

ASSAGGIO TOSCANA (A TASTE OF TUSCANY)
CICLISMO CLASSICO TOUR -- JULY 1-6, 2007
by Michele Schmidt

In February 2006, my Aunt Pat passed away after a very short, painful battle with pancreatic cancer. Later that year, I learned I'd be receiving some inheritance money after the sale of her home. My overly-cautious nature told me to put it all in savings for "someday, just in case," but, I was starting to see how much I was limiting my life by always living in fear of what might happen. Aunt Pat wanted to visit Italy someday and see where her parents and other relatives came from - that someday never came and she died before fulfilling her dream. With the encouragement of my husband Derek, I decided to use some of Aunt Pat's money to take that trip to Italy. Before I could change my mind, I placed a deposit with Ciclismo Classico for their Advanced-Beginner Assaggio Toscana (taste of Tuscany) cycling tour.

Although I was pretty active up to this point (jogging, yoga, etc.), I hadn't been on a bike in quite some time. The biggest challenge I faced was not my fitness level, but getting over my fear of crashing or being hit by a car. I learned of a local cycling group that had EZ Rides and went with them three or four times on the local trails. It was a lot of work to keep a 10 mph average on my old heavy low-end mountain bike with wide, knobby tires and flat pedals - oh, and getting my tennis shoe laces and sweat pants caught in the chain didn't help either! April 1 was the last of the EZ Rides (the leader moved out of state) and I was told I wasn't fast enough to participate in this cycling group's other rides.

Fast forward to mid-May. I learned of another local cycling group (CycleFolsom). They had just formed a "C" group, which would be focused on building a base level of cycling fitness. I decided to give them a try. I showed up wearing all my new cycling attire. I kept up with the group for about 3/4's of the way and suddenly my legs turned to lead and my mph dropped dramatically. Thankfully, the ride leaders (OZ and Quinn) were very patient! I made it back and later realized that I must have knocked my rear brake askew when I tipped over for the umpteenth time that day (note to self - learn to use new equipment, such as clipless pedals and shoes, *before* riding in public!). No wonder it was so hard to get any kind of speed! No, I am not a real cyclist, I just play one on tv . . .

Quinn encouraged me to come back, so I joined the C group every Saturday morning leading up to the tour. We added more mileage each week, culminating in a 75 mile ride to Davis and back. Each week I learned something new, whether it be that bananas are not a good fuel to pack in the back pocket of a jersey on a really hot day (they turn into black mush after about 2 or 3 hours) or that road rash is really painful (yes, I crashed my second time out while learning to ride in a peline and lived to tell the tale). In anticipation of Tuscany's hills, I also practiced a bit on my own on "Costco Hill" and Sophia Parkway (twice, to be exact).

Derek, on the other hand, trained on a stationary bike at the gym, his philosophy being why be out in the sun and allergens when you can be in the air conditioned indoors watching ESPN? Needless to say, I was a bit worried about how he'd fare in Tuscany . . .

On Friday, June 29, we started our travels at 6am by catching BART to SFO. We were glad to arrive at the airport the full three hours in advance as it took over an hour to get through the line to get our boarding passes. I had obsessed over making sure we could pack everything into our carry-on bags (we were allowed one 17.5 pound (max) carry-on and one camera bag each). While it was a pain to wash clothes in the sink each night, at least our luggage arrived with us (unlike others on the tour). Rather than bore you with all of the travel details, suffice it to say it was stressful running to make all of the flight connections and navigating the bus, train, and cab system in Italy. We were more than thrilled when, 28 sleepless hours after beginning this journey, we arrived at our destination in San Donato in Fronzano - the Fattoria degli Usignoli, a country resort dating back to the 14th century. Caryn, a single mom from Tennessee, who would be joining us on the tour, had arrived the day prior and she was kind enough to make dinner reservations for the three of us. We met at 9pm and were seated outdoors overlooking the courtyard where an Italian wedding reception was taking place. What a treat to get the added benefit of listening to live music while we dined. The food was exceptional. Derek had some kind of pasta, filetto alla griglia (grilled filet mignon), and insalata mista (salad). Michele had the mushroom risotto (rice), lombatina di vitella (veal chop), and insalata mista. At the end of the meal, the three of us shared a sampling of dolci (dessert). After bidding Caryn "buono notte," our heads finally hit the pillow at about midnight.

Day 1 - *San Donato to Reggello with extra climb to Vallambrosa - approx. 18 miles with 4500 ft. of climbing; 5 mile climb from Reggello to Vallambrosa - 1600 foot gain.*

We were glad we arrived the day prior to the start of the tour. This allowed us to have a more leisurely morning leading up to our maiden voyage. Despite having eaten at such a late hour the night before and getting so little sleep, we woke before the crack of dawn ready to eat! We counted the minutes until we could go eat breakfast - a "continental" affair including fresh fruit (our fruit tastes like cardboard in comparison), hardboiled eggs, yogurt, cereals, rolls, juice, and coffee. After breakfast, Derek went back to bed while Michele and Caryn strolled the grounds taking photos. Finally, at 1pm, it was time to go meet our tour guides and the rest of our tour group. Over a picnic lunch of assorted fruits, cheeses, prosciuttos, salads, and breads we got to know our fellow cyclists - 12 in all - ranging from Scott, a retiree who was used to riding centuries, to Donna, a gal from ultra-flat Miami who had never had the need to shift gears on her bike! Our fearless tour guides Andrea Marchesini and Paolo Nicolosi ("Sicilian Paolo"), reviewed with us some basic bicycle safety, did a basic bike fit, and we were off!

We saddled up on our bikes (most had the Bianchi Via Nirone 7 road bikes with Campy Veloce components, a few had hybrid bikes, and I had the Dama Bianchi DB She (women's specific) road bike with Campy Mirage components). I brought my own saddle, pedals, and stem so at least those felt familiar! After a quick bike fit, we were off! Our first stop was the Pieve di S. Pietro a Cascia, a church restored in 1930. Next we regrouped in the town of Regello, where Scott and Derek's gelato addiction officially began. At that point, we had the option of returning to the Fattoria or continuing for a strenuous (for beginners) climb to Vallambrosa (approximately 5 miles with a 1600 foot gain). I think most of us opted for the climb. I took off and felt pretty good for the first

half of the climb, then began to overheat and felt as though my heart might pop out of my chest! Apparently, when you've only done a couple one-mile or shorter climbs before, you shouldn't go all out at the beginning of a five-miler! I pulled over to the side of the road to drink some water (I really need to learn how to drink while on the bike) and got my heart rate down. I watched Scott disappear and then Dr. Caroline came past. After about 5 or 10 minutes I took off again. I caught up to Caroline and we made it to the top where we met Scott and Andrea for some spectacular views. We waited a few and figured everyone else had turned around to go back. On the way down, we saw Derek & Co. chugging their way to the top! Derek finally made it and then sped downhill passing us all - he was the downhill speed-demon all week - no fear for that boy! I, on the other hand, rode my brakes the whole way and almost wet my pants.

We returned to the Fattoria, where Derek jumped in the pool and I showered. We all ate outside, enjoying the beautiful sunset and delicious food. The guides gave history and background of the different wines. Unfortunately, I didn't write down what we had for dinner - this might have been the night of the wild boar and wild hare - whatever it was, it was delicious! After dinner, I stayed up too late trying to figure out how to work my new camera and didn't get to sleep until after midnight. Derek was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Day 2 - Giro del Pratomagno - approx. 32 miles with 4400 ft. of climbing - rolling

Again, we awoke early and hungry! We walked around the grounds and took photos, then went to eat breakfast before our second day of riding. We took a leisurely spin to our first stop, La Tenuta I Bonsi, where we had an olive oil tasting and learned all about the art of making olive oil. The Bonsi estate was built in 1400 and overlooks the Arno valley - beautiful! We got back on our bikes and rode easily along the Via dei Sette Ponti (Road of 7 Bridges), curving in and out of the foothills of Aretina. Next stop - Loro Ciuffenna, a village that has retained many features of a medieval castle. Here we stopped in to a local market and ordered prosciutto and rolls, which we supplemented with fresh tomatoes and fruit from the van. I would have liked to do the extra loop option with some climbing, but I didn't want to go alone so I stuck with the group and headed back to the Fattoria. Derek and Scott stopped for their daily gelato fix and we all got back just in time for a pre-dinner Italian lesson. Our last meal at the Fattoria was just as fabulous as the rest and we were well-sated before dropping off to sleep that night.

Day 3 - San Donato to Arezzo -- approx. 39 miles with 2595 ft. of climbing - gentle rollers

We overslept! Derek woke me up by asking what time it was - 8:05am! That meant we had 40 minutes to get dressed, packed, checked out, and to eat before meeting for our ride! Needless to say, I was stressing and by the time I got on the bike minutes after stuffing my face I felt ready to vomit! Things didn't improve much from there. Within the first three miles, my chain dropped no less than three times. The first time, Caroline and Jeannette stopped to assist. By the third time, I was on my own and the rest of the group was long gone. At that point, I started to question whether I was even going the

right direction. I debated turning around and going back to the Fattoria. I didn't have a cell phone or contact information for our tour guides. What a welcome site when Paolo came circling back in the van! He pointed me in the right direction and made sure I got to the next destination okay. I decided not to risk dropping the chain again, so I pulled a Donna and navigated the rolling hills without shifting gears! Luck would have it that the first regroup took place at a local bike shop - Cicli Lusatti. The rest of the group waited as Mr. Lusatti affixed my bike with a little mechanism that would prevent the chain from dropping again. Problem solved! Yay!

Next, we headed out for the medieval town of Montemarciano, where, after a 3/4 mile 8% grade climb, we got the joy of experiencing a typical hole-in-the floor toilet. Once again on the Sette Ponti, I decided to go on ahead and enjoy the gentle rollers. We opted to visit the tiny medieval hilltop village of Il Borro (recently restored by the Ferragamo family) rather than take the shortcut. After strolling around a bit and viewing the mechanical dioramas of the Pinocchio story, we returned to the Sette Ponti and spun to our picnic at a park along the Arno River. We ate various fruits, cheeses, prosciuttos, tomatoes, and breads, even tastier with the spectacular view of the Ponti Buriano in the background. The Ponti Buriano is the first of the Seven Bridges for which the Sette Ponti is named. It was erected in the mid-13th century, took nearly forty years to build, and is perceptible in the right far background of Leonardo DaVinci's Mona Lisa. The rest of the group opted to ride over this bridge and on to Arezzo, while Kathleen and I opted to take the van - Kathleen had a good excuse as she was awaiting surgery on her toe and it was starting to hurt; I was just chicken of the heavy automobile traffic they would experience in Arezzo.

We arrived at the Vogue Hotel in Arezzo, checked in, got cleaned up, and regrouped for a walking tour of the city. Don't be fooled by the barren facade, the interior of the Chiesa di San Francesco is breathtaking. Too bad we weren't allowed to take photos. The parish was built in 1322. Above the doorway is a stained glass oculus (1520). A painted crucifix showing St. Francis at the foot of the cross hangs with the frescoed Legend of the True Cross on the walls behind. I cried a bit as I thought how much my passed Catholic relatives would have loved to experience this. Our tour guide left us at La Tagliatella da Cristina, where sommelier Cristiano Cini instructed us in the proper etiquette of wine tasting. While the rest of the group drank up, I took photos of the wine bottles bearing the surname "Bertani" - the name of my deceased (great) Uncle Art and -Aunty Dorothy. Although this was to be "dinner on your own" night, we all decided to stay at La Tagliatella and try the fare of Cristiano's mother Cristina. This was no mistake. The handmade pastas were delicious. Derek had the melt-in-your-mouth bistecca Fiorentina (Florentine steak). Although my lamb was quite tasty, I wished I could have had more than a bite or two of Derek's steak - it was that good! After dinner, the lights dimmed and Cristiano brought out an Italian cake lit with candles. I was completely surprised as everyone sang, "Buon Compleanno" (Happy Birthday) to me. Walking back to the hotel, Derek and Scott had to top of the cake with gelatos. Once back to our hotel room, Derek fell asleep right away while I stayed up way too late (early) watching re-runs of the Giro d'Italia on the big flat-screened tv in the bedroom.

Day 4 - Arezzo to Cortona - approx. 39 miles with 2595 feet of climbing; 8% climb to Lucignano (approximately 1 mile climb with 426 foot gain); 8% climb to Cortona (approximately 2.4 mile climb with 1045 foot gain)

Only one night at the Vogue Hotel, so we had to pack up and check out before getting on the bikes. Luckily, the clothes I had washed in the sink the night before were already dry. We had breakfast, similar to those we had at the Fattoria, and headed out for our bikes. I was very nervous about riding in the city. Remember, I had mainly ridden on the American River Trail back home, with just a few ventures out on the road in the early morning hours with not much traffic. I made a decision to face my fear and stay as close to the pack as possible. There was one close call with a BMW (Scott called the guy a jerk and wished he knew how to say that in Italian!), but other than that we all made it out of the city safely. Once out of the city, I decided to go on ahead. The wind was heavy and it was tough going through the mostly flat terrain lined with wheat and sunflower fields, but, it's amazing how fast one can ride when needing to find a restroom! The rest of the group had stopped to take photos among the sunflowers, but soon arrived.

After a short regroup we headed off for Lucignano, a picturesque little hill town unique for its maze-like street plan. Caroline and I led the way on the 1-mile climb, with Derek close behind. We had an hour to go our separate ways and explore the town, eat lunch, or whatever. Derek and I weren't hungry, so we got espressos and wandered around taking photos and video. Of course, we felt hungry right before it was time to go, and quickly ate some fruit and nuts from the van. The wind continued to pick up and it grew cloudier. This kept the temperature a bit cooler, but definitely added some extra pedaling effort. What goes up, must come down and I was near tears on the descent. With the wind as strong as it was, I feared my little Bianchi was going to blow over. I rode the brakes the whole way and everyone passed me. I caught up again on the flat and rolling terrain and once turned away from the wind we took off! With the wind at my back, all of a sudden I was in my hardest gear and zipping along with minimal effort - wheeeeeee!!! One more short regroup and we gave each other pep-talks for the last climb of the day yet ahead - another 8% grade, this time with 1045 feet of climbing in 2.5 miles. The road leading up to Cortona curved with switchbacks, making it even more interesting. At the top, we checked in to the Hotel Villa Marsili. The view from the room was spectacular, with Lago Trasimeno in the distance.

We met for a walking tour of Cortona. It remained cloudy and winds gusted, so I didn't get any photos along the way. We walked along the Via Nazionale, the only level road in town, to the Piazza della Repubblica, the town center and home of the city hall. We walked up steep, narrow paths (which, the tiny cars and Vespas liked to speed down) to the Santa Margherita Basilica at the top of the hill. After our history lesson, the tour guide dropped us off at Fufluns Tavern Pizzeria, where we were glad to get out of the wind. Paolo and Andrea had pre-ordered a variety of bruschettas and pizzas for us, including a Sicilian pizza with tuna! I got my own personal pizza without cheese. The crusts were very thin and the pizzas were not loaded down with massive amounts of sauce like they are in the U.S. Of course, Scott and Derek had gelato for dessert. After dinner, we explored the city a bit more and then retired to our hotel room.

Day 5 - Lago Trasimeno - Approximately 60 miles - wasn't able to get a routeslip on this one, so don't know climbing totals

On our last day of cycling, we awoke and headed down to the best breakfast yet. We served ourselves at a table piled high with an abundance of fresh fruits, cheeses, cereals, breads, nuts, yogurts, and more. I was nervous about the descent, so Paolo graciously agreed to drive me down. I got in the van as the rest of the group left on their bikes. My heart was pounding just watching them! At the bottom of the hill, Paolo retrieved my bike from the van and I met Derek as he arrived on his bike. From there we continued for Castiliglione del Lago where a short, steep climb through traffic brought us to an amazing view of the lake. We posed for group photos and decided to do the long route around Lago Trasimeno, the largest lake on the Italian peninsula. Even Donna joined in the fun, who, with Scott's mentoring, had mastered the art of gear shifting!

Next stop was lunch at Trattoria da Faliero, which looks more like a truck stop than a restaurant, but has great food. Most of the group ate outside at picnic benches, but Derek, Paolo, and I opted for the cool indoors. We struggled to the front and ordered. Derek and I had the torta di testa, thin pizza-like bread baked in a giant open wood-fired oven and filled with ingredients such as spinach, cheese, and prosciutto; Paolo had some kind of pasta with tripe - we decided to let him enjoy that on his own! I chugged down about a 1.5 litres of water, which would prove a smart move later on in the ride.

Back on the road, I sped up and went on ahead. It was getting warm, with a hint of breeze off the lake - aaaaahhhh, bliss! I passed by what appeared to be a lakeside resort town, and figured the rest of the group would probably want to stop there, but I wanted to get back to Cortona and take those photos I missed out on the day before. After about 12 miles or so, I began to question whether I had gone too far. According to my route notes, it appeared I should have come to the Ristoro Puntabella, where I was supposed to make a left turn. What to do? I decided to turn around. I saw a sign for Arezzo and thought maybe I should go that way. About halfway up the ramp I realized I was about to enter the autostrada (highway/freeway)! I was able to turn around and get back on the regular road, where I waited a few more minutes and continued to study the route notes. Finally, I realized that the kilometers/miles listed on this portion of the route notes were that for the short loop! That, combined with my poor math skills - no wonder I couldn't figure out how far I'd gone! Off I went and just a few minutes after the point where I first turned around, the Ristoro Puntabella appeared - whew! I made the left and continued on. Soon there came a pretty good climb. This was not on the route notes, so I began to question my sense of direction again. When I got to the top I wondered whether I should go ahead and descend the other side, or turn around and go back down the way I came. I drank the rest of my water and decided to keep going. Good thing, because at the bottom of that descent I saw the next landmark. I've got to stop second-guessing myself! About 2 miles later I did miss a turn though. I stopped at a gas station in Camucia and got directions to Cortona, repeating yesterday's climb. Almost to the hotel, I pulled over at an overlook to take photos. Once done with the photos I decided to walk the bike up the last 1/8 mile or so to the hotel since I'd have to make a left across traffic at the top. Wouldn't

you know, the van carrying Derek and several others came up at that same moment! My first thought was that they'd think I'd pooped out and couldn't make it up the climb, but that was just my pride talking. Scott and Caroline raced each other up the hill and they arrived shortly after me and the van.

After showering, we met for a cooking lesson at La Locanda nel Loggiatto. After that, a wine tasting at Enoteca Molesini, and back to La Locanda for our "last supper." We must have had seven courses, starting with the ribollita ("reboiled" vegetable and bread soup) made at the cooking lesson, zucchini terrine (a zucchini tart), veal, lots more wine, and more gelato for Scott and Derek . . . We drew names the night before and tonight we awarded our secret partners with certificates.

After dinner we walked around a bit, Scott and Derek ate their second gelatos of the evening (last chance!), and then we headed back to our rooms to pack up.

Day 6 - Arrivederci!

We awoke, finished packing, and had our last Italian buffet breakfast. We took a shuttle to the train station and said our good-byes. A wonderful trip overall, and I must admit it was fun to feel like one of the strongest riders of the group for a change (I'm one of the weakest back home), but I couldn't wait to get back on my own bike with CycleFolsom! I couldn't have done this trip without all of the CF riders' patience and advice. Thank you CycleFolsom!