
WHERE: French Alps

START & FINISH: Annecy

ELEVATION: The road summit at Semnoz is 1,660m

PICTURES: Alamy & Calvin Jones



GREAT RIDES

BROMPTONS UP THE ALPS

*You don't need trade team lycra and an over-g geared road bike to cycle up mountains, as CTC member **Calvin Jones** and his friend Jon proved*

The Alps, we know, are high. It's why weekend cyclists and professionals ride up them. They're also exposed, sitting up there where the weather happens. As I began my descent towards Aravis from top of the Croix Fry, I could see thunderheads and skirts of rain. They were travelling fast. So was I: sixty kilometres per hour. A professional might descend much faster, an imperial rather than metric sixty. But he wouldn't be on a Brompton...

Travelling with a bike in Europe is easier than in the UK, but still not always easy, especially if you don't fly. Looking at a map, the Alps were a long drive from Calais, particularly for a long weekend. Rail seemed sensible, but would involve loading and unloading road bikes onto three different trains – assuming we could book them aboard. We could hire decent road bikes there, but an early Monday return would bring logistical difficulties.

'Jon, let's take the Bromptons,' I said.

Folding freedom

A folder is a perfect way to ease and extend the experience of train trips to city destinations. Relying on one to provide fun over a few days of steep climbs was something else. The logic seemed inexorable, though: train to Paddington, then across to St Pancras; bikes bagged for the Eurostar; unfolded for the dash across Paris from Gare du Nord to Gare de Lyon; and onto the TGV to Annecy. Ten hours, door to door. Two days of riding, then home.

All that remained was the question of how far to adapt our commuting machines

in search of extra speed and power. Swap out the Marathons for slicks? SPDs? Lighten the load by ditching rack and guards? In the end we did none of these things. What was an extra kph or two?

My only concessions to cycle specificity were some padded undershorts, a couple of merino T-shirts, and a pair of Five-Ten shoes that would double up as pub wear (and turn to weighty sponges on the soggy Col du Aravis, never to recover).

Baronet of the mountains

When you tell other cyclists you are going up an Alp (or two) on your Brompton, they mostly look askance. As if somehow the tiny wheels on the bike don't function over 1,000m in altitude or on gradients greater than 6%. But Bromptons climb fine. The gearing, on a six-speed at least, is no problem. The lowest gear, with the minus 12% gearing option, is under 30 inches. That's lower than on most road bikes, and is perfectly adequate to get a half-fit person up a 10% slope.

Other Brompton downsides – the twitchy steering, the right-then-left shifters – actually matter far less when winching upwards at a steady 10kph in a straight(ish) line. Some things do need thought. Two hours of climbing with the same hand position would bring home the inadequacy of the grips, so



Do it yourself

› We took the train from Cardiff, the Eurostar to Paris, and then the TGV to Annecy. It was about 10 hours door-to-door. We had no trouble travelling with the Bromptons, but the optional cover hides the fact it's even a bike. Cycling across Paris (from Gare du Nord to Gare de Lyon) is a joy using the separate cycle paths, but you might want to walk your bike around the big and busy Place de la Republique. There are plenty of places to stay in Annecy – the Ibis is cheap, and central. A return train ticket from London to Annecy was around £200.

“THE LOWEST GEAR ON MY BROMPTON IS UNDER 30 INCHES – LOWER THAN ON MOST ROAD BIKES, AND ADEQUATE FOR A 10% SLOPE”



● (Left) 6-speed Bromptons climb fine. It was the descents that were worrying...

“I HAD INTENDED TO LEAVE THE S-BAG AT THE HOTEL. THEN I REMEMBERED I WAS ABOUT TO CYCLE UP AN ALP WEARING A STRAW TRILBY”

» a swap-out for Ergons is a must.

The reach is necessarily short, and you'd never suggest it's the most efficient position for getting the most from your quads. Yet both spinning and honking are perfectly feasible. Not once on a climb did I wish for a 'proper' bike. On the descents, however... Here the small wheels of the Brompton show their worst, not so much in the quickness of steering but in the transmission of bumps and surface roughness.

The Tour de France finished its annual sojourn to the Alps at Semnoz last year on Stage 20, high above Annecy, with Mont Blanc to the east, floating serenely over its lesser brethren. This meant the Yellow Jersey and his lesser brethren would not essay the descent to Leschaux, and thus that road was not spruced up. Inches-deep potholes, long fissures jutting in and out of line with your direction of travel, and unexpected sprays of gravel jarred the arms and shoulders, and caused me to grip tighter on the handlebar (which made things worse).

Brompton brakes are, to put it politely, adequate for their urban use. The intrepid descender must factor their wooden languor into his Alpine hairpin braking, whilst remembering the problematic physics of

rubber-on-metal rings that are friction-heated twice as much as 700C versions.

Bags of fun

In my case, some of the braking was taken care of by the air resistance offered by the Brompton S-Bag sitting athwart the long stem. I had intended to leave it at the hotel and fill my pockets with bottles, gels, tools and sealant. Then I remembered I was about to cycle up an Alp on a Brompton wearing a straw trilby, and so had already crossed the line into ridiculousness. The bag stayed on. It swallowed all manner of emergency clothing and useful bits. And I could hunker down behind it in the hail coming off the Croix Fry.

I think it was the bag that caused the most consternation and amusement from the lean Frenchmen and Italians grinding purposefully past me up the Semnoz. It was the cause of much jocular banter at the top with the Brits in the café. (‘You'll have to climb it again – you forgot the shopping.’) Most of all, the S-Bag seemed to me to say: ‘Yes, I am here for the same reason as you. For the challenge of this hill. But (as I said to the especially amused French couple) not with some lung-bursting Strava-goal in mind, but *lentement, observant et avec plaisir*.’ ●

Fact file

WHERE TO RIDE: From Annecy, the Tour climb to Semnoz is next door. The Cols Aravis and Croix Fry are easily doable out-and-back, as is the more famous Colombiere. For the more laid back, the multi-use path around the lake is ace.

WHAT TO RIDE: We had 6-speed Bromptons, which give a nicely low spinning gear. Would I do it on a 2-Speed Brompton? No.

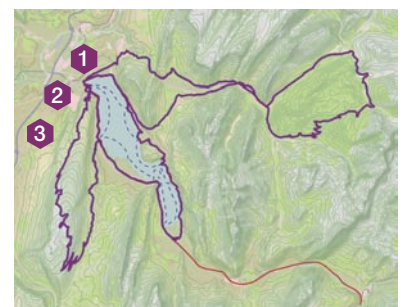
WHEN TO GO: We went mid-June, which meant the weather was reasonable (mid-20s) and the snow had departed all the cols. All roads were relatively calm, but be careful of mad downhill MTBers flying overhead as you climb the Semnoz.

MAPS/GUIDES: I downloaded full worldwide base-maps (with turn-by-turn guidance) to my Nokia phone, thus avoiding troubling data charges.

INDISPENSABLE: The Brompton S-Bag, which stayed with me on all the climbs – a baguette fits nicely. The aforementioned Nokia phone, an 808. The quality of the camera meant one thing fewer to carry.

IF I DID IT AGAIN... I'm not sure the straw trilby was quite the thing. A bit Sid James? Maybe this year, a Panama?

ANNECY



- 1) Annecy-le-Vieux
- 2) Seynod
- 3) Vieugy