

Classic Cols

of the Tour de France

The French Alps are home to some of the most iconic climbs in the world. In the wake of Cadel Evans' Tour de France victory, there's no better time to conquer the same mountains yourself.

We arrived in Grenoble on July 23 after a four-hour train ride from Paris. This was of course the very same day Cadel Evans secured his epic Tour de France win after his amazing performance in the final individual time trial around Grenoble. There was certainly no better time to be an Aussie in this part of France.

You may also remember Cadel's inspiring performances in the Alps. It was he who pretty

much single-handedly dragged the remnants of the peloton up the Col du Galibier while chasing down key rival Andy Schleck.

You should also remember Evans' stellar ride up Alpe d'Huez, where he matched the pace of the Schleck brothers after again leading the chase to bring back Andy Schleck and Alberto Contador, who had earlier escaped.

If you want to experience the pain, suffering and euphoria that Tour riders feel every year, there's only one thing to do. Pack up your bike,

jump on a plane and head to the Alps. You'll never regret it.

We based ourselves at the foot of the big mountains in Allemont, about 50 kilometres east of Grenoble. From here you have access to such legendary climbs as Alpe d'Huez, the Col du Galibier and the Col de la Croix de Fer, to name a few.

If you're looking for somewhere to stay, there are few towns that are as simple to get to and so close to the high mountain passes.

Alpe d’Huez

This climb is as iconic as it is brutal. Its famous 21 bends are a marquee symbol of Le Tour and the spectacle it produces each year. Sure other mountains have switchbacks, and other climbs may be harder, longer and steeper. But if there’s one climb any cyclist must conquer before they’re too old to mount a saddle, it’s Alpe d’Huez – the jewel of the French Alps.

Alpe d’Huez has become synonymous with the Tour de France since its introduction in 1952, where it was won by the legendary Fausto Coppi.

In fact, Alpe d’Huez has been included almost every year since 1976, despite being curiously absent from the race in both 2009 and 2010. This was actually the first time since 1976 that it has missed two consecutive years.

Given the 2011 Tour was the 100th anniversary of the Alps being used in the race, Alpe d’Huez was always destined to be the scene of yet another epic stage finish.

The climb itself is 13.8 kilometres at an average of 7.9%, with 21 switchbacks or hairpins, each bearing the name of a previous stage winner.

This climb has seen a large number of pivotal moments in Tour history. Who could forget the famous attack by Lance Armstrong in 2001? After turning around to assess the damage already done, the Texan launched a lethal acceleration and dropped rival Jan Ullrich like he was on a Sunday bunch ride.

Another moment us Aussies won’t forget occurred in 2008 when Carlos



Above Steady is the key for amateurs climbing Alpe D’Huez

Right The Col du Galibier is infamous for its difficulty

Sastre went alone to claim the stage win and yellow jersey, while also distancing GC rival Cadel Evans. It was textbook teamwork by Team CSC, who had Frank Schleck in yellow, but allowed the Spaniard to take the stage and later the overall GC.

From the start the road ramps up to over 10% and doesn’t relent for two kilometres. Numbered signs, counting down from 21 on the first switchback, symbolically mark each turn. Every sign also carries its elevation and the name of a previous Alpe d’Huez winner.

It’s easy to get carried away when you first climb Alpe d’Huez and launch

yourself from the bottom. But conservatism will always be rewarded here; leave the long solo attacks to the professionals. We saw many cyclists stooped over their bikes in absolute exhaustion, not even half way up the mountain. Don’t let that cyclist be you!

The best part of the climb is undoubtedly the panoramic views on offer, overlooking the valley and Bourg d’Oisans at the bottom.

Col du Galibier

While Alpe d’Huez holds a traditional and sentimental place in Tour de France history, the Col du Galibier is known for

BEST TIMES UP ALPE D’HUEZ

RANK	TIME	NAME	YEAR
1	37’ 35”	Marco Pantani	1997
2	37’ 36”	Lance Armstrong	2004
3	38’ 00”	Marco Pantani	1994
4	38’ 01”	Lance Armstrong	2001
5	38’ 04”	Marco Pantani	1995
6	38’ 23”	Jan Ullrich	1997
7	38’ 34”	Floyd Landis	2006
8	38’ 35”	Andreas Klöden	2006
9	38’ 37”	Jan Ullrich	2004
10	39’ 02”	Richard Virenque	1997

Alpe d’Huez
Elevation: 1850 metres
Length: 13.8 kilometres
Average gradient: 7.9%
Difficulty rating: 4.5/5

“We saw many cyclists stooped over their bikes in absolute exhaustion, not even halfway up the mountain. Don’t let that cyclist be you!”

its sheer difficulty. It’s so hard that 1911 Tour winner Gustave Garrigou proclaimed “You are bandits!” to organisers after finishing the first Galibier stage. While Alpe d’Huez is romanticised, the Col du Galibier is always feared.

In 2011, the Tour celebrated the 100th anniversary of the first crossing of the Galibier. In fact, this epic climb has been the most visited mountain in the Alps in Tour de France history. It’s so popular that the race climbed the Galibier twice this year.

In 1911, the Tour de France began its inaugural ascent of the Galibier, a mountain that was even higher, even harder, and even colder than anything any cyclist had ever seen before.

Interestingly, 1911 was the year after the Tour first experimented with high mountain passes in the Pyrénées. While

the Col du Tourmalet and Aubisque are tough, the riders soon learned that the Galibier was in a league of its own. For starters, the Galibier is over 500 metres higher than the Tourmalet!

The climb to the summit can be approached from two ways. From the north, starting at Saint-Michel-de-Maurienne (including the Col du Télégraphe), the climb is 34.8 kilometres long, gaining 2120 metres. That’s an average gradient of 6.1%. The actual climb to the summit starts at Valloire though. From here it’s 18.1 kilometres with an average gradient of 6.9%. The maximum gradient is 10.1%, which really hurts at that altitude!

From the south, the climb begins from the Col du Lautaret at a height of 2058 metres. To give you an idea of how high this pass is, there aren’t many climbs that begin above 2000m! From this side it’s 8.5 kilometres long at an average

gradient of 6.9%, with a maximum kicker of 12.1% at the summit.

If you’re approaching from the south and are feeling tired at the summit of the Col du Lautaret, it’s worth stopping for a bite to eat and a quick coffee in the village before heading up for the final push to the top.

Col du Galibier

Elevation: 2645 metres

Length: North side – 34.8 kilometres. South side – 18.1 kilometres

Gradient: North side – 6.1%
South side – 6.9%

Difficulty rating: 5/5

Quick tips...

How to get there?

UCA stayed on the outskirts of Allemont, a small town that comes to life with skiers in winter and cyclists in summer.

By train/bus

To get to Allemont, all you need to do is catch a TGV fast-train from Paris to Grenoble, which takes about four hours.

From Grenoble, it’s a 45-minute coach trip using Transisere to Allemont (www.transisere.fr) and slightly longer to nearby areas, including Bourg d’Oisans, where you’ll find Alpe d’Huez.

By car

If you’re hiring a car, it’s about a seven-hour drive from Paris.



The Col de la Croix de Fer has plenty of nasty pinches



Col de la Croix de Fer

Elevation: 2067 metres

Length: Northeast side – 29.5 kilometres. Southwest side – 31.5 kilometres

Gradient: Northeast side – 5.5%. Southwest side – 5.75%

Difficulty rating: 3.5/5

Col de la Croix de Fer

While not as famous as other nearby mountains like Alpe d'Huez and the Col du Galibier, the Croix de Fer is a fantastically long pass that peaks out at 2,067 metres.

What hasn't done the Croix de Fer any favours in terms of boosting its popularity is that it has only featured in the Tour de France 15 times since it was first used in the 1947 Tour. The last inclusion was in 2008 when the Tour de France approached the Col from the east via Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne on the 210-kilometre 17th stage from Embrun to Alpe d'Huez.

The approach from the northeast (Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne) is 29.5 kilometres with an average gradient of 5.5%. Climbing from the southwest (Rochetaillée) is 31.5 kilometres long at an average gradient of 5.75% with some sections in excess of 11%.

Climbing from Rochetaillée is difficult due to the undulating nature of the profile.

There are a few brief descents leading to the summit, which are followed by short but nasty pinches over 11% which really bite your legs and throw off your rhythm.

Col du Glandon

The Col du Glandon was last used in the 2006 Tour de France.

It may not be as famous as other nearby cols, but don't think this means it isn't tough. Beginning from La Chambre, the Col du Glandon is a nasty but gorgeous climb that peaks out a few kilometres from the top of the Croix de Fer.

The start of climb sees you snake your way through the valley in a gentle manner. "This isn't too bad", you say to yourself. But don't be fooled, the best is yet to come.

As you emerge from the dense woodland and discover the exposed upper sections of the climb, the road only gets steeper. The last five kilometres don't drop below 8% and the last two kilometres are over 10% with sections

"The Col du Glandon was last used in the 2006 Tour de France"

Remember...

To always take plenty of food, your rain jacket and some warm clothes with you when climbing these massive peaks. While it may be warm at the bottom, it'll always be chilly and often wet at the top. The last thing you want to do is descend for 20 kilometres in wet clothing!

If you want to catch the 2012 Tour while you're there, best to book ahead, because accommodation in the Alps goes fast during Tour week!

The Col du Glandon hasn't been used in Le Tour since 2006

Col du Glandon

Length: 21.3 kilometres

Average gradient: 6.9%

Difficulty rating: 4.5/5

right near the top of 12%. What makes this climb worth it, though, is the stunning descent back to La Chambre. With few tight switchbacks but plenty of twisty roads, if you're a daredevil descender you'll love this one.

Col de la Madeleine

Again, not one of the better known cols in the Alps, but this beauty certainly shouldn't be overlooked.

Beginning in La Chambre, while the Col du Glandon is to the south, the Madeleine lies to the north. While it can be climbed from the northern side (beginning in Aigueblanche), we conquered this beast from La Chambre after descending the Glandon.

The Madeleine is another HC category climb, and was last featured in the 2010 Tour. It's definitely not the toughest climb in the Alps, but the views across the valley and the descent back to La Chambre are worth the trip up.

If you're staying in Allemont or Bourg d'Oisans, you can climb three HC cols in one day.

Col de la Madeleine

Length: 19 kilometres

Average gradient: 8%

Difficulty rating: 3/5

Quick tips...

Where to stay?

Chalet Saskia

Overlooking Allemont and perched in the ski resort of Vaujany, Chalet Saskia has everything a cyclist could ask for. At 1200 metres above sea level, it's just a short drop down into Allemont if you're heading towards Alpe d'Huez or Col du Galibier.

Head chef Marcus shows off his Michelin-star expertise every night with delicious and creative meals. There's nothing like being spoilt with a sensational dinner after a hard days riding in the Alps. If you're anything like us, you'll be riding all day and relaxing all night as you enjoy the panoramic views of the valley below.

For more information visit www.skipeak.net/saskia.html

Chalet Lac Douce

Owned by an Australian expat, Chalet Lac Douce offers charming and family-friendly accommodation all year round. Situated on the outskirts of Allemont, Chalet Lac Douce overlooks the Lac du Verney (lake) and lies beneath imposing mountain peaks from all directions. It's a great place to meet fellow cyclists in summer and trade war stories over a well-earned meal.

As soon as you head out the door you can either start climbing the Croix de Fer or head down to Bourg d'Oisans towards the Galibier or Alpe d'Huez.

For more information visit www.chaletlac-douce.com.



The Col de la Madeleine follows a descent of the Col du Glandon