

Pedal back in time with Tuscany's VINTAGE CYCLE EVENT

Woollen jerseys, retro bikes and plenty of chatter at food and wine stops make Chianti's L'Eroica cycling event the least competitive of races, discovers **Ellie Ross**



Ellie before the off, complete with retro kit and 80s bike



'I'm quickly finding *L'Eroica* is more a cultural celebration of cycling than a race...'

Leaning my gaudy 80s bike against a tree, I sip a cup of Chianti, exhaling a lungful of air as the ruby-red liquid washes down my throat.

In front of me, the hills where the grapes for this vintage were grown stretch into the distance, the neat rows of vines soaking up autumn's last rays alongside the white, dusty *strade bianche* chalk roads this Italian region is famous for.

My biggest challenge right now is deciding whether to have another bowlful of *ribollita*, hearty vegetable and bread soup, or *crostata*, the Italians' answer to jam tarts.

Looking around me, colourful groups of cyclists stand casually chatting, as the tune from an accordion fills the air.

Trestle tables with red and white checked table cloths are laden with platters of *prosciutto*, *pecorino* cheese, crusty bread and bunches of red grapes that glisten in the afternoon sunshine, and wine is on tap.

There seems little reason to leave, apart from the fact that we still have 21km left to go on our 75km route.

As I am quickly discovering, *L'Eroica* – a period cycling event in Tuscany – is more a cultural celebration of cycling than anything resembling a race.

Past perfect

In particular, *L'Eroica* is an event to celebrate the spirit of vintage cycling. Its name translates as 'heroic', because the cycling heroes of yesteryear were precisely that.

They would pedal on heavy steel bikes with just one fixed gear across rough roads, with no support vehicles, fuelled, not by energy bars and gels, but by good local food and wine.

In a bid to emulate them, or just to enjoy the spirit of the day, entrants of *L'Eroica* can choose from four routes to suit all abilities – 38km, 75km, 135km and, for the hardcore, 205km.

Entrants wear numbers, but the event is untimed, allowing for plenty of breaks to make the best of the handful of food and wine stops along the way.

I opt for 75km, reasoning that it will be far enough to make me feel a little 'heroic', but short enough to complete before the wine bars close.

‘I’m wedged between a man on a penny farthing, wearing a string of sausages across his shoulders, and a woman in a polka dot dress..’

It was clear even from the two-hour drive east from Pisa airport the previous day, over ever-steeper rolling hills that the ride would be no walk in the park.

My base for the event is the hamlet of Montebuoni, made up of a handful of apartments, a pool, tennis court, private chapel and a cellar dating back to the 1500s.

It’s a gorgeous location, and the evening before the event, I watch the sun slip below the horizon from my apartment terrace, wondering just how many of these vineyard-cloaked hills I will be tackling on two wheels.

Morning arrives, and I along with some 5,620 wool-wearing entrants pitch up to the centre of Gaiole in Chianti, a small village of cobbled streets, lined with yellow buildings with olive-green shutters.

The square – which transforms on the first weekend in October into a hub for all things vintage bike – is where the event starts and finishes.

Clad in retro cycling kit, from woollen jerseys to small peak caps and leather cycling shoes, we roll to the start line, past stalls selling antique leather helmets, old bike parts and classic goggles.

The atmosphere is a mixture of nervous anticipation and excitement as we wait to be released in staggered starting groups, a few minutes apart to avoid congestion.

For the start, I’m wedged between a man on a penny farthing, wearing a string of sausages across his shoulders, and a woman in a polka dot dress, fifties-style head band and open-toed leather sandals. This is going to be fun!

My metal steed is a neon yellow and electric blue road racer from the early eighties, hired from a local cycling club. This is my nod to the Eroica’s entry rules, which state that you must use a bike that was built before 1987, the year cycles were said to have become ‘modern’.

To qualify as ‘vintage’, your bike must have gear shifters on the main frame instead of the handlebars and pedals with toe cages, not modern clip-ins. The frame must be made of steel, as it would have been in the ‘good old days’, before super-light carbon.

L’Eroica feminine

Perhaps it’s this friendly, fun combination of style and conviviality that has led to this year’s *L’Eroica* seeing the highest number of women ever take part. When the event first started in 1997, just two of the 92 participants, a meagre two per cent, were women. Turn the clock forward to 2014, and that number has rocketed to 13 per cent – 743 out of 5,620 participants.

As I bump down the *strade bianchi*, the bone-shaking gravelly white roads that criss cross Tuscany, I grip my handlebars, struggling to slow down and dodge potholes. A voice from behind calls to me: “Move your hands onto the drop bars and get your bum out of the saddle! Let it roll!” It’s Neil, a guy from Cheam in England whom I met at the start line just an hour earlier and who told me he found his “bargain” bike on eBay.

Doing as he suggests, I instantly feel the improvement.

Living history

Everything from the ancient chalky roads (above), to the bikes (top centre), clothing, emergency spares (bottom centre) and ‘energy’ food (top right) harks back to cycling’s glory days...

IN NUMBERS

5,620

Participants in *L’Eroica* 2014.

92

Participants in first *L’Eroica* in 1997

1716

The year Chianti became the world’s first officially defined wine-producing area



I just manage a thank you before he’s gone, a flash of blue wool and polished metal disappearing into a cloud of dust down the hill in front of me.

At my lowest point, just over halfway through the route, I start chatting to Alessandro, a ship broker from Genoa. Bonded by our retro bikes, and the ridiculously steep gradient rising ahead, we hop off to walk. But we’re not alone. The slope behind me is dotted with people pushing their bikes, and chatting and laughing. Our conversation is broken to cheer a solitary cyclist, who, still in the saddle, powers past us.

Soon after, an old truck rattles along, churning up dust in its wake, as a man with a megaphone leans out of the window. His voice blares loudly in Italian, which Alessandro translates for me.

“He’s saying, ‘come on fatties, you can do it. You shouldn’t have had so much wine, but there’s more at the top of this hill’”. It’s all the incentive I need – not for the wine, honest, but for the pit-stop.

The white stuff

The 75km route features some punishing ascents and for me, terrifying descents – with much of it on the more technical *strade bianchi* white roads.

When *L’Eroica* was first held in 1997, it was intended to help save these iconic paths from being gradually replaced with asphalt – and it worked.

Today, the route is marked with permanent signs and

EVENTS HORIZON

MORE L’EROICAS...

L’Eroica Running marathon or ultra marathon, to be held in Gaiole in Chianti on 2 November, 2014. Distances range from 10km to 65km running.eroica.it

L’Eroica Britannia, the UK’s answer to Tuscany’s version, will be held for its second year around Derbyshire on 19-21 June 2015 eroicabritannia.co.uk

Watch out for a L’Eroica USA, as organisers are in discussion about an event in California in 2015.

RETRO RIDES...

The Retro Ronde is a vintage tour of Flanders, on 13-14 June 2015 retroronde.be

Marathon du Medoc, is a full marathon where runners dress in fancy dress – and drink local Bordeaux wine at 22 stops en route marathondumedoc.com

Wicked Wine Run, 5km routes through vineyards in various US locations wickedwinerun.com

A L’Ancienne, a retro bike ride in the Lake District, 10-12 July 2015 sportivelakes.co.uk/the-old-way

LADIES ONLY RIDES...

Ladies of the Lake, a women’s only sportive held in the Lake District sportivelakes.co.uk/ladies

Cycletta, whose ambassador is Victoria Pendleton is a women-only bike ride series held around the UK humanrace.co.uk/events/cycletta



**Chapeau!**

This gent has the retro look nailed: the food, jersey, string-back mitts and even the 'hairnet' helmet...

'The slope is dotted with people pushing their bikes and chatting...'

the hundreds of kilometres of bumpy tracks still exist.

From Gaiole, I climb to Castello di Brolio, the birthplace of Chianti wine, where I join other riders admiring the red-brick castle on the horizon, overlooking vineyards and olive groves.

After, a lengthy ascent to Radda, with its Romanesque Church of San Niccolò raised high on a platform, is thankfully rewarded by another food stop, where I eat enough Nutella and fruit to get me to the pretty hilltop town of Panzano and the next food stop.

This time, I'm handed Dario Cecchini's deliciously herby salami. "This has to be the only cycling event where you get fatter than when you started," someone says as we stand in the sun, meat in one hand and drink in the other.

At the last stop, I find it hard to leave the tree where I've been resting listening to the accordion player, but eventually I saddle up and push on. Luckily it's a downhill run for the last few miles into Gaiole, where the crowd is cheering in the finishers.

Heading for the line, I fall into a rhythm, remembering to move to the 'drops' for a valiant sprint finish – of sorts... *L'Eroica* might not be a race, but as I grind to a final halt, saddlesore but exhilarated, I definitely feel like a winner. Now where's my Chianti and *crostata*?

AT

Footnotes

NEED TO KNOW

Country Italy

Capital Rome

Population 3.5m in Tuscany

Climate Mediterranean

Time zone GMT+1

When to go Tuscany is best before Easter (March-May) or in late autumn (September-November) when the towns are less busy and the countryside is in blossom or mid-harvest. Avoid August, when the heat can be stifling and the majority or Italians take their own holidays.

Money Euro

Comms Good



TRAVEL INFO

Health & safety

There are no real issues other than the normal ones when travelling in Europe. Call 112 in an emergency.

What to pack

Padded shorts are an absolute must for comfort on long rides, and woollen jerseys for proper *L'Eroica* styling. You can easily buy one from stalls at the event. Take your own lights (just in case), spare inner tubes, pump and puncture repair kit.

Our trip

We stayed in La Stalla at Montebuoni, a two-bedroom, two-bathroom villa with shared pool near Lecchi in Chianti, from £478 for the week (to-tuscany.com, 0121-286 7782). To Tuscany can arrange cycle hire from 20 Euro per day and guiding on request. *L'Eroica* entry fee is 45 Euro en.eroica.it

Getting there

British Airways flies to Pisa from Heathrow from £91 return, from Gatwick from £77 return ba.com, 0844 4930787

Getting around

The price-comparison site Carrentals.co.uk features car hire from Pisa airport from around £13 per day.

Food and drink

Ribollita is a hearty vegetable and bread soup – its name translates as 'reboiled'. Wash down with local Chianti wine.

Where to stay

Online-booking site To Tuscany features more than 600 high-quality holiday properties in Tuscany at affordable prices to-tuscany.com