

Col de la Couillole, 6 July 2024

THE TOUR DE FRANCE EXPERIENCE THROUGH A PANORAMIC LENS

Cycling enthusiasts from the four corners of the world were treated to the special conditions of the 32nd edition of L'Étape du Tour de France on Saturday, savouring the experience of a lifetime on the roads between Nice and the Col de la Couillole. The leg-breaking 138 km course put the riders through the wringer, but the jaw-dropping landscapes of the Nice hinterland spurred them on to the summit. It was a day to remember.

Key points:

- Keen cyclists turn out in force for 32nd edition of L'Étape du Tour de France, held on a course stretching from Nice and the Col de la Couillole (Alpes-Maritimes)
- 138 km and four mountain passes for a total altitude gain of 4,600 metres
- Amateurs tackle the course of stage 20 —the penultimate one— of the 2024 Tour de France two weeks before the pros
- More and more women hitting the road
- A star-studded start list sees the skier Jean-Baptiste Grange, the F1 driver Damon Hill and the biathlete Sturla Holm Lægreid brave the course from A to Z
- Damien Jeanjean and Gladys Verhulst-Wild take the spoils

Words were in short supply at the finish of the 32nd edition of L'Étape du Tour, at the top of the Col de la Couillole. The final climb and last-minute efforts had left riders gasping for air, with many only able to muster a cry of exhilaration. Yet their eyes told the whole story. The thousands who rolled out from Nice's Promenade des Anglais at dawn, with the Mediterranean as their backdrop, had experienced far more than a run-of-the-mill cyclosportive. Over 138 km, four mountains and 4,600 metres of altitude gain, they had embarked on an epic journey through the stunning landscapes of the Alpes-Maritimes hinterland. The course featured the Col de Braus, with its notorious hairpin bends, the Col du Turini, a staple for cycling tourists in the region, the Col de la Colmiane and the final slog up to the Col de la Couillole. This vicious sequence, punctuated by white-knuckle descents, demanded unwavering focus. While Damien Jeanjean and Gladys Verhulst-Wild (who won silver in the French national championships two weeks ago) romped home in 4 h 40'28" and 5 h 36'24", respectively, the vast majority of the field faced a much longer day in the saddle.

Sporting jerseys emblazoned with a big red-and-white heart, 300 Riders of the Heart rolled out after drumming up at least 800 euros each for Mécénat Chirurgie Cardiaque, a long-standing charitable partner of the Tour de France for two decades. These charity race numbers will help save 17 children's lives. Among these big-hearted cyclists were Manon Bastianelli, the youngest member of the Team of the Heart, and her father Pierre, who came all the way from Clermont. "We took up cycling three years ago, during lockdown, when we were allowed out within a 5-kilometre radius", explains the father. "And we just kept going. We chose to ride this prestigious event with a purpose by getting charitable race numbers. These regions are amazing for cycling. We were here for fun and good vibes only." Robin Duvinage is no stranger to charity events, both on a bicycle and on foot. "The concept of solidarity is crucial. It often gets forgotten these days. I was keen to ride not just for myself, but for kids who need a helping hand. By the way, you can still chip in until the end of July."

PRESS RELEASE



More and more women hitting the road

Just like the fourteen-strong women's crew in Hutchinson kit, flying the flag for the Femme et Cycliste organisation, more and more women are giving L'Étape du Tour a crack. Marie, from Aveyron, was among the 44% of first-timers. "I took up cycling four years ago. I was looking for a challenge and L'Étape du Tour seemed the obvious choice. I love climbing, so the course definitely suited me well, although the last five kilometres felt endless. The route is truly spectacular and not having to worry about traffic is brilliant. I was often head down, but I tried to soak in the scenery. It definitely makes you want to come back for more." With three starts under her belt, the Estonian Ann-Christine Allik (fourteenth in the women's classification) is a bit of a veteran. "Taking part in L'Étape du Tour has become a tradition for us", she points out. "There's a group of us from Estonia and, every time we spotted our flag on someone's number, we'd cheer each other on. This year was tough... but then it always is. I loved starting from Nice, right by the sea. It felt a bit like a holiday. We stayed for several days, mixing cycling with beach time. It was awesome. I'll probably come back next year."

While many riders hailed from France and across Europe, the event drew cyclists from around the globe. Take the Brazilian Luciano André Pagliarini. "Coming all the way from Brazil is quite a trip", he notes. "It took me two days to get to Nice. But I have no regrets. The landscapes are gorgeous and the organisation is on point. Incredible! I landed a week back and managed to catch two Tour de France stages in Italy. Tomorrow, I'll explore Monaco before heading back to Brazil with loads of fond memories." Until next year.

World champions in the peloton

Several sporting greats also threw their hats into the ring. The skier Jean-Baptiste Grange, a two-time world champion and slalom World Cup winner, rolled over the line in 6 h 24′24″. "It was a fantastic experience", he chirps. "The first three climbs went well, but I might have been digging a bit too deep. Obviously, the final ascent was tougher, so I was relieved to finish! But I had a blast at an incredible event with an incredible organisation. Of course, I made sure to look up and take in the scenery. As a former athlete, it feels good to set yourself a new challenge, even if it's on a smaller scale." The Swedish biathlete Sturla Holm Lægreid (an Olympic gold medallist and multiple-time world medallist) came in just one second shy of the six-hour mark. Alizée Baron (a world medallist in ski cross and two-time Olympian) also earned her finisher's medal atop the Col de la Couillole after 8 h 34′54″ in the saddle. The 1996 Formula 1 world champion, Damon Hill, picked L'Étape du Tour over the Silverstone Grand Prix, aiming to raise funds for Neuro UK. "I'm no Mark Cavendish, but I tried to do my best", he quipped. Mission accomplished in 11h08′14".

In two weeks, on 20 July, Tadej Pogačar, Jonas Vingegaard, Remco Evenepoel, Primož Roglič and the rest of the Tour de France peloton will tackle this very same route for the penultimate stage. Whether they are standing on the side of the road or glued to their screens, the pro race will send a shiver down the spines of participants in the 32nd edition of L'Étape du Tour de France, who will be able to proudly say, "I was there!".

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