

Menton to Hendaye

As a first diagonale, I chose to ride Menton-Hendaye. Menton is the nearest town from my home and this diagonale is the shortest : 900 kms. First I studied the road on the map and I tested it during my travels to do the rides Bordeaux-Sete and Bordeaux-Paris at the beginning of the season. My first wish was to do Montpellier-Hendaye via Toulouse but the road was difficult though pretty. I preferred to ride a longer route, in the south, passing by Carcassonne, Foix and Pau.

I decided to start this ride at the beginning of September. At that time of the year, days are short and lights are necessary. I had one Union generator, two lights using batteries and three back lights. Mark Trigg told me once, "Your bike looks like a Christmas tree!" I brought a gaz stove to have hot coffee during the night or early in the morning. I had also mudguards and three paniers.

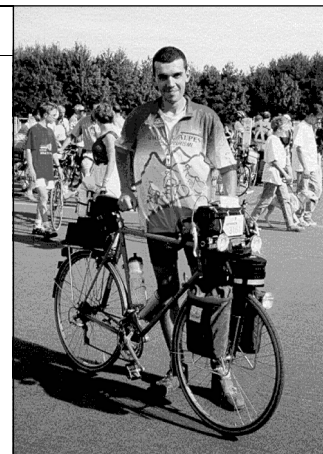
I started on Monday September 4th from Menton. I went to the police to collect the first stamp and I left this town with its casinos and big cars. This moment was enjoyable, the sea was on my left and I could glimpse ships with lights. I really enjoyed La Corniche de L'Esterel, just before Frejus, with a beautiful contrast between red rocks and blue sea. When I left the coast, I met the wind. It was coming from the north and dehydrated me. I had to deal with it during the whole day. Sometimes, it decreased and clouds appeared in the sky. The traffic was light due to demonstrations in service stations (no petrol available!). The afternoon was difficult because of the warmth and the terrible wind coming from my right. I reached Salon de Provence at 08:00pm and I ate a Pizza before finishing this first stage in Arles. I left Salon at 09:30pm and saw a beautiful moon growing in the sky. I arrived just before midnight in Arles after riding 314 kms.

I slept in an hostel for 4 hours. I really enjoyed this rest and the shower before the second stage. I started early in the morning using my lights to

see the road. The wind was less strong than the day before. Around Montpellier, until Meze, the ride was great: The sea was again on my left, and the wind in my back! As soon as I left Meze, I found again the wind in my face until Carcassonne. Just after Beziers, I ate in a little village (Montady) where I talked to a wine grower. Two weeks before he met an old man riding Hendaye-Menton. He explained to me how the wine was grown and, yes, the season was good!

This second afternoon was still difficult. Carcassonne, the

I climbed Col Del Bouich before entering a thick fog for 30 kms. My bike, my clothes were wet, but later in the morning, I arrived in Saint Giron where I could admire Pyrénées. At midday, I was eating two pizza portions in front of a baker's shop when an old woman came to me and offered me a *Pain au Chocolat*. I was embarrassed but she wouldn't take no for an answer. After the Diagonale I contacted her to thank her. In the afternoon, I went through Mauvezin where I saw the Pic du Midi for the first



motorway was beside my road. Midnight, two in the morning, and still the visibility of the road was good due to my light system. I arrived in Bayonne at 06:00am, took a large coffee and went on my route. After the warmth, the wind, the night, the fog, the rain appeared for a long quarter of an hour.

Never mind, I was very close to the end. Traffic increased because it was the beginning of the day and I realized the last kilometers would be hard. Good climbs, long descents, very good climbs to arrive where? I was close to the sea, near another French border, in a city called Hendaye. It was 08:00am, I looked for and entered into the police station. The policeman was amazed to see me. I realized how I was stinking! "Where do you come from? Did you ride all night long?" Only one policeman knew what a Diagonale was. I obtained the last stamp after 374 kms without sleeping and asked where the railway station was. I came back home by via Toulouse and Valence. In Valence, trains were not available due to another demonstration. I took again to my bike, began to ride towards Grenoble and my wife picked me up 90 kms from home...

I wrote to the old woman and to the organizers because a Diagonale is validated if you write a story about it.

As a conclusion, Menton-Hendaye is perhaps short compared to the other ones but difficult. During a Diagonale, you can sleep during nights but you have to ride whatever the weather. When a french Diagonale is completed, you are allowed to ride European Diagonales, another challenge of the FFCT with longer times...



What is a Diagonale ?

The French organization for cycling, FFCT, proposes permanent rides between six towns located at the French border : Dunkerque, Strasbourg, Menton, Perpignan, Hendaye and Brest. There are 9 diagonales because you can't link towns which are near one to the other. You must complete these rides in a given time (77 hours for 950 kms for example). The route isn't imposed, you propose your own route to the organizer by setting control steps every 100kms. At each control step, you have to collect a stamp in a shop. Start and finish controls must be done in the police station. When you finish the diagonale, you send your route book to the organizers in order to validate the ride. If you have to respect the control time during PBP, during a diagonale, there is no closing time for control steps. You must do one of these rides on your own or with five riders maximum. Pace cars are not allowed.

capital of Cathare's castles was not the end of the second stage. I ate a little before going on with the ride. In the evening, the road changed, climbs and descents appeared and the wind gave up. After Fanjeaux with a good climb but a nice view on the valley at sunset, Mirepoix with the central food market, I arrived in Foix at midnight after riding 312 kms. Again I slept 4 hours, and started early in the morning after drinking two large coffees.

time. Pyrénées mountains were beautiful and the wind had totally disappeared. After Lestelle Betharam and the little churches in the mountains, I arrived in Pau at 09:00pm.

At this time, I had about twelve hours left to complete the ride. I preferred not to sleep and to ride in the night as much as I could. Thus I would have time in case of punctures or tiredness... I ate pasta in Pau and went on with the ride. Traffic was light because a large