



There were several such abandoned railways linking Paris with Mont Saint-Michel, more along the *Vélodyssée* and, when leaving Bordeaux, I followed the superb *Voie Verte Roger Lapébie* linking the great city of wine to the Canal de la Garonne some 40km to the south-east. Many of these disused railway lines have been officially adopted as departmental roads (without cars). This requires the local authorities responsible for them to maintain them to a high standard. If only that were the case nearer to home... Combined with the canal towpaths, much of my cycle journey came courtesy of the toil of hardworking navvies of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

Crossing Paris early on in the trip, I did make life difficult for myself by not sticking to the route of the *Avenue Verte* as I made my way through the city's suburbs. It wasn't easy when the signs had to fight for my attention among all the other urban clutter but I knew my destination was somewhere south and, making use of the compass on my handlebars, eventually arrived at Notre Dame in time to make it to my Warmshowers host's flat in the nearby Marais district. He proved to be an excellent host, giving me a guided tour of the 4th arrondissement and fascinating insights into the changing face of his corner of Paris.

I had equally memorable Warmshowers experiences on a co-housing project near Ostend, and with a wonderfully welcoming non-cyclist in Agen (she had stumbled on a lost cyclist in the street a couple of years previously and had been taking them in ever since). I even attended a birthday party with the extended family of a sprightly 78-year-old in Sierre, Switzerland.

Most nights were, however, spent in the tent and I'm delighted to report that, despite reports to the contrary, the French municipal campsite is alive and kicking. Famed for their locations near town centres, their facilities and above all their prices, the standout example was the Camping Municipal Champ Passais in the Normandy town of Domfront, which still charges just €4 per night for a cyclist and their tent. The facilities were about as good as you can get, and the beautiful hilltop town was only a few minutes up the hill.

MIDI PROBLEMS, MAXI CLIMBS

One disappointing section of Le Grand Tour was the Canal du Midi. I'd interviewed Declan Lyons, author of the Canal du Midi Cicerone guide for the Cycling Europe Podcast earlier in 2022, and I was aware that some sections of the towpath were hard going. In cycling from Toulouse to

Fact file Le Grand Tour

- **Distance:** 4,700km cycling plus 800km on 10 trains

- **Route:** An anti-clockwise circular route from the Hook of Holland via the Netherlands, Belgium, the north coast of France to Dieppe, Paris, back to the north coast at Mont Saint-Michel, the west coast of France to Royan, Bordeaux, the Canal de la Garonne to Toulouse, the Canal du Midi to Sète, the Rhone to Switzerland, and the Rhine back to the Hook of Holland.

- **Conditions:** 80% traffic free, fabulous weather, just a few stormy days between Lyon and the Alps.

- **Accommodation:** 45 nights camping, 11 nights in hotels, four nights Warmshowers, two nights on the ferry, one night *Vrienden op de Fiets*.

- **Bike used:** Koga WorldTraveller Signature (a bike called Wanda).

- **Maps/guides:** IGN 924 Greenways and Cycle Routes of France, Kompass Radfernwege Deutschland, maps picked up for free in local tourist offices for each of the named routes, and Cicerone Guides.

- **I'm glad I had...** the apps for the national train companies on my phone: SNCF (France), SBB (Switzerland) and DB (Germany) as they made taking the ten trains so much easier.

- **Next time I would...** not have so many beers in Bregenz and cycle the entire length of the Bodensee instead of taking a ferry. I think I may have missed a treat.

- **Further info:** [CyclingEurope.org/LeGrandTour](https://cyclingeurope.org/LeGrandTour)