

An Afternoon Ride Through the Corbiere Hills

Paul Hughes 2009

This is a description of a typical ride that I do when visiting our apartment in Barcares near Perpignan France just to give you an idea of what the area is like.

Le Barcares is a small seaside town which is in the South West of France on the Med about 20km from Perpignan in the Pyrenees Orientales department (no. 66) of the Languedoc Roussillon region. Le Barcares sits on a narrow strip of land between the sea and a large saltwater lake that's about 10km long and 4 km wide.

The geography is characterised by a flat coastal strip (le littoral) about 10km wide and running for 60km from the Spanish border in the South to Narbonne in the North. To the North West are the Corbiere hills where the wine of the same name comes from, which is actually in the Aude department (no. 11).

To the West are the Roussillon hills and the Maury valley where the TdF passed through in '08 when Mark Cavendish won at Narbonne. This area is well known for its prehistoric sites with lots of gorges and caves. Its also dotted with small AOC wine producing areas such as Maury, Roussillon Village and Fitou.

To the South West is Perpignan and then 50 km beyond that the Pyrenees begin with Andorra about 100km away and the high Pyrenees where the big TdF climbs are a further 100km away.

Due South are the Les Alberes which is a ridge of hills straddling the Spanish border.



Almost every small town in France has a local cycle club, even if its only half a dozen blokes who go out for a ride on Sundays and Baracares is no exception. I've seen the CC Barcares "boys" around a few times but not been on any rides with them yet. Nice blue strip though ---



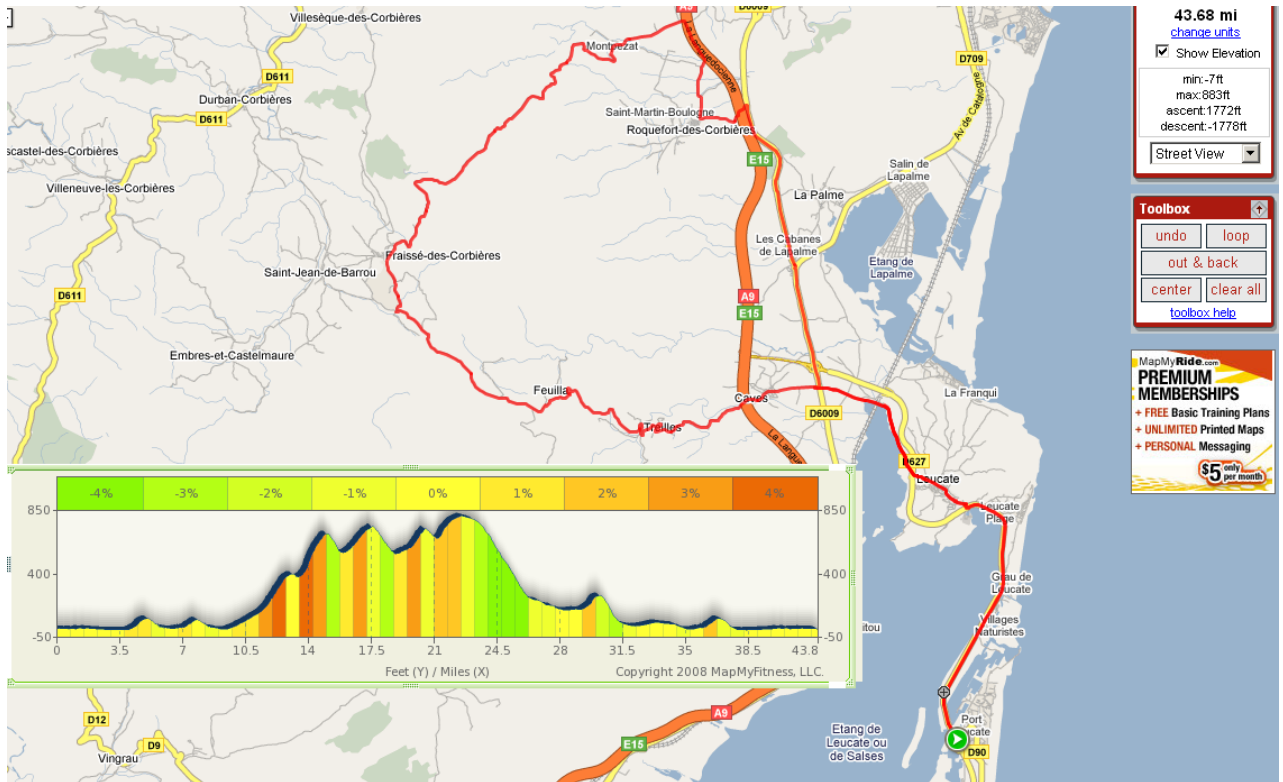
Photo from town website of CC Barcares with the lake and Corbiere hills in the background

The main local racing clubs are CC Rivesaltes (<http://velo66.neuf.fr/>) and CC Sigean (<http://www.cycloclubsigean.com/index.php>). Most clubs are affiliated to the FFCT (http://www.ffct.org/qui/s_cec.htm - equivalent to CCT), the FFC (<http://www.ffc.fr/index.asp> - equivalent of BC) and UFOLEP (<http://ufolep.org/> - which is a French multisports organisation).

There are only a couple road races and TT's organised each year in the local area. However there are plenty of regular Sunday and weekday rides as well as several randos/sportifs. Needless to say that with all the Pyrenees not far away there is a lot MTB activity with competitions and raids/randos most weekends.

The Corbiere Hills Ride

It's the 3rd of January 2009, I've just about sobered up and the sun's shining so I decide to go for a ride over the Corbiere hills. The route covers about 70km (43 mi) with over 500m (1700ft) of climbing. Not exactly a Grand Tour but I only had 3 hours before sunset.



The Corbiere hills have peaks up to 600m with road cols at around 250m. The gradients aren't too severe but can go on for several kms. The main problem is the road surface. It can get so hot in summer that the roads melt and so they are covered in a thick layer of chippings for protection and there is a lot of patching where the surface has broken up. My solution is to use a pair of 28mm Conti GatorSkins with only 90 psi in – heavy but smoothes out the ride a treat. By the way, the rest of the bike is my old Audax Borghini alu frame & carbon fork with a 52/42/30 triple and 9sp 12-25 block.

The first 15kms are pan flat so I can get a good average built up before the climbs begin just after the little village of Caves. The climb starts with an added kick over the motorway bridge before the steady drag up to Treilles. Through the village and the road continues to climb up to an unnamed col and then down a fast steep decent to the village of Feuilla. From now on there are no flat bits, only up or down.

Past Feuilla, the road immediately starts to climb up to the col de Feuilla (250m). There's not many inhabitants around here but part way up the climb is a typical small holding and that can only mean one thing, *%£\$* dogs. As I go past there it is, the woof-woof-woof of something that sounds big and nasty. Now - is the gate shut? Is the beast chained up? Thankfully yes on both counts so the heart rate subsides and I press on.

The col de Feuilla is followed by a lovely 3km decent with fast sweeping bends down to the village of Fraises. Here there are the signs of previous bike race activity – direction arrows painted on the road and the letters "M 1000" indicating 1km to go for a mountain prime. Looking ahead I can see the road zig-zagging to the summit. Part way up I exchange "bonjours" with a cyclist coming down and try not to look in as bad a state as I feel. At the top I do a short sprint for the line and yes sadly I punch the air as I it – you know you'd do the same!

The next objective is the col de Souil (267m) the highest point on this ride. It ends up being a bit disappointing. The climb is a long flattening ascent to the top with no obvious \wedge shaped col and only a signpost to say you've arrived. I stop and take a photo for my "col-lection" and then its time to head for home.

The decent starts slowly but gradually gets steeper and runs for 5km. I turn a bend and there in front is a fantastic view to Narbonne and the sea 20km away. On this decent its easy to hit 70 kph. Most bends are gentle enough to straighten the line but there are a couple of hairpins where I have to brake hard and sprint out of the saddle to get back up to speed. The trick is to keep concentrating. Spot your line in and out of the bend and then commit with a smooth flow. The trouble is its hard to concentrate when that image of Beloki crashing in front of Armstrong in the 2003 TdF keeps popping into my head (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtZhG2kWVLY>) Yuk!

The road starts to flatten and I'm soon back down to 30kph and doing more pedalling. A short bumpy ride through the narrow lanes of the vineyards to Roquefort where I decide I have to take the main road back since its now getting late. One last hill and then a 20km flat time trial home. This part would normally be easy but I forgot to bring my cereal bars and the bonk's starting to set in *&%\$*.

As I plod along the last few kms past the unusually flat calm lake at Leucate, I'm treated to a fabulous sunset over the distant mountains. Just one last drag over the estuary bridge and I'm home soon tucking into any food that isn't nailed down!!!

