

The BORDER GUARD

Before we can cross from France to Italy on this 160km ride, *Cyclist* first has to make it past the Col de la Bonette – one of the true giants of the Tour

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I have studied the map of southern France, and from what I can see the shortest navigable loop from St-Étienne-de-Tinée, including the Col de la Bonette, is 159km in length. The route includes two

other climbs, the Col de Larche, which will take us into Italy, and the Colle della Lombarda, which will take us back out of it. The hardest climb will come at the end, so it promises to be a long day.

In view of this, I aim to get as much local knowledge as possible, so arrange to meet with someone from the tourist office on the eve of our ride. Unfortunately, a congenital knee problem means that Pascal Lequenne doesn't actually cycle himself.

'My doctor said it would be good for me to ride a bike, but only on the flat. But just look around you,' he says, pointing up at the mountain peaks that tower above us.

A friend of Pascal's, however, completed 104 ascents of the Bonette last summer. 'He's a physiotherapist in the town. He'd close for lunch at 12, get on his bike, and be back down in time to open up again at three.'

The climb up the Bonette from St-Étienne-de-Tinée is 25km long, at an average gradient of 6.5%. I quickly calculate that tackling it in your lunch break wouldn't leave any time for a dessert.

What's the weather forecast for tomorrow, I ask. Pascal swipes at his phone and his brow darkens. 'I'm afraid it will be bad,' he says, without any attempt to soften the blow, such as by adding '...but only in the morning' or 'it won't last long'. Instead he continues: 'Rain. And a thunderstorm. Oh, my battery has just died, sorry.' Perhaps it's just as well.

He recalls the last time the Tour de France came over the Bonette, in 2008: 'It was a great day for the town. We had a party all day long.' Such is his Gallic pride, he doesn't mention the Giro d'Italia coming through here in 2016.

The celebrity slicer

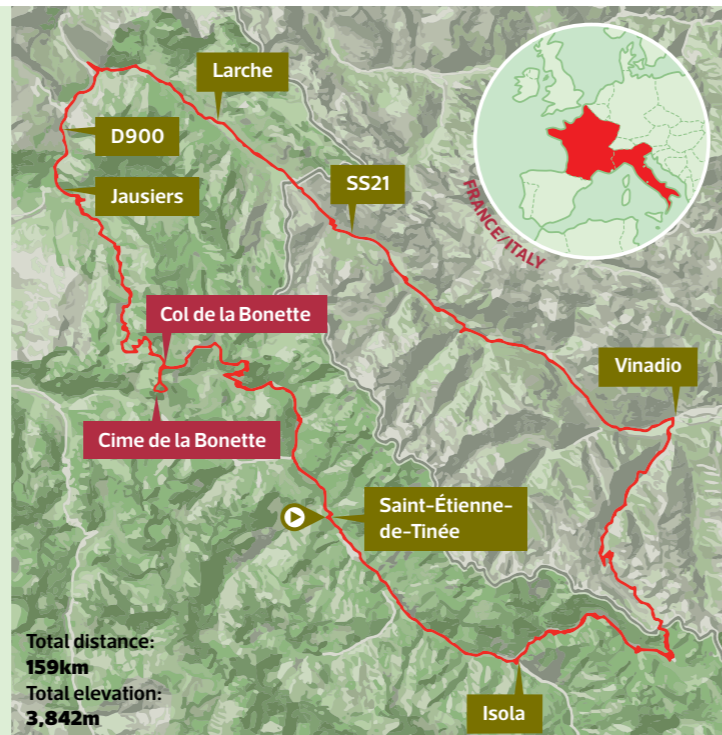
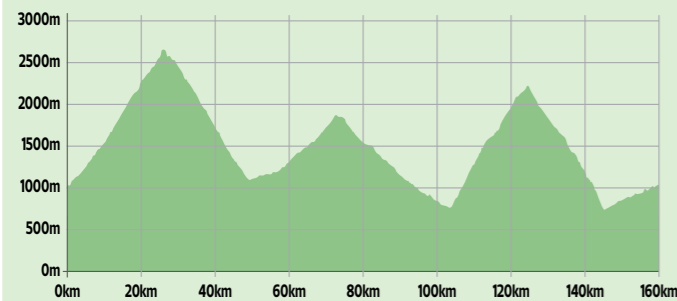
I'm riding with Tim Myers, a guide with Marmot Tours. He has driven a support van over the Col de la Bonette regularly, attending to the needs of clients doing one of the company's Raid Alpines. So he knows the road well, but has never actually ridden it himself. ▶

What's the weather forecast for tomorrow, I ask. 'I'm afraid it will be bad,' Pascal says, without any attempt to soften the blow

Keep turning right

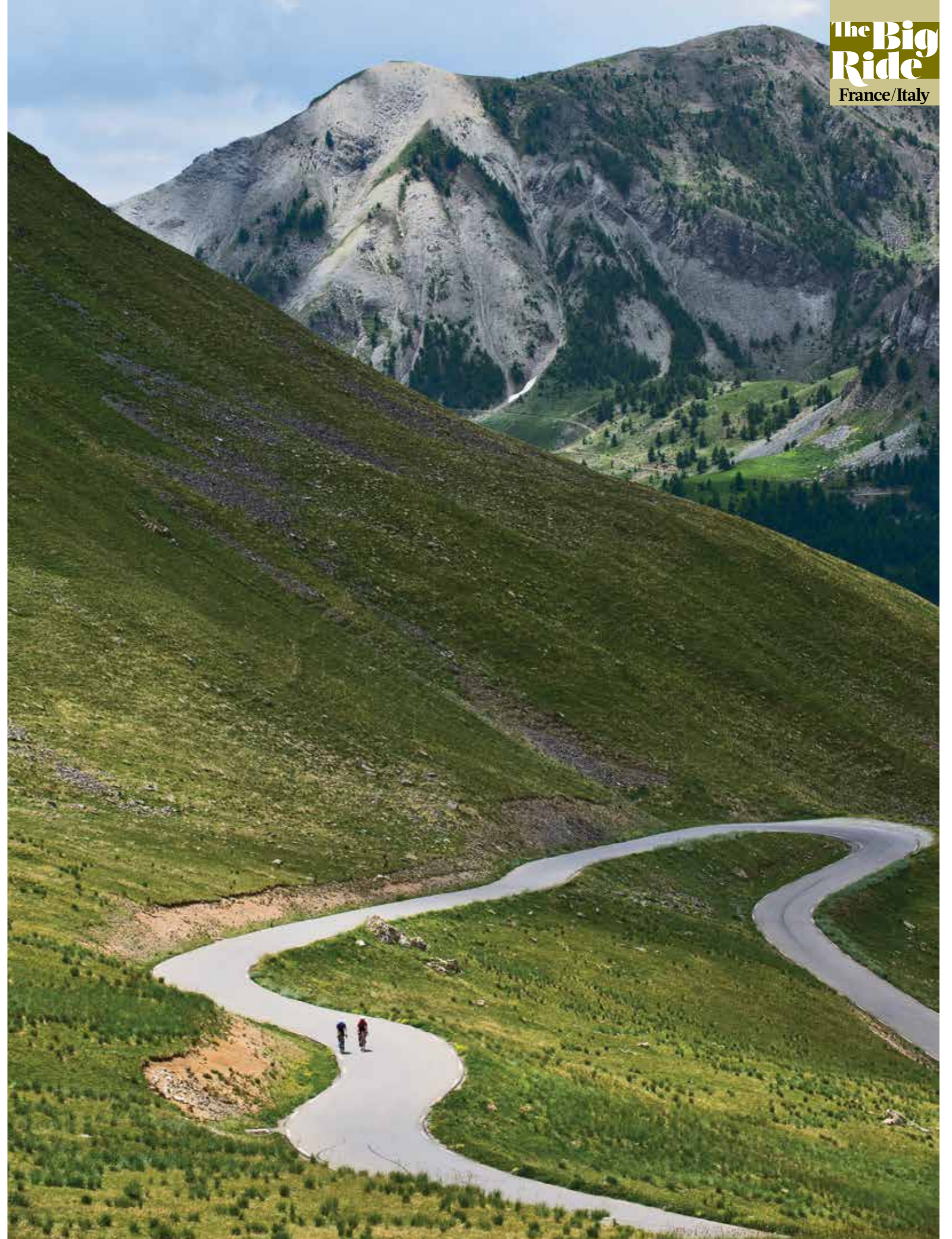
Follow *Cyclist's* loop over the Col de la Bonette

To download this route, go to cyclist.co.uk/76bonette. From St-Étienne-de-Tinée, follow the D64, signposted to Col de la Bonette and Jausiers. At the T-junction in Jausiers, turn right onto the D900. After about 10km, take a right turn – still the D900 – signposted for Larche. Follow this road all the way to the summit and the Italian border where it becomes the SS21. Stay on this road for the next 30km – all downhill – until just before the village of Vinadio. Turn right onto the SP255, signposted to France and the Santuario di Sant'Anna di Vinadio. Follow this road all the way to the summit and border, ignoring the turn off for the sanctuary after 15km, and then descend all the way to Isola. At Isola, turn right and follow the D2205 back to St-Étienne-de-Tinée.



Previous pages: The southern Alps form a stunning backdrop as *Cyclist* grinds up the final few metres to the Col de la Bonette

This page: From the town of St-Étienne-de-Tinée the road heads upwards for 25km at 6.5% to the summit of the Bonette



Right: Halfway up the Bonette, and the word 'serpentine' springs to mind

Above right: The forecast is for rain but it could be worse – as this warning about putting snow chains on tyres reminds us

We're a long way from civilisation, in distance and height, and the emptiness – combined with the thinness of the air – is unsettling

◻ In view of the weather forecast and the fact that there are no noticeable settlements marked on any of the climbs, I decide it would be prudent to stock up with bread, meat and cheese from the local supermarket before we set off.

The woman wielding the slicer behind the deli counter speaks perfect English, and turns out to be a local celebrity, Marie d'Auron, a singer and guitarist who used to perform Edith Piaf classics at local venues. Along with my wafer-thin cuts of mortadella and gruyere, she gives me a slip of paper with her YouTube name on it – 'Mariedauron'.

'I do covers too. I used to sing this,' she says, referring to the song on the radio. It's REM singing 'Everybody Hurts'. Of all the songs to have stuck on repeat in my head for the next 100 miles, it has to be this one.

As soon as we set off, the road ramps up pretty sharply, but otherwise it's a rather unprepossessing start to such an iconic climb. Things only start getting interesting – with

the kind of views expected from such rarefied altitudes – halfway up when the road unspools in a series of long, lazy curves that thread around a natural amphitheatre.

The whistling of marmots fills the air. We're regularly leapfrogged by a bus that disgorges its cargo of young school kids so they can use their binoculars to scan the landscape for other flora and fauna. They don't give us a second glance. Cyclists are far from a rare species on this route, being only outnumbered by the motorbikes.

The eeriest stretch is through Camp des Fourches, a ghost town of abandoned buildings dating back more than a century to when they housed a 150-strong battalion. The ruins reinforce the sense of remoteness. We're a long way from civilisation, in terms of both distance and height, and when we're not in the vicinity of buses or children, the emptiness – combined with the thinness of the air – is unsettling. ◻

The rider's ride

Officine Mattio Lemma, £7,400, officinemattio.com

The Lemma is the only carbon frame this Italian brand produces, its other two models being steel. Despite its retro appearance, the frame was rigid and light enough for the massive amount of climbing in our route.

The brand is as big on aesthetics as it is technical excellence, describing its products as 'bicycles intended as jewellery'. Our frame was certainly a head-turner, but behind the breathless blurb is 20 years of framebuilding experience. The price quoted above is for the Dura-Ace model, but ours came with a Sram Red eTap groupset. If I'm being picky, I didn't find the changes quite as slick as with Shimano's Di2, although that may have been something a bit of tweaking back at the workshop could have easily rectified.

I never felt as if a single pedal stroke was being wasted while going uphill, and on the descents I felt confident enough to sweep around hairpins without my customary inhibition. In fact, I'm happy to endorse another line from the company's purple prose: 'As perfect as water, as solid as a rock, as light as the wind.'



Our altitude increases in direct proportion to our proximity to jagged walls of rock

So what is the Bonette's claim to fame? Despite the many signs we pass proclaiming it 'Plus Haute Route d'Europe', I know it's not the highest road in Europe, because I've twice been up Spain's Pico de Veleta, which reaches its dramatic dead end at an altitude of 3,384m.

If it's not the highest road, perhaps the Cime de la Bonette, at 2,802m, is the highest pass? It depends how you define 'pass'. The Cime is a 2km loop from the actual pass, the Col de la Bonette. The Cime doesn't go anywhere except back to the Col, and the Col itself, at 2,715m, is a few metres lower than the Col de l'Iseran or Stelvio.

So the top of this mountain is shrouded in ambiguity and controversy, which only adds to its allure. What is certain, however, is that the Cime is the highest point ever reached by the Tour de France, even if it has done so only four times – twice in each direction.

The Cime is marked by a monument commemorating Napoleon, rather than the names of the riders who have led



The descent swirls past a picture-postcard tableau of lakes, pastures and craggy escarpments

the Tour peloton over here – Federico Bahamontes (1962 and 1964), Robert Millar (1993) and South African John Lee Augustyn (2008), who then plunged nine metres down a steep embankment of scree during the descent, fortunately emerging unhurt.

Unfortunately, when we reach the summit I can't get near enough to the monument to read the inscription, as it's besieged by heavily layered motorcyclists patting each other on the back for having valiantly conquered the climb with just their 1,000cc engines to help them. Come the revolution, I will introduce a protocol at such mountaintop monuments giving priority access to anyone who has propelled themselves up there under their own steam.

Lakes, pastures and crags

From the summit of the Bonette, the descent to Jausiers passes the hulking concrete remains of more military



This was the downhill finish to Stage 16 of the 2008 Tour, and I can only imagine the speeds eventual stage winner Cyril Dessel reached



► barracks, before swirling past a picture-postcard tableau of lakes, pastures and craggy escarpments. Long, fast stretches break up more technical sections of tight bends. This was the downhill finish to Stage 16 of the 2008 Tour, and I can only imagine the speeds eventual stage winner Cyril Dessel reached.

Tim has zipped ahead of me on the descent, and as I fly past an open-air cafe halfway down I'm unaware that he is in fact inside trying to find a table for lunch. As a result, he is forced to chase me the rest of the way down, and we only meet up at the T-junction at the bottom of the climb. We may have lost our table but we quickly find a pizzeria that serves delicious, wood-fired, thin crust pizzas – a reminder that we will soon be crossing the border into Italy.

Over lunch, Tim and I discover that our paths once crossed in the unlikelyst of places, the remote oasis

town of Siwa near the Egypt-Libya border. I was the only one riding a bike at that particular time – Tim was there teaching English to the children of a wealthy local family, while I'd been shepherding groups of backpackers around local landmarks such as Cleopatra's Pool and the Temple of the Oracle of Amun on a fleet of rusting mountain bikes. And now here we are, 15 years later, wearing designer kit and being photographed eating pizza on the side of a mountain.

Border crossing

Our next climb, the Col de Larche, will take us into Italy, where it's known as the Colle della Maddalena. After the demands of the Bonette, it's a fairly gentle and constant gradient on a much quieter road. Of more concern are the storm clouds looming ahead where the valley narrows. ►

Left: The Cime de la Bonette may be a mere extension loop to the Col, but it's the highest point the Tour de France has ever reached. Also, it's popular with motorcyclists who just get in the way of your photos



Our arrival at the summit and the border is marked by a noticeable deterioration in road quality and a marked increase in the number of 18-wheel juggernauts travelling in the opposite direction. 'The Italians are too tight to pay the motorway tolls,' speculates Tim.

The tarmac is particularly sketchy on the first section of hairpins, resembling a carpet that hasn't been straightened out properly, but as the road tumbles down a seemingly endless valley, its imperfections become somewhat easier to negotiate.

We hurtle past a succession of distinctly Latin-sounding place names – Argentera, Pontebernardo, Sambuco – feathering the brakes as long, swooping

straights of road are interrupted by rippling hairpins. And the descent continues for 30 wonderful, dizzying kilometres, until a succession of short, unlit tunnels jolts us from our reverie and we're delivered to the valley floor. The threatening clouds are behind us now, although the blue of the sky is noticeably deepening in the fading late afternoon light.

We turn left before the village of Vinadio and scan the looming bulk of mountains in front of us for any clue to the road's trajectory. From this angle, the wall of rock appears impervious to any feat of engineering, but we have underestimated the ingenuity of past generations of road builders.

The narrow valley's flanks appear to squeeze the road upwards and occasionally force it back on itself to cope with the gradient

Previous pages: The stunning valley that leads up to the Colle della Lombardia is like a secret, hidden kingdom

Below: This bridge on the lower slopes of the Bonette looks slightly worse for wear, but we made it across



The hairpins up to the Lombardia are stunning, but a roadside memorial is a reminder they can be lethal



A chink of metal glinting amidst the rock and shrubbery above us hints at something manmade, and sure enough a narrow strip of grey asphalt ascends in a series of tightly coiled hairpins with a flaking, whitewashed guardrail delineating the fine margin between upward progress and oblivion.

This is the start of the final, 20km climb of the day, the Colle della Lombardia, and these early, steep hairpins twisting beneath a thick canopy of trees and bushes give no hint of the beauty to come.

The gradient hovers constantly around 7% or 8% even after we have broken free from the hairpins onto a long straight. This eventually emerges from under the tree cover and we get our first proper glimpse of the valley.

It's deep and narrow, its flanks appearing to squeeze the road upwards and occasionally force it back on itself to cope with the gradient. But above all, it is rugged, remote and relentlessly spectacular. The French border is at the summit so it's fitting that the landscape has the feel of a wild frontier.

The gradient slackens about halfway up, and I catch sight of a marble plaque and photograph at the side of the road. It's a memorial to a 22-year-old local rider called Giovanni Bersezio who died after crashing into a rock at this spot in 1968. He had been returning home from the Santuario di Sant'Anna, one of Europe's highest religious shrines, just a few miles up the road. ▶

By the numbers

The day in digits

160

length of loop in kilometres

3,842

metres climbed

4

number of times the Tour has climbed the Bonette

30

length of longest descent in kilometres

12

diameter in inches of pizzas for lunch

87

height difference in metres between Cime and Col de la Bonette

2

marmots spotted



I've lost sight of Tim behind me, but I have no inclination to hang around as a human lightning conductor on this exposed road

It's always moving to come across a memorial to a fallen cyclist, especially in a place as remote as this. His black and white photograph is almost completely faded, but judging by the polished marble and fresh flowers, someone obviously still regularly pays tribute to the memory of young Giovanni.

Everybody hurts

By the time we reach the turn off for the sanctuary – where Katusha rider Rein Taaramäe won the penultimate stage of the 2016 Giro – the sky has darkened and we can feel spots of rain. We decide to forgo the 2km detour to the religious site and press on to the summit.

The road ramps up once more, just as a wooden cross comes into view on the roadside and a crack of thunder ricochets overhead. An image of YouTube sensation Marie d'Auron singing 'Everybody Hurts' flashes in front of me.

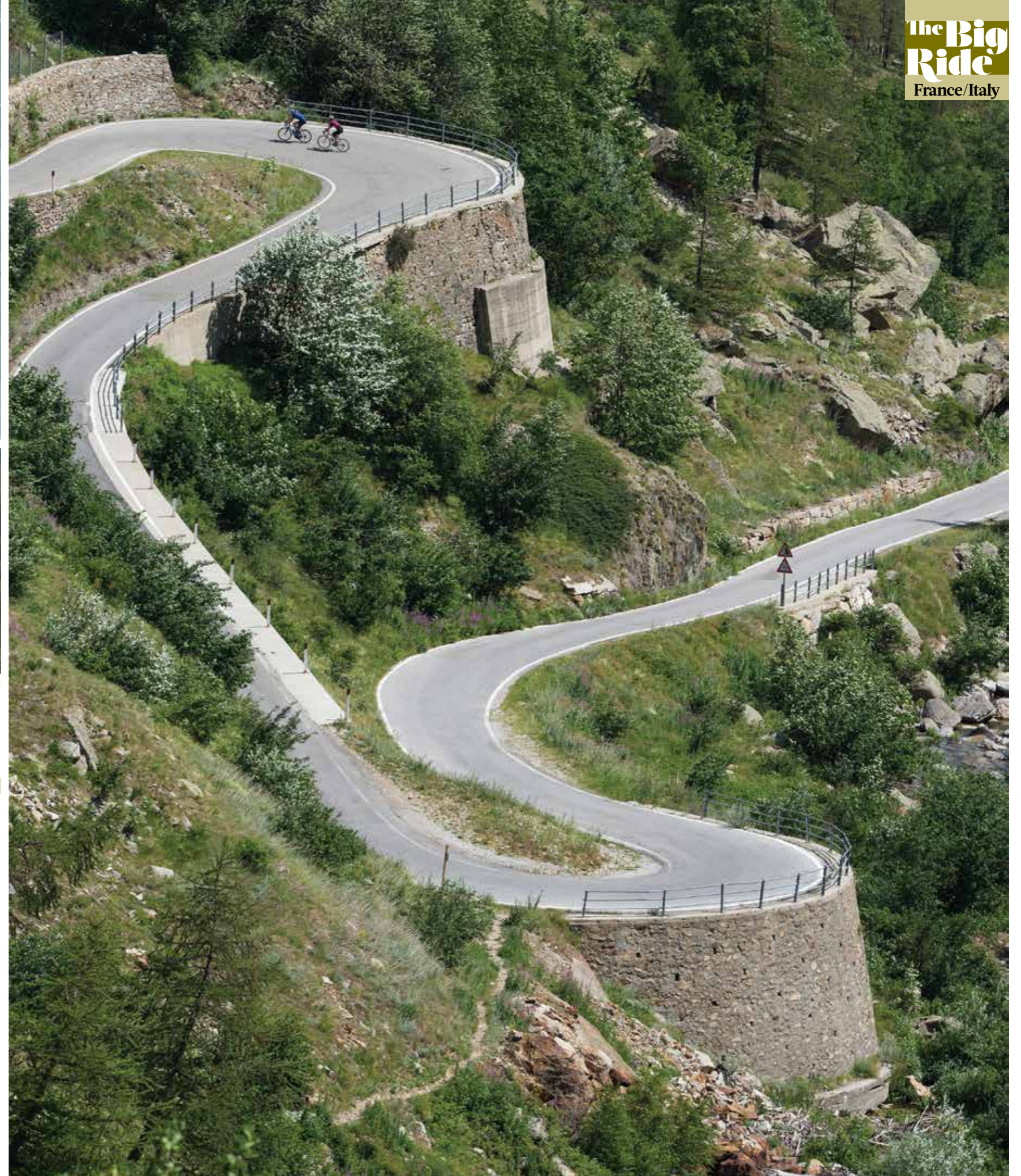
I stop and dig out my rain cape. Big gobs of rain are exploding onto the tarmac and visibility has been reduced

to about 50m. With 3km still to go to reach the summit, the gradient has eased off but it's the occasional forks of lightning illuminating the plateau that now concern me.

I've lost sight of Tim behind me, but I have no inclination to hang around as a human lightning conductor on this exposed section of road. Up ahead, I can see the neon glow from something – what, I'm not quite sure – that must mark the summit, so I grit my teeth, bow my head and churn through the gears.

It's a rolling last couple of kilometres before I see that the neon blur is from a pink wagon dispensing drinks and snacks. Other than that, the summit is deserted – a far cry from the chaos and hordes of tifosi that greeted Gerolsteiner's Stefan Schumacher when he was first over the Lombarda during the Tour's last visit in 2008.

There are no hot drinks available, so I am forced to buy a beer. And then another. Although it tastes good, it's not quite the warming elixir my body is craving at this moment in time.



How we did it

TRAVEL

The nearest airport is Nice, which you can reach from several British airports. It's about a two-hour drive to St Étienne-de-Tinée, with car hire being the best option.

ACCOMMODATION

We stayed at the Le Régalivou Hotel in St Étienne-de-Tinée, a simple, family-run hotel offering a decent cold buffet breakfast and superb steaks or pizzas on its outdoor restaurant terrace for dinner. B&B in a double room costs around €75 (£65) in high season. More details at leregalivou.free.fr.

BIKE

We hired our bike from Café du Cycliste in Nice. It offers a choice of premium carbon Officine Mattio or hand-built steel Cycles Victoire bikes, costing from €60-95 a day. Go to cafeducycliste.com.

THANKS

A big thank you to Marmot Tours for all its help. Visit marmot-tours.co.uk for info on its range of tours across Europe.

Thanks also to Pascal Lequenne of the local tourism office for help with accommodation. Visit cotedazurfrance.fr.

By the time Tim arrives, we're in the throes of a full-on storm. The thought of the 21km descent to the valley floor and home straight to St Étienne-de-Tinée is not an appealing one, especially as from the ski resort of Isola 2000, 4km below us, it will be a much busier road than the one we've just ascended.

We compromise by gingerly descending to the resort – ugly and unloved, wet and out-of-season – and piling into the support vehicle there. My logic is that if any reader gets caught in a similar situation, they can at least take a taxi 30km from the ski resort back to St Étienne-de-Tinée.

By the time we arrive back at our hotel, it's early evening and still pouring with rain, but any doubts about whether we 'bottled it' or not are solemnly crushed when we hear that a motorcyclist was killed during the storm on the Col de la Bonette after being hit by a stone dislodged by lightning. Sometimes, discretion really is the better part of valour. ❀

Trevor Ward is a freelance writer who has definitely ridden the highest road in Europe, whichever one it is



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The clouds darken as we cross the border between France and Italy

