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Crossing the Volcano

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Crossing the Volcano

France's largest volcano – don't worry, it's been extinct for two million years – is the Puy Mary. It's a favourite climb of the Tour de France, crossing the Pas de Peyrol mountain pass.

But whereas the Tour riders approach from the west, on a road that reaches a lung-busting 13%, this cycle route never exceeds a much more manageable 7%. Still challenging, yes. But if you want to try a Tour climb without 'race fitness' – yet with the same spectacular mountain scenery – this route could be for you.

The V74 cycle route, aka *La Grande Traversée du Volcan à Vélo*, links the Lot valley with that of the Allier. With 2000m of climbing in its 160km length, it's a route best suited to travelling light rather than lugging heavy camping equipment.

Scenically, it grabs your attention at km 0 and never lets go. The first leg is on quiet roads along narrow valley sides, eventually leading to Aurillac, capital of the Cantal *département*. From here the D17 has cycle lanes at first, but these drop away as the road narrows and the altitude increases. Should you need an excuse to stop for a rest, the strung-out villages of the Jordanne valley aren't without charm, particularly their churches.

After Mandailles the gradient ramps up significantly, but so does the scenic appeal, and it's an open question which will leave you out of breath first. Toast your success at the Pas de Peyrol with a drink at the Chalet du Puy-Mary, then settle in for the long descent.

It's not all plain sailing from here: there's another tough climb, albeit shorter, out of Allanche up to the Col de Baladour. The scenery shifts to wide expanses of green but still retaining a high-altitude character, dotted with wind turbines.

You may choose to end your tour at Massiac, which has a station, rather than the official finish of Blesle. The run in to Blesle is a lovely quiet road which makes a fitting end to the ride, though, and Blesle itself is a picturesque, closely-packed little village.







