

The Grandest Fondo

There may be longer sportives and ones with more climbing, but few events are as demanding, popular or beautiful as the Maratona dles Dolomites, as *Cyclist* discovers

Words **PHIL GALE** Photography **WIG WORLAND**

Rounding a corner, my small group finally rides into the sunshine, its rays offering us some warmth after the cold start. I look at the cathedral-like rock formation that towers over us, the beauty taking

my mind off of the pain in my legs. All around me, wiry Italians in pristine kit are keeping up a fast pace, and I realise that I'm in a race. This is no gentle jaunt in the countryside – the riders here take it as seriously as any pro event and I'm already pushing my limits to stay with the bunch.

I can't help smiling as my mind jumps back five days to my last minute call-up to ride the Maratona dles Dolomites, one of Italy's biggest and most scenic gran fondos. Taking place in the centre of the Dolomites, the stunning mountain range in northern Italy, it's an event that not only offers a hard route, but also some of the most epic landscapes you can ride through. When I got the call asking me if I was free to ride that weekend, my answer was a very quick and concise, 'Yes!'

The Maratona is an event that has been on my radar since my first gran fondo in 2010. By 2011 I was a regular participant in European gran fondos, but somehow this one had always slipped through my net, so this is a very welcome chance to make up for missed opportunities. Even if my fitness isn't quite what it was a few years ago, I'm looking forward to the challenge. For Italians, the Maratona is one of the top gran fondos on the tick-list, because it takes in seven punishing climbs in its 138km distance.

First held in 1987, with a meagre 167 riders taking part, the 2013 Maratona has 9,000 riders

The details

Get in quick if you want a place in next year's event



What: Maratona dles Dolomites

Where: Corvara, Italy. Note that registration is in Badia and the start in La Villa. There are shuttles but be aware of what time they stop if you don't want to get caught out.

Next one: 6th July 2014

Entry: There are 3,000 places saved for tour operators, so if you can't get entry through the website (maratona.it), going with a tour company will guarantee a place.

Cost: €77 for the event plus a €10 deposit for the timing chip.

Entry requirements:

To collect your entry you'll need your passport, a race licence or doctor's certificate and proof of entry.



(its field limit) with over 30,000 attempting to register for the event online. In terms of popularity, it's up there with the Etape du Tour and Marmotte, which means that anyone looking to do the event needs to book up early, not only to gain registration but also to make sure that they can find accommodation, as over 12,000 people descend on the Alta Badia valley during the Maratona week.

Pre-match nerves

Three days after the call and I'm waiting in Venice airport, the closest main transit hub to the event, for my shuttle. Ahead of me is a three-hour bus journey from the Veneto Plains up into the Dolomites. Checking the delights of social media I see news from the event that some passes are closed due to snow. Snow at the end of June?

Above and previous page: The leading group flies up the Passo Sella. Note the helicopter capturing the action for live TV

Left: Riders process through the start town of Corvara, with the Sassongher mountain in the background

Right: The Passo Falzarego, one of the Maratona's umpteen 2000m+ climbs

I know the winter was long but this is an ominous sign of the trials to come. I tell myself that it's only Friday and there are two days until the Maratona and weather can (please, please) change.

During the transfer to Corvara, the town where the Maratona is based, I do some research on the route and the course profile – partly out of interest and partly to help me ignore the other Maratona riders on the bus who are chatting about the winter gear they have with them. I have come prepared only for Italian sunshine.

As with all gran fondos, the Maratona has three different routes to choose from: the Sellaronda, or short route – 55km and 1,780m of climbing; the Medio Fondo – 106km and 3,090m of climbing; and the Gran Fondo comprising of 138km with a leg-sapping 4,190m of ascent.

I have my eyes on the Gran Fondo route, the ▶





Left and bottom:
Cyclist presses on
up the Passo Giau

‘The starting gun sounds and the riders head off at a full sprint – a usual tactic for a gran fondo of this grade’

► now-dormant competitor within me slowly coming back to life. I haven’t pinned a number onto a jersey since September 2011, so I temper my bravado and examine the options of a bail-out route on the Medio Fondo.

As I browse the key facts of the Maratona, it dawns on me just how tough this ride is. Seven mountain passes, five of which are over 2,100 metres, including the top six highest roads in the Dolomites. This makes me nervous, as my training has been inconsistent to say the least.

Summer chills

It’s the morning of the event, 48 hours after my coach ride into the mountains, and I’m dreaming of the warmth of that heated transfer. At 5.30am, waiting at the start with the hordes of other competitors, the cold is boring into my body. I’m in the front pen, with cyclists looking like they’re heading out on a winter ride surrounding me. Some are decked out in thick jackets, while others have devised more interesting methods of keeping warm, opting for disposable paper overalls that make them look like forensic investigators at a crime scene. It’s an unnerving sight at this time of the morning. I hug myself and pray for the gun in the knowledge that in 60 minutes’ time we’ll be climbing the 1,875m Campolongo Pass at full

gas, creating some much needed body heat.

During this wait the sheer size of the Maratona hits me. I’ve done plenty of sportives in the past, but I have never seen such a vast mass of bodies lined up at the start. As I look back it’s impossible to see where the queue of riders ends. A constant flow of cyclists passes, while the announcers build up the crowds with shouts and loud music. Overhead TV helicopters buzz around, getting their pre-race shots. The Maratona is broadcast live from start to finish on national TV channel Rai Sport, just like the Giro.

Can you call this gran fondo a race? Think of it more like a marathon, where at the front the riders are paid – full-time athletes with full support, riding to win – while further back the riders are just there to complete the challenge.

At last the starting gun sounds and the riders head off at a full sprint – a normal tactic for a gran fondo of this grade, with the lead riders wanting to sort the strong from the weak.

Straight away a group of 30 riders forms at the front, which I cling to for dear life. The pace is high, and with my legs still stiff from the cold, it’s an effort that puts me in the red. I keep telling myself to relax, it will surely ease, but the tempo just keeps rising, and as the lead group slowly thins to 20 riders I am distanced over the top of the Campolongo, the memory of how fast ►





◀ these Italian events are coming flooding back.

After the Campolongo the course splits from the Sellaronda loop, and all the riders I can see follow the Gran Fondo circuit. The descent from one climb is followed immediately by the ascent of the next. This relentless routine sets the tone for the rest of the Maratona, with barely a flat section in sight. Slowly finding my rhythm after the frenetic pace of the start I ride with a small group over the chilly summit of the Passo Pordoi, snow all around us.

One pass leads straight into another. The sun slowly climbs in the sky, bringing with it warmth. In the morning light the vistas are out of this world. Often I find my mind wandering from the riding at hand when another great view – snow-capped peaks in the distance or rocky outcrops overhead – appears in front of me, and despite the effort I find that I have a big smile on my face.

A close shave

The main event of the Maratona's Gran Fondo route is the 2,236m Passo Giau. Often the scene of battles in the Giro d'Italia, it is one of the toughest climbs in the area. It's only 9.9km long, but it includes 922m of climbing at an average of 9.3%.

After descending the Campolongo for the second time we turn left and head down the valley towards the Giau. With the rolling valley road the only section of flat (well, flattish) I have ridden so far, I get a chance to regain my breath



and I decide to stick to my guns and take the Gran Fondo circuit rather than sneak off onto the Medio Fondo route.

Our arrival in the small town of Selva di Cadore marks the foot of the Giau, and a left-hand turn takes us straight on to its 9.3% gradient. Two riders in my group wish each other luck and we all settle in to do battle.

The Piton bike that I am riding has the same set-up I've used before at previous gran fondos: 53x11 as the largest gear; 38x25 the smallest. I am not a grinder by any means, but I really didn't think I would need anything smaller – given my years of racing and riding. That was the theory, anyway. Now cursing myself, regretting the two beers and enormous slab of cake I enjoyed the day before, I take off my leg warmers, have a nature break, suck up the gear

'Normally my Garmin would warn me of sharp corners to come, but I forgot to bring it so I'm flying blind'

The rider's ride

Piton Scuro RS, €1,900 frame and fork, piton.it



For many the name Piton will be unknown. A small bike outfit based outside of Brescia in Lombardy, Piton really does have Italian flare. The Scuro RS is made from Dedacciai tubing, but with a custom Piton finish.

It's not the most featherweight bike you'll find – my size 58 with full Dura-Ace weighed 7.5kg – but the rigidity makes it ride as though it's lighter. For me, the bike's best quality is found in its handling: stable and predictable. It urges you to push it hard into the corners (sometimes to ill effect, as I discovered). The integrated seatpost can make packing the bike for travel abroad tricky, but if you're looking for something that will stand you out from the pack, then the Piton should be on your radar.

Above: Green, white, and riders in the red... the Italian tricolore on the Passo Pordoi, which tops out at 2,239m



situation and start to muscle up the slope.

The Giau offers no respite in its gradient. The climb is brutal, relentless, and those of us who are over-gearred are paying dearly. At the start of the climb, our group is around 3:40 off the leaders. The TV helicopter that follows the front group appears tantalisingly close. By the summit I have lost a handful more places, so zip up my vest knowing that a speedy descent is necessary to get back in contention.

So far the descents have been welcoming, with great visibility, predictable corners and relatively gentle gradients allowing me to ride at maximum speed. I hit the descent off the Giau at the same pace I tackled the others. Normally I'd ride with a Garmin computer, and a quick glance at its mapping screen is a handy tool to provide a warning of upcoming sharp bends. However, I forgot to bring it on this trip, so I'm flying blind and throwing caution to the wind.

Halfway down the descent I get caught out. ▶



The Maratona is widely regarded as one of the toughest and most beautiful sportives on the calendar. Cyclist concurs

☛ Taking a steep hairpin I exit too fast for the one that appears straight after. I'm carving a big S-shape and halfway through the second turn my front wheel slips away from me. I manage to stop myself from going down, but I overcompensate and end up throwing the bike into the outside of the turn. Suddenly my right hand, still on the drops, is over the Armco that lines the edge of the road, my right leg rubbing against it as I fight hard not to get tipped into the chasm below. Coming to a stop, the inside of my right bar tape shredded, I fall forward, chin hitting the barrier, clip out, blink, and realise I am still alive.

As the adrenaline courses around my body, the realisation of what I have just got away with dawns on me. I feel like I've used up several of my nine lives, and I decide that my desire to survive trumps my need for a fast finishing time, so I opt to take it steadier to the finish.

Riding into the sunset

Not riding at race pace allows me more opportunity to appreciate the terrain of the Maratona. The Dolomites look like no other mountain range in Europe. One moment I'm surrounded by lush green pasture, and then the valley opens and high above are rocky peaks, where the end of the tree-line is so abrupt it looks man-made. It's so perfect it feels like the set of a film, and I can't help suspecting that if I could see behind the peaks I would discover they are cut-outs made from chipboard and papier mache.

The rest of the Gran Fondo circuit comprises one last climb and then a short run back to the start village of Corvara. By now spectators are out in force, supporting all the riders in their final efforts. Local residents, musicians, cycling fans and family members cheer us as we pass, until we roll past the vast crowds at the finish.

The Maratona is one of the most beautiful cycling events I have done. Its climbs are hard, but the distance is manageable and it's not out of reach for any rider who wants to experience Italy's gran fondo scene. There's no better place to ride than the Dolomites, and when the roads are closed to cars it becomes even more special.

Despite my close call on the descent of the Giau, the competitor within me has been re-awoken and already I'm considering what I could do with a bit more training (and a Garmin to show me the route ahead). I suspect my relationship with the Maratona is far from over. 🌸
Phil Gale is writer and photographer who still harbours dreams of becoming a pro cyclist

How we got there

Follow our route to the Dolomites

TRAVEL

There are two main airports close to Corvara: Innsbruck at 130km and Venice at 200km. We flew to Venice, which has multiple flights a day from London and all over the UK. If you don't hire a car, the Maratona has a transfer partner, Holimites (holimites.com), which offers transfers from Venice and will also help you find hotels.

ACCOMMODATION

Being a winter sports resort there is a vast array of hotels throughout the Alta Badia valley to suit every taste and budget. We stayed at the Hotel Diamant in San Cassiano (hoteldiamant.com). Though away from the start, causing some complications with shuttles, the hotel owner did everything in his power to make sure we were well

looked after, even taking us to Corvara twice in his car. All the hotels in the area can be found at altabadia.org.

THANKS

Thanks to Marco Mori of Gusto Cycling for all his help with organising the trip (gustocycling.com). The company arranges cycling packages to events such as the Maratona and L'Eroica, as well as guided cycle tours in Tuscany.