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Breaking Away

No longer content to simply watch, more and more Americans are traveling to the Tour de France to *ride*.

By TERI LETTINA

Every year, Joe DeYoung spends countless hours training for the biggest race in cycling: the Tour de France. When the weather is good, DeYoung is out on his bike, doing interval work to boost his cardiovascular power and climbing the most challenging hills he can find to prepare for riding in the French Alps. In the winter, the Chicago-area resident attends up to five indoor group-cycling classes each week. He also teaches a weekly two-hour "Cycle Camp" class designed to get cyclists ready for the spring season.

Despite his intense training, DeYoung will never vie for the Tour's signature yellow jersey. The 55-year-old computer supervisor travels to France every summer to cycle the same legs of the Tour as the pros — but he's there as a tourist.

DeYoung rides on a closed portion of the racing course with a group organized by the tour company Discover France/Cycling Classics. The amateurs start out about an hour ahead of the actual competitors and ride until the peloton (the main group of racers) overtakes them. "The pros eventually catch up with us," DeYoung explains. "We can hear them coming from way back — the helicopters, the cheering fans — and we just keep cycling until the police eventually usher us off the course so the real racers can come through." After the pros pass by, DeYoung and crew hop back on their bikes and resume pedaling. They may do this multiple times throughout the Tour, depending on what their tour operator can arrange.

Two active fans pose with a Tour flag in 2006; Sunca Hincapie of Team Discovery Channel signs the jersey of an amateur cyclist in the town of Cambo les Bains in 2006; a group with Trek Travel makes a pit stop in front of the Eiffel Tower in 2006.

These active vacationers say it's a thrilling ride. "There's nothing like it in the world," says DeYoung, who has ridden the course each year since 2000. "It's like being at the Olympics and getting to run or swim or whatever right before the competitors get there. It gets in your blood, and you just want to go back, over and over."

The Lure of Adventure Travel

DeYoung is part of today's growing breed of "active adventure" travelers. More than 98 million vacationers

have signed up for active adventures in the past five years, according to the Travel Industry Association, and more adventure travel companies are springing up every year to meet the demand.

Most adventure travelers are health-conscious folks in search of challenging new experiences, and because they're often sports enthusiasts, they look for opportunities to combine vacations with athletic pursuits. No matter their passion — from triathlon to cross-country skiing (see "In Good Company" at right) — these tourists don't want to just watch from the sidelines: They want to be *in the game*.

Adventurous Americans are especially drawn to European cycling adventures like DeYoung's annual Tour jaunt. It all started with Greg Lemond. In 1986, he became the first American ever to win cycling's biggest prize, and American fans took note. Then, from 1999 to 2005, another charismatic American, Lance Armstrong, overcame testicular cancer and won seven consecutive Tour titles, sparking a media frenzy — and a cycling boom — in the United States.

Before long, cyclists from all over the country began to flock to Europe to test their mettle on some of the Tour's famous routes. It's something fanatical Europeans had been doing for many years, explains Michael Meholic, sales manager for Madison, Wis.-based Trek Travel, but Armstrong provided the incentive American travelers needed to join the ride.

Bill J. Widmann, of Jefferson, Wis., an avid follower of the Tour since the 1960s, first journeyed to France with his bicycle in 2003, three and a half years after suffering a heart attack and other subsequent health problems. He has ridden various legs of the Tour each summer since then.

"For me and for others I've ridden with, there's certainly some ego involved in being able to say we've covered the same roads, been on the very same mountain passes, as world-class cyclists," Widmann says. "But it's not just the riding. Attending the Tour de France is like participating in a three-week-long nationwide party. There's nothing like it in the United States."

Novices Welcome

You don't have to be an experienced cyclist like Widmann and DeYoung to sample the Tour route, though. The key is to choose a tour that matches your cycling ability.

Breakaway Adventures, in Mount Pleasant, S.C., offers a self-guided vacation called "Tour de France for Wimps." As the name implies, this trip is less rigorous than some other tours. "We attract travelers who want a relaxing, noncompetitive vacation," explains co-owner Carol Keskitalo. "Cycling jerseys and waxed legs are definitely not required on our trips."

If you want to be in France during the actual three-week Tour in July, you can book your "Wimps" tour for that time. (The Tour de France route is announced each October, and by late November many trips are sold out, so book as early as possible.) Or you can avoid the crowds by →

In Good Company

Does a Tour de France trip appeal to you? The following are just a few companies that offer package deals.

Trek Travel
"Grand Tours–France"
866-464-8735
www.trektravel.com
Tours for travelers of all fitness levels. High-end tours can run as much as $6,300 for one week.

Breakaway Adventures
"Tour de France for Wimps"
800-567-6286
www.breakaway-adventures.com
The seven-day, six-night "Wimps" tour runs approximately $1,600 (not including airfare).

Discover France/ Cycling Classics
"July French Grand Tours"
800-960-2221
www.cyclingclassics.com
Group tours of four days, three nights or longer, ranging from 670 to 1,945 euros (roughly $900 to $2,600).

traveling before or after the big event — as early as May or as late as September.

On the "Wimps" tour, Breakaway representatives pick you up at the train station, fit you with a 21-speed hybrid bike, transport your luggage and brief you on your Tour de France route. You then travel on your own schedule.

If you *do* decide to ride while the Tour de France is actually underway, you need to be comfortable cycling past enthusiastic spectators — hundreds of thousands of fans line every roadway for miles around the Tour route. "I had little old French women motioning instructions to me," recalls Widmann. "I later learned they were telling me, 'You should be pedaling right now, not coasting!'"

> "Many of the miles were tough for me, and there were some mountain climbs I didn't finish. **But the ones I have done, I wouldn't trade for the world."**

Also, race officials often close roads unexpectedly along the Tour route. That means you'll need to keep up with your tour group or risk running into a dead end.

As with all travel, of course, you may find yourself facing certain cultural idiosyncrasies. Rosemary Strong, a 63-year-old cyclist and retired teacher from Golden, Colo., learned during her "Discover France" trip that restaurants there typically serve dinner late at night — often after 8 or 9 p.m. That's challenging for cyclists who've been in the saddle for up to six hours and are hungry and hoping to turn in early.

Strong is also a vegetarian. She did fine during her Tour vacation, but she suggests asking your tour company about food options if you have dietary restrictions.

Wide-Open Ride

Tour de France riding tours are best for adults or families with older children. Some tour operators do offer rear infant seats for babies, but they rarely offer tagalong bikes or trailers for toddlers. Older teens who do a lot of cycling may be welcome — ask your tour operator.

For adults, though, age is no barrier. While traveler-cyclists are often in their 20s and 30s, Widmann, 62, says he feels perfectly comfortable. "I'm never the oldest person on my trip!"

Besides, he adds, it's a great way to combine your love of sports and travel — no matter what your age. "Go ahead and live your dreams! Back when I was still overweight and smoking, if anyone had told me I'd be riding Tour de France routes in the Pyrenees, I would have said 'no way,'" he says. "Many of the miles were tough for me, and there were some mountain climbs I didn't finish. But the ones I have done, I wouldn't trade for the world." ■

Teri Cetting is a freelance writer based in Portland, Ore.

More Than a Fan

Cycling options aren't limited to the Tour de France. And adventure travel crops up in almost every sport you can imagine. Here are a few ways to get in on big events:

Italian and Spanish Cycling
Along with the Tour de France, the major European cycling events are the Giro d'Italia in Italy and the Vuelta a España in Spain. Many tour companies, including Trek Travel and Destination Cycling (www.destinationcycling.com), offer spectator and cyclist packages.

Pro Cycling Tour—Philadelphia
A bit closer to home, the Philadelphia International Championship cycling race takes place each June. The Fox Chase Cancer Center's Pedal for Prevention Bike Ride lets amateur cyclists ride the 13.5-mile course before the pros arrive (www.fccc.edu).

Olympic Venues
Although you can't race with medal contenders, you can still test official Olympic venues after the Games. In Utah, home of the 2002 Olympic Winter Games, you can ski at resorts that hosted the Games (Deer Valley, Snowbasin and Park City Mountain Resort). You also can test yourself in the biathlon event (skiing and shooting) at Soldier Hollow's Olympic range (www.soldierhollow.com). Participants use rifles and wear athletic bibs from the actual Olympics. (For more high level ideas, see "Olympic Thrills," in the January/February 2006 archives at experiencelifemag.com.)

Ironman Triathlon
Even if you don't qualify for the Ford Ironman World Championship in Kona, Hawaii, in October, a lottery allows a number of amateurs to compete in this prestigious triathlon (www.ironman.com).

World-Class Rugby
Amateur rugby players can hit the field for two days in the annual Hong Kong Tens Tournament, then stay to watch the Cathay Pacific/Credit Suisse Hong Kong Sevens rugby tournament the following weekend (www.hongkongtens.com, www.hksevens.com).

Cross-Country Skiing
The annual Subaru American Birkebeiner takes place in Cable and Hayward, Wis., each February. The 51K race is the largest in North America and is open to everyone. Those wanting a shorter challenge can try either the Prince Haakon 12K race or the Kortelopet 23K (www.birkie.com).