

Maratona dles Dolomites: a bike race of ups and downs (and little else)

The famous event in Italy's beautiful South Tyrol is 86 stunning miles long - but with 4,000 metres of climbing. Could Peter Walker take it in the 30C-plus heat?

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At about six miles, the Passo Giau isn't the longest climb I've ever cycled up, or the steepest, with an average gradient of just under 10%. But it is possibly the most relentless, especially during a freakish hot spell, bringing 30C-plus temperatures even at the 2,200-metre peak.

I'm about three-quarters of the way through the 86 miles of the Maratona dles Dolomites, an annual race across Italy's almost absurdly beautiful South Tyrol region, and I'm really feeling the heat. Three times I have to stop my bike on a hairpin bend - there's 29 in all, helpfully numbered with signs - to douse myself in water. All around me other riders are doing the same. We glance wordlessly at each other, all thinking the same thing: can we go on?

The Maratona, which celebrates its 30th incarnation next year, is a venerable example of what's officially known as a Gran Fondo. While in the UK, most mass riding events are sportives - not officially races and held on open roads - a Gran Fondo is about as close the enthusiast rider can get to experiencing a professional event.

It's also famously tough. Those who opted for last Sunday's full 86-mile route (there were also 66-mile and 34-mile versions) committed themselves to 4,000 metres of combined climbing. Virtually the entire course was steeply up or steeply down, with just one, small flat-ish section.

It's fair to say I wasn't as prepared as I could be. After accepting an invitation months ago from the organisers' press office, far too much of my preparation ended up involving rides to and from work on a trundling Dutch bike. Denmark Hill in south-east London is all very well, but it's not the Dolomites.

Then I foolishly opted for a Saturday afternoon flight, not factoring in the two-and-a-half hour transfer from Venice airport, meaning I finally got to the hotel at 11.30pm, about five hours before I needed to wake up.

There was, however, a very happy surprise waiting for me in the room. The organisers had promised to provide a bike, but didn't specify what it would be. Amazingly, it is a Pinarello Dogma F8, around £8,000 of sleek shininess, as used by Team Sky in the Tour de France.

Things get better still the next morning, even with the bleary-eyed 6.30am start time. The Maratona, it's fair to say, is fantastically exciting and well organised. As we wait on the start line there are TV helicopters buzzing about - it is shown live on air in Italy - and a priest to bless the riders. We even get a speech about forgiveness (every Maratona has a "theme", and this is the 2015 one). And, of course, it all happens on roads closed to other traffic.

Another lovely touch is the back-of-the-jersey race numbers, which also give names and a national flag, a great prompt for on-the-course chats.

That said, the route isn't conducive to idle talk. Immediately we set off, we're heading straight uphill, the first of seven big climbs of the day. Soon the pattern is set: a long grind up, then underneath the banner marking the top of the pass and a rapid, occasionally terrifying high-speed hairpin twist downwards. It's exhilarating but remorseless. While the climbs need constant effort the descents require complete concentration. There is no let-up.

I'm helped, of course, by being on perhaps the poshest bike I've ever ridden. The Pinarello is a not-unexpected joy to use, especially as I jostle with the assorted Italians and Germans on the descents. The bike feels like it's on rails. I only learn the price after the ride, which is probably just as well.

More relief is offered by the scenery. The Dolomites are less celebrated among cyclists than the Alps or Pyrenees, but are arguably even more spectacular. More help comes from the frequent and well-run refreshment points, bringing food and the all-important fluids.

And it is getting hot. While the 2014 Maratona started in 4C temperatures, with the previous year seeing snow on some of the passes, this year even at 6am at the 1,500m-altitude start point it is already balmy.

By lunchtime, as I begin the slog up Passo Giau, it's over 30C. While most of the other climbs are about 7% gradient, the extra steepness on this one is agonising. The one thing worse than the ache in my legs is a fear of succumbing to heat exhaustion.

But the 29th and final bend does come, and then there's just one more major climb to go. Well, one-and-a-bit. As a final challenge, a mile or two from the finish in the town of La Villa comes the Mur dl giat, or the "wall of the cat". It's almost absurdly short - a mere few hundred metres - but a sheer, leg-knobbling 19% gradient. My body desperately wants to give up. However, the noisy, bell-clanging, horn-toting crowd on the pavement (some of whom, I learn later, started drinking the night before) somehow gets me to the top.

Then comes the finish. My time is just over eight-and-a-half hours. I'd hoped to beat eight, but in that heat I'm just glad to have done it at all. I sit panting in the shade, the weighty finishers' medal around my neck, just about every muscle aching. Even amid the pain, I think: I would recommend the Maratona to anyone.

Aside from the setting and the organisation, it also feels very inclusive, with notably more female riders than I'm used to seeing at British events, and a vast range of

nationalities. Italian, German and Dutch riders probably comprise a majority, but there are Belgians, Britons, Americans, Australians, even a Brazilian man I saw on one climb, cursing loudly in Portuguese as cramp struck his legs.

Would I do it again myself? Almost certainly yes. Just don't ask me for a couple of weeks.

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