

Diary of Joachim Jerichow

1st ride. Val di Non. After a long travel day the day before, the first ride was planned to be a relaxing ride in the beautiful Val di Non. Maurizio brought his wife, Ornella and some other friends and met us in front of Hotel Stella delle Alpi in Ronzone at around 9.30 AM. The sun was shining and the driving conditions couldn't have been better for our first ride! Everybody took their time catching up with Maurizio who did a similar trip two years ago in which just about half of our group had participated. Ornella, the mother of Maurizio's three kids, proved to be a solid rider to everybody's surprise but as she revealed... she didn't go as much as she wanted and Maurizio did not want to ride with her... (that bastard!)

The winding road brought us through myriads of apple fields which is the prime product of the valley. We stopped at a scenic point with the most breathtaking view of Lago di Giustina with the characteristic double bridge connecting the northern and southern parts of the valley.

After having said "Adio" to the Fondriests in Clés, we passed across one of Europe's highest dams in Dermulo and turned left towards the last climb back to Ronzone. But not Ron... he went on! What we were about to learn was Ron very special riding characteristics: As quick as he is climbing and going straight, as slow is he descending and therefore we simply forgot about him before turning. But did he come back! As a man possessed! Trying to follow his wheel re-joining the group was mere suicide!

The climb to Ronzone following the internal road passing through Dàmbel was quite easy but had a critical point of about one kilometer with an incline of 10-12%. As my lung capacity began feeling rather inadequate while trying to keep up with the group, I understood that this group did not come to Italy to kid around! This was a group of strong, experienced riders!

2nd ride. South Tyrol, Passo Palade and Passo delle Mendola. Again Maurizio came to pick us up around 9 o'clock. And again the Weather-Gods showed us mercy. Passo Palade (1.512 meters) is not steep but it is long. From Fondo it is about 13 kilometers with 4-5% average. But the descent was terrible... for Ari whose bike started behaving like the knees of a boy when it is time for a kiss on the first date... for Ron who squeezed his brakes as if he was holding on to a lifeboat! His wheels were gloving and very conveniently lighting up a couple of nasty, pitch dark tunnels with "surprise" cobblestones, potentially very slippery! It cost him two flat tires!

In the meantime... the rest of the group enjoyed the first cappuccinos in Lana just five kilometers from Merano. The next 20 kilometers or so were pleasantly flat and going right through the apple fields along tiny roads which only a born Trentino would know... or did he improvise just a little bit? Next time we'll bring our mountain bikes! No worries, we could wash up in the spacious fontana in San Michele that had the most incredible view to Monte Penegal. Thanks, Søren for not taking off your biking pants before your full emersion!

Passo della Mendola (14 kilometers, 900+ altitude meters) lived up to its reputation of being one of the Dolomites classical ascents. Built for horse carriages in the late 19th century, it rarely exceeded 10% but never leveled off - constantly 6-7%, all the way to the top. Maurizio took it real easy in the beginning but was excused since he had an urgent interview from Australia to do – and what was more appropriate than doing it climbing the oldest pass in the history of The Giro d'Italia sitting straight up in the saddle with no hands on the handlebars!? About half way up he ignited the turbo fuel injection motors and comfortably passed everybody before the pass!

Personally, I enjoyed chatting a bit with some of the participants on the way up. I learned that David had worked as a police officer from New York and was an eye witness to the 9/11 attack! Now he is working as an attorney of law. Mary had completed an Iron-man (woman) in Brazil and had worked for Al Gore in the White House! I felt like some biking talk show host with “special guests!”

Finally, reaching the top...again Ari, from Puerto Rico was the strongest of the pack! But Bjarke (alias “Hercules”) hadn't quite had enough so he went on to conquer Monte Penegal, a four kilometer bonus ascent with a terrifying 11% average and several touches of 20%. Another group jumped in the van and did some desperately needed cheerleading of the poor guy who suffered severe cramps on the way up. Bjarke Andersen, probably the most experienced rider in our group, works as part time cover model for the Danish bike review “Cykel-motion” and completed Europe's toughest bike race last year: The Trans Alp (six days).

3rd ride. Giro of the Brenta Dolomites. Take-off in the morning was a bit confusing. Jeff and Robert had left early to calibrate Jeff's bike computer on a horizontal surface (its true!). Ron went on to work on his descending technique and was to meet up with the other two. A little after, none of them were to be found at the meeting point! Anyway, we found them and were joined by Fondriest and friends at the bottom. At a furious pace, we made it to where the first ascent Sella di Andalo started. The climb was long and not that easy after all. I rode with Bob who has an accountant firm in New York. We all stopped in the ski-resort town of Andalo and went on to one the area's most beautiful lakes, Lago Molveno with its turquoise water and 3.000 meter mountain frame. The speed was wild and we divided in two groups, Maurizio staying in the rear.

With three drops of rain as a warning, suddenly the front group were in the midst of a nasty squally shower. Lightening and claps of thunder were all over us. We were soaking wet even before the bikes came to a halt under some roadside pine trees. After 20 long and wet minutes the van came to our rescue and we put on some dry clothes. In the meantime, Maurizio had anticipated the whole thing and was enjoying a nice warm cappuccino and a chat with Robert, Bob and Husam! Not to forget, he was the World Champion!

Less than 15 minutes later, the group was reunited and the sun was shining again which created a perfect atmosphere for the next few kilometers: The winding road from Stenico,

more than 500 years old, carved into the rock, leading from the old episcopal castle to Val Rendena, on the edge of a 400 meter vertical drop to the greenish Lago Ponte Pia. Having overcome nature's ugly face and seeing this kind of scenery created a very special atmosphere that few of us will forget.

Next stop was Cascate Nardis, the second highest waterfall in Italy. Everybody was starving after 5 hours in the saddle and the bloodsucker had reached the bottom. Too hungry, I guess, to fully appreciate the incredible beauty of this place? Unfortunately, clouds had covered the sky in the meantime and some drizzling rain forced us to eat the programmed snack indoors. Anyway, the snack was fully appreciated! Even Husam liked the many different types of local ham... just kidding!

Feeling somewhat better, we went for the last climb to Madonna di Campiglio, the last climb of Marco Pantani, who was found positive for doping misuse on this very ascent. 10 kilometers with an average of 6,5% and about 750 meters altitude meters. While riding up, Torsten (alias Tarzan), who also could call himself "Iron-man", understood exactly what the poor "pirate" was going through and had to stop for some extra vitamin pills!

The views to the shark teeth of the Brenta Dolomites were spectacular even though the weather wasn't the greatest. Just before we reached the tunnel outside beautiful Madonna di Campiglio, it started drizzling again.

Coming down from the pass, called Passo Campo Carlo Magno, Husam came out of the closet as a downhill maniac! Being about 100 meters behind him, I learned every step of the fine art of passing cars and busses in hairpin bends in the left lane! Good lord and thanks God, we made it down!

A long day's ride (160 kilometers) finished in the shop of Maurizio where we had a nice "aperitivo" and some crackers while enjoying the old posters and bikes from a long and impressive career.

4th ride. Passo Erbe, Val Badia. After a late re-entry after a beautiful opera experience in the famous Arena of Verona, built 50 a.c., we woke up to see that the weather reporters had not been kidding. Plenty of rain! So, instead of leaving around 10.00 AM we sat around for another two hours and hoped for the best. At 12.00 AM we left the hotel with lunch bags in the vans and our new guide Roberto Daz, a very small but incredibly fit guy with taste for climbing expeditions in remote areas and extreme winter sports. Descending from Passo della Mendola in drizzling rain was not great but we managed and thanks to Roberto we made it through Bolzano which can be rather confusing.

After having consumed our lunch bags and their content, we started the week's toughest climb, Passo delle Erbe (2.000 meters). We divided in two groups initially but soon after we were closer to 16 groups, everybody more or less on their own in the middle of the greenest, most enchanting surroundings with old, traditional farm houses beautifully decorated with flowers in pink and purple colors. A fresh scent of mountain herbs,

stronger than usual because of the morning rain, gave many of us another bike and nature experience that will always remain! Hovering above us was one of the most fascinating rock formations of the Dolomite Range, the Puez Odle national park, with its shark teeth shaped finger rocks. A couple of low hanging clouds created a surreal, a bit spooky atmosphere as cut out of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings.

Passo delle Erbe, "...No time for losers..." a tough, continuous and long climb! Five times we had to use all our remaining forces with stretches 12%, 15% and 17.5%. The worst, though, was that extra climb half way down the descent... o boy, did that one pull out the last teeth!

Not a single word about those who got lost on the way up because I lost count, and absolutely no moralizing about paying attention to the briefings or staying with your guide, because the good man, Roberto, got lost as well! Anyway, we all made it to the top, Passo delle Erbe, with a close up look to impressing Sass di Putia 2.875 meters as the well deserved prize!

I had the fortune of riding up with Bob and later Robert who had a long international career behind him in the Biotech industry. Most interestingly in the midst of our agony, Robert revealed that he had been the chief scientific officer of the first American company who started developing EPO, which is now one of the most widely used drugs for kidney failure. As you all know, EPO is a hormone produced by the kidney which acts on the bone marrow to increase red blood cell numbers; if your kidneys fail, they don't make EPO and thus you get anemic! Unfortunately, Robert did not bring fresh supplies!

In the evening we were joined by Maria Canins, a former world champion living right across the street in La Villa, Val Badia: A truly amazing personality with numerous championships in completely different sports. 14 times Italian Champion in Nordic Track, winner of the legendary Wasa-loppet, a 100 km race in Sweden (Nordic track), twice winner of Tour de France, world champion the same year as Maurizio etc. etc. Maria was very sympathetic and answered all our questions with a contagious passion.

5th ride. Four Passes. What a joy to wake up with looks to the peaks of Fanes-Sennes-Prags national park from your bathroom window!!! And a beautifully shining sun waiting impatiently to accompany us to the world's roof, the most spectacular bike ride in the Dolomites, the Four Passes. The winding road to Passo Campolungo 1.875 meters with views to Corvara and the mountains behind was first and quite easy. Then a fast descent to Arabba from where the 9 km hairpin road to legendary Passo Pordoi (2.239 meters) had its starting point. Sitting there at a restaurant with a magnificent view to the Sasso Lungo and the Sella Pas, in the sun, eating gullasch-soup and sipping cappuccino... that made my day!

Six of us wanted to see the Sella Pas (2.244 meters) close up and rode up the extra six kilometers with more than 7% average. The impressive rock formations rising to the sky right from the side of the road were dramatic. After having completed the climb, Søren

raised his bike in a spontaneous I-made-it-to-the-top-mamma kind of gesture but almost had to let go of the 8 kg bike because his sweet wife, Ulrike, our helpful driver, couldn't find the right button on the camera! (I want that picture, Søren!)

Continuing to the last climb of the day, Passo Costalunga (1.741 meters), we found the rest of the group lying around on the grass enjoying the sun and the scenery. What an extraordinary day!

The last descent to Bolzano was 30 km long, the longest of the week. Some took it easy - others forgot all about brakes and left no prisoners! A car had the nerve to perform a sudden stop in the middle of one of the nasty tunnels on the way down. Husam, almost always keeping an extra safety distance to motorized vehicles, rammed into the car as a pile driver into a medieval castle gate! Luckily, he didn't get harmed and neither did his bike but for sure an unpleasant experience!

Again, Roberto helped us through Bolzano's spider web of bike trails and completely exhausted, we made it to San Michele where the van and trailer was waiting. Bjarke (Hercules) said "what the hell" and finished the day with a fifth pas: Passo delle Mendola... again?... a stunt I found rather surprising, I must admit!

6th day. Granfondo/mediofondo Colnago in the Appenine Range. Another beautiful day gave us the best possible circumstances to finish the week with style. David had hurt his legs and couldn't participate, unfortunately! 2.500 riders waited for us at the starting line.

Ten minutes after the start signal, our group made it to the line itself. I squeezed the start button of my computer but nothing happened. I squeezed again... no response! Everybody took off until I was last man on the line. The speaker found it very amusing and invented some dramatic story. I gave up and began pedaling. Luckily, Paul, Ron, Dolores and Mary had waited for me and together we chased everything moving in front of us. It took us about 20 minutes to catch up with the rest of the group. In the meantime, I had realized that it was the magnetic field at the starting line that blocked my computer! A mistake you do only once!

The first ascent was only a few kilometers but living hell! 10 % average incline with several points at 18 %. The group was scattered and I continued with Bjarke but not for long because he wanted to do the long route (160 km). Surprise! Instead Søren caught up from behind but had troubles with his knee. We chased down the first descent, a winding, single lane road paved with brand new asphalt. Excellent! The scenery was hilly and less dramatic than the Dolomites but very charming indeed!

At the bottom, suddenly Dolores appears in front of us. Where the h... did she come from? Apparently, she passed us at the first water and snack post. We stayed together for the next flat part and the next ascent to Passo Cerro. I learned that Dolores is a senior instructor at the biggest fitness center in New York. She stays in shape giving spinning classes. No wonder, I had to give everything to stay on her wheel!

Unfortunately, we got apart at the next water and snack post. I went on alone until Paul completely unexpectedly caught up with me from behind on the third and last ascent at a point where I began feeling the wear and tear of my leg muscles. What a pleasant surprise! In a moment I was ready to compete again! The last 25 kilometers became one long chase. About 400 meters in front of us we could see another group. If we could just... then... It took us 15 kilometers to catch them constantly changing the lead with average speeds from 42-43 km/h. In a group of about 40 riders we entered the last kilometer. I went for the sprint and came in second... but at the wrong line... another two got by me during the last 100 meters to the real finish line! What a race!