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NO. 002

THE OFFICIAL GUIDE

MADMAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

Up and down the Ventoux

WORDS: CLIVE PURSEHOUSE

Christophe Bristiel is a rare cyclist. No Strava, not even a GPS; he still uses Michelin maps to find his way. A throwback and a romantic, Bristiel lives at the foot of Mont Ventoux. He has climbed the Giant of Provence more times than you can imagine, but he's never competed in a bike race. He is, as we riders well understand, in love with the bicycle and one particular mountain.

After a successful career in international banking, Bristiel turned to wine, where he would eventually work for one of the most storied châteaux in all of France: Château La Nerthe in the Rhône Valley.

"Mont Ventoux," Bristiel explains, "is freedom at my doorstep: a luxury only a short ride away. Every year, thousands and thousands of cycling enthusiasts flock to my village, Vaison-la-Romaine. [Ventoux] is on any cyclist's bucket list. I would be a fool not to make the most of it!"

Bristiel estimates that he has climbed Ventoux about 15 times a year, for the last 25 years, except for one epic 365, in 2022, when he climbed it 100 times. Doing the math, that's $15 \times 24 = 360 + 100$. That's 460 times up Ventoux, give or take.

For many of us, even those of us born in France, Ventoux conjures images of the Tour de France. For Bristiel, his most visceral Tour memory has nothing to do with Ventoux. "It's a very special and very vivid memory, that of sitting on top of my grandfather's shoulders," Bristiel recalls, "watching Bernard Hinault don his very first yellow jersey following stage 20 of the 1978 Tour. It was a time trial between Metz and Nancy: I can say I was there!"

Mont Ventoux first featured in Le Tour in 1951, with the approach from Malaucène. That year, the stage didn't finish on Ventoux but descended to the plains to

finish in Avignon, where it was won by Louison Bobet. The French star repeated that feat in 1955, riding clear on Ventoux and soloing the final 60 kilometers, to win the stage and clinch the overall title.

The Ventoux's stark white moonscape has been host to many more dramatic Tour stages. There was the mountaintop victory of Raymond Poulidor in 1965 and, two years later, the death of Englishman Tom Simpson just short of the summit, laying bare cycling's sins. Eddy Merckx collapsed after his stage victory in 1970; Marco Pantani defeated Lance Armstrong in 2000; and Wout van Aert passed first over the Ventoux twice on his way to stage victory in 2021.

It's an otherworldly climb, a maker of legends, a mountain that can shatter the dreams of GC pretenders. For Bristiel, it's home. "Most people—cyclists and non-cyclists—would regard my relationship with Mont Ventoux as a single-minded obsession! But this is not how I see it," Bristiel says. "If anything, I would say it mirrors how I approach most things in life—with self-discipline and determination but also with enthusiasm and open-mindedness.

"My relationship to the Giant of Provence is much more personal. Strangely, the physical performance is not primarily what drives me up there." To explain that relationship, Bristiel quotes the legendary English mountain climber George Mallory: "Because it is there.

"Ventoux is the first thing I see from my bedroom window when I open my shutters in the morning, and the last thing I see when I close them—impossible not to be drawn to it, wouldn't you agree?"

Undeniably a challenging climb, Bristiel has made three specific sorties on the mountain. He "Everested" Mont Ventoux, climbing it 18 times for the 29,031 feet

Christophe Bristiel at the summit of Ventoux.



Christophe Bristiel

total. “That was the easiest, both in terms of logistics and effort,” Bristiel says. “A good, kind, and patient friend agreed to drive up and down for 16 hours to assist me with all the supplies, food and clothing. So, all I had to do was pedal up, try to recover and eat while negotiating the super-fast descents.”

The hardest challenge involved a fairly bonkers idea. Bristiel and a friend cycled from Marseille and back, including a Ventoux summit on a Vélip, an urban bike-share bicycles—the equivalent of New York Citi Bikes. “I consider the Citi Bike ride from Marseille and back as my single toughest one-day effort—300 kilometers on a 28 kilogram [62 pound], three-gear bike, done in 21 hours. Fighting the Mistral [a fierce northerly wind] all the way to the top was no small feat!” Bristiel says. “My friend Nick and I had no particular support. We carried supplies in the very convenient front basket, with the bananas turning into mash before we had even left the outskirts of Marseille.

“There was a big breakfast in Bédoin at 7 a.m. Meilin, my wife, was kind enough to drive next to us during the climb, supplying us with food, clothes and much-needed encouragement. We had an equally big lunch in Crillon-le-Brave, including a magnum of rosé, before heading back to Marseille, this time with the Mistral at our backs. We had left the Old Port of Marseille at midnight, arriving back at 21:00, well within the



24-hour limit. Missing that would have meant we would have lost our 500 euro deposit on the bikes.”

Bristiel aimed to take on his third different feat in 2022: riding up and down the Ventoux 100 times between January 1 and December 31. “The 100 ascents required a totally different organization of course,” he says. “One of my objectives was to do these 100 climbs completely unsupported. Having said that, without the kindness, support and patience of my wife, and no vacation in 2022, none of this would have been possible.

“I had one singular focus, which was to avoid injuries during the summer. I knew I could not afford to lose even a couple of weeks without compromising the ultimate goal. And in the autumn, my numerous global travels to promote wine would resume. As a result, I only did one ride that was not on Mont Ventoux throughout the year—that was in Alsace, tackling the Grand Ballon





and Petit Ballon, for a charity ride I had committed to.

“I was always looking for efficiency. For example, in the late spring, when I had more time, I did a few triple ascents [known as the Club des Cinglés du Ventoux, or the “Ventoux Crazy Club”], but I realized it was not particularly efficient, as it would take me a day or two to recover. So, I moved to double ascents, which I ended up being able to do for many days in a row.” Bristiel finished that challenge successfully on December 31, 2022.

In addition to the 460 or so climbs on a bike, Bristiel has even run up the mountain. His personal best is two hours flat. He has also taken a *fixie* (ouch), mountain bike and cross-country skis to the summit. As the saying goes, there is more than one way to, well, skin a cat—sorry! Also, there are many ways up the mountain.

“There are three paved roads leading to the summit. And countless trails, including the rugged, savage north side, much steeper, and home to bighorns, chamois and wolves,” he says. “The most famous cycling ascent, thanks to the Tour, starts in Bédoin, on the south side. On the northwest side, the climb starts in the village of Malaucène. Both share the same average incline [7.5

percent) and distance [21 kilometers] but the profiles of the climbs are quite different.

“The South side is much more gradual, with only the last kilometer—once you pass the Tom Simpson Memorial—becoming really challenging (over 11 percent). From Malaucène, the road is much more jagged, with long stretches hovering around 12 percent (with a maximum at 14 percent), but with easier bits where you can recover. It depends on your own profile as an athlete; I find it easier to settle in a pace from Bédoin.

“The third paved option starts in Sault, is longer (26 kilometers) and easier, as Sault is at an altitude of 700 meters (versus 300 meters for the other two). And it is really pretty, so maybe a good option for a first attempt?”

If you find yourself in Provence, you’re welcome at Christophe and Meilin’s home, La Baye des Anges, a luxury vacation rental set among lavender fields and olive groves. All within view of Ventoux—and certainly, if you’d like to go for a ride, he’s happy to show you his favorite mountain. **FM**

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