

## Raid Pyrenees

In June, 2010, I participated in the Raid Pyrenees. What follows is my trip report.

For the past three years I have gone to Italy in May for cycling. A few friends from Chicago and I would spend a week at the Hotel Dory, a wonderful cycling hotel south of Rimini, in Riccione. Then a week at the Garden Relais, another nice hotel in Semonzo, at the foot of Monte Grappa. While at Dory we did the Gran Fondo Novo Colli, and while in Semonzo we did the Gran Fondo Sportful. One year we made plans to get up into the higher Dolomites to do another Gran Fondo, the Gavia, Stelvio, and Motirilo, but got snowed out and had to return to Garden Relais.

These trips were wonderful and my cycling mates good travelers, but I got an itch to do something a bit more challenging and unique. I have done the Marmotte, seen Tour stages and Giro stages, and wanted something very much less crowded and just as interesting.

Ah, the wonders of the internet! My attention kept being drawn to the Raid Pyrenees.

When one thinks of a 'raid' one thinks of a sudden attack or an assault. An attack on a fort, or the assault of a mountain top. The 'Raid Pyrenees' is not meant as an assault on the Pyrenees, but more of an assault on one's body. The experience is meant to put the body under stress, to allow the 18 cols of the route to attack the body. What cyclist can pass that up?



The Raid Pyrenees was formalized in 1953 by the Cyclo Club Bearnais of Pau. It is a permanent brevet – a fixed route, with control points,

that can be started anytime. You are allowed 100 hours to go from Hendaye, France, on the Atlantic, to Cerbere, France, on the Mediterranean. It is 710 kms (441 miles). The route goes over 18 cols, many of them made famous by the Tour de France – Aubisque, Tourmalet, d’Aspin, and Portet d’Aspet.

The Cyclo Club Bearnais also recognizes an east to west trip on the same route, and a 10 day 474 mile route that can also be done either way. The 100 hour, west to east trip is the most popular, with about 300 formal registrants each year.

A number of tour companies offer support for the Raid. After reviewing and comparing a few, I picked Pyreeneen Pursuits. The owner, Nick Flanagan, and his company have been mentioned many times in the writings of Graeme Fife. Nick probably has the most experience leading cycling groups in the Pyrenees. Unfortunately Nick seems to be winding down his business, but plans to write a book about his years in the Pyrenees. He has some wonderful cycling stories to tell.

Some of the tour companies that offer Raid Pyrenees trips do not do the proper route. There are some segments where navigation is very tricky. Leading 15 cyclists strung out long the road is easier on a straight road, and even nicer when the detour is shorter than the proper route. One tour company even has a rest day during their “100 hour” jopurney.

I flew into Toulouse via Madrid on Iberia. Some of the French government employees were on strike and the Paris airport was shut down. European flights were a mess. A delayed departure out of Chicago resulted in a missed connection in Madrid, but a later flight to Toulouse got me there in the afternoon, luggage and bike box intact.

Some airlines require a no-cost ‘reservation’ for a bike. You still must pay for oversized luggage. Iberia didn’t require such reservation, and their website indicated a bike was only 75 Euro (\$95), relatively inexpensive. And in fact they only charged me 75 DOLLARS going over.

A telephone call to Nick from the Iberia – Madrid offices allowed him to do some last minute shopping and then wait for my delayed arrival.

During the 2-1/2 hour ride to our base hotel in Massat, Nick gave me an intro to himself and the Raid. I was tired and cranky, wanted a shower and a bed, so I was only half listening. As mentioned above, you can read all about it in his book, which I certainly hope he completes.

The base hotel was a fine place. Nothing fancy, but very adequate. This can be said of all the other hotels on the trip.

Arrival day, Thursday, was an early dinner and early bedtime. A short shakedown ride was scheduled for Friday. At breakfast Nick casually mentioned that there was to be a cyclo sportive on Saturday. My ears perked up. Why not grab for the gusto? Nick didn’t think I was serious about doing it – the Raid was to start Monday morning. But the logistics were so easy. I

could ride over the Col de Port to Tarascon and register for the L'Ariegeoise. A British couple, Derek and Donna, who were Nick's friends, were staying in Massat and Derek was going to do the cycloportive. I could hitch a ride over with them Saturday morning and do the ride with Derek.

It turned out to be a great event. Derek and I were pretty well matched so we rode together. There were three distances for the event, the longest being 185 kms (114 miles), which is what we did. The route was just challenging enough and very picturesque. We rode along a gorgeous corniche road that traversed above a large talc factory. The quarry that supplies the factory is the largest in the world. It was above the corniche road. We rode under the tramway that supplied the factory from the quarry.

The cycloportive's rest/food stops were typically French – crowded and barely adequate. They paled in comparison to those here in Wisconsin for the Horribly Hilly, Insane Terrain, DLD, or any number of others. But they did have figs.

The finish was atop the Plateau de Beille, 8+ miles at an average grade of 8+%. The finishing climb was a real death march. There was very



little shade and it was very warm. I have never seen so many cyclists walking their bikes. Any shade was used by cyclist to rest and cool down. I stopped a few times when I could find shade. It is incredible to think that Tour riders race up for a stage finish. Tour finishers, and especially winners, are near superhuman – with or without artificial enhancements.

I was one of only 9 Americans doing the event. The other 8 were in a group from a bike shop in Madison, WI – what a small world! My finish of 31<sup>st</sup> out of about 90 riders in the 60+ age group was satisfying.

The next day, Sunday, was a leisurely start. We had a 3:00 pm pickup at the Biarritz airport for the second rider in our group. He was coming in from England. Two other

riders from California cancelled at the last minute.

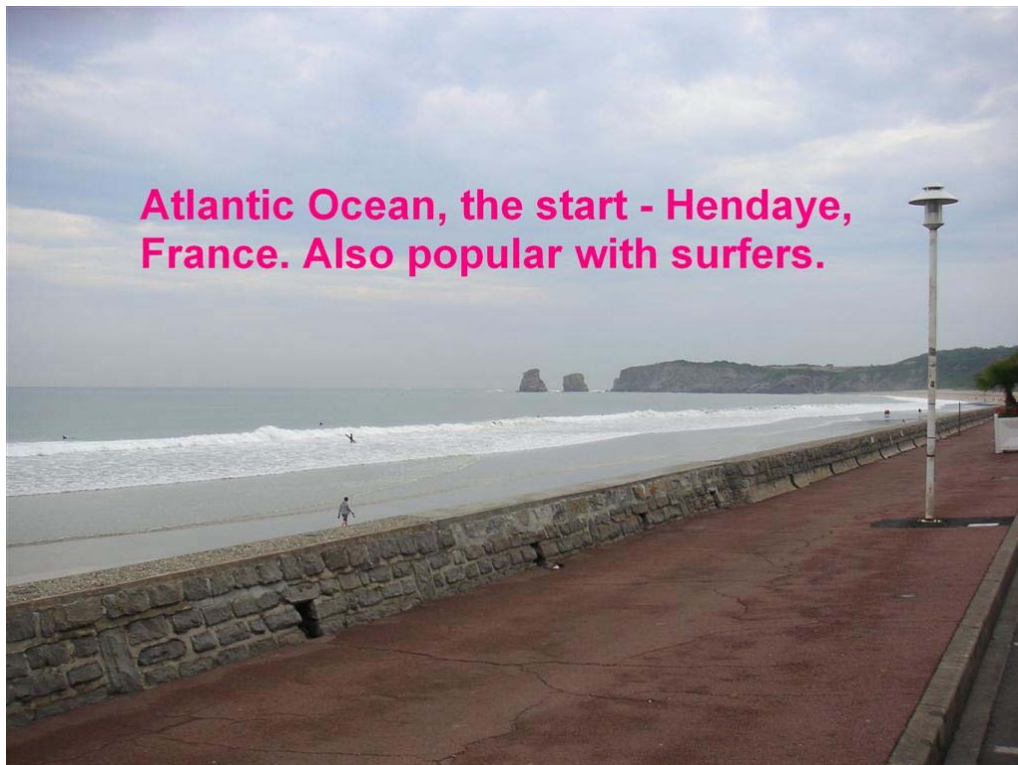
The other two tour companies we came across doing the Raid each had about 15 clients and two large vehicles. Nick's operation is pretty low

key. He prefers 4-6 clients for each of the four Raids he does – two in early summer and two in late summer.

After picking up Paul in Biarritz we got to the Campanile in Hendaye. Campanile is a chain of hotels/restaurants in France. Not inexpensive, but a good value. I also stayed in one at the Toulouse airport before my departure.

Two other cycling groups were staying at the Campanile. Another Raid tour group and a private group that was doing its own Pyrenees traverse route.

At Monday breakfast Nick gave Paul and me our “carnets”. This was the official document that had a route summary and areas for the control stamps. The control stamps could be done by any business in the designated village along the route. The stamp was nothing fancy, just the inked stamp one would use for a return address on an envelope. Nick also gave each of us a map of the day’s route and a general info sheet for the day.



At 9:00 am, after a few photos, the Campanile stamped our carnet, and we followed Nick in his vehicle out of town.

Friday afternoon around 11:00 am we reach the sea at Cerbere. We did the customary toe dip in the water, a few photos, our final stamp, and we had completed the Raid Pyrenees with a few hours to spare.



The end,  
Mediterranean  
Sea, Cerbere,  
France

We were blessed by the weather. A few spots got warm. The descent from the Tourmalet was very cold. Nick has done Raids when it rained everyday. That would be uncomfortable.

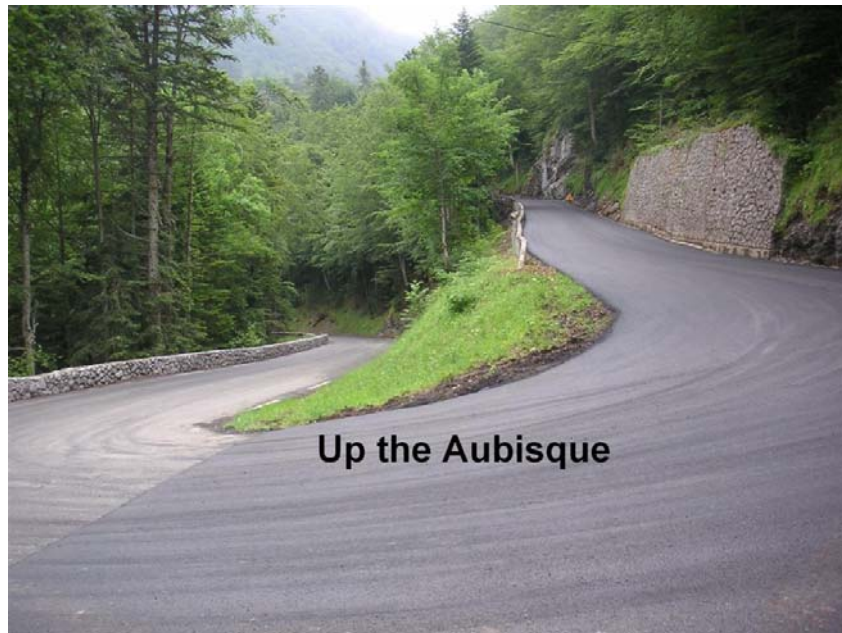
Paul and I were evenly matched. We rode the entire route together. Paul was a demon on the down hills, I was faster on the up hills.

Paul had done the Cape Epic and the John O’Groats to Lands End rides. He knew the ropes of multi-day riding. Packing, laundry, day bag, nourishment, etc. Two of the most valuable things I learned from Paul about long multi-day riding: wash your kit first thing upon arrival at the hotel; and buy a smaller suitcase so you don’t take as much stuff.

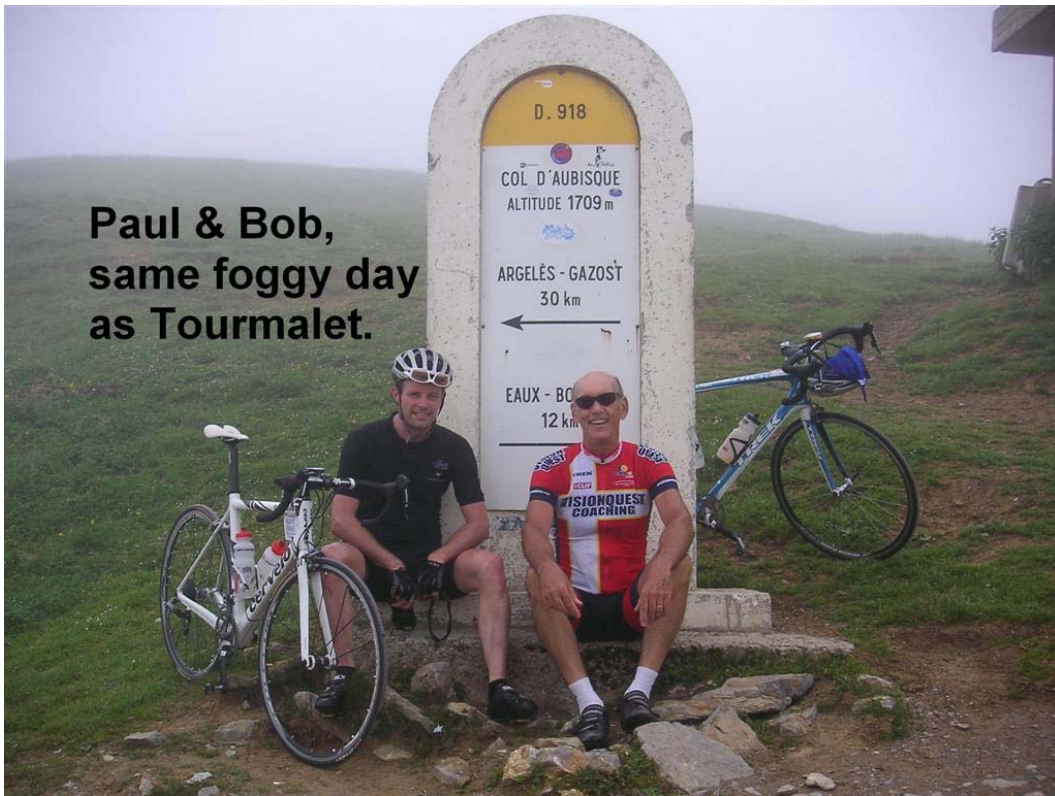
The hotels along the route are not glamorous. There are a limited number of places to stop if you want to smooth out the daily mileage. Each hotel had its own “charm”. Nick has used the same hotels every year so he knew the owners, the menu, etc. There was always plenty of food. A few of the hotels had wi-fi. Others had a bar nearby with service.



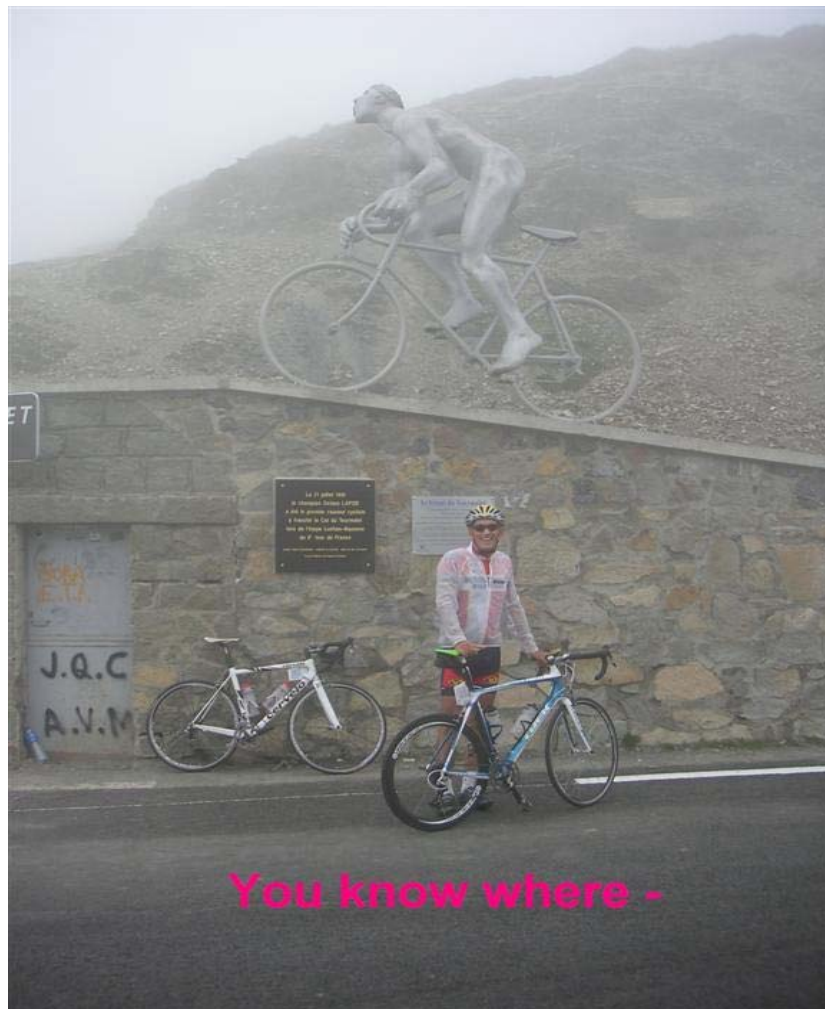
A few sections of the original route have seen an increase in vehicle traffic and have become Michelin “red” roads. Most of the route was on “yellow” roads with the “green stripe”.



**Paul & Bob,  
same foggy day  
as Tourmalet.**



Paul and I each had our “moment” on the route. This was when we almost got off the bike. It took every ounce of energy to just keep the pedals moving. He had his during a long slow gradual incline slog on a blacktop road. It was warm; the road was fairly straight and boring. I just rode a bit in front of him until he got his second round of energy. My moment came toward the end of the next day. I was in a foul mood because I was really drained, and told Paul to go ahead.



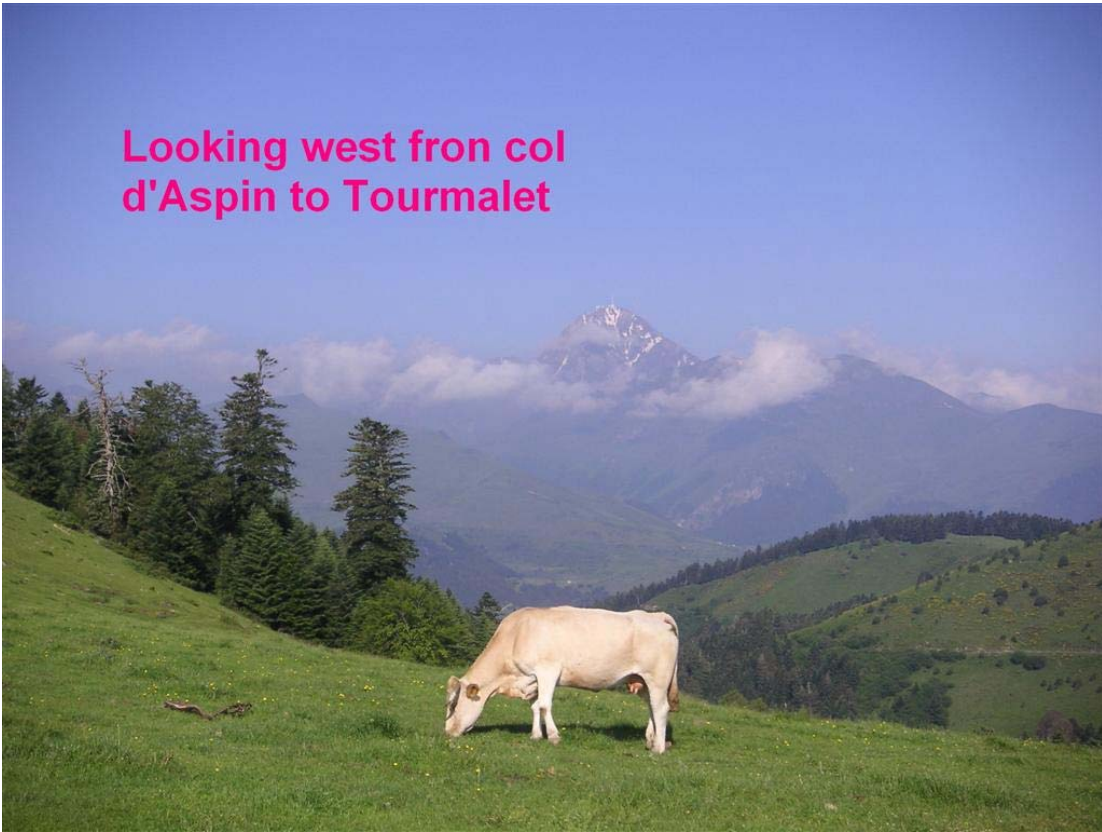
The night's lodging was only about 15 miles up the road. About 20 minutes later I recovered and we rode into the hotel together.

The third and fourth day were mostly on 2010 Tour roads so the pavement was new and smooth. During June a few of the cols were closed to vehicles because of repaving. Nick had to take a long detour because the Aubisque/Souloir was closed to vehicles.



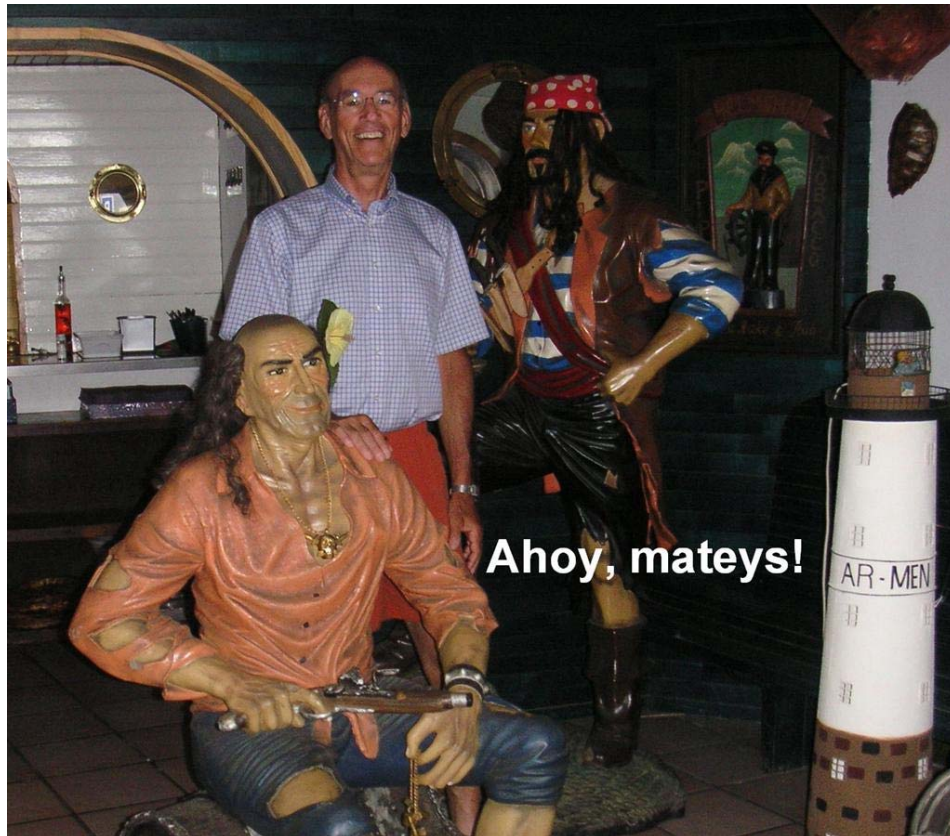
On the internet one can see plenty of professional photos of all the 18 cols we went over. All sorts of statistics can also be had at various climbing websites. Each col was different and spectacular – even the Tourmalet, which was completely fogged in. Stopping atop a col and having a coffee was very enjoyable. Most of the cafes have Tour memorabilia on the walls.

Looking west from col  
d'Aspin to Tourmalet



The entire trip was terrific. I would love to repeat it. But there is a new challenge lurking in the shadows – the Sirocco!

Derek and Donna, the British couple, plan to move to Massat. Donna's executive position allows her to live almost anywhere in Europe. The two of them also hope to lead Raid groups. Their website is [bikealive.com](http://bikealive.com). They plan to offer an east to west registered Raid Pyrenees and a west to east Spanish Raid (traverse the Pyrenees on the Spanish side). How great would it be to do both, back-to-back!



Ahoy, mateys!