

Jeremy Chandler joined an exclusive French club to tackle the cols of Corsica – and, despite a few scrapes, enjoyed the freedom of the road and the friendship of fellow travellers. He also learned a few choice French phrases...

Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité... and lucky noodles



THE CLUB des Cent Cols, as its name suggests, is a French cycling club whose members love the romance of the high peaks. To become a full member you have to have climbed at least 100 mountain passes – they can be anywhere, including in the UK, but at least five must be over 2,000 metres.

It's taken me the best part of 15 years to reach that target (there aren't that many mountains close to London), and still, some years later, I hadn't yet been on a séjour with them, or indeed met any of the other club members.

But would I be able to keep up with those wiry Frenchmen and women, up those 10 per cent slopes? And would I be able to understand a word that was going on? These were my worries as I signed up. But the temptation was too great – the mountains of Corsica beckoned me.

Day 1 THE TAGNONE VALLEY

I needn't have worried. This was a wonderful first day of riding. Not too

hard (there would be much longer days to come), and perfect cycling weather. On the plain below, we cycled through groves of olives, vines and orange trees. On the climbs there was a constant fragrance from the Corsican maquis, with its lavender, sweet-smelling cistus, and in particular the "immortelles", which gave off a slightly curry-like perfume.

I rode most of the day with a friendly group of about ten, and when they stopped for a snack, and I forlornly admitted I didn't have any food with me, they showered me with egg, bread, salad, and cheese, so I probably ended up with more than them. (After that first day, we were given a picnic lunch so the problem didn't recur). There were small groups of us all over the mountains all day, but it was still a surprise to see everyone at the reunion in the evening, and realise how many there were – 210 in total!

Day 2 BETWEEN BRAVONE AND VERDE

Our second day was just as good as the first, except for one small thing – I had a

fall. It was really silly. On the flat, a moment's inattention, one hand off the bars, over some gravel, the front wheel skidded away, and down I went. It was one way (not entirely to be recommended) of getting one's name known, and lots of tender attention from the other club members. Though in some immediate pain, my main concern was for the bike, which for a horrible moment I thought I'd wrecked completely.

Fortunately a small group of centcolists had turned back when they heard me fall, including Thierry, who managed with all his strength to pull back my derailleur, and repair things. I could continue, thank heavens.

Day 3 BAVELLA

This was a monster of a day. I just did the "basic" circuit, which was 110 kilometres, with nine cols. Some people did little extras in order to bag even more cols. Gérard, my driver, who I'd named "Monsieur Col" (he got his 4,000-col certificate at the end of the week) did 135k.

The citadel town of Bonifacio, at the far south of the island

The main climb was over the Col de Bavella, which is one of the most celebrated in Corsica. The climb up was hard enough, but it was the descent which was the real killer. It was fearfully cold at the top, as we were hit by a strong, icy headwind, with gusts that sent the bike ricocheting across the road. And I had miles and miles of this descent to get through, all on my own by this time. I have rarely ever felt so cold. I met Danièle at the bottom, who was shivering uncontrollably just like me – but together we managed to squeeze into a tiny bar with a real fire and hot coffee.

“... It was a beautiful day, with amazing landscapes, and villages perched impossibly over the valleys

I then cycled with Danièle for the rest of the day – she was a good cyclist, and rode at the same speed as me – and the day improved markedly from then on. The highlight was another enormous descent from the Ospedale, but this time lower down and much warmer, and with wonderful views out over the sea. It was also on a beautiful road surface, so you could really get speed up, swinging round quite gentle bends. Absolutely blissful.

Day 4 The “Grand Sud”

This was, as anticipated, a superb day, in beautiful weather. I was riding, very happily, with another small group; and the highlight was reaching Bonifacio, right at the south of the island, an amazing citadel town. We rode up into the citadel itself (incidentally also riding over the Col de St. Roch, the most southerly col in “France”) for coffees, and in my case beer, in the lovely old cobbled streets. With the wind behind us on our way home, we could make really good speed. At one point, in the slipstream of our group, I think I went for four or five kilometres on the flat, without pedalling at all. We did 12 cols in the day, but most of them were easy-peasy.

Day 5 THE CRETES OF THE CORSIGLIESE

Gérard and I made a navigational mistake at the start of the day’s ride, which meant that we did the whole circuit in reverse. But this turned out to be a happy error, as we had some wonderful descents on smooth roads towards the end of the day.

It also meant of course that, half way round, we met the other centcolists coming in the other direction. I was pleased at how many of them called out to me, “Bonjour Jeremy!” – I had obviously made a slight impression.

Day 6 La Castagniccia

My sixth and last day of cycling. Also one of the best, perhaps because I was really lazy (by centcolist standards) and cut the circuit down from an enormous 120 kilometres to, finally, only 50. I also only did three cols out of a possible nine. But it was a beautiful day, sunny and warm throughout, with amazing landscapes and villages perched impossibly over the valleys. The best bit was after I had rejoined the “official” circuit after Piedicroce, where the road started contouring round the hills, rising very gently all the time, with ever more spectacular views down to the Porta valley, opening up to our right. Just amazingly beautiful.

Homeward bound

I was sad to leave the next morning, and wave good-bye to so many now familiar faces. But at least I had no more cycling to do. Kind Gérard had offered to drive me, not only down to my bike-shop, but also all the way back up to Bastia, where he had to catch that night’s ferry. On the way, we stopped at the little fishing village of Pinarellu for a coffee, but when I offered to pay, I was waved away and told it was “on the house”. Then I also didn’t have to pay anything for the slight damage I’d done to my hired bike in the fall.

“You’re in luck today,” Gérard told me. Except he didn’t put it quite like that - his actual phrase was a bit cruder. “Tu as le col bordé de nouilles”. I think the literal translation is something like: “You’ve got noodles round your bum”!

Well, I felt the noodles had been with me all along. It was a marvellous séjour for me – wonderful outings in magnificent scenery, and great friendliness and conviviality from all the centcolists I met. My French definitely improved – a lot. And I did 50 cols exactly, in my six days – a world record for me. It was a great week.

JOIN THE CCC

The Club des Cent Cols is currently looking to increase its membership – all are welcome, particularly younger members, and non-French members. At the moment it has a very small membership in the UK, but the club is keen to attract more Brits to its ranks.

To qualify for full membership you have to have climbed at least 100 recognised mountain passes – but they can be anywhere, in the UK, the rest of Europe, the world.

Many readers of *Arrivée* will already have achieved this target. But even if you haven’t, the club offers help and encouragement to get there. It has produced, for example, a series of “grandes randonnées” – long-distance cycling trails, which plot the best cycling routes in mountainous regions, and which include a large number of recognised passes. These are mainly in France, but also in Spain and Switzerland – and their details

are all available to non-members.

The main benefit of club membership is the access it gives riders to unrivalled catalogues of the Cols of the world – the catalogues cover over 60,000 passes in 35 different countries, including a newly revised catalogue for the mountain passes of Great Britain and Ireland. These catalogues come in both paper and electronic form, with good links to Google Earth and other cycling apps. Existing UK members have found the catalogues invaluable in mapping their rides, in planning long-distance tours, and in exploring out-of-the-way regions.

There is also a general wealth of knowledge in the club, which members can tap into through its discussion group, on all cycling matters, navigational aids, the best cycling routes, and places to stay. The club also sends out regular information bulletins, and publishes a very

attractive and informative annual review, with an updated “Tableau d’Honneur” of members’ climbing achievements.

UK members may not be so attracted to the club’s gatherings – understandable, given the difficulties of logistics and language. But even if your French is not very good, they are very welcoming and convivial events. The club organises many regional meetings, as well as two main week-long “séjours” each year, one in the spring and one in the summer – and all in the most scenic of settings.

If you are at all interested in joining the club, Jeremy would be happy to hear from you and answer any queries you may have – he can be contacted at jeremy.chandler@blueyonder.co.uk. You can also get much more information, and details of how to apply for membership, from the club website on <http://www.centcols.org/>



A club gathering, on the Swiss/French border

A View with a Room... relaxing above Verbier, in the high mountains