



— The bike route

BIKE ACROSS ITALY

May 10-21, 2010

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The main railroad station in Rome is *Roma Termini*. It's one of the world's largest train stations and it serves more than 150 million passengers annually. That's nearly a half million per day on average. It probably gets over one million per day during the tourist high season. At least it felt like that much when I arrived.

I stopped at a busy bar for a panini sandwich off the central concourse in the station. I was hungry after an early morning flight from London to Rome, followed by 40 minutes on the rapid "Leonardo" express train to Roma Termini from Fiumicino Airport on the far perimeter of Rome. I was waiting for a train to *Fano*, Italy where the adventure cycling tour operator *Ciclismo Classico* would start its iconic *Bike Across Italy* ride. *Ciclismo* has conducted this ride through Central Italy for the last twenty years. I signed up many months ago and the time had finally come.

The ride will go from sea to sea –the Adriatic Sea to the Mediterranean Sea – and it will cut through countryside, small cities and villages that few American tourists get to see. Over the years I have visited the major tourist destinations in Italy like Rome, Florence, Venice, Amalfi Coast, Milan and some of them several times. But the Ciclismo tour is a chance to see authentic places that, I was hoping, were pretty much untouched by the big tourist agencies.

The starting point was the city of Fano which is on the Adriatic Sea. The ride would head west and south to end at a seaside town called Porto Ercole on the Mediterranean. Ciclismo provides the bike (a Bianchi), and sags the ride all of the way. The company puts its cyclists up in pretty decent hotels usually rated four stars which means you have your own bathroom and good service. In some of the four star hotels there even are swimming pools. And, most important when the company's guests travel in Italy, the company insists that they eat and drink well.

May 10, Monday, Day 0: Fano

I took a train from Rome cross-country to Fano. Nobody I asked in the U.S. had ever heard of Fano but it has a significant population of 58,000. Fano is located in *The Marches* (pronounced mark-uh) region well south of Venice and it is not far from Ancona, a major Adriatic coastal city. Since Rome is on the Mediterranean my train ride had to cross Italy just as I would do on the bike except I would bike east to west and a lot more slowly.



The Trenitalia website showed there would be a train leaving Rome for Fano at 3:30 pm taking 3 hours and 41 minutes. Following stops in unfamiliar sounding towns of Central Italy like Orte, Terni, Foligno, Fabriano. Falconara (connection to Fano), the train arrived in Fano at 7:11 pm. All along the train's route were low mountains and almost nothing was flat until we got close to the Adriatic. I was going to bike along the same route and it dawned on me that I

had nine days of climbing and descending ahead of me.

I arrived in Fano a day ahead of the beginning of the start day. I checked into a room at the Hotel Elisabeth Due where the tour was scheduled to begin. The room had space enough for a queen bed and room to walk around the bed but not much more. The hotel was on the strip of beaches north of the city center. After settling in, I took a really pleasant stroll along the beach and stopped for a glass of Peroni (Italy largest selling beer) at one of the outdoor tables of a beachside café. There were not many people around. The waitress claimed it had been too cool and rainy. But the early evening sun was shining and began to slowly disappear in a beautiful explosion of orange and red behind the distant mountains west of me. I'm easily inspired by sunsets and I decided

then and there this was going to be the mellowest bike ride of my life. What I didn't see at first was that the eastern half of the sky was full of dark clouds.

Day 1: May 11, Tuesday, Fano



The first official gathering of the cycling group occurred at lunch in the Hotel Elisabeth Due. Eight “guests” (as Ciclismo calls us) were signed up but only four of us showed up at lunch. One missing couple, Kees and Sheila from eastern Washington State, had got as far as Bologna after coming out of Amsterdam where they were delayed by the volcanic ash from Eyjafjallajokul Volcano (I looked it up) in Iceland. Two women guests, Gail and Heather from Rhode Island, were stuck in Munich for the same reason and

were trying to get a flight to Rome. Of the four present, Jeff came from the East Bay area in California, Jodian from Winnipeg, Faез from Montreal and me from Albuquerque. We were all experienced cyclists and at least appeared to be in good shape.

Also at lunch we met our Italian guides, Marcello Bonini and Massimo De Laurentiis. The guides' English was very good and they knew American tastes and needs. In their mid-forties, these two guys were smart, competent and super fit. Marcello spent his youth competing all over the world in an Italian triathlon team. He is one of those people who is on top of every situation and can not suppress his enthusiasm. Massimo was a tall, rangy athlete with a calm and insightful style that blended nicely with Marcello's high voltage style. Later in the trip one guest labeled Massimo “the Italian Stallion” – I think he discreetly approved of the label but he was a modest guy and would never say so. Marcello and Massimo proved to be worth the price of admission.

The plan for the rest of the day was to get our assigned Ciclismo bikes and to do a short check-out ride on the side streets and through the hills around Fano. On the ride we tried out the brakes, shifters (Campagnolo), saddle adjustment and cornering and then alerted Marcello and Massimo to what we thought needed fixing. I had not brought my pedals and thought I would try the Bianchi's toe cages just wearing my Nikes. I got over that idea as soon as I got out on the streets. Later that evening in a light rain, I followed Marcello to the Alessandro & Roberto EUSEBI bike shop where I picked up new Shimano PD-M520 pedals for 30 euros (less than \$40). I worried whether the new pedals would fit the cleats on my ancient Shimano shoes but the fit was perfect. I needed only one turn on the spring tension bolts to get the correct tightness and the pedals served me well the rest of the way. By the time we got back from EUSEBI's bike shop, the delayed Washington couple had arrived by train from Bologna and were getting outfitted on their bikes.

The six riders present and the two guides had dinner and then toured Fano on foot with a guide. Fano, like countless small and anonymous towns in Italy is like a museum. The old walls, churches and palaces are amazing to this American who thought Santa Fe, New Mexico founded in 1608, was ancient. Fano has 600 meters (nearly 2,000 feet) of the old Roman wall built by Cesar Augustus a few years before Christ that are still intact. There are huge 12-meters tall guard towers every 30 meters that once housed Roman foot soldiers. Several modern apartments have been built by reusing parts of the Roman wall. In one apartment building, the Roman wall serves as one side of the structure and at a fourth floor apartment the owners have created a patio garden on top of one of the old filled-in guard towers. Having a 2,000 year old guard-tower garden patio should make a great conversation piece.



Like so many of the small towns, Fano has churches and palaces dating from the 12th Century. A couple of renaissance period churches built in the 1500s are the new structures in town! The church was all powerful in the Middle Ages. We were told that out of a population of 6,000 in those times, 600 citizens were part of the church.

An old church near the Roman city gate has a window with a plaque beneath on which is written the word *Expository*. In the middle ages it was the place where families could “deposit” a child they could no longer afford to care for and wanted to abandon and assumed the church would raise the child.

I should mention that Fano was the end point for the *Via Flaminia*, the old road across the country built by the Romans in the first century B.C. You can still see parts of the road in Fano.

Day 2: May 12, Wednesday, Fano to Urbino (74 km)

I finally met Gail and Heather from Rhode Island at breakfast at 7:00 am the next morning. They had slept in the Munich airport the night before last night. Last night they got a late flight to Rome and then a flight to Ancona followed by a cab ride to Fano, arriving after 2:00 am in the morning. They were met with instructions from our guides to get packed and prepare to leave at 8:30 am for our first day’s travel. It was the two women’s first overseas travel and I could imagine them deciding “Never again – I’m staying close to home next time”. As it turned out they were very game, good cyclists and pleasant to ride with over the ten days that followed.

Every morning after breakfast at about 8:30 Marcelo or Massimo conducted a map and route review to describe the coming day's ride. First we got oriented on a local area map with the route marked in. This was followed by profiles that locate and scale the routes' climbs and descents. Finally, a set of route notes gave detailed instructions on the route's

turns and prominent landmarks.



The first order of business after our first route review in Fano was to ride out on a pier or breakwater that extends into the Adriatic Sea for a photo shoot. It was our starting point for the “sea to sea” adventure. We couldn't get any further east. We lined up and thought, if all goes well, we

will be lining up for another shot at the Mediterranean Sea ten days from now.

With the group photo behind us, we headed out of Fano through flat fields dotted with farm houses, but with the progressively rising terrain that is found near the Sea. Soon after a food break at around 20 kilometers out, the group spread out, each rider riding at his or her preferred pace.

I began a 9 kilometer climb. After topping out, the descent was fairly sharp and twisty. I rode behind Faez who was hitting the turns aggressively. We approached a downhill right curve where I could not gauge how tight the curve would be because the forest crowding against both sides of the road blocked my read. I began pulling on my brakes until I could figure out the curve. Faez ahead of me figured he could lean into the curve at a faster speed, unaware that the curve actually became tighter and steeper after he entered it. His bike slid out from under him and he hit down full force on his right hip.

To avoid him I swerved sharply left into the oncoming lane and steered onto the opposite shoulder of the road. When I got to Faez, Massimo also appeared, magically, with the sag van. Faez was in a lot of pain. Because he is a doctor he took over his own care, immediately downing three ibuprofen and a Tylenol. Sheila, our other doctor, also came on the scene quickly. She persisted in advising Faez to get the hip X-rayed even though his initial instincts were that nothing was broken. He later agreed with Sheila and Massimo took him for X-rays and a C-scan at the small hospital in Fossobrone. Unfortunately the doctors there determined that he sustained hairline fractures of the femoral head where the femur connects to the hip socket. Faez called an orthopedist friend in Canada and got the treatment protocol: six weeks off his feet, preferably in bed.

What a downer. He is a seasoned cyclist but the poor guy was finished on his first day of riding. He talked to his travel insurance carrier about transportation back to his home in

Montreal. He had trouble just sitting without a lot of pain. Eventually Faez was flown out on “Med-Jet” to Frankfurt and then on to Montreal in Air Canada’s first class where he could lay out full body length. Despite this beginning I told myself the ride would get mellower from here on out. Later, I learned we had another near-incident this same morning when Kees’ front tire virtually exploded. Despite moving at rather high speed, he managed to control his bike and bring it to a stop.

We stopped for lunch in the town of *Fossombrone*. There was a big battle fought here between the Goths and the Byzantines in 552 AD. The Byzantines won. The Byzantines were trying to defend Christianity from their eastern Roman Empire stronghold in Constantinople while the Western Roman Empire was in the final stages of falling apart.

Fossombrone also has original statues of Roman emperors Trajan and Diocletian from the second and third centuries AD.

Today the town is noted, on a more modest scale, for “Pizzeria Arcobaleno”. We walked the bikes across some rough cobblestones and got an outside table. The proprietor Bruno is known for making a great piadina. It’s a flatbread which you top with ingredients like cold meats, cheese and vegetables. You fold it over and eat it with your hands or use a fork. Marcello tried to convince me it is like a burrito but it really is not like that at all.



After lunch, I began a gentle climb of about 12 kilometers and then a steeper climb rising 450 meters (1,500 feet) over a distance of 8 kilometers. Jeff was climbing smoothly as he continued to do throughout the trip. His great conditioning quickly became apparent. Immediately on his tail was Jodian. She is a physical training teacher in private schools in Winnipeg and she looks and moves like a well conditioned athlete.

Massimo was busy escorting Faez and was unable to meet us with water so I stopped at a bar at the top of the climb in a light rain, filled my water bottle and headed downhill into the outskirts of *Urbino*. From there, as almost always is the case in these hilltop towns, the cyclist must climb to enter the town and track over cobblestones to the night’s lodging. In this case it was Albergo San Domenico, our hotel refuge for the night.

Later, in the hotel lobby I recapped with a couple other riders over beer (*birra* – that’s all the Italian language some travelers need) and we agreed it would have been a fine day except for the downed rider. Events like that certainly keep you humble.

Day 3: May 13, Thursday, Urbino to Genga (88 km)



Urbino was the most important town in the Marche region during the 15th to 18th centuries. In the morning we toured the fabulous ducal palace with our guide who had come over from Fano that morning. It was the home of the all powerful Duke of Montefeltro – Federico III -- in the middle to late 1400s. The palace must contain at least 40 huge rooms with ceilings 25 feet high. Gold and invaluable paintings are everywhere. The Duke consolidated his power by beating up on the nobles of Fano

and *Rimini* and so got these cities' allegiance.

Our guide said the duke was a refined patron of artists including the famed Piero della Franchessa who in the middle 1400s became a pioneer in the use of perspective (with vanishing point) in painting. But the duke, and Urbino itself, is probably most known for cradling the great Renaissance master Raphael (1483-1520). Actually, the duke supported Raphael's father who used his connections to bring attention to Raphael's genius. All I ever knew previously about Urbino is that it's the city with Raphael's house and museum. A thing to remember about Raphael is that he was patronized by the pope in Rome much to the jealousy of Michelangelo, his older contemporary. The latter claimed to be the pope's favorite (after all, the pope underwrote Michelangelo's painting of the Sistine Chapel for over four years). Michelangelo went into a jealous rage over Raphael's connection with the pope and Raphael's painting style which Michelangelo claimed stole from his revolutionary painting technique.

After the tour of the ducal palace we met for route review. It looked like more rain so we stuffed our day pack with rain gear in the van and pedaled south and east over rollers, but mostly downhill for 23 km. Then the route leveled off until *Cagli* where we stopped for lunch. It was raining hard as we entered Cagli. I headed into a little alimentary, ordered a Panini with prosciutto crudo, provolone and the fresh tomatoes provided by Marcello. We stepped under a large portico in the center piazza to eat and watch the rain.

Exiting Cagli, the sun broke through and we began a steep 500 meter (1650') climb through the little town of Frontone and on toward our night's destination, the tiny town of *Genga*. Clumsily, I grabbed the wrong exit in a traffic circle in Frontone and headed downhill about 6 km figuring this road was going to start climbing any minute. It never did and I finally concluded something was fishy and turned around. Soon Marcello – it was his day to drive the van – came tooling after me and I sheepishly explained my blunder. The rain started up again. No wonder this country was so damned green.

We ate that night at our lodging, the Hotel Le Grotte. I had wet clothes all over the room. Fortunately the towel dryer bars were heated and I got the shoes and critical other stuff to dry quickly. Marcello provided newspapers to stuff the shoes in order to promote drying.

That night Marcello wanted to tell about Italian pop music. Marcello is an interesting and energetic guy so I figured this would be good. True Italian pop all started at the 1958 Sanremo Music Festival. A not well known singer named Domenico Modugno walked onto the stage, spread his arms and began a surreal prelude to his song (in Italian of course): “I think that a dream like that will never return, I painted my hands and my face blue, then was suddenly swept up by the wind and started to fly in the infinite sky”. (Marcello is a bit of a ham so he provided a good reenactment – he has a good sense of rhythm). Then, prancing around the stage, Modugno followed with “*Volare... oh oh! Cantare... oh oh oh oh! Nel blu, dipinto di blu*“. The audience could not believe its ears. People were stunned by this fantasy tune. They were used to formal and sentimental songs by singers with trained and polished voices.

When Domenico Modugno introduced “*Volare*” (I’m flying”) that night it changed Italian popular music forever. The song hit the top of the charts all over the world and was number one in the U.S. for 6 weeks. Modugno got Grammy awards for Song of the Year and Record of the Year. *Volare* was picked up by Dean Martin in 1959 (who can forget Dean’s magnetic boozy sound), Bobby Rydell in 1960 and The Gypsy Kings later in the 1980s.



Days 4 and 5: May 14 and 15, Friday and Saturday, Genga to Gubbio (65 km)

By now I was getting used to the routine. Get a wakeup call at 6:15 to shave and get my duffle bag (primary luggage) and day bag packed, eat breakfast at 7:15, deposit my primary bag in the lobby at 8:00, meet with Massimo and Marcello for the day’s route review at 8:15, check the bike, fill the water bottle and deposit the day bag with rain gear in the van between 8:30 and 8:45, and get on the road.

Marcello and Massimo switched off each day. One rode the route with guests and the other drove the big sag van. They hated their van days and loved their ride days. Still, whether he liked it or not, the van driver never failed to be where he needed to be – waiting at the “easy to miss” turns of the route, ready with water and snack foods at critical regroup points and picking up a fatigued or rain-soaked rider. The biker guide for the day would ride circles around the entire group, back and forth, circling from the lead guest rider back to the furthest behind rider. It was a chore the guides loved even though the group got spread over a couple of kilometers or more. They were like good border

collies shagging a herd of sheep. On many days they at least doubled my mileage with their back and forth routine.

On this particular morning it was Marcello's turn to "guide-ride". The guy has surplus energy that, after seeing that you are OK, spilled over in singing. His singing was completely involuntary like he could not help but sing. On the bike you knew he was coming up behind you because the singing got there well ahead of him. Recently he had been impressed with the opening riff of a soft rock tune. It goes: "Sunshine! When you are with me I can fly!" Problem is he did not know or could not remember any more of the song than that, so the riff got repeated endlessly. It was a cheery song so everyone enjoyed it -- more or less.

Grotte di Frasassi The morning's ride to *Gubbio* was to be fairly short and the sun was shining, at least for the moment. At kilometer four we stopped at a surprising caves complex where we swapped our bike shoes for sport shoes to stroll through one of the world's largest underground caverns. The place is called *Grotte di Frasassi*. There are 30 kilometers of caves loaded with stalactites, stalagmites, alabaster spears and little crystal clear lakes all formed from dripping



bicarbonate water and mineral sulfurous water from below. It's a magical place that looks like something that Disney might have created on psychedelic drugs.

We left the caverns in a light rain and got back into our bike shoes. We retraced the route back toward Genga and then headed straight west 10 kilometers to a small bar on the far side of *Sassoferrato* where most of our riders treated themselves to cappuccino (it's proper to pronounce it "cop-o-chino"; the last "c" precedes an "i" which makes it a "ch"). I followed the route notes, turned south out of Sassoferrato and onto a 22 kilometer loop with a long gentle climb. Again, we had a gentle rain. On this run we left *The Marche* region and crossed into *Umbria* region.

Gubbio I felt mellow at last. I was beginning to move a little faster while soaking up the views. There was a patchwork of light green newly planted fields of corn, deeper green fields of mature fava beans, pale green barley fields and deep green forests. At higher elevations it was an incredible patchwork quilt of green except for splashes of white structures representing towns and small cities in the distance.

I topped out, rolled through the streets of a village and then started a 4 mile descent. I moved carefully then: the road was narrow, patched-paved and had loose gravel. I carved a track downhill leaning into the curves with weight on the outside down pedal and then broke out into interim small rises before resuming the descent. After the loop I rejoined the main road and continued an uphill run of a good 20 kilometers and 350 meters elevation gain. It was raining. I thought the others were well behind me when, Heather

came around me pumping smoothly on the uphill. She is a veteran climber. Then we hit another sharp downhill with unmarked hairpin turns followed by a short steep uphill and suddenly we were at the Porto Castello, the stone gate entrance to Gubbio. From there it was a short and careful uphill ride on the city's wet cobblestones to get to the Hotel Bosone Palace.

The Gubbio St. Ubaldo Day Festivities

Marcello had been preparing the riders for Gubbio's annual great festival – in Italian *La Festa dei Ceri* -- that occurs every May 15. We arrived on the 14th and would have a day off of the bikes the next day in order to attend the festivities. The festival is in honor of Bishop Ubaldo who died on May 15, 1160. St. Ubaldo is said to have saved Gubbio from being ransacked by Frederick Barbarossa, the Holy Roman Emperor at the time. Ubaldo was holier than holy and was made a saint after his death.

After checking into the hotel, we riders assembled, along with thousands of others, in the grand piazza in front of the Palazzo Ducale where, at the designated hour, the bell up high in the belfry was to ring out the start of festivities. The shorter riders strained for a view over all the umbrellas. Finally, we could see someone up in the belfry begin to pull the bell cord and the massive bell slowly started to swing. There were half a dozen men in the belfry and, as the bell swung past their heads, they gave it a shove. Success is when the bell clapper bongs twice in one full swing so the men pushed mightily. These guys appeared to be pretty sauced up and there were no guard rails around the sides of the belfry some 40 feet up. Miraculously, as far as I know, no one has ever fallen. In any case, with the initial deep peal of the bell, the crowd went bananas. The St. Ubaldo festival was underway.

Later, we walked down about 80 stone steps to a lower level in town for an elegant dinner at the *Taverna dei Lupo*. The name had something to do with a wolf (*lupo*) that threatened the town's citizens in ancient days. As legend has it, St. Francis befriended the wolf much to the town's relief (and I always thought St. Francis got his naturalist credentials befriending birds). Thanks to Ciclismo Classico's generosity we were able to celebrate with wine, anti-pasta, primi piatti, secondo piatti, dessert and after dinner aperitif. The dinner went on and on.



I should to give a little background on the festival. The city is divided into three sections and the people in each section are associated with a given saint. There are St. Ubaldo, St. Giorgio and St. Antonio sections. Each section dresses in its own colors: yellow for Ubaldo, blue for Giorgio and black for Antonio. Three "stagna" – a large H-shaped platform – serve as carriages for huge *ceri* (also called "candles"). These are tall 20 foot pedestals and all three are raised simultaneously in the piazza with images of, respectively, Ubaldo,

Giorgio and Antonio attached at the tops. This assemblage weighs nearly 1,000 pounds and must be carried or raced by the section's team around town and finally up to the Basilica di San Ubaldo on the top of Mt. Ingino, a tall mountain above the city. The teams have as many as twelve or more carriers and they trade off with reserve teams as they exhaust themselves. The townspeople are extremely spirited before and during the event. Every citizen worries about the performance of his or her section's team. A waiter at the previous night's restaurant was so emotionally involved he said he could not concentrate on our orders.

Kees, one of our riders, recorded a fine video of many key aspects of the "Ceri race". As he pointed out, it's not really a race but more a competition is carrying the ceri in great style without mishap, such as having the top-heavy ceri topple over. Kees Koster's video is on U-tube and its really worthwhile checking it out. He was the tech expert in the rider group as well as a strong rider.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkKBdKGhbNY>

It was a lively, if not whacky, event that all started on the next morning – May 15 -- with a drum corps marching around the city starting before 5:00 am. It was our only non-riding day of the trip. Our guides suggested a walk up the mountain to the St. Ubaldo church where the "race" of the three ceri would end later in the day. The Ubaldo team always arrives first and enters the massive church doors, momentarily shutting out the



others – finally the Ubaldo people let Giorgio and Antonio into the church. We walked uphill through a light rain and increasingly foggy sky to arrive at the church. There, above the altar, lies St. Ubaldo. He appears not to show his age 850 years after his death and has been miraculously preserved, more or less, because of his purity and piety.

We were pretty well whipped after the trudge up the mountain. Then we realized that the men carrying the *ceri* had to literally run up the same mountain with their 1,000 pound loads.

Several of us took the *funivia* or chairlift back down the mountain. It was a standup affair with two of us in each carrier. We started the ride in the clouds and rain on top of Mount Ingino. The trip down through the mist was eerie and mystical. As we descended the gray city wall and housetops were gradually revealed behind the green of the forest that surrounded the mountain. Lousy weather but a fantastic view.



Dinner that night, with our group of nine, consisted of a variety of pizzas at one of those *osterias* with the barrel vault brick ceilings overhead. I had a nice conversation with Heather and Gail and got a chance to appreciate Gail's low-key but wry humor. The restaurant had a listing of pizzas with about 80 pizza possibilities. We tried at least a half dozen, shared between us. Where did the Italians learn to make such great pizza?

Day 6: May 16, Sunday, Gubbio to Spello, day visit to Assisi (63 km)

We started the day meeting in the lobby of our Hotel Bosone wearing our rain gear. It was Massimo's day to ride. It was cold, about 48F, with rain in the air. I spun through Gubbio's main traffic circles and got set on a zig-zag southerly trajectory toward the city of Assisi. On the outskirts of town Marcello had the van parked where we could look across a grassy field to Gubbio's 2,000 year old Roman amphitheater. Most of the first level arched wall is in tact and a few, much taller arches remain on the upper level. Behind the amphitheater, rising in layers are Gubbio's old stone houses. Looming above the houses is Mt. Ingino, which we climbed yesterday, its top third shrouded in clouds. I took off again as Marcello was gathering up the water jugs and snacks. A familiar refrain echoed behind me: "Sunshine! When you are with me I can fly!"

The descent out of town was gradual for 15 km and then the road started to roll. As I approached *Carbonesca* to catch a cappuccino break at a small bar, the rollers continued. For a while there were much bigger rises than descents. From *Carbonesca* Massimo pointed out what he described as a dying city high on a mountain top across a wide and deep revive. There are city walls still standing along with a church and stone houses but apparently only a few families are holding out.

Assisi Out of *Carbonesca* the climb to *Assisi* got serious and I picked up 1,500 feet in elevation. Then it was downhill to Assisi. On the outskirts our group was met by a guide who showed us what she called original Roman houses. They have neat stone masonry and nice arched windows. Frankly, they looked to us like houses from, say, the 17th to 19th centuries, not ancient Roman. It seems the truth is that they were built with old Roman walls as foundations and, I suppose, they are legitimately, or partly at least, 2,000 years in the making. We got a sneak look inside one man's garage with an ancient Roman wall fully eight feet thick to serve as the back wall of his garage.



Assisi is one of the world's most beautiful cities. It is perched high above the surrounding terrain with a sweeping view below of rolling farmland, vineyards and pastures as far as the eye can see. It has a large area full of narrow streets flanked by tall houses. There's the Basilica of Santa Chiara (Saint Clare) from 1257 that features wild flying buttresses

and a gorgeous rose window. Santa Chiara made great sacrifices to her monastic order and there was some kind of platonic love between Saint Francis and her.



The city's main attraction is the Basilica di Santo Francesco d'Assisi, a world heritage site, with its two levels. The lower level church has some of Europe's most important early frescoes, especially by Giotto and Cimabue (Giotto's predecessor). During the 1300s Giotto produced the first painting with some semblance of humanism and this changed the world of painting forever. The upper church has a famous cycle of paintings by Giotto's workshop depicting the life of St. Francis.

The ride from Assisi to the walls outside *Spello* took us deeper into Umbria. Spello was our home for that coming night. The run from Assisi was an easy descent but once inside the old first century B.C. gate I took a hard right for a steep uphill run to Hotel Palazzo Bocci. I thought I had it made when I took another sharp right and realized there was another half a kilometer straight uphill – maybe 14 percent and on wet cobblestones. I arrived at the hotel pooped.

Spello The room in this compressed little hotel was a funky one. It was on level 1-A which was somewhere between levels 1 and 2. It was necessary to take the elevator either to level 1 or level 2: the latter was best because, with luggage, you could walk down half a flight of stairs, not up.



Dinner that night was at a little restaurant just up from the hotel. You would assume that in this tiny town the best restaurant would be some mom and pop sandwich and milk shake shop. But this place – complete with brick barrel vault ceiling, linen table settings and an anti-pasta selections of cured meats and breads like I'd never seen – was a gem. I felt like I was

eating my way through Italy.

I began to feel the return of a respiratory infection I thought I had beaten just before arriving in Italy. I bailed out of the dinner gathering a little early and went to bed.

Day 7: May 17, Monday, Spello to Todi (81 km)

Next morning we formed up on the cobblestones in front of the hotel. Most riders donned their rain togs because already there was a mist in the air. We pedaled up the street, wheeled through a small piazza, counter-clockwise around an empty traffic circle, headed slightly downhill to the west through *Cabonara* and then south through *Bevagna*. From there we climbed uphill a couple of hundred meters in elevation over a four mile stretch to *Montefalco*. The town didn't appear to be distinguished in any way but that's a mistaken impression. This is the heart of Umbria's wine country. All morning we have been riding alongside large vineyards. Montefalco produces some of the best reds you can buy.



After another panini lunch acquired at the foodstore on Montefalco's main piazza, we turned west again and glided downhill 11 kilometers for *Bastardo*. From here we left the main highway to *Todi* and headed south on a minor road. This road tracked steeply uphill for 7 or 8 kilometers and then began rolling. We looked down across a broad green valley to a bluish green mountain in the distance half

shrouded in clouds. Directly across we spotted the city of Spello, a hodge-podge of white structures crawling up the foothills. A much larger splash of white ascending the lower mountain on the far left was Assisi. Dark clouds began to boil up behind me and a stiff wind blew. Then came a long descent with a badly crumbling surface and sharp unmarked hairpin turns. I controlled my speed but I was making good time. I hoped to make Todi before the rains came.

I picked up the main highway again; it was mostly downhill to Todi. There was not much shoulder but fortunately, very little traffic. I needed to refer to my route notes so I could figure how to find the night's lodging once I entered Todi. The rain had caught up with me and was hitting pretty hard now but I had to stop to organize the notes. A couple of minutes later several riders from our group blew past me as I was bent over straining to read the route notes and trying to keep them out of the rain. The notes were water-soaked (as I was) so I put them away and tore off in the direction of Todi, now less than 10 kilometers away. I was discovering that my rain pants and jacket in no way protected me against getting wet.

Todi A couple of kilometers past the Todi town sign but still 6 or 7 kilometers short of the night's lodging, I heard several voices shout out "Don". The riders that previously passed me had sought shelter in a bar and now emerged to hail me down. I stopped and announced that I was going on to the hotel, rain be damned. At the medieval arch in the town wall I turned left, skirted around a large white church and pulled up to the Hotel

Bramante. Marcello and Massimo had dutifully placed my bags in my assigned room. Everything I had on was soaked and the towel heater was not operating. Soon I had bike clothing hanging all over my room. I hoped the stuff would dry hanging from doors, lamps and chair backs.

After a hot shower I tried to grab a half hour's nap before meeting up for a walking tour of Todi's main piazza. My respiratory hack was still hanging on.

It was one of the biggest and most attractive piazzas we have seen. The duomo is a Gothic structure that dates from the twelfth century and was built over the ruins of a Roman temple dedicated to Apollo. It has a square façade with a huge rose window and a double belfry (two bells, one over the other). On another side of the piazza are two ambitious palaces dating from the 13th C, the Palazzo del Popolo and the Palazzo del Capitano (in the picture below). Marcello said the piazza has been used in movie sets because it is so picturesque.



The town overlooks the Tiber River which is the same one that flows through Rome. Todi is located well into the western end of Umbria and is a sort of demarcation point for the ancient civilizations in the area. Specifically, it divided the prehistoric Umbrian people from the Etruscan people further west. The Etruscans got going around the 8th century BC so these are really old haunts. Actually, legend says that *Hercules* founded the town. Take that with a grain of salt.



Todi's population today is 17,000. I read that in the year 1290 it had 40,000 people so you can see it was a truly important town – or city-state – in medieval times when most cities were a small fraction of their size today. Massimo and Marcello said that, back in the 1990s, Todi was pronounced as the *world's most livable city*. Take that with a grain of salt too. To be sure, it is a beautiful city. I liked it a lot but I'd try the local pizza before I'd accept the most livable tag (just joking).

The group's dinner conversation was amiable and animated. The food was terrific, as almost always. I decided to conserve my energy for combating the respiratory infection and broke away after eating well but foregoing the wine and desert which is really hard to do in Italy.

Day 8: May 18, Tuesday, Todi to Orvieto (66 km)

The distance time by crow's flight from Todi to Orvieto must be about an hour and a half. We managed to make it a lot longer by adding a loop off the main highway that runs up

into the heights of Mount Peglia. It was a gorgeous ride, some sunshine, but more than that it was the vistas as we got higher up. It was mid-spring and the fields were all planted. There were plenty of vineyards but also fields of barley, wheat, and abundant wild ginestra which are shrubs with brilliant yellow flowers. I learned ginestra is also known as “Scotch broom” because the penurious (look it up) Scots use the twigs to make brooms.

You would never know it but the total elevation gain for the day was 3,500 feet. We climbed most of the day but it was always gentle climbing. Either the fact is that the climbing was gentler or else we were finally assimilating to this rolling landscape.

After about 24 kilometers we stopped in the village of *Prodo* at a little bar on the main piazza for a little cappuccino. An older gentleman managed the bar. I bellied up and announced loudly in my best Italian: “Cappuccino, per favore”.

He looked across the bar quizzically – even sharply -- and said “Cappuccino?” with a note of skepticism (what does this yank know of true cappuccino?).



More assertively: “Si, Cappuccino.”

He shot back: “Prego” as I snapped a photo of him. (That’s Heather on the right).



On this day all riders wore their 2010 *Ciclismo Classico* jerseys anticipating a group picture. It had to be a day that was likely to be sunny and no rain. In *Prodo* we got lucky because the sun was out full. So seven riders lined up plus Massimo in the middle (out of uniform) and Marcello juggled

everyone's cameras to get the shot.

Going on, we topped out on Mount Peglia at 837 meters above sea level. Mount Peglia is surrounded with the rugged beauty of forested deep ravines, rolling hills and a sequence of smoky ridges stretching north to south. From this top there are views to the northeast of some of the tallest peaks in the Apennine Mountain range, the mountains that, to mix metaphors, runs down the spine of the Italian boot.

The descent back down from Mount Peglia in the direction of Orvieto was long but swift. The rain was holding off. It looked like we would get to the hotel around 3:00 or 3:30, time to recuperate a bit before a special program the guides had arranged for us in Orvieto. We were hammering smoothly. Just as I rounded the first traffic circle before the



sharp climb into Orvieto, I had that soft, wobbly feeling that could only mean a tire was going flat. Massimo was just ahead and I hollered out "Flat!" He got the message and we quickly had the rear wheel off, tire peeled back and a new tube fit over the rim. We pumped it up and I was back in action.

Orvieto is up on top of geological tuff, the soft rock comprised of consolidated volcanic ash. I remembered driving a car up the rock's streets many years ago and seeing cyclists climbing

into the city. I thought "Poor suckers". Well, it was our turn. The lead group was ahead of us after the flat. I asked Massimo to take me to the funicular that, of course, runs on rails straight up two of the last four kilometers to the hotel. For two euros, I loaded my bike in the funicular cabin and enjoyed the rapid ascent on rails.

I paid for this diversion from cycling purity when my companions suggested "shunning" me Amish-style for this indiscretion. Sanctimonious Puritans! But, hell, I've always liked funiculars. In the end, I got to the Hotel Maitani behind the leaders anyway. I checked in and crossed over to a bar opposite the hotel for a quick panini lunch with Jeff.

Orvieto Duomo The Hotel Maitani is just off of the main piazza and a stone's throw from the Orvieto Duomo. If you step out of the Maitani's entrance onto the street (Via Maitani of course) and look right, you are squarely on line with the center doors of the cathedral. It is one of Italy's truly spectacular churches with its alternating bands of white travertine marble and deep green



basalt. The façade is equally spectacular and features extraordinary sculptures by the 14th Century sculpture Lorenzo Maitani (hence the hotel of the same name).

Orvieto is deep inside the ancient Etruscan lands. There is reputed to be an Etruscan acropolis (cemetery) just outside the city at the bottom of the tuff outcropping on which the city rests. Within the tuff rock and beneath the city is a surprising labyrinth of caves and tunnels, much of which was scratched out of the soft tuff by the Etruscans. Marcello and Massimo arranged for our group to tour these underground structures. There are rooms, passageways and galleries with many wall niches that once were used for nesting pigeons which the occupants apparently raised for eggs and meat. Etruscan wells or water shafts were dug deep into the tuff measuring about 4 feet by 6 feet but incredibly deep – it looked like 100 feet or more. Later, medieval era noble families used an underground system of tunnels that extended from beneath their houses to a point well past the city walls as a place to escape in case of siege.

The evening activities began at the restaurant Il Laborinto, a gem owned and operated by the Di Mario family (Adriano and Rita) since the 1950s. The couple still works in the kitchen where their son, Maurizio conducted a cooking lesson for this bunch of hungry bikers. Maurizio is a talented and highly trained chef. He supervised as each guest created a ball of pasta from flour, egg and water. Then the lot was blended thoroughly in a mixer, rolled out on the rolling machine and carved into tagliatelle and cannelloni shapes.



There are thousands of shapes and names of pastas so you can see that the simple pasta we riders prepared had huge possibilities. Pasta names end with *ini*, *ette*, *illi*, *elle* or *ine*, diminutives that express *little*. There are long noodles like spaghetti, vermicelli, capellini, fusilli; ribbon cut ones like fettuccine, lasagna, linguine, pappardelle, tagliatelle; extruded tubular ones like cannelloni, fusilli, penne, rigatoni; fancy cut ones like farfalle, gigli and rotini.

Later, dinner was a phenomenon starting with white wine and two fine reds poured alongside antipasti of cured meats, small pizzas, seasoned breads and more. This was followed by our tagliatelle in tomato sauce and cannelloni stuffed with ricotta and spinach followed by a variety of cheeses including young pecorino, aged (strong)

pecorino, cacao and others. And more wine. At the end there were several imaginative desserts: great tastes but not too sweet – the way the Italians like it.

By now the respiratory crud was catching up with me again so, following Massimo's directions, I headed back early to the Hotel Maitani. Next morning my voice was barely working and I needed antibiotics. From my experience in the U.S., I was sure I would lose half a day of biking while spending the morning in local medical emergency services. I figured I would be triaged to the end of the line, wait for a doctor, get my vitals checked and the doc would finally send a prescription order to the *farmacia* where I would wait some more to get it filled. However, Dr. Sheila overheard all this and prescribed something like "Zitromax", a strong antibiotic. We were discussing this in the lobby when the hotel desk manager interrupted, telling us she knew the pharmacist. She promptly called him and ten minutes later I was at the *farmacia* handing 16 euro over the counter for a 6-day supply of Sheila's stuff. A few minutes later I was on the bike heading downhill, on time, departing Orvieto. Is this the "primitive" Italian medicine I hear about? Poppycock! Getting those meds swiftly was some kind of damn medical miracle and, already, I started feeling better.

Before we left Orvieto, we read our hotelier's sentiment about the glories of Orvieto (the English translation comes off a little awkward but you get the point he's making):

"This Orvieto, that is thousands of years old, where time stands still between geraniums and stones of different times, where you can meet surprising beauty and the taste of life in the spirit of well-fed Etruscans; this "elevated and unexpected" gem, so sad, so splendid, so alone, and unreachable, totally magic, is waiting for you".

I understood what he was saying (except maybe the "well-fed Etruscans" part). Was it hyperbole? Naw -- I don't think so. Orvieto is a magical place.

Day 9: May 19, Wednesday, Orvieto to Sovana (107 km)



Every morning I found that my respiratory complaint became less of a problem after 15 or 20 kilometers. Besides, on this day the first ten kilometers were mostly downhill. About six kilometers out of Orvieto we began to climb. Then there was a break in the trees along the left shoulder of the road. Through the opening we got a stunning view of ancient Orvieto perched on top of the tuff outcropping in the early morning sunshine. After 3 or 4 kilometers of climbing the road began to roll for another ten kilometers. We pushed hard into the downhill side of the rollers and then,

sustaining the hard pedaling, let the momentum carry us halfway or more up the next uphill.

The clouds looked heavy to the west and south. We broke for water refills and a cappuccino at the hilltop town of *Lubriano*. There's a nice view from a small terrace off of the highway looking across a deep and forested ravine. From here it was a straight shot to *Bolsena*, our lunch stop. Bolsena is on the northern shore of Lake Bolsena and is the second largest body of water in Central Italy (Lake Turismo is the largest). We rumbled across Bolsena's cobblestone streets, through a few traffic lights and reassembled on the lakefront. After lunch we would ride clockwise around the whole perimeter of the lake. For now, the sun was breaking through so we settled into a hearty salad and pasta lunch on the outdoor veranda of a nice lakeside restaurant. There were dark clouds to the east and northwest and they seemed to be moving fast. Jeff predicted a hard rain. He decided to forego the sit-down lunch, grabbed a panini and took off on the perimeter road.

It's about 42 kilometers around the lake. As we finished lunch the group agreed that there would be rain and so we wasted no more time getting onto the perimeter route. Once we were underway, the sky rattled with thunder and there were flashes of lightening – not good for cyclists – but up to then only a very light rain. We rolled through the town of *Montefiascone* and pushed on toward *Capodimonte* on the southern shore of the lake where we planned to stop for refreshment. Capodimonte is two-thirds of the distance around the lake so we thought our luck with minor rains may be holding. We stopped at a bar and parked the bikes under big yawning table umbrellas. The bar had a large cold display case with a big selection of gelati. I was learning that a good gelato lifts the spirit. As we ducked into the bar the sky opened up and we got rain. It rained hard. Should we wait it out? At length, Marcello declared there was no use waiting. Like it or not, the rain would continue and so should we.

After a few kilometers we turned off the main road onto a little traveled one. Riding alone at this point, I pedaled up a rise and then rushed downhill back to the lakeshore. The road deteriorated into a choppy gravel surface along the lakeshore. The rain pelted against my face and partly blinded me to the road ahead. Rain water filled the thousands of potholes which, at least, made them easier to see. I dodged some road construction equipment and gradually a paved surface began to win out over the gravel. I was thoroughly soaked but the rain became lighter. Five kilometers later the perimeter ride ended and I arrived at the main road heading west to the town of *Gladoli*. First though I held up at the intersection and Massimo in the van caught up to me.

He had already picked up three of our riders and their bikes. They too were rain drenched and ready to head for the night's lodgings in *Sovana* up ahead. Massimo asked if I wanted to get in the van. I figured I had made it this far so I would ride the remaining thirty kilometers. Our last two riders, Gail and Heather, were still pedaling a couple of kilometers behind me.

It was a short steady climb up to Gradoli followed by a long flat run into *Pitigliano*, the next large town. Pitigliano was a busy town. I rolled down the main street along with the

automobile traffic. By now I was completely soaked and cold. I stopped in the rain at a service station where I ducked under a tent occupied by two local guys. Our eyes met in acknowledging the deluge of rain out on the street. They were watching two other men crawl under an automobile they were repairing. The tent fellows looked at me with amusement – like this Yank is a little nuts riding around in the heavy rain. I peeled off my “rain” jacket (no longer the least bit waterproof) to put on my riding jacket under the rain jacket and then got back into the soggy rain jacket. The rain did not slow down.

Back on the road, I headed downhill and rounded a hairpin turn to exit Pitigliano. The road narrowed but it was not busy. Climbing through the next seven kilometers I wound up at the approach to Sovana, the night’s destination, and headed into town. It was uphill of course, and on more wet and clunky cobblestones. Finally, on the far side of town I located our accommodation, the Sovana Resort, and checked in. Immediately, wet clothes were strewn all over the room again. I rejuvenated in the hot shower for a good half hour. Later I learned that Massimo and the van wisely picked up Gail and Heather in Pitigliano during the downpour. Damn, it really rained.

The Sovana Resort was one of the most charming 4-star places we visited. The rooms are rather large and have rustic wood ceiling beams and rafters. The bathroom has cut stone covering some of the walls and a good shower stall. The extensive exterior grounds are neatly groomed in grassy lawns and you can look down into an exposed Etruscan foundation wall underground that runs nearly the length of the hotel. Some of the wall is visible under a plexiglass cover in parts of the restaurant floor inside the hotel. A rank of cypress trees stands parallel to the hotel’s rear wall and beyond there’s a grove of trimmed olive trees among the well-tended green lawn.

By now we had left Umbria behind and were in the south end of the region of Tuscany. It is a predominantly rural and not highly developed or touristy part of Tuscany. It is a region of Tuscany called Maremma. I had never heard of it so I googled it and learned that Maremma is the last place in Tuscany that has not been “touristified”. A Google site says that in Maremma many of the ancient traditions of the authentic Tuscan culture are preserved. I decided some day I will return here. It’s got a great, untrampled feel to it.

Like most of the small towns we saw during the trip, Sovana is laid out linearly and is really one main street stretching from a 14th C. palace to the cathedral. It has a natural, non-commercial feel to it. The town is essentially all limestone. It was the capital of Etruria (the Etruscans) some 2,700 years ago. There are Etruscan tombs a little west of town but we did not have time to see them. The center has two very old churches; the cathedral, the largest, fronts the far end of the main piazza. It has a Romanesque façade and dates from the 12th C.

Dinner was at the Loconda della Taverna Etrusca which is in closer to the center. It is a modern place that straddles a ridge and has a view overlooking the ravine that runs alongside the town. Each of the many tables



has a nifty faux lamppost for lighting. Marcello's friend Marco played keyboard during dinner (and after). Marco prides himself on being able to play any song guests might request. He got his start as a musician playing piano on ocean cruises for about ten years. He said that after his marriage, it was no longer "appropriate" to continue the "Love Boat" cruises. I think I see his point. I checked with Marco to see if he knew the song that starts: "Sunshine! When you are with me I can fly!" But, no, he didn't know it.

The Ciclismo group quickly warmed to Marco and so the night carried on with song and drink. We sensed the tour's coming finale on the next day, our last day of riding, and there was a growing celebratory mood. To the sounds of my companions raising their voices in song, I excused myself and returned to the room and to bed early to try to hold off these fool respiratory complications.

Day 10: May 20, Thursday, Sovana to Porto Ercole (82 km)

We consumed a generous breakfast at the Sovana Resort. It will be the last day of riding and will be Massimo's turn on the bike. Marcello would command the van. We headed out down the long hill leading out of Sovana and backtracked to the low lying outskirts of Pitigliano. From there we climbed sharply for a mile and the road began to roll all the way to *Manciano* nearly forty kilometers into the day's ride. Just beyond Manciano Marcello was waiting with the water jugs and snacks. No one stopped at the adjacent bar. It felt like people wanted to get on with the last push to the Mediterranean.

From this point the remainder of the route was gently downhill as we gradually approached the sea. Lunch was at *Bar Trattoria Vallerana* which was positioned in the countryside at a turn in the road. Tall flagpoles idiosyncratically display the Swiss, American and Canadian flags along with the Italian. We parked our bikes in a shed and entered the restaurant for lunch at a large table. I opted for a salad. The Italians are not casual about making salads. They get really fussy about the quality of the greens and other ingredients. Marcello is a bit of a food activist. He has joined a "slow food" movement (as opposed to "fast food") that supports local growers and lobbies against adulterated foods and mass food processing in which consumers don't know what evil stuff they are fed by the enormous corporate processors.

After lunch the whole group seemed to fly along easy roads. And guess what? No rain! We could see the Mediterranean now. At one point we raced alongside a busy railroad track for about five kilometers. Then there was a short, steep rise into a prosperous residential neighborhood approaching *Ansedonia*. From there, we made our way to an unpaved path built of crusher-fines and ran for three miles through a forested causeway leading out to the peninsula that included our final destination, Porto Ercole.

All of a sudden we were in Porto Ercole and stopping at the *Capalbio Scalo* (Café del Mar) for a round of beers, anti-pasti and lots of self-congratulations for finishing four hundred miles of what we now knew to be one helluva beautiful country. En route to the hotel we stopped for a ritualistic group photo with the rear wheels of our bikes dipped into the Mediterranean.



Good job riders! Good job Marcello and Massimo! Good job Ciclismo Classico!

Post Script:

I checked with my physician after I returned home to Albuquerque about this respiratory ailment that had plagued me for a while. He said: “You are lucky. Whoever that doctor was that prescribed the anti-biotic in Orvieto, really knew what she was doing!”