

Med to Manche

Great rides

Last summer, 78-year-old Cycling UK member **Vic lent** pedalled 1,000 miles across France, from south coast to north. Here's how he and his e-bike got on

The night train from Paris arrived into Nice around 9am. Soon I was cycling along the Côte d'Azur to Golfe-Juan, where Napoléon landed in 1815

after escaping Elba. My plan was to follow the 200-mile Route Napoléon (route-napoleon.com) to Grenoble, after which I would continue north.

The first day's cycling was short: 32 miles to Grasse, the perfume capital of Provence. I had imagined that sightseeing along the French Riviera would be a relaxing start but this morning the Côte d'Azur was anything but. A grey stormy sea greeted me, dark clouds gathered and torrential rain began.

A Turkish restaurateur at Golfe-Juan welcomed a very wet cyclist. I asked the young waiter where the monument to Napoléon's 1815 landing was. Amazingly, it was only 100m away, near the beach opposite, on which the sun was beginning to shine. I had arrived at the beginning of the Route Napoléon.

Route Napoléon: dynamite

After cycling through the Cannes Film Festival, where I was completely out of place with all the glamorous people and limousines, I turned north into the Alpes-Maritimes. It was quite a climb to the hilltop town of Grasse, with its narrow streets and tall buildings, but the roads were quiet away from the





Fact file Med to Manche

Route: Nice to Dieppe via Cannes, Grenoble, source of the River Loire, Orléans, River Seine and Dieppe.

Distance: 1,000 miles (1,609 km), including 18 in the UK, over 20 days of cycling and two rest days.

Getting there: Ferry to Dieppe. Train to Paris and then a night train to Nice. For details, see bit.ly/vic-ient-night-train-south.

Conditions: Road and cycle paths were excellent; I think I saw one pothole! It was mostly sunny and dry in May and June, with temperatures of 15–23°C and occasional rain.

Maps/guides: Mostly I used IGN Top 100–series paper maps. I also had the IGN Rando app on my phone and The River Loire Cycle Route guide (Cicerone).

Bike: Giant Explorer E+1 touring bike with 2x10 manual gears and five e-bike settings.

Accommodation: There are plenty of campsites, gîtes and hotels en route but few hostels. I stayed in small hotels that cost £50–£95 per night.

I'm glad I had... My French cycling cape, which was excellent for keeping the rain out on the few wet days.

Next time I would... Get a mount for my phone so it could be positioned on my handlebar.

coast. Roadside cycle route markers showed the ascent for each hill and the distance to the top of the col.

Travelling through the mountains of the Alpes-Maritimes and on to the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, I enjoyed crystal-clear mountain air and breathtaking views of distant, snow-covered peaks, along with forests and inviting valleys. I began to appreciate just how big France is.

I'd love to mention all the inviting villages I stayed at along the way, but will settle for describing Castellane. It's an ancient town set around a central square, with sand-coloured buildings fitted with light green and blue shutters. The main feature is a huge rocky outcrop, Le Roc, which rises up above the town. At its summit is the Notre-Dame du Roc chapel.

My ride continued to nearby Lake Verdon, the fourth-largest lake in France, which was created by the hydroelectric dam at its southern end. The turquoise lake is something to behold, with high wooded cliffs to one side and the road backed by steep cliffs to the other.

I continued over the hills into the wide valley of the River Durance, which is bracketed by mountains on either side. My route was a well-made path alongside a wide irrigation canal. It went on for miles. The town of Sisteron is a must-see in the Durance valley. A citadel commands the narrow gap in the mountains at this point. This is where Napoléon was held up by royalist forces. Thanks to them eventually relenting and opening the gates, he was able to go on to Paris.

Following the Loire

The rest of the route to Grenoble consisted of long rides, as I moved away from the River Durance and up some long ascents. One day, after a

Opposite: Vic's arrival at Orléans, with the Joan of Arc statue in the background
Top: A welcome stop in the Alpes-Maritimes
Right: The ancient hilltop town of Aurec-sur-Loire in south-central France



climb of 4,000ft, my battery power was running very low so I stopped at an open-air bar. The barman gladly recharged the battery while I downed a pint in the evening sunshine.

My final stop before Grenoble was at Corps, a picturesque village with a steep valley to one side and mountains to the other. If you want the full old-fashioned French hotel experience, stay here at the Hôtel de la Poste. The maîtresse de maison even provided some escargots to try

as a free extra with my evening meal.

The next day was virtually all downhill to Grenoble, which sits beneath a beautiful arc of snow-clad mountains. From here I followed the rivers Isère and Rhône on some excellent cycleways, including the ViaRhôna. After Valence, I headed up into the Massif Central on a well-made cycleway on a former mining railway line. But this only got me part of the way: I still had some mountainous hills to climb. Finally, I arrived at the →

“The barman gladly recharged the battery while I downed a pint in the evening sunshine”





Above: Arrival at Dieppe. From here, Vic caught a ferry home
Top right: Château De Sully-Sur-Loire. It guarded one of the few places the river could be forded



source of the River Loire (4,619ft), at the foot of Mont Gerbier de Jonc in the Cévennes range.

The route from the source of the River Loire to Orléans is about 375 miles. There isn't a cycle path alongside this first part of the ride, but you do get to cycle through beautiful, undulating countryside dotted with villages and hamlets.

Although there are some hills, you drop from 4,619ft to the pilgrimage town of Le Puy-en-Velay at 2,000ft. This is on the French part of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela.

From here I cycled through the Gorges de la Loire. The views along this stretch offer impressive panoramas, where the clear waters meander between cliffs and steep, wooded hillsides. Eventually I arrived at the fortified medieval village of Aurec-sur-Loire, set on a hilltop overlooking the river.

“It was great cycling on canal paths and on a track along the top of the levees”

Then the landscape spreads out onto a wide alluvial plain. There is still no cycle path alongside the river until you get to Roanne, where I joined a canal path and then an excellent path along a former railway line. I was now in the Burgundy region, and the fields were dotted with the famous Charolais white cattle.

The weather had mostly been good to me but towards the end of the day I got caught in a downpour. It didn't stop me from diverting off my route up to the medieval hilltop town of Sancerre to sample a glass of this region's excellent wine.

The kindness of strangers

The people I met were the biggest bonus of all. In the area of Nevers, I was trying to find the start of the EV6 cycle route when I paused at a patisserie. There I met Margret and Rainer from Germany, who were cycling to the Atlantic on the Loire route. I rode with them for a while and then they guided me onto the route of the EV6 itself. What lovely people! It was great cycling on canal paths and on a track along the top of the levees.

I spent one evening chatting to an old guy accompanied by his little dog. We had a wonderful dinner on the terrace overlooking the River Loire. In his career, he had set up centres all around France for autistic children, long before it became a well-known condition.

Charging points

My e-bike has an 800Wh battery. It provides a good range but there were a few occasions when I ran out of power. One of these was in Alpes-de-Haute-Provence. Here I asked a restaurateur to charge my battery, which he was happy to do. On another occasion, I had a long ride up to the source of the River Loire, with some steep ascents. The tourist office staff were very kind and let me charge my battery in their office.

Along the River Loire there were a few places where there were public charging points near camping/rest areas. On at least two occasions, I had to go to a bike shop. I chose Decathlon as they had charging points outside the shop.

On another occasion, I had a puncture and, as if by magic, a young boy of eight or nine turned up with his grandfather. The boy took over the repair work of the tyre, taking it into their nearby farm workshop, and set about inserting the new innertube. I didn't have to do anything. It was marvellous

Avenue Verte to Dieppe

I left the River Loire at Orléans for the cathedral city of Chartres, and then followed the beautiful River L'Eure valley to the ancient town of Vernon. I crossed the River Seine and went up over the hills to Forges-les-Eaux, where I joined the Avenue Verte to Dieppe. Orléans to Dieppe is just over 300 miles.

At Dieppe, I met two Dutch cyclists who asked if I would do it again. “Actually,” I said, “I could start cycling again now, I enjoyed it so much.”