

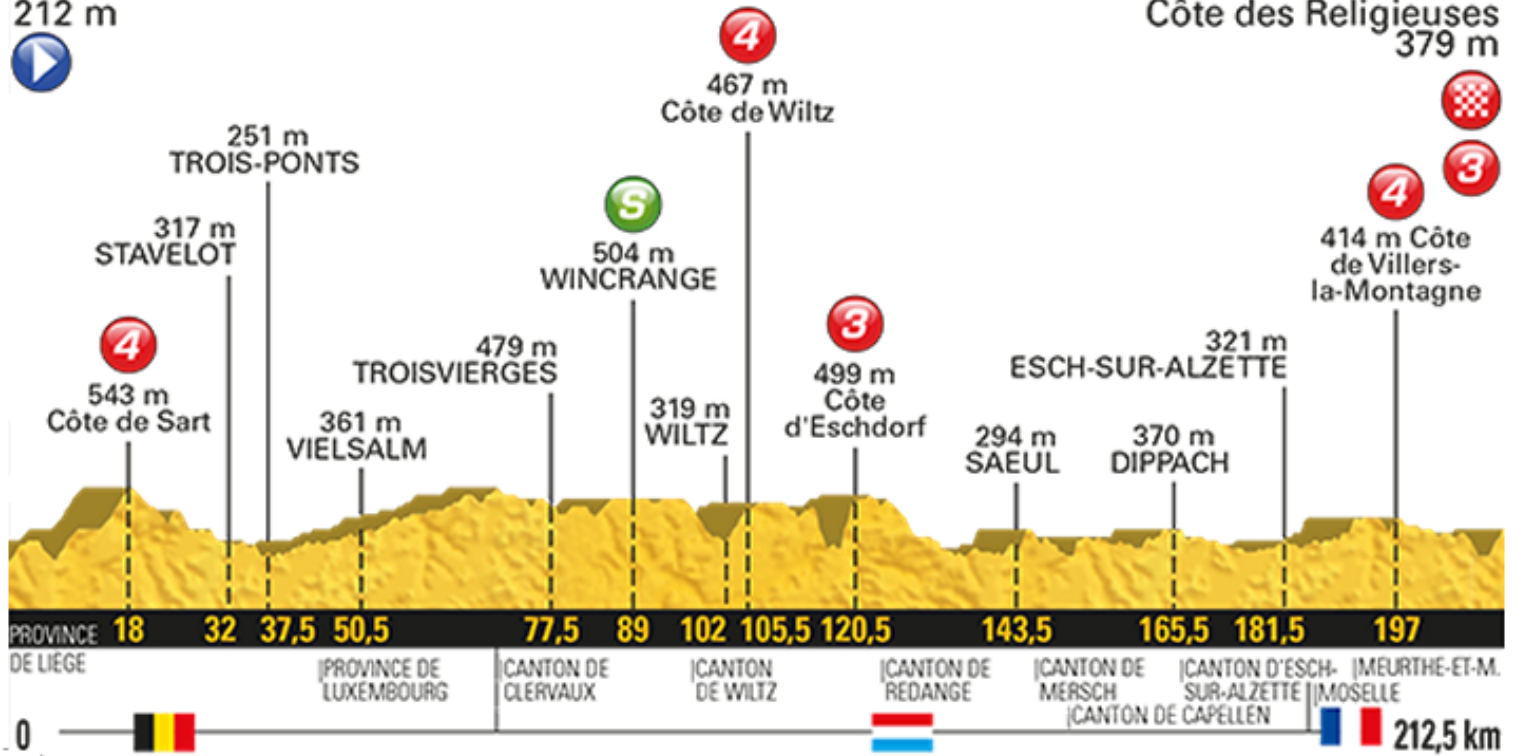
VERVIERS

212 m



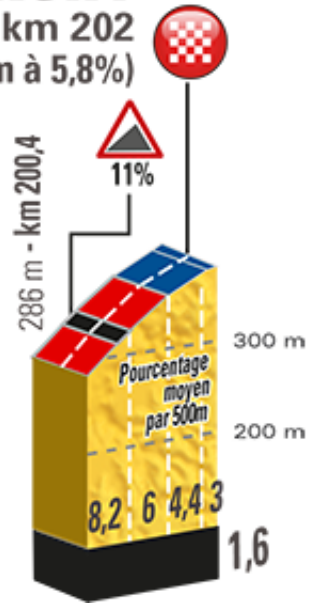
LONGWY

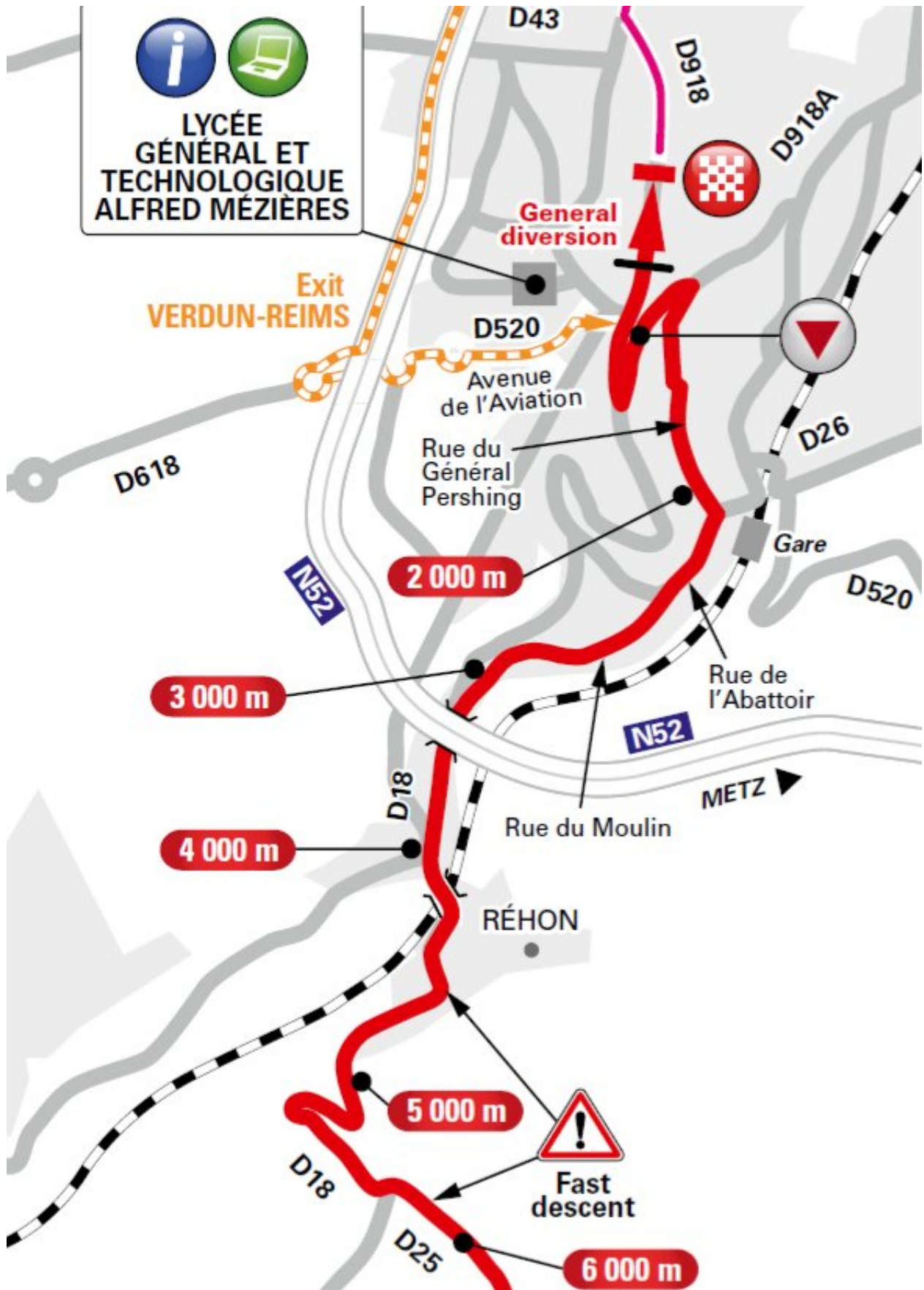
Côte des Religieuses
379 m





LONGWY
379 m - km 202
(1,6 km à 5,8%)





Having read a bit of biography of Isak Dinesen last week, I would like to start today by saying "I had a farm in Africa," but I didn't. What I did have, were friends who lived along today's stage route, on the Belgium-Luxembourg border.

This seems almost a lifetime ago, of course, but really was only half so, and I last visited there about 20 years ago. The stage today begins at Verviers, near Liege, and passes through the Belgian province of Luxembourg, before crossing into the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, traversing that country from almost absolute north to absolute south, before finishing a few miles into France. Through most of the day, they are in the Ardennes...

I had a citadel at Namur... After the ravages of the First World War, and the ignominious and terrible defeat of the Belgian bicycle mounted troops, a citadel was built at Namur. In the Great War, the Germans had quickly overwhelmed the Belgian defenses to the east, and swept across the country until they reached reinforced defenses on Flanders' fields, causing unimaginably terrible pestilence and pain. The Belgians, at the end of that war, decided they needed to defend themselves against the Germans, historically often allies, but sometimes great foes, and they would build a great fort, not too far from the start of today's stage. The citadel, standing today at Namur, overlooking the Meuse river valley, was built in such a way that it was considered unconquerable. It was considered completely defensible, as it was constructed in such a way that paratroopers could not land upon or in it, and it could not be taken by ground assault. Everyone was so pleased by the citadel, and prideful in its construction, that leaders from throughout the world wanted tours, and these were liberally granted. Unfortunately, during a time of peace, the Germans also toured, and when they were preparing for war, they built a secret replica of the citadel, practiced how they might land paratroops on it, and came up with a battle plan. Within minutes of the German invasion, the great unconquerable fortress had been conquered, and the King, stupefied and dismayed by what had happened the first go round, allowed the Nazis free passage through his country. Belgium was safe, at least, that is, until the Battle of the Bulge.

The Battle of the Bulge is very much in play today, as this area was part of the bulge. A friend who was living along the border with Luxembourg said that, every night, her family would barricade themselves in the basement of their house, and hear the boots of troops entering and leaving throughout the night. In the morning, her father would go up, and report back whether the "visitors" had been Nazis or Americans.

The Ardennes are not the grand and glorious Alps. They are, however, a great training ground for cyclists, and any fan will know them from the Tour and Liege Bastogne Liege, etc. The entire area consists of forests, with clearings for small villages and

estates, and this area along the border was once famous for duty free shops, and perhaps still is. Luxembourg has very low taxes on things like liquor and cigarettes, so local Belgians would, and probably still do, walk over the border to shop. Every bit of Luxembourg is so neat and clean, with quaint views, chateaux and forested roads, that it mostly reminded me of Disneyland, when I first saw it as a college student. Near the capital, throughout the countryside, there are small office buildings of a story or two, with signs with very impressive names in front. Luxembourg, because of its central location and favorable tax environment, serves as European headquarters for many companies. Everything is kept as neat as a pin, people are happy, and the Grand Duke and Grand Duchess reign in style.

Verviers, depart of the Tour, has hosted the Fleche Wallone multiple times, and the Tour once before. It has a chocolate museum! The Belgians, you see, are a bit crazy for chocolate at least since colonial days in the Congo. Apparently at least King Leopold had a farm in Africa.... Longwy was important in the early days of the Tour de France, and hosted four finishes before the First World War. It was last visited by the Tour in the early 1980s. Longwy became definitively French in 1679, and the great fort was built there by the Sun King, Louis XIV.







