

The Stelvio has 48 numbered hairpins



## The Netherlands

### Riding the water lines

**Chris Tomes** cruised through Dutch countryside beside military defences

**HAVING SIX DAYS** spare for a trip in April, my research led me to the Dutch Waterlinieroute, which runs for 410km from Bergen op Zoom in the south to Edam above Amsterdam. Two days were needed to get there and back, leaving 100km a day for the route. It looked achievable.

The Waterlinieroute follows a line of fortifications dating from 1628 but used as late as WWII. They were employed for armed defence and for flooding surrounding land to strand would-be invading armies.

Always a value-seeking tourist, I took the daytime ferry from Harwich and used Vrienden op de Fiets (Friends of the bicycle) where available for affordable B&B.

Spring weather is unpredictable in the Netherlands. I rode through one afternoon of rain and had a tough day cycling into a headwind. The water lines route is well signed, skirts cities and occasionally uses ferries. Cycling on traffic-free paths with simple navigation was very relaxing.

Whenever I wanted a break there was lots to see. I visited the remains of forts and many of the memorials to Allied forces who had sacrificed their lives helping to liberate the country during WWII. There were working windmills, museums and plenty of wildlife. I saw my first spoonbill.

My Vrienden op de Fiets hosts were lovely. I was so taken by the good nature and efficient running of the organisation that my wife and I have subsequently taken the plunge and become hosts ourselves.



## Italy

### Stelvio unplanned

*The classic road climb was too tempting for David Futter to pass up – even in jeans, riding a hired bike*

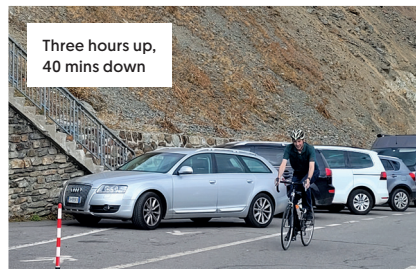
**D**uring a recent holiday in South Tirol, the organiser suggested a trip up the Stelvio Pass due to the good weather forecast. After a brief check on Google, I asked if I could be dropped off at Baldi Sport bike hire in Prato, then meet the others at the top. He was happy to accommodate the crazy Englishman's suggestion.

Suitably equipped with a high-end road bike and a helmet, I set off to tackle the 25km ride, without thinking too hard about the 2,400m ascent. The many hairpins in the last 10km are the headline of the Stelvio, but the road climbs steadily right from the start.

I was trying to pace myself, while avoiding using up all the gears too soon. One elderly German cyclist asked what was with the jeans and T-shirt as I rode past; I explained this was a completely unplanned excursion. I stopped for a quick snack and photo opportunity, just as the ladder of hairpins came into view.

Refreshed from my pit stop, I found a reassuring rhythm to the hairpins, which gave a few moments of relief each time I was going around the outside, and a few moments of extra effort when taking the inside. The last few seemed to get easier as the summit came into sight.

I managed the ascent in three



hours, then refuelled on bratwurst and sauerkraut from a roadside stall, having spotted my wife and our friends. After lunch, I bought a couple of souvenirs and then donned my jumper for the descent. High in the Alps in October it's not that warm.

I set off just as the others were returning to the car. The descent was very fast, despite my natural caution, and 40 minutes later I returned the hire bike. I'd arrived at the town before the support vehicle!

