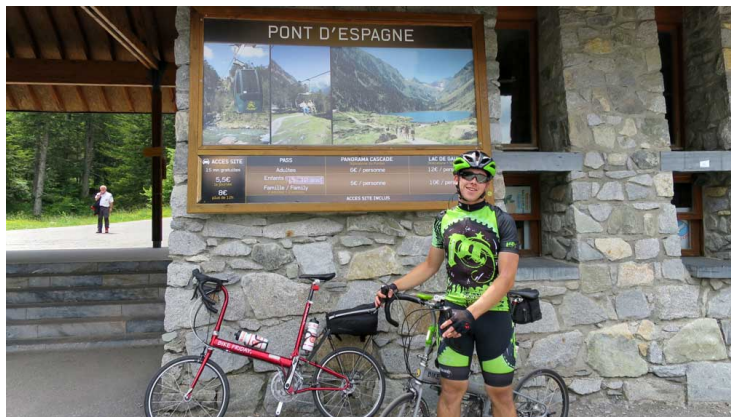


It's Jambon Blanc w/beurre and a coke. No, it's the awesome rides. No, it's the way cars respect you. It's France.



In the hectic weeks leading up to my annual trip to France, I start to wonder... why? It's lot of work trying to make sure the shop is in order for my departure, and planning the trip involves a lot of stress in itself. And that first day there, one of those infinitely-long travel days that this time began at 5:15am in Redwood City and didn't end until the next day at 6:30pm in France... why would anybody do that?

Because it's France and you're a cyclist, that's why. Today we had a getting-to-know-our-bikes ride, a little 48 mile jaunt that included a climb quite a bit nastier than its billing. A twisty little road, accompanied by a full-blown raging river, up to a place named "Pont d Espagne" which if course is just what it sounds like; a place you can look across and see Spain.



Chasing down cyclists, one by one

It took a few miles to get into "Bike Friday" mode (our folding travel bikes); they're a bit heavier and mine has a rack on the back with a seat pack weighing it down even further. So no, it doesn't climb like my Trek Madone. Nothing does. But you get into the groove and it goes pretty well.

And when the road tilted upward, Kevin and I went into chasing-down-rabbits mode and were caught by no-one and passed everyone. Including this large riding club from Italy with their high-zoot \$10k+ bikes and fancy pedals and such.



A few of the guys we passed. I'm not gloating. Yes I am.

While Kevin and I got to enjoy stopping several times on the descent to take photos of things we'd seen on the way up, happily walking through muddy paths and over slippery rocks without issue because we had our SPD mountain-style shoes with us.

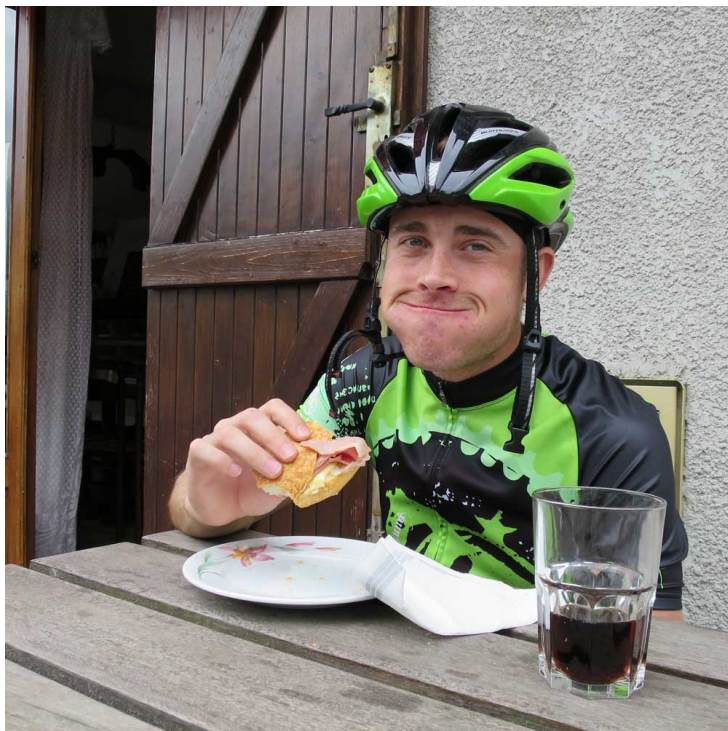
I do have a difference of opinion with Kevin though. On the way up, he's telling me how much he enjoys rides like this for our first full day in France, rides that are difficult but not really tough. And I'm thinking, as the road went to 11% for a while, what's his definition of "not really tough?" And I'm seeing watts on the power meter similar to what I see climbing Kings, and again thinking, "what's not really tough?"



You can imagine what this is like going up

Which reminds me, this ride did settle, once and for all, whether you can put out as much power (wattage) on a less-optimal bike as you can on your favorite machine. The answer is yes. I didn't feel awkward or forced putting 280 watts into the pedals for an extended period of time. Sure, I was going slower; I'm not as efficient as I'd be on a bare-bones bike that weighs nothing to start with. But it all works.

Just like Jambon Blanc w/beurre and a coke. It just works.



Kevin finishing his Jambon Blanc w/buerre

What's so special about a ham and butter sandwich made with a too-tough piece of bread? I don't really know. But it works. And why is a coke so much better on a climb than anything else, ever? I don't know, it just is. It's really easy for a cyclist to like this place. If you became independently-wealthy, you could find a place in the Pyrenees or Alps and spend a few years riding before you could possibly become bored and want to move on. Their idea of a "busy" mountain road is nothing like ours.

The only thing that doesn't work well is getting change. Haven't figured out the correct approach for getting 100-euro notes exchanged for 20s. The banks won't touch you unless you have an account. And merchants don't want to take bills that large.



Bathrooms remain a mysterious variable in France. Some are literally holes in the floor, while others are straight out of the Jetsons.

This is one area where I can see a very good command of the French language would help; you'd simply go into a merchant and ask them, in a friendly way, where would you go for such a thing? And after trying a couple, you'd likely find someone to help you out. Or not. After all, someone coming into my shop asking to break down a \$100 bill would be cause for suspicion, concern that it might be a fake. OK, still working on this one. But if this is the worst France can throw at me, I'm likely coming back for more.