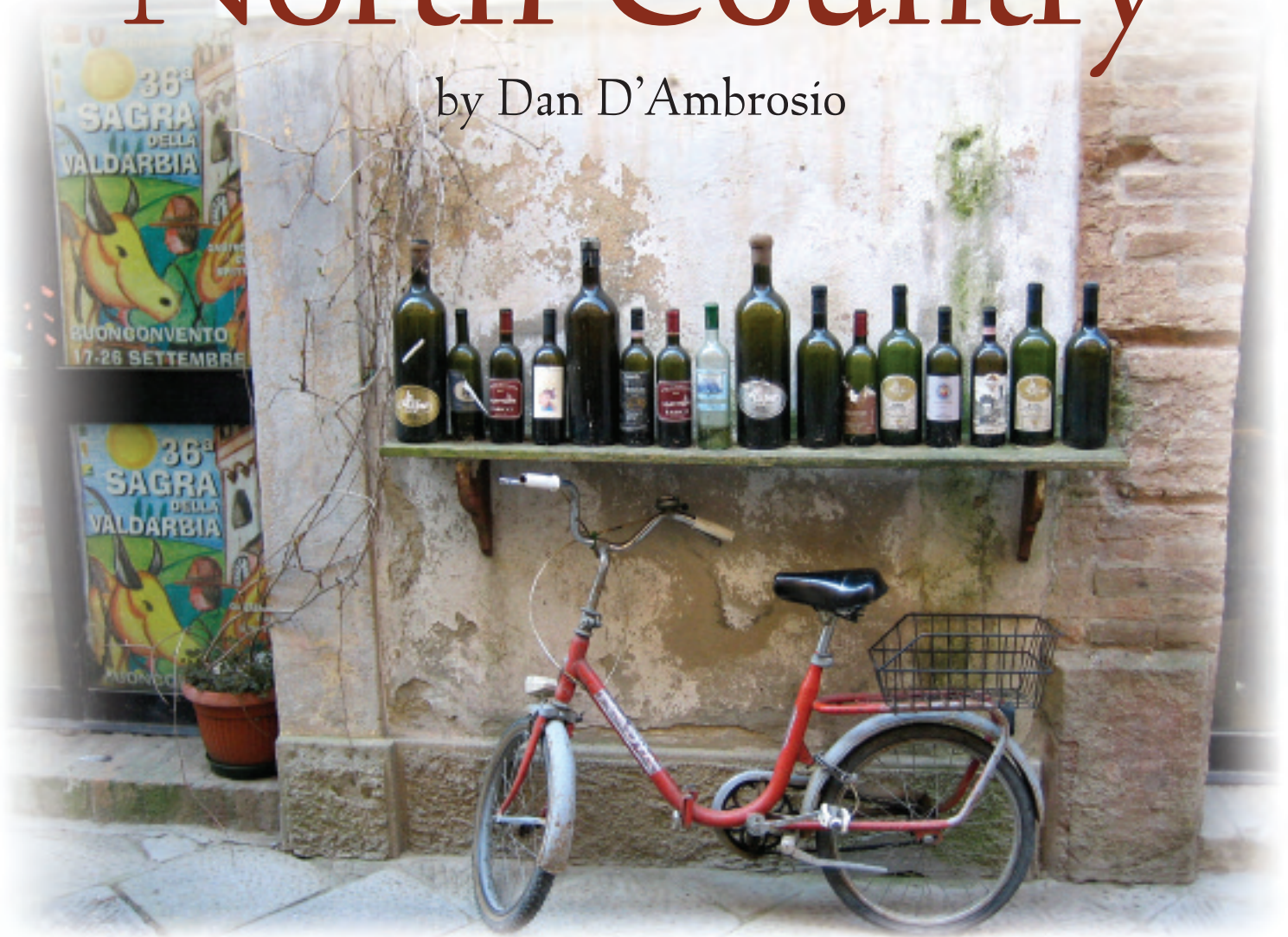


Cycling Italy's North Country

by Dan D'Ambrosio



it has been almost a year since my wife Alice and I were in Cortona's Piazza Signorelli, watching as an impromptu game of soccer broke out among a group of Italian teenagers and children, including a girl who played barefooted on the ancient paving stones of the square.

The boisterous group of players, rang-

ing in age from perhaps eight to eighteen, shouted and laughed as they chased the black and white ball around one corner of the piazza, kicking it with a loud smack against a thick, dark oak door of the Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca — a museum of the original Etruscan inhabitants of Tuscany — to score a goal.

Around them are the mothers and fathers, young couples, little children, and bent old women in black dresses who come out in every Italian town when the day begins to wind down. They flowed through the piazza of the medieval town, unchanged over the centuries except for the Alfa

Romeos, Fiats, and Renaults that now share the narrow streets with the pedestrians.

On a wide set of stone steps beneath a clock tower topped by a dark bronze bell and a four-fingered parapet, groups of mostly young people sat and talked or just watched the ebb and flow of activity in the piazza. In a gigantic window high above the piazza, framed by the stonework that characterized every hilltop town we saw, a man leaned on the sill and soaked it all in.

Walking through an archway directly beneath the castlelike clock tower, Alice and I came to a balcony overlooking the wide expanse of the Tuscan countryside, still rural and verdant, with clumps of poplars and pines and rectangular brown fields freshly plowed, and in the distance, a cemetery, which in Tuscany are walled affairs with graves resembling miniature shrines.

This is the pattern in Tuscany. Ancient hilltop walled towns, providing the last grueling climb of the day up a winding but well-paved road after a day in the sunshine (usually). It is a wonderfully agrarian landscape of vineyards and fields and stone villas that have escaped the ugly touch of industrialized society. That is left to other parts of Italy, not Tuscany.



Topping a climb, and there are many in Tuscany, you may come across a white-dotted field of sheep grazing on rich green grass, or an abbey soaring from a ravine that once reminded the peasants living near it of the gates of hell. When you do see evidence of industry, it will likely be something that seems

almost benign, such as a ceramics factory cranking out fanciful hand-painted butter dishes and dinner plates, or those warm brownish tiles that roof nearly every building in Tuscany. It is that uniformity, combined with unique beauty, that is part of the appeal of the region.

Alice and I spent eleven days and twelve nights in Tuscany and Umbria last April using a style of self-guided touring that suits us perfectly, and that we will be repeating in a few months in

Holland. Our Italian tour, booked through Iron Donkey (www.irondonkey.com), was the first time we had tried this type of touring. We were a group of two, without a leader, but with our route, and our overnight accommodations prearranged.

Think of it as combining all the advantages of a supported group tour without having to deal with other group members. For someone like

me, who can't bear to accommodate anyone but my wife when I'm on vacation, it's the only way to go.

Iron Donkey's secret weapon in Italy is

Giovanni Ramaccioni, who grew up in and still lives in a small town in Umbria and knows it and Tuscany like the back of his hand. He also happens to be one of the friendliest and most helpful people my wife and I have ever met.

We first met Giovanni in Siena, where he arrived at our hotel with two bright red Cannondales — mine a road bike with a Headshok, my wife's a mountain bike with a suspended fork — and all of the cue sheets we would follow for the next eleven days. Giovanni put us immediately at ease. He felt like an old friend as he set our bikes up in the heart of Siena on a narrow, winding street where cars periodically squeezed by us.



When we rolled out of the gates of town to begin our odyssey in the Tuscan countryside, Giovanni was waiting there in his Isuzu Trooper, making sure we had navigated our way through the twisting maze of Siena. He gave us a bag of Italian cookies and sent us on our way into the drizzling rain.

Giovanni has his own tour company called Circolo degli Esploratori — Circle of the Explorers — but he has teamed up with Iron Donkey's Tony Boyd to add an itinerary of Italian tours to the company's existing tours in England and Ireland. All of Iron Donkey's tours are offered either guided or self-guided.

Our route took us from Siena to Buonconvento — from Buonconvento to Montalcino by way of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, that abbey built at the gates of hell — from Montalcino to Montepulciano, where we spent an extra day to do a loop to Monticchiello and Pienza — from



Montepulciano to Cortona, by way of Lake Trasimeno and some singletrack, believe it or not — from Cortona to Montone/Umbertide, where we stayed overnight at the Villa Cavagnetti, owned by a friend of Giovanni's who exports Tuscan-made Viner bike frames to England and the rest of the Continent — from Villa Cavagnetti to Assisi, the most famous destination on our trip (we spent two days exploring this mountainside

Mecca) — from Assisi to Bevagna, a little Umbrian village that I must admit was my favorite of the trip — and finally from Bevagna to Spoleto, an ancient Roman bastion that I ended up enjoying, although at first it shocked Alice and I out of our agrarian revelry with its size, noise, and traffic.

Before returning to Rome on the train from Spoleto, we did a loop through Terzo La Pieve, Francocci, and Castel Ritaldi. It was anticlimactic, probably because we



We followed the Road of the Olives on our way to Bevagna after descending from Assisi on the slopes of Mt. Subasio. The road is what you would imagine it to be, a narrow, gently curving pathway really, wide enough to accommodate a single lane of Italy's small cars, through an olive grove of dark, gnarled trunks and delicate, shimmering silver-green leaves that extended away from the roadside in both directions for hundreds of yards. Lush green grass grew literally to the road's edge.

Spoleto had its appealing aspects too, such as an afternoon lunch of *salsiccia* and *patate fritte* — Italian sausage and very thin fried potatoes that were almost like potato chips — followed by the best tiramisù either my wife or I had ever tasted.

Or the Rocca Albornoziana, an imposing rectangular fort commanding the high ground in this hillside city, built in the fourteenth century for Cardinal Albornoz at the initiative of Pope Innocent VI who was residing in Avignon at the time. Those were the days when popes commanded armies and required forts.

Alice and I were very lucky to tour the fort with just one other person, an older Italian man. Our tour guide was a young woman who spoke English very well. She

traded off seamlessly between explaining things to him in Italian and us in English.

Although significant portions of the interior of the fort — built to consolidate the pope's hold over the surrounding lands, which were then and are now rich with grapes, wheat, and other bounty of the land — have been lost over the centuries, the fort overall is remarkably well preserved and conveys a contemporary feel that makes it easy to imagine what it was once like.

The walls of arched walkways and cavernous inside rooms are covered in vivid frescoes depicting the great cities of the times and tales of religious battles and crusades. A central sun-washed courtyard surrounded by what once were the mess halls and sleeping barracks of the pope's armies made it easy to feel transported to another time and place.

From the ramparts of Rocca Albornoziana we could see a striking thirteenth-century aqueduct, called Ponte delle Torri, spanning a ravine hundreds of feet deep to a forested mountainside. We could also see people walking across the aqueduct, which may or may not be built on Roman foundations. Apparently, scholarly opinion is divided on that point.

But one thing was for sure: We wanted to cross Ponte delle Torri to the other side. Once across, we found a wonderful network of trails lacing the mountainside and followed one to its end in a field of wildflowers and olive trees near a winding mountain road and a stone country house.

In both Spoleto and Assisi, we took advantage of multiple-day stays to get some walking and hiking in, a welcome break from cycling.

Another fort, this one commanding the heights at Assisi, is called Rocca Maggiore. It is also linked to Cardinal Albornoz, who built it in 1367. Later, Popes Pius II and Paul III added onto the



knew our trip was nearly at an end, but also because the Umbrian countryside was relatively unremarkable compared to what we had been through in Tuscany, which is as remarkable as you've heard.

Not that Umbria didn't have its own charms, like the Via degli Ulivi — Road of the Olives — near Assisi, for example.

commanding structure, which was intended to intimidate the people of Assisi. I'm sure it did.

One of the walls of the fort doubles as a long tunnel leading to a guard tower at a corner of the fort. The tunnel is claustrophobic, fitting a person within its arched, stone-lined interior in roughly the same way a finger fits a glove, but Alice and I made our way along its hundred yards or so anyway and were rewarded with a commanding view of Assisi below us and the Umbrian countryside in the valley beyond.

Four kilometers up Mt. Subasio from Assisi, isolated in a world of its own by the thick forests that cover the mountain's slopes, is a collection of buildings and chapels, called Eremo delle Carceri, that is built around a cave that St. Francis used for meditation and prayer.

The cave is still there, marked by a hand-lettered sign, "Grotta St. Francesco." St. Francis would go there to be alone, sleeping on a stone bed with a wooden pillow. The complex of buildings grows organically from that point of origin, some of the rooms and chapels literally carved out of the mountainside.

Although I'm not a religious person, there was a presence at Eremo Delle Carceri that spoke volumes about Italy's patron saint, his devotion to the poor, and

his love of the natural world and animals. When Alice and I were leaving for the walk back down to Assisi, a white dove burst from its perch on one of the stone walls of the complex and flapped noisily into the surrounding forest before circling back to land again on the wall. It seemed a fitting

the unique way in which it combines a feeling of complete independence and freedom with the certainty of knowing where you're going to sleep every night, and where you will ride the next day and the day after that.

In that sense, self-guided touring does take some of the adventure out of a tour, but it definitely still leaves room for serendipity and discovery, as we discovered many times on our ride through Tuscany and Umbria.

On one of the warmer days of our early April tour — it was probably in the low seventies — Alice and I completed a challenging climb into the little Tuscan village of Montisi only to find it seemingly shuttered for the afternoon.

We rode up and then back the main street of town — a narrow road bordered by the stone houses and heavy wooden doors that line the main streets of every Tuscan village — looking for a place to have lunch.

On our return to the point where we had first entered town, we noticed the shaded outdoor patio of La Locanda di Montisi — the Inn of Montisi — owned by Roberto Crocenzi. We would later learn that Crocenzi was a

former General Motors executive who had worked in Detroit before retiring and returning to his native Italy.

At first we weren't sure if Crocenzi's



end to our visit to this still isolated sanctuary.

I am drawn to self-guided touring for a variety of reasons, but chief among them is

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inn was open, until we noticed the two men having lunch in the corner of the patio, speaking English.

Seating ourselves beneath an arbor covered in vines, we were soon joined by Crocenzi, a tall, elegant man who nevertheless had a casual air about him that immediately made us feel comfortable and at home.

As it turned out, Crocenzi, like my father, had been born and raised in the Abruzzi region of Italy, a mountainous area south of Rome serrated by the Appenines.

Although Crocenzi had a soft spot in his heart for his native Abruzzi, he was as charmed by Tuscany as the millions of tourists who visit there every year, and when the time came to choose where he would retire, he chose Tuscany.

I'm sure it will come as no news that the food in Italy is uniformly superb, but Crocenzi offered a new twist on the food he served — it was all organic, most of it raised by his friends and neighbors in the surrounding hills and valleys.

I had a pasta dish with a cream sauce incorporating bacon and peas. The bacon, Crocenzi informed me, came from a pig raised not far from where we sat, the cream from a dairy just over the next hill. It was a thoroughly pleasant lunch with a man at ease with himself and with his native land.

I will admit that when Alice and I finally descended onto the flatter terrain of Umbria after five or six days and countless climbs in Tuscany, we were exhilarated to be covering so much ground so easily.

The passage into Umbria was marked by our only actual mountain pass of the tour, which we tackled climbing out of Cortona. After descending into Umbria, we came upon the roadside village of Petrelle,

where we stopped to get a quick shot of the house Giovanni had noted on the cue sheet as having “one of the mottos fascists used to write on country houses, ‘Honour the bread, glory of the field, fragrance of the earth, feast of life.’”

The message painted on a building with multiple apartments was, Giovanni noted, signed by Mussolini. It was hard to imagine this unruly, easygoing country

under the totalitarian rule of Mussolini, and indeed the entire era is likely one most Italians would just as soon forget, although Mussolini's granddaughter, Alessandra, is of all things a member of the European Parliament — and a former *Playboy* model. We saw her campaign posters, much to

our surprise, in Montepulciano.

Iron Donkey offers a number of options on its self-guided tours, including one that allows you to show up in Europe with just your luggage. While Tony Boyd was still updating his website at the time of this writing in December, the 2006 prices for the Tuscany and Umbria tour Alice and I took are listed at \$1,430 per person. For an additional \$292 each, you can rent bikes, and for an additional \$612, you can have your luggage transported from hotel to hotel.

Those prices include first-rate accommodations for the twelve nights, along with breakfast every morning and dinner on five nights.

Boyd, who is adding more itineraries in Ireland and one in Wales in 2007, is very accommodating with his self-guided tours. He will adjust the length and duration of the routes, change the accommodations — although I can't imagine why that would be necessary — and arrange for any sort of activities you might want to add to your cycling, such as hiking, kayaking, or even a round of golf (although I can't imagine why that would be necessary either).

I should note too that the bikes Boyd provides are no department-store specials. He uses Orbit bikes from Sheffield, England, available in three sizes with twenty-




ty-six-inch wheels and drop or straight handlebars.

The bikes have a rear rack, fenders, a bottle cage and water bottle, toe clips and straps, a handlebar bag, a spare tube and repair kit, a multitool, and a pump. For another fifteen bucks or so, you can also have a bike computer and a pair of rear panniers.

Although Alice and I are going to take our own bikes on our upcoming tour of Holland, arranged with Tulip Cycling, I think there will be a time in the future when we do show up on one of Tony's tours with just our rolling luggage in hand. For me, it's a very appealing way to go.

Because we were flying in and out of Rome, Alice and I decided to tack a couple of days onto the end of our time in Italy to see the Eternal City. When we first arrived there on the train from Spoleto, I must admit that we saw only a city that was eternally dirty, eternally noisy, and eternally expensive. That's what eleven days and twelve nights in the Tuscan and Umbrian countryside will do to you.

But Rome is, after all, one of the world's great cities, and after a stroll through the Forum guided by telephonelike devices that provided lots of fascinating details, a trip around the haunted interior of the Coliseum, and a climb to the heights of Palatine Hill, where the emperors built their extravagant palaces, not to mention an Easter address by the Pope at the Vatican, we had fallen under the city's spell.

Still, when I think back on our experience, it is not Rome I remember, but those twisting country roads through the vineyards, villas, and ancient fields of the bucolic countryside on a fresh spring morning filled with the smells and sounds of farming. I think of the next stony village on the horizon, unchanged over the centuries, waiting to beckon us onward from its hilltop repose. 

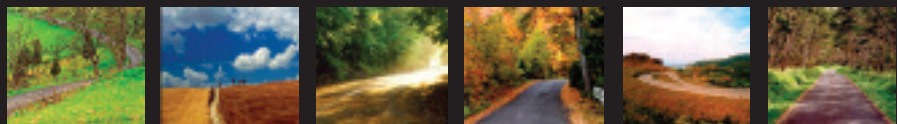
Dan D'Ambrosio is the former long-time editor of Adventure Cyclist. He is a reporter for the Republican American, a local newspaper in Waterbury, Connecticut. Amongst the Adventure Cycling staff, he is famous for being a "Ford man."

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