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Amateur de France Bike Vacations Offer Chance To Sample Cycling's Storied Race

By ANNELENA LOBB July 22, 2006

Amateur cyclists who fantasize about riding in the Tour de France can do more than just watch the race on television and live vicariously through the peloton.

The race, considered by some to be the most difficult competition in all of sports, speeds around much of the map of France every July.

TACKLING THE TOUR Tour options for amateur cyclists range from short excursions for novices to demanding multi-week packages that shadow the race.

For amateurs, organized vacation tours take cyclists through some or all of the stages, including storied portions of the

race, like the notorious Alpe d'Huez, a steep, eight-mile climb containing 21 hairpin turns.

Some tours are essentially Tour de France fantasy camps, letting diehard riders cover hundreds of miles and experience the toughest stages.

Marcy Horkey, a real-estate developer in Malibu, Calif., is on her second Tour de France trip this year. She opted for a challenging eight-day package in the Alps, upgrading from a Pyrenees leisure package she took a few years ago.

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Other tours accommodate a range of athletic abilities. Butterfield & Robinson, a Toronto company that offers luxury biking and walking packages, held two Tour de France trips this year. The Geneva-to-Paris tour ends with an overnight stay in Paris and a view of the final race stage from a private balcony suite on the Champs-Élysées. This year's trip included riders ranging in age from 35 to 70. None of the participants are hard-core cyclists, Mark Fincham, the group's leader, said after a day cycling in the Alps. "One woman took up cycling three weeks ago," he says. "Another cyclist is a neurosurgeon who came with his son -- they just wanted to see what it was all about."



A 2004 Butterfield & Robinson guest on l'Alpe d'Huez.

On one day this week, the group biked an Alpine climb hours before the Tour itself came through, then ate lunch in a mountain restaurant and later watched the pros ride by, catching a glimpse of top American cyclist Floyd Landis. The trip costs \$7,995 per person, and a comparable package will be offered again next year. Butterfield & Robinson recommends travelers book trips at least two to three months in advance.

In general, it is easy to tell which tours are for cyclists who want to spend less time on the bike and take in more ambiance, and which are for cardiovascular stars out to test their abilities. Trek Travel of Madison, Wis., offers tours like its Uber Trip, which allows serious cyclists to complete six back-to-back race stages, and others, such as its first-week Grand Tour trip, which accommodates families with children as young as 10. (The company offers Grand Tour trips for each of the three weeks of the race, and won't allow kids on trips during the second two weeks, when the race takes place in the mountains.) Destination Cycling classifies its tours as performance trips, on which cyclists ride for 40 to 75 miles a day or more on challenging terrain, or lifestyle trips, on which cyclists max out at about 30 miles a day on flatter turf. Most companies have a van available at all times to pick up tired cyclists.

Interest in Tour de France bicycling vacations grew during seven-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong's years in competition, tour companies say. "I think the pinnacle of Tour de France tourism was when he was going for victory No. 5," said Destination Cycling's Mr. Tonon.

But Mr. Armstrong's retirement has damped demand for Tour de France cycling tours, some companies say. Tour de France packages at Backroads, a Berkeley, Calif., outdoor-vacation company, has dropped to 55 this year from 125 in 2005 and 400 in 2004. Cycling Classics, of Scottsdale, Ariz., last year offered 10 Tour-related packages, but this year it has only four.

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## TACKLING THE TOUR

### Butterfield & Robinson

Each cyclist on the company's Tour de France trips has the option of riding a Rocky Mountain hybrid or Pinarello bicycle. Trips can take a maximum of about 40 people and typically follow weeklong routes through the Pyrenees and Alps. This year, trips cost about \$7,000 to \$8,000 per person. The company also organizes private, or "bespoke," trips for smaller groups.

[www.butterfield.com](http://www.butterfield.com)<sup>2</sup>

### Backroads

Backroads offers Alps and Pyrenees trips that cater to both casual travelers and those who want more luxurious accommodation. The company provides a lightweight titanium bike to every

cyclist and supports a range of fitness levels. Casual trips cost about \$3,000 and premier trips some \$5,500. [www.backroads.com](http://www.backroads.com)<sup>3</sup>

### Destination Cycling



Destination Cycling

Destination Cycling this year offered eight Tour de France trips, including five lifestyle and three performance trips. The company plans for more of the same in 2007, plus two Tour de France half-challenge trips and a trip designed exclusively for CEOs, their spouses and accompanying riders. Prices range from a few thousand dollars to \$30,000 a person for the full-length Challenge. The company recommends booking the Challenge tour eight months in advance.

[www.destinationcycling.com](http://www.destinationcycling.com)<sup>4</sup>

### Trek Travel

Cyclists ride on 5.2 Madone bicycles. Trek Travel has ties to the Discovery Channel pro team, and some of its trips include time with the racers. The company has trips that aren't for the faint of heart, like its Uber Trip, and some family-friendly options. [www.trektravel.com](http://www.trektravel.com)<sup>5</sup>

### Cycling Classics

Cycling Classics offers both guided and self-guided bicycle tours; travelers stay in either hotels or apartments. The company provides each cyclist with an Eddie Merckx bicycle. Tours last from three to seven nights. [www.cyclingclassics.com](http://www.cyclingclassics.com)<sup>6</sup>

*\*Most bicycle-vacation companies assemble tour packages in November, when the following year's Tour de France route is announced. Prices given here are for 2006. Companies plan to offer comparable packages for 2007.*

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