

# SAVOIE FAIRE

*A decade ago, an epic six-day enduro rally blazed an Alpine trail that changed mtb events forever; we experience its final outing*

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here's a mountain bike event in France that's been going on for 10 years now, in which riders inevitably end up standing around at the end of a trail completely dazed by what they have just ridden. They might be anywhere: in a forest, Alpine meadow, or, like me this year, on a hairpin on a tiny road in the middle of nowhere trying to process what I'd just ridden down. And yet it wasn't an isolated experience - I'd found myself in that exact same state every August since I started going to the event.

The other riders looked just like me: bug-eyed maniacs with locked-on grins, giddy on adrenaline and jabbering like the intoxicated. A timing box breaks the trance, and I start to pull myself together and regroup, but it's a struggle, because my senses have been working more than overtime; they've just done a week of nightshifts.

Another wild-eyed rider arrives, but I'm still partially detached, muffled, muted and ➡



Exhausted but ecstatic is an intoxicating combination



## THE OTHER RIDERS LOOKED JUST LIKE ME: BUG-EYED MANIACS

spaced-out inside my helmet, immersed in a strange mid-afternoon collective euphoria on an anonymous roadside. Everyday life doesn't matter, it doesn't even exist.

Jaws sore from hollering down a trail that went on for over 20 minutes, we're high-fiving and grinning now while agreeing it's some of the best terrain we've ever experienced. All ridden against the clock to a level that frequently scares, bang in the middle of a crazy train of riders and a maelstrom of dust, loam, spitting rocks, brake scent and roost.

Taking it all to another level is the fact the 'lead' swapped hands on practically every manically over-shot corner between a German, a Finn, a South African and another Englishman: all friends I've made or cemented at this event over the last decade.

### A MOVEABLE FEAST

At Trans Savoie, these and the preceding minutes are the moments I'll always remember. It's what we've all come for – our drug, our religion, our unbridled joy. Earned this time on a downhill singletrack that dropped over 1,300m vert, and flooded our synapses with an adrenaline overload, leaving our nervous systems vibrating with energy.

Trails like this happen every day at the Trans Savoie in this amazing part of the French Alps. Everyone has a favourite trail, or section, that presses their own buttons, and the event has a brilliant rhythm whereby you're likely to follow a take-your-brain-out descent with a super-technical, steep, near unrideable trail where you need to riff on hard sections and maintain the bassline. Around 30 trails each week follow this vague pattern, and by the end of it, the six-day event challenges, thrills and puts the fear of God into riders, while offering the most timed downhills of any mtb event in the world.

Loosely based around Bourg St Maurice,



With ridgeline views this good, competition might have to wait

IT OFFERS THE MOST TIMED DOWNHILLS OF ANY MTB EVENT IN THE WORLD



Follow the leader... if you can remember who it is

the exact route changes every year; always with the main idea of offering the most epic singletrack and as many of the longest, technical enduro stages possible. In this Instagram age, it's odd that it's not really marketed to its full potential, especially when every year riders reach the end (or don't) and literally can't believe what they've done half the time. Maybe this is because the proportion of repeat customers is so high, it almost sells itself. This is an event that's about experiencing the riding and exploring the ultimate Alpine trails and locations first-hand. No amount of superlatives can fully do justice to it; quite simply, "you had to be there, brother". Even though some of the top enduro riders in the world have lined up to take on the timed stages (many are over 30-minutes long for the average competitor), riding and socialising with other converts is just as important as racing downhill against the clock.

The length of these stages and the

continuously challenging terrain has earned Trans Savoie something of a reputation as one of the world's toughest enduros. I'd agree, but having been involved since the beginning, it's actually got easier over time, mainly because the event's creator and organiser, Ali Jamieson, has mellowed. When half the field gets to day four and are too tired to get out of bed – however much they want to continue riding – it's probably an indication the level needs tweaking.

### EDGE OF DANGER

Being a bit more 'friendly' means new converts are spared trying their luck on stages like the suitably named, near-vertical, rock fest 'Ornamental' in Courcheval, where only two riders (of around a hundred competitors that year) actually managed to ride it all without getting off. Or trails – no longer timed at least – where there is a genuine danger of death if you slip on a cliff edge.

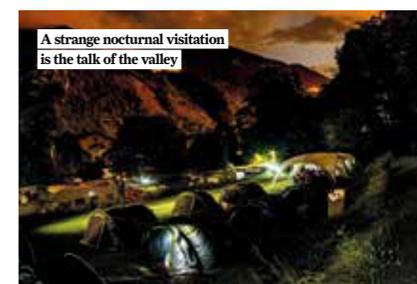
All this incredible riding is made possible

because the French Alps have the highest density of ski lifts in the world. But don't imagine this means Trans Savoie is some kind of bike park challenge; this year's edition included only two machine-built tracks in the entire week. So, yes, chair and cable car uplifts are used as a tool to gain height fast, and they're topped up by shuttles in locations with no lifts, but they're sure not used to access some blown-out, braking bump-infested flow trail. Riders are even dropped off on mountain passes like at the French/Italian border on the Col du Petit-Saint-Bernard under the shadow of Mont Blanc, or halfway up the Col d'Iseran at Val D'Isere, to continue upwards by pedalling and pushing for the maximum gravity hit.

To put the kind of riding done into a different context; this year, one of the French trail crew helping mark the stages and marshal the event, Quentin Richard, is also one of the organisers of the Maxiavalanche race held in Meribel each year. His one-day



Ski lifts string together a series of mountain highs



A strange nocturnal visitation is the talk of the valley



With scenery this magnificent, the sunlit uplands are there for the taking in the here and now



A river crossing adds churning water to the bracing elemental mix

## EVERY YEAR THE TRAILS KEEP GETTING BETTER

got it, took pity, and now generally splits the longest trails into individual segments, as, “it’s more fun”. And the event’s better for it; you savour more stunning scenery and it definitely is more enjoyable when you can actually pull your brakes and feel your hands at the end of a descent.

There have also been some pretty crazy stories trying to ferry, feed and look after riders between camps across high-Alpine terrain. Any event like this is often run on a wing and a prayer, or at best a wafer-thin veneer of things going to plan behind the scenes. Bikes break all the time (but less than they used to), bones break (occasionally) and stamina, fitness and resolve get pushed beyond their limits.

One such example (that wasn’t even funny at the time) was at Les Contamines Montjoie when around a 100 riders and marshals needed to get a short chairlift to a final day’s stage (or face pedalling up hundreds of metres of fire road in the sun). The operator of the ski lift wasn’t having any of it though, and despite Ali showing her a stamped permission slip and email from the director of the lift company, she still refused to let them on. With an increasingly tired group of riders and staff, and patience running thin, the only solution was to whip out the credit card and buy everyone a lift ticket. Over €1,000 blown in one hit, and a big chunk of profit lost.

### ORGANISATIONAL HEADACHE

This kind of thing is an occupational hazard for a multi-day race organiser, no matter how well everything’s squared off in advance. The folder with all the authorisations from different local Mairies, fire services, police, lift companies and forestry officials runs to hundreds of pieces of stamped paper, all negotiated on a knife edge, but when you’re racing weekends and public holidays, it can all fall apart in an instant.

Being an absolute mission to organise and sign off is something that competitors shouldn’t need to be aware of, but it’s one of the main reasons that this year’s event was advertised as the last. Or so Ali says... Being a trail hunter is an addictive business though, and he’s clearly totally hooked on the buzz of sharing all the trails found during 20 years of guiding in the region. Ali has a messianic zeal to ride every single piece of unknown singletrack, and Trans Savoie gives him the excuse to seek them out, and share them with others. And every time he goes out, he strikes gold. I know, because every year the trails keep getting better.

This year, Trans Savoie had a couple of the best trails from the original events, plus some completely new zones and many next-level stages that were simply too epic, remote, sensitive or exposed to race down before. But we got to enjoy them as part of the six-day journey.

Participants don’t move camp every day anymore, but the point-to-point element still takes in some truly incredible scenery with more time on liaisons to soak it up, dip your head in a stream or take a few pictures. I’m not exactly the world’s biggest fan of climbing, but some of the transitions – especially ones far between ski-lift infrastructure or in the more remote locations – have to be seen to be believed. Who cares if you’re twiddling 32/52 when



Shallow, natural berms are the place to feel the flow



It takes a lot of bottle to get to the end of these stages



A shared feast seals the camaraderie of the trail

race takes on the entire mountain from the highest lift at over 2,700m back into town via a phenomenal high-Alpine rocky singletrack, high-speed paths and bench-cut balconies, before dropping into the top of the bike park and hitting what feels like about 15km of continuous arm-pummelling berms and jumps. “Yep, I’m sure it’s decent, but that’s just the first of six stages we’ll be doing here today”, jokes Ali.

The riders that come to tackle the Trans Savoie come from all over the world, and (especially when it was harder, wilder and every race organiser including Ali was still sussing out the level at these crazy multi-day events) there have been some wild goings on over the years. This is not only to do with some stages being insanely technical and way too long – some took over an hour to complete – but Ali was simply isolated from his typical clientele. Having spent months riding in the Alps every single day, he had little concept of regular riders’ thresholds, but gradually he



The Trans Savoie is heading into retirement but its golden years will live long in the memory

one of the most beautiful places you've ever been scores 10/10 on the eyeballs, or you're on the way to a mountain refuge where you'll spend the night under the stars on the edge of the Vanoise National Park?

The continuous ride-eat-sleep-repeat regime, and the sheer mileage add up, and it's no joke; something I can definitely attest to after completing every edition with a camera pack. But it wouldn't be the same without the suffering and the pedalling; an essential part of the beauty of days spent making memories and tales to tell are the thrills, spills and aches along the way, and it's all the better if you crawl back into camp on your knees at least a few days during the week.

## THE FINAL ACT?

Whether Trans Savoie (or an event that's in a similar spirit) happens around these parts again is hard to say, but knowing that Ali is literally obsessed with sharing all the trails he finds, and continually questing to go further, more remote and higher than last time, I hope it won't be the last. And if it continues, get yourself involved; it's genuinely an event you'll never ever forget. I tip my hat to Mr Jamieson – like any event, the Trans Savoie isn't perfect; you can see it's definitely a tightrope navigating the stress levels of pulling it all off, and the set-up can be a bit rough and ready at times too. This isn't an event that attracts the industry influencers and cliques that need pampering either, but if you prioritise the absolute best riding in the world over everything else, you literally can't beat it.

I've had some of the best times of my life being involved with Trans Savoie and, as long



Snaking woodland trails offer a leafy interlude

as these beautiful mountains in one of the most stunning areas in the world are there, let's hope maniacs like Ali Jamieson are willing to put up with the strain of making it happen, pushing the limits of his competitors and trying to give them the ultimate journey and the perfect trail. For now, I'll get through winter fantasising about those virgin tracks through leaf-strewn Haute-Savoie forests and brake-smoking Alpine singletrack. Forget counting sheep, I'll be counting Trans Savoie's endless loamy lines through the dark nights, and dreaming of getting back there next year.

■ For a non-competitive taste of the Trans Savoie, Ali's tours can be found at [trailaddiction.com](http://trailaddiction.com) [mbr](#)



An event this good makes you want to raise your hands up to the sky