

Here is an account from the Mudguardian archive of a trip to see the Tour de France in the Alps in 1955. Evidently much has changed in terms of miles, tyres and accommodation; the Tour de France seems to have been just as crazy though! The stage they watched was 255 km from Thonon-les-Bains to Briançon via the Col de Galiber. It was won by Charly Gaul from Luxemburg. He was King of the Mountains that year and went on to win the Tour in 1958. Gaul's Wikipedia entry is worth a read for his career, the doping and some sad years in retirement.

JULY 8TH. SATURDAY: HERTFORD TO ABBEVILLE. 150 MILES.

Going via the Gravesend - Tilbury Ferry to Dover we arrived with over two hours to spare. Disembarked in France at 6.30, after a perfect crossing. At this time of day the sun was extremely hot and poured down till sunset. As it was still early we decided to bash in a few more miles from Boulogne. We eventually stopped at Abbeville and as it was almost dark we decided to sleep beneath a hedge.

SUNDAY. ABBEVILLE TO CHALONS-SUR-MARNE. 160 MILES.

After only about three hours sleep we felt really roaring and got under way about 5.30 a.m. with not a soul in sight. By 5 o'clock the sun was really hot. The pavé menace was rather bad on this day and we found it in nearly every village. By midday the temperature was about 85 in the shade and we had consumed many pints of water. Although the route had looked flat on the map it was in fact hilly. We purchased our first French food at dinner time - not in a Café, of course (too expensive) - ate it, and pounded on. I, being a Charlie, carried some butter in my back M/S jersey pocket. We poured it over a bridge somewhere South of Reims. Arriving at C-sur-M at 8.30 we found the hostel with some difficulty. They possessed a glorious shower and we washed our sunbaked, grimy selves. Then we wandered round the town, where apparently a Grand Kermesse had just finished, and there was a fair and dancing in the street.

MONDAY. CHALONS-SUR-MARNE TO DIJON. 145 MILES.

50 miles North of Dijon we ran into a belt of hills. This is where my gear cable broke and I enjoyed grinding along in 92 and 100. We arrived at Dijon well after dark and found the hostel, where I repaired my cable. There was some rain on this stage, but not much.

TUESDAY. DIJON TO LYONS. 120 MILES.

With very uninteresting scenery today and the disheartening effect of a disintegrating inner tube over the previous days we only did 120 miles. The hostel took two hours to find as Lyons is such a big city. It is the most picturesque city I have ever been to, with two huge rivers running through the centre.

WEDNESDAY. LYONS TO ST. JEAN. 120 MILES.

More blowouts in the morning and we bought several French inner tubes. The sun was again extremely hot. Today we reached the Alps and passed through some marvellous scenery and over some dreaded climbs, we thought. That night we slept in a pine forest by a river and had a fire in which we baked some potatoes - ah!, a cooked meal.

THURSDAY. ST. JEAN TO BRIANÇON. 56 MILES.

Away at six but soon halted with our magnificent inner tubes. At present we took it in turns to puncture. Today we were to watch the 'Tour' and we could not mistake the way, for cars and motor bikes streamed by endlessly. The ride from St. Michel to the top of the Col du Telegraph was a dreadful experience, riding and weaving in and out of cars bumper to bumper nearly all the way up. Round endless bends and hairpins with a straight drop hundreds of feet below into St. Michel. Desperate Gendarmes were trying to clear the road. After a small descent of the Telegraph the Col du Galibier starts proper. On the stiff early part Brian decided to walk as he had a little knee trouble, but I rode alongside, deciding this was easier than walking. So did Brian after a short while and we got under way again. Round about the snow line we decided to stop for we had a magnificent view of the road as far as the bottom of the Col du Telegraph. We were about 5 km from the summit.

Two hours before the riders came the Caravan started, an incredible spectacle, with excitement growing among the crowds six deep at the sides of the road. We had sun most of the time but at this height it was fairly cool. Then the crowd went mad as the first rider arrived. It was Charly Gaul, a quarter of an hour

ahead of the main leading group.

As soon as the last rider had gone we got under way, before the cars could move. Down the other side of the Galibier to the hostel a few km's out of Briançon we sped, leaving the crowds wobbling down far behind. This hostel had showers, which were very welcome. It also provided us with beds which were the most comfortable Y.H.A. beds I have yet experienced.

FRIDAY BRIANÇON TO DIE. 125 MILES.

Yet another hot, sunny day as we left on a nearly downhill all the way ride, except for one climb of the Col de Cabre, but unfortunately into a strong wind. We stopped six miles South of a small village called DIE in an old collapsing building.

SATURDAY. DIE TO MACON. 140 MILES.

This day was really hot, 95-100 in the shade and the sun really fierce. We stopped around dinner time and had a swim in a river. After a very groggy morning we found our speed later in the evening, luckily, for it was getting dark and we had about 15 miles to do. More luck, a dirty great transport lorry drifted by at 30's and we fell in behind. Km's sped by like minute men in a '25'. Just before Macon he stopped, and the lorry behind also, the driver of which yelled out something about Coppi. We found the Youth Hostel via the Gendarmery.

SUNDAY. MACON TO HAUTEROUCHE. 115 MILES.

Pounded Northward in more fierce sun through Dijon and the hills to the North. which seemed much smaller now. The Hostel was found after asking many times and travelling along many lanes. But we discovered it had been closed for a year, so we slept on the floor after a woman who had the key let us in.

MONDAY. HAUTEROUCHE TO RIEMS. 155 MILES.

With less sun and a cooler atmosphere we made Riems well before dark and found the Hostel without much trouble. That night a fierce storm raged with heavy rain and lightning, but not directly on Riems.

TUESDAY. RIEMS TO AMIENS. 105 MILES.

Today turned out to be dull with thick mist and rather cold, the previous night's storm having left its mark. Huge trees were snapped in half like matchsticks, or torn up by the roots, and strewn along and over the roads for miles. The Hostel was at the top of a five storey building, up miles of steps.

WEDNESDAY. AMIENS TO CANTERBURY. 100 MILES.

Brian was sick in the night and wasn't feeling too good, so our get home by sunset plan was abandoned. We took it easy and caught the afternoon boat from Boulogne to Dover. Again we had a perfect crossing in sunshine. Making for Canterbury, we arrived at the Y.H. just as darkness was setting in, but Wednesday was closing night, the Warden said. So we put up at a bed and breakfast establishment, which seemed like luxury.

THURSDAY. CANTERBURY TO HERTFORD. 90 MILES.

Home via Tilbury ferry, arriving just after dinner with ample time to get my bike ready for the Thursday night bunch, and Brian to go swimming.