

Ride of remembrance

The inaugural Granfondo Michele Scarponi takes in the home roads of the much-missed Italian rider on the anniversary of his death

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Locals and ex-pros including Gilberto Simoni, Andrea Tonti and Simone Stortoni pay their respects to the late Michele Scarponi before the start in his home town of Filottrano.



The streets are ablaze with the blue and yellow of Astana, and from every shop window grins the face of Michele Scarponi, the Eagle of Filottrano. Hanging either side of the archway into the town centre are giant images of the rider. Balloons adorn the driveways of houses as we leave behind Scarponi's old birth town on a ride through his native Marche region on Italy's eastern coast.

Cycling's Peter Pan

A year ago Michele Scarponi was killed in a collision with a vehicle while on a recovery ride on a sunny Saturday morning in spring. It happened on a road parallel to the one that takes us out of town today at the start of the event set up in Scarponi's name.

I'm riding with my friend Mike, who swapped London for Italy two years ago to open a nearby B&B with his wife. Judging by the scenery, it was the right decision. It sure beats Peckham.

Bordered by the more fashionable Tuscany and Umbria regions, and nestled between the Apennines and Adriatic Sea, the rural Marche is one of Italy's hidden gems. It boasts a strong tradition of mass participation rides and hosts a series of nine gran fondos - the Marche Marathon - running over the season. It was ▶

Dedications line the streets: 'Scarpa - we're with you', 'Michele - always in our thoughts', 'The Eagle was born here... Michi continues to fly', 'Grazie capitano'. It's the most poignant and uplifting start to any sportive I've done.

'He was a talented cyclist but clearly an extremely popular family man and his reputation was well known'

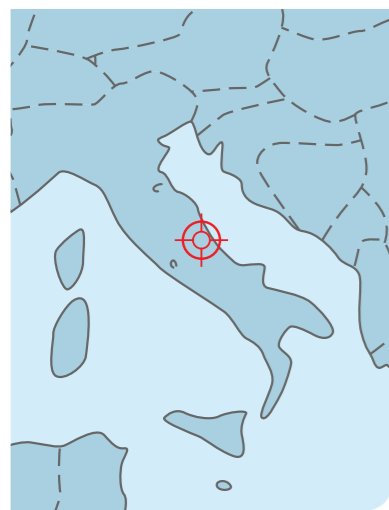
Below: A shop front displays photos of the Eagle of Filottrano, including his Stage 1 win at Tirreno-Adriatico a week before his death

Bottom: Riders pass through the sleepy town of Maiolati Spontini ahead of the first feed zone at 40km



The details

Come and pay your respects



What: Granfondo Michele Scarponi
 Where: Filottrano, Italy
 How far: 135km/90km
 Next one: 14th April 2019
 Price: €25-40
 More info: michelescarponi.it





Trains worthy of Mario Cipollini in his pomp zip past me – often followed by support cars

Top: The 5.5% hairpins through Castelbellino's olive groves were one of Scarponi's favourite training roads

Above: 'You have made the big flight leaving behind so much love in the hearts of those who cherish you'

Right: After 50km, riders on the longer route cross Lake Castreccioni to tackle the climb to Monte San Vicino

It's always Scarponi's intention to set up his own event in retirement, incorporating his favourite training roads.

Yesterday, over coffee at Caffè Wally in Filottrano's central piazza, which was Scarponi's favourite haunt, Mike described the local pro he used to look out for from the saddle. 'He was a talented cyclist but clearly an extremely popular family man and his reputation as being a fun-loving, jovial, selfless teammate was well known,' Mike says. Indeed, in an obituary the journalist Daniel Friebe painted him as 'a sort of Peter Pan' figure and 'a more prolific collector of friendships than of victories'.

It's not long before we pass through Scarponi's home hamlet of Cantalupo and approach the first of two sections of dirt track. It darts straight to the top of a cypress-capped hill and as we climb we can see the colourful line of riders stretching out ahead of us to a farmhouse on the brow. There may be no dust rising from behind the riders, but this is as close to taking part in the Strade Bianche as I've ever been.

As the track ramps up, my legs feel good and I find myself skittling past riders, swallowing up the dirt like Strade winner Tiesj Benoot en route to Siena (or so I tell myself). The white roads do make me feel vaguely heroic, and although I've dropped Mike, I'm eager to crest the wave of this optimism and ride on, mindful of the 11am cut-off in place for the longer of the two routes.

A trio of short climbs – to Monte Roberto, Cupramontana and Montevello – splits the bunch, and I congratulate myself on my speedy progress as we pass by the olive groves and umbrella pines of Castelbellino. Ahead looms the domed summit of Monte San Vicino – the big test for those doing the longer 135km route.

Vai! Vai! Vai!

There's nothing like a bit of abject humiliation to put you back in your place. Having revelled





The rider's ride

Cervélo R3 Ultegra, £2,999, cervelo.com

With a hatful of Paris-Roubaix podiums to its name, the R3 proved to be an ideal fit over the mixed terrain and road surfaces of the rural Marche. Despite selling itself as a light, stiff race bike, the R3 was supple enough to tackle the lumps and bumps of the *strade bianche*, helped by the addition of 28mm tyres.

It handled itself well (in truth, better than the organic lump sitting on top of it) and felt slick on the flat and nimble on the hills. Precise cornering was reassuring on roads that were frequently off camber and riddled with cracks.

In the absence of Frankie the macaw, the Cervélo R3 turned out to be the best partner I could have hoped for on a long day in the hills of eastern Italy.



Far left: The riders head past Lake Castreccioni towards the steep stuff

Left: Two punchy sections of gravel bookend the route through the farmland of the Marche after 13km and 124km

Bottom left: The climb up Monte San Vicino is 11.5km long with an average gradient of 6% and a maximum of 18%

in plucking off riders on the earlier leg-stretchers, I'm engulfed by a flurry of activity soon after the first feed zone. Trains worthy of Mario Cipollini in his pomp zip past me – often followed by support cars – and the penny soon drops: these are the top-end amateurs racing the shorter 90km circuit.

These are the kind of guys who cry 'Vai! Vai! Vai!' ('Go! Go! Go!') as they fly by worryingly close to my handlebars. They may even be the kind of guys who (judging by the things I've read about Italian gran fondos) may have succumbed to the same temptations that turned the head of Scarponi during his career. They are certainly the kind of guys who, sadly, have no qualms about discarding their empty gel packets in the most beautiful countryside.

My disquiet at seeing this natural Arcadia tainted by artificial debris is soon soothed by the shimmering waters of Lake Castreccioni. Once on the bridge, I have left behind the clinical racers and started the extra 45km loop of the long course. All of a sudden I'm very much alone, which suits me just fine, because it



Where before I always had gears in reserve, on this climb I'm constantly clicking in vain for the next one

allows me the chance to savour the bucolic idyll of the valley beyond the lake.

Poppies, buttercups, purple thistles and other spring flowers catch the same breeze that swishes through the leaves of overhead branches. I've never seen Italy so verdant and lush. The trickle of a stream cuts through the chirping of birds; lizards rustle through the undergrowth; wild horses trot through fields; sheep and goats graze amid the tink of bells and a distant tractor hums as it drags a plough. Passing through a small village, a man watering his garden takes time to douse me with his hose. It's no surprise Scarponi smiled so much. If this was my home, I'd never stop grinning.

Overcome by the beauty of my surroundings, it's not until I round a corner and hear a beep

as my timing chip kicks in that I realise I've hit Monte San Vicino. Two years ago, Stage 5 of Tirreno-Adriatico was supposed to finish on the summit of this exposed 1,208m peak but heavy snow saw the stage cancelled. No chance of that today. For late April, it's extremely hot – in fact, I haven't taken on nearly enough liquids and I'm pedalling not so much squares as triangles.

The full bonk comes halfway up and I force myself to stop, eat, drain my bidons and compose myself before pushing on. I'm really starting to struggle. Where before I always had gears in reserve, on this climb I'm constantly clicking in vain for the next one.

On the slow ascent, I keep trading places with two bearded men in matching blue kits (apparently a father-and-son combo). The

Older of the two, whose beard is a touch whiter, is in difficulty and is even stopping occasionally. His son, though, stays with him to offer encouragement and on one occasion even literally pushes him on the steepest 16% ramp. I'm touched by this act of familial selflessness, and it's with a lump in the throat that it dawns that this is the kind of relationship that twins Giacomo and Tommaso will not be able to have with their father, Michele.

Some reprieve from the heat comes when I enter the beech forest of Canfaieto, giving me the spur I need to press on to the summit, where a cheerfully manned spread of cured meats, cheeses, fruit and cakes awaits.

I'm just starting on the descent when I receive a text. It's from Mike, who's at the finish line having completed the shorter course. Over a glass of wine later that night, he'll admit he



Right: A water station at the cliffside hamlet of Elcito breaks up the gruelling climb – but there's still another 420m of vertical ascent to the summit

Bottom right: The 1,208m summit of Monte San Vicino looms over the riders as they tackle the long descent to Apiro

struggled to hold back the tears as he crossed the line, astonished that entire families had come out to show their support. 'It was a wonderfully touching way to end a tough day's riding on Michele's roads.'

Right now my day still features another 40 rolling kilometres, and I'll admit my morale is on the wane. The view back over the lake is as sumptuous as the town of Apiro is quaint, but I'm still alone, my pedalling reduced to an exercise in pain redistribution. Depending on how I ride I can shift the aching from my legs to my backside to my arms, but it's always somewhere. I eventually pull myself together by focusing on why I'm here: to commemorate someone who is no longer able to suffer.

Flight of fancy

While thinking of Scarponi, my mind drifts to his mascot – the macaw, Frankie. The exotic bird lived in a nearby village and would follow Scarponi on training rides, perhaps because his plumage matched his adopted master's blue and yellow of Astana. The same jersey I'm wearing.

I know there's something in The Rules about sporting pro kit, and I'm aware that,

until this morning, if I were to parrot any team it would hardly be Astana (unless ironically or at Halloween). But the team's handling of the Scarponi tragedy over the past year – including providing jerseys for today – has impressed me.

So it's with pride that I'm in full Astana regalia, but in secret I'm also harbouring the self-indulgent hope that it may attract Michele's old air-bound training partner. At one point, when I see the silhouette of a bird appear on the road above my own shadow and hear the flapping of wings, I find myself shouting, 'Frankie! Frankie!' But when I look up, it turns out to be a large blackbird mocking my efforts.

Later, I discover that Frankie did put in an appearance. On the anniversary of his friend's death, the bird landed on the shoulder of Scarponi's former *directeur sportif*, Stefano Zanini, near the start. Zanini will go on to tell me that it was 'incredible – of all the people he could follow, Frankie joined me and mechanic Federico Borselli to the start. It was very emotional. I don't know, but such a coincidence makes you think.'

Even in such an emotionally charged event, there comes a time when you just want it to

How we did it

TRAVEL

We flew directly to Marche airport (known as Ancona Falconara) from Stansted with Ryanair for around £100 return. If you're taking your own bike, expect to shell out an extra £60 each way. From the airport it's 35km to Filottrano.

ACCOMMODATION

There are many options in and around Filottrano, but Cyclist stayed at Casale Volpe (casalevolpe.com) about an hour's drive away. Casale Volpe is a traditional farmhouse above an imposing valley in Pontano, within riding distance of the striking Sibillini mountains. Double/twin rooms from €85 per night.

THANKS

Many thanks to organiser Zelio Pallotto for pulling all the strings, including arranging bike hire from ex-pro Simone Stortoni (levelobike.it), to Mike and Kelda Curtis at Casale Volpe, and finally to all of Michele Scarponi's family, friends and followers for an unforgettable experience.

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‘There aren’t many famous people in this region of Italy so Michele really stood out,’ he says. ‘But he was so humble and always had a smile for everyone. Any cyclist around here would have ridden with him at some time – which is why his death was such a shock.’

As we approach the arch into Filottrano, I recall, one month earlier, Adam Yates making the same journey (albeit much faster) en route to victory in Stage 5 of Tirreno-Adriatico. It’s with poignant symmetry – and a serendipitous nod to Giacomo and Tommaso – that one month later, Yates’s twin brother Simon will win Stage 11 of the Giro at nearby Osimo having ridden over these very roads in the *maglia rosa*. For my part, I’m just happy that I could play a

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small role in the middle section of this commemorative triptych.

When Vincenzo Nibali won the 2016 Giro against all odds – largely thanks to the almost-canine loyalty of Scarponi – he later declared that his Astana teammate ‘deserves a statue’. A year after this popular figure was so cruelly taken away from his loved ones, the Granfondo Scarponi – which is set to become an annual event – could be such a statue. The Eagle may have flown, but he’s still present in our lives. ✿ *Felix Lowe is a blogger for Eurosport and has been the journalistic lanterne rouge of Cyclist magazine since issue one*

► be over. This feeling strikes me after a cruel detour to the hilltop town of Cingoli, seemingly added as a gratuitous slap in the face to riders already at the limit of their endurance. Luckily it’s at this point that I meet Andrea, my saviour.

We team up in the valley after the descent, taking turns to pull on the front before finally exchanging some words during the second gravel section, surrounded by fields of bright yellow rapeseed, further mimicking the Astana colours against the deep blue afternoon sky. Andrea runs a beach resort at nearby Senigallia and speaks impeccable English. His riding companion damaged a wheel and so he’s been forced to ride alone. Talking to him takes my mind off my own discomfort and before long we hit the final rise to Filottrano – but not before Andrea tells me what Scarponi meant to him.

Scarponi posters have adorned the archway into Filottrano since Stage 5 of Tirreno-Adriatico – won by Britain’s Adam Yates – finished in the town centre

