



Low-season highs

Why wait until summer for a short break? **Rob Angell** headed to the French Alps in March

Col D'Izouard, Alpe D'Huez, Col du Galibier... I traced the names across the map as Tom and I sank the bottom half of our pints. I'm hardly a connoisseur of the Tour de France, but the names of these lofty Alpine passes had a mythical status that wasn't lost on me.

As we'd unpacked Tom's brand new Cannondale the night before, my feelings of envy were mingled with other concerns. We were taking on a serious ride at the back end of winter. Snow still lay on the higher peaks and most of the passes above 2,000m remained closed.

What's more, my cycling buddy had a brash confidence but virtually no cycling behind him in the last three months. 'You'd better get some miles in', I'd warned Tom when the idea of an Alpine trip had first been mooted. He phoned the weekend before departure to boast that he'd done eight miles that Saturday. 'Some of it was uphill too, mate!'

PEDAL PROBLEMS

At 9.30am on a weekday morning we plunged ourselves into the chaos

of Heathrow's Terminal 1. Half an hour later most of our hand luggage had gone. My favourite question was: 'These pedals, Mr Angell. What are they for then?' I explained the basic principles of cycle power, trying desperately not to sound in any way patronising. 'It wouldn't take much imagination to see this being used as a weapon, sir, now would it?' interjected the security guard. My jaw dropped.

Tyre levers, spanners, spare spokes, all joined the growing pile of suspect items. If that weren't enough, my bike was receiving the most invasive examination imaginable. Almost fully dismantled by now, wires were being inserted into tubes, light casements taken apart and the gel saddle massaged and prodded. (This was 2006 – the situation should be better now.)

Two hours later, outside Lyon airport, the painstaking process of re-assembly began. It was midday when finally, fully lubricated, greased, inflated and laden, we wobbled onto the main road from the airport and headed east. I set off with visions of the two of us, heads

down, blazing a trail along the N85, rolling up in Grenoble at sundown for a quick shower before heading for a blow-out at a restaurant.

As it turned out, we made about 20 miles. The 'blow-out' came

"Near the summit, a vista of glittering peaks emerged from behind the mist, bathed in a crisp, brilliant, morning sun."

sooner than expected in the form of two punctures in succession, after just an hour of cycling. Repairing a double puncture brought on raging hunger pangs so we retired to the nearest *supermarché*. With the evening drawing on, we glided into the small town of La Frette, 40km shy of Grenoble.

A RIOTOUS TIME

With no campsite in the vicinity, I decided it was time to test the *entente cordiale*. In faltering French we managed to secure a pitch in someone's garden. It was not quite the Ray Mears 'back to nature',

Grenoble – 'the capital of the Alps' – sits in a broad valley surrounded by mountains

extreme camping experience I'd promised Tom, but there was always tomorrow.

The night was cold. In fact, it was bitter. So cold was it that neither of us slept for more than an hour at a stretch. We awoke with a renewed resolve to get tough, get miles under our belts, and get proper sleeping bags as soon as we could. With that in mind we made good time and reached Grenoble at lunch time... just as a riot was in full swing!

The disturbances affected many French cities and had rumbled on for months. They concerned employment rights for students amongst other things. I'd watched public disorder from the comfort of my armchair a few times and had made a mental note that should I encounter it in real life, I'd put some distance between me and it. Tom, on the other hand, was more interested in getting a new 'sleeping system' and seemed unconcerned that the outdoor shop we now found ourselves in was only a Molotov cocktail's throw from the 'action'. Then again, Tom was *in* the shop. I was outside sniffing the tear gas.

I stood guarding the two bikes plus luggage while belligerent gangs of youths jostled past to join the fray. The atmosphere carried more than a hint of menace. I assumed a disgruntled, anti-establishment expression and wished my arsenal of offensive weapons hadn't been confiscated quite so early on in the trip. Where was the adjustable spanner when you most needed it? Twenty minutes and a cup of tea later, Tom re-emerged. 'Five seasons, buddy!' he beamed triumphantly, as he held his new sleeping bag aloft.

COLD COMFORT

Grenoble sits in a broad valley bordered to the east by inspiring mountain scenery. We headed for the hills, following the main arterial route towards Briançon deep in the High Alps. Traffic was heavy so we took a detour and pushed south. The quiet route followed the Drac river and we were soon climbing through spectacular scenery. Far below, the river opened into a wide aquamarine lake flanked by rugged snow capped peaks.

The going was slow and we settled into a steady cadence as we churned out the miles. Eventually the road began to descend. With dusk drawing in, we tucked in for the

exhilarating descent into the village of St-Georges-de-Commieres.

We'd arrived at a campsite! This was a step closer to nature than the garden of the night before, the only drawback being that it looked closed. The site contained a scattering of chalets and plenty of space in which to pitch a tent. There was no gate, no fence, and we lost no time in unloading. With shower facilities closed we plunged into the lake 20 yards from the tent. The buttock-clenching coldness caught us by surprise. We ran out shivering and hyperventilating, staggering back to camp to stoke up the fire. An open fire has to be the most comforting and warming sight at the end of a hard day's cycling.

ATTACK DOGS IN THE DARK

It also proved to be a very effective way of summoning the site owner. By now it was pitch dark and getting late. There were no lights for miles. All was silent save the crackling of the fire and our hushed voices. Picture the scene then, when the stillness, the crepuscular blackness was rent by the distant roar of a car engine. Seconds later, with a squealing of brakes, a vehicle burst into the campsite and ground to a halt 50 yards away.

The headlights died. Silence for 30 seconds. I pictured cartridges being loaded into shotguns. Then a slamming of car doors accompanied by raised voices. Male voices. Two, maybe four of them, and, disconcertingly, dogs. Big dogs. By the sound of them, three or four – a pack, you could say – were straining at the leash in an ecstasy of barking.

Trying to sound casual, I turned to Tom. 'Think they're after us mate?' The absurdity of my own question only occurred to me later. What else could possibly bring a team of men and dogs into a remote spot on the mountains late on a Saturday night? A blown bulb in one of the chalets?

The barking grew closer and soon a pair of gnashing, salivating Dobermans emerged from the gloom followed closely by their owners, a guy in his early twenties and his girlfriend. No shotgun, I noted with relief. Addressing my words exclusively to the dogs, who didn't share their owners' warmth, I explained why we were here. After an awkward couple of minutes, we promised to leave at first light.



When they're open, out-of-season campsites are empty. But don't forget a decent sleeping bag

FACT FILE: INTO THE ALPS

DISTANCE: Day 1, Lyon – La Frette (40km); day 2, La Frette – Grenoble (35km) and on to St-Georges-de-Commieres (50km); day 3, St-Georges-de-Commieres – Bourg D'Oisans (90km); day 4, Bourg D'Oisans – Alpe D'Huez & back (28km)

TERRAIN: Undulating as far as Grenoble. Long, steady climbs and descents through the Drac valley. Steep in the High Alps.

WEATHER: Clear crisp days with spells of heavy rain in the mountains.

TRAFFIC: Main trunk route to Briançon and the High Alps busy and best avoided, elsewhere traffic is light in March.

ACCOMMODATION: Only a few campsites are open in March, 15-20 Euros per night – phone ahead. Rough camping discouraged.

MAPS: Michelin 1:300k numbers 523 and 333.

GETTING THERE/BACK: We flew Heathrow to Lyon and back. TGV to Lyon or Grenoble is an alternative.

FURTHER INFO: Lonely Planet 'France' guidebook.



ALPINE FORESTS

The next day dawned cold and overcast. A steady drizzle greeted us as we hit the road. Peddling through the town of Mure we headed north to Valbonnais and soon entered the spectacular scenery of the Parc National des Écrins. The second largest national park in France the Écrins covers almost 1,000 square kilometres of Alpine countryside. Large areas of the park are relatively inaccessible, a fact that helps explain why a dwindling population of wolves survives here, though they are seldom seen.

Our route to Bourg D'Oisans climbed inexorably towards the summit of the Col D'Ornon. It was a quiet road, being the low season. The jagged peaks of the Parc des Écrins were still covered in snow. We cycled through dank forests and quiet villages where the wet, empty streets had an almost oppressive feel and the silence was punctuated only by the occasional gong of a church bell. Persistent drizzle turned to heavy rain as we neared the summit. We skittered into a hamlet just below the crest of the pass and sank a warm beer. Snow lay heaped along either side of the road as we slid over the high point and began the hair-raising descent to Bourg 10km below. We arrived 15 minutes later with faces set in an icy grimace.

The town of Bourg D'Oisons

boasts a number of four-star campsites. Some of the campsites were open too. We had finally arrived at the foot of Alpe D'Huez. A popular ski resort in winter, the road to the summit village was what we'd come for. The road snakes its way from the valley floor in 23 dizzying bends to the resort at 2,000m. Steep and unrelenting, Alpe D'Huez is the most famous of mountain climbs in the Tour de France and is a Mecca for sports cyclists.

ALPE D'HUEZ

The following morning, Tom declined the opportunity to join me on the ascent. 'Mate, my left leg has seized up. Count me out!'

The ride began gently enough but soon the gradient sharpened and the road became steep. There was no let up. The eight miles disappeared slowly beneath my front wheel as I gazed mesmerised into the glittering spokes. Each switchback bore a plaque commemorating previous stage winners of L'Alpe D'Huez: Pantani, Armstrong, Hinault, Zoetemelk...

I could almost hear the baying of a summer crowd lining the roadside, and see in my mind sinewy riders dancing on the pedals. The worn and faded slogans splashed across the tarmac years ago glistened from the damp of the mist.

Suddenly the air cleared as I neared the summit. A vista of



In between the ski-season and the summer, roads were empty. Passes above 2,000m were closed

glittering peaks emerged from behind the mists, bathed in a crisp, brilliant morning sun. I ground to a halt and soaked up the view.

Back in the saddle I slogged up the remaining kilometres. The road, like a piece of string tossed across the mountainside, twisted upwards, eventually emerging in the resort village of Alpe D'Huez. A glance at my watch confirmed that Marco Pantani's fastest ascent time of 37' 35" was comfortably intact.

The legendary Fausto Coppi won here in Le Tour's first visit to Alpe D'Huez in 1952 and the race returns here this summer, with stage 17 on 23rd July ending at the summit after a punishing 210km ride. The 2004 Tour featured an individual time trial up the mountain. The event attracted a staggering 900,000 spectators to the slopes of the climb.

The streets were eerily quiet now as I drew to a halt at the road's end. I parked my bike in a convenient snowdrift to recuperate before the exhilarating return back through the clouds beneath.