

Bikes, kit, tips, tactics

The thrill of the ride

Cyclist

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OF THE
YEAR

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perfection beneath
the peaks of the
Dolomites

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ISSUE 40 • OCT 2015 • £5

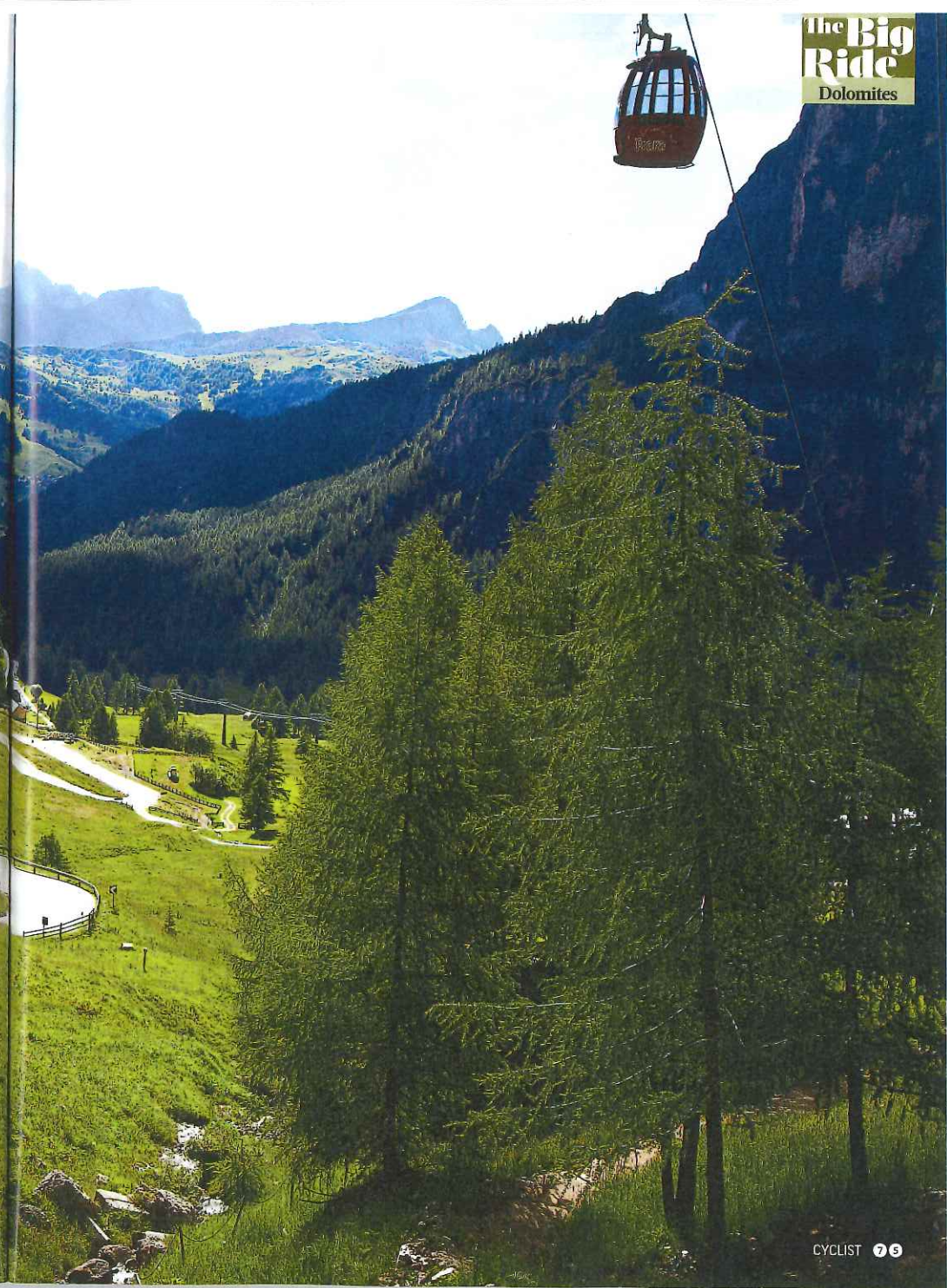




Peak Perfection

Renowned as some of the most beautiful mountains on the planet, the Italian Dolomites also deliver as tough a riding terrain as you'll find anywhere

Words MARK BAILEY Photography JUAN TRUJILLO ANDRADES

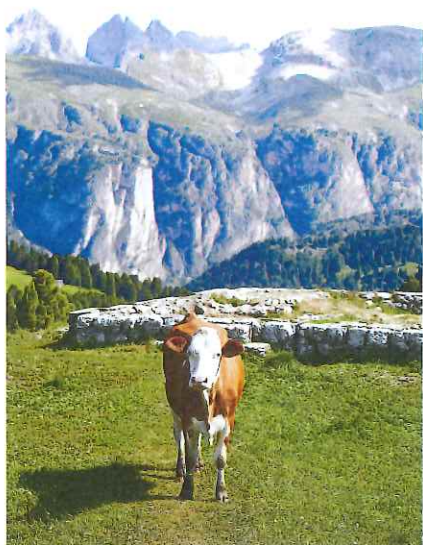


Just two hours into our 130km bike ride around the jagged rock spires and twisted pinnacles of the Italian Dolomites, which will culminate in a sweaty siege of the forbidding 2,236m Passo Giau, Vincenzo Nibali launches an unexpected attack. It all happens in a dazzling blur of Astana blue. The first I know about the 2014 Tour de France champion's surprise cameo in *Cyclist* magazine's

latest adventure is when my local Italian ride companions Klaus and Roberto start bellowing 'Vincenzo!' and rubbernecking towards the left of the road.

The hullabaloo shatters what until then had been a tranquil, early-morning spin along the sun-dappled slopes of the 2,244m Passo Sella. And sure enough, here comes the Italian cycling idol, unmistakable in his sky-blue Astana kit emblazoned with the green, white and red hoops of the Italian national champion, trailed by his sinewy mountain-slaying lieutenants Michele

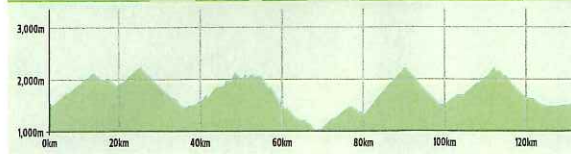
Far right: The 6.2km descent from Passo Gardena provides a perfect viewpoint for the Dolomites' spectacular-looking rock formations



Dramatic Dolomites

Sample beauty and pain on this 130km loop over the Passo Giau

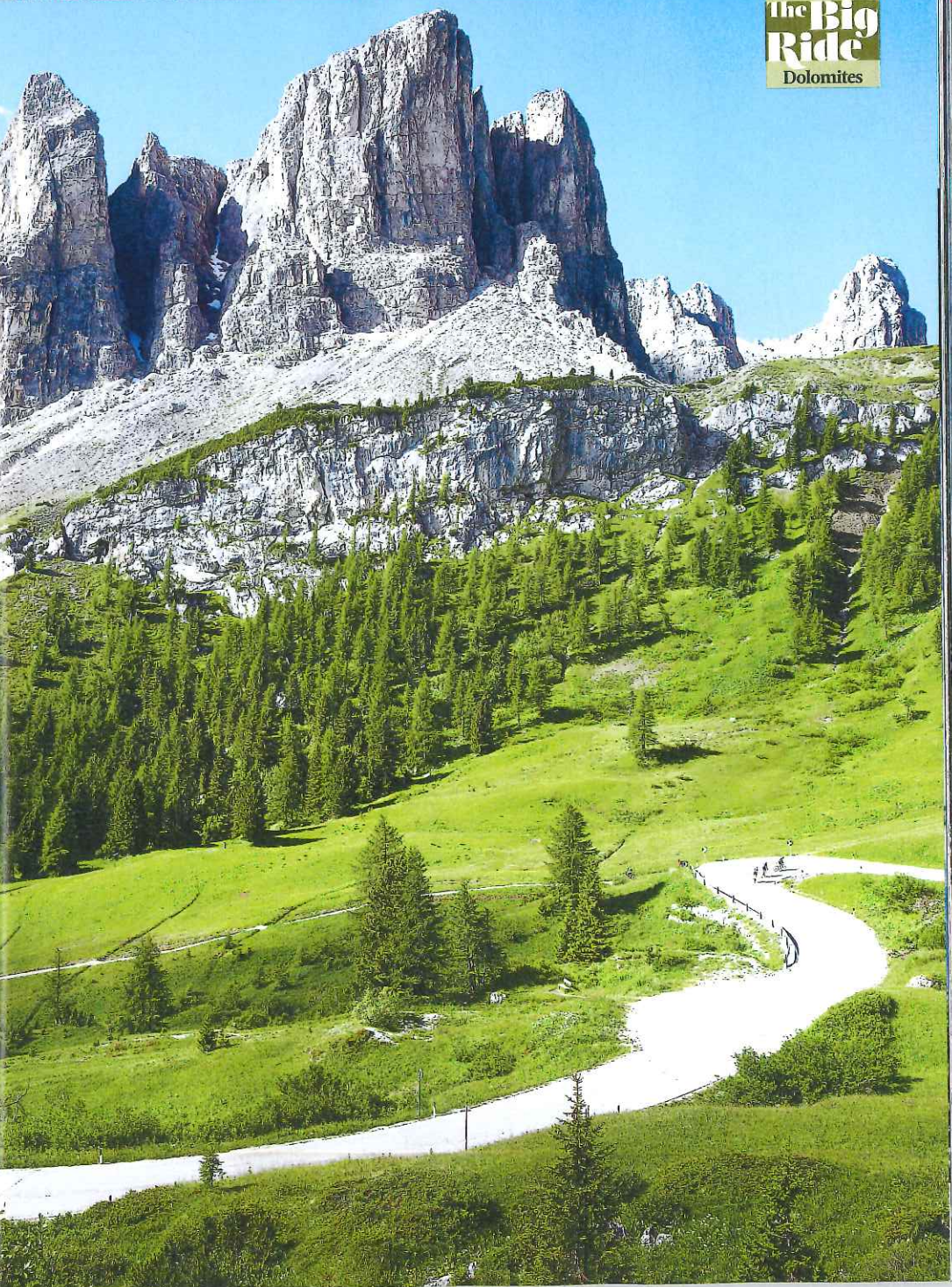
To download this ride, go to cyclist.co.uk/40dolomites. The route begins and ends in Corvara in Alta Badia. Take the SS243 west over the Passo Gardena, then the SS242 south over the Passo Sella. Join up with the SS48 south then the SP641 east over the Passo Fedala and on towards Saviner di Laste. From here take the SR203 and SP251 north towards Colle Santa Lucia and Codalonga. Join up with the SP638, which travels north over the Passo Giau, then head west at Pocol on the SR48 to cross the Passo Falzarego and Passo Valparola, before hooking south on the SS244 back to Corvara.



Scarponi and Tanel Kangert, and with an Astana-branded support car growling just behind.

Fortunately Nibali is attacking in the opposite direction to us. As we spiral downhill at 50kmh, he is blasting skywards, out of the saddle, eyes fixed on the tarmac, chest heaving. Juan, our photographer, who is travelling in a support van along with a driver, orders a rapid U-turn and starts pursuing Nibali, the paparazzi instinct which lurks in every photographer unleashed in a frenzy of hanging-out-of-the-window snapping. My own instinct to try to

**The Big
Ride**
Dolomites





chase after them evaporates in nanoseconds with a self-admonishing shake of the head and a realisation that it is only 10am and I must already be acutely dehydrated.

Half an hour later, when we reassemble for a round of espressos in the valley town of Canazei, Juan reveals that Nibali, showing a classy touch of professionalism, had waved him past to take a few photos, then accelerated around some tight hairpin bends and disappeared out of sight, as if saying, 'You've got what you want. Now leave me to suffer in peace.' Our van, says Juan in disbelief, was doing about 25kmh uphill at the time.

World class heritage

There can be few better seals of approval for the high-mountain region of Alta Badia in the Italian Dolomites than the fact that one of only six riders in history to have won the Tour de France, the Giro d'Italia and the Vuelta a Espana uses it as a mid-season training playground.

But even without the Nibali commendation the savagely beautiful mountain landscapes would be enticing enough. A UNESCO World Heritage site, the Dolomites are a rugged realm of stark, serrated mountains, glacial landforms, echoing valleys and pristine meadows festooned with bluebells and edelweiss. The Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier described the spiked chains, which erupt out of the earth like the plated spine of a stegosaurus, as 'the most beautiful work of architecture ever seen'.


A buzzing ski mecca in winter, the region's mountain roads and sharp gradients become ideal training terrain for cyclists in the summer months. And Alta Badia's lofty location between 1,300m and 3,000m offers an attractive blend of luminous mountain sunshine and mild, altitude-diluted temperatures. A particularly appealing trait of the Dolomites is that climbs are open and expansive: roads rarely disappear under a tree canopy for long, so cyclists can perpetually gaze at the towering cliffs and peaks.

Below: 2014 Tour de France winner Vincenzo Nibali blasts past Cyclist on a training ride with Astana teammates Michele Scarponi and Tanel Kangert



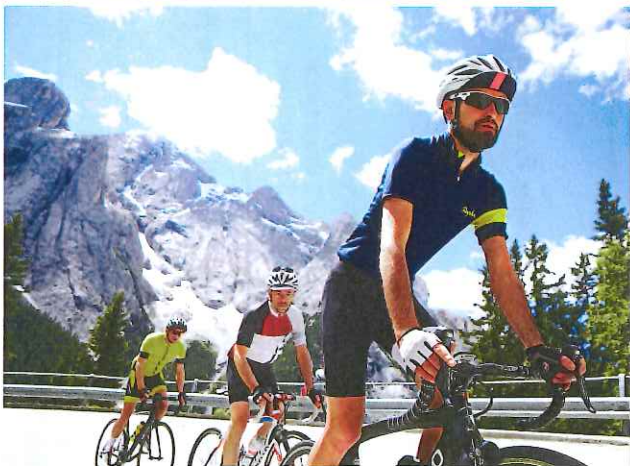
Hotels in the area tend to roll out the red carpet for cyclists too, with riders treated as valuable summer guests, not mud-soaked imposters. Our ride started at Hotel La Perla in Corvara, which is nestled in Val Badia at the foot of the horse-shoe-shaped Sella Massif. To put us in the right mood, the hotel features a 'Pinarello Lounge' containing bikes including Bradley Wiggins' yellow 2012 Tour de France-winning Pinarello Dogma and Miguel Indurain's iconic 1994 Espada time-trial bike. Locals tell me Italian sprinter Mario Cipollini often visits in winter, always immaculately dressed and rarely lacking female company.

Beginning the ascent

As you would expect in a region popular with skiers, hikers and mountaineers (the legendary Everest climber Reinhold Messner is from the area and honed his skills in the Dolomites), there is a bewildering array of climbs to choose from. 'When you ride your bike around here, 



Nibali accelerated past us around some tight hairpin bends and disappeared out of sight. Our van was doing 25kmh uphill at the time





'We can stop for some pasta. This is an important part of the Italian cycling culture: to ride, to talk, to eat, to enjoy.' I'm not going to argue

the first thing you do is go up,' says Klaus, one of my ride partners for the day and the owner of the Melodia del Bosco hotel in nearby Badia. 'When I go from the ski season to the cycling season, it is always a shock.'

We are also joined by Roberto from the local tourism board. 'I'm not so fit right now,' he declares when we shake hands in the hotel car park. But as he has the diminutive frame of Nairo Quintana, I know I'll be the one suffering today. As well as tackling the Passo Giau, which was once described as being 'like a slap in the face' by Italian pro Ivan Basso, we will also battle the 2,057m Passo Fedaia, the summit of which is adorned by the sparkling waters of the Lago Fedaia, a location for scenes in the 2003 remake of *The Italian Job*. 'We can stop for some pasta there,' says Roberto, reassuringly. 'This is an important part of the Italian cycling culture: to ride, to talk, to eat, to enjoy.'

I'm not going to argue with that philosophy, but before we can think about spaghetti we must cross the Passo Gardena and Passo Sella. Fresh and fun but with a surprising kick, the 2,121m Passo Gardena feels like the glass of fizzy Prosecco before the hearty *primo* and *secondo* of the Fedaia and Giau later in the day. The

The rider's ride

Scott Addict 10, £2,799, evanscycles.com

I've ridden a Scott bike before and loved it, so I had high expectations of the Addict 10. This is a race-ready bike with a beefy, oversized bottom bracket for better power transfer, aerodynamic tube shapes designed specifically for speed, and a slender 860g frame. Slick Shimano Dura-Ace components top off an already extremely tempting package. To save weight and increase ride stiffness where it's needed the most, Scott uses 'IMP' technology that involves stripping carbon from areas of the frame where it has no benefit. If you're looking for a light, stiff bike that will survive the mountain ranges of Europe, but will also optimise your chances of beating your mates to the nearest lamppost back home, the Scott Addict 10 would be a solid, well-specced choice.



Above: Tunnels on the approach to Lago Fedaia provide some shade on a ride that takes place almost exclusively in bright sunlight



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By the numbers

Like the Dolomites, stats go up and down

130

Kilometres ridden

3,989

Metres climbed

2,244

Height in metres of the Passo Sella, the highest point of the ride

3

Astana riders spotted

78

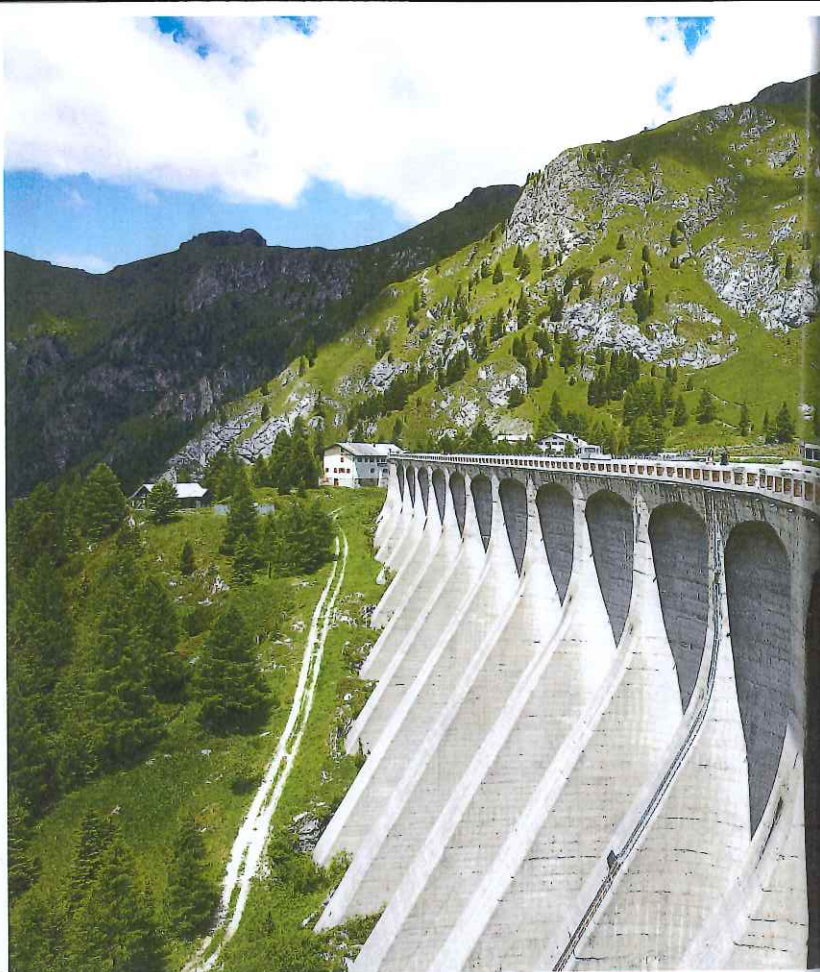
Maximum speed in kmh

34

Maximum temperature in degrees

5,449

Calories burned then replenished via pizzas



climb involves a 9.6km ascent out of Corvara and crosses meadows dotted with clusters of pine trees, piles of fire wood and mountain chalets, before delivering you to the pass 599m above. The tarmac is smooth, the gradients are a gentle 6.2% (aside from the 9-10% ramps after 1.5km and 7km) and the sunshine toasts my arms as we climb ever higher into the famous gnarled peaks of the Dolomites.

The descent to the base of the Passo Sella lasts for 6.2km. The most exciting part is when the meandering hairpins are interrupted by a fast, straight dash beneath the shade of a vertiginous stone wall, dotted with patches of snow, which is appropriately called *Parete Fredda* (Cold Wall). The wall is so high and steep the road below never sees sunshine, and I can feel my arms tremble as we plunge into the icy air. Like any Englishman drunk on the sight of the sun, I had rather naively ignored Klaus's suggestion to pull on a gilet, and am soon relieved to dive deeper into the valley where I can feel my limbs defrosting.

The road to the picturesque Passo Sella rises 373m over 5.45km at an average of 6.8%. The leg-shredding parts





Left: The dam at Lago Fedaia offers a brutalist alternative to the otherwise picturesque scenery



Like any Englishman drunk on the sight of the sun, I had naively ignored Klaus's suggestion to pull on a gilet, but I'm soon relieved to feel my limbs defrosting

come in the middle section, where the road hits 9%, but the climb is mellow. As we ascend we drink in sweeping views of the mountain scenery. Today the protruding grey fingers of rocks are glowing white in the fierce sunshine. The saw-tooth peaks of the Sella Massif loom to our left. There is something almost reptilian about the cold, serrated ridges of the Dolomites that seem to lash and scrape against the summer sky, conjuring up images of lizard tails and crocodile teeth. At the summit I take a moment by myself to enjoy the sight of these cloud-piercing pinnacles bursting out of the valleys below.

Determined not to suffer another chilly descent, I unpack my gilet and set off. We're not far into the winding

450m drop from the Passo Sella to the valley town of Canazei before Nibali makes his unexpected appearance. It's a reminder that the Dolomites have been an important part of the fabric of professional cycling in Italy since 1937, when the Giro d'Italia first ventured into the region. The mountains have appeared in the race more than 40 times and their peaks have regularly claimed the *Cima Coppi* – the title given to the highest point of the Giro course.

Reaching the oasis

Powered by espresso and Coca-Cola following our rest stop in Canazei, we begin the slow, steady eastward assault of the 2,057m Passo Fedaia. In this direction ☞



Left: The Serrai di Sottoguda gorge is so steep you are only allowed to cycle up it – not down

◊ the climb averages 4.4% over 13.9km but we are now riding through the midday sunshine. Rivulets of sweat are bursting out of my helmet and my knees are glowing the colour of the *maglia rosa*.

We climb through a natural amphitheatre of snow-covered rock faces, occasionally diving through festive pine forests or dipping beneath the cool shade of mountain tunnels. Eventually the azure water of Lago Fedaiia appears up ahead like a tropical oasis. The surface is shimmering in the intense sunlight. A few solitary tourists line the edge of the water, fishing, sunbathing, or cooling their feet.

The Passo Fedaiia sits at the northern base of the colossal Marmolada, which at 3,343m is the highest mountain in the Dolomites. The white tongue of the Marmolada glacier unfurls down the side of the mountain. A bridge stretches across the lake and at the end are a cluster of restaurants and cafes. Roberto has promised us a plate of pasta and



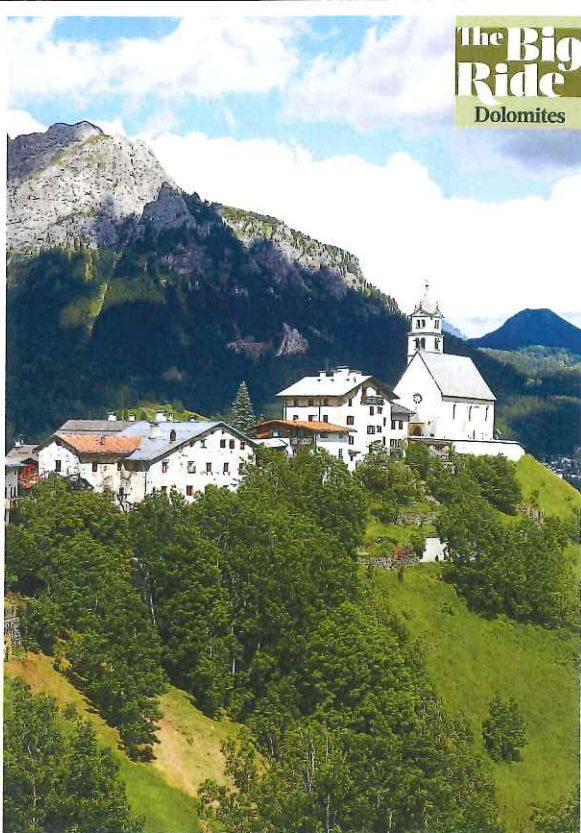
more so we head inside and tuck into mounds of steaming spaghetti, juicy steak and salted potatoes.

Replenished and ready for more climbs, we clip in and head off for our appointment with the fearsome Passo Giau. For those with a penchant for suffering, it's better to do this route in reverse, taking on the westward climb of the Fedaiia, which averages 7.5% and was once labelled 'probably the hardest climb in Italy' by double Giro champion Gilberto Simoni. There is a 3km drag where the gradient hits 18%. 'It is so painful,' says Klaus, wincing at the memory. 'The hardest thing is that the road is straight so it feels like you aren't going anywhere.'

Of course what makes for a punishing climb also makes for an electrifying descent, and my brakes are almost flaming by the time we reach the ski resort of Malga Ciapela. During the long, straight dash downhill I have to yank on my brakes to stop myself inadvertently overtaking a motorbike at 70kmh.

Klaus pulls over to the side of the road to show me an enchanting natural gorge far below called the Serrai di Sottoguda. The secluded trail out of the gorge and into the mountains is so steep you are only allowed to cycle uphill, but it is a popular leisure route with mountain bikers and hikers. In winter the waterfalls around the trail freeze and ice-climbers hack their way to the top.

Perhaps foolishly, I had convinced myself that the Passo Giau was only a few kilometres away but I'm soon caught ◊



During the dash downhill I have to yank on my brakes to stop myself overtaking a motorbike at 70kmh



out by the sharp rise from the riverside town of Caprile to the mountain commune of Colle Santa Lucia. It looked like a small bump when I had examined the map at breakfast, but is in fact an ascent of over 400m. By now the afternoon sun is brutally hot and my energy levels are dwindling.

The climb itself is strikingly scenic, soaring from the chalets of Caprile on the banks of the boulder-strewn Torrente Cordevole to a stunning white church that clings precariously to the side of the mountain at Colle Santa Lucia. By the time I reach the foot of the imposing Passo Giau near Codalonga I'm already in ruins. I take a well-deserved breather beneath giant, raptor-proof fencing designed to hold back rocks falling from the cliffs above.



From the second you start the climb until the divine moment you finally reach the summit there is no respite



The Giau is a silent, brooding hulk of a mountain that's guarded by 29 hairpin bends. It has a fearsome reputation in the cycling world. The 10km climb involves 922m of relentless, thigh-stabbing ascent at an average gradient of 9.1%. From the second you start the climb until the divine moment you finally reach the summit there is no respite. On its first appearance at the Giro of 1973 the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* described it as 'so high, so muscular and so dark'. When French rider Laurent Fignon tackled it at the Giro of 1992 he lost 30 minutes and was so crippled by the experience he even had to be pushed on the descent.

Suffering alone

I know I will struggle so I tell Roberto and Klaus to feel free to go off ahead. 'I'll only slow you down! Save yourselves!' I yell. And so I commence 90 minutes of solitary suffering, inching up the road at shamefully slow speeds. After weaving around the lower flanks of the mountain I see





the Italian duo disappear into a tunnel up ahead, but by the time I edge around the corner in pursuit they've vanished. I'm pedalling so slowly it feels like my chain is coated in a thick layer of glue which is slowly hardening in the late-afternoon sunshine.

The hairpins on the Passo Giau are all numbered (*tornante 1, tornante 2...*), which feels either inspiring or depressing as your mood fluctuates. I spend the whole climb fantasising about bubbling, salami-topped pizzas, bowls of pasta smothered in rich beef ragu and the fruity aftertaste of a fine Italian wine. When I catch up with Klaus and Roberto (a more accurate account would be that they were waiting for me) they look similarly traumatised.

About 2km from the summit of the Giau, the stark majesty of the climb begins to wash away the pain. The pass lies in a vast mountain pasture at the foot of the even higher 2,647m Nuvolau Alto peak. All around us are sharp columns of rock that jut out of the ground like knives,

Don't be deceived by this atypically flat stretch of the Passo Giau – the 29 hairpin markers (one of them pictured above left) count down the torment of 10km at an unforgiving average gradient of 9.1%.

swords and bayonets. The beauty of the terrain seems to pull you uphill, while gravity does her best to slap you back down. By the time I see the sign for *tornante 26* the end of the ordeal is in sight. I arrive at the summit, panting and drenched in sweat.

The top of the pass offers a panoramic view of the entire mountain region. Klaus points out many of the distant peaks on the horizon that we crossed earlier in the day. The Giau was the *Cima Coppi* of the Giro in 1973 and 2011 and it's easy to imagine the vast empty space teeming with cycling fans cheering riders over the pass. Today we're alone but for some ageing motorbike tourists.

Picture perfection

The descent of the Giau is broken up by countless hairpin bends so we decide to maintain a steady pace and recover our energy ready for the final major pass of the day – the Passo Falzarego. Named after the treacherous King of Fanes ☛



◻ (Falzarego is formed from the words 'falsa rego' or 'false king') who was turned to stone for betraying his people, it rises for 12km to a height of 2,105m. After the drunken twists and turns of the Giau, the Falzarego seems to slice straight through the landscape in long, straight surges.

From the Falzarego the climb continues further up past the mirrored surface of a high-mountain lake to the 2,168m Passo Valparola. Here we encounter a large film crew hiding a collection of new cars beneath giant blankets in preparation for filming a TV advert. The footage of the new cars twisting along the mountain roads will no doubt be gracing our screens later in the year.

Arriving back in Corvara after a day of fine cycling, with the iconic peaks of the Dolomites glowing in the evening sunshine, it's easy to see why the Alta Badia region entices so many visitors. As Reinhold Messner once declared

We encounter a film crew hiding new cars beneath giant blankets in preparation for filming a TV advert

of the Dolomites: 'They're not the highest but they are certainly the most beautiful mountains around the world.' Hollywood film makers, global car corporations and Vincenzo Nibali wouldn't disagree. ●

Mark Bailey is a freelance writer who now dreams of mountains when he is eating pizza and drinking wine

How we got there

TRAVEL

Monarch Airlines (monarch.co.uk) flies to Venice Marco Polo from London Gatwick, Birmingham and Manchester with prices starting from £64 return. Transfers from Venice to Alta Badia are available via taxi, shuttle or shared buses.

ACCOMMODATION

Cyclist stayed at Hotel La Perla where guests can enjoy tailored cycling holidays, including meal plans, guided tours, mechanical help, laundry services, bike hire and more. The price for a basic

'Mangia. Beve. Bici' ('Eat. Drink. Bike') package starts from £466pp for a four-night stay, which includes breakfast and €40 credit for dinner in the hotel's five restaurants. Visit hotel-laperla.it for more details. The 'Leading Bike Experience' package, created in conjunction with In Gamba tours, offers the hire of Pinarello Dogma bikes, guided tours and even supplies of foil-wrapped rice cakes.

INFORMATION

Visit the Alta Badia tourism website at altabadia.org. The tourism board has

introduced a 'Bike Friendly' infrastructure, which means cyclists can pick up route maps, carry bikes for free on ski lifts and book guided trips through Dolomite Biking (dolomitebiking.com).

THANKS

Thanks to Vicky Norman at Heaven Publicity and Nicole Dorigo and Stefanie Irsara of the Alta Badia tourism board for their help with the trip. Also to the Costa family, Pio Planatscher and the staff at Hotel La Perla, and to Klaus Irsara and Roberto Huber for their help and patience.

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