

The champion of champions

From foothills to high passes, La Fausto Coppi sportive reveals the Alps as they might have been seen through the eyes of *Il Campionissimo* himself

Words JOSHUA CUNNINGHAM Photography GEOFF WAUGH

The name Fausto Coppi conjures many images in the minds of cyclists: the lithe figure with his aquiline nose and graceful pedalling style; the gravel-strewn roads of post-War Italy; the rivalry with Gino Bartali. It was a black and white era of thin steel bikes, toe clips and tubular tyres wrapped around shoulders. It was a time of regeneration for both Europe and the sport of cycling, and Coppi dominated the latter so completely that he earned the nickname *Il Campionissimo* – the champion of champions.

With such a reputation, any sportive that calls itself La Fausto Coppi has got a lot to live up to. Thankfully, as I discover throughout the seven hours, 177km and 4,125m of vertical ascent that pass under my wheels on this testing event, the name is entirely justified.

Getting prepped

I arrive in the town of Cuneo in Coppi’s native Piedmont region just prior to Saturday’s opening ‘Nations Ceremony’. This preliminary event, typical of European sportives, is held in the race village the day before the ride. It’s a chance to sign on and size up the riders I’ll be sharing the road with tomorrow. Judging by the tangle of bronzed, sinewy legs that are wandering around the marquees, I get the feeling that very few of them are planning a leisurely day in the saddle.

Once I’ve negotiated registration, I head off to locate the bike I’m hiring for the ride. I find my way to local bike shop Cicli Pepino, and soon

The details

Book your place before everyone else discovers it



What La Fausto Coppi le Alpe del Mare
Where Maritime Alps, Piedmont, Italy
When 12th July 2015
Distance 177km or 111km (both options include Colle Fauniera)
Price €35–€50 depending on month of entry. €10 deposit required for timing chip
Info faustocoppi.net



The bunch enjoys some serenity on its way to climb number one. It's a relaxed mood that won't last long



discover that its owner, Michele Pepino, is a seven-time winner of La Fausto Coppi. Pipped by the professional Francesco Moser in the inaugural 1987 edition, he went on to take the spoils in almost every other year until 1996, and so while he’s taking it upon himself to adjust my saddle height I try to extract some advice about what awaits me in the morning.

‘These are four different climbs,’ he relays to me via two separate translators, while gesturing at the ominous spikes on my route profile map. He points to the major climbs – the Santuario di Valmala, Piatta Soprana, the mighty Colle Fauniera and the Madonna del Colletto – and tells me, ‘You have to ride them differently. Especially the Fauniera, you must take it easy. In Italy we say *piano*.’

Only the Italians, I think to myself, could use such a elegant word to describe the act of riding slowly, as though riding with grace is something strictly reserved for them, for Coppi. But Michele cuts my musings short. ‘The descents too. Be careful – they are very technical,’ he says with concern, patting the air in front of him with an outstretched palm. ‘*Piano, piano, piano*.’

Coppi took one of his most famous wins here, where he gained nearly 12 minutes on arch-rival Gino Bartali



Apparitions of the Virgin Mary were common on the Valmala climb – hence the statues

The dawning sun reflects brightly off Cuneo’s polished stone streets in the morning. More than 2,000 starters cram eagerly behind the inflatable gantry, each with the same La Fausto Coppi jersey, chatting in the cool morning air. An empty pink-blue sky expands high above the central square, bridging the gap between the starting pen in which we’re waiting and the snow-capped Maritime Alps, just visible over terracotta roofs.

Coppi himself took one of his most famous wins after a stage depart from Cuneo in the 1949 Giro d’Italia, where he proceeded to gain nearly 12 minutes on his compatriot and arch-rival Gino Bartali on stage 17. It was an effort across the French-bordering High Alps that won him the final *maglia rosa* that year, and no doubt added a log to the fire of their notoriously inflammatory relationship. For me, it’s a more nonchalant start, and I leave the fringes of



► Cuneo amid the wheels of the last big group that forms. I peer over my shoulder at the rising peaks as we make our way northwards through Piedmont vineyards to Costigliole Saluzzo, before following the directions for Francia and the infamous Colle dell’Agnello pass.

Virgin territory

The start of the Santuario di Valmala climb, which shoots left off of the Agnello, comes 52km into the ride and provides a brutish induction to the many vertical metres that are to be gained today. Steep ramps are interspersed with sections of mild reprieve (*‘falsopiano’* roads, as the locals call them) making a rhythm hard to come by, and a temptation to delve into the red all too easy.

Once a stronghold of the Knights Templar, and later a site of multiple sightings of apparitions of the Virgin Mary, the Valmala climb is lined with Mother Mary statuettes carved into the rock walls above. They watch unflinchingly as I struggle past each hairpin.

As the 1,380m summit comes into view, along with the sanctuary itself, I wonder whether the miraculous apparitions may have just been the result of delirium striking the people who hiked up here. I’m not quite hallucinating yet, but climb number one hasn’t been easy.



Above: The lumpy green pastures and sheer rock faces of the Colle Fauniera provide a true feast for the eyes... and legs

When a turreted bridge comes into view, I feel as if I’m passing through a Dan Brown novel

I catch a glimpse of the imposing 3,841m Monte Viso behind me as I turn the final bend, but I soon disappear into the Pian Pietro forest as the road inverts and I begin to negotiate downwards through the trees – my fingers hovering tentatively over the brakes in light of Michele’s foreboding words.

The hundred-strong groups that earlier rolled out of Cuneo have by this point begun their gradual disintegration, and I sweep around the final few hairpins in the company of just four other riders. We swap turns on the flat, looking out across the encroaching flatland to the walls of rock beyond. The mid-morning haze still shrouds the lower slopes, while the remnants of winter snow dusts their tops. Soon enough we reach the town of Dronero and the start of the second climb.

Dronero passes quickly in a flurry of tight cobbled streets, dimly lit archways and sporadic groups of clapping locals. Intricately painted friezes flash by on the glowing terracotta walls, the Piedmont coat of arms is seen dangling on a flag overhead, and when a turreted bridge comes into view further downstream, I feel as if I’m passing through a Dan Brown novel.

Ramping out of the suburbs, the Piatta Soprana climb is a steadier effort than the Valmala, with great views of the surrounding hillsides, bursting with so much vegetation ►



Il Campionissimo

Who was Fausto Coppi?

In a career that spanned 21 years from 1939 to 1959, Fausto Coppi earned a reputation as one of cycling’s most complete riders. He won the Tour de France twice, the Giro d’Italia and Giro di Lombardia five times apiece, the World Championships, Milan–San Remo three times, Paris–Roubaix and Flèche Wallone, as well as setting an Hour record that stood for 14 years.

Many believe that if it weren’t for the Second World War, which blighted the early portion of his career, and during which Coppi spent time in an English POW camp, his palmares would have been even lengthier. But his successes nonetheless earned him the *Il Campionissimo* nickname.

Coppi’s career was entangled in rivalry with his countryman and one-time team-mate Gino Bartali. The two riders abandoned the 1948 World Championships rather than help each other, and on one occasion where they shared a bidon there was even dispute over who had offered it first. Their different personalities – Bartali was pious and rural, while Coppi was a modern urbanite – split Italy into rival factions.

In 1960, aged 40, Coppi died of malaria after a trip to Burkina Faso. He is commemorated each year at the Giro by the *Cima Coppi* prize, awarded to the first rider to cross the race’s highest point.



Following the passage of the rivers Grana, Maira and Varaita, the route of the sportive negotiates its way through the mountain valleys

► that they almost look tropical. But with a crumbling road surface and riders beginning to zig-zag across the road, it’s also indicative of what’s to come. Another tricky descent ensues before eventually, after 100km of riding, both my attention and pedals can begin to be turned on the mighty Colle Fauniera.

Mountain crescendo

At almost 23km in length and topping out at 2,480m, this climb is both the longest and highest (being the 15th highest paved road in Europe) I will have ever traversed, by bike or otherwise. It dwarfs its counterparts today almost by a factor of two. I remember Michele’s words once more – treat each climb differently – and resolve to treat this one as a true Alpine test.

Like so many ascents it begins in a forested river valley, that of the Grana, with the gentle gradients and sheltered enclosures that are so often to blame for episodes of premature acceleration, and the resulting leg combustions when the real climbing begins. Having been forewarned, I let the group around me disappear up the road as I click up a few sprockets and tell myself to ride *piano*.

The road clings to the side of the rocky gulley and begins to twist back and forth as it picks its way out of the trees to the village of Castelmagno, home to the cheese of the same name. A peeling advert for the *formaggio* is painted on a few half-hung wooden doors.

The ramps get a little fiercer heading out of Castelmagno – up to 14% – and as my speed slows to one that allows flies to circle in a humiliating buzz around my head, I begin to suffer from a predicament that’s been niggling me. I’ve had stomach cramps since before the first climb, no doubt due to my three-espresso breakfast, and as a result have neglected to eat enough. Pushing hard on the pedals at least diverts the pain from my stomach, but I’m running dangerously low on fuel and I peer longingly upwards to the mid-way feed station at Santuario di San Magno.

On arrival, I take my fill of bread, dried fruit, hams and cheeses – not Castelmagno, I might add – and remount. Once out of the trees, the landscape opens up into wide basins of green, penned in by a rough border of scree. The serenity is broken only by the gentle clanging of cowbells. At one point I’m forced to dismount as a weathered farmer shoos his herd from one side of the road to the other, and I can’t help but feel



If the 23km ‘Hill of the dead’ is the drainer of life, the lengthy descent is a tonic as it sweeps down the valley

as if I’m riding through scenes that have changed little since those that Coppi witnessed.

As the hairpins continue upwards into the cloud, I notice a direct correlation between the altitude, my legs and the road surface; as the former increases, the latter two deteriorate. Above 2,000m the road has been reduced to a crumbling asphalt strip no wider than an armspan as it creeps along the northern wall of the valley. It was first paved in 1992 and I’m inclined to think the Italian highways agency hasn’t visited since.

The Giro d’Italia has traversed the Fauniera pass only once, on stage 14 in 1999. Paolo Salvodelli was the eventual winner of the stage, but the undying hero of the *tifosi*, Marco Pantani, took pink that day, and it’s his statue

that stands proud at the top. I have to wonder how a pass that’s featured in the Giro only once has come to gain such renown that it has a cyclist’s statue on its summit. I ask the rider on my shoulder, and he stares at me for a second before saying, ‘The Giro came here. If the Giro visits a climb, then it is famous. Even only once.’

As I draw level with the Pantani statue I reach the high point of the day at 2,480m. Through the ruckus of the feed station I notice a sign highlighting the Fauniera’s alternate title: Colle dei Morti – ‘Hill of the dead’ – in recognition of a bloody 17th century Franco-Spanish-Piedmontese battle, and consider the name’s ongoing relevance for those at its mercy today.

But if the 23km ascent is the drainer of life, the equally lengthy descent is a tonic as it sweeps ►





The statue of Marco Pantani looms large at the top of the Colle Fauniera at 2,480m

down the adjacent Stura di Demonte valley. The technical switchbacks, freefalling straights and wandering livestock leave little room for error. Its narrowness only exaggerates the speed, and it will punish those who let their eyes linger on the surrounding beauty a little too long.

Cracking then whip

Now riding solo, I follow a combination of pointing marshals and the exploded remains of what were once groups of riders towards the finish. The route follows that of the 1999 Giro: down the Fauniera and along the valley floor, before delivering the final crack of the whip in the shape of the Madonna del Colletto. Compared to the Fauniera it's a mere blip, but my tired legs are complaining about this 1,310m barrier to home.

Once over the hill, I ride through the Giro stage-finishing town of Borgo San Dalmazzo and on to Cuneo along fast, meandering roads, with my hands now resting on the drops in my eagerness to finish. A group of eight or so riders shuttles past, accompanied by the incessant beeping of a moto-policeman's horn, and I latch onto their wheels. Calculating eyes glance over my face and legs – they are worried that I might want to race them for 500th-and-whatever place. I leave them to it, but nonetheless enjoy the free ride down a tree-lined boulevard to the finish in the square, the memory of departing it under a dawning sky seven hours ago now alarmingly distant.

The switchbacks, freefalling straights and wandering livestock leave little room for error



I coast over the finish line and fight my way through the melee to return my bike to Michele. 'How was it?' he asks as I sit puffing on my top tube. I squeeze into my mouth the last remaining drops of water in my bidon, shrug my shoulders, and lie through a broad smile: 'Piano'. 🌸
Joshua Cunningham is editorial assistant at Cyclist and a virtuoso of the piano

Do it yourself

Get in our slipstream...

TRAVEL AND ACCOMMODATION

The nearest airport is Turin, which is a two-hour drive from Cuneo, or trains run at fairly reasonable prices to Cuneo from Turin airport and Turin. Cuneo is a provincial capital so has plenty of accommodation, but La Fausto Coppi does attract a large international field and early booking is advisable. Cyclist stayed at Hotel Royal Superga in Cuneo, which couldn't have been more suitable: 200m from the start, bike storage facilities, and able to cater for an early breakfast (hotelroyalsuperga.it).

THANKS

The fluidity of our trip was in large part down to Luis Rendon of High Cadence Cycling Tours (highcadencecyclingtours.com), which arranges trips to cycling events across Italy, and saw to it that our trip passed without a hitch. Many thanks to Michele Pepino of Cicli Pepino for the hire of the bike and the invaluable advice. Visit good-bikes.net for more info.