

# Pedalling en Français

**Julia Blunden** discovers that there is more to France than yellow jerseys and big mountains.

**R**eaders of *Ride On* know that France is the home of elite cycling. But what does France have to offer riders of more modest ability? Well, quite a bit actually. Apart from the beauty of the scenery and built environment, and its fabulous food and wine, France has a growing network of traffic-free and lightly trafficked routes for touring riders, drivers who treat bike riders with great courtesy, and a veritable smorgasbord of organised cycle tours.

Paris isn't yet in the same league as Copenhagen, but is rapidly becoming a very cycle-friendly city. The cheap bike hire scheme, Vélib, launched in 2007 and has been hugely successful; over 20,000 bikes are now available from 1,800 stations across the city. Paris also has around 400km of signed bike paths. All you need to take advantage of this happy state of affairs is a credit card with a chip and a free Paris à Vélo map.

If you prefer to leave route planning to someone else, try Fat Tyre Bike Tours.

This American company offers city tours, as well as day trips to Monet's Garden and Versailles. The young guides manage their groups with great aplomb, and provide racy and entertaining commentary on the various sights along the way.

Of course there's more to France than Paris and its surrounds. Lonely Planet's *Cycling France* covers twelve different regions suitable for independent bike touring, all with much to offer in the way of scenic and cultural attractions.

## BIKE ON A BOAT

One appealing option for those who prefer to ride unencumbered by luggage is a 'bike and barge' tour. France has an extensive network of rivers and canals, and regions that can be explored in this way include the Loire Valley, Champagne, Burgundy and Provence.

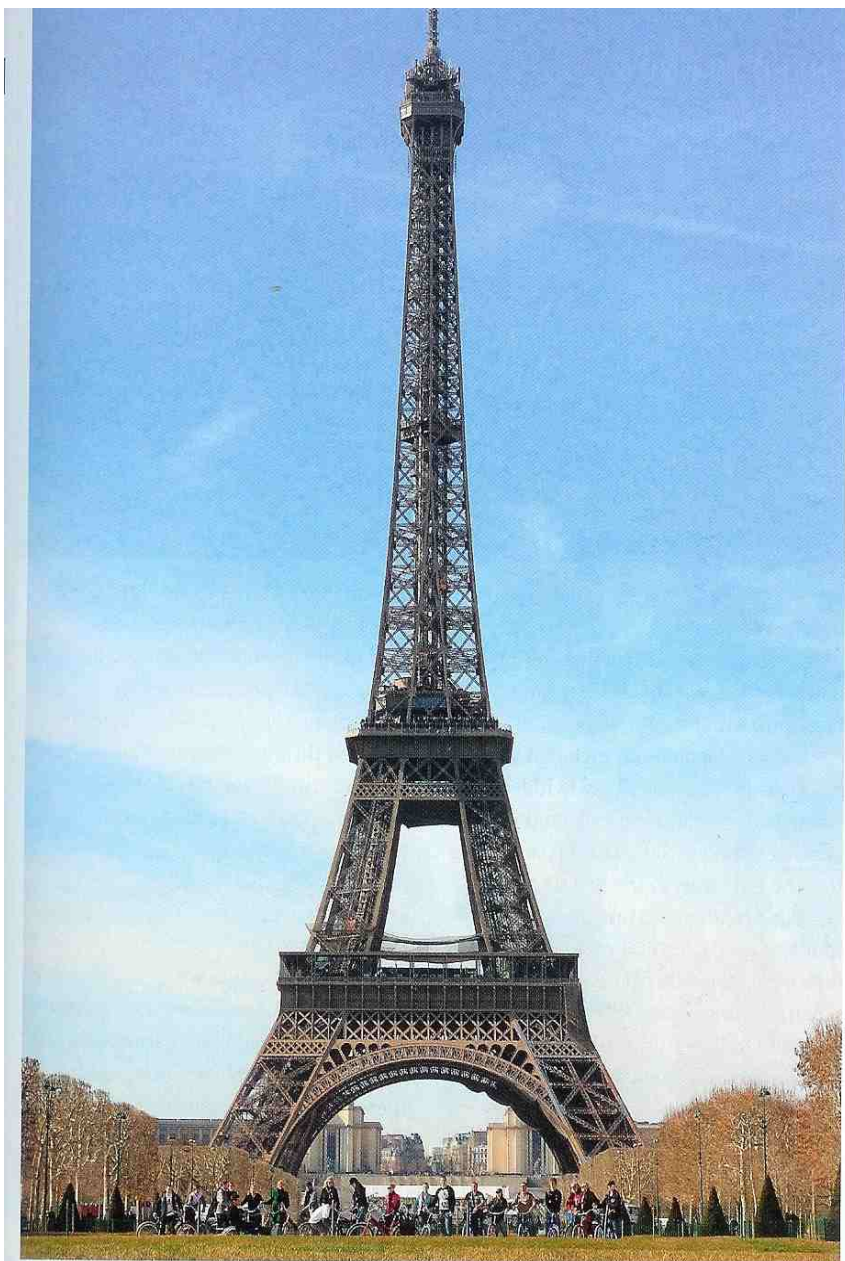
In May this year, my husband and I, along with eighteen others, did a fourteen-day tour from Bruges to Paris on the *Fleur*. She's a beautiful barge. Cut down from a larger vessel to fit snugly into French locks, her interior was designed by her original, female owner with great attention to detail.

When we arrived to board *Fleur* our bikes were lined up ready for us. The shiny red, sturdy hybrids were comfortable and well-suited to the terrain we covered, and as they were equipped with luggage racks and panniers, carrying our gear was never a problem.

Of the four crew and two guides all but one were Dutch, but they spoke excellent English. The guides, Roalie and Albert, were agreeable, competent, multi-lingual, and well-informed about the



Photo: Marlene Robb



places we visited along the way.

Breakfasts were lavish, and with the food provided we also made packed lunches. At around 9am we disembarked for the day's ride. Mostly this was before Fleur set sail but sometimes we were put down along the way. The crew were well-drilled in hoisting bikes and passengers safely ashore at top speed. Some days we all rode together, but more often we split into two groups for a shorter and a longer ride. We rode on quiet roads through sleepy villages or leafy forests, or on towpaths alongside rivers and canals, but occasional stretches on busier roads got the adrenaline pumping. Our routes took in points of interest such as markets, notable buildings, museums or historic sites.

Most days there were morning coffee stops, with lunch eaten in the open where

possible. In rural France tea and coffee can be bought in bars, or a beer or a glass of wine if you prefer, but food isn't generally served. If there's a patisserie or boulangerie nearby you can buy food there and bring it to the bar, or you can eat your packed lunch.

Dinners consisted of three courses prepared with great care, and with fresh, local ingredients as far as possible. Each day our cook, Annalies, rode off on her bicycle to fill her large panniers at the local markets. Wine and other drinks were available at very reasonable prices.

## PEDALLING IN PICARDY

Riding through Belgium and the French region of Picardy we observed all manner of agricultural activity and village life. Architectural gems included the

wonderfully diverse city of Ghent; the magnificent old town hall and cloth market at Oudenaarde, and the remains of the beautiful 12th century Abbey of Vaucelles.

The area we rode through was the scene of much fighting in World War I, as attested by numerous war cemeteries and memorials. We visited a museum in the Armistice Clearing at Rethonde, featuring a train carriage similar to that in which the armistice was signed.

A quirky treat was the Musée Serge Ramond, dedicated to graffiti through the ages, of which the museum's creator has painstakingly taken impressions. These are displayed in no less than 22 rooms. And of course, you can't travel in France without visiting a chateau. The Domaine de Chantilly with its extensive park and magnificent stables filled this requirement nicely.

On our last day of riding, we climbed to the Terrasse de St Germain where, over morning coffee, we enjoyed the stunning view of Paris it commands. Then, after some hairy riding through the suburbs, we visited La Défense, the Manhattan end of Paris, a total contrast to the old city.

The next day we all stayed on board Fleur as she sailed up the Seine through the city to her mooring near the Place de la Bastille. Learning about, and being part of, the river and canal traffic was the greatest highlight of all.

## TOUCHING BASE

Another good option for less intrepid riders is a base camp, where you can stay in comfortable accommodation and explore the surrounding area with day trips by bike.

Alison and John, like many other English people, have taken advantage of the declining population in this charming part of France to invest in property. They've turned the erstwhile farmhouse of Gue de Ray, and its barn, into a cushy base for exploring the Loire Valley, whether by bike or car.

Our five sunny spring days at Gue de Ray, filled with varied and well-planned rides along almost traffic-free roads followed by delicious four-



## NEED TO KNOW

### USEFUL RESOURCES:

*Cycling France*, Lonely Planet, 2009

The Vélip website (English language version) allows you to sign up online and find the nearest bike stations: <http://en.velip.paris.fr>

The free booklet *Paris à Vélo* is available from the Paris Mairie, place de l'Hotel de Ville. You can view a map of Paris bike lanes at <http://bit.ly/q91C8M>

Bike and Barge from Bruges to Paris: <http://bit.ly/r4F4rM>

Fat Tyre Bike Tours: <http://fattirebiketours.com/paris>

Loirelife has information on cycling through the Loire Valley: [www.loirelifecycling.com](http://www.loirelifecycling.com)

Other reputable tour companies include Provence Cycling Holidays ([www.provence-cycling-holidays.com](http://www.provence-cycling-holidays.com)) which offers self-guided tours through the Provence region, and (for the more adventurous riders) Alpine Etape ([www.vanillaski.com/Alpine\\_etape](http://www.vanillaski.com/Alpine_etape)) offer tours through the French Alps, which include many mountain climbs made famous in Le Tour.

course dinners complete with bottomless carafes of wine, were some of the most enjoyable I have spent anywhere.

Gue de Ray can accommodate up to eight guests but there were only six during our stay. We rode together most of the time, but there's no compulsion to do so. Bikes were supplied for a small additional charge. Basic puncture repair kits were also supplied, but it was reassuring to know that rescue was at hand in case of serious problems.

John had planned one or two rides for each of our five days. Each evening he distributed maps and instructions, and ran through the route, pointing out tricky navigational issues and explaining options to shorten or lengthen rides or to visit different attractions.

Our first ride took in forests and lakes and a chateau to the north of Gue de Ray. An early thrill was to see two deer, surprised while feeding in a field, springing across the road ahead of us to the safety of the forest.

Our destination on day two was the weekly market at Bourgeuil. After a turn around the market and lunch at a café overlooking it, we headed off to La Cave du Pays de Bourgeuil. Here we visited an underground museum of historic

wine-making equipment and enjoyed a wine tasting.

Day three saw us heading southeast down to the Loire for the first time. Chateaux within reach, depending on one's riding capabilities, included those at Langeais, Villandry, Azay le Rideau and Usse. At day's end John collected us and our bikes and we rode back up to Gue de Ray the easy way, in the people mover.

Our decadent destination on day four was one of several cafes in the area offering a Menu Ouvrier (workman's lunch). Four courses and drinks are provided for a set price of around €12.

Our last day saw us heading down to the Loire once again, crossing the river at Varennes and heading west

to Saumur. The limestone cliffs along the river here are honeycombed with dwellings, and we lunched in a troglodyte café with a terrace overlooking the river. After lunch we pedalled through vineyards to reach the chateau sitting high above the river at Saumur. There was time to explore this, the town and its bars, before another rendezvous with John and the people and bike mover.

There are plenty of other establishments offering cycling base camps in the Loire Valley, and in other parts of France including Provence. And for those aspiring to greater heights there's even a chalet available for doing day rides in the French Alps! 🚲

