

FRENCH REVOLUTIONS

YOU could win yourself €500,000 next month, and at the same time enjoy a holiday in some of France's most idyllic scenery. But you'll have to be able to ride some 3,500km, cycle up seven mountain passes topping 2000m, and do it all faster than anybody else.

Yes, the Tour de France, one of sport's major endurance tests, is almost upon us: up to 12 million people will watch the race live, some 100 million more on television. For a single event, this is unique.

Each day's racing on Le Tour begins with great pomp. For towns involved, the honour of a 'Départ' is the biggest news event since the English somewhat unhelpfully burned Joan of Arc. And you can be right in with the cycling action. Even with the gendarmes screaming at you, 'Sur votre bicyclette!' or 'Fin de cycle!', it's still possible to be run over by some of the world's greatest athletes at the start of each day's racing.

The event has changed little over the decades – even the drugs for which 'le Tour de Pharmacie' is infamous have long been a part of proceedings; some poor competitor always has to visit Urine-le-Sample.

An established tradition is for the authorities to announce every June that the Tour 'this year will be drug-free, deffo,' although probably adding under their breath 'if you want it to last five months, you silly saucissons'.

The arcane origins of the race lie within the bitter divisions of 19th century France and the Dreyfus affair. An enormously popular cycling publication Le Vélo backed Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish army officer wrongly convicted of treason.

The paper's sponsor, the reactionary Comte de Dion, was incensed, so together with nationalist friends André and Edouard Michelin, set up a rival paper, L'Auto. Its editor, Henri Desgrange, was an ardent cyclist – and like his associates would have regarded Attila the Hun as a mealy-mouthed liberal. Yet Desgrange was destined to become one of the 20th century's great sporting figures.

Le Tour was to promote sales of L'Auto and it certainly did the trick. At the finish of the first event in 1903 thousands turned out to greet the 22 finishers, and the race was on its way.

This year the Grand Départ is from Vendée on July 7.

The peloton makes its way to the mountain stages on July 17, with riders facing the notorious climb to Alpe d'Huez and the Col du Tourmalet – and then it's off to the Pyrenees.

The Tour de France is a magnificent spectacle, featuring some of the most iconic images in world sport.

But just a word of warning if you're viewing the descents. Stephen Roche, our only winner, revealed that this is where cyclists usually relieve themselves. 'It depends on the wind,' he explained 'but if you gotta go...'

RELIEF IN THE FJORDS

NEXT time you need to ask the way to the toilets, you could try: 'Excuse me, I'm seeking a sense of poetic solitude, somewhere



WHEN STEPHEN ROCHE MADE A SPLASH ON LE TOUR

ON HIS TRAVELS MAL ROGERS TRAVEL JOURNALIST OF THE YEAR



that complements the natural landscape of the surroundings.'

Being at one with nature while contemplating a number two sounds a good idea, and it's exactly what the Norwegian authorities have done along the Scenic Route Helgelandskysten at Ureddplassen.

This is one of the world's great highways, snaking along the fjords and crossing the Arctic Circle.

The new service area on the road boasts state-of-the-art ablution facilities done out in the most stylish of ways.

The Norwegian Public Roads Administration recently opened the installation near the town of Gildeskål. The elegant frosted-glass toilet building, designed by Oslo-based architects Haugen and Zohar, evokes a transcendental atmosphere. And the marble building is fast becoming one of the few toilets in the world that is a stand-alone tourist attraction.

At the other end of the relief scale is the toilet-in-a-briefcase for the traveller. It sounds just the thing for the busy man or woman on the move.

A Cleanwaste 'briefcase' one of many available, retails online for around €100. The business end folds out, and according to the comments section on the website 'can hold about 500lbs'. Which should cover you for most occasions, I would think.

Another online comment says: 'I

keep mine in the horsebox.' Which begs the question – if you don't have a horsebox, where on earth do you use it?

Suddenly, all those fellow train/bus passengers merely using their mobiles don't seem so bad.

A SPORTING CHANCE

THE World Cup begins next week, and, of course, Ireland won't be there.

It's a pity – if you look at the slow-motion replay of some of our qualifying matches, we certainly look OK. Oh no, sorry, that wasn't the slo-mo; that's actually how we were playing. Ah well, never mind.

Still, if you've decided to forego the sights and sounds of Moscow this year, you can, instead, go to a World Cup next year.

Yes, next year. And it's being held in Rome. The Vatican World Cup, also known as the Clericus Cup, is a tournament hotly contested by national teams of priests and trainee priests drawn from Rome's seminaries.

This year's final, held on May 26, was between the USA and Italy – the North American Martyrs were pitted against Collegio Urbano, with the Americans winning on penalties.

The Pontifical Irish College sadly, and somewhat predictably, went out early doors.

Nonetheless, the tournament was apparently an exciting spectacle, so could make a fine centrepiece for a Vatican vacation next

May.

Now, most regular visitors to Rome are aware of the best travel hacks such as the Aventine Keyhole, or the Vatican Scavi tour – the latter worthwhile not least because it deposits you at St. Peter's Basilica at the end of the tour, thus skipping the huge queues outside.

My own tip is head for the rooftop cafe on St. Peter's Basilica Cupola. Order a takeaway coffee, then sip it on the terrace overlooking the Eternal City.

Maybe think great thoughts. Such as – do you think Martin O'Neill could start getting the Ireland soccer boys training for the priesthood? Then at least we might win something.

JUST THE TICKET

LOW-COST carrier Tigerair Australia has been named the cheapest airline in the world in Rome2rio's 2018 Global Flight Price Ranking.

The report analysed economy fares on international and domestic airlines from their search engine over a two-month period.

With flights costing \$0.06 (€0.05) per km on average, Tigerair Australia took the number one spot. Ryanair came in at a very creditable 10th place, clocking up \$0.10 (€0.08) per kilometre.

And the most expensive mode of transport? Well Rome2rio's survey didn't cover top-end travel, but perhaps I can help. Henley Regatta – the blazers and bubbly extravaganza on the Thames – has a ferry that probably edges it. I was charged £3 to cross the river by punt, a voyage of some 50 feet or thereabouts. That works out at £316 per mile.

Never mind business jets, the Space Shuttle probably compares favourably with that.



Part of the island: Mary finds the perfect seat on Crete

swimming pools to bring it to the current 35-room facility.

During my stay, we work out that about about half of the residents have stayed here already. My new friend Vicky says she has been here more than 20 times since the early 2000s.

She loves Walking Week but also flies out at other times during the season. Gwillem, a man in his late 60s from Wales, is on his sixth trip here. 'This place has everything,' he says.

If the return visitors are perturbed by interlopers like myself, they don't show it. Indeed lifelong friendships are forged here.

And more: on my final day, I meet a couple who met here a few years ago – and got engaged on the night prior to my meeting them. The irony is, they're only dropping by the hotel to see their old friends: now that they're solidly partnered up, they can no longer stay here due to the 'solos only' policy.

You can't blame them for returning. For widower John, 84, who is on his 11th visit, there is something very special about the place. 'People come with an open mind,' says Vassilis, 'and they leave with new friends.'

And all it takes is a willingness to plunge in...