

*The top of the D809, as spectacular a road as you'll find anywhere in the world*

# A BRIDGE NOT FAR

Not only has the amazing Millau Viaduct traversed a gaping chasm of a valley, but it's also created a spectacular focal point for a brilliant biking area





**A**midst the beauty of the area's rugged vistas stands a monument to man's brilliant achievements – and the ultimate biking destination. The Millau viaduct is a shining achievement of engineering and endeavour, notwithstanding it was only built to stop angry Parisians from being stuck in Millau's traffic on their way to the beach...

The bridge spans the Tarn river, and given the immense scale of this creation you'd expect the Tarn to be a raging body of water. But it's not, it's just a common or garden river that meanders its way through the pretty French countryside. But millions of years ago a glacier cut its way through the area, creating a spectacular valley in the process, with the ancient town of Millau latterly built at its foot.

Until engineering caught up, the only way to span this valley was to drop down into the town and to climb back out, causing traffic chaos. But as long ago as 1987 plans were hatched to bypass the valley completely.

Construction of the Norman Foster designed bridge began in 2001, and four short years later

it was opened to wonderment – and not just because it was a month early and on budget. Some piers were bigger than the Eiffel Tower, the road deck often floated above the clouds, while the scenery simply amazed.

In the flesh it's a jaw dropping sight, and a testament to the vision of its British designer and a tribute to all who built it. You can see it for miles around and there are plenty of sights that capture its majesty all around the area. The visitor centre tells you all you want and need to know about the bridge and its building. It's free and well worth dropping in to understand the problems faced by the engineers – and the subsequent ingenious solutions found.

But the best bit about the bridge is that it shines the light on the area and its many fabulous roads. Now a destination in its own right, you can easily spend a few days in the area exploring all sorts of different roads; from flat out sweepers to gnarly gorge floors. Cast the net a little wider and you'll get a week's worth of riding, pas de problem, Rodney.

Getting in and out of town is entertaining in its own right. Because Millau is set at the Tarn's floor, roads north and south have to wind their way up and down steep sides. These either give you a great taste of what's to come or a final hit of action before the long ride back. Of the two sides, it's the climb south that really offers the best thrills. The D809 is a brilliant stretch of road that packs in corners galore, but all set on super smooth roads with nice, wide sweepers. One pass will get you acquainted with the road, then you can drop down again for another go in anger. Don't forget to stop at the top for a brilliant view of the bridge and the town below (see main pic).

For the up close bridge experience it all starts under the shadow of the viaduct, with a brilliant set of corners just beyond the entrance to the visitor centre. This road takes you to what is actually needed to cross the river, a simple 80 metre bridge at the valley's floor, where above you, 270 metres up, Norbert Dentressangle trucks are serenely making their way north and south. 🏎️



## IN NUMBERS

### THE MILLAU VIADUCT

**343m** – the highest mast's summit, making it the tallest bridge in the world.

**270m** – deck height, making it the 12th highest bridge deck in the world.

**140mph** – wind speed the bridge is designed to resist.

**€394m** – cost of construction.

**290,000 tonnes** – total weight of the bridge.

**120 years** – bridge's design life.

**4 years** – length of construction.

**40m** – number of vehicles using the bridge since opening.

**15m** – depth of pylon footings.

**€4.60** – price of a motorcycle crossing.



*You want bridges? You've got two right there!*



**IN THE AREA ALONE THERE ARE TWO DAYS OF SUBLIME RIDING. WANT MORE? JUST HEAD AN HOUR IN ANY DIRECTION...**

Close by there are a few zig-zag roads heading south that look tempting on the map, but are only one up from goat tracks so don't go expecting action here – although they do offer yet more spectacular views.

Beyond the immediate area there are some other beltters to try out. You've heard of Roquefort cheese, right? Well this is made in, er, Roquefort, and the D23 to and beyond this village is perfectly cornered, offering a great array of second and third gear turns as you head closer to the smell.

The Gorge du Tarn is in the other direction, and the D907 follows the river as it once cut its way through the area. Straighter, but way more challenging, it offers mile after mile of more enclosed roads that often have to traverse through the rock via small tunnels on their relentless path forward. Some bits are bumpy, others smoother, but they are all hugely technical with plenty of traps set along the way to lure you in.

If you're heading this way, the Gorge de la Jonte is another road in the same vein. You can hook the two up together to make a great round route that starts just ten miles from the middle of Millau. There are also some great options to get you out of the gorge that incorporate some serious switchbacks to ensure that your brakes are fully in order.

So right there you've got two full days worth of riding. Want more? You could head to Alles any choose any route you want, ride to Rodez in lightning manner, head north and find some brilliant roads around Figeac and Decazeville or head south and play in the Forests des Nonts d'Orb. There you go, a perfect week sorted. What are you waiting for? It's only eight hours from Calais. **FB**



## MILLAU BRIDGE

**Take the pilgrimage to Millau and be amazed by the roads and routes....**

### How to get there:

If you want to base yourself in the area then the best bet is to ride hard down to Millau, rest up that night and then tackle the roads fresh in the morning. That means racing down the 550 miles or so of Autoroute from Calais to Millau. Allow eight hours if you're gunning it – ten to be on the safe side. It's not all dull, as the closer you get the more 100mph-plus sweepers you see! But there's no denying that the first 350 miles are nothing but boring. Static speed cameras can face both ways, but are well sign posted. The police, however, don't like big speeds and will punish you draconically for blatant piss taking. Going the back way still means riding through big swathes of nothing very exciting, meaning it takes longer to get to the action for no benefit.

### When to go:

It's almost at the bottom of France, so you'd expect this to be a year-round playzone, right? Er, no. Because it's so high and in the middle of a big land mass it gets really cold in winter, so expect to see snow from late November through to early March. Out of this time you'll get rideable weather, but in the height of summer hot means hot and busy means busy...



*You'll be doing plenty of this on your trip to Millau...*