

# Tour de France - the ultimate adventure

by Guy Barnett

CADEL Evans cycled the time trial of his life to gain the yellow jersey and move into first place on the last day of the Tour de France before Paris.

The one hour warm-up was amazing to watch as sweat was streaming down Cadel's face as he cycled hard and strong on his stationary bike. I would be zonked after that effort I said to myself. Cadel was so focused he hardly noticed the dozens of supporters staring at him encouragingly.

With exactly 20 minutes to go to the start of his time trial he wiped his face with a towel, got off his bike and returned to the inner sanctum of his BMC sponsored bus, but with a two fingered victory sign over his left shoulder. Then with 15 minutes to go he exited the bus and cycled slowly to the start line accompanied by his coach and screams of 'Go Cadel'.

Discipline and determination is everything in this game-one of the world's most gruelling iconic sporting events. Cadel Evans was not just Australia's first ever winner of the Tour de France, and the oldest victor since 1923 at 34 years, but the way he won the race demonstrated he has the heart of a giant and more guts than the world's greatest gladiator, Maximus Decimus Meridius.

Both Richie Porte and Matt Goss, in the same pre-race training areas and following a similar routine, seemed pleased to be extended a good luck message from a fellow Launcestonian. Richie appeared relaxed and looking forward to the challenge ahead which augured well for his outstanding 5th place in the 42.5km time trial beating many of the world's great cyclists.

People were cheering the cycling warriors along the 150 to 200km of road each of the 21 days of this event. Much of the route, especially the uphill sections, was lined with campervans from all over Europe flying their home country flag.

Tim Piper and I cycled four days before, and four days during the tour itself.

After departing on Bastille Day and 30 hours

flying from Launceston to London to Geneva, we hired our station wagon, with our own bikes in the back, and drove three hours to Lyon in the south of France. Arriving late at night exhausted, we plunked into bed and slept soundly.

This part of France is renowned for its gastronomic pleasures which of course were a top priority with cycling each day. Breakfast was a French pastry or croissant and coffee, lunch a baguette, Tim's favourite cheese was munster, saussisson a type of well matured salami, and occasionally foie gras with the evenings allowing us time for a more extensive tasting of the local fine cuisine and a local wine.

We travelled north to Beaune, a 2000 year old Roman built town of 20,000 people protected by a moat and high walls. We were in the heart of the Burgundy region. Each day we cycled through vineyards, several small historic villages and passed the odd chateau.

We cycled into a valley surrounded by a forest and up and up. We reached the top by which time I had suffered my first hypo (low blood sugar) of this adventure and required most of my jelly beans and a good 20 minute break rebuilding my strength while kicking myself for miscalculating my food and insulin intake.

On the next day we followed a similar route but found a good hill of some 12 per cent incline which removed any vestiges of jetlag and prepared our legs for the Alps in the days ahead.

We then began our six day official tour which included four more serious days of cycling. During the tour we breakfasted at 7am and were on the bikes at 8am to ensure we could conclude cycling by around 2pm. We would cycle the same but a shorter route as the professionals, with of course the all-important coffee breaks at scenic locations.

The tour riders started each day at 12 and finished around 5pm, so we had time to shower, and then watch and cheer, unlike our fellow Australians who were staying up late to do so in front of their televisions.

Day one we cycled 100 km from Serre Chevalier in the heart of the French Alps to Pinerolo in Italy. We climbed three mountains at 6 per cent or more incline and enjoyed a 45km downhill amidst some of the tallest mountains in France. For the first time since 1996 these were snow-capped during the tour.

Tunnels through the hillside or mountains were common in the Alps. Entering a tunnel at speed was at first dark, disconcerting, scary even, until I was advised to lower my sun glasses and look over them not through them.

The roads were lined thick with people, campervans, dogs, flags and police. Police ambulance and fire trucks would be racing one way then the other with sirens blazing. Organised and disorganised chaos in a friendly excited and welcoming atmosphere seemed all around.

This was France at its best and we were loving it.

The road up the final hill was blocked to cyclists and vehicles by police (with guns) four hours before the pros were due, instead of the usual two or three hours. What were we to do?

Of course our tour van was 'official' and had special rights, so we placed our bikes in the back with cyclists squashed in as well and we drove 1.5km up the road, unloaded and back on the bikes for the remainder of the journey.

I blew a front tyre on the steep descent at the same location two of the professional riders ended up in someone's open garage.

Front tyre fixed in record time with assistance and on we travelled to the finish line with people eight deep, cheering and celebrating our arrival knowing full well that their real heroes would be arriving at twice the speed in another couple of hours.

We had cycled 70km up and down hills along cliff edges sometimes too scared to look down, before we hit the base of Alp d'Huez, the iconic French mountain cyclists the world over dream of conquering. It is 13.8km in length with 21 switch backs, 1815 metres high and an average 8 per cent incline, with parts at a 10

per cent incline.

The carnival atmosphere was in full swing with people, cyclists, cars, vans all over the place, but most attempting to ascend. At the halfway point Dutchmen wearing orange had commandeered the road and surrounding landscape, and they cheered and yelled madly at all comers.

As I was wearing my Launceston team jersey, JUU which is orange, they cheered all the louder at me and offered a special Dutch liqueur to give me strength! I had no option of having a rest or piking out at this juncture.

My friend Tim said it was the hardest physical challenge he has ever completed. Mine remains the PNG eight day Kokoda trek in 2008.

We joined over a hundred fans from Luxembourg that night who were celebrating the stage victory of Andy Schleck and his brother Frank who was in second, with Cadel third.

We knew Cadel had a good chance to whip the two Schleck brothers in the time trial the next day but for the moment Luxembourg had the yellow jersey and every reason to feel and be victorious. They also had no problem with the odd Aussie flag being part of the mass of Luxembourg flags and well-wishers singing loudly.

Goodwill abounded. Being literally metres from Cadel Evans as he put on his yellow jersey in Grenoble after his time trial success was a memory to cherish. He had tears in his eyes and so did we.

We were very proud to be Australians and so were many others which is why Tim and I lead the cry "Aussie Aussie Aussie, Oi Oi Oi!". The response was fantastic. Australian flags were flying with boxing kangaroos bouncing up and down in the crowd.

Our final day in Paris would see Cadel Evans officially bestowed as the winner of the 3400km Tour de France 2011 in 86 hours 12 minutes and 22 seconds after finishing second in 2007 and 2008.

We rose early put on our bike gear, reassembled our bikes in our small hotel room and walked with our bikes to the local garage to pump

up the tyres. Our aim was to see Paris in a morning on bicycles.

First stop the Eiffel Tower, followed by the Arc de Triomphe and the Champs-Élysées.

My mate Tim was wearing a yellow jersey and was stopped and congratulated on his cycling prowess. People asked us several times for photos no doubt as a memento of this auspicious day.

Later that day I purchased for Tim the red polka dot king of the mountain jersey. He deserved it.

As we watched our cycling heroes complete the eight lap race along one of world's most beautiful avenues, the Champs-Élysées we yelled and screamed encouragement to Cadel Evans, Richie Porte, Matt Goss and others.

Matt Goss played an important role in helping his HTC-Highroad sponsored team-mate Mark Cavendish secure a final stage victory in front



of a crowd of millions in Paris and one of the largest viewing audiences ever around the world.

•Guy Barnett and Tim Piper on the Champs-Élysées

(Guy Barnett travelled to France from 14 to 27 July to cycle with his friend Tim Piper, and enjoy the Tour de France.



•Guy Barnett with Launceston's Tour de France competitor Matt Goss

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