



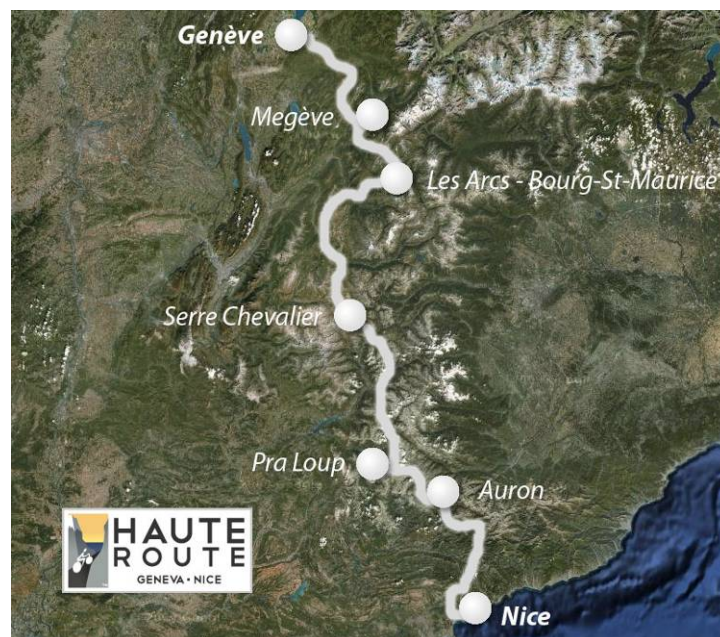
La Haute Route is a new seven-day event from Geneva to Nice organised and run as a stage race. See www.hauteroute.org for all the facts – far more reliable than the account that follows. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental and of course deliberate.



Me



The Route



Why?

In life one can achieve moments of extreme contentment. Such moments are earned often only by extended periods of misery. The rest of life is, well, just existence. OK, as a philosophy I can't see Immanuel Kant or Rene Descartes turning in their graves with worry that they are about to be upstaged, but each to his own. Given this guiding light, with the announcement of a 730km, seven day stage race, with 15 mountain climbs all 'Tour de France' classified, over 17km of ascent, and even a time trial in the middle, what could I do but sign up?

It wasn't a case of just this one planet being in the right position, for such a massive sign up to potential misery all my planets had to align. My wife was helpful here. She just doesn't get cycling long distances and, well, mountain

climbs are, to her mind, for the borderline insane; those suffering severe personality disorder; or worse. Hurt by this relentless negative attitude to my sport I needed something to hold up as a real accomplishment. The Haute Route provided the perfect solution, with this I could establish for sure that there was no borderline case here: Entering this would provide all that was required to get me sectioned into a secure environment and the specialist help so badly needed.

Other planets were also entering just the right orbit. As a kid I dreamt of not just being in the Tour de France, but being one of those climbers who charges up some improbable mountain pass with Phil Liggett going apoplectic as he commentates about Britain's best climber since Robert Millar. Here in August would be my moment. I've always emphasised the need to blur reality with a healthy dose of dreamy fantasy, so the fact that this wasn't *actually* the Tour, nor was I ever likely to be best at anything due to a profound lack of talent – these things were neither here nor there. I *would be* lining up with great Champions, the Stages *have been* real Tour stages or at least parts of them. It is a real race (on this point more later) and a truly international one at that. And if the 12 year old Tony saw that in forty-one years time he'd be doing such a race, he'd be in awe. On this point given the fact that advancing age has dimmed my eyesight, thinned my hair, brought on clear signs of early onset dementia, and made me increasingly risk adverse, I needed something to show myself and the world that I wasn't past it quite yet. This might of course backfire, but I can't stress enough the importance of not being realistic when one takes on something new and rather unknown like this.

Lastly I needed a new challenge having conquered the Etape, tried road racing and time trials, and experimented with doing no sport at all. So at the beginning of this year I signed on to the Haute Route with the words of professional bike rider Michael Barry in my head (*to paraphrase, pro-bike riding is easy to understand. Think of it as gentling banging one's head with a mallet for hours. Not pleasant, but man when you stop it's wonderful*). It might even inspire the kids to take up cycling, after all if you were reading this about your Dad, wouldn't you want to rush out and do the same? Hmm, perhaps this aspect of my aspirations needs more work.



What?

Having covered the reasons *why* I'd set myself up to do this thing, the next thing was to establish exactly *what* I'd got myself into. Take a look at this:

Geneva ----- lots of mountains ----->

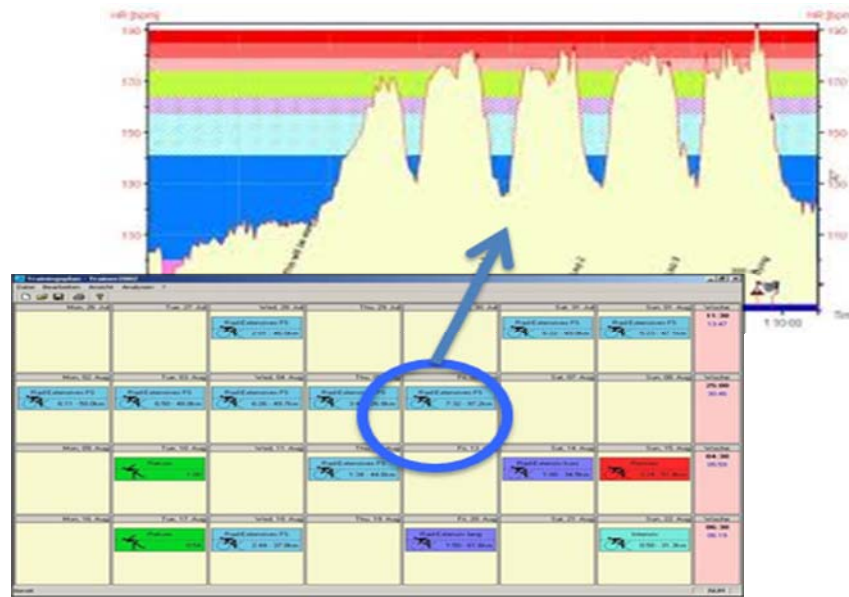


Nice

Really there's not much more to say, although it might be mentioned that a healthy head or cross wind should be expected for much of the route, it can get very cold on top of these mountains, and that even in the real Grand Tours they don't go seven days without a rest day. The way I like to explain this malarkey to the kids is to say, well look at Stage 3 for example; 169km with 4000m of ascents. What this really means is cycling on a flat road for 100miles whereupon there is a ladder that goes over two and half miles up into the sky. To finish one just has to grab hold of the bike and scamper up the ladder. Amazingly this fails to inspire them into taking up serious bike riding. How I fear for the future of our race. Here, albeit over seven days, one has to cycle 730km (turned out to be nearer 800km) or 500 miles and zip up a 10mile high ladder, carrying the bike, energy bars and any other bits one might wish to take for the ride. Blimey, if that does make any reader immediately want to sign up for next year I just don't know what will.

Training on the bike

On this subject I could write a book. I won't, but I could. The challenge here is the huge volume one needs to persuade one's own body that it is going to be quite happy riding full bore for four or five hours each day for a week. My carefully worked out program started in November 2010 and was conjured up using a coaching company called PBScience. They advise on regimes to get that body shaped up and ready for the chosen challenge. To be honest it's more body conditioning than true one to one coaching, but that's not to knock it. The thing works via a website for the hardcore athlete and the athlete-pretenders like me, called Training Peaks. Here's a screen shot:

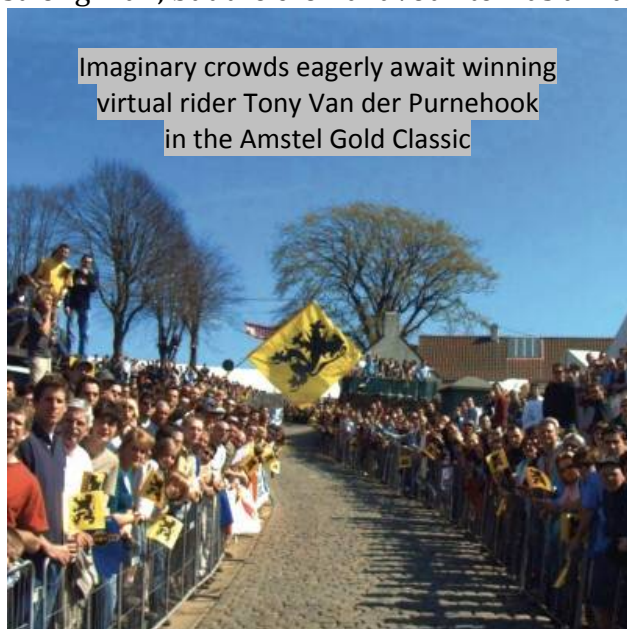


Essentially one works out a program for each month, PBScience put instructions for each day on the Training Peaks diary and then you do it. Rather than just say 'yeah did that - I was super', the idea is to use hard facts gathered by the wonders of modern day cycling technology, in my case a Garmin 500 bike computer and a 'Powertap' rear wheel. This allows each day's exercise to be logged in the diary with cadence, heart rate, power, speed, route, gradient, weather, and no doubt a lot of other stuff that I never look at either. The unfortunate side of this is that, failing hacking in and tampering with the data like a News of the World journalist, one is presented with the stark facts about how one's training is going, or not, as the case maybe. This is discussed on the phone once per week with PBScience's experts (in my case Dan Henchy of whom I only have praise) it's simply not possible to bluff. This actually serves as quite the motivator. If one is feeling truly anorak one can double click on the data file for the day and probe into one's inner meaning: *Yes that is a 0.004% improvement on my training stress indicator of 4.101 over last month, but the CBA ratio is a cause for concern at only 8.03 to the power of four declining.*

Looking at essentially 10 hours per week on the bike, plus two hours in the gym from November to August it sounds like a community service sentence for some misdemeanour or other, it certainly doesn't sound like fun. How does one keep sane for such a long period? Well, my wife has a short answer to that one, mine is rather longer, but probably confirms her suspicions. Thing is that it's not just 'training', but it's training to a purpose and a plan. The big picture was that I would build up a 'base' meaning lots of long rides at 'low' intensity, until April and then start interleaving shorter rides at much high intensity to 'peak' in August. Trouble is, low intensity is not quite what it appears, it's riding along just under the intensity that would cause one to stop talking due to one's breathing getting in the way of a chat. This has to be done for 2 to 4 hours at a go, none stop, no let ups, three to four to five times a week. Now this doesn't really work out if one goes with others - their pace is always wrong to stick with the program. Moreover it is not intense enough to get those endorphins that folks talk about that give you a sort of high when you really push it.

What I've just described takes a bit of reflection: No company; all through the wet and cold of the winter; no pushing it to get a buzz; and long periods of no stopping 'mediocre' riding. Add all this up and misery comes to mind. However there are strategies to elevate this which work rather well. First off is to test the family relationship and go off whenever one can on a cycling holiday. I managed to do this rather successfully starting with seven days in New Zealand in January, Majorca training camp for five days at the end of February, three days in the Pyrenees doing the three stages of the Tour on consecutive days in June, a week in Cornwall in July and another week in France cycling vaguely from Alp d'Huez after the Etape du Tour, to Bergerac. These trips were fun and made one pretty chipper. Unfortunately this is a big conflict with work (being self-employed I took liberties this year) and does leave 80% of the training period still to do. The secret here is to get down not with the yooff 'keeping it real', but down with the nursing home sect and keeping it thoroughly unreal.

In 2005 I bought a Tacx Virtual Reality trainer being seduced by the idea of training in the garage with a computer screen full of interesting things to side step the utter boredom of training on rollers (or a 'turbo'). In 2006 I got around to using it but found it just as tedious as having ordinary rollers, but I stuck with it and began to discover how very clever it could be. The key was to enter the world of the unreal wholeheartedly. Team Tony was born. The first team was filled with characters such as 'Slobbie', 'Fat Boy', 'Old but Eager', and 'Slug Face', but slowly this turned into a top pro-team affair; ToniPurnador was chosen as team leader, AntPancellara joined the team for time trails, Purdel Heavens as the strong man, but the crowd favourite was always to be Antonio-Hoyla-y-Purnosa



Imaginary crowds eagerly await winning virtual rider Tony Van der Purnehook in the Amstel Gold Classic

the great Spanish geeky climber. After Christmas Two Tonne Tony Tubbs would join the team, but he always disappeared from the scene by the Spring. This all-star cast lines up in my garage to ride classic race stages all winter through and beyond, such is the appeal of the unreal. The weather is always good, the crowds cheering you up the hills are massive, the competition fierce (Tony April 2008 vs Tony Sept 2006, vs Tony Today for example), and one of the Tonys always wins, which is nice because that's me. The

organisers have put loud speakers out along the entire route playing my favourite tunes [iPod], and what's more I can program in absolutely silly personal data and go up say, Alped'Huez weighing only 60kg, with the happy result that I go up at the speed of the world's best professionals as a consequence. There's not a downside. It's always a good ride in the virtual world. Tacx have some great DVD's available including pretty much the whole of the 2010 and 2011 Etape courses, some of the great Pyrenean climbs and even

some of the Majorca rides. Why spoil the day with the ucky stuff that happens like traffic, getting lost, red lights, losing races and it being too cold or too hot?

And when it's only low intensity training allowed? Well I set up my laptop and watch a DVD film or two to while away the hours. Alison bought me a year's subscription to 'Love Film dot com' and I've seen scores of really good films because of it. Ah cycling at it's best, err, that is when it's not really cycling.

Now in addition to turning the pedals like a laboratory hamster on a treadmill for hours on end I thought that perhaps there might be more to riding a bike than meets the eye. Club superstar Tim Williams has seen the light this year and given up a software career to become a profession coach. Now with this sort of expertise available how could I resist? Tim has given me lessons in how to pedal (not easy this and even after six months I've a long way to go); how to go around corners quickly and safely; how to climb and descend; how to time trial; how to road race. The hours spent with him were a complete eye opener, although the bloke clearly doesn't really know what he's about as he favours the real world and something called 'feel' rather than hanging off every change in the reassuring digits of the bike computer. Just think how good Emma Pooley (Tim is her coach) could be if she invested in a Powertap wheel and three or four Garmin computers on her handlebars! She might see herself in a rainbow jersey one day. . . err or be better than the best woman cyclist in the world, err she is anyway, hmm, on to the next subject.

Training off the bike

Riding a bike to the common man is well, a little bit girlie with all that lycra and skinny physique, so to get macho I thought I best balance it out in a 'real man' gym and pump some iron. Well it sounds good, but unfortunately I go to the Leys gym which is full of rugby and more particularly huge man-mountain rowers. One can almost hear the sniggering as Mr Punyverseheaves up a personal best squat of 100kg as they warm up juggling with twice that sort of weight on each bicep. It is as well they don't have any sand there for these beefcakes to kick in my face. This said the 'Cyclist Training Bible' by Joel Friel (all praise Joel for it is he whom I believe in) states clearly that once your over forty weight training is a must, so twice a week I'm pushing up iron for an hour or so. Folks also extol the virtues of strengthening one's 'core' muscles, basically your trunk, so I put strange Swiss ball exercises and things called planks in the mix. I'm very fortunate to have found rugby hard man Lyndon Wainwright-Noble to supervise my feeble efforts here and stop me from damaging myself and others likely to be caught by uncontrolled free falling weights while I fantasize that I'm training à la Schwarzenegger. I'm sort of convinced that all this gym stuff is highly beneficial to all but my ego so I've kept it up pretty well.

Keeping it loose

On the subject of training off the bike there are two cunning plans that I've stuck to all year in the hope of avoiding injury and feeling chipper more of the time. The first is in all the books: 'The Bible' already referred to; and also Lance

Armstrong and Ian Carmichael's bike training book; 'The Nazi way to information' by Joseph Goebbels; 'KGB favourites' Stalin and many others. The basic idea is on display at the London Dungeon with their inspiring 'rack' display. I refer of course to stretching. Now you'll get the same spiel from every coach in the land, you must stretch your muscles or you are essentially bad and not worth spitting at. Well I happen to think I'm well worth a good gob at so I've been stretching away. Now this might not be for everyone but after months of trying to touch my toes with huge efforts of mind bending discomfort for 15 to 20 seconds I couldn't help but notice that my fingers never got any closer to my ankles let alone my toes. Winning the stiffest bloke in the peloton award at the Majorca training camp spurred me into action and I started holding a stretch for a count of 60 seconds, without quite such a good imitation of being on the torture rack. Now this works much better and I can actually touch the floor and demonstrate many other yoga like positions that show clearly that I'm no longer suffering from rigamortis. Another millennium and I'll be flexing like Olga Korbut.

Coupled to all this is my absolute sure-fire secret weapon; going for a massage every three to four weeks to get the muscles ironed out. Now a couple of years ago I associated massage with a raincoat and a trip to Bangkok, but how wrong could I be? Cathy Speed a consultant at Attenbrookes advised me to go to have deep tissue massage when a hamstring injury was becoming a major issue. She recommended one Mark Roberson, ex-olympic javelin thrower, six foot five, the biggest and strongest hands in the civilised world, and full time masseur. The man is a genius. There's nothing feel good about sessions with Mark until its over, and even then you come out feeling you've been in the ring with Mike Tyson. It's very hard to describe but sessions with Mark iron out the creases and loosen up the muscles. I can measure it easily. When I'm getting tight I find a cadence of 100rpm really difficult, but a couple of days after recovering from a good pummel by Roberson and I'm spinning at 105rpm with out a problem. Mark gets rid of back problems, twangs and clicks, and the hamstring problem is in the dim and distant pass. If there was one person I would have liked to have with me for this race it would have been Mark. I can see why the pro's say they can't imagine doing a Tour without their soigneurs.

Crashing

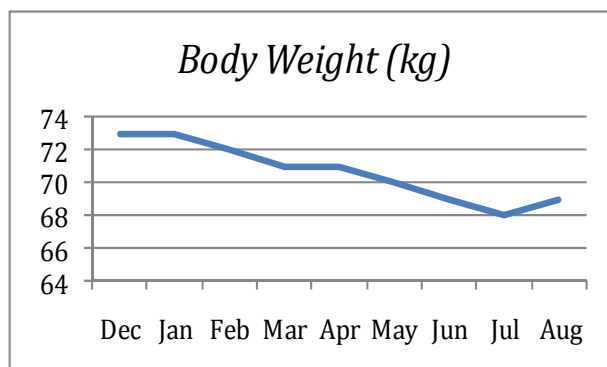
A rather unplanned part of this year's training was two crashes. These were pretty much the first time I'd fallen off and hurt myself, well ever, except for a bizarre mountain bike accident being chased by a swarm of horse flies back in 2008. The first was in Majorca, but was a minor affair just bruising me up a bit and wrecking a rear wheel. Probably a net gain that one as it has made me instinctively avoid use of the front brake. Unfortunately it did negate a bit of descending and cornering confidence, but this was largely back in place when I decided to race at Houghill at the beginning of May. Truth is absent minded 50+ year olds should not be mixing it with the youngsters, especially if they chose to inspect their chain rings just at the moment folks in front hit the brakes for reasons unknown. The staff at Attenbrookes hospital were very helpful at 1am when pain overcame my more stoic nature, 'Oh I bet that hurts. Shame there's

nothing we can do, have some drugs – this one’s a Goodie’. However every cloud etc, and my ego soared when a particularly nice nurse said that my resting heart beat was so low it tripped an automatic warning on her machine that goes ‘bing’, and she was seeing the best heart test results she could remember in an over fifty year old. Suddenly it was almost worth being injured. A week trying to sleep with suspect cracked ribs, severe bruising and ‘road rash’ followed. A hint for the wannabee racer - I can thoroughly recommend not crashing and hurting your ribs. Top tip this, I hope you juniors are playing close attention.

I managed to return to training within a week of this, but any heavy breathing was met by intense pain so my transition to higher intensity had to be delayed until the end of June. It seems that the injury was probably a torn inter-costal muscle, for which the medics have nothing to help but soothing comments such as ‘ensure you have at least 3 months absolute rest’ and ‘you’ll be fine in six months or so’. Actually it still hurts sitting here in September and I have to avoid any ‘core’ exercises that pain. I also find the device called a ‘Powerbreathe’ helpful as I’ve never been able to breath that well at high intensity. Essentially it makes you breath hard. This is, even now, out of the question. The result was that my ‘base’ four months turned into six, but I did do some interval training and the like come July as, while painful, it was no real problem. The net result was that I’m not really much cop at going flat out or changing pace, but I do mediocre to brisk speed really pretty well and for seven days in the mountains this is probably just what you want.

Body Weight

One of the multitude of mental and neurological symptoms associated with cycling regularly discussed by the family and friends is my, allegedly, obsession with my weight. According to them I have all the traits of someone with severe anorexia; constantly weighing myself; special body-fat scales that connect to your hands to show in detail just how very fat you are; a nutty approach to food, etc, etc. Well, all these things do tend to confirm the diagnosis. However the thought is blown apart by the fact that I also eat like a staved pig and gobble down the rest of the families calorie intake put together at every meal.



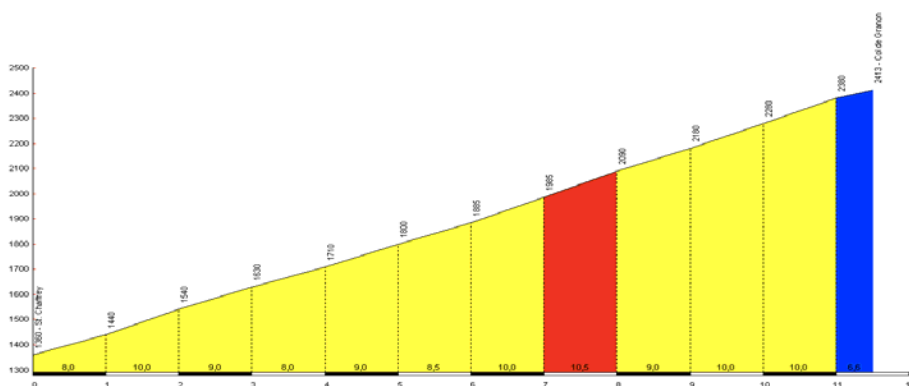
I started year at a shocking 73kg, horrible to see such numbers on the scales, after all that represents a normal healthy weight for a bloke of my 181cm height. The last thing on the agenda was going to be normality so I set my sights on a thoroughly unhealthy 67kg. The way I saw it was that failing to lose this amount would mean

carrying an extra 6kg weight up that 10 mile high ladder. Motivation or what? As it happens in June I’d got as low as 68kg, but lost my nerve and my monkish devotion to self-abuse so decided it would be best to get to the start with a bit of fat at 69kg.

How was trimming myself down achieved? Come the post Christmas period it was straight down to Betty Ford's clinic for rehab. I had to face up to my addiction, I shame to admit it, but in December I was drinking as much as eight glasses of wine a week, eating sweets and ice cream, sneaking into Valerie's Patisserie for a great big chocolate éclair and many other sins to grievous to mention that normal and sane people do. The counselling has helped me face up to it all. I'm not ready to 'fess it all out here however. Anyhow all that excess had to come to an abrupt halt and I had to face cold turkey, or any other protein rich, non-sugar laden, low GI food that was in the fridge. Cakes I prescribed as a placebo to prevent me guzzling down even worst things in the same way that methadone is used to help heroin addicts. This only if associated with before or after a tough training session. Alison was marvellous here really, placing bowls of fresh and dried fruit, nuts, and healthy Munchy Seed snacks everywhere for me to graze on so I could follow the 'little but often' philosophy of a healthy diet. It has to be said that she also bakes cakes on a daily basis filling the kitchen with wondrous smells, devil women, oh how I pined for dried bread (wholemeal of course) and gruel.

All this said on the whole I think the weight loss program was a success. I do wonder if I really should have got down to a prisoner of war looking 66-67kg, as for sure I would have gone quicker, but believe me doing this amount of exercise and dieting at the same time is in the utter-bject-misery bracket of lifestyle. Even a nutter like me has his limits. Make no mistake I love food like the next man and crave more than a glass of red with the evening meal. I might have joined up for a monkish life, but I guess on reflection I'd opted for the Friar Tuckians, rather than the Opus-Dei sect, albeit with the occasional self-flagellation session pushing myself up a mountain or stretching my hamstrings.

Rather than brush off the subject of weight too lightly let's jump ahead and look to see if losing those 3kg would have made much of a difference. Let's take the giant leap of an assumption that I would have lost no power in pursuit of that fashionable war victim look and analyse the time trial stage. This was a 12 km climb of a mountain known as the Granon.



This is a typical, if a little on the steep side (9.2% average, 1053m ascent) mountain climb, there was a head wind which I've guessed at an average of 5mph. Now 69kg me managed to go up this in 55min 55s while the winner,

Peter Pouly managed a stunning 43min 4s). He is, according to his web-site, a mere 63kg (and a national mountain biking champion of France). Add 8kg for bike, clothing, and stuff (pretty much as light as one can buy) and here's how the work needed goes:

	All up weight	Time Trial Time	Power Needed
Today Tony	77 kg	55:55 _(actual)	275W
Mega-slim Tony	74 kg	53:30 _(-2:25)	275W
Fat Tony	80 kg	58:30 _(+2:35)	275W
Winning Tony	77kg	43:03 _(-13min)	350W
Fresh Tony	77kg	51:00 _(- 5min)	300W
Peter Pouly	71 kg	43:04_(actual)	320W

It's always a mistake to construct the sort of table above. Not only does it tell me that I should have thinned down some more (the 2min 25sec faster would have promoted me from 38th to 27th), but also one can extrapolate and say there were 15 of these climbs, which adds up to some 36mins over the seven days, which in turn would promote me from 31st overall to 23rd! Blimey whatever was I thinking? I'm joining Opus-Dei right now and will get my stomach clamped for next year should I decide to do this again.

I guess it is worth a look at the 'fresh Tony' figures. During the ride I did think to myself that I needed to back off and save myself for the next day, probably wise but hey there's not much wisdom going on here (I was at 286W about 7km up the hill and feeling pretty good). This said, 300W is certainly within my capability with fresh legs, some five minutes quicker, maybe I should remain a lard arse and just get stronger instead? Cancel Opus Dei and Friar Tony-Tuck-in will go to the gym more instead. Hang on, better still, do both, coo that works out at 48min 30s for the climb, 7th place. Hmm, time to stop this section and take some medication.

Equipment

Every man has a dark side. In secret I'll fire up the internet and go to those specialist sites, you know the ones that you'd never talk about in front of the family or your mother. I know it might be that the Thought-Police raid my home early one morning and take away my computers, but the risk is worth it. I skip the soft-core stuff and go straight for the ultra bike-porn. Even as I write this my breathing is getting heavy; deep carbon rims, sub-100g cassettes, boron fibre brake cable, unobtainium chain rings, oh, oohh, man, time for a cold bath.

Things got worse come the Spring, I was torn between two lovers, the deeply smooth and sexy Scott Addict R1 or my mountain goat Cevelo RS. The Scott, supreme around corners complete with the best of Italian artistry Campagnolo Super-Record bits or the new mistress Cewelwith an 11-32 SRAM block milled from solid metal and coming in at a full 200grams lighter. Oh how the younger lighter machine infatuates with figures like that. 'Watch your back' said Steve

from Primo's as I loaded the Scott into the car having just paid for the black and white beauty that is the RS. What a philanderer I had become.

In the end I lost my head completely and turned against both of them as a new set of 'Edge' mountain climber special carbon fibre tubular wheels arrived. I sat in the garage caressing their slim micro-gram construction. A full 750 grams lighter than my old clincher type wheels. I was in love. Ah dear reader take note, a fling with a bit of bling will bite you, and in a story for another time the wheel collapsed due to some sort of biblically shoddy quality control issue and we parted company in a most acrimonious manner this July. Alas one never learns and while a whacking 100g heavier, I lined up in Geneva sporting a gorgeous set of Envy 1.45 tubular wheels. These were bolted to the Cevelo for the gears and the lighter weight, no doubt the RS felt jilted as I ignored her lines instead displaying the new wheels to one and all like a trophy bride.

My old training wheels and the Scott are suing for divorce.

The opposition

So who enters this? Well a good spread of folks. The average age is 43 according to the web-site, and the youngest rider was 20. I think the majority were experienced racers in the 30 to 40 bracket, but with a good number of over 50 'codgers' along for the ride. Not many over 60 and only 11 women.

Some names you might recognise, Alain Prost the Formula One world champion who I soundly trashed on Stage One and he abandoned shortly after (wimp); Peter Pouly who I've already mentioned, a French national mountain bike champion; Stephen Roche, Tour de France winner and personal hero (looking rather tubby and only did the last stage). There were some other French people and I think a German woman of note, but I'm not into foreign celebs in general.

A few British folks entered – the best team were British but not sure who they were, Bath road club had two entries who looked fully pro and had me completely psyched on the first day. (These turned out to be terrific guys who made for great company on the final evening.) In all 23 nationalities entered, a good number of Australians, Canadians, and Americans for sure, as well as German, Dutch, Spanish, Benelux, as you'd expect, more unlikely were riders from Singapore, Israel, and Monaco. All this made for a great atmosphere when we were all thrown together for the nightly pasta party, although no fights broke out to my knowledge so I guess things remained tame compared to the average night out on Britain's streets.

Geneva

Talking of Britain's streets it was a tad unfortunate that I arrived just after the looting and riots that were spectacularly reported all over Europe and the States painting Britain as, well, a land full of rioters and looters. Thus when I got to the hotel and filled in the registration card and wrote 'UK' in the little box the hotel staff start cowering behind the counter whispering nervously 'take the money,

but please don't hurt us'. I thought better of looting the reception desk of its free Geneva maps and just took the key to my rather nice room.

Geneva is a rather nice European city and everything seems just ticker-dee-boo as one walks around. It is only when one decides to buy something that this idyll is shattered. We are talking mega prices, orbital, hugemungous, - choose your own adjective. Pizza in a rather unprepossessing restaurant £22; bottle of water to wash it down £7; how about a simple green salad on the side £9? In the end I was driven to Liddl, the supermarket that redefines low prices, coo wee still a bit on the pricey side, but only the equivalent of a nice English restaurant meal for four in say Knightsbridge (box of cereal, bars of chocolate, fruit, nuts, dried prunes).

Anyhow there were some good things. The hotel gave me a card to use public transport for free. Once I'd been cured of taxis by a £32 bill for about a 10min ride to register for the race and listen to the first riders' briefing, I gleefully bounced on to the trams and buses to return to the hotel. They were great. What fool would ever take a taxi with a public transport system this good? Moving maps, clearly announced position using a big TV screen inside the bus, even the bus stops are clearly marked, it's a joy. The Swiss tourist office had even provided a nutcase to sit next to me for the journey. What fabulous attention to detail eh? The man was a marvel, emitting noises that were a fusion of the final push to relieve a week's constipation to a sigh of relief akin to that having just given birth. This performance was repeated at every stop making it a positive joy to get, well to get anywhere really.

The hotel put on a sumptuous breakfast (it was a four star hotel in the centre of Geneva, amazing really as part of the package). We were greeted off the lift by a charming Swiss banker who took us through the various finance packages to pay for the breakfast in front of us. The 25 year mortgage, fixed for 5 years, attracted me, but in the end I opted for the endowment scheme that provided an extra free breakfast once the loan was paid off in 2050. After eating I placed my bag (provided by the organisers as part of the deal, clearly labelled 189 - Purnell XL to remind one and all that I hadn't lost those 3 kilograms) in the lobby and set off the 2km to the start at the Jardin des Anglais. You have to hand it to the organisers for welcoming us Brits, start in the English Gardens and finish on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice. Attention to detail, can't fault it.

Recovery

Lance Armstrong said once that Stage Races are all about recovery. Now I used to think that this just meant a good night's sleep and one pray's one feels tip top on waking. Experience of some multi-day cycling used to mystify me in this respect, some days I'd wake up feel like death and yet go well once on the bike, other days the opposite and occasionally I'd feel like a candidate for the morgue and cycle like one. Having sinned in a previous life, last year I decided to do the four Pyrenean Stages of the Tour de France in consecutive days. For three days I danced on the pedals, roared up the hills, and felt fab, but come the fourth day . .

. . . . even today I still awake in a cold sweat screaming. Alison is good at calming me down:

“It’s alright darling, you’re back home, this is not the Col de Marie Blanc.”

Suffice to say that my recovery from the previous three days was not as complete as I’d have liked that day in June 2010. So a quick read of the Cyclist’s Training Bible, an ask around the local gurus and I constructed a rigid regime for waking up like a recharged Duracell bunny. Now for those of you who think this was perhaps over the top, well I poop in your general direction. While I can’t say I had seven super strong days, I certainly didn’t blow to bits, nor feel anything like as bad as that day last June. In my mind all this extra effort to recover works well:

Step One: Have a soft week before the start. It’s best to do little but spin your legs and do short efforts so you arrive eager to beaver. Here’s what I did and make no mistake I was bright eyed and bushy tailed on the start line in Geneva:

Sunday one week before	Four hour all out effort on the 2010 Etape course using the Tacx machine	Up the Col de Telegraph (250W), Galibier (245W) and then Alped’Huez (250W). Big effort and absolutely shattered at the end.
Monday	40 min spin at 200W	Very tired after Sunday’s ride
Tuesday	Day off	
Wednesday	45 min spin at 200W + one hour in the gym doing weights	Beginning to feel good.
Thursday	One hour spin at 200W	Feeling pretty chipper
Friday	One hour spin	Very light effort due to horrendous traffic in the area. Actually did 2 hours, but only one of these wasn’t really pedalling. Bit stressed.
Saturday	Nothing at all	Feeling good to go, if apprehensive
Sunday 21st August	Race Start in Geneva	Felt utterly ballistic, like superman on steroids. Great first day with 273W, 260W, 250W averages for the three climbs.

And at the end of the first stage, well I was tired, but not wasted. Now seems a good time to throw in a description of this first day, here’s the route:



The start ----- --> Jogging along ----- -->The finish 'village' -
 Contador (not) is joined by the French diddymen team.



Geneva to Megeve, first bit before the climb was utterly manic, but come the climb sense resumed.
 109km (79km timed)
 2300m ascent

Tony 29th in GC

And here's five times Formula One World Champion Alain Prost smiling despite getting his butt kicked by Team Tony on Stage One. Purnell quicker than Prost – official. In reality he might have been riding for fun, but what has reality got to do with it?



So the 'taper down' easy week worked pretty well as I really went well on day one and actually held back on the first climb for fear of blowing the rest of the week.

Back to recovery, well this became a ritual:

1. Immediately after finish one 'For Goodness Shakes' protein recovery drink (with a tacky name like that it has to be good). I carried the sachet in my back pocket so there would be no mistakes in getting this down me straight away.
2. Massage – this was laid on by the organisers and one got a 15min rub down within about 90mins of finishing. Not really want I call a real man's massage, more of a feel-good affair, but hey it was free and it felt great!
3. Stretch all leg muscle groups and back for 60s each stretch within 30mins of finishing if possible.
4. Eat and graze continuously until bedtime.

5. Drink a mix of carbonated water and water continuously until bedtime. I probably had four litres in this time, perhaps five on some days. One of these would have a sachet of 'cherry active' mixed in, apparently good for recovery or so the saps who buy it believe when they spend £1.50 per dose on the stuff.
6. Have a one-hour afternoon nap.
7. Have a 20 minute ice cold (or as cold as the water comes out of the tap) bath (i) to squeeze out that lactate acid and (ii) to feel like Martin Johnson after beating the all blacks, macho-plus. I tended to make phone calls during this to get my mind off the discomfort of it all.
8. Self-massage the legs using two products for just such a lunatic activity, 'The Stick' a sort of bendy rolling pin, and the 'Rumble Roller' picked up from www.medievaltorturesupplies.com, this needed head banging determination to get through.

The Stick



A Rumble Roller – dig those spikes!

9. Wearing of compression tights – everyone had these on so rather than feeling alone like having just failed the audition for Billy Elliot ('too old, next'), one felt like one had joined the entire Bolshoi ballet (without the ballerinas).
10. Going to bed really earlier, which is what I did (9pm usually).

Now all that effort possibly doesn't make a scrap of difference to one's actual recovery, but boy do you feel smug factor ten at breakfast . . . "You didn't have a cold bath, (suck through teeth). Ah well, I don't suppose the Col de Terrible is that hard, do you?"

Actually on the day it all finished I couldn't be arsed to do any of the above and guess what – I felt utterly exhausted and whammed the next day. (Don't think the wine helped here either).

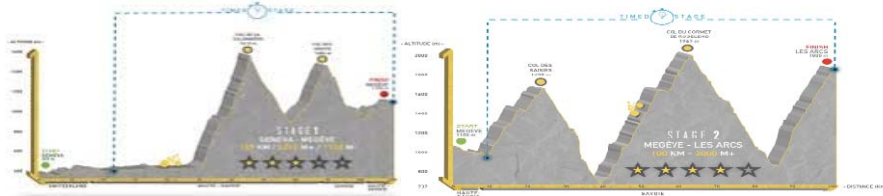
In between Geneva and Nice

Now I've described the first stage, and the fourth (time trial) stage, so what of the others? It's all a bit of a blurr, but basically they followed the pattern; roll along for about 20km in a neutralised section with everyone very nervous and sparing to get to the front for the last 500m; fail to get to the front and miss the start completely; roar up a serious mountain climb just after the start and go pass all those who thought they could keep up with the lead group but couldn't; get to the top and refill the water bottle; swop down like an Eagle to the beginning of the next climb; pass more people shelled out the back of the front group; finish

with a few others up a final climb; go across the timing pick up with a ‘thank the Lord that’s over’; muse that you’re pretty sure there was the most awesome scenery known to mankind along the way, but you’re not quite sure; walk around the finishing ‘village’ and try to ascertain how long people had been there before you arrived; and lastly find the hotel; have a massage; have a nap and start eating like a piggy wiggy.

Here’s an at a glance summary of the seven stages:

Stage	Distance	Ascent	Cols	Winner	Team Tony ¹
Geneva to Megeve	109km	2300m	Columbiere – 273W Aravis – 260W Megeve – 251W	3hr 49min	4hr 9min (29 th)
Megeve to Les Arcs	100km	3000m	Saisais – 273W Roselend – 260W Les Arcs – 251W	3hr 10min	3hr 45min (31 st)



A word on Stage Three, I was right on the limit as I’d pushed pretty hard on day one and two, you can see I nearly collapsed on the Galibier, there was a fierce head wind and I was struggling a bit. Fortunately everyone else was much the same and some a lot worse. I should note that the climb of the Telegraph and Galibier combined was about 25min slower than I did in the Etape. This was as much to do with the wind as weak legs. Still it was the toughest stage:

Les Arcs to SerreChavalier	169km	4000m	Madeleine – 261W Telegraph – 245W Galibier – 214W	4hr 21min	5hr 16min (29 th)
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Granon TT	12km	1100m	Granon – 275W	43min 04s	55min 55s
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¹ Team Tony is me accompanied by all the virtual Tonys that I rode with during the winter, it’s a strong team, with common purpose and we didn’t fail out at all.

I've talked about the Granon time trial earlier. Try imagining the profile as I'm not going to reproduce it again. It's easy 12km long, 1.1km up, job done. Nice and twisty, although a big head wind at the top. Amazingly I felt rather good on this, I think helped by a one hour spin with a few higher effort bursts immediately beforehand and a very good night's sleep. Most unlike me I thought, 'back off' halfway up, no point in burying yourself and blowing up tomorrow.

Chavalier to Pra Loup	119km	2800m	Issard - 256W Vars - 238W Pra Loup - 251W	3hr 40min	4hr 20min (37 th)
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This was all OK, but the descent was a bit a hairy. Pra Loup was a pretty good place to stay the night, nice restaurants, but sort of a 'journey day'.



I remember being with four other riders all looking at each other going into the Pra Loup climb and then blowing me away! They took a minute out of me on the climb, alas some people have no manners.

Pra Loup to Auron	78km	2300m	Bonnett – 255W	2hr 09min	2hr 33min (40 th)
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Now that's what I call a climb! Look at that, 1600m all at one go. It was actually quite cold at the top. Last time I did this was in 2005 and I was a whole 30mins slower, so progress there. The descent was for the bold, brave



and/or completely foolhardy. This was never going to suit me, as the descent was long and very fast and to be honest I think I lost quite a few places and about 4 minutes. I need to get some more viva-voom, verve and well, bigger balls.

Eating

Not much to say here. The package included breakfast which was a typical continental affair, croissants, French sticks of bread, jam, cold ham, salami, washed down with coffee, chocolate or the make your own cup of tea with some tepid water that the French love to taunt the British with.

Now being someone with compulsive / obsessive disorder there were two aspects to this very satisfactory arrangement that unsettled me. Firstly I've read that one should have a light breakfast *at least 3 hours before a race*, secondly I didn't want to lose time having a pee. Therefore I had a cunning plan. The day before (i.e. immediately after the last stage finished) I would start to guzzle fluids, and this didn't stop until bedtime, hence come the midnight hour I would be 100% hydrated to the max. Just before bed I would add some yogurt and milk to very fruit laden muesli and put it in the mini-bar fridge or outside in the cool mountain air. Then I would get up early, and immediately have a small glass of water to balance any loss overnight and my bowl of now soft and easy to digest muesli along with some soft prunes – all of which I bought from Liddl in Geneva for the cost of a small two bedroomed house in Fulham. I'd also have a little chocolate, because Tonys love chocolate. Nothing, however, to drink.

Then I'd go down to breakfast as late as I dare, have half a cup of chocolate and a tiny bit of ham and bread. "Is that all you're having?", "Of course it's a great mistake to eat a large breakfast, gosh you're not going to eat all that." I'd reply. Master of the mind game me. Strangely as I walked away it crossed my mind that my breakfast companions continued their chatter; "What a dick eh? Pass another butter soaked croissant."

Lunch didn't really happen as one finished the racing about 12noon and given that there was a spread of boring, but nourishing food there at the finish (and it was free) I would attack this with relish and have what amounted to a healthy lunch: Two or three ham and cheese sandwiches, a bag of salty crisps, an energy bar and a bottle or two of water to wash it down. I would then graze non-stop until the pasta-party (essentially the evening meal) on prunes, fresh fruit, nuts, dried fruit, and chocolate.

The pasta party after the 6pm riders briefing (an excellent affair I thought pointing out the route, hazards to watch out for and then some pictures and commentary of the stage we'd just completed), was on the whole nice enough if a tad bland and hardly haute cuisine. Pasta and meat sauce some days, rice and perhaps ham and cheese sauce other days, masses of it followed by a slice of apple or chocolate tart and a big slice at that.

No complaints about the food really, and on the last day at the closing party they laid on a really excellent spread with lots of choice (cold meats, various couscous and rice salads, pasta, roasted vegetables, fabulous selection of fancy cakes for desert) really good quality stuff, nice in Nice!

Organisation

It would be difficult to praise the organisation enough. This was by far the best run event I have ever cycled in. Nearly everything deserves praise, the routes, the atmosphere, the hotels, the amazing attention to detail, the food, the massage service (for all the riders), the fantastic closing day, the police escorts, the buzz, the daily briefings for the next day, the little video shows of the day's highlights shown just before the really rather good 'pasta party' held each night (no need to buy any food at all for the entire week), breakfast, bag movement, . . . well everything. It was a triumph of organisation, and while a few things did go wrong, nothing of any note and everyone involved deserves their own medal.



One of the support vehicles rejected by the organisers in favour of Mavic's vehicle and motorbikes.



Here's the actual one:

Actually the Mavic support was so very good, with the opportunity to have anything tuned up before, during or after, that I am now going to buy Mavicstuff out of preference, they deserve a pat on the back.

To get a feel of how good the thing was organised download the race manual from the excellent web-site (www.hauteroute.org). It's comprehensive and they stuck to the plan pretty much exactly. They gave us a Haute Route jersey to boot, which I thought rather nice:



One thing I think the organisers did get wrong was the ranking system. They had the idea of having three categories 'solo', 'duo' and 'team'. Now if you entered as a 'solo' that didn't prevent you having a team of mates who had

also entered 'solo'. However if you entered as a 'duo' or a 'team' you were excluded from the 'solo' rankings. For example I came officially 18th overall in the 'solo', but 31st in the 'scratch'. Now the scratch results were 'unofficial and just for fun' while the other three categories were where all the prizes and 'official' recognition went. I didn't meet anyone who really thought anything but the scratch results were the real deal and most thought that the focus should have been here.



Moreover the 'duo' idea (two people as a team) was thought silly, while the 'team' idea fine, but a bit of a side issue. On an entirely self-serving basis, and a number of folks agreed, there was a view that the age categories should have been a focus, but just for the general classification not every day, so that there were not too many awards to present each day. Thus something like this would have worked better:

1. *Daily men's top three for the stage*
2. *... and for general classification (combine 1 and 2 if the same)*
3. *Daily women's top three for the stage and for general classification*
4. *... and for general classification (combine 3 and 4 if the same)*
5. Then all together a fifth podium for:
 - *Yellow jersey for the leaders (daily but just for GC)*
 - *Red jersey for 40 to 50 (daily but just for GC)*
 - *Purple jersey for 50 to 60 (daily but just for GC)*
6. Top team each day for the GC
7. Hero of the day

Truth is that I've put this in my write up because I came 3rd in the 50-60 age group which is perhaps the best thing I've ever achieved in my sporting life. All I got was the satisfaction of knowing this and a finisher's medal, actually fine, but I did so want to be on the podium for one time in my life! Perhaps I should make up one of those tee-shirts, *"I came third in a big bike race and I had to give myself this bloody tee-shirt."*

In the Etape they have this all about right, so it surprised me that the Haute Route Organiser's choose this rather odd affair. To counter this I guess I can say I came 18th overall in the official individual listing, and some 300 started, but it is a spin. Actually I'm chuffed to bits to have come 31st in the real general classification.

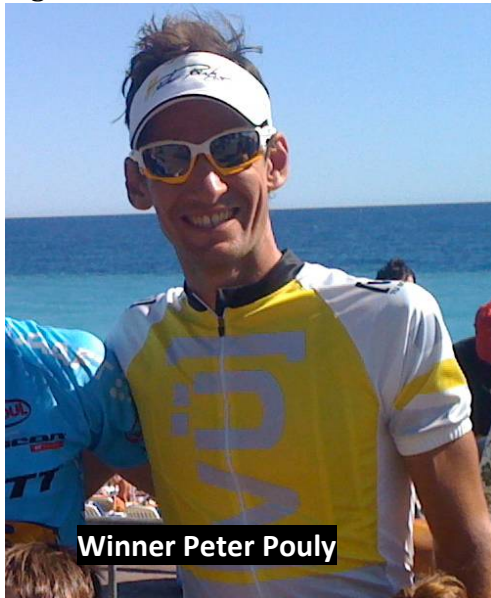
Note that there was no sprint finishes, so no green sprinter's jersey required, and the polka-dot jersey was here, always going to be the same as the yellow.

Cost

The entry was about £650 and the hotel package about the same, add the flights and some spending money for extra food (not really necessary, but nice) and I think a budget of £2000 would cover it very comfortably, cheaper if one shared a room (£1600 all in perhaps). To me this is utterly wonderful value, worth delaying that new car for or even a new bike. Come to think of it, sell the old car and bike and go do this next year. This was the best cycling thing I've done by far, worth every penny and some.

Is a race or a super sportive?

I can imagine some of the elite type racers looking at this with a sneer and condemn it as not a proper race as there are no qualifications needed to enter. Well jump in next year I say, but first look at the winning times, not too shabby so don't get too cocky. How many races have you done this year with over ten motorbikes buzzing around, two official cars, a bunch of neutral support vehicles, a handful of team cars following along, (semi)-professional teams and riders, a big digital timer at the end of each stage, automatic timing equipment, marshals on absolutely every junction, and everyone going hammer and tongs (well OK you've probably done quite a few of the latter). Moreover there was a prize giving podium ceremony everyday after the stage, yellow jerseys, and indeed a little 'village' making a lot of noise at the end of the route. There were nine members of the press following the race throughout, and the mayor and local dignitaries turned out to start the day and / or present the prizes. This was organised as an all out race, and that's what it was: One was only allowed



refreshment at the official stations, there was lots of tactics going on at the front, and everyone I spoke to was treating it as such, indeed most were racers. To emphasize the point I detected a bit of friction between the Velo-101 team, sponsored by Scott bikes, Peter Pouly's Team sponsored by clothing manufacture Vu, and the two American riders. Scott clearly wanted Michele Roux to win, a sub-60kg, 50+ year old who is rather famous in France among the cycling fraternity, as having such an old guy win sells bikes to old guys like me who tend to be able to afford the top end. Roux is a very impressive guy, Lord knows what he was

like when younger. To help him along he had a super-domestic, one Jean Broudier or some such name, and the two of them would do no work whatsoever until the steeper sections of the climbs, when Jean would attack with Roux on his wheel. No one could remember Roux ever being in front until the very end of the stages. This infuriated some of the riders, who had no such help and so they teamed up as best they could to go against the Velo-101 team. In the end it worked as Roux finished second to Pouly overall. I got all this from one of the American riders, so probably a one sided account. Anyway for the top 25 or so riders it was a cut and trust affair for sure.

At the other end of the scale it was as much a sportive, but in the Italian style whereby their 'Grandfondo's' are races for anyone over about 24. These are all out races at the front, often with substantial prize money, but at the back it's just about finishing. There was a pretty easy 15kph cut off pace (except for the time trail) and in the end about 40 folks abandoned at a rate of five to seven per day. I'd say of the 300 or so starters about half were racers and half were sportive riders. The vast majority of riders were in the B (30 to 40) age group. I'd guess

there were fifty in group C (over 50) and a little bit more in the A (18 to 30). Just to inspire there was one seventy-year old! There were only 11 women, but for the three leaders of this section it was a fierce competition.

I should say that this would be a great challenge for non-racers. The organisers were very good at making every finisher feel special and indeed finishing is no walk in the park even if one just aims to do that and no more. The lantern rouge group seemed to be enjoying themselves, but don't forget that they were in the saddle for far more hours than the folks at the front. In my mind this is extra tough and makes seven days one heck of a challenge.

Nice

Auron to Nice	140km	1600m (2800m descent)	Saint Martin – 273W	1hr 52min	2hr 7min (58 th)
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Now you see the big downhill neutralised bit before the timed section, well this turned out to be a big highlight. It was pretty cold at the start, but I vaguely heard the mayor say something about Stephen Roche doing the stage. Sure enough I'm riding along and a thick Irish accent says "Do you think you've

got the legs for today?" I then chat to the man for at least 5 minutes. Roche is one of my uber-heroes. I have to say this was a distinctly tubbier version. He hadn't been on the bike since June but was doing the trans-Alpine mountain bike race (not for sissy types) and needed to start getting in shape. Well I hope it's the 2012 race and not the one in a few weeks time. Anyhow I asked him what he really said when they took him away in an ambulance having collapsed at the top of some mountain having all but caught Pedro Delgado and thus won the Tour de France. Was it really "Tell my wife I won't be having sex with her tonight"? Unfortunately we got separated at the moment of his reply, but I think he said "No, it was tell my wife I'll still be good for sex tonight!" (In truth I didn't hear.)

Now looking at the stage profile I thought this should have had me whizzing up the field giving everyone the 'coo I'm faster than you' eye-ball. Unfortunately it was not steep (5%-6%) and has a massive tailwind, so I found that the balance had tipped in favour of the fat and the strong. I did go well up the climb and yet got passed by really quite a number of riders. On the way down I thought 'this is going to be an hours spanking down the hill, with everyone mentally saying 'scaredy cat' as they fly pass. Well it wasn't so bad, I did lose time, but not much as by day seven my descending was getting OK. In fact I got caught by some bare arse time trial types – big and mega-muscles. They steamed along. I think we did the last 10km at 35+mph, it was downhill with a tailwind. We caught and passed lots of folk, who then jumped on behind, so we finished in a big bunch, but some 15mins behind the leaders. It think this might have been the prettiest

scenery of the whole trip, but I never put my head up to confirm one way or the other. We was motoring baby and didn't lose much time in the grand scheme of things, so 58th was not so bad.

The last bit to Nice was neutralised and actually we had to wait for everyone to regroup for a police escort into Nice. This was a bit slow, but when we hit the Promenade des Anglais, which is the big main seaside road, all closed off with a sizeable crowd to cheer us in and all the traffic honking like crazed Inter Milan supporters, well then I got one of those BIG moments of happiness that I alluded to at the beginning of this work of literary importance. And my new mate Roche was there to present the prizes (he's the porky bloke on the far right).



Nice: The finish on Les Promenade des Anglais

Was it worth it?

Everything cycled	809km	17000m of ascent	Includes warm up, spins, hotel trip etc.	19hr 44min – the winner’s time	23hr 8min – a bit behind really, but I’m 53 and a micro-porky 69kg
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At the end of a book called ‘Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance’, the author Robert Pirsig explores value systems while travelling around the world on his motorbike. At the end, despite a formidable achievement from the mileage and seeing the world point of view, he ponders on whether it was all worthwhile. Well that’s his problem. I didn’t for a moment. The buzz I got on that last day was fan-bloody-tastic. When I’m breathing my last and images of my life flash before me, I’ll see myself on that first climb of the first stage and again in Nice at the finish and go ‘yeah cool’. Then expire happy that I’d done something absolutely ‘effing mega.

Yes, nurse I’ll take the medication now, basket weaving next, how nice.

Tony Purnell, September 2011