

1001 Miglia Italia

You, Too, Can See Italy
on 200 Miles a Day...

—BY GREG CONDERACCI—

If Paris-Brest-Paris is too easy, too French and too crowded for you, there's always the 1001 Miglia Italia — 1001 miles around Italy with the climbing equivalent of two times up and down Mt. Everest.

Do you want breath-taking scenery? It's there at every turn. Quaint little mountain towns with churches centuries older than the United States. A storybook countryside laden with ripening grapes, olives and sunflowers. Dazzling vistas of villages nestled against a Mediterranean as blue as the sky.

Do you want Powerbars and Gatorade at the controls? Ha! How about mountains of fresh pasta, prosciutto and melon, crusty bread with extra virgin olive oil — and even beer and wine? Italian hospitality is wonderful.

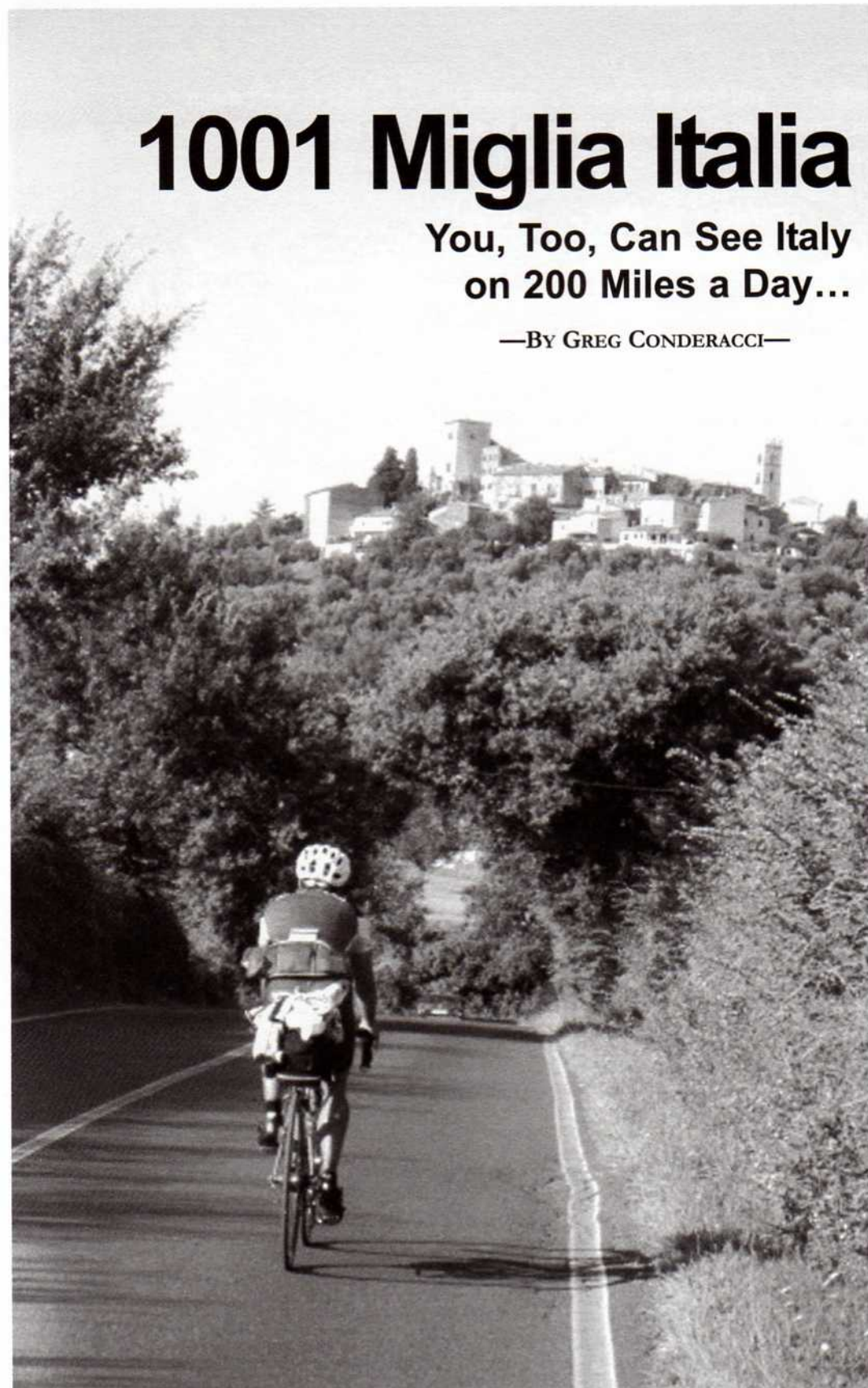
Do you want well-marked roads with names and route signs providing a clear sense of where you are? Sorry: you should learn enough of the language to ask directions!

Yes, Rando, you're not in Kansas any more. In addition to lots of miles, I believe adequate preparation for this ride involves speaking basic Italian. I spent the two months before the ride listening to language tapes and was happy I did.

Navigation Under Duress

The key insight for the 1001 Miglia Italia (<http://www.1001migliaitalia.it>) is that it is *much* more than a bigger brevet. For the

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The 1001 Miglia wanders through beautiful Italian countryside and tiny hilltop towns.

1001 Miglia (continued)

Italians, it is the ultimate test: the longest Randonnée in Europe. For an American, it is a 1,000-mile exercise in navigation under duress.

The 1001 Miglia is no PBP, which is a delight for a poor navigator like me. Just follow the other 5,000 riders along an obvious, well-marked route. At the 1001 Miglia, there are only 300 riders and the route is anything but clear. You see, there are few route signs in Italy on back roads and almost no posted road names. The scenery is spectacular, but it's hard to pick out landmarks — especially at night. I mean, there's a castle on almost every hilltop....

Although I was actually only lost once, I often felt that I was. The impact was like a dragging brake. It made me move more slowly and carefully. It drained energy that could have gone into turning the pedals.

Fortunately, Bob Rich, who was a veteran of the event, warned us in advance as he and our little group of Americans — Catherine Shenk, Veronica Tunucci, Dave Thompson, and Hamid Akbarian — met in strategy sessions before the ride.

The impact of confusion about direction became clear — right from the 9 p.m. start. About 300 riders roll out in waves of 30, about 10 minutes apart. We Americans are in the second wave.

A Fast Start — Sort Of...

The Italians in the pack tear down the road at more than 25 mph — as if the

A Short History of the 1001 Miglia...

Back in the glory days of Italian sports car racing, few events generated the excitement of the Mille Miglia — a 1,000 mile race across Italy. Begun in the 1920s, the race was discontinued in 1957 after some serious accidents.

But if you add just one mile and subtract two wheels, you get the 1001 Miglia Italia, the longest randonée in Europe at 1625K. Begun by organizer and Audax Randonneur Italy President Fermo Rigamonti

in 2006 as a Race Across America qualifying race, it attracted 14 riders. Converted to a randonée in 2008, it drew 200-plus registrants to the rugged ride.

More than 300 — about half of them Italians — signed up for the August 2010 event to pit themselves against its beautiful but challenging topography; 228 finished by the 135 hour deadline. Amazingly, the first finishers took slightly more than three days to accomplish the feat.

We mere American mortals took about five days, more or less. The first US finishers were women: Suzie Regul, a Californian who works for a cycle touring company in Italy, and Iditabike Veteran Catherine Shenk. Then came Dave Thompson, a Canadian who lives in the US and rode with us, Robert Brudvik, Greg Conderacci, Rick Blacker, Mark Roberts, Hamid Akbarian and Veronica Tunucci.


event is 25 miles and not 40 times that long. We let them go, but as soon as their tail-lights disappear into the night, we begin to worry: "Is this still the right road?" Instantly, we start to ride slower, groping our way through the night.

At the next roundabout, the wave of riders who started behind us catches up — and splits in half — each taking a different road. Now, we are really confused: dead stop. We are less than half an hour into the ride and we are already trying to puzzle out the way.


Fortunately, Dave has a GPS and that helps us make the right choices in our mad dash through the night as we roll more than 400K across the flats southeast of Milan. Then, the climbing begins — almost 60,000 feet of it.


The best way to think

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1001 Miglia (continued)



Author Greg Conderacci, in the mountains, "lugging extra clothes and water."



The last 1001 Miglia control before the finish is the final resting place of the famed Fausto Coppi.

about Italian mountains is that they feature both the steep pitches of the Eastern

US hills and the length of the Western U.S. mountains. In other words, after every bend

in the road, there is more climbing. At one point, it takes six hours to go just 45 miles.

Risk on the Roman Roads

Often, we ride through towns whose street pattern was created by oxcarts and trod by the Roman legions. In these villages, the streets can run in every direction, with no clear main road. This instant multiplication of choices abruptly slows progress, especially in mountain towns. The reason is clear: risk. One wrong turn and a fast 20-minute descent could easily lead to hours of extra climbing.

What goes up, must come down and the Italian descents are, well, interesting. For the most part, the roads are narrow by American standards, corkscrewing down mountainsides hairpin after hairpin, with no shoulders and, often, no guardrails. If you go off the road alone, especially at night, you are gone, gone, gone. A clear road on this side of the hairpin is no guarantee that the

coast is clear beyond it. Sometimes, a bus is inching its way up a pothole-infested grade — straight at you.

The 1001 Miglia is a far cry from US 1200Ks where the organizers sometimes reserve hotel rooms for the riders in advance. Indeed, the 1001 organizers only provide the bare minimum of bag drops — two — and that means carrying at least one change of clothes with you, if, like me, you have a bias for changing your kit every day.

Often, you can't get away with just a change of clothes and a little rain gear. Although most towns have public drinking fountains where you can reload your bottles, the towns can be far between — especially in the mountains when a few miles can take hours.

No 7-11s!

In the U.S., there's always a 24-hour 7-11 around the corner, but there's no such thing in Italy. Restaurants will stay open

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late, but there's no place to find food from about 10 p.m. to 8 a.m. along the out-of-the-way roads we travel. If you ride through the night, as I did three times, you'd better carry enough food and water.

Fortunately, the weather is spectacular. None of the searing August heat we expected and nary a drop of rain. We are, instead, bathed in the beauty of Italy. The organizers have been ingenious in avoiding heavily traveled roads for most of the trip. And the cue sheet, which I eventually learn to read, warns about traffic, steep climbs and hazards.

The 1001 Miglia staff, from "Capo" Fermo Rigamonti down to the vol-

unteers at each control, are universally cheerful and friendly, no matter what time I arrive and how broken my Italian. For us Americans, expat Tony Lonero provided excellent advice and guidance. I also got a lot of great guidance from Rick Carpenter, who had done the ride successfully two years ago.

The Sleep Temptation

A grave temptation is to go without sleep. As I soon discover, what Italians call a "dormitorio" does not mean you're sleeping in a dorm. I had counted on sleeping at the controls, but the accommodations were often Spartan — unheated, un-air-conditioned tents, sweltering gyms or locker-room floors. Hamid,

Catherine and Dave are good at finding hotels but I'm not.

At first, I try skipping real sleep and just dozing briefly. By the fourth day of the ride, I have gone almost 90 hours and ridden 800 miles — on about 10 hours of sleep. I am becoming very, very stupid. I am having difficulty remembering even the simplest things. I am cranky. Whenever I feel lost, I am tending to panic. I stop repeatedly to ask directions. I am having difficulty clipping my feet into my pedals.

I know I need to check into a hotel and sleep, but that's not easy to find on the mostly rural route. I find some bed & breakfasts, but

they are closed. Finally I beg my way into one and collapse for six hours, moving myself from the first third of riders to the last third, but I don't care.

For all of its unique challenges, the 1001 Miglia is an amazing experience, especially if, like me, you can trace your DNA to the very hills that you are climbing. We rode within a few miles of the town where my grandfather grew up — more than a century ago.

As the ride progressed, I could feel myself becoming a little more Italian — a little better climber, a little better descender, and a lot more relaxed. It was the ultimate Italian lesson.



Intelligent Training

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- *Mental Preparedness*

John Hughes, Coach, RUSA #46

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