



Version: 1

Source URL: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/onyourbike/article4499842.ece>

THE TIMES

On Your Bike

Riding in the shadow of giants on the Maratona

Graham Hutson

17 Jul 2015 15:46:33

About half an hour into the climb I started to become suspicious. Where was the really nasty bit? Any minute now, that 11 per cent stretch of barren, shelterless torture would arrive. Just get it over with, I thought.

The Passo de Giau had been looming omnipresent over my every waking hour since I agreed to undertake the Maratona dles Dolomites in the grey days of winter. Back then it had been a speck in the distance, a ghostly shape on the horizon of tooth-like peaks visible from the window of the Airbus as you approach Marco Polo airport in Venice. I couldn't tell which peak it actually was, but I knew it was there.

No one had a good word to say about the Giau, and the Maratona itself came with a veiled health warning from friends of friends who had attempted it. The event was widely accepted as at once the most beautiful and most brutal events on the amateur cycling calendar. "I think it's quite tough," said my friend Stuart, with a frown. This hasn't done its reputation any harm at all - every year 40,000 hopefuls apply for 9,000 places.

When you arrive at the mountain resort area of Alta Badia the reason for the cap on numbers is clear. This is ostensibly a ski area comprising a few villages along a valley strung together by a reasonably narrow, winding road, and while the purpose of the Maratona is to encourage visitors during the quieter summer months, any more participants, with the attendant families and transport they bring with them, would overwhelm the place.

As it is, Alta Badia is teeming with cyclists. They are everywhere, to the extent that any other vehicles on the roads is reduced to their speed. But no one moans, mainly because traffic consists of either fellow cyclists in their cars, or people with a vested interest in them. One thing you learn about the Maratona, is that the entire population seems to get involved.

The event was born over dinner 29 years ago, when the local cycling club decided to mark its tenth anniversary with a race. The inaugural 1987 event was attended by 166 competitors. A combination of stunning scenery and the fact the route covers seven of the most beautiful mountain passes in Italy ensured it soon garnered a following from well outside the area. You're riding on roads that have seen their fair share of glory, too. The Pordoi, Sell and Campalongo have all featured in the Giro d'Italia on numerous occasions. As a fellow participant said: "There are no crap bits. Usually an event will go through an industrial estate or somewhere grotty to get to the next nice stage, but that doesn't exist on the Maratona. It's all amazing scenery."

Fast forward three decades and the Maratona dles Dolomites is considered by many to be the premier gran fondo of the year. As for popularity, not many events receive live TV coverage and are started by a helicopter with an whacking great speaker

slung beneath it. Add hot air balloons, a priest to bless participants and a brass band and it's almost a relief to be past the mayhem and rolling down the road. They're a friendly bunch up here, all smiles and glad tidings and they line the road to cheer us on with drums and horns and anything they can make a noise with. This is a happy place unaffected by unemployment and where you can buy gnomes in the gift shops, where the people are at least tri-lingual, speaking Italian, German and - a dialect unique to them - Ladin. Most of them thankfully speak English, too.

For many participants, the day itself forms only a small part of a full cycling holiday. They arrive in Alta Badia all through the preceding week, get a few miles riding in, acclimatise to the mountains, that sort of thing. By the time the race weekend has arrived they are gagging to get going and ripe for being sold to. Hence the Maratona village, where you can kit yourself out head to toe in limited edition Castelli kit - the brand's head office is nearby and many staff live and ride in Alta Badia - as well as stock up on any extras you might need, from gels to a new Kask helmet. You can even get, should you wish, a new bike.

My bike had been kindly loaned to me by Pinarello. A Dogma F8, pure pedigree, all the bells and whistles including Dura Ace Di2 groupset. At 10pm the night before the race I was sitting on the bed gazing adoringly at it leaning there against the wardrobe when something, we'll call it instinct, told me to squeeze the rear tyre. It wasn't so much flat as spongy, the consistency of a haribo. With only one tube on me, and reluctant to use it before I'd even set off, I bashed out a panicked text to Manolo, the man behind my trip and who had told me earlier in the day "they call me The Fixer." I don't think he was referring to flat tyres but if anyone could ...

Being friendly types, the hotel staff had left a track pump at reception that got enough air in my tyre to get me to the start where I was told a mechanic would be on hand. He wasn't but would be "round the corner." The helicopter boom echoed around the mountains, a cymbal crashed and a trombone honked and about a thousand riders jostled for position. The mechanic was not on the corner but at the corner after that so I collared the support crew of InGamba cycle tours in the mistaken belief they were there to help everyone and pretty much forced them to put a new tube in. They didn't notice the hair-thick strand of metal that had caused the flat in the first place and by the time I got to the foothills of the Pordoi I was deflated yet again, in every sense. I sprang off that bike and impressed even myself with the speed in which I changed the tube and found the offending sliver.

The Maratona is a gran fondo, which means it is a race. It's up to you how hard you ride, or not as the case may be. The upshot of this is that the standard of rider tends to be that of the energetic club rider. So the pace is brisk, riders in close proximity, especially on the initial ascents before the field has been given the chance to thin out. It's an intimate form of riding that can leave you questioning personal hygiene levels. Is that smell coming from the cow dung at the side of the road? Is that the waft of goulash?

Getting going again uphill amid hundreds of riders was a bit of a challenge but it wasn't long before the rest stop, where the true difference between gran fondos and sportives was laid out before me. Sickly gels played second fiddle to ham and cheese bagels, chocolate wafers, cubed-up pecan pie and lashings of Coca Cola. If there was a medal for stopping at each rest stop and sampling every piece of food, I'd have won it.

It was while tucking into a bagel at another such stop when I received the cheery text. The fact that I had summited the Passo Valparola, the final climb and it was all downhill from there save a punchy little 19 per cent hill near the end should have brought with it a feeling of intense relief. But for me it meant only one thing - that I had somehow taken a wrong turn, missed the Giau altogether and climbed the Valparola from the other side. I wanted to go back but I was told the temperature was now 45 degrees on the Giau. You could probably fry the proverbial egg on the road. Besides it was 2pm, no time to go back down and climb two mountains. I had, essentially, ballsed it up quite royally. The remainder of my ride was an exercise in self control. Emotions were swinging wildly from fury to fatigue. I had come to do the full, 80 mile Maratona, not the 65 mile version. Even Manolo's soothing tones over a beer at the finish and his reminder that I had still ridden up six mountains only served to lighten my mood briefly. Begrudging acceptance eventually crept in but it wasn't until the next day when I realised exactly what opportunity the wrong turn had presented.

The next day when, with a happy heart, I wheeled the Dogma back out of the hotel for another day's riding. In hindsight I could have done the Giau then but I was already at the top of Passo Gardena before I realised that. So I did another three mountains instead. Another full day of fine riding around some of the most stunning alpine scenery in Europe that I probably wouldn't have had the legs to do in other circumstances. The weather was amazing, other riders were in abundance and the drivers were still

respectful.

As for the Giau, well, it's not as if it's going anywhere, is it?

Travel and accomodation.

Graham Hutson stayed at the Hotel Mezdi in Colfosco - a three star family run hotel located on the road up to the Passo Gardena. Staff speak good English and along with most hotels in Alta Badia allow bikes to be stored in rooms. Spa facilities and a swimming pool are available.

Travel was by easyJet from Southend to Venice Marco Polo. The transfer from Venice to Alta Badia takes 2.5-3 hours and can be arranged through the hotel.

Related Images





Publisher: News UK & Ireland Ltd

Published Date: 17 Jul 2015 15:46:33

Article Id: 21569336 Version: 1

Word Count: 1631

Character Count: 6951



Reproduced by NLA media access with permission from the Publisher. May not be copied or otherwise reproduced without express permission.