

SELLA ITALIA

There's a long tradition of cycling in northern Italy, especially on the famous passes that wind around the Sella massif – and more recently on the myriad trails that zig-zag across its ski slopes in summer. An adventurous duo booked a guide and explored the famous Sellaronda ski circuit on their bikes. WORDS BY GERHARD CZERNER. PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN BISSIG





I'M MESMERISED BY THE VIEW.

The vertical cliffs seem to literally touch the sky, the towering peaks looking like the spires of some giant cathedral. Whichever way I look, the panorama is breathtaking.

Awestruck by the scenery, I don't initially hear the voice at my side. Our guide, Klaus, is trying to catch my attention. "Don't we want to get going? We still have a way to go?", he says with a gesture towards the trail ahead of us.

Oh, yeah right, that's why we're here.... We're doing the Sellaronda, a ski route that loops around the Sella massif in the Dolomite Alps, on our mountain bikes. We're in South Tyrol, a province of northern Italy, and it's the famous Sella peaks and the Langkofel that have so entranced me. Slowly, I come back down to earth. Yes, please, I do want to keep going!

My cycling partner Caroline and I began our day with a fantastic breakfast at the Hotel Melodia del Bosco in Alta Badia. Here we met Klaus who, together with his sister, runs a family business that specialises in tailor-made cycling tours in the mountains.

The area is as popular with cyclists in summer as it is with skiers in winter. Gathered outside our hotel that morning were road racers looking to challenge themselves on the mountain passes, tourists on electric bikes being equipped with freshly charged batteries, and other mountain bikers getting ready to peel some rubber on the Alta Badia trails. Then there was Caroline and I, looking to take on the famous ski circuit.

While the hotel foyer is filled with maps and information guides on all the various cycling routes, we've been advised that it's

better to do the Sellaronda with a guide. It proves good advice. Many of the trails Klaus guides us along aren't marked on any maps; he has plotted a route around the mountains based on our skill levels and preferences, thus guaranteeing us a unique experience. There's also no financial reason to skip the professional know-how – it only costs €10 more for the guided tour than it does to purchase a map. Plus we get to hear Klaus's tips and ideas for other rides in the area, as well as information about the country and its people.

We choose to go clockwise around the Gruppo Sella because it allows us to make better use of the lifts and means we don't have quite as many steep slopes to climb. It also allows us to connect more technically demanding trails. However, it's possible to do the circuit in either direction. In fact, it seems that for mountain bikers, almost



Ski lifts are happy to transport bikes up the slopes so that riders can bomb back down again. And, of course, a photo in front of the famous Passo Pordoi sign is almost obligatory.



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anything is possible here, especially as most of the lifts will happily transport bikes. Many of the bike trails run parallel to the hiking trails, too, so there's no need to worry about running into a group of walkers as you come barreling down a slope.

There's a very long tradition of cycling in these mountains. The Passo Pordoi has featured 13 times in the Giro d'Italia and the Maratona dles Dolomites has been a major annual event since 1987 – it attracted more than 9 300 cyclists in 2015. It's also here that you'll find a monument to Italian cycling legend Fausto Coppi. Once a year, too, the local authorities close all the passes to vehicle traffic for Sellaronda Bike Day, where the motto is “No noise, no traffic, only 56km, four passes and approximately 22 000 cyclists”.

The four famous passes of the Sellaronda – Campolongo, Pordoi, Sella and Gardena

– will form part of our tour today. Though we won't be slogging up all their bends, as road riders in the Maratona have to; we'll be taking advantage of some of the ski lifts to get to their summits.

Before we get to the passes, however, Klaus has a little extra treat for us... We are taking the cable car from La Villa up to the Piz La Ila. It's not actually part of the ronda, but it offers amazing views across to the Gruppo Sella. And it's here that I'm so entranced by the mountains I almost forget about my bike. It's certainly not hard to understand why the Dolomites were listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2009.

This early in the morning, the trails that take us from Piz La Ila towards Passo Campolongo are completely deserted. Even as we continue on towards the little mountain village of Arabba, we rarely

come across other cyclists. From Arabba, a cable car takes us up to Porta Vescovo at 2 478m. The summit station sits directly across from Marmolata, which at 3 343m is the highest peak in the Dolomite Alps, and the view towards its majestic glacier is breathtaking. The wind howls up on the Porta Vescovo and unfortunately there's no chance of grabbing a warming cup of coffee – in summer everything up here shuts down.

So we tear ourselves away from the view and concentrate on the trail winding across the mountain. It's narrow, and a wrong move could see us tumbling all the way down into the valley below. A few uphill sections help raise our body temperature, and by the time we reach the Passo Pordoi, we've been able to put away our jackets.

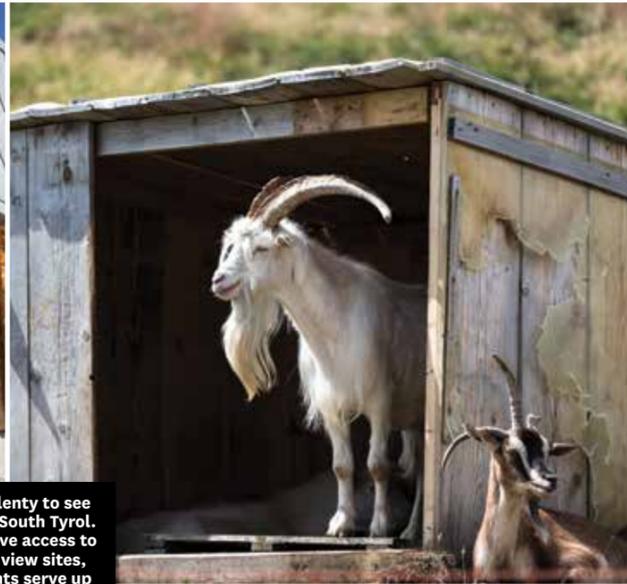
While we've had the mountain trails more or less to ourselves, the pass is busy.



**"A WRONG MOVE
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There's plenty to see and do in South Tyrol. Ski lifts give access to amazing view sites, restaurants serve up food with a combined Italian and Austrian influence, while the Alta Badia trails offer exciting action.



We want to get a picture in front of the famous Passo Pordoi sign, but we have to get in line behind a long queue of cyclists. But it's fun to watch everyone getting their photographic evidence – some people hold their bikes up in the air, while others let themselves hang down from the sign. Various poses are tried out, handstands are done, kisses are given, laughs are had, faces are made and all of it is caught on film. The action around that sticker-riddled sign is an attraction in itself!

By now, we've built up an appetite, so we find a restaurant with a terrace where we can sit and admire the view while we eat. We can see the highest point of the pass from here, where swarms of car, motorbike and motorhome drivers fight over the few parking spots available. Racing bikes, e-bikes and a few mountain bikes weave between them. There are

people from all parts of the world here and a colourful mix of languages can be heard from the souvenir stand behind us. The menu itself offers an exciting mix of traditional Tyrolean specialities and Italian favourites. Many of the products, such as the cheese, ham and wine, are from local farmers. And, of course, to round it all off, we have to have an espresso. This gets our engines revving and ready for the next downhill run.

The combination of trails Klaus leads us along is fantastic. They're a combination of specific mountain bike trails and general nature trails that have been optimised for bikers. They're not the smooth dust tracks you find in bike parks, but the larger stones have been removed and crossings installed at fences. There are also berms and some jumps every once in a while, but the natural characteristic of the ground

has been maintained as much as possible. We have a blast, especially on the trails leading down from Passo Sella.

By the time we make it to Passo Gardena, the last of the Sellaronda passes, it's almost evening and we take a break to appreciate the astonishing sunset. The sky turns red and, along with it, the fissured rock faces all around us. Traffic on the trail is virtually nonexistent and we admire the sight in total peace and quiet, lost in our own thoughts. After the sun has disappeared over the horizon, Klaus's familiar, friendly voice breaks our trance: "Dinner is waiting for you at the hotel, are you all ready?"

Ah yeah, thanks Klaus, let's go. 🍌

For more information on the region go to www.altabadia.org. Book a guide with www.dolomitebiking.com.