

ALMOST LIVE FROM FRANCE (July 20th-30th)

07/20-07/21- NO, I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT DAY IT IS, OR WHEN IT STARTED, OR HOW SOON IT WILL END although the ending part is pretty much determined by when I finish this entry!

It was quite the ordeal getting over here with my son (Kevin, 14 years old, not the 51-year-old Kevin I ride with on Tuesdays & Thursdays). United flight #906 had us sitting on the plane for just over two hours due to a "high pressure relief valve" that wouldn't operate properly. It sounded so dreadfully serious nobody questioned what it was, even through the many announcements regarding why they first thought it would just be a few minutes and then more and then a realization that the location of the valve pretty much involved disassembly of the plane, which meant the flight wouldn't leave. That's when the pilot gave us the option of leaving with only half the bathrooms working (our first indication that this was a bathroom issue and not some serious engine or control thing). So we left, two hours late, 1 1/2 hour connecting time to flight 942 out of Chicago. We land and I'm thinking great, we're going to watch the other plane pulling out of the gate... when I get a call on my phone when taxiing (when you're allowed to have your phone on) with an announcement from United that flight 942 was leaving "on time" at 8:05pm. On time???! That's almost two hours late. The good news is that it meant I'd make the flight after all. The bad news is that United has a funny way of calling something "on time" (apparently, once they earlier declare it's going to leave late, at some point after that, if the new time doesn't change, it's now considered "on time"), and that the late arrival into Paris meant we couldn't take the bus to the Montparnasse train station, but instead a \$100 taxi.

But we did make it to the train, and we did arrive on schedule in Tarbes, and there was, ready to go, a cab just large enough to take both of us and our two bikes to the hotel 5 miles away. So for right now, we're back on the plan. Next opportunity for something to go serious amiss will be on our 30-mile ride tomorrow morning (which is getting closer as I type) to pick up our rental car in Pau. And then hopefully we catch up with the Tour de France on Monday on the Port du Bales climb!

7/22/07-(am edition) BIKES CAN BE USEFUL! My plan, worked out some time ago and subject to a whole lot of things that could have made it seem ridiculously silly, worked out perfectly. I got up at 7:05am this morning (of course, *where* I got up was about 6,000 miles away from home, in a very spartan Etap hotel room in Tarbes, France), started getting the bikes ready, woke up Kevin (my son) about half an hour later, and around 8:20 or so we were on the road to Pau, 30 miles away, where we had to pick up our rental car. I should add that we had to get there by 10:45, or else we'd have to wait around 3 hours until the office opened again (renting cars on a Sunday in France is an interesting experiment that everyone ought to try at least once!).



Fortunately we made it in time (pretty much on the nose, about 10:42am or so) and the rental came off without a hitch. Mostly. The car is pretty darned small, but somehow we'll manage to get everything into it when need be. How that's possible, when we can't even fit everything into our hotel room,

will be interesting to watch play out. Perhaps we'll have to strap Kevin to the roof? Sure hope he wasn't expecting a seat!

But even more interesting was me trying to figure out how to start the car. You turn the key and nothing happens. OK, it's a diesel, maybe there's a sequence to it. So we dig out the French-only manual, find the section on starting the car, and it goes into great detail (in French), appearing to say there are three positions for the ignition switch, of which we can only find two. OK, maybe I'm not translating it very well? Undoubtedly true! Whatever the case, I just can't get the thing to start. Being a guy, I don't give up until well after the rental office has closed, but I did actually go and check. Finally we spot somebody wandering through the lot (I believe an employee for one of the other car companies) who cannot speak one word of English not has much interest in figuring out bad (*really* bad) French. But somehow we communicate that we can't get the thing started, mainly by showing him the relevant part of the manual. So he tries himself, and the darned thing starts right up. And y'know why? 'Cuz you have to turn the wheel a bit to unlock the mechanism, just like any other car. I was so hung up on the idea I was doing something wrong (because it was a diesel) that I overlooked the obvious.

From there on things went smoothly; the car's easy to drive (although cycling shoes seem to make your braking a bit ham-fisted), and I found our way back to Tarbes. Even though we arrived last night, today is our first chance to actually see the town we're staying in. It's actually quite nice, with no areas we've seen that you wouldn't feel safe walking alone at night. Not sure why but it's pretty much exclusively "French" as far as tourists go, which is fine by me. It's a lot more fun that way (although I'll admit that the desk folk at the Etap hotel we're staying in speak very

good English). Right it's 3:30pm in France, and I'm in the hotel room with the French 'Tour coverage on, and Phil & Paul coming through on the computer via the 'net. Let's see... so it's 6:30am back home, which means Burt, one of our Redwood City guys, has already been up for several hours watching the TV. I don't know what's crazier... getting up just past 4am to watch live coverage on TV, or flying to France to see it in person!

7/22/07- (pm edition) *THERE'S A GOOD & BAD SIDE TO TARBES.* My initial impression of Tarbes was quite favorable, based on its rather "unspoiled" nature as something other than a touristy place for Americans (or, for that matter, anyone but the French). But there appears to be a downside to that as well. I wouldn't quite say that the town infrastructure is backward, but its people, some of them, well... they live in that version of France that confounds many Americans. A version in which you go into a local cafe and ask to see a menu (and "menu" is one of those pretty darned universal words) and the first thing they want to do is find someone who speaks English. Well guess what? You *can* communicate in severely flawed French and severely flawed English *if you want to try!* And in Tarbes, a good number of people clearly do not. Very strange. Later this evening (an evening that went on forever, as the restaurant seemed to lose track of each course of it) my son & I dined in a fairly nice (food was exceptional and pricing fairly steep) place, in which the most English offered was a rather-well-perfected "Sorry, I don't speak English." To which you're thinking fine, maybe she doesn't. Trouble is, I had asked for, en Francaise, "Eau Ordinaire." French for plain tap water.



The upshot of the endless dinner ordeal (which started at about 8:10pm and ended at 10:55) was that we got to ride back in the dark, without lights, to our hotel. Fortunately the city's fairly well lit up, so it was more an adventure than a dangerous ordeal, but it certainly wasn't part of our plan. In fact, we'd left for dinner *far* earlier, but spent about an hour circling the city looking for the very few places that are open on Sundays. I'd guess there might be 100+ places to eat in Tarbes, of which maybe 6 were open.

OK, so you don't think I can make my case with a couple anecdotes. Here's another. For lunch we found a very nice family-run Pizza place (Tarbes seems to have quite a few Pizza places, by the way). Excellent service, excellent food. Had fun figuring out the menu with them. But they couldn't figure out what to do with a US-style credit card, which doesn't have a "chip" in it. European cards have little coded ICs so they don't have to be "swiped", just inserted into a slot in the machine. No scanning of a strip, like in the US. OK, so that's one place. Well, it also happened at the previous-night's dinner, and again at tonight's endless meal ordeal. In each case they'd look at my card and look at me and wonder, what's this? Why is this card different? Well, it isn't any different than any of the other 100 million+ cards probably issued in the US, with commercials telling you they work anywhere and everywhere. And in each case, these establishments had machines that did work with the card. They just didn't have people who knew what to do with them until they found someone who could help figure it out. (The credit-card snafus are meant to support my premise that they don't have much contact with Americans, and are not an indication of poor behavior or whatever).

That's the charm, and the downside, to spending time in a less-touristy, urbanized area of France. If you're in a more rural area, even one that doesn't see many tourists (perhaps especially so?), it's quite different. People seem to have a *desire* to communicate. I think that's normal. That's my own bias, I'll admit. I think there is, or should be, a desire to try and learn something about others, and help them communicate. I don't get mad when somebody thinks someone who can't speak French well isn't worth the time of day. I don't even get frustrated. Rather, I get a little bit sad.

Maybe that's why when, if I'm on the floor and I overhear someone asking one of our salespeople for a "camera", I'll quickly stop what I'm doing and explain to the salesperson that they're asking for a bicycle tube. It wasn't all that long ago that I would have been thinking that somebody coming into our store and expecting someone on our staff to speak Spanish was an unreasonable person, not someone to spend much time with. And I still believe that, if you live in a country, you ought to learn the language spoken by most of its people. But I'm also convinced that, no matter what someone's situation is, we should do whatever we can to try and make their day just a little bit better. I know I fail, too often, in this regard. I know I can do better, and I will try. That's the message I take away with me from today's encounter with a few of the citizens of Tarbes. A few, mind you. There were many others... well, OK, a few others, who knew that the best communication was often 10% verbal and 90% smile.

07/23/07- (am edition)- *THE FIRST BIG DAY* looms ahead of us, as we finally visit the Tour de France in-person. The Port du Bales is our destination; we'll be driving to the base and riding up as far as we can. How far? Just don't know. Film at eleven, as they say!

07/23/07- (pm edition)- ABOUT 4 MONTHS OF PLANNING WENT INTO THIS RIDE and he pulled it off. Kevin (the 14-year-old) had started improving significantly this past winter, and I'd decided that maybe he could handle something like Ragbrai, that big rolling party of a ride in the midwest, held each July. But then I got to thinking a bit more, and wondered if maybe, just maybe, he could handle the climbs of the Tour de France and actually watch the race. A pretty crazy idea, to be sure, but his sister did the Europe thing with Mom and a group from her school when she was 14, and this seemed like something so far-fetched that it just might work.

And today the impossible happened. Kevin made it up the Port du Bales, an HC-rated climb (beyond-category, meaning the toughest rating for a climb in France), without a whole lot of trouble. Oh sure, Dad had retrofitted his own bike with a handlebar bag and seatpost-mounted rack with a large racktop bag, so a lot of water & food & clothing could be carried, but still it was Kevin who climbed the mountain, waited first for the Caravan (and snagged an Aquarrel bottle first-try!) and then got some good shots (better than Dad for most of them, actually) as the riders crossed the top. It was easier than he expected, but not so easy that he didn't walk maybe 300 meters between the 4 & 3km signposts, where the grade pitched up pretty nastily. And from about 6km to go we made it a point to stop at each kilometer sign and take a breather. The idea isn't to get to the top as fast as possible; the idea is just to get there, period. An idea that seemed impossible not that long ago.

No doubt this is something he's going to talk to his friends at school about, as well as the other kids he races at the Velodrome with. And that's exactly according to plan, because the more he talks about it, the more motivated he's going to be to keep it up, because, in a way, he'll be getting some peer pressure from his friends to. And I can think of a lot worse things a 14 year old boy can be doing that steadily getting himself into shape, on a bicycle, no less. Plus, it gives him a sense of accomplishment, a degree of self-esteem and even direction, that a 14 year old boy can definitely use. Especially since his sister is now in College and has a plan for her life that she's working on. We'll know a bit more on Wednesday, as he takes on the Col d'Aubisque.

07/24/07- I WAS GOING TO SHOW YOU PHOTOS OF THE ASTANA TEAM AT THEIR HOTEL, but now? Strange day. Supposedly a "rest" day for the Tour de France, but that wasn't the case for either the 'Tour or ourselves. We had a catch-up day that involved driving to Pau to pick up some passes for Thursday's stage (which involved a whole lot of cruising around Pau looking for the Discovery Team hotel), trying to get a larger rental car (not available), hanging out at the Rabobank etc hotel, checking out the TdF monument on the highway between Tarbes & Pau (which is unfortunately on a toll road so, near as I can tell, no way to see it by bike!), spending a whole lot of time finding the only Laundromat in Tarbes, then riding off to find dinner and pick up the now-dried clothes, only to find upon our return that somebody backed into our rental car in the hotel parking lot while we were gone (leaving no note)!

And of course learning after dinner that Vino tested positive for doping. All this makes tomorrow's climb up the Col d'Aubisque seem not so tough!

RASMUSSEN'S FINAL MOMENTS IN YELLOW. POSSIBLY THE FINAL MOMENTS OF HIS CAREER.

How ironic that I removed my editorial piece about doping in bike racing just a day before the first big scandal of this year's Tour de France broke- that being Vinokourov's positive test for blood doping, and two days before the Yellow Jersey himself, Rasmussen, is pulled out of the race by his team due to irregularities regarding missed (required) doping tests in the past.

To add even further to the chaos, the Cofidis team learned of a positive drug test result on one of their riders (Moreni), who isn't even requesting further testing (pretty much an admission of guilt, particularly when he apologized to his team). Cofidis has now withdrawn their entire team, leaving the race short both Astana and Cofidis squads, as well as the leader of Rabobank (Rasmussen).



Sadly, this puts Discovery's Contador into the lead in a manner certainly not to his liking. He will, almost assuredly, win the 2007 Tour de France, but it is destined to be remembered as yet another 'Tour with an asterisk attached to it, pretty much the same way many will view Barry Bond's accomplishment when he breaks Hank Aaron's home run record. Only in Contador's case, his record will be tarnished not by anything he did, but someone else. That's got to be the worst way to win the Tour de France.

As my son & I climbed the Col d'Aubisque today, in advance of the race, people everywhere could be seen reading a paper with a huge headline that said (in French), "Tour in Chaos."

07/25/07- THE CHAOS THAT IS THE 2007 TOUR DE FRANCE IS NOT AFFECTING MY SON, which is, I think, a good thing. At some point he needs to learn about heroes with feet of clay, and what it means to have the world on your shoulders but not be worthy of the task, but for now, while such things are quite present in my thinking, it's best that he enjoys his time in France and sees the world's greatest bicycle race as just that. Today we climbed another HC (beyond category) climb, the Col d'Aubisque. He had very little trouble with it, and when he got to the 400 meters to go banners, the darned kid starts sprinting!!! I was literally having trouble keeping up with him, not that the 25 or so pounds of racks and food and extra clothing and water aren't having some effect on me by that point. Still... the message is clear. Big monster hills won't stop him. Slow him down, yes. Stop for several breaks as we approach the top (during the final 6k, I called for a madatory stop at each kilometer marker remaining), yes. But when I think about how far he has come over the last year, it's quite remarkable.

Oh yeah, he did get a kick out of coming back down the mountain amidst a pack of racers, including Christophe Moreau. Pretty cool thing for a 14 year old. Moreau was a bit more skilled at threading through the crowds on the way down, but Kevin says if he comes out our way, he'll take him on 84. I had to explain to Kevin that no, that's not terribly likely... :->)

In the meantime, you can see today's photo and editorial on our main page (www.ChainReaction.com).



07/26/07- A DAY IN THE VILLAGE AT THE TOUR DE FRANCE starts well ahead of time by either putting up some serious dollars with a tour group that has the connections, or knowing someone yourself in high places. Fortunately this was one of those times where I did, in fact, know the right person who was able to get my son & I a couple of passes to the "Village" at the start of today's stage. The "Village" is a fenced-off secured area where the riders and media and celebrities and such hang out. I'd been into the Village on one other occasion, way back in 2000 during my first visit to France. Not sure how I got in that time, but it was definitely a lot easier than it is now.

The spotlight is on 2nd-place Cadel Evans (Three years ago, this press mob would have been surrounding Lance Armstrong). But today the media attention is all over Cadel Evans, the no-longer long shot to win the Tour de France. He still has about two minutes between himself and Discovery's Contador standing in his way though, and that won't be an easy task.

Evans is an excellent time trialist, and the odds favor him beating Contador in Saturday's 55 kilometer race against the clock. But Contador, the current holder of the Yellow Jersey (after Rasmussen was pulled from the 'Tour due to possibly-intentional missing of drug tests in June), may find sudden strength with that jersey, as many others have in the past.

You'll note that 1st-place Contador is not wearing the Yellow Jersey in today's (Thursday's) stage, a decision made by the Tour de France organization after having Rasmussen, the former leader of the race, removed from the event.

Getting the Yellow Jersey due to the misfortunes of others isn't a great way to get it anyway, and the "White" jersey he's seen wearing (for Best Young Rider) still carries quite a bit of weight in prestige.

Shortly after the end of today's stage, Contador was in fact given the Yellow Jersey, which he will wear at least through Saturday, assuming he doesn't get injured.





Levi Leipheimer moves into 3rd place, a position he would like to improve upon, which would require him to beat Evans in the final time trial by just under a minute.

So barring a disastrous time trial for Contador, Evans and Levi, they are the *only* contenders at this point for the 3 places on the final podium, since the next-best rider is another 3 minutes back.

Of the three, only Cadel somehow seems to have escaped the harshness of media and fans believing that they didn't earn their newfound positions, probably because he doesn't have the strong



team behind him that Discovery offers both Levi and Contador. Not that Chris Horner isn't a good person to have in your corner, but Chris seems to be the *only* person in Cadel's corner on the Lotto team. Sprinters just aren't much good in the mountains.

Speaking of Chris Horner, here he is posing with Kevin before the start of today's stage. Chris is one of the most sought-after interviews in the English-speaking media, because he always has something (intelligent) to say and doesn't mind the glare of the spotlights.

But Chris Horner wasn't the only celebrity Kevin got to see. Here he is having a polka-dot



King of the Mountains jersey signed by none other than Richard Virenque, 7-time winner of that title.

This is significant for Kevin because that's his favorite riding jersey (not a signed one, of course!) and after having ridden both the Port du Bales and Col d'Aubisque in the last few days, it seemed particularly appropriate.

Of course, he didn't know who or what Virenque was until I pointed him out, at which point my wallet became precisely 65 euro lighter since Kevin had to buy a jersey to have signed.

I tried to get Kevin interested in posing with the polka-dot-clad podium girls nearby, but he wasn't interested. Is life really that simple when you're 14?

07/27/07- I'VE ALWAYS

WANTED TO DO THIS! (That would be putting up a photo from the Tour de France while the stage is still going on).



You're looking at the Discovery and (a bit hard to see, but they're right behind) Lotto trains, protecting Contador and Cadel Evans as the main field moves through Perigueux. Several minutes ahead... actually 17... are four riders of little consequence to the overall standings- Laurent Lefevre, Axel Merckx (yes, son of Eddy Merckx), Michael Boogerd and Sandy Casar. My money's on Boogerd to win the stage. (OK, the race is now over, I called that one wrong as Sandy Casar, injured earlier in the stage when a dog ran in front of him, pulled off the win of his life literally riding away from the other three).

Tomorrow's the **BIG** day of the 'Tour, a 55 kilometer flat time trial that could rearrange the top-3, who are currently

Contador, Evans and Levi. Any one of those three could end up in Yellow at the finish, but my money is still on Contador. Levi is the long shot, but who knows? It will be a race to watch! --Mike--

07/28/07- WHEN THE 'TOUR HAS A "REST" DAY, THEY'RE TRAVELING. WHEN I HAVE A TRAVEL DAY, I'M CERTAINLY NOT RESTING!

I would love to tell you that my son & I spent the day at the final Time Trial, getting great photos of Evans, Levi & Contador. The reality was quite different though. It started at 7am (for Kevin, about 7:30; I let him sleep for a bit) in Perigeux, where we'd spent two nights as the 'Tour traveled through the center of France. But this morning it was time to head a bit north, up to Cognac. It was also the day we'd be ditching our faithful-but-small Peugeot 207... which would prove to be a difficult undertaking as car rental centers tend to be located near railway stations, and the Tour de France start & finishes are rarely far from... train stations. And after dropping off the car we'd be taking the 6:09pm train from Cognac to Angoulume, and another from there to Paris.

It all seemed so simple when I planned this trip out. What I hadn't figured out ahead of time was how to deal with getting back from the car rental place to the train station (ended up leaving a bike in the back, which I rode to the train station) and how badly congested the areas around the race course would be. So we didn't even get to course until almost 2pm, and ended up too nervous about missing connections to stay to the end, so we left about the time the 15th-best rider came through. Dang. Sounds like a great race, from what I read on Cyclingnews!

Tomorrow's another day. We survived the long drive, getting seriously mis-routed around Cognac, the train transfers (more on that later), lugging our bikes & baggage from the train station to our hotel in Paris, and we're ready, seriously ready, for tomorrow's finale on the Champs Elysees. The original plan was to use our bikes to get around the course, but after all the work getting them bagged up for transport, I'm thinking we're going to do the walking thing. Supposed to be a pretty cool day for it too; forecast is for upper-60s and a possibility of light drizzle. That's a *lot* better than the sweltering heat & humidity of years past! --Mike--



07/29/07- CHASING THE DREAM!

Against all the oddmakers and conventional wisdom, Discovery (formerly known as US Postal) has come back with a win at the Tour de France, with a young (24 years old) Spaniard named Alberto Contador showing not only strength in his riding, but the ability to not crack under the pressure of cycling's greatest event.

And it wasn't just Contador that had the Discovery team feeling good about the future. Levi Leipheimer won the final time trial, nearly vaulting past 2nd place Cadel Evans in the overall standings.

And as for me, I'm ready to come home. It's been a fun 10 days away, catching up with the Tour de France in the Pyrenees and following it back to Paris. No tour group this time, just myself, my 14-year-old son, two bikes, trains, planes & automobiles, as they say.

There will be some good stories to tell in the diary section over the next few days, but first we have to make it home, which means lugging all our stuff down the street from our hotel tomorrow morning and hoping that the airport bus has room to take it all. And then hoping that there are no issues with our flight out (which for some reason United says we can't check in on-line for and have to see the agent at the airport).

But we've got tons of photos and memories and a feeling that you *can* think about doing the impossible (in this case, getting Kevin ready for two nasty beyond-category mountain climbs) (plus the logistics of hauling around bikes plus luggage), make plans, and actually do it. And, of course, it helps that we've got

some great people back home at the shop taking care of things while I'm away. See you soon- --Mike--

07/30/07- SPECIAL SURPRISE ON THE TRIP HOME! Last year I was sitting next to Tiger Wood's golf caddy, who was quite a hit on the plane. This year? Something much better... in the row ahead of us, Chris Horner, 15th place in this year's TdF, and primary domestique for Cadel Evans (who finished 2nd). I'll admit that Chris was in Economy+, while last year I was sitting in Biz class, but given that Tiger Wood's caddy likely makes over a million a year...

It took quite a bit of prodding to get my son to go up to Chris for an autograph after landing. It would have been easy for me to handle things myself, but it really seemed like something he ought to handle himself. So we got an autograph and another photo with Chris. Definitely made the trip home a lot more bearable. For what it's worth, Chris had gone through the passport line just ahead of us, so when it was our turn, I mentioned to the passport guy that Chris was a cyclist who'd just finished the Tour de France. To say the guy was unimpressed is an understatement. Sigh.

