



Trip organiser Chris Evans focuses on the mountainous plate of meat waiting for him at the lunch stop on the opposite bank

★ Rated Travel

'At lunch, some of the riders look as though they've carried their bikes for the last mile'

Chippy Wood heads to France for a nice, relaxing weekend. Or so he thought...

Words and photography Chippy Wood



I arrive at my hotel expecting to find a gaggle of off-roading newbies and their user-friendly trail bikes. What I actually find are 16 serious machines and a group of riders who look like they could compete in the International Six-Day Enduro. Worryingly their hardcore enduros are already battle-scarred from their first day on the trails. Tomorrow I'll be riding through extreme French countryside with this lot, on my 300cc two-stroke KTM.

We are three and a half hours south-west of Lyon, in the Lozere region, and the group is alive with banter and beers. Just out of sight the bikes are being prepped in readiness for tomorrow. I feel envious and nervous at the same time. Talk of killer climbs over rock strewn terrain has me contemplating broken knees and collarbones, at the very least. I have nothing to add to the conversation... yet. But the bravado is all very funny and has me chuckling as I head for bed.

In the morning there's breakfast, a briefing and a look over the roadbook that describes the day's route. The roadbook's paper roll shows hazards, petrol, lunch stops and other important points – I'll wind it along as I ride. This and the trip computer are what I have to get me from A to B. Organiser Chris Evans supplies the roadbook and holder, riders bring along their own trip system.

It's also the rider's responsibility to provide tyre mousse, and anyone who doesn't know what tyre mousse is should really think twice before tackling a trip like this. In fact, unless you've competed at least at clubman level enduro events you'd be best advised to stay away because you will get yourself stuck in a French canyon and need Thunderbird 2 to get you out.

As we prepare to set off on my first morning I'm paired with Peter and Andy. We're in the second group, five minutes behind the first. Mercifully the pace is brisk but comfortable. Then, 20 minutes in, we hit a rocky climb that lasts 2km and leaves my

Chippy wisely opts out of the extreme section that precedes yet another meat-a-thon



Chippy takes on the Valley of Hell





Day one's fast rocky section is typical terrain. At 5pm riding it is equal parts fatigue and exhilaration



Groups range from two to five riders. Andy and Pete share the trails with Chippy



Day three is the toughest of them all. Industrial language probably not optional

It all looks rather beautiful
and sedate from here.
One out of two isn't bad



arms locked solid from being pumped. I haven't ridden off-road like this for at least nine months so I'm far from bike fit. Thankfully the pain subsides after a short time.

The terrain is super-technical and not for the faint-hearted. Amazingly the only thing stopping me from sticking right behind Pete and Andy is the dust and my goggles, which are steaming up

▶ **We work our way through rushing rivers and over fallen trees... this is hard, energy-sapping riding, but the thought of lunch drives us through the Valley of Hell**

like an MP's specs in a sauna full of rent boys. In fairness to the other two I'm not reading my roadbook that much and I certainly couldn't keep this pace up if I was out in front. The lunch stop arrives just in the nick of time; organiser Chris gets pissed off if you're late because it means he has to set off to find you. We lunch in a small house turned restaurant. The setting is beautiful and the plates of delicious lamb are so full they could feed a small army, plus the 10,000 flies that followed us in.

It's at lunch that I meet our outrider, Duke, a French chap who reminds me of the devil himself. His job is to go ahead of us and make sure the route is passable... just. He used to be in the French equivalent of the SAS so he's not the sort of person you want to annoy. He also works for the French enduro club that has the sole rights to ride these amazing mountains. I make a mental note not to come down here on my own; if Duke should catch me there are plenty of places to hide a body.

With lunch finished we head off into the afternoon and much harder going. My situation isn't helped by the mountain of meat that's being tossed around in my stomach like the contents of a washing machine. Finally, at seven in the evening, we roll into our hotel car park weary, blistered and deplete of water. It's been an extraordinary day but I now feel part of the team as we drink beer and relive our adventures.

Day two dawns sunny and the mercury begins to rise quickly. Three Welsh guys opt out because yesterday one of them

launched himself into the undergrowth and is feeling less than enthusiastic about a repeat performance. Chris warns us this is a pretty big day. I empty a can of Red Bull into my Kriega water pack and prepare for the worst. Again I'm with Andy and Pete. We work our way through more unforgiving countryside, rushing rivers and fallen trees making progress even more of a challenge than yesterday. This is hard, energy-sapping riding, but the thought of lunch drives us on through the Valley of Hell that stands between us and more meat. I miss out a huge sandy hill, which both my back tyre and body are too knackered to tackle, and take a short-cut to the lunch stop. As we eat, the six riders who chose the extreme stage arrive looking as though they've carried their bikes for the last mile. I nod and finish my lunch.

Another 7pm finish, on another 170km day, on another hot French evening leaves me totally whacked and, very nearly, satisfied. I really wish I'd been here for the first day, because just two days of riding leaves me wanting more... much more. I can't think of anywhere in the UK that offers this sort of riding, legally, on such extreme tracks in such great company.

Everyone on the trip is vetted by Chris who has spent years negotiating with the local enduro club to let him run these trips through this gorgeous national park. This is a private members' club for enduro riders and you don't get to join it without proving yourself. Chris wants to be sure first-timers are capable of completing the routes and that you will fit in with his many regulars who book months in advance for these very special trips. I'd love to become one of those regulars. **BIKE**



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Bike tip: Definitely not for the beginner

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