

Easy rider in Paris

PARIS. Cycling through the still-dark streets at 6:45 a.m. on a rough-and-ready Portuguese town bike, you're not thinking of Lance Armstrong. Or of cars or passersby. Pedalling at a good five-speed clip, and dodging through alleys and one-ways the wrong way, it's ten minutes from Montparnasse to the Louvre, and from start to finish you've got the City of Light (even without light) almost all to yourself.

Why ride an early-morning bike in Paris when you could do something civilized like, say, sleep? Because it feeds body, mind and spirit.

(And because, of course, if you're nuts enough to ride a bike after 7:30 a.m., you risk a serious disagreement with a four-wheel rival. Here, even women drivers drink testosterone, and pedestrians and bikes are mere Formula-1 track-blockers. A Green-friendly City Hall offers a few special cyclists' lanes – usually shared with buses).

The feel-good side of biking at dawn draws on endorphins and one-upmanship. You're pumping hectolitres of oxygen into the old brain, and blasting out cobwebs. Then you get an early-morning rush from beating the rush: that tingle of smugness you feel when you're up and at 'em, and others doze. You stop at a sun-lit terrace for a *café au lait* and buttered slice of fresh baguette, unfolding your morning newspaper. Friends snore? You sneer – though not unkindly.

But oxygen-and-coffee cocktails are not the real thrill of Paris. History is. Evidence of kings and queens, their courtiers and lovers, of revolutions, writers, artists, musicians and scientists fill your eyes everywhere in France. Buildings and plaques memorialize them, well, to death. History-mania led last year to spoof plaques announcing “nothing happened here, ever.”

On a bike ride from Left Bank to the Seine, it comes at you from every corner. Two minutes from home, I whiz past the huge 18th-century Saint-Sulpice church. Its strange, asymmetric building harbored ferocious theological battles, and housed the Revolution's Temple of Victory.

Cavaillé-Coll's famous five-keyboard organ there draws the world's greatest organists – following composer Charles Widor (for 63 years “temporary organist”) and master-improviser Marcel Dupré (38 years). Now the vicar moans that his church has become a mere way-station for tourist mobs -- not pursuing Christ, but Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* fantasies.

A few other on-the-fly glimpses: the Place Saint-Germain-des-Prés, where literary and political cafés split clientele with the square's thousand-year-old namesake church. Picasso's long-time home on rue des Grands-Augustins slips by as you turn the corner where, on May 14, 1610, a nine-year-old boy called Louis became Louis XIII. Emissaries told him there that his father, Henri IV, had just been assassinated.

Even the Louvre has bloody memories. It was from there that, on August 23-24, 1572, Charles IX ordered the St. Bartholemew's-Day massacre of tens of thousands of Protestants. Charles's appalling sister, Marguerite de Valois, disgraced by lovers and booze, snagged a mansion you zip by on rue de Seine on the way to the gold-domed Institut, home of four state Academies, including France's linguistic Vatican, the Académie Française.

The peak of this Easy Rider's joy comes when I wheel into the vast, empty courtyard of the glass Pyramide, the Louvre's spectacularly modern main entrance. The sun's first

fingertip rays touch the ornate dark-grey chimneys, creeping down to the small round roof-alcoves, then to the tall, statue-laden arcades of the museum's glorious inner facades. I careen six or seven times around the periphery, my private *vélodrome*.

By the time I leave, the massive courtyard is aglow. High up in the azure sky, white contrails betray the morning jets to North America, Africa and Asia. It's a surreal moment, past and future bracketing a luminous, solitary now.

Before heading home, I dash through Napoleon's Carrousel du Louvre, a mini-Arc de Triomphe leading one's gaze through the grand Jardin des Tuileries, up the Champs-Élysées to the real Arc about four kilometres away. A quick run up and down the high side-wall of the Jardin, then I scam home before cars and buses spoil the illusion.

As illusions go, remembering student landmarks and the friends you met there is more heart-warming than a millennium of kings and their often equally blood-thirsty women. Ah yes: this café was the Icelandic girl, that one the German girl. A third, just the old gang from that Sorbonne course where the French warned they would "civilize" us foreign savages.

They didn't entirely succeed. But rolling back here fifty years later in the early-morning mist, and owning this great city for a few minutes each dawn, I decide that if life is but a dream, biking through Paris at daybreak is not a bad way to dream it.

Of course, this really is all about Lance Armstrong. The next Tour de France is barely nine months away, and he'll be devilishly hard to beat.