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'Crazy Froggers' love to live and tackle mountain passes



Members of the Club des Cent Cols, posing in Aspen before tackling McClure Pass Thursday, like strong drink and steep passes. Daniel Bayer photo.

By [Scott Condon](#)
Aspen Times Staff Writer

They aren't the kind of guys you would expect to be out bagging high mountain passes on their bicycles. Most of them are in their 60s, a few have big bellies, they all like to party.

But bag passes they do — and with a vengeance. Five members of the Club des Cent Cols visited Aspen this week on the 12-day Tour du Colorado. They tackled Independence Pass en route from Leadville Wednesday and set their sights on McClure Pass Thursday.

The club, which translates into the Club of 100 Passes, was founded 22 years ago in France for the one-and-only purpose of sharing the joy of topping mountain passes, or cols — big cols, small cols, cols that sometimes don't even seem like cols.

"In the beginning it was a very French club, now it's international," said Bernard Chalchat of Paris, a 63-year-old retired CEO of a pharmaceutical company.

The most-accomplished member has 6,000 passes under his belt. None of the riders on the Colorado tour have bagged that many passes, but they're no slouches, either.

Didier Chouquet-Stringer, a businessman who lives near Chamonix, has tackled about 1,700 passes. His colleagues joked that he is tops in their group in both passes and weight.

Chouquet-Stringer is a big man with a belly, but he's far from fat. He has the legs of an avid cyclist. Chouquet-Stringer acknowledged that part of the pleasure of touring is partying in the various towns and countries they visit.

"We love life," agreed Chalchat. "We can eat a lot, we can drink a lot."

Jacques Seysses, a 61-year-old winemaker from Burgundy, said he wouldn't think of sacrificing food or grog on a bike tour. Instead he prefers to exercise more so he can partake of the good life. He has 1,600 passes under his belt so far.

"We're crazy Froggers," he said.

Nevertheless, they are serious about their passes.

The club doesn't require documentation of the passes completed. They take the members' word for it. If a member can't complete a pass and has to push, they aren't supposed to add a notch to their belts. Five of every 100 passes must be greater than 2,000 meters, or about 6,600 feet.

"It's a game of honor," said Chouquet-Stringer.

He and Chalchat have tackled all the hard passes in France, including those incorporated into the Tour de France routes. They have also searched neighboring countries to get their pass fix.

"We have finished Europe. Now we are obligated to visit Colorado," said Chalchat, who has 1,100 passes to his credit.

He was the organizer of the Tour du Colorado. Chalchat said half the fun of tours is planning them, and his exuberance shines through as he shows off the booklet he made for the trip — complete with biographies of the 10 riders and three-person support crew, maps of the 12 routes and details of the passes.

If all goes as planned, the group will bag another 70 passes during their stay here. One week into their route, Chalchat was drooling over the prospect of returning to Colorado to ride even more passes.

Riding in Colorado is significantly different, the men said. The worst of Europe's cols are much steeper, with the grade often greater than 10 percent. The grade on Colorado passes are often 4 to 8 percent. Independence Pass, for example, has an average grade of 6.5 percent.

Chouquet-Stringer said the toughest of the 1,700 passes he has climbed is Mont Ventoux, part of this year's Tour de France. It has a 9.5 percent grade over 21 kilometers.

Chalchat's greatest nemesis was the Col of Madeleine, also with a 9.5 percent grade over 20 kilometers.

Where the Frenchmen ran into trouble was with the distances associated with the Rocky Mountain rides. They could top multiple passes in Europe in the distance needed to tackle one in Colorado. They have also battled the elevation, which is considerably higher than in their native mountains.

Chalchat was still amazed by the ride through Rocky Mountain National Park and over 11,471-foot Trail Ridge Pass.

"I've never done anything like that," he said. "The Alps for me now look very different." And very small, he explained. They were thankful their bikes had three chain rings, which provides lower gears for grinding up the passes.

Believe it or not, they noted that American drivers aren't as aggressive with bicycles as drivers in France. Although less traffic in Europe allows them to regularly ride two and three abreast, Chalchat said.

They were also impressed by Aspen's hospitality. Aspen cycling enthusiast John Wilkinson greeted the Club des Cent Cols crew with beer, wine and hors d'oeuvres Wednesday at the Aspen Mountain Lodge.

Wilkinson frequently cycles in Europe and learned of the 100 pass club. He's one of its few American members.

Chalchat used Wilkinson's Web site on Colorado passes for much of his research. They also communicated via e-mail about riding in Colorado.

The French riders were also greeted by Aspen Mayor Helen Klanderud, who read a proclamation honoring them for their efforts.

Chouquet-Stringer, speaking for the group, said Aspen provided one of the more memorable moments of the trip due to the hospitality.

"This is deeply American," he said. "We weren't ready."

[Scott Condon's e-mail address is scondon@aspentimes.com]