Since the publication of the Part I of “A Terrible Climber in Italy” in the February issue, Italy Cycling Vacations has re-branded and is now known as Bici Amore Mio (biciamoremio.it). From my recent conversations with them, their services have not changed — they still provide wonderful accommodations and services for cyclists visiting Italy.

Leaving Bormio was difficult. It was a mountainous wonderland, the kind of place I could see myself retiring someday. But the other bike hotels beckoned.

The next morning, Daniele Schena’s father-in-law gave me a ride to the train station in Tirano. He spoke very little English and I speak very little Italian, but we managed to communicate when necessary. Besides, he was having what sounded to me like an orchestra of a conversation with a friend on his mobile phone for most of the drive.

Little did I know, but my train tour of Italy was about to begin. The ride to Milan was on a regular train, but the one I rode to Torino was a Red Arrow high-speed train. At 300 KPH, I was in Torino before I could even take a nap. Maybe I was just excited to ride on my first high-speed train (not counting the Amtrak Acela Express from New York to Washington, DC. European trains are different animals altogether!)

Gianni Marsaglia, the owner of l’Hotel Lo Scoiattolo, picked me up at the train station and drove me to the town of Pralormo in the Piedmont region. His English was passable where-as my Italian remained nauseatingly bad. Actually, I believe it was already worsening. I’d thought I’d be able to communicate effectively in Italian, if only crudely, but even that had already become just a pipe dream.

Scoiattolo, although much different in character than the Hotel Funivia, was also immaculate. I took a swim in the pool and sat in the sun for a bit and admired the property, which featured a large garden (yard) with a special section for kids — again, all immaculately kept.

Dinner was at 7:30 PM and I hadn’t eaten all day because my last meal, dinner the night before in Bormio, was amazing and had strong legs, but now I was very hungry. As a result, I went a bit overboard, attacking the buffet as if making up for my inability to do so to the many climbs I’d made so far. Unfortunately, I failed to realize that the first and second courses, as well as dessert — a delicious green sorbet — were still to come. The ravioli and swordfish carpaccio were outstanding, but because of my overindulgence in the buffet, I couldn’t finish the ravioli (Unacceptable!). I promised myself not to let such a thing happen again.

The next morning’s breakfast spread was excellent (bread, thinly sliced ham, cheese, yogurt, cereals, pastries, fruit, etc.), and I packed it in — again. Good thing, because my guides, Davide (pronounced Dáveeduh) and Sergio, had a devilish ride planned for me. If Bormio’s climbing was relentless for its constancy, Piedmont’s climbing was sneakily its equal. Although it wasn’t Stelvio Pass, we may have climbed the equivalent distance, plus climb after climb were quite steep. And Davide and Sergio were either whistling, chatting each other up, or on their mobile phones, all while I sucked in all the Italian air I could. It was on this ride that I began to think Italian cyclists are simply super-human. I can’t believe they don’t win.

Four of the cyclists in the Garda Bike Hotel group take a break at a café high above Lake Garda, Verona.
Italy, Part II

Story and photos by Michael Deme
the Giro d'Italia, the Vuelta a España and the Tour de France every year.

To my guides’ credit, they were very patient with me. Each time I reached the top of a climb, they would be waiting, using their mobile phones. I’m pretty sure Sergio was Googling where the next climbing opportunity was. I thought, “Hey, I know where it is. It’s anywhere you look!” Which is true. But I was finally figuring my own approach to these climbs. A method for the mad, no doubt.

We carried on with Davide and Sergio answering in fabulous detail the many questions that streamed out of me. I had waited my whole life to visit the land of my ancestors and I wasn’t going to let the fact that I could barely breath stop me from finding out everything I could about this enchanting country.

As we rode, we came upon a police road block. At first, I thought we had cycled upon a crime scene, but no. Much better. The Italian National Cycling team, including 2013 Giro d’Italia and 2014 Tour de France winner Vincenzo Nibali, were training in the area and the police were keeping the roads clear. We only had to wait about 10 minutes before the team came streaking by. I’m not typically star struck, but that was a pretty cool stroke of luck.

Soon, it was time to stop for lunch, and the boys took me to Eataly. Yeah, you read that correctly. I was extremely skeptical, hoping instead that we would have stopped at some quintessential Italian relic, but my disappointment was soon diminished. Eataly (eataly.com) is a high-end eatery/deli/market with an incredible selection of local wines, beer, dried meats, produce, etc., and lunch was delicious.

The only reason I didn’t leave with a bottle of wine was because I didn’t want to carry it in my hydration pack, a piece of gear Italians barely understand. (If it won’t fit in your jersey pocket, you don’t need it!). But I’m not easily swayed and I prefer to have plenty of room for what I consider necessities and “found” items.

We capped off lunch with an espresso, naturally. I’m not usually a coffee drinker, but when I travel, I don’t want to pass on anything. If the locals eat worms, I’ll eat worms. Fortunately, Italian espresso, generally, happens to be excellent.

We continued riding along quiet roads and past many vineyards, the locals busily tending their vines. We climbed up to a hilltop castle and gazed out over the Piedmontese countryside and the rolling hills of Langhe. We spoke about the history of the area, its culture, and its current state of affairs until it was time to head back to the hotel.

Before dinner, I availed myself of Scoiattolo’s jacuzzi and sauna, soaking and sweating out the day’s ride, spending much of my time reminding myself to go easy at the dinner buffet. Mission accomplished. I nibbled a bit but saved my appetite for the full courses. The meal was, again, delicious.

The next day, Davide and I took the van with a couple of city bikes to Torino, the capital of Piedmont and a city of just over 900,000 people. We parked at a trailhead, hopped on the Bianchi townies, and headed for the city center. The trail through the park was not overly crowded, but there were quite a few others riding, walking, running, roller blading, and skateboarding. No worries – everybody gets it; people just make way for each other. Every imaginable type of person rides bikes, and we were just two of them.

We rode along the Po, a very serene river, perfect for the many training rowers we saw. After a couple of kilometers, we arrived at the Museo Nazionale dell’Automobile. I mentioned to Davide that, if there were time, I’d like to stop for a visit on our way back.
Americans are known for their love of cars, but the Italians are also passionate about automobiles, and I was keen to see what this museum in the home of Fiat had to offer.

First, we tackled a climb, which culminated at a popular overlook above the city — marvelous. The fog was beginning to burn off, and the red-roofed city looked alive and vibrant. So we headed into it, but only after another espresso break.

I’d never toured a large metro area by bike before but, with Davide leading the way, we covered a lot of ground and saw many magnificent and interesting sights. Before joining Scoiattalo and Bici Amore Mio as a guide, Davide had worked at the Museo Nazionale del Cinéma, and he recommended I pay a visit. Many people know Rome as the capital of Italian cinema, but Torino can hold its own. The museum was enlightening and generally terrific. I could’ve spent hours ogling its massive collection of cameras alone, but Davide was waiting outside watching the bikes so I didn’t want to linger too long. I did want to take the panoramic glass elevator to the viewing platform of the Mole Antonelliana, which houses the cinema museum. If you ever visit Torino, don’t miss it. The view of the city from atop the Mole is phenomenal.

Once I reconnected with Davide, we rode through the city until we found a sidewalk café for lunch. It was located on a piazza that housed the National Museum of the Italian Risorgimento on the Palazzo Carignano.

And so it came to pass that I had my first pizza in Italy, a monumental occasion. I was born and raised in New Haven, Connecticut, a place renowned for its excellent Naples-style pizza, so I had been looking forward to this since I first started planning the trip. It wasn’t cut into slices so I had to dig in with a knife and fork, a no-no in New Haven. Well, I wasn’t in New Haven so knife and fork it was. It was fresh and hot, but I couldn’t hold back. What’s a slightly burned roof of the mouth between friends at such a heavily anticipated moment? It was worth it. The pizza didn’t disappoint, nor did the mouth-cooling gelato.

Back on the bikes, we bobbed and
weaved our way through the crowds, nobody minding in the least. We
ducked down alley after alley, visiting
one interesting gem from antiquity
after another. It was a whirlwind tour
and very stimulating on many levels.

Davide knew I wanted to visit the
auto museum, so after another hour
or so, we headed back toward the van.
It was pretty cool that we were able to
ride bicycles right up to the entrance
of an auto museum, but it shows how
accepted the bicycle is in Italian cul-
ture. Again, Davide waited outside with
the bikes. With all possible sincerity,
hisaid he’d forgotten to bring a lock,
but I think he’s seen these museums so
many times, he just couldn’t muster up
the necessary enthusiasm. But I could.

Inside was an auto lover’s dream,
which I wouldn’t consider myself to
be, but the machine’s significance in
Western culture can’t be denied, and a
good museum is a good museum. The
Museo Nazionale dell’Automobile is a
good museum. There were many beau-
tifully maintained and restored cars
from all over the world, but most from
Italy, Germany, England, and the U.S.

Cars, engines, frames, race cars,
futuristic cars, videos — you name it.
the Museo had it. A video about the
size difference between European and
American cars was extremely inter-
esting. And a display of where cars are
now made around the world and how
many cars are owned per capita was
an eye-opener. It turns out there are a
more cars per person in Italy, Canada,
Germany, and Iceland than in the U.S.

Once out of the museum, it was a
short jaunt back to the van, and before
long we were back at the Scoiattolo. I’d
be meeting Gianni and Sergio at 6:00
AM the next day so they could drop me
off at the train station in Torino as I
began my next journey to Cesenatico
on the Adriatic Sea. They would then
pick up Davide in Torino and head to
England for the Cycle Show 2014 trade
event in Birmingham.

Navigating Italian train stations can
be a bit intimidating but I managed
and soon arrived in Cesenatico where
a woman named Laura took me the
short distance to the beachfront Hotel
Lungomare, another immaculate estab-
ishment. I got situated in my room and
soon was strolling on the beach, which
I seemingly could have done all the way
to Rimini.

When I returned, I met Silvia Pas-
solini, the hotel owner, and I chatted
up the staff. I’ve never been more
convinced that English is the modern
equivalent of Latin in earlier times. It’s

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Above: Nicola Verdolin (left) and the Garda Bike Hotel group take a break on one of the day’s climbs.
Center: The author rides past the Basilica San Zeno in Verona. Right: Many astounding treats await
the curious visitor at a local market near Cesenatico.
the language that people of the world use to communicate with each other, and we single-language Americans are lucky for it.

At 5:30 pm, Marco Agostini took me on a tour of Cesenatico. We walked along the city’s ancient canal that still uses a lock designed by Leonardo da Vinci to keep the sea at bay. Cesenatico is the home of Marco Pantani, the great bike racer and climber who won both the Giro d’Italia and Tour de France in 1998, the last person to do so in the same year, and we visited a small but impressive museum dedicated to “Il Pirata.” Pantani died in 2004 from cocaine poisoning. His life spiraled downward after a blood test revealed a 52-percent level of hematocrit during the 1999 Giro, resulting in his expulsion. His death in 2004 has been a big blow to this village where he remains a hero despite the circumstances at the end of his career and life.

The next day, Marco and I set out at 11:00 AM. We rode over flatlands before reaching some climbs, but they were not as steep as Bormio or Langhe. I told Marco that long, steep climbs weren’t my strength so we started slowly — too slowly — but we were talking about the history of the area so it was fine. Eventually, I told him he could pick up the pace, and he took us up to 20 KPH. I encouraged him to go faster still so we began to pick up steam. By the time we got to the climbs, we had been humming along at around 30 KPH. After the climbing I’d done in the previous regions, I felt a bit stronger, but facts are facts and my lungs can only take in so much air, so I fell behind Marco on the steeper, longer climbs.

At the top of one climb, we stopped for espresso. The bar seemed to be in a lonely spot, but soon many other cyclists were stopping in. The number of cyclists in the Cesenatico area is astounding. They’re everywhere and on every kind of bike — but the road bike rules. It’s truly amazing to see.

We climbed a bit more, and then we turned around. On the way back, Marco cranked it up, and we sped back to Hotel Lungomare, stopping only once at a local market where I saw the biggest salami I ever hope to see.

When we got back, we tucked into the cyclist’s-only lunch buffet of local seafood, pasta, dried meats and cheeses, and bread.

After eating, we took advantage of the hotel spa, soaking in the hot tub and dozing in the sauna and Turkish
bath. There’s nothing better after a good ride.

On our ride the next day, Marco didn’t hold back and we rode at 28 to 30 kph the entire time — unless we started to chat about American movies or music. All in all, it was a good ride, and we stopped at the Pantani family residence. It felt a bit weird, but it seems the family is used to it.

Upon our return, I showered up and, after another wonderful dinner, hopped on one of Hotel Lungomare’s city bikes and headed into Cesenatico. It was a beautiful early fall night, and I sped toward town. Once there, I was surprised to see how much was going on. Music was blasting and people were buzzing in and out of shops, bars, and restaurants on both sides of the canal. So much for sleepy, traditional Italy on a Sunday. I tooted around on the city bike, stopping occasionally to take it all in before heading back to the hotel.

In the morning, I hopped on a slow train to Milan and then took another Red Arrow to Verona where Alberto Verdolin picked me up. Twenty minutes later, we were in Peschiera where I met Nicola, Alberto’s older brother. Nicola is owner of Garda Bike Hotel and the engine behind Bici Amore Mio. Garda Bike Hotel is a fantastic place. My room even had a round bed, another first for me.

After introductions and a shower, it was time for dinner. Salad and dessert were buffet style, but for first and second courses we had sit-down service. On my table was a flier about the next day’s ride. Yikes. 110 kilometers with a 4,500-foot climb along the way, so I ate well, drank a couple glasses of the local red, and hit the sack.

On this ride, we would have company. Tracey and Mickey from Colorado and Terry and Ari from Toronto would join us. Off we went through Peschiera, then down the east side of Lake Garda. After 25 kilometers, we caught a ferry across the lake. Nicola and I took time on the boat to discuss Bici Amore Mio, its formation, and the concept behind the bike hotels. He had been president of...
a group of 50 bike hotels, but he wasn’t getting the level of cooperation from the government or the other hotels that he wanted, so he started over with this group of five — Funivia, Scoliatolo, Lungomare, Garda, and Silva.

He seemed concerned that most of his clients come primarily to hammer out miles. Our conversation turned to Adventure Cyclist and the kinds of people who read it. It seemed to me that he’d like to have more people visit who like to ride but who would also enjoy the other amazing travel opportunities Italy has to offer.

Once on the other side of Lake Garda, we began the long climb. The air was heavy with the haze of smoke from the local vineyard burn piles but I could see how magnificent the views were. Up and up we went until we came to a little village where we stopped for espresso and gelato. We stood on a balcony that seemed to be floating in the sky. I wanted to linger and enjoy the view, but we had a ferry to catch. I may be a bit slow on the climbs but not on the descents. I flew ahead of the group and reveled in the joy that only flying downhill on a bicycle can bring. Unfortunately, we missed the ferry and decided to ride around the lake back to the hotel. Good thing Nicola’s father had followed us in a van because after 100 kilometers (mostly climbing) with another 45 to go, we were all ready to hop in for a ride back to the hotel.

Once we returned, I showered up and met with Michele Mutterle of the Federazione Italiana Amici della Bicicletta (FIAB) onlus and Albergbici (fiab-onlus.it, albergabici.it, bicitalia.org). We discussed their efforts to promote bike touring in Italy and the network of accommodations needed to support it. They are the Italian partner of EuroVelo and have established a 10,000-kilometer network of touring routes throughout Italy. Tent camping as Americans know it is not common in Italy so much of their focus is on the accommodations along the routes. He and Nicola spoke at length while I drank wine and enjoyed listening to two Italians use the language of my ancestors like instruments in an orchestra. I could have sat there all night, but it was time for dinner.

I joined Terry and Ari in the dining room. It was their third bike trip to Italy, and the next day they would head to the Adriatic coast. We discussed the experience of cycling in Italy and how different it is from what we’re used to in North America. We all agreed that
the concept of the bike hotels made these trips enjoyable and surprisingly affordable.

On my second day in Peschiera, it rained hard, which was good. That meant no riding. My legs were shot, and I needed a rest day. Instead of riding, Andrea arranged a tour of the Zenato Winery, famous for its Valpolicella and Amarrone, as well as the other wonderful wines made from the indigenous Trebbiano di Lugana varietal. I enjoyed the tour led by a highly knowledgeable guide who ended the proceedings with a wonderful wine and cheese tasting. I left with a couple of bottles of the delicious Amarrone as gifts for some recently married friends and family. I also purchased a bottle of grapa for me. Go figure.

On our way back to Garda Bike Hotel, we stopped at a medieval village and wandered about discussing various subjects of interest, with me asking most of the questions. Some things can be learned by reading books and others cannot, and these are the things that interest me most.

On Day 3 at Garda, Davide had come from Torino to meet with Nicola so Sergio came along and rode with Andrea and me into Verona. Because I had to catch a train at 2:50 pm, it was a speedy trip and a “best of” tour, but Andrea's guide skills came to the fore and he managed, during our short time, to take me to many fascinating and historic places, including the famous Ponte Pietra, an ancient stone bridge that crosses the Adige River.

We weren't going to make it back to Peschiera in time so we flew to the train station and jumped into the space between passenger cars with our bikes. It was nerve wracking and exhilarating. We arrived back at 1:40 PM so I bustied it to my room, speed packed, took a shower, and we were off to the Verona train station with Andrea doing his best Mario Andretti impersonation. We made it by a hair, and I was on another Red Arrow Frecciarossa (no stops) with two minutes to spare. Fortunately, Nicola had shoved a lunch bag in my carry-on so I had something to eat on the train. As I sat eating, it made me think of the many times an older family member had thought to make sure I was well nourished. Memories flooded in, and I sadly realized my time in Italy was beginning to slip away.

Adriano of Silva Hotel Splendid was waiting for me at the Roma Termini train station. We hopped on a crowd-ed commuter train and soon arrived at Fiuggi. After a 15-minute van ride, we were at the hotel. The Silva Hotel Splendid is more of a classic hotel than the others — and the biggest. There were more non-cycling guests, many to visit Fiuggi's thermal baths. Formerly Anticoli di Campagna, Pope Boniface VIII, once claimed he had been healed of kidney stones by the mineral waters from the nearby Fiuggi spring. Michelangelo made this same claim, stating he was cured of “the only kind of stone I couldn't love.”

My first ride with Adriano was on mountain bikes, and it was nice to be on a rig with a triple chainring. The countryside was green and it seemed more devoid of people than anywhere else I'd been, which seemed odd because Fiuggi is only about 30 kilometers from Rome.

After our ride, we went for a drive...
up to the Comune di Fumone. The castle there was the main papal stronghold in southern Latium, and Pope Celestine V had been jailed there after his renunciation of the papal throne.

We walked the steep, slippery cobblestone streets and visited the church of Santa Maria Annunziata, which houses relics of St. Sebastian. This was quintessential Italy, no doubt.

That night, I had dinner with Marco Giorgi, the hotel manager. Marco regaled me with various tales, and it turned out that many of his relatives live in the U.S., including Bridgeport, Connecticut, only 40 miles from where I grew up. He excitedly told me story about the infamous Crown Prince of Indonesia coming to stay and cycle there with his entourage and causing all kinds of mayhem.

The next day would be my last day of riding in Italy. Adriano and I climbed and descended through many small villages, houses clinging to every hilltop and steep slope.

We stopped at as many markets as possible for espresso and gelato, and we rode a bike trail that skirted and rolled through the mountains with spectacular views at every turn. I knew, at some point, this day would end, and riding bikes in Italy would, like all things, become but a fading memory. Such is our fate.

But I wasn’t done with Italy just yet. The next day, I would take a train to Naples and spend a week in southern Italy, visiting villages with which I have family ties. After that, I’d spend a few days in Rome, wandering around the spectacle that is the Eternal City, a place that epitomizes Italy for me — a querulous mixture of both the modern and the ancient.

But those are tales for another place and another time. 😊

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