



# Take the High Road

As the world's best cyclists gear up for this month's Tour de France, it's the ideal time to conquer some of the toughest mountain climbs on the planet. Just saddle up, grit your teeth and go.

Words ALIX CLARK



**OR THOSE WHO** love Lycra, lactic acid and long rides in the stunning French countryside, July can only mean one thing — the Tour de France. The world's most-watched cycling event is a chance for professional cyclists to pit themselves against the world's best as they pedal 3540 kilometres over 23 days to finish in Paris on 23 July. This year marks the 104th Tour and, for the first time since 1992, the course includes the mountainous 'grand slam', with cyclists racing over all five of France's ranges — Vosges, Jura, Pyrénées, Massif Central and the Alps — in the hunt for the polka dot jersey (given to the fastest rider over the mountain stages, known as 'the King of the Mountains'). One stage has a total altitude gain of 4600 metres, while another has sections with a 20 per cent gradient (anything over eight per cent is considered 'past categorisation' — aka, *really hard*).

But it won't only be the pro-riders testing their legs: enthusiastic amateurs have the chance to experience part of the course, with 15,000 cyclists expected to tackle the 179.5-kilometre stage from Briançon to Col d'Izoard on 20 July, just a few days before the peloton arrives, in an event known as L'Étape du Tour.

If this opportunity doesn't quite inspire you to do it yourself, or if the timing isn't quite right, there are many other mountains around the world that will put your climbing legs to the test — and plenty of touring companies who offer cycling trips specifically geared towards those who like this kind of hill challenge. Here's just a few of them.

## FRANCE

If watching the race from Australia in the middle of the night isn't enough Tour de France action for you, take to the hills on your next trip and see how you measure up to the mountain stages of Le Tour. UK-based company Le Domestique Tours (named for the rider who works for the benefit of their team, rather than trying to win the race themselves), offers a 'King of the Mountains TdF' itinerary through France that covers 700 kilometres, 20 cols (mountain passes) and over 20,000 metres of elevation gain. The seven-day trip runs during the summer and includes the famous mountain trio of the Col du Tourmalet, Mont Ventoux and Alpe d'Huez. The tours are fully supported with riding guides, a support van and a chef making sure you're well refuelled at the end of each day.

Keen amateur triathlete Emma Thomas and her husband travelled to the Tour de France last year and rode ahead of the peloton for four stages. "It was a real thrill," says Thomas, who trained on the roads around Canberra and has competed in a number of Ironman triathlons. "We never imagined we'd be riding on the same roads as the Tour riders and it gave us a new appreciation for how hard they work during the race. We felt so grateful to be there among the Tour action. One day, for example, we had a big climb up the Col de la Colombière, then stood in the madness of the giant crowd watching the time trial. It's well worth the effort." [www.ledomestiquetours.co.uk](http://www.ledomestiquetours.co.uk).

## ITALY

This year marked the 100th edition of the Giro d'Italia, one of the three major road races (along with the Tour de France and the Vuelta a España) that make up cycling's 'Grand Tours'. The penultimate event before Le Tour, the Giro includes many notoriously difficult mountain stages through Italy.

If you aren't planning on joining a pro team anytime soon but want a cycling adventure, you might want to try the 'Trans-Dolomites Challenge' created by Thomson Bike Tours and held in September. This seven-day, 691-kilometre ride, starting at Ravascletto near the Austrian border, offers almost 20,000 metres of elevation. It begins with a bang, tackling the Monte Zoncolan (considered the toughest climb in all three Grand Tours), which includes 10 kilometres at a 12 per cent gradient.

"The sensation you get when climbing these mountains is tough to describe," says Chris Tarlton of Thomson Bike Tours. "I tend to feel elation — however many times I've been up a mountain — and, in particular in the Dolomites, you realise how small you really are; the mountains put you in your place."

Most of Thomson's riders are men who "love to ride and to push themselves to their limits", says Tarlton. "If you can ride a steady 120 kilometres a day, you can do the trip and get huge satisfaction from it. We have enough guides so riders with varying speeds can form their own groups, so it's easy to find your pace." [www.thomsonbiketours.com](http://www.thomsonbiketours.com). ➤

**OPPOSITE, FROM TOP** Le Domestique Tours' 'King of the Mountains TdF' trip includes an ascent of Alpe d'Huez; the peloton races to the finish on stage 16 of last year's Tour de France.







## AUSTRALIA

While the mountains of Australia might not have the altitude of those in Europe, when it comes to cycling, these slopes certainly have the attitude. For tough climbs, try the Snowy Mountains, using Thredbo or the Perisher Valley as a base. One of the hardest is from Snowy Creek to Dead Horse Gap — a 17.8-kilometre ride with an elevation gain of over 1500 metres.

If you really fancy yourself a contender, sign up for L'Étape Australia, an official Tour de France event described by race director Christian Prudhomme as “providing a very similar experience for riders to a mountainous stage of the Tour de France”. The 157-kilometre race takes place on 2 December, going from Crackenback to Perisher and features two ‘King of the Mountains’ sections. Three-time Le Tour winner Chris Froome was a mentor at last year’s event. [www.letapeaustralia.com](http://www.letapeaustralia.com).

## USA

For a climb that’s as challenging as anything in the Tour de France, head to California for a brutal ride from the town of Independence along Onion Valley Road, which leads up into the mountains. Making up the majority of this 20.5-kilometre route is an eight per cent climb — steeper and longer than either the Tourmalet or the Galibier, two iconic stages of Le Tour.

If you want longer on the road, tour firm Backroads offers a four-day trip in nearby Death Valley National Park, which includes rides across salt flats and the desert. Backroads do trips all over the US and the world, and cater to all standards and ages. A six-day Hawaiian trip offers a 1200-metre vertical ascent and a section of the Hawaii Ironman Triathlon course.

You may also consider cycling the US from east to west — starting in Yorktown, Virginia, and finishing in San Francisco — with charitable tour group Bike the US for MS. You’ll cross nine states in 62 days and cycle 6091 kilometres. Along the way there are plenty of mountainous climbs, high-desert passes, snowy peaks and thrilling descents to experience. And the best bit? You’ll be raising money for multiple sclerosis as you ride. [www.backroads.com](http://www.backroads.com); [www.biketheusforms.org](http://www.biketheusforms.org).

## CANADA

If you like to climb but would rather relax than race against fellow riders, consider a self-guided cycle through the Rocky Mountains of Alberta and British Columbia, in western Canada. Starting in Canmore, near Banff, and finishing eight days later in Jasper, this 329-kilometre trip, curated by Randonée Tours, includes bike hire, accommodation and luggage transfers each day, allowing you to cycle at your own pace through some of the country’s most picturesque mountain scenery.

The average daily distance is about 50 kilometres and three of the days offer challenging hill climbs. Push yourself with a 94-kilometre, 1116-metre elevation gain ride up to Lake Louise in Banff National Park, and a day on a bike-only route across the Continental Divide, before cresting Bow Summit, which has incredible views of Peyto Lake. [www.randonneetours.com](http://www.randonneetours.com). 📸

**GETTING THERE** TO BOOK YOUR FLIGHT TO ANY OF THESE DESTINATIONS, VISIT [WWW.VIRGINIAUSTRALIA.COM](http://WWW.VIRGINIAUSTRALIA.COM) OR CALL 13 67 89 (IN AUSTRALIA).

A Backroads cycling tour of the US’s Death Valley offers surreal and sublime landscapes. **OPPOSITE, FROM TOP** Peyto Lake at Bow Summit in the Canadian Rockies; riders struggle on a climb during L’Étape Australia.

WATCH THE 2017 TOUR DE FRANCE LIVE ON SBS FROM 1 JULY. PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES, LEDOM CC, SPORTGRAF

