

I first came across the Raid Pyrenean whilst looking through the Rapha book, "The Great Road Climbs of the Pyrenees". The Atlantic to the Mediterranean in 5 days over some of the great fabled names of the Tour de France – Aubisque, Tourmalet, Aspin, Peyresourde.....

Last years club trip to the Maratona dles Dolomites was a real eye-opener for me and I loved the atmosphere, the roads, the craic, the climbs. This year I wanted a slightly bigger challenge. I decided to do the Raid along with Marmot Tours, a small husband and wife team whose personality appealed on their web pages. Peter Mulholland fancied it too so we paid the deposit in the winter and the plan was then to get ready.

I read somewhere that it's not what you do on the day but on the 150 before and this simple truth had a resonance I really liked. Peter and I resolved to train like mad but weather and illness certainly hampered preparations. It wasn't until the spring that I was able to do what I felt was required.

We flew to Biarritz on the 22nd June to be met by James and Cathy Thompson with baby Jack in tow. We had met some of our fellow cyclists on the plane and after a short transfer found ourselves in the grounds of the Hotel Campanile in Hendaye, the southern most village on the French Atlantic coast putting our bikes together. We had a briefing at 6pm before dinner when Cathy and James filled us in on the history of the Raid and how they proposed to help each day. Their enthusiasm, energy, wit and friendliness was immediately apparent – this was going to be hard but they'd do everything they could to help. We were given our Raid numbers to attach to the bike and our carnets which we had to get stamped at specific villages and towns along the way. Over a big buffet dinner we mixed a bit more and got to know each other better.

On Tuesday morning we awoke at 7am to what would be the weather we would get every day – bright and sunny. What would become the morning ritual took over; toilet, chamois cream and shorts, pack day bag, big breakfast, toilet, bags on the bus, toilet! We took off behind the bus to head to the beach to dip our toes in the Atlantic. After a few more photographs we were off at 9am precisely. We had to get to Cerbere, on the Mediteranean, in 100 hours to complete the challenge.

The first day was magical. We all rode more or less together for the first few hours over some minor cols and stopped in Esplette for brownies, coffee and banana and walnut cake. At the next stop in St. Jean Pied du Port, Peter and I decided to push on ahead. The scenery was beautiful, very Basque and very hot. Despite there only being 2400m of ascent the long distance of 183km took its toll at 30°C and we were glad to find the Hotel du France in Arudy. After a quick shower, we both opted for a massage from Cathy who had made it to the hotel just ahead of us. The hotel was typical of most we would find ourselves in in rural France – quirky and full of character!

The next day was the one that most feared but also were here for – the Aubisque and Tourmalet. After the breakfast ritual Peter and I set off with

Rob – a physiotherapist who was here with his wife Sarah, a doctor. We rode fairly hard over the 20km to Laruns, the base camp below the Aubisque. We climbed through Eaux Bonnes and then up the climb proper. Peter wanted to start off pretty easy but Rob and I were keen to test ourselves. I was feeling very good and dropped Rob before the ski station at Gourette. This was a beautiful climb, 18.4km at 10%, in the cool weather of the morning. We had our carnets stamped at the top and took off down the descent which took in the Col de Soulour and watched the condors floating high over the thermals. After a lunch in Argeles sur Gazost we headed towards Luz St. Saveur and the most traversed climb in the tour – the Tourmalet. Rob waited for his wife and as I was feeling good I decided to check out the climb up to Luz Ardiden – the site of Armstrong’s famous fall and comeback to seal his 2003 Tour win. It was very hot and very steep and was maybe a mistake, although I loved it at the time.

At the bottom of the Tourmalet, I filled the bottles up and settled into the 18km climb. The only downside to the whole week was that 3 of our ascents were going to be Tour de France descents - Toumalet, Col d’Aspin and Col de Port, and hence were being resurfaced. Tar and gravel stuck to the wheels, the flies surrounded one’s head and the lack of cover made it seem much hotter than 32°C. I suffered very, very dark moments but knew I couldn’t stop. It took a very long time to get to the top. I wasn’t able to enjoy the stunning scenery but could only try to follow the wheel in front. When I reached the top many of our group were there, taking photographs, eating chips or crepes and enjoying the wonderfully atmospheric café at the top which was more of a museum than a café with winning bikes from 1903 and 1933. After the obligatory photo-opportunity at the Goddet memorial it was off down the long descent through La Mongie and onto St. Marie de Campan where I was dropped again by Peter’s kamikaze descending. The hotel in Campan was again typically rural with dodgy plumbing and thousands of stuffed animals on display. Each night James would approach Madame and point over to me telling her I was the vegetarian. She would invariably look over at me with unconcealed disgust. Day 2 was over, 120km with 3215m of ascent but those of us who had looked at the profiles knew day 3, 173km with 3110m of ascent would be just as hard.

We left Campan and retraced our steps to St. Marie de Campan where I sought out the blacksmiths shop where Eugene Christophe had walked down to from the Tourmalet with his broken forks in 1913. Despite fixing them alone he was fined time because he asked a boy to work the bellows in the forge! We then ascended the beautiful Col d’Aspin and the equally beautiful Col de Peyresourde. If you are in the area these are not to be missed. These were followed by the minor climbs of the Col des Ares and Col de Buret which were stunning in their own right. Peter and I were again forging ahead and began the last climb of the day over the very steep ramps of the Col de Portet d’Aspet. We stopped for photos at the Fabio Casartelli memorial and regrouped at the top for the 60km left through to Massat for our fourth hotel, the Trois Seigneures. We stopped to get our carnets stamped in St. Girons and watched the locals get the town ready for a Tour arrivee in the next few weeks.

I woke up on Day 4 feeling a bit dodgy after, I think, an over ambitious, deeper massage the night before. Again, the profile ahead looked very demanding, 169km with 2800m of ascent. The routine was wearing slightly – how do the pros do this for 20 days? This day began as the two previous had with an immediate climb over a stunning col, this time the Col de Port. It was cool and misty and I chose to ride with the northern lads; Dave, Dave, Nigel and Alistair. Like the rest of the group they were great company. I laughed at how Gateshead Dave referred to his wife as “Management” all the time, e.g. “Those wheels are lovely, how did you get that past management??” I left them in Ax-Les-Thermes and joined Peter on the interminable but gradual climb over the Col de Puymorens after resisting another detour over the Plateau de Beille. This was quite a main road and quite industrial but I really enjoyed this 28km climb towards Andorra. Further refuelling at the top and another hugely enjoyable descent – 25 miles in a little over 30 minutes. One of the things I most enjoyed as we traversed this part of France was that every day had a different feel and look. We were now over the watershed and it was very hot, very windy and very Spanish. We struggled into the wind over 3 minor cols and then began another 30km descent through a stunning gorge. We stopped at the fortified town of Villefranche sur Conflents for lunch and sat under the covers outside the café as the first rain of the week began to fall. As we had only 5km to Prades we weren’t at all concerned. We met up with some of the others a bit later and they had really struggled on those incredible descents in the wet and had stopped for multiple hot chocolates genuinely fearing hypothermia. Prades was another beautiful town and the group all went out for pizzas and beer now very comfortable in each others company.

The final day promised to be much easier – 80km with just 620m of climbing. We launched towards the sea on excellent roads at high speed. After a few dodgy map reading detours along the coast we headed over the final cliff top climbs and descents towards Cerbere and Peter and I put the hammer down – not at all childishly wishing to get there first. We arrived to champagne and a dip in the sea, more photos, a big lunch and ice cream.

We had done it. The whole group had made it too. 720km in 100 hours over 18 cols. I was glad I had prepared well but the truth is that all regular Foyle cyclists could achieve this. James and Cathy had been brilliant and if you want to do it I would recommend them extremely highly. Nothing was too much trouble for them, they were always there for you, they always went the extra mile and they were just brilliant people and excellent company. Now for the Race Across America.....

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