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There's no place like Provence

The new issue of Cycling Plus [192] hits the shops on Thursday (21 December), bagged up with a free 36 page Cycle Traveller supplement that's packed with stunning rides to suit all budgets.

Inside you'll see Rob Lampard following the smell of grapes as he takes a ride in Provence for a week. Rob spent his time with the French company Cyclomundo, which is run by a chap called Bruno, who speaks perfect English and who also knows France (particularly Provence) extremely well.

Whatever your level of experience, you can go on guided or self guided tours with Cyclomundo depending on your preference; the latter means that the routes for each day are worked out and mapped for you but you can go out to ride on your own.

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Cyclomundo are the France-based Official Tour Operator for the Tour de France, the Etape du Tour, and the Etape de Legende. If you fancy getting out to do some biking in France this year, call Cyclomundo on 0033 450 872 109 or check out cyclomundo.com



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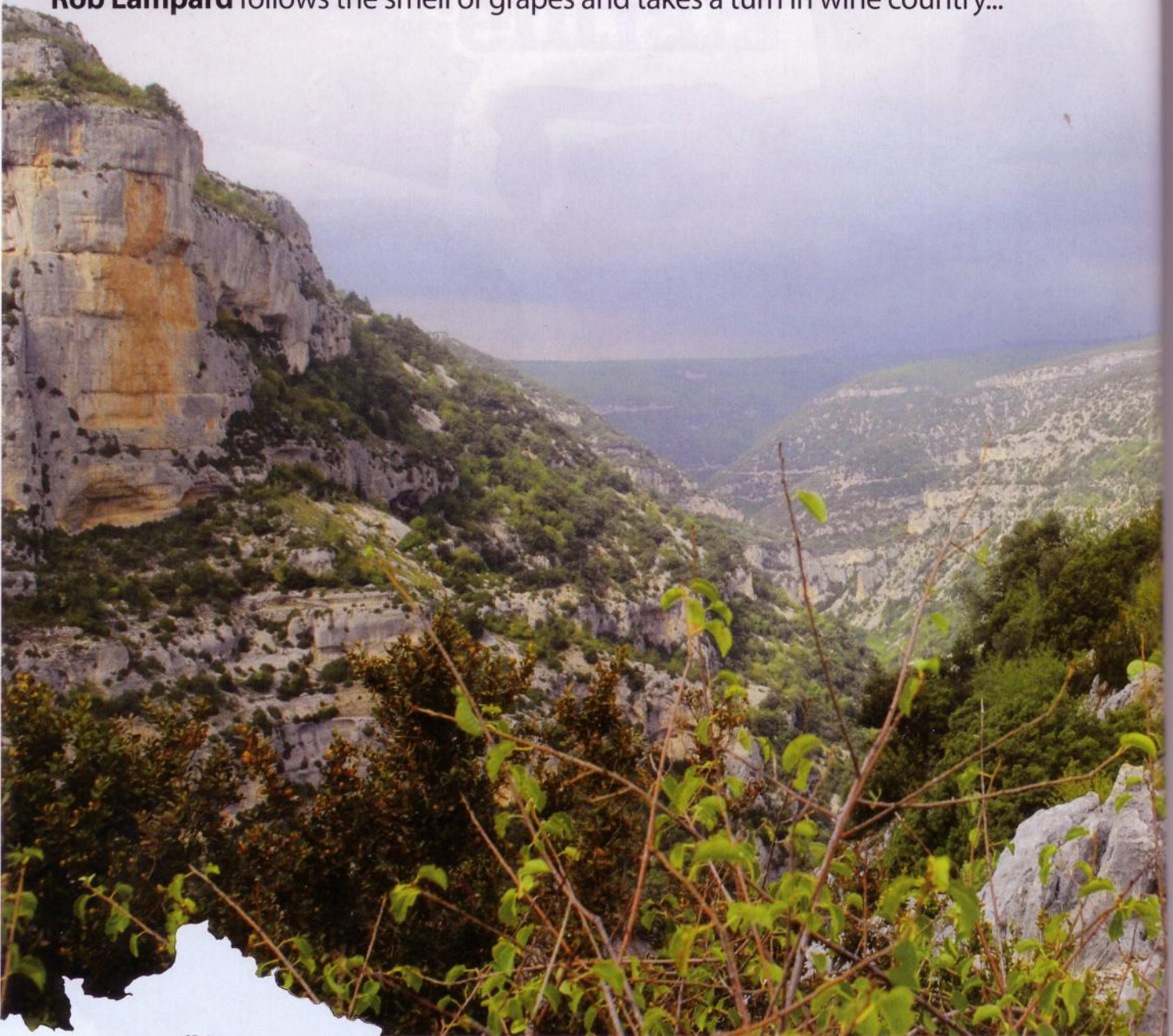
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A week in Provence

Rob Lampard follows the smell of grapes and takes a turn in wine country...



While taking a tow from a trailer carrying a load of grapes, I tried to work out how many bottles of the lovely red stuff would come from this particular harvest. One, two, three hundred bottles, I mused. I was lost in wine heaven and started to wobble slightly, either due to the idea of being surrounded by all this potential alcohol (or Shloer to the under 18s) or by the intoxicating aroma of the freshly picked grapes.

The tractor I had been following turned off towards the winery (*entreprise vinicole*), but in late September the smell of freshly picked grapes fills the air of Provence wherever you go.

Having such a liking for the finished product I thought it only right that I helped in the process and a few miles down the road I climbed off at a vineyard to offer my services. The genial estate owner duly lent me a pair of clippers and off I went.

The Gorges de la Nesque is stunning and a fabulous ride



A leisurely ride through Menerbes



However, after only a few minutes of this back breaking work I sheepishly handed back the clippers to a look of Gallic despair. Had I stayed for the day I would have been expected to collect around 300kg of the little wine producing nuggets! Chapeau to all the thousands of grape pickers working in Provence...

Toute de France

Fortunately, I had not come here to pick grapes, but to ride my bike and

find out why Provence is so perennially popular with cyclists from around the world. Firstly, La Provence is not only one of the most beautiful regions in France but that it captures so much of what people imagine to be 'French'. In summer it has fields of sunflowers or lavender alongside endless vineyards and olive groves, all of which inspired artists such as Cezanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh. Apart from the landscape, one of

the main attractions for the impressionist artists was the sunshine. For most of the year Provence is bathed in the stuff and there are only a couple of months when you will need to wear anything more than arm warmers. The only meteorological downside to this area is the infamous Mistral wind, which can on occasion make cycling impossible. The upside of the mischievous Mistral is that it blows away all the clouds, leaving the region with almost permanent blue skies.

If the scenery and climate aren't enough to coax you to visit here then the food (and wine) will certainly do the trick.

Doing Provence

The region is big and its boundaries are defined by the Alps to the east, the Mediterranean to the south, the Rhone to the west and, to the north, 'where the olive trees stop growing.' But with only a week to 'do Provence' most of the riding was done in the area of Vaucluse which is not only considered the most picturesque part of the region but also offers some of the best riding, including the legendary Mont Ventoux.

I met up with my riding companions (a top bunch) and we set off from Avignon easing into the relaxed atmosphere with a gentle meander through the vineyards surrounding the city, including a visit to Chateauneuf-du-Pape, which produces some of the most prestigious wines in France. Heading back into Avignon you pass by the famous Pont St-Benezet (Le Pont d'Avignon), which originally had 22 arches but, due to a storm in 1668, now has only four (French builders are notoriously slow!) The medieval walled city of Avignon is a great place to explore and if you

get lost in the narrow back streets you simply follow the wall to get back to where you started.

Eating al fresco is the thing to do in this medieval city and you can get a really good three course feast for around 10 quid.

Cowboy country

The rocky landscape dotted with olive groves, the inspiration of so many artists, provided really good riding on quiet roads as we headed towards Les Baux de Provence. Lunch at Saint-Remy de Provence was a relaxing affair despite the town being known for housing the asylum in which Vincent Van Gogh spent his final year.

However, it was just down the road in Arles where the one-eared genius spent most of his time painting. Arles is also famous for its Roman amphitheatre which, rather unusually for France, regularly holds bullfights (although the bulls are rarely killed). While in Arles I was asked by an American tourist, 'How do I get to the amphitheatre.' I replied, 'Become a Christian,' although I think the joke was perhaps a little too Pythonesque...

Arles is also the gateway to the Camargue where the wild black bulls are herded by Les Gardiens (Camargue cowboys). The Camargue is a huge wetland created by the Rhone delta and is a bird spotter's paradise. While it is indeed beautiful, the cycling is completely flat and tends to get a bit boring. But far from mundane is the Val d'Enfer (Valley of Hell) which you pass through to get to Les Baux de Provence. The views from the top of the valley across to the ancient hill top fortress at Les Baux were breathtaking and this type of barren, rocky landscape will be familiar to anyone who has seen the fabulous films *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*.

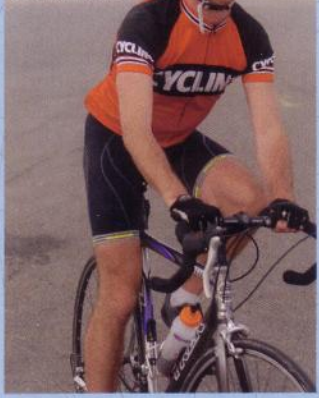
The Giant of Provence

For the average tourist, Mont Ventoux is simply a geographical anomaly – a huge, extinct volcano which, at 1909 meters above sea level, dominates the surrounding countryside. To the cycling fan it is a place of magic, myth and tragedy. To the professional cyclist it is the most feared climb of the Tour de France. It was described by the French journalist Antoine Blondin when he wrote: 'There are few happy memories of this sorcerer's cauldron. We have seen riders reduced to madness... falling men, tongues hanging out, selling their soul for a drop of water, a little shade.' Ventoux's most documented casualty was British rider Tom Simpson, who died on July 13 1967 after collapsing close to the finish. There now stands a memorial. Although Mont Ventoux is legendary in Tour history it has been climbed only 13 times. Le Tour has finished on the top just seven times, with the finish more usually in Avignon. It was first in the Tour in 1951 and last in 2002.

Often called the Giant of Provence, Mont Ventoux has seen some epic battles. Perhaps the most exciting in recent history was that between Lance Armstrong and Marco Pantani in 2000. Pantani, who died in 2004, was one of cycling's greatest natural climbers but his talent on this day was matched by the tenacity of the American. Armstrong eased off metres before the finish line and Pantani won the stage, with the Texan saying later that he did it as 'tribute' to the Italian. Pantani responded by saying this was disrespectful to his skills and Armstrong parried by nicknaming Pantani, 'Elefantino', in reference to his ears.

Armstrong recorded the fastest ascent in 50 minutes, while chasing Richard Virenque in 2002. But the most impressive win over the Ventoux was that of Eros Poli; At 6' 4" and built like a boxer, the Italian was a most surprised winner in Carpentras. These legendary feats on this mythical climb have led many amateur riders to tackle this giant, sometimes taking all day to do it, but leaving with a justifiable sense of achievement.

Rob reaches the top of Ventoux with a mixture of pain, relief and elation



Travelling through Les Gorges de la Nesque



Clever Romans

Much of the history of Provence comes courtesy of the Romans and while I was here to ride, not to be a tourist, I couldn't pass up the chance to see the extraordinary Pont du Gard. The three tiered aqueduct, which was built before Christians were invented, is still in excellent condition and puts many modern buildings architecturally to shame. When in use it daily carried 44 million gallons of water across the Gardon river to supply the Roman city of Nemausus (Nimes). 'Smashing people the Romans,' I muttered to myself as we rode off. The steady riding, along undulating roads through this rural idyll was perfect in the warm sunshine of a September afternoon but it was now time for lunch. The problem around here is that when you want to have lunch you have to climb up to get it as just about every town or village is built on a hill. Uzès is no exception and the climb took us to a town that could have been plucked straight out of Tuscany. The dappled light played in the fountain in the tree-flanked square overlooked by the tall, round

church tower. For much of the remaining ride we were in the shadow of Mont Ventoux which, although a long way off, dominates these parts and was to be tackled the next day. As we arrived at the hotel in Orange, the Giant of Provence looked even bigger and, for me, the future wasn't looking bright.

Monster mount

'That was the worst day of my life,' were apparently my first words after reaching the top of Mont Ventoux, a good hour after my two riding companions, Bruno and Scott (everyone else had, wisely, decided to give it a miss). You have a pretty good idea at the bottom of this monster climb that it is going to be steep, because of the smell of clutch fluid from the cars going down as you head up out of Bedoin. What you aren't prepared for, however, is the fact that for the next 22km there is not a single stretch of flat road (or hairpin) on which to recover as you

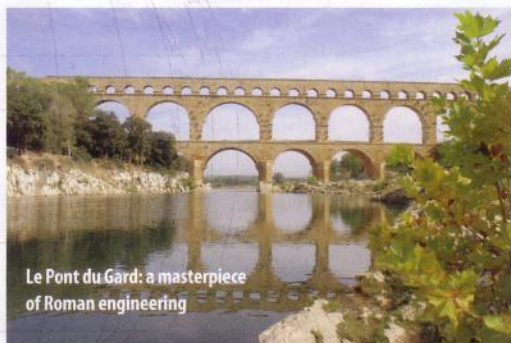
climb 1610 metres at an average gradient of 7.6%. It all started quite pleasantly as the road headed into the trees on the lower slopes, but it was not long before I was searching for the granny ring, after which time I kept looking down to see if there was any chance of adding a great-granny ring. The wide, sweeping bend at the Chalet Reynard café is the only place that offers any chance of recovery as the road heads out of the trees and into the lunar landscape for which this climb is so well known, and feared.

The steep, final six kilometres to the top were, fortunately, done in the cooling mist and not the merciless July sun faced by riders of the Tour de France. Shortly before reaching the top of Mont Ventoux you pass the memorial to Tom Simpson, and any cynical views I might have held regarding his drug-induced death were put very much into perspective at this point.

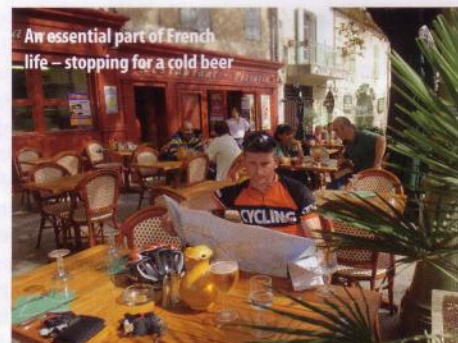
The plus side to riding up this horrible climb was the super fast descent, on perfectly smooth roads,



Top travel tip...
Stop for a wine tasting session (dégustation) not grape picking...



Le Pont du Gard: a masterpiece of Roman engineering



An essential part of French life – stopping for a cold beer



On the lower slopes of Mont Ventoux the signs tell of the impending challenge ahead

Approaching the summit is the memorial to British biking legend Tom Simpson



and the prospect of some more Provençal cuisine in yet another excellent hotel.

If you don't have a point to prove in becoming a member of the 'Ventoux club' then there are much easier ways of doing it than going from Bedoin, which is the hardest route, used when the Tour de France pays its rare visits. Slightly easier is the route from Malaucene which involves 1570m of climbing over 21km. The most pleasant way to tackle the Ventoux is from Sault, to the east, which climbs 1220m over 26km, giving an average gradient of 4.4%. Whichever way you choose to ascend you will be willed on by shouts of 'courage' by everyone you pass. One person who would have received more than his fair share of encouragement was amateur rider, Jean-Pascal Roux, who this year took the record by riding up Mont Ventoux eleven times in 24 hours, all from the difficult Bedoin side. Nutter!

Nesque quick

After a brief tasting at a wine cave in Bedoin (and to see how my paltry contribution to viticulture was doing) it was off for another day of

riding to discover some more of Provence's hidden gems. The first find of the day was along the narrow road following the steep-sided Gorges de la Nesque. The gradual 15km climb was covered much faster than the previous day's ascending and afforded great views all the way up the gorge as the road weaved through tunnels

Col de Murs, with the descent taking you into the Luberon National Park. The Luberon hills loom up across the broad valley, which in summer is a purple and yellow patchwork of lavender and sunflowers. Set amidst this

'You have a good idea that this climb is going to be steep, because of the smell of clutch fluid from the cars going down'

cut into the rock.

As we approached the spectacular viewpoint at the head of the valley, it occurred to me that we had not passed a single car on the way up. Parfait! To guarantee seeing no cars you can mountain bike along the bottom of the gorge which is part of the hundreds of miles of trails in the area.

Lunch at the beautiful hill top village of Venasque was followed by the relatively easy climb of the

stunning scene is the bright red town of Roussillon, famous for its mineral harvest of ochre.

The final stop on our tour of the region was the town of Gordes, perhaps the most famous of Provence's hill top settlements whose higgledy-piggledy collection of old houses cover the rock face entirely.

All in all, a wonderful place to wander on a bicycle, and not too far from our shores. ■

The lowdown on Provence

What is it?

Provence is part of the administrative region of Provence-Alpes-Cote-d'Azur. The traditional region of Provence takes in the departements of Vaucluse, Var and Bouches-du-Rhone as well as parts of Alpes-de-Haute-Provence and Alpes-Maritimes.

Take your pick

Although there are hundreds of varieties of wine in this region, the best Provençal wines to try are: Cassis, Bandol and Palette, Coteaux d'Aix-en-Provence, Coteaux Varois, Coteaux des Baux, Côtes de Lubéron, Côtes de Provence, Côtes-du-Rhône, Gigondas, Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The traditional Provençal apéritif is Pastis, a licorice-flavoured liquor made from the fruit of the herb anise (similar to the Greek ouzo); it is taken with water which turns it a cloudy white.

Truffle treats

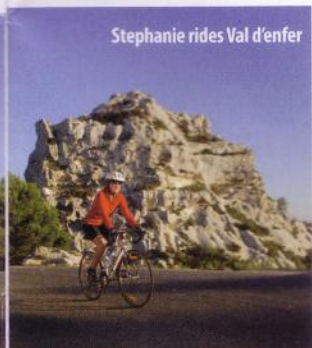
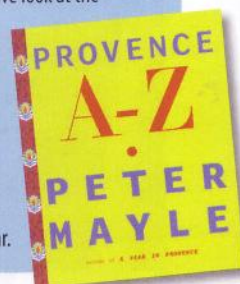
If you see a man with a pig on a lead and a sack over his shoulder, he is probably searching for truffles, or black diamonds as they are known hereabouts. Provence is the world's truffle capital and they are big business; it has been known for the truffle hunter (or rabassier) to dispense with the pig (or dog) and get down on all fours to sniff out the valuable product himself. It might seem a somewhat extreme way to get your hands on an underground fungus, but a single truffle was recently sold to an American restaurateur for \$41,000. Needless to say, a successful truffer is a great guy to be around.

Corking display

When it comes to places of esoteric interest, we have the British Lawnmower Museum at Southport in Lancashire, while the French have the Corkscrew Museum (Musée du Tire-Bouchon) at Menerbes in Provence. The Domaine de la Citadelle has over 1000 of the spiraled wonders dating from the mid 17th century to the present day. It is worth noting, however, that the corkscrew is an English invention based on the tool used to extract bullets from a wound. Now you know.

Be prepared

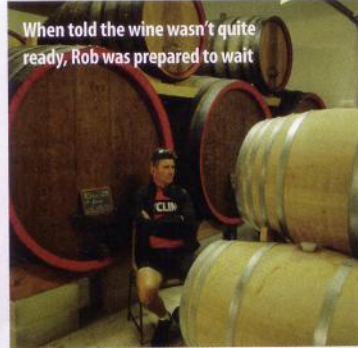
To become a master of the wit, wisdom and trivia of Provençal life, read *Provence A-Z* by Peter Mayle (published by Profile Books, www.profilebooks.com). The book does indeed run from A through to Z but the anecdotes are completely random. It's more of an alternative look at the region than a guidebook. While it won't teach you everything there is to know, the tales from this sun-drenched land will make the British winter easier to bear.



Stephanie rides Val d'enfer



Sur le Pont d'Avignon



When told the wine wasn't quite ready, Rob was prepared to wait