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TASTING
NORTHERN
ITALY BY
BICYCLE



BY TOM ROBERTSON

THE LAST TIME I participated in an organized bicycle tour, the idea of a Clinton presidential campaign was still fresh and new. Although in the ensuing decades I've done dozens of bike trips, my usual touring style is more "DIY" and involves many hours of map- and internet-based research to determine the destination, route, and logistics needed to make it happen. The trips themselves are generally lacking in frills — unless you consider a can of Pringles strapped to the handlebar bag to be a frill (and by day three, I usually do). Also, I'm an unlikely candidate to join a tour centered on gourmet food and wine. I love them both, to be sure, but like Jack Nicholson's character in *As Good as It Gets*, my comfort zone involves ordering the same meal from the same restaurant every single day at the exact same time.

All that said, when the opportunity arose to join Italiaoutdoors Food and Wine (italiaoutdoorsfoodandwine.com) for a six-day journey through northeastern Italy's Veneto region, I quickly said yes. Cycling is in the blood of most Italians. Although Tuscany seems to get the lion's share of press for bike riding, the Veneto region is actually the center of the cycling culture. Veneto is home to 80 percent of the Italian bicycle industry, including many companies like SIDI, Campagnolo, Selle Italia, and Pinarello Bicycles. Thanks to its location at the foot of the Dolomites, there are not only miles and miles of cycling roads, but also a ton of other options for outdoor recreation. To top it off, the Veneto region also produces the largest volume of Italy's wine. Surely, this must be the greatest place in the world to do a bicycle tour, right?

It didn't take long to develop an appreciation for the advantages of traveling with a professional outfitter. Any bike-touring enthusiast knows that one of the most challenging things to

figure out for overseas trips is how to get yourself, your gear, and your bicycle to the starting point. Then at the end of the trip, you need to find a bike box and do the transport dance in reverse. Some operators do offer rental bikes, but that can feel like an unsatisfactory option if you're used to a higher-end bike. My worries on this front were quickly put to rest through a series of pre-trip emails with Kathy Bechtel, one-half of Italiaoutdoors Food and Wine. "All of our bikes are Italian," she assured me, "and most have been built up by my guiding partner, Vernon McClure, using frames and components made within 50 kilometers or so of his home in Vicenza."

Kathy had suggested that I arrive a day or two early and spend some time exploring Venice, the Veneto region's capital and largest city. Stepping off the public transportation that ran from the airport to the island, I was immediately immersed in a multicultural clamor unlike anything I'd experienced before. Thanks to the giant cruise ships lined up at the docks, the main streets of Venice were crowded with people and the air reverberated with the din of multiple languages. I soon discovered that if you detour down an empty narrow alleyway, you can quickly get away from the crowds. You might get disoriented and lost in the process, but that's part of the fun.

Our group was scheduled to meet just one train stop from Venice on the mainland so the logistics were seemingly straightforward. However, while double-checking the train schedule online, I saw an announcement about a strike underway that would affect certain trains. With no idea if mine was one of them, I



Top: The back roads in the Veneto region are lined with vineyards.

Bottom left: Coffee is a huge part of the Italian culture, with career baristas plying their trade for decades.

Bottom right: The Veneto region has over 220,000 acres of vineyards with hundreds of small wineries.



hustled to the train station early only to be confronted with the discovery that I had zero idea how to navigate the various lines and ticket kiosks. Thankfully, a kind Italian couple heading to the same place took me under their wing. Not only did they buy my ticket, but they took me to the train and sat with me, happy to practice their English during the 10-minute ride. Being rescued by locals seems like one of those quintessential authentic travel experiences, and I was grateful that they had lent a hand.

After disembarking at the station and drinking a few *espressi*, it was time to meet up with the group. There were nine of us in total, all from the U.S. save for a gregarious couple from Hong Kong (in a delightful bit of irony, the Harvard-educated husband was named Yale). We piled into two black vans piloted by drivers in dark, mirrored sunglasses, which gave the ride an air of luxury that I just don't get when driving my dusty Subaru around back home. Although being on a group's schedule is usually anathema to me, I suddenly



Top: The Castle of Soave was built in the 10th century to protect the area against Hungarians. Today, it serves as a backdrop for medieval pageants and cultural events.

Bottom: Even with the route condensed into a small bike computer, a paper map remains helpful.



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Owner/Guide Vernon McClure
Owner/Guide Kathy Bechtel
www.italiaoutdoorsfoodandwine.com



relished the opportunity to turn off the logistical side of my brain and just give myself over to Italy, getting lost in the scenery rather than worrying about losing my car keys or missing a turn.

The vans shuttled us west through exactly the kind of prototypical Italian landscape that you'd imagine: vineyard-covered rolling green hills watched over by stately fieldstone villas perched up high. Our overnight accommodation was a charming small hotel in the heart of the Valpolicella wine region with its own restaurant and winery affiliation

and a view for miles from its cobblestone terrace. We pulled up and hopped out next to a line of waiting bikes, which, aside from their missing saddles and pedals, looked ready for the week's adventure. Italiaoutdoors Food and Wine co-owner Vernon McClure was standing beside them, ready to get to work. In his hand was a chart with all of our names, bike preferences, sizes, and other random notes. He was methodical and admirably efficient in getting each of us properly fitted to a sleek, lightweight, personalized machine.

McClure has been riding, guiding, and residing in the Veneto region for over 20 years. Prior to that, he was the recreational programming director for the U.S. Department of Defense. In addition to the variety of bike tours he leads these days, he also guides skiing, rock climbing, and hiking excursions, as well as just about any other custom adventure a client can dream up. Perhaps the most accurate description, bestowed on him by an Italian travel magazine, is "the MacGyver of active vacations." After



Clockwise from top left: A typical Italian village. A wine barrel signed and dated by the vintner. There are a number of signed bike routes all over the Veneto region. Taking a break from the Italian sun under the vines.



seeing Vernon in action, I could only nod my head in agreement.

Although we hadn't yet pedaled a single kilometer, as soon as the sun went down it was time for our first wine tasting. We gathered in the large, modern "cellar" below the hotel, which housed a true family operation. Tonight's wine was from a fourth-generation vintner who produces around 6,000 bottles per year from grapes harvested on four acres nearby. At harvest time, the entire family gathers together and picks the plump fruit by hand. The winemaker shared plenty of information about the particular wines he produced, but he only spoke Italian, and, well, my Italian is limited to the most critically important words like cappuccino, macchiato, and gelato. Thankfully, Kathy was there to translate and to add tidbits from her own extensive wine-related knowledge. I was struck by the way he had signed the oak barrels used to age the wine; it was a sign of obvious pride in his family's craftsmanship. Our glasses were carefully coated inside with a thin film of wine before the actual taste was poured. One sip let me know that the vintner's pride in his product was well deserved.

The group was up bright and early for a leisurely breakfast and some coffee drinking before our first ride together. A game-changer in bike touring in recent years is the introduction of GPS computers. Vernon handed everybody a Garmin with our day's route pre-loaded, as well as a cell phone with which to call him in case of confusion. On top of that, Kathy would be riding with us, and Vernon would be out along the route in his car to help if any issues came up. But, even with the GPS, the phones, and Vernon patrolling the route, there were still just too many unsigned and unnamed roads not to make a wrong turn or two. Getting a little bit lost was part of the adventure, and Italiaoutdoors' small group size made it easy for them to wrangle wayward cyclists before anyone got too far off track.

Before setting off each day, in addition to briefing us on the route description, Vernon gave us a thorough



NUTS & BOLTS *Italy's Veneto*

BEST TIME TO TRAVEL

While it's possible to ride in most of Italy from spring through fall, the most popular months are May, June, July, September, and October. Like most European counties, August is the time when Europeans take their holiday and accommodations and roadways can be quite crowded. If you're there for wine tasting as well as cycling, then early October is hard to beat.

ITALIAOUTDOORS

They offer small, personalized group tours in north-eastern Italy. Focusing on this area of the country provided a high level of regional focus and knowledge. Along with the established small-group tours, Italiaoutdoors Food

and Wine also offers the ability to put together custom trips for a similar cost. For group sizes from 4 to 12, they can tailor a trip for the pace and activities that you want to experience.

GETTING AROUND

Regardless if you are traveling with a group or not, it's great to be able to take advantage of Italy and spend a couple of days walking around Venice on your own. From the Venice Marco Polo Airport there are options to take a bus, train, or water taxi to Venice. If you are touring on your own and want to skip a section, you can take a bike on most regional trains — there is a small fee and sometimes reservations are required.

BIKE RENTALS AND GEAR

Italiaoutdoors Food and Wine includes high-quality road bikes with their tour. They suggest bringing your own pedals, with an option to bring your own saddle as well. They also provide all the tools and tubes you need, as well as a Garmin computer to help you navigate the day's route. If traveling on your own, there are a few places throughout the region where you can rent bikes.

RESOURCES

- bicycle-touring-guide.com/bicycling-italy
- italy-cycling-guide.info
- italiaoutdoorsfoodandwine.com
- italia.it/en/home.html

overview of the history of the area. On that first riding day, we were headed toward Lake Garda, Italy's largest lake and for centuries a hugely popular holiday destination. Lake Garda has a serene, peaceful vibe today, but there's a long and bloody history of battles fought along its shores, dating back to the third century. Napoleon's troops campaigned here against Austrian forces in 1797, and in the 1940s Mussolini used the lakeside town of

Salò as the capital for his Italian Social Republic, providing a base for the occupying German forces.

Vernon's and Kathy's abundant knowledge and enthusiasm were infectious, but I'll admit that once I was on the road and pedaling, all of the details pertaining to the history and viticulture of the area escaped my thoughts. Effortlessly pedaling through the countryside, fueled by espresso and drunk on the scenery, I couldn't

imagine being any more content with the present moment. It all just felt so authentically ... Italian! That sense was only reinforced when, at the end of the day, we pulled into our hotel parking lot and docked our bikes next to a dazzling cherry red Ferrari.

novices alike. Located in the hills around Lake Garda, the estate also has over 1,300 olive trees in addition to the grapes. It turns out that the mild climate and fertile soils that lead to award-winning wines also produce some of the best extra-virgin olive oil

purple clusters were hanging heavily on the vine. The best wine producers are so familiar with the taste of ripeness that they can do exactly what we were doing — walk down a row sampling grapes — and know right away when it's time to pick. Of the many important decisions a grower or winemaker makes each year, timing the harvest to optimize the fruit's sugar-acidity balance is one of the most critical.

Naturally, there was a wine tasting with someone from the estate, but the main event of the evening was the one thing I had been worried about ever since committing to this trip: we were about to take part in a cooking class. The Tinazzi's estate had an oversized kitchen with multiple prep stations set up before our arrival. The family regularly offers courses on Italian cuisine as well as team-building classes based on cooking competitions. Kathy

SITTING IN FRONT OF A CAFÉ IN A TINY ITALIAN VILLAGE IS ABOUT AS COMFORTABLE AS YOU CAN GET ANYWHERE WHILE FULLY DECKED OUT IN LYCRA.

Within minutes, the black vans pulled up and whisked us away to Tenuta Valleselle, a country house surrounded by 12 acres of lush, sun-kissed vineyards. The estate is one of four owned by the Tinazzi wine family, and its aim is to share the full wine experience with oenophiles and

in Italy.

After a quick introduction to the house, we went out to walk among the rows of vines during the day's last light. We plucked and sampled a few grapes here and there as we strolled. The fruit was about a week from being ready to harvest; consequently, the



It's hard to put in big mileage days in Italy when there are so many places to stop for espresso.

was going to coach our group through preparing our meal for the evening, using fresh local ingredients she had purchased along that day's route. I've been (affectionately, I think) referred to as a "kitchen dummy," and as a general rule I don't cook — at all. But Kathy is a formally trained chef and a wonderful teacher, and after an hour and a half of wine-fueled cutting, dicing, sautéing, grilling, and mixing, we sat down to an authentic dinner of regional specialties. Looking back on my notes from the evening, the only thing that I could make out was "lots of fun cooking and eating with folks." Apparently the food turned out well enough, and I might have had too much wine.

I'm not sure how much practical knowledge I retained from that cooking class. One thing that did stick with me after getting home from the trip was that there's never a wrong time for tasting and drinking wine. The next morning we spun for about 20 minutes before pulling into a winery for a quick taste. After drinking in moderation and purchasing some bottles for the road, we started pedaling again. Our route that day was the hilliest of the trip, and we climbed up through seemingly never-ending vineyards before ripping down a descent with multiple switchbacks. Despite the range of experience levels among our group's riders, after a 20-minute descent on a winding country road, everybody was smiling. We did what any respectable local would do afterwards to celebrate — we stopped for coffee. Sitting in front of a café in a tiny Italian village is about as comfortable as you can get anywhere while fully decked out in Lycra. The Italians don't bat an eye at that, and in fact, they even seem a bit envious that you're out riding while they aren't. As a double bonus, most of the small-town cafés are also bars so as soon as you finish your espresso, you can order a glass of wine.

Although I might be a wine novice, I would place myself squarely in the coffee aficionado category. Regardless of Italy's connection with and stellar reputation for cycling, when I think of this beautiful country, the first thing



that comes to mind is coffee. The beans first arrived from the Arab world in the sixteenth century via Venice, then a major trading port. By the mid-1600s, the germinal café (so named for the drink it served) opened on the island and soon became synonymous with a relaxed atmosphere and good conversation. The Veneto region,

and Venice in particular, served as the gateway for coffee's movement into Europe and subsequently the U.S. We also have Italy to thank for the invention of espresso-style coffee, and in my book that's reason enough to visit the area and show our appreciation!

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Italy's pervasive coffee culture is that anywhere you go, you'll find an amazing cup. The average age of baristas is around 45, and they've been pulling espresso shots for most of their lives. Here, being a barista is a legitimate career, and not just a starter job. Thanks to the drink's ubiquity, baristas quickly learn to serve good coffee or patrons will just go somewhere else. Rumor has it that the French-Italian border is the definite hard line where quality, or at least the consistency of coffee quality, drops off precipitously. Although I wasn't able to investigate that on this trip, I did what I could in terms of quality-control testing within the Veneto region. Of course, that required a large sample size to allow for an accurate assessment. Thus, my daily rhythm went something like this: breakfast, a few cappuccinos, riding, one or two macchiatos, riding, lunch, riding, some espresso shots, riding, and finally a wine tasting followed by an outrageously good dinner. There's just something magical about drinking



Bikes were lined up and waiting for us every morning during our group tour.

coffee at a sidewalk café, surrounded by wrought-iron scrollwork and a sea of cascading geraniums. Despite the caffeine, my heart rate actually dropped in those moments from watching the locals stroll by in their typical unhurried fashion.

Our trip wasn't all slow-paced villages and vineyards, though. After a few days of exploring various charming small towns, we pedaled into the bustling and cosmopolitan city of Vicenza, just 20 miles west of Venice. One of the nation's wealthiest



amazing Nature

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cities, thanks largely to the textile and steel industries, Vicenza is filled with restaurants, museums, art galleries, and undeniably stylish people. Until a recent move to Romania, the Tullio Campagnolo factory, of the famed Campagnolo bicycle components, was also located here.

I had ridden in Rome once before and remembered the urban traffic getting pretty wild so I was a little concerned as we approached Vicenza. But, as we pedaled into the city, the streets were quiet with minimal traffic. Stores were closed, and very few people were out and about — they were in the midst of *La Pausa*. “The Pause,” an idea not unlike the siesta, is the time of day when most businesses close their doors and the proprietors take a three-hour lunch break. It’s a huge departure from American values of round-the-clock convenience and productivity, but one that I could get used to. In the interest of doing as the locals did, I settled in for a quick nap after our hotel check-in.

By the time the city starting coming

to life again in late afternoon, I was out wandering the streets with a triple scoop of gelato in one hand and an old film camera in the other. The impeccably dressed locals on their cruiser bikes made for such compelling subjects that I could’ve spent all evening photographing were it not time for — you guessed it — another wine tasting! At the risk of making wine lovers everywhere cringe, what I really loved about the tastings was that they all had an unlimited supply of potato chips available. I might not be as classy and stylish as the Italians, but this felt like a huge upgrade from the bungee-recorded Pringles.

As on any successful group tour, our cohort had started out as strangers, but we had become fine friends and these tastings were turning into small parties. But all good things must come to an end, and before we knew it the black vans were pulling up in the morning to take us back to the airport. Once again, I had most of the day free to explore Venice on my own. I

reluctantly turned the logistical side of my brain back on, but apparently it had atrophied during its week-long furlough. By the time I had missed one bus and disembarked two stops too early from the next, I already regretted not having someone around to take charge.

One final observation: after doing a trip like this, the effects can linger for weeks. Without even realizing it, you find yourself opening a bottle of wine at noon to have a glass with lunch. Extra scoops of gelato sound like a perfectly reasonable idea. Then, if the trip really hit you hard, you celebrate *La Pausa* by shutting the door and taking a three-hour nap. If you embark on a similar trip and experience any of these aftereffects, don’t say you haven’t been warned! **AC**

Tom Robertson is a freelance photographer and a cycling and adventure enthusiast based in Missoula, Montana. He was a cartographer at Adventure Cycling for 14 years. For more visit tomrobertsonphoto.com.

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