



Traversing the Alps on two wheels

GREG CHRISTISON gets on his bike for a cycling holiday in France, tempering some tough runs with some pampering in the sunny south-east of the country

CRAWLING up the never-ending, winding slope with my closest competitors out of sight, I focus my eyes downward and will my heavy legs to defy logic and keep turning. There is sweat cascading from my brow, my calves feel like they are being battered to smithereens and my energy levels have plunged to an all-time low.

It is approaching midday in the sweltering French Alps and I am struggling to climb the steep mountainside on my road-racing bike.

To clarify, you're not reading a first-person piece with newly crowned Tour de France champion Chris Froome, but an account of my painstaking 10km cycle up the Col du Frêne in the picturesque Savoie Mont Blanc region.

As beautiful as the scenery is, I'm not focusing on the sun-kissed vineyards or the snow-topped mountains. There is only one image in the forefront of my mind – the peak of this excruciating climb... and perhaps the wine-accompanied luxury picnic we had been promised for making it to the top.

Despite my dwindling optimism, I persevere and eventually turn the corner to see my fellow bikers slumped in the sun at the Col's summit. Somehow, I've managed to emerge victorious.

As I reach the final crest of the hill, I'm filled with an amazing sense of achievement and euphoria. And perhaps, for one very brief moment, I feel inclined to do it all over again.

Luckily, that fleeting thought lasts seconds as we are encouraged to free-wheel down in search of our reward – a delicious lunch at the renowned Château des Allues.

Nestled in the vineyard area of the Combe de Savoie, near Albertville, the charming guest house is the perfect base for cyclists, skiers, wine-lovers and those looking to indulge in the area's abundance of historical offerings.

Today, our host Stephane serves up a spectacular array of typical French cuisine – with the majority of the ingredients grown in the mansion's own gardens.

Sipping a locally brewed lemon-flavoured wine, I quickly realise there is so much more to a cycling holiday than tight-fitting Lycra and saddle sores.

The Col du Frêne challenge is undoubtedly the most testing moment of my four-day trip to the south-east of France.

Our personalised package has been set up by unrivalled biking specialists Cyclomundo which – under the expert guidance of boss Bruno Toutain – provides visitors with the perfect cycling holiday.

Priding themselves on their excellent customer service,



PERFECT VIEWS: Lake Annecy is a must

Bruno's well-informed staff ensure everyone receives first-class treatment from the moment they touch down.

Guests are greeted by a friendly face at the airport before being transferred to the starting point of their trip in the spacious Cyclomundo people-carrier. The company provides everything required to make your cycling holiday a success, from bikes and helmets to water bottles and satellite navigation systems.

Bruno's team also take care of hotel bookings, restaurant reservations and luggage transfers for the duration of your trip. And ours takes in Lake Geneva, Lake Bourget and Lake Annecy.

UNLIKE the Tour de France, cyclists are more than welcome to dismount and spend time in the history-steeped towns and villages spread throughout the countryside.

Highlights include a visit to the medieval settlement of Yvoire, where we sample offerings from the town's Garden of Five Senses, and a stop-off at Château de Miolans in Saint Pierre d'Albigny – where the Marquis de Sade was once famously imprisoned.

The elegant city of Chambéry – known for its narrow alleyways, traditional courtyards and delightful architecture – is worth a visit, as is the town Annecy, nicknamed "The Little Venice of France" due to the way its buildings rise up from its winding canals and cobbled streets.

Cycling in Savoie Mont Blanc, and France as a whole, is massive, and it's getting even bigger. There are currently almost 6,500km of cycle routes and 2,800km of mountain bike tracks.

The region boasts 68 Cols – or mountain passes – and for a fortnight during the summer, 14 of those are closed off for one day each so enthusiasts can enjoy their ride safely.

Visitors to the region are spoiled for choice when it comes to accommodation, with the countryside packed with picturesque retreats hidden away in the hillsides.

However, the rustic Auberge Hotel, in Anthy, and the Tour de Pacoret, in Albertville, come highly recommended as both offer cyclists a warm welcome, hearty meals and overnight bike storage.

Nestled in the Alps, the Tour de Pacoret also has tennis courts and a swimming pool on site. And both provide guests with the ideal French dining experience – meats, breads, pâtés and cheese, accompanied with several glasses of local fine wines. Exactly what you need after a hard day in the saddle.

● GETTING THERE

During the summer several airlines fly to Lyon and Geneva direct from the UK. The Auberge D'Anthy Hotel offers double rooms with breakfast from €74 per night. Visit www.auberge-anthy.com

The same package at the Tour de Pacoret starts at €75. Visit www.hotel-pacoret-savoie.com For more information on Cyclomundo's tailor-made cycle tours of France, Switzerland, Italy and Spain visit www.cyclomundo.com For more on the Savoie Mont Blanc region visit www.savoie-mont-blanc.com



IDYLLIC: The town of Annecy is known as Little Venice. Above, Greg gets cycling