

Totally Eclipsed: part three

Chris James, Danial (Hybrid) Digam and Terry Dickerson went for a week tour in Europe. In part three of this multi-part adventure, after watching the eclipse they head off into the French and Belgium Ardennes.

If you remember we were waiting on top of a hill and had just watched a perfectly clear view of first contact. As the sun became more covered by the moon, the cloud became thicker and thicker. A big black cumulus decided to obscure the view for the start of the totality event. However the lighting effect was still spectacular - it was like someone turning a dimmer switch down. The totality was due to last about 2m20s, after about one and a half minutes the cloud thinned and we got a perfect view of the sun's corona. All this time it was eerily quiet except for a dog that had been confused and was barking away in the distance. The cloud meant that we did not need the special glasses. And then, as a wall of light seemed to rush towards us, it was over.

We hit the road pretty quickly so we could beat the traffic. The hill that we were on must have been a fair size because the descent was much longer than I had anticipated. Making a good speed, we missed a lot of the traffic congestion, but a lot of Belgian and Dutch were still coming past us. We were heading for the hills - the Ardennes to be exact. I had heard that there were hills in Belgium, but I was looking forward to getting personal confirmation. Perhaps they would be a bit like the Gogs I thought!

We were heading for Givet, which is located on a finger of France that sticks into Belgium. However we would be going onto and out of Belgium all day. We were still in France but climbing steadily. As the map told us a substantial climb was ahead, we decided to stop for an afternoon drink at a non-descript café a few km on the French side of the border. Dan had his usual afternoon beer! The climb was not steep but the road was straight so we could see where we had to go. I decided to take it easy and just plod up. Dan quickly disappeared into the distance and Chris pulled away slowly. I found the other two waiting at a junction - they did not know which way to go. I was carrying the map and doing the navigating, this was good for me, otherwise I don't think I would have seen the other two again! By now the road had levelled off and we were riding on a road in a forest. Slowly the road started to turn down. We were getting twitchy now as a country sign was coming up - a country, even Belgium, is worth a lot of sprint points. In the end I took the sign, but more by luck than judgement. The border was just not well marked. Indeed the most significant indication was that the road surface changed! Chris had started pointing into his mouth and saying FOOD, FOOOD, FOOOOD; he also was slowing considerably on the hills.

Givet was out of reach so we decided to stop at the next place that had something better than a table to sleep under. It was now becoming clear that these hills were a bit bigger than the Gogs. We found a hotel in a touristy village called Bohan - it was sheer luxury compared to the previous night. Dan, his normal manic self, showered and went out to explore. Chris decided to go to sleep, when I say 'decided' I think it was an involuntary response brought in from the previous nights bivouacking. Me, I just played it cool and waited for Dan to return. Some time later Chris awoke, he showered; he and I then went to find Dan, as the bar was now open this did not take long! A few Belgian beers were drunk before we went off to find something to eat. Bohan was set in a wooded valley with a small river running through it. The village was not that big but it was well endowed with eateries. We chose a restaurant where we could sit outside and watch the bustle of the main street. Can't remember what we ate. On finishing eating we went to the travelling fair that was in town. With hundreds of teenagers around I felt very old! We had had our fill at the restaurant but we decided to have that Belgian delicacy, chips and mayonnaise. A short walk and hundreds more teenagers persuaded us it was time to sleep.

Revitalised the next morning, we paid up, brought some bread and croissants and headed down the road. The road was literally down as we were closely following the river downstream. The French boarder was approaching and I was getting ready for a sprint. We cycled on an on and no border marking were seen. There was a small climb; the other two rode ahead of me only to take the country points on the following small decent. At Monthermé, 12km down the road we would turn 90 degrees and head up the side of the valley. The map said the climb would go up to 500m - just a little bit bigger than the Gogs. Arrg, grind, sweat, arrg sweat, grind, clunk, sweat, grind, puff, arg (another corner), grind, grind, grind. Well that was the hill over, the following long decent was: woosh, squeel, lean, woosh, woosh ... Back at river level, we stopped for a coffee in the grottest café you have ever seen (the Silver Ball is the Ritz by comparison). The big hills were over now but there were still a series of geological ripples to surmount, these are the heavy roads of northern France that the TdF talks about - even though they are in Belgium!

We really knew that we were in Belgium when a woman in a shop refused, at first, to take French francs. Belgium is criss-crossed with small roads, many of which are concrete, so we used these to wind our way north. Some of those roads really were 'heavy' but they went through lovely wooded countryside. As we pushed north the hills became smaller. For the second time on this trip coal mining became a geographical feature. The area, near Mons (Bergen) was really rundown and quite depressing; the people looked miserable and I could not blame them. Northward we pushed. We were heading for a town called Soignies (Zinnik), on arrival we looked for a hotel but could find nothing. It was weird, we couldn't believe it, a reasonable large and quite handsome town did not have a hotel. The tourist info was closed, but eventually we obtained a accommodation list from a bar. The nearest hotel seemed to be 7km from the town. Off we went along a very straight N57, it seemed a very long 7km. Eventually the hotel, actually it was called a motel, came into view and what a sight it was. Rooms, showers, a bar, a restaurant, all set in an old mill - just what we wanted, just what we needed! We were going to make a night of it. ... *Next part next month.*