

Experience: Ton Merckx



About 12 years ago, I first entered the AtosTour, back then the route was from Eindhoven (NL) to Groningen (NL). Gerrit Rorije asked me to be front rider, an invitation I gladly accepted. Then I started wondering what to expect from such a ride and how it would be organized. But knowing Gerrit, I expected it to be a smooth operation. I decided to just undergo the event and ever since I am very excited about the AtosTour.

I can very well imagine that cyclists who register for the first time wonder how the tour will be and if they are capable to do such a tour. Firstly, I can say to these new participants: the AtosTour is an excellently organized tour, no detail is being overlooked. On Thursday morning, you get on the bus in Eindhoven and from that moment on everything will be organized for you.

Concerning the biking (the most important part) it is essential that your BIKE is in good condition. New tyres, a new chain, cassette or brake pads are a good idea and make sure you appear at the start well prepared. It is also important to have proper bike lights because we leave Paris on the first day early in the morning in the dark.

Next crucial thing: your CONDITION. The AtosTour is demanding but doable. It is 450 km and runs over accidented terrain and occasionally there are real climbs. It is important that you have done some 150 kilometre rides before the AtosTour starts. Also, experience with cycling in a peloton is welcome, because the peloton consists of 70 cyclists riding close together, always two by two. The cruising speed will be about 27 km per hour, so we will have an average speed of 25 km per hour. The two front riders are responsible for the speed. It is not allowed to bypass the front riders, except on the first day during the ascent to the Chateau Aufrique and on the second day at the long cobblestone road in Belgium. During the climb to the youth hostel in Mons bypassing the front riders tolerated. Every day there will be three breaks of about 30 minutes to eat and drink. Also during some stages and extra sanitary stop will be made somewhere in the French/Belgium countryside. If so, cyclists will be notified upfront. In case of a flat tyre the crew of the support vehicle will provide a new wheel and the cyclist will be escorted back to the peloton by one of the road captains or motards.

New participants who are not sure they can keep up with the pace, I would advise to take the 3rd or 4th position in the peloton so you are kept out of the wind. Besides this at the front of the peloton the pace is more stable than at the back of the peloton. The road captains ensure that all participants cycle two by two and they also make sure that if anyone here has a difficult moment and falls behind he/she is directed to the front of the peloton. The motards are responsible for

stopping normal traffic at side roads, alerting oncoming traffic and making sure traffic from behind can pass the peloton safely. This is why it is important to keep cycling two by two so we can keep cycling continuously without delay and keep the pace steady.

In short, it means that if your bike and you are in good shape you will have two fantastic days of cycling, and then I do not even mention the nice evening with drinks on the marketplace in Mons. Do not underestimate the ride but you also should not let yourself go crazy over all the cowboy stories. Enjoy route, the beautiful scenery, villages and many Atos colleagues who cycle along.

Kind regards, your frontrider Ton Merckx