keep going. You want to stay ahead of the *lanterne rouge*.
- 5. Avoid the first rest stop of the day.** (If possible). The first feed station is invariably a bun fight. Carry enough food and water to get you through to the second feed station.
- 6. Ride smart.** Do your turn in the bunch, but don't try to ride the peloton off your wheel. You will pay for it. Similarly, it's worth working hard to stay in a bunch in the long flat sections (which can sometimes be 60km long), but if you are at risk of blowing, ease off.
- 7. Use the bunches.** Often the descents are not timed, and at the bottom cyclists will gather just before the timing mat. Pull over and wait with them until a bunch forms up. It'll save you valuable energy, and will usually get you to the end just as quickly.
- 8. Start at the front.** In a contradiction to #2, it is smart to start towards the front on every day except the first day of the week. The top 75 riders are sent off ahead of the pack, and then it is everyone for themselves. If you start toward the front, you can settle into one of the big bunches and get a drag to the first climb of the day, then ride at your own pace.
- 9. Get prepared.** Every night, do as much as you can to get yourself ready for the next day. The rides usually begin at 7.00am, which means getting up around 5.30 or so. The less you have to do (and remember) at that time of the morning, the better. Get your gear out, put on your bib number, set out the food you'll carry. Have your water bottles handy, and have your bags pretty much packed.
- 10. Pack your own lunch.** Haute Route provides a lunch, but unless you are confident you'll be in the first hundred or so, you'll find that a lot of the nicest food is gone and you are left with a choice between boiled fish, gluggy pasta and dried out rice. At breakfast, make yourself a roll or two and stash them in your bag ready to scoff at the end.

■ ADRIAN ROLLINS



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