

Day 1 – Setting off

Well the moment has finally arrived: after a couple of lazy days chilling out with Kate and Matty G, I set off for England at 0833 local time, waved off by Kate and Matteo who thought he might be coming with me. One “passenger” who did follow me along the road was terrier Max who gave up once I gathered speed down the substantial hill towards Piedimonte Etneo. It's been a lovely few days, a strenuous bike ride up Etna with Davide, a short ride down to Piedimonte to buy a bungee to secure stuff on the pannier rack and, most importantly, time with Kate and little Matteo.



The ride co-incided with Kate's birthday yesterday and we celebrated with a meal at Shalai (means “enjoy with great pleasure”), a restaurant in Linguaglossa that we visited for Kate's birthday last year as well. It's not cheap but it is very good, and what are fathers for if not to pick up the bill? Matty G decided that he needed feeding before he would allow us to do so but once he'd had enough he slept soundly until he was back in the car, so other diners weren't too disturbed. He's certainly got a good voice!

Through Piedimonte and down the steep hill towards Linguaglossa with a full load made the bike difficult to control at first but once I was going I got used to the extra weight, especially from the handlebar bag, although it makes braking more interesting. I turned off the main road with a view to missing Fiumefreddo but then became hopelessly lost in Calatabiano which wasted the best part of half an hour before I finally found the right route to Giardini Naxos and the main coast road to Messina. Once going I made good progress along the coast passing below Taormina, with Bella Isola sparkling in the sun and on through Letojanni, resisting any urge to make the steep climb up to Forza d'Agro where some of the Godfather films were shot and on through lots of seaside resorts, now quite deserted with everyone back at work and school. The traffic was not bad: I had the odd incident with people cutting me up but nothing serious and arrived in Messina in good time to catch the 1320 ferry across to Calabria. Having bought my ticket for 3 euros I waited for the ferry to dock and saw a squall out on the Strait that I hoped wouldn't lead to more rain later (it didn't).



The ferry loaded quickly and left on time and I was able to take a couple of



pictures saying Farewell Sicily

and Hello Calabria.



The trip across the Strait of Messina takes about 20 minutes and I took the opportunity of grabbing a delicious Arancina and a bottle of water for lunch. In hindsight I wish I'd had two Aranchini but it'll make supper more enjoyable.. I bought a second bottle for my bidons as I knew I had some sharp climbing to do before arriving at my B&B and, although the weather has cooled down considerably it is still about 23 degrees and thirst making..

I made my way north out of Villa San Giovanni, the port of arrival on the coast road. Perhaps it was the fact that it was lunchtime but also because most traffic makes for the main A road that drives it way through hills by tunnel and across valleys by impressive viaducts, but the road was pleasantly quiet, my only close shave on what is quite a narrow road that hugs the base of tall cliffs, was with a local bus who blew diesel fumes in my face as he passed too closely for comfort. I looked across the Strait to the impressive

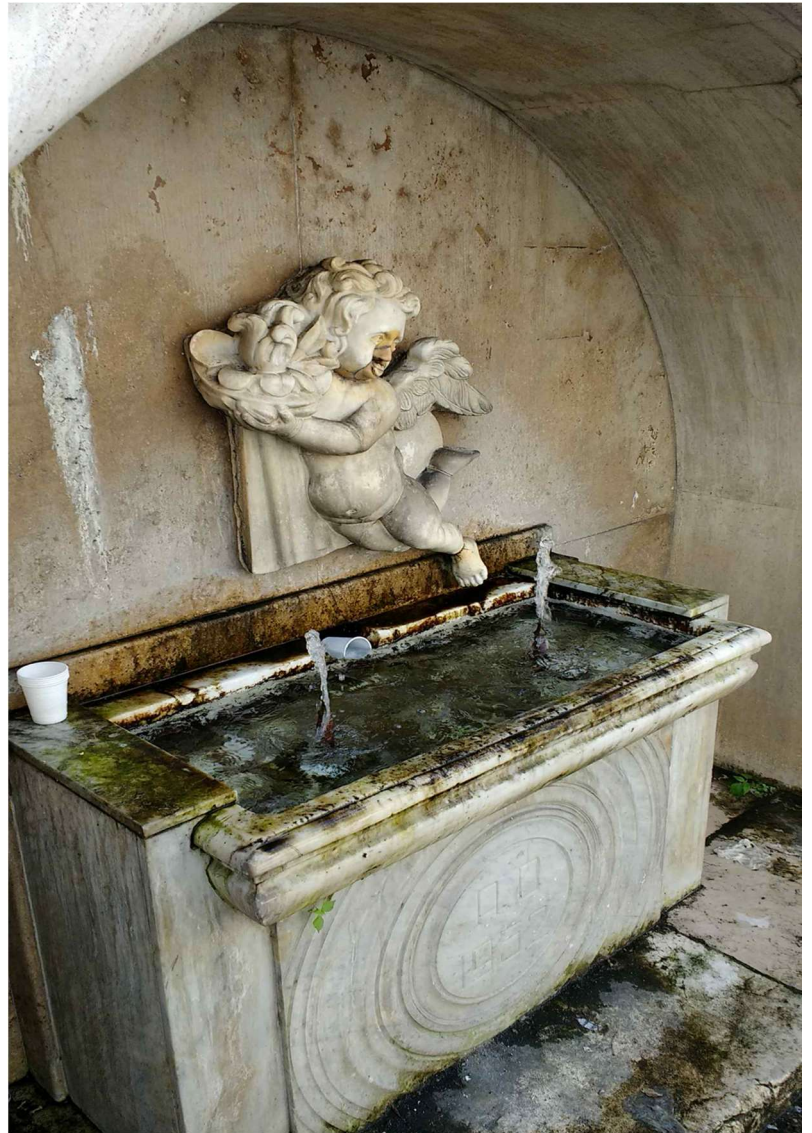
pylon that used to carry electricity from the mainland to Messina.
Electricity now flows through an undersea cable but the pylons have been saved as a National monument and can be visited and climbed for the view..

Onwards through Scilla (sic) which is the origin of half of the myth of Scylla and Charybdis where I caught up with the little tourist train that seems omnipresent in seaside resorts, but he soon outpaced me up the hill



and had disappeared when I reached the crest and coasted down the other side.

My goal was Bagnara Calabra where I had no option but to climb the substantial hill to Ceramida where I was staying the night: no option because the coast road disappears with steep cliffs barring its way and takes a winding but well paved path up the hill. Rita had led me to believe that this would hit 12% in places so I was not entirely looking forward to the six journey but, in the event, although she now claims 17.6% in one place, I find that hard to believe as the climb, although long, was fairly gentle, not really exceeding 8% and much less for most of the time. I can only imagine that the reading was taken for a moment on the inside of one of the many hairpins. Anyway the main joyful discovery was the many fountains alongside the road and I was able to re-fill my bidons and have a good drink at the second one that I passed. I'm hoping that I shall find more tomorrow when I make my way across the hinterland of Calabria.



The views from the hill are spectacular, looking across the Strait and down



to Bagnara below.

Unfortunately the views are blocked by bamboo and trees further up so photographs were not so effective. But here's one that shows the amount of detritus, especially plastic bottles, that litter Italian roads.



I finally crested the hill and had a mile or so to go to my stopping place, the Antico Carro. When I arrived just before 1600hrs there was no one about. I was able to walk into the building and could have helped myself to drinks but I resisted the urge and sat outside for 15 minutes or so when the staff turned up and I was able, by sign language and some poor Italian on my part to book in and was shown to a substantial room on the first floor whilst my bike is staying overnight in a large function room in the basement. The building is huge and has a large restaurant and bar so I guess it must do



good trade in the summer months. I washed my kit and put it out on the balcony to dry

overnight, put everything on charge, had a shower, emptied my panniers and then refilled them with a little bit more order than this morning and settled down to write the blog. That's it for tonight: I'll tell you about my night in tomorrow's episode but my stomach, at 1930hrs, is telling me that it needs filling, before a hard day climbing across the toe of Italy tomorrow.

Day 2 – Disaster

What started as a good day, as yesterday easier than I anticipated, ended in disaster when my phone slipped out of the handlebar bag where I thought it was securely wedged and disappeared. I only realised when I was aware that Rita had not been giving me directions for a while. I tried to retrace my journey back to where I thought I had last heard her speak, but to no avail. As I was about 7 miles from the end of the journey I kept going and after a lot of faffing about trying to report it to the Carabinieri who weren't terribly interested, I went into the Vodaphone shop and bought a replacement with a one month Sim card that should see me through until I get home. Unfortunately all the photos I took today have gone with the phone so you'll have to take my word that the scenery was lovely, spectacular in places and I'm very glad that I decided to cycle over the top of the toe instead of around it.

Well I'm glad that I got the blog done before supper last night because at about 2100 we lost internet access. I went downstairs at about 2000 to find a deserted dining room, sat down at a table and ordered a large beer. The young waiter spoke no English and had trouble understanding my little Italian but a menu and a bottle of water was produced with the beer. By this time one other man had appeared and was followed over the next 30 minutes or so by 6 others. I would guess that they are Contractors working away from home. Of much greater interest was the three generations of Calabrian family, about 20 strong, that appeared from about 2030 onwards. I would guess Nonno and Nonna were octogenarians and the youngest child was about 3. Whether this an Italian or Calabrian way of doing things, I know not, but all the men down to, I would guess, a 10 year old boy sat at one end of a long rectangular table whilst all the women, including Nonna and children sat at the other..



I dined royally on a large and tasty plate of linguine with stockfish and tomatoes followed by a well cooked mixed grill and game chips. I was given, unasked for, a large plate of flat bread to get on with whilst waiting for the primi: there was more than enough of everything but I managed to squeeze in an almond and fig semifreddo to finish. Nothing fancy but simple well cooked food: I liked it.

The bed was not particularly comfortable but everything was clean and tidy.. There was a heavy storm whilst I was writing the blog last evening and another one during the night. Unfortunately this led to a lot of noise as the water dripped onto a metal roof and kept me awake after the party had ended downstairs at about 1130. There was no sound proofing and every noise carried through the building so my night was fairly sleepless.

When I came down for breakfast at 0800 there was nobody around and I had to wait about 20 minutes before finding the same young lady who had booked me in the night before. A typical sweet Italian breakfast was produced in dribs and drabs and I was finally ready to leave at about 0905: however when I asked for the bill it was considerably more than I understood had been agreed. In the end we settled for 65 euros against the 50 euros mezza pensione that I thought had been the agreement. Anyway it was still reasonable value for the meal and drinks so I don't feel especially aggrieved and was away at about 0913.

There was a short climb up to the crest of the hill and then a long run down to Palmi and Gioia Tauro where I met a bit of traffic before taking to some rough roads through the citrus orchards, emerging just south of Rosarno in a ghost industrial area with excellent roads and little or no industry.

Probably most of the EU money for the project ended up in the pockets of the N'Drangetha, the Calabrian criminal empire who are responsible for most of the drugs that come into Europe from the Americas, much of it through the port of Gioia Tauro..

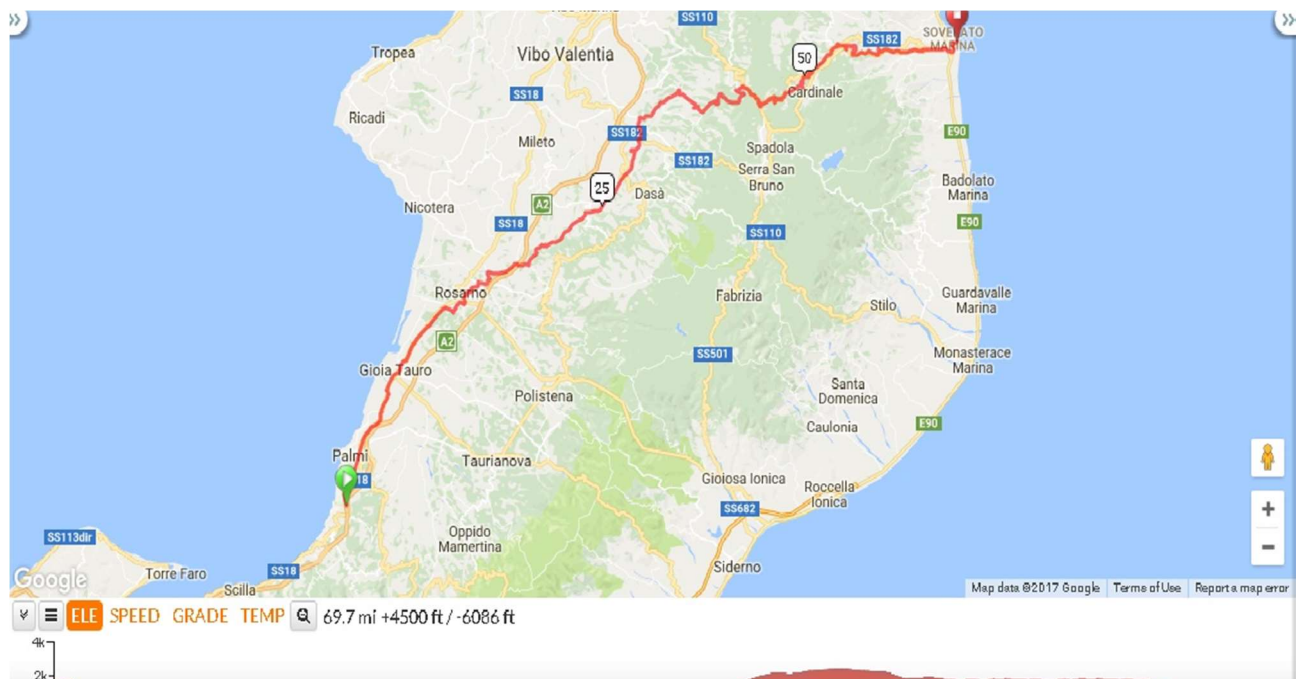
I was concerned that I was travelling through a lot of countryside with few

villages and that I might be short of water if the weather was particularly hot (which, in the event it wasn't) so I had sussed out a few drinking fountains through Google Street View. The first in Rosarno allowed me to fill my two bidons before carrying on into the hinterland. The next 20 or so miles was through river valleys, mostly cultivated with orchards of citrus and the odd herd of sheep, two herds of which I met coming towards me in the road. At about mile 30 the road steepened and I found myself into a 12% pitch. The view from the top was superb (you'll just have to take my word for it) and I continued towards Vazzano, my next water stop. Having refilled once more I decided not to stop for lunch but continued along a road that climbed steadily for the next four miles at a steady 6-7%: hard work and I stopped at the top to take pictures and get off the bike, stretch my legs and drink some water. Then it was along a ridge and down a steep pitch which had a very poor surface to the extent that they had dumped soil either side of the carriageway to slow the traffic. Up again until, finally I reached the top at about mile 44.

The road then descended steeply: I took a wrong turn and ended up on some rough roads down to Torre di Ruggiero where I got badly lost yet again: however one upside was that I found another fountain to refill the bottles. Having got back onto the right road I passed the corpse of a puppy that looked as though it had only just met its end, sad to see but southern Italy is full of dogs and inevitably some of them are run over.

On to Chiarevalle, between which and Argusto I lost the phone. I've already told you the sorry tale so suffice it to say that the long swoop down to my overnight stop at Soverato Marina was not as joyous as it should have been. I'm staying in a large but fairly basic hotel. The receptionist speaks little English so explaining the lost phone was only possible with Google translate on this laptop. She was very kind and pointed me at the Carabinieri and told me where to look for a mobile phone store so an hour or so later I had my replacement. I'll return to the police station in the morning and hope that they may have some news but I'm not hopeful. Tomorrow is just over 70 miles but fairly flat so 6 hours should see me there. Even if I don't leave until midday I should still get there comfortably in the light even with a lunch stop so I can exhaust all possibilities before the onward journey. It's tedious and slightly alarming that there is no security on the phone and maybe it will teach me to use a password in future. The Sim card has been cancelled but anyone can pick it up and see and use everything on it. I'm hoping that the IMEI number is at Home Farm, in which case we can kill

the phone and that will be the end of it.



Day 3 – Along the Instep

I've just ended a rather tedious day with a brilliant meal in the restaurant of the Hotel Melissa where I am staying for the night.

My day started with a good breakfast at Hotel Gli Ulivi which, I think, translates as the Olives, where I stayed last night in Soverato Marina. The

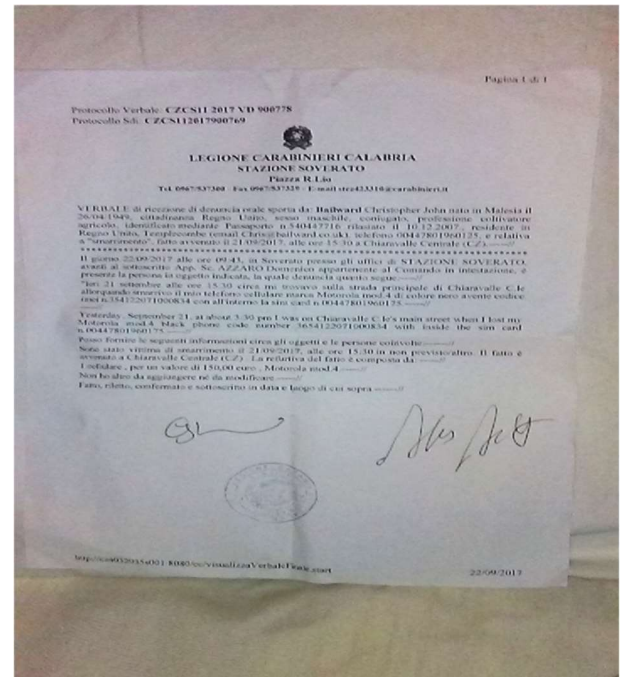
hotel caters for German guests; ham, cheese and eggs are on offer along with the usual Italian fare so I made the most of it and filled up for the day.

Unfortunately the bed was small and uncomfortable so I didn't get much sleep, possibly because my mind was still full of the loss of my phone, and my stupidity in leaving it in such a place that it could fall out. Anyway, enough said: it's been replaced albeit with a rather poor alternative, especially in the photo department. Quality of future pictures will not be good.

I returned to the Carabinieri with the IMEI number of my phone that Rob had found for me and met my English speaking contact from the night before. He passed me over to another English speaker who tortuously completed a form with the aid of the Desk Sergeant and, after an hour or so I was able to leave with a copy to pass to the insurance company.

I still did not, apparently, have a phone signal so I returned to the Vodaphone shop who pushed a few buttons and got it working to the extent that I was able to ring Kate to check that all was in order and then Rob so that he now has the number.

With all this kerfuffle I wasn't able to leave until 1056 and wasn't feeling



much like cycling 70 miles in the high 20's C. Soverato was full of a street



market both in the middle of town and on the sea front, where I made my way to avoid the main road as far as possible..

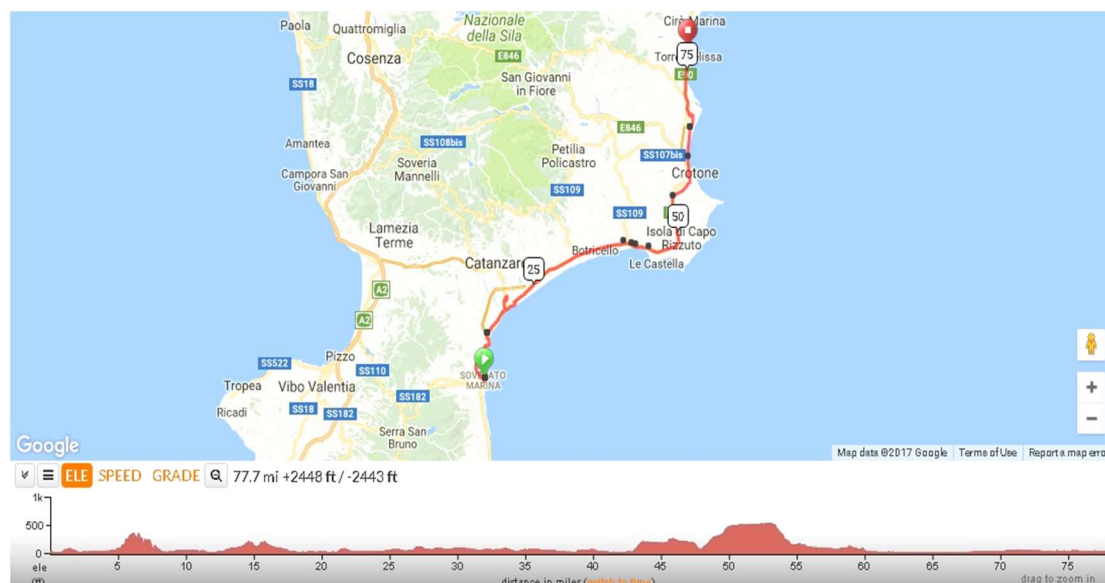
The initial couple of miles was along a cycle path on the front and was very pleasant but that soon ran out and I found myself on a narrow, busy road with impatient drivers: however the traffic dispersed onto the main SS106 which I was to follow most of the day and I was able to make a bit of headway on quieter roads until I had to join the main carriageway when the coast road ran into cliffs and headlands. It wasn't as bad as I feared because there is a wide hard shoulder that acts as a cycle lane and I didn't feel at all threatened until I came to a tunnel when I just put my head down and went for it, fortunately, without problem.

I was feeling tired and the heat was getting to me so the day was a grind, not helped by Gary Garmin refusing to record the journey properly after the first 24.5 miles. Fortunately Rita, in her new home in the LG phone behaved impeccably and I have a proper record of the journey. A mere 12 miles into the journey I failed to hear a cue and went badly wrong, going about 6 miles out of my way uphill. I had to retrace my steps until I found myself back on the coast and a nice bike path along the prom. It was hot and I was thirsty but couldn't find any working fountains so pushed on until I stopped, at lunchtime, and bought 2 litres of cold water for 1 euro – bliss. I had a drink, filled the bidons and still had a bit left that I bungeed to the rack for later. The SS106/ E90 follows the coast until it heads due north, uphill past Isola di Capo Rizzuto and then Crotone airport which seemed

almost deserted.

I was having to work hard to get up the hill, not especially steep but with the heat I was feeling the pain. Eventually it started to go downhill and steepened quite dramatically to the extent that I, on the hard shoulder, was able to keep up with a truck doing about 40 miles an hour alongside me – great fun. I turned off the main road to take a short cut through Crotona, one of the least appealing places I have been to. Full of high rise buildings and dirty industry it sprawls along the coast with a liberal covering of waste.

Once out of town I followed an extraordinary road for the best part of ten miles. Via Leonardo da Vinci morphs into the Via della Conciglie and then becomes the Via del Delfini. It is almost straight and runs through horticultural crop land with few buildings. Apart from to provide me with a good road away from the SS106 it is hard to see why it exists in such good condition – I was most grateful as, by now, 60 miles into the journey, I was



knackered. I eventually re-joined the SS106, still with a good hard shoulder, for the final 8 miles of the trip and I have never been more pleased to arrive!

Having put everything on charge, washed my kit and myself, I lay down for a couple of hours before going down for the excellent meal I referred to at the beginning. Probably the best seafood salad I have ever had, a seafood linguine full of crustacea and a spicy pizza washed down with beer and local wine recovered my spirits and left me feeling almost too full.

The bed seems comfortable and now that the shouting 10 year olds have

been sent to bed, all is peaceful. I'm looking forward to a good night's rest.

Day 4 – Follow the coast

The day dawned bright and sunny and I hoped it would not be quite so enervating as yesterday. As I only had about 70 miles to go, almost completely flat I thought I would leave at about 10 am. This coast is obviously well loved by Germans. Both the hotel in Soverato and Hotel Melissa where I was staying had German speaking staff and most did not speak English. I had a good breakfast, ham and salami on offer as well as the usual Italian cakes and biscuits, so I stoked up for the day, and very good it was too. I had a wander around the hotel after breakfast. It is on the edge of the main town and not much to see but the sea and, looking up the hill, a wind farm.

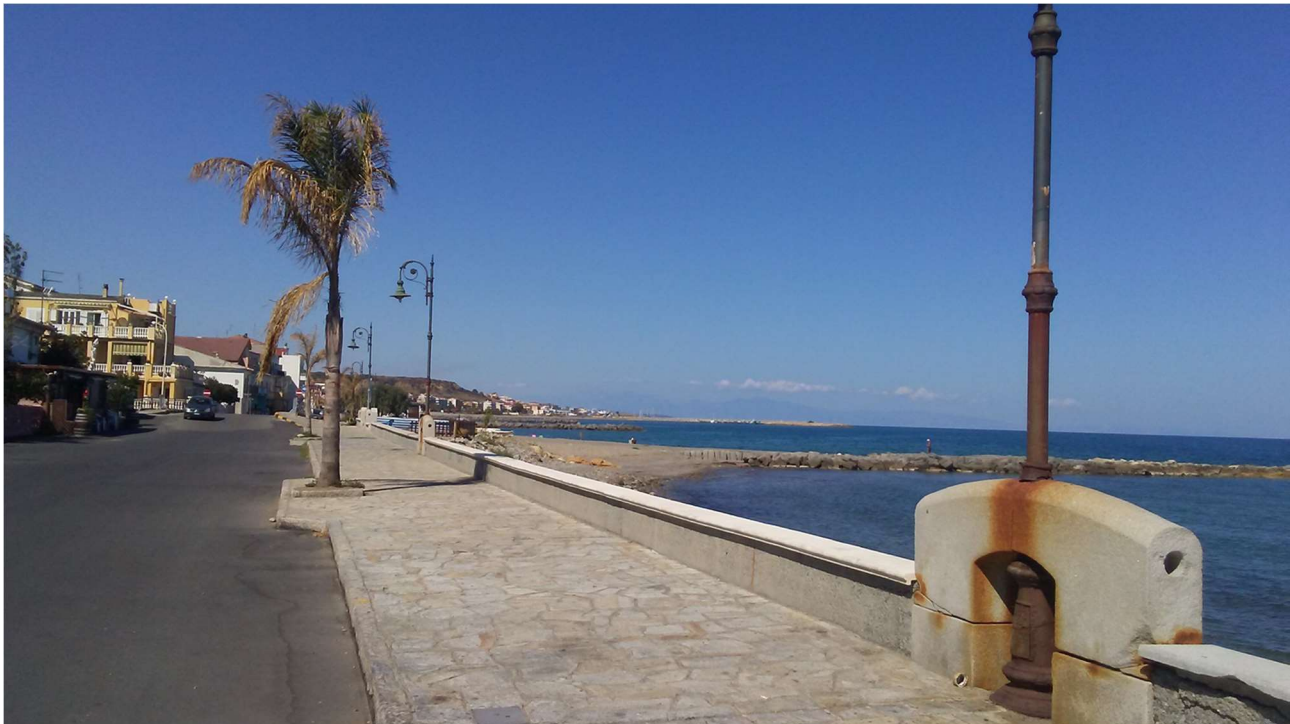


I went to pay the bill and proffered my Halifax card that had been working perfectly but it was twice refused so I ended up paying cash, 76 euros for

B&B and the superb dinner I had last night. I thought pretty good value, although the bed had a broken slat so I ended up sleeping across it.

Because of the card refusal I thought I had better ring Halifax to make sure that it wouldn't happen again. After going through all the security questions the young lady said they had no record of any transactions that had been made that morning so she could only assume that the fault was with the card machine in the hotel. Hopefully there won't be any more issues.

As a result I set off at 1006 and made my way more or less straight back onto the SS106 Jonica on which I had spent a lot of yesterday and will continue tomorrow. When this is wide, with a good hard shoulder it is a doddle but every now and then it narrows and then it can be quite taxing. Fortunately for most of today it has been the former and, being a Saturday, there is probably less heavy traffic anyway. The most frightening vehicles are the lorry with a trailer on the back who sometimes cut in too soon. However the worst incident happened when a car pulled out of a side road on the left



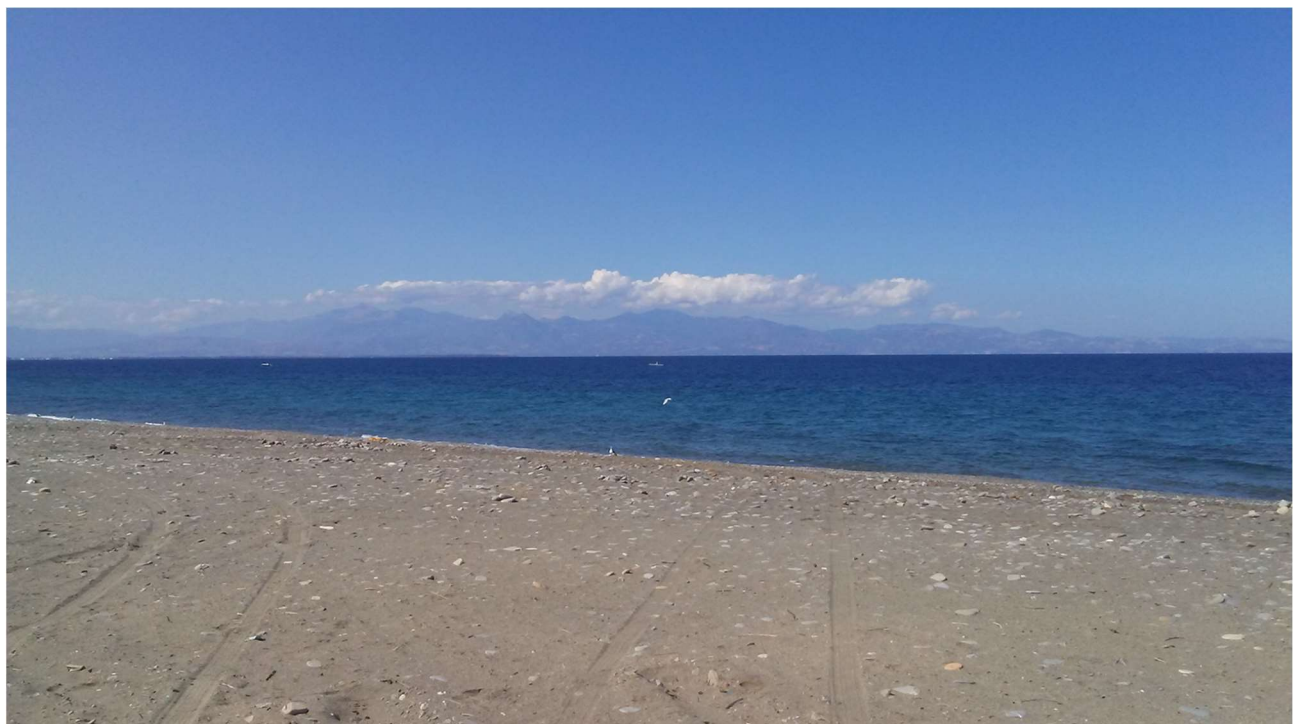
straight across in front of me, giving me a hell of a fright. After about 15 miles I left the main road and made for Cariati Marina, it was no further and I thought a view of the sea would be pleasant. As with all seaside resorts in Italy in late September there is almost no one around and I had a pleasant ride along the promenade, the wrong way along a one way street. I continued on past the boat yard where the fishing fleet was getting on

overhaul and came across this rather sad sight

I kept going as I thought I could get back onto the SS106 but eventually ended up with a stream to cross so had to retrace my steps before crossing the railway and returning to the main road. Because I spend all the time on



the hard shoulder where all the rubbish, including broken glass ends up, it was almost inevitable that I would get a puncture and sure enough after about 30 miles the back tyre went flat in a really awkward place where the road was crossing a bridge so I had very little space to work in. However it worked to my advantage in that the Armco barrier proved an excellent rest



for the wheel whilst I put in a new tube. After that I thought it best to stick on the SS106 which had, once again, broadened to include a hard shoulder. As time was getting on I pulled into a filling station for a bottle of water and ham roll to keep me going: not the nicest lunchtime view but the break did me good.

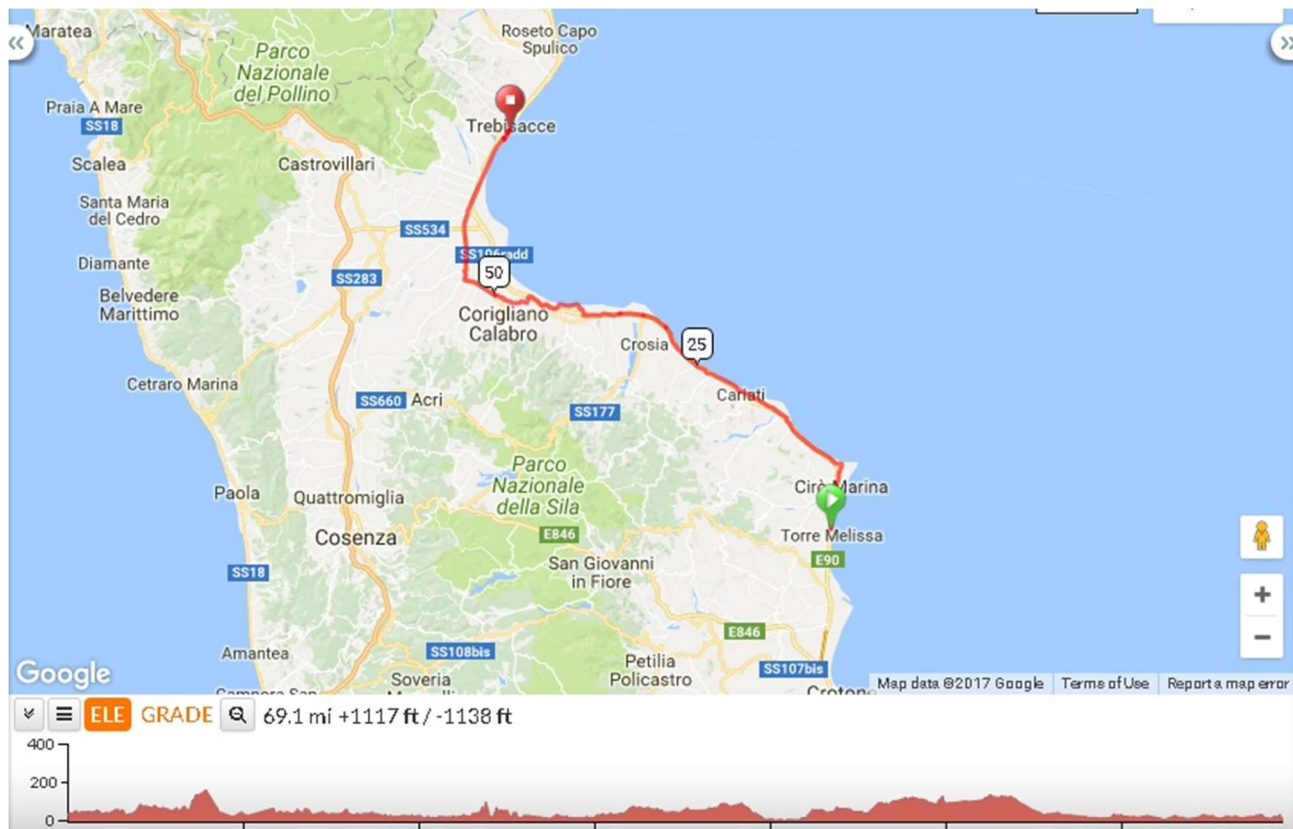
Onwards along the SS106 Jonica and then another little detour to the sea at



Lido Saint Angelo where I looked across the Gulf at the mountains of Basilicata that I would start to climb tomorrow as I make my way across the instep to the east Coast..

Back to the main road which I left for the final 10 miles through Villapiana and its Marina and to my hotel in Trebisacce. I tried to get in but the door was locked but as it was only about 4.30 I sat down and waited. Shortly a lady, who had obviously heard the door rattle came out and asked me my business. She spoke only Italian but I tried my best “Vorrei fare il check-in”. She was unimpressed and gabbled away, giving me the feeling that I was not expected and there was no room in the Inn. However I got my phone out and showed her the Booking.com reservation, after which she made a phone call to the owner and I was given the key to Room 105. I did the usual offices and came downstairs to do some work on the bike. When I had the puncture I noticed that the rear tyre was quite badly worn so I thought that I would swap the tyres over, which I duly did before the owner returned with wife and son from their day out. It's also apparent that the back wheel is becoming a bit twisted. I hope it doesn't get any worse but I may try to find a bike shop and get them to straighten it. I have a bit of spare time in

Matera on Monday morning so that may be a good opportunity.



Day 5 – Into the boondocks

I set out to cycle 70.9 miles according to my planned route and ended up cycling an extra 7, and I'm still not quite sure how. There were a few wrong turns and detours but I'm surprised that they add up that much.

I was the only resident in the hotel last night. The room was air-conditioned and there was a south facing balcony with a lovely sea view, which dried my clothes beautifully

overnight. The bed, although a single, was firm but comfortable and I had



the best

night's sleep since I have been on the road. Little to complain about except the welcome

or, rather, lack of it. The same old crone was on breakfast duty and there was the usual Italian choice plus yoghurt and cornflakes so I did OK. The bill was 50 euros as agreed, but a trifle more expensive than it should have been. As the restaurant at the hotel was closed I wandered down the street about 100metres and there was a choice. I plumped for the one that offered fish specialities and was immediately ushered to a table outside. There were several diners and more appeared later. I ordered their Seafood Fantasy as aperitivo and a fritto misto di Pesce as Secondi, skipping the Primi that almost did for me last night. The first was excellent though not as good as the one the night before, but the fritto misto was as good as any I have eaten: lots of different fish and crustacea dipped in a light batter and fried to perfection. A decent plate of chips, a large beer and fizzy water gave a bill of 36.50 euros which was quite acceptable.

I set off at 0931 in overcast conditions with a forecast of rain from 1100. I went all the way down the prom and joined the minor road that I arrived by last night, virtually traffic free and no maniac drivers. I had to join the SS106 to get across a river, narrow and twisty but at one point I had this view across to Taranto.



I carried on, dropping back off the main road to go through Amendolara and Borgata Marina, both of which I had researched hard beforehand as possibilities for the overnight stop.

Eventually the E90 disappeared into a tunnel and I forked right through Montegiordano. Coming out of the town I was passed by a MAMIL who asked me in broken English where I was heading. Our conversation was short and he soon outpaced me, followed a minute or so later by a couple of mates in the same club jersey. At this point the SS106 became a dual carriageway but the former road runs parallel and provides a great route for cyclists. Quite how they managed to build a complete dual carriageway between the old road and the railway either demonstrates great luck or prescience by former road planners.

At Novo Siri I left Calabria and entered Basilicata but shortly after that the



E90 becomes

a dual carriageway that is, theoretically, forbidden to cyclists: however I was damned if I could find a way of making my way without going on it, so following a Sunday morning peleton, I took to the hard shoulder.

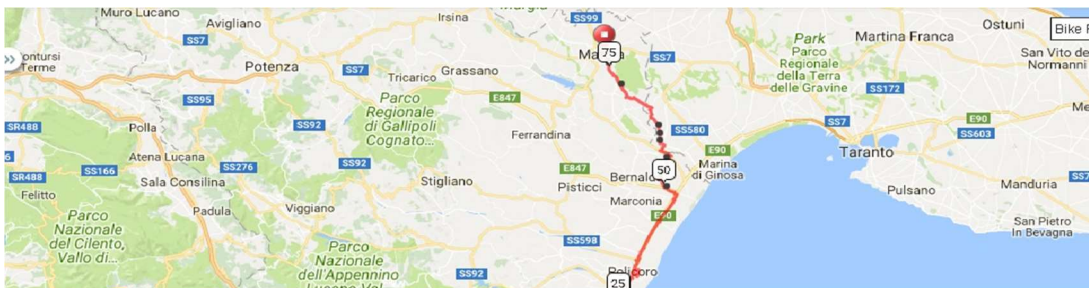
Unfortunately I stayed on longer than necessary and ended up doing the best part of 5 miles before I could get off. Even then I failed to find a way forward and ended up lifting my bike over the Armco and back onto the motorway.

Eventually I stopped for a snack and a bottle of water at a Q8 filling station before finally leaving the wretched SS 106 behind for the last time. Then the



fun really began. I knew from my planning that I would have to go across country but could not see enough from Google street-view to be sure that my route was passable. The gravel bike came into its own as I made my way across an unpaved surface and took to the boondocks. The road became worse and worse until I was faced with a river that passed under the railway and a dual carriageway. The only way forward was to put the bike in the river and scrabble along a concrete embankment, occasionally having to put my foot in the mud to steady the ship. It was a nasty moment but I made it through accompanied by lots of unidentified creatures plopping into the water in front of me.

My route took me along an unmade road that should have joined with tarmac in about 5 miles. However a couple of miles in to the journey the road had slipped into the river and I had to make a detour around a vineyard and through a sheep field to get back on track. I finally made it to the black top, but 55 miles into the journey I was faced with a further road closure that involved pushing the bike through a cultivated field for about 100 yards. Finally I was back on proper roads, albeit not great ones, past fields of horticulture and irrigated crops but they took me to my destination Matera, a world heritage site where I am staying tonight. I found my way to the B&B and made a couple of phone calls to contact Ivan, my host, to gain entry to a courtyard where I could leave the bike and up some steps to one of the most spectacular views you could wish for. This is the view from the window of the room in which I am staying. A picture says a thousand words. Tomorrow I have about 60 miles to travel so will spend some time wandering around Matera before I leave at about midday.



Day 6 – Back to the Bible



Ivan is a charming 25 year old who has spent time working in a restaurant in London so his English is OK. He now manages 6 apartments in a large building in the Sassi di Matera and does it very well. He saw me into my accommodation which is a huge room up a couple of flights of stairs and provided me with some choc rolls and fruit juice for snacks. He said that he would bring breakfast to the room at 0800 and he would tell me what to see in Matera.

I duly settled down to the blog and at about 830pm went out in search of food. Matera was heaving with *La Passeggiata*, although probably less so than it would have been a month ago. There are restaurants at every turn but I thought that I would look off the main drag in search of best value. In the end I plumped for Il Pettolino and was welcomed in by a personable waiter who didn't quite pick my nationality but provided an English menu when asked. A large glass of Moretti alla spina quenched the thirst and I then went onto the house red which was a very pleasant Primitivo grape from Apulia. The menu was quite limited but my pasta with mushrooms and tomato was perfectly cooked and served in a pan and I followed it up with a peasant's sausage served on a piece of toast with oven cooked potatoes – again excellent. I decided to skip pudding in favour of gelato on the way home and Kate will be disgusted at my choice of zuppa inglese and limone but I enjoyed it..

This morning I woke at about 7 after a good night's sleep in a comfortable bed and started my packing. Ivan turned up with focaccio and a cornetto and brewed me a coffee and I told him my plan to spend the morning in Matera and leave about midday. I then asked if he knew of a bike shop who might take a look at my rear wheel which is out of true and he was immediately on the case. We removed the wheel and he drove me about 10 minutes to the suburbs of Matera where Domenico of Bici Sport was fettling the front basket of an electric bike and said he would be about ten minutes. Ivan went off in search of coffee while I stayed and, true to his word, Domenico put the wheel on the jig and trued it from side to side: however it has a bad flat spot that he could not cure so I shall be left with a

bump bump bump for the rest of the trip unless I buy a new wheel. He wouldn't accept any payment but wished me good luck. If you're ever in need of a bike shop in Matera, look no further.



We were back at the Duomo by about 1030 and I put the bike back together before settling the bill with Ivan – an incredibly reasonable 46 euros given the amount that he had done for me. I then went off for a lightning tour around the Sassi on my own.

The Sassi di Matera are two areas of Matera that have been the home to cave-dwellers for nearly 10,000 years. Post war the Government, ashamed of the abject poverty and mosquito ridden slums, relocated most the then inhabitants to new middle-rise dwellings in the growing city (shades of the Gorbals and Anfield) and left the caves to dereliction.

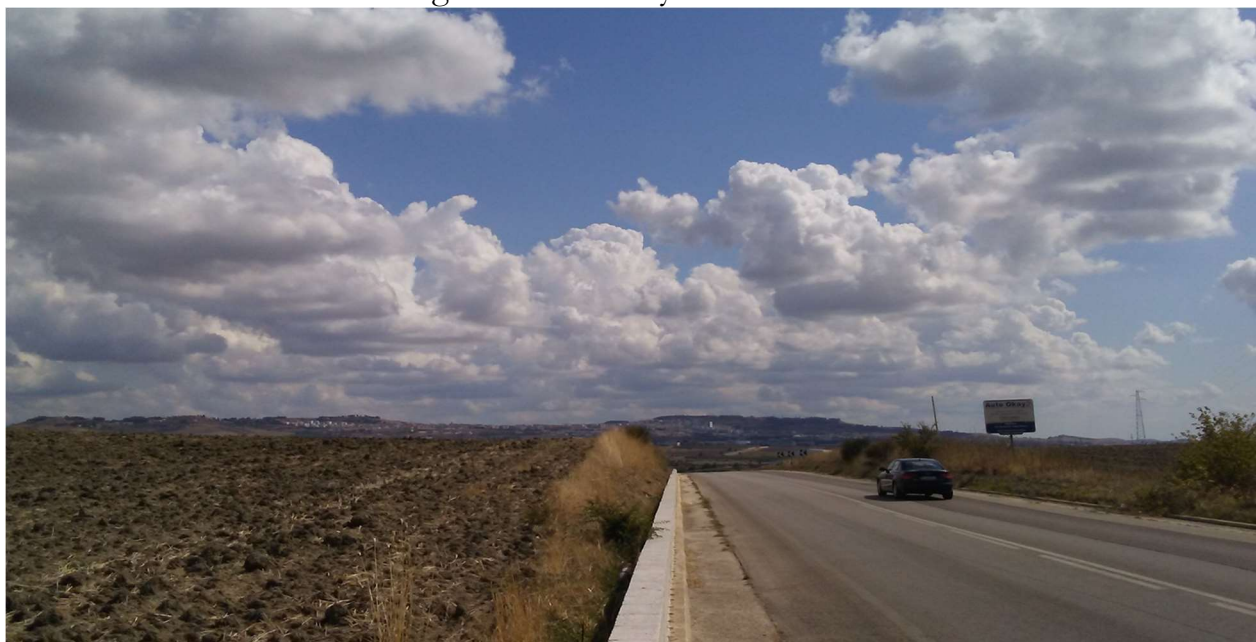
However the local authorities, in the 1980's, recognised that there was great tourism potential in developing the trogloditic areas and with European funding and UNESCO heritage status have turned Matera into one of the must see attractions of Southern Italy. The cave dwellings have been turned into bars, restaurants and accommodation for tourists and many films have been shot here, taking advantage of the perceived resemblance to Judea in the early part of the first century. AD.



The crowds attest to the success of the experiment and it is, indeed, a fascinating place, well worth a visit for a day or two. I didn't have enough time to do it justice but would highly recommend a visit if you haven't been here. There are several churches full of early frescoes and some of the cave dwellings have been opened up to the public.

It was now approaching the witching hour of 12 pm and I needed to be on my way if I hoped to arrive in Lavello by 5pm. The other salient point is that thunderstorms were forecast from the early afternoon and I didn't especially want to be caught out in them, although my waterproof jacket is very effective.

I went back to the B&B and Ivan let me in to get changed and load up the bike. I left the Duomo at 1148 and made my way out of the city, getting slightly lost on the way. My first big mistake was to try to cut a corner of the main road which landed me on a steep cobbled surface but I was soon back on the main road looking back at the city on the hill



I wound between the Regions of Basilicata and Apulia all day: Lavello, my stop for the night is in Basilicata but I will enter Apulia again tomorrow and not return.

The journey today has been quite tiring. Although I have only travelled 58 miles the first half of the trek involved a lot of climbing. The roads were almost completely deserted helped by the fact that many of them were said to be closed to all traffic “eccetto frontisti”. I'm still uncertain what this means but take it to allow Rule #5 cyclists: indeed there seemed little reason for the roads to be closed. In places the surface had given way but not greatly different from a lot of minor roads in the UK. The soils looked fertile and there were tractors ploughing. I imagine that this is good corn growing country, large fields and granaries dotted over the landscape. The other thing that grows in abundance is wind turbines: I was never out of sight of them all day and the significant head wind that I suffered was testament to their presence.

The other thing that caught my attention, and has done throughout my travels, but most especially today, is the number of partly built and uninhabited houses that litter the countryside. Why would you start to build



seven houses in the middle of nowhere?

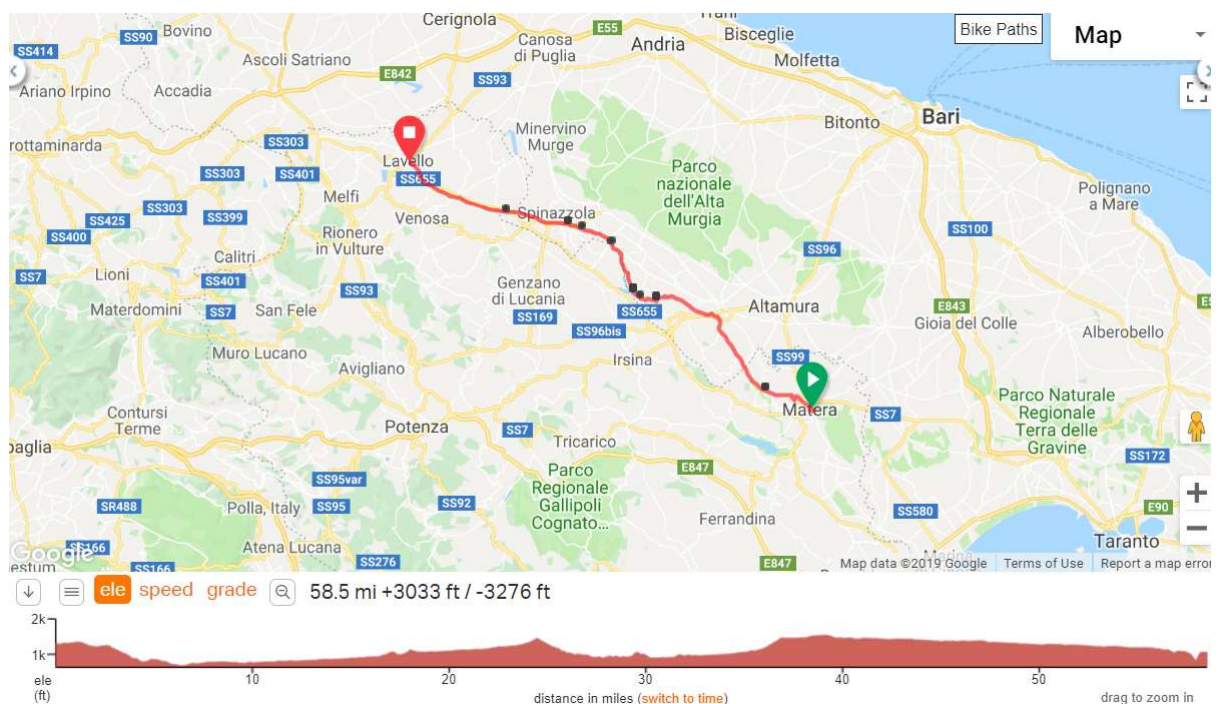
37 miles into the journey I was on top of a plateau: the road was arrow straight and followed the main autostrada so, once again, no traffic. I could



see a storm brewing on

my left and hoped that I would make Lavello before it hit me.. In the event I just about made it, although I did get hit by spits and spots.

The worst was saved until last. I had plotted a route that brought me into Lavello up a 20%+ slope on cobbles. Coupled with the rain I decided to Get



Off And Push, so the final half mile was pretty excruciating. Anyway I made it to the Hotel just before 5pm and half an hour later the heavens opened: I was fortunate.



Day 7 – Pursued by dogs

The Albergo Italia in Lavello is a working-man's hotel. Totally unpretentious it does a good night's sleep and a meal for 45 euros. I pitched up and was greeted and shown to my room on the first floor. The manager said that he would put my bike in the garage. The room overlooked the street and had a balcony so I set to and did my washing and hung it out. At that point the heavens opened so it never dried properly and I was forced to pack it damp this morning. Having done all my usual chores I looked over the balcony and my bike was still out in the street so I went down to give them a rocket. I'm not sure of the relationship between the

3 “managers” that I met but they could have been brothers 40-50 years old and the one I met next seemed to be the dominant party who immediately took me around to the garage which was at the back of the hotel down a very steep slope. Bike secured, I ascertained that dinner was at any time up to 10pm and so I went back upstairs and started blogging. I came down at about 830 and the restaurant/bar was crowded with blokes. During my stay I saw, very briefly in the bar, only one female, young and gorgeous, and possibly a daughter of the house. Otherwise dinner was cooked and served by the “brothers” and all the residents were male. There was no menu but a choice was offered and I plumped for a penne pasta in tomato and cheese sauce which was excellent, followed by a succulent grilled pork chop and green salad and finished with a not very good slice of strawberry tart. A pint of Peroni and 50cl of extremely tasty vino rosso locale completed the meal: good tasty home cooking.

The single bed was comfortable and, having put the blog to bed, I followed soon after. Breakfast this morning was a bit lacking; a custard doughnut and a raspberry cornetto with a cup of cappuchino was all that was offered but, I suppose, for 30 euros B&B and 15 extra for the meal I could have no complaint.

I set off at 0846 knowing that I had a difficult day ahead. Apart from the journey back from Portsmouth to Horsington this is the longest mileage of

the trip, coupled with quite a lot of climbing at the beginning and the end. I thought I could probably do it in about 7 hours but, in the event the total journey was almost 9 hours with quite extensive stops for photographs, water and lunch.

Lavallo is, as I said last night, on top of a hill so the first thing that I did was to come screaming down into a valley. I'm not sure what I was thinking when I planned the route but Rita soon told me to turn down a rough track which became narrower until it finished in an orchard. A pack of dogs gave voice and chased me away from their territory but they were fairly half-hearted and I found myself looking down a set of steps at a bridge across a ravine. I couldn't see an alternative so across I



went. On the other side the track disappeared completely and I wheeled the bike until I could remount and ride across the field. Eventually a track appeared and took me onto a tarmac road which wound its way along the Ofanto river valley and then steepened for about two miles to take me up the hill and over the other side. It was a substantial climb and had me panting before I crested the hill, passed by an oil delivery tanker on the way

Today was a day of windmills: Don Quixote would have given fight to



hundreds of them. At no point during the day was I out of sight of turbines. I don't mind them; there is something majestic and stately about them, although I wouldn't want to live underneath one. Clearly the landowners of Apulia have taken to them in a big way and, I dare say, Italy is now being substantially powered by green energy. I followed a couple of tractors down a road and they turned right down a rough track. Rita asked me to follow and the track deteriorated until I was faced with a clump of *Miscanthus* and instructions to proceed.

After about 25 miles, at snail's pace because of the rough tracks I was taking, I emerged onto a central plain. Substantial big agriculture, well mechanised, but, interestingly, a large number of black workers, possibly Somali or Eritrean, doing some mundane jobs such as collecting the tons of plastic pipe that is used for irrigation.

I was heading in the direction of Foggia but skirting around the edge on some very rough road surfaces. Occasionally they became gravel or dirt tracks but, for the most part they were heavily eroded tarmac. I came to a main road and stopped at a filling station for a veal and salad panini and a frighteningly expensive bottle of Fanta at 2.50 euros; however it hit the spot and gave me some energy for the second half of the trip

At this point life became interesting, if not downright scary. Every house in the middle of the country seems to possess a pack of dogs, a mixture of terrier types and alsatian cross retriever: most are simply noisy and contained, but there was a stretch of road from about mile 50 onwards that had three packs that were vicious. The first two lots chased me along the

road for a couple of hundred metres giving voice but the third actually made contact with my pannier. If the pannier hadn't been there, it might have been my leg. Anyway an unpleasant experience.

Having run the canine gauntlet I returned to small towns where the dogs are still noisy but locked behind gates. It is the vendemmia or grape harvest and there were trailers full of grapes being taken to presses. The smell of grape must is omni-present and piles of pomace are being put back on the ground to fertilise the following crops.

Through the town of Torremaggiore which has this brightly coloured



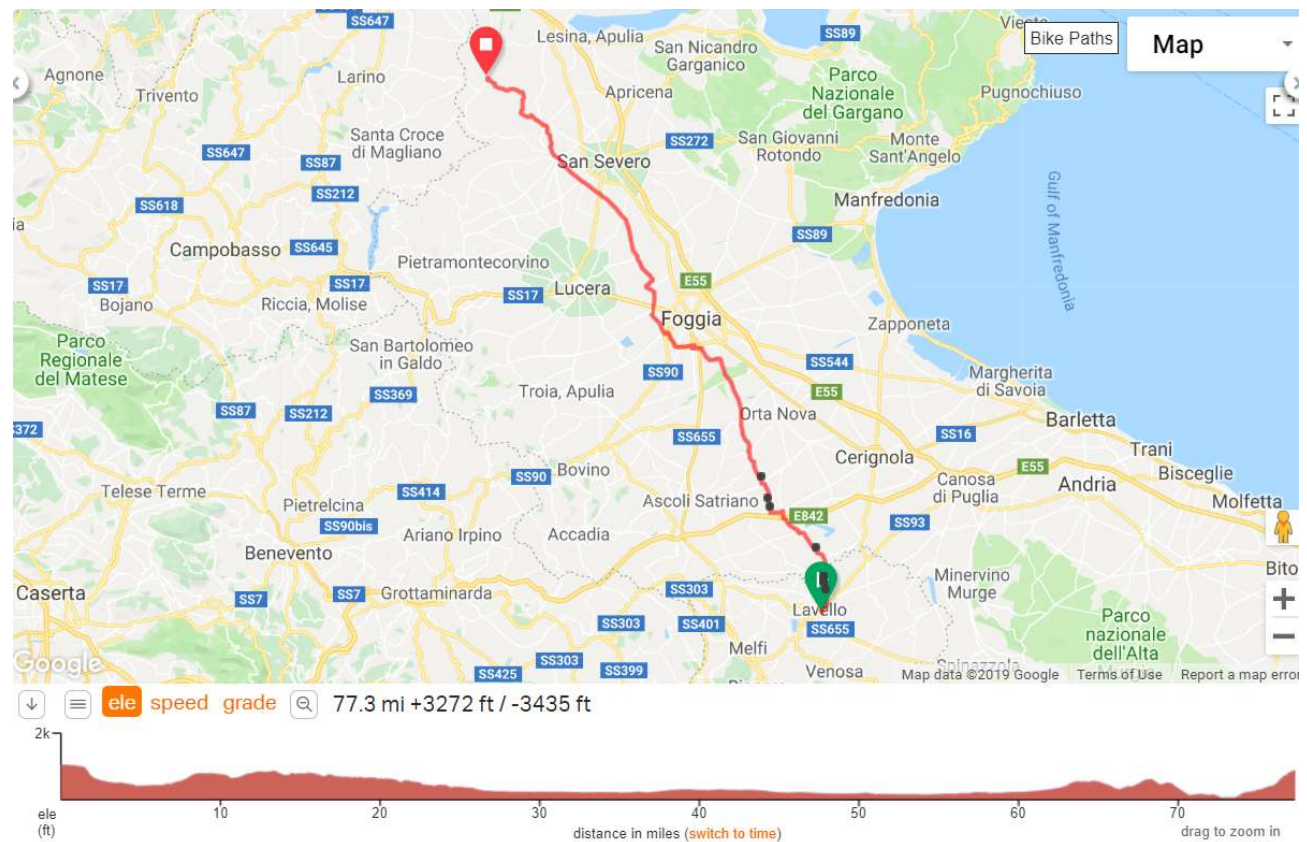
school of music in its centre and down a substantial hill to hit a large puddle of very sticky sandy mud which wrapped itself around my wheels and clogged the mudguards. I had to stop to try to clean it but was left with a dreadful scraping sound as I climbed the following hill. It remained with me through San Paolo di Civitate where I was able to fill my water bottles at the fountain in the centre. Finally after another 3 miles I stopped, removed the



front wheel and scraped off enough to get rid of the problem.

I was now only about 4 miles from my destination but I knew that it sits on top of a substantial hill. I gritted my teeth and finally made it to the Dimora

Fioriti where I am staying the night. It is an old building that has been refurbished to provide 3 apartments. Lots of room and cooking facilities if required. I shall head off and find someone else to cook me supper.



Day 8 – Mud

Last night I wandered down the main street and found a nice looking restaurant. There were a number of people hanging around outside but no-one eating at 830pm so I went in, was shown a table and asked whether I would like fish or meat. No menu was shown and not much choice was given but I decided on a seafood antipasti, some cold and some hot which turned up quite quickly and in good quantity.

At this point the restaurant started to fill with a bunch of 30 somethings who hung around waiting for something to happen. I was seated in a small alcove out of sight of the entrance and ended joined by 6 of them whilst others hid elsewhere. Eventually the birthday girl, for such was the surprise party, arrived and lots of kissing and auguris and compleannos were

expressed and I was left in peace. Pasta was spaghetti with assorted seafood, including clams and mussels and the main course was a beautifully cooked swordfish steak and salad. To finish I had a pannacotta covered in chocolate sauce. A very pleasant meal washed down with some tasty vino rosso locale.

I had some doubts about Dimori Fioriti when I booked it 4 months ago. I had not noticed when booking that they have a policy of charging on a sliding scale, for cancellation whenever it happens. Most of Booking.com B&Bs allow you to cancel at 24 hours notice without penalty: however I think this is a little unfair on the hotel and feel a week is reasonable for both parties. Anyway I decided to go through with the booking and was greeted by Mamma, shown the room and allowed to put my bike in the laundry room. It was noticeable that nothing in the way of food or drink was provided. Most places give you a bottle of water and some coffee and tea but here, nothing. The bathroom was up some steep steps that would have been a challenge for anyone less than able, assuming that they had climbed the steep stairs to the apartment in the first place. The shower was very small but had good hot water so I was able to wash off the dirt of the day and my clothes. Unfortunately the apartment was dimly lit and sunless so drying the clothes was a challenge. I had to pack some of them damp this morning in the hope that I can finish drying them tonight.

I was given a ticket to go to the Cafe Bar Sport just around the corner for breakfast: it was a paltry affair, one cup of coffee and a cornetto was all that was offered. I then had some problems paying for the accommodation. I proffered my card but the lady said only her son could deal with such a thing and wouldn't I rather pay cash? Well no..... I would wait for her son. I was in no great hurry, only having to travel about 60 miles, most of it downhill or flat and son eventually turned up so we did the business with the card so I could set off. I felt the whole atmosphere was a bit grasping and that 45 euros for the accommodation was plenty.

Serracapriola sits on top of a hill. It has a castle and a lot of old buildings so was, presumably, well fortified in the past. The main street is wide and straight and was filling up with local growers selling their vegetables as I left. I had a significant and steep



downhill run for the first mile or so but had to take it very easy because recent storms had washed large quantities of detritus all the way across the road, including empty but whole beer bottles. When I reached the bottom of the hill my heart sank. There was a foot of thick gloopy mud all the way across the road and no way of getting round it. I foolishly started peddling but soon gave up when everything clogged up. I ended up carrying the bike, getting filthy shoes and then taking both wheels off on the other side so that I could get the bike clean enough to ride. Another cyclist turned up on his way up the hill, and he too carried his nice light racing bike through the mess. Even a 4x4 that came down the hill slid around making its way through. Not a very good start to the day.

Having cleaned everything off, I was then faced with a bit of climbing up



and down on my way to the coast. My legs were heavy after yesterday and I wasn't travelling at all fast. However on the bright side there were no savage dogs and remarkably few of any sort. It is remarkable that I haven't seen a dead dog all day. On the southern coast they were as common as dead badgers in England but they are obviously better contained on the East Coast.

I met the windy Adriatic Sea at Campomarina. I shall follow this coast for the next couple of days before heading across the Po plain. The weather was a bit variable but pleasantly cool compared with some recent days. Again, no rain – how much longer can this go on? At times the sun came out and warmed me but I was battling a head wind all day so progress was

slow.

I stopped for lunch at Priscilla restaurant at San Salvo Marina. It was the only place, of many, open late season, on the long promenade and almost exactly half way through the journey. I was feeling lethargic and felt that a decent meal might help perk me up so I sat down and ordered a beer, black risotto and mozzarella and a grilled vegetable salad. It was, indeed, just what the doctor ordered and I peddled away after an hour or so feeling much better.



The SS16 Adriatica, like its southern coast cousin SS106 Jonica, has good and bad sections. Much of it has a wide hard shoulder but where it is squeezed between sea and cliffs it narrows sufficiently to feel the forceful draft of passing lorries. So I dodged on and off it, taking to some long promenade cycle tracks and another that started well and deteriorated to nothing, completely unkempt and overgrown with miscanthus. The cycle way at Vasto wound through housing areas before



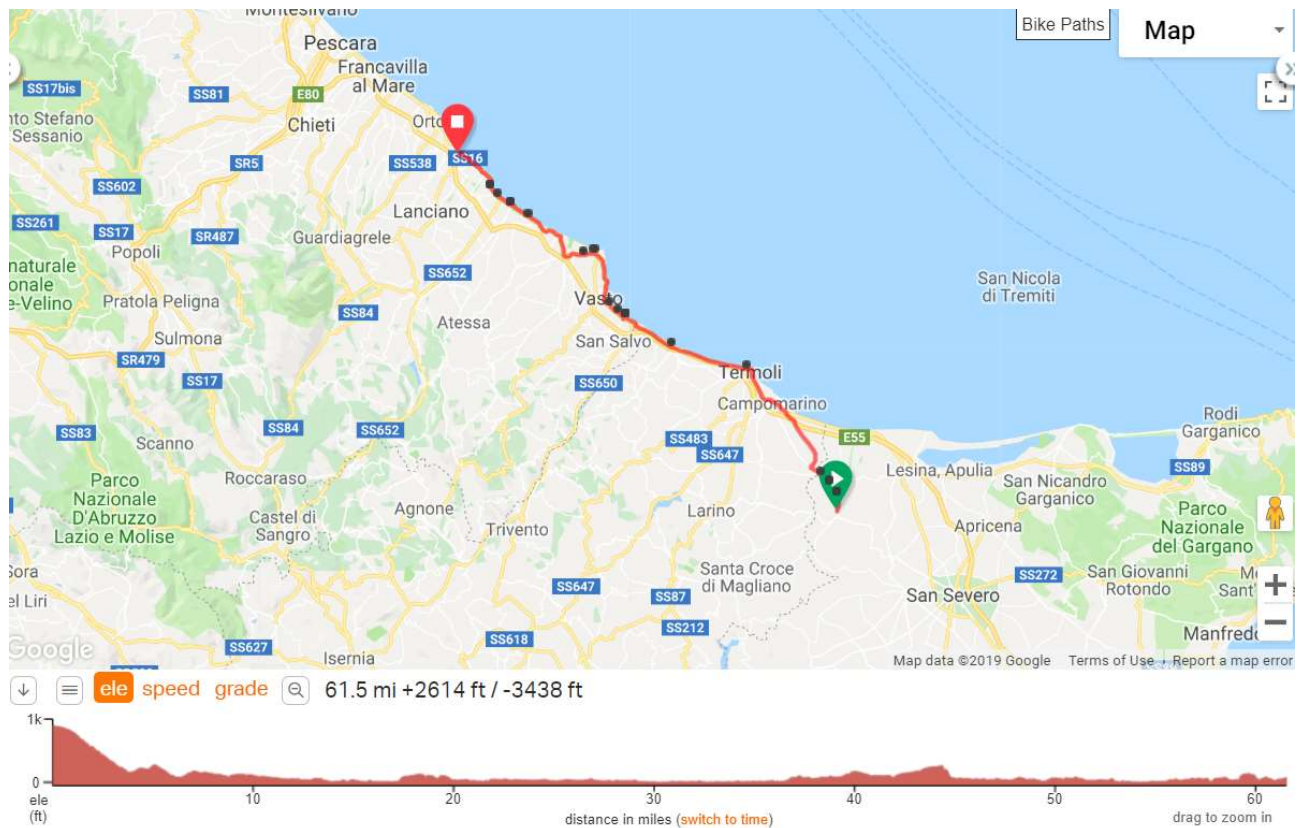
spitting me back onto the SS16. There is a plan to build an Adriatic Cycle Way for 1000km from the Po delta to Apulia but I shall be surprised if it ever happens looking at the state of some of the existing tracks.

At Vasto Porto, (surprise, surprise) I took a wrong turn and went on an unnecessary inland trip before realising my error and heading back towards the sea. I was now on the Costa dei Trabocchi, in the Abruzzi region, with its extraordinary eponymous fish traps that jut out into the ocean. I passed

several and took a not very good picture of this one at Fossacesia marina. There are two in San Vito marina where I am staying the night. I arrived at the Marina B&B at about 1700 after a gentle day in the saddle: I needed it



after yesterday. Unfortunately, although the B&B is actually a large apartment designed to sleep 6, there is no Wi-fi so the blog will have to await publication until tomorrow. If I can find a Wi-fi connection at lunchtime I shall do it then – otherwise it will have to wait until Valdaso, tomorrow evening



Day 9 – Oh I do like to roll along the prom prom prom

The owner of La Marina in San Vito lives in the building and lets out several apartments including the one in which I stayed through Booking.com. He was clearly an anxious sort and had been trying to get me on the phone to confirm my time of arrival. The phone may have been ringing in a gutter or someone else's pocket but it wasn't in my possession so he had contacted Booking to see if they could help. In response to their email I said my best guess of arrival was somewhere between 4 and 6 pm and I duly arrived at almost exactly 5. I rang the phone number and the owner opened the door and showed me round. The apartment is huge and the table in the sitting room was laid with large quantities of Italian pastries for breakfast. Coffee and tea were provided and the fridge contained milk, water and fruit juice: just about the opposite to the night before. Unfortunately the one thing it does not have is Wifi which put me in a bit of a pickle both for reporting in and publishing the blog. However the new phone has enough data capacity included to cope with the former and the blog would just have to wait. The one thing that concerns me in that situation is that the day's journey does not get recorded until there is a Wifi signal so I just have to hope that it does not get lost in the ether in the interim.

Having done the washing and charging I started to write the blog and had most of it done bar the pictures by about 830pm. By this time it was quite chilly and I put on a fleece before wandering down the road in search of food and drink. (it takes a lot of space in the pannier so I'm glad to have needed it) Right next door to La Marina is a Trattoria but it looked very busy with a party singing along to an accordion so I kept going and about 200 yards down the hill found a fish cafe with most dishes between 5 and 8 euros. I wandered in and asked the waitress if she spoke English, which she did extremely well, and if they had Wifi, to which the answer was yes. I didn't have the computer with me but I was, at least able to synchronise the ride and move the pictures I had taken that day to the cloud where I could download them later to the computer. The food was served on plastic plates but was very good. I had seafood pasta and a cod and potato main and a couple of bottles of beer and then wandered down the road to the gelateria for a couple of scoops to send me to bed.

I slept very well but woke quite early and got up about 8 and started packing. Unfortunately the washing was still damp so I wrapped it in my waterproof jacket and it should dry tonight. I had noticed that the front tyre of the bike (which was the rear until I swapped them) had a large gash in it so I thought I should investigate further. On taking it off the gash goes right through the wall so I put a patch on the inside and blew it up. That should, at least, stop the tube pushing through the tyre but, ideally, it should be replaced if I can find a bike shop.

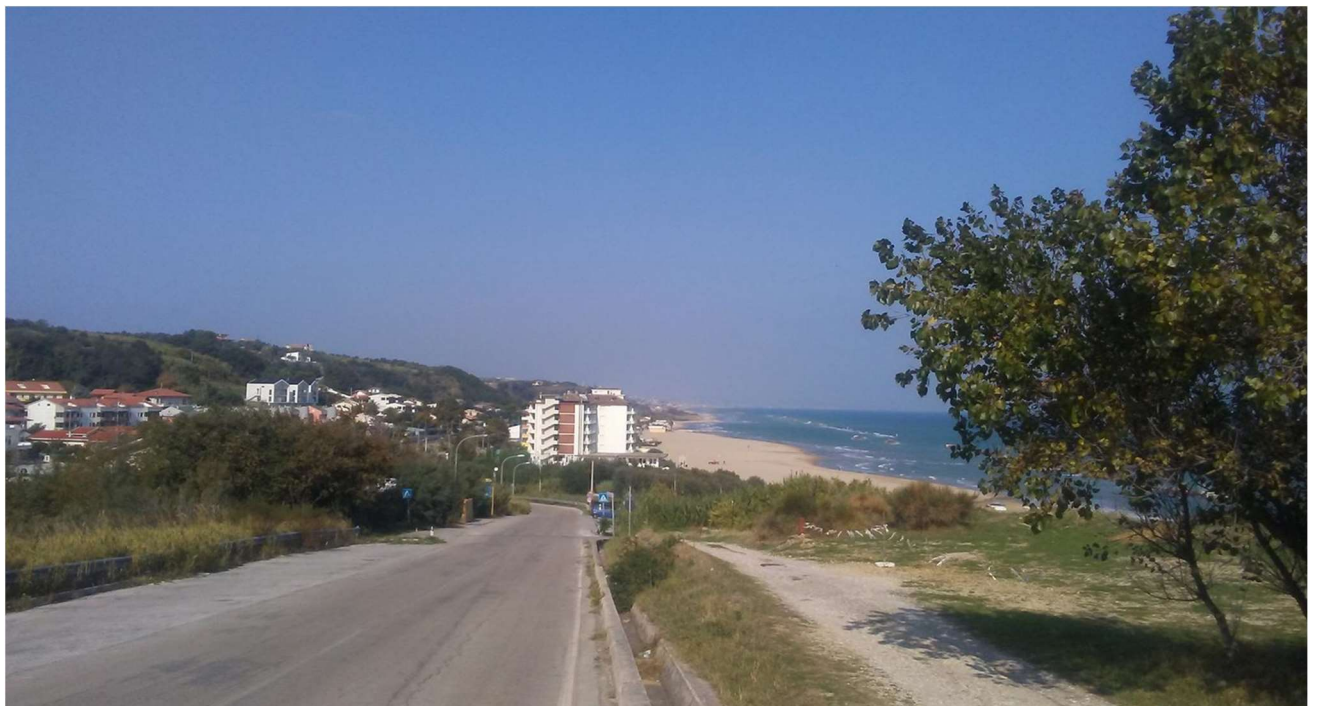
Having done all that I finally left at 0915, knowing that the first 8 miles were going to involve quite a lot of climbing. I don't know if Thursday is a day for club cycling but there were riders all over the place, some in twos and threes, others in large peletons. Most were going the opposite way to me but I was passed by one or two before I climbed up to Ortona which sits

on top of a 250 foot hill that I ascended from sea level. The view was good,



if a bit industrial and the sweep down the other side exhilarating.

I ended up back at sea level at Lido Riccio which looked fairly high class with a couple of splooshy hotels. I almost stopped and asked if I could use their internet to publish the blog but thought that was a bit cheeky.

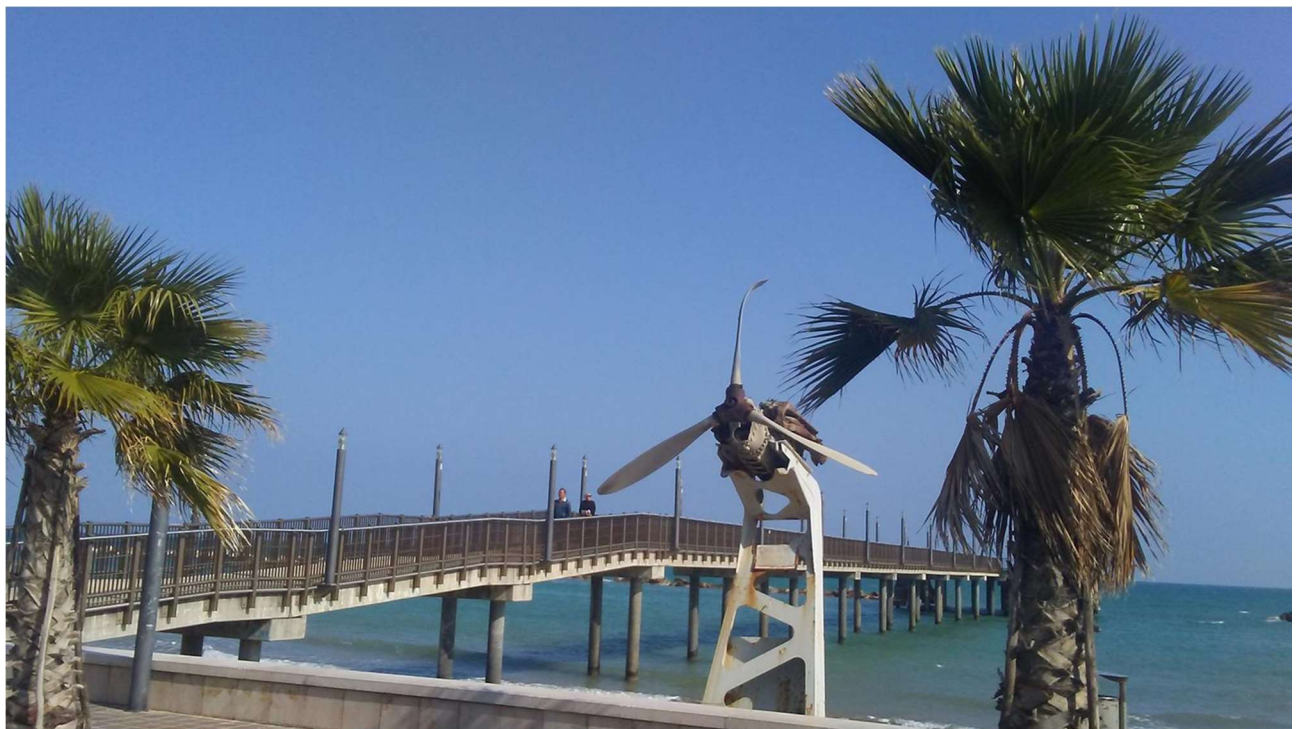


The remainder of the journey was at sea level which sounds easy but there

was a strong wind blowing in my face which put paid to any thoughts about a relaxing day. However what I did have was the benefit of miles and miles



of cycle lanes along the lungomare or promenade of most of the towns I passed through. Unlike yesterday these were well maintained and surfaced in red, green or blue tarmac and were being well used. At Francavilla I came



across this strange sculpture without explanation.

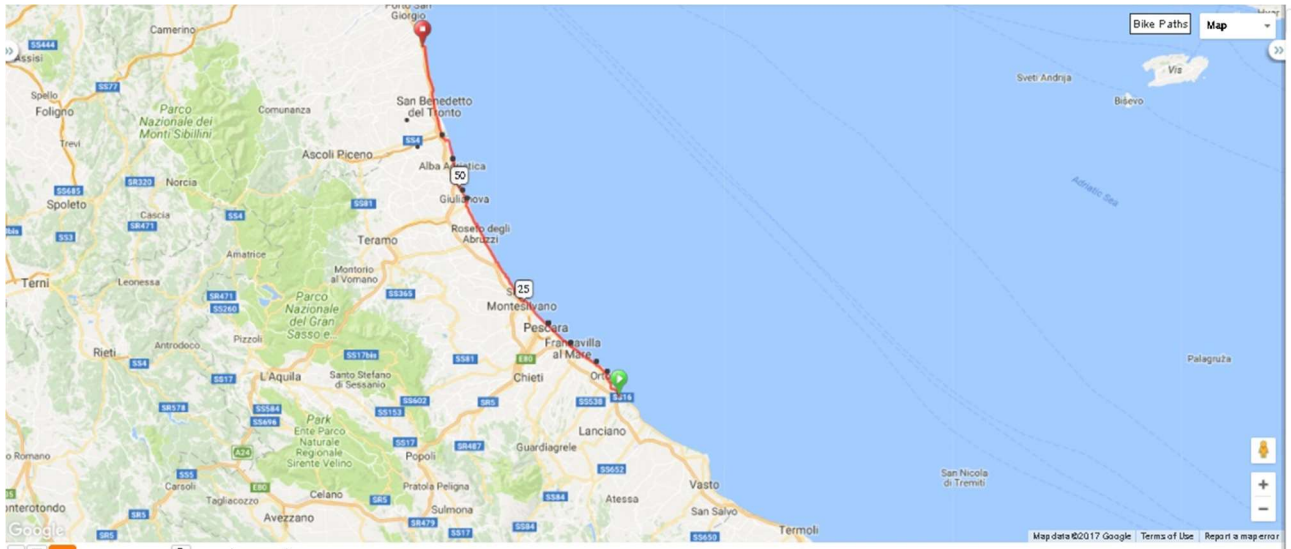


Near Pescara the cycle route was marked on the roadway and, I guess is a first step towards the Po to Pulia route I referred to yesterday

The weather was, again sunny, though noticeably cooler, so not unpleasant for cycling. Just after Martinsicuro I passed into the seventh Italian region I visited, when crossing the river Tronto from Abruzzo into Marche. After this, fed up with the headwinds I stuck to the main SS16 road which had a decent hard shoulder and lightish traffic. I arrived at the Hotel Valdaso in Pedaso at about 5.15pm after 8 hours in the saddle with no lengthy stops. I tried to stop for lunch at one point but the restaurant had no Wifi available because the waiter informed me that the owner hadn't paid the bill! After that I just kept going as I wasn't especially hungry and had plenty of water. I am now making a point of stopping at every water tap I find, even if my bottles are full. If they are, I just take a good drink.

Day 10 – Steep hills and broken wheel

I found the hotel Valdaso in Perdaso not by the usual means of Booking.com, but by searching on line, because I could not find a hotel in the right place through Booking. What an amazing find. It is a rather garish pink from the outside and next to it is a vast car park which was filled with



lorries by the time I arrived. It appears to be a favourite stop for lorry drivers on their way south or heading to the port of Bari for those heading for Greece. I was booked in by a very efficient clerk who told me what to expect and when. My room was large, the double bed comfortable, the bathroom big and well appointed and the Wifi, when I finally worked it out, was fine except last thing at night when, I guess, everyone was using it. The log-in would only support one device but I was given a second code for my phone so all was well.

Having done the usual I came down stairs at about 8 to find the place was buzzing. The large restaurant was full of people and the waiting staff were buzzing round like demented flies. There were about 6 of them moving at a rate of knots. They had even roped in a couple of children, I'm guessing sons of the manager, who were “helping”. I was offered a table, a menu, a glass of wine and bread. My order was soon taken. As I had had nothing

since breakfast I ordered a fritto misto starter, a brilliant macaroni carbonara and a mixed grill. The waiter returned to say that was more than the menu included in the half board room rate but I said that I would pay the difference. Also was I sure that I wanted so much to eat because the mixed grill was very large? Yep, I was up for it. A couple of large beers and a bottle of aqua frizzante completed my intake and the food was delicious and



large in quantity, as suggested. I retired to bed feeling very full and worked some of it off finishing the blog.

My clothes dried well on the balcony overnight: only a pair of socks needed bagging to await drying tonight. Breakfast was as plentiful as last night's cena. Help yourself to as much cereal, sweet pastries, ham and cheese as you wanted. Squeeze your own fruit juice, take yoghurt, bread and jam to your heart's content and come back for more if required.

Having packed up I paid the bill which came to a very reasonable 63 euros and set off at 0923. The first part of the journey was flat, following the sea-



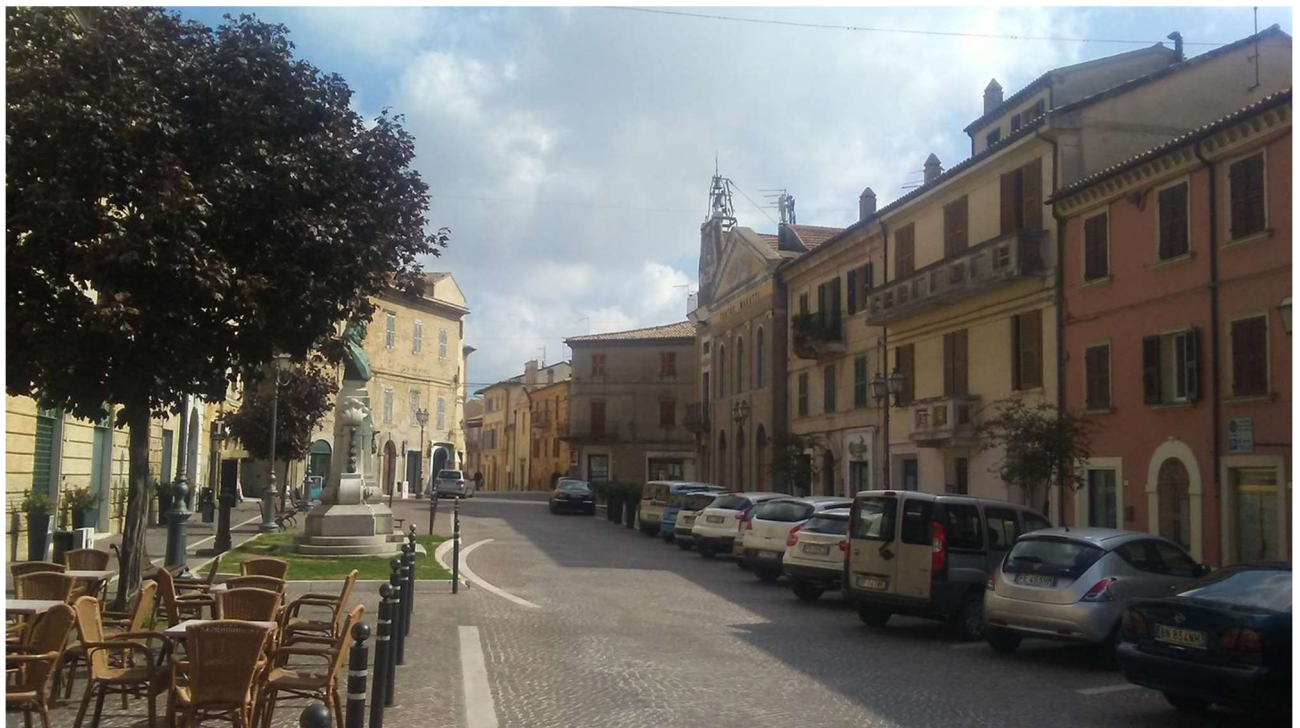
front and lots of cycle paths so, apart from that pesky north-westerly in my face, was OK. I thought that I had worked out the easiest way of getting over the hump around Ancona, a rocky outcrop that goes all the way to the



sea and requires some climbing. I probably should have followed the SS16 but thought better of it and let myself in for a hellish journey up slopes up to 16%.

The climb started at Numana a pretty village on the sea and I was straight

into some 8% slopes. The road then forked and I found myself going steeply back down. At the bottom was a pedestrian bridge with steps up and down so, nothing ventured, over I went to join a gravel track. This was OK but I then hit the tarmac again and saw a “wall” in front of me; 20%, I had to GOAP. I looked again at my route and saw what appeared to be more cross country so I thought I would reroute along obvious tarmac. The problem was that this went up and down very steeply and I found myself climbing up to a town called Cametano which was on top of a hill. It was a charming town but I was in no shape to appreciate it: however I did find a water tap to refill my bottles



Down again and then up and down and up and down until, finally I was



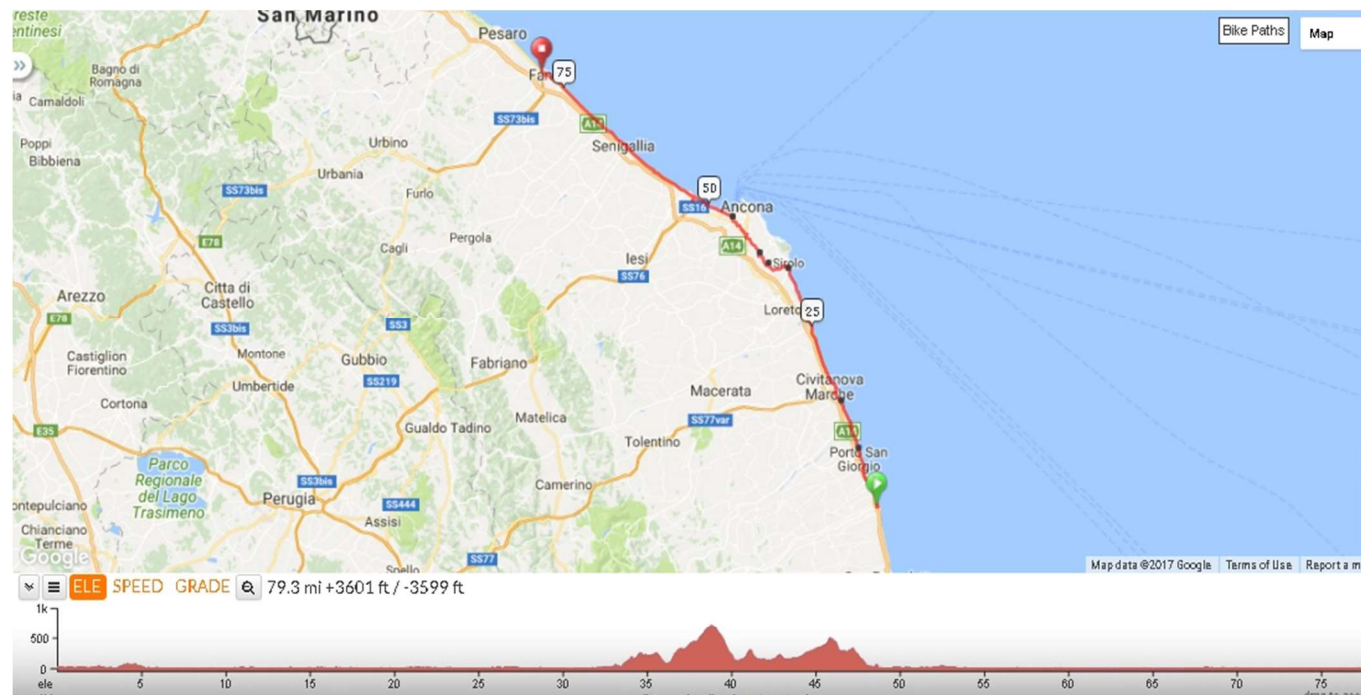
back at sea level at Ancona. I still had about 30 miles to travel and needed sustenance so I called in at a service station, of which there are hundreds, as Ancona has a refinery, and bought a bottle of energy drink and had a rest. I looked at my bike and saw that I had a broken spoke in the back wheel which, in itself, is not a huge problem but, on closer examination, the rim



was breaking up. I looked on Google Maps for bike shops and found one on my route about 10 miles on. The owner said yes, he thought he could help but then realised that he did not have anything suitable with a through axle.

I carried on to my destination Fano where I called in at another bike shop to get the same response. This had become a serious problem

I limped to my hotel and put out an SOS to the family. Eventually Davide contacted a shop in Forli, my next stop, who seemed to be of the can do mentality and they said they thought they could get me going. So tomorrow I shall get on a train and see if they can be good to their word. Otherwise I don't know what I can do because the wheel will not last much longer.



Day 11 – Enforced rest day

Once I had done as much as possible to sort out the wheel problem I went downstairs to the hotel restaurant. They specialise, as almost every restaurant on this coast, in seafood so I had a hot seafood antipasto, mainly clams and mussels but with a couple of langoustine. I then went onto a spaghetti carbonara – it's amazing what a different beast carbonara seems to be in Italy. In England it tends to be a creamy sauce but here it is definitely cooked only with egg giving it a lovely yellow colour. I decided to go for a bottle of local white wine which was also very good. Finally I had a large seafood fritto which was cooked beautifully in a light batter and left me just enough room for the complimentary cake to finish before I staggered off to

bed.

Because of the wheel problem I was restless and slept fitfully before getting up at 0800. Breakfast was served across the road at another hotel in the same ownership. It was by a long way the best breakfast I have had on the trip with eggs and bacon, ham, cheese and all the Italian breads and pastries you could think of. Plenty of fruit juices, yoghurt and fresh fruit with coffee and tea of all sorts were available buffet style.

I got on the bike to cycle to the station to catch a train to Forli and immediately cycled in totally the wrong direction. My sense of direction is appalling, even with Rita and Gary to help me. Eventually I found the station with plenty of time to spare and bought a ticket for me and one for the bike. There was a nice ramp down to cross to Platform 2

where the 0925 train was due to leave but only a flight of stairs up to the platform so I had to lug the loaded bike up. I had a bit of a wait before the train arrived about 5 minutes late (where's a Mussolini when you need one?) and wasn't sure how I would be able to stow the bike. In the event there are



luggage areas on each coach and I was able to wedge the bike in securely whilst I wrote a bit more of the blog.

The train took about an hour and ten minutes to get to Forli, passing through Rimini and Cesena and I had had a little foresight in putting the directions to the bike shop in the phone before I left the hotel this morning.

I found Baldoni bikes very easily. It is in a small parade on the ring road and is well appointed. I went in and asked the bloke



behind the counter if he spoke English but he said no and then proceeded to wax lyrical about the Specialized Sequoia I had just wheeled in. In the event he wasn't the main man but the mechanic immediately got to work, finding a pair of DT Swiss wheels that would fit. I had to buy both of them but the front wheel will be sent to Home Farm as part of the service. The bike was built back up again, every nut and bolt tightened and the brake disc sanded before I went for a spin down the road. All was in order except the front brake but Stefano, the English speaking manager said I needed a new rotor and pads which, unfortunately, they did not have in stock. It's not that important, a bit noisy and juddery and I'll try to use the back brake where possible and maybe look for a replacement en route. So for 150 euros I'm very thankful to be back on the road and able to continue tomorrow. Thanks very much Baldoni Bike Shop for amazing service and son-in-law Davide for paving the way for me on the phone yesterday..

Of course this meant that I had a day to kill in Forli where I was due to stay anyway so I made my way to the centre where Food Eataly (sic) were hosting Street Food from all over the country with stalls from Puglia,

Salento, Sicily and most of the regions. There was a lot of meat, mainly burgers and sausages and some artisan beer. I sat in the sunshine listening to Bruce Springsteen being pumped out of the PA system and just watching



the world go by. It was a pleasant experience and I am glad for a break from the bike. Hopefully that will replenish my batteries which were, I must admit, becoming a bit run-down.

Forli is definitely a bike city. It has proper bike lanes everywhere and it is



noticeable how many people use bikes as a result. It is home to Departments of the University of Bologna and has a bit of an Oxbridge feel to it. Car users also seem to be more considerate and there are special traffic lights for bikes. Hopefully this will continue as I make my way up the Po valley.

After an hour or so I went in search of the hotel which I found easily. The rather Fawltish owner demanded prepayment and showed me where to put the bike in a courtyard at the back. Wifi is only available in the lobby so I'll do most of the writing in my room and then come down to add photos with the benefit of the internet. The hotel is basic but clean but for 36 euros the room is big enough and, once I had opened the Velux blinds and windows, nice and airy. I did a wash and, with a decent drying time I should be OK for tomorrow. I'll go out later and snack on street food as the festival is running until 11pm.

So forebodings when I woke have been replaced with a pleasant laid-back feel to the day. As last year I've missed cycling the whole way, although I've probably already done those 65 miles with what I did in Sicily and wrong turns!



Day 12 – Straight for Il Papa

I obviously needed a rest because, having finished yesterday's blog, I passed out on the bed and woke up as it was getting dark at about 7.30. Strangely I wasn't especially hungry but I made my way to the centre and it was humming. Every stall had a queue waiting for food although it didn't take long to get to the front. I walked around the whole square again and it was clear that there was something of a cartel going in that nothing was priced under 8 euros. I had a artisan beer, 50cl for 5 euros (makes English beer look cheap) whilst I wandered around the stalls. In the end I plumped for a 9 euro Wagyu beefburger: It was fine but I've tasted just as good unspecified beefburgers for about two thirds the price. Anyway I left the Streat (sic) food fair and went in search of a gelateria. On my way home I found the perfect place and had an excellent Granite Limone fo 3 euros. I was back in bed and asleep by 1030.

By the time I got up at about 8am all my washing was dry from the night before and I packed and went down to breakfast. It was typical Italian but plenty of it so I felt pleasantly full when I left the hotel at 0834.

It was marvellous not having the thump squeak thump squeak that has been dogging me for the last couple of days. The new wheel did its job well and silently and I vowed to keep away from potholes and broken surfaces as much as possible.

I followed the SS9 for most of the day. It runs almost arrow straight across the plains of Emilia-Romagna, only shifting one way or the other to bypass towns, the first of which was Imola. I diverted slightly to have a look at the Autodroma Enzo and Dino

Ferrari which lies at the entrance to the town alongside the Santerno river. The racetrack is protected from the river by concrete walls and it was during



practice and the actual 1994 San Marino Grand Prix race that the lethal nature of the track was brought into sharp perspective when first Roland Ratzenberger was killed when he hit a kerb and ploughed into the wall in Saturday qualifying and then, during the race with the death of Ayrton Senna, generally recognised as one of the best F1 drivers in history. Senna's death led to great improvements in driver safety to the extent that there has only been one other fatality during an F1 race since then. The San Marino Grand Prix continued to be held until 2006 but on a course designed to reduce speeds. There was a saloon car race in progress but I could only look through the chain-link fence.

At this point it started raining heavily enough for me to don my rain jacket as I continued through the centre of the mediaeval town. It was only spitting but enough to wet the roads for the first time since I started from Sicily and it continued until I reached Bologna, one of the great cities of Central

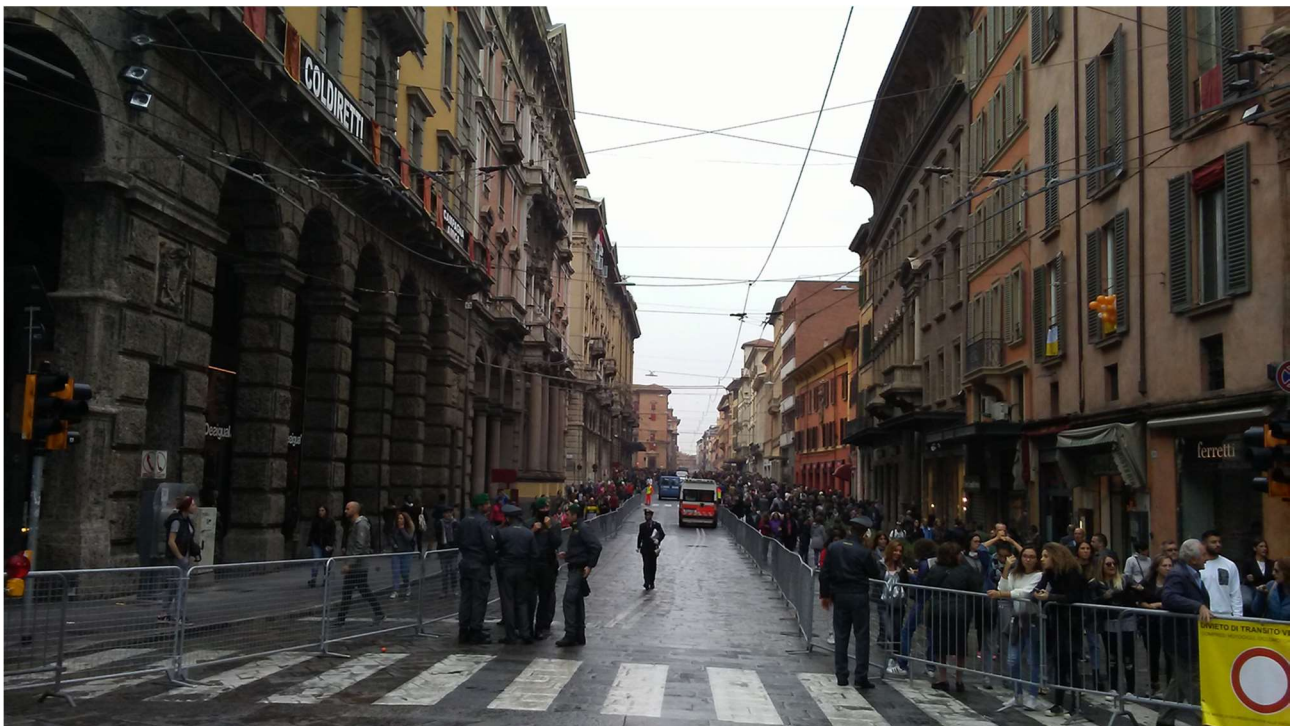


Italy, home to the oldest university in the world, beating Oxford University by 8 years

As I approached the ring road there were police cars stopping traffic from



entering the city but I was allowed through the road block. As a result my ride into the City Centre was traffic free and I was able to appreciate the colonnaded shops and approach of the twin towers in the centre. The



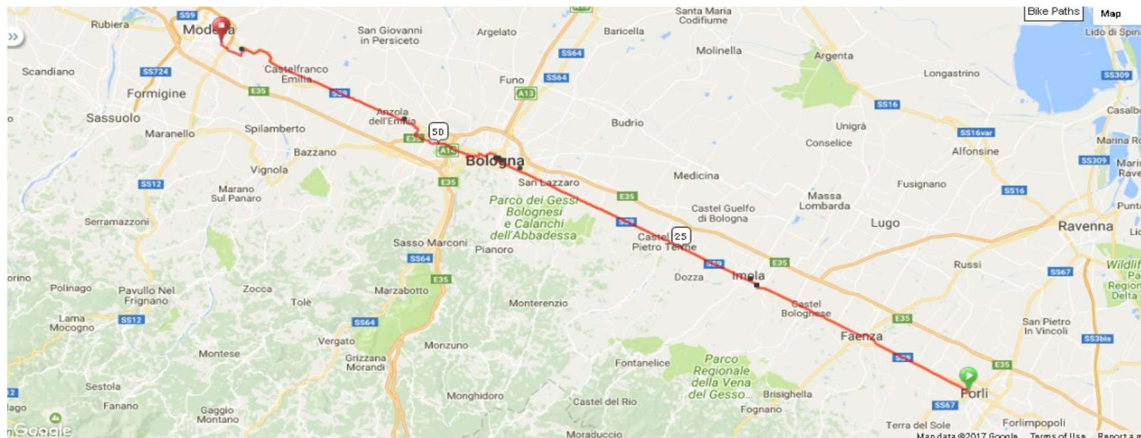
nearer I got the more police and barriers were in evidence. There were also stewards in fluorescent jerkins so obviously something was afoot. It wasn't

until I was stopped from going forward that I realised that 1st October was the day Pope Francis was due to visit Bologna. Apparently he helicoptered in at about 1020 and stayed until 1845 but the whole of the city centre was brought to a standstill and I found great difficulty in extricating myself. Eventually I found a hole in the barriers and was able to get away down a side street but not before stopping at a sandwich shop for a delicious slice of pizza and a puccia filled with ham and cheese: at 3.5 euros for the two it made last night's Street food look expensive. Whilst endeavouring to get out I could hear a helicopter so maybe it was Il Papa making his way across the City without getting involved with the crowds?

My detour became a real pain when my senses of direction once again deserted me and I took several wrong turns before eventually finding my way back to the SS9 by a rather pretty route down back roads before finding myself beside Gelato University which, I believe, hosted Phillipa Tarling



before she opened Ecco Gelato in Sherborne. Once back on the main road, which was a bit of a curate's egg of cycle lanes and too narrow SS9, I made good speed to Modena where I am staying the night at Albergo Moderna, the most basic accommodation I have been in. It is a student hostel with a shared bathroom on each of 3 floors. The walls are paper thin and my neighbour has been having a telephone conversation, on loudspeaker, with his girlfriend at high volume. Hopefully he'll quieten down at sleep time.



Day 13 – Across the Po

For some reason I thought that I needed a curry. There was an Indian not too far from the hostel so I walked about 10 minutes: I'm afraid that it was far from good. I had a set fish based menu which used, largely, salmon. The stuffed paratha was dripping with grease and the whole meal was very disappointing. Perhaps it proves what good Indian food we get in the UK.

My Bob Marley loving neighbour did, indeed, quieten down and I probably disturbed him more by my tossing and turning in a too small bed which resulted in poor sleep. I was conscious again at 0700 but lay in bed for a while and finally went down to breakfast at about 0800. Typically Italian the breakfast was OK. Help yourself to fruit juice, cornflakes and yoghurt and a lovely custard filled cornetto with a cup of cappuccino and a couple of Italian sweet cakes. Considering I paid the same in Modena as I had the night before in Forlì it was poor value for money. I was loaded up and left at



0839. I thought that I would take a bit of time looking at the centre of the town and it is worth visiting. The central piazza is surrounded by interesting buildings: I can't tell you anything about the history but I enjoyed my brief sojourn. It appears that sculpture of crouching lions is a feature of this part of Italy.

These are of Roman origin but the cathedral at Cremona has a similar motif.

I carried on, staying away from the main roads, for the first 8 miles of the journey on cycle tracks completely protected from the roads and through some delightful countryside called Il Forno. It was noticeable how many people cycle without any form of headwear when they feel unthreatened by motor vehicles. Hardly anyone wears helmets except for club riders.



I crossed the river Secchia by a cycle bridge of wooden planks. My fat tyres were fine but I would have been nervous on racing tyres. The countryside was plain flat but made more interesting by groves of poplar in rather better shape than mine at home, which have succumbed to all sorts of disease.



I passed by a Parmesan factory. Although this part of Italy is famous for this cheese there was very little evidence of cows anywhere. I saw one large farm during the day with cattle in buildings but you never see herds grazing outdoors. Maybe it is the weather that is too hot for them in the summer



months but the only animals I saw outdoors all day were some sheep with donkeys and horses grazing what looked like the aftermath of a maize crop.

Plenty of evidence of grapes: all the vineyards I passed seemed to have been picked for the local Lambrusco wine, slightly effervescent and sweet, it's enjoyable enough to quaff but has very little depth of taste and is soon forgotten. There were also some flowers growing in gardens, something that has been missing for most of the trip.

I was stopping quite regularly to enjoy the countryside and take pictures but, unfortunately, the latter occupation led, literally, to my downfall, the first tumble of the trip. I saw a view that I thought was picturesque and pulled onto the verge. Alas I didn't notice the ditch hidden in the grass and over I



went gashing my knee quite deeply in the process. Fortunately the substantial first aid kit came into its own and I was able to clean the wound with some antiseptic wipes and apply a plaster. It's sure to leave a scar, as it should ideally have been stitched or steri-stripped but I'll keep it clean and it



should heal fine. Anyway here's the picture, that I took anyway, that caused the crash.

During the day I passed two biogas plants so Italy is adopting all sorts of renewable energy. Both were attached to pig farms but I don't know what other material is used for the gas production. There were a lot of bin lorries



passing me all day so maybe that vegetable waste also goes into the production process.

I was heading for the river Po that I needed to cross to reach my destination in Cremona. This is Italy's greatest river: it provides hugely fertile soils that



give the nation the flour to make the pasta that is eaten in such great quantity, as well as the milk to

make the famous cheeses. It rises in the southern Alps near the French border and flows for over 400 miles across Italy to its delta on the Adriatic. It passes close to all the major cities of north Italy and provides power for industry along the way. I crossed it by way of a long bridge just south of

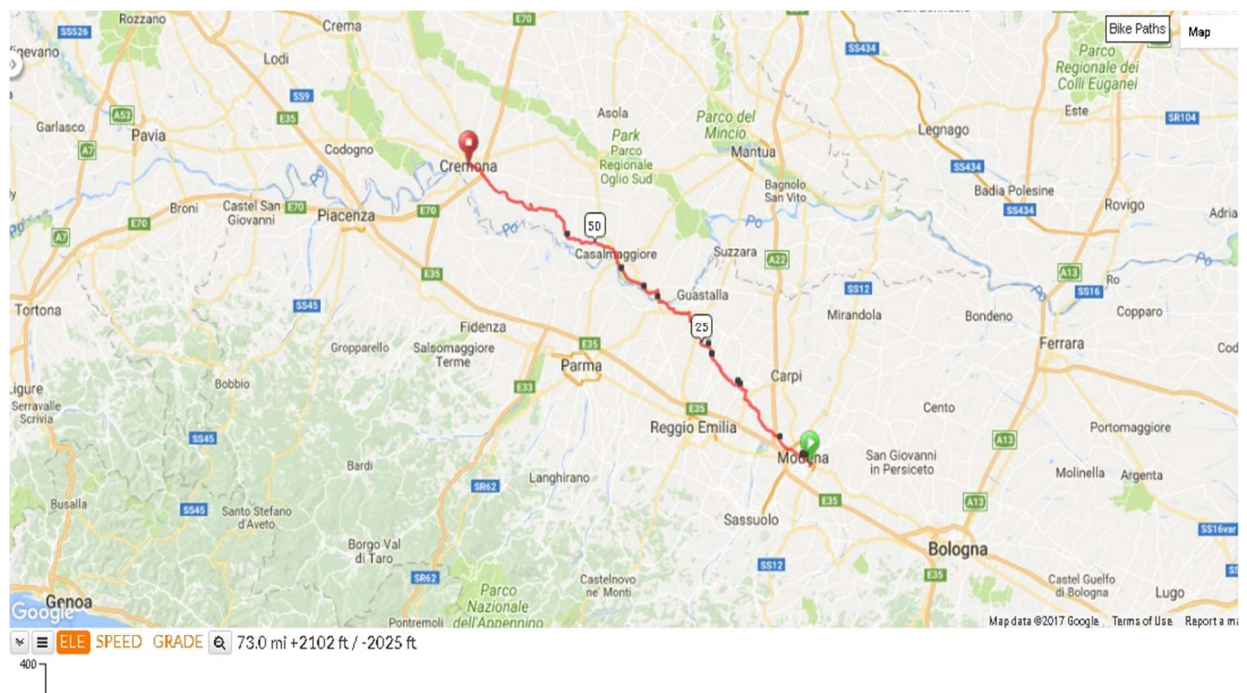


Viadana. Fortunately the bridge has a bike/pedestrian way on each side: the traffic was heavy and I wouldn't have relished tangling with it.

Once across I was more than half way to Cremona but from Viadana there is almost 20 miles of tarmac cycle track on the Po levee. There is motor traffic on parts of it but, as it does not lead anywhere in particular this is very light and you can just bomb along at your best pace. I was getting a bit tired and sore by this stage and needed to stop and rest regularly so my best pace was not very fast!

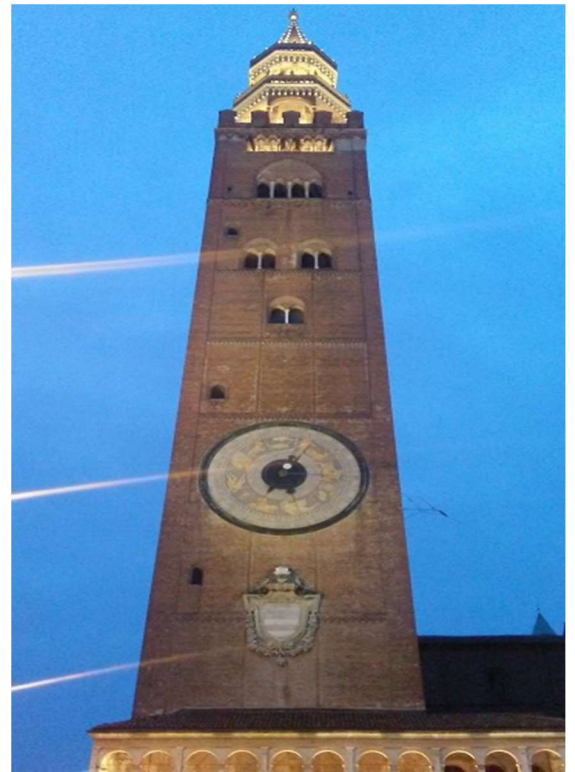
With about 16 miles to go I joined the main roads that took me into the centre of Cremona. I am staying at the Hotel Duomo which, as its name suggests, could not be more central. It looks a fascinating city and I shall have a wander around this evening before supper and bed. My room could hardly be more different than yesterday with a double bed and ensuite bathroom. I've done some washing and hope it dries overnight.

I'm now pretty much half way: certainly in days taken, probably in distance travelled though I haven't done an exact calculation. Tomorrow, all being well, son Rob and I will meet in Vigevano for our 4 day trip through the Alps.



Day 14 – Rice paddies

I arrived in Cremona at a decent enough hour to get washed and charged and go out for a wander round the town in daylight. Unfortunately I had not allowed for the fact that museums and public buildings remain tightly closed on a Monday so I couldn't visit the Violin Museum which might have been interesting. However there was a service at the Duomo that started just as I walked in and there were a surprisingly large number of people there. I had a cursory look at the decoration. There were some quite nice frescoes, but of no



great age, and various dark oil paintings by artists I hadn't heard of. The exterior was of much greater interest. Attached to the Cathedral is a baptistry and a Campanile which is the third highest in the world and the oldest brick structure still standing.

The Duomo itself dates to 13th century with various additions since, and is one of the most important monuments of Romanesque art in Europe. It

was a fine sight with the lights on. There were a few people wandering around the square whilst others sat at tables and sipped their pre-dinner drinks.

I consulted Tripadvisor for my dinner venue. Hotel Duomo has a restaurant but it did not feature highly so I went about 100 yards round the corner to del tempo perso a trattoria with highly decorated glass ceilings and socialist posters all over the wall. Mine Host looked like a revolutionary but the food was plain and good. A very well cooked plain risotto with lots of parmesan followed by pork escalopes in a root vegetable sauce with spinach and roast potatoes washed down with a half of local vino rosso and some fizzy water. I finished the evening with a stroll back to the hotel and a gelato on the way.

The Hotel was fine. I had a large double bed with en suite shower-room. The shower was very good and had something I have never seen before, it's own hot water tank above it, so there was no chance of anyone else nicking the hot water. Breakfast was a tad shambolic but had the usual Italian with cheese and ham. The one harassed waiter was a bit slow with the capuccino but it eventually arrived and I left with a full belly, later than intended at 0915.

I quickly found my way out of the city but had to wait at a level crossing for a passing freight train. The first 8 or so miles were on lovely segregated bike lanes but once they ran out I was on narrow roads but not too busy. Then it



was back to bike lanes and then roads with wide verges and finally after I passed the HQ of Lidl Italy, an interesting piece of architecture on the edge

of town, the road deteriorated to a narrow but very busy highway with lorries that were giving little room to the poor cyclist. I had a very uncomfortable 25 miles until I reached Pavia on the River Ticino which is



crossed by a covered bridge. I tried to get some lunch but apparently Tuesday is chefs day off in Pavia. Once across the bridge I was on the levee of the river, similar to that of the Po and had a traffic free ride.

After Zeebola I entered a world of rice fields. Most had been harvested but I saw one combine and other fields that had yet to be touched. Presumably

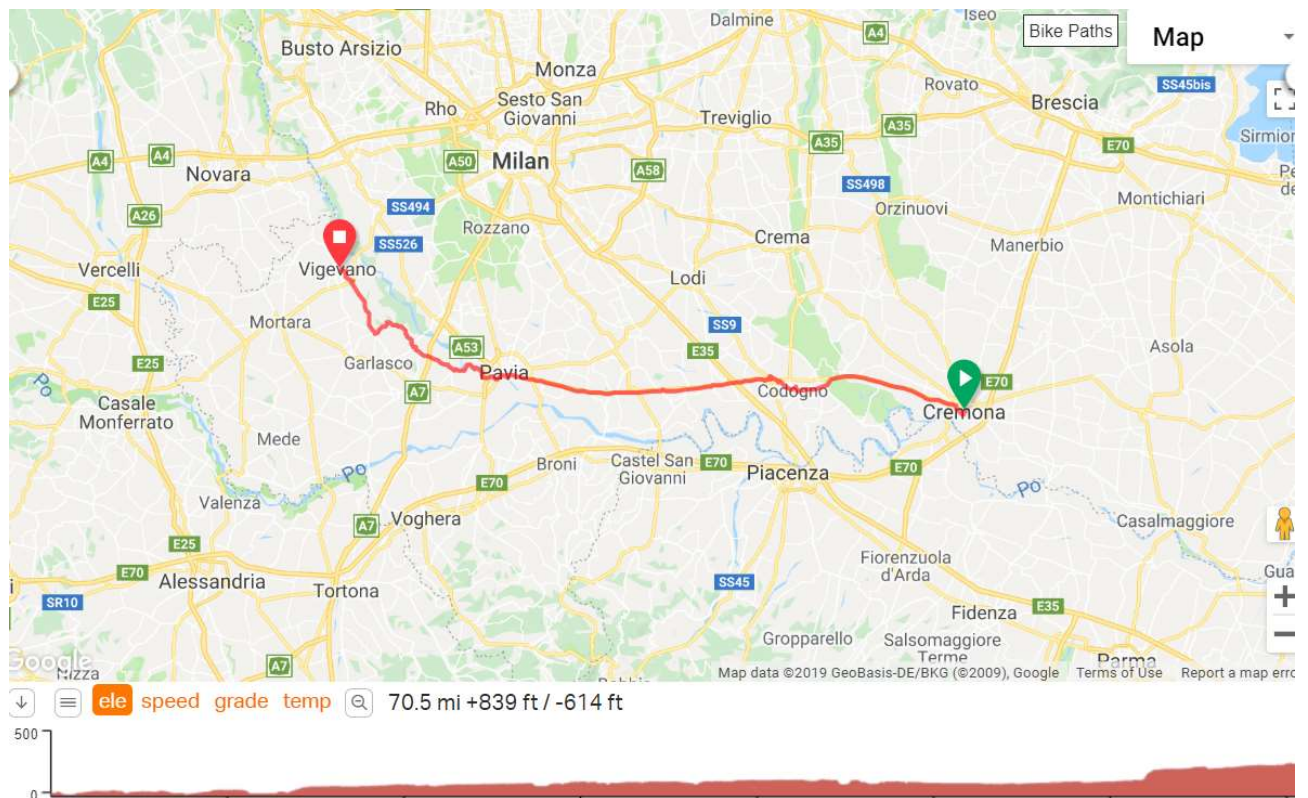


this is arborio or risotto style rice. I stopped to take a picture and a dozen snipe flashed up off the field and jinked away from me.

I passed by some gin clear streams with trout in evidence and large signs saying fishing and hunting were privately owned. Some really nice countryside with well managed woodland. Finally I was brought back down to earth with a run into Vigevano along a busy main road. Fortunately there was a cycle path for some of the way and the route through town was trouble free until I stopped to consult Rita, overbalanced and grazed the other knee so I am now a mass of plasters!

I arrived in very good time and was shown round the flat, for such it is. Rob arrived about an hour later and I went down to Carrefour Express and bought something for breakfast. Rob has fixed the new disc rotor and brakes to my bike and we should be ready to go for our first 60 or so miles together.



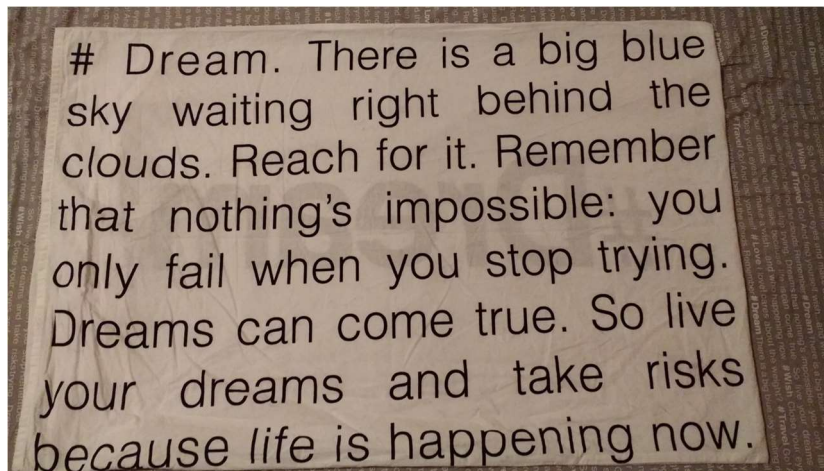


Day 15 – Riding with Rob

We went round the corner from the flat for some food at about 8pm. There was a nice little pizzeria/trattoria with a waitress who spoke better English than our Italian. We had a meat and cheese antipasti which was very good, served with chutneys and jams and then a prawn and pistacchio risotto, again excellent. We shared a bottle of fizzy water and a bottle of sparkling wine, chosen by me in error but it was perfectly good. Not cheap and the card machine would not work so we had to pay cash. I'd been shopping for breakfast earlier and had come back with a couple of pints of beer. We'd drunk one earlier but thought we'd better drink the other one rather than have it for breakfast so that sent us off to bed.

The bed linen was an interesting assortment but, although a bit corny, my pillowcase perhaps encapsulates what my journey is about?

There was a large sofa bed that was comfortable and a small camp bed



which Rob didn't complain about. We put together breakfast of yoghurt, fruit salad, eggs and ham and some custard cornettos. There was coffee in the flat so we did OK and set off from the flat

at 0914. I wanted to go into the centre of Vigevano to see the piazza and it was well worth the detour. Built at the end of the 15 century by Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan who is best remembered for being the man who commissioned Leonardo da Vinci to paint the Last Supper in the Convent of Santa Maria della Grazie in Milan. The piazza sets off the Duomo and is



now home to shops and restaurants.

The navigators quickly guided us out of town and we meandered along some lovely rural roads through hamlets and farms, past plantations of poplars and fields of rice, mostly harvested but some still standing. We passed a rice mill, dust billowing out of the building as the rice was cleaned and polished. Italy is the largest rice producer in Europe and we were



passing rice fields all day.

It was impossible to ignore the opportunity for a photograph at the town limits of this small town.

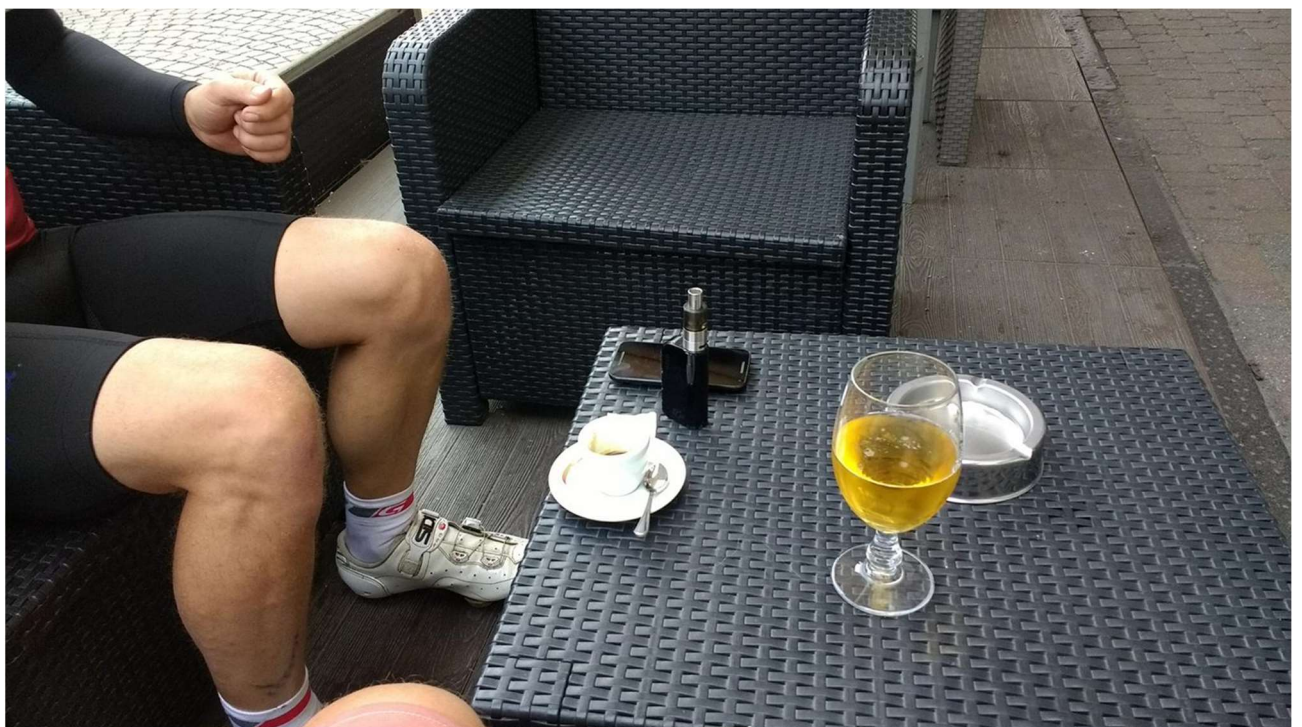




We were still on minor roads with very little traffic and it was a stress-free ride for the first 25 miles to Vercelli which also boasts a picturesque piazza with a statue in the centre against which we parked our bikes whilst we ate what remained of breakfast. A pleasant interlude after a couple of hours of riding in ideal conditions, overcast and with very little wind. However it was chilly and we both had coats on for much of the day.

After Vercelli we were forced on to the main road which connects with the Milan-Turin autostrada and had some heavy fast moving traffic and no hard shoulder so we were very pleased to fork off after about 5 miles back into the world of rice fields and quiet roads. We passed a stubble with flocks of Sacred Ibis pecking around for grubs who flew away when we stopped for photos.

It was about 1 o'clock when we reached Tronzano, 38 miles into a 60 mile journey, so we stopped for a bite to eat and had a nice panini with salami and cheese. Rob opted for coffee but beer seemed a better idea to me. It was a nice break from peddling and put some energy back in the tank for the remainder of the journey. We dodged along some dirt roads but nothing too rough, until we crossed over the A4 autostrade and suddenly we were into a completely different world. Gone were the vast open fields and we found ourselves meandering along lanes through what could almost have been alpine meadows and some steepish slopes that made us puff. After a couple of miles of this we found ourselves in the town of Viverone where we made a quick descent towards the lake, narrowly missing a post van on his way up the narrow cobbled street.



The original plan had been to stay off the main road to Ivrea by wiggling our way through hamlets and vineyards but the road was wide and had a good hard shoulder so we bombed along it for about 6 miles before making a slight detour south where we passed an unidentified crop. It is clearly a pulse but of uncertain variety: probably one of the many types of dried bean that are used in Italian cooking.

We were now in the suburbs of Ivrea and only about 6 miles from our destination Borgofranco d'Ivrea. The navigators took us off the main street and up some quite testing climbs before we hit the main road that will be our route to Aosta tomorrow. We arrived at the B&B Verde Musica which is owned by the charming Anna Maria almost spot on our ETA of 1530. I'm not sure that Pepe the dog was too keen to see us but Anna Maria showed us to our room which is on the ground floor and arranged for an 8 o'clock breakfast. Finishing early we were able to get washing done and hanging out to dry. Unfortunately it is very grey and overcast so it may still be damp tomorrow. No rain is forecast and perhaps there will be a bit of early morning sun.

It has been a most enjoyable day: not really taxing and with some good



sights. We start climbing in earnest tomorrow with an 8 mile finish that will certainly test the legs as we climb to Etroubles.

