

VecchioJo finally makes it to the Dolomites and does the Maratona dles Dolimites

by VecchioJo July 9, 2013



I've waited half of my life to be here. About 25 years ago a friend came back from a walking holiday in the Dolomites and told me I needed to ride my bike there and ever since then it's been nagging me. Teased by stunning pictures in magazines and watching various Tours weave through has only made matters worse, but thanks to a mix of poverty and inefficiency I've never made it in all that time. I was lucky enough to go there for a cross-country skiing trip a few months ago, but amazing as it was it wasn't riding a bike, it only served to fan the embers of desire brighter. So when the opportunity arose to do the Maratona dles Dolimites all the things that could have got in the way were quietly and swiftly swept under the carpet. When I arrive in Corvara it's cold and it's raining but it doesn't matter because I'm surrounded by impressive fists of rock punching up into the cloud, and my mountain heart is happy.



The Maratona dles Dolimites is a sportive, one of the big ones, but to think of it in British sportive terms is to do it a huge disservice, actually, it's a massive insult, it's a Gran Fondo, and done the way these things are done on the Continent. That's to say properly. The roads are closed, all day, the feed stations are stocked with real food, not out of date energy bars and sticky stale energy drink, motorbikes

patrol the route to help riders in distress, there are mechanic stations along the way and a TV helicopter follows the pointy end as the ride is televised live.

Riders get texts from the organizers with updates on the weather in the preceding days, and at the top of select climbs you're sent a message with your time and a final congratulatory text at the finish with your overall time and position. As you cross the line you get a medal, of course you get a medal, and a free recovery drink from Enervit, handing in your timing chip gets you either a Maratona baseball cap or 10 Euros in return, I'll take the note thank you, that'll pay for beer and ice-creams later.

Your number board comes with a selection of free vouchers on the side with which you can tear off and claim a free sausage, plate of pasta, glass of beer, and some strudel. Oh, and a free Maratona gilet. Not so bad. This is on top of the racer's pack with a 100 page ride programme, a selection of leg and bottom salves and potions and some energy drink, a sachet of clothes wash, a free bidon, a Maratona jersey and some gardening gloves, bizarrely. A bit better than a plastic bag with a tyre-lever, some zip-ties and a bike parts catalogue then.

The days before the event sees the area crawling with cyclists, hotels are booked up, cafes are riddled with Euro lycra, and barriers and banners are strung out along and over the roads through the town for the big day. In Badia where you sign on there's an Expo area where you can get all touchy-feely with Pinarellos, Sidis, Sportful kit, Selle Italia saddles and a whole bunch of other stuff, and if you're staying in a distant village there are free shuttle busses and taxis too and fro. Impressed yet?



The Maratona is set in the Alta Badia region of Italy which is right up the top near the border of Austria, and with a history that is only recently joined to the boot has a strange hybrid of Italian and German cultures going on, say "Danke" and they will reply "Prego", say "Grazie" and they will reply "Danke". Maybe just to confuse outsiders. The ride was started in 1987 with only 166 riders and numbers have grown significantly over the 27 years and the event is now 9,000 cyclists strong, and those are just the lucky ones picked from a pool of over 31,600 hopeful

entrants. Popular then. 76 nationalities take part and somewhat marvelously almost 1 in 10 of all riders are women. Unlike UK sportives which aren't races, even if some people pretend they are, the Maratona is a proper race with hard fought times, podiums and prize money. Ex Pros take part, and there are very serious teams jostling at the front of the peloton, many of the rest are after a personal best and a vast majority are just getting round as best they can. There are three routes to choose from; the Sellaronda at only 55 km with 1780 m of climbing, the Medio at 106 km and 3090 m and the full distance Maratona. This is only 138km, which at about 85 miles in old money doesn't sound particularly hard, it wouldn't even qualify for Epic if it wasn't for the fact that squeezed into that distance is 4190 metres of climbing with seven cols of note to contend with. Ah, that's adds a certain piquance to the day.



It's a bit of a shock to find out that the start is at 6.30am, and riders are ordered to be there fifteen minutes beforehand, and the road to the start closes to all traffic five minutes before that. Painful sums are done as to when the alarm has to be set and an early night is planned, this doesn't happen as there's a midnight clothing crisis in my room. Hopes of a glorious ride under summer sunshine through jagged peaks bursting into azzurro skies are dashed with the news a few days before that cold weather has hit and there's snow on the mountains with single digit temperatures. That wasn't supposed to happen. Just like getting ready for any weekends ride at home the weather forecast for northern Italy is checked hourly in the days preceding and it varies from 10 degrees with rain to 20 degrees with just showers in the afternoon. Many differing clothes of varied thermal ratings are packed. And waterproofs. Sigh. Combine the mixed forecasts with an early start that's going to be cold and then climbing and descending at altitude and it's a kit choice nightmare. Gloves, socks, cap and ¾ longs are sorted, now do I go for a short-sleeved jersey and arm-warmers or a full-on warm long-sleeve? Erring on the side of not wanting to die of hypothermia I opt for the latter. With a back pocket gilet and a showerproof. And a Buff just in case. It's a fitful sleep worrying it's all wrong.



Up too early for a rushed breakfast, and although it's pretty much still dark cyclists are already heading down to the start a few kilometres down the hill in La Villa, wrapped up like it's a freezing Winter ride - full leggings, white, long sleeves, balaclavas and neoprene overboots, and too many are in coverall decorating suits to keep warm until the start gun, which is an interesting look, even by European standards. There was a whispering fear that the hotel wouldn't have breakfast ready at this stupid time but they understand such pressing matters here and the full continental smorgasbord is laid out, there's even pasta and sauce for keen cyclists although that seems to be taking it a bit too far.

In the start pen I have that particular mix of excitement, fear and trepidation that only comes from being on a bike in the mountains very early in the morning with a big day ahead. It's an invigorating start line, and not just because I'm stood by the toilets, ladies are handing out coffee, hot-air balloons are right there, there are men on stilts doing that festival arty thing, several thousand people are behind me, a few hundred are in front, a helicopter swoops over head to get dramatic shots and the sun is finally peaking over the tops of the rock faces. It's quite simply beautiful.



There's a noisy speech in Italian, I suspect it's rousing and passionate, and we're off, luckily the road points gently up so it's not too frantic a pace, but after half a minute the second wave of riders is let loose behind us and for a brief period it's like a 4th Cat race, riders excitedly weaving in and out all over the place, time to hold your line and your breath and hope no-one is extra stupid. After a few easy climbing kilometres the route goes through Corvava, which despite the hour and the chill is full of people cheering us along, and then to make progress the road ramps steeply out of the town

right into the sun and the Passo Campolongo. Thanks to cold legs and an early start I'm in "that" gear already, this could be a long day, the road soon levels off but I keep it in a spinny ratio mindful that getting over-eager now could bite me in the calves later on.

None of the climbs on the Maratona are especially lengthy by alpine standards, the longest one is 11kms, and none of them are remarkably steep, well apart from the Giau, it's their relentless frequency that makes this ride tricky. We drop off the Campolongo into Arabba and because I haven't found my descending head yet I mince down quite convincingly, as soon as we're down in the village there's the chorus of clacking gears and we're straight into the next climb. A stand out feature of the Maratona is that there appears to be absolutely no flat bits. Anywhere. At all. Straight, up, straight down, straight up, repeat for several hours.

At this time of day the transaction between descent and climb is horrifically abrupt on the legs made frigid from fresh rushing air and lazy pedaling on the downhill, forced instantly to climb with no level section in between to ease muscles into effort. Looking up at the pretty helps distract the pain though, we're onto the Passo Pordoi now and the sun is up in the blue sky showing off the Dolomites in full holiday brochure joy. It's another steady climb made of switchbacks allowing views down the valley at the constant salmon stream of cyclists weaving up. At the summit a trio of Alpine horn players serenade the riders, if you can serenade on an alpine horn, and that marks two climbs out of seven done already and it's not even breakfast time. Lorks.

We plummet into the dark side of the mountain and straight back up the Passo Sella where there's a small feed station, I make a quick Formula 1 pit-stop and grab a banana chunk and a croissant, eat now for later, to my surprise and delight the croissant is filled with custard. Happy day. One I have further on will be filled with



chocolate; this could be the best event, ever. This climb and the next of the Passo Gardena are ticked off in quick succession, that's four out of the seven climbs done and over halfway in ascent terms, which is a boost. If you want inspiration for keeping going just look at Alex Zanardi who I pass on his hand-bike, his very tricked out hand-bike, as you'd expect from an Olympic champion, and he seems to be shadowed by another rider with just the one leg, and they're not going slowly. That sort of thing always makes your troubles and pains seem somewhat trivial. I also pass a dwarf on a bike, I'm pretty sure that's never happened before. Tiny tiny little legs pedaling the tiniest bike up a hill, again, not slowly.

The descent off the Passo Gardena isn't the most technical, nor is it the longest, but it's got curves in all the right places, has a giggly personality and is a whole bunch of fun to be with, I'm smiling too much and biting my lip in that kind of way. If it was a first date you'd probably skip desert. The tail end of the downhill speeds us through Corvara and into the finish arena. I look at my computer, I've done 35 miles and it's taken not much less than three hours, that's probably the slowest I've ever done that distance, but to be fair half of that has been climbing, which isn't usual. The short Sellaronda course ends here and the Medio and Maratona routes go through the finish arch and head back out of town onto the Campolongo climb once again. I could just turn left and ride the 200 metres back to my hotel. Nap, beer, pizza. I keep going onto the Campolongo climb which is a lot lot easier the second time around as both legs and the day have warmed up, and knowing that the first bit of this climb is the hard bit makes the second half a pleasing little jolly.



After the scrum of the feed station at the top we fall into Arabba again but instead turn left this time and begin the long steady descent down the valley through Andraz, Cernadoi and Rudava. It's obvious that people are cruising and conscious of resting their legs as the obvious payback for these easy miles is the Giau, there are a couple of cheeky little climbs in the way but they hardly count. On the route profile the Giau is an ugly spike 87 kilometres in and obviously the Queen climb of the day. Just under 10km long and with an average gradient of 9.3% up to its 2236 metre crest it's a ruthless beast. A little bit of pre-ride research informs me that Giau has roughly the same gradient as my local and cycling's favourite of Ditchling Beacon, but climbing the Giau

will be like riding it 6 times in succession. Right you are then. The descent stops, we cross a bridge that's probably actually flat, turn left and we're straight onto the Giau, best settle in for the long haul.



This side of the Giau is horribly devoid of hairpins to ease the gradient and is characterized by long straight stretches that stretch uncompromisingly up the mountain. And just to turn the misery screw that little bit tighter the day has heated up considerably to the upper end of the forecast and the sun is beating off the hill. My cosy long-sleeved top and $\frac{3}{4}$ shorts choice turns out to be uncomfortably the wrong one and I'm an ugly mess of unzipped sweaty flappery. Previous Maratonas have been done in 35 degree heat, I appear to be doing my best to replicate this. People hide in the tunnel for shade and a bit of a rest where no-one can see them. It's only towards the summit as the road climbs above the tree line into open mountain pasture that the hairpins kick in to

offer some respite and the snow cooled air eases things a little.

My lowest gear availability of 39x25 isn't ideal and there's some gear envy with those on compact chainsets or dinner-plate rear cassettes but it's all I have on my bike so I just get on with it. Grind away sitting down, stand up to use different muscles and ease the knees, sit down and grind away. Repeat for 10 kilometres. With so many people on the road it helps psychologically that I'm passing people all the time, and I make a conscious effort to stick to wheels of riders that are going just that little bit slower than I might on my own so I don't blow myself up. It works and I get to the top in not too mangled a shape. The summit feed has the feel of a Red Cross aid station with riders wandering about dead-eyed, pawing at ham-and-cheese rolls and gulping down Coke.

The organizers are very big on the whole ecology, environment and harmony thing, and living in such a beautiful place as this who can argue with that? There are constant reminders to be tidy, loads of bins at the food stops, and the Maratona jersey has an "Eco Pocket" on the right hand side to safely stuff used energy bar and gel wrappers, but that doesn't stop riders littering the roads with spent wrappers, and enough arm-warmers, gloves and extra layers to build up quite an impressive, if eclectic, wardrobe.



A profile map of the day is printed upside-down on the top of your bar-mounted number so when it's folded back you can read the upcoming hardship from the saddle, very clever, more of that sort of thing please. The permanent up/down nature of the course has two weird consequences. One of them is that precious few groups form, there's no working together to ease things along, everyone climbs and descends at their own pace. To be honest most of the time it's safer that way, despite the fact that the standard of riding is significantly higher than at an UK event you still have to keep a watchful eye. Riders happily drift across your wheel on descents, yes, I'm looking at you old Italian guy in the orange jacket who casually did it three times, there was the

every popular 5 foot lunge back as a rider went from seated climbing to standing, and just your normal incontinent wafting across the road. As well as a number on the bars, it's a sportive after all, every rider had a number pinned on their backs, because it's also a race, and this rear number also displayed their name on as well so it helped to be able to mutter at a rider personally. But on the plus side it does mean that a local rider spots me as I pedal slowly past and we grab a bit of a chat halfway up a mountain.

The other strange aspect of that saw-tooth profile is that it's a very quiet ride. With all that climbing people are in their own special world of suffering so aren't in the best of moods, or willing to waste precious oxygen on idle chit-chat. Quite pleasant really. In the absence of noise there's only the parade of amusing sartorial choices to fill the time. The nippy early start and variable weather forecast led to some interesting fashion gaffes when combined with the Italian cyclist's fear of riding in anything less than 30 degrees. The shorts with winter overboots is a traditional perennial, but my favourite on the day was the knee-warmers runkled down so they became ankle-warmers. Always useful on a bike. Ankle-warmers. Giggling helped those climbs fly by.



There's a tangible sense of relief from the riders now that the bastard climb of the day is done and there's only one more to winch over. It's a swift descent but glee is tempered somewhat by the sight of a rider at the end of a long straight section on the wrong side of the barriers, wrapped with space-blankets and with a pair of ambulances in attendance. Wish them well under your breath and carry on with a little more care. The first rise after the mountain bottoms out has people instantly cluttering the road to remove jackets for the final push and compared to the Giau the initial slopes of the Passo Falzarego are a blessed relief. After a few switchbacks in the shade of the trees it straightens up for a long steady drag



underneath a massive face of Dolomite to the right and forest to the left, this could be one of the most picturesque roads in the world. The last kilometres resort to hairpins again before the last feed station and final cheeky little pinch up the Passo Valporola.

These final 2 kilometres of hill are too much for many, I pass cramping riders and others stood astride their bikes in grimacing pain, and I learn some new German and Italian swear words along the way. Pass through the rocks and that's pretty much it, all downhill, mostly, to the finish 18kms away. I doubt many people were looking up at their surroundings, just focusing on their front wheel to get them home, but it's truly spectacular, the descent is

open but for huge walls of rock crowding it on the right-hand side reminding you of your insignificance in this landscape, as if your legs weren't letting you know that already.

There's only the easy rise up from La Villa to deal with now and I have just enough fun and gumption in the legs to lazily push the big ring up the valley and get out the saddle for the last 100 metres in a last show of bravado into the finish. I'm not bothered by my time, let's just say it's about the winners time and a half, I was just happy to get round the unknown quantity unscathed whilst being in complete awe of the scenery, because I definitely shouldn't be smiling this much after so much climbing. The Maratona is an absolutely amazing and beautiful and challenging ride. Have the Dolomites been worth waiting half a lifetime for? Worth their wait in gold.



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