



## Torino-Nice Rally

The ride is a touring event that starts in Turin and ends in Nice, taking place in early September. There is a recommended route but no obligation to stick to it. The route includes around 485km of tarmac and takes in two Grand Tour cols alongside 240km of rocky gravel-based military stradas, often at an altitude of 2,000m or more. Route information is also available for anyone wanting to do the ride at other times. The ride is free aside from a small donation to the Smart Shelter Foundation. Find out more on the event's website.

**Equipment:** I took an Isen G.O.A.T. steel-framed touring mountain bike. I used tubeless 2.1 tyres which worked well on and off road. I was glad to get no punctures – particularly as when I returned home I discovered all the back-up inner tubes I'd taken were the wrong valve type and would have been useless. I used a variety of fashionable “bikepacking” bags, strapping a lot of my equipment to oversized bottle cages on the fork. A single front chainring and a wide range cassette gave me a lowest gear of 32x50. Unusually for me I suffered no mechanical issues aside from the odd bolt working loose.

After some cycling disasters, **Adrian Downie** was looking for something kinder when he decided to attempt the Torino-Nice Rally in early September – a scenic and non-competitive jaunt, with the added appeal of top-class Italian food...

# NICE

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**I HAD A DISASTROUS 2017.** London-Edinburgh-London was abandoned after 900km – I was out of time, and suffering borderline hypothermia. It was difficult to summon up any enthusiasm for doing anything over 200km in 2018.

The discovery that I'd been anaemic for some time, which had taken its toll on my average speed, had contributed to my falling a long way short of previous cycling achievements. I felt the time was right to try some more relaxed riding.

I'd read some accounts of the Torino-Nice Rally and it sounded perfect – no deadline, beyond making it on to a flight home, non-competitive, a choice of routes, amazing scenery and most importantly – Italian food.

The entry process involved going into a lottery for a place. Some months later I received confirmation I was in. The next stage was concern about being capable of a ride with 15,000-plus metres of climbing and for which I didn't own a suitable bike.

Come September I had resolved the bike issue – having borrowed a very nice Isen Workshop bike. It fitted me almost perfectly aside from the front end being a bit low.

I then set about spoiling its appearance with far too many bags, some loop bars and my reliable Brooks saddle. My fitness had greatly increased following a course of heavy duty iron pills, though I was still a long way from my Audaxing peak. Unfortunately I then put my back out badly two weeks before the ride while attempting to change a car tyre. I contemplated cancelling the ride altogether.

My physio was not optimistic about my chances of finishing the ride, but suggested it was worth going anyway and doing as much of it as I could manage. Right up to the day of departure I fretted over whether it was better to just cancel altogether and avoid the disappointment, but in the end I found myself hobbling round Gatwick airport with a bike box I could barely lift.

My careful efforts to get it within the limits were wasted as they didn't even weigh it. I then suffered another low moment as my flight was repeatedly delayed and with my back issues I could find nowhere to sit or stand in the airport that didn't hurt. We finally took off around three hours late, further increasing my sense of gloom (but



Nervous start... Piazza Bodoni where the ride begins with friends, from left, Caren, Nelson and Cata

eventually resulting in a substantial refund).

Approaching Turin I was excited and apprehensive at my first glimpse of the mountains. I had a couple of days before the ride started, which I largely spent stretching and walking in an attempt to ease my back pain. I reassembled my bike and did a quick test ride with luggage attached – something I should have done before leaving but hadn't had enough time. It was worryingly heavy and I started to regret the extra gear I'd brought.



Assietta... Caren on the climb

The night before the ride starts, most participants meet up for a meal at a restaurant in the same Piazza Bodoni where the ride begins. I was at the older end of participants, so sensibly opted to limit myself to a couple of drinks and got an early night. I wasn't keen to start the ride with a hangover.

Early the next day I walked to the local supermarket where I stocked up on emergency rations – pastries, cheese and focaccia. The piazza was full of nervous-looking cyclists and there was much fretting about who had too much or too little luggage (definitely too much in my case). A quick group photo was taken and then people gradually set off at their own pace. I had several friends on the ride, but because of worries about my speed and back problems I'd told them I would mostly ride independently and would hope to meet them along the way. They diverted to Decathlon for some last minute shopping and I joined a large group through the Turin suburbs.

After Turin the group fragmented. This was the last point I'd see

many of them. Now we were on a long straight road with the mountains visible in the distance. Another rider pointed out my bars were too low. I was already all too aware of this, so all this did was increase my pessimism as there was no further room for adjustment.

On the positive side, my back seemed fine while I was cycling. There was the odd twinge, but nothing unbearable. As usual it was a delight to be cycling in a country with relatively tolerant drivers and a plentiful supply of bakeries and cheap espressos.

The very detailed route notes gave two options at this point – one relatively easy road climb, or the Colombardo (1,898m), which it made very clear was not easy. I went for the Colombardo before I had the chance to change my mind. It started as a very steep road climb and proceeded to add in rough gravel and rocks from about halfway up. It quickly became clear that distances were largely irrelevant compared to the amount of climbing and quality of surface.

It was late in the afternoon by the time I reached the top. I triumphantly took photos of the Colle sign, before discovering I wasn't actually at the top and had several kilometres more of steep, rough gravel to deal with. The sun was going down and it was getting cold. Condove at the bottom of the descent seemed a bit grim so I pressed on to

Sant'Antonio di Susa which looked more hopeful. I then wasted a great deal of time trying and failing to find accommodation in the dark. B&B's were either full, closed, or no longer existed.

I considered camping, but the area was too built-up for this to be appealing. Eventually I managed to online book an apartment back in Condove, so doubled back 7km, unsure if my booking would actually exist or if I'd have to sleep under a road bridge. Fortunately I was met by a cheerfully drunk Italian man who let me into a large comfortable, apartment while enthusiastically congratulating me on my ride. Even more fortunately the local pizzeria was still open.

Retracing the previous night's route, I observed the massive amount of scaffolding on the bridge and felt glad I'd not slept under it. While on holiday the previous year, my family and I had missed the Genoa bridge disaster by about an hour and I suspect I would have had a sleepless night contemplating it.

The next climb was the Colle delle Finestre (2,178m), the longest climb of the ride. It started easily with a good road through forests, before the scenery turned more alpine and the surface deteriorated. I'd occasionally get a glimpse of another rider in the distance, but I mostly enjoyed the peace of riding on my own. As I finally

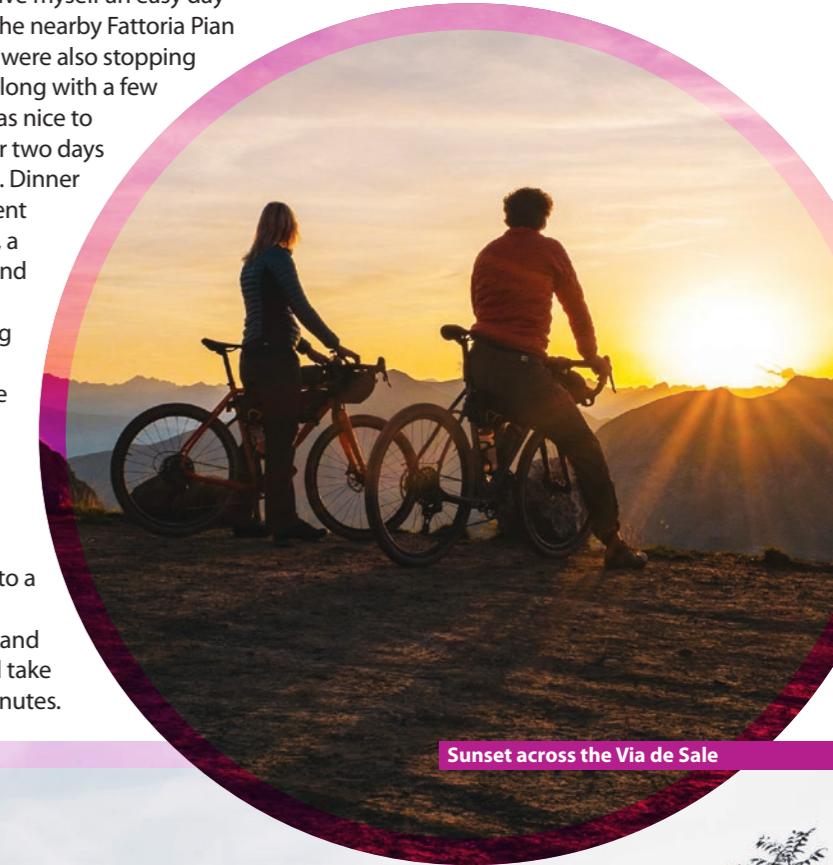
reached the top the weather got worse and the subsequent descent turned my hands numb with cold.

The next part of the route was the famous Strada Assietta. The rifugio (a remote mountain shelter combining youth hostel accommodation with restaurant quality catering) where I planned to stay was only 10km further. I made a start, but quickly decided to give myself an easy day and turned back to the nearby Fattoria Pian dell'Alpe. My friends were also stopping there for the night, along with a few other riders and it was nice to speak to people after two days of mostly solo riding. Dinner was of course excellent – home-made pasta, a huge cheeseboard and plenty of wine.

The next morning was sunny and my decision to postpone the Strada Assietta seemed a good one. It's an amazing road, but the 10km to the next rifugio took me until lunchtime due to a mixture of climbing, washboard surfaces and my need to stop and take photos every five minutes.

Apparently riders who had tackled it the previous afternoon had to go through a snowstorm. There are some advantages to being slow...

My friends Caren, Nelson and Cata rode much of this with me and it was also the first time on the ride I saw marmots. These large fluffy ground squirrels live at high altitudes but are hard to photograph



Sunset across the Via de Sale



Dan, from Canada, begins the climb up the Colle Finestre

without a zoom lens. Reluctantly leaving my friends behind (they had an extra day before their flight home), I spent the night as the only guest in a resort town hotel.

The next day started with a long, cold descent to Briançon over the border in France. The first thing I found in town was an artisan boulangerie which allowed me to fully restock on pastries. As long as I had at least one squashed pastry in my bar bag I wouldn't starve.

This day would see me climbing two Cols, but all on road. First was the Col d'Izoard (2360m), full of road bikes, well signposted and with numerous distance and height markers. I stopped briefly at the top but it was crowded with cars and motorbikes and felt too hectic after the

peace of the previous couple of days. The descent felt like it went on for ever and I was glad that I had good disc brakes.

It was now very hot and I had another massive climb ahead, the Col Agnel (2,744m) – the third highest road pass in Europe, which took me back into Italy again.

By late afternoon I still had a way to go when I bumped into a group of Canadians I'd met at the start of the ride. They were staying at a campsite in the village of Pierre-Grosse so I decided this was a better option than finishing the climb that night.

While I had a dynamo light that would have made

night-time riding fine, it seemed a shame to miss out on the views. I was also feeling bad for having not done any camping so far, particularly as, unlike most people on the ride, I'd brought a small tent rather than a bivvy bag, reasoning that if I didn't finish I could spend a few days camping.

The rest of the Agnel was a long, hot climb, with very limited shade. I reached the top around midday, feeling a little irritable at the massive number of motorbikes and cars blocking the views. I descended the very steep other side, impressed at the few cyclists tackling it from that direction. Somewhere near the bottom I found a reservoir and a restaurant that was open and still willing to serve a late lunch.

I was conscious of being hot and dishevelled in a smart restaurant full of people enjoying lunch, but the ravioli with nut sauce outweighed these concerns. I carried on towards Sampeyre where I planned to stock up on supplies. Unfortunately the supermarket was closed and I didn't want to wait around until mid-afternoon for it to re-open.

I began the climb up the Col de Sampeyre (2,284m), intending to stay at a rifugio three-quarters of the way up. However when I eventually got through to them on the phone they were full, so I had no choice but to continue upwards. This was a more enjoyable climb, being mostly surfaced, with plentiful shade and almost entirely free of traffic.

Reaching the top was something of a highlight for me. I was up above the clouds in early evening sun, totally alone on this peaceful mountain top, the only noise being cowbells in the distance. This coincided with an awareness that my back pain was decreasing and for the first time I allowed myself to believe that I could actually finish the whole ride.

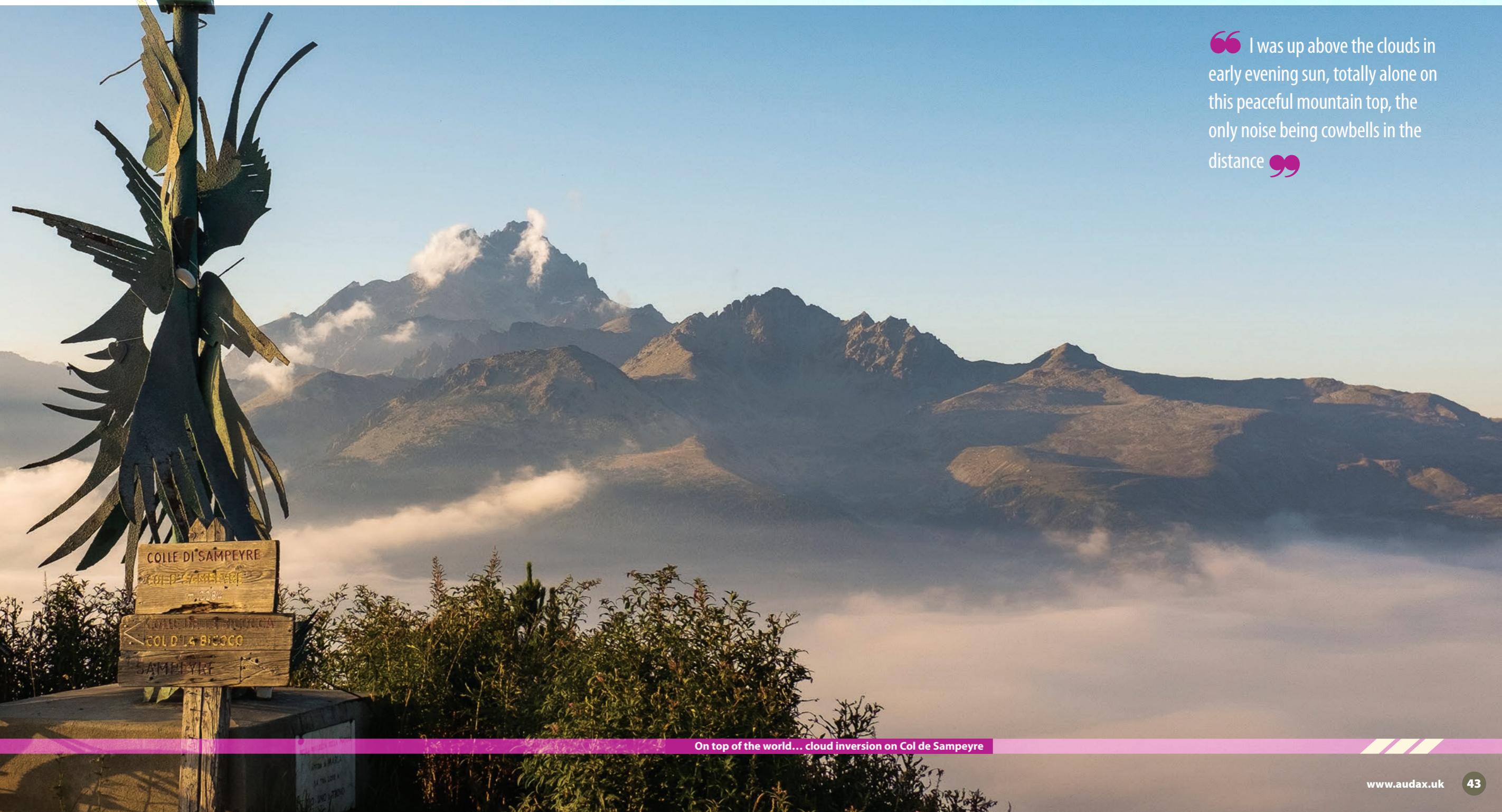
Things remained good as I found myself the only guest at the Rifugio La Sosta dal Col which had recently been taken over by a nice young couple who spoke good English and were keen to feed me huge amounts of food. Faced with a hard choice between a cheeseboard and dessert I ended up opting for both.

Leaving the next morning I was given a

massive takeaway sandwich with my favourite of last night's cheeses and a very reasonable 60 Euro bill. I had another choice of routes here, the harder and longer one apparently involved quite a bit of bike-carrying, so I reluctantly went for the easier one, not wanting to risk further back problems. Also the shorter route took the "Death Road" which was too good a name to miss. It followed a narrow valley with a sheer drop beyond railings, which were frequently missing. In good weather it didn't feel that deadly, but I took it very gently anyway.

Next came the Colle del Preit (2,076m), another "easier" road option where I wouldn't have to risk lifting my heavy bike and bags. I was low on food aside from my

“I was up above the clouds in early evening sun, totally alone on this peaceful mountain top, the only noise being cowbells in the distance”



On top of the world... cloud inversion on Col de Sampeyre

sandwich but there were two restaurants in Preit about halfway up the climb so I didn't worry too much. Unfortunately, when I got there, one was closed and the other was unwilling to serve me without a booking. I pressed on.

The top of the climb led on to "Little Peru" – a particularly stunning and remote area. It was hot and slow-going, with rough surfaces and very little shade, but the views were amazing. I finally reached a road downhill just as thick cloud rolled in, dropping the visibility to a few metres.

I descended as rapidly as was sensible under the conditions, eventually reaching the bottom of the valley where quiet bike paths took me to Borgo San Dalmazzo where I booked a cheap room in a guest-house. Heading into town to get food I was unnerved by being in a busy town after such remote places. The restaurant the owner had recommended turned out to be an "English" style pub that was very busy with young people out for Saturday night. I decided I couldn't really face this so continued on and found a pizza place where I wouldn't look as out of place in my hiking trousers and unnecessary down jacket. Having been used to the mountains I'd neglected the fact I was at lower altitude and most people were out in shorts and t-shirts.

Next came the Col de Tende (1,870m),

another long road climb. Early in the climb was the small, busy town of Limone Piemonte then through a road tunnel into France it quietened, with more dormant ski lifts and never-ending switchbacks. Reaching the top I turned on to the gravel track of the Via de Sale, an ancient route where tradesmen once carried salt from the coast to the hinterland.

The early stages were steep and meant my patience was occasionally tested by large groups of weekend quad bikers. I had to stop and have a sandwich of supermarket cheese under an empty ski lift station before I could face continuing. The views were incredible – the best of the ride alongside Little Peru.

By early evening I reached the very remote Rifugio don Barbera. There were a number of TNR riders already there. I enjoyed the sunset with a beer – before the temperature dropped rapidly and we headed in for a large pasta dinner. It was nice to chat to a variety of international riders about our experiences of the ride.

I set off the next morning with Ellen and Chris, an English couple who were doing the ride. They were faster than me up hills but less reckless going down them, so we stayed together for a while. After some fun descents, which made me glad to be running such large tyres, there was more steep, hot and dusty climbing,

before road-signs revealed we were back in France again.

I celebrated returning to urban civilisation with a lavish lunch in the first town I reached, before tackling the Col de Turini (1,607m). This climb started off deceptively easy with good roads before becoming steep, rough and slow. I'd planned to camp at the very top by an abandoned fort, but it was growing dark and I reluctantly decided I needed to put up my tent while I could still see.

Cautiously circumnavigating some vicious-looking sheep dogs I pulled off the road and set up my tent near a ruined settlement. It wasn't the best camping spot, but it was properly dark by the time I'd finished trying to insert my horribly bendy tent pegs. I could hear thunder rumbling in the distance which added a sense of urgency, but once in my tent I remained undisturbed by rain or angry dogs.

I lay in my tent watching the sunrise, torn between despondency that my flight home was that evening and joy that I was actually going to finish the ride. There were two route options here and I reluctantly took the shorter one to minimise any risk of having to rush to catch my flight. With plenty of time to cycle the remaining distance to Nice and only one climb en-route, I could relax and

**Little Peru... the startling rock formations in the northern Italian Alps**



make the most of it. This meant stopping for a first breakfast of pastries in a picturesque village cafe, then again at Sospel for a full French breakfast from another artisanal bakery.

I filled any remaining space in my bags with even more pastries and began the final climb up Col de Braus (1,002m). This seemed easy compared to the others, well-surfaced and with gentle gradients. From the top, the descent towards Nice was initially fun, but as it approached Nice it got busier and more industrial. It seemed like ages to get through the heavy traffic on the way into Nice and once in the centre I could conjure up little enthusiasm for the crowds and noise.

I stopped at Cafe du Cycliste, the traditional end to the ride, had a cold drink, and decided not to spend £35 on a clean t-shirt, tempting as it was. I navigated multiple lanes of traffic and crowds of tourists, stopping to purchase several rolls of cling-film to assist with packing the bike. Lastly I went for a quick beach-front shower.

The airport proved incredibly confusing to navigate. I established that I could only buy a bike box from Terminal Two, but signs frequently led to dead ends and it was another 30 minutes or so before I found it. I was very glad I had taken a shorter route as my time buffer before the flight was quickly evaporating.

I purchased a flimsy bike box for 25 Euros, borrowed a large roll of adhesive tape, then set about dismantling the bike in a quiet corner of the airport. After a long

struggle I checked the weighing machine to ensure it was within the limits and encircled the thin box in many, many layers of tape in the hope that nothing would get lost from it during the flight. I then stood back triumphantly before realising my passport was still inside the frame bag, within the box.

I borrowed scissors and more tape, frantically extracted the passport, went through the whole wrapping process again, then began the long journey back to Terminal One

with a huge and unwieldy box. I managed to get it on to a tram, then eventually on to a trolley, manoeuvred it through the airport and finally deposited it at Oversized Baggage where they again failed to weigh it. I boarded my flight and sat back thinking about all the overseas rides I'd be doing in 2020. What could go wrong?

## Update

At time of going to press the Col Tende and Roya Valley areas near Nice have been badly affected by flooding. The damage has been very severe and a section of the route is currently impassable. It's uncertain what effect this will have on the ride in future.



Caren, Nelson and Cata view the Assietta



The author, Adrian Downie and a passing vulture