

Cycling RIDES

EUROPE'S BEST ROUTES



"THE VERCORS IS A PART OF FRANCE THAT EVERYONE TENDS TO PASS BY, BUT WITHIN IT THERE IS SOME OF THE MOST SPECTACULAR SCENERY YOU WILL SEE ANYWHERE, INCLUDING THE DEEPEST GORGE IN FRANCE," ROGER DUNNE

The Vercors, France with the Glendene CC



THE GLENDENE JUNIORS invite *Chris Sidwells* to their pre-Tour of Wales training camp in scenic rural France

"**T**HEY'VE had quite a hard week, so they're going to take it easy today," the

Glendene team manager Bob Downs says before the ride. But juniors taking it easy, it's not going to happen is it? And it doesn't.

Over the last few years the Glendene CC, an Essex club, have built a reputation for

fielding the best junior road race team in the country. They've become sort of unofficial training academy for riders in the 18 and under age group. Downs explains why: "It's one of the most important stages in a bike racer's development. If you learn good habits as a junior it saves lots of time later and makes the transition through under-23 to the elite ranks much easier."

Downs is the ideal man for

WHERE TO?
A three-hour ride through two spectacular gorges on quiet roads in an undiscovered part of France

the job. His long racing career as a top amateur international and as a British-based pro demands respect. Plus he's got the personality; a mix of quiet encouragement, stern words when necessary, and enough humour to prick an ego that might unbalance the team.

Roll-call

The team for Wales are Tom Moses, Alex Murison, Paul Young and Conor Dunne, and the connection with the Vercors comes through Dunne. His uncle, Roger Dunne, a former



"The cycling is varied, with flat and gently rolling rides"

the angry torrent waiting above, the group arrive at the gate to the gorge in Pont en Royans. The houses here are amazing; many are built into the rock wall while others are cantilevered and arched to cling onto the side of the gorge. While agreeing that the architecture is "neat" the Glendene boys see Pont en Royans as a sign for them to pile on the pressure as the first big climb begins.

No slow

The rest day is out, turning the screw is in, as 550 metres of altitude are gained in 11 quick kilometres. Roger Dunne is riding with them, and he tries to bring a little prudence, pointing out that they have a long drive to Belgium next day and a race the day after. "But I like blasting it," Moses tells him. "It won't work, they won't slow down, juniors don't know how to," Downs adds.

He's smiling though; the worst thing Downs could do is try to put a brake on these guys. They're a mixed bunch. Moses and Young are both from Yorkshire. Young, the son of former top pro Chris, is a little nearer the dour stereotype than

Moses, who came to the camp late because he was busy finishing 17th in the junior road Worlds. Murison and Dunne are both southerners.

It's Dunne's fourth time here, and he puts his local knowledge to good use by forcing the pace towards the top of each climb. His climbing bends the laws of physics; people who are six foot eight shouldn't be able to go uphill so fast. The national junior 25 champion is the epitome of a gentle giant though. "I climb OK. I'm good in a time trial and I love racing in Belgium," is how he sums himself up as a bike racer.

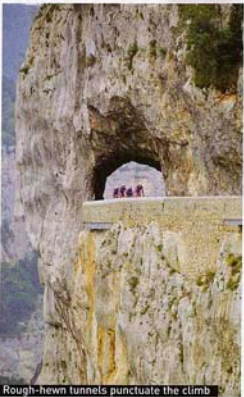
His size and strength are an advantage there, as he proved when he won the Flanders



WHO ARE THE GLENDENE BOYS?

Conor Dunne, Alex Murison, Paul Young and Tom Moses

Age: 18
Based: Brentwood, Essex
Sponsor: Bike Trax
Philosophy: Take the best and make them better



Rough-hewn tunnels punctuate the climb

75km
Ride length

international rider from North London, runs Velo Vercors with his partner Teresa Harte.

They have several gites connected to a big old mill in the charming town of St Jean en Royans, right on the edge of the Vercors regional park.

It's a perfect location for any cycling holiday, and ideal for the Glendene's build-up to one of the high points of the British junior season. "The boys have done long rides using climbs in the park, but the cycling here is very varied with flat and gently rolling rides too. Today though we are taking you to two spectacular gorges: the Gorge de la Bourne and the Combe Laval," Roger Dunne tells me.

Spectacular indeed. After a short spin along the lower river Bourne, which is nothing like



"The road spears through short tunnels"

Gorgeous: the Combe Laval forms a sublime backdrop

1,500m
Climbing

Trophy this year, but he says, "I really hope I don't grow any more. I'm at the max of everything: shoe size, frame size, everything. I spend a lot of time trying get hold of things like size 13 race shoes on the internet."

Breathtaking

The second long climb is the Col de Carri, the high point of the ride at 1,202 metres, under a nearby peak called La Sacha. Then it's down a bit, up a bit over the Col de la Machine, and into the breathtaking Combe Laval. This huge gorge, over one third of a

mile deep in places, like all limestone gorges is a collapsed cavern where the rock, dissolved for millennia by the infant river Cholet, just gave way under its own weight and collapsed leaving a gigantic trench in the Vercors plateau. And like other limestone regions, there are caves here too, so the Vercors has been inhabited for a long time, but today's road was only cut into the cliff side quite recently. It wriggles downwards, spearing through short tunnels and rock arches. It's an adrenaline rush on a bike.

Down safely, the Glendene meander back to St Jean and enjoy an excellent lunch in the mill garden with Roger and Teresa's adopted kittens — Eddy, Tommy, Nicole and Beryl play around our feet. The week's training is done. The team score a one-two in their race in Belgium through Tom and Conor. And in the Tour of Wales, Moses finished sixth to current GB junior hotshot Joshua Edmondson, Dunne took second in the points classification and Glendene won the team award. Mission accomplished.

NEXT WEEK
Isle of Man with Chris Whorral

Cycling in the Vercors

THE Vercors is just west and a little south of Grenoble, so acts as a gateway to the Alps and to the Ardèche and Provence. The Tour de France has been here but more often just zips past the Vercors on its way to or from the Alps. The Vercors climbs the Tour has used include the Col de Romeyere in the north, the Limouches and Tourniol in the west and the Col de Rousset in the south.

It's a great place to race, but exploring at your leisure is just as rewarding. If you want to check out this land of cavernous gorges and quiet towns, contact Velo Vercors at www.velovercors.com.

Turning up the heat as the ground points up



GORGE DE LA BOURNE

This gorge is a famous location for white water sports, and for the adventurous pastime of canyoning. You only catch glimpses of it from the road, but the Bourne tumbles through its gorge in a series of waterfalls, rapids and deep pools. The river rises on the slopes of the Montagne de Lans, and there's good trout fishing lower down.

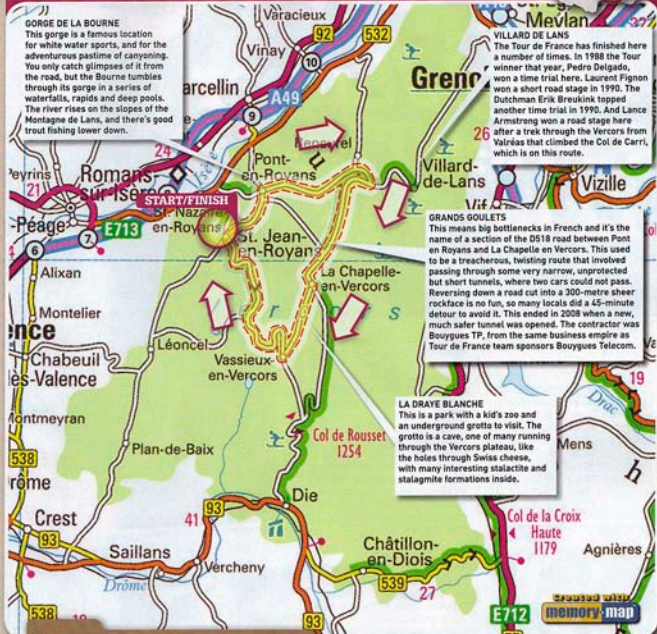
VILLARD DE LANS
The Tour de France has finished here a number of times. In 1988 the Tour winner that year, Pedro Delgado, won a time trial here. Laurent Fignon won a short road stage in 1990. The Dutchman Erik Breukink topped another time trial in 1990. And Lance Armstrong won a road stage here after a trek through the Vercors from Valréas that climbed the Col de Carri, which is on this route.

GRANDS GOULETS

This means big bottlenecks in French and it's the name of a section of the D518 road between Pont en Royans and La Chapelle en Vercors. This used to be a treacherous, twisting route that involved but short tunnels, where two cars could not pass. Reversing down a road cut into a 300-metre sheer rockface is no fun, so many locals did a 45-minute detour to avoid it. This ended in 2008 when a new, much safer tunnel was opened. The contractor was Bouygues TP, from the same business empire as Tour de France team sponsors Bouygues Telecom.

LA DRAVE BLANCHE

This is a park with a kid's zoo and an underground grotto to visit. The grotto is a cave, one of many running through the Vercors plateau, like the holes through Swiss cheese, with many interesting stalactite and stalagmite formations inside.



My training bike

PAUL Young's bike is a Ridley Noah, the same carbon model that the team all race on. It has a Dura-Ace groupset, and Fulcrum wheels with Specialized tyres for training.



Ride route

FOLLOW the D54 north from St Jean en Royans. This part of the ride is flat but the road tips upwards just before Pont en Royans. Careful here, the town's streets are narrow and the beautiful houses clinging to the gorgeside bring out the tourists. Follow the D531 (a number that should strike a chord for fans of steel frames with long memories) and climb the Gorge de la Bourne, leaving it shortly before its summit to head south over the Pas de l'Echarasson. Take care in the tunnels on this climb. Continue south, picking up the D518 and turn right after La Chapelle en Vercors to climb the Col de Carri. Continue down and up again over the Col de la Machine to enter the top of the Combe Laval. Again, take care through the tunnels and some tight bends, but enjoy this huge swoop back down to St Jean en Royans.