

Finally made it up Ventoux. Sort of.



This is Kevin (my son, not ex-pilot) in 2009, his first time up Ventoux, my second or third... have lost track). This is as far as I've ever gotten, due to road closures during the race.

Ventoux and I have a bit of history. It was my first big climb in France, on my first trip, back in 2000. A bit of a mess; the day started in the mid-80s but by the time we got to the base of Ventoux (as part of 7000 other cyclists in the "citizen's" event/race at the Tour de France) it was getting a bit cloudy, and as we suffered our way up it got colder and colder and then it rained... I was one of the few prepared for nasty stuff, having experienced a wicked turn of weather for the worse a month prior on Sonora Pass. But many others not so fortunate, one person even dying from exposure. By the time I got to Chalet Raynard, just 4 miles to go, they closed off the summit. I wasn't too happy about that, so close to my goal, but they had to make room for a steady stream of ambulances and busses that were hauling people off the mountain to safety.

The next two trips to Ventoux were with Kevin, and each time we got a bit further before the gendarmes shut down the road. Frustrating, but close enough to enjoy the amazing views and it's one of those climbs where getting that close is close enough to still write you "climbed" Ventoux without attaching an asterisk to it.

I think I've still got it in me to do one more climb up Ventoux, maybe this Summer or the next. Flash forward now to this morning. It was raining outside, so I set up the trainer. Not so bad I couldn't have ridden, but I still need to get the bike set up for it. At 7:45am I did get a text from ex-pilot, wondering where I was. Yikes. So he was brave enough and I was being a wimp? Shortly after came another text, "Just kidding."

I was looking over the various Zwift ride options, and noticed the tab for "France." OK, that might be interesting, what's on tap? The only recognizable one was Ventoux. Did I have enough time for it? What would such an obnoxious grade feel like on a trainer? How would I feel if I didn't make to the top?

It was brutal. I should have started earlier. It was also pretty realistic; I could place every turn, all the steepest parts felt so familiar. Not much of a warm-up, just a couple miles of 4 or 5% grade and then it hits with all cylinders.

It's not THAT long a climb, nothing like the Galibier. Just under 13 miles/21 kilometers, and just over 5000ft. The Galibier is 34 kilometers less 5k descent in the middle, with a total of 6,960ft of climbing. But it's relentless with very long stretches of grade just over 9%. Zwift doesn't quite get the atmosphere right though; in real-life, the mid section of Ventoux is the worst because any view you might have is completely obscured by the forest around you. No such forest on Zwift. And yet they still managed to capture the Lunar-landscape feel toward the top, even without the forest providing contrast.

It's also a bit odd that the view from up high is the sea... definitely not the case in real life. I've read that on a particularly clear day you can catch a glimpse of the Mediterranean, but on Zwift, the sea is everything you see looking south.

That 10k to go marker... where is it? In real life, you live for that 10k to go marker; it feels like you're almost there (nevermind that you've still got over 6 miles, substantially longer than King's 4.3 miles in total). Zwift provides you with a display in miles, but let's have kilometers please; they progress more quickly!

And no food stands on Zwift. There are crowds cheering you on, but if you look not too closely you'll notice it's the same people, usually wearing the same outfits, doing the same waves. One woman even shows up multiple times in the same scenes. Weirdly, you start looking for her.

Time was running out. The idea of finishing by 10am and heading down to the shop with my wife at 10:20 (after a very much required shower) was not a reality. I started to worry this was going to be yet another attempt that didn't quite make it to the top! Surprisingly, I was able to coax more out of my legs the last four miles than I had the rest of the way, spurred on by the dreaded fear of not making the time cut.

I did make it. With two miles to go I decided there really wasn't a choice; I had to. I **think** the very top is a bit different on Zwift than in real life; a big flat area with a road that circles around it, which is kind of the Zwift way of doing things. Kind of like the real-life Barcelonette.

Because I was running late, it was just up the hill, all ascent, no change to race back down and accumulate some miles. This was all effort but very few miles. Did it feel like actually climbing 5000ft in the real world? Surprisingly, yes. I felt the effort for several hours, not something I've previously experienced on Zwift. Much of that might have been from the added 30 or so watts I pushed during the final part of the climb.

Will I do it again? Probably, but with a bit more time, and a bit more of a warm-up before hitting the climb. Will I ever be able to deliver as much power on Zwift as in the real world? Not likely. I did find I was doing better, or at least it felt a bit more real, if I allowed myself to rock side-to-side a bit. But overall I'm convincing myself I can't let rain stop me from getting out in the real world.