



FEATURE
The 100
Cols Tour

WORDS & PHOTOS IGOR KOVŠE

LESS IS MORE

The 100 Cols Tour is a 4,000km odyssey over mountains famous from the Tour de France. **Igor Kovše** blitzed it on his road bike – with only 3kg of luggage



The 100 Cols Tour road book has been in my drawer for years. I kept it there as a joker, ready to play when I retired or ran out of ideas. Traced by a Dutch cyclist, this 'Honderd Cols Tocht' covers 4,000km and has about 66,000m of climbing through all the mountainous regions in France: Vosges, Jura, Massif Central, Pyrenees, Cévennes, Provence, Alps. It crests all the major cols from the Tour the France.

This year I took a closer look at it. I was going to France anyway to ride Paris-Brest-Paris. Why not kill two birds with one stone?

In fact, it could be three birds: this was a good opportunity to test a long ultralight tour with a light road bike and only 3kg of luggage.

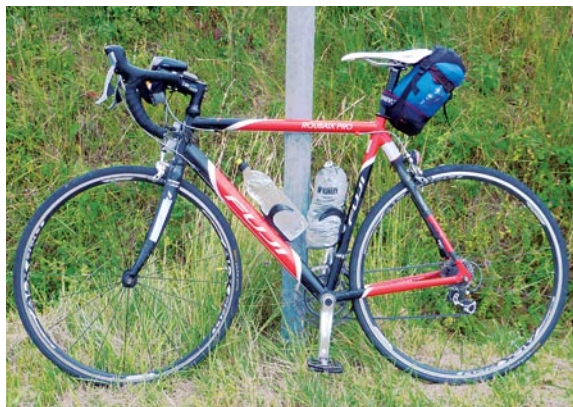
THE ULTRALIGHT PHILOSOPHY

I was not a newbie in the field of ultralight touring. It was an idea that grew from suffering frequent rear wheel spoke breakages. That happened on second-hand bikes of questionable quality, but the idea of weight and volume reduction stuck with me. It became a lifestyle.

I am religiously convinced – which

means without evidence – that ultralight touring reduces the number of mechanical problems; decreases energy requirements and fatigue; increases average speed, distance and enjoyment of cycling; and provides a comforting minimalistic philosophy in a world that pushes us into consumerism.

Ultralight touring isn't exactly new. Decades ago, British tourers favoured a saddlebag rather than panniers. In 1986, Richard and Nicholas Crane took minimalism even further on their Journey to the Centre of the Earth, a 58-day and



Above Looking south from the Col du Galibier, a 2,645m pass near Grenoble

Far left Most of Igor's scant luggage was in a pack under the saddle. There was also a bivvy bag in one bottle cage and a tiny camera bag on the handlebar

Left The Col de la Bonette is the highest paved road in Europe



“I COMPLETED THE 100 COLS TOUR IN CROCS – 266G FOR A PAIR. ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE”

› 5,301km tour from Bangladesh through the Tibetan Plateau and central China to a place near the Kazakhstan border (‘the centre of the Earth’). It’s a trip that still inspires and stirs the imagination.

They used steel road bikes, which were very light for the time (10kg including rack), and their luggage weighed just over 8kg. They made some radical weight saving measures. For example, they removed the front derailleur and shifter and moved the chain between front rings manually. Since then, even though bicycles and equipment have improved and become lighter, the trend in touring is to carry more and more.

GOING ULTRALIGHT

A common mistake that we all make as newcomers to ultralight cycling is to start by cutting the handle off a toothbrush. Forget the little things for now: start by thinking big. There are seven big things, in terms of weight or volume, that you should consider first: bicycle, tent, sleeping bag, sleeping pad, cooking equipment, carriers and – last but definitely not least – clothes. The seven big

things can be reduced to just three if you don’t intend to camp; all you need is a bike, some clothes, and carriers.

• **The bike.** I chose to ride the 8.8kg road bike that I use for my weekend training rides. It has a compact double crankset (50-34), with a lowest gear ratio of 34/27. On some climbs, when my lower back ached, I wished I had lower gearing, but I was too stubborn not to complete the climbs in one go. In future I would still use a light bike but would do exercises to strengthen my core muscles.

I don’t believe in clipless pedals, particularly for touring. Using ordinary shoes has a good side effect: you don’t need a second set of footwear. The fact that I completed 100 Cols in Crocs (266g for a pair) shows that anything is possible. I had flat pedals with pins. They were great: good grip, a wide, comfortable platform, and at 260g (with titanium axle) lighter than most clipless pedals.

• **Containers.** Panniers are by far the most common bicycle carrier. I don’t use them. If you are serious about weight saving, they are the first thing to abandon. This time I had so little luggage that I didn’t need a rack either. Most of my stuff was in the compression bag behind the seat. This could be expanded to include food bought at the end of the day or shrunk when I wore all my clothes. On my way home from the airport, I even managed to ride with a big bottle of Sheridan’s liqueur strapped to it. The bag could be strapped on





Opposite page, top to bottom

Descending out of the clouds on the Col d'Aubisque in the Pyrenees. The climb to the Col de la Bonette in the Alps. The road down from the Col d'Aubisque. The Col du Pas de Peyrol (Massif Central)

This page, top to bottom One of Igor's last climbs in the Alps, the Cormet de Roselend is 20km long. The town of Montbrun

and off relatively quickly, even though the items inside were not quickly accessible.

The little camera bag on the handlebar contained a camera, tools and skin ointment. As a 40g container carrying 340g of content, it was the realisation of the first axiom of ultralight cycling. It was simple to tie it to the handlebar with a nylon strip and once I tied it on, I never took it off. During the rain, I'd just slip a plastic bag over it.

Then there were two carbon fibre bottle cages. The first was for a one-litre PVC water bottle, the second for a bivvy bag's storage bag – which also held my rain jacket, arm warmers and coins.

• **Clothes.** I had a cycling jersey made of 50% merino wool. While it is stylishly designed, it was just too hot for me. On every longer climb and no matter what temperature, I was soaked with sweat. Conclusion: wear a light, synthetic jersey that wicks away the sweat. My windproof and rain resistant jacket was just right to keep the chill out and wasn't too hot. Arm warmers were great too, keeping me relatively warm in the rain. Leg warmers

weren't really necessary. I wore them only on the three nights I slept in the bivvy bag. They could have been replaced with winter nylon stockings. I didn't need my second, thicker pair of merino socks either. A better solution for the rain was to wrap my feet in clingfilm.

For the time off-bike, I replaced long trousers with light shorts without pockets. I really liked them, even if sometimes I didn't know what to do with my hands.

• **Other items.** I took a bivvy bag for emergency camping, and even used it three times when I had problems finding a room, generally at weekends. However, I wouldn't take it next time.

For navigation, I didn't carry maps. I had six plastic-coated, double-sided cue cards (size 12x6cm) that I made from the 31 pages of the 100 Cols road book. They were an excellent navigational tool.

THE 100 COLS TOUR

To get to Dijon from my home in Ljubljana, Slovenia, I used a city bus, airport bus, aeroplane, TGV and a bit of walking. It took my boxed bike and me ➤



IGOR'S ULTRALIGHT KIT LIST

The headline figure of 3kg includes the bike computer, clothes worn, even bottle cages...

BICYCLE	8890g	
• bike	~8800g	
• lock	48g	
• computer	40g	
CARRIERS	258g	
• 2 carbon fibre bottle cages with bolts	50g	
• front camera bag on the handlebar	40g	
• compression bag behind the seat, plus straps	112g	
• bag for storing bivouac bag	10g	
• water bottle	46g	
WEARING	724g	
• cap	32g	
• glasses	20g	
• cycling gloves	32g	
• jersey	210g	
• cycling shorts	140g	
• socks	24g	
• Crocs	266g	
OTHER CLOTHES	650g	
• wind jacket	176g	
• off-bike shorts	184g	
• leg warmers	104g	
• arm warmers	62g	
• merino socks	38g	
• nylon socks	10g	
• bathing trunks	34g	
• warm gloves	42g	
NIGHT RIDING	376g	
• reflective vest	114g	
• front light plus batteries	200g	
• rear light plus batteries	62g	
PHOTOGRAPHY	288g	
• camera	228g	
• battery charger	60g	
TOOLS & SPARES	234g	
• pump	38g	
• patch kit	10g	
• 2 tyre levers	10g	
• 2 minitools: allen keys, screwdriver, chain tool, spanners, spoke key	86g	
• razor blades	2g	
• rim-cleaning rubber	14g	
• spare tube	54g	
• duct tape	10g	
• oil	10g	
CAMPING	252g	
• bivouac bag	252g	
CATERING	2g	
• plastic spoon	2g	
• plastic toothpick	0g	
MEDICAL, HYGIENE & SEWING KIT	34g	
• toothbrush (handle cut off)	6g	
• two razors (handles cut off)	6g	
• skin ointment	12g	
• white medical tape	4g	
• cloth for cleaning glasses	2g	
• wiping cloth	2g	
• needle with thread	2g	
MISCELLANEOUS	94g	
• spare glasses	36g	
• cue cards	18g	
• notes, pencil	24g	
• ID, phone card, credit card	16g	

Most of the stuff was in a sleeping bag's compression bag strapped behind the seat. The camera and tools were in a small camera bag on the handlebar. Spare tube and lock were tied to the bike's head tube. Rain jacket and arm warmers were in the bottle cage, in the bivvy bag's bag.

I'M GLAD I HAD

The cue cards that I made from the 100 Cols road book were an excellent navigational tool, not least because they encouraged me to contact the locals and ask them about directions. I'd carry a card or two at a time in a jersey pocket and would usually check directions while riding. I'm positive that I couldn't navigate better or faster with any kind of paper or electronic map.

I WISH I HAD

A substitute for the bivvy bag. The bivvy bag didn't keep me warm and I stayed relatively dry only because I wiped off the condensation from the inside of it several times during the night. A 'space foil' would probably perform just as well, if not better. For emergency camping I'd take a light summer sleeping bag. Another possibility is just to continue cycling throughout the night. So I'd recommend good lights. Instead of a reflective vest, I'd take only reflective belts.



“I DIDN’T APPROACH MONT VENTOUX LIGHTLY, BUT ONCE ON IT I DIDN’T FIND IT SO DIFFICULT”

Less than eight hours. I was impressed.

The next day, however, as I was assembling my bike in a hotel room in Dijon, I tried not to look through the window at the dark, rainy morning. But once you dive into it, rain is not such a disaster. The first few days were rainy, but that couldn’t spoil the great feeling that I had right from the start.

My strategy was to wait out the heaviest downpours under a tree in a forest, and to cycle through drizzle or light rain and let the wind dry out what the rain had wetted. It worked well. If I got a midday meal for a reasonable price, the day was made perfect. If not, a baguette and a wedge of Brie was sufficient.

The nature of this tour became evident very soon. The cue sheets that I made using the road book of the 100 Cols Tour were leading me along secondary roads that I would never have found if I had navigated by map. The route weaved among vineyards, forests and quiet little villages, away from major roads and traffic. There were many climbs with fantastic long descents. Whoever traced this route deserves a medal.

Before the climb to Pas de Peyrol – the first really big climb of the tour in the Massif Central – my front light slid from its bracket, fell on the road, and cracked open, spilling the batteries all over. I could find only three out of four batteries, so I couldn’t check if the light was still functional. It didn’t matter much for the 100 Cols Tour, but would be essential for the Paris-Brest-Paris. The chef of the hotel where I stayed that night gave me the fourth battery to check the light. It was working, and moreover, the chef let me keep the battery. I mention this little incident because it was the worst that happened to me during my five weeks in France.

The cols in the Pyrenees were a surprise: really steep, especially some lesser known ones like Gamia, Burdincurucheta, and Marie-Blanque. Going down a few of them, my rims almost caught fire from braking. I went over the Pyrenees in five high-powered days of serious climbing. The second day (3,359m of climbing) and third day (2,872m) were packed with legendary Tour de France passes. The tops of the highest passes were still in the clouds, and it was chilly up there.

INTO THE ALPS

After leaving the Pyrenees, one would expect a few sedate days before the big climb to Mont Ventoux (which is categorised as the toughest climb of the 100 Cols). But even here, the route was packed with cols. The road leads through a variety of landscapes: sometimes it is a narrow forest road, then it crosses a high grassy plateau, then it goes

through gorges with Mediterranean scents. Just a few times the itinerary follows bigger national roads, and at those times you learn to appreciate the blessed tranquility of 100 Cols’ little roads.

I didn’t approach the climb of Mont Ventoux lightly. However, once on its slopes, I didn’t find it so difficult – or maybe I was just super motivated. After the first 6km of introduction, there is about 18km of more or less constant gradient, around 9%. The kilometres – or rather, hundreds of metres – pass agonisingly slowly, so it is better not to look at the distance on the cycle computer and switch to the clock. Those numbers advance faster! In the meantime, look around you and try to enjoy it. Once you get out of the forest it’s much easier: you can see your target and there’s only 5km to go.

After Ventoux, I had another mountain chain to conquer: the French Alps. The 100 Cols Tour takes a beautiful route into the Alps, through two splendid gorges – the Verdon and Cian. The latter is especially spectacular due to the dark red colour of its rocks. After that, the 100 Cols Tour follows the Route des Grandes Alpes. That took me over the major Tour de France passes in four majestic days.

On my first day on the Route des Grandes Alpes, I rode 134km and climbed 3,300m. From Beuil, you climb to the Col de la Couillolle and then take a breathtaking descent of 18 kilometres and 1,200m down to Saint-Sauveur-sur-Tinée. Just when you’ve taken a deep breath in Saint-Sauveur and



Far left The Verdon Gorge: its turquoise river is named for its vibrant colour

Left The road up the Col du Galibier was closed to everyone but cyclists when Igor was there. Some day-riders were carrying more than he was.

Below The reward for tough climbs: long, long descents



thanked him that you survived the descent, you start your first Alpine climb – the highest pass in Europe, La Bonette: 2,802m. If you come early in the day, as I did, you still have the time to enjoy the mid-day warmth on the 23-kilometre descent to Jausiers, which will give you some momentum over the next climb to the Col de Vars.

Day two was 164km, with 3,600m of climbing. I descended to Guillestre, climbed to Izoard, and then had a hurricane downhill to Briançon. After a long gradual climb to Lautaret, I left the 100 Cols route briefly – it turns right to Galibier – and followed another fantastic downhill through the dark endless gorge to Bourg d'Oisans. There I checked into a hotel, climbed Alpe d'Huez without luggage, and then came back down its 21 bends – each of which is named after a winner of this TdF stage.

Day three (175 km, 4,600 m) began with a climb from Bourg d'Oisans back to Lautaret, then on to Galibier. I was fortunate that the road to Galibier was closed to all but

cyclists until noon that day, and at the top there was free coffee and snacks. After a thrilling descent to Valloire, I climbed the Col du Télégraphe. Then it was down again to Saint Michel de Maurienne, a side climb to Aussois, another climb to Madeleine, and – since I didn't find a reasonably priced room in Bonneval – I climbed the Col de l'Isèran in the cold of approaching evening. I descended to Val d'Isère with my feet almost frozen.

Day four (139 km, 3,000 m) had an easy start: a 1,000 m gradual descent to Bourg Saint Maurice. Then I rode up to Cormet de Roselend, along the lake and down to Beaufort, with another three ups and downs for the Saisies, Aravis and Croix-Fry cols. I finished this excellent Alpine section with a descent to Thônes.

JURA AND VOSGES

Riding the grand passes of the Route des Grandes Alpes is satisfying and unforgettable, but I was not alone to appreciate it. There were motorised

sightseers too. After four days, I had had enough of cars and motorcycles buzzing around me. I was looking forward to peaceful cols and roads through the woods. The last part of the journey – through the Jura and Vosges – provided just that.

This is not to say that the last part of the trip was easier. There were as many cols as ever, some of them quite difficult. The first day of the last stage saw two of such kind: Clergeon and Grand Colombier. I started the climb to Grand Colombier just half an hour before a stage of the Tour de l'Ain passed, with the finish at the top. There was a big crowd at the side of the road, cheering me, and some may have even mistaken me for a leading escapee!

I had two punctures that day, and after the descent from the pass I took an hour to fix the flat and patch up the tubes. That slowed me down and night fell before I had the opportunity to find a hotel. I used my bivvy bag for the second time, this time in a particularly scenic place: it's called Pain de Sucre and is an open air stalagmite.

The following days passed in a tranquil atmosphere and in routine but enjoyable cycling up and down cols and côtes, peppered with longer, more challenging climbs (like Grand Ballon) here and there. On the last day to Saverne, I tried to delay the finish. I was a bit sad that this beautiful trip was coming to an end.

The sadness didn't last too long, however. Three days later I was at the start of another epic ride: Paris-Brest-Paris. ☺

DO IT YOURSELF

»»» The website of the 100 Cols Tour is 100cols.nl – there's an English language option. From the website you can buy the '100 Cols package', which includes: a description of the route, profiles of the mountains, and index list of all cols and côtes, recommendations for luggage, alternative routes in case a col is closed due to weather, and more.

Getting there: Dijon is 90 mins from Paris by TGV. A return train ticket from London St Pancras to Dijon costs from £89. See raileurope.co.uk. Dijon has a small airport but you can't fly direct from the UK. Fly to Paris, then take the TGV. **Travelling light:** visit Igor's blog: <http://ultralightcycling.blogspot.com/>

