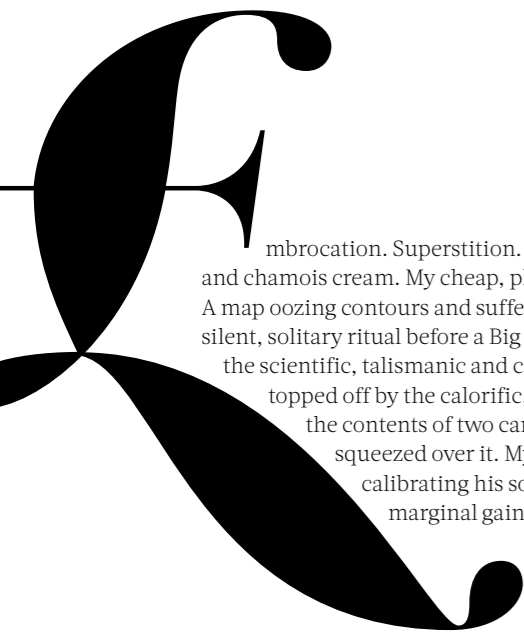


# Summits *and* Switchbacks

Near the French city of Nice is a playground of soaring cols, sweeping descents and countless hairpins that has become a favourite training arena for the pros. *Cyclist* pays it a visit

Words **TREVOR WARD** Photography **PATRIK LUNDIN**





ambrocation. Superstition. Navigation. Sunscreen and chamois cream. My cheap, plastic 'climber's crucifix'. A map oozing contours and suffering – the symbols of my silent, solitary ritual before a Big Ride. A combination of the scientific, talismanic and cartographic that will be topped off by the calorific, a big bowl of muesli with the contents of two cartons of natural yoghurt squeezed over it. My riding partner, Gav, is calibrating his sock length. These are the marginal gains that will define our day in the mountains of southern France.

They say cycling is 'the beautiful sport', though they have obviously never seen Gav in full flight. He may be fast, but looks like a chimpanzee trying to escape from the zoo. Or me, hunched like a bear stuck in economy class.

Maybe 'they' meant the machines we ride, but there is no way our bikes are more beautiful than our sleek, freshly shaved legs, glistening in the morning sun on this beautiful June morning. (Although I will concede my bike does have a gorgeous finish – see The Rider's Ride.)

No, the beauty of cycling lies in the places and feelings it transports us to. Today, these places will include some of the roads and climbs regularly used by the pros who live in or near Monaco, about 90 minutes' drive away. Chris Froome says this area is 'a hidden gem' (sorry, Chris, not any more), while Lizzie Deignan's favourite climb, the Col de Braus and its 'lovely long switchbacks', is also on our itinerary.

Ah, those switchbacks – we got to 56 before losing count of the hairpins on the map. I check for the factor 50 in my rear pocket and wonder if I should have packed some seasickness tablets too. 🚗



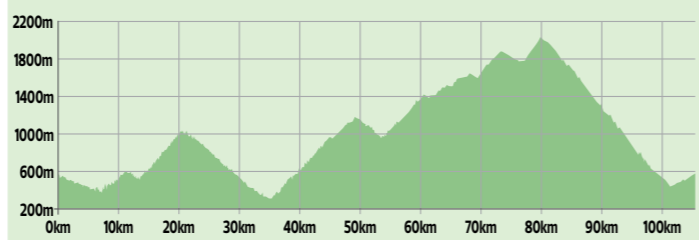
## Let's twist again

### Follow *Cyclist's* route to Turini

To download this route go to [cyclist.co.uk/67turini](http://cyclist.co.uk/67turini). Leave Roquebillière in the direction of Lantosque to the south. Once through Lantosque (after 7km), turn left signposted Col Saint-Roch. Follow this road for 18km until you arrive at a staggered crossroads just after cresting the col. Turn right, then left, heading downhill to Lucéram. Follow the D2566 to L'Escarène (your last chance to re-stock on supplies before the Col de Turini). From here, head north on the D2204, signposted Col de Braus. Just before the summit – marked by the ruins of a restaurant and René Vietto's memorial on the left – is a narrow road on your left that continues climbing, signposted Col de Turini. Follow this for 19km and then turn right onto the D21. After the hairpins, turn right at the T-junction, signposted Peira Cava and Col de Turini. At the col there are several roads leading in different directions – take the one signposted Circuit de l'Authion. This climbs for 6km before the circuit starts. It's one way, so you take the right-hand fork. After completing the circuit, retrace your route back to the Col de Turini, and take the right hand turn signposted La Bollène-Vésubie. This descent will take you back to the road you started out on, the M2565. Turn right to return to Roquebillière.



Total distance:  
**110km**  
Total ascent:  
**2,900m**



Left: Round and round we go. This is just one of the 50-plus hairpins on the route, on the descent to lunch in L'Escarène  
Previous pages: *Cyclist* crosses an oversized bridge to start the first climb of the day, to the Col de la Porte



▶ The pros attack these mountains, the Maritime Alps, from the coast, but we have based ourselves in the little village of Roquebillière, nestling in their western flanks. We leave across a handsome stone bridge before an anonymous-looking left turn signals the start of the climb to the first of half a dozen cols we will pass over today, the Col de la Porte.

### The quiet life

After the hum of traffic on the main road towards Nice, it's suddenly silent and still, though we are soon filling the void with our laboured breathing as the gradient kicks in. If a rider climbs a 7% slope through dense forest but there is no one to see him, did he really do it? Of course he did, as long as he remembers to upload it to Strava later.

There are occasional clearings and a succession of bridges across an unseen river as the road goes up. When we finally break free from the foliage at a crossroads, a sign announces Col Saint-Roch. We obviously rode straight past the Col de la Porte without fanfare further down in the forest. Looking ahead now, we see our first set of hairpins descending enticingly to the medieval village of Lucéram.

As we enter its narrow streets, it would be easy to be



## A local points up the hill and tells us the next restaurant isn't for another 20km

lulled by our downhill momentum into rolling straight through, but I decide such an attractive jumble of pastel facades and delicate church towers demands more respect – or at least a few photographs – so slam on my brakes.

A coffee would be nice, but nowhere appears to be open. Instead I click-clack over a cobbled square to see ▶

**Below:** The ascent to the 1,607m Col de Turini twists and turns its way acrobatically through some dramatic landscapes







## There are at least a dozen hairpins up ahead of us. That's 10km divided by 12 multiplied by 180° times 7%

◀ what I can glean from the posters in the tourism office window: not a lot, it's all in French. But as I return to my bike I catch sight of what was previously hidden from view – the road we were riding on is supported by a succession of 10-metre high stone arches, from whose blackness tumble torrents of ivy. It resembles a spectacular art installation, and is probably missed by the hundreds of tourists who choose to pass through here each day by car.

A few kilometres further on, we arrive at the outskirts of L'Escarène. We turn left at a sign saying 'Col de Braus 12km'. The sign also announces a village in 3km. Will it have a restaurant or do we stop for lunch here? We gamble, and start the climb. The village does indeed have a restaurant. It even has an inviting outdoor terrace with tables and chairs overlooking the valley. But it's closed.

A local points up the hill and tells us the next restaurant in that direction isn't for another 20km. Reluctantly, we turn around and freewheel back down into the town of L'Escarène, where our frustration is partly tempered by pizzas the size of bicycle wheels.

### Satisfaction, trepidation, calculation

Pizza and beer immediately followed by a 12km climb at an average gradient close to 7% requires some quick mental calculation. It's less challenging than splitting the bill for lunch had been – 'plant-powered' Gav insisted on having his chicken pizza without the chicken – and we agree we're still on schedule to make it back to the hotel pool before dark.

There are at least a dozen hairpins up ahead of us on Lizzie Deignan's favourite climb. That's 10km divided by

12 multiplied by 180° times 7%. These are the fractions that haunt us over and over again as we climb up the Col de Braus, with the view back down the valley constantly switching from one side to the other.

But we don't get to fully appreciate the aesthetics and engineering of these hairpins until we have finally slipped their curly bonds and the road has straightened out for the last couple of kilometres to the summit. Only then, looking to our right, do we see the complete stack of bends, looking like some otherworldly concoction left behind with geometrical precision by a master race of extra-terrestrial engineers. Except that it was actually built by the local council's highways department.

A narrow road signposted Col de Turini leads off to our left. We shall return to this imminently, but first I want to pay my respects to a cyclist whose story makes the modern-day peloton look about as exciting as a Sunday night in Crewe (Peter Sagan excepted, obviously). ▶

## The rider's ride

Officine Mattio Lemma, £7,400, [ciclimattio.com](http://ciclimattio.com)

This Italian brand is as big on aesthetics as it is technical excellence, describing its products as 'bicycles intended as jewellery'. The frame was certainly a head-turner, with a striking finish that was the result of the brand's 'handmade paints', researched and produced to 'clothe our bikes'.

Behind the breathless blurb is 20 years of framebuilding experience. The Lemma is the only carbon frame the brand produces, its other two models being steel. Despite its slender, retro appearance, the frame is light, rigid and compliant, which is just as well considering our ride was either uphill or downhill with very little flat in between.

The price quoted is for the Dura-Ace model, but ours came with a Sram Red eTap groupset. As someone who's never owned a smartphone, the idea of riding a bike that changed gear wirelessly made me dizzy with excitement – I was using down tube levers just a few years ago. But if I'm being picky, I didn't find the changes quite as slick as with Shimano's Di2, although that may be easily rectified with some tweaking back at the workshop.

And so it was the quality of the frame that really came into play. I never felt as if a single pedal stroke was being wasted while going uphill, and on the descents its sure-footedness encouraged me 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.'



Left: The hairpins on the climb to the 1,002m Col de Braus are more uniform than on the wild road to Turini



We did say the roads on the Col de Braus were uniform

Below: Cyclist finally finds some straight(ish) road on the way to the foot of the Col de Turini

## By the numbers

Don't disrespect digits

**110**

length of ride in kilometres

**2,900**

total vertical elevation accumulated in metres

**56**

number of hairpins

**2,020**

highest point of ride in metres

**6**

number of cols ridden over

**15**

diameter of lunchtime pizza in inches

**9**

number of toes René Vietto completed the 1947 Tour with



## The restaurant that once stood here at the summit of the Col de Braus is now an abandoned ruin, so we clip in and ride back to the turn-off for the Col de Turini

▶ The tale of René Vietto's toe captured my imagination as I thumbed through a bargain bin history of the Tour in a bookshop many years ago. On a rest day during the 1947 Tour, he told his team doctor to amputate one of his toes after it had turned septic (the result of a long-standing injury). 'It will make me lighter in the mountains,' he said, presumably while biting on a branch and knocking back a large Pernod.

The toe became regarded by some as a holy relic, with its whereabouts and final resting place the subject of feverish

debate, as if its DNA might somehow be used to facilitate a new generation of French super-grimpeurs.

Author Max Leonard eventually tracked it down to a jar in the kitchen of a friend of Vietto's, and paid it the respect it deserved by not publishing any of the photographs he took of it. Like a religious relic, he felt it should 'exist in the imagination, not in sight'.

Hooked by the story of his toe, I learned about the rest of Vietto too – what a formidable climber he was and how the Col de Braus was his regular training ride, and where he

first made his name, launching a race-winning attack in the Boucle de Sospel of 1931. So I feel a genuine frisson of awe standing at the top of the climb now and looking at the monument dedicated to him (even if it is just a carbon copy of Tom Simpson's memorial on Ventoux). Balanced on a ledge are two small urns containing the ashes of Vietto and his wife. Following René's death in 1988, his son had cycled up the mountain with the urn in his bottle cage, honouring his father's final wish.

### The cols keep coming

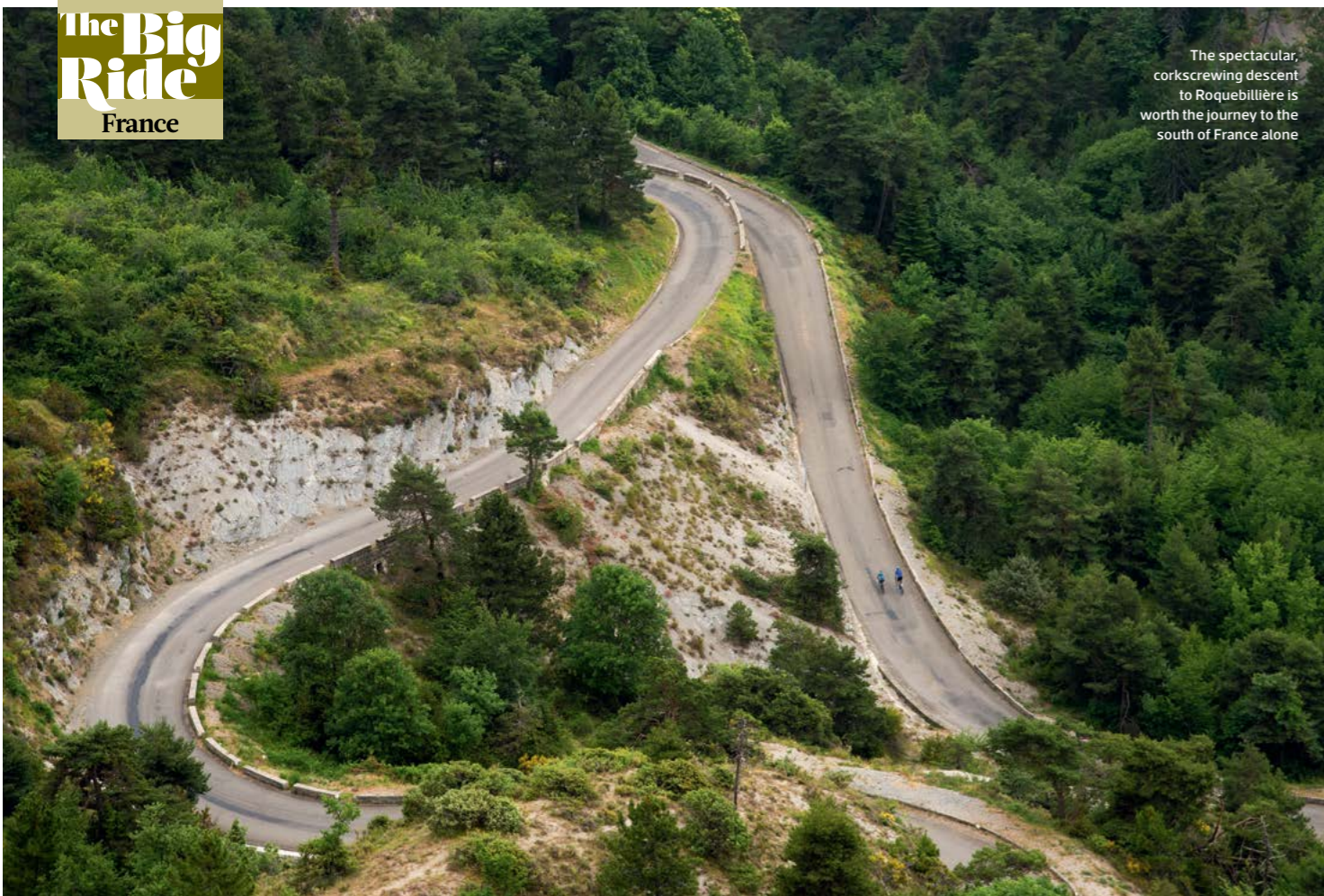
By now it's starting to drizzle and the restaurant that once stood here at the summit of the Col de Braus is now an abandoned ruin, so we clip in and ride back to the turn-off for the Col de Turini.

The road climbs through mist and forest to the Col de l'Able before a twisting descent delivers us to a T-junction at the foot of the next climb. The sun has reappeared, and ▶





The spectacular, corkscrewing descent to Roquebillière is worth the journey to the south of France alone



## Eventually the road loops back on itself, and the inevitable consequence of all that downhill reveals itself in the shape of an ugly ramp pointing up

▶ Gav is squinting at his Garmin. ‘There are 14 hairpins just around the next bend,’ he says with barely suppressed glee.

Sure enough, here is another set of God’s gift to the gravitationally challenged. These hairpins have had to work harder to conquer the contours of the mountain than those of the Col de Braus. The rugged landscape here has forced these hairpins into a more irregular pattern, where the coils aren’t quite as compact and the length of the ramps between not quite so uniform. But that’s just me being picky – I’m now a switchback snob, and nothing less than a perfect, tightly arced 180° bend is going to satisfy me.

By the time we reach the top of these bends, however – and we seem to be twisting and turning forever – I have been won over once more. The sheer acrobatics of the road, combined with the complete lack of traffic, has made going uphill feel almost as much fun as going downhill. Almost.

The last bend spills out onto a ridge, which we follow for about 10km, passing the village of Peira Cava, whose claim to fame was becoming the region’s first ski station in 1914 ▶











Bottom left: The memorial to René Vietto at the top of Col de Braus includes the caskets containing his and his wife's ashes

## The road pours down the narrow gorge like a torrent of tarmac, cascading between soaring rock escarpments and through occasional tunnels

◀ (it's now closed). We arrive at a crossroads to find a cluster of Swiss chalet-style buildings marked by a sign trumpeting Col de Turini. As summits go, I've had better. But thanks to Froome, we know the fun is a few kilometres up the road.

Some more climbing and another handful of hairpins brings us to the Circuit de l'Authion, of which Froome said, 'I really recommend the summit loop. Just be aware that it might be under snow if you're up there any time before late spring. Richie Porte and I went up there in March 2014 and nearly had to call for a couple of snowboards to get down.'

The weather is more hospitable today, and we can see where the road splits to form the loop, or 'noose' for the more pessimistic. At the fork, one-way signs instruct us to head right, which is downhill. The road is narrow but well surfaced, and the views to the peaks of the southernmost Alps are endless.

As the descent flattens out and begins arcing to the left, we pass the remains of a fort or bunker – such a vantage point has not gone unnoticed by generations of armies, from Napoleonic to Nazi – and the rusting hulk of a World

War Two tank. We stop for photos but are disappointed to find its entrance hatch has been sealed shut.

### One-way system

The circuit now skirts a verdant crater. We haven't seen another vehicle or human since leaving the Col de Turini, and now we are on a mountaintop one-way system high above the clouds. Eventually the road loops back on itself, and the inevitable consequence of all that downhill reveals itself in the shape of an ugly ramp pointing up. Buoyed by the knowledge this will be the final climb of the day, we dig in and toil up the 12% slope for what seems like an eternity, a solitary hawk circling above us in the darkening sky.

Though this spectacular loop has never been used in the Tour de France (Turini itself has featured only three times, the last in 1973), it's a regular fixture on the Monte Carlo Rally. Cycling fans may be considered reckless for running alongside riders wearing Borat-style mankinis, but that's ▶





nothing compared with the antics of motorsport fans. Hundreds gather for the night-time stage to throw snow into the path of cars already straining for traction.

To reach the highest point of today's ride we came the long way around, climbing 2,900 metres in almost 100km. The return journey will be considerably shorter, with a corkscrewing 15km descent down to Roquebillière. It also includes the final 20 hairpins of the day.

The road pours down the narrow gorge like a torrent of tarmac, cascading between soaring rock escarpments and through occasional tunnels. Between hairpins many of the other curves are sweeping, allowing us to lean in at speed.

At the bottom, Gav declares it one of the best descents he's ridden, and as a rider and guide with cycling tour operator Marmot Tours, he should know.

The final few kilometres along the valley floor to our hotel are flat and fast but missing something. A hairpin or two would be a fitting end to a gloriously dizzying ride. *Trevor Ward is a freelance writer who was driven around the bend by this assignment*

## How we did it

### TRAVEL

The nearest airport is Nice. From there it's just over an hour's drive to Roquebillière. If you're staying in Nice, an alternative is to take the 40-minute train ride to L'Escarène and pick up the route from there.

### ACCOMMODATION

We stayed at the Hotel Saint Sébastien on the outskirts of Roquebillière. Housed in a beautiful, ivy-clad building, it's a simple but charming, family-run affair. There's a great outdoor pool and dining terrace. The steaks we had for dinner (Gav had lettuce and chips) were sensational. Bed and breakfast in a double room costs around €90 (£83) in high season. More details at [hotel-saintsebastien06.com](http://hotel-saintsebastien06.com).

### BIKE HIRE

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 (£55–£87) a day. It also has an extensive database of information and maps about routes and climbs throughout the region, and it organises regular group rides from the cafe. Find out more at [cafeducycliste.com](http://cafeducycliste.com).

### THANKS

A big thank you to Marmot Tours for all its help. My co-rider, Gav Savage, and our support van driver, Tim Myers, are two of the company's most experienced guides, so their input was invaluable. Marmot offers fully supported cycling tours in all of Europe's great mountain ranges. Go to [marmot-tours.co.uk](http://marmot-tours.co.uk).

Thanks also to Florence Lecointre of the local tourism office for helping us out with accommodation. There's loads of useful information and ideas for riders at [cotedazurfrance.fr](http://cotedazurfrance.fr). Finally, thanks to Ali McKee at Café du Cycliste for supplying our bike, kit and handy details about our route.

The rapid descent down to Roquebillière features sweeping bends and wide tunnels as well as... more hairpins

