



The pack glides past the mediaeval abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel on the 2011 Tour

Stage whispers

Can beauty triumph over scandal? It can, if organisers of the Tour de France have their way. This year's focus is on the French countryside. **Chris Wright** selects his favourite stage destinations.



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES



Backstreets of Panier Quarter, Marseille, heart of the old city

RIDING a segment of the opening stage of this year's Tour de France teaches a cycling novice two things: the strength and commitment Tour riders need, and just how extraordinarily beautiful the Tour's scenery is.

"When you design a course, naturally there is the sporting aspect, but also you want to think about what you see from the helicopters," Tour director Christian Prudhomme says in Porto-Vecchio, Corsica, where Tour correspondents are limbering up for a 25km ride to Bonifacio, to see how it might feel to be an elite cyclist. "So when you are on your couch in Adelaide or Kuala Lumpur, what do you see? You see the beauty of France."

For the moment, I am aware only of the man beside me: Bernard Hinault, a five-time winner of the Tour between 1978 and 1985. Even at 58, he's not alongside me for long, disappearing into the distance. Members of a local racing team drop back to give stragglers a push up the hills; they hold conversations, relaxed, not even out of breath.

The following day, in a team car following Confidis rider Jérôme Coppel around a time trial, the speedometer hits 80km/h on a downhill section. As American racer Jonathan Vaughters once said: "If you want to feel what it's like to be a bike racer, strip down to your underwear, drive your car at 40mph and leap out the window into a pile of jagged metal."

This year's tour is the 100th and, from the outset, Prudhomme and his team wanted a route to showcase everything that is magnificent

about France; an antidote, perhaps, to the performance-enhancing drug scandals that have threatened to derail the elite sport. So in addition to the mountains and sunflower fields, the coasts and the Champs-Élysées in Paris, spectators will get to see things they have never seen before: a section through the grounds of the Palace of Versailles; a loop of the Arc de Triomphe as part of the finishing circuit, proposed for many years, but always thought too logistically problematic; and, best of all, a time trial ending at the majestic sea-bound rock fortress abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel.

The Tour de France, which finishes on Sunday July 21, having covered a total distance of 3360km, features 21 stages in all: seven flat and five hilly, six mountain stages, four summit finishes, two individual and one team time trial stages, and two rest days. A total of €2 million (\$2.64m) prize money is at stake, €450,000 (\$593,000) of it for the winner of the general individual classification - the famous *maillot jaune* (yellow jersey).

The first Tour de France was held in 1903. However, 10 races were lost during world wars. The Tour extended to include stages in other European nations in 1992, including the UK in 1994 (and next year's Tour will begin in Yorkshire). With drug cheat Lance Armstrong's records stripped from the books, the all-time greats - France's Bernard Hinault and Jacques Anquetil, Miguel Indurain (Spain) and Eddy Merckx (Belgium) - share a record five victories each. Reigning champion Bradley Wiggins is the first winner from the UK. ➤

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CYCLING TOUR DE FRANCE

Vieux Port, Marseille

2013 Tour de France



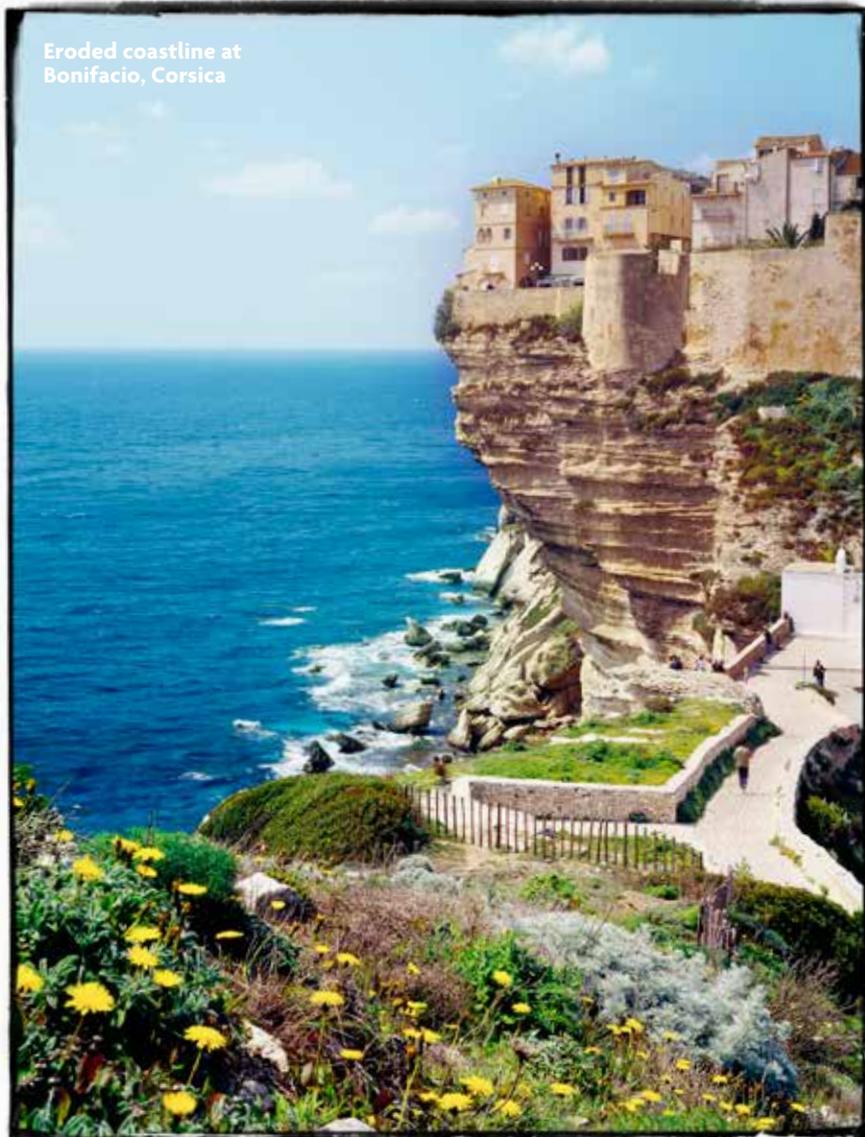
With its huge international following, the Tour puts a spotlight on some of the most exquisite regions in France. Here, three destinations that will continue to lure visitors long after the Tour champion is decided and the TV cameras are packed away.

Corsica STAGES 1-3

The Tour began on the rugged Mediterranean island of Corsica on June 29. It's a mystery why it has never come this way before, as the island is the perfect cycling and tourist destination. The towns of Porto-Vecchio, Bonifacio, Bastia, Ajaccio and Calvi; the hilltop citadels and dramatic harbours; craggy granite mountains rising sheer out of the sea; some of the finest beaches in France, but with far fewer crowds outside the very high season; and wonderful food and drink, such as the charcuterie cuts of meat from free-range local pigs, which have a distinctive taste due to their diet, which is predominantly acorns and chestnuts.

"We wanted a water theme in this Tour," says Prudhomme. "The idea was to have something aesthetically beautiful and spectacular, in a place the Tour had never gone. There are the mountains and there is the sea." With flat and hilly stages, competition was expected to be fierce.

It would be possible to fashion a rewarding holiday doing nothing but driving the first three stages of the Tour on Corsica – about 500km of road – and stopping at the towns, villages and mountains along the way. The third stage follows one of France's great drives, across the Vizzavona pass (1163m), skirting the jagged granite outcrops known as Les Calanques between the sheer pink cliffs that fall to the Golfe de Porto. Driving it is ambitious enough; one can only imagine what it would involve to race through it in the *peloton*.



Eroded coastline at Bonifacio, Corsica

Mont-Saint-Michel

STAGE 11 INDIVIDUAL TIME TRIAL

It is easy to see why Mont-Saint-Michel was the only major outpost in northern France to resist English attacks during the 100 Years' War. The towering mediaeval Benedictine abbey was built between the 11th and 16th centuries atop a granite rock that is, at high tide, surrounded by the sea (and, when a proposed bridge replaces the causeway, will be so more frequently). The Mont's inhabitants have fought off invaders – particularly English ones – for more than a thousand years, and it wears its impregnable history in its craggy, imposing stockiness. Used as a prison during the French Revolution, it was classified as a World Heritage site in 1979.

The Mont itself is by turns forbidding, peaceful and packed, attracting about three million visitors per year. However, even in high season, to visit Mont-Saint-Michel is to be transported to another time, of barbarians at the gate and mighty constructions built with a combination of ingenuity and faith. It has been the seat of a monastery since the eighth century.

Le Tour has finished at the Mont before now, but only in a bunch sprint and in a different orientation from this year's route, which ➤

has been designed to be as photogenic as possible. “This time will be a time trial, and the rider will almost be able to touch the Mont-Saint-Michel,” Prudhomme says. “The idea is to be able to see the riders and Mont-Saint-Michel at the same time.”

Sandwiched between Normandy and Brittany, the region is worth a week of anybody’s time. Barely an hour away is the walled town of Saint-Malo, by far the most picturesque of all the Channel ferry ports (and the finish of this year’s 10th stage); the mediaeval town of Dinan; and, a little farther away, the D-Day beaches and WWII memorials, and the Norman Conquest chronicle that is the Bayeux Tapestry.

Alpe d’Huez STAGE 18

Which of the mountain stages to choose? This year’s route has so many: Col de Pailhères and Ax 3 Domaines in the Pyrenees; the brutal relentlessness of Mont Ventoux, in sharp contrast to the beauty of Provence around it; and the rarer choice of Annecy-Semnoz in the Alps. But Alpe d’Huez stands out from the crowd all the more so this time around: on stage 18, riders will have to summit it twice.

There are 21 hairpins on the way up Alpe d’Huez and it is renowned for the fervour of the densely packed crowds of spectators who flank the route, not always with a great deal of caution. As author Tim Moore put it: “When the Tour goes up Alpe d’Huez, it’s a squalid, manic and sometimes lethal shambles – and that’s just the way they like it. It’s the Glastonbury Festival for cycling fans.”

This is part of the reason for the Tour going over it twice, on two routes: it spreads the crowd out over a wider area and showcases more of the villages on the mountain’s flanks. “When you have a stage of l’Alpe d’Huez, all people see is l’Alpe d’Huez, the monster: it squashes everything around,” Prudhomme says. “There are many little villages around it and, thanks to this stage, we will be able to see them and gather people together.”

In other seasons, Alpe d’Huez is a top alpine ski resort; in summer, it’s a favourite place for mountain biking. Outdoor sports centres such as Grenoble and Chambéry provide a base for the region, and both can be easily reached from Lyon. 

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The peloton
climbs Alpe
d’Huez on the
2006 Tour

