

A TOUR DE FRANCE VACATION

I never imagined the excitement we would see this year watching the Tour de France. I wanted to be in France for the 100th Anniversary of the ride and wanted to be there to watch Lance take number 5. I never imagined the problems Lance would have to endure to win #5, or the heroics of Tyler Hamilton riding the whole tour with a broken collarbone.

The tour company I chose for my vacation was VeloSport Vacations out of Bloomington, Indiana. They've been organizing these tours for about 15 years and their experience certainly showed. Imagine the logistics for them to organize biking routes on the Tour de France course, having hotels centrally located near a few stages at a time, arranging a tour bus, and the amount of time we had available to watch the stages of the Tour.

We had a nice tour bus that transported 25 of us from town to town when we were not biking to a stage. In addition, VeloSports had 2 other groups of 25 set up the same way. The only difference is that they stayed at different hotels. We would meet up with them from time to time. We had 6 support people to cover our group of 25. Our 6 support people included our bus driver, 4 guides and one other person who drove support along the route, providing us with water and food. Of the 4 guides, all were former racers. One was our mechanic who took care of any technical problems, fixing flats, etc. Another one was a massage therapist, who was kept very busy with our group throughout the vacation.

Our vacation started in Toulouse at the airport hotel where we would meet up with the group and get our bicycles put together. They did have a handful of rental bikes if you reserved in advance, but most people brought their own bikes. While we were putting our bikes together, some of the Tour de France Team buses started showing up at our airport hotel. (Now we know why we had an early 10:00 am checkout time!) After our bikes were put together, we got into our bus and headed to our official first hotel in Carcassonne.

When we arrived in Carcassonne, we were quite surprised with the accommodations. We stayed at the Hotel de la Cite inside the Carcassonne Castle. After checking into the hotel, we watched part of the end of stage 11 of the Tour on TV, before we headed out for our "shake down" ride late in the afternoon. Overall biking distance on this tour ranged from 300 miles to 380 miles, depending on those who chose to do extra mileage and those that kept to the basic mileage. Our average daily mileage ranged from 25 to 50 miles a day.

On day #2, we went to see the Tour live for the first time. We did a 45 mile bike ride from the town of Revel to Gaillac. Gaillac was the start of the first individual time trial where Lance suffered from dehydration due to the 100 degree heat. When we arrived, VeloSports took care of getting our bikes in the trailer so that we didn't have to worry about our bikes while watching the stage. They did this throughout the vacation. We never had to worry about our bikes.

As part of our daily routine, we brought a change of clothes in a day bag that was kept in the bus so that when we were done with riding for the day, we could get out of our sweaty lycra and be in more comfortable clothes watching the Tour. They even had a little portable shower that could be used for a little cleaning.

On this day, we watched the start of the individual time trial. I saw at least 60 riders start, including all the top GC contenders. It was on this day that I learned in France that you have to be aggressive if you really want something. If you end up in a security area where you don't have the credentials, I usually acted surprised and said I didn't speak French. On this day, I did end up in the "Village" and saw US Postal and other riders warming up for the time trial. I think my T-Mobile hat got me in without any problems, as a couple other guys in our group jumped the fence to get in.

Our plan for watching the stage was to watch Lance start the stage and then we all headed to pubs to watch him finish the time trial on big screen TVs. After the time trial was over, we headed back to our hotel.

The next day, we rode from Mirepoix to Quillan, which included a Category 4 climb in the Pyrenees. This was our first experience riding the Tour de France route ahead of the tour. We climbed the Col de Portal where we would picnic and watch the stage come through a few hours later. Before the stage came through, the caravan came through about 1 hour ahead of the riders. This was our first of many experiences with the caravan throwing out souvenirs to the crowd. By the

end of my vacation, I had souvenirs from Team Telekom, Saeco and Credit Agricole. We watched the tour come through and we were all humbled at how fast they were climbing the mountain.

Moving to the next day, we rode from Louires to do a category 1 climb, Col de Peyresourde. As many people see on OLN TV, there are crowds of people closing in on the riders on these mountain climbs. We experienced the same thing doing these mountain stages. It also challenged our bike handling skills from time to time. We had people cheering us on by yelling out "Allez" with big smiles. When I stopped to take pictures, there were times, where the French would help give you a push to get started again. Other times, they'll just come up and give you a push.

The Peyresourde was an 8 to 8.5% climb for about 10 miles. As I summited the Peyresourde, our guides told me to head back down to our restaurant before the caravan comes through. That ended up being more challenging than expected due to the crowds of people all over the road. Unfortunately the caravan started coming through before I got back to our restaurant, which was about 7 miles down the mountain. The police forced me to walk my bike. I walked at least 2 miles before I finally gave up and decided to find my own spot watching the tour on the mountain. I would then meet up with the group after the tour came through.

This is where an experienced tour company provided us the best service by minimizing our ride time back on the bus to our hotel. On these mountain climbs, typically cars/buses are not allowed on the Tour's route on the day of the stage. As a result, we packed our day bags the night before and one of the cars took our change of clothing to our ending point the night before a mountain stage. That way, we can get out of our lycra and enjoy watching the stage. After the stage went through, we actually got back on our bicycles and rode down the mountain several miles where we would reach our bus. If they had taken our bus to the end of our biking destination on the mountain, we would have sat hours on the bus trying to come down from the mountain with all of the traffic and people. Once we reached our bus on this day, we headed to a new hotel for the next 3 nights. Our next hotel was in the city of Lourdes.

On day #5, this became the most challenging day of our biking. We had tired legs from 2 days in the Pyrenees mountains already, and now we are going to tackle the famed Col du Tourmalet. We biked from our hotel and the hills started a couple miles into the ride. By the time we got to the town of Bagnères, this is where the real category 1 climb would begin. This was a 12 mile climb that was mostly a 9.5% grade. Again, we packed our bags the night before, and our bus would meet us after the stage in Bagnères to bring us back to Lourdes.

The Tourmalet was a very tough climb. By the time I got to our restaurant in La Mongie, which was 4 kms down from the summit, I was too tired to eat. At that restaurant, we met up with our other 2 groups and watched the Tour on a big screen TV. I was so tired that I almost fell asleep watching it. But when the Tour came through, we went outside and watched the riders come through. It took about 25 minutes to see all the riders come through. Again, we were very humbled by the riders. We only did one major climb that day and they were on the 4th of 5 climbs. When we saw Lance go by, he was riding behind Ullrich and Mayo saving his attack for the final climb of the day.

After the tour came through, we went back into the restaurant to watch the remaining 20 kms or so of the stage on the big screen TV. This was the infamous stage 15 where Lance fell, and then stumbled again, before he attacked and won the stage. We couldn't believe what we were seeing. With 100 cyclists watching this on TV, everyone gasped when Lance fell. When the riders waited for him, we all cheered. When he attacked, we were all screaming and yelling as if Lance could hear us. It was one of my favorite days of the tour and an experience I will never forget.

On day #6, we had a rest day just like the Tour although VeloSports did have a ride planned for those that needed more mountain climbing. We had a few that did that climb. Some people chose to do a 20 mile spin. I chose to be tourist that day and gave my legs a break. I spent most of the day at the Church in Lourdes and visiting the fountain where miracles have occurred. While being tourist, I was walking along the road and saw Tyler Hamilton's team (CSC) out for a spin. At the fountain in Lourdes, the entire Saeco team visited the fountain and lit candles.

On day #7, we left Lourdes to ride out to the start of stage 16 in Pau. I didn't have time to take pictures on this ride this day, since I was barely hanging in to keep from getting dropped by our group. They bumped the pace up to ride the 25 mile loop from 19 to 23 MPH. When we arrived in Pau, our guides, of course, took care of our bikes. We watched the

beginning of this stage and then got on our bus for one of our longer transition days to another hotel just outside of Bourdeau. We would spend 2 nights at this hotel.

Day #8 had us leaving our hotel and biking out to see the end of stage 17 ending in Bourdeau. 35 miles of that ride was on a bike trail. The bike trails are very nice in France. They even have rode signs indicating the number of kilometers to the next city or town. Riding into Bourdeau was challenging as many of us got lost trying to get into the final couple miles into Bourdeau. The traffic was extremely heavy with crowds of people showing up to watch the end of this stage. We did arrive in plenty of time, including time to see the caravan for about the 4th time on this trip. I found a good spot about 300 meters from the finish. I decided to stay there instead of trying to get through the crowds at the finish line. I would not have been able to take good pictures at the finish line and was quite pleased with the pictures I got of Lance and Ullrich and many others from my vantage point.

Day #9 – On this day, we had 2 options. Most of us chose the option to not bike and to take the bus out to the start of stage 18 in Bourdeau. Only 6 or so in our group took the other option. They biked to one of the feed zones in the tour. They also had Kevin Livingston riding with them and from what they told me, it was their fastest day of riding on this vacation. For those of us who chose to watch the start of the stage, it was interesting watching how the start is organized, including watching riders signing in. I chose to find a good spot less than 50 meters from the start of the stage where I was able to get a lot of good pictures of the riders with many pictures of Lance. After we watched the stage start, we headed back to the bus which then took us to the train station for our final transfer to Paris! The others who rode to the feed zone would have a very long day. They would get to Paris by bus, which was a 6 hour bus ride after they got done biking. I think they got in at 10:00 pm, whereas we got in at 4:00 pm.

When we arrived in Paris, our hotel for the next 3 nights was on the Tour route where the riders would do their final 10 laps on the Rue de Rivoli and the Champs Elysees. If you ever see the Ferris Wheel on the final day of the Tour de France, our hotel was across the street from that Ferris Wheel.

On Day #10, we had the option to do a 30 mile ride in Paris, but since the weather was questionable, most chose to take a rest day and do tourist stuff in Paris, including visiting the Tour de France museum. Many of us then met back at the hotel at 2:00 pm to watch the final time trial on TV. 2 of our riders chose to take the train to Nantes and watch the time trial live (and in the heavy rain)! It took until this day before we knew for sure that Lance would take number 5. We celebrated after the time trial was over.

On Day #11, the final day of the Tour: We were quite surprised to find out that VeloSports had taken care of us by getting us registered, months in advance, to ride the “La Randonnee Du Centenaire Ride”. We were given “yellow” vintage bicycle jerseys for this ride and rode with 15,000 other cyclists and did an 18 mile loop in Paris, including a loop around the Champs Elysees. What an adrenaline rush to be doing this ride! After we were done with the ride, we headed back to our hotel, and boxed up our bikes, showered, had lunch before we headed to our final viewing spot for the final stage of the Tour.

VeloSports reserved a salon at the Hotel Crillon on the Place de la Concorde. We had a second floor balcony to watch the laps including a big screen TV to watch the Tour work its way to Paris. We could also go outside to watch the laps. We were 250 meters from the finish line and had a great viewing spot for these laps. Security was very tight, and we got kicked out of a couple areas, but after the first lap was done, we were able to get into a great viewing spot without any problems. Here we are on the Champs Elysees watching the riders go by us. It was truly amazing!

After Lance won the Tour, we heard the National Anthem in Paris and for us; it was pretty emotional listening to it after all the political issues throughout the year. After the National Anthem, I managed to get to the front of the crowd that formed to watch the parade of riders on the Champs Elysees. At one point, I was concerned that I may have put myself into a position that I didn't want to be in, especially when the police pushed us back a few times and I was pushed back to a barrier that I climbed over. There was no way I could climb back over that barrier, because of the crowds, so they let a few of us stay there, which gave me a pretty good view of the parade. I was still able to get some great pictures of Lance, Ullrich, Hamilton, US Postal, and many other riders. If I had do it all over again, I would still “politely” push my way to the front.

As I finish this article, it's really hard to explain what we experienced on this vacation in just a few paragraphs. VeloSports did a great job balancing daily mileage for biking to having sufficient time to watch the Tour. How many vacations can you experience decent biking mileage, great countryside and roads for cycling, biking some difficult mountain passes with people cheering you on, meeting people on these roads from all around the world, and finish each day watching the Tour?

In addition, many people have asked me how the French treated us and I can honestly say the French were great, helpful and very friendly.

After getting back from vacation, I thought I wouldn't go back and do another one of these vacations. How could it get any better than what we saw this year and with it being the centennial and Lance matching the record for 5 wins? It only took me about 4 days after I got back from vacation to put down another deposit for next year. I just hope I sent it in time to get another Paris finish with hopefully Alp Duez as one of the mountain climbs. If you ever want to do a tour like this, you need to book your trip NOW! These trips, thanks to Lance's success, are selling out about 1 year in advance.

One final comment, at the time of writing this article, I have decided to fly to San Francisco in September to see Lance do his final race of the year. I guess I'm a bigger Lance fan, as well as Tour de France fan, after experiencing such a great Tour this year!

Happy Cycling and Go Lance for #6!

- Monica Zaborac