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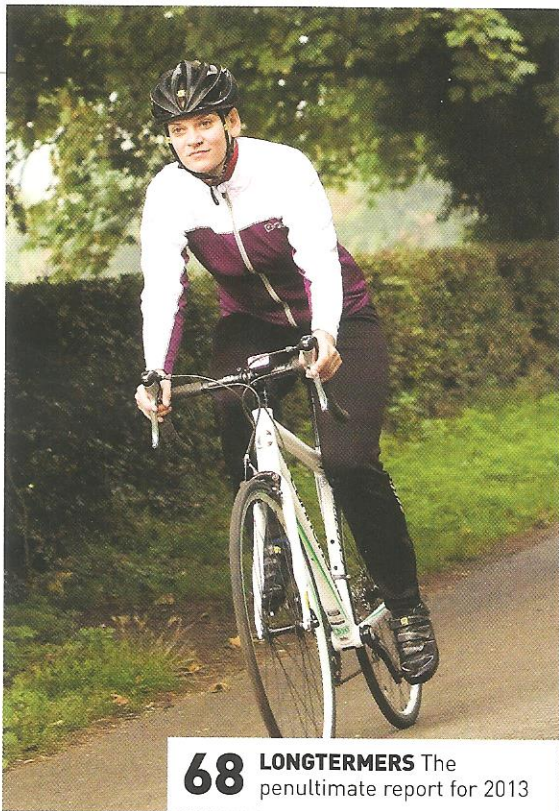
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CYCLING ACTIVE

For cyclists by cyclists

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Cycling Active is published by IPC Media Ltd, Leon House, 233 High Street, Croydon CR9 1HZ. Colour origination: CTT Limited, Units C/D, Sutherland House, Sutherland Road, London E17 4BU. Printing: Southern-print (Web Offset) Ltd, 17-21 Factory Road, Upton Industrial Estate, Poole, Dorset BH16 5SN. Tel: 01202 626300; fax: 01202 632403. **CONDITIONS OF SALE AND SUPPLY** This periodical is sold subject to the following conditions, namely that it shall not, without the written consent of the publishers first being given in text, resold, hired out or otherwise disposed of in a mutilated condition or price in excess of the recommended maximum price shown on the cover and that it shall not be lent, resold, hired or otherwise disposed of in a mutilated or any unauthorised cover by way of Trade or otherwise to or part of any publication or advertising, literary or pictorial matter whatsoever. © IPC Media Ltd. 2013 ISSN 2041-3858.

The 2013 US annual subscription price is \$92.99. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named Air Business Ltd, c/o Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Jamaica NY 11431. US Postmaster: Send address changes to Cycling Active, Air Business Ltd, c/o Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Subscription records are maintained at IPC Media, Blue Fin Building, 110 Southway Street, London, SE1 0SU, England. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.

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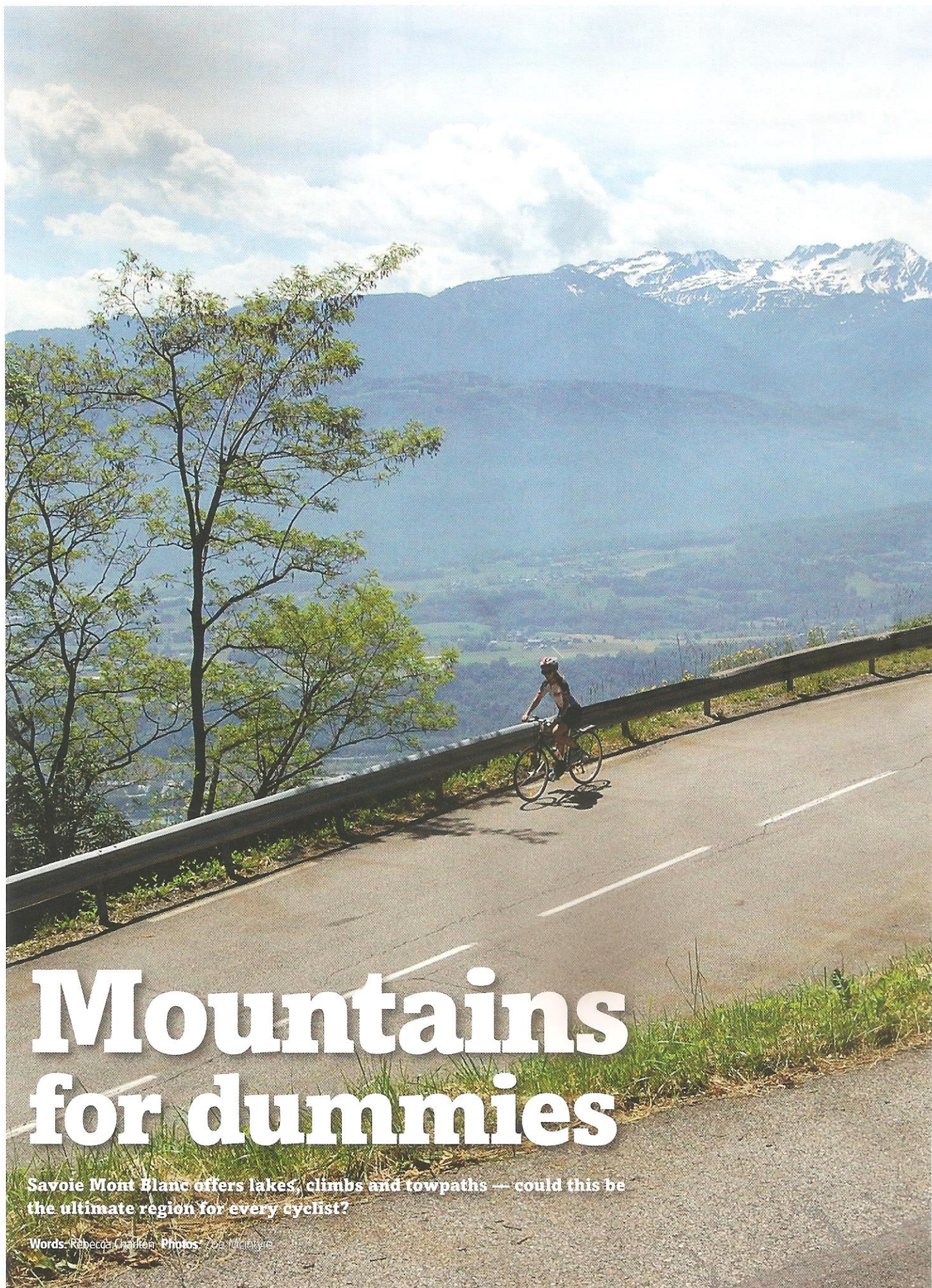
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Mountains for dummies

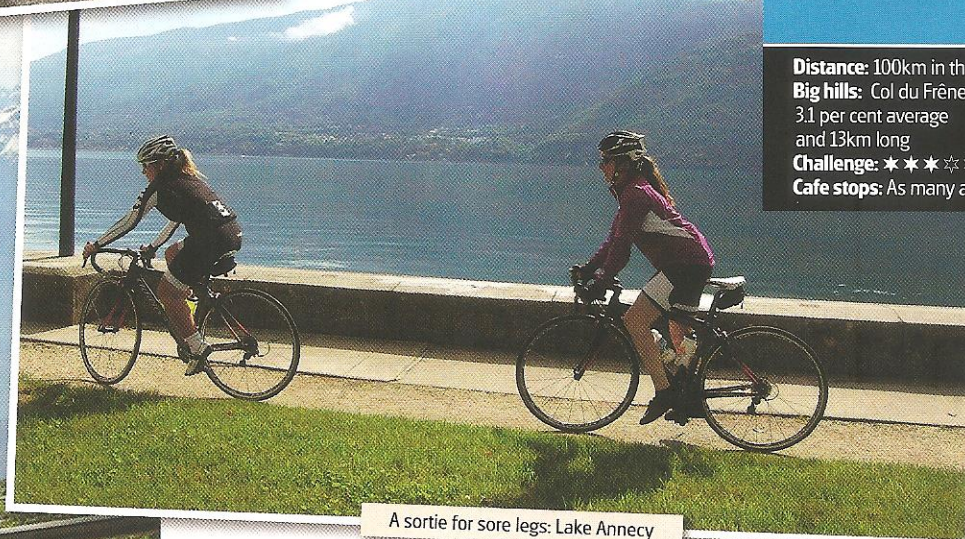
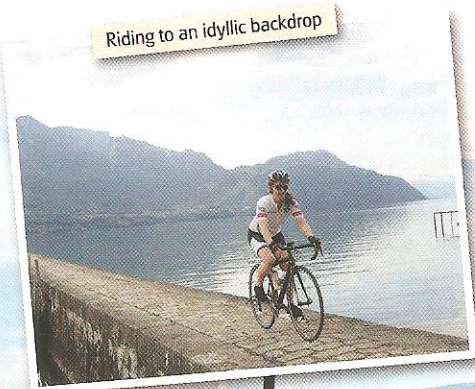
Savoie Mont Blanc offers lakes, climbs and towpaths — could this be the ultimate region for every cyclist?

Words: Rebecca Charlton Photos: Zoe McIntyre

HEADS UP

A three-day, fully supported guided trip to the Savoie Mont Blanc region taking on the Col du Frêne during the tour

Riding to an idyllic backdrop



A sortie for sore legs: Lake Annecy

Distance: 100km in three days

Big hills: Col du Frêne, 3.1 per cent average and 13km long

Challenge: ★★☆☆☆

Cafe stops: As many as you want!

Just as the For Dummies series has made a wealth of topics accessible and stress free for the less computer savvy among us, I suppose the aim of my trip to the Savoie Mont Blanc region was to see if, contrary to popular belief, scaling an Alpine climb could in fact be a cinch.

When tour guide company Cyclomundo invited me out to the Alps, I had a minor panic over whether I'd done enough training to get through the itinerary. To me, hitting this mountainous destination could surely only lead to one thing: pain, suffering, steep gradients and more pain. I was assured this wouldn't be the case and that anyone could tackle these slopes with the right approach.

Cyclomundo is a travel centre catering for trips to France, Italy, Spain, or Switzerland, offering guided and self-guided cycling tours for riders of all levels and it was the latter that drew my attention. Could all levels really manage this sort of a trip? I still couldn't shake the idea that cols were for super-skinny mountain goats so I was going to take some convincing.

Press gang

Arriving at Geneva Airport which, as far as airports go is a great haunt, especially the sun-trap terrace, I met the other journalists who I would be spending the trip with. Greg from the *Express*, Phil from the *Sun*, another cycling writer called Rebecca and Zoe of *France* magazine.

Far from being a group of egos, the chat soon turned to the fact that I

looked like a 'proper cyclist' and would they all be able to keep up with me. This made me laugh and it was apparent we were all here to check out the region, sample local gallettes (pancakey crêpes) and head out for some sociable spins in the sun. I could tell everyone was pretty fit, though, so I had an eye out for competitive streaks hidden beneath poker faces.

We met our tour guide and founder of Cyclomundo, Bruno, and set off for a ride to acclimatise in the 30°C heat.

The next morning our first job was to tackle the Col du Frêne: 13.2km of climbing with sections of 6.5 per cent, so you can guess the main topic of conversation at dinner the night before. I'd done a fair bit of mountain riding before but poor Zoe's eyes filled with fear as Bruno casually dropped into conversation that we would most likely be climbing for an hour. She explained that she hadn't ridden a bike since she was a child and if this was one big stitch-up she wouldn't be impressed.

The good news was that we would cycle directly to the foot of the col, have a breather and take it on first thing in the morning. Awaiting us after the descent would be a secret garden picnic of which the finer details were being kept discreet to keep us focused.

So basically, to allow us the best chance of scaling the mountain, every other worry was removed. All we needed to focus on was riding to the top, where the support vehicle would meet us with encouragement, snacks and drinks.

Having all the stresses removed is not to be underestimated when you're

The vistas alone make the Col du Frêne premium parcours

My first col...

Zoe McIntyre, France Magazine



"Although I consider myself fairly fit, my cycling experience was pretty much nil, so I was somewhat unprepared for what awaited me on the Col du Frêne — it was steep! Although it was pretty hard going, I took the climb slowly at my own pace and managed to reach the summit not too long after the rest of the group. Once the initial leg aching had worn off, I must admit I did feel quite triumphant."

Greg Christinson, Scottish Sunday Express

"After an easy start — tucking in behind my fellow riders — and not knowing what lay ahead, I was confident I would enjoy a leisurely pedal up the Col du Frêne."

"But as the road continued to wind upwards and with the sweltering morning sun beating down, I soon realised how tough the climb was going to be. Before long I had lost sight of my friends and struggled to prevent both my morale and energy plummeting. As tempting as it was to jump in the support vehicle, I carried on."

"And I'm glad I did — what an exhilarating feeling, turning the final corner, seeing my fellow cyclists basking in the heat and realising I had made it to the top. I certainly felt as if I'd earned my picnic lunch!"

"I'd recommend the cycle to anyone."

Rebecca Miles, freelance writer



"For the first third of the climb I was really uncertain that I'd be able to make it to the top, but then something — perhaps a combination of remembering to take it easy and to look at the incredible views — gave me energy and I started to enjoy it. The feeling of elation at the top was well worth the climb and I wanted to do it all over again!"



taking on a big challenge, like your first mountain climb. Our bikes were provided, meaning no worries about dragging heavy luggage from the airport. And at the end of each day in the saddle, our bags were loaded into the support van for us and taken to the hotel along with us and our tired legs.

The big one

Zoe was on a hybrid, with the rest of us on road bikes and so we agreed we'd all take it at our own pace and regroup at the top. Easier said than done. A knowing glance between me and Rebecca told us we both wanted to take on the boys. This was going to get competitive.

So she and I sat in the slipstream of Bruno, Phil and Greg but by the second switchback it was apparent three of us were out of our comfort zone while guide Bruno and dark horse Phil were chatting away happily. I said to Greg as we dropped back, "You know we're going to be going up for the best part of another hour, right?" At which point we conceded and decided to get sensible and ease back to a steadier pace.

But then, Rebecca and I realised we were pretty fairly matched and the edging up of the pace started again. Perhaps both of us had done more training than we'd let on to the other.

Turn after turn, we kept the gas on. We could see the front runners up ahead and while we knew we weren't going to catch them we were not going to let up and admit defeat. The sun beamed on our backs and the tension was building. The scenery was beautiful, the weather perfect and the climb all consuming.

As some bronzed, cycling Adonis passed I yelled 'how much longer!?' to which came the music to my ears that we had only a kilometre to go. That was it, the race was on, and with 200m to go Rebecca shot me a look, jumped out of the saddle and assumed sprint mode, I responded and it ended in a lunge to the line. We were so elated at reaching the summit, and seeing Bruno and Phil who had barely broken into a sweat, that we couldn't stop hugging, victory saluting and congratulating each other.

We'd done it, and for the others, bar Bruno, it was their first ever col.

Everyone made it to the top and although Zoe assured us she would speak to us again after lunch, she was questioning our loyalty at the summit.

We enjoyed a fantastic descent, the wind in our hair and our reward for the hard work that preceded.

What happened next wasn't something I would have ever associated with cycling. We rode in through the gates of the most spectacular, hidden grounds of Château des Allues where a champagne picnic awaited us. A beautifully arranged table sparkled in the sun. I decided this was the life for me, it was like a scene from the film *Chocolat* and no expense was spared.

We laughed the afternoon away in a slight haze of fine wine and delicious home-cooked food.

We decided after all this to pedal back to the hotel, passing up the offer of a ride in the van. What we forgot was the fact that we had coasted down a fair few hills to get to the start of our ride and it was quite a climb back up to where we started. This, more than anything, was pure comedy and after deciding we were a bit tipsy (the roads were secluded and we were cautious, honest) Zoe and I took a rather sedate pace back.

The flat finale

After the mountain, Bruno wanted to show us that there are plenty of flat roads to be found in this area of France so we spent our final day at Lake Annecy pedalling around the water on the cycle path.

This was a real contrast from the previous day in the saddle and there wasn't so much as a lump or bump. We battled a fair few tourists taking the sights in on a leisurely holiday weekend but it was a change of pace and if this kind of riding floats your boat you'll definitely enjoy Annecy.

The great part of this trip is that Cyclomundo caters for your budget, number of riders and specific requirements. You can do things more independently than we did and still benefit from the bike transfers. These tailor-made trips allow you to focus on your riding and get the most from the trip, whatever your desires.



The operator

Cyclomundo

The France-based official tour operator for the Etape du Tour, the Marmotte sportive, and the Maratona, provides a range of trips. To cycle a similar itinerary to ours, with a tailor-made tour including accommodation, visit www.cyclomundo.com. Options available for self-guided for smaller budgets. Cyclomundo SARL La Chatelaine, 18 rue Rene Cassin, 74240 Gaillard, Tel: +33 450 872109

The hotel

La Tour De Pacoret <http://www.hotel-pacoret-savoie.com>, Albertville Grésy Sur Isère — 73460, Frontenex Tel: +33 (0)4 79 37 91 59

The region

For more info on cycling in the Savoie Mont Blanc region, visit: www.savoie-mont-blanc.com.

Eat

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