

# Caen to Cantabria



## *... an epic journey through France and Northern Spain*

Our Caen to Cantabria tour will take you through some of the finest regions of France and into Spain for an easy return to Portsmouth on the Santander ferry. Return ferry is included in our prices for this tour. You will ride through Normandy, the Loire Valley, the ancient Poitou region, Cognac, Dordogne and Gascony before traversing the Pyrenees at St Jean Pied de Port, for centuries the crossing point for pilgrims on their way to Santiago to Compostella. Five days in Spain will end in Santander, in the Cantabria region, where the ferry return will take you back to where you began two weeks earlier - you may even spot some whales in the Bay of Biscay as you relax on deck. Spectacular scenery is guaranteed!

The ride is graded 'expert' as to ride for 15 days in a row is a big ask for most people - even the pros on the Tour de France don't do this. The route gets more challenging as you ride south with the Spanish section offering some good climbs; however the gradients are mostly shallower than many hills back home and it should be within the grasp of all regular cyclists. For those who like a challenge there is also the opportunity to climb the mighty Col du Tourmalet.

### **At a glance:**

- 15 days' riding
- 925 miles (1,493km)
- 21,500m ascent
- Daily distances from 39 to 83 miles (64 to 134 km)
- 17 nights in comfortable 3\*\*\*+ hotels
- 12 dinners
- 5 nights dinner not included
  - Return ferry included
  - 5 picnic lunches included
  - Snacks, drinks and cakes along the way
  - Coffee & Cake stops
  - Fully supported

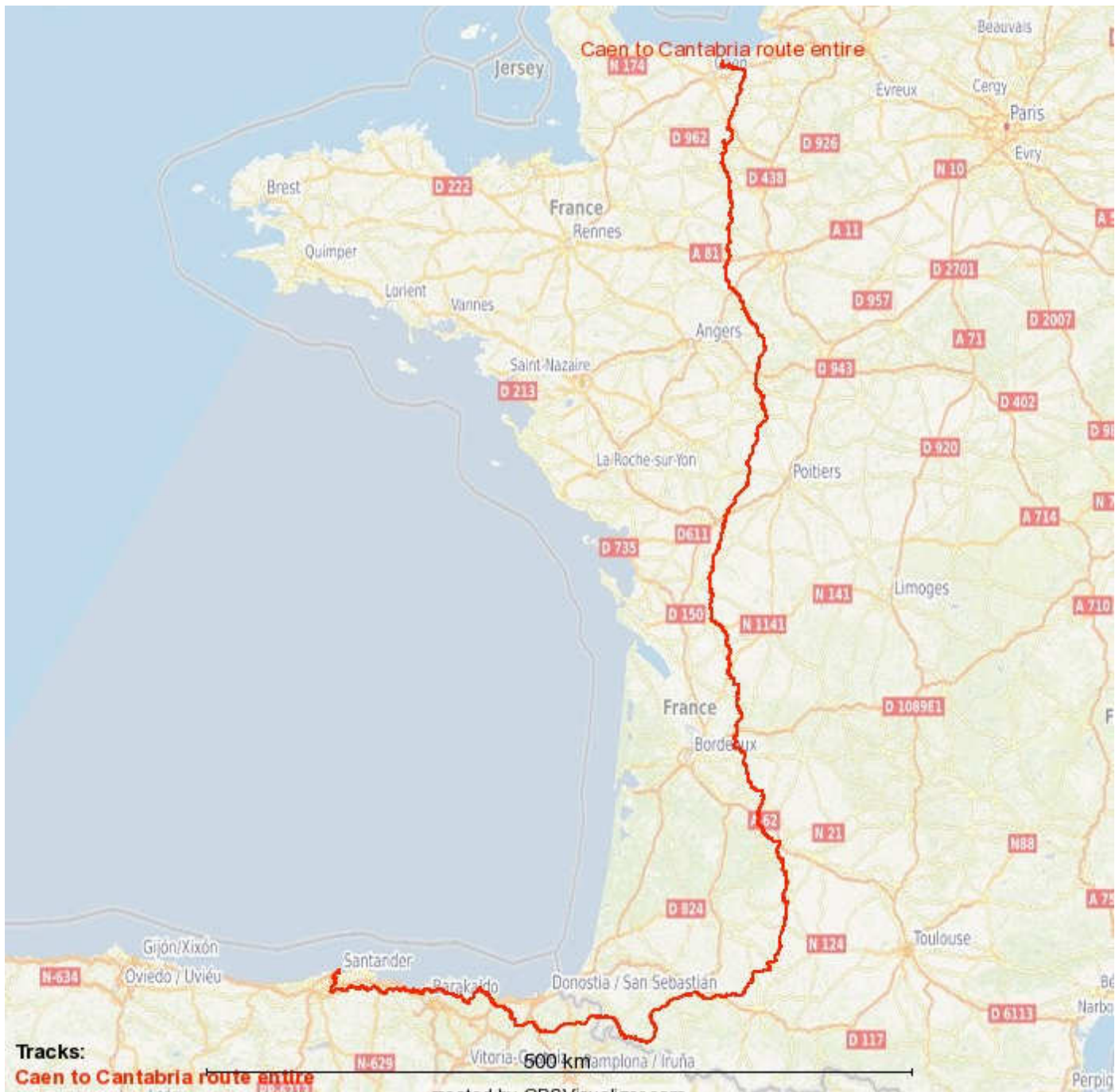
## Highlights include:

- Beautiful lush Normandy and its produce
- The Loire Valley
- Cognac, an elegant town known the world over
- Beautiful unspoilt Gascony
- Pau, a civilised town at the gateway to the impressive Pyrenees
- Optional Col du Tourmalet ascent
- The tranquillity of the Pyrenees
- Sublime scenery of the Basque country
- The Cantabrian coastline
- Sophisticated Santander
- Hotels of character & quality
- Cruise back at leisure to Portsmouth
- Cake & Coffee stops





## The Route:



The map will not show all of the towns and places we go through but is intended to give an overview only. Daily distances can be found under the daily itinerary pages and elevations charts are towards the end of this guide.



## Itinerary

**Day 1:** We depart on the afternoon ferry for Ouistreham, arriving for a late check-in for our functional but well placed hotel in France ready for the start of the ride tomorrow. Dinner not included. (Saturday).

**Day 2:** After breakfast and briefing, we take the obligatory departure photograph in Ouistreham and set off on our journey south! Skirting east of Caen, we stop for coffee in a wonderful old village full of half-timbered houses and this is the first chance you will get to experience of our famous coffee stops. Ground coffee, loose-leaf tea and home made cakes will be produced for your enjoyment and consumption, before setting you on your way again through wonderful verdant and lush Normandy. Apples, cider and cream are everywhere in this landscape which is wonderfully rural and very pretty. The second half of the day is hillier as we enter the Suisse Normande but it is incredibly beautiful. The small, family-run hotel is comfortable and newly renovated and sits in a small market town on the banks of the river Orne. (100 km / 62 miles / 857m). (Sunday)





**Day 3:** Striking south we head through the lower reaches of Normandy along quiet roads through oak forests and rolling farmland. There are some lovely views to enjoy as you make good progress to our coffee stop next to a chateau by a lake. Continuing to a picnic lunch, there is more of the same after lunch as we head for our small hotel west Le Mans. In 2019 the meal this night was rated as one of our riders' favourites. (113 km / 70 miles / 1329m). (Monday).

**Day 4:** Two famous rivers are crossed today - the Loir and the Loire - the latter being known the world over for its famous chateaux. The riding is benign and you will not find it difficult, arriving in plenty of time to explore the wonderful abbey at Fontevraud where we spend the night in a nice hotel with a great restaurant. With luck we can eat outside as the warmer climate begins to manifest itself - they always say that it is when you get south of the Loire that you notice that it is noticeably warmer. (100 km / 63 miles / 568m). (Tuesday).

**Day 5:** From Fontevraud the countryside is easy and you will speed along,



encountering your first vines of the trip. There are several options for lunch stops, and you begin to feel that you are really getting into rural France - 'La France profonde' as they say! It is a little more undulating after lunch but not what we would describe as hilly. Overnight we are on the edge of a medium sized town in a small hotel in a quiet position. The food here is exceptional and you will enjoy a fine feast after a dip in the pool perhaps. (104 km / 65 miles / 1156m). (Wednesday).

**Day 6:** Apart from the Loire where we saw a small area of vineyards, we have not yet seen much evidence of France's most famous product. That will change over the next few days, but first, another by-product of the vine, brandy, is the order of the day. We are riding to Cognac where the famous producers' warehouses still line the river and where, if in time, you can take a tour; in any case, tonight there will be the opportunity to try the delicious drink. It is a little hillier today as although the elevation figure is less than yesterday, the height is gained in small climbs rather than very gentle long sections. Our hotel tonight is one of our favourites, in the heart of the town and extremely comfortable. (114 km / 72 miles / 997m). (Thursday).

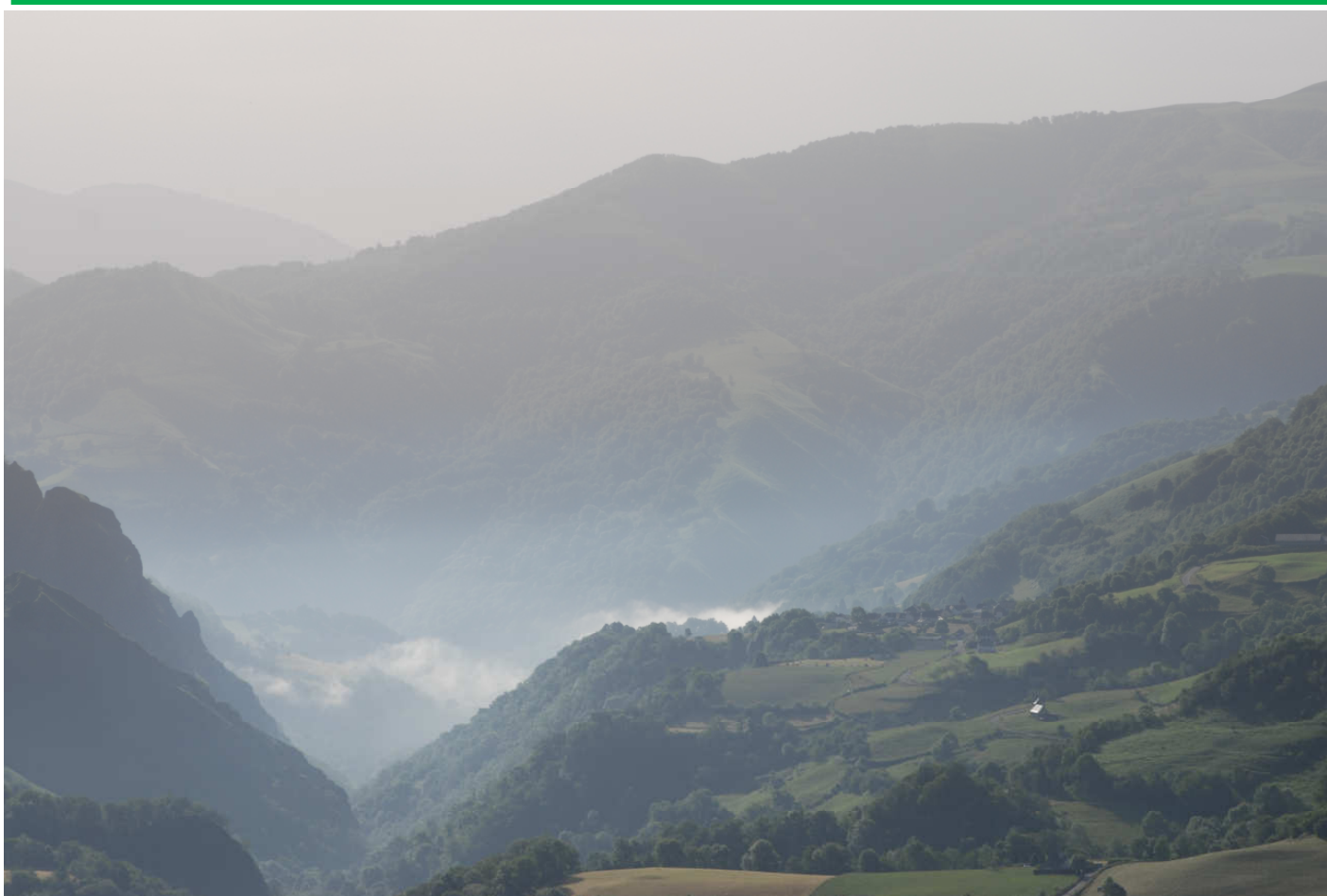


**Day 7:** From Cognac to St Emilion; two towns of great charm with some great riding in between. The terrain is more varied with a succession of ups and downs but these are not big hills as the elevation figure shows. In fact, this is one of our favourite day's riding in all of France as it seems to encompass so much of what the country is all about. Our destination is a Roman town and a charming hotel right in the centre, from where you can wander the cobbled streets seeking out a wine bar or tasty morsel to eat. The produce of the land is at the forefront in this region and there is so much of it to enjoy! Tonight is a free night where dinner is not included and you can eat in any of the multitude of restaurants of wonderful St Emilion. (116 km / 72 miles / 1215m ). (Friday).



**Day 8:** The Dordogne needs no introduction and we cross the famous river today; another landmark checked off on our way south. We only really skirt the Dordogne region, however, as we are heading into Gascony, an old and proud region and home of d'Artagnan. There are vineyards galore today and some really lovely countryside; the views are truly exceptional on a clear day. It is little hiller so sensible pacing is required, but by now you will have found your rhythm. Tonight's hotel is simpler; modern and spotlessly clean and they are used to welcoming cyclists. There is a good breakfast to look forward to and the evening meal in the past has always been well-received. (104 km / 65 miles / 1389m). (Saturday).

**Day 9:** You have spent a week on the road and are now over half way to our final destination in northern Spain! Along the way you will have seen famous sights and some unexpected delights, as so often happens when touring by bike, as you stumble across an old chateau or a pretty view. With the Pyrenees getting closer you may be thinking they look rather high, and although you will inevitably have to cross them, the crossing



point is lower than the section you can see today! There are some wonderful old villages and castles on the ride today and it is hillier, although the last third is predominantly flat or downhill. Our hotel is in an old bastide (a mediaeval village based around a central square) amidst glorious countryside. (98 km / 61 miles / 1574m). (Sunday).

**Day 10:** Today we cycle to glorious Pau. It is a short day, allowing you time to relax and enjoy this civilized town at the foot of the mountains, which has been a favourite with the British for many centuries. With its old chateau, charming streets and abundance of cafes and bars, there is plenty to do whilst passing the afternoon, or you could simply sit on a bench on the Boulevard des Pyrenees looking at the glorious mountains.

If sitting around is not your thing, there is the option to climb the famous Col de Tourmalet in the afternoon! There will be a van transfer to and from the mountain for those who wish to take it on. Usually we depart at about 3pm and get back at about 8pm for this option, and those who do it are always full of that wonderful mix of achievement and adrenalin afterwards. We go up from Luz, the route taken by the 2019 Tour de France when the fastest riders took about 50 minutes. Good cyclists can expect to take a



---

bare minimum of 90 minutes. (80 km / 50 miles / 961m). (Monday).

**Day 11:** With the mountains on our left we exit Pau along the river cycle path which avoids main roads and is a pleasant ride, before turning south and heading into the hills. The geography is hillier and you will appreciate that you are now approaching the higher mountains with a number of climbs to contend with along the way. At the halfway point there are several options to find lunch, including a supermarket where many riders stock up on their favourite riding snacks and drinks for the next few days. After lunch you will cross more quiet roads before the final climb up to one of best-positioned hotels of any of our rides. Sitting in a small Pyrenean mountain village, it has a superb kitchen and you will be spoilt without doubt tonight and at breakfast - of all of our hotels this is the one that was consistently rated as a favourite when we invited our riders' feedback. The views down the valley are sublime; the tranquility deafening and that growing sense of both achievement and the anticipation of the final stages of your journey just add to a great atmosphere. (106 km/ 66 miles / 1978m). (Tuesday).

**Day 12:** A fast descent from the hotel leads to the first proper test of the



ride with the climb up the Col de Bagargui. At the top we pause for coffee and refreshments and wonder how Tyler Hamilton managed it with a broken collarbone. The col has a rude nickname given by Tour riders which is not suitable for a family website. The payoff is a great descent and then another simply stunning climb showing the best of the French section of the Basque country. Massive rock formations and long views will take your mind off this not inconsiderable climb, before you plunge down to St Jean Pied de Port for lunch, a town which for centuries has been the crossing place for pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostella. It is then an easy ten miles or so to our overnight stop, where you can relax and anticipate the entry into Spain early tomorrow morning. (64 km / 39 miles / 1823m) (Wednesday).



**Day 13:** Straight from the hotel you are climbing the 8km stretch to the Spanish frontier. It is not a steep climb and as you reach the top you are rewarded with lovely views on you left of the country you have ridden through this morning and yesterday. Birds of prey will be in abundance, and at the top, the van will be there to cheer you on into the Navarre region. After a fabulous down, where you may see wild pigs grazing on





acorns, you are essentially in a valley for 20 miles or so with no major undulations. We stop for a picnic lunch before a long and gradual climb which our riders all seem to enjoy. Down the other side, a few shorter climbs and you are soon on the run-in to our overnight stop in a larger town with plenty of options for an evening meal. (87 km / 54 miles / 1734m) (Thursday).

**Day 14:** We are still in the Basque country and the ride continues to inspire with great views and pretty villages. The roads in this part of Spain are a little perplexing to begin with: when you first see them you imagine they will be busy because they are wide, well surfaced and modern. But no one lives here and the major routes run north-south which is not our direction of travel, with all of the east-west traffic on the shiny new motorway. Once out of town there is a long climb and fantastic associated descent, and then a wooded climb to our coffee spot with superb views and where, on a clear day, you should see the Bay of Biscay laid out before you. After exiting the next valley there is a very steep section but keep going and it levels out soon enough. The remainder of the day stays like this

---

with ups and downs, and it may be that you find this the hardest day of the tour. We have altered the route for 2020 to avoid the last hill and enjoy the coastal road to the wonderful fishing village where we stay the night. The hotel is great, and is another rider favourite, with another good breakfast overlooking the bay. (78 km / 49 miles / 2569m). (Friday).

**Day 15:** Riding inland we stop for coffee near Gernika, a town which became renowned for all the wrong reasons when it was flattened during the Spanish civil war in the first example of carpet bombing. It remains the centre of the Basque country symbolically and emotionally. Exiting its valley, the route heads for the famous transporter bridge at Getxo, where we pause for lunch. Crossing the river it is a little busier until you get past the old port (although there are cycle lanes) and turn off the road into the usual quiet lanes once more. A section of old railway runs right along the coast with spectacular views of the sea, a part of the route which will have you stopping to take photographs for sure. There are another two decent climbs to get you to our Paradore for the night, housed in a wonderful old palace with a wonderful banquet infused with that 'almost there' feeling (and the knowledge that you don't have to wash any more socks!). (134 km / 83 miles / 2412m). (Saturday).

**Day 16:** The final day! Caen will seem a long way away and indeed it as you have ridden 875 miles to get to this point. The last day always seems easier and as you head to the coast the hills ease off. You will arrive in Santander at about 3pm judging from previous experience, ready to relax with a swim on one of the sandy beaches before celebrating your achievement that night. (80 km / 50 miles / 990m). (Sunday).

**Day 17:** After breakfast there is plenty of time to explore the famous beaches of Santander, the island of Magdalena and the old town, before the afternoon departure for the overnight sailing to Portsmouth (Monday).

**Day 18:** Enjoy your cruise home and perhaps have a massage, swim in the outdoor pool or even see some whales in the Bay of Biscay! The ferry is comfortable with two restaurants, bars and coffee shops. There is a swimming pool, cinema and plenty of areas to sit and watch the world go by. (Tuesday).



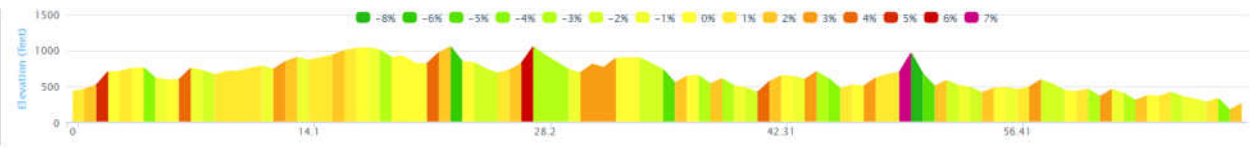


## Elevation Charts

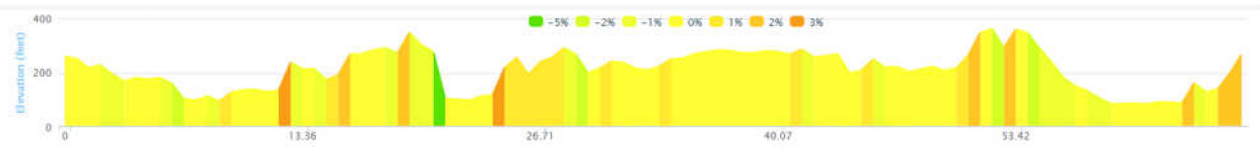
**1**  
60 miles  
857 m



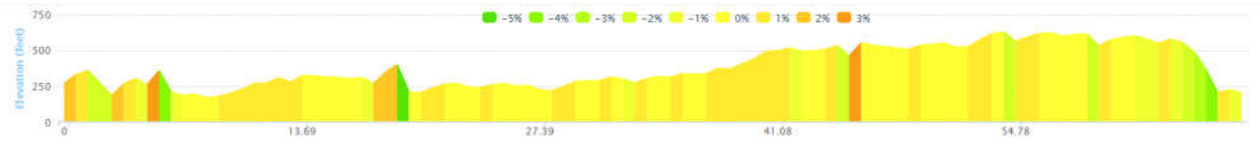
**2**  
72 miles  
1339 m



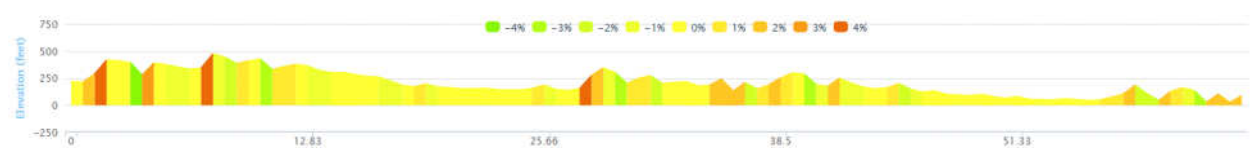
**3**  
67 miles  
568 m



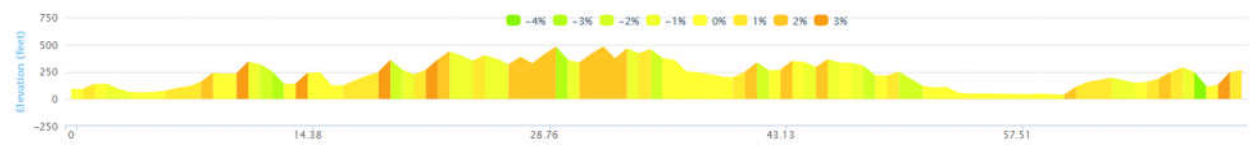
**4**  
70 miles  
750 m



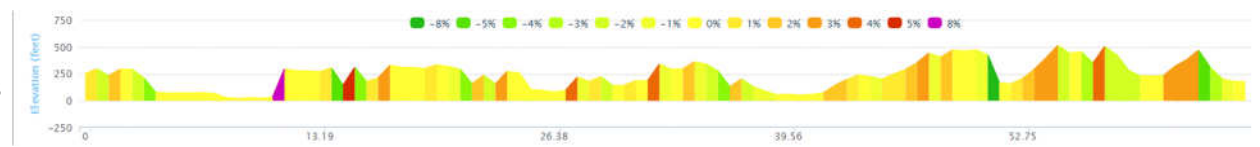
**5**  
65 miles  
780 m



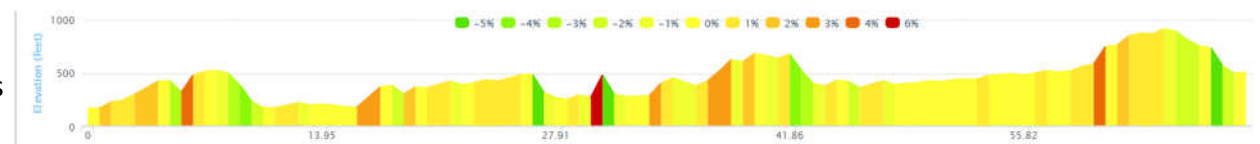
**6**  
73 miles  
1013 m



**7**  
66 miles  
1234 m



**8**  
71 miles  
962 m

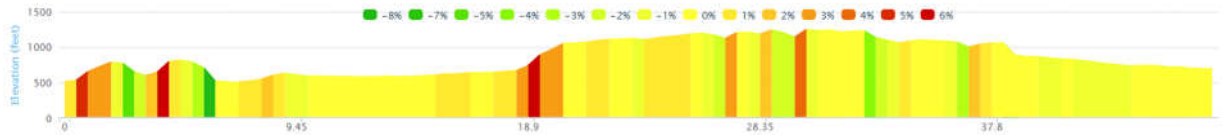




## Elevation Charts

9

48 miles  
735 m



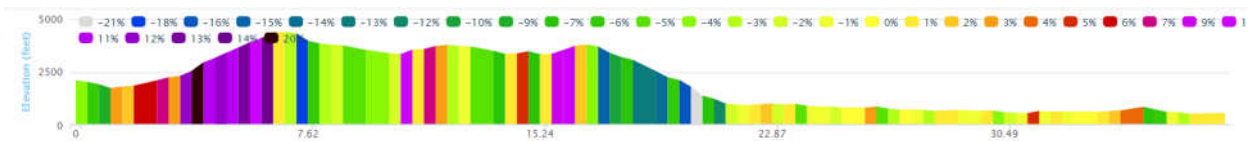
10

58 miles  
1097 m



11

39 miles  
1823 m



12

54 miles  
1734 m



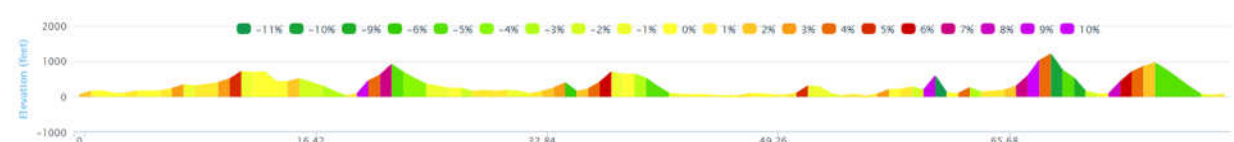
13

49 miles  
2569 m



14

83 miles  
2412 m



15

50 miles  
990 m



*For general identification only. Actual route may vary. Note different scales for each day. Distances on graphs are km. Elevation is calculated by MapMyRide which produces significantly higher figures than Garmin. No two systems will produce the same figure but the visuals will let you know what to expect.*

*Starting elevation 0m. Finishing elevation 0m. Average overall gradient therefore 0% !*

**Thank you (and Simon) once again for a brilliant holiday.**

***‘The most enjoyable cycling holiday I’ve been on in 15 years - quiet but well-maintained roads, beautiful and occasionally stunning scenery, overnight stops in hotels and towns with character, and even bags carried up to rooms.’***



## **BIKES, NAVIGATION & EQUIPMENT**

This tour is one on which to bring your best bike. We recommend road or touring bicycles, although we have had people complete our rides very happily on mountain bikes with road tyres (‘slicks’). All bikes are secure at night. You won’t need panniers or bar bags as you will frequently see the vans.

We provide a printed route card with turn by turn instructions, and we will also tell you which maps cover the areas we pass through. However, by far the best way to find your way is with a GPS and we provide tracks; you will save so much time and the ability to find yourself geographically uncertain is reduced by a huge amount.

We send you out a kit list in advance of your holiday so you know what to pack. It’s easy to take too much but we will give a list of what you should need on your holiday.

A number of our hotels have swimming pools which is a lovely way to end the day! Your full itinerary, sent out about a fortnight before your trip, will detail all this and much more.



**TERRAIN:** This tour takes the country as it comes and there are some hard days. In general terms it is easier at the start and gets progressively harder with some good climbs in the Pyrenees and Basque country, but as with many European roads the climbs are longer and more gradual, rather than shorter and steeper. It is undeniably beautiful. You should ride as much as possible in the months before your trip, and definitely do a couple of consecutive weekends of long back to back days of 60-70 miles each day, over hilly terrain, to ensure proper preparation.

The key to success on this ride is patience, and riding at your own pace. To get the most out of this ride you will enjoy the variety of terrain on offer. If you have never done a trip like this you will find some days harder than others – and not always the ones you expect to! On other days you will find your legs and enjoy blissful riding along some of the quietest and most beautiful roads you are ever likely to ride along.



*'A brilliant trip – great routes, good hotels and meals with an excellent level of support. The standard of hotels and food was much higher than I expected, the quality of the Spanish hotels was particularly high. I find it hard to think of things to improve... It was a great experience, the other riders were good fun and company, I think we all got on well and I am very grateful to you and Simon for all the support and encouragement, nothing was ever too much trouble even when you were both exhausted. Chapeau to you both. Thank you for a great time, look forward to seeing what new routes you are planning.'*



Two vans operate on this trip to cater for all speeds of rider and are there to provide everything you need to make your trip easier, so that all you have to do is pedal. We provide a coffee stop in the morning and snacks throughout the day but you will see us far more frequently than that as we sit by the side of the road to see you all through a tricky junction or to dispense sun-tan lotion. Everyone loves our homemade cake (you have to eat it all, because we get in trouble if we take any back at the end of the trip) and we also have a range of spares on board. You can leave a daybag in the van with waterproofs, gels, your iPad or whatever you may need to get at throughout the day—you will see us every hour on average and we are always only a phone call away.

## **TRAVEL TO / FROM THE TOUR**

Return ferry travel to and from the start and end of the tour is included in our prices for this tour. Outbound, this is from Portsmouth to Caen and return from Santander to Portsmouth. There is parking available at Portsmouth port or we can collect you from the station at Portsmouth. There is also some free street parking not too far away, and in the past some riders have parked at hotels (with prior agreement) or with parking apps to find private rentable parking. We are happy to advise.

The outward ferry is mid afternoon, and the return arrives at approximately 3pm.



## GROUP RIDING v SOLO RIDING

**Y**ou do not need to ride as a group as our support vehicles will cater for everyone's speed. You will usually find someone else who rides at a pace that you are comfortable with, even if you did not know them before the holiday began. If you find yourself riding in a large group and are not familiar with group riding, ask us, or other riders, to explain about warning signals and how to pass information about hazards on the road between yourselves.

If you are a slower rider you can still complete the route at your own pace, although on longer days you may want to set off a little earlier – we always advise completing 60% of the daily distance by lunch time. It is important to ride at your own pace, not someone else's.

Our group sizes vary from 4 up to 12. Sometimes we go to 14, but we are keen to keep the personal service that our returning customers love. On our feedback form a lot of people have told us that we should stress the benefits of small groups—so we have!

*'Of 6 companies that we have used for this format of holiday you are far and away the best.'*



---

**W**e are a specialist family run company and we care deeply that you have a good time. It's more than likely that one of the business owners will be leading your trip. This isn't just a livelihood for us, it's a vocation, so we'll do whatever we can to look after you and make sure you have fun! We're mad keen cyclists and want to pass on the joys of a cycling holiday. This means is that if you want to ring us at 9pm on a Sunday with some questions, please do. If we can't come to the phone we will get back to you surprisingly quickly. You'll probably be speaking to the person who planned the route and has actually ridden it, or chose the hotels. If you have any questions at all, please call us on +44 (0)1300 350555 or email [info@greenjerseycycling.co.uk](mailto:info@greenjerseycycling.co.uk).

## **HOTELS**

We use hotels of character (avoiding chains wherever possible) where a generous breakfast is offered. All have en suite facilities. The average rating is 3 or 4-star. Final confirmation of actual hotels is decided in January / February each year. Accommodation is on a half board basis on the majority of nights—see the 'At a glance' section on page 1 for precise details. If a hotel does not have a restaurant for dinner then we eat out (cost included in tour). We arrange tables together for the evening meals although you are of course free to come and go as you please. If you have any dietary requirements please let us know in advance. On nights when dinner is not included you are free to make your own choice but we will of give you pointers.

## **MEALS & DRINKS**

Breakfast and usually dinner is included in the cost of your holiday (see 'At a glance' on page 1 for number of dinners included) and we also include your first drink (beer, soft drink or glass of wine) when it is. Pre-dinner drinks, extra wine and coffee afterwards are not included and you should pay for these yourself at the time.

For lunch, we will tell you where you will find places to eat / buy food. On several days on this tour we provide a picnic lunch (included in the cost of the holiday) where facilities are scarce due to the rural nature of our route.

## **DATES AND PRICES**

Please see our website.

## **BESPOKE DATES**

If you can rustle up a group of 8 or more we can put on a bespoke date just for your group.

**TO BOOK:** [Our booking pages can be found at http://greenjerseycycling.co.uk/contact](http://greenjerseycycling.co.uk/contact)

Green Jersey British & Continental Cycling Tours, March 2020

