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Tuscany

on Two Wheels

By Mark Sissons

With the growing popularity of e-bikes, Italy's most cycling-friendly region is becoming more accessible.

If there is one European active holiday destination tailor-made for exploring on two wheels, it's Tuscany. Undulating landscapes dotted with golden wheat fields and ripe vineyards, winding climbs toward medieval hilltop villages, and superb wine and cuisine combine to make the Tuscan countryside bucket-list worthy. And now, thanks to the growing popularity of electric bikes, Tuscany on two wheels is a far more accessible proposition. E-bikes still require pedalling but come equipped with small electric motors that allow riders of differing abilities to keep

up. They provide power on demand, responding to and complementing your efforts. If you pedal hard, little battery power will be used. As you slow your pace, the electrical assistance kicks in and provides a welcome boost. According to the Italian cycling industry association, ANCMA, nearly 150,000 e-bikes were sold in Italy in 2017 – a 19 per cent increase in sales over the previous year. And with an estimated 35 million e-bikes purchased worldwide in 2016, the e-biking trend looks like it is here to stay.

THE HILLS OF TUSCANY



WRITER E-BIKING IN TUSCANY ©MARK SISSONS



A STOP FOR SOME WINE-TASTING ©MARK SISSONS



VAL D'ORCIA, FAMOUS FOR ITS MANY MEDIEVAL HILLTOP TOWNS ©MARK SISSONS



SPA TOWN OF BAGNO VIGNONI, FAMOUS FOR ITS THERMAL POOLS ©MARK SISSONS

“Eat and drink, eat and drink. Up and down, up and down,” chants my cycling guide, waving his arms to simulate the rolling route ahead as he leads our group out of the hilltop town of Pienza, south of Siena. Practically unchanged since native son Pope Pius II ordered it transformed into the quintessential Renaissance town in 1459, Pienza is today most famous for producing Pecorino Toscano, a cheese made from aromatic milk produced in the sheep pastures in Val d’Orcia.

Today is the beginning of our four-day exploration of Val d’Orcia, a land of singularly spectacular scenery dotted with fortresses, villages, and vineyards. Awarded UNESCO World Heritage status in 2004, this is the Tuscany of brochures and Instagram, swathed in olive groves, endless rows of cypress and beech trees, and centuries-old wineries that produce Brunello and other famous Tuscan wines.

Today’s ride will take us on a 50-kilometre loop via Montepulciano and Monticchiello, two famous fortified hilltop towns. It’s a perfect morning – sunny, crisp and cloudless – as we cruise down the long twisting downhill road from Pienza, following a route that winds through scenic landscapes and timeless villages.

Despite not being a seasoned road rider, I am still able to keep up with my fitter companions because I’m riding a Scott E-Sub Cross 10 e-bike. This state-of-the-art hybrid of old-fashioned pedal power and a sophisticated battery-powered motor that kicks in when I need it significantly narrows the gap between my fellow cyclists and me. At the press of a button, I can activate incremental levels of electric assist ranging from eco to turbo. On the downhill sections, which can span over a dozen kilometres, I rarely turn e-assist on. Nor do I often need an e-boost on the long flat stretches. But once we enter steep uphill sections of road, I’m able to zip along like I’m on a moped, enjoying the fantastic scenery while my human-powered companions are pedalling hard and digging deep.

All this is not to say that e-biking isn’t a serious workout. With its bulky battery, my Scott e-bike is much heavier than standard road bikes, which makes cycling the long flat sections of road especially taxing. And I can always choose to switch off the e-assist modes and work up a real sweat, as I often do until the climbs become too taxing.

Each morning, we set off from a former 15th-century convent beside Pienza’s town square called Relais il Chiostro that serves as our home base. In Montalcino, a classic fairytale hilltop town scarcely changed in



GROUP E-BIKING THROUGH TUSCANY



FANTASTIC CUISINE IS A HIGHLIGHT OF ANY TUSCAN E-BIKE TOUR ©MARK SISSONS

appearance since the 16th century, we sample the world-famous Brunello di Montalcino wine made from Sangiovese grapes. In Montepulciano, which produces Vino Nobile, considered by connoisseurs to be one of the finest wines in the world, we lunch on fresh pici pasta at a winery called Salcheto. The ancient spa town of Bagno Vignoni reveals thermal pools where Roman senators once settled affairs of state in toga-optional grottos. An organic winery called Corte Pavone offers spectacular views of Val d’Orcia from its hilltop tasting room.

Our evenings are also filled with genuine *Cucina Toscana*: Crostini Toscani dripping in chopped liver sauce; Panzanella, a cold bread salad made with fresh tomatoes and red onions; cured pork Lardo di Colonnata, Pappa al Pomodoro soup; Tagliolini al Tartufo, and Pici al ragù Toscano, among many other mouth-watering local dishes. By the time we cycle into the historic centre of Siena on our final afternoon, I’m totally sold on e-biking. On this most memorable tour de Tuscany, I have discovered that the ‘e’ in e-bike stands not for elettrico, but for estatico.



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