

Raid Pyrénéan

by Gerry Goldsmith

In October 2006, I set off to cycle on my own from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean via the main cols of the Pyrénées on a well-established French route known as the 'Raid Pyrénéan'. At 'Randonneur' pace, the aim is to finish 720km and 18 cols within 100 hours. However there is also a 'Touriste' version (790km and 28 cols, within 10 days) which is longer, takes quieter roads and crosses several very remote cols as well as the well-known cols. John Richardson had cycled most of this route with a Rucksack Club group and he provided me with inspiration, information and encouragement.

For various reasons I set off in mid-October, with maps and route information but no firm plans about where I would stay each night. The route starts at Hendaye (on the Atlantic coast near the Spanish border) and finishes at Cerbère on the Mediterranean coast. I had ten days, plus two extra days contingency in case of bad weather or mechanical problem. Weather in October can be poor, and if things got really bad I was prepared to divert my route or even pack-in and catch a train. I did not book hotels; this gave flexibility of route and stops. Flights were booked to Biarritz and home from Perpignan.



St-Jean-de-Luz, Atlantic coast.

All Photos by Gerry Goldsmith unless stated

10th October: Biarritz to St-Jean-de-Luz (20km)

Biarritz has a very small airport which is very calm after the chaos of queuing for security checks at Stansted. As I unwrap my bike from its CTC plastic bag, an airport worker chats about cycling – how civilised! A short ride down the coast road takes me to St-Jean-de-Luz, where I stop as darkness approaches (I carried lights but preferred not to cycle in the dark). A local asks where I'm going on my bike, and replies 'oh I've done the Raid myself, though not carrying my luggage'. The lady at the nearby hotel is used to cyclists doing the traverse; however she assumes I want a room for two, and is surprised that there's no husband or friend waiting outside with the bikes. (This happened frequently – a solo woman tackling the route was considered very unusual. Nonetheless, everyone was friendly and helpful; no doubt my fluent French helped but I'm sure any cyclist is warmly welcomed.)

St-Jean-de-Luz is a pleasant seaside town and fishing port, quiet outside the holiday season. An evening stroll on the beach and a paddle in the Atlantic precedes a cheap pizza in a convivial restaurant. I feel very relaxed, but some preparation on the map is required for next day, and ominously a storm is brewing.

11th October: Hendaye and St-Jean-Pied-de-Port (92km)

Last night's storm has blown out and the weather looks OK. Being October it's still dark when my alarm rings at 8am, so I'm in no hurry. Having decided I ought to go south to Hendaye where the route really starts, I cycle along the coast road. Although wide and well-surfaced this is not busy. In Hendaye, gazing at the almost deserted beach, I meet another chap who has cycled the route.

Now at the 'real' start, I have to retrace to St-Jean-de-Luz before heading inland along a quiet road by the river, to Ascain and a boulangerie for necessary food supplies. Over the Col de St-Ignace (167m) and Col de Pinodiéta (176m) then to touch the Spanish border at Dancharia; nothing to see here except an old customs shed and unpronounceable Basque place-names on the signposts.

Early afternoon, a café at Espelette provides a welcome stop, but the staff are rapidly stacking all the chairs and tables on the terrace, pointing to the darkening sky above. Soon the storm erupts and I shelter inside the café. Any hopes of it calming down are dashed, and after an hour and a half I decide to continue despite the torrential rain (the staff looked at me as if I was crazy). Fortunately this first day is not in the mountains, where it's snowing. I'm drenched but only feel cold when I stop to deal with a puncture, a few kilometres short of my destination. Finally, arriving at



Left – Laruns on 13th October.



Right – A typical kilometre sign. (it says ‘the cols used by the Tour de France...’)



Left – Col d'aspin. Photo taken by a passing cyclist mentioned on 14th October.



Right – Quiet roads and colourful woods on the way to Col de Marmare.

St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, I spot a person wearing a sackcloth cape and carrying a staff; not just my imagination – this is a pilgrim town on the route to Santiago de Compostella. I find a hotel, the staff kindly wheel my dripping bike into a store-room and a hot shower warms me up. Fortunately everything inside my panniers is dry – Ortlieb are expensive, but worth every penny. That evening the waiter puts a whole tureen of soup in front of me and tells me to finish it all – he had seen me arrive wet and bedraggled.

12th October: To Arette (77km)

The hotel patron informs me the weather will be good today, but I am dubious. I am right; at the start of the climb the drizzle starts and clouds envelop me just like the Peak District on a wet day. Visibility is so poor I see nothing at the Col d'Haltza (782m) nor the Col de Burdincurutcheta (1,135m), and I only realise I'm at the summit when I start descending. It's not far down to a lake before climbing again to the next col, but because I'm wet I'm freezing. Amazingly, a tiny café by the lake is open; to cater for the local forestry workers. Chocolat très chaud is quickly delivered and a heater turned on for my benefit. It is hard to leave such comfort. The road then winds up steadily through forests to Chalets d'Iraty and Col Bagargui (1,327m); I am still in the cloud so no views. A long, cold descent follows and I'm in need of warming up again; a hotel in Larrau kindly provide soup, and I continue my journey.

Once over today's big cols, the cloud disappears and the weather improves slowly. A pleasant rolling route takes me to the small village of Arette, where I hope the hotel will be open; if not I may have to divert from the route to a town. Fortunately, the Hôtel de l'Ours is open, and they are very friendly. There are cycling pictures on the wall (the owner was a professional cyclist in his youth) and a huge stuffed bear in reception. Bears have been reintroduced to that area of the Pyrénées, though I never met one. Hôtel de l'Ours is not serving dinner (being October I am the only guest) and the local restaurant owners are on holiday; so I buy 'pique-nique' at the local shop and the hotel provides me with plate and cutlery.

13th October: to Arrens-Marsous (80km)

A cold, sunny morning greets me and makes me feel much better; I wasn't looking forward to another wet day. There is frost in the valley and the mountains look beautiful. At Escot I stop to look at the large sign announcing the Col de Marie Blanque (1,035m) and showing a daunting profile of the climb. Easy at first, it steepens considerably for the last 4km, and painted on the road I see 'ici commence l'enfer' (hell starts here) along

with famous Tour de France names. The col is rather an anti-climax, not very interesting, but I take a picture of my bike beside the summit sign, as I do on every col just to prove I was there. A fast descent through trees and down a long valley takes me to Laruns, fortunately just before the shop closes. Laruns is a pleasant small town in a superb setting, and I picnic in the sun by the fountain.

The cols used by the Tour de France and the Vuelta often have signs telling you the altitude and the average gradient of the next kilometre. Depending on how you're feeling at the time, the sign is encouraging ('good – only 5 km to go and only 8%') or discouraging ('oh no – 13%').

From Laruns a good road and steady gradient leads to Eaux-Bonnes, a spa town smelling of sulphur. The climb to Col d'Aubisque (1,709m) is very quiet. It's hot, I have little water left and the part-way ski station is deserted. Fortunately a local cyclist races up behind me; just a little training run after doing a race yesterday he explained, in a local dialect that was hard to understand. He fills his bottle at a water tap which I'd not noticed and I follow suit. I enjoy the rest of this climb, the views are spectacular; sun, clear blue sky and fresh snow on the mountains. At the top I meet a few motorists and the café is open so I sit for a while admiring the views. Although it's not late, the October sun is low and the descent is very cold on the shaded side of the mountain. Climbing the Col du Soulor (1,474m) warms me up for a while before the final descent into Arrens-Marsous, a small village. I consider continuing to Argelès-Gazost, a town just off my route, but I spot a gîte which is open just for the weekend. I'm allocated a dormitory all to myself; next door there is a group of six walkers. The gîte provides a good meal; first course is the local soup 'garbure' which apparently was the daily sustenance of Gascon peasantry. It's a substantial soup full of vegetables, just the job for a hungry cyclist or walker.

14th October: to Arreau and Sarrancolin (101km)

Another cold start, but the first climb from the village soon warms me up. The Col des Bordères (1,156m) is rather insignificant, but has the advantage of avoiding the main roads around Argelès-Gazost. A market in Pierrefitte Nestalas provides provisions, and the gradual ascent up the Gorge de Luz to Luz-St-Sauveur seems easy. This is the start of the famous climb to the Col du Tourmalet (2,114m). My luck is in; it is a beautiful sunny day with very little traffic and not too hot. I take my time on the long climb, with frequent photo stops and a drink at a café part-way. (Unfortunately this café was destroyed by fire the following year). At the top of the Col du Tourmalet, a kind couple take a photo of me (below the huge statue of a cyclist) to record my achievement, and I quickly don several layers of

clothing for the descent. I pass the ugly ski resort of La Mongie and continue down to Ste-Marie-de-Campan, where I resist the urge to go in the café, having decided there is just enough time to go over the Col d'Aspin (1,489m).

This climb is pleasant, the sun highlighting the deep autumn colours of the trees. On top, the view back to the Col du Tourmalet is impressive (was I really that high up?). Not much time to linger however; the sun is now low and it's getting very cold. A local cyclist offers to show me the hotels in Arreau and waits for me at the bottom of the descent. We are surprised to find both hotels closed, and the only alternative is Sarrancolin (7km in the wrong direction). It's almost dark but, thank goodness, the hotel is open; it's rather seedy but friendly. No food there, but fortunately I find a nearby restaurant; I am suddenly ravenous.

15th October: to Bossòst (64km)

I cycle back to Arreau to start the ascent of the Col du Peyresourde (1,569m). The shaded valley glistens with frost and my breath hangs in the still, cold air. It takes a long time to warm up. The top of this col is not particularly interesting, though part-way up there are good views worthy of a photo stop. The wooden cabin, a café in summer, is closed so I quickly descend to the spa town of Bagnères-de-Luchon. The tourist office, where I hope to find hotel information, has just shut for lunch and the cafés look inviting in the warm sunshine. So I decide to treat myself to lunch. At 2pm the office opens but they are totally clueless about hotels outside town.

After a hot ascent of the Col du Portillon (1,320m) on the Spanish border, I meet a group of French cyclists. They are in the area for a club weekend and my panniers provoke discussion about my journey. It's fortunate for me that they recently tried the hotel I'm aiming for at St-Béat and discovered it closed; they recommend I stay in the next town, Bossòst. I was hoping to get further that day, but there was little habitation for miles and I did not fancy sleeping under a hedge in October! Bossòst is a strange town; being just in Spain it's full of shoppers come for cheap booze, clothes and trinkets. I find a large hotel which looks posh but turns out to be very reasonably priced, and friendly. When the shops close at 6pm, the town empties and it's very quiet. The hotel restaurant is posh and the menu fancy, but the chef provides me with an excellent vegetarian meal.

16th October: to Pont de la Taule (100km)

Full of a hearty breakfast, I buy provisions at a local shop and leave Bossòst a little later than intended. Freewheeling 20km down the main road, and back into France, I arrive in the little village of St-Béat, where



Mountain views on ascent of Col du Peyresourde. 15th October.



End of the journey, at the Med. The photo was taken by Olivier mentioned below.

indeed the hotel is closed and so is the shop. Just as well I'd stocked up on provisions. (Finding provisions each morning was essential because I was often cycling in remote areas with no shops or cafés.) Turning off the main road onto the first ascent of the day, Col de Menté (1,349m), it is very quiet. From the col the narrow, twisting road descends past tiny hamlets with no one in sight and no vehicles. It's warm and I've almost run out of water. The river I cross at the bottom is in an inaccessible ravine, so I take water from a stream running alongside the road; not very palatable but I'd drink it if really necessary. On the ascent to the Col de Portet d'Aspet I stop at the impressive monument to Fabio Casartelli, an Italian cyclist and an Olympic gold-medalist, who died in a crash on the descent of the col during the 1995 Tour de France. The ascent is short but very steep in parts, and I walk one short section – the only one on the whole trip I'm proud to say!

At the totally deserted top (I have seen no one since I left St-Béat) I notice a café. It looks shut but something draws me to the door, from where I hear piano music. Am I hallucinating? No, the patron is playing his piano and welcomes me. His wife produces a cheese sandwich and drinks while I chat to the patron about famous cyclists who stop at the café, and about the Tour, which is due to come through the following year.

A long descent follows, through deserted little villages. Early afternoon I ring Neil who had looked on the Internet for hotels in the area – I am wary of finding closed hotels. Furnished with some phone numbers, I ring and find a hotel open at Pont de la Taule near Seix. This seems a reasonable distance to cover before dark, and with a bed booked, I can manage my third col that day. Col de la Core (1,395m) was steady and not steep, like many ascents it's in the trees much of the time but near the top it opens out to show good views. My ETA is achieved just before dark. This hotel is run by a friendly Dutch couple and supper is a sociable affair with multi-lingual conversation between French, German and English guests. It's a nice change from being the only guest.

17th October: to Tarascon-sur-Ariège (66km)

Cloudy and damp today. A gradual climb to Col de Latrape (1,111m) and down to Aulus-les-Bains where I find a hotel open for coffee, and a village shop for provisions. The next climb to Col d'Agnes (1,570m) is long, but very quiet. Windy near the top, it's cold so I descend to Etang de Lers, an attractive tarn on a high plateau. An appropriate spot for my picnic, but all my clothes are needed to keep warm. From the tarn the road winds across the plateau, gradually climbing through moorland and high pastures to Port de Lers (1,517m). Shortly after, I arrive at a junction and a sign 'Route

Barrée'. No way am I going back up and round a long diversion, so I continue down, arriving at a huge hole, with no way across. I am rescued by a big burly road-worker, who picks up my bike, panniers and all, in one hand and leaps across the hole!

Further down, the main road with traffic is a shock to the system – I'm used to seeing only half a dozen vehicles a day. By now it's 4pm and I am glad of the easy downhill into Tarascon-sur-Ariège. I know there are a few hotels here and I find one quickly. There is time for a wander round town and up to a viewpoint before supper. Tomorrow's ride is a long one with plenty of climbs – I hope it doesn't rain.

18th October: to Quérigut (82km)

The Raid Touriste route takes the 'Corniche' which traverses the mountainside high above the busy Ariège valley. The weather looks threatening, at Axiat the sky is black and I wonder whether to take the easier valley option, but the main road is very busy and I tell myself not to be a wimp. The high route is worth the effort; very quiet, remote and good views, and I manage to avoid the storms which are drenching the valley. Midday, the sun comes out for a while and lights up the wonderful colours of the deciduous woods on the way to the Col de Marmare (1,361m). Col de chioula (1,431m) is not far but it's now very windy and I descend quickly to the junction just above Ax-les-Thermes. Here it's decision time; the weather is not good but I'd like to get further today. It's a risk, with no certainty of a bed for the night. However, I decide to continue, and set off on the long climb to the Port de Pailhères (2,001m). Easy at first, the gradient increases, and above the tree line it's cold, damp and windy. A few chalets appear on the windswept moor, but there is no sign of life. I shelter briefly by the small hut on the summit for the obligatory photo. (This summit always seems to attract bad weather; I've been there three times and never seen the view.)

All my clothing is needed for the descent, which I take cautiously, aware that I won't be found if the wind blows me over the edge. It's a long way down before conditions improve. I stop at the first village (Mijanès) where there is a hotel. Although it looks inhabited, with tables and chairs outside, there is nobody at home. A couple of locals tell me it should be open, at least I think that's what they said; their accent is so strange I hardly understand them. I wait a while but no one comes, so I get back on the bike. It's dark by the time I arrive at Quérigut, if this hotel is closed it's a long way to anywhere else; luck is with me, it's open – very basic but friendly. They are amazed to see me; the only reason they are open is because they function as the local bar and even that is empty. I eat a simple

meal with my hosts in the bar and realise how hungry I am; I have not eaten much that day. I sleep like a log.

19th October: to Moligt-les-Bains (52km)

After stocking up at the local shop, I set off along rolling country lanes, over Col de Moulis (1,099m), Col de Garavel (1,256m) and Col de Jau (1,506m). These are relatively small cols compared to most. As usual I meet very few vehicles or people, except for a Swiss cycling couple sitting eating their picnic lunch. Their bikes are loaded with piles of camping gear, and they had camped high up last night in the snow. After a long, cold descent I arrive at Moligt-les-Bains, and a cheap hotel with café. Chocolat chaud is needed. Because I made such good progress yesterday, I have enough time in hand to stay here and relax in the sun. Checked in to the hotel, there is time to explore the village. This is unusually busy with people who have come to the spa to ‘take the waters’.

20th October: to St-Cyprien (110km)

My final day to the sea! But it’s still a long way and there is a big col to cross. I set off fairly early, in good but cold weather, down to the town of Prades on the main road. There is a short stretch of busy main road before turning off to climb on quiet roads. I enjoy this ride, past vineyards on the slopes of Pic du Canigou, then up a remote forested gorge. The small road winds round the valleys as it climbs to the Col Palomère (1,036m). I try to spot the sea, but the blue haze is confusing. Hooray – it should be all downhill from now on. Apart from the occasional small rise it was down, and there are ‘free’ cols en route – Col Xatard (752m), Col Fourtu (646m) and Col de Llauro (380m). The scenery is definitely Mediterranean, with olives and dry scrub.

The town of Le Boulou and the busy main road is a shock, having spent so long on quiet roads across the Pyrénées. On my map the main road looks OK, but soon a sign prohibits cyclists and I have to study my map. By now I am tired and hungry, and although it’s not far to the coast the route is not obvious. A couple on a motor-bike kindly stop and point me in the right direction. After a while I’m back at the main road, not sure where to go next; fortunately a cyclist appears and says ‘follow me’. Lanes and minor roads lead us to the sea, where he suggests a photo of my arrival at the Mediterranean. Olivier is interested to hear the story of my Pyrénéan journey, being a long-distance cyclist himself he is keen to do a similar traverse. He offers hospitality and we spend a convivial evening looking at my photos (my digital camera connected to his TV) and I recount my experiences.

21st October: to Cerbère (75km)

I'm on the coast but not yet at the Spanish border where the Pyrénéan route finishes. Leaving my panniers chez Olivier, I have an enjoyable ride along the undulating coast road, stopping at various places on the way – I no longer need to hurry. Next day I say goodbye to my new cycling friend and head for the airport, well satisfied with my achievement. On reflection, my solo trip was often very tough going and sometimes lonely. However, I met friendly people and enjoyed wonderful mountain views in remote places. It was a memorable journey.