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Nikon Brikk, Ralph Lauren's
Bugatti watch, Venice hotels

INFLUENCE
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Top 100 restaurants, art and
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Berlin, the French Riviera,
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elite traveler

**THE PRIVATE JET
LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE**




**Hot
in the
city**

A STYLISH WEEKEND IN
NEW YORK, PLUS THE
100 BEST RESTAURANTS
IN THE WORLD



TAKE THE HARD ROAD

As the peloton zooms into action at next month's Tour de France, Susannah Osborne enlists the Rapha team for a pro-worthy experience on one of the most iconic climbs in the Grand Tour's history

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At 2,950 feet above sea level at the side of a road enveloped by a dense forest of pines, juniper and cedar, an ex-Team Sky *soigneur* (the term for someone who cares for members of a cycling team) is feeding me a patty of sticky white rice and prunes. It's an odd scene, but these secret, foil-wrapped parcels are key, so I'm told, if I am going to cycle to the top of the mountain that's affectionately known as the Beast of Provence.

My impromptu picnic is taking place half way up Mont Ventoux, a 6,273-foot zenith that has a mythical status among cyclists. This road-cycling Mecca lies 93 miles north of Marseille and 22 miles north-east of Carpentras, in south-east France and looks a bit like a ship on the horizon of the flat Provence skyline. So far, each pedal revolution of the six miles I've ridden from Bédoin, the starting point for the 14-mile climb, has been resisted by dense, oppressive air - the kind that forces you to find the bottom of your lungs. In this case it's like being held hostage in a steam room on a bike.

It's early May and, despite the clear blue sky and early summer sunshine, my fellow riders and I - the captain of a super yacht and a whippet-like Australian - are the only cyclists on the road. But, unlike most of the hardy souls who ride this mountain solo, we are getting a brief taste of life as a professional cyclist because following us is a mechanic and a support crew in a black Jaguar XT Sportbrake station wagon laden with food.

I've come here to experience a Rapha Retreat. It's a cycling holiday hosted by Rapha, the cycle clothing company that took understated style, waved it in the face of cyclists and urged them to look sharp on and off their bikes. In just 11 years Rapha has become a global success, official kit providers to Team Sky, and Rapha's travel arm offers group and bespoke cycling journeys all over the world,

from San Francisco to Japan, Tuscany to Australia. Our base for the retreat and the place we had left several hours earlier is Le Grand Banc, a private hamlet at the end of a farm track in the Luberon Valley. A secret oasis of calm, this jigsaw of tiny stone villas is the kind of place where you can sit around in Lycra while appreciating an original Warhol and eating a peach that was picked from the property's orchard that very morning, which makes it pretty special and well aligned with the Rapha brand.

Abandoned after the First World War and overlooked until the 1960s, Le Grand Banc was discovered and lovingly restored by Jeremy Joseph Fry - a descendant of the British chocolate dynasty responsible for the pink-, orange- and purple-centered chocolate cream bars (a very British, Willy Wonka-style treat that no one I know claims to have ever eaten, or liked). During the 1960s the hamlet became a bohemian retreat for Britain's great minds. An engineer by trade, Fry invited old colleagues and inventors to hang out at the hamlet, while they developed their brilliant ideas - James Dyson of vacuum cleaner fame was a regular.

A MOUNTAIN OF TWO HALVES

The experiences offered by Rapha are hard to match. The cycling journeys are fully supported by an extensive team of guides, mechanics, masseurs and drivers - even your dirty Lycra gets the pro treatment and will be laundered and waiting at your door, ready for your next ride. Off the bike, dinners and lunches are part of the main event and the summer dining room at Le Grand Banc has a 15ft-long outdoor marble table with views of the Luberon Valley. What's more, Rapha has a unique partnership within the cycling industry - guests who joined a tailor-made Rapha trip to the Giro d'Italia last year were given a secret preview of cycle manufacturer Pinarello's Dogma F8 (the bike ridden by Team Sky at the Tour de France) two days before its global launch.

From afar, the bare, barren mound of Mont Ventoux looks as if it's covered in snow, but what you are actually seeing is a chalky-white, limestone ridge. The mountain's reputation is fierce. This is a mountain of two halves and two landscapes; it can be still and sunny at the base and cruelly windy and exposed at the top. It's not uncommon for riders to be blown off their bikes by the tail end of the mistral - a cold, violent wind that blows across southern France to the Mediterranean. Amusing to see, but horrific if it's you that's being beaten around the head by an angry French wind.

After nine miles grappling with the gradient, I have a sudden, overwhelming urge to weep. I have ridden extensively in the Alps but we've been pedalling on an average incline of nine percent for well over an hour and I've hit a sugar low. It's at this point that we

“So far, each pedal revolution of the six miles I've ridden has been resisted by dense, oppressive air”

Below

Chris Froome, becoming the first British winner on Mont Ventoux during the Tour de France 2014





Clockwise from top left

The verdant lower slopes of Mont Ventoux; fully equipped back-up cars are always on hand; the downhill run

emerge from the forest and spot Chalet Reynard, a very plain but celebrated watering hole, where the Rapha support crew is waiting. More foil wraps of rice are handed over - in my glycogen deficient state they look like legal highs and I stuff one whole into my mouth. Rather than stop, we're urged to get back on the bikes and push on into the lunar landscape that characterizes Ventoux.

The mountain was once covered in evergreen forest but a demand for timber and charcoal, which began in the 12th century, stripped the peak of vegetation leaving behind the signature scoured, exposed limestone that makes it famous. Ventoux has featured in the Tour de France 15 times (though this year the route will take in the Alpe d'Huez instead), most famously when Britain's Tom Simpson died two kilometers from the summit on July 13, 1967. Simpson was the first British rider to have a genuine chance of winning the Tour, but he died from exhaustion and dehydration with alcohol and amphetamines in his bloodstream. A granite memorial, which features a silhouette of Simpson, sits at the side of the road where he died.

Ventoux was also the scene of the Lance Armstrong and Marco Pantani duel when, in 2000, the Italian climber and the Texan cowboy rode away from the peloton. Pantani was first to the finish, yet Armstrong told reporters he had let the Italian win, which caused a war of words between the two.

The top is now in sight and my heart is thumping so hard my hands appear to be shaking on my handlebars. Were I in the emergency room, they'd be getting out the defibrillator. In 2013 Chris Froome made history here as the first Briton to win a stage when he rode away from Alberto Contador but even Froome had to be given oxygen to help him recover after the win.

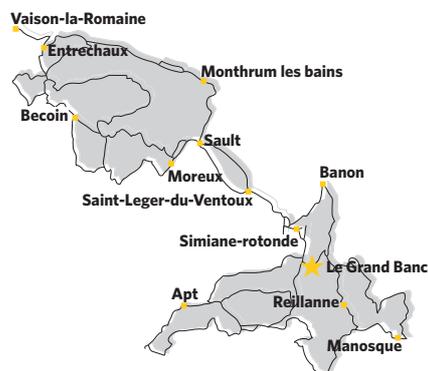
THE GRAND DESCENT

We reach the summit, pause only fleetingly in front of the huge, white observatory and do an immediate about turn, stopping for a minute to layer up with jackets, winter hats and mitts - in early May it's bitter up here and there are still patches of snow on the side of the road. The descent is fast, fluid and utterly exhilarating in a way that makes you want to whoop like a kid. I'm on a high as we weave and flow around the hairpins. It's like riding a Scalextric track in real life. We're on the drop, pedals high, then low sprinting out of the bends until the incline is erased and we're back on flat land.

I've certainly failed to put a dent in Chris Froome's personal best up the Bald Mountain, but I reckon I can match the Team Sky rider when it comes to effort - it has been a big day and I'm cooked. Showered, refreshed and back at Le Grand Banc, dinner is served - a tender lamb stew with dauphinoise potatoes and thyme and honey ice

LE GRAND BANC - ROUTES

Ways to get your heart pumping



cream to finish. It's not fancy, but it's so good.

As we discuss our efforts, the Rapha staff are washing, cleaning and servicing our bikes for the next day's ride. A man from Campagnolo has flown in from Italy to tinker with the gears. From our efforts today it's clear we're not going to make the cut as professional riders, but here's a place where we can at least pretend.

The trip was supplied by Rapha Travel. A Rapha Retreat at Le Grand Banc costs between \$3,000 and \$8,300 per person for full-board including transfers, but excluding hire of a Pinarello Dogma F8 bicycle.

*"My heart is
thumping so hard
my hands appear
to be shaking on
my handlebars"*



Rapha constantly seeks special places to visit during two-wheeled experiences. New to the portfolio is the restaurant Scaramouche, where the ice creams and sorbets are made by hand using unpasteurized milk. Favorites are geranium and pistachio, salted caramel and lavender. Cours Aristide Briand, 04280 Céreste, France; +33 4 92 79 48 82