

ALPINE ESCAPE

Explore the abundant riches of the Alps using the region's expansive network of tailor-made bike paths



Pathways to perfection

An expansive network of bike paths in the Alps is empowering cyclists to tailor their own bespoke cycling adventures

Words MARK BAILEY Pictures JOE MCGORTY

Cyclists can now unlock secret Alpine passes, off-the-radar towns and hidden cultural gems, thanks to a game-changing system of bike paths criss-crossing the region's luxurious mountains and lakes.

This mesh of inter-connecting bike paths is the brainchild of the Association of Alpine Regions (Arge Alp, argealp.org) – a group of 10 regions in Austria, Italy, Switzerland and Germany which encourages cross-border collaboration.

Branching out across the Tyrol, Salzburg, Vorarlberg, South Tyrol, Trentino, Lombardy, Bavaria, Graubünden, St. Gallen and Ticino regions, the paths enable cyclists to enjoy diverse, multi-day adventures by pedalling from historic castles and architectural treasures to jagged peaks and glistening lakes.

Most paths are tarmacked and traffic-free, offering smooth and safe cycling expeditions, while others follow roads across scenic Alpine passes and valleys. But the paths also serve as a springboard for adventure, allowing riders to adapt and augment each journey with extra climbs and adventures along the way.

Cyclist explored six regions over the course of six days to discover how riders can construct their own pick-and-mix expedition for a truly unique Alpine adventure.

Riders can adapt each journey by adding extra climbs and adventures along the way

ARGE ALP
Die Alpen leben
Le Alpi vivono

Grand adventure

Explore the Arge Alp region with six epic rides taking in three countries



6 Grand Designs

The unique style of Vorarlberg



12 Swiss Rolls

Dramatic mountain passes in Graubünden



18 Green Dreams

Natural beauty in Central Lombardy



24 Garda Of Honour

Lakes, climbs and much more in Trentino



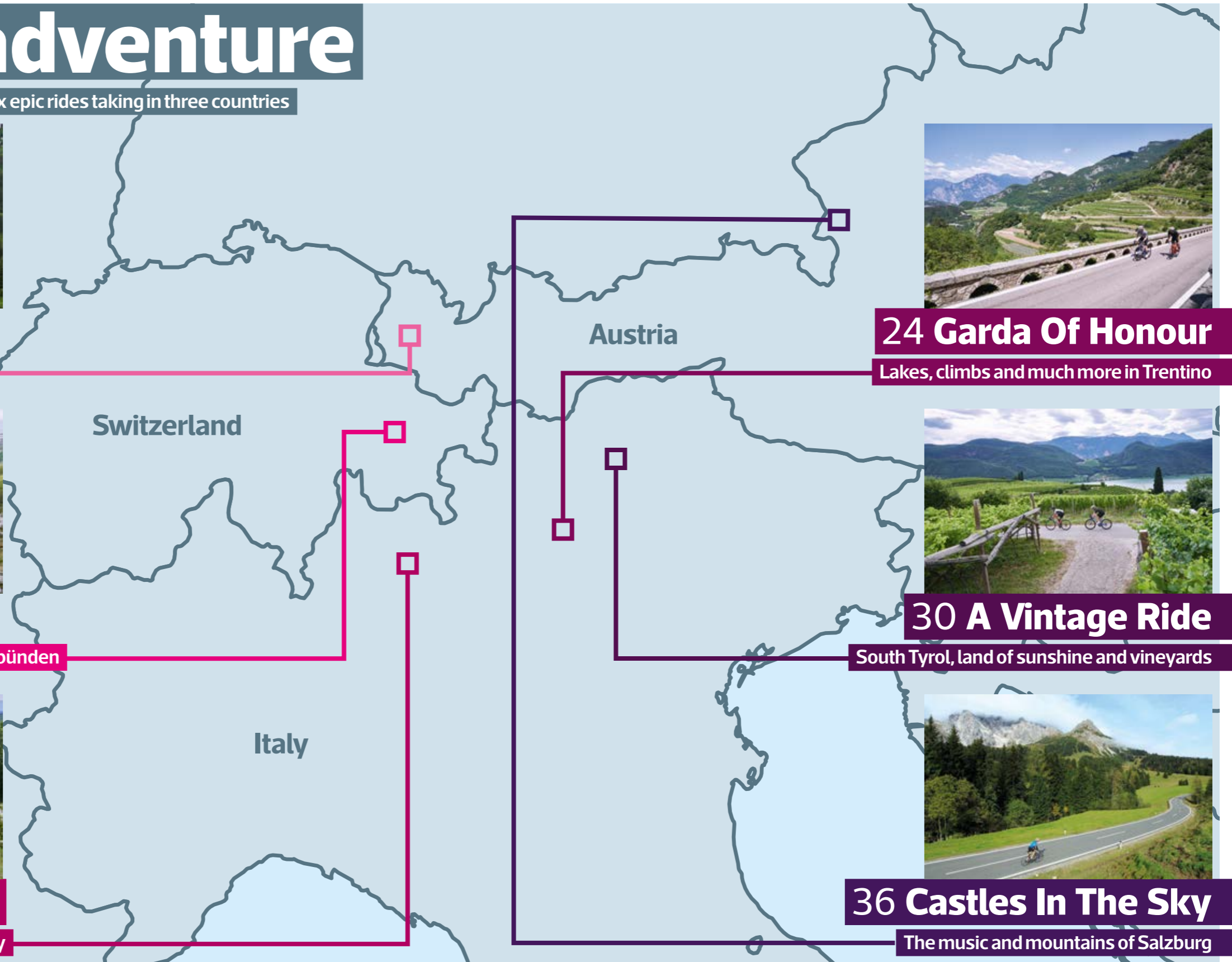
30 A Vintage Ride

South Tyrol, land of sunshine and vineyards



36 Castles In The Sky

The music and mountains of Salzburg



Grand Designs

The Austrian region of Vorarlberg blends epic mountain scenery with innovative urban architecture for a uniquely stylish cycling adventure

Vorarlberg is a canvas of colourful contrasts, a picturesque corner of western Austria where the natural, rock-hewn architecture of mountains and valleys blends with man-made urban designs and modern sculptures to serve up a photogenic cycling odyssey.

Bordering Germany, Switzerland and Liechtenstein, Vorarlberg is known for its quirky architectural heritage, luxury ski resorts and cultural events. But with hundreds of kilometres of traffic-free cycling paths now crossing the region, stretching from the sparkling mirror of Lake Constance in the north to the ice-encrusted 3,312m peak of Piz Buin in the south, it is also a designer destination for cyclists. And because this network of bike paths links up with some iconic Austrian mountain passes and cycling trails in neighbouring regions, it's the perfect springboard for a cross-border Alpine adventure.

My journey begins in the city of Bregenz on the eastern edge of Lake Constance. Formed during the Ice Age by the Rhine glacier, the lake covers 536km² – roughly 10 times the size of Loch Ness. Today swimmers bob up and down by the shore, while distant passenger ferries chug sleepily across the smooth surface. The lake splashes across the borders of Austria, Switzerland and Germany and is surrounded by a popular 270km cycling path. But I'm taking a trail south instead, so I can zip along the lustrous River Rhine, past sun-drenched bathing lakes and river meadows, to the medieval town of Feldkirch. This 50km route would make a leisurely day ride on its own, but today I'm extending the journey along the cycle path network to the village of Partenen, from where I can tackle the famous 34 hairpins of the mighty Silvretta Hochalpenstraße.

Riding alongside me is local cyclist Maximilian Braun, a super-fit mechanical engineer who competes in Ironman events. We start with a brief ride past the architectural treasures of Bregenz. Architecture is an important part of the culture of Vorarlberg, and Bregenz is filled with eye-catching designs. We ride past the Vorarlberg Museum,




Riding up the Silvretta Hochalpenstraße, a 22.3km journey which has 34 hairpins



which is covered in 16,656 concrete flowers, and pass the glass and steel Kunsthaus museum of modern arts, designed by the Swiss minimalist architect Peter Zumthor.

As we ride along Lake Constance I almost crash at the sight of a pair of giant hands reaching out of the water, its fingers shuffling a deck of cards suspended in mid-air. This is the latest incarnation of the famous 'Seebühne', a floating stage surrounded by a 7,000-seater open-air amphitheatre, which hosts the annual Bregenz Festival of opera and music. The design of the stage changes every two years. In 1999, for example, a 22m-high skeleton lurked above the performers, while in 2008, when scenes from the Bond movie *Quantum of Solace* were filmed here, the stage was shaped like a giant eye.

As we trace the Rhine southwards into quieter terrain, we dash past water meadows, shaded forests and fields festooned with wildflowers. Cycling is popular with both locals and visitors and the smooth paths are designed to make long rides as comfortable as possible. At regular intervals I see vending machines for inner tubes, fitted with handy tools and pumps. This is the home turf of former Hour Record holder Matthias Brandle of Trek-Segafredo, and popular events here include the Highlander Radmarathon, which features 4,040m of climbing over a 187km course.

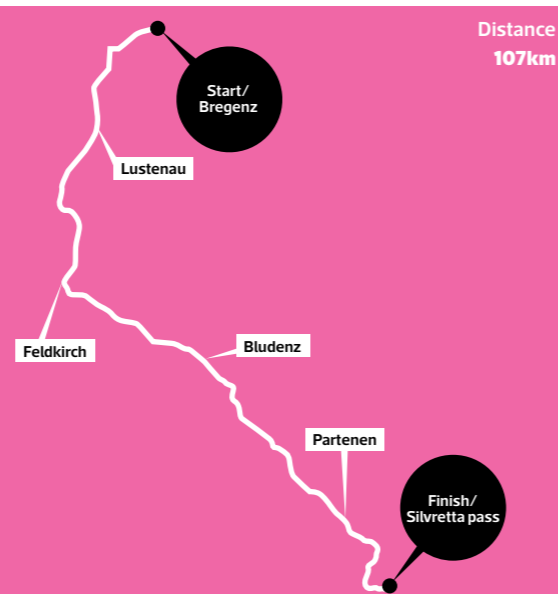
Depending on your mood you can either blast along the traffic-free bike paths at speed (Maximilian likes to use )



By the banks of the Rhine

A leisurely ride along the Rhine ending in a testing climb

To download this route, head to cyclist.co.uk/alpine1. This branch of the Vorarlberg bike path network takes you from Bregenz, past Lustenau, to Feldkirch. From here you can continue along the bike path network through Bludenz to Partenen, from where you can join the scenic Silvretta Hochalpenstraße road to complete a 107km ride.





▷ the cycle paths as a training ground for time-trialling because he can sustain an uninterrupted power output on the smooth tracks) or take some relaxing breaks en route. Riders can enjoy a leisurely brunch on the luxurious Hohentwiel paddle steamer at Hard; visit the Rhein-Schauen train museum at Lustenau; swim at the Rheinauen outdoor pool in Hohenems; or ponder sculptures in the eerie gravel works of Galerie Im Kies in Altach.

From Meiningen we dash through a broad valley surrounded on all sides by soaring mountains. Hidden among the peaks to the east is the luxury ski resort of Lech – a popular winter retreat for Hollywood stars such as Tom Cruise and Renee Zellweger. We take a detour to Bangs on the outskirts of Feldkirch, then ride along the Rhine to the border with Liechtenstein. From here our route takes us to the old town of Feldkirch, an atmospheric warren of narrow medieval streets guarded by the 13th century Schattensburg Castle. We stop at the Rauch restaurant for a lunch of veal cordon bleu with cranberries, cheese and aniseed rolls.

Anyone could be forgiven for spending a lazy afternoon exploring the historic streets of Feldkirch, but as Vorarlberg boasts the Silvretta, Ratikon, Verwall and Arlberg mountain

In this stylish and scenic corner of Austria cyclists design their own bespoke adventures

ranges we can't resist the temptation to finish the day with a lung-busting climb. So we follow the bike path network past the town of Bludenz, which sits at the heart of five Alpine valleys, to Partenen, where we leave behind the bike path to lay siege to the 2,032m Silvretta pass.

Our journey to the summit involves a beautiful 22.3km ride along the smooth and quiet Silvretta Hochalpenstraße (high alpine road). Grinding up the 34 hairpin bends we are treated views of rocky pinnacles and the sparkling Vermunt and Silvretta lakes. Scree slopes run down the mountain and patches of snow stubbornly cling to the rocks. In the distance is the 3,312m peak of Piz Buin – the highest mountain in Vorarlberg. Near the summit Maximilian challenges me to a spontaneous sprint finish. I agree, and swiftly regret it as he powers ahead – the wild scenery is breathtaking enough. From up here the surrounding mountains seem to be covered in a thick green, black and brown skin, like the scales of a sleeping dragon.

Vorarlberg offers an endless array of riding options, from languid rides to high-mountain challenges. Today we've enjoyed a zippy ride along the traffic-free bike paths as well as an epic climb, all within a 107km day ride of Bregenz. From the summit we could spin back down to Partenen, cross into the Tyrol, or head back to Feldkirch and south into Switzerland: in this stylish and scenic corner of Austria cyclists design their own bespoke adventures. 🌸



The climb to the 2,032m Silvretta pass offers views of jagged Alpine peaks and the pristine waters of the Vermunt and Silvretta lakes

How to get there

TRAVEL

You can take a Ryanair flight from Stansted to Memmingen in Germany (77km from Bregenz), or an EasyJet flight from Gatwick to Innsbruck in Austria (185km from Bregenz), but we flew with EasyJet from Luton to Zurich in Switzerland (120km from Bregenz). Swiss and British Airways also offer direct UK flights to Zurich. We hired a car with Sixt but all major car rental companies have offices at the airport.

WHERE TO STAY

We were based in Bregenz, at the Schwarzler Hotel (schwarzler.shotels.com; +43 5574 4990). This bike-friendly hotel has comfortable rooms, hearty breakfast buffets and a relaxing garden restaurant where you can enjoy delicious fresh fish dishes and nut cakes. Find alternative hotels at bodensee-vorarlberg.com/en.

MORE INFO

For information on the local cycling network visit the Vorarlberg tourist site at vorarlberg.travel/en, which has plenty of recommended bike routes with distances, riding times and elevations. You can also download a mobile app featuring detailed listings of local bike routes. Bikes can be transported on regional trains and boats for a small fee to help you venture further afield or return to your hotel after a long ride.



Swiss Rolls

Graubünden is a land of dramatic gorges and mountain passes guaranteed to serve up tasty two-wheeled journeys

Cyclists don't have to learn a lot about Graubünden before wanting to dig out their passport and bike box. Stretching across the chocolate box landscape of southeast Switzerland, the region is blessed with 937 mountains, 615 lakes and 150 valleys, providing a winning mix of Instagram-friendly scenery and Strava-boosting climbs. It is the largest canton in Switzerland but also the most sparsely populated, with just 28 inhabitants per square kilometre, giving you a luxurious sense of freedom as you pedal from wooden chalets and alpine meadows to rocky gorges and corkscrewing mountain roads.

This corner of Switzerland connects with the wider Arge Alp bike network through the eponymous Graubünden route, a sumptuous 130km course which weaves through the ruggedly beautiful Viamala gorge and over the colossal 2,066m San Bernardino pass. Unlike many cycling routes in the Arge Alp region, which typically follow dedicated bike paths, this route takes place mostly on roads. But with hardly any summer traffic, and stunning vistas at every turn, the smooth ribbons of tarmac are welcome and rewarding, making it easier to relish the twisting hairpin climbs and spiralling descents.

My guide today is Kurt Ladner of Moose Tours, a

The region is a mix of Instagram-friendly scenery and Strava-boosting climbs

passionate fan of American culture who drives a gleaming white pick-up truck, rides a loud pink bike, and enjoys *Breaking Bad*. He has travelled extensively across the States, but says his home landscape remains his favourite place to ride. He's also a trained bike mechanic, while wife Nicole is a co-owner of a local bike shop, so there is no danger of mechanical dramas while we are in his company.

The host town for our Grand Depart today is Chur, which archaeological evidence suggests is one of the oldest settlements in Switzerland. Its car-free centre is a tangle of ancient squares and historic cobbled streets. We ride past the white tower of the late Gothic St Martin's Church and the Romanesque portal of the Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Assumption, before gliding through Arcas square, where colourful houses sit alongside the remains of the town's medieval walls.

Heading west out of Chur takes us past a pump track and football pitches before we arrive at the stark grey bridge of Reichenau, where the Vorderrhein and Hinterrhein tributary rivers collide in swirls of seething chaos to form the River Rhine. This rich mountain



Panoramic views abound on the approach to the summit of the San Bernardino pass



landscape is as popular with rafters and kayakers as it is with cyclists. As we peer over the bridge at the torrent of water, a red train slices through the valley, transporting merry tourists all the way to St. Moritz. The 2,998m pyramid of Piz Beverin dominates the skyline.

We swing south, following the turquoise slither of the Hinterrhein through the Domleschg Valley, which is lined with hill-top castles built centuries ago to guard this strategic trade route through the Splügen, San Bernardino and Julier passes. Clusters of trees line the rocky horizon like battalions of camouflaged soldiers.

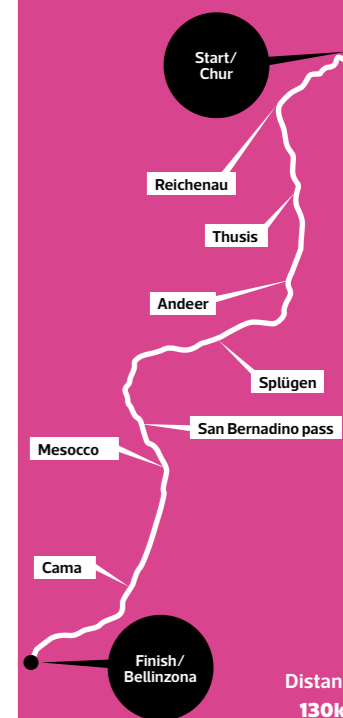
After passing the town of Thusis the rocky pinnacles and pine trees which line the road begin to loom closer as we plunge into the Viamala gorge. We dive through several tunnels (lights are a must on this section) and pass between narrow walls of rock up to 300m high. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche described ◀



High times

The San Bernardino pass awaits on this 130km ride

Beginning in Chur, the 130km Graubünden route heads west to Reichenau, before diverting south through Thusis, the Viamala gorge, Andeer and Splügen. The course passes up and over the San Bernardino pass then continues south through Mesocco and Cama to Bellinzona. The route is presented in rich detail on the Switzerland Mobility website (schweizmobil.ch).





◊ the Viamala gorge as having a 'terrible magnificence'. Viamala, or Via Mala, translates as 'bad road', and the name stems from its origins as a notoriously rugged and difficult trade artery in the Roman era. Today you can still see the ruins of old bridges, once used by mule traders, as you ride along the smooth tarmac. We pass stone bridges and listen to the sound of thrashing water reverberating up from the ferocious river below.

After darting past the neat orchards, cream houses and thermal spas of Andeer and skirting around some peppermint-coloured lakes, we arrive in Splügen – an idyllic mountain village of pretty wooden houses crowned with roofs of heavy gneiss slab. Piles of firewood sit outside the cosy homes and Swiss flags flutter in the breeze. From this viewpoint the scenery is irresistible so I unclip from my pedals and soak up the panorama of pristine meadows and saw-toothed mountains.

Anaesthetised by these wildly beautiful landscapes, we have unknowingly been climbing for quite some time, from an altitude of 672m in Thusis to 1,456m in Splügen. But the real quad-burning ascent to the 2,066m San Bernardino pass begins when we swing south and face a succession of switchbacks spiralling up to the heavens. The pass was given its current name in the 15th century in honour of Saint Bernardino of Siena, who preached in the area.

Humans have crossed this pass for centuries, from prehistoric hunters to rampaging armies, but a paved road was finally constructed here in the 19th century. Now it's largely the preserve of adventurous cyclists and touring motorbikers. As we curl up the hairpin bends, the valley opens up beneath us and we enjoy a wonderful vista



How to get there

TRAVEL

Zurich is the nearest airport to the Graubünden region and EasyJet, Swiss and British Airways all offer direct UK flights. You can hire a car at the airport for the 120km drive to Chur or take a 90-minute train.

WHERE TO STAY

We stayed in Chur at the Hotel Post (hotelpostchur.ch) close to the old town centre. The Ambiente Hotel Freieck (freieck.ch), Romantik Hotel Stern (stern-chur.ch) and Zunfthaus

zur Rebleuten (rebleutenchur.ch) are also recommended for a mix of old town charm and character.

MORE INFORMATION

Information on cycling in Graubünden can be found on the tourism website (graubuenden.ch). There is also a site dedicated specifically to Chur and its surrounding areas (churtourismus.ch). Guiding and transfers are available through Kurt at Moose Tours (moosetours.ch).



Crossing the Reichenau bridge where the Vorderrhein and Hinterrhein tributary rivers meet to form the River Rhine

of forested peaks dropping dramatically towards the sparkling Hinterrhein. We cut through meadows and past glacier-polished rocks into a high-altitude lunar landscape of dark crags and rivers of scree. At the summit lies the eerie black surface of the Moesola Lake.

We stop for lunch at the mountain-top restaurant, where we devour vegetable-rich barley soup and slabs of homemade lasagne, washed down with mugs of hot chocolate. Even more satisfying than this hearty mid-ride feast is the knowledge that we now have over 2,000m of descent ahead of us. In fact, we will drop 1,500m in the next 25km alone. We shoot around hairpin bends, past avalanche barriers and cattle huts, then swoop into a dense forest where pine trees tickle the sides of the road. I suspect you could glide from the very top of the San Bernardino pass into the lush Valle Mesolcina without touching the pedals, but we pump our legs hard and crank up the speed.

The jagged drama of the pass has now been replaced

You could glide from the top of the pass to the valley without touching the pedals

with the soft, sunny warmth of the valley. We spin past tranquil lakes and picturesque valley towns, before pausing for a rest at the Grotti di Cama – a cluster of old stone storage cellars hidden in a densely-wooded chestnut forest, which were used centuries ago to preserve wine, cheese and fruit. From here it's an easy ride to the medieval fortress town of Bellinzona, the gateway town to northern Italy, where you can stay the night and plot the next stage of your pan-Alpine odyssey. For now, we're content to sit in a shaded terrace in Cama and reflect on a memorable day of gorges, glacial valleys and gargantuan peaks. 🍷

Green Dreams

Central Lombardy is a land of lush, forested hills, iconic industrial inventions and tranquil river valleys that are just ripe for cycling exploration

Cycling by the River Adda near the Bertini hydroelectric power station



Blessed with blazing green mountains, languid olive groves and silvery rivers which meander through its fertile valleys like strings of spaghetti, Lombardy is rich in natural beauty. But as the industrial heartland of Italy, it is also dotted with striking monuments, from the famous red San Michele bridge of Paderno to the Unesco-protected old factory town of Crespi d'Adda. This captivating blend of verdant scenery and industrial archaeology is evident wherever you pedal along the paved bike paths that roam across the region, offering traffic-free cycling adventures and easy access to spectacular Italian climbs.

Lombardy enjoys a rich cycling heritage. The great Italian cyclist Felice Gimondi, who won the Tour de France in 1965, the Giro d'Italia in 1967, 1969 and 1976, and the Vuelta a Espana in 1968, was born in Sedrina, just north of Bergamo and a 162km gran fondo bearing his name takes place here every year. Iconic bike marque Bianchi – which has associations with Grand Tour-winning champions Fausto Coppi, Marco Pantani and Mario Cipollini – has its headquarters (painted in the brand's famous celeste colourway) just outside the city. And the Giro di Lombardia, the fifth of cycling's five Monuments, takes place around Lake Como every October.

In a nod to Lombardy's industrial heritage I start my ride in Crespi d'Adda, an atmospheric former 'company town' of factories, houses, schools, theatres and churches that was developed by 19th century textile manufacturer Cristoforo Crespi to house his cotton workers and their families. Accompanied by knowledgeable local guide Paolo Puglioli of Emotion Bike, I ride past factory chimneys and pastel-coloured houses before following the bike path north along the Adda River, a tributary of the River Po. Lombardy is meshed with waterways which link its rivers and lakes and these form the skeleton of its cycle path network.

We pass villages of lemon-coloured houses, before arriving at the imposing red San Michele bridge near Paderno d'Adda. Built between 1887 and 1889, in the same



The view is a riot of dazzling forests and colourful foliage, as if beamed to our eyes in HD

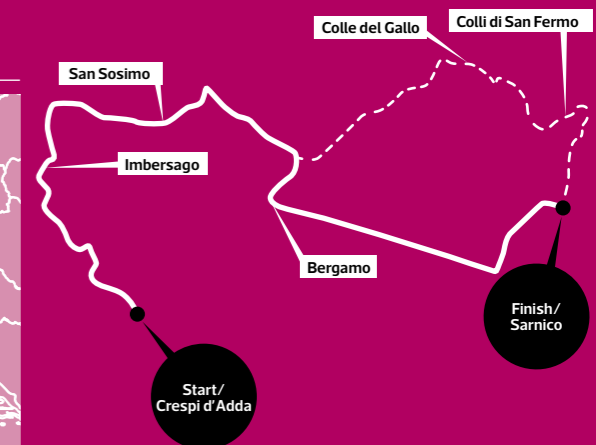
era and lattice style as the Eiffel Tower, the 266m-long bridge is regarded as a symbol of Italian industrial achievement. It is made from 2,500 tonnes of iron and held together by 100,000 nails. As we ride beneath it, trains and cars pass across high above. In the distance we can see the plump hills east of Bergamo, a visual reminder of the vertical adventures we'll be enjoying later in the day.

The radiant landscape appears almost tropical in the fierce sunlight. The region enjoys healthy rainfall all year which triggers an explosion of dazzling forests and colourful foliage, as if the view is being beamed to our eyes in ultra-high definition. After darting through this sun-drenched scenery, we get a surprise boost at Imbersago, crossing the River Adda on a water-powered wooden ferry inspired by Leonardo da Vinci, before diverting east to Bergamo. ▶

Natural wonders

Exploring Lombardy's rich array of visual treasures

To download this route, go to cyclist.co.uk/alpine3. A dedicated bike path takes you north from Crespi d'Adda to Imbersago, from where you can cross the River Adda and head east to Bergamo. After leaving Bergamo you can follow the bike path east all the way to Sarnico for an 83km ride, or tag on the two climbs to Colle del Gallo and Colli di San Fermo for a more challenging 108km adventure (see cyclist.co.uk/alpine3extra for this additional loop).



Distance
83km/108km

On arriving in the city we ride along the city's 16th century Venetian walls, which extend for 6km over arched gates and around a labyrinth of ancient streets. From up here we enjoy extraordinary views of the lower town - a sprawl of white buildings and terracotta roofs spreading out into the distance. Bergamo is a city of baroque architecture, bustling bakeries and sunny piazzas - and the perfect stop for lunch. The region is famous for its hearty cuisine, including polenta served with game or stew, and *casoncelli alla bergamasca* - pasta stuffed with succulent meat and smothered in a sloppy butter and sage sauce.

From Bergamo it is possible to continue along the bike path for a leisurely spin past villages, vineyards and olive groves to the town of Sarnico by Lake Iseo, where you can finish your 83km ride with a refreshing swim in the cool water. But it is easy to adapt and upgrade your ride at any point, whether you want to add on a trip north to the thermal pools of Terme San Pellegrino (home of the famous Italian mineral water), or a diversion south to the Italian Renaissance castle of Malpaga, before rejoining the bike path. We are keen to inject this ride with some altitude, so we sweep north to take on the climbs of Colle del Gallo and Colli San Fermo for a longer 108km journey.

We pass houses the colour of dried apricots and pristine white chapels, Italian flags rippling in the hot, thick air. The 436m ascent of the Colle del Gallo is short but challenging, especially in the fierce sunshine. At the top we discover the Sanctuary of the Madonna of Cyclists, where every year local riders complete a candlelit vigil with bikes to receive a blessing from the spirit of the Madonna of Colle Gallo. From up here we can see Lake Endine sparkling like a gemstone

The view of Lake Iseo in the afternoon sunshine is a visual treasure only nature could serve up

in the valley below, and towns of red-roofed houses clustered in the thick folds of the mountains.

We continue through buzzing meadows and sleepy villages to the twisting 1064m Colli San Fermo. To reach the top we battle up layer after layer of hairpin bends but we are soon high enough to see the shadows of clouds dance across the vast, green landscape which unfurls like a patchwork quilt beneath us. A paraglider slices through the sky above. Despite the sweat and the pain, it is a spectacularly scenic detour for those who have the energy.

We arrow down the mountain to rejoin the bike path at Sarnico on the banks of Lake Iseo, passing art nouveau villas on our way onto a wooden jetty that protrudes onto the glittering surface of the lake. Italian architectural endeavour has created some striking sights on our ride, from the red iron bridge of Paderno d'Adda to the elegant Venetian walls of Bergamo, which are a UNESCO official site as of July 2017, but the view of Lake Iseo in the late afternoon sunshine is a visual treasure only nature could serve up. 🌸



Riding up the twisting roads of the 1,064m Colli San Fermo



How to get there

TRAVEL

Ryanair have return flights from London Stansted, Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds Bradford, East Midlands, Manchester and Glasgow to Milan Bergamo. From the airport - which is also known as Il Caravaggio or Orio al Serio - it's a 6km, 12-minute taxi transfer or a short bus ride to the city centre in Bergamo. The journey from Bergamo to the bike path in Crespi d'Adda, which marks the start of this route, is around 20km.

WHERE TO STAY

We stayed at Best Western Hotel Piemontese (hotelpiemontese.com; +39 035 242629), a hotel in central Bergamo close to a bus stop with regular services to and from the airport. The hotel has a locked terrace where you can store your bike, an on-site restaurant serving pizza and pasta, and a good breakfast buffet.

MORE INFO

Details on cycling in the Lombardy and Bergamo area can be found on the regional tourism websites lombardia.it/en and visitbergamo.net. Maps of the bike path network can be found (in Italian) at lombardia.movimentolento.it/it/ but there are also supplementary resources available at italy-cycling-guide.info, as well as piste-ciclabili.com/regione-lombardia. Bike tours and pick-up services can be booked through Paolo at Emotion Bike (emotionbike.eu; +39 3479662900).

Garda Of Honour

Trentino rewards intrepid riders with a trove of cycling treasures, from luminous lakes and elegant hilltop castles to secret climbs and alluring echoes of the Giro d'Italia

On Trentino

Head for the pick of Trentino's 297 lakes

This course is a combination of two cycle paths – the Lake Garda cycle track, which travels from Riva del Garda to Mori, and the Valle dell'Adige cycle track, that connects Bolzano/Bozen with Verona. Although the route is short at 50–60km, there are lots of additional climbs and detours along the way to help you bulk up the distance and altitude, notably the twisting climb to Val di Gresta on the SP88 road from Loppio. Detailed maps of both bike paths are available on the regional tourism website (visittrentino.info/en), complete with places to visit, distances and altitude gains.



Distance
50–60km



Viewed through the rich colours and shades of a relief map, Trentino is a Tolkienesque landscape of snow-coated peaks and green forests stitched together by the silver-blue threads of rivers and lakes. Experienced on two wheels, this dramatic north Italian terrain becomes even more luxurious: the valleys are drenched in the scent of lemon groves and Mediterranean herbs; the rocky peaks are illuminated by dazzling mountain light; the landscapes enriched by the presence of crumbling castles, white churches, stone bridges and terraced vineyards.

Stretching from Riva del Garda at the northern tip of Lake Garda to the pale mountains of the Dolomites, Trentino is a mecca for road cyclists. There is a huge variety of road cycling routes in this region alone, enabling riders to tackle some of the historic climbs of the Giro d'Italia, including the vicious 1,463m Monte Bondone. But with the creation of over 430km of marked cycle paths, cyclists are now able to plunge even deeper into the region. This network is well mapped on the region's tourism website, with suggested routes, drinking fountains, bike shops and panoramic viewpoints all highlighted. There is even a range of 19 *Bici Grills* – cyclist-friendly restaurants which serve hearty Italian dishes and provide bike pumps and tools.

There are 11 major cycling paths in Trentino and today I am connecting two of them: the Lake Garda cycle track, which meanders east from Riva del Garda to Mori, and the Vallagarina cycle track, which travels north via Rovereto to the city of Trento. My journey begins in local style with a cappuccino by the shores of Lake Garda. I am accompanied by local cycling guide Giovanni Toldo, who reminds me that the Trentino region is the home of the great Italian cyclist Francesco Moser. Known as 'Lo Sceriffo' (The Sheriff), Moser enjoyed 273 race wins, including three triumphs at Paris-Roubaix and 23 stages of the Giro d'Italia.

There are 297 lakes in Trentino but Lake Garda is one of the most beautiful, its inky surface sparkling in the morning sunshine. Riva del Garda is a neat cluster of amber and ochre buildings overlooked by the ruins of the Bastion and the



Riva del Garda may be enshrined in mountains but it has a Mediterranean climate

porcelain-white Santa Barbara Church above. The scene is bathed in sunshine: Riva del Garda may be enshrined in mountains but it has a warm Mediterranean climate, and produces the most northerly olive oil in the world.

We ride past aromatic olive and lemon groves to the village of Nago, which sits on a rocky ledge on Monte Altissimo. The village is dominated by the ruins of the Penede Castle, which was first mentioned in historical documents in 1210. The climb is short and steep but the journey offers spellbinding views, stretching across the red roofs of Riva del Garda to the glittering expanse of Lake Garda and its surrounding pine woods and cliffs.

Cyclists can enjoy a relaxed pedal along the bike

Above: Cycling through the town centre of Trento gives us the welcome opportunity to refill our bottles from the picturesque fountain





The 16th century Castel Beseno looks like a drawing from a child's picture book



Steadily gaining altitude on the swirling climb to the mountain towns of Val di Gresta

path to Rovereto but we branch off at Loppio to enjoy a sweaty, swirling climb to the mountain towns of Val di Gresta, which involves a total ascent of around 500m. We ride through a colourful mosaic of agricultural meadows, fir trees, vineyards, stone terraces and rock spurs. An elderly farmer, digging up vegetables in the fierce sunshine, nods as we pass his sun-toasted fields.

The terrain we are riding through is coated in vibrant shades of green. Over 60% of Trentino is forested and there are 1,000 trees for every person living in the region. As we ride higher, we see rocky pinnacles jutting into the sky – a reminder that the global climbing hub of Arco is located just outside Riva del Garda.

After savouring the views from the summit, we speed back down to the bike path and continue our journey to Rovereto. Here the cycle track hugs the turquoise slither of the River Adige and conveniently passes the local Zenzero ice cream shop. After some ice-cold refreshment

we continue into Rovereto's town centre – a tightly-coiled maze of cobbled streets, arched bridges and ornate lanterns nestled beneath the rounded bastions of the Castello di Rovereto. The castle was fortified in the 15th century but today its moats and walls harbour the Italian War History Museum. Rovereto is a busy town, but at the same time is small enough to feel welcoming for cyclists. Views of mountains and rivers poke through the gaps between the buildings.

We fill our water bottles at a fountain in the town centre and continue through the Valle dell'Adige. We soon pass the spectacular 16th century Castel Beseno, which looks like a drawing from a child's picture book, with its fantastical mix of towering walls, rounded turrets, dark gates and drawbridges, perched on a plump green hill. Overlooking the Valle dell'Adige, this is the largest fortified complex in Trentino, which is dotted with around 200 other castles.

Dashing through the valley, past forests of spruce,

beech, larch and fir, we are now mirroring in reverse the route of the time-trial on Stage 16 of this year's Giro d'Italia from Trento to Rovereto won by Australian Rohan Dennis. The pro cyclists followed a road route, but with the smooth, traffic-free bike paths it's easy to glide along at high speed, without worrying about cars.

The bike path we're following ends in the city of Trento, set in a wide glacial valley. The hub of the city is the buzzing Piazza Duomo, decorated with the Romanesque-Gothic Cathedral San Vigilio, the stone tower of the Palazzo Pretorio, and the 18th century Neptune Fountain. But it is worth delaying your arrival in the city to visit the *Bici Grill* located just south of Trento. Here you can enjoy fresh fish, venison, pasta or *carne salada* in the company of other cyclists, while soaking up the stunning mountain views from the shaded outdoor terrace. There is no hurry: from Trentino it's only a short distance to the South Tyrol and a whole new chapter of cycling adventures. 🍷

How to get there

TRAVEL

Verona is the nearest airport to Trentino. EasyJet and British Airways both fly from Gatwick to Verona and Ryanair flies there from Stansted. There are car rental services, shuttle buses and taxi services available to complete your journey. You can also fly to Venice and Milan.

WHERE TO STAY

For our time in Trentino we were based at the Hotel Campagnola (hotelcampagnola.com) which has

a wonderful outdoor pool looking out onto the mountains, a restaurant which serves local cuisine, and pretty gardens. The hotel also has a Jacuzzi, Turkish bath and Finnish sauna.

MORE INFO

All cycle paths are well mapped on the tourism website at trentino.com. For more information on the region see visittrentino.info/en.



A Vintage Ride

South Tyrol offers cyclists a tasty blend of sun-kissed vineyards, refreshing lakes and the famous, full-bodied climbs of the Dolomites



With 80% of its surface area covered in mountains, 300 days of sunshine every year and 150 wineries dotted throughout the region, South Tyrol whispers a seductive siren song to cyclists around the world.

In this autonomous province of northern Italy, an undulating land of monochrome peaks, sun-baked meadows and fruity wines, riders can pedal from tranquil vineyards to the turreted pinnacles of the Dolomites within just a few hours.

Italian cycling greats Alfredo Binda, Gino Bartali and Fausto Coppi sculpted their legendary reputations on the steep climbs of the Dolomites, which have featured in the Giro d'Italia over 40 times since the race's first visit in 1937. And the region's expansive system of cycle tracks invites riders of all levels to explore further afield, from buzzing meadows and sleepy orchards to ancient abbeys and historic towns.

I start my ride in the luxuriously languid town of Tramin, which is marooned in an endless green sea of vineyards. This area marks the southern tip of South Tyrol's Wine Road, a 150km wine-tasting route which sways and stumbles through a dreamy valley of grapevines, apple orchards and palm trees. South Tyrol is famous for its white wines, and with the growing area of the Wine Road spanning 4,249 hectares, cyclists won't lack options for mid-ride rehydration.

My companion for the day is Pierpaolo Macconi, a spaghetti-slender rider who is as quick to laugh as he is at powering up climbs. He insists that however beautiful this landscape is in the summer, I must return in the autumn when the vineyards and forests erupt in a blazing riot of red and yellow. He makes a compelling argument.

We begin by taking the Oltradige cycle track through the Oltradige valley to Bolzano. The path weaves through rolling hills coated in grapevines, which stand in neat rows like spectators lining the terraces of a stadium. We pass Cantina Tramin, one of the oldest cooperatives in the region, whose striking green headquarters mirrors the shape of tangled vines. This modern steel and glass construction, which houses storage cellars and wine-tasting rooms, was built in 2010 by renowned local architect Werner Tscholl.

All along this route you can take playful detours up the steep, coiling roads which climb through the vineyards at formidable gradients. To break up the flat of the valley we dash up one such climb into a vineyard and enjoy a delicious cooling blast from the hidden sprinklers, which refract the sunlight to paint dazzling miniature rainbows in the air. From up here we can see Lake Caldaro – the warmest body of water in the Alps. The temperature of the water in the lake once topped 28 degrees, but today it's a pleasantly refreshing spot for a dip on a hot summer ride.

At the town of Bolzano we change onto the Valle Isarco cycling track (the region's bike paths interconnect so you can mould your own favourite routes) and head northeast, past picturesque churches and farmhouses. We travel by Chiusa, an old town of stone houses and shaded alleyways watched over by the elegant white-walled Sabiona monastery, which sits on a rocky spur 200m above. ▶



Cycling high above the market town of San Candido in the Dolomites

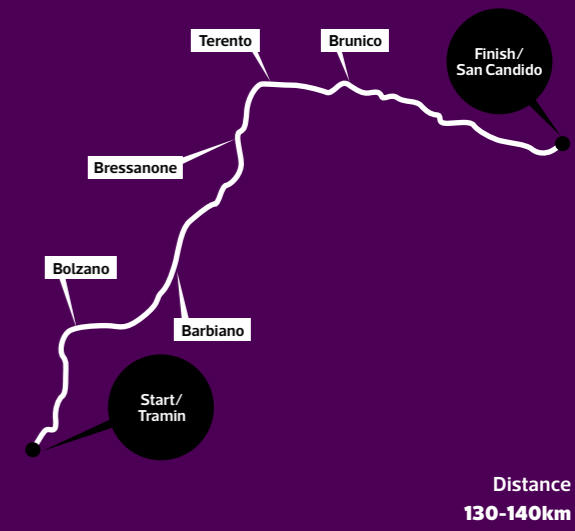
He insists that I return in the autumn when the vineyards erupt in a riot of red and yellow



Sunshine and vineyards

All the wineries and mountain detours you could wish for

This 130-140km route connects South Tyrol's Oltradige, Valle Isarco and Val Pusteria bike paths, travelling from Tramin to San Candido via Bolzano, Bressanone and Brunico. Most of the journey is on dedicated cycle paths but with a few stretches on valley roads. All the paths are listed in excellent detail on the tourism website (suedtirol.info/en), complete with pictures, maps and places to visit.



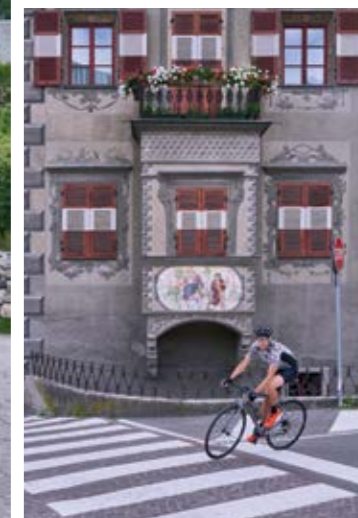
◊ The journey from Bolzano to the medieval town of Bressanone is around 42km long and involves a gentle 300m ascent. On our arrival we cross a bridge and roll past hotels painted pink and green and fitted with colourful wooden shutters. The main landmark in Bressanone is the majestic twin-spired Bressanone Cathedral, but to a hungry cyclist the surrounding street stalls, which are stocked with thick slabs of speck, bowls of porcini mushrooms, and huge packets of pasta, nuts, honey and local cheese, are just as compelling. Food is an important part of local culture and South Tyrol hosts festivals and fairs celebrating everything from milk to apricots.

A few kilometres past Bressanone is the 12th century Abbey Novacella, a handsome cluster of monastic buildings, fountains, libraries, wooden doors and stone archways surrounded by forests and vineyards and intersected by white paths. We ride down and enjoy the cool shade afforded by the old walls and alleyways before grinding back up to the cycle path. Soon we pause for a quick lunch of speck rolls and fresh orange juice. Visiting cyclists should also make the most of the traditional South Tyrolean afternoon snack of Marende, which consists of cured ham, flat bread, cheese, sausage and a glass of wine – the Italian version of a ploughman’s lunch.

Refuelled, we tack east onto the Val Pusteria cycle route and travel through green fields to Brunico, then on into the grey and white jaws of the Dolomites. A Unesco World Heritage site, the Dolomites are a unique range of mountains. 250 million years ago these jagged pinnacles and spires lay underwater, forming part of a spectacular



Close to Bressanone is the 12th century Abbey Novacella, a cluster of monastic buildings, fountains, libraries, wooden doors and stone archways



The setting inspired composer Gustav Mahler when he visited more than a century ago

How to get there

TRAVEL

The nearest airports are in Innsbruck and Verona. EasyJet flies from Gatwick, Luton and Manchester to Innsbruck and from Gatwick to Verona. British Airways also offers flights from Heathrow to Innsbruck and from Gatwick to Verona. There are car rental services, shuttle buses and taxi services available at both airports. See suedtirol.info/en for more details.

WHERE TO STAY

We stayed at the friendly Hotel Traminer Hof (traminerhof.it) in Tramin, which offers comfortable rooms with outdoor terraces and (surprisingly) Dyson hairdryers, a bike storage garage, and a popular restaurant. The hotel has indoor and outdoor pools, as well as a sauna, solarium and gym.

MORE INFO

For information on the South Tyrol region, flights, accommodation and places to visit, see the tourism website (suedtirol.info/en).



coral reef. But tectonic activity and volcanic eruptions turned them into the majestic mountain range we see today.

Thousands of cyclists flock to the region each year for sportives such as the Sellaronda Bike Day and the Maratona Dles Dolomites, and the Dolomiti di Sesto region we’re passing through is home to the famed Tre Cime di Lavaredo peaks. We ride beneath grey turrets of rock topped by moon-white lumps of snow safe in the knowledge that we won’t be taking on those challenges today. The paths are clearly marked – simply follow the colourful whirl of Pierpaolo’s luminous orange shoes, which guide the way.

We soon arrive at the sumptuous Lake Dobbiaco. Nestled between forested peaks, the setting inspired composer Gustav Mahler to create several pieces of music when he visited more than a century ago. A short ride along its shores sees our day finish in the market town of San Candido, surrounded by dark forests and serrated grey mountains. We ride high up above the town to enjoy the views and discuss the final challenge of the day: where to find the biggest apple strudel in town. 🍏

Castles In The Sky

Jagged peaks and cloud-piercing fortresses await cyclists in Salzburg, the fairytale Austrian province of music and mountains



The Hochkönig Bundesstraße B164 between Maria Alm, Dienten and Mühlbach am Hochkönig is very popular to road cyclists



This small street called Strubklammstraße between Ebenau and Faistenau is situated only 15km east of Salzburg and is part of the famous Eddy Merckx Classic race, which takes place every September

Thanks to this regional bike path network it is possible to cross the Alps without enduring leg-buckling climbs, allowing riders to swap painful vertical ascents for longer, stamina-testing days in the saddle. But road cyclists who crave mountainous challenges can easily tack on some arduous ascents along the way. Deliciously tempting climbs rise up from the bike path at intervals, and the ominous Grossglockner, Austria's highest peak at 3,798m, lurks just a few kilometres west of the start of the route. If you have the time, it's worth taking an extra day to attack the famous ribbon of road which lures you through high mountain pastures and the Hochtortunnel at 2,506m.

After meeting local ride partners Hannes Rieser, who lives in nearby St Johann im Pongau, and Raimund Gruber, who has just returned from a cycling trip to Switzerland, we pedal through the steaming streets of Bad Gastein in the early morning fog. This old spa town is an elegant cluster of steep gorges, fast-moving rivers, pastel-coloured hilltop hotels and chocolate shops. Thermal water bubbles up from pools and fountains throughout the town. We ride over an old stone bridge and pass by the beautiful Gasteiner waterfall. This huge cascade of water descends for 341m at exhilarating speeds not even Vincenzo Nibali could dare to match.

The bike path dances through the Gastein valley which, at almost 40km in length, is the longest of the region's

If you have the time, it's worth taking an extra day to attack the famous Grossglockner pass

valleys. In winter the area boasts over 200km of slopes. The valley is watched over by the dramatic mountains of the Hohe Tauern, a land of 3,000m peaks, sparkling glaciers and emerald lakes. We continue north to St. Johann-Alpendorf, a charming settlement of wood-panelled chalets and artisanal shops in the Salzach Valley. Riders can take a detour to see the dramatic 300m-high walls of the Liechtenstein Gorge just south of this ancient copper mining town, which extend for 4km.

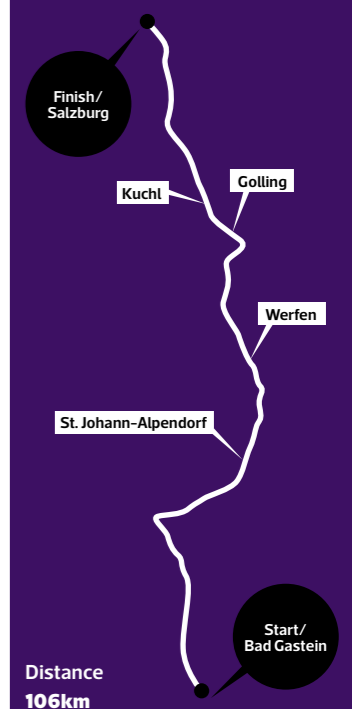
As we ride along we spy cosy Alpine inns, seething waterfalls and the green baize of mountain meadows. Continuing further north we arrive at Werfen, a historic town overlooked by the 11th century Hohenwerfen Castle. The fortress is built on a 623m-high rocky precipice, and is surrounded by the spectacular Berchtesgaden Alps and Tennen mountains. With its white walls and pointed roofs, this Disney-esque castle is a popular setting for movies and TV shows, most notably *The Sound of Music*.

My map shows multiple slithering white roads ▶

A true classic

Take inspiration from Mozart's birthplace

This scenic section of the Alpe Adria bike route (alpe-adria-radweg.com) heads north from Bad Gastein to St Johann im Pongau and Werfen before continuing through Golling and Kuchl to Salzburg. The route is around 106km. For some extra climbs along the way, choose from the dozens of up-and-down ascents leading off the bike path on the stretch from Bad Gastein to Werfen, which lead to secret viewpoints, mountain villages and alpine meadows.



Salzburg may be one of the smaller regions of Austria but with its soaring limestone peaks, dark forests, thermal springs, and wealth of castles, fortresses and palaces it is an ideal destination for cyclists hunting scenic expeditions in theatrical mountain terrain. Located in the heart of Austria, the Salzburg region is blessed with over 2,000km of cycling paths, which guide riders on quiet trails through the enchanting land of Mozart, mountains and Maria von Trapp, past deep ravines, thundering waterfalls, and mist-wreathed pyramids of rock.

I'm here to sample a segment of the Alpe Adria bike route, a classic 416km journey from the Italian shores of the Adriatic Sea to the city of Salzburg itself – birthplace of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. As I have only one day available, I start my ride further north in the Belle Époque town of Bad Gastein, from where I can weave 100km, through sweeping valleys and forest-cloaked mountains, to Salzburg.



Left: The famous gazebo from *The Sound of Music* in the gardens of Hellbrunn Castle



veering off the bike path and into the surrounding hills. It's that time of the day when 'Der Berg ruft' (the mountain calls) so we decide to test a few out. We ride through a forest of beech, larches and pine trees as gangly as Chris Froome's legs, and up to the meadow of Gschwandtanger, from where we can see the castle erupting majestically out of the mist. There are dozens of wriggling climbs like this all the way from Bad Gastein to Werfen, so riders can easily crank up the altitude gain with a few blasts uphill to scenic viewpoints and mountain villages.

Werfen is also the home of Eisriesenwelt – the largest ice cave network in the world. I am not wearing enough base layers to wander around an underground ice cave, however, so we pause for lunch instead. At the Werfenerhof restaurant we devour roast venison with beetroot, orange and *spatzle* (macaroni-esque lumps of soft egg noodles, the name of which translates as 'little sparrows'). Because it's our photographer Joe's birthday we finish with a luxurious dessert of cream-filled pancakes. His dish arrives with a sparkling flare bright enough to guide lost ships home in a storm.

Refreshed and refuelled, we head further north through the Salzach Valley. This part of the bike path involves a memorable dash between dark mountains covered in polished black rock and slivers of snow. We pass a track where local equestrians are racing horses and traps, watch bright red trains chug through the valley, and slice

Salzburg is a busy city, but over 180km of bike paths will keep you away from the traffic

past rivers of inky water and the Golling waterfall, which plunges 75m down two giant steps into the valley below, and on to Kuchl, where the landscape begins to soften into a green oasis of rounded hills, agricultural meadows and fertile river valleys.

Our odyssey ends among the aesthetically pleasing jumble of domes, spires, stone alleyways, coffee houses and music halls of Salzburg, the music of Mozart wafting through open café doors. Although Salzburg is a busy city, there are over 180km of bike paths available to keep you away from the traffic. We ride to the dazzling 17th century Hellbrunn Palace, which is painted the same bright yellow as the Tour's *maillot jaune*, and glide past a pavilion used in *The Sound of Music* (the von Trapps really do haunt every corner of Salzburg) before heading into the centre of the city to observe the striking white Hohensalzburg fortress, which dates back to the 11th century.

This 106km ride has showcased the very best of the Salzburg region, from rugged mountain scenery to welcoming valley towns, so it feels only right to end our pan-Alpine adventure in the traditional local style – with a plate of hot sausages and some frothy steins of beer. ❁

How to get there

TRAVEL

Salzburg is a direct two-hour flight from the UK. EasyJet has flights from Bristol, Luton, Liverpool and London Gatwick; Jet 2 flies here from Edinburgh, Leeds, Manchester and Stansted; BA flights are available from Gatwick and Heathrow; Eurowings flies from Heathrow and Stansted, and Ryanair from Stansted.

WHERE TO STAY

We stayed at the beautiful Villa Solitude Hotel (villasolitude.com) in Bad Gastein, which features wood-panelled bedrooms, hallways decorated with suits of armour and antique furniture, and an on-site restaurant with a spectacular

terrace overlooking the waterfall.

The sound of chef Werner Thanner pounding the veal shortly after we placed our order for wiener schnitzels only added to the venue's charm. In Salzburg we stayed at the comfortable and eco-friendly Das Grune Hotel zur Post (hotelzurpost.info) which is popular with cyclists and hikers.

MORE INFO

Information on the cycling paths in the Salzburg region and ideas for routes and places to visit can be found on the regional tourism site at salzburgerland.com. A detailed breakdown of the Alpe Adria bike path is also available at alpe-adria-radweg.com.



The parish church of the old spa town of Bad Gastein in the early morning fog

Arge Alp highlights

The Arge Alp region boasts an eclectic mix of geographical, historical and architectural treasures. Here are 12 highlights not to be missed

VORARLBERG

- 📍 **SEEBUHNE BREGENZ:** Spectacular floating stage and 7,000-seat amphitheatre on Lake Constance. Hosts the annual Bregenz Festival
- 📍 **FELDKIRCH:** This atmospheric medieval town in Vorarlberg is a charming labyrinth of streets overlooked by the Schattenburg Castle

GRAUBÜNDEN

- 📍 **VIAMALA GORGE:** Striking rock-hewn chasm in Graubünden, with 300m high rock walls and vertiginous drops to the river below
- 📍 **SPLÜGEN:** Postcard-perfect Swiss village of pretty wooden houses surrounded by pristine meadows and jagged mountains

CENTRAL LOMBARDY

- 📍 **SAN MICHELE BRIDGE:** Located at Paderno d'Adda, this 266m long bridge was built in the same era and style as the Eiffel Tower
- 📍 **SARNICO:** Surrounded by vineyards and olive groves, this stylish Italian town looks out over the dazzling mirror of Lake Iseo

TRENTINO

- 📍 **TRENTO:** Visit Piazza Duomo, tower of the Palazzo Pretorio, the Neptune Fountain and the Muse Science Museum!
- 📍 **CASTEL BESENO:** A striking 16th century fortress in the Val d'Adige, it is the largest fortified complex in Trentino

SOUTH TYROL

- 📍 **ABBEY NOVACELLA:** This 12th century abbey near Bressanone houses monastic buildings surrounded by forests and vineyards
- 📍 **LAKE DOBBIACO:** A shimmering Alpine lake in the Dolomites nestled between forested peaks and turrets of rock

SALZBURG

- 📍 **GASTEINER WATERFALL:** The noise from this 341m cascade of water echoes around the beautiful old spa town of Bad Gastein
- 📍 **HOHENWERFEN CASTLE:** Stunning 11th century fortification of dense white walls and turrets built on a 623m-high rocky ledge

The Alps are a cyclist's paradise, offering up a mix of history, culture and natural beauty, not to mention fantastic roads and bike paths

