

# ROMULUS

2007 Wolfson College

*Motion* →



# ITALIAN JOURNEY

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## Mittenwald, 29 July 2006

THE SUSPENSE HAD BEEN BUILDING UP FOR ALMOST TOO LONG: more than six months of conscious training and several weeks of careful planning. But now, the time has come. I do not recall how this idea first came to my mind. It was maybe a youthful desire to explore far-off places. In any case, the mere thought of cycling across the Alps had captivated my imagination during the last few years and became synonymous with fascination and inexplicable restlessness. The route: Munich to Venice, via the Dolomites. The endeavour seemed to be the ultimate challenge for anyone who loves long-distance cycling, enjoys high mountain peaks and can't resist thrilling down-hills.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe also fantasised about going south and eventually set off on his own Italian journey in 1786. The German poet had been working for the Duchy of Weimar for more than ten years and

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desperately wanted to move away from his asphyxiating bureaucratic commitments. The need to find the classical world of the Ancients, idealised in white marble statues, drove him to leave Weimar in the middle of the night and set out for Italy. Two men, two periods of time, different motives and yet the same craving for adventure.

Needless to say, Goethe's means of transport were also different. He preferred the 'comfort' of carriages, which entailed travelling on bumpy gravel roads, broken axles and sore backsides. Maybe he would have walked or sailed on a boat for part of the way. But he would not have used a bicycle. The historical origins of this contraption are contested, and conjectures about them often prove to be unfounded—like attributing its invention to a pupil of Leonardo—but it is doubtful that the modern bicycle became a common sight in Europe until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Even its direct precursor, the velocipede, was not invented until the 1810s by a supposed Baron von Drais. The idea of cycling across the Alps was simply unthinkable in Goethe's times.

The German poet likely would have been amused by the idea of sitting on something that looked like a tiny horse saddle and propelling himself with an awkward windmill-like movement of his feet. If Goethe was already puzzled by the clothes and the hats with peacock feathers that people wore in the south of Tyrol in the eighteenth century, he surely

would have been perplexed by the sight of a young man wearing black spandex and an eccentric helmet made of a strange blend of unimaginable materials.

But the *untraveller* can be equally bewildered. I remember how suspiciously the townspeople looked at me when I first arrived at Mittenwald in the early evening. There is no doubt that they, unlike Goethe, are used to seeing many cyclists around, but my Latino look and the fact that I am travelling on my own didn't help much to gain their trust (*Er muss verrückt sein*). It was so difficult to get a room that I even considered cycling on and trying my luck in the next town.

To keep going would have been awfully painful as the first day of cycling had been much harder than expected. Despite all my cautious planning and my careful analysis of maps and other people's itineraries, things had turned out slightly different than planned. I had miscalculated the distance between Munich and Mittenwald (according to my little computer I covered 112 km); took an unintended detour along a cycling path after Wolfrathausen; and came across an unexpected 10 km climb after the Köchelsee. These were, however, minor faults. My worst mistake was to underestimate the sun's dreadful effect which made me suffer from dehydration.

But at least the reward was worth the pain. About 20 km before Mittenwald I reached the magnificent Walchensee, a huge lake surrounded by limestone cliffs which are reflected in the waters of that crystal-blue mirror. The lake, already high in the mountains, is itself adorned by a panoramic view of Alpine peaks. Goethe must have been touched by this landscape when he visited on his way to the Brenner Pass, more than two hundred years before, on the seventh of September, 1786.

## Innsbruck, 30 July 2006

I write these lines while drinking a nice coffee in front of the *Goldenes Dachl* ("Golden Roof") where Emperor Maximilian I used to watch special public events. It is a landmark of Innsbruck, the city where I arrived two hours ago. It was a short and easy day of pedalling: only 52 km with a lengthy but not very steep up-hill. Along the way I passed a couple of Tyrolean towns before finally descending into the fertile valley where this city is located. It was very sunny again, but I was careful to drink enough water this time.

Goethe passed by Innsbruck during his first trip. For a moment he considered exploring the city, but he was too anxious to get to Italy and decided not to stop over. I am as impatient as he was to leave at

once but, unlike the German poet, I should stay for a days' rest before the actual challenge begins. This charming though touristy city, rising gracefully on the banks of the river Inn, is the gateway to the Brenner Pass, the first Alpine pass that I will cross on my little adventure and itself the gateway to Italy. I am looking forward to tomorrow.

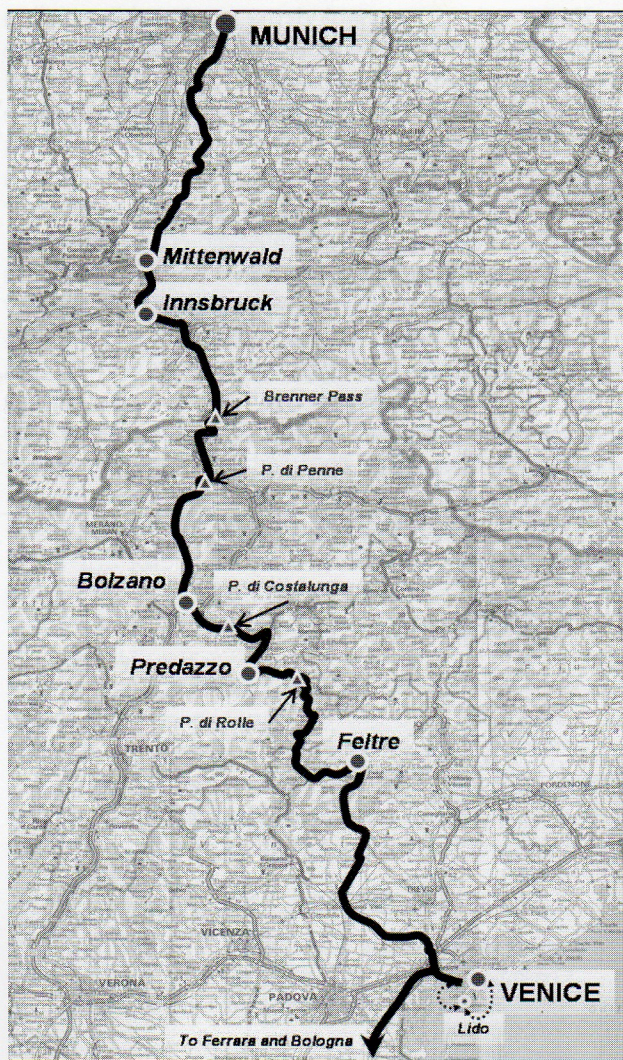
### **Bolzano, 2 August 2006**

I am exhausted after yesterday's physical and emotional ups and downs. Sitting immobile on a nice piazza and trying to digest all the thrills of my first day in the Alps is all that I feel capable of achieving today. It all began after leaving Innsbruck around midday. I found the way to the Brenner Pass and began cycling with a childlike joy. The time had finally come: it was the Alps, me and the Highlander—that's the name of my bike.

I began climbing towards the Brenner Pass at a good pace: between 17 and 20 km/h, not bad if you have a constant, 17 km-long uphill and are carrying some extra pounds of luggage. I only stopped in Gries to eat something and adjust the panniers. It was here that the torrential rains began, but I cycled on toward the *Paso Brennero*. The change in language was not the only indication of my arrival in Italy. As if a spell had been cast, the sun began shining when I crossed the Italian border and reached, as Goethe described it, 'the land where the citron trees blossom'. The first Alpine pass had gone alright and there was now a long downhill ahead of me—almost 40 km—until Sterzing. A memorable experience: playing with the law of gravity on my side, gliding down effortlessly, and enjoying each moment as it slipped away.

It was maybe the feeling of elation after that long downhill or some inexplicable impulse, but for some reason I decided to continue towards the *Paso di Penne*. This was not a good idea. I soon found myself facing an endless series of serpentines extending steeply up the mountain. Even worse, the spell turned into a curse as heavy rains fell again, and the temperature dropped rapidly as I ascended. I was not even halfway up when I had that horrible thought that anyone practicing endurance sports has had at least once: *Why the hell am I doing this?!*

The rain worsened when I reached the pass. I needed a break and stopped for a moment, but really there was no time to waste. Bolzano was more than 50 km away and there were just a few hours of daylight left. I had to get going. I jumped back on my bicycle and began my descent. I was tired, I was not focused. And the rain, the weight of my luggage, and the steep inclination made for a dangerous combination. I checked my speedometer and realised that no matter how strongly I pulled on the brakes, I kept racing down the mountain with increased speed: 30 km/h, now 40 km/h, now 55 km/h. I looked ahead



and there was a turn of almost 90 degrees and just beyond it...a steep ravine. Again I squeezed the brakes. I could not stop. Images flashed into my mind: a helicopter looking for my body, a brief note in the Italian tabloids (*Ciclista messicano muore nelle Alpi*).

But these terrible premonitions were not fulfilled. How, I don't know, but I managed to manoeuvre the bike around the bend; I was lucky that no cars were coming from the opposite direction. I continued my frantic ride, pretending nothing had happened. But deep inside, the experience left an indelible mark.

### **Feltre, 4 August 2006**

Goethe followed a different route after Bolzano. He was looking for another type of emotional excitement: that inspired by Italian paintings and architecture, rather than cycling up and down hills. And so he took a detour southwest, avoiding the precipitous Dolomites. He visited Verona, Trento, Vicenza, and Padua before eventually arriving in Venice. In contrast, I went southeast from Bolzano to Predazzo across the *Paso di Costalunga*, and from Predazzo to Feltre across the *Paso di Rolle*.

Heavy rain accompanied me again while cycling the first half of the *Paso di Costalunga* and made the steep ascent particularly difficult. I must have looked so miserable—my clothes drenched through to the skin, myself struggling to keep a good cycling cadence and lugging two huge panniers—that a motorist stopped and offered to give me a lift. Our conversation became an unintelligible combination of

Italian, English, and Spanish: a sort of Alpine Babel. He insisted that he would take me all the way to the *Paso di Costalunga* and I insisted, 'No way'—I had begun in Munich four days ago and I was expecting to reach Venice the next day. He finally gave up, and the memory of the strange encounter renewed my energies for the rest of the ride. I

## DANCE

Below,  
Waters moving,  
Washing ashore onto silky sands  
Wet with living,  
Turning spirals in pools around pebbles.  
Each grain of sand alone, holding the next,  
Holding,  
Making fluid the carpet of wet beach.

Waters, again,  
Coming,  
Below the edge, coming  
Over the sand,  
Upon the cliff  
Cut at, torn down  
By the tides.

Waters coming,  
Throwing  
Onto the rocky shore,  
Taking  
For the Ocean,  
Slamming  
Against doomed cliffs.

Small, wet crevices  
Where salty smells and mists  
Linger,  
Fill quickly with ocean foam,  
Then slowly purge again  
As the waters release.

A hush after the Doing,  
Spent whitewash groans quietly  
Rolling backwards in retreat,  
Tired from the Dance,  
And beckoned back to the sea.

- Naseem Badiey

continued, always up, pushing the limits, absorbing the pain, seizing the moment...until I reached the summit, 1,750 metres above sea level, at last. I would not exchange that experience for anything in the world. The Dolomites towered around me like colossal, vigilant cathedrals, the majestic Latemar (2,850 m) on the one side and the Roda di Vael (2,806 m) on the other, and my heart hammering wildly after all that effort.

## Venice, 5 August 2006

"It was written, then, on my page in the Book of Fate that at five o'clock in the afternoon of the twenty-eighth day of September in the year 1786, I should see Venice for the first time," Goethe wrote in his *Italian Journey*.

I crossed the *Puente della Libertá* and arrived in the outskirts of Venice an hour ago on the fifth day of August in the year 2006, after a total journey of seven days and 555 km. I am now on a boat to the Lido and I gaze into the distance, waiting for the sight of land. The sunken Queen of the Adriatic appears before my eyes and I can now see the splendour of the Ducal Palace, the Basilica San Marco, the Bridge of Sighs farther on, and San Giorgio Maggiore on the other side. *Venezia*: the magic city that cast a spell on Goethe, Thomas Mann, Shelley, Byron, and many others. I too have now arrived.

Goethe stayed for several weeks, studying Palladio's architecture, analysing the Venetian school, and enjoying the Venetian ways of life. I will only stay for a day before cycling to Ferrara and then to Bologna from where I will take a train back to Munich. But for now I recline and enjoy the view while my thoughts are again excited by the open air and the boat in motion. ☺



Sarah Irving