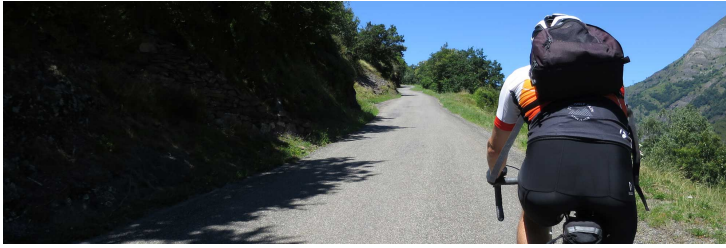


Luz Ardiden is one tough climb!!!



Looks steep, but is actually steeper. There is no easy way up Luz Ardiden!

I'm not sure of the wisdom of doing progressively-harder rides day-by-day ahead of your toughest ride, but that seems to be how things were working out. Today I wanted to do a "local" climb new to us, and that's getting tougher all the time, for as often as we've stayed in this part of France. Either a new ride *or* face down the Tourmalet again, a climb that's repeatedly gotten the best of me. But, I opted for new, and chose Luz Ardiden, the climb that became famous in 2003 when a handbag snagged Lance Armstrong's handlebar, crashing him to the ground and (unknown to him at the time) breaking his frame. He picked himself back up and, of course, won the race. Testosterone-driven rage? Maybe. Unfortunately I had no such performing-enhancing drugs working in my favor today.



The possible coffee place in Lourdes that is closed Mondays

Kevin and I got off to an intentionally-late start, actually wanting to get out in the heat of the day, so we could acclimate ourselves to the forecast hot weather coming up. Of course, we first fueled ourselves on pastries and coffee. Coffee? In Lourdes? Yes, a near impossibility, were it not for the bar adjacent to the next-door train station, which serves up an excellent double-espresso for just 2 euros.



The bike path between Lourdes and all-points west. Actually heading other direction in this photo.

The ride out to Luz Ardiden follows the same path as a ride to Gavarnie, the Tourmalet, the Hautacam and a few others. The long bike path which used to seem like the coolest thing in the world but by now is kind of like, again? But it's well-paved with gentle grades (used to be a rail line), leaving only the very fickle wind to torment you. And today, on the return, it certainly did! But we're not there yet.

There are two ways to climb Luz Ardiden; the normal way, and the way few seem to mention but looks nice on the map. I did quite a bit of research and really couldn't find much information on the alternate routing, that connects up to the main road about 4 very long kilometers to the stop (the last 4 kilometers are ALWAYS longer than the rest, by the way). But there were mentions of it being much quieter, much cooler because most of it is tree-shaded, and also, paradoxically, both steeper and longer. If it's longer, how can it be steeper?



The camp cat

The plan (remember, there's always a plan) was to pick up some cokes before the climb, and, thankfully, right at the base was a campground with camp store/cafe. Yay! Except that I discovered I'd left my wallet back at the hotel, inside the rear pack that I decided not to bring. Kevin had a very limited (20 euros) amount of cash and a credit card. We didn't want to use the cash since we'd be needing to refuel (buy baguettes) later. Amazingly, they were willing to sell us two cokes for a total of 4 euro... on a credit card! Thank you, Charlotte, a nice young woman who spoke English very well and had visited New York for a year.



Kevin talking with Charlotte at the campground we bought the cokes.

Fueled up with coke, we were ready to attack the climb. Anyone here familiar with the first kilometer of Alpe d'Huez? You know, where it's impossibly steep and you're thinking no way can you do this, all the way to the top? Thankfully, it is only a kilometer. Not this road. It starts out steeper than Alpe d'Huez, and keeps it up for a bit over 2 kilometers. And then it levels off. To 8%. And keeps going, and going, and going...

I was actually doing pretty well those first 2k, averaging about 270 watts, and thinking hey, I can do this! And then my new nemesis strikes. Sweat. Sweat pours off my forehead these days, so much so that my stops-anything-from-reaching-my-eyes Halo headband is no longer enough. I'm constantly pushing it against my forehead, trying to squeeze out the sweat, and wiping my eyes. I'm fine for maybe 20 minutes and then... stinging eyes. Particularly my right eye, for whatever reason. From that point on, you just can't keep going like you did earlier. Temperature has some effect, but really not all that much. Mostly it seems to be a side effect of the drug I'm on for my bone marrow issue. Well, if it keeps me alive, sweating is a small price to pay. But I made it, a few minutes behind Kevin who had taken off a kilometer or two prior to the top. Funny thing, excessive sweating with effort isn't supposed to be a side-effect.

Would I recommend the alternate route up? Yes. It's really quite pretty, lots of hairpins, and definitely more shade. But I'd never consider descending it, as the pavement isn't all that great in places. Perfectly suitable for climbing though.



On the return we stopped at our favorite food truck, the green one in the picture, and then back to the bike path for the long, into-the-wind return home. I think part of the problem with that path is that it's always the final leg, and you're getting kinda tired and just want to be back.

So, it looks like having the tough ride today is going to work out after all, due to really questionable weather tomorrow, our first day seeing the "Tour. Originally on tap was a gnarly 75 mile "open jaw" (starts and finishes in two different places) but the possibility of spending quite a bit of time in the rain has changed the plan, so now we're going to just ride 25 miles to the top of the penultimate climb, skipping the final, and then ride straight back to the station. We may be able to make it in time for the 6:30pm train, which would make preparation and sleep for the next day's ride a lot easier.

Film at 11!

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