

BEYOND THE TOUR

Cyclist Off-Road takes an unconventional route up the Col du Tourmalet, then carries on climbing long after the tarmac stops

Words **SAM CHALLIS** Photography **PATRIK LUNDIN**



The Col du Tourmalet is the Tour de France's most famous mountain. The world's best pro riders have ridden the ascent in the world's biggest bike race an impressive 87 times and untold drama has unfolded on its slopes over the years. Even the story of its recognition as a suitable Tour inclusion is famous. Alphonse Steinès, a colleague of the Tour organiser Henri Desgrange, nearly died during his recce of the pass, but nonetheless the next morning (after being saved by a search party sent to rescue him) he relayed an iconic telegram that read: 'Crossed Tourmalet. Very good road. Perfectly feasible.'

The asphalt might reach its highest point as you pass *le Géant du Tourmalet* – a huge statue of a straining Octave Lapize – at 2,115m (making it the highest paved pass in the Pyrenees), but with suitable tyres and gearing, branching off onto gravel here opens up the possibility of another 600m of vertical ascent, over 6km, to the Pic du Midi de Bigorre. It towers over the Tourmalet like a burly older brother, with an astronomical observatory built on its summit, and I do wonder if, had he continued to this point, Steinès would have reconsidered the tone of his telegram.

Taking on this supplemental gravel sector, having already ascended the *hors catégorie* climb from Luz-Saint-Sauveur, transforms this route from difficult to

formidable. It is this challenge – one not merely of fitness but of grit and skill too – that our ride guide, Jamie Wilkins, co-founder of cycling tour company Escape to the Pyrenees, has in store for *Cyclist Off-Road* today.

Trail happy

To ratchet up the difficulty of our task still further, we won't even have the luxury of climbing to the summit of the Tourmalet on tarmac either. The route Jamie has devised will have us ascending predominantly on gravel tracks, which he says lace the mountainsides of every major Pyrenean ascent yet remain mostly undiscovered.

'Gravel riding is a real hidden gem here in the Pyrenees,' Jamie says as we tuck into a hearty breakfast at his guesthouse. He and his partner, Kitt, renovated it themselves, turning a draughty old farm building into a well-appointed HQ for their cycling holiday business. 'Pretty much every well known mountain ascent around

Gravel tracks lace the mountainsides of every major Pyrenean ascent yet remain mostly undiscovered

Off-piste Pyrenees

The route *Cyclist Off-Road* took

To download this route go to cyclist.co.uk/or4/pyrenees. Starting from Villelongue, take the D921 south to Luz-Saint-Sauveur, then turn left onto the D918. After a couple of kilometres look for a turning off to the right signposted for Viella. Past the hamlet wiggle west on unnamed gravel tracks, keeping the D918 on your left down below. Look to join the road again near Super Barèges and finish the Tourmalet ascent. At the summit, take a left off the road and follow the slate path until you can ride no further underneath the Pic du Midi. Soak in the views, then retrace your path until you reach the Lac d'Oncet, where you'll need to take a right onto a singletrack descent. It will eventually bring you out at the chicane underneath Super Barèges. You'll immediately have the opportunity to take in an 8km out-and-back that offers superb views of the valley and peaks beyond. Take that or don't – either way you'll be whizzing down the D918 then D921 to get home.



Above: The out-and-back gravel path off the Tourmalet climb from below Super Barèges ascends as the road drops, soon offering expansive views over Barèges, Betpouey and Viella back down in the valley



here – Hautacam, Aspin, Peyresourde, you name it – has myriad gravel roads criss-crossing their slopes. Once you know about the alternative routes, that way of thinking gets under your skin and you will never look at a Pyrenean road climb the same again. You’re always wondering what other routes might be hidden in those trees to the left or where that rocky sheep trail to the right might go.

‘Also there are plenty of mountains nobody knows about because they don’t even have a sealed surface route up them. You can spend days exploring mountains on a gravel bike. The Pic du Cabaliros just down the road from here is a good example.’

By ‘here’, Jamie means the sleepy village of Villelongue, which is handily nestled on the southwestern flank of the Hautacam. Several bucket-list Pyrenean road climbs are barely a stone’s throw from Jamie’s front door. But as we head south to start our ride, we snub the signposted turnings for known road ascents, the likes of the Col du Soulor and Luz Ardiden, and very soon the rhythmic hum of our gravel tyres on tarmac is replaced by the crunching of stones as we begin the gritty ascent that will deliver us to the summit of the Tourmalet.

Bright start

The morning has dawned bright and clear, if a little chilly, but this means the light in the valley we are riding through is spectacular, giving everything that bluish hue that typifies perfect weather conditions in the mountains. The air smells fresh enough to cure any illness – or my hangover at the very least – and it feels good to suck in purifying lungfuls of the stuff as we begin ascending.

We begin to zigzag up the valley side on a narrow road of broken tarmac and gravel. Below us I can see riders on the tarmac ascent of the Tourmalet from Luz-Saint-Sauveur

The point at which the pros unclipped is the point where we again head off onto gravel, with plenty more climbing ahead of us



The rider’s ride

3T Exploro Team, £3,000 frameset, approx £6,625 as built, 3t.bike

Climbing and descending technical gravel trails in the mountains was very much entering into the unknown for me, so I chose a familiar and versatile bike that I knew could be depended on.

The 3T’s well-conceived geometry has been designed to work with 650b and 700c wheels equally well but for this ride I opted for the more rugged 650b setup with Hunt’s Adventure Carbon Disc wheels and the extra cushioning and grip offered by WTB’s Sendero 47mm tyres. In this guise I found the Exploro handled impeccably.

The frameset was stiff and responsive when I needed to power my way up ramps or maintain momentum over rocky sections, yet with the aid of those wide tyres it didn’t batter me when hammering downhill on rough surfaces.

The flawless performance of Shimano’s gravel-specific GRX Di2 components backed the frame up well. The clutched rear mech did its job of ensuring the chain never came unshipped, and every shift was crisp and precise, even over some very bumpy terrain at times. The ergonomics of the levers also offered plenty of grip and comfort despite my hands being covered in varying levels of sweat, energy gel and mud during the ride.

Above: Le Géant du Tourmalet, the statue of Octave Lapize, marks the end of the climb on tarmac – and the start of the gravel ascent

Right: The last couple of kilometres of the Tourmalet climb are the hardest, but the switch onto gravel doesn’t offer any respite, averaging 10% for a further 6km





Left: The Lac d'Oncet signals a change in the Pic du Midi de Bigorre climb's character. Where before it trails along a ridgeline over slippery slate, from here it switches back and forth, getting steeper and more technical

Below middle: When Cyclist Off-Road made the Pic di Midi ascent one of its short tunnels was closed, which necessitated a hike up and around it

▷ tapping away absentmindedly on the paved road, but here we find ourselves facing an early technical test. Our path twists left and right, often with steep gradients to contend with too, and on the erratic surface it demands full concentration to maintain my momentum.

The woodland we are meandering through grows taller and wilder with every turn, and save for the knowledge that we are getting higher – provided by some compelling feedback from my legs and lungs – it becomes easy to lose my bearings in a way that just isn't possible on the road. Despite the scale of the wilds that have enveloped us the environment remains unexpectedly bright. The leaves, in transition from the dark green of summer to the burnt orange of autumn, refract and soften the sunlight that is now piercing through the canopy.

Dew-covered grass dazzles silver in glades to our left and right. Pyrenean road climbs have far less traffic than their Alpine counterparts, but they still aren't impervious to the roar of motor vehicle engines – something that can quite easily detract from a cyclist's riding experience. By contrast, all we can hear now is the sound of our own breathing and more of that satisfying crunch of our knobby tyres on grit. Despite the difficulty of the gradient, this part of the route is somehow relaxing to the point of being almost meditative.

Alternative fun

Tracks sprout off the one we are riding along, appearing and disappearing seemingly organically. It's like being in a secret network expertly hidden by nature. Jamie explains most of the trails are out-and-backs, leading to brilliant vantage points that reveal the Pyrenees in all their rugged glory, but would tack significant distance on to our route today because we would have to retrace our steps back down to these junctions. Still, they are tempting propositions nonetheless. It presses home one of the inherent pleasures of gravel riding; that

The slates feel threatening, like they could easily slide on each other and have my wheels out from under me

of being able to ride in the same location but often with the option to choose a completely different route.

Even though we seem to be kilometres from anywhere, we have actually been pretty faithfully shadowing the Tourmalet's road ascent. Now we turn away and into the gradient of the mountainside directly to slalom up under the path of a chairlift that services a small ski area above the town of Barèges. Although autumn is exerting its seasonal power on the colour of the trees, the snow of winter is still a few months away so the lift is stationary, each chair hanging forlornly at that peculiar skew they have when they are unweighted. Salopette-clad backsides will be back putting them to good use soon enough though, when the temperature drops and everywhere around here ▷





The view stretches out for hundreds of kilometres. This giant mountain feels like the gatekeeper to the Pyrenees

is covered in a deep layer of snow. It's funny to think that backcountry skiers, practising a discipline as different to skiing as gravel riding is to road biking, will use the same paths we are riding on now, seeking the same satisfaction *off-piste* as we are getting off-tarmac.

The chairlift station signals the top of the woodland. We're due to join the Tourmalet road a few kilometres from the summit but as we've ascended far more sharply than the road does we have some altitude to burn on our way there. The descent we find ourselves on encompasses some purpose-built mountain bike trails, and after more than 20km of ascent we dive into them enthusiastically. The hardpack dirt feels smooth and we carve into the bermed corners, but we're also careful to remember that we are on gravel bikes, not fully suspended mountain bikes, so we don't want to get too crazy.

By the time we meet the road I can't hide the size of my grin. Had we ground our way up here via the conventional route, I'd have been at threshold for well over an hour and would be in significant discomfort by now. I'd be cursing my feeble legs, searching for gears I didn't have and staring at my stem. As it is we've taken more than twice as long to get here, yet despite a few hard efforts I've had the time of my life. I've appreciated the view far more and felt the adrenalin-fuelled glee of technical riding, with the added bonus of not having to worry about traffic. I'm definitely starting to agree with Jamie's view that these famous mountains are better climbed on gravel than on road. Even now that we're back on asphalt, despite ceding a little rolling resistance and weight to the best road bikes, our gravel bikes' lower gearing at least allows us to spin up what's left of the Tourmalet climb in comparative ease.

Just a few months earlier at the 2019 Tour de France, there were scenes of national jubilation as Groupama-FDJ's Thibaut Pinot reached the top of this iconic pass first to win Stage 14. Furthermore it was a fellow Frenchman,

Above right: The gravel road up the Pic du Midi Bigorre is one of the highest rideable routes in the Pyrenees

Right: This gully near the top of the Pic du Midi reveals the expansive flatlands of central France, and the view seems to go on forever



Deceuninck-QuickStep's Julian Alaphilippe, who arrived second to retain the yellow jersey for yet another improbable day. But the point at which the pros unclipped is the point where we again head off onto gravel, with plenty more climbing ahead of us.

More where that came from

Just before the road tips into the descent towards Bagnères-de-Bigorre we dive off left onto some slaty gravel. The Pic du Midi de Bigorre sits at the top of a ridgeline strung up from the Tourmalet, so the gravel road mirrors the ascending towers of rock and it's possible to see our route ahead snaking steadily up along the side of the mountain. The slates beneath my tyres, stacked by their flatness, feel threatening, like they could easily slide on each other and have my wheels out from under me. That prospect is even more daunting when I peer over an unbarriered edge into

a gully stretching several hundred meters down. I later discover this type of terrain is described as 'active scree' and should be treated with caution owing to its tendency to shift in exactly the way I was afraid it might.

Considering we started this climb at the Tourmalet's 2,115m summit, it isn't very long before the effects of altitude begin to make themselves known, both on the environment and my body. The landscape is barren and the flora reduced to patches of mossy grass, giving it an appearance similar to Iceland's lava fields. In general our surroundings appear like a darker grey version of Mont Ventoux's moonscape or the Col d'Izoard's *Casse Déserte*. It is majestic, yet ominous and silent, although the silence doesn't feel tranquil as it did in the forest earlier. Rather, with the harsh, sheer slopes all round it feels loaded – poised in anticipation of something dramatic happening, as if a huge landslide is moments away from swatting us



from the road. No matter how challenging road ascents become, connections and clues to civilisation are never far away. The climb to the Pic du Midi is wilder and truly treacherous, making it hard not to feel vulnerable as we continue the ascent.

The Lac d'Oncet to our left signals the beginning of the climb's denouement. The gravel road – or what's left of it – flicks left and right in front of us up the final peak to the observatory, and the temperature has dropped noticeably to the knife-like chill high altitude brings. Gravel riding up here creates some interesting foibles with regards to pacing. With the trail alternating between patches of melon-like rocks and mushy clag the consistency of fresh mortar, matches have to be burnt as a necessity rather than a luxury. A few seconds of near maximal effort is often required to avoid stalling. With the lower level of oxygen available in the thin air chucked into the mix too this ascent is turning into one of the toughest I've ever had the pleasure to take on.

We get as close as we can to the observatory before the rocks turn into boulders and the gradient tips above 20%. The only way onwards is on foot or in a cable car, and seeing as you have to book your visits to the observatory – which incidentally houses an exclusive hotel for stargazers and gastronomists, or 'gastronomers' as I dub them – we stop at a hollow in the shoulder of the mountain. It reveals the astoundingly expansive flatlands of central France to the

north, a view that stretches out for hundreds of kilometres. This giant mountain feels to me like the gatekeeper to the Pyrenees, with this gully the door. To the south, 400km of jagged peaks stretch out behind me. It is a geological stormy sea hemmed in by the breakwater of the Pic du Midi de Bigorre.

We sit astride our top tubes and stuff down some snacks, drinking in the view, before turning tail. The bumpiness of the track makes for an out-of-focus dash down to the lake, where we split from the route we used to ascend in order to flank the Tourmalet road on the opposite side of the valley we entered this morning.

Final fling

The trail now is little more than a narrow animal track, and staying in the centre of the spindly line of dirt requires huge amounts of concentration as we descend. The slope is open and, for the brief moments I'm able to lift my eyes from the technical trail, I can see it zigzagging down back towards the main road, which first appeared as a pale grey thread hundreds of metres directly below us. Just before we reach it, though, the temptation to tack on some more gravel proves too much.

We transition from the narrow dirt trail onto a more defined gravel path and begin one last steady ascent, which Jamie assures me will be worth the effort. We reverse our

The trail is little more than a narrow animal track, and staying in the centre of the spindly line of dirt requires huge concentration



As Off-Road climbs away from Super Barèges on the route's out-and-back, the view is unrestricted across the valley, although the gravel roads we started the day on are all but invisible by now



By the numbers

Tour-rific stats

92km

Total ride distance

42km

Amount of climbing to start

30km

Amount of descending to end

2,115m

Height of Col du Tourmalet

2,543m

Height of Pic du Midi

9%

Average gradient in between

40

Teeth on largest cassette sprocket

3°C

Temperature atop Pic du Midi



Unlike on a road climb, here there is nothing by way of protection between us and a near-boundless fall

► angle to the road, watching it sink below and away from us once more. Our new heading swings lazily through grassy, rock-strewn slopes. The vegetation lining our route is never more imposing than knee-high bushes and I find myself considering our open environment with much more awareness.

Unlike on a road climb, where we are so often cosseted by barriers, here there is nothing by way of protection between us and a near-boundless fall. The views, though, are more than enough to distract me from my fear of impending doom. Famous peaks are scattered about like sweets across the horizon, their outlines dark blue against the deep orange of the now setting sun.

As we whizz off the final descent of the day and lazily pedal the final few kilometres back on tarmac to the guesthouse in Villelongue, I can't deny Jamie was right about the infectiousness of Pyrenean gravel riding. In spite of my fatigue from today's ride, I'm already itching to explore some more. 🌟

Sam Challis is tech editor at Cyclist Off-Road and is at least halfway towards being an expert gastronomer

How we did it

TRAVEL

Cyclist Off-Road flew from London Heathrow with British Airways to Toulouse for around £150, but it is a route served by many low-cost airlines too. It is then a two-hour drive to Villelongue. Flying into Lourdes cuts the transfer time to just 25 minutes, although this airport isn't served by as many flights from the UK. Other travel options include driving 10-12 hours from Calais or taking a ferry to Bilbao in Spain and driving for three to four hours.

ACCOMMODATION

We stayed at Escape to the Pyrenees' HQ in the sleepy village of Villelongue, at the

base of the Hautacam. Jamie and Kitt's well-appointed guesthouse is perfectly situated for tackling many of the Pyrenees' bucket-list climbs and all of their gravel equivalents. The home-cooked food was both delicious and nutritious, and there's a large, secure garage-cum-workshop for storing and working on bikes too.

THANKS

Thanks must go to Jamie for being the quintessential ride-guide, full of info about this epic route. Thanks also to Kitt for her patience while supporting us on the ride, and for the incredible meals she repeatedly whipped up during our stay.