

Cyclist

The thrill of the ride

MAGAZINE
OF THE
YEAR

Glory of the Giro

Italy's most stunning ride



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Mountains of the mind

The Dolomites' sculpted peaks will host the 30th anniversary of the Maratona sportive and a breathtaking stage of the Giro d'Italia this summer. *Cyclist* clips in to discover the history and legends of the 'Pale Mountains'

Words **MARK BAILEY** Photography **JUAN TRUJILLO ANDRADES**



he Dolomites are mountains of magic and miracles, where local folklore transforms jagged peaks into the turreted castles of mythical kings, glistening lakes become bewitched pools of dazzling treasure, and howling snowstorms evoke the spittle and fury of ancient spirits. As I cycle up the 2,239m Passo Pordoi, a lofty pass through this spellbinding region known as the ‘Monti Pallidi’ (Pale Mountains), stories surround me.

Legend says the silvery rock spires ahead, which glow gold, pink and purple at dawn, were painted by a magical gnome to entice a star-dwelling princess back to her earthbound prince. The white edelweiss flowers in the meadows are her gifts from the moon. Even cycling fans become entranced here. In the 1940s, a local watching the Giro d’Italia claimed he saw Italian cyclist Gino Bartali ascending the slopes flanked by two angels, like a pair of heavenly domestiques. Today, as I crest the pass, I find the late Fausto Coppi himself ghosting across its summit. The Italian hero is immortalised here in a giant memorial in which he is depicted gliding through a sea of adoring fans. Princes, ghosts, angels and champions are all tokens of the magical appeal of the Dolomites, a Unesco World

Every June the roads are closed to traffic and more than 20,000 riders take on the Sella Ronda route



Heading out of the village of Corvara at the start of the ride, already the scenery is nudging close to epic

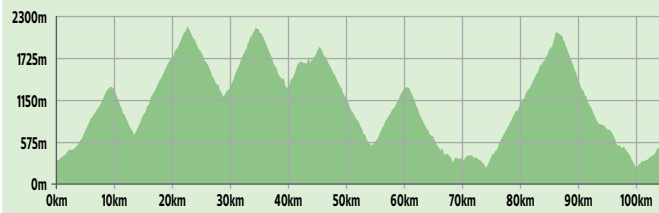
Heritage site in north-eastern Italy full of geological wonders, and an essential pilgrimage for cyclists ever since the Giro d’Italia’s first foray here in 1937. There is something about the otherworldly geology of the region, with its towering turrets and twisted pillars of rock, and the intense high-altitude sunshine, that inspires fantasies and daydreams. The bulging chronicles of myths and legends only emphasise the awe that this majestic landscape arouses. And it is precisely this mix of sparkling beauty and fearsome terrain that attracts cyclists to the area.

The Dolomites have graced the Giro more than 40 times and famous Italian cyclists such as Bartali, Coppi and Alfredo Binda carved out their reputations here. The elegant names of the climbs – Campolongo, Falzarego, Valparola – roll off the tongue with a gentle rhythm and cadence that evokes the long, meandering roads that cross them. Coppi, a five-time Giro champion, adored the pristine beauty of the Pordoi, which has featured as the Cima Coppi – the highest point of the Giro – on 13 occasions. ▶

Round the Ronda

Follow *Cyclist’s* figure-of-eight loop

To download this route go to cyclist.co.uk/48italy. Beginning in Corvara, head south on the SS244. After Arabba, swing right on to the SR48 to climb the Passo Pordoi. Turn right on the SS242 to head north over the Passo Sella, then head right on the SS243 over the Passo Gardena and back into Corvara. Repeat, but this time go left at Arabba on the SR48 to Andraz. After the town, swing left – staying on the SR48 – to climb the Passo Falzarego. At the top, head left on the SP24, then follow the SP24 and SP37 down to the SS244, from where you take a left turn straight back to Corvara.



◀ 'I was the first over the summit there five times, maybe because whenever I was in that area I could breathe beautifully,' said Coppi. Old sepia photographs capture the great champion grinding up gravelly roads past snow-dappled rock faces, pursued by the chugging, open-topped Bianchi-branded motorcar of his team.

Amateur riders flock here too. Every June the region hosts the Sella Ronda Bike Day, when roads are closed to traffic and more than 20,000 riders take on the Sella Ronda route, crossing the four passes – Campolongo, Pordoi, Sella and Gardena – of the famous Sella Ronda ski tour. The Maratona dles Dolomites follows in July, with 9,000 riders tackling one of three courses, from 55–138km. The Italians do sportives in style: many riders arrive a week early for parties and training, the race is screened on TV, and feed stations are stocked with apple strudel.

This year marks the 30th edition of the Maratona, which is why I have come to sample the spectacular mountains on which the race's legendary reputation has been built. Following a figure-of-eight loop similar to the Maratona's middle-distance course, our route covers 106km and 3,130m of climbing, ticking off

From far below, the sharp crags of the Sella Ronda look like shark's teeth gnawing at the skyline

The Sella Ronda is a popular ski touring region, but in summer there is a better way to enjoy the mountains



the four passes of the Sella Ronda and extra climbs to the 2,105m Passo Falzarego and 2,200m Passo Valparola. This classic route will also form the bulk of Stage 14 of the 2016 Giro on Saturday 21st May, when the pro peloton will zip along these same roads at bewildering speeds.

The Longo route

My ride begins at Hotel La Perla in Corvara, an elegant wood-panelled sanctuary cradled beneath the jagged Sella Massif. It's not easy to combine luxurious bistros and bedrooms with sweaty cyclists, but La Perla has cracked it. The hotel runs 'Leading Bike' tours in conjunction with Pinarello (who have equipped a special cycling lounge with bikes ridden by Miguel Indurain and Sir Bradley Wiggins) and the cycling tour operator InGamba, whose alluring mantra – 'Eat up the miles, drink in the culture' – will appeal to any rider. With on-site mechanics, soigneurs and hearty dishes cooked in mountain-refuge style restaurants, it's a fine place to spend a week in the Dolomites.

I'm joined on my ride by Klaus, the owner of the Melodia del Bosco, another cyclist-friendly hotel in ▶

We pause at the Fausto Coppi monument. It’s customary to place your cycling cap on the great champion’s head



nearby Badia, and another local cyclist called René. Both tell me they are not very fit after their winter indulgences, but Klaus looks as lean as a wheel spoke and René has biceps and quads like Sir Chris Hoy. I clip into my pedals secure in the knowledge that I will be the *lanterne rouge* today.

After gliding past the wooden chalets of Corvara, we immediately start ascending a smooth tarmac road to the 1,850m Passo Campolongo that curls through an open bowl of mountain pastures and pine forests. The grass of the meadows, which glistens in the early-morning sunshine, is as immaculate as the greens of Augusta. René tells me that Corvara’s coat of arms features green fields, red mountains and white sky, and this image is echoed in

the three layers of meadows, rock pinnacles and open sky ahead – albeit today the sky is a rich Azzurri blue.

With its gentle 5–7% gradient, the road unfurls like a welcome mat as we climb skywards, past ski lifts, avalanche barriers, shepherds’ huts and grey scree slopes. The road swirls through a series of hairpins that René and Klaus say resemble the Moto GP course at Mugello. Apparently it’s a lot of fun if you’re descending.

From the first pedal stroke, I find it impossible to take my eyes off the stunning grey serrated towers of the Sella Massif, around which our route will pivot. From far below, the sharp crags look like jagged shark’s teeth gnawing at the skyline. In such an otherworldly landscape, it’s easy to immerse your mind in all those wild local legends.

The real history behind this rugged terrain is no less remarkable. Two hundred and fifty million years ago the Dolomites were part of a spectacular coral reef in the primordial ocean of Tethys, sculpted over time from mounds of compressed marine sediment. Years of tectonic activity and volcanic eruptions helped transform this reef into its earthly terrain. But to cycle around these eerie rock spires is to explore an ancient underwater reef forged into unique architectural shapes by titanic forces.

At the summit of Passo Campolongo there is a small plateau with a mountain-top restaurant. We head straight past it in pursuit of the buzz of our first descent, which opens up before us as a series of swirling switchbacks, surrounded by pine trees and exposed scars of rock.

The Passo Pordoi is crowned with this memorial to legendary Italian racer Fausto Coppi, nicknamed *Il Campionissimo* – the champion of champions

At an average of 7.1%, the descent is steeper than the climb, and the road down is grippy, inviting you to take the corners at speed. We pull on some jackets and begin the twisting journey towards the village of Arabba 274m below. Not even the motorbike riders, with whom the Sella Ronda is so popular, reach the valley before us.

Chasing Coppi

The second of the four climbs that make up the Sella Ronda route is the 2,239m Passo Pordoi. Completed in 1904, the road wriggles through a patchwork of meadows surrounded by pine forests and ridged grey peaks. The 9.4km climb is steeper than the Campolongo, with an average gradient of 6.7% and some sharp bursts at 9%. More than 30 hairpins




Pedalling towards the serrated peaks, I feel like I'm commencing a siege on a massive fortress

The climb up to the summit of Passo Pordoi at 2,239m still manages to make you feel small when you get to the top

guard its slopes and I repeatedly drag myself out of the saddle to shift the lactic burn in my hamstrings. It's an inspiring feature of the Dolomites that the climbs here are so open, allowing you to glance back at the valley, or stare up at the crags crowning the summit ahead.

When we finally reach the pass, we pause at the Coppi monument. Klaus tells me it is customary to remove your cycling cap and place it on the great champion's head. A plaque reads, 'In the shadow of these majestic Dolomite peaks, this bronze tablet will testify forever to the incomparable feats of the greatest cyclist. To Fausto Coppi, *Il Campionissimo*, champion of champions.'

To the east is a circular ossuary containing the remains of 8,582 German and Austro-Hungarian soldiers who died here. The Dolomites were the scene of vicious fighting in both World Wars, with many soldiers dying from cold and exposure, as well as from fierce combat.

As we begin the descent, I'm reminded of a story from the 1940 Giro d'Italia. Bartali – then a teammate of Coppi at the Legnano team – turned left at the bottom instead of taking the right-hand turn to the Passo Sella. By the time Bartali caught up with his 20-year-old teammate, 





► Coppi (who was leading the race) was starting to crack after several draining days in the saddle, and Bartali was forced to stuff snow down the back of Coppi's jersey to revive his spirits.

I make sure I take the correct turn and begin the third climb of the day to the Passo Sella. The ascent starts in the shade of a dense pine forest that provides welcome relief. Gradients at the bottom hover around 6% but jump to 7-8% on the upper slopes. However, the final few kilometres of the Passo Sella are as compelling as any I've ridden. Spinning around one of the last hairpins, we rise up a steep incline to be greeted by a wall of giant grey rock pyramids erupting out of the earth ahead. They are mesmerising in their size and grandeur. I ask Klaus if he ever gets used to having such stunning landscapes on his doorstep. With a smile and a shake of his head, I have my answer.

Occasional large cracks in the road, the scars of a fierce winter, look big enough to swallow a wheel

Day in the Gardena

A few white clouds and drops of rain accompany our descent towards the final climb of the Sella Ronda loop – the 2,136m Passo Gardena. But the brooding weather only enhances the rugged beauty of our surroundings.

The opening kilometres of the Passo Gardena feature

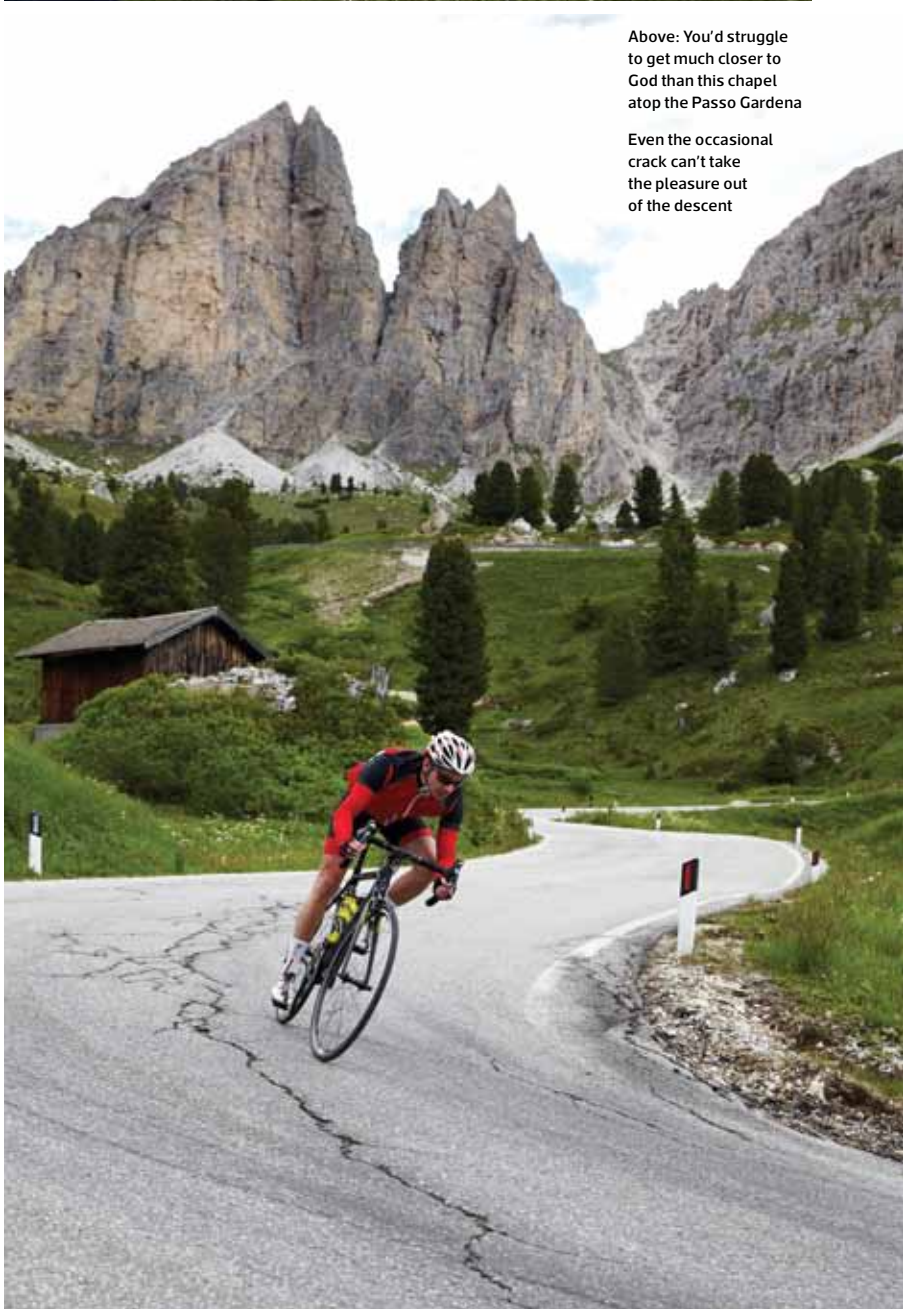
a long, straight ascent through a forested valley in the shadow of an imposing cliff, before you reach a short plateau halfway up the climb. Pedalling towards the serrated peaks at its summit, I feel like I'm commencing a siege on a massive fortress. However, with an average gradient of 6%, I know that this is a battle in which patience will win out.

When we finally reach the wild and windswept summit, with its jumble of giant boulders and stark rock spires, Klaus tells me that it's worth rolling a few hundred metres to the other side, where the Rifugio Alpino resort offers spectacular views. We stop for a while to rest our legs and feed our eyes on the valley below us. The descent will be fun, Klaus says. Val Gardena, the nearby ski piste, hosts numerous downhill World Cup races and the curling grey ribbon of road ahead ►



Above: You'd struggle to get much closer to God than this chapel atop the Passo Gardena

Even the occasional crack can't take the pleasure out of the descent







Left: It helps take your mind off what looms above if you think of these as tunnels rather than avalanche shelters

Previous pages:
The descent of the Passo Gardena is fast, despite frequent hairpins, and is made even more dramatic by the brooding cloud cover

By the numbers

Because sometimes words aren't enough

106

Distance ridden in kilometres

7

Number of passes crossed

1

Sighting of Fausto Coppi

3,130

Total altitude climbed in metres

15

Maximum percentage gradient on the Valparola

22,000

Number of riders who participated in Sella Ronda Bike Day in 2015

17

Pinarello bikes seen en route

► confirms that we are also about to enjoy some fine gravity-assisted entertainment.

The descent features long straights on which we can pick up pace, interspersed with some sharp hairpins that yank us back into safety mode. Occasional large cracks in the road, the scars of a fierce winter, look big enough to swallow a wheel, but the road surface is generally kind. Giant avalanche barriers line the peak to our left, while the clouds throw shadows on the forest to our right. I take a few turns too quickly and rein myself in, but

Klaus and René are more skilled and shoot ahead, past the red cable cars, wooden chalets and larch trees, until we arrive back in Corvara.

It's necessary to repeat the Passo Campolongo in order to complete the figure-of-eight route we have planned, but it's a gentle climb and serves as a good chance to chat about cycling and kit. I'm fascinated that Klaus and René are sporting Rapha clothing and seem more interested in discussing Sir Bradley Wiggins than Vincenzo Nibali. Much as British cyclists love exploring cycling playgrounds ►



The final stretch is tough thanks to some vicious 15% gradients and glimpses of imagined summits



abroad and indulging the heritage of Italian cycling, it seems that our European cousins are just as enthusiastic about British cycling culture.

When we reach the town of Arabba again, this time we fork left and enjoy an exhilarating dash through the valley to the town of Andraz, which includes 200m of descent in 10km. I hit the drops, pedal hard and revel in the free speed. We whizz through a warren of cream houses and peach-coloured hotels in the sleepy village of Pieve di Livinallongo, before gliding along a balcony road to Andraz.

From here we begin the final climbs of the day, first to Falzarego, before continuing up the same road to the Passo Valparola. The Falzarego pass was built in time for the 1956 Winter Olympics in nearby Cortina d'Ampezzo. The early part is mellow enough and we slice through a fragrant pine forest that has plenty of false flats. The forest opens up at intervals to permit the occasional



glimpse of the valley below, which helps prove that we are actually making vertical progress.

At the hamlet of Pian di Falzarego we pass a small chapel. On the upper slopes we head into a tunnel and curl around a tight hairpin bend carved out of the mountainside, meaning we dip into the shade of a cave before emerging into the sunlight on the other side. The cleverly engineered road is held up here by stone arches that from afar resemble Roman ruins. In the final kilometres the dense green forest gives way to spiked crags, piles of scree and colossal slabs of rock. After 885m of ascent, it's a hostile welcome and I feel strangely vulnerable.

Despite the cold reception, it's worth continuing another 1.2km to the Passo Valparola. This final stretch is tough, thanks to some vicious 15% gradients and the cruel way the road offers glimpses of imagined summits, even though the real one hides behind boulders and cliffs. ▶

Climbs, tunnels, hairpins... the Passo Falzarego has them all. The name means 'False King' and comes from a legend about an evil ruler turned to stone for betraying his people



The descents are fast and technical in places. But mainly fast

The locals here say, *'Pedala forte, mangia bene'* – pedal hard, eat well – and we're eager to get back to the hotel

▶ When I reach the Passo Valparola I discover an austere but striking landscape that is still riddled with scars from the fierce battles fought here by Italian and Austrian troops during the First World War. Given its dark history, there is an unsurprisingly eerie atmosphere at the summit. Looming to the right is the monolithic peak of Lagazuoi, a 2,835m mountain that hides wartime tunnels, trenches and machine gun turrets. A museum chronicles some of the brutal fighting that took place here and all of a sudden my private battle with the mountain doesn't seem quite so important.

After exploring the summit for a while, we begin our final descent back to Corvara. The locals here enjoy the saying, *'Pedala forte, mangia bene'* (pedal hard, eat well) and all three of us are eager to get back to the hotel in order to attack a different kind of mountain – one made of pasta. When we arrive in Corvara, with the late-evening sunshine staining fiery new shades onto the bleached peaks that encircle the town, our figure-of-eight route is finally complete. This is a ride that will score 10 out of 10, though, with any intrepid cyclist eager to explore mountains rich in history, heroes and legends. 🌸
Mark Bailey is a freelance journalist and legend in his own household

How we got there

TRAVEL

Monarch Airlines (monarch.co.uk) flies to Venice Marco Polo from London Gatwick, Birmingham and Manchester, with prices starting from £64 return. Transfers from Venice to Alta Badia are available via taxi, shuttle or shared buses.

ACCOMMODATION

Hotel La Perla (hotel-laperla.it) in Corvara offers bespoke 'Leading Bike' cycling packages, including meal plans, guided tours, laundry services, bike hire and more.

The on-site Pinarello Passionate Lounge features some iconic bikes, including ones that belonged to Sir Bradley Wiggins and Miguel Indurain. Three-night packages start from £286 per person, which includes hire of a Pinarello Dogma F8 and the services of a mechanic and soigneur. Special Giro d'Italia packages are now available.

INFORMATION

Visit the Alta Badia tourism website (altabadia.org) for information on the new 'Bike Friendly' infrastructure, which

means cyclists can pick up route maps and carry bikes for free on ski lifts. You can book guided trips through Dolomite Biking (dolomitebiking.com).

THANKS

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