

A Week in Provence

(with apologies to Peter Mayle and his book *A Year in Provence*)

by Margaret Kilby

"I had been looking forward to VéloSport Vacations' *Ride Provence Cycling Vacation Camp* since January. I could tell I was excited because I was religiously practicing my French, riding my bike, and reading Peter Mayle's books on Provence. I must admit I was a little nervous too because the cycling camp included climbing the infamous Mt Ventoux. Even Lance Armstrong fears 'the Ventoux'. Though I might have a little difficulty with the cycling, I knew I'd love visiting all the quaint villages in the Luberon Mountains, and enjoy the wine and food. Provence really exemplifies, 'Joie de vivre!'"

Saturday, June 10th

We arrive at our 'home base' for the week. Malaucène is the picture postcard Roman/Medieval town one thinks of when visiting Provence. I guess what I liked most about the town was that it wasn't 'touristy'. VéloSport Vacations made sure that the camp was in an uncrowded area for the best cycling. We stayed in a four star hotel, the *Arts et Vie*, about a two minute walk into town. *Arts et Vie* hotels can be found throughout France. They are the official tourist hotel of France. Though recently built, it was in a beautiful setting that did not detour from Malaucène's charm. And...it had all the wonderful amenities a cyclist could possibly want: full kitchen, washer and dryer, plenty of room, hangers, towels, swimming pools, and weight room! After getting settled in our room, we walked to the Bike Workshop, conveniently located next to the hotel, and were fitted for our rental bikes. Jean-Luc, one of the ride leaders, helped get our bikes ready for the week. Then we took some test rides. That evening, we met all the other riders for the week (a small group...about 10) and the ride leaders in an orientation meeting. Chris Gutowsky, owner of VéloSport Vacations, gave us a shakedown of what the rest of the week would be like for us, and introductions were made. We had cyclists of all levels, but all could ride at their own level because we had several ride leaders: Jean Luc, Chris and Kathy. At no time did I feel that I was riding above or below my ability. The rides were discussed (Mt Ventoux would be climbed on Thursday) and we were all ready for tomorrow. All the rides would take a half-day, leaving the rest of the day for our own sightseeing.

Sunday, June 11th

We wake up to a rainy morning. But Provence, even in the rain, is a wonderful place to be. Our group decided to wait until the afternoon to ride. We spent the morning in Vaison-la-Romaine. Vaison is situated in a river valley, with medieval backstreets, lively squares lined with cafes and Roman remains. And...they have a wonderful outdoor market on Sundays. Unbelievably, the sun came out at noon - and we took advantage of it! The 40-mile ride that afternoon was just to get us warmed up for the rest of the week. No big climbs, just rolling hills. Cherry, almond, olive and apricot orchards surrounded us while we rode. We did have one pit stop though. We had to stop and taste the cherries - a cherry pit stop!! After this first bike ride, my confidence was up and Mt Ventoux actually seemed doable.

Monday, June 12th

Another rainy morning, but that didn't detour the group. We all played tourist in the AM, and delayed our ride for the PM. This ride was definitely preparation for Mt Ventoux. Called Col D'Ey Tripper (the VéloSport staff really had a sense of humor), this 60-mile ride had four climbs. The first two were the hardest: Col de la Croix (4.3 miles) and Col d'Ey (3.7 miles). I was pretty well toasted after the first climb! Each of these climbs had great views of vineyards in the valleys. The last two climbs were comparatively easy. At that point, I was happy when we made our final decent back to Malaucène. Unfortunately, the confidence I built yesterday deteriorated a bit today. I kept asking Chris and Kathy to compare these climbs with Mt Ventoux. Unfortunately, they explained that Mt Ventoux was similar in grade, but just a lot longer!

Tuesday, June 13th

OK, enough of the rain! Bring on the good weather! The Mistral, a cool and constant breeze, blew in sunny days

for the rest of the week. Another pleasant aspect of Provence...even though it gets hot, The Mistral will make any cyclist comfortable. Today's ride was intended to give our legs a little break from the mountains yesterday. 'The Flatlands' was a 47-mile ride visiting flat farm roads through small chateaux and vineyards. The VéloSport Staff did a great job finding the tiniest country roads to ride on. In Provence, you can not completely avoid climbing, so we rode a few 'token' mountains. The longest climb, 'Le Debat' was only 1.2 miles - much easier than yesterday.

Wednesday, June 14th

This was our rest day before V-Day...Ventoux day. Even Lance took a rest day before climbing Mt Ventoux in the Tour de France! We played tourist and visited several small towns. The highlight of the day was visiting Pont du Gard, a mighty three-tiered Roman aqueduct that is astonishingly well preserved. The day we visited coincided with a film shoot. It was wonderful to see 'Romans' fighting on the Aqueduct. Just like old times!

Thursday, June 15th

OK. The true test. What Lance fears. Mt Ventoux is a 22-Km (13-mile) climb with an average grade of 7.6%. French cyclists know it as 'un casse pate' - a leg breaker. Yes, I was nervous, but I knew I could do it. However, I wasn't given much confidence from another guest at the hotel. At the beginning of the ride, he said to me: "C'est impossible! Vous ne le faites pas!" - "It's impossible! You can't do it." Well, I now had a mission - to prove him wrong!

We approached the 'Giant of Provence' through a small town, Bedoin. Then a left turn and on to the mountain. From then on, there was never even a tiny descent! Though the bottom was shaded with trees, we heated up pretty quickly. I just kept thinking about what that fellow said to me, and it gave me extra incentive!

Mt Ventoux is an anomaly in the Provence countryside. It's an extinct volcano, and above the tree line it looks like you are biking on the moon! About 3.7 miles from the top, we hit the tree line. The terrain and weather immediately changed. Though sunny, because we had climbed roughly 6,000 feet, it became cold and windy. We had to stop to put on leg warmers, arm warmers and vests. We then passed the memorial to Tommy Simpson, who died while climbing Mt Ventoux in the Tour de France in 1967. His last words were, "Put me back on my bike!" What a trooper! After several hours on the bike, we finally made it to the top! And...we had a spectacular view of Provence and the Maritime Alps.

From this point, it was all down hill. Literally. Right into Malaucène! The descent was long, steep and bumpy, but a lot of fun too. Some fellow riders went as fast as 60 mph! What a thrill and payback for all that hard work climbing. Riding into Malaucène, I had my eye out for that naysayer. Unfortunately, I never ran into him again.

Friday, June 16th

You would think this ride might be a let down after Mt Ventoux, but I found it very relaxing. 'Don't-Ask-Dentelles' was a 37-mile ride through the Dentelles de Montmirail mountains. The Dentelles is prized not only by winemakers for its high-altitude soil but also by rock climbers, mountain bikers, and, of course, our cycling group. We had spectacular views of the surrounding mountains while winding through the local Côte du Rhône wine villages of Beaumes de Venise, Vacqueyras, Gigondas, Seguret, Roaix and Vaison-la-Romaine. The best part for me was winding through little country roads no bigger than a driveway. We finished the day relaxing over a glass of wine, a wonderful dinner, and an exciting round of mini-golf with the VéloSport staff.

Saturday, June 17th

The end of our cycling camp. The week went by so quickly, I could hardly believe it was time to pack up and go. I can honestly say this is the best cycling trip I've made to date. From the ride leaders to the riding routes, the hotel to the wine and food, everything was a pleasure. Even Mt Ventoux was a pleasure! And now I am ready to tackle the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia any day!

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