

Tour de France 2011 as a bicycle tourist



Inge Bjart on a hilltop in Central Massif 9. July 2011

Eventually got through *Paris* and ended up on the old highway to *Provance* and a bit further *East* than my intention. Found the way in direction *Chateauroux* by the help of local heroes at a gas station where I bought a map.

Went eventually 203 km to *Argent-sur-Sauldre* where I spent the night at the *Post Hotel* and had a good dinner with a *Filet Mignon* and *Fois Gras* in order to fill up the bearings with proteins for the next day. Plus a glass of *Armagnac* of course.

Ahead the wind inbetween the grain fields the next day to *Chateauroux* before I got to the finish line of the 7. stage between *Le Mans* and *Chateauroux*. Was located a few hundred meters before the finish line in front of a big wide screen along with several hundred other bike enthusiasts and saw World champion *Thor Hushovd* enter in yellow to a third place.

Met "*Bike messenger*" *George Christensen* from *Chicago* who biked around on an old *TREK* bicycle with 25 kg baggage. It was a bit more than the 5-6 kg I had in my backpack! It was the seventeenth time he participated as a bystander in *TdF*! He was also in this year's *Grand Depart*, i.e. the beginning of the race.

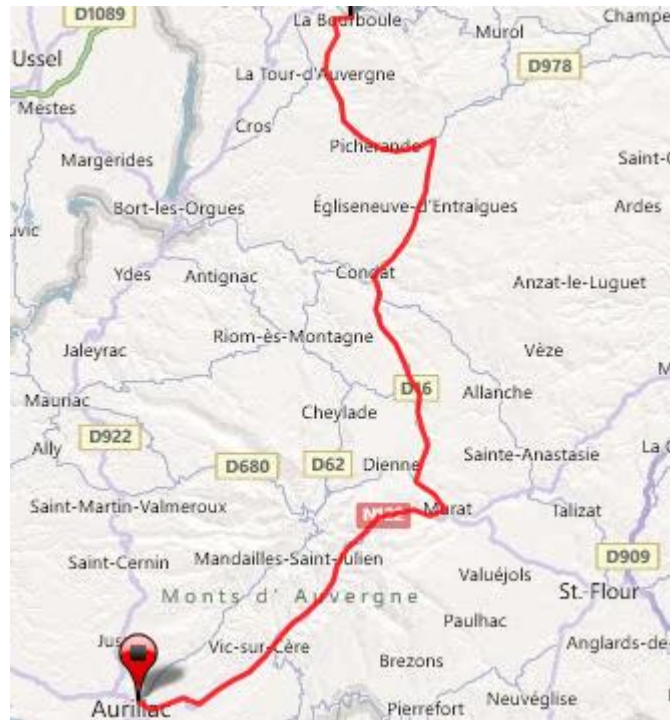
After the finish I went on 66 km to *Aiguirande* where the next day's stage started, but there was full house and of course, not a free hotel room.

Thus, 20 km further to *Guéret* where I found a room for disabled to 110 €uro a night. A total of 205 km that day.



Next day I crossed the trail about 100 km from the start by the *D82 junction* at *St.-Auit* and after a couple of hours the peleton came in sunshine, *Thor* hanging a bit behind, but he rejoined them again and kept the yellow shirt until the next day despite the uphill in *Central Massif* and up to *Super-Besse Sancy*! Met a nice *Dutchman* and his wife who lived right next to where I was standing, got food and watched the finish on *Internet*. Afterwards, he joined me a couple of kilometers on his «rowing machine» bike that had an impressive speed downhill. It helps to be able to use both arms and legs in addition to reduced air resistance!

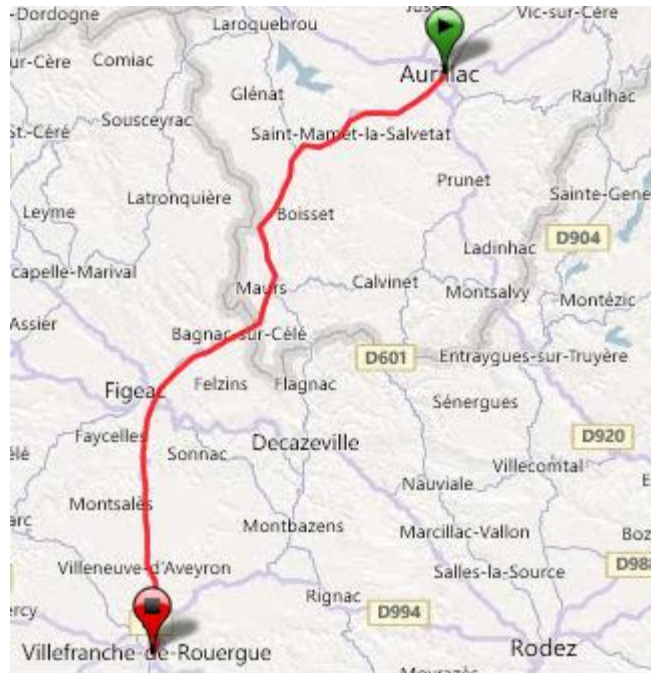
Found a nice hotel in *La Bourboule*, a small mountain village right next to the source of the river *Dordogne*. 120 km that day, rewarded with a good dinner at *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The hotel was run by a *Dutch* couple who also spoke a bit of *Norwegian*. In fact, some *Norwegians* take the trip via *Central Massif* and stop by.



Next day, 10. July I biked 85 km over the mountains to *Murat* before the last loop and final sprint in *St. Flour*. Had lunch and a few hours of waiting in good company before the groups came disciplined down the hill and no crashes at the intersection. Great view in beautiful mountain scenery.

Thor was a bit late and *Thomas Voeckler* gained the *Yellow Jersey* after a couple of other riders in front crashed due to a press car that swerved into the group, a bit unnecessary, but shit happens. A lot of things to be aware of and looked like the driver was trying to avoid a branch that ran across the road. Some think automatically about the car ...

Then rode down 48 km to *Aurillac* where the next stage would start. 133 km that day and actually found a cancelled room at a hotel in a fully booked centre of town.



"Rest day" 11. July went to cycle 95 km on the *TdF* track from *Aurillac* to *Villefranche-de-Rouergue* to get in time for the finish in *Carmaux* the next day.



12. July, it was a relatively comfortable 63 km to *Carmaux* where I again met *George Christensen* who had spent the last 24 hours cycling from *Aurillac*!

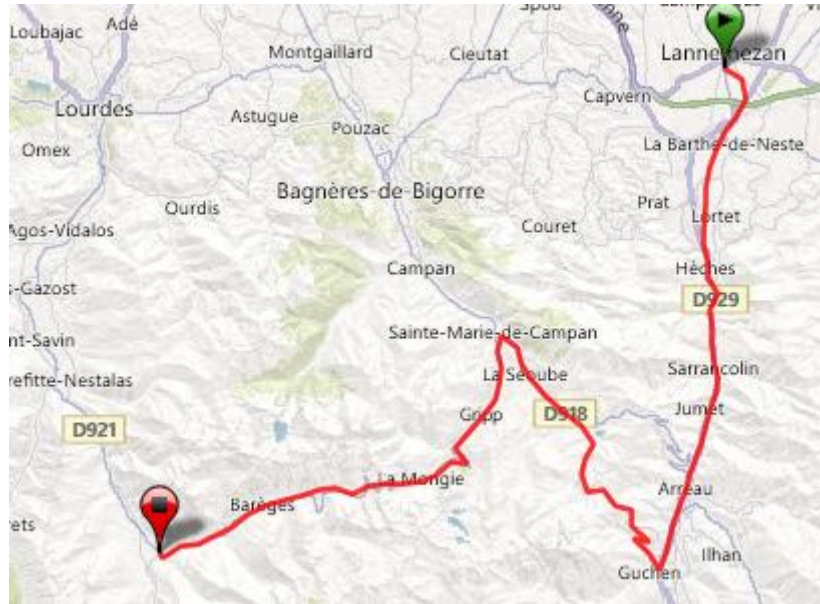


Bike messenger George Christensen from Chicago in Carmaux is a real TdF veteran!

Found a great location a few hundred metres before the finish line where it actually was possible to see the riders on both the big screen and in real life blaze past with the customary *Mark Cavendish* first over the line.

Then a couple of kilometers down to *Albi* to find a hotel room which was difficult, but a receptionist found a room in a so-called "*hôte*" which is a room leased by private people. In this case, the room over the garage about 10 kms outside the town centre and slept well there in a thunderstorm night.

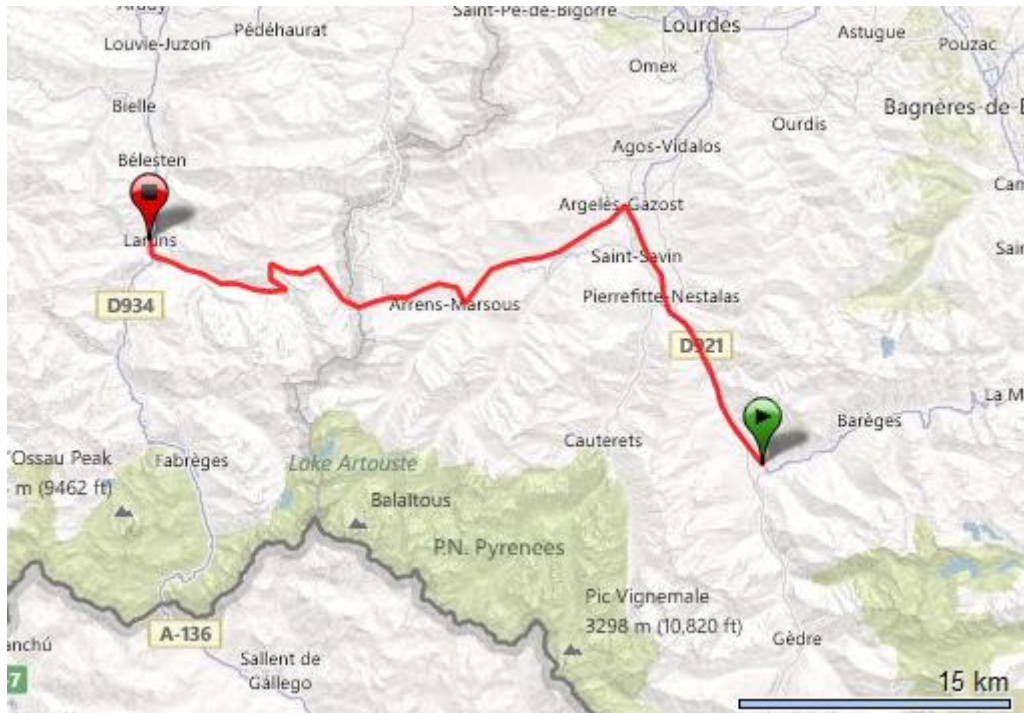
Next day, a flat and boring stage from *Blaye les Mines* to *Lavaur* and used the chance to get ahead to the *Pyrenees*. It rained most of the day, only a dry few hours around *Toulouse* half way and cycled around 100 km on the *TdF* track from *Cugnaux* to *Lannemezan* at the foot of the *Pyrenees*. You bet it was wonderful to find that *Hotel de Gare Lannemezan* was still in operation and had room after over 200 km on the bike and wet like a cat! Took a good half hour rest in the bath and food afterwards. *GPS Garmin receiver* had a break that day and survived by staying in the backpack.



Next day, it was strength pedalling on my *TREK pace bike* with a backpack 76 km up first a pass on 1.520 m above sea level and then the famous *Col de Tourmalet* at 2.106 m where I found my place among other cyclists in the clouds and watched groups of cyclists fight their way up. Saw *Day Otto Lauritzen* come driving by in his *TV2* car, but was too far away to greet him that day.



Thor and *Edvaldo* sat in the "bus" at the end to rest for next day's surprise. Wheeled 19 km down to *Esquize Sere* by the intersection to *Luz-Ardien* where the finish of today's leg was. A real bike party and *Latin American* rhythms in the evening. 95 km that day...



Col d'Aubisque at 1709 m.

15. July, the stage went from *Pau* to *Lourdes* and pedaling like a few other tourists 47 km in the opposite direction up *Col du Soulor* at 1.472 m and *Col d'Aubisque* on 1709 m. Met a couple of *Norwegian* guys there, but with yesterday's unpleasant cold in mind

I biked down to *Laruns* on the intersection by the road to *Spain* to ensure me a hotel room and rest until next day.



Dag Otto and Inge Bjart in Laruns (©Photo: TV2)

Only 65 km that day and *Day Otto Lauritzen* came driving in his special car to go food shopping next to the hotel in *Laruns* I just had checked in to! A so-called *TdF* coincidence and nice to meet an enthusiastic *Southerner* who has made exceptionally much to promote the sport of cycling in *Norway*, especially together with *TV2* friends!

He also won a stage up *Col de Tourmalet* a few years ago as the first *Norwegian* to take a *TdF* stage victory. Then there was the second *Southerner*, *Thor Hushovd*, who had gone into a break with *Edvald Boasson Hagen* and others in full speed up the slopes to *Aubisque*. *Thor* passed as third over the pass a few minutes after the leader which he caught downhill and passed in the finish. The effort and strength from a person who is known as a sprinter, not hill climber!

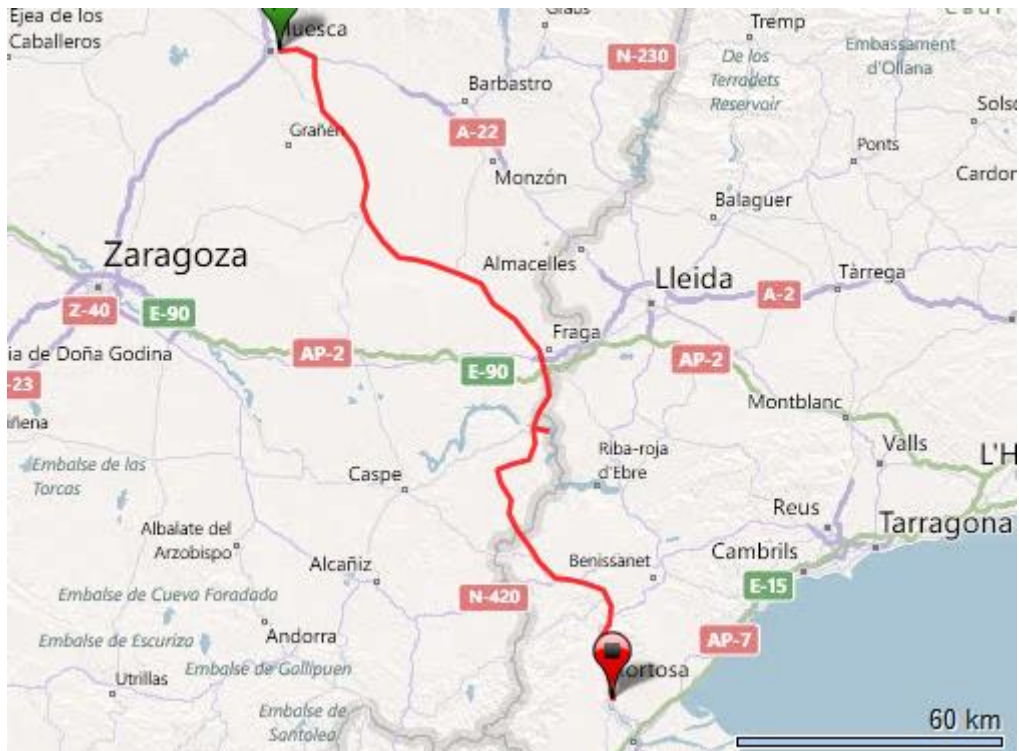
That was a cycle tourist trip by 6-7 *TdF* stages and 1,200 km on the bike in 9 days and came to my senses and left the next day over the *Pyrenees* to *Spain*.



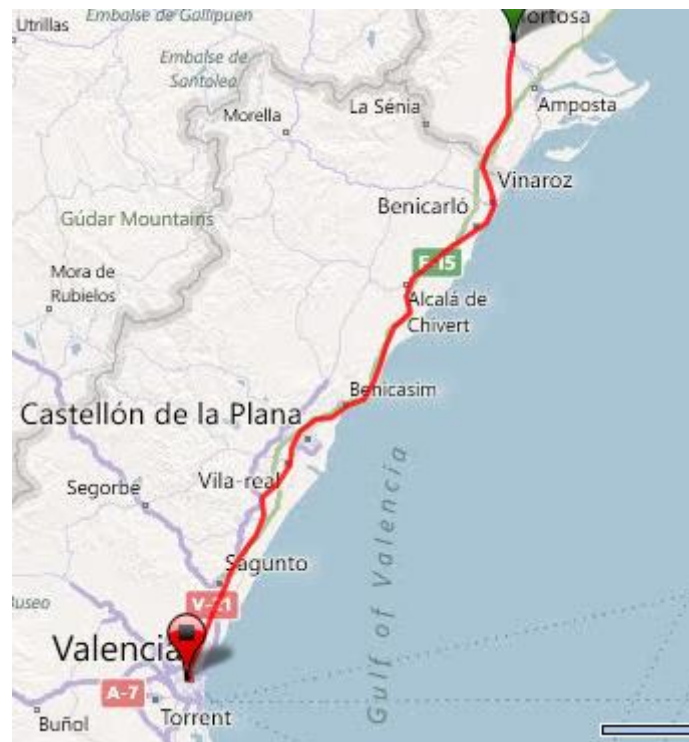
The ride up the first 30 km to *Col de Pourtalet* at 1,792 m, another classic bike pass, was not so bad, almost pleasant compared to other passes I went over in the *Pyrenees*.



The trip down to *Huesca* in *Aragon* province was full of momentum, but of course, a hill of 1,263 m in *Sierra de Guara* about 20 km before the city. A bit hot and drove like a rocket on the highway the last 15 km and checked into a hotel just by a great park in the Centre of *Huesca* after a total of 126.5 km.



Next day 240 km down to *Tortosa* by *Rio Ebro* a few kilometers from the estuary. Nice tailwind most of the first 100 km down to *Fraga*, but then a bit rugged terrain and variable wind. Took advantage of the pace bike in both tail and head wind, but got a bit stiff in the neck by the sack. In the summer of 1985 I actually worked a few months on an oil field outside the *Ebro Estuary* with a base in *San Carlos de la Rapita*, next to *Vinaroz*, but didn't bother to ride in for a visit...



18. July, *Valencia* was the goal and went relatively all right, just a puncture. 190 km and hardly 1.112 m altitude gain. *Valencia* is one of its largest cities in *Spain* and granted me my first full day of rest there.



Oceanographic and Museo de ciencias by the harbour is definitely worth a visit and spent a few hours there. Demonstrative with interactive physics to explain physical phenomena in the *Museum*. In particular, the dolphin show was formidable, like *Olympic synchronous swimming*!

20. July, "only" about 150 km flat down to the *Albir/Altea* where I stayed a month to recover, train a bit and say hello to old friends before the start of *Vuelta a España*.

One must need a bit of madness to see *TdF* or parts of it in this way, but it's exciting and you meet many nice people along the way.

Maybe a little more comfortable with a camper or bus along with the Club and ride your bike over the passes as appropriate, but when you add in some extra kilometres you really get the feeling of how sovereign the pros are in relation to a half old "horse".

It was about 1,900 km over two weeks, a bit more than normal, but that is quite far from 3.471 km done by the pros in three weeks!