

iCycle

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What is it that makes faraway hills so alluring for Irish cyclists? Weekend warriors like myself who live close to the Wicklow Mountains are spoilt for choice when it comes to routes for racking up the vertical metres.

But the harsh reality is the Sally and Wicklow Gaps, the Shay Elliott and Slieve Maan, tough and all as they may be, pale into insignificance compared to climbs available on the continent.

A latecomer to cycling, I only got into the sport in my 30s. But I quickly caught the climbing bug and for much of the past decade, I have been making annual pilgrimages to the French Alps with clubmates from Orwell Wheelers Cycling Club in Dublin.

Friends and family often ask why we put our bodies through the wringer on these trips. It's meant to be a holiday, right?

The simple answer is that for all the suffering, nothing beats the buzz of conquering the same climbs as the pro riders and the camaraderie of the chain gang as we do it.

The most recent French pilgrimage was to the Étape du Tour in 2019, which culminated in a 36km-long climb in blistering heat up to Val Thorens ski resort.

No sooner was that out of the way than thoughts began to turn to what the next challenge should be.

Few of us had done much cycling in Italy and the Maratona dles Dolomites, an annual gran fondo covering seven mountain passes, quickly came up as a possibility.

But on consideration we hit on a better idea. Why not do all, or most of, the big climbs in the Dolomites and the Italian Alps over the course of a week.

A 20-strong group from Orwell, a mixture of male and female riders, road racers and leisure cyclists, ranging in age from the mid-20s to mid-60s, came together and a trip was organised for July 2020, only for Covid to intervene.

Two postponements and two years later than we'd hoped, we finally got to live out our Italian dreams earlier this month, setting out on a programme taking us from Cortina d'Ampezzo in the north-east to Bormio near the Swiss border via as many mountain passes as we could manage.

What unfolded was a truly unforgettable experience that was at times exhausting but never dull and frequently exhilarating.

Trips to France in the past had taught us three key lessons which we took with us for the Italian job.

First of all, you need to train quite a bit to take on the big mountains. If you go over there undercooked, you will struggle, and it won't be as enjoyable an experience.

Secondly, the importance of constant fuelling and hydration



Shane Phelan (left) and Barry O'Donnell (right) with Giro d'Italia stage winners Marco Canola (second left) and Andrea Ferrigato (second right) at the Passo Sella. Inset: An aerial view of Passo dello Stelvio SHANE PHELAN/MATTHEW BROADSTOCK



Rising to the challenge in the Italian Dolomites

Mountain range offers the cyclist a stiff test and a chance to feel on top of the world

cannot be overstated when dealing with higher altitude and temperatures.

The third thing we had learned was that with a large group moving from location to location, it is best to get logistical support.

For this trip we used the services of Destination Sport Experiences, a Manchester-based sports travel company.

They provided us with a driver and a mechanic to help move our gear from hotel to hotel along the way and make sure our bikes were in good working order.

Winners

Most impressively, the package included the services of two Giro d'Italia stage winners, Andrea Ferrigato and Marco Canola, who acted as our guides on the road. Both proved to be great mentors as we toiled on the climbs.

An early morning flight to Venice on July 4 was followed by a bus ride in the lashing rain to Cortina, a charming little ski resort which hosted the Winter Olympics in 1956.

Miraculously, the sun came out just as we arrived and the roads were soon bone dry, so we headed out to try some of the local climbs and enjoy the stunning scenery.

The first thing that struck

us was there was barely a flat road in sight. You are invariably either going up or going down in the Dolomites.

A lot of concentration was required on the descents, which we found to be much more technical than we were used to in Ireland. We also realised that the behaviour of some local motorists, who thought nothing of overtaking on blind bends, would be keeping us on our toes throughout the week.

It was a gentle enough introduction though as the following day's programme was a 90km and 3,200-metre vertical ascent ride to the town of Corvara.

This took in the Passo Giau (16kms, average gradient 6.5pc), Passo Fedaia (12.7km, avg

7.8pc) and Passo Pordoi (13km, avg 6pc), all three of which are more than 2,000 metres above sea level, and Passo Campolongo (3.9km, avg 7.2pc).

While most agreed the Giau, Pordoi and Campolongo were manageable, the Fedaia was simply brutal.

The final five kilometres had an average gradient of 10.8pc and ramps of 15pc near the top.

That night Andrea Ferrigato could see some of us had bitten off more than we could chew and plans for another monster ride the next day were dispensed with.

Instead most of the group took in just two mountain passes, Passo Valparolo (13.9km, avg 5.8pc) and Passo Campolongo again, while a

few of us also tackled the Passo Gardena (9.6km avg 6.2pc).

The fourth day was billed as a "transition" ride from Corvara to Bolzano. The description didn't do it justice though as it featured enjoyable climbs, amazing scenery and a cracking descent.

First up was a spin back up Passo Gardena, my favourite climb of the week, followed by the Passo Sella (5.4km, avg 6.8pc), a longish descent to the town of Canazei before going up the Passo Costalunga (9.3kms, avg 4.6pc), a climb that is steep at the beginning but is largely a false flat for the final 4kms.

An amazing 30km descent into Bolzano followed. Technical switchbacks soon gave way to longer straights and then an experience some of the group found exhilarating, some slightly terrifying, and some a bit of both.

We passed through around 3kms of tunnels, all downhill, on the outskirts of Bolzano. It was fast and furious, with the noise of spinning wheels and oncoming cars creating a cacophony that reverberated off the walls.

If that was memorable, the fifth day will stay etched in my mind forever as we took on the mighty Passo dello Stelvio, which stands 2,758 metres above sea level.

The climb itself is 24km long with an average gradient of 7.8pc. It starts out gently and gets harder the higher you go.

But before we could get the start of the climb, we had an 80km run in from Bolzano, which was much harder than expected.

We found ourselves buffeted by headwinds for much of the way. After the town of Merano around 30km was spent on bike paths which brought us through fields of apple trees. These included some challenging gravel sections which left a few of us wondering if we'd have any legs left for the Stelvio.

Thankfully, we all did as it was a monster with 1,820 metres of climbing and 48 bends crammed into those 24kms. The climb was a psychological battle as much as a physical one.

I picked a pace I was comfortable with and just kept my legs spinning, taking a drink every half kilometre and a small bite of food every two.

The process broke down the climb into manageable portions in my head and gave my body little rewards along the way.

Euphoria

Reaching the top brought a sense of euphoria. Strangers cheered and many photos were taken.

And then it got even better, with a spectacular 26km descent to the town of Bormio along much quieter roads than we had experienced earlier in the week.

Our final day of riding took in the more forgiving Passo Gavia, which, although slightly longer than the Stelvio, was not as steep, with an average gradient of 5.6pc.

The town of Bormio was a marvel, charming and perfectly located for anyone interested in road or mountain biking, hill-walking or skiing.

It was easy to kill a few hours that evening wandering the narrow streets checking out stores selling cycling apparel and paraphernalia, while the local cuisine was delicious.

With the bikes all put away, the following morning most of the group took a spectacular cable car ride up to Monte Vallecetta, over 3,000 metres above sea level.

At the top was a restaurant, the aptly named Heaven 3000, where coffee and grappa was drunk to keep out the chill.

It felt like the top of the world and, as we surveyed the valley below, we knew this was a place we would have to come back to again.



Shane Phelan at the Passo dello Stelvio