

Living the dream...

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY
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It's early Sunday morning in Paris and I'm cycling through the City of Lights with TDA Global Cycling. There are nine of us in this group of intrepid cyclists, hailing from Australia, Canada, the USA and Taiwan, and we've already taken obligatory selfies in front of the Notre Dame and the Arc de Triumph.

In a few minutes, we'll be doing the same in front of the Eiffel Tower. But instead of cycling back to our hotels and calling it a day – perhaps with an espresso and a croissant – we're about to cycle 580km all the way to Germany.

If all goes to plan, we'll pedal into Freiburg, a dynamic university town at the foothills of the Black Forest in southwest Germany, on Saturday. Along the way we'll cycle across north-eastern France, through perfectly manicured villages and charming medieval towns before heading into the famous Champagne wine region. From there, we'll tackle the Col de la Schlucht pass (1139m) which involves a 800m climb before cycling through towns that sound more German than French until we finally cross the border. Although my legs will only take me as far as Freiburg, the rest of the group will continue on to Varna, Bulgaria, 3,100-kilometres later, roughly tracing the famous Orient Express train journey linking Western Europe to Istanbul and the exotic east beyond. Heading out of the Paris urban sprawl, it doesn't take long before we're cycling past bucolic vistas, tractors and chapels. It will be a mostly straight route to our first campsite at Chenoise according to our GPS. But even without the aid of technology, we're unlikely to get lost on this first day – the guys from TDA have marked the route with eye-catching orange streamers, marking the turns and reconfirming the route at

key stages along the way. At 2.30pm, myself and Daniel, another Victorian, pull into the first campsite of the trip, 102km from Paris. I wake a little after 7am as the sun is beginning to break through the clouds. It's the morning of day two, and despite yesterday's huge efforts, my legs are feeling fine and I'm ready for another day on the saddle. For the next three days we cycle through small French villages on scenic backroads and bike paths alongside sunflower plantations and farms where solitary houses look out over vast wheat fields recently harvested by combines. At some points along the way, our route takes us onto busy motorways and I'm careful to keep my bike on the painted white line of the edge of the road as the traffic zooms past. But French drivers are remarkably courteous in giving us all enough space, and there's usually plenty of shoulder room for us to ride safely alongside the passing cars and trucks.

On average, we cycle around 100kms a day, and thankfully the weather stays dry the whole time despite looming grey clouds threatening to unleash a deluge of Biblical proportions at any minute. It's now the morning of day five, and after a leisurely day spent exploring Troyes, a city famous for its colourful 16th century half-timbered houses, it's time to leave our comfy hotel and get back on the saddle. But I'm slightly dreading the day ahead.





With 125km standing between us and tonight's campsite, this will be the longest I've ever ridden. Just after lunch, with 60km behind me, I choose to break off from the group to ride on my own and navigate myself to the day's campsite. The last 30kms are especially tough, and I struggle to make my way up steep gradients without having to stop halfway for a breather. But eventually I've put all the hard work behind me and pull into the campsite; I'm first in, and the guys from TDA have only just arrived to begin preparations for the evening's barbecue dinner. I kill some time by taking a swim in the campsite pool to soothe my aching muscles. But yesterday's impressive distance is nothing compared to what's ahead. Today on day six we'll tackle the hardest stage of our ride to Germany by climbing the Col de la Schlucht pass before reaching the town of Munster. At this stage in the journey, France is becoming more German. The pass we'll need to summit sounds unmistakably Germanic, as do the towns we cycle through. But language is the last thing on my mind as I struggle to make my way up the monstrous mountain climb.

Halfway up I'm completely drenched in sweat and in a world of pain. I knew today's ride was going to be hard – in fact, I was kind of looking forward to it. But now I can't wait for it to be over. Eventually, to my relief, I summit the pass, and after a delicious lunch up top, I cycle the remaining 30kms downhill to the day's campsite, glad that all the hard work is behind me – literally. It's bittersweet riding through the rolling vineyards of the Alsace region on the Rhine River plain and rolling into Freiburg the following day. On the one hand, I'm feeling triumphant over completing this 580-kilometre challenge and proving to myself that I have what it takes to tackle such a vast distance on a bike. But on the other hand, I'm sad to be leaving the group and my saddle behind, and I know I'll be missing those delicious stops for coffee and croissants at French bakeries along the way. In fact, I'm slightly jealous that I can't accompany the group all the way to Bulgaria. But cycling is an addictive sport, and I know it's only matter of time before I'm back on two wheels.