

First time gran fondo

Jennifer Stuart-Smith started her sportive career by jumping in at the deep end, heading to northern Italy to take part in La Prosecco Classic

On the start line of the Prosecco Classic sportive, in the foothills of the Dolomites, in front of 1,800 other cyclists, I suddenly feel nervous. It's just after 9am. The tape is about to be raised. The TV cameras focus on the line-up of ex-Olympic athletes, the great and the good of the cycling world – and me.

What did I think I was doing here? And how had I managed to end up facing the wrong way? My raised foot trembled on its pedal.

Sparkling wine country

Six weeks earlier, I'd been asked by a friend if I fancied accompanying an elite men's cycling team to northern Italy. They needed an Italian-speaking dogsbody – and they had room in their van for my bicycle. I was online, booking my 'plane ticket, before he'd even got to the words 'cycling team'.

Keeping up with, and trying to impress, boys has always got me into trouble. Aged seven, I walked along the top of a barbed-wire fence to impress the scouts. In my teens I climbed rock faces, and in my twenties I learned to fly solo. Now in my early thirties, and after my first summer of road cycling, this seemed like the perfect way to start

hardcore road riding. Stuff time-trials on my local dual carriageway.

La Prosecco Classic is a semi-competitive sportive that takes in some of the best and arguably most scenic cycle routes in Italy. The zone formed part of the 2009 Giro d'Italia and will do again in 2011. It is split into two options: the 'gran fondo' of 125km and the 'medio fondo' of 67km. For my first sportive, I thought I'd play safe, and I opted for the shorter route.

The day before the event, I'd sampled the area's steep inclines and its fizz – the dry, white wine that is the race's namesake and a notable alternative to French Champagne. On a practice run with the elite riders to 'Il Muro' – The Wall, a delightful incline that goes on for 1km – I'd ignored my new friend Luciano's advice to keep on pedalling past the Prosecco promotional tent. Damn those Italians and their crazy, tactical hospitality.

I took the bait and gulped down a glassful before getting back on the saddle. I also fell for a large portion of tiramisu the evening before the event, while the elite riders from our team – Team Frezza Pasta Monte Grappa – showed the abstinence required of true athletes.



Of the 950 participants in the 67km medio fondo, only 70 were women

Now, swathed in fancy promotional kit, I was jammed amongst the VIPs by the starting tape, my Pinarello bicycle looking every one of its ten years – and the only exotic language escaping my lips was muttered Anglo-Saxon.

I'd arrived late, having had to cycle 15km to get there, and found myself cycling into the line-up from

Photos courtesy of Jennifer Stuart-Smith, except far right (Phil O'Connor)



Vineyards are everywhere in this part of Italy. La Prosecco Classic is named after sparkling wine

the front, my bike then pointing in the wrong direction. This was not the adrenaline buzz I was after. Thankfully the starting cannon scared the bejesus out of the rest of the competitors, so at least we were on an even footing.

In the peloton

Out we wobbled, feet grappling for clip-in pedals, around the cobbled square of Valdobbiadene, before heading up into the vine-covered foothills. But, as I laboured my way up the 5km climb from the start, I blessed yesterday's tiramisu – which, appropriately, translates as 'pull me up' – and the added momentum it gave me as we started on the first of many fast descents.

My tunnel vision cleared as the fear slipped away, and spectators at the side of the road cheered me on with 'Forza le donne!' and 'Brava ragazza!'. Of more than 950 participants in the medio fondo, only 70 were women – making it hard for me to merge into the pack. That said, being the centre of attention now didn't feel so bad.

Fired up by the shouts and the increasing pace, I felt the competitive spirit take hold. I wanted to get past the rider in front. 'A sinistra!' ('On your left!').

'Attenzione!' ('Watch out!')... English girl coming through.

Two of the elite riders from our team passed me early on, and I felt a sense of pride as they sped past me and the local cycling hotshots. I urged them on. At this stage, I was happy maintaining my position among the sleek Italians on equally sleek bikes, while plotting my next manoeuvre.

My fellow participants were, in return, the epitome of gentlemanliness. The next couple of hours were marked by random acts of kindness, from the guy who put his hand on my back and urged me to stay with the peloton, to the angel – a local rider who was not even in the event – who gave me his water bottle and led me to the finish.

Everyone a winner

Over the last couple of kilometres, I needed all the help I could get. The gentle climb, up the straight to the line, was almost my undoing, and I feared I might not have enough fuel in the tank. 'Bonking' was a distinct possibility. I stood up on my pedals, and prayed that my legs wouldn't fold.

In the town square, where earlier there had been a media circus, which had seemed dedicated to exposing me as a charlatan, now there were glitzy PR girls, handing out medals – and roses to the female riders. In England this might have seemed naff, but here in Italy it was perfection. There had been a biplane in the sky at the start; now I wanted it back, writing my name in the air.

From the delirium of making it across the finish line, my mind began to settle and, managing not cry, I started to enjoy the sensory overload of the heaving town square.

My eyes took in the canapés, prizes and crate after crate of Prosecco, and the gentle October light worked its magic on the church tower's sundial. While all the other racers had their fancy bike computers, that medieval timepiece was all I had to gauge my speed. Two and a quarter hours had passed – not bad going for 67km. I was placed 462nd overall and 10th out of the 70 women in the medio fondo. Amazingly, I'd hardly even noticed the men I'd been riding with.

Fact file
La Prosecco Classic



The event: It's an end of season sportive that takes place in early October each year. Anyone of reasonable fitness can ride it.

More information: the event website is www.laprosecco.com. This is in Italian, so it's easier to search for 'La Prosecco Classic' in Google, which will give you the option of automatically translating the page. Your search will also provide links to companies offering package deals for the event from the UK.

DIY travel: Ryanair have twice-daily flights to Venice-Treviso airport from London Stansted

UK sportives just for women



If you'd like to take part in a sportive but can't get to Italy, why not try one of the Ladies Only Sportives organised by the CTC Champions programme in the UK? There will be two events in 2011, June 12th in the Leeds/Bradford area and September 18th in Reading. Both events will feature a variety of distances from 30-100km, full route signage, feed stops and mechanical back up. There will be an events village at the start /finish area where you can get information and advice. For more details, visit www.ctc.org.uk/challengerides.