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T'Tour: a grand depart

The Tour de France is coming to Yorkshire next year and the organisers, on both sides of the Channel, are confident that it will represent a successful return to these shores for the world's biggest annual sporting event. Sharing such confidence, *The Leisure Review* nevertheless wonders whether the rest of the UK realises quite how big these three days in Yorkshire could be.

"Inoubliable" – unforgettable – is the word that Christian Prudhomme, the director of the Tour de France, says springs to mind whenever he thinks of the Tour in London in 2007. It was the first time that the Tour had staged the Grand Départ, the rolling carnival of the race's opening days, in the UK and possibly the first time that the non-cycling British public began to understand not only the scale of the Tour de France as an event but also the scale of interest in the race this side of the Channel. "Aussi exceptionnel" – equally spectacular – is his confident prediction for 2014, when the Grand Départ comes to Yorkshire for the first two stages before Cambridge and London horn in on the act for stage three.

It is fair to say that when news began to circulate a couple of summers ago that Yorkshire was bidding to host the Grand Départ a good many people in the UK thought the most appropriate word would be "incroyable" – incredible. However, those doubters (and there were a few in *The Leisure Review* offices) were unaware quite how struck the Tour's organisers had been by the welcome the Tour received in 2007 and subsequently by the beauty of the countryside, the variety of the routes available and the passion for cycling that Yorkshire was able to demonstrate. The success of the London 2012 as an event and the spectacular achievements of British cyclists on the track and the road then added mass to a gathering momentum.

As Prudhomme explained, "At that time, we were considering a return to the UK for the Tour in 2016-2017. That was before British cycling's golden summer. Bradley Wiggins' historic victory in the Tour de France combined with the phenomenal success of the cycling events during the Olympic Games convinced us that we should come back earlier and, to tell the truth, as quickly as possible."

The excitement of the Tour grips the cycling fraternity and sorority across the UK each year but this community of interest has been growing steadily over recent years as consistent television coverage, persistent British involvement and sustained British success has drawn more and more people into the story. It seems that cycling is now in the midst of a virtuous circle of interest, profile and participation. The viewing figures for ITV4's coverage is consistently in the millions for the set-piece events of the Tour, while the numbers of people on bikes, whether for sport, transport or fun, is growing significantly. Local and national government are being required to take cycling more seriously and the profile of cycling is sufficient to draw the attention of parliament, with the All-Party Parliamentary Cycling Group publishing a report, following its own inquiry, that recommends increased investment in and support for cycling in all its forms.

For this reason there was a special frisson of excitement during the opening stages of this year's race when representatives of the following year's Grand Départ, "the county of Yorkshire", captured some air time

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and a significant number of column inches to remind everyone that in 2014 the Tour would be returning to the UK. It was notable that these interviews with representatives of the Yorkshire organisers were held in Corsica, the last region of France to be visited by the Tour and the host of the first three stages of the 2013 race. A bus stuck under a gantry and a few post-stage traffic jams aside, the Corsican stages were regarded by Tour organisers as a success and the Corsican tourism authority will have been counting the cost of bringing the Tour to their island as a sound investment. A great many people across Europe and around the world, many non-cyclists among them, will have been watching the Tour and thinking that Corsica looked rather lovely; visitor numbers in the next few years are likely to grow as a result.

As the British press took a moment to look to the following year, the Tour organisers entered into the spirit with some subtly knowing references to the Yorkshire mindset – “the world’s greatest county” and “Yorkshire toujours plus haute”, for example – but there was also a genuine acknowledgement of Yorkshire’s place in the story of British cycling and in the history of the Tour. Introducing Yorkshire to the world’s press, the Tour documentation noted: “The county is widely regarded as one of the spiritual heartlands of UK cycling producing trailblazing talent like Brian Robinson, the first British rider to win a stage of the Tour de France, Barry Hoban a winner of 8 stages of the Tour de France and Malcolm Elliott the first British rider to win a Grand Tour points jersey. Its landscape continues to inspire a new generation of star cyclists today.”

This new generation was the focus of the announcement of an ambitious programme of events and initiatives to accompany the Tour’s arrival in Yorkshire, including an arts festival and a bike library that will aim to lend a bike to every child in the region, along with all the hoopla and hyperbole that the Tour delivers as standard. British Cycling and other organisations will no doubt be working hard to make sure that the opportunity to promote participation and engagement with cycling is not wasted.

Anyone familiar with how the Tour de France operates and the impact it delivers will be only too keen to explain to any doubters that this is an enormous opportunity. If many have been left deflated by the failure of London 2012 to deliver on its legacy ambitions, the rather more realistic and manageable prospect of a twelve-month window to focus upon an accessible and wholly egalitarian activity such as cycling, an activity that ticks so many boxes in terms of health, physical activity, community engagement, the environment and transport, may be seductive for organisations and local authorities across the UK. That any cycling programmes and promotions will culminate in a month-long media blitz in the height of summer with the world’s biggest annual sporting event, not to mention British riders, dominating headlines and airtime throughout July 2014 should seal the deal with even the most reluctant advocates of cycling.

Many people were surprised by the scale of interest and the number of spectators on the road last time the Tour came to the UK but the intervening years have seen interest in cycling soar across Britain and the Yorkshire organisers are already indicating that they are expecting very big crowds at all points on the route; Cambridge and London will no doubt be making plans based on similar expectations. While the phrase “Allez, tha’ soppy ha’porth!” may take time to enter the lexicon of the world’s greatest race, the mass of spectators could be astounding for anyone still unsure of why the Tour de France is such a significant, venerable and celebrated institution. If the sun comes out, who knows what could happen.

***The Leisure Review* Festival of the Bike will coincide with the Tour's arrival. To receive full details of the programme, which will include the world's shortest cyclo sportif, and to confirm your place contact the managing editor.**

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