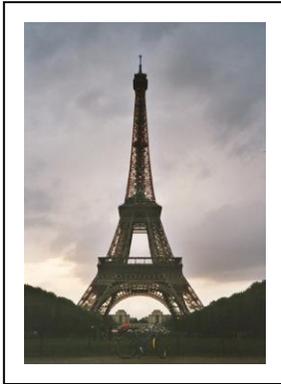


## See France, See Lance

Could Lance Armstrong win his sixth consecutive Tour de France victory? What would it be like to witness that historical moment in bicycling history if he did? And never having been to France nor speaking the language beyond the two phrases “Bon jour” and “Merci”, what would it take to make that trip? And as a first time France visitor, what would I want to see – in Paris and beyond? In the spring of 2004, I whimsically committed to plot a bike route to see France, and see Lance.



### The Route

As a newcomer to France, and in order to see the conclusion of the Tour de France, I knew my route must begin and end in Paris. In any endeavor, once one is pledged to the quest, all good fortune rises to assist the intrepid adventurer. My first angelic intercession came in the form of my co-worker, a cultured Swede who enthusiastically recommended that a bicycle tour of France include the destination of Fontainebleau – site of the first palace of regal France and the extensive forest of Fontainebleau. Located 70 kilometers southeast of Paris, it was a doable day-long ride at a casual pace. My second inspiration stemmed from a lecture that I had just attended on labyrinths, which enraptured my interest in walking the most famous – the 13<sup>th</sup> century labyrinth in the cathedral at Chartres. Chartres I discovered is 80 kilometers due west of Fontainebleau. Along the 70 kilometer return stage from Chartres to Paris, lies the gilded palace of Versailles. Thus was born my own Tour de France: Paris – Fontainebleau – Chartres – Versailles – Paris.

### The Preparation

Weeks could be spent exploring Paris alone; I allocated 10 days for my trek through France. Enough time to see the sites of Paris and its invigorating urban culture, and to experience the French countryside – its pastoral villages, natural vistas, and storied history.

Accommodations for Paris I arranged through a travel agent since major cities are their expertise. For both weekends in Paris – bookends on my trip – I was registered in the three-star Hotel Aston (80 Euros), located near the center of Paris. For Fontainebleau and Versailles, my French-speaking colleague came to the rescue booking me into the ubiquitous Ibis hotels (60 Euros) – utilitarian two-star accommodations. And I used the ease of the Internet to book my overnight stay in Chartres at a Comfort Inn (50 Euros).

Airfare (\$600) was simply a matter of finding the least expensive direct flight into Charles de Gaulle Airport (American Airlines for my timeframe). Leaving New York on Sunday night, that brought me into Paris Monday morning with a full day in front of me. To return, I arranged for a leisurely noontime departure the following Tuesday, having me back in New York that evening.

Luggage consisted primarily of a 24x12x12 duffel bag (manufactured by Answer Racing) which I chose because of its rigid structure, waterproofing, and multiple compartments and pockets. The carrying straps I padded with pipe insulation bound with duct-tape that incessantly aroused suspicion of security personnel at the airports, but provided me with a

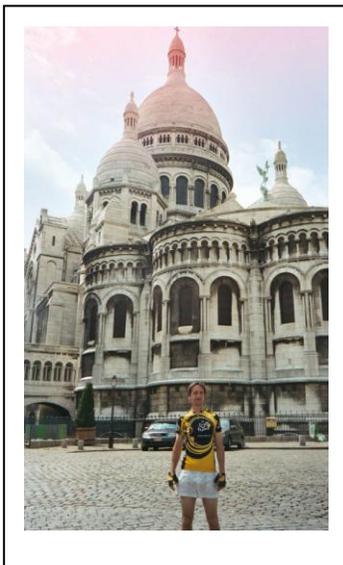
comfortable, backpacking method for carrying the duffel bag. This I supplemented with one small backpack for toiletries, reading materials, and other sundry items, and I brought another empty backpack to hold souvenirs to bring home.

Clothing required for a July trip was minimal. Footgear consisted of a pair of sneakers for riding and pair of lugged, waterproof dress shoes (Durham) to handle any inclement weather and to look presentable when the need arose. Two pairs of jeans – black I find gets you into places blue cannot. Comfort cotton shorts and shirts for casual rides; quality riding apparel (Pearl Izumi) and microfiber shirts for the long rides. A fitted wash-and-wear dress shirt (Brooks Brothers). Some wool socks, some cotton. A sweater. Rain gear. And the essential accessory for long, summer rides – sunscreen.

Maps are always the key to a satisfying tour. In Paris, I had the good fortune of discovering a map perfectly depicting my triangular route printed by the Institut Geographique National ([www.ign.fr](http://www.ign.fr)) entitled “Paris – Et Ses Environs.” Regional maps, published by Blay-Foldex ([www.blayfoldex.com](http://www.blayfoldex.com)), provide more detail. I bought one such map – “Siene-et-Marne Department (region) 77”, and in retrospect wish I had gotten more, particularly Essonne Department 91. To navigate Paris, the Blay-Foldex map “Paris – Par arrondissements” is perfect providing both an uncluttered detail of the streets and clearly portraying points of interest. A map of Paris’s subway dubbed the Metro ([www.citefutee.com](http://www.citefutee.com)) is useful for quickly traversing the city. The most intriguing map – actually a set of directions – came from a young Parisian couple I met shortly before leaving on the trip, entitled “How to Bicycle South from Paris: Cycle to Fontainebleau along the Seine bike path and through the Senart Forest” ([http://www.mayq.com/Cycling\\_out\\_of\\_paris/Route\\_4\\_south/Route\\_4\\_south.htm](http://www.mayq.com/Cycling_out_of_paris/Route_4_south/Route_4_south.htm)).

The bicycle (80 Euros) I rented from Free Scoot ([www.freescoot.com](http://www.freescoot.com)), a shop more geared towards city excursions. The most touring-worthy bike they had was a five-speed, step-through, with excessively wide (26 x 1.75) tires (at least they were not knobby!), and upright handlebars, though the key feature was a sturdy steel bike rack. Despite Paris being a bicycle-friendly city, there are few bicycle stores and even fewer rental shops. I would recommend researching bicycle clubs in the area through the Internet to obtain a more tour-worthy mount.

And to capture the memorable adventures: bring a camera, bring a journal.



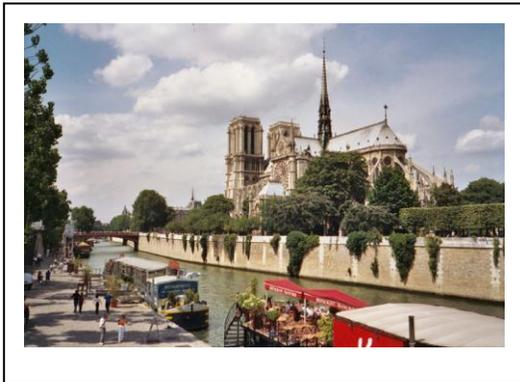
### **Day One – Sunday, July 18 – New York**

Excerpt from my journal written on the train from my home to the airport:

*France. It begins on a train rumbling through Westchester and onward to Kennedy Airport. Despite the vague, normal apprehension of a long airplane trip, I look forward to the wonders that will be inscribed in these pages in the coming days, and enshrined in the essence of who I am as have been countless unwritten volumes of days past.*

*I think of how my once-in-a-lifetime journey is but a ho-hum international flight to the crew of American Airlines and how my tour de France pales next to what Lance has accomplished through 13 stages and what it took him to get here. Still, this is “Skip’s Great Adventure” and this is my story.*

An airplane trip begins with the luck of the draw: the quality of the flight and the character of the seatmate. My trip began with a peaceful, comfortable, actually quiet night and flight in the company of Jessica from San Francisco State College with conversations ranging from Eastern philosophies, family, travel, her band “Twilight” (coincidentally both our favorite time of day), travel, and whatever topics sauntered into mind. She taught me my third French phrase “Se vous pley.” We delighted in each other’s company and thrilled for each other: that I was venturing to France with merely a plan and sense of adventure; that she, traveling from California to Lyon for six months to rendezvous with her boyfriend – how romantic.



### **Day Two – Monday, July 19 – Paris**

Arriving at Aeroport Charles de Gaulle at dawn, and plodding through customs, I found myself sitting at the arrivals curb with my Paris map, realizing I was far from the city, no idea how to get to the hotel, and no knowledge of the language.

Journal excerpt:

*Resisting the temptation to ransom my wallet to a taxi cab, I searched for the subway, watched countless buses go by, and approached several official airport personnel – none of whom spoke English. Finding the information booth, I had my first conversation. “Bon jour,” I began with a smile. “Bon jour” was the reply. And after the attendant clarified that I needed directions to the city, to which I responded “Se vous pley”, I learned that the E12 Roissybus goes directly from the airport to Le Opera in the center of the city, just a few blocks from my hotel – a one hour ride – for a mere six euros. I concluded our exchange with “Merci.”*

The foam pipe insulation padding on the arm-straps worked fabulously making the luggage (well named) manageable. The hotel was but a few blocks from Le Opera bus stop, and I felt satisfied having negotiated my arrival so frugally and successfully. The Aston Hotel, despite garnering a three-star rating, was miniature, with a cramped room barely fitting a bed, and a tiny shower so tight that the door could not open fully. Its best feature was its location on the quiet Cite Begere – an alley away from the busy boulevards. It was so quiet, in fact, that at night I slept with the windows (French doors) open. More than the mere air of quaintness, it had an atmosphere of romance and authenticity.

Taking the subway from the stop near the hotel at Grands Boulevard to the bicycle shop (Free Scoot) at the Saint-Michel / Notre Dame subway stop, I enjoyed munching on a crepe along the way. The staff at the bicycle shop, speaking broken English, were very helpful, finding me their best bike (albeit a mere five-speed, step-through, upright model), lending me a helmet, and insisting I take their orange windbreaker since rain was threatening.

Journal excerpt:

*A testimony to my lack of French finesse (though I suppose some of the humor is lost in translation): when the staff at the bike shop – Morgan and Stephan – asked me about my destination, I responded with my closest pronunciation of “Fontainebleau.” “Fon-Tain-Blue?” they queried asking for clarification.*

*“Fon-Tain-Blue,” I repeated.*

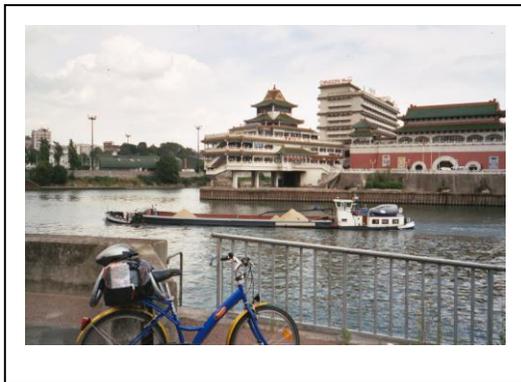
*“Fon-Tain-Blue?? they puzzled.*

*“FON-TAIN-BLUE,” I enunciated as distinctly as possible.*

*“Ah,” they surmised with a smile, “Fontainebleau!”*

Upon my first glimpse of Notre Dame Cathedral – just a partial view of the spire from a side street – I got goose bumps on my arms and legs knowing I was in the presence of its historical holiness. My favorite viewpoint in all of Paris – though there are so many to choose from – is the Pont Arch which overlooks the buttressed rear end of Notre Dame, its park and gardens, and the scenic Seine.

Setting off on the bike, it was a delight leisurely peddling from site to site. The bicycle was an excellent way to cover much ground without losing the sense of sightseeing. I was amazed how much space there is inside the center of the city for pedestrians, especially the Jardin Des Tuileries behind the Louvre and the Champs Elysees. Even the Seine is fully accessible with walkways on both sides of the river, being cobblestone north of Notre Dame. In the span of a few hours, I saw almost every major site in Paris along the Seine, passing under the Arc de Triomphe and culminating in climbing the Eiffel Tower which interestingly always has a long line for the elevators, but has immediate access for those ascending the stairs. Attempting an early dinner, I learned that in Paris, it is impossible to find a restaurant open before the appointed hour of 7:00 – in some ways coercing you to enjoy the day before settling down for a restorative evening repast.



### **Day Three – Tuesday, July 20 – Paris to**

### **Fontainebleau**

Religiously attempting to follow the narrative from the directions “How to Bicycle South from Paris: Cycle to Fontainebleau along the Seine bike path and through the Senart Forest”, I actually started out on this 70 kilometer trek in the wrong direction! Though it did afford me a pleasant cobblestone ride along the Seine. So after delighting in scrumptious Parisian pastries, and seeing the Seine sights in a different

light, I embarked on my bicycle journey from Paris to Fontainebleau. Starting with the “bike path” described in the narrative.

“Bike paths” to me – being spoiled by the rail trails of New York – are point-to-point routes of relatively flat grade through secluded areas away from traffic and people with surface varying between packed dirt and pavement. In actuality, the Paris-South bike path was an unmarked bike route consisting of an amalgamation of sidewalks, side streets, occasional footpaths, highways without shoulders, and most thrilling: roads through forests – both dirt and paved. The wide 1.75 tires which I first considered a handicap, handled all the varying terrain I encountered.

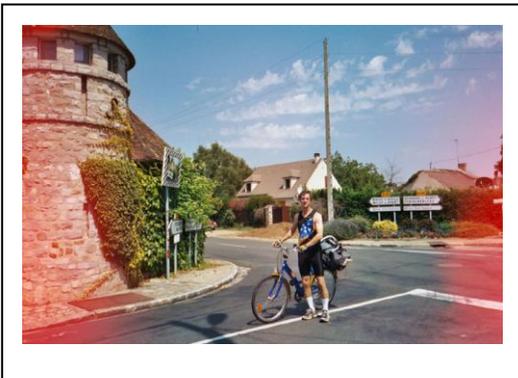
The route from Paris begins at the Cathedral of Notre Dame and continues southeast along the Seine, passing through the towns of Choisy-le-Roi, Villeneuve-Saint-George, and Montgeron. A treat at this point, with one-third of the journey completed, is a 6 kilometer ride through the secluded Forest De Senart with a multitude of packed-dirt bike paths. Exiting the forest leads through the small towns of St. Germain-Les-Corbeil, St. Pierre-du-Perray, and Siene Port. At Ponthierry, crossing the Seine is a milestone, not only in that the journey is now two-thirds completed, but also the directions become less complicated. With the day waning, from this point I road 20 kilometers along the shoulderless four-lane highway N7 to Chailly-en Biere, the saving grace, perhaps literally, was the extremely light traffic. Had I started my trip in the morning, at Ponthierry I would have taken route D50 through the small towns of Jonville, Brinville, St. Saveur, and Perthe into Chailly-en Biere – only a marginally longer ride and I am sure much more pleasant. From Chailly-en Biere, peddling just one kilometer south leads to Barbizon, an artist colony of galleries, shops and restaurants, and worthy of a respite. The remaining ride to Fontainebleau is a bucolic odyssey through 6 kilometers of the famed Forest de Fontainebleau – though in the pitch black of night I saw little of it. Arriving at the Ibis Hotel for a shower and sleep after a day's ride was most welcome.

#### **Day Four – Wednesday, July 21 – Fontainebleau**

Fontainebleau itself is a charming town of many shops, cafes, and the Chateau de Fontainebleau, a 16<sup>th</sup> century palace dating from King Franco – whose coat of arms is an endearing salamander – to the Emperor Napoleon. Staying the day afforded time to stroll about town, experience the cuisine, enjoy exquisite chocolate, and to tour the Chateau.

Journal excerpt:

*Fontainebleau! Amazing! The palace is more a town than an edifice. The gardens – awesome! Acres of flowers are orchestrated into three-dimensional color designs. The statues – romantic! And the canal – majestically serene. The palace rooms – “apartments” as they are called – are splendid in gilded opulence, and rich in ebony wood paneling. The Chateau is both awe-inspiring in its magnificence, yet subtly powerful as is its “red room” where Napoleon abdicated. The museum, while it contained little historical depth beyond Napoleon’s artifacts, did display Napoleon’s unique hat, those long, narrow shoes of his, and an unusual six decade rosary from the Vatican – I suppose he needed extra prayers.*



#### **Day Five – Thursday, July 22 – Fontainebleau to Chartres**

Enjoying breakfast by the palace pond, strolling through the nature garden in the morning light, and returning to the majestic flower gardens to take more photographs, it was afternoon before I packed and started cycling the stage from Fontainebleau to Chartres. The 80 kilometer trek auspiciously began with a beautiful ride on the Bourne Road through the Forest de Fontainebleau.

Exiting Fontainebleau on route N152, a short spur on D301 leads to the beautiful Bourne Road through the Forest de Fontainebleau. Exiting the forest onto D64 south, that intersects with D63 west towards Tousson. Then taking D101 and D1 toward Gironville S. Essonne, and D449 north to Maisse. From there, taking D12 and D145 to Puiset le Marais which is a pleasantly remote road and not the heavy traffic of highway D837. In Puiset le Marais it is important to look for the ancient road sign attached to a building – that is the only road sign signaling a change of direction! – for a sharp left leading to La Montagne along D63 and on into Etampes.

I have heard stories of the French during World War II switching their road signs to confuse the Germans. I can assure you those deeds were purely superfluous. Routes and towns on the map do not appear on the road signs. Road sign routes and towns do not appear on the map. Sometimes a route springs from nowhere, or seemingly terminates abruptly.

Taking D21 out of Etampes it turns into D24 towards Sainville. Five kilometers from Sainville, D24 seems to disappear, and going straight on the highway would take you onto D16 and into Auneau – the wrong direction! The correct way: take the minor road one block south where D24 picks up again and continues west. In the town of Nogent le Phays, again D24 seems to disappear with road signs listing all the routes except D24. There is a sign that says “Other Directions” – take that to stay on D24!

Sweating throughout the heat of the day, I thought of this trek to the labyrinth at Chartres as a pilgrimage. After the half-way point at Etampes, the road opened up into expansive wheat fields with no traffic which was fortunate since the two-lane highway had no shoulders. (Another nicety of France is that in all the miles I traveled and thousands of vehicles I saw, I spotted not a single SUV the entire time. Trucks, too, are a rarity aside from farm machinery.) Interestingly, villages from that point onward were entirely closed: shuttered up and people-less – truly eerie. Low on food and fluids, I had counted on foraging in the villages. Fortunately, just outside Chartres, as the day began to turn to dusk, I encountered a cosmetics factory in which the workers ushered me to their vending machine.

Arriving at Chartres at 10:00 p.m. (2200), I was hoping to catch EuroSport on TV to see how superiorly Lance Armstrong was conquering the mountains as he had the day before. Unfortunately, the address for my hotel, the Comfort Inn with which I had made reservations through the Internet, was not on the public welcoming map displays on the perimeter of Chartres. Astoundingly, nor was there any hotel, nor police station, nor service station to be found in Chartres where I could inquire about the Comfort Inn. And of the few people I encountered none had heard of the Comfort Inn! But as I continuously circled Chartres like a seven-circuit labyrinth, I did get to see the famed asymmetrical spires of the Notre Dame Cathedral at Chartres lit at night. It was 2:00 a.m. before I located my hotel on the road to Orleans. It was an interstate highway hotel off the exit for Chartres, not really in Chartres center as the Internet indicated! Alas, the hotel was closed with no manager on duty!! So where a safe place to sleep outdoors? Either search further for the police station and spend the night sitting in some reception area, or return to the cathedral and homelessly sleep on the steps. I chose the latter.

Journal excerpt:

*Placing my orange windbreaker on the stone steps as a moisture barrier and laying my towel on top of that as a cushion, I actually had a restful sleep, drifting off at 3:00 a.m. and rising at 7:30. Surprisingly, I had slept through dawn and had awakened fully refreshed and was thankful not to have been martyred during the night.*

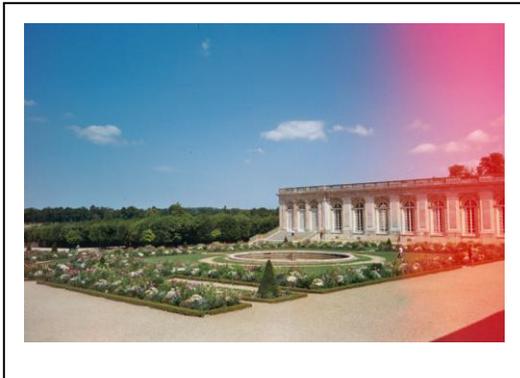


interior stairwell of its medieval spire.

### **Day Six – Friday, July 23 – Chartres**

At a local café I had breakfast and the hospitable owner offered to safeguard my luggage while I toured the cathedral. Unlike Notre Dame in Paris which was a bustling place, Notre Dame in Chartres is quiet and playful. After attending Mass and viewing the exquisite stained glass windows, I walked the 13<sup>th</sup> century labyrinth in my stocking feet, feeling each crevice as would a climber on the cliffs of Fontainebleu. And later, ascended the vacant

At the end of the day, sensing that my time in France was growing short, rather than bicycling further, I boarded the train in Chartres which had me in Versailles in just over an hour. To save 15 euros, I stayed at the less expensive Ibis Hotel in Le Chesnay which borders Versailles.



### **Day Seven – Saturday, July 24 – Versailles**

In Versailles, the lily has been gilded. I began the day exploring the fragrances, colors, textures and shapes of the flowers in the gardens of the Grand Trianon, and followed that with brunch in the picturesque German hamlet “Hameau de la Reine.”

The Chateau Palace is truly stunning in its grandeur. It was awe-inspiring touring the King and Queen’s chambers and the Mirror Room in which was signed

the Treaty of Versailles ending World War I. I had the good fortune of arriving at the boathouse before the 4:00 closing and thus was able to row the entire length of the Grand Canal. While French cities are famous for their sidewalk dining, it often comes at the expense of a noisy atmosphere polluted by automobiles. In Versailles, Savoy Street is closed to all but foot traffic, and hosting a variety of cuisines, I found it my most pleasant dining experience in France.

I concluded the day taking the 10:00 (2200) train to Paris. As I awaited the train on the dark platform with nary a fellow traveler, descending the staircase to the platform came a girl seemingly angelic: beautiful, svelte, golden hair flowing, in a striped blue dress that flattered her form while not too tight. Awaiting the train, more her aura than just her beauty seem to radiate the platform. Boarding the train in different cars, I gave her not another thought. Upon arrival in Paris, attempting to board the Metro, my ticket would not process my entry through the turnstile. Behind me, a soft voice asked, “Having trouble? Can I help?” Turning to feebly respond, “I think so,” before me stood the angelic apparition in the striped blue dress. Without another word, she used her ticket to provide me entrance. “Come with me,” she intoned. “I have a party tonight, but I have time to show you to your train.” As we walked, I could not help but consider the absolute incongruity of this angelic model escorting a cross-country biker, unshaven in days, open orange windbreaker flapping with each step, and luggage piled high on his fat-tired, urban bicycle. For some reason we reached a point where we needed to pay again for the Metro, but this time instead of a

turnstile, I was blocked by plexiglass doors imprinted with “Non vélo!” I was trapped. Without pause, my angel strode to the transit clerk booth, engaged in animated French conversation, the result of which was the doors parting before me. She lead me to my track, pointed to an electrical sign indicating train arrival in two minutes, and said, “You are where you need to be; I must leave now.” I thanked her. And as all angels do without lingering, she vanished.

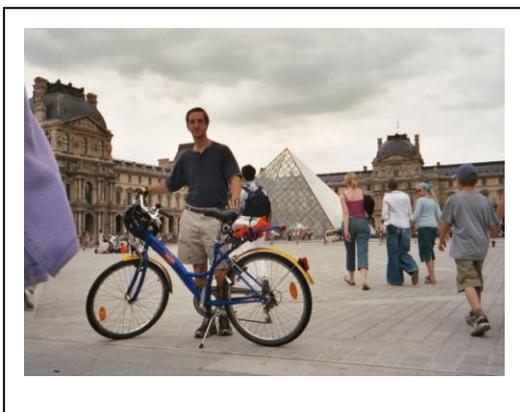
Back in my bed at The Aston by midnight, I said night prayers, especially grateful to my guardian angel.



### **Day Eight – Sunday, July 25 – Paris**

Tour de France day! The last stage of the tour was scheduled to arrive in Paris that afternoon. So Sunday morning, I took the opportunity to bicycle up to the Montmartre section of Paris, and to attend Mass at the magnificent church Sacre Cour – to me the most aesthetically appealing building in the city, both viewed from afar and viewed from the tower atop the church. From that perspective, one sees the panorama of Paris, even looking downward on the Eiffel Tower.

At four o'clock (1600), Le Tour came into Paris. Asking where to best view the cyclists, everyone said the Champs Elysees in the 8<sup>th</sup> arrondissement (neighborhood). So as not to follow the crowds, instead I opted for a viewing point on the Rue Rivoli in the 3<sup>rd</sup> arrondissement. Front row seats! The US Postal Service team led the peloton protecting the yellow jersey Lance Armstrong. With the cyclists zipping by so quickly, I barely snapped four photographs and they were gone. Having my bicycle, I was able to catch up to the pack as they circled the Champs Elysees. The area was so mobbed that the cyclists could not be seen except on the giant TV screens placed above the crowds. Still it was wonderful to be part of that historical event – Five high and one for Lance!



### **Day Nine – Monday, July 26 – Paris**

Louvre day. What wonders: the Mona Lisa, Venus de Milo, the Gladiator, Mercury, and appropriate to me – Bonne Adventure. I have always appreciated paintings, but for the first time, the Louvre gave me love of sculpture; I could not help but marvel at “Cupid and Psyche.”

Returning the bicycle, I thanked the staff at Free Scoot with a box of chocolates. I concluded the day with a ride on the giant Ferris wheel in the Jardin

Carrousel taking one last grand look at a fabulous city.



## **Day Ten – Tuesday, July 26 – New York**

With a noontime return flight, the morning Roissybus was a leisurely ride to the airport. On the plane to New York, I made my final journal entry:

*A fine trip, and ready to return home as well. I accomplished all I wanted and more. And when the trip varied from my plans, it was always for the better, even the sacred night sleeping on the steps of Notre Dame in Chartres. Mostly, I went to Paris and France to be open to whatever unfolded. I did see France, and I did see Lance.*

*Oddly, despite not knowing the language, I was never at a loss communicating. And despite having heard rumors of the aloofness of the French people, not only did I not encounter a single instance of rudeness neither in the city nor in the countryside, in fact, I found people offering to be generous whenever they had the opportunity.*

*Several people – the bike shop staff, the Aston hotel desk clerk, my airplane seatmate – said I was very brave and very adventurous to make such a journey. If so, my courage was surpassed only by the hospitality and generosity of the French people.*