



Larry Olmsted, Contributor

I travel to learn, eat, golf, and ski, but mostly for travel's sake

+ Follow (138)

Subscribe

451

LIFESTYLE

|

7/06/2012 @ 8:04AM

|

1,390 views

Watch - And Ride - The 100th Tour De France In Style

+ Comment now

The Tour de France is in full swing and the top riders in cycling's biggest event have support staff, vans, mechanics, and even



A guest on a Ciclismo Classico trip ascends a classic European climb. Note the support van waiting ahead, a key features of these deluxe guided trips.

“domestiques” to bring them fresh water bottles and assist them on rides.

Shouldn't you?

“Le Tour,” as it is known in its home country, began last Saturday and will run through July 22nd. To say the Tour de France is the biggest bicycle race in the world is an understatement – even among American cycling enthusiasts, for most it is the only race they will watch or pay attention to all year (some especially avid fans might tune into the Giro d'Italia or another classic). Imagine the Superbowl or World Series with no actual season first.

For this reason, many recreational cyclists want to experience the thrill and ride a part of the Tour route, which changes annually. This presents several opportunities, including one that is pretty much unique in sports: you can ride on the actual route, during the Tour; ride legendary sections of Tours past and future; or combine these rides with spectator days of watching the main event up close and personal. Imagine if they let you play the front nine at the U.S. Open once the competitors had made the turn. They won't, and that's what makes many of the best Tour de France bike trips special.

The top cycling tour companies do far more than just organize the routes and supply high quality bikes, guides and support, though all that is pretty important to creating a great experience. They can also secure excellent vantage points for viewing the race live, sometimes to the extent of camping out overnight roadside with an RV so that their clients have a comfortable home base from which to watch – the Tour's equivalent of a skybox. Just getting luxury hotel rooms along the route is tricky, but these companies have them booked a year in advance. It's an unbeatable combination – a highly organized ride on some of the most legendary cycling roads on earth coupled with a chance to watch the world's best competing in their premier event.



Few sports allow fans as close access as the Tour de France, with spectators just a few feet away when the race comes by. Photo: Butterfield & Robinson.

While last minute availability may exist with top tour operators for the next couple of weeks, most customers will be planning for 2013 – and it's not too soon. After all, next year's edition will be the historic centennial, the 100th Le Tour, and for this reason the highlights of the route were announced early: it will begin in Corsica and make landfall in France in Nice, continuing through the Cote d'Azur.

To make every trip a “best of,” these tour operators use ground transportation to cherry pick the best sections of the ride, then transport guests in between. Since the race layout change annually, many tour companies combine sections of the current route with some of the most historic and famous segments that have been repeated in many races, even if they are not on tap the current year. For most recreational riders this means attempting the dramatic climbs seen on TV, the best known of all the stages, and none more famous than the Alp d'Huez, though there are many other stiff climbs.

“It is the Alps that will make or break a cycling champion,” said Lauren Hefferon, founder of Ciclismo Classico. “You don't need to pedal like you're worthy of the yellow jersey on our new tour, but you'll definitely come to know the satisfaction of riding world-class terrain.”

Massachusetts-based [Ciclismo Classico](#) was started by Hefferon after she graduated from Cornell with an anthropology degree, studied fine arts in Florence, and rode more than 35,000 miles throughout Europe. She created the company to share her twin passions of Europe and cycling, and she does it right, employing expert guides who do triple duty as mechanics/drivers, guides for cuisine, language, history and customs, as well as your personal trainers and coaches, eager to share you tips and techniques to help you enjoy cycling more. Ciclismo Classico features bikes by legendary Italian manufacturer Bianchi. [Its new French Alps to Riviera tour](#) gives guests the “opportunity” to ascend the Alps, “To make the Golden Galibier, Col d'Izoard and Col de Vars, four of the most infamous and challenging climbs in Tour history. I say “opportunity” because, unlike the pros, paying customers can opt out and grab a ride in the van if their legs give out and their vanity allows. The 9-day trip runs about \$4,700-\$4,900 per person. “Our French Alps to Riviera tour is a one-of-a-kind ride put together by our guides from the area,” said Hefferon. “It takes cyclists from the heart of the mountains made famous by Tour de France legends to the Mediterranean.”

Ciclismo Classico is focused on the route itself, rather than spectator end of the equation, with three summer departures for this trip, not all of which overlap with the Tour. But they are hardly the only high-end tour operator running Tour-related trips. [Butterfield & Robinson](#), a company I have ridden with three times and [written about here before](#) has made this an annual highlight of its roster of worldwide bike trips, and offers [just one departure each year](#) that combines spectating with riding in equal doses. The 7-day trip includes four days in the saddle and three of viewing important stages of the race (around \$6,000). It's the most luxurious of the scheduled trips but also one of the least physically demanding. B&R also offers a wide array of bespoke options for private versions of the itinerary.

“As all our trips are custom, it's easy to plan something for the Tour,” said Cari Gray, a former Butterfield & Robinson veteran who founded [Gray & Co.](#) literally to cater to the active travel needs of billionaires, but the company now casts a bit wider and more affordable net, though the all-custom, deluxe company is still pretty much at the top of the market. “To date we have had clients who want to ride parts of the Tour in Provence, most notably the climb of Mt. Ventoux, but the highlights, the Pyrenees, Alps, Burgundy are all doable for deluxe trips.”



On Tour de France trips run by top cycling tour companies, recreational riders get to challenge the most infamous climbs in cycling, while support – and a fresh water bottle – is always nearby. Photo: Butterfield & Robinson

[Backroads](#) is another very well-known and respected active travel company doing biking, hiking, walking and multi-sport trips around the globe. They run two departures of their 2012 “[World's Greatest Bike Race Casual Inn Trip](#),” both of which dovetail with stages of the race. These Tour de France trips and are a great choice for the aggressive rider – the very first day begins with a 53-mile loop that includes an ascent of the Col du Soulor, which the Tour rates as hors catégorie – beyond categorization – meaning it is harder than their numeric scale of climbs goes. The pros race this in Stage 16 the very next day – and you get to watch them – but only after riding up the Col du Tourmalet, another legendary climb. And so it goes for four more days averaging around 45 miles each day, with lots of vertical, riding ahead of and behind the Tour while watching important stages. The 6-day trips are about \$4,200 per person.

Finally, France specialty active tour company [Discover France](#) offers a number of custom options that combine viewing with riding highlight sections of the Tour, but beginning this year they offer packages that are especially unique, a hassle free way for customers to participate in the otherwise logistically complicated [Le Tape du Tour](#), in which recreational riders get to attempt two complete Tour stages days before the pros, under the same conditions – with roads closed to traffic and full support. These trips are aimed at avid, fit cyclists. The first stage is around 93-miles with five major climbs, the second is closer to 125 miles, also with five major climbs.

As with France itself, there is something for everyone.

Bon chance!