

# L'Étape alternative

While some of you were suffering the heat in last year's Étape du Tour ride, Giles Croft was recreating a French Alpine stage of his own...



**N**o, I can't possibly be bonking. Bonkers, maybe, but... how? The family sized feast of pasta consumed not 20 kilometres ago at the bottom of this heinous col still weighs heavily on my mind, if not my stomach. In fairness, I had eaten to the point of nausea. But experience had taught me that hoarding excess calories in the high mountains was simply a means of survival. Cycling on a full stomach was a luxury seldom enjoyed.

And yet... as I toil my way to the top of the Col du Glandon the signs are unmistakable: a sharp pang of hunger joins the cacophony of protest from my legs; a faint buzzing in my ears signals a

lightening of the head and all of a sudden it just doesn't seem real somehow. The Tour commentator in my ear raves gleefully as he sees me losing contact: "Croft en difficulté! Il a craqué!" As I start to weave, my eye catches a flash of colour on the hairpin below: incoming! The thought of being caught so close to the summit has me choking down a gel in between gasps, biting back the pain and hauling myself out of the saddle for the final assault...

So here it is: the point in this odyssey I've been dreading, where – over halfway through, yet with so far still to go – I question the point itself. What the hell do I think I'm doing? How can I possibly

**Halfway through his alternative Étape ride and, though he's beginning to feel the strain, Giles still manages a smile**

hope to complete the queen stage of the Tour de France, alone, unsupported and in this kind of heat? And what on earth possessed me to add in an extra col?

## Lofty ambitions

The idea had been hatched a few years previously. One very long day on the Randonnée Alpine when a splinter group of five riders, one of them me, had defied the odds – and the advice of our tour guide – to get ourselves over the Colle della Finestre, Sestriere, Montgenevre, the Izoard and the best part of the Vars. I'd managed to accumulate more altitude than I'd believed possible in one ride: 4,902m. To get so tantalisingly close to the



mythical 5,000m mark had left an unsuppressible ambition; under what circumstances would I be able to attempt passing this personal milestone again?

The unveiling of the 2006 Tour route – a tantalising glimpse of cycling nirvana that always keeps me going through those dark winter months – caught my attention. Not only was there a brand new summit finish to relish, but riders would “have to endure 5,000m of climbing during this epic stage”. My vague plans to head back out to the Alps in the summer suddenly firmed up considerably, and from that moment on, the thought of replicating this Étape alternative became a recurring one.

**Goal attack**

July 10, 6.30am. I park the car in a residential street by the river in Bourg d’Oisans, assemble my bike and take a deep lungful of crisp, early morning, mountain air. As I munch on a banana there’s no local activity to disturb my quiet reverie. Every year another challenge to exceed the last, I muse. Where will it end? I’ve pored over the maps for days, studied the profiles and done the maths. At 182km it’s further than I’d like in the mountains, yet despite searching through every Tour de France publication I can find, I’ve still not been able to establish exactly how many metres this route promises to ascend.

There is, however, an insurance policy of sorts which I can’t help but notice: the Col de Chaussy. By adding to the Tour route and climbing out of St Jean-de-Maurienne on an unclassified road, it would not only guarantee my ludicrous vertical goal, but also offer a more scenic alternative to several kilometres of the uninspiring main valley road. It’s unsurfaced at the top according to Mr Michelin, but I’m assured otherwise by my insider guide, so it’s certainly something



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to bear in mind if I still have the legs...

Here and now, all this is mere theory. The reality I face is getting up the interminable 40km ascent to the top of the Lautaret before 9am, the time widely advertised as its closure for the official Étape du Tour to pass. And so I begin...

After the annoyingly steep ramps on the way to the Lac du Chambon, it’s a case of setting a pace, nibbling bananas and enjoying the scenery as the stunning vista of La Meije gradually develops on my right. The best days all seem to begin with a steady climb: once you’ve drilled an incessant rhythm into your legs it’s hard to shake, whatever the terrain.

**Above: The Col de Chaussy lived up to its promise of quiet beauty**



**Don’t feel guilty about your compact chainset: Tour climber Richard Virenque rode a triple and a massive cassette**

With a decent sweat on, I’m jubilant to negotiate all the day’s perilous tunnels and reach the summit in exactly two hours. At the top I meet an intrepid cycle tourist from Cambridge who’s bivvied nearby overnight. He kindly takes my picture and – the grass always being greener – I feel a pang of jealousy when I spy his fully laden tourer; overcome with fond memories of months on the road. But I remind myself of my lightweight, high speed mission as I stride purposefully over to the Café du Ferme for coffee and pastries.

Turning left to complete the Galibier seems almost straightforward after the

**The Col de Chaussy. I’m sure I started on the other side of those mountains...**





## Travel information

### Ferries

The most direct route to the Alps is P&O's service between Dover and Calais ([www.poferries.com](http://www.poferries.com)), and note that CTC members get a discount. Brittany Ferries ([www.brittanyferries.co.uk](http://www.brittanyferries.co.uk)) sail from Portsmouth and Poole to destinations further west.

### Roads

Travelling from Calais to Bourg d'Oisans entirely on toll roads costs less than £50, and took under 11 hours including regular stops. When you reach the Alps the number of through routes is limited, so plan for holiday traffic, relax and enjoy the scenery.

### Planning and maps

First, decide on a base. There are only so many routes over the cols and if you intend starting and finishing at the same point you must be realistic about how far you can cycle in a day. Having a car increases your options, but travel in the mountains eats into your cycle time and spending sweaty end-of-the-day miles in the car will quickly lose its appeal when all you want to do is shower and eat.

1:200,000 scale Michelin maps ([www.viamichelin.com](http://www.viamichelin.com)) are perfect for planning (244 covers the Northern Alps, and 245 the South, though I tend to rip the pages I need out of their road atlas). It's easy to get carried away with the famous Tour climbs but be wary of the summit finishes – without the cheering crowds, some are just unsightly roads designed to get coaches up to ski resorts. The best cycling is often to be had on the 'unknown' cols or unclassified balcony roads, free from traffic and with spectacular views – the network around Bourg d'Oisans could fill several days. Try the Virtual Alps website ([www.aukadia.net/alps](http://www.aukadia.net/alps)) for photos, detailed descriptions and road conditions; and the Slopes of Europe (<http://ciclismo.sitiasp.it/motore.aspx>) for road profiles.

### Accommodation

The Alps are popular in summer and there are regular cyclosporitifs. Bourg d'Oisans ([www.bourgdoisans.com](http://www.bourgdoisans.com)) requires booking well in advance, especially around the weekend of the Marmotte/Grimpée de l'Alpe ([www.sportcommunication.com](http://www.sportcommunication.com)). Ski resorts in summer are seldom busy, though, and you can usually just turn up and find accommodation, as I did in la Toussuire ([www.la-toussuire.com](http://www.la-toussuire.com)).

One option worth considering – and booking in advance – is a Youth Hostel (UK/IYHF card required). They're mostly well situated, are cheap and clean, and in rural locations such as the Alps are invariably cycle-friendly ([www.fuaj.org/eng](http://www.fuaj.org/eng)).

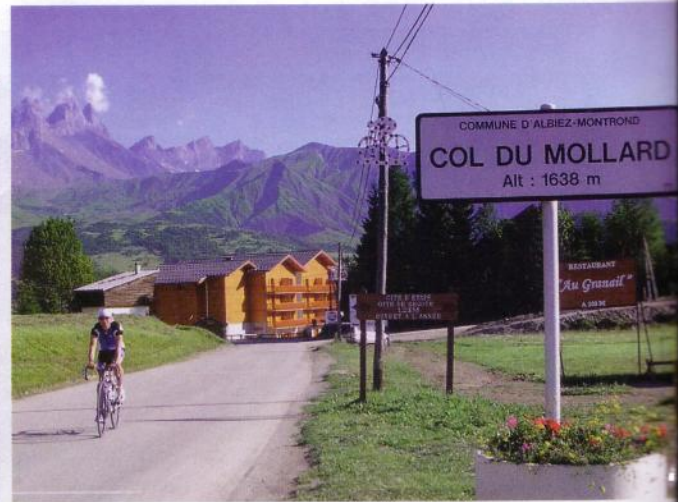
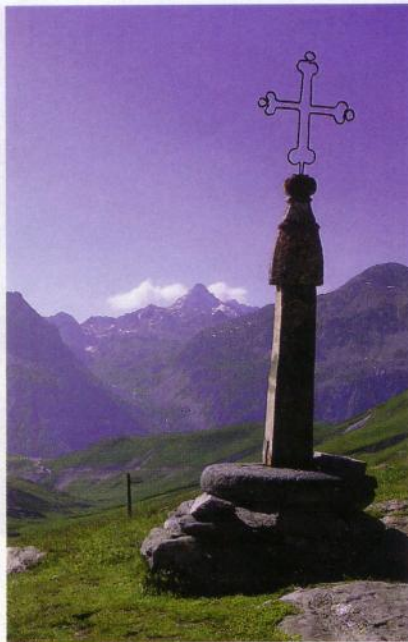
For hotels, the official French Tourist Board website (<http://uk.franceguide.com>) is the definitive source for drilling down to regional, departmental and city tourist offices, most of which allow you to book online in English. Another reliable option to consider is [www.logisdefrance.com](http://www.logisdefrance.com).

### Cyclomundo

I travelled independently but if you'd rather get some local help the French bike travel company Cyclomundo will sort you out. They offer guided tours in many regions of France (and some tours in Switzerland and Spain) for all levels of rider from kids and beginners through to hardcore mile-munchers.

In the Alps, Cyclomundo provide self-guided tours, meaning that they do all the organisation for you. You get maps for each day along with a detailed cue sheet, route notes and a list of local contacts (such as bike shops and tour guides). Cyclomundo will also organise custom tours on a guided basis for groups and clubs.

Visti [www.cyclomundo.com](http://www.cyclomundo.com) or give them a call on +33 450 8721091.



Above: 12 hours on the road and it's nearly over  
Left: No prizes for guessing – it's the Col de la Croix de Fer

18.4km I'll want a bed and somewhere to consume my own bodyweight in food. With a yawn and a slug of caffeine, I clip in once more, switch off and grind. It's not that hard. At least it wouldn't be if I hadn't already covered 196km. My legs seem to be made of plasticine, but the adrenaline is starting to course at the thought of surviving this long, long day. My head's so full of scenery that Bourg d'Oisans feels like a week ago. I'm cycling slowly enough to be plagued by a troupe of flies, and I spend the closing kilometres swearing at them crossly and wondering at what altitude insects run out of steam.

In a final, cruel twist, le Corbier does a very good impression of looking like the end, and it's only when I get there that I have the wherewithal to look higher up to my right and see la Toussuire mocking me, still 4km on. Bugger! A few more curses drag my heavy legs onwards, and then I'm turning the corner into what looks like a building site. After more than 14 hours on the road and 6,312m of climbing, I have arrived! I'm out of the saddle, sprinting up the deserted main street, arms aloft to celebrate the win, all tiredness gone, happy as I've ever been. Then it dawns on me: my car's at the bottom of the mountain. Maybe arrival celebrations are a little premature...

The Glandon starts off quite well. But as anyone who's ridden it will tell you, it gets worse the further up you go

huge baguette I wolfed at the top of the Croix de Fer didn't touch the sides. With time running out and 60km and 1500m of climbing left to go, I barely hit the brakes coming down the other side. With the smell of victory in my nostrils, the Mollard – the most pleasant of diversions – had fallen to my relentless pedal-turning, the reward being an icy cold fountain in which I'd immersed my entire upper body, and a descent with enough surprises to put hairs on my chest and a few yards of rubber on the ground at one point.

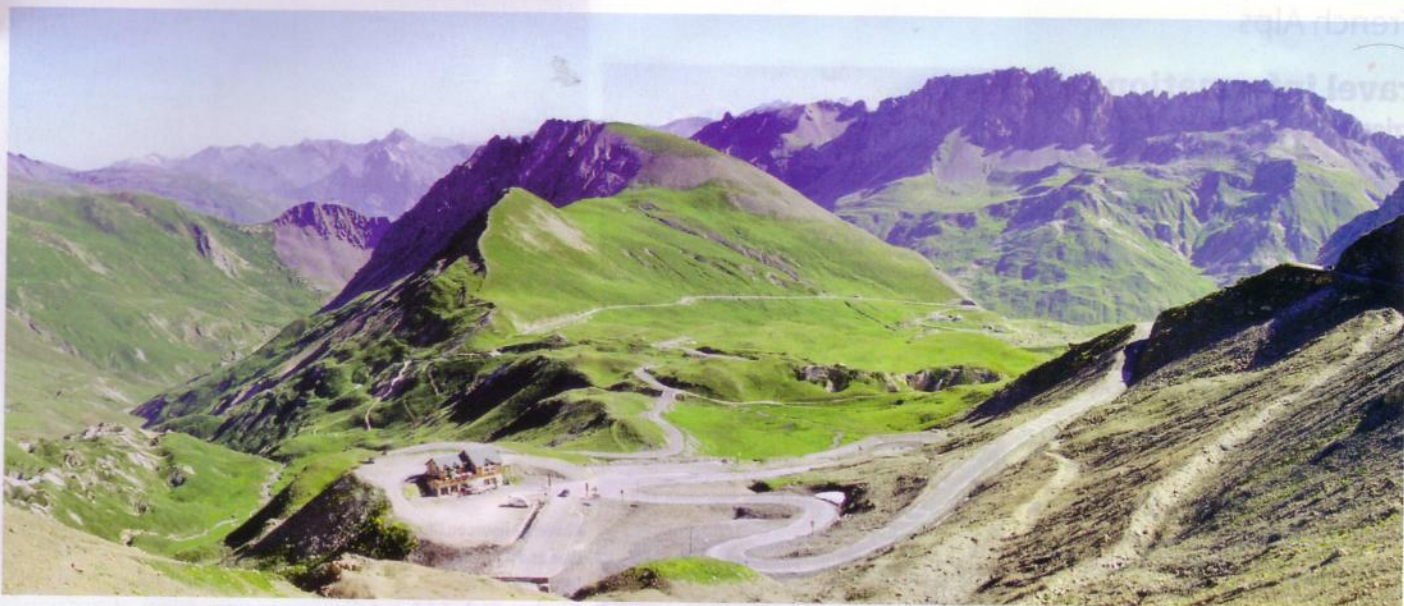
At the base of la Toussuire, I'm in unknown territory. All I know is that in

Below: Rehearsed victory celebrations for the mass of waiting photographers – just before Giles remembers his car is parked at the bottom of the mountain...

Below right: The fastest way to put 215km worth of carbs back in







rest stop. Away from the traffic the climb takes on a more laid back persona, and it's only when I bypass the entrance to the tunnel and the gradient kicks up alarmingly that I'm reminded, albeit briefly, that this is the highest point of the entire Tour. At 2,646m I'm met by a stunningly attractive French girl cycling solo on a team issue Lapierre (hypoxic hallucinations, surely?) who revels in taking many pictures for me, while offering the sage advice that "if you feel bad, just take five minutes and try again". With pleasure...

The first descent of the day is classic Alps, but such is the unutterable beauty of my surroundings that I'm probably spending too much time gawping at the view and not enough time bending my frame into the corners; a luxury I'm more than happy to indulge under the circumstances. Plenty of descents to come, and it's not every day I get to swap the scenery of the Brecons for this sort of jaw-dropping panorama. By the time I hurtle into Valloire I'm pumped with

**My descent from the Galibier: miles of hairpin heaven**



The staff at the Hotel Les Soldanelles rewarded my efforts by presenting me with a commemorative jersey depicting the stage

adrenaline, and hungry. I take the spoils from a local charcuterie across the road, to combine the two cycling staples of demolishing food and stretching.

As time wears on, it begins to heat up. With a brief kick in the big ring the almost unnoticeable tump of the Télégraphe comes and goes, and as I begin to fall toward more socially acceptable levels of altitude, someone ramps the temperature up to gas mark six. All the more reason to go faster; increase the breeze... The descent is asking for it: a big road with wide switchbacks and plenty of traffic to play with. I quickly lose count of the number of vehicles I overtake as I scream through the hairpins, letting out an involuntary whoop of joy, knees practically brushing the tarmac. In the valley bottom, it's roasting.

#### Decision time

It's been a joyless 14km down the main valley road into a headwind which conjured images of fan ovens. White

light is burned onto my retinas and I'm parched. But I'm halfway there, making good time and still feeling optimistic. The perfect time to make important choices, no? Before me, another 7km on the highway to hell; to my right, a 30km detour up the "thoroughly recommended" Col de Chaussy... and of course a guarantee of breaking that 5,000m barrier. Easy decision. Though I know without a shadow of a doubt that later in the day I will pay for this dearly.

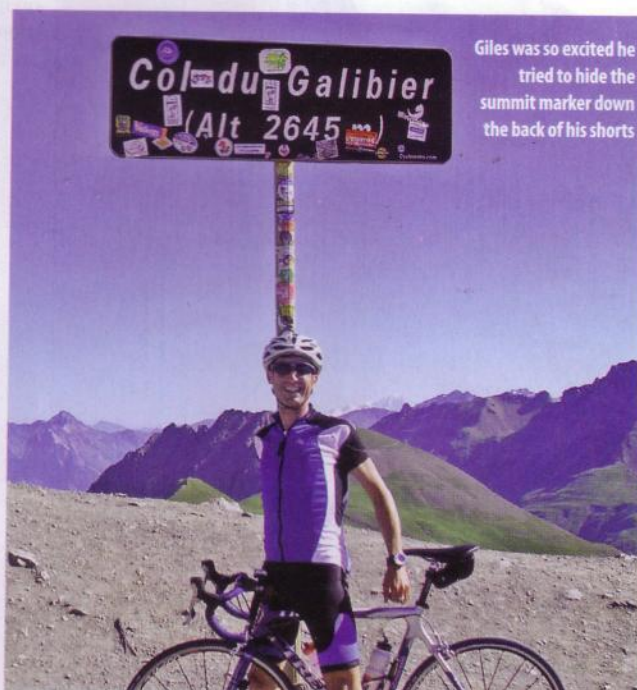
It's slow, hot and steep up the Chaussy, but the cicadas provide the soundtrack and there's no one taking my picture when I reach the stunning view at the top. How could I possibly regret this?

I could regret it almost instantly, actually. I can still picture the words on the page of my trusty insider's guide, "it is fully surfaced throughout", as the tarmac disappears from under my tyres and I start to hurtle downwards over gravel and rock. Having enjoyed the sensation of drifting into reverie on the ascent, I'm rudely awakened by the sharp contrast of full concentration, finding the tarmac'd line, keeping my weight back and not overheating the brakes. I'm certainly ready for that meal by the time I hit the tarmac'd road again, let off the brakes and finally pull into la Chambre.

#### Mopping up the miles

With my stomach full, the Glandon starts off quite well. But as anyone who's ridden it will tell you, it gets worse the further up you go. The lower shade disappears, and after brief respite at St Columban the ever steepening gradient reminds you that 22km uphill is an awful long way. The end is a wall. Sticky tarmac grips my tyres as the temperature hits 37°C. At the top, following near-collapse, I lean against the cool marble sign just long enough to reattach myself to reality and to vow I'll never ever grace that evil climb with my presence again. (I ate my words several days later – turns out it was the best vantage point for the passing of the Tour!)

Jeez! It's 7.20pm. St Jean de Maurienne for the second time today. I've been on the road almost 13 hours and I'm cooked. The



Giles was so excited he tried to hide the summit marker down the back of his shorts