



(top): Bam and Petit Louis starts his preparations with some bread, cheese... and wine (above): 9am and Jonathan's unsure whether he's about to have one of the most exciting experiences of his life or simply lose his life (right): the Montée's 60 per cent gradient – that's steeper than 1-in-1 and difficult even to stand on, let alone ride up

I'M SITTING AT THE START LINE on the weirdest motorcycle I've ever seen, let alone ridden. I'm surrounded by grinning Frenchmen waiting to watch me ride it up a near vertical mountainside – and I'm beginning to wish I'd never been born. Orange tape, flags and banners mark a course that rises up in front of me like a massive raised middle finger. Over the buzzy crowd noise and the energetic commentary I can hear *Bike's* photographer Chip, my sole compatriot and only friend for 800 miles, laughing. At me.

It's at moments like this that I question my arrogant, juvenile belief that I'm invincible and can conquer any bike. I was shocked yesterday by both the sight of the hill and the bike I was to ride, but that was nothing compared to how I feel now, sitting on this dew-covered prototype. I know I need to practise, but I've had none.

Last night, I'd begun to think the French fuel strike had got me off the hook. As darkness fell, the bike I was to borrow still hadn't turned up. I walked around the paddock looking at these beasts growling at each other, stumbling through Franglaise conversations with my fellow competitors and accepting their over generous measures of wine.

The paddock is full of characters – surely anyone who builds these motorcycles and rides them up a mountain has got to be something of an eccentric. Some come to the event as the highlight of the French hill-climb championship. Others simply treat it as a one-off – an excuse to travel, do a bit of camping and swap cured meat, cheese and wine.

Then a group worked its way through the paddock on a wave of back-slapping and cheek-kissing. In the lead was Petit Louis, the man who'd offered me a go on his bike.

Watching Louis unload the bike, my guts began to churn. It looked big, scary and dangerous. I managed a nervous laugh when he got on and found there were no footrests. Such ugly and cumbersome bikes hardly look like they'll be useful for anything. But I tell myself they must work, because everyone's

got one. What makes them effective at powering up hills better than anything else also makes them far less rideable. The combination of huge back wheel and massive power outweigh the steering. The exaggerated swing-arm helps to keep the front on the deck but doesn't completely stop the bike rearing up on the steepest parts of the course. There's a very real feeling that things could go spectacularly wrong. I went to bed and had the worst night's sleep in years.

The next morning my biggest fear is realised when the running order is drawn. I drew sixth out of the hat, which means I'm now sitting at the start a mere five riders into the event. I wanted to see how the others tackled the mountain, or Petit Louis at least, but no such luck. I look at Chip again – he's still laughing.

The rider in front makes his attack and Louis starts the engine for me. Sitting on an exhaustless GSX-R1100 when it fires up would scare away anyone's butterflies, mine are now down the valley and on their way to Spain. I try blipping the throttle a couple of times to warm the engine but fear for my eardrums and sympathy for the environment make me stop and let it tick over.

As I wait for the flag to drop, world championship rider Jean-France Abadie decides the armour in my leathers isn't good enough. The starter agrees and there's a flurry of activity as I'm man-handled into motocross body armour. Louis gestures that I should use first gear and all eyes are on me. The commentator has already announced that I'm the 'journaliste en Ingletterre', which seems to make the crowd go quiet. Do they know something I don't? I look round at Chip. He's still there laughing at me – and fires the flash gun into my eyes.

The man at the top of the mountain (the man I'll surely never meet) waves his green flag, the man in front of me waves his red flag and that's it. Not knowing exactly what to do I set off, guessing that I need some speed but low revs. It seems to work well enough but I quickly forget about fine