



The Via Francigena: UK to Italy

Wheeling their bikes across Lucca's Piazza del Carmine, looking fit and lean and younger than their 60-something years, you can tell these two are serious cyclists.

Friends from their teens, Paul Ryan and Tom Stephens are here in town on day 26 of their amazing biking journey from Canterbury in the UK to Rome, following the 2000 kilometre Via Francigena. The ancient pilgrims' route has taken them across the English Channel, into northern France, along the Somme, through the World War I battlefields, across the Swiss Alps and into Italy's Aosta valley.

We started out not knowing much about cycling, bike maintenance, or even the Via Francigena. We'd done a little bit of weekend cycling in Australia. Riding our bikes through Europe seemed like a good idea at the time over a couple of beers, says Paul, as his friend Tom breaks into a wise smile.

So far they have had four flat tires, seven broken spokes and three spills. They have gone through countless tubes of sun-screen, battled a few days of rain and lost one wallet. They both nod their heads in unison when I ask if they have enjoyed the ride so far.

Although, if we'd known some of the mountains to be climbed, I am not sure we'd be here. It's not just the altitude. In some places the wind is so fierce it's like cycling standing still. On these occasions I'm glad to have 30 kg of gear strapped to my bike to keep me upright, says Tom.

With bike grease under their nails, suntanned arms, and a look of contentment on their faces, they talk of the spirituality of the ride. *It's not so much a religious pilgrimage, but it's a journey of thinking. Watching the scenery spin by day after day, there's plenty of time to let one's mind wander. It's almost meditative,* continues Tom.

Charting our course every day has been a surprise. In Australia you might have two or three roads that lead into a town. In France it might be 53. We have spent many hours charting our way each day, occasionally adding a few extra kilometres in detours, laughs Paul.

They have stayed in hostels, pilgrim refuges and accommodation offered by a network of fellow cyclists. They are overwhelmed with how friendly and generous people have been along the way. With no rental cars, no tolls, and no fuel bills, their trip hasn't broken the budget either. *The journey is surprisingly free of stress,* says Tom.

With nine days to go before they wheel into Rome and complete their pilgrimage, they say the worst is over. There are no more mountains, the sun is shining, and travelling through Tuscany will be a highlight of their trip.

Green rolling hills, pencil pines, and fine wines – it's a pretty good combination, Paul says as he stretches back in his chair, visualising this last stage of their impressive journey.

We are happy pellegrini.

– by Jane Cotter

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