

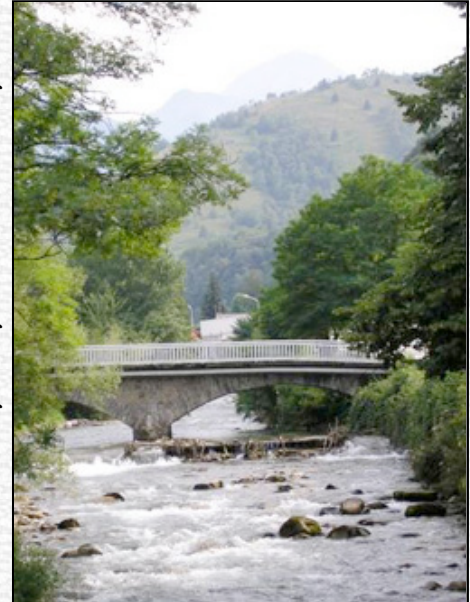


In August 2004 I toured the Pyrénées with VeloSport Vacations. From a variety of French tours offered (including a Tour de France option) I opted for their 9-day Classic Climbs trip (which alternates each year between the Alps and the Pyrénées) so I could experience some of the famous Cols without the Tour de France crowds and logistics.

I should probably preface this by saying I don't get out all that much, but honestly this tour was one of the more fun things I've ever done: pedalling through nearly 500 miles of gorgeous French countryside, and tackling the Aspin, the Tourmelet, the Soulor and the Aubisque, the Marie Blanque, and many picturesque Basque hills. VeloSport is an Indiana-based company whose owners, Chris and Kathy Gutowsky, and guides all speak French and know their destinations well. In fact, the staff is the best part of VeloSport: They're all extremely talented cyclists and guides and they've all mastered exactly the right balance of friendliness, fun, and professionalism. Three out of 15 or so clients in our group were repeat clients.

Each route had been thoroughly researched and documented. Detailed maps and directions (including a little laminated sweatproof card you could keep in your jersey pocket) were provided for each day, as well as expert bike maintenance during and after each ride (even for personal bikes, despite the brochure's claim that only rented bikes would be supported). A support vehicle accompanied all rides and provided feeds at about 20 mile intervals.

The accommodations far surpassed my expectations, especially the CitéCycle hotel we started from in Bagnères-de-Bigorre in the heart of the Pyrénées, and the Grand Hotel we ended in Saint-Jean-de-Luz, a resort town on the southern Atlantic Coast near Biarritz. CitéCycle is a chic, modern sports hotel, dedicated to the region's skiing in the winter and cycling in the summer. VeloSport has dedicated facilities there for bike storage and maintenance. The Grand Hotel, on the other hand is, well, *grand* (maybe it's just me but *is* there a better way to vacation than to ride hard through Basque country all morning and then lounge in a bikini on the hotel deck



The stream next to the CitéCycle hotel in Bagnères-de-Bigorre. I iced my legs in this stream after the first three rides. The French thought I was nuts.



Looking back down Col du Tourmelet



overlooking a French beach having waiters bring you Kirs all afternoon?) I was also pleased with the food (and wine!) provided throughout, and VeloSport provided several more meals than scheduled. The quality of the accommodations and meals seemed due in large part to Chris and Kathy's excellent contacts and rapport in the areas we toured.

In fact I can't think of anything negative about the trip. Some might find irksome that, although they *said* that you could set your own pace, in reality they were always very aware of everyone's location. We were each loosely divided into 3 groups, depending on ability (with one guide leading each group and one guide driving the support vehicle) and you *did* get the distinct feeling they wanted you to stay with a group: fast folks who hammered too quickly up the road would soon find themselves easily caught by one of the ex-pro-racing guides, spinning effortlessly and asking casually if they were sure they knew where the next turn was. (In fact, the only thing that tarnished my Tourmelet ascent was watching the guides fly up and down the mountain as they coached multiple riders to the top.) I was generally glad they were keeping such good track of us, but occasionally I wished I felt more free to linger in a village or café. But I also have to say that I felt the encouragement and coaching I received from the staff to be one of the best values of the trip.

Information on this year's "Classic Climbs: The Alps" trip is at <http://www.velovacations.com/>, and you can email me ([susan528@hotmail.com](mailto:susan528@hotmail.com)) with general questions about the company.

