

Turin's new tradition

At the first ever Granfondo Torino, *Cyclist* savours the beauty and history of the Italian countryside, and for a brief moment becomes the event's accidental hero

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Photography **GEOFF WAUGH**



he Italians love their cycling. The fervour of the support from the *tifosi* is legendary, but it's usually reserved for the pro elite at big races such as the Giro d'Italia. Which is why I find it a bit strange that on an amateur event like the Granfondo Torino I'm receiving such a rapturous response from the crowd that lines the road.

As I tap through the town of Cinaglio, people wave flags and cheer enthusiastically. Some even run alongside me, yelling encouragement. Up to this point, I've had 70km of comparatively quiet, if hard, riding and so I'm a little overawed by my newfound celebrity. I respond with smiles and a few muttered '*ciaos*' and '*grazies*', but as the celebration continues around me I experience a rising sense of suspicion, then guilt.

The realisation hits me: the crowd thinks I'm leading the race. Somewhere along the route I must have taken a wrong turn and I've unwittingly shaved off a chunk of the course, meaning I've leapfrogged the hardcore competitors and assumed a position at the head of affairs.

My fear is confirmed when I look behind me and see a pack of 100 riders bearing down



I do my best to avoid still-cycling Italians with handling skills as poor as their judgement. The event is already showing plenty of character

at speed. In no time they reach me; I search for a wheel to cling to but the pace is just too high and I get spat unceremoniously out of the back of the group.

As the peloton charges into the distance, my former admirers shoot looks at me, some of pity, but those that now understand I am a mere pretender look betrayed. I bow my head and spin away, ashamed to have unintentionally duped such passionate support. As I leave the village, I replay the events of the day that led to my brief moment of accidental stardom.

Start of the race

As Luis, my riding partner, and I queue to start the inaugural Granfondo Torino, all is as it should be at an Italian sportive. The early morning sun glints off the helmets of 3,000 riders who chatter excitedly, the only sound that intrudes on the quiet of a city yet to wake.

We wait in the Piazza Castello, a vast square that breaks up the imposing Baroque



architecture around us. With the Royal Palace of Turin at our backs we set off in typical Italian fashion – that is, 15 minutes later than the scheduled start time of 8am. To reach our escape route from the city, Via Po, we skirt the Palazzo Madama, a mighty structure that was the first Senate of the Italian Kingdom – it's the second palace I've seen in as many minutes. The wide, arcaded Via Po is a fitting route out of the city, but the tramlines and polished stone slabs that make up its road surface present significant danger to skinny-tyred road bikes. Sure enough I witness a cyclist get tangled in the tramlines less than a kilometre in. He picks himself up as I roll past and it seems only his pride has been injured, but it's enough to spike my heart rate much earlier than I intended.

Via Po safely traversed, we spin along the Corso Cairoli, luxuriating in the novelty of closed city roads as the river Po flows lazily to our left. Tramline dramas notwithstanding, the first few kilometres have been considerably less

frenetic than other gran fondos I've ridden. I soon find out why.

We cross the river and immediately begin to climb – we're onto the Bric della Maddalena, one of two significant climbs that bookend the route. The 7km climb averages 7%, which would be easily manageable were it not for the vast number of riders arriving at its base en masse. The road predictably becomes gridlocked, so we've no choice but to unclip and walk. As I do my best to avoid still-cycling Italians with bike handling skills as poor as their judgment, I'm forced to admit that the event is already showing no shortage of character.

Just before my cleats get completely ruined the bottleneck starts to thin and I'm able to remount. The climb wends its way out of Turin, passing small dwellings nestled into the hillside. Near the top I give up trying to keep pace with Luis – he seems to be inhaling helium today – and flick a look back across the city. Those houses certainly have a spectacular view. 📍

The details

The 'fondo in Torino



What **Granfondo Torino**

Where **Turin, Italy**

Distance **110km or 158km**

Next one **4th September 2016**

Price **€50 (€60 the day before), includes free race jersey**

More information granfondotorino.it

Expansive vineyards are a common sight along the route, but the rolling hills mean you're seldom in the saddle to take in the view



The technical roads and punishing climbs are just about offset by generous feed stations



They told me that ‘the rolling hills should be easy for your long legs’, but before long I’m cursing after another punchy incline

Rider’s ride

Bianchi Intenso 2014, approx £1,850, uk.bianchi.com

Thanks to a solid Fulcrum wheelset and decent Vittoria Open Pavé CG tyres, the Intenso handled confidently and the frame was comfortable on the flat, but its weight was apparent on the sharp Monferrato ramps. The Veloce groupset had a positive but slightly heavy shift that kept me on my toes when shifting under load, but this didn’t detract from the overall quality of the ride.



After taking advantage of the first feed station to rehydrate, the route quickly repays its initial demands with an exhilarating 9km descent, winding through the hills of Monferrato that represent Turin’s eastern border. Heading south, we barrel straight across the flatlands towards the town of Chieri. With 20km of flat roads to come under cloudless skies with not a breath of wind, I relish the opportunity to settle into the drops and lift my average speed.

Making new friends

The exposed roads consolidate fragmented riders into groups, and before long I find myself in a large bunch racing past the maize fields and rambling houses of rural Piedmont. As we ride, our numbers continue to swell, to the point where it becomes a little unsettling when we hit the cobbled town centre of Riva presso Chieri at 40kmh and burst out onto the narrow, twisting roads beyond.

Deciding to bravely take my destiny in my own hands, I move up the group and assume

a position on the front. At a gentle bend in the road I look over my shoulder and discover I have 50 riders on my wheel. The excitement goes to my head and, even though I know it won’t endear myself to my riding companions and will probably cost me later in the day, I lift the pace. The train of riders behind stretches out to over 100m, but my fascination at the effect one rider can have on the dynamics of a peloton is interrupted by someone shouting in Italian behind me. By the tone it’s safe to say it wasn’t ‘I really like the speed you are going, keep it up’, so I calm down and retreat back into the bunch for the few remaining flat kilometres.

The second feed station is situated near the village of Ferrere and marks a distinct change in the landscape. The flat, expansive horizon is replaced by heavily wooded hills – they form the southern tip of the Monferrato range that we’ll now weave back up through to reach the Basilica di Superga, where the event finishes. Earlier in the day, Davide Cerchio from Piedmont bike hotel Lo Scoiattolo, where I’ve been staying, told



me that ‘the rolling hills should be easy for your long legs’, so I’m confident – despite the profile looking like 90km of saw blades. But before long I’m cursing Davide’s comments as my legs are punished by yet another punchy incline over 15% that I only just manage to haul myself up.

Until now I’ve at least been part of a group – misery loves company – but just past the town of Monale I arrive at a fork in the road that is marked with arrows pointing in different directions to divide the *medio* and *lungo* routes. Having signed up for the long course, I turn in the direction of the *lungo* route, and soon find myself alone – all the other riders in my group have headed off down the *medio* course.

It’s here, as I will soon discover to my embarrassment, that I make the mistake that will see me accidentally shave off 20km from the route and lead the race. Apparently, I should have turned off for the *lungo* route several kilometres before and done an extra loop that would have eventually brought me to this point, but the junction was so subtly signposted that

In my defence, it later transpires that I wasn't the only dunce in the bunch – just the first one

The kilometre of red bricks in San Damiano d'Asti is a highlight of the route: it combines a unique riding surface with superb views



❖ I missed it. In my defence, it later transpires that several hundred other riders did exactly the same thing, so I'm not the only dunce in the bunch – just the first one.

Playing to the crowds

The road narrows, dense woodland closes in and it becomes eerily quiet as the route meanders its way northwards through the rural hills of the Asti district. Those saw teeth continue to serrate my quads but the natural beauty of Monferrato's woodland does a good job of distracting me from how slowly my bike computer is notching up the kilometres.

The tranquility of my surroundings persists and I begin to wonder what is going on – surely I should have come across other riders by now? Such thoughts are abruptly driven from my mind as roadside support suddenly explodes at the first sign of civilisation around the town of Cinaglio. I enjoy my ill-gotten celebrity status for 10km until the peloton passes me and the spectators switch their vocal support to others

more deserving. To be honest I'm just a little relieved too – the pressure of projecting the cool façade of a race contender for the benefit of those lining the road was almost as exhausting as climbing the hills themselves.

Left to my own devices I'm now able to settle into a reasonable rhythm as the route heads northwest, playing dot-to-dot with the Piedmontese churches and townships that seem to be perched atop every hill. Woodland in turn gives way to vast hazel groves, whose trees once grew the nuts that were used to make the original batches of Nutella. I think to myself that I could really do with a large spoonful of the calorific spread to bolster my waning legs. So far the route has generally cancelled any altitude gained with quick, technical descents, but at around 110km it starts to gain altitude more consistently before a final 10km push at an average of 7% to reach the Basilica di Superga.

A few kilometres past the town of Sciolze, the foliage lining the road briefly clears and I am afforded a truly impressive view – the Basilica



standing proud on top of Superga hill across the valley, with the Alps towering behind in the far distance. Davide later tells me that the vista is only this good for a brief period in late summer, as earlier in the year it is more often than not obscured by a heat haze, while later the view is obstructed by snow clouds. I mentally doff my cap to whoever planned this route and I feel privileged to be cycling through terrain with such a spectacular backdrop.

The landscape becomes progressively more suburban as the route leads onto Via Superga, the road that weaves steadily upwards towards the hill's summit. I find myself back among recreational riders once again and to a man we resemble bipedal zombies, grinding up the slope, almost too exhausted to take in the cheers of the spectators who are urging us onwards.

Via Superga is picturesque and meandering, only revealing small sections of the climb at a time. In this situation my optimistic disposition would normally step in and try to convince my legs that the finish is just around the next ❖



The final 500 metres are up a 10% gradient, but the sight of the Basilica di Superga is enough incentive to push hard to the finish

I turn a bend and am relieved and intimidated to see the final steep kick up to the Basilica unfold before me

corner, but the course planners have laid out kilometre-to-go markers that have been counting down since the base of the incline. With the option of blissful ignorance removed, I have little choice but to dig in and watch the markers tick slowly by.

Between the houses and trees that line Via Superga I catch glimpses of verdant Piedmont greenery some distance below, which at least reassures me that good progress is being made. I turn a bend and am relieved and intimidated in equal measure to see the final steep kick up to the Basilica unfold before me. The late summer sun is beating down, nudging the temperature upwards of 30°C along this cramped road, but I am invigorated by the sight of the finish. A last stamp on the pedals sees me across the line, and I'm both exhausted and elated. The imposing Basilica di Superga and the vista over Turin make for an appropriately triumphant finish to the route.

Later, over a glass of the region's famous Barolo wine, I look back over my day's experience. Other events may be more steeped in history or include longer Alpine ascents but

today's smaller, steeper hills have proved no less testing, and the views across Piedmont's vineyards and hazel groves no less inspiring. This may have been the first Granfondo Torino, but my ride today assures me that it will definitely not be the last. 🌸

Sam Challis is a writer for Cyclist and is looking forward to cheating his way to the front of future sportives



How we did it

TRAVEL

Cyclist flew with Ryanair from London Stansted to Turin. Fares start at £19.99 one-way with no luggage, but travelling with a bike box costs £60 extra each way. It's a 30-minute drive to the centre of Turin for the start of the Granfondo Torino.

ACCOMMODATION

We stayed at the Piedmont Bike Hotel, Lo Scoiattolo, in Pralormo, approximately 45

minutes' drive to the southeast of Turin. It's thoroughly equipped to accommodate guests and their bikes, offering comprehensive tailor-made services for cyclists. Lo Scoiattolo is part of the Bici Amore Mio Italy Cycling Holidays hotel group. For more details visit bicimoremio.it.

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