

I started cycling at age 17. Until then, I just had ridden my bike. I had cycled to school and to friends' houses, and on weekend rambles with my parents and sisters, but I had never ventured out into the hills just for the pleasure of riding.

Every year, I spent a few weeks in Montpellier, France, with my friend Philippe and his family. We had met through a school exchange program years earlier... This time, Philippe was in school while I was on vacation, so I had little to do during the day.

I had Philippe's racing bike at my disposal and southern France at my doorstep. I loved the small villages of the Cevennes mountains, and now I was free to roam and visit them. And roam I did, venturing further every day. At the dinner table, I recounted to my somewhat apprehensive host family where I'd been and what I'd seen.

Philippe also caught the bug. We looked at a Michelin map and found a road marked "*Route Dangereuse*". We were teenagers – we had to explore that road...

The danger of the road turned out to be its steepness, but we had fun grinding up the slope. With my cheap "pocket" camera, I took a photo of Philippe sitting on a kilometer stone 100 km into the ride. When we returned home just in time for dinner, we had ridden close to 150 km (95 miles), more than doubling the longest distance either of us had ever cycled before.

Last summer, post-*Paris-Brest-Paris*, I returned to Philippe and his family for a week-long sabbatical of writing BQ articles and

catching up on work before continuing my trip across France. On Sunday, I decided to return to the roads of my youth.

Armed with two Michelin maps, a few chocolate croissants and a box of *Petit Ecolier* cookies, I head out into the glorious morning. Leaving Montpellier is a little more complicated than it was 30 years ago: Apartments have replaced the vineyards where I used to go for long runs, and the small roads of my youth have turned into four-lane highways dotted with roundabouts. But not for long...

Soon I leave the *agglomération* behind. By the time I reach the second town, Pignan, it feels like little has changed in the last century. Its buildings oscillate between the grand architecture of the nearby city and the simpler structures of the mountain villages. As a teenager, I loved the classicism of the urban style. Now I am more drawn to the simpler, older buildings. The morning sun gives the ocre sandstone a golden hue that complements the azure sky. It's easy to see why this part of the world has inspired painters and poets for centuries.

From here, the road leads into the *garrigue*, the low scrubland that covers the limestone hills of southern France. I remember this stretch of road quite well: It was the first time I encountered a false flat. Back then, I stopped and checked whether something on the bike was broken. I leaned the bike against a kilometer marker to look it over. To my surprise, the bike started to roll backward. The road looked flat to me, but in fact it was heading uphill.

These days, my eyes are more attuned to discerning the slope of the road. Even so, I am surprised by how much my bike slows on this seemingly minor incline. The looks of this road are still deceiving!

The road steepens and curves as it winds its way up the hillside. The gradient now is noticeable, but not so steep that it would discourage a novice. As a teenager, it was in these hills that I got my first "taste for the effort". Today, I increase my power output to avoid shifting my chain onto the small chainring. The lure of the "taste for the effort" remains as strong as it was 30 years ago. It's easy to see why I fell in love with cycling here.

I roll into the big square of Aniane. It looks

The dry hills of the Cevennes are criss-crossed by great roads.



the same as it did when I rested here during one of my first rides. I am grateful that the buildings, the crooked streets, and the cafés under the poplar trees all remain unchanged three decades later, so that I can relive my formative experiences. The only thing that reminds me of the 21st century are the cars parked by the roadside. Gone are the old Citroën 2CV and Ami 6. Their dented bodies were held together with wire, and their license plates often were written by hand. They crawled along the backroads of this region. I loved them, and my dream was to resurrect one of the many Traction Avant “gangster cars” that still littered the scrapyards of France. As a teenager, I didn’t even know about the wonderful bikes of the French constructeurs. Otherwise, I would have dreamt of them instead. Today, I am riding my own René Herse...

Thirty years ago, I didn’t have the money to go to a café, so I just filled my bottle from the fountain in the main square. Getting here already was a major accomplishment. Today, I’ve been on the road for less than two hours, and I continue without stopping.

I cycle up the valley of the Herault until I reach Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert. When I was 13, my family spent a few wonderful weeks in this historic hillside village. We children roamed the narrow streets with our sheepdog, playing hide-and-seek and creating all kinds of mischief. Back then, we knew every nook and cranny of the labyrinthine streets, where many houses were semi-abandoned and the only businesses were a bakery, a small *épicerie* (grocery store) and a cafe or two in the main square.

Today, I sit under the huge poplar tree that shades the entire main square and enjoy an ice cream cone. Saint-Guilhem attracts far more tourists these days, and I notice many restaurants, shops and boutiques. Yet it’s still early in the day, and the only people out are locals walking to the bakery with their shopping bags, as well as restaurant staff sweeping the cobblestones and putting out chairs in preparation for this Sunday’s incursion of tourists. For now, the village feels like it did when I ran around here as a child. I am grateful for this.

I leave as the first tourists arrive and head further up the Herault River. I have never been

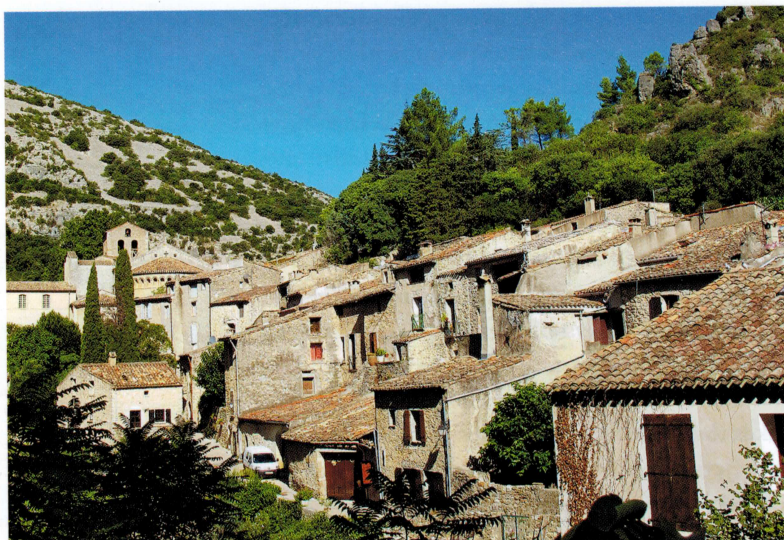
here – as a teenager, my radius rarely exceeded 70 km (45 miles), with the exception of that one long ride on the “dangerous road.”

Below me is the river, almost dry in late summer. With the denuded limestone hills unable to absorb much water, the river rises rapidly when it rains. Signs along the road warn of the *voie submersible*: The road gets inundated after rainfalls. I am glad it hasn’t rained in recent days...

Through the morning, I’ve seen a fair number of cyclists. Many are older men riding bikes that date from the 1970s or 1980s. They wear jerseys of long-gone professional teams. (When did Renault last sponsor a team?) I realize that they are the same men whom I met when I rode here as a teenager. Cycling is an

Early on Sunday, the historic streets of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert are populated only by locals buying their bread.





Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert is one of the most beautiful villages in the Cévennes.



Fountains provide drinking water in many towns.



The baker arrives in Causse-de-la-Selle.

aging sport in France, but I suspect that the main reason for the advanced age of the riders I meet today is more benign: Today is the last day of the school holidays, and many younger cyclists probably are still unpacking from their vacations, if they aren't stuck in interminable traffic jams on France's *autoroutes*. I am grateful that this means fewer tourists and less traffic in these remote hills.

Causse-de-la-Selle is another beautiful village with narrow, shaded streets. It's too small to support any businesses; even the restaurant is closed. Just as I prepare to leave, a van arrives, sounding a distinct klaxon. "*Le boulanger arrive!*" shout the children in a nearby garden, and quickly, men and women gather shopping bags and head into the street, where they buy their baguette and croissants, and use the opportunity to chat with their neighbors. It brings back memories of the butcher and other merchants coming to Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert when I was a child. I'd like to join the locals and buy a few pastries, but my bag still contains the two croissants I bought that morning...

The road drops from here toward Ganges. The day is heating up, and in Brissac, I turn off the main road and roll into the market square. It's typical of the *Midi* (southern France), with its church, poplar trees and café/restaurant. On the balcony above the café, a young woman is hanging laundry to dry. The waitress informs me that they are *complet* for lunch, but I can buy an ice cream bar and a Coca-Cola. With typical French professionalism, she reaches to a shelf with a multitude of branded glasses – Orangina, Coca Cola, Schweppes, etc. Of course, my glass matches my drink... For the people here, it's just everyday life, but for me, this café and this square are the essence of southern France.

I am eager to explore the *Hautes Cévennes*, the real mountains that eluded me as a teen. Toward Sumène, the road follows the valley of the Rieutord River. On the other side of the valley are the mighty viaducts of the railway line that used to penetrate these mountains. Built during the 1870s and abandoned in 1987, the massive stone arches stand as a quasi-permanent testament to the days when the first cyclotourists explored

these mountains, often using the railroad as a jumping-off point. The railroad may not exist any longer, but cyclists still roam these hills, even if I see fewer and fewer with my distance increasing from Montpellier. Now it's mostly locals on casual rides: I pass a young man and his daughter, maybe 8 years old, on mountain bikes. They wave, and I cheer them on.

In Sumène, I leave the abandoned railway behind. The valley narrows and starts to climb in earnest. The road winds from one side of the valley to the other. I traverse the dry river bed on beautiful, single-lane, stone-arched bridges. The few hamlets consist of ancient buildings that look unchanged in decades, if not centuries. Some are abandoned and slowly return to the landscape from which their stones have been taken. It's nice to see that throughout their life cycle, these buildings harmonize with the landscape. Their purpose fulfilled, they fade back into the hillsides.

This is the country that I fell in love with thirty years ago, and it has lost none of its appeal. It's a harsh landscape, lacking the lushness of the Pyrenees or the grandeur of the Alps, but its colors and the bright light of southern France make it unique.

Soon I have to decide whether I want to penetrate further into the Cevennes, or whether I'll start to head east and back to Montpellier. The mountains are tempting, but looking at the Michelin map, I realize that if I continue, I commit to a much larger loop. In that case, there is little hope of returning to my host family in time for dinner. So I choose an eastward road that descends rapidly into the valley. For the next couple of hours, I see only two cars. The road is barely wider than a single car, so I have to be careful in the blind curves. For a while, I wish for Japanese-style mirrors that allow looking around the corner, but I finally decide that the old road, devoid of any signs of modern civilization apart from the tarmac, should not be despoiled with hundreds of mirrors.

I catch up with a local driving a station wagon full of paint buckets and ladders. He is driving well, taking the best lines through the corners and rarely touching the brakes. Even so, he cannot match the cornering grip of my



bike. I brake to let him get ahead, but soon, I am hovering on his rear bumper again. Since he takes up the entire road when cornering and accelerates hard on the straights, there is no way I can pass – until he finally slows and waves me past. I surge ahead, but I also know that I have to be careful, lest I run head-on into another, equally enthusiastic driver who might be coming the other way.

I check my watch and persuade myself that I have a little more time. When the road up the Col de Bantarde beckons, I follow its invitation. A sign explains that tonight, the reconnaissance for next weekend's car rally will run over this road. Now I understand why I have seen a number of enthusiastically driven "hot hatches" on the road. "*Drive slowly out of respect for the locals*", the signs exhort the rally drivers. Let's hope they heed the advice.

Above: Main square in Brissac, with church, café and drying laundry on the balcony.



Traversing the dry bed of the Rieutord River on beautiful, single-lane, stone-arched bridges.

I can see why this road was chosen for the rally. The corners have larger radii than the previous roads, yet the gradient is steeper than before. The sightlines are good for the most part, so I am not too concerned about the fast Renaults and Citroëns approaching from behind. When I hear their engines reverberating among the trees, I move far to the right. They slow as they inch past me, then roar away in a flurry of high-revving engine noise.

The climb is the steepest I have encountered yet. I am working hard in my second-smallest gear. When the trees open up, I get magnificent views over the wooded hills of the Cevennes, dotted with the occasional old stone building. I am enjoying this ride immensely!

I pass through a small village. I need water. Nobody is around, but I spot a faucet connected to a garden hose. I enter the garden, remove the hose – preferring the water directly from the faucet – and fill my bottles, before replacing the hose. Fortunately, most French have a generous view of private property, so

this is OK. Earlier in the day, I saw a sign on a driveway to a remote farm: “*You are entering private property. Please respect this.*” An attitude so different from the “*No trespassing*” signs that litter the Cascades at home...

I reach the Col de Bantarde, having climbed to an elevation of 624 m (2047 ft). Here the rally organizers have set up a desk where the drivers will check in. It reminds me of a randonneur ride.

All roads go downhill from here. I chose the D185, which will take me to another, lower, pass. Then I’ll head south to return to Montpellier. Usually, I prefer the smallest roads, but today, I am glad I overlook the tiny *ancienne route*. The “new” road makes for an absolutely wonderful descent. Winding along the hillside, it’s steep enough that only occasionally pedaling is needed, but not so steep that I have to use the brakes more than occasionally. The pavement is 1.5 cars wide, so I know that, as long as I stay close to the right edge, I should not encounter cars in my way

as I round the many blind corners. I am glad my bike has such precise handling and doesn't tend to run wide in tight turns. On this hot day, my wide tires grip with incredible tenacity. When the road surface is clean and the sightlines are good, I can lean my bike into the turn until it feels like I could touch the ground with my knee like a motorcycle racer. This isn't something I would have done when I was 17, a novice cyclist on narrow, inexpensive tires that felt wooden and offered limited grip. For an exhilarating 20 minutes, I enjoy the descent, before arriving at the Col du Rédares. I have dropped almost 300 m (1000 ft) to arrive at this pass...

From here, the road gently descends to Saint-Hippolyte-du-Fort, where I enjoy another Coca-Cola and ice cream bar and plot my route toward Montpellier. An elderly couple stops to admire my René Herse: "You don't see these very often anymore." They are surprised to learn that my bike is only four years old, but then they connect the dots and ask whether I am the author of the book about the famous constructeur. It turns out that they are bicycle collectors. To top it off, they are good friends with BQ contributor Raymond Henry. It's a small world!

Now I am leaving the mountains, and the landscape opens into wide valleys and gentle ridges. The sun is setting, and the lonesome scrubland is achingly beautiful. I realize that getting back to my host family for dinner will be a stretch. I call them, but I still don't want to get back too late, so I speed up. If I take the direct route, I will be on the busy *Route Nationale*, and I'll have to navigate across the entire *agglomération*. Instead, I have plotted a route on tiny backroads that will take me around Montpellier. It's a bit longer, but navigation will be easier, and most importantly, it will be more fun.

What follows is a blissful ride through the dusk on small and tiny roads that wind through the foothills. The D127E6 is particularly enjoyable, a narrow ribbon of asphalt barely wide enough for a small French car. A three-digit number already guarantees a minor road with little traffic, but the suffix "E6" indicates a sub-road of the already small D127.



Preparations for a car rally: "Drivers, slow down. Think of the locals."



The car rally goes up the D185. It's even better downhill on a bike.



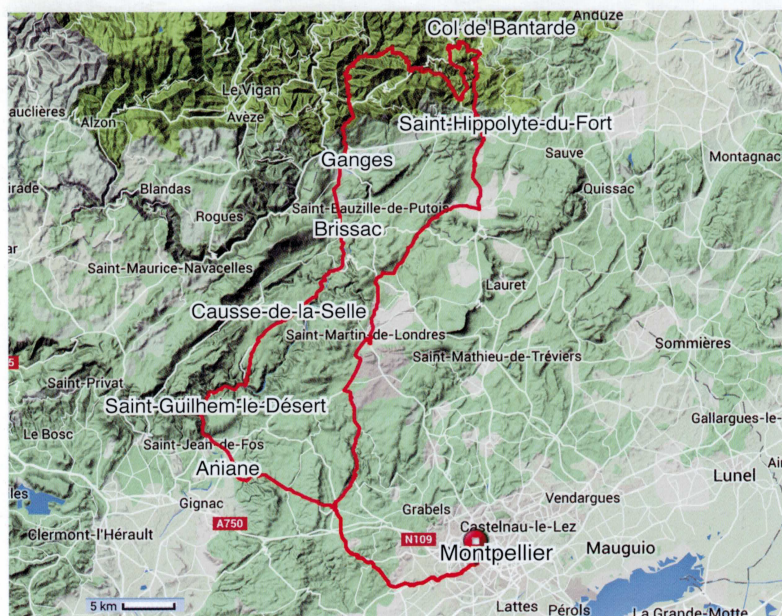
A bicycle collecting couple in Saint-Hippolyte-du-Fort with Jan's bike.



Tiny backroads are more fun than the busy Route Nationale.



Rewards of night-time rides: The full moon rises above the Mediterranean.



A loop of 187 km with 3000 m (10,000 ft) of climbing.

For an hour, I race along the flats, smoothly climb the small rises, and zoom down the descents while the sun sets behind the hills to my right. I have the entire landscape to myself, until I encounter a single car halfway along the road. Then I am alone again, racing through the twilight, completely in sync with the lightweight frame of my bike, its low-trail geometry dialed into my reflexes, its supple tires smoothing the rough pavement and gripping tenaciously in the tight corners. It sounds like a cliché, but the bike really has become an extension of my body in a way that I could not even imagine when I was 17.

For the last few kilometers, I am back on the roads that took me into the hills this morning. It's dark now, and I am glad I am not riding the racing bike of 30 years ago, which did not have lights. Now I simply turn my stem cap switch, and my front and rear lights illuminate, powered by the generator hub.

Riding at night brings rewards that I didn't imagine when I was 17: As I race toward the lights of Montpellier's suburbs, I see a huge orange ball on the southern horizon. It takes me a moment to realize it's the full moon, rising above the Mediterranean Sea. It is so large, so orange, so beautiful!

It has been exciting to rediscover the roads of my youth, but I'm also glad I am not 17 any longer. Everything I've learned – my better command of the French language, my fitness, my bike – has allowed me to venture further into the mountains and to enjoy this ride to the fullest. Those first rides 30 years ago will always be special, but it's thanks to these new developments that my cycling remains fresh and exciting.

When I roll up to the apartment of my host family, Philippe opens the door and shakes his wrist in the typical French gesture that implies trouble. Even though I called, my host family has been terribly worried about me being out in the dark. For them, I'll always be 17! —JH