

Epic day for us in France



Looks like a scene from an end-of-the-world movie where people are fleeing the cities



There's nothing like experiencing the "Tour come through a small town, especially when the Caravan comes through (ahead of the riders). This "puts them on the map" and is a real source of pride.

The idea (aka "the plan" of which there is always one) was to try and see the Tour de France come through twice in one stage, on Saturday's Annecy/Samnoz route. It seemed so simple; get out on the road by 8:30 & travel from Grenoble to Annecy, just 1 hour, 15 on the toll roads. Find a place to park somewhere in Annecy close to the start (not so easily done, but we did it), and then get out on our bikes by 11am, well ahead of the race's late 1:30pm start, and intersect in a little town called... well, it's called nothing at all, just a place on the map where D10 and D912 intersect, a convenient place to watch it come through. (To be fair, the town of "La Croix" is just a couple hundred meters up the road from where the "Tour came through).

Small towns have the very best roadside food you'll find anywhere; all local stuff, sausages to die for and mustard that is so good in just the right amount but just might kill you if you have too much. If you think Paris is France, you're missing the best. Small towns, during festivals ("fetes") and when the "Tour passes through, have a picnic atmosphere with stands selling local foods and everybody's happy and they don't look down at you because you don't speak "parisian" French.



At the bottom of the grade, the Gendarmes had no issues with us riding up

A few hours later comes the critical part of "the plan." Riding up the backside of the Semnoz ski resort, the opposite direction the riders will climb. This, I figured, would either get us to the top a whole lot easier than trying to thread through massive crowds along the race course... or it could fail entirely if they closed off the "top of the mountain" so we'd be stuck a few hundred yards from the end of the course, not able to see or experience anything but frustration.

I googled in every way I could to see if anybody else had come up with the same idea and knew something of the tour's plans for the top of the mountain, but came up empty handed. Was it possible nobody else would consider something so silly? I found that tough to believe; it seemed like such a logical idea.

And it was a logical idea, logical enough that there were at least 200 or so others heading up the backside to intersect the race for a second time. We even inquired of the Gendarmes at the bottom, who said fine, no problem, head on up (they were stopping cars though).



A single Gendarme staring down a rapidly-increasing number of determined cyclists

Happy that our plan was good, we headed up... but not too far up, before we came across a very unfriendly Gendarme who stated no, they weren't letting cyclists up the hill; it was closed to traffic due to the Tour de France. Since we cyclists have such great respect for authority, we dutifully turned around and... just like everywhere else at the 'Tour when the Gendarmes say you can't pass, you find a way around them. In this case, a long grassy field, as seen in the photo at the top of this page. It was an amazing sight, like something out of a movie where everyone is fleeing the city with only their most important possessions (our bikes, of course!). We even had to cross over an electrified barbed-wire fence to get into that field.



Despite heat and a tough grade, this is what makes us happy! This was what we were not to be denied.

And then, as we neared the road, we noticed that cyclists ahead of us had stopped. The road should be there, but the cyclists were going nowhere. Odd. Then we heard the shouting as we got closer, the single Gendarme trying to turn back the endless incoming tide of cyclists who were determined to get to the top. That wasn't going to happen; once you've crossed a long field like that on foot, your determination to continue increases by leaps & bounds!

I tell Kevin to keep on moving towards the front of the group (meantime, some are actually hiding out in the woods!), telling him the guy's either going to have to shoot us or let us through. He's clearly stressed, looking for help on his phone, but determined to not let us pass. A couple minutes later a Tour official of some sort comes down the hill in a car, stops and talks with the officer, and voila,

the road is open!



Kevin at the finish line at Annecy/Semnoz stage

And that made a normal day into something really special. We were not to be denied. Anything. This was our day, the day that cyclists ruled the earth. We came, we swarmed, we conquered. Everyone climbing that hill must have felt somehow special today. Despite the heat, despite that really tough climb, people were happy.

And when we got to the top? Wow! We had access to the finish line!!! We were right there when Quintana came through to win, when Froome came through looking exhausted and ready to go home but oh-so-thankful it's pretty much over, when Jens Voigt, who'd done so much to enliven the race with his long solo breakaway, came through with a big smile. It's not the best place for photos, but it sure is a great place to soak up the atmosphere.



Jens Voigt finishes with a big smile.

I uploaded photos to Facebook, to Instagram, and sent a photos via email to friends back home, letting them know where we were. Maybe it wouldn't have meant so much to us if not for what we went through to get there. But it sure made for one heck of a memorable day.