

Six Days on a Trek Domane... and a "Spin" Up Mont Ventoux

In 2014 Linda and I experienced another great cycling adventure, Trek Travel's "Provence Explorer" ride through the hills and towns of southern France. We sandwiched the trip itinerary between a couple of days in Avignon at the beginning so we could acclimate a bit, 4 days in Paris to relax (?) afterward and a 3-day stopover in Iceland.

This is going to be somewhat long, so I'll break it up into sections.

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Provence:

If you have a desire to ride in France and your goal is not to test yourself on the classic climbs in the Alps or Pyrenees, a trip in Provence is a great way to go. There is *plenty* of challenging terrain and nearly every village is on top of a hill, but you can do it at a comfortable pace and really enjoy the French country lifestyle and breathtaking scenery. This particular trip itinerary includes multiple stops each day to explore, which was contrary to my normal riding pattern of straight-through or one-stop rides, but it definitely gave you an opportunity to immerse yourself in the culture and history of the area...and the *food*. We thoroughly enjoyed it and recommend it highly. If you have a chance to ride in Provence, do it; you'll love it!

If you're interested in a guided tour, Trek Travel did a great job of putting together wonderful accommodations (including 3 nights in a hotel that was formerly one of the homes of the Marquis de Sade), fabulous food (we're spoiled for life!) and interesting side trips. The guides were great, unwaveringly enthusiastic, informative and supportive when you needed it. We did see several other tour groups, so there are other options if you're looking for a different experience.

Mont Ventoux:

Ventoux is an unrelenting beast of a climb, plain and simple. It's by far the hardest thing I've done since I last rode Mt. Washington 35 years ago. Thanks largely to our long winter and cold, wet spring, I had done nowhere near the training miles necessary to ride this mountain well. The first two days of the trip included several steep, multi-kilometer climbs that really wasted my legs, so they were pretty much dead when I started the Ventoux ascent. That said, I made it to the summit, if only because I was too damned stubborn to quit! It was ugly and I suffered like a dog, but it was worth it and I'd do it again in a heartbeat, as I'd really love to see what it's like to do it when fit and fresh.

We did the classic Tour route up from Bedouin, which doesn't sound too bad on paper, but the numbers are deceiving. It's a 21K (13 mile), 5600' climb at an *average* of around 8%. However, the first 5K are at 5%, plus or minus a half, which lowers the average and means that the next 16K are steep. You come around a switchback, the grade kicks up to 9.5% and the real fun

begins. I would guesstimate that the average for the rest of the climb is around 9.5% and the 9K in the middle averages 10%+. I saw at least 4 sections of 11% and the GPS data indicate some 13% sections, though I don't know if that's accurate.

There are two corners at around the 14K mark where the gradient drops to 3.5% and 4.5% respectively, but only for 20 - 30 meters. When you reach Chalet Reynard at 15K, you can take a break for cup of coffee if you're so inclined, but I think it would make the rest of the climb worse. I did one quick lap around the parking lot, then headed back up the treeless final slopes. It starts off pretty easily at around 7%, but it's just a tease, as it quickly steepens again, though it does back off periodically to reward you for your efforts. At that point, you're at well over 5000' and the temperature has dropped considerably. You may encounter wind and fog as well. It's also where you start getting assaulted by the enterprising photographers who enthusiastically capture your pain, then hand you a business card (I guess that they generally stick them in your jersey pocket, but I was wearing a Camelback, which seemed to confuse them).

The final 50 meters is a 15% ramp, but at that point with the summit in sight, I didn't even feel it. On top, it's a cyclist's party, with everyone posing for photos at the summit markers and donning warm clothing for the descent. It was ~40 degrees F with fog and a good breeze when I arrived, so after the photos were done, I quickly threw on all of my rain gear and headed down.

The top part of the descent is open and exposed, the road was intermittently damp, there are no guardrails, and I was tired and shivering, so I rode the brakes somewhat and proceeded cautiously. Once past the chalet and into the trees, I could feel the temp rising and when another rider blew past me, I let it roll and had a blast! There aren't many sharp corners on Ventoux and you can generally see pretty far ahead, so you can really let it rip. The tighter corners are well marked, so you know when to moderate your speed. Cyclists pretty much own the mountain, so drivers are courteous and give you a wide berth when passing. Until you're well down the mountain, they can't go any faster than you can and I found that I pulled away from trailing vehicles most of the time. This is one place where I really wish I'd had a video camera.

The Trek Domane:

We rode stock Domane 5.9s, with Ultegra DI2, wide allow rims and 25mm tires. They also supplied us with Garmin "Edge Touring" GPSs with the daily routes pre-programmed.

This is essentially a tale of two bikes, the front half and the back half. The good news is that the back half is a magic carpet ride. The ISO Speed coupler really does a wonderful job of smoothing out rough roads. In fact, the rear end was so muted that I really couldn't tell what the rear tire pressure was. It did occasionally feel slightly bouncy, but it wasn't objectionably so.

The front end can be summed up in one word, *harsh*. It is ridiculously stiff and in complete contrast with the supple rear end. Even running as low tire pressure as I do at home (low 70s in the front), I couldn't take the sting out of it. With the wide rims, I could probably have reduced it further, but neither I - nor the guides - were willing to risk denting a rim. Their suggestion for rough roads was to lean back and put more weight on the saddle, which worked to some degree. I did find it interesting that both of them were riding Madones, not Domanes.

Handling-wise, the bike was great. It tracked well in a straight line and with just a bit of pressure on the bars, it carved corners smoothly and held its line well on uneven surfaces. The handling isn't as "intuitive" as my SuperSix, but more time on the bike would solve that and as it was, it had no noticeable vices.

The DI2 was interesting and our first experience with electronic shifting. Shimano users will take to it immediately, but I still found myself hitting the wrong button occasionally, even at the end of the trip (old dog, new tricks). Functionally it's good, but it can be finicky. I twice had problems with the chain jumping cogs, which required recalibrating the computer. It doesn't perform single-gear shifts any faster than mechanical systems and it's much slower on multi-gear shifts, since you can only shift one gear at a time and the buttons don't react as quickly as mechanical levers (perhaps this is adjustable?). Multi-gear shifts also caused some gnashing of gear teeth at times. Front shifts were generally good, but not noticeably exceptional. I also found that I had trouble developing a feel for how hard you need to push the buttons, but I'm sure that would resolve itself over time. Overall, I don't see any compelling reason to choose Ultegra DI2 over mechanical Ultegra or Dura Ace and I definitely prefer mechanical Campy to it. One of the guides even expressed that she wished they'd go back to mechanical shifting, as it was easier to adjust.

The Garmin Edge Touring computers were a mixed bag, as they often became confused. Given the nature of the roads in Provence, it's somewhat understandable and perhaps the mapping data for France isn't as good as it is for the US. The bottom line is that you need an analog backup (a map and/or cue sheet). However, the displays were generally easy to read without my reading glasses and the audible turn warnings were quite handy. The menu system is somewhat confusing, but I suppose one would get used to it. I won't be replacing my 500 with one any time soon, but if you like to use courses, the 810 is a much better way to go.

Iceland:

OK, this has nothing to do with the initial subject, but I'd be remiss if I didn't say something. Iceland is everything you might imagine it to be, rugged, fascinating, mysterious and whimsical. We only had a short time there (2 1/2 days), which was just enough of an appetizer to ensure that we'll go back as soon as we can, next time for long enough to get out and explore more of this incredible island.

While we did see a surprising number of cyclist there, most loaded down with panniers and camping gear, I don't know that we'd go there to ride. The roads are good, at least in the "Golden Circle" area that we traveled, but they're narrow and generally lack shoulders. Although the terrain we saw wasn't too bad, the wind is **fierce** and an inadvertent off-road excursion into the volcanic terrain could result in serious injury. Let's just say that riding in Iceland isn't for the faint of heart. Nick would probably love it! :-)

If you're into photography, bring your best gear, as you'll be in photographic heaven. If you're not a shutterbug, I strongly suggest that you become one before you go.

Part Deux - Six More Days on a Domane in 2016:

In 2016 we made another excursion to Europe with Trek Travel (notice a pattern here?), this time doing the Tuscany Explorer trip, so I guess this update is actually “Part Due”. Italy was just incredible and has become my new favorite place on the planet. Our trip began with some time in Florence to get acclimated and take in the spectacular art and architecture (fodder for another article), before meeting up with our companions and guides for the bike trip.

Although there was no equivalent to the Ventoux climb on this trip, the Tuscan terrain is a giant roller coaster; it seemed that we were always either climbing or descending steeply. As our exceptionally-understated guide Lorenzo put it, "Tuscany is not flat and there is some climbing". What we learned is that basically anything that isn't 7-8% uphill is considered a descent and "rollers" are any climb less than half a kilometer in length, regardless of the grade.

There were a lot of 5-10K long climbs in the high single digit to low double digit gradients, with very little flat ground at all. For as tough as the climbs were, the descents were equally amazing and thrilling, and more than compensated for the effort required to earn them. While this wasn't a week in the Alps or Dolomites doing classic ascents, it was sufficient for us and by the end of the week I was climbing better than I have in at least a decade. This place changes you for the better, on and off the bike.

The scenery was magnificent, the people were warm and inviting and the overall vibe of the country is just so relaxed and comfortable that it felt more like staying with friends than being a tourist. Combine that with Italians' unbridled zest for life and it's truly irresistible. And then there's the food, simpler and less pretentious than French cuisine, possessing a rustic, earthy goodness that speaks to the soul as much as the palette. It's all prepared and served with Italian passion, of course. Yeah, we ate *well*.

I could go on and on about Italy, however, the point here is to update you on the bikes.

I had hoped that we'd be able to try the new Domane SLR with the IsoSpeed front end, but alas they weren't going to be added to the livery in Europe until 2017. However, riding the same bikes in Italy that we rode in France did provide an opportunity to see if my initial impression from 2014 were still in evidence two years later. There were two differences between the 2014 and 2016 bikes:

- The 2016 bikes came standard with a 30t lowest cog in the back, which got quite a bit of use on the long, steep Tuscan climbs. I was most grateful for this on several occasions.
- The second change wasn't to the equipment spec, but a difference in the flexibility of the guides in regards to tire pressure. This made a huge difference!

Unlike in 2014, where the guides were insistent that we run 100 psi minimum in the tires – which is serious overkill – in Italy I was allowed to drop the pressure down to 80/90 front/rear. That was still 8 psi more at both ends than I run at home, but the difference in the feel of the bike was enormous. The drop of 20 psi in the front tamed most of the harshness, except on the roughest surfaces. The drop in the rear wasn't particularly noticeable, probably because it was masked by the compliance of the IsoSpeed system and was less of a change anyway. The bike

felt much more balanced front to rear and I definitely enjoyed riding it more. It just goes to show that optimizing the setup to the rider is most of the battle.

Still, I would really like to try the SLR, so I guess we'll just have to "suffer" through another trip. Ah, the sacrifices we make in the name of cycling research...

Bonus Feature – The Madonna del Ghisallo, Museo de Ciclismo, and more

No cycling trip to Italy is complete without visiting the Madonna del Ghisallo chapel and Museo de Ciclismo in Bellagio! You simply have to go, end of story. I'll get to the details shortly, but the journey there from Tuscany bears some description, too.

Lucca

Lucca is an ancient walled city with streets so tight and sinuous that there are very few vehicles other than bikes. The "wall" is actually a tall, broad earthen structure encircling the city, with a paved, tree-lined, multiuse boulevard on top. Other than the ramps up and down, it's pretty much dead flat and doesn't pose much in the way of cycling challenges, but that's not the point. It's meant for meandering, soaking in the Tuscan sun and breezes. Riding hard on the wall seems pointless and antithetical to its purpose. Tooling around on bikes borrowed from our B&B owner was just the relaxing "leg-loosener" we needed after 6 days of hills.

One thing that's in abundance in Lucca is bike shops. Replete with yellowed, historic photos and dusty, but storied old racing machines, they're as much museums as retailers. You can find bargains on kit from local race teams and events, as well as shop kits, so you can bring home some nice conversation pieces to wear proudly on your local rides. My favorite was Antonio Poli Biciclette, which has been around for over 80 years. He took one look at me, stated "cinque" and marched out back to get me a perfectly fitting, size 5 jersey. Ya' gotta' respect that!

Cinque Terre

Mention Cinque Terre and you'll likely get mixed responses. One of inkeepers we stayed with spoke of it with a disparaging tone and hissed that that "only Americans and Australians go there", which was completely untrue. The owner of the inn in Vernazza where we stayed was very proud of the area, but said "During the day, it's not crazy...it's f***ing crazy!" He was right; it was intensely packed with tourists and swimmers until around 6:00. After that, it was pretty nice.

To actually ride in the towns of Cinque Terre, you'd have to be a beast of a climber. Why? It's simple, really. These are *vertical* towns, with every building set into precipitous terrain. Getting around on foot is challenging at times, let alone riding. Our B&B owner Guliano was one such beast, but he also built our room by hand from "around 1 million stones" harvested from the local hillside, which is entirely believable when you see the place.

It was good to get a different form of exercise for a few days. I'll put together a travel article with more details at some point, but it's time to move on to one of my favorite experiences of the trip.

Madonna del Ghisallo chapel and Museo de Ciclismo

For those who may not have heard, the Madonna del Ghisallo is the patron saint of cyclists (who knew that we even *had* a patron saint?). As I mentioned earlier, the chapel and museum are must-see destinations for cyclists vacationing in Italy. You won't be disappointed.

You can rent suitable bikes at the Hotel Perlo Panorama in Bellagio, which caters to cyclists. There are two routes to reach the chapel and museum. The classic route starts in Bellagio and snakes its way [i]steeply[/i] upward through numerous tight switchbacks for 12K (the section outside the hotel is 14%). If you take that route, make sure to buy the T-shirt you earned by doing it!

The easier route follows the lakeshore for ~8k before turning upward at somewhat more gentle grades, typically mid to high single digits. Aside from providing a descent warmup and easier gradients, when you reach the top, it also treats you to a truly spectacular view of the chapel with the mountains in the background, which literally brought Linda to tears. The chapel pays silent homage to many of the greats of cycling's past and it's hard not to be inspired by it. The museum is bright, open and airy, and packed with more historic and classic bikes and memorabilia than one can easily take in during a ride. We were on the site for nearly two hours and if grumbling stomachs hadn't forced us to find food, we would have lingered longer. It was a truly fitting finish to the cycling portion of our trip!

From Bellagio, we journeyed to Venice for a few days, but that's an entirely different type of story for another article. Besides, there are no bikes there, as there's literally no place to ride!