

Hot ticket

Rookie Anna Gardiner straps in for ride of her life at a scorching L'Étape du Tour, the world's biggest and arguably best mass-participation event

Words Anna Gardiner



Images A.S.O. Bastien Seon



There were no qualifying events, so how hard could it be? That was one of my initial thoughts when

Cycling Plus, through holiday firm Sportive Breaks, suggested, close to Christmas last year, that I ride and report from the 2023 L'Étape du Tour. It's a ride that, for 30 years now, has been giving amateur riders the chance to ride a key stage of the Tour de France, on closed roads. With thousands of riders taking part each July, it might not be the toughest one-day ride in the world, but it's certainly the most prestigious and the most recognisable within the cycling community. I was new-ish to road cycling and had only heard about it second-hand, but knowing this was enough for me to instantly say yes... and then worry about the rest later!

In January, once Christmas was in the rear-view mirror, I knuckled down to training, which roughly followed a plan on the Etape's website. I was largely starting from scratch as, following the 2022 RideLondon event, which I'd written about in *Cycling Plus*, I'd fallen again for my first love: running. It's obviously not training from the ground floor, though, as I have years of endurance training in my back pocket, and that does help. I kept a copy of the course route in front of my Wattbike, boosting my training

motivation through the long winter of 2022/23. The 157km with 4,100m of ascent, from Annemasse to Morzine, captivated and bothered me. The course profile was like a sawtooth. Three category 1 climbs (Col de Cou, Col de Feu and Col de la Ramaz), all before a brutal finale on the *hors catégorie* Col de Joux Plane, one of the most feared climbs in the pro peloton, with its 11.6km over an average gradient of 8.5%. It'd be wretched in isolation, let alone at the end of a long, hot day.

Training meant five to 10 hours a week around family, work and life, typically two hard turbo sessions and one long ride at the weekend. The planning of the trip – the travel, transfers, lodgings and meals – would have been one job too many alongside everything else, so I was grateful that Sportive Breaks took charge of it all. The weeks ticked by slowly, then quickly, and in seemingly no time at all I was staring out of a plane window on my way to Geneva, followed by a bus transfer to

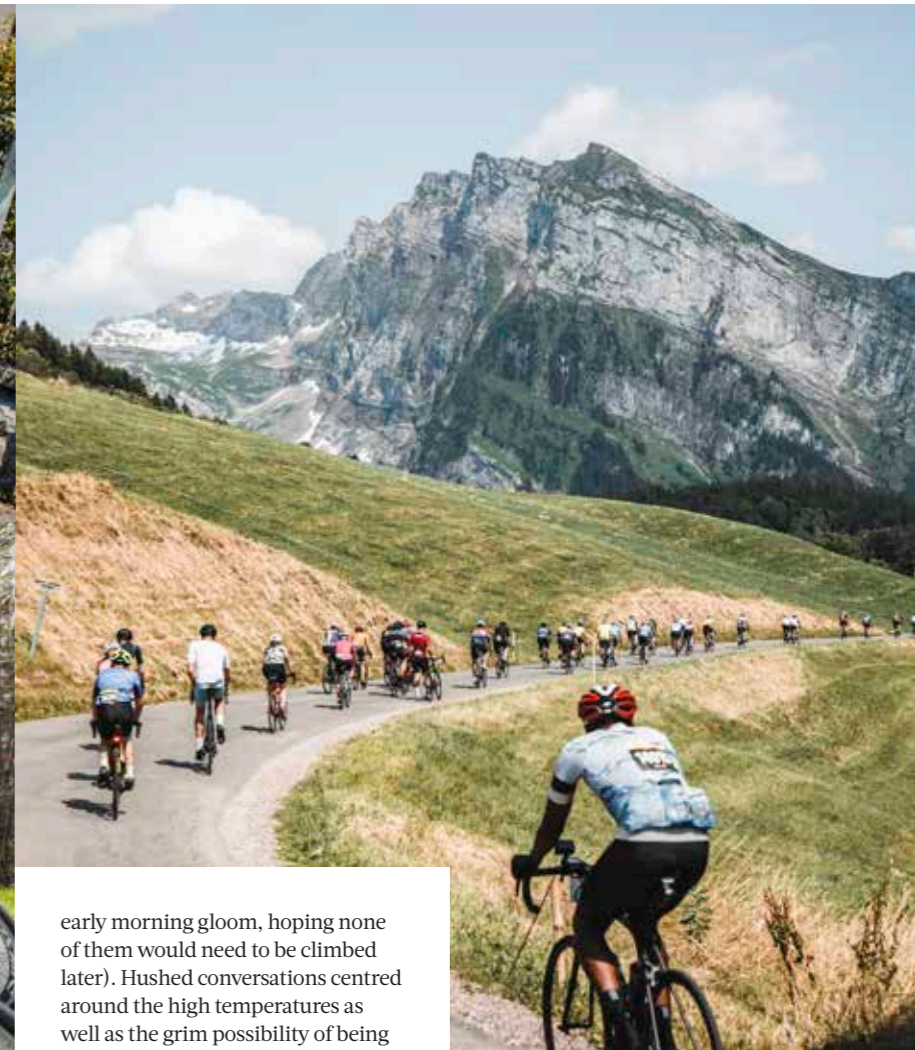
our base in Morzine, for the start. The only time I've climbed 'proper' hills outside of my home county, Wiltshire, in my training was for a trip to The Tumble, outside Abergavenny in South Wales. On that ride I'd met some riders doing hill reps for charity, who then just so happened to be on the same bus as they too made their way to Morzine for their first ever Etape. We all had a laugh at what we were about to attempt.

Briefing encounters

New to the mountains, I was eager to take Sportive Breaks up on their offer of a warm-up ride, on the Saturday, the day before the Etape, with their

Above You ride the same route that the real pros will be covering a week later

Right Anna on her warm-up ride in the goat village on the Col de la Joux Verte



early morning gloom, hoping none of them would need to be climbed later). Hushed conversations centred around the high temperatures as well as the grim possibility of being hoovered up by the broom wagon, for riders like myself who'd be starting at the back.

The race village was basic but luckily our hotel had supplied a breakfast bag (although sadly not loo roll as not much was supplied in the cubicles).

The nervous mass start quickly eased as thousands of riders spread out across the road and began to enjoy the gorgeous scenery. The road surfaces were a treat after the potholed, broken roads of Wiltshire, and this was coupled with close-to-perfect conditions, with the low sun not yet fully powered up.

I didn't get too excited with my pace, sticking to my pre-ride strategy and maintaining the fuelling that had worked for me on long training rides. Every 20 minutes I ate a bite of a Veloforte bar, or a square of fruit loaf with peanut butter, plus a bit more than that every hour, as well as drinking Active Root carbohydrate sports drinks.

The French spectators were very generous, showing as much enthusiasm and love to us amateurs

as they do to the pros at the Tour de France. In populated areas, the cries of "Allez! allez!", and for the few women riding the event, "Allez les filles!" really did boost morale, as did their love of throwing water on us. Later on, up the final climb of the Col de Joux Plane, I would ride so slowly up one section that someone walked alongside pouring water from a vase down my back, giving me what I took as words of encouragement and respect. Their generosity of spirit (and water) saved the day for many, although at one point I had a wobbly moment with one chap using a power hose that was more like a water cannon left over from the French riots earlier in the summer.

Hot, hot heat

The first three smaller mountain passes were not to be taken lightly, particularly as they came along quickly one after the other. I tackled them strongly, inwardly thanking my genes and knocking alcohol on the

Top The atmosphere is amazing, with plenty of encouragement

Above People did resort to walking up some of the steep sections

Above right You can enjoy lots of amazing traffic-free descents

experienced road crew, including an aperitif on the Col de la Joux Verte (12.5km at 6.4%). It was great to meet fellow competitors, share race nerves, stroke goats in the goat village, marvel at screensaver views and know there'd be at least a few familiar faces among the thousands on the day.

The race briefing delivered later that afternoon brought us back down to earth, warning that, although the focus should be on the two big climbs towards the back end of the route, the first three climbs were not to be underrated, particularly with their lack of shade on a searingly hot day.

Race day began very early. Our hotel was close to the finish line in Morzine, which meant being on a coach to transfer to the start line in Annemasse at 4am before the roads were shut. The journey allowed time to question life choices as we wound our way through picturesque villages (and peered worriedly up at mountains looming through the



and was naïve to think I'd broken the back of the route.

There were some joyous descents through wooded, shaded sections, giving the chance to recover or make up some time. These were fine moments to absorb my surroundings and, not distracted by the pain on the climbs, remind myself of what an amazing experience this was, and of the 160 hours of training that I'd put in to prepare me for the ride.

By the time the Col de la Ramaz appeared at 85km, the heat was oppressive. It has a particularly steep section before a dark tunnel, which offered shelter from the burning sun. More people than was safe at any one time decided to take a break in there and, as I was really beginning to suffer, I joined them. I felt disappointed with myself – climbing is my ace card – but given so many others were also hurting, I reframed it as a strategic action.

Top Using the water-over-the-head cooling technique for some relief

Above Ouch! Some people do take the event pretty seriously

Above right You can imagine you're in the real Tour de France as onlookers cheer you on

“After a phone call home, some food, water, and encouragement from the team, I felt revived. But I had another 80km left..”

head for six months for having a light frame to haul through the Alps. The road was often narrow on the climbs, so it was hard to find a way through the crowds and maintain a rhythm. I managed to climb them quite quickly, though, enduring good-natured heckling from Brits that I passed. I assured them that they'd reel me back in on the descents, which I tackled with much caution.

The heat soon became so fierce that sections of the asphalt started to soften. I was getting nausea too. I'd tried to stop at a feed station but it was chaotic, with bikes strewn all over the small plateau and men relieving their bladders next to me – five portaloos weren't enough! I left empty handed and quite intimidated. I'd left a bag with a Sportive Breaks private food station at 70km and it appeared as a shimmering vision as I was beginning to flag. After a phone call home, some food, water, and encouragement from the team, I felt revived. But I had another 80km left with the two biggest climbs to come

battlefield, bodies strewn everywhere, dozing, ill, or waiting for the broom wagon. I didn't care, I was trapped in my own dark place. It wasn't the gradient that got me and many others (although it never dips under 6.8%). Heat sickness meant I hadn't eaten in at least ninety minutes and the dregs of my water/carbs drinks were hot. Eventually, after a final punishing 5km at over 9%, the summit appeared, and, glancing at my watch, I realised if I actually did some cycling, I might dip under 10 hours for the ride.

I managed to reach the peak, totally spent and in dire need of hydration, but the top was devoid of water. I had just enough brain function to stop my computer (the timed section finished there to allow for a safer descent into Morzine), pause to admire the view to Mont Blanc, and get back on my bike.

The descent was technical, all steep inclines and sharp hairpins, and required concentration, but happily I could largely freewheel and it was very cooling. Crossing the



Above Men's winner Artus Jaladeau shows off his medal in Morzine

finish line felt emotional as it always does following an endurance event, but more so this time as there had been moments where making the finish on my bike really was in doubt.

Since then, I've had time to contemplate the ride and what I accomplished. It was an amazing experience, but I do feel this event is too big for the organisational capacity. Watering, feeding and

Below The cooling blast of water pistols was welcome on the many hot ascents

looking after 16,000 cyclists is challenging, with narrow roads and safe spots for facility stations. It's unfair for those at the back of the pack and I'm not sure there was enough medical support. Apparently from Morzine, you could hear the mountains ringing with the sound of sirens all day and I saw a number of people waiting for proper medical assistance. It was like zombie movie *Shaun of the Dead* on that last climb! Of course, it's the cyclists' responsibility to be physically prepared for the event, but most of us can't do heat training and it seems that the high temperatures are a feature of L'Étape that are here to stay so hopefully there'll be more provision for heat in future events.

Would I do it again? Never say never! It was spectacular and I'd recommend it if you're prepared to put the training in. This was a ride to enjoy in retrospect and now I feel that I need to go back and do myself justice, not walk, and try to fully enjoy the wonderful atmosphere.

Registration for the 2024 event opens in October, when the Tour de France route is unveiled. Pre-register at letapedutourdefrance.com, or guarantee your place now through travel company Sportive Breaks (sportivebreaks.com) [PLUS](#)

Another Sportive Breaks food stop sat, oasis-like, two thirds of the way up the Ramaz, and as well as a chance to refuel, it was the perfect time to read encouraging messages from friends and family, chat with the team – and to learn that it was 40°C at the finish in Morzine. I felt somewhat justified to be moaning about the heat.

Col de Joux Plane felt like a cruel joke at the end of 125km of mountains. Its start, I thought, would be one last carpe diem moment on the way to the summit, but after the first kilometre at 10%, the wheels came off. Metaphorically speaking, of course, though I wished they actually had fallen from under my bike, as at least I'd have an excuse to give up.

The heat was on

I walked for a bit, cycled the few 7% bits then walked. And walked some more. There was a long line of us trudging, zombie-like, in the blazing sun, a silent march through a



Images A.S.O. Bastien Seon, Morgan Bove