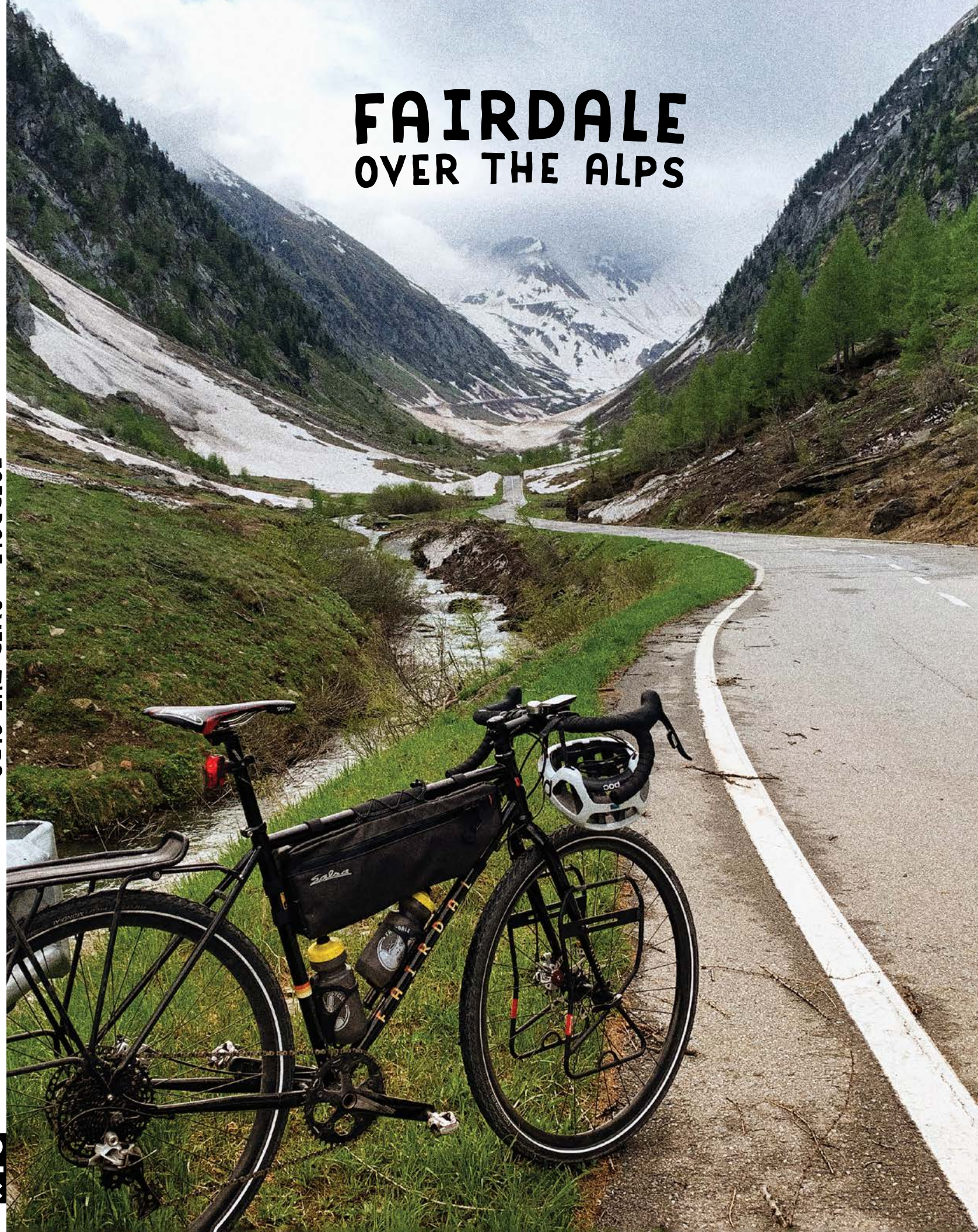




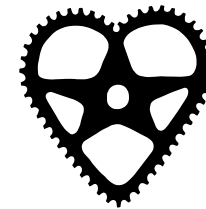
FAIRDALE OVER THE ALPS



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Vans invited me to a BMX Pro Cup event in Stuttgart, Germany. With a free trip on my hands I decided to try and make the travel interesting by turning it into a little adventure. I convinced Chris Cotsonas (CC) from Fairdale Bikes to come with me. I know he likes riding bikes in the Alps since he took me there for the first time a few years ago (Bicycling Magazine Fairdale France trip). Our plan was to ride “Over the Alps” and then pick up the Rhine River Cycleway. This is a popular cycling route that follows the Rhine River from its start high in the mountains, across Europe, and all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. We wouldn’t be able to ride the entire route, but our goal of Stuttgart was not too far off the trail, and it seemed achievable. -Taj Mihelich



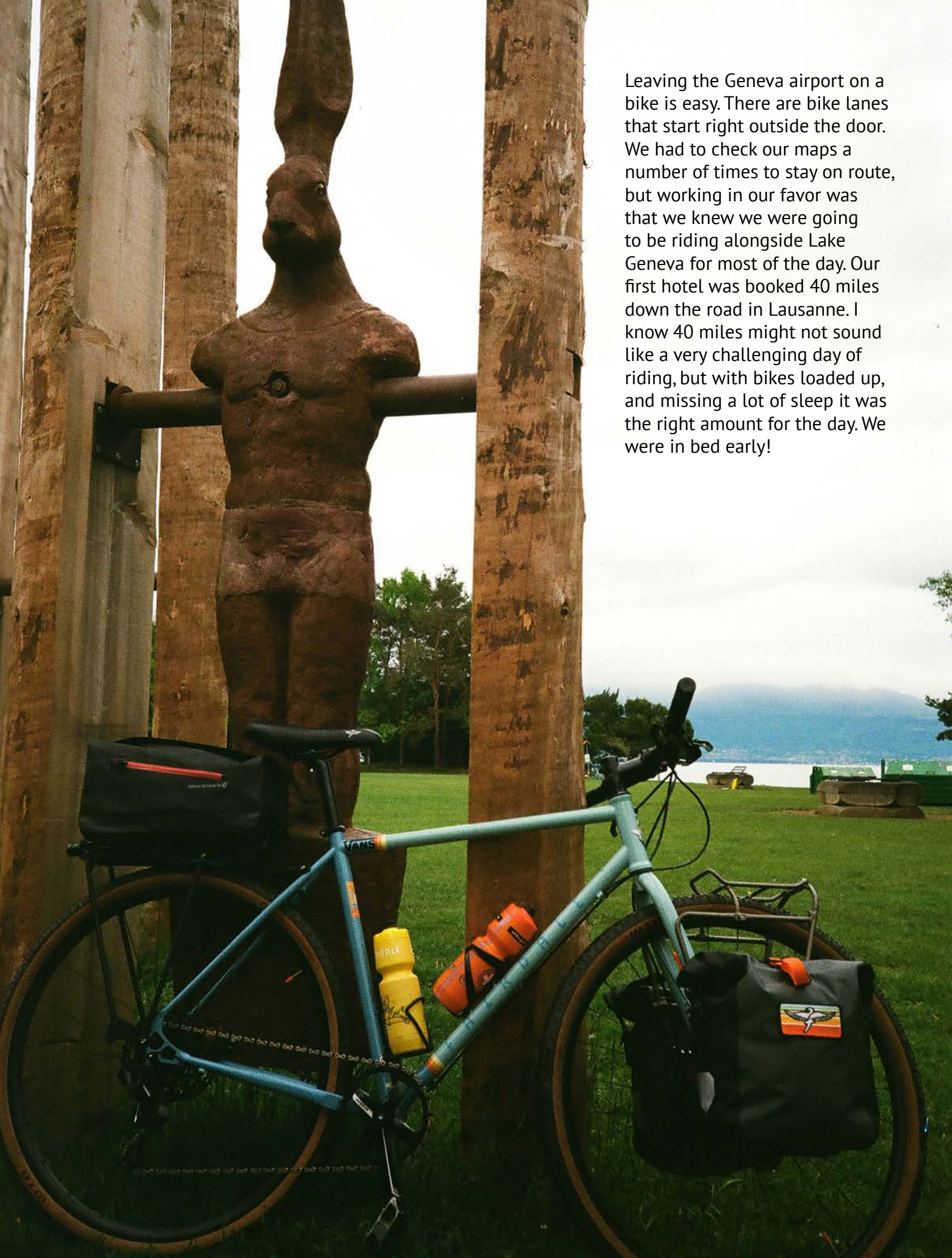
We flew into Geneva, Switzerland and assembled the bikes in the baggage claim. Since we were going to fly back to America from Frankfurt, Germany, there wasn't a practical way to carry bike bags with us. We simply packed the bikes and everything we were going to carry with us into cardboard boxes and then ditched them at the airport.

Luckily both our flights were on time and both of our bike boxes arrived with us. Assembling the bikes was simple, but seemed extra difficult because we were so tired from the long flights. I kept dropping tools and forgetting if I had tightened a bolt already or not. Next to us were two British guys also putting bikes together. They were riding from Geneva to go climb Alpe D'Huez which we had done a few years prior. I cheered them on and promised them they would have a good trip because we sure had (and I was grateful to use their full size bike pump to inflate my tires).

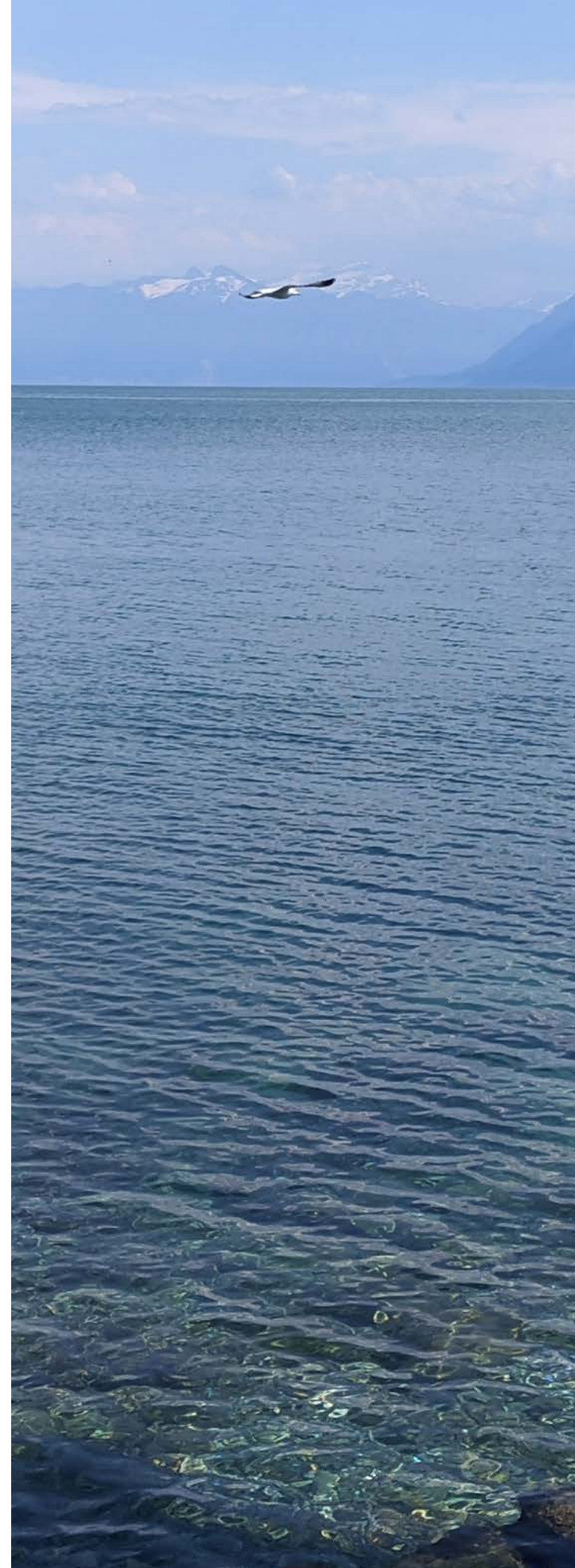
When the bikes were all together we rolled them right through customs. For me there was something surreal about ending a long journey across the ocean in that way. We were in a whole other part of the world, in a new country, but my hands were on the grips of a bike I knew well (and that made me feel at home).



Outside of customs we grabbed some food before pedaling out of the airport. It was early in the morning but we were so jetlagged and confused it was hard for us to tell, and even harder to pick out food and pay for it in a foreign currency (Swiss Francs in the airport, not Euros). The long flight and lack of sleep really mixed us up. Simple things like looking for items in our bags seemed ridiculously difficult. Trying to understand the GPS unit's maps was even more of a challenge. Going for a bike ride straight off the plane is a good way to get over jetlag, but we felt very out of it that whole first day! Chris sums up our state in this photo.



Leaving the Geneva airport on a bike is easy. There are bike lanes that start right outside the door. We had to check our maps a number of times to stay on route, but working in our favor was that we knew we were going to be riding alongside Lake Geneva for most of the day. Our first hotel was booked 40 miles down the road in Lausanne. I know 40 miles might not sound like a very challenging day of riding, but with bikes loaded up, and missing a lot of sleep it was the right amount for the day. We were in bed early!





The ride along Lake Geneva was gorgeous.

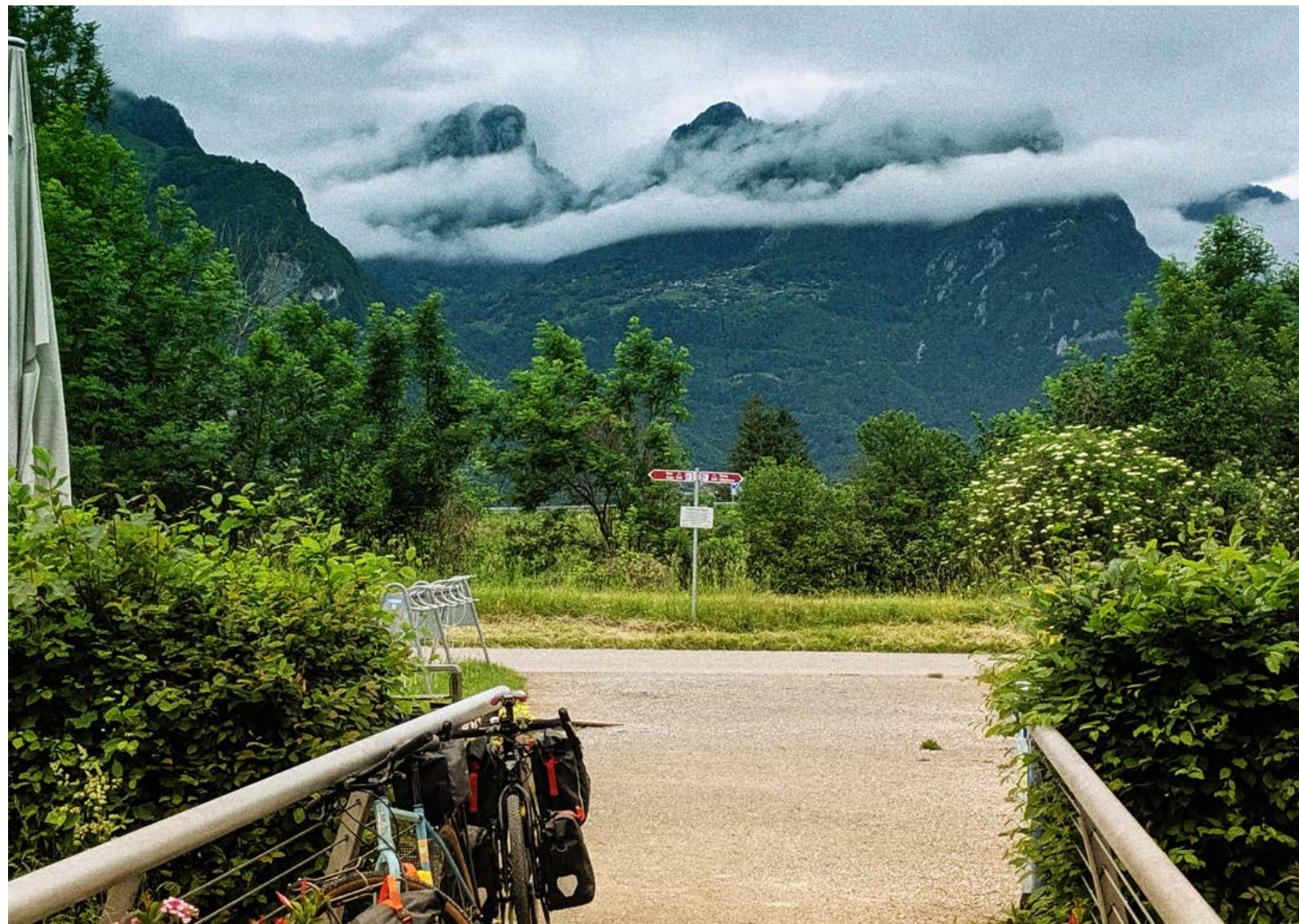


There was a constant mix of both old and new to see.





We wrestled with our GPS unit's finicky route selection. The cycling routes were abundant but our GPS never seemed to agree with them. It kept trying to route us onto the main roads instead. It was definitely faster riding on the big roads, but it was not as peaceful as the meandering (and sometimes confusing) bike lanes. We bounced between a few hours of hammering on a road and then a few hours crawling down bike paths...often missing turns. We eventually gave up on the pre-planned GPS directions and just freestyled our routes directly off of the maps on our phones. This worked surprisingly well... most of the time.



After Lake Geneva we followed the Rhone River cycle route up and into the mountains.



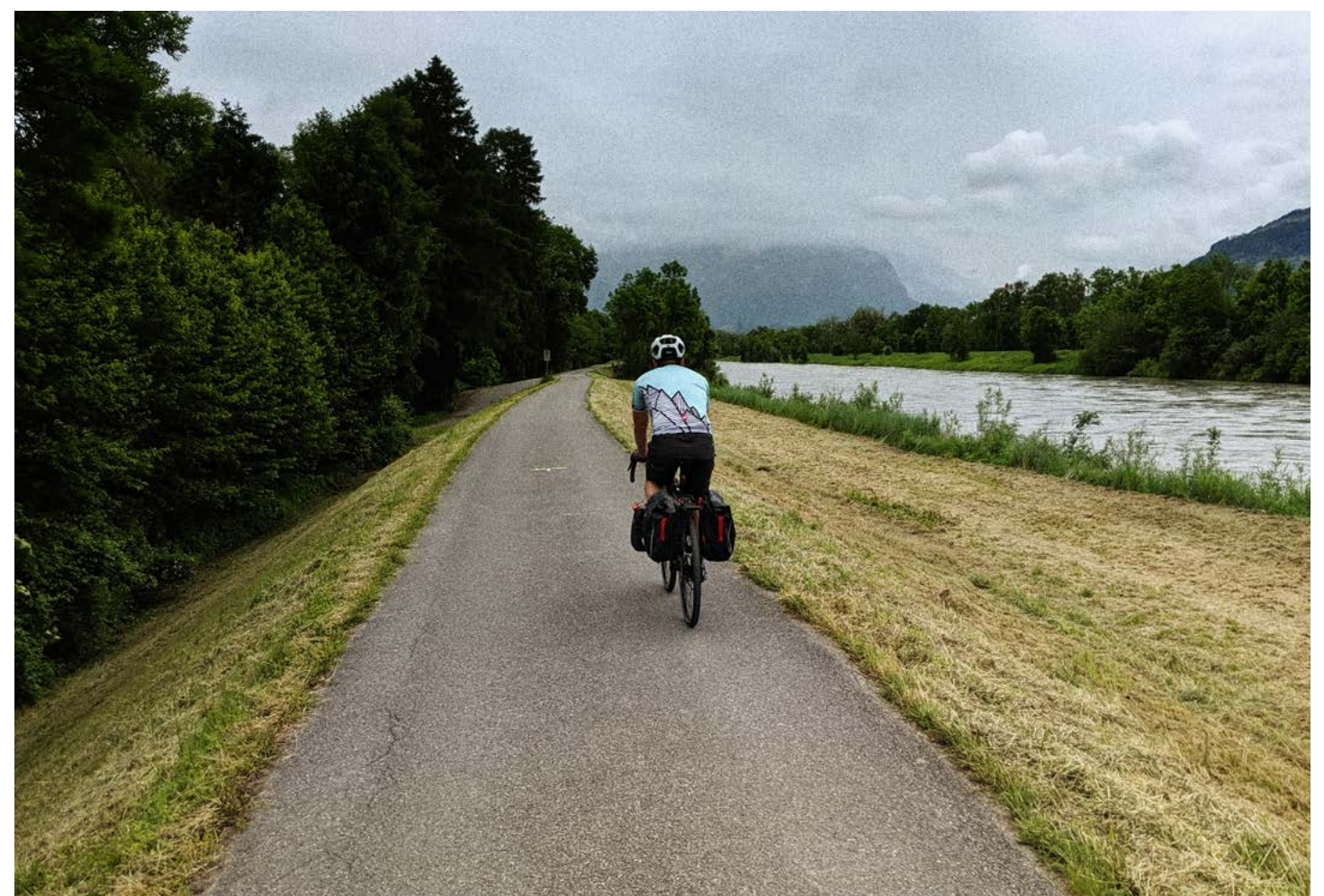
The views became more and more stunning as we pedaled farther into the mountains.

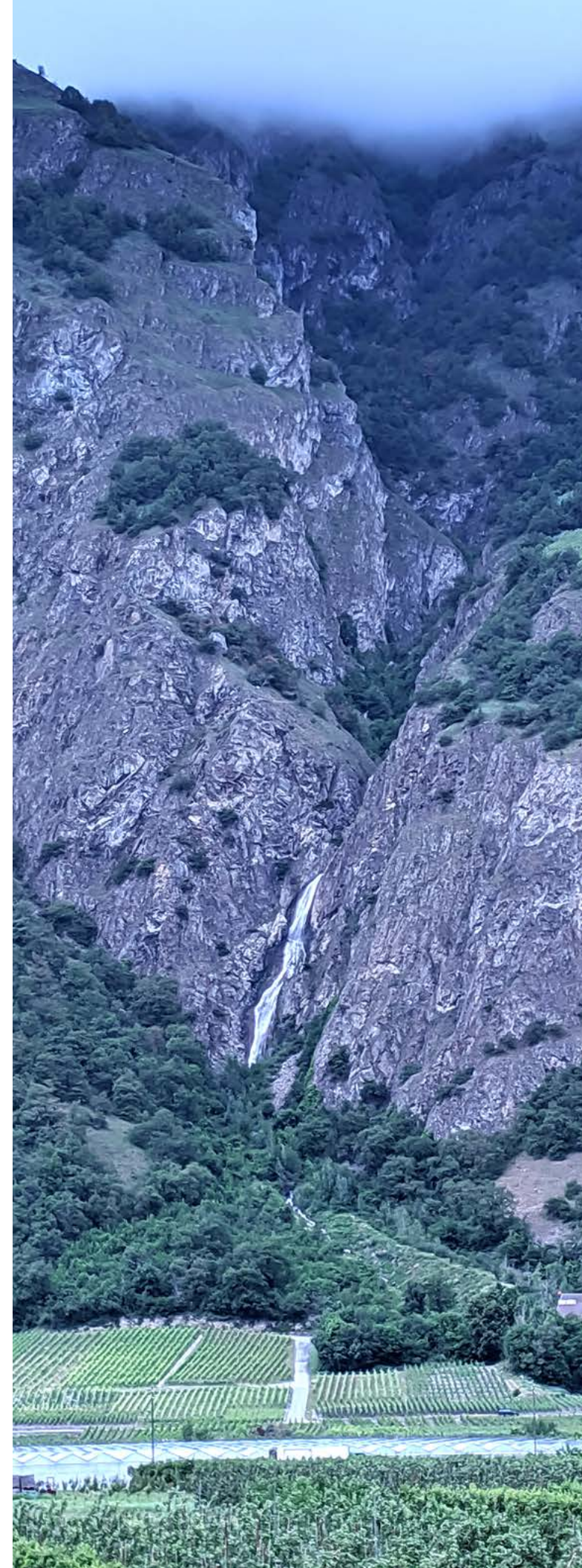




We stumbled upon both the Olympic Museum and UCI headquarters in the same day. The bike path in Aigle goes right by the UCI, so we went into the building and wandered around a bit. I was really tempted to climb the fence to grab a photo while riding the velodrome. I don't suspect that would have gone over well, but there wasn't anyone around and it seemed like it might be possible.

The bike paths were nice here. Peaceful paved lanes that followed the river into an ever narrowing valley with mountains growing taller on either side.







The more we rode, the narrower the valley became. The mountains marched in from both sides. The protected valley floor we followed was full of vineyards and vegetation on all sides. Many miles were passed on bike lanes like this one, other times we'd get kicked out onto a busy road that usually had some kind of marked bike route on the edge. These peaceful and quiet bike lanes following the fast moving river were my favorite.

CC: We also had many miles of quiet gravel, and sometimes even dirt paths through the woods, farmland or weirdly close to a nuclear power plant straight out of The Simpsons.

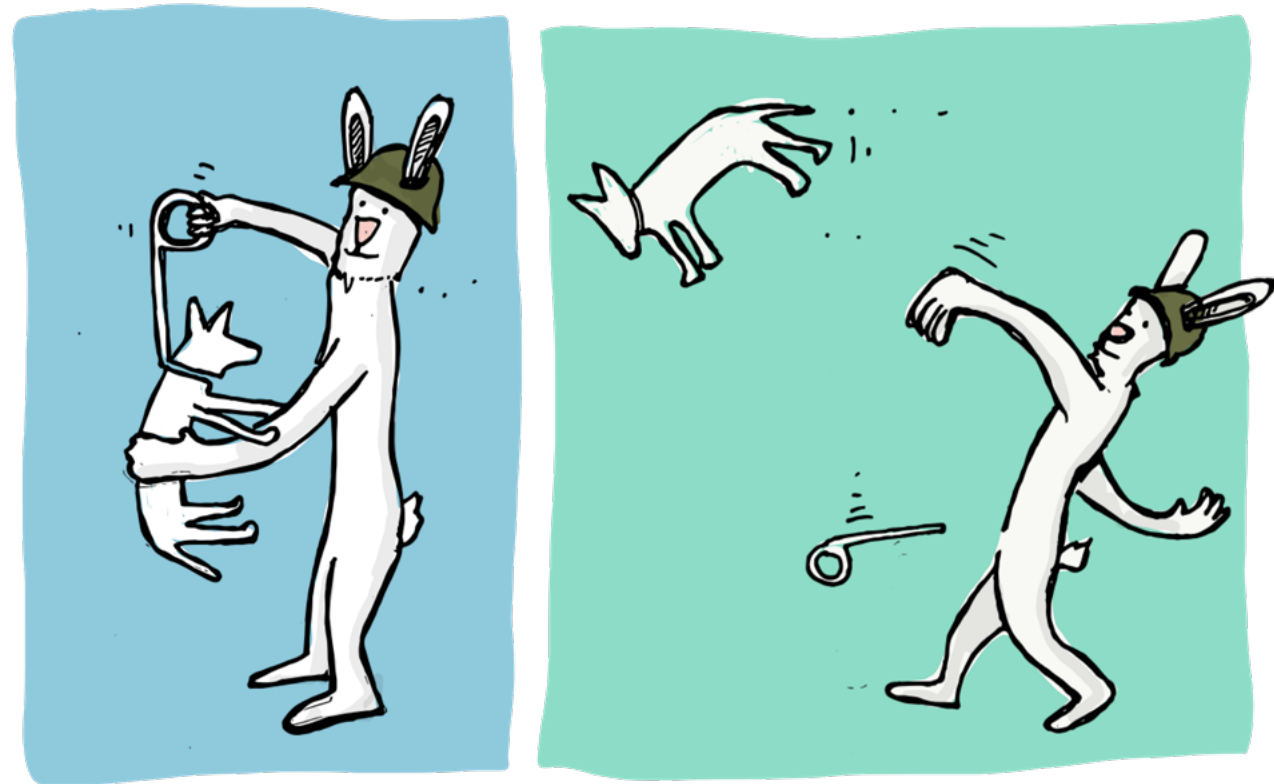


Signs along the way...

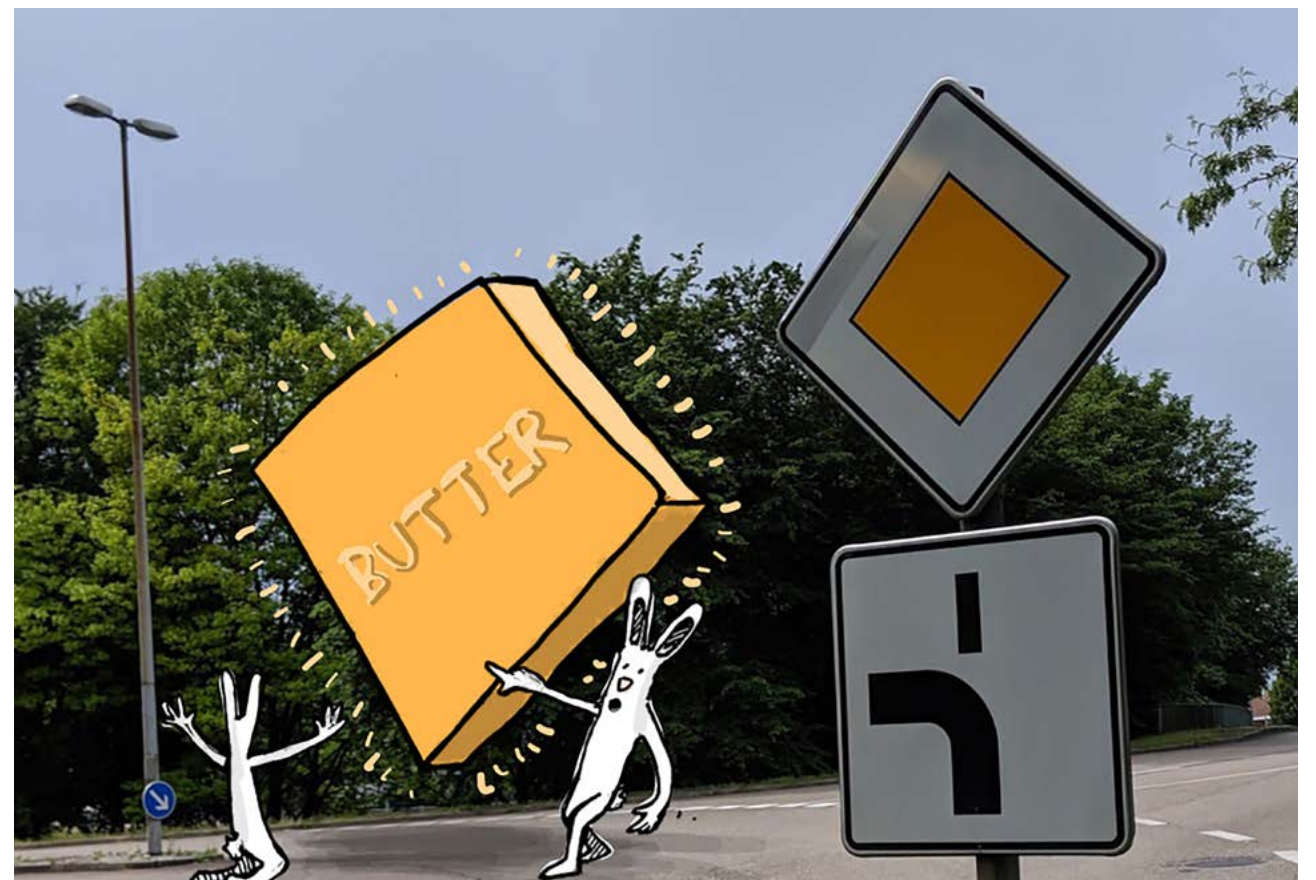




This guy was lurking in the woods.



Grenade dog!



Watch out for butter pats in the road!



The road got really hectic with traffic and the bike route got insanely steep and it didn't go where we wanted it to. A 50mph headwind kicked up and stung us in the face with road grit and my glasses were lost.

CC: This is the strongest headwind I've ever encountered in 31 years of road riding and it lasted for what must have been over 2 hours. I think this is also where we accidentally ended up on a highway. With Swiss truck drivers honking at us we knew that we had to get off of it as quickly as possible. I had hope for pedaling to the "next exit" but Taj convinced me that we needed to get off the road immediately. This resulted in throwing the bikes over an 8-9 foot high farming fence and climbing over it. A police officer witnessed the whole thing and didn't bother us.

The wind eventually slowed, the road got steep and the traffic got sketchy from crowds of people going on vacation. We also ran into road construction and knew it was time to hop on a train for a quick leap away from this difficult road.



The Nufenen Pass was closed with 22 feet of snow and avalanche warnings.



We headed up it anyway.



Before the trip we decided we wanted to climb the famous Nufenen Pass. We were sad when our hotel told us it was closed and showed us photos of 22 feet of snow at the top. It was mid-June but it had been a big snow year. Our hotel was at the very base of the climb so we left our bags behind and decided to ride up as far as we could. After sneaking around a barrier, we had an amazing climb. The entire mountain was empty. No traffic, no one around, and we felt light with no heavy bags on our bikes. We were able to climb about half way up before being turned back by snow and it was unforgettably beautiful the whole time.



A glorious Alpine pass all to ourselves.



Myself and Chris on an Alp that was closed to the rest of the world. It was just us and hundreds of marmots that we had to be mindful of when descending at full speed.



CC: Our hotel in Andermatt had sheep grazing out the window, a family playing outdoor table tennis, an elevator without a door on it, and a shower at the foot of the beds that left you exposed to anyone else that was in the room.



CC: Taj was feeling a little under the weather after we arrived and I went out on a gravel ride toward the St Gotthard Pass (also closed due to snow). The path I used passed dozens of cows and flower spotted fields like something straight out of The Sound of Music. The views of the mountains on this part of the trip were unbelievable. Photos will never do them justice.





Leaving Andermatt behind and climbing up and over the Alps.



The road out of Andermatt worried us a little. Most of our maps suggested taking a train to the top and we were concerned the road might not be safe to ride on. Fortunately, aside from a few single-lane construction areas, it was totally fine, and filled with fantastic views like this.





We got to the peak to find that it was named the “Oberalppass”. This was fitting really since we’d been calling our trip “#OvertheAlps”. Now we really could claim to have gone over at least a part of this amazing mountain range.

CC: At an average gradient of 7% over 5 miles, it went by quicker than you’d think first thing in the morning.



After all the climbing and lots of snow at the top, the Alps paid us back with an amazing descent.

CC: We had hours of going downhill on fun, wide-open roads and you could feel the temperature progressively increasing from the 40's to the 70's all the way down. I checked the GPS file and it was 31 total miles downhill!

Later we ended up in what felt like a giant national park. There was a lot of unexpected climbing through this area because we thought the bike route was going to stay down in the flat lands along the river. Instead we climbed high up onto cliff roads that looked down to the valley far below. Truthfully, we might have lost the bike path but our route was a good choice for moments like this. Chris is in this photo as a little dot of red on the cliff road.







We found a hotel in Bad Ragaz for the night just as the rain rolled in, and marveled at the tough-guy sounding name for the town.

CC: Bad is German for “bath” and references the historic town’s famous natural spring.





This pump track was one we stumbled on along our route. It looked so fun... wish I'd had a little bike for this bit.



A sketchy little "skatepark" and Chris with Mario.

Riding along the Rhine River with Liechtenstein coming into view. The completely open European borders sure were nice to see. Pedaling into and out of countries resulted in zero stress with nobody standing guard.





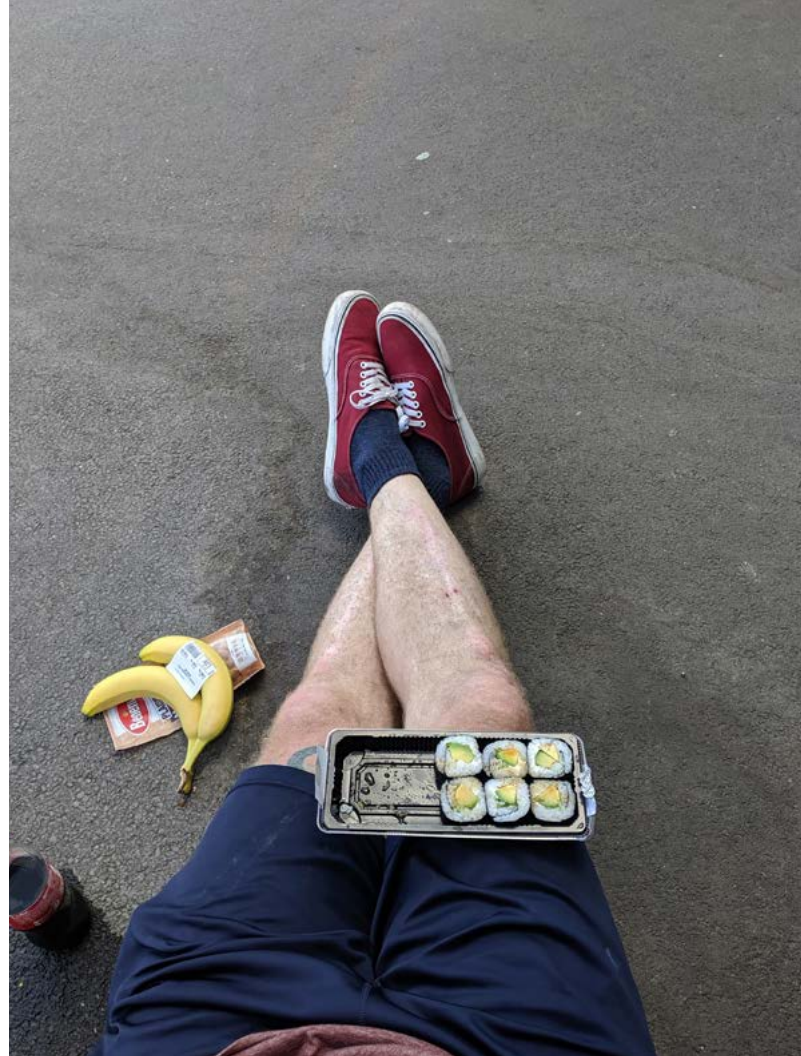


Chris and I did not expect to end up on gravel trails during the trip. By chance we'd both put some more chunky 42mm-ish wide tires on our bikes, and it was awesome that we did.

We ended up riding tons of miles on gravel and we felt like we had an almost ideal bike set up for the ride.

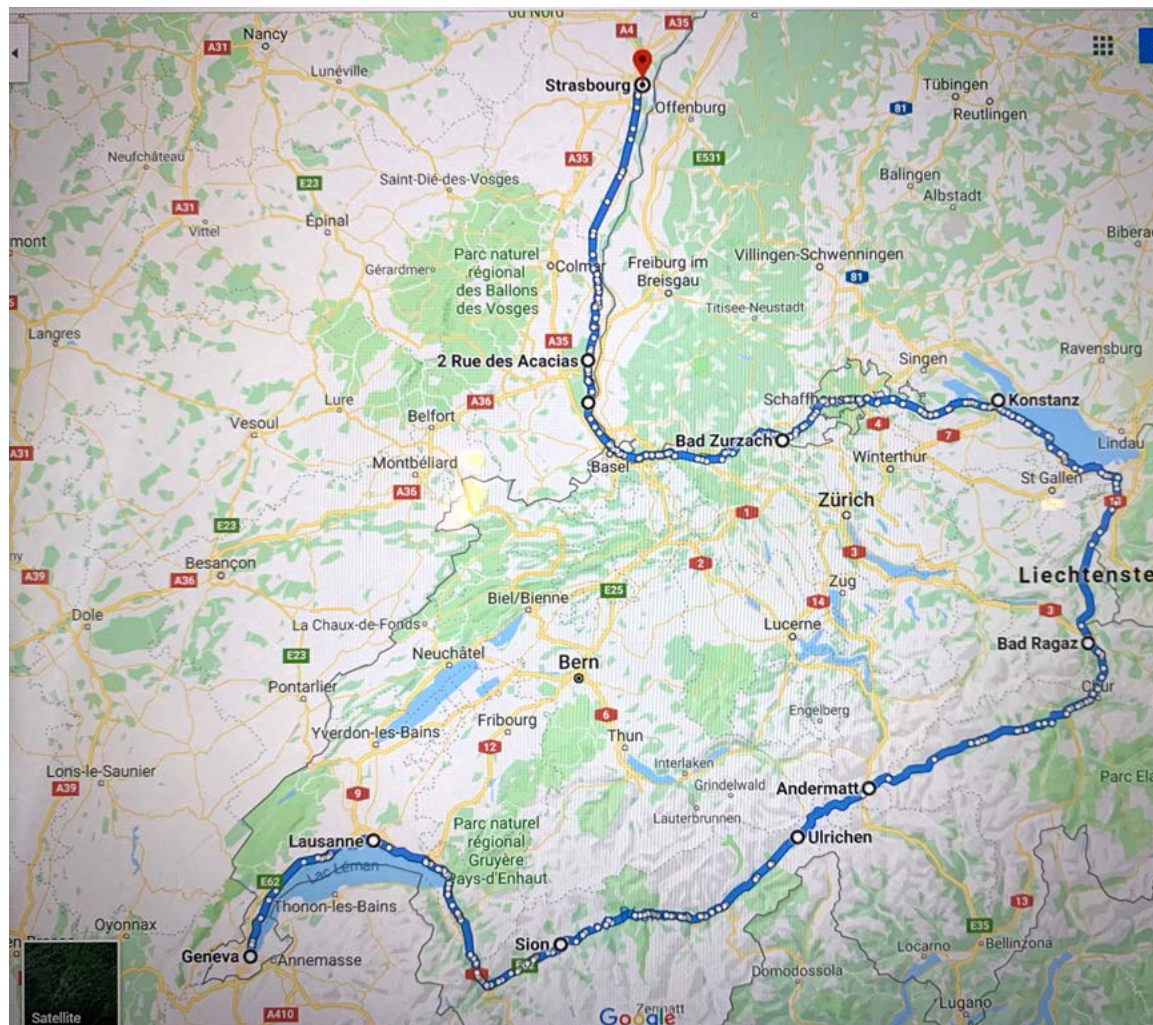
Being away from cars and out in the woods on trails like this was a seriously great way to travel. Riding through farmland allowed us to see how the smaller towns operate. Traveling by bike is a really unique and refreshing way to see how a country really lives.







I rode the Weekender Archer and Chris rode the Weekender Nomad. They truly were perfect for this trip and the amount of gear we carried. Having no mechanicals made for a stress-free adventure.



Our route took us to Strasbourg, France on the last day of our ride. We hopped a train with our bikes and jumped over to Stuttgart, Germany and the Vans BMX Pro Cup. The event was plastered with my drawings and handwriting which I found a bit overwhelming (and kind of cool). The BMX riding was amazing too! After such a long bike ride I was very content sitting back as a spectator with a beer and watching the action.





Josh Dove. Photo Colin MacKay



Clint Reynolds. Photo Colin MacKay



The Vans BMX Pro Cup in Stuttgart was really well done. It is organized as a “rider’s contest” and designed to be fun for the folks on the course. With jam style runs, the riders are free to try new tricks and hard lines. Touching a foot down doesn’t mean your entire contest is ruined. Just wait for your turn to come around again and drop in! Fun to ride, and fun to watch. The energy seems to be building constantly with the riders pushing each other to keep taking things to the next level.

Here Jason Watts celebrates a great win at the after party and this is the last photo my film camera took before breaking down (which means I missed the celebratory beer Jason drank out of someone’s prosthetic leg!).