

# Maratona

## A Challenge in the Tyrol

A Gran Fondo event covering 138km and over 4,000m of climbing through the most spectacular alpine landscape; who wouldn't want to experience this? Gary Hunt took on the Maratona dles Dolomites challenge in July this year.

The Maratona dles Dolomites is one of the premium cycling events on the planet, a real bucket list event for many cyclists across the world.

Traversing a picturesque loop route through the South Tyrol including sections made famous by the Giro d'Italia, the event is open to all, though places are limited, and racing at the serious end of the field is fast and hotly contested. Lower down the field riders take on the challenge to compete with their mates or just to complete the race, but the commitment and struggle is no less real.

This year marked the 28th running of the event which began in 1986 with just 166 riders racing a 175km course that took the winner over 10 hours. By 1994 there were over 5,000 entrants and still the event continued to grow. This year the field was capped at 9,000 riders with a lucky 44 from Australia and 789 women gaining entry across the three distances on offer from the 35,000 riders who applied. The vast majority of the entrants are Italian and many make it a day trip or stay in surrounding villages to make the early start before heading home after the ride.

This year the race took in seven climbs including the Passos Campolongo, Pordoi, Selle, Gardena, Campolongo again, Giau, Falzarego and Valparola for a distance just on 140km and total climbing of a little over 4,000 metres. The organisers threw in a surprise kicker just three kilometres from the end this year; a 300m climb at 19% Mur de Giat — the Cat Wall; a winning effort after 135km of riding.

While short sharp pinches like this may be taxing, it's easy to think that climbs of six or seven per cent should not pose too much of a problem, and though the length of these Italian passes may not match some of the epics in France or Switzerland, they are long enough to sap the energy of the unprepared.





Corvara

ITALY

A neat feature of the Maratona is that when you pass over milestone checkpoints usually at the top of the pass, a text message is sent to the mobile numbers you nominated on the website, so your support team on site, or abroad, can track your progress through the ride. There's also an astonishing number of photographers on hand who submit their work to a central database from where you can source every image of yourself taken on the day, automatically identified by your plate number. Similarly there is video available online from fixed location cameras that will show you riding by, including footage of you crossing the line that you can share on social media if you're that way inclined. Shortly after the finish you'll be emailed your ride time and also splits for each climb!

The Passo Giau at an average of 9.9 per cent for just on 10km is the most challenging climb of the Maratona.

The altitude of the course plays a part in making the climbs tough too, with oxygen saturation in the air down to 16% at the top of the passes (approx. 2200m) compared with almost 21% that you might be used to at sea level. It's generally accepted by occasional frequenters of alpine atmosphere that from around 1200m, where oxygen levels sit around 18%, you can notice that it's harder to breathe. And as the entire area is above this level, for the first few days you might start to feel a little breathless when you begin to climb.

### The Course

#### Passo Campolongo - 5.8km, 6.1%

From the 6:30am start in La Villa you ride a few kilometres to the town of Corvara where the Campolongo climb begins. It's a gentle rise with a few switchbacks at the start, followed by a few long straight drags to the crest and food station which you might forego on this first time round (you'll climb this hill once more shortly). The backdrop is stunning, with postcard views from every angle. Descending to the town of Arabba is fast and fun with long straight shutes, tight switchbacks and a few sweeping corners.

#### Passo Pordoi - 9.2km, 5.8%

Immediately after the Campolongo descent begins one of the most famous and regularly featured climbs of the Giro d'Italia, the Passo Pordoi. It weaves its way up the back of the Sella group of mountains through green farmland where long-horned cattle graze, their cowbells clanking occasionally, and unseen marmots sound their high pitched cries of alarm. Views through the crystal clear air go on for miles behind you, though you'll more likely be eyeing a stream of riders ahead, snaking their way up the winding road to the top of the pass. It's here you'll find a bronze monument paying tribute to Fausto Coppi; one of the heroes of the Giro. This point is also the beginning of a sweeping and swooping 10-minute descent through the pines that will see the smile return to your face.



#### Passo Sella - 5.5km, 7.9%

Changing down to begin the next climb you're greeted by some local musicians on the roadside and then a merry troupe of alpine 'percussionists', each armed and cranking for all they're worth on their own deafening rotary-handled noise box that sounds like a dozen jackhammers. It's good incentive to keep your momentum up and quickly push on with the climb. The road passes fairly close to the sheer rock walls of the mountains here, dwarfed by these rugged monolithic beings, ancient and unchanging. So close the enormity of them crowds in on you, insisting you recalibrate your perspective on life, your sense of self, and world view.

This is the highest pass of the day and the second steepest of the real climbs (forgetting the Mur de Giat) but it is the shortest of the lot too. So you'll be at the top soon enough,

but possibly sucking in lungs full of crisp mountain air before the journey down.

#### Passo Gardena - 5.8km, 4.8%

The Passo Gardena is a climb of two sections with a short false-flat in the middle. There's a well-stocked food station in the break where you can find all sorts of refreshment, from chocolate wafers to jam slices, fresh fruit, ham and cheese rolls plus plenty of water, cola or premixed energy drink. Note also the surreal incongruity of the swinging jazz band playing in the carpark for your pleasure.

You'll finish the second half of the Gardena and descend the long straights and hairpins to the start/finish line. But you have barely scratched the surface, having just completed the short course of 5.5km. You've come halfway around the world; why not make a day of it?

Onward! Back over the Campolongo for

the second time and once again through the tiny hamlet of Arabba but this time turning left along the closest thing to flat road you will find today. A few kilometres down this road is the point of no return; the choice of medium course; the easy road, just a couple of hours' riding before a partially deserved beer, or the long course which will see you battle the mighty Giau — for which, should you succeed, you will be amply rewarded with ale, Strava kudos aplenty and bragging rights for a lifetime.

#### Passo Giau - 9.9km, 9.3%

Don't confuse the small climb up the Col di Santa Lucia with your nemesis; this is a red herring, a paltry pimple of a hill the organisers have thrown in to mess with your head. You'll know when the Giau begins... there's a big sign that says Passo Giau.

There are 29 switchbacks hidden in the mountainside above you, each numbered

and interminably counting down those left until the top. It's very green, and surrounded by trees at the lower end but this gives way to wide open spaces of the saddle nearer the top. Even the locals, presumably acclimatised to the altitude, seem slower here, but this is definitely the place that will make you glad you are built more like Chris Froome than Robert Forstemann.

To be sure this climb is no Angliru, nor does it have the length of Ventoux, but for the average Joe after 87km of riding and 2,350m climbing, you will notice the road is pointing up a little. Rest assured you will make it to the top of this 10km climb, and that such is the nature of these roads, your reward will include around 10km of downhill.

The descent here is something akin to leaping from an airplane and should perhaps come with that 'don't forget to pull the ripcord' caution. The view from the top here is just mesmerising and you need to remem-





Corvara in July is usually cool in the morning and warm during the day. There is an average of 13 days in the month when precipitation surpasses 1mm. When it does rain it's usually in the afternoons after clear mornings so Brevet rides are usually scheduled for the morning leaving your afternoons free. However this mountainous area is subject to sudden changes in weather and temperature, so it's advisable to pack of warm gear and a good rain jacket just in case.

Hire bikes are available in a range of sizes and component specs from the local bike stores (get in early for the best selection) and can take the cost and hassle out of transporting your own bike. I hired a bike over there and while it got me round, I did miss riding my own bike on these stunning roads.

The 2014 winner Stephano Cecchini completed the course in 4:44:15 just three seconds ahead of second place getter Tiziano Lombardi, with Roberto Cunico in third place. First woman across the line was Astrid Schartmuller in 5:24:56, some 10 minutes ahead of Laetitia Roux, followed 12 minutes later by Gloria Bee.

ber to keep your eyes on the road and those rapidly approaching hairpins—and be ready to brake! You'll likely hit your top speed on the way down this descent.

Bring on the Falzarego!

### Passo Falzarego / Passo Valparola 11.5km, 5.8%

Even though it's long, the last big climb of the day seems pretty cruisy after the Giau, with long straights between turns. Pine forest frames the road here giving your senses a rest from the visual overload of South Tyrolean alpine vistas, at least until you breach the tree line close to the top of the Falzarego and then turn up the Valparola. (There's a café at the turn here if you feel like a genuine espresso caffeine hit rather than a sticky gel pack simulation.) As you crest the top of the Valparola and head for home you'll likely be beaming as the realisation of accomplishment dawns. There's a 15km descent ahead, then the murderous Cat Wall and just a few kilometres of rolling road to the finish in Corvara—you may even have the locals lining the streets and cheering

you onwards as you turn up the finishing straight to cross the line.

The Maratona organisers run this event impeccably well. The availability of information, the notification of results, the food stations, the start line corrals, the mechanical services and entertainment throughout, not to mention the after party in the ice hockey stadium, are very well run; the management here seems almost as Swiss as the mountainside chalets that dot the hillsides.

To be perfectly honest I had little idea what I was signing up for when I agreed to ride this event. I imagined there would be some hills, but had not heard of the Maratona before, let alone any knowledge of the distance or altitude profile. While riding 140km and climbing over 4,000m in a day is not unheard of in Australia, it's a pretty solid ride in most people's books. The seven unabating climbs at modest grade pose an achievable challenge for most riders with reasonable fitness. And even though the event is hotly contested at the fast end by ex, semi and neo pro riders who do set some cracking times, as Greg LeMond so suc-

cinctly put it, "it doesn't get any easier; you just go faster", so they suffer all the same.

The one thing you cannot begin to imagine if you've not encountered these mountains personally is the sheer jaw-dropping overwhelmingness, the breathtaking magnificence of them. To be able to ride a bike through this area is a real privilege, and to complete a challenging event like the Maratona in these spectacular surrounds is very special; an experience that will stay with you forever.



## Brevet Alpine Cycling Adventures

With entry to the Maratona such a lottery (you have about a one in four chance of getting in!) and the event itself just a brief one day gig, once you've made up your mind this event is a 'must do', it's worth considering options to firstly ensure your entry is successful and secondly make the most of your trip to this spectacular place. Just flying into Venice from Australia will likely endow you with some level of jetlag, so a few days to settle in and get your clock sorted is a good idea. You might like to spend some time in the Dolomites to do a few recon rides and get used to the altitude a little.

There are a few tour operators who can manage your trip to the Maratona. I was a guest of Brevet Alpine Cycling Adventures who run around a dozen cycling tours every year. I concede I've not done a cycling tour like this before but thoroughly enjoyed my time with Brevet and recommend the experience of joining a gran fondo tour like theirs. It takes the hassle of travel and accommodation plans out of your hands and lets you sit back and relax.

Their Maratona Dolomites cycling tour comprises six days of riding the Maratona roads and guarantees entry to the Maratona itself. They can pick you up from Marco Polo Airport in Venice and take you to your Corvara accommodation right in the thick of the action. And the action is very thick, the town is completely overrun by cyclists and hotels are booked out well in advance. Brevet works closely with the very comfortable

and recently refurbished La Tandra hotel in Corvara. The hotel is complete with a bike storage room, a highly regarded restaurant, bar and day spa facility including steam room, sauna and massage. Situated on the edge of town it's just two minutes' walk from cafes and restaurants, three minutes from the local bike shop and only 10 minutes' walk to the other side of the village.

A tour like Brevets' Maratona package is also a chance to meet some great people. Our group built a strong rapport very quickly including with the Brevet team, and by the end of the shuttle from the airport we were already a tight group. Team GB comprised Richard; the London based finance guru (with just eight months of riding under his belt), the charming Sandy also from London and fresh from her Welsh Dragon Ride, and the garrulous Chris, who seemingly has learned the secret of eternal youth. Then there was Charlie, an affable IT and communications manager from Dubai, Gerard the vegetarian evangelist from Galway, three mates from Puerto Rico (including an eye surgeon and another chap who had climbed a knee-trembling 94,000m in the first six months of the year) and two other Aussies —both of whom I was not aware were coming—Justin, the smiling race machine from my own home town of Wangaratta and also the one time cycling media mogul Gerard Knapp who was back for his second tour with Brevet. It was a real pleasure to get to know all of these guys and spend the week with them.

Our guides Tom, Raphael and Alain who comprise the core of the Brevet team made

the trip an absolute pleasure and quite trouble free. They were well organised, friendly, helpful and very well-credentialed. Tom, a UK expat, is the brains who keeps it all going. He was previously a management consultant and is pretty handy on the bike. Rapha worked for the UN in a past life and is also a cycling 'machine'. Then there's Alain who works for the UCI on the Tour of Beijing when he's not with Brevet. He rode the Maratona this year finishing 25th overall at an average speed of 26.5kph, and third in his age group!

Taking on the climbs of the Maratona is technically not difficult; you just find your rhythm and keep on spinning, but the descents with long steep shutes and tight hairpins can be a tad daunting if you've not ridden them before. The Brevet guides provide useful expert coaching and advice in the days leading up to the Maratona about how to deal with the speed but also the sheer number of riders you'll ride with on race day, and especially how to ride safely and smoothly amongst them on the descents. 🚴

*Thanks to Tom Eeles and the guiding team at Brevet ([www.brevet.cc](http://www.brevet.cc)) for hosting Bicycling Australia at the Maratona Dolomites. You can book your spot on the start line now at [www.brevet.cc](http://www.brevet.cc) and receive 10% discount with the code "bicyclingaustralia" until November 30th 2014*

*For more information check out [www.brevet.cc](http://www.brevet.cc)*