

DEAR MONT VENTOUX

JUST A QUICK NOTE TO
SAY THANKS FOR ALTERING
MY LIFE FOREVER.
BY MIKE MAGNUSON

Win
a Free
Trip Here!

See p. 68.

On the windblown, lunar landscape that marks the last few kilometers of climbing, the author approaches the summit of the legendary Ventoux.

A Brief History of Ventoux

PART I

Mike Magnuson
BICYCLING
Emmaus, PA, 18098, U.S.A.

November 2005

Christian Pic
President-Founder
Club des Cinglés du Mont-Ventoux
13, rue Chateaubriand
42290 Sorbiers
France

Dear Monsieur Christian Pic:

This is a letter of thanks for the souvenir medal you have sent to commemorate my unsuccessful attempt to earn the special distinction of *Galérien du Ventoux* in the *Club des Cinglés du Mont-Ventoux*. I appreciate also the sympathies you have expressed to me in your handwritten note, which I have taken to heart, and please let me assure you, I will get better soon.

Concerning the souvenir medal, I must say I have always marveled at the rubber industry's ability to produce a material that looks so much like real brass. In fact, until I held the medal in both hands and bent it and twisted it to and fro, I thought you had sent me the real medal. I quite honestly had been hoping that my misfortune on the Ventoux might move you to the degree that you would matriculate me into your club, perhaps as an honorary member. But alas, as cyclists often are, I am prone to flights of the imagination, and your gesture is correct, Monsieur. I do not deserve the real medal; I failed to climb Mont Ventoux on a bicycle four times in one day.

Yet I can't help gazing at this rubber medal and welling over with emotion: Avignon's coat of arms in the right corner; on the upper corner, the symbolic mountain-road connection between the villages of Bedoin and Malaucène and Sault; and on the left corner a cyclist climbing an impossible grade toward the sun. I was there. I can see in my memory everything that happened to me there...yet at the same time what exactly happened to me remains shrouded in impenetrable mystery. I'm going to remove the plastic strip on the adhesive backing and affix this medal to my file cabinet, next to a similar souvenir one of my students purchased for me while visiting the American Southwest. That medallion's inscription reads, "Hello, Earthlings, from Roswell, New Mexico."

As you know, Monsieur Pic, I crashed at 55 kilometers per hour during my second descent of the Ventoux and broke my left clavicle and had to be evacuated from the mountain via helicopter. I have since told this story to people, and they have said, "My God, that sounds *terrible*," and I tell more, about locking up my brakes in a corner and setting the bike down to avoid flying over a guardrail and over a cliff. "*Horrible*," people say. But then I get

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PART II

1st CENTURY A.D.
Part of neither the Alps nor the Pyrenees, the lone mountain towering over Provence (think Rainier over Seattle) is named for either *vinur* (victory) or *vent* (wind).

25 MILLION B.C.
The 6,266-foot peak, mostly covered by the Miocene sea, is an island.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JAMES STARTT

to the part about riding in the helicopter, an older bubble-type helicopter, floating away from a field of green grass and white stones near the ski station at Mont Serein, guardian of the Ventoux's northern slopes, which fall away into the Toulourenc River some 1,400 meters below. Off in the distance, I could see the city of Carpentras, and beyond it, Avignon, the Rhône Valley, Vaucluse, the dim green bumps of the Massif Central on the horizon, and everywhere underneath me, I could see the villages and hills and vineyards and orchards and ancient roads of Provence, where the Romans once garrisoned legions, where Popes once came to refresh their minds and better understand the machinations of His Earth, where nowadays cyclists come from all over the world to ride long circles around the vast base of Mont Ventoux and then try to ride up it.

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PART III

highway, and I did make it to the summit twice on this bike, and I did bomb down the mountain's slope successfully once, at speeds over 70kph—and had a blast doing it.

My second descent was equally euphoric, on that inky-black, superfresh glacial tarmac laid down not 24 hours ago and still closed to traffic. I slowed to 55kph for the turn, and, all of a sudden, saw the impossible: a boxy Citroën taking a wide sweep through the middle of that blind corner, heading dead into me. I locked the brakes and went into an uncontrollable skid toward the guardrail, the cliff, the stand of trees, the certain death, and so I set the bike down. I flopped over a couple of times and ended up wedged against the guardrail.

1336: Poet Petrarch climbs to the summit merely to see the view, an act often cited as ushering in the humanistic Renaissance Age.

I did not move. I did not listen for birds calling happily to each other in the clear mountain air. I did not think about the Tom Simpson Memorial, past which I had descended twice already. For the first time in my life, I found the exact word to express my thoughts. I said, rather poetically, "Shit."

And I went into shock and started to shiver.

And people came to me. French-speaking Swiss people, I think. A woman and two men. Cyclists. I couldn't see them and couldn't understand what they were saying. I looked up and was blinded by the sun, looked down and saw asphalt so fresh and black that dust hadn't yet settled into it.

My thighs began cramping violently, and one of the Swiss people, a large bald man, massaged out the cramps, while the woman held my head in place and said something soothing to me. I floated free of my body, away from all the petty restrictions I have placed upon my life—don't eat this, don't drink that, don't lose focus, don't take the day off, don't let

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PART IV



Magnuson's crash prevented him from being an official Nut, but there were plenty of people who thought he was certifiable.

1880s: As soon as a paved, southern road is established, cyclist Adolphe Benoît rides to the top, then organizes the first race up Ventoux.

You are familiar with the place where I crashed, I'm sure, on the descent to Bedoin, in the cedar forest perhaps 2 kilometers below Chalet Reynard, at the end of that long, steep, 10-percent-grade straightaway, that first sweeping blind left bend before the snaky section down to St. Estève. I guess the crash was routine, at least for that corner; four cyclists died in crashes there last year alone. And yes, I might have been carrying too much speed, probably 70kph on the straightaway. Had I descended a bit more prudently, I might be writing you a different sort of letter right now, but I do not wish to make excuses. I'm certain I made mistakes along the way. What human being doesn't?

On the day of my attempt, the road from Chalet Reynard to St. Estève was closed to motor vehicles so it could be resurfaced; crews were getting it ready for the individual time trial in the Dauphiné Libéré, laying down such excellently smooth asphalt that, in a couple of weeks, Iban Mayo would set an all-time record for the climb of Ventoux. I was riding a brand-new bike, a custom-made steel Gunnar Crosshairs, a cyclocross bike, not really a climbing bike but a cool bike nevertheless, equally at home on a fire road or a fine

My crash was routine, at least for that corner—4 cyclists died there last year alone.

large bald Swiss strangers massage your legs, and so on—and the very notion of time slipped from me till I reached a place white and cold and pure and transcendent, as if I were being taken aboard the spaceship of the afterlife and strapped to a gurney and examined before traveling to galaxies I didn't heretofore believe existed. Indeed, I was rising in an ambulance past the Tom Simpson Memorial and over the stony summit of Ventoux and to the green field near Mont Serein, over which the helicopter emerged from the heavens to transport me to oblivion.

You'll have to forgive me, Monsieur Pic. My emotions regarding this incident override rational explanation of it. Months before this, actually, I had been having a difficult time explaining to my American cycling friends the exact nature of your club. *Cinglés du Mont-Ventoux*, I've explained, means the Nuts of Ventoux, and to become

Earn Your Nuthood

■ A club known as *La Confrérie des Cinglés du Ventoux*—roughly, “the brotherhood of the nuts of Ventoux”—was created on Easter in 1988 when the founders

ascended Ventoux from each of the three possible routes in a single day, a total of 136 kilometers and 4,285 meters of climbing.

■ In 1998, the title of *Galérien du Ventoux*—roughly “slave of Ventoux”—was introduced for those who also climbed a dirt road to the summit, for a day’s total of 190km and 5,922m of climbing.

■ There are fewer than 1,200 *Cinglés* and 150 *Galériens*.

■ To try, you give eight to 20 days’ notice to the *Confrérie*, and pay 13 Euro for an official map and, if you succeed, you get a plaque and medal confirming your elite status.

■ *VéloSport Vacations* can arrange entry (see “Get There,” on p. 67), or find info at the official website: les.cinglés.du.mont-ventoux.club.fr.—*Bill Strickland*

a Nut of Ventoux, one must ride up the Ventoux three times in one day, taking, in whatever order, these routes: the classic Tour de France route up from Bedoin, 21.5 kilometers and 1,610 meters’ elevation gain; the route up from Malaucène, 21 kilometers and 1,570 meters’ elevation gain; and the lavender route up from Sault, 26 kilometers and 1,220 meters’ elevation. I told my friends that to become a *Galérien du Ventoux*, a Galley Slave of Ventoux, requires adding a fourth route to the day’s itinerary, a dirt route on an ancient forest road that traverses the mountain through the Massif des Cèdres, the largest stand of cedars in Europe.

My friends, like all cyclists, fully embrace the idea of being nuts, of pushing a little more than we should, of trying things slightly beyond our abilities just to see what will happen, et cetera. Being nuts, to the cyclist, is a badge of office. But to climb the Ventoux four times in one day? A 190-kilometer ride with 5,922 meters of climbing? That’s beyond nuts, my friends said.

When I began my attempt to enter *Les Cinglés*, at dawn in Malaucène, I was neither nuts nor irrational. The sky was impeccably clear; the air, dewy and cold. I passed the natural spring at the Source du Groseau, where the road first points up, and promised myself that before this was over I would get a drink of water there and give thanks. Then I settled into myself, into a nice climbing groove, spinning along and looking around at the trees, the birds, the bends in the road, the rock formations, enjoying the peace and the exquisite solitude of climbing on a smooth road. Twenty-one kilometers with a 7.5-percent average grade. The sun rising over one side of the mountain, me rising from the other side to meet it. I didn’t see another cyclist the entire way up, not even when I climbed past Mont Serein and came around the classic, 90-degree turn where the woods disappear and the famous moonscape of the Ventoux summit pops into view. Not

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PART V

1949: The Dauphiné Libéré race first climbs Ventoux.

till I had cranked all the way to the top did I see another cyclist, a German woman, I think, or maybe she was Dutch. She had just climbed from Bedoin, to which I was about to descend, and it turned out she was attempting to become a *Cinglés* on this very day, too. We wished each other well and had a few laughs, and neither of us, I couldn’t help noticing, made a remark about the spectacular view. I hope she made it down the mountain.

This was not long past dawn. I was soaking wet with sweat from the first climb, as was my wind jacket because I had sweated through my jersey pockets, and the temperature was roughly 40 degrees Fahrenheit when I began rolling downward. I was so freezing cold after only one kilometer that when I blew past the Tom Simpson Memorial at 65kph I was ready to join him, but I kept going as fast as I could, using the froze-brain logic that the faster I rolled the sooner the descent would be over. I got my Crosshairs up to 80kph a few times, and somewhere in there I successfully negotiated the left corner that would end my day later.

By 8 a.m. I had turned around in Bedoin and was pedaling and warm again, and I saw that I was not alone, that I was part of an everyday miracle on Mont Ventoux. Cyclists were appearing literally everywhere, one after the other, on road bikes, on touring bikes, mountain bikes, tandems, newsboy bikes with baskets, any kind of bike you could imagine, every one of them rolling toward St. Estève and the left-hand turn to the summit of Ventoux. They must have been waiting for the sun to rise before making the rise of their own.

I merely fell into line, passing some cyclists, getting passed by some, saying *Bonjour* to whoever would hear it.

Partway back up, I turned away from the line of cyclists and went into the woods and negotiated the forest road, which was full of potholes and rocks but fun to ride up anyway, and I kept thinking about other people throughout history who may have wandered along on this road, all alone, traversing a mountain that beckons to so many.

When I reached the summit the second time, there were people by the hundreds up there, cyclists, hikers, hang gliders, vendors selling cookies and sausages and beads, people going in and out of the gift shop, expressing joy in every conceivable language, and I couldn’t stop smiling. This was the greatest moment I would ever have in cycling, and I knew it. I pulled on my wind jacket and began plummeting so I could get warm.

Hours later, when I was in the hospital at Carpentras, I was having a difficult time speaking, not because of my injuries but because my French is disgracefully poor. I communicated with the hospital staff with smiles and nods and telepathy,

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PART VI

1951: The Tour de France first goes over the summit.

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1967: During the Tour de France, Englishman Tom Simpson dies less than a kilometer from the top (where a memorial now sits). His last words reportedly were: “Put me back on my bike.”

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PART VIII

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Get Off Your Bike

Riding through Provence with Trek Travel in 2002 was one of the greatest bike trips of my life—especially because I often left my bike behind to explore this rich region in the south of France.

■ **VILLAGES:** Tiny, colorful settlements pepper the base of Ventoux and the fertile plain that lies between the Rhône River to the west and the foothills of the Alps to the east (with the Mediterranean beaches of Côte d'Azur just a two-hour drive to the south). Malaucène, at the base of Ventoux, is lively with cafés, restaurants, pizzerias, butchers, *pâtisseries* and *boulangeries*, local artists, and an open-air market on Wednesday mornings. (The best market in the area is in Vaison-la-Romaine on Tuesdays.) Bedoin, a sleepier village, lies at the foot of the most traditional route up Ventoux. After you climb and descend the Giant of Provence, sit at one of the outside cafés and gorge on *frites* cooked in olive oil, which will taste like the peak of all of humankind's culinary efforts. Close by, and the meeting and end point for many bike trips, is the walled city of Avignon, with 2,000-year-old aqueducts,



Roman ruins, churches, cathedrals and museums, and a square populated with a carousel and puppet show that delighted my non-French-speaking, four-year-old daughter.

■ **VINEYARDS:** Provence isn't one of France's best wine regions, but Gigondas and Vacqueras produce decent varieties of Côte du Rhône; my PBR-level palate picks the best local winery as Châteauneuf de Pape (and, surprisingly, several expert sources agree). The best Provençal wine I tasted: Cassis.

■ **OLIVE OILS:** This is the real delicacy of Provence, and well worth burning your Euros. Each village will have an olive oil specialty shop that will educate your palate with tastings, help you buy the right types for your needs (cooking oils don't need to be as aromatic), and even ship your bottles home. Never, ever pass up an olive oil shop. (Good info: nyonstourisme.com)

■ **OTHER DELIGHTS:** The area known as The Garden of France is lush with lavender fields (120 pounds make a single pound of essential oil), lime trees (90 percent of France's harvest is grown here) and nougat (an addictive mix of honey, almonds and egg whites). Strong-smelling, expensive black truffles are still hunted by truffle dogs and collected by hand in about 80 spots throughout Provence. Meals typically include guinea fowl, chicken, pigeon, Mediterranean seafood—all sautéed or drizzled with olive oil—plus a decadent, post-main course of cheese that approaches gourmet pornography.—*B.S.*

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PART VIII

1999: American Jonathan Vaughters wins the Ventoux stage of the Dauphiné and sets the record for the 13-mile ascent of 56:50.



I was not alone, but part of an everyday miracle on Mont Ventoux, with cyclists everywhere.

such as when I was brought to Radiology for X rays, when even though I didn't know exactly what I was being told to do, I knew what to do. The radiology nurse was very young, dark-haired and dark-eyed, new enough to her profession that she was visibly bothered by instructing me to get up on the X-ray table and lie back; she knew how much agony the maneuver was causing me.

"*Ne respirer pas,*" she said, and I wouldn't breathe, and she would take the X ray. "*Respirer.*" And I would breathe again.

Seemed like she was presenting me with options; I could go one way or the other with my life. The X rays would prove something permanent: My left clavicle had snapped in the middle, and there was nothing to be done about it but let it heal in the shape it had broken. I would carry the disfigurement, a reminder of the Ventoux, with me till my death.

"Don't breathe," she'd been telling me. "Breathe."

2000: After breaking away with Marco Pantani on Ventoux, Lance Armstrong grants the troubled Italian the win, a favor Pantani resented, and Armstrong regretted, because he never won atop the peak.

The next day, a Thursday, was the scheduled day off for the touring company I was with, VéloSport Vacations, which had customized its weeklong Ride Provence trip for me so that I could take a day for myself and attempt to become a Nut before the group climbed the mountain. From our base of operations in the Arts & Vie resort in Malaucène, the group did a series of rides around the base of Ventoux, venturing north through the ruins at Vaison la Romaine, south through the Gorges de le Nesque, north and east along the Toulerec River, finally taking a rest day to catch its breath before pointing its wheels to the sky.

My shoulders were pinned back with a butterfly brace. Whenever I twisted my torso, my clavicle would crunch and hurt so much I'd nearly pass out, but I was in remarkably good spirits. If I held myself erect and proud, I could walk along just fine. I could use my good hand to hold my wife's hand, and we could venture out and enjoy a classically blue-skied day in Provence. So Beth and I wandered around Malaucène and talked and laughed and ate and picked up trinkets for our kids and a few bottles of Côtes du Ventoux for our friends and relatives.

Somewhere in there, we walked a couple of kilometers toward the Ventoux, the very route I rode yesterday, the very route my wife would take tomorrow, and we stopped to rest and have a drink of water at the natural spring Source du Groseau. There's a

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PART IX

Clockwise from far left: Ventoux, with its four summit routes, is called The Giant of Provence because it alone towers over a terrain fertile with fields of grapes, lavender, succulent vegetables and, of course, the olives that make the region's most distinctive product, olive oil, which you can buy fresh anywhere. Each little town has its own spring-fed water fountain—a traditional stop for cyclists pre-summit—and its own open-air market, the traditional stop post-summit.



Get There

Two of our favorite touring companies run trips through Provence that give you a chance to try your luck on Ventoux.

■ **VÉLOSPORT VACATIONS:** Seven-night trips, weekly from late May to mid-June and from late August to early September. Price: \$1,795 (\$1,245 for noncycling companion or \$795 for noncycling child under 12). Includes breakfasts and dinners, four-star accommodations and ride support. Fuji bike rental: \$135. 800/988-9833; velovacations.com

■ **TREK TRAVEL:** Five-night trips in June, and early August to mid-October. Price: \$3,175. Includes most meals, private tours and tastings, luxury accommodations, ride support and use of a Madone 5.2 or 7700 FX Trek bike. 866/464-8735; trektravel.com—B.S.

pond next to the spring with trout swimming in it, a very peaceful sight, and I was thankful for it. On the way back to town, we stopped at the Chapelle Notre Dame du Groseau, a small church where Pope Clement used to greet penitents and contemplate the wonders of God's Earth and His sky, the everlasting blue canopy. Penitents still come. Me, yesterday. My wife, tomorrow. Were Pope Clement to return here on this blue Thursday afternoon, he could stand outside on his stone pulpit and see a steady procession of cyclists heading toward the mountain and returning from the mountain like blood cells through a vein. I believe Pope Clement would be pleased to see this.

I am not a broken man, Monsieur Pic. I want you to know that.

True enough, I cannot forget crashing on the famous slopes of Mont Ventoux. Who could? But the crash isn't what I replay again and again in my

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PART X



The author's office filing cabinet is a monument to absurd pursuits.

mind. Instead, I see the cyclists, everywhere.

And among these cyclists, I see my wife rolling through Malaucène, riding next to Mike Ley, one of the VéloSport guides, who lives with the icon looming over his shoulder and is a *Galérien du Ventoux*, and who will coach Beth to the summit. With them are other riders with the VéloSport group and Jean-Luc, the other guide (and a *Galérien*). They stop at the road sign that says "Mont Ventoux 1909m, 21km," and pose for pictures. Even if they're apprehensive, no one lets it show. Everybody's been waiting all week to do this. Everybody is smiling.

My wife is new to cycling; she's really only been riding regularly for a month or so, but she likes the challenge and the exercise. It's on her face when she's on the bike, a kind of wacky smile cyclists often get when they're working hard, and during the week approaching this climb, especially, she seems to have developed considerable grit.

2005: Lucky BICYCLING reader wins free trip to climb Ventoux (above).

Win a Trip to Ventoux

If you want to test your mettle on Ventoux—once, or to become a Nut—send an essay of 200 words or less explaining why to rideventoux@velovacations.com (by Dec. 31, 2005). The best essay, judged by VéloSport Vacations, will win a free trip for two (not including airfare) to the company's Ride Provence tour.

Kathy Gutowsky, another VéloSport member in good standing of *Le Club des Cinglés du Mont-Ventoux*, drives the support car. I'm in there beside her. We hand up water bottles and yell *Allez, allez* at our riders, who pass one by one. My wife keeps coming by last in line, Mike Ley next to her, saying, "She's awesome, she's going to make it." My wife just keeps smiling and cocking her head and driving ever upward toward the summit.

Halfway up the mountain, we spot an old man on an upright cruiser bike, wearing khaki trousers and a flannel shirt and a fishing-type hat. Kathy stops the car, and we get out of the car to cheer

him on. He pulls up to us, sets his foot on the tarmac, and says, "Do you know me?" He's an Englishman who says it's been two years to the day since he last climbed this mountain, on his 65th birthday.

The woman in X ray said to me, "*Né respirer pas.*" And I didn't breathe. She said, "*Respirer?*" And I did.

At Ventoux's summit, the temperature is about 45 degrees Fahrenheit, and the wind brutes its way into the soul. Cyclists approach from both sides of the mountain, a procession of men and women of every imaginable age and from everywhere in the world. When the riders crest the summit, they let out hollers and roll to a stop and weep or meet up with their friends and laugh and rejoice and exchange hugs and kisses and raise bikes over their heads and toward the sky, in defiance of the wind that blows up here like the very breath of God. We are all nuts for Mont Ventoux up here.

Everyone in our crew arrives at the summit safely, one after the other, and we're all so happy, it's such a magnificent accomplishment. Finally, I see my wife working her way up that last steep pitch here at cycling's peak of the world, and she gets out of the saddle and hammers hard to the top.

She cries.

We all cry, we all hug, we all exist in perpetual triumph atop Mont Ventoux.

My wife, like I've been saying, is new to cycling. She says, "Wow, that was a really big hill." Then she wanders out of the wind and into the relative warmth of the gift shop and looks for a souvenir to bring back home.

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PART XII

Sincerely yours,

Mike Magnuson ■

Mike Magnuson has also torn a muscle and been bit by a truck while reporting for BICYCLING; next, he'll be bitten by a dog.