

DETAILS

- **WHERE:** Northern France
- **START/FINISH:** Roubaix or Busigny to Roubaix
- **DISTANCE:** 70km, 145km or 172km
- **PICTURES:** Belga Pictures



Great rides

A SATURDAY IN HEAVEN

In April, Cycling UK's **Matt Mallinder** rode the Paris-Roubaix Challenge, a sportive that takes place in northern France the day before the race

Filmed in 1976 as *A Sunday in Hell*, the Paris-Roubaix is the most famous of the one-day spring classics, notorious for the crashes on its cobbles. I was first captivated by the race in 1999 when I watched Andrea Tafi win. It wasn't his victory so much as the brutality of event, the frenetic pace over farm tracks made up of eroded stone setts. One day, I would ride on that pavé.

Seventeen years later, I headed off to northern France to take part in a sportive that lets ordinary cyclists do just that. For professional cyclists, Paris-Roubaix is 270km. Its final 170km include 27 sections of pavé anywhere between 500 metres and 4km in length. For the 'tourists', there are three route options, all shorter than the pro race, but still with plenty of opportunity to test yourself on the cobbles.

GRUELLING? NO THANKS

I didn't see it as a test, however, and it certainly wouldn't be a race. I'm bored of cycling magazines' tendency to portray sportives as 'epic'. When did cycling become so hard? I'll leave that to the guys that get paid to do it.

I DIDN'T SEE IT AS A TEST AND IT WOULDN'T BE A RACE... THIS WAS A JOLLY, A HOP ACROSS THE CHANNEL TO RIDE THE COBBLES

My Paris-Roubaix Challenge would be an enjoyable weekend of cycling abroad, enhanced by watching the pros duking it out on a course steeped in history. Ah, that course! The unforgiving pavé has witnessed genuinely epic rides from the true champions of the sport: Coppi, Merckx, De Vlaeminck, Hinault, Kelly, Museeuw, Boonen, Cancellara... A list soon to be joined by the name Mallinder? In my dreams!

No, this was strictly a jolly, a hop across the channel to drink in the atmosphere and a few beers, and to ride the cobbles. Weeks of carefully planned training had fallen foul of family commitments, lousy weather and general lethargy. As the 'medium' route kept being revised upwards by the organisers towards the 145 kilometre mark, I decided to drop down to the 70km short route. I had to be realistic. The short route still promised seven sections of the pavé, including the legendary Carrefour de L'Arbre, one of two sections rated five star for difficulty; the other is the Trouée d'Arrenberg on the longer routes.

I met up with my riding companion Duncan the night before the ride in Lille, our digs for the weekend about 6km from the start.

Review

WHAT TYRES FOR PAVÉ?

I used a pair of 28mm Vittoria Open Corsa G+ tyres for the event. These build upon Vittoria's pedigree Pave tyre, a tyre built especially for these conditions and the 'go to' tyre for many of the pros in recent years. They incorporate the new wonder-material, Graphene. The Corsa is built upon a Kevlar cotton Corespun casing – lightweight but highly resistant to nicks and punctures. The rubber bit is four-compound rubber. It boasts great grip and low rolling resistance. All I can say is that I ran the 700x28C version of these at 70psi over some of the worst roads I've ever ridden. I suffered no punctures or nicks and they rolled really nicely. They're staying on the bike.

SIZES AVAILABLE:

700x23C, 25C and 28C

APPROX WEIGHT: 265g

PRICE: £49.99

MORE DETAILS: vittoria.com



Right: Narrow tyres and cobbles can equal pinch-punctures – unless you're on tubulars or tubeless (see p71)



I did it!

DUNCAN DARED

DUNCAN DOLLIMORE
RODE THE 145KM ROUTE

One of the joys of cycling is that despite advancing years and receding fitness, it makes me feel younger. By the time I reached Arenberg I was, in my own mind, 22 years old again and about to take on Eddy Merckx over the cobbles.

Unfortunately, it turns out that I am utterly useless as a rider of cobbles, which is itself a misleading term to describe what awaited me at Arenberg, by far the most difficult of the 18 sections on the route back to Roubaix. I seemed to bounce over every bump and pothole, arms shaking and rattling, while being passed by riders who appeared to have some form of internal shock absorption system. The helpful French enthusiasts drinking wine and cheering as I juddered past kept telling me I needed to go faster.

I wouldn't want to ride on cobbles every day, but this sunny event in northern France was one of the most memorable and enjoyable days I've had on a bike. A beer in the velodrome completed the journey.



Talking tyres

Is wider and softer the way to go? Discuss: bit.ly/cyclinguk-pressuredrop

Over dinner, and despite my fear-mongering, Duncan stuck to his guns in committing to the 145km route. Race prep was called for. We toasted the pavé with two of Lille's finest Pavé de Boeuf steaks and a carafe of *vin de table*.

BELGIAN WAFFLES

The morning of the ride broke fine, misty and sunny. Coffee, *confiture* and baguette consumed, we were at the start in Roubaix by eight. The medium and short rides both start and finish from the Jean Stablinski velodrome, the longer route requiring buses out to Busigny 100km to the south.

We set off with some trepidation. While the geography promised little more than a few hundred metres in height gain, the cobbles were an unknown. Looking for advice online, I'd found a mix of rattly helmet cam images and tales of numb wrists and hands. So like the pros, we had doubled up: two layers of handlebar tape to limit the vibrations. The route was well signposted and was clear of traffic at this time of the morning. Hundreds of volunteer marshals navigated us through every corner.

Soon we were out into the countryside, cruising along past black-and-white timbered cottages, quaint villages, and the scent of buttery *boulangeries*.

This was real Paris-Roubaix country: open fields, rough, honest and agricultural, like I had seen on the telly. After 30km, Duncan and I split onto our respective routes. *Bon courage!* Watch out for the cobbles!

I quickly dropped into a group of other riders. I enjoyed the easy ride now amidst the camaraderie and chatted with Aussies, Americans and a chap called Tim from Hertfordshire, who became my riding companion for the remainder of the ride.

After a long headwind section, the food stop at Templeuve at 37km heralded the halfway point and a wonderful feast. I was happy to get off the bike and load up with Belgian waffles, jelly babies, and *stroopwaffles* – wafer thin, caramel-filled waffle sandwiches. I might not have earned them but I was on holiday.

COBBLING IT TOGETHER

Straight after the feed stop, we hit the first of our allotted cobble sections. Templeuve-

THE PAVÉ WAS A CAR'S WIDTH ACROSS AND HIGHLY CAMBERED, WITH A HIGH SPOT OF COBBLES ON TOP AND RUTS AT THE SIDES





MY WEIGHT PREVENTED ME BEING BOUNCED AROUND LIKE THE LIGHTER RIDERS

Moulin de Vertain is short at just half a kilometre, but the first 200 metres are a jumbled mess of rocks with muddy gaps between them. As I slipped into the gully at the side of the path, I laughed out loud: this was it, we were off!

The cobbled sections were a car's width across and highly cambered, with a high spot of cobbles along the centre section and ruts at the sides that had been churned by tractors. The sides are smoother but often disappear into mud or large potholes. Google had again been consulted; the common advice was to put the bike in a big gear (big chainring) and power over the top. Easier said than done when you're trying to steer with a handlebar that bounces up at you. My hands became numb and gripping the bars was difficult. Thankfully, I was quickly out the other side and onto normal roads. The pneumatic buzzing stopped. My fingers unclenched.

Five hundred metres of pavé done. So far, so good. It would be 10km to the next section, and Tim and I nervously laughed about what lay ahead. How had the difficulty

rating been worked out? If the Templeuve section was only a two-star, what about the three-, four- or five-star sections to come? We were thankful it was sunny and dry; the cobbles in the wet would have been a much different proposition.

The mist had burnt off by now, and though it was still cold enough for a jacket, it was bright enough for sunglasses. The route between sections was largely flat, the landscape peppered with concrete pill boxes from the war. Many were overgrown but some had been turned into sheds or garages. One even housed a kids' fort, and had a basketball hoop on the side.

Cysoing à Bourghelles, a 1.3km three-star pavé section, was next. I duly put it in big gear and accelerated, bouncing but making progress, the bike finding its own line. The next day we would watch Matt Hayman (the winner), Tom Boonen and Ian Stannard power through here at 40km/h and more, gliding over the ruts like they weren't there.

By Bourghelles-Wannehain I was into my stride, enjoying pounding over the 1.1km pavé. I'd discovered an unexpected bonus of being a larger cyclist. My weight provided cushioning and prevented me being bounced around as much as the lighter riders. So I was in control and could choose a good line. I've done other events, climbing Mont Ventoux in the *Étape du Tour* and completing the hilly Liège-Bastogne-Liège. This was the first time being bigger was helpful.

We were soon into the sections that put the legendary 'hell' into the pro race's

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'Sunday in Hell' billing. The four kilometres of Camphin-en-Pévèle and Carrefour de L'Arbre are four- and five-star rated. There are huge gaps between cobblestones, some missing entirely, plus potholes and mud. Riders and bikes are easily broken here. Depending on my mass to carry me through, I adopted a double-or-quits attitude and got stuck in. Overtaking the more careful riders, I felt very much the pro. (How easy it is to descend into hyperbole!) But no: this was epic fun, not epic hell, although I was losing sensation from the saddle and could barely trust my fingers to hang onto the bars. Fortunately, I could see the fluttering flag denoting the end of the pavé not far ahead.

A PERFECT FINISH

Just 10km of countryside and villages remained before the finish. Tim and I



chatted away, the most difficult sections now ticked off. The final pavé section at Willems-Hem was curious in that it had been recently rebuilt but without any grout. Huge, inch-gap tyre traps were ready to catch a front wheel at anytime, causing a puncture or tipping the rider over. By the end of the section, my decision to take the shorter route felt vindicated.

Then it was a normal road section back to the velodrome. At this stage in Sunday's race, the pros had been whittled down to a handful of riders, ready to play cat and mouse to the finish. Tim and I just meandered along, feeling that we'd had our slice of Roubaix. Before we knew it, we were swinging right into the velodrome, initially taking a brave line up the banking but quickly realising that we'd become accustomed to the flat over the last 70km. We returned to the safety of the bottom of the track and managed a sprint for the line: a dead heat.

Shortly before the finish, Tim had said to me that usually in sportives he looked forward to finishing but that he didn't want this one to end. I couldn't have put it better. They say that you shouldn't meet your heroes for fear of disappointment. The hero in the Paris-Roubaix is the route, not the rider. I'd met it and not been disappointed.

As I walked around trackside collecting my medal and a welcome beer, I passed a rider who looked familiar. It was Andrea Tafi, the 1999 winner. I decided not to approach for a selfie. I'd met one hero and it was enough. Until next year and the longer route... **C**

Left: Matt gets used to 'putting it in a big gear and powering over the top of the cobbles'

Below left: Neither Matt nor Tim from Hertfordshire wanted the 70km ride to end

Fact file

DISTANCE: Three options: 172km, 145km or 70km (shown below)

TERRAIN: Mostly flat, with washboard cobble sections. Even the shortest route has seven sections of pavé.

CONDITIONS: Cool, sunny and very little breeze. Ideal.

START/FINISH: Jean Stablinski Velodrome, Roubaix

WHEN: Early April each year

ENTRY FEE: £20

ACCOMMODATION: Duncan and I stayed in Lille, not far from the start. It looks grotty from the outskirts but makes for a picturesque tour, with more cobbles, a castle and ramparts.

BIKE: BMC Grand Fondo with disc brakes and 28mm tyres.

I'M GLAD I HAD: New Rapha Core bib-shorts: perfect fit and great padding.

I WISH I'D HAD: An extra 20 miles of route.

NEXT TIME I WOULD: Avoid the local 'sour beer'. I'd stick to the Leffe.

FURTHER INFO: sport.be/parisroubaix

