

I went to France and all I got was a fuzzy picture of Chris Froome...

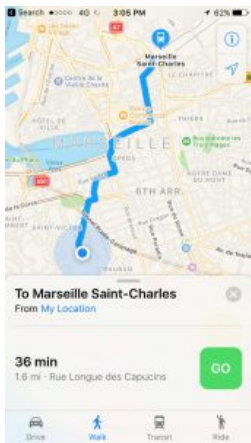


Sorry no update yesterday; we got back pretty late from the time trial in Marseille and had to finish packing and cleaning up the apartment in Grenoble. But I've got a bit of time while on the train from Grenoble to Paris; I get to update things while my friend Larry is asleep against the train's window, looking like a much-older version of my son Kevin.



Last sighting of a built-up Bike Friday night before the time trial.

The day started like any other day in France (except today, which I'll get to shortly). Coffee and pastries from one of the two great patisseries within 50 meters of our apartment in Grenoble. Then a train to Marseille at the very civilized time of 9am, about 2.5 hours with no connections, arriving in Marseille in plenty of time to get our bearings and quickly discover that their Metro (subway) is not going to be of much help because it would take forever to access due to security screening measures. So time to figure out how to do their bike share thing, which would be really easy if, when you chose English as your language on the screen, it actually stayed in English. There are a few things confusing in French, like "retirez" is the option you choose to snag your bike (but I was thinking that was for returning it). Eventually we got the hang of it and pedaled towards the big hill on bikes that were quite heavy, had just 3 speeds, but for some reason pedaled fairly easily. We found a place to eat near the base of the stage's climb, returned the bikes to the nearby bike-share station, and headed up the hill on foot.



Our route from watching the TT to the train station. What did people do before iPhones?

Hill? This time trial course was MEAN! The steepest section was probably 1/4 mile long and well over 10%. We watched from the very top, which mellowed out to maybe 8% for the last 1/4 mile. I know, I'm in France, it should be meters, maybe 500? Larry got better photos than me, as he's a bit more comfortable in crowded quarters than I am. Or maybe it's just that Texas thing (he's from Houston). The tough part for us would be getting back to the train station, because the last rider (Chris Froome) would be coming by at about 5:22pm and our train departed at 6:15. No time to grab and return a bike, no time for the metro (and none close by anyway).

So imagine that you've got 1.6 miles (think it was actually further) to get to the train station, the app says it's going to take 36 minutes under normal conditions, your train leaves in 45 minutes or so and the roads remain closed for a bit after the last rider goes through. And when they do let you get across the street, you're in a huge crush of humanity, moving at a crawl until you spot the odd opening that you sprint through here & there. Finally you get past the worst of it and you "jog" as much as someone who can't put one foot in front of the other can... thinking ohmygosh I could use a bike right now... and of course every traffic light is red, and the train station?



Train station on top of a zillion stairs on top of a hill!

It's on top of a huge hill! Who would put a train station way up on top of a hill? It's times like these you're thinking about one of those "senior lifts" that run up the side of stairs, one of those things you'd make fun of anyone wanting to use, but right then I'd happily pull out my ID to show I'm old enough to "qualify" as feeble based on age alone. Heck, my knees were telling me I needed help. In fact, I'd say that "racing" to the train station was tougher than the hardest climb on my bike this past week! Seriously.

We did end up making it, with at least 8 minutes to spare. Thank goodness for apps that tell you which platform your train will be leaving from; figuring out that alone can easily eat up 5 minutes. But we made it.

It's been an interesting trip, substituting my friend Larry for my son Kevin. On the bike rides, the big difference is that Kevin, if he suffers, suffers in silence. Larry? You and everyone within a kilometer knows when he's suffering! And coming from Houston,

where it's flat, he suffers a lot in the mountains here. On the other hand, he did a lot better than me threading the gauntlet and climbing the hills and steps of Marseille on foot. Sure, I can climb mountains on a bike, but that's about all I can do. Kevin's not much different from me in that regard, he's just faster.

We're now on our final long train trip, two hours on high-speed TGV from Lyon to Paris. Frankly, there remains a lot of not-exactly-fast parts of the TGV journey, probably only 100 mph or so instead of 220. This train takes us straight to CDG (Paris airport) but we're not leaving France just yet! We check into a hotel at the airport, then take a short local train back into Paris to see the finale. We'll be at a Trek Travel function located right on the course, allowing access not just to the race itself but it's also where the riders exit at the end of the race, which is always memorable, seeing the relief, exhausting, and friendships all come together in one place. --MikeJ