



CAMBRIDGE CYCLING CLUB

For Recreational And Racing Cyclists



Newsletter July 2026

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Unless you're a gardener, what a summer we are having! Endless days of warm – sometimes very warm weather, with long, balmy evenings. Perfect for cycling or, for that matter, taking it easy with a glass of rosé. The last day of rain I can recall was day three of the Lord's Test!

We start this issue with an update from Jan Eric on our ever-popular Wednesday evening time trials. They continue to attract a great turnout and, for anyone interested in taking

part, you can ride on a standard road bike. There's no need to invest huge sums in a specialist time trial machine.

Ann Knight has recently attended a safeguarding workshop and is now our club's go-to person on all safeguarding matters. If you're not entirely sure what that means, do read on. As part of our more regular features, Will has kindly written two articles. The first, together with a few words from Tim Williams, provides an update on the Saturday morning introductory rides. I attended my first this weekend, along with Will, Richard and Emma as club representatives. I thought it was a very positive experience, and I'm confident these rides will continue to grow both our membership and the club's presence within the local cycling community. Will's second article brings us up to date on the Sunday Club Rides and includes a few words on SMART & SAFE cycling. Whether you're a first-timer or a regular Sunday rider, it's well worth a read.

Next Sunday, 1 August, is our Annual Garden Party. If you haven't signed up yet, it's not too late. And while we're on the subject of posters, you'll also find information about an ARU study investigating the benefits of resistance training and nutritional supplements for the over-40s. The Club



neither endorses nor discourages participation; it is entirely a matter of personal choice.

Finally, we round off this issue with two articles on members' summer adventures. Read about Phil Blakeman's first Audax – a brave step into the world of long-distance cycling. The second adventure, by your Editor, recounts a 4-day gravel trek across the Tuscan countryside while taking part in the Tuscany Trail 2026.

As always, if you have any comments or would like to contribute an article, however brief, to the next issue, I would be hugely grateful. You can contact me at email address above,

Thanks for reading.

Muscle function & healthy ageing

Take part in a research study exploring how **resistance exercise** and **nutritional supplements** affect **muscle strength and function**



Are you eligible?

- Aged **40+** years
- Males & Females
- Do not regularly perform resistance training
- Generally healthy & able to perform lower body exercise
- Do not regularly take omega-3 supplements

Benefits:

- Supervised low-volume strength training (2 x 30 min/week)
- Resistance training plan after completion
- Insights into muscle function
- Contribute to research on healthy ageing

Location :
Compass House
Anglia Ruskin University
Cambridge, CB5 8DZ
In-person visits required

Interested?



Find out more at:
<https://aru-healthyageingstudy.lovable.app>
<https://forms.office.com/e/YCOTrfjpew>
Email: dd672@pgr.aru.ac.uk
Dani Dalmay | Postgraduate researcher

  **ARCTIC BIOSCIENCE**

Study approved by the Faculty of Science and Engineering Research Ethics Committee, Anglia Ruskin University. Ethics number: ETH2526-4230

CAMBRIDGE CYCLING CLUB EVENING TIME TRIALS

BY JAN ERTNER



Lucy Griffin and Kai Egan on the Madingley 5-mile course.
(Photos: Davey Jones)

The Cambridge CC evening Time Trials are in full swing and enjoying another great year with around 20 riders taking part each week, and that is in spite of World Cup clashes and some very hot evenings! The events which are run in accordance with the standards of the CTT (Cycling Time Trials UK) feature two categories, one for Road bikes and one for Time Trial bikes, making it accessible to everyone.

We have Juniors from the age of 14 all the way up to people in their 70s enjoying testing themselves against the clock and, of course, a bit of friendly competition with fellow club members is also part of the fun. Ever since the 2023 “Reboot” of the CCC Evening Time trials a great community has been build up centred around the events and the associated WhatsApp group, the latter allowing people to stay in touch and talk to fellow riders about the events and all things related to Time Trialling.

We use a selection of courses throughout the season varying in distance from the short and feisty 5-mile Madingley course (which is also used for Come & Try events) to the ever-popular Bottisham 10, 13 & 25 Mile courses and the more vertically challenging Hilly 9-mile circuit around Six Mile Bottom and Brinkley. Here’s a few photos from our events:

If you are interested in taking part or otherwise support the running of these events do check out the CCC website: <https://www.cambridge-cycling-club.org.uk/timetrial.htm> or get in touch using timetrials@cambridgecc.co.uk



Bottisham “HQ” following an early season event.



Former multiple National Champion Michael Hutchinson is still enjoying riding his TT bike and it's great to have him as part of the CCC evening TT community (Photo: Davey Jones)

Rachel Fellows and Simon Bond enjoying a well-earned ice cream after a very warm evening on





Ramona and Alice at the Bottisham finish line together with Mick Draper who made a guest appearance helping with the timekeeping.

MAKING SURE OUR CLUB IS A SAFE AND WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT FOR EVERYONE. A QUICK INTRODUCTION FROM OUR NEW CLUB WELFARE OFFICER

BY ANN KNIGHTS, CLUB WELFARE OFFICER

Hello. I would like to introduce myself in my (relatively) new role of Club Welfare Officer, having completed British Cycling's Safe Wheel training and passed the DBS checks. I want to share a summary of what my role as your Club Welfare Officer involves, and why it matters.

What I'm Here For

I'm the first point of contact for club members on anything to do with welfare and safeguarding. In practice that means:

- Making sure everyone knows who I am and how to reach me. I am not so often out riding on a Sunday these days – but you can contact me anytime at welfare@cambridge-cycling-club.org.uk
- Working with the committee to keep the club a safe, welcoming place. This means raising any concerns passed to me and supporting the committee in deciding how to respond to them, as well as actively encouraging ways of making sure that everyone feels welcome and supported in our club
- Embedding our policies, promoting the code of conduct, and making sure safe recruitment is followed (for example of volunteers, any coaching roles etc)
- Being approachable, supportive, and honest, and keeping my own training up to date
- Referring on concerns where appropriate to British Cycling or other bodies who can offer support



The Skills (and Knowledge) I Bring

Good record-keeping, clear communication, and genuinely active listening. I will also try to make sure you feel properly heard, and I'm not afraid to ask questions or challenge things if something doesn't sit right.

I also bring my skills and knowledge from years of workplace psychology training and practice.

With regard to this role, I have trained so that I understand the different types of abuse, how child and adult safeguarding differ (particularly around consent), and am aware of British Cycling's policies and reporting procedures. I also understand how and where to refer situations on where necessary.

Building a Safe Club, Together

Hopefully you have always felt that you can raise concerns with each other, or with the Committee. Everyone in the club needs to continue to make sure we look after each other and

that we are vigilant in looking out for signs that someone might be struggling with their wellbeing or signs of abuse or poor practice.

Behind the scenes, I and the committee will make sure the right checks are in place. We will also keep a good set of policies: a safeguarding policy, risk assessments, consent forms, codes of conduct, a disciplinary process, and specific policies covering things like photography, social media, record keeping, anti-bullying, and concussion.

What British Cycling Does

As the national governing body, British Cycling investigates cases, supports clubs like ours with compliance, leads on safeguarding training, processes DBS checks, and develops policy, all while meeting standards set by the CPSU and The Ann Craft Trust. Behind the scenes there's a whole Safeguarding Team, plus a Case Management Group, an Integrity Committee, and a Board Welfare and Safety Lead. I act as the liaison with British Cycling – though you can also contact them directly if you choose to.

What to Report (and how)

Anything that doesn't feel right. That could be a wellbeing concern, a concussion or injury, poor practice, signs of abuse, a code of conduct breach, bullying, a disclosure, or just someone seeming unusually upset. There's no such thing as "too small" to mention, British Cycling doesn't set a threshold, and neither does the club.

You can contact me any time at welfare@cambridge-cycling-club.org.uk

Ann Knights — Club Welfare Officer

CLUB RIDES REPORT SUMMER 2026

BY WILL LOCKHART, CCC CLUB RUNS CAPTAIN

I think any report on our club rides should start with thanks to the group organisers (Marino, Steve, Paul, and Richard) and to the individual ride leaders. Paul especially as after 17 years with the club, and a year of organising the GT group, he has decided to step away from club activities. I hope someone in the GT group will be able to take on the responsibility for organising ride leaders.



CCC enjoying a visit to the Porter's Lodge

Carrot (cake) and stick

We're fortunate to be surrounded by a good number of cafés in pretty much every direction, and at a good distance for a morning's ride. I haven't come across that many new cafés so far this year, but there are a few that seem to have become popular destinations that I thought I would mention. Heading east, The Porter's Lodge is always welcoming, and very efficient at dealing with larger groups. Plenty of outside seating during the summer months. In the same direction is Fuller's Mill which gets good reviews, and that's not far from West Stow Country Park which also has a café. Sticking with the easterly direction, Smalltown in Clare has recently moved to larger premises, with outdoor seating at the back and is a good alternative to Platform One. Switching to the west, I finally had a ride to Franklin's Farm Dairy Café a few months ago, a nice alternative to the usual destinations out that way.

One of the nicest things about being Club Runs Captain (sounds grand, isn't) are the emails I get from people, usually looking to try a ride with the club. Feedback after a ride, when I get it, is always positive. However, I do unfortunately sometimes with everyone taking get messages from people within the club who feel that the standard of riding has fallen short. I think it would be reasonable to say that the complaints are generally best summed up as 'lack of discipline' - hence the repeated messaging on WhatsApp about group riding and 'ride etiquette'. No one likes to be told 'you're doing it wrong', but equally there's almost always room for improvement no matter how good you already are at something; club riding is no different. I took a look back through my emails and found one from 2017 when our then Club Coach, David McGaw, went out with various groups, and recorded his thoughts. All of his observations still hold true today.

So, I'll just run through some areas where collectively we could all improve our riding. Remember that the only really important outcome from a club ride is that everyone gets home safely; it doesn't really matter if you don't get your cinnamon bun, or latte, although those are of course nice things to have:

SMART & SAFE RIDING

- S Smooth and Steady** – Maintain a consistent Pace. Avoid sudden braking, surging or erratic swerves. Ride two abreast unless there is a good reason not to such as riding single file to avoid a traffic hazard. On no account ride three abreast.
- M Maintain Position and Stay Tight** – Stay close together and don't overlap wheels. Always ride directly or slightly offset from the rider in front of you about 1 wheel length apart.
- A Awareness** – Don't just stare at the wheel in front of you. Look ahead through the group, anticipate hazards, and pay attention to traffic.
- R Relay Signals** – Call out Hazards such as potholes and any obstacles in the road. Make sure the message is passed back in big groups e.g. "Car Front", "Car back", "Pothole right"
- T Take a turn** – Share the load. Take your pull at the front, then smoothly rotate the lead. Verbally communicate your intentions. Stay on the front as long or short as you like. Even if you are not confident, the group will support you.

INTRODUCTORY RIDES MID SUMMER UPDATE

BY TIM WILLIAMS, CCC CLUB RUNS CAPTAIN

2026 will be the third year in a row when CCC has run introductory rides during the summer months, since restarting them in 2024. Sometimes the turnout is small, as in the picture above from May's ride, where we had four guest riders. Typically, we get around half a dozen riders, it was a similar story on July 25th. Experience shows that riders who sign up either through referral by a friend or through Strava are really quite likely to show up on the day, and Strava seems to be by far and away the most effective way of advertising the rides. We are also hoping to advertise July's ride through British Cycling's Limitless program, which aims to widen participation by disabled riders



On behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank club members who have helped out on these rides - without you they wouldn't happen, and we always get very good feedback from the people who take part.

Will Lockhart

CCC Club Runs Captain

.....and a few words from Tim Williams of Perfect Condition who helped on one of the rides as Heather had a bad cold:

"Ah, yes. I remember. I was the eleventh-hour stand-in for my ailing beloved. My fellow guides, Tom and Stuart, were also standing in at the last-minute meaning that the three of us arrived with zero forward planning or preparation - just a suggested route from Will.

I can remember the six people who came (though none of their names, I'm afraid). There were four gents and two ladies, which with four from the Club (Stuart had brought Nathaniel along), made for a nicely sized group of ten.

The six guests had no trouble being club cyclists, i.e. they all rode comfortably at the speed of the group, chatted freely at the same time, and navigated a cafe stop without upsetting the staff, the other clients or each other.

In short, smiles and thumbs up all round.

The only slight oddity, which having noticed on the way home I could not un-notice, was the invisible cyclist (i.e. the empty space) on the right-hand side of row two. Everyone else in twos and on the wheel, but always a singleton behind the two leaders. Any cycling psyches care to ponder that one?"

AUDAX TYRE ANGEL

BY PHIL BLAKEMAN

When CTC announced a day of audax rides in the Cambridge area, including a 300km event, I knew I had to sign up. I'd been audax-curious for a while but had never committed. 300km would be a new milestone for me that I wanted to experience, for better or worse.

Preparation - I've done longer rides (up to 250km) in the past without too much preparation. These have always been with the aid of a group for drafting. I thought there might be long periods of solo riding on an Audax, and I wanted to make sure I could cope with that. So, to get some single-ride volume in my legs, I took advantage of a couple of Sunday club runs by added solo distance either side of them, getting over 200km on one without blowing up. Confidence built!



The 300km ride started at just after midnight at Cambridge station and would finish in Haslingfield village hall. Night riding brings more challenges. You are certainly on your own for nutrition and mechanicals at 3am! A puncture in the dark on a country lane requires light - so I bought a head lamp. I also bought 4 inner tubes (tubeless always seems too much effort). Then I needed clear glasses for night and sunglasses for the day. I don't have interchangeable lenses... A power bank for phone and Wahoo recharging, and a plug charger in case there was somewhere available - I did not know how long my Wahoo would last with the screen light always on. Fortunately, I have a powerful and long-lasting front light, but I bought two rear lights - always-on mode is better for nighttime than flash mode and of course it drains the battery faster. Then there is food - I never eat enough on a ride and so I thought I would try to eat more - which meant carrying plenty of bars and gels. Way too much as it turned out! And the ride was happening in the July heatwave, so a third water bottle seemed a good choice - it was! My only other long night ride was last year's Dunwich Dynamo, where I definitely carried too much gear - and I was nearing the same problem. Still, I have some small lightweight panniers so I would be carrying with comfort rather than stuffing jersey pockets to bursting.



A final bike and equipment check, chain lube and tyre pressure top up, a 90min nap early on Friday evening and I was good to go! Or so I thought

The Night - Midnight, and all the riders (about 40) were massed at the station frontage, getting registered and making sure control requirements were clear. I was finding it all slightly confusing as there is a paper-based control method (a brevet) and a digital method (an e-brevet). You only need to use one though, so I went digital. QR code scanned, we rolled out on time, neutralised for the first couple of km because of the terrible city roads. Heading past Coldham's Common everyone started to turn the pedals at their own pace, and into the flatlands we went.

Night riding is really quite pleasant. There is hardly any traffic, so the bigger roads become much more accessible. That means better tarmac, flowing curves and gentler gradients, so you really can make good time. A few riders passed me, and I picked up the wheel of small groups for a way, taking turns on the front into the slight headwind.

I was being careful not to go too hard too soon. I focussed on riding smooth. Slow accelerations, easy on the down slopes (such as they were), steady on the uphill grades. Good pacing was the name of the game today.

Swaffham's 24h McDonald's was reached in good time (the drive-thru is 24h - the restaurant was specially opened for us jet-lagged, ravenous cyclists - a first example of the excellent organisation). Fuelled up with synthetic food and coffee, a recharge of head unit and phone with a plug, a bit too much faffing due to early hour brain fog, and on the road into the dawn light.

The Morning - Heading to Southwold pier was the best stretch of the ride. It was cloudy and cool and spirits were up. I had a good long banter with Karl, who had just done a 1200km ride



in 84 hours in Sweden (!) and Mark, who had loads of good tips for other audaxes (audax, audii- what is the plural?). I was feeling good, I was on brand new roads which I could now see and enjoy, and I was looking forward to the freshly cooked bacon roll provided by the organisers at Southwold Pier.

Arriving at Southwold Pier - almost exactly halfway - at 0730, I put my order in for a bacon roll, took some photos and grabbed a coffee and water bottle top up. A bit of banter with other riders - including Gareth from CCC, who I haven't crossed paths with for a while, and a couple of ladies from Histon & Impington Bicycling Club who I recognised from last year's Dunwich Dynamo and a couple of other shared rides. Just after 8am, I hit the road again - to immediately find I had a rear puncture! Damn! Still, there are worse places to have to fix it.

However, it quickly became clear that my rear tyre had worn through to the canvas! This was a disaster. I doubted if I could get a new tyre in Southwold (when the shops eventually opened) and there was no way this tyre would get me much further. It was a miracle I had got to Southwold at all! For all my prep, I had not checked the tyre tread depth. I take the wheel off and on regularly when I put my bike on the indoor trainer and had done so just a couple of days before - it all looked fine, but clearly the tread was thinned right down. I was facing abandonment at only halfway.

I was also facing an extremely expensive taxi to a train station. I thought it might be worth at least swapping the tyres (my front one still had life left in it) so set about doing that. Perhaps I could ride a bit further to a station if the worn tyre was on the front. My tyres sit really tight on my rims, so it was a long frustrating job as all the other audaxers came through. Lots of sympathy and chat of similar experiences, so I was not alone. But also, I was still failing to complete my first audax. Just as I was finishing, a final group of riders came through the control and asked if they could help. I shrugged ruefully and said, "Only if you have a spare tyre.". To which one of the group, Alba, said "Yes, I have. I can give it to you."

I couldn't believe it. My first reaction was I couldn't take it - what if she needed it? And besides a road tyre is quite expensive! But she and her companions insisted, and I gratefully accepted the charity! I was back in action! After yet more tyre removal and replacement - I wanted the

new tyre on the rear, but I had already set my front tyre on it, so I was basically swapping it back again - and a cafe stop (the bacon roll long since used up) I was rolling again. I had lost over 2h - but the audax community had saved my ride!!

And at Midday - Despite the heatwave, we still were riding under cloud, so it was quite cool. I knew it would change as I headed

back inland, and by midday I saw my shadow for the first time. One other problem my long mechanical caused was that I would now have to ride through the whole afternoon heat, instead of finishing mid-afternoon. I steeled myself for a harder run back.

Still on new roads, I was keeping my riding efficient and started to catch up with a few riders. A bit of a chat and check in on how people were feeling in the heat and then back to my pace. I never did see Alba and her group again. One rider said he had seen some audaxers in the Debenham Coop, so I think I must have passed them there. I know she finished safely after me. We had exchanged contact info, so I was happily able to pay her back from the tyre on Sunday.

The next control was Lavenham. I took a late lunch from the coop and a fancy ice cream from one of the shops. That was necessary I was starting to feel the distance and the heat. A fellow rider had bought too much water and so he gave me the half litre that was left - more generosity!

The Afternoon - The final leg lay ahead, and after a slow start immediately out of Lavenham, I found my mojo again. I think I had caught up somewhat with my fuelling and I started to recognise the roads as we were within the 50-60km radius from Cambridge that defines a typical weekend ride limit! Pushing on, I made it to the finish at Haslingfield village hall.

It was very busy! There was a surprisingly BIG spread of food laid on - sweet and savoury, hot and cold. I went for a bowl of creamy rice pudding with jam; I couldn't face anything else at that moment. Riders off the shorter routes were arriving constantly, and lots of people were





sitting around tables chatting. I saw Gwyneth and Lynne from HIBC again and shared our highlights of the day and then it was time to ride back home in Cambridge!

Overall, I really enjoyed my first audax. It is about the ride and the experience, not the speed, and has a DIY attitude that makes a different feel to the sportive events I had done in the past. It was really well organised, and I was

amazed at the amount of catering and the commitment of the volunteers. Many thanks to Yasmin from CTC for organising the whole day so effectively, Roger and his friend cooking up bacon and coffee at Southwold, all the other volunteers it took to make it happen, my fellow riders for making it seem less than 300km, and of course Alba, my tyre angel!

What I learned - In total, I registered 324km, 1525m elevation, 12h 41min moving time and 17h 15min total time (plus another 13km at the start and end). No big pains post ride, nor excessive tiredness due to missing a night's sleep. What is not to like!?

- 1) tyre wear is not obvious until it is
- 2) I really don't need to carry so much food. I am not in the Australian outback; there are plenty of shops and cafes here!
- 3) I didn't realise, but using a wheel sensor for speed & distance gives you a higher measured distance than using GPS distance. GPS is a 2D projection onto a flat plane, while wheels measure the surface distance. I measured 9km more distance than the billed 315km advertised - which was confusing and a bit demoralising while on the road. I thought I must be finished but I was still in Balsham!

I would certainly do another audax, 200km or 300km. Would I do a longer audax? 400km is the next distance, which is probably around 20h riding without sleep. At 600km distance, there is usually a control which provides a chance to sleep (or you can stop in hotels if you like too!). I don't think I will do those sorts of distances soon - but I think I will eventually!

TUSCANY TRAIL 2026 – A UNIQUE GRAVEL ADVENTURE

BY GEOFF ARNOLD



Retirement can be dangerous: Although still officially working until December 2025, my retirement planning started in the summer when I visited Adam's garage and was introduced to his new gravel bike, a Canyon Grizl. I had already been toying with the idea of trying gravel riding myself, inspired by countless GCN videos and Conor's adventures across remote landscapes. Seeing the Grizl in the flesh was all the encouragement I needed. Canyon

was about to launch a new generation of the bike, which meant the outgoing model was heavily discounted. A few days later, after convincing myself that the yellow-and-purple colour scheme was perfectly acceptable, I became the proud owner of a Di2-equipped Grizl.

After a brief shakedown ride the bike sat patiently in the garage while I consumed even more gravel content online. One video introduced me to the Tuscany Trail, a self-supported gravel event through the heart of Tuscany. It seemed to offer everything I wanted: cycling, spectacular scenery, great food and, naturally, excellent wine. The event was scheduled for May 2026, giving me plenty of time to prepare. My friend Adam, who many of you will know from ELSR, was the obvious candidate to join me, and fortunately he required very little persuasion.

The Tuscany Trail sells out every year, so when registration opened in December 2025, we coordinated our efforts to secure matching start slots. I was supposedly working from home while Adam was travelling back from Cornwall. We needn't have worried quite so much, but all 6,000 places were eventually sold out by early January.

Preparation quickly became an excuse to buy accessories. Conveniently, I retired at the end of 2025 and received a Garmin 1050 and a Tailfin rack and pannier system as leaving gifts. Flights were booked, accommodation arranged and, with remarkable optimism, I assumed we would complete the route in four days.

Although the full route was not published in advance, the start was known to be near Campiglia Marittima. I booked a small B&B in the old town for both the first and last





nights, partly because there was a chance they would store our bike boxes. They kindly agreed and proved to be excellent hosts throughout.

Training consisted of a cycling trip to Lanzarote, the club's Mallorca week and a loose adherence to Garmin's performance metrics. To be honest, the metrics caused more anxiety than motivation. I never achieved the aerobic targets Garmin believed I should reach. Fortunately, Tuscany was about to demonstrate that numbers on a screen are not everything.

On 26 June 2026 we flew to Pisa with our bike boxes, caught the train to Campiglia Marittima and somehow got away with taking luggage that was technically larger than permitted. At the station we found a single waiting taxi driven by Roberto, whose number we carefully stored in the hope he could rescue us again at the end of the ride.

After assembling the bikes and storing the boxes, we wandered into the historic centre for a beer and dinner. The town was decorated with Tuscany Trail flags and buzzing with anticipation. We already felt part of something special.

The following morning, we rolled downhill to the start area. Riders from across Europe milled around collecting packs, adjusting luggage and drinking coffee. We soon discovered that the booked start time simply determined when you collected your rider pack; you could actually begin whenever you liked. Had we known, we would have collected ours the previous evening.



The weather was perfect as we headed off. We had agreed from the outset that this would not be a camping expedition. Instead, we booked accommodation each night, ensuring hot showers and comfortable beds. Our first stop was in Sant'Angelo in Colle, around 94 miles away and somewhat further than ideal for a first day.

The opening miles followed the coast before turning inland toward the first organised food stop. Italian coffee, cakes, sandwiches and even wine were available. We met English riders intending to bivvy along the route. A brief discussion between Adam and me confirmed that

sleeping outdoors while being eaten alive by mosquitoes held little appeal.

The route wound through rolling countryside, cafés and vineyards before reaching Paganico. From there we continued toward Sant'Angelo. Near the final climb we encountered a circular red-and-white sign. More observant riders would have recognised it as "road closed". I did not.



The climb itself was our first real taste of Strade Bianche, a long gravel ascent averaging around seven percent. Near the top we discovered exactly why the road had been closed. A large metal barrier blocked the route, beyond which part of the road had disappeared down the hillside. Having climbed so far, retreat seemed unthinkable. We carefully picked our way around the barrier and across a section covered in protective sheeting, hoping there was still road underneath. Thankfully there was.

Our reward was arrival at the B&B, which we shared with two American riders. We planned to celebrate with a beer, only to discover the town appeared deserted. Restaurants were closed and the streets empty. Fortunately, a bottle of prosecco supplied with the room improved matters considerably. Later we found a Trattoria serving skewered pig's liver with fennel, white beans and roast potatoes. Rustic, perhaps, but excellent.

Day two began with rolls from a breakfast basket before we rejoined the trail. We rode alongside an entertaining group of Italians consisting of family and friends. One gentleman proudly pointed to his daughter and described her as his "product", proving that translation apps still have some way to go.



Our lunchtime destination was Pienza. The climb through cypress-lined gravel roads was classic Tuscany and one of the highlights of the trip. Pienza itself was crowded with tourists, confirming its place on the Tuscan grand tour. After coffee and sightseeing we pressed on toward Siena.

The route into Siena passed vineyards and avenues of cypress trees before delivering us to one of Italy's most beautiful cities. Our Airbnb appeared at first glance to contain only one bed, but Adam eventually discovered a fold-out bed and duvet hidden in a cupboard. Crisis averted. After exploring the city, we enjoyed a memorable

tasting menu that contained more food than either of us could sensibly consume

The next morning, we escaped Siena after a brief battle with navigation and traffic. One of the pleasures of the Tuscany Trail is that fellow riders are everywhere, instantly recognisable by the banners attached to their bikes. Whether at cafés, junctions or viewpoints, there was always someone else sharing the experience.



Day three was arguably the most spectacular. Our first major stop was Monteriggioni, a compact medieval walled town that I knew almost nothing about before arriving. Entering through the gate felt like stepping back in time. The pride locals felt in their town was obvious, from the immaculate streets to the elderly man collecting litter on the approach.

From there we continued to San Gimignano. Alongside thousands of tourists and cyclists we filled water bottles at the fountain near the gate before exploring the centre. Adam explained the history of the famous towers, built as symbols of wealth and status. My attention, however, was soon diverted by a porchetta van. The resulting pork-filled baguette was probably the finest food of the entire trip—warm, salty, buttery and utterly perfect.

Accommodation that evening was an Agriturismo we had booked while resting in Siena. Surrounded by rolling hills, complete with swimming pool and panoramic views, it represented Tuscany at its finest. A German couple wasted no time heading for the pool, while I decided that remaining dry was the more sensible British option with of course a Moretti in hand.

Dinner was served in a converted barn alongside fellow riders from around the world. Pasta, pork, beans, potatoes and a bottle of local 5 Euro red wine provided exactly what was needed after a long day in the saddle. As the sun set, the shadows stretched across the hills, creating one of the most beautiful scenes of the entire trip.

The fourth and final day featured the biggest climbs. While the ascents were challenging, I often found the technical descents harder. Steep gravel tracks demanded complete concentration and left my hands permanently resting on the brakes. We climbed through Montecatini Val di Cecina and later onto a high forest ridge. For around 40 kilometres we rode through woodland on gravel roads with barely a settlement in sight.

Eventually the route turned toward the Mediterranean and began its final descent. At one point I stopped to identify birdsong using the Merlin app. It revealed the singer to be a Golden Oriole. Sadly, I never managed to spot the bird itself.



Back in Campiglia Marittima we rolled beneath the finishing arch and collected our rewards: a finisher's T-shirt and a bottle of Tuscan red wine. A celebratory beer and chips provided fuel for the final challenge—an 800-foot climb back to our B&B.

By the end we had covered 266 miles and climbed more than 21,000 feet.

What were the key takeaways? First, a gravel bike was unquestionably the right tool for the job. Both of us rode Canyon Grizls with 45mm tubeless tyres and never wished for anything different. Second, the Tailfin luggage system whilst expensive was utterly reliable. Third, accommodation should be booked as early as possible because rooms disappear quickly. Fourth, food and drink are plentiful along the route, but every opportunity to refill water bottles should be taken. Finally, the atmosphere is exceptional. Riders, volunteers and locals alike create a genuinely welcoming experience.

Would I do it again? Absolutely. Just not for a little while.