

A broken leg couldn't stop **Judy Armstrong** from enjoying the attractions around one of Europe's largest artificial lakes

On an iridescent autumn day, I sat on a white-pebbled beach with a view of a viaduct. Built of sturdy stone and sporting a series of graceful arches, the viaduct trundled from the shore near my feet... and disappeared under water.

The water was turquoise blue and contained in a lake so vast that it looked like an inland sea. The viaduct, built between 1909 and 1935 as part of the Gap to Barcelonnette railway line, was never used. When the Lac de Serre-Ponçon was created in the 1950s, the viaduct was sacrificed and now peeps, half-heartedly, above the watery parapets.

The whole thing was bizarre. As I sat in sharp sunshine, staring at this folly, I promised to return and find out more about this strange, spectacular place.

Earthquake defences

The Lac de Serre-Ponçon has a wet foot in the Haute-Alpes and Alpes-de-Haute-Provence départements, between Gap and the Italian border. Mountains loom over it – dark cliffs reflecting in the dream-blue water – and green fields and forests freckle its shores.

One of Europe's largest artificial lakes, Serre-Ponçon was created by damming the rebellious River Durance just downstream of its meeting with the Ubaye, a placid waterway that tumbles for 80 kilometres from the Col de Loriget. The Durance regularly flooded its valley and displaced or destroyed its inhabitants. In 1895 a dam was proposed to tame the river; finally, after decades of research, a solution emerged in 1948.

The answer was an earth dam inspired by American techniques. Earth, rather than concrete, can cope with the deformations caused by earthquakes; an important consideration because the lake was in a seismic zone. Work started in 1955 and took more than four years; three million cubic metres of earth were moved, an earth-core dam 123 metres high was created and gradually the valley was flooded. Four villages and the Chanteloube railway viaduct disappeared, and 1,500 people, plus their livestock, were moved to villages higher up the valley sides.

Today, the Lac de Serre-Ponçon is one of France's largest areas dedicated to recreational activities; ▶

LEFT: The Lac de Serre-Ponçon with the Chapelle Saint-Michel on its island

watersports, cycling, hiking, flying, skiing and climbing all take place on and around this vast body of water.

So, how best to explore it? A session online led me to Undiscovered Alps, a family business specialising in activity holidays in and around Gap, including the lake. After chatting to Sally Guillaume, who heads the business, we agreed that a cycle tour was an ideal way to explore the lake shore. By chance, she and Laurent Foissac, her expert mountain bike guide, had recently created a route, so my husband Duncan and

I could be the trailblazers.

We would cycle from Barcelonnette in the foothills of the Provençal Alps, along the banks of the River Ubaye to the lake. Heading anti-clockwise

around its shores, we would finish, a week later, by the dam itself, after enjoying a hedonistic blend of easy roads and trails, and technical tracks. What could possibly go wrong?

A week before we were due to arrive in Barcelonnette, I broke my leg. Having forgotten to take out travel insurance, I persuaded the doctors that a fractured fibula was not life-threatening and I'd be fine, honestly, just hobbling. Then I phoned Sally. To my astonishment, she was serene. "That's no problem. You can hire an electric bike. It's just like riding a mountain bike, but a motor does the work," she said. "We suggest them to mixed groups, where some guests want hard-core cycling and others, including younger children, prefer to travel in comfort."

An electric bike! What fun! While Duncan packed padded shorts and racing stripes, I tossed a comfortable pair of capri pants and a few T-shirts into a suitcase. We could ride the same route, but only one of us would be sweating – and for once, it wouldn't be me.

Gentle acceleration

Picking our way by car across France, via sky-scraping Alpine passes and spartan mountain villages, we arrived in Barcelonnette. Duncan had brought his own mountain bike, although Laurent had assured him it was possible to rent a top-specification, full-suspension model on arrival. I brought a helmet and a smile, ready for my first whirl on an electric bicycle.

Laurent was waiting with my trusty steed. It was black, with swept-back handlebars and a battery pack on the back rack. With its top speed of 27km/h and a range of around 60 kilometres, all I had to do was recharge the battery in our hotel each night and my broken leg was as good as forgotten.

After a brief tour of the controls – pedal a few rotations to get moving, select your speed, sit back and relax – I hopped on to the seat. Choosing the slowest speed, I pushed the pedals and accelerated gently. Suddenly I was moving up an incline, on a bicycle, without making the slightest effort. It was fantastic.



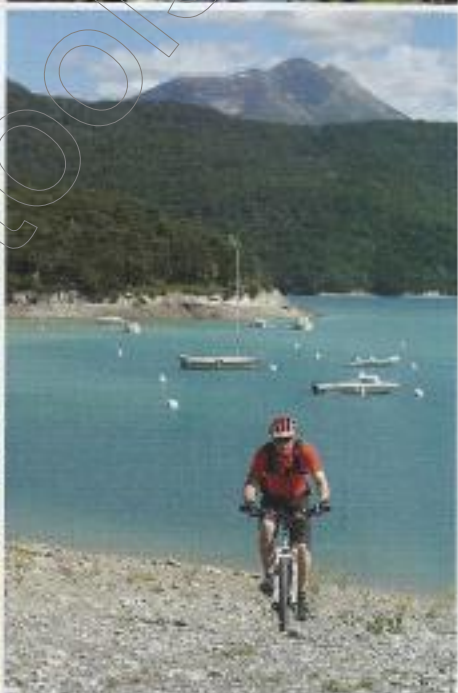
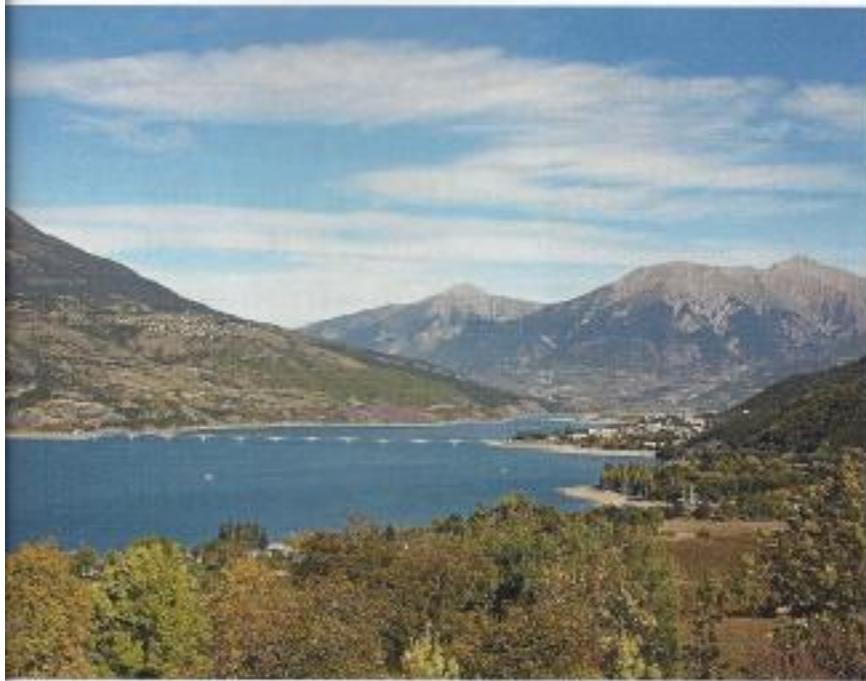
I named my new friend Ernie, started grinning and didn't stop smiling for a week.

Barcelonnette is a charming little town with a strange back-story. It is home to 45 'Mexican villas', extravagant houses built between 1860 and 1920 with money made by entrepreneurs from the village who emigrated to Mexico, made their fortunes in the fabric industry and returned with a new heritage. The cobbled streets, gaily painted buildings and shops with Mexican art are surreal in this Alpine environment; it's a wonderful place to start a journey.

Our accommodation here, as throughout the holiday, was organised by Undiscovered Alps. In Barcelonnette it was an auberge on the fringe of town. Various a Roman settlement, priory and a farm, it now cheerfully hosts walkers, cyclists and passers-by in airy rooms with panoramic views. We met Laurent here for a chat about the route. He has been a mountain bike

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: The town of Barcelonnette; Judy coasts along on the electric bicycle; The village of Chorges and the Eglise Saint-Victor

PHOTOGRAPHY: JUSTY ARNOSTREICH



guide for 20 years, travelling worldwide to find the best single track for off-road cyclists. Now he has settled down with a family, running an auberge and guiding from the Champsaur Valley near Gap. He worked tirelessly to create this itinerary around the Lac de Serre-Ponçon and stressed that it was adaptable to all skill levels. We would find out soon enough: you don't get more varied than a road-keen mountain biker accompanied by a wife with a fractured leg.

It was time to ride. We had a GPS, route notes and a map; Laurent would meet us in a few days to discuss more choices and we had Sally's number for any emergencies. I fired up Ernie and we were away, gliding downhill into town. Barcelonnette was half-awake; only the patisserie showed signs of life. We slid past the bourgeois villas and horse chestnut trees on a road that mirrors the river. Soon we crossed the River Ubaye and meandered through stands of Mediterranean pine trees.

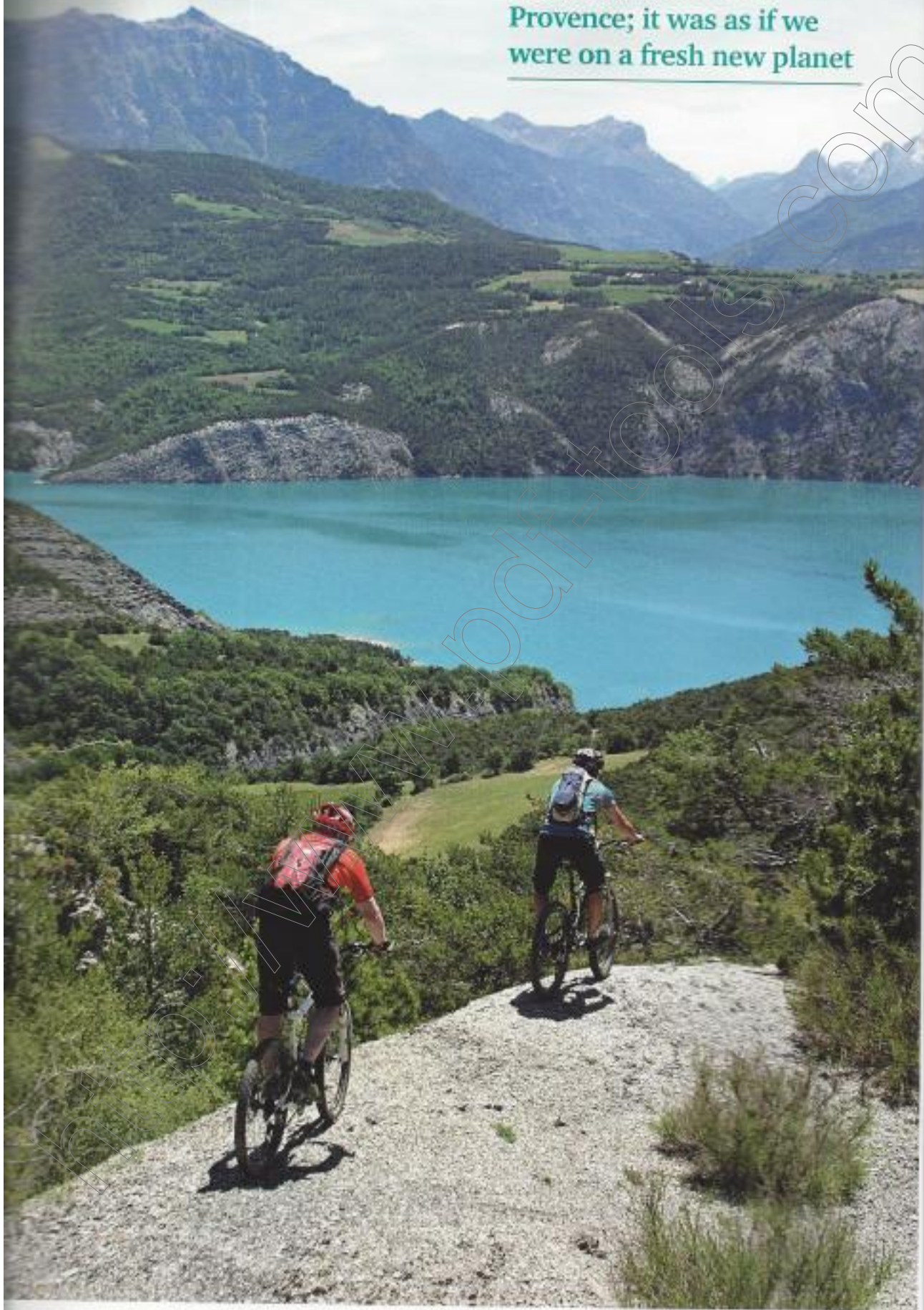
The valley narrowed, streams bounced down steep rock slots and we had glimpses of snow-capped peaks and fluted cliffs. The forest track was a gentle roller-coaster, smooth enough for Ernie but still fun for Duncan. It was 15 kilometres of mellow riding to Méolans, a bijou village with a church perched on a rock.

We exited on a road that was barely wide enough for the bikes, and which soon morphed into beautiful single track. Just as things started to overheat for Ernie and me, we emerged on to a road beside a rafting centre. Here is where Sally's genius went into overdrive. As Duncan continued to cycle on technique-testing track, I flopped into a fat yellow raft and floated downstream to Le Lauzet-Ubaye, Ernie following in the rafters' van. This is the most tranquil section of river; white-water enthusiasts can opt for rapids up to expert grade, but I am a calm-water girl at heart.

Le Lauzet-Ubaye is anchored by the river, boasting ▶

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The view from Sauze-du-Lac toward Savines-le-Lac; In a disused railway tunnel near Le Lauzet-Ubaye; On the shore of the Lac de Serre-Ponçon at Baie des Moulettes; The view over Charges toward the Parc National des Écrins

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pretty plan d'eau with fishermen, picnickers and swimmers. Some residents of the drowned hamlet of Ubaye were rehoused here, but the population is declining; it now hovers between 200 and 300 residents. The viaduct that fascinated me in the Baie de Anteloube was part of the railway line that we now followed down the valley. A series of tunnels led us to the lake shore; pre-warned, we had head torches tucked to our cycling helmets. The first tunnel is the longest, 1,740 metres of damp darkness. We wobbled to the black, balance lost as vision was swallowed; it took a lifetime before we glimpsed daylight.

The tunnels became shorter and suddenly we saw the lake. The water was turquoise and the air smelt like Provence; it was as if we were on a fresh new planet. Leaving a road, we cycled to the chapel and cemetery to mark the village of Ubaye, whose sunny microclimate earned it the nickname *Le Petit Nice*, before it is inundated by water.

Underwater village

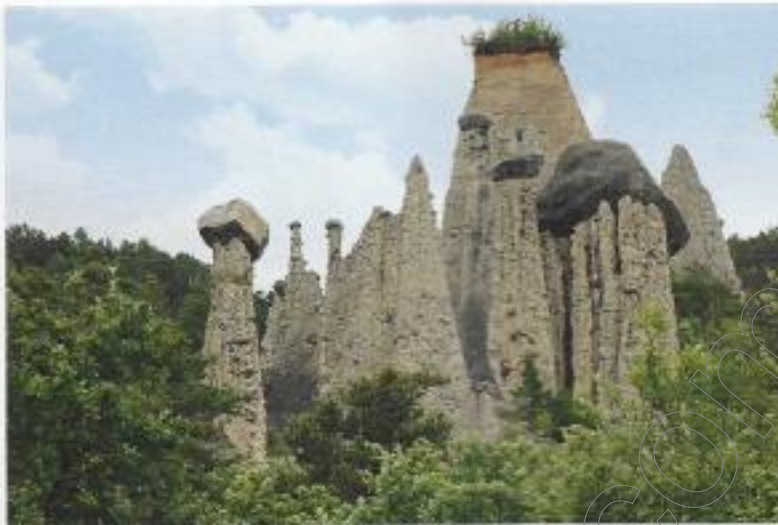
At the beginning of the 20th century, Ubaye had shops and artisans serving a population of 220. Earlier protests against the barrage were overwhelmed by the need to control the River Durance and provide hydro-electricity. A château, church and houses were dismantled before the water arrived. Only the cemetery is saved, relocated 300 metres higher up the hillside.

Annually, since July 1972, on the initiative of Émile Derbez, mayor of Ubaye from 1944 to 1953, there is a gathering of families, friends and sympathisers. On the door of the new chapel, the programme is laid out in careful printing: assembly, éréfif, picnic and convivial game of boules.

I stood in the immaculate cemetery, looking past the headstones and bright flowers, to the calm water of the well-filled lake. I tried to picture what lay below – the ruined houses, shattered lives and outlines of fields flooded, not grazed. Then I thought of Laurent, who said: "There are two ways to look at it. One is with sadness for the families who were forced to move. The other is to realise that their villages and lives were often in danger from the uncontrollable flooding; they would have moved eventually. The economy of this area has shifted dramatically from the damming of the valley. In the end, there was no real choice."

We continued around the lake, past sheltered bays and pretty inlets. A hefty climb to Le Sauze-du-Éric passed effortlessly beneath Ernie's tyres while Duncan puffed like a steam train, sweating with the effort. Pausing to recover in the small village, we found a restaurant and belvedere, with a view down the lake to the barrage. Information boards gave glimpses of the valley's past, painting a picture of what once lay at its feet.

It was an easy run now to our night's halt at Savines-Lac, a new village built above the water after the original was dynamited. Duncan was tempted to drop off the road on to the signposted mountain bike tracks which lace the hillside, but stuck with me for a visit to the Demoiselles Coiffées. These shale spires, formed from



ancient moraine – rocks and sediment deposited by glaciers – are tucked into a valley beside the road. Some support boulders, like heads perched on narrow necks; one has a mad tuft of grass, like hair. The pillars are up to 20 metres high, with blocks weighing up to 800 tons. We climbed the path beside them for a closer look, nearly stepping on wild strawberries and pink orchids.

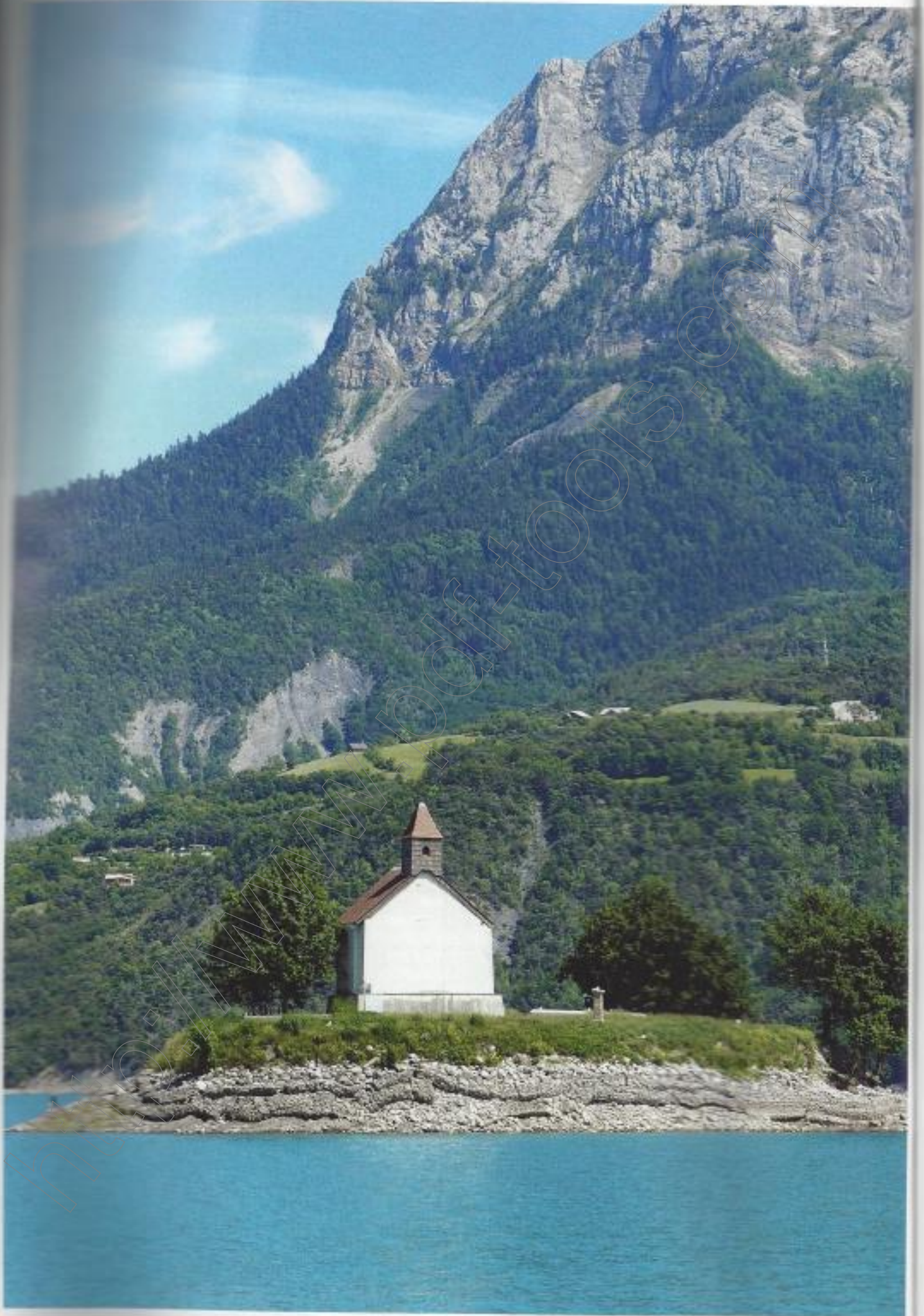
Lift across the lake

Our destination was Hôtel Eden Lac, which has an elevated position and wide-angle views of the lake. From the glass-sided restaurant I watched wind patterns on the water – the surface is large enough to behave like the sea. As an exquisite meal was served, a storm rolled in from nowhere and the lake disappeared behind a grey veil, emerging less than a minute later, fresh and bright.

In the morning, we loaded the bikes on to a motorboat for a lift across the lake. As well as exploring the shores, we wanted to feel life on the water; also, this was an ideal way to cut out a busy section of road. We chugged past windsurfers and sailors, accelerating under the Pont de Savines, which rises 40 metres from the lake bed.

We disembarked at the jetty in Baie Saint-Michel, famed for the chapel that sits on a rocky island. The dam's planners had intended to demolish the building, before realising that its perch was just high enough to avoid the flood. It is now a protected monument and

FROM TOP: The Demoiselles Coiffées rock formations; **At the Baie des Moulettes on the shore of Lac de Serre-Ponçon;** **FACING PAGE:** Duncan and Laurent on the technical descent above Les Hyvans



closed to the public due to vandalism, but cruise boats pass close enough to allow a decent sighting.

From the bay we climbed to a meadow of wild flowers and rode swooping tracks across a headland before dropping to the beautiful beach at Charneleoube and the viaduct that had mystified me on my first visit. The network of mountain bike trails here made my head spin. Duncan wanted to ride some shale single-track, which was far beyond my scope, so I left him to his challenge and cycled to Chorges. A quiet town, it is best known for the 12th-century Église Saint-Victor where, in 1790, members of the first assembly of the Haute-Alpes département held their inaugural meeting.


Sally had factored in a rest day, which Duncan used to ride with Laurent on steep, technical trails above Chorges, learning new skills for sharp descents and switchbacks. Our hotel had spa facilities, but the sun was shimmering too brightly to stay indoors. Instead, I whizzed back to the lake on Ernie, to board the cruise boat *Le Serre-Ponçon*. The 90-minute tour was fascinating, the French commentary bravely translated into English by the captain, Pierre-Jean Dominici.

For our final day of cycling, we took different routes. Duncan and Laurent tackled a huge climb with a spectacular descent down rock and slate ribs. Ernie and I chugged along quiet lanes, climbing almost as high as the men but with much less effort, meeting them hours later on a hillside above the barrage.

We took a side-trip together to the Saut de Rolland, a waterfall which squirts over a rock lip into a chasm and a deep blue pool. Then, as I zoomed down the corkscrew road beside the barrage, the mountain bikers

made a final drop, down a rocky trail that made Duncan's eyes bulge, to the town of Espinasses.

Slipping a beer in an empty bar, we thought back over the week. We hadn't circumnavigated the lake, but we had discovered many kilometres of trails, enjoyed sweeping views and dozed on white-pebbled beaches. We had explored the lake from water and solid ground, and got an insight into life before and after the flooding.

I had a blast on an electric bike – I could never have tackled the climbs and tracks without Ernie. Duncan had the privilege of riding with an expert, learning techniques from Laurent that would stay with him forever. In the end, though, a cycle tour of Lac de Serre-Ponçon isn't just about the riding; it's about the soul of the place and its people. It's about the journey. 



ABOVE: The Saut de Rolland waterfall; FACING PAGE: The Chapelle Saint-Michel on its island in the lake

FRANCOFILE

Riding off the beaten track in the Alps

GETTING THERE

By road: Judy travelled with P&O Ferries (www.poferries.com, tel 0871 664 2121) and drove to Barcelonnette (9.5 hours).

By rail: The nearest station is Gap. Undiscovered Alps provides transfers.

By air: The nearest airports are Grenoble and Marseille Provence. Undiscovered Alps can arrange transfers for a fee.

WHERE TO STAY

Accommodation is included in the holiday.

Examples include:

Gîte Auberge L'Étarlou
Villevielle
04400 Faucon de Barcelonnette
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 36 15 78
www.gite-auberge-etarlou.com

Hôtel Eden Lac
1 Rue des Maisonnettes
05160 Savines-le-Lac
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 44 20 53
www.edenlac.com

Ax'Hotel
ZA Grande Île
05230 Chorges
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 21 45 17
www.ax-hotel.com

WHERE TO EAT

Half-board is included; the quality is excellent. In Barcelonnette, also try:

Le Bocaccio
3 Rue Cardinais
04400 Barcelonnette
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 81 34 64
Cosy ambiance, with innovative combinations of Italian and French mountain cuisine.

HOLIDAY PROVIDER

Multi-activity specialist Undiscovered Alps offers this seven-day cycling holiday from June to September. Prices from €599 per person,

including half-board and transfers to and from Gap railway station. The firm works with Laurent Foissac from Cap Liberté for trail selection, route advice and guiding if required. Guests can bring their own equipment, or hire bikes. The electric bikes are suitable for adults and children aged 12 and over. The firm has bases in Gap and the UK. UK office: 10 Langwood Langley Road Watford, WD17 4PW Tel: 0845 009 8501 www.undiscoveredalps.com



TOURIST INFORMATION

Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur tourist board
www.tourisme-paca.fr

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<http://www.mountainbikes.com>