

September sun

Al Churcher extended his summer riding by heading south to the mountainous Italian island of Elba, off the coast of Tuscany

Coastal touring in the last of the summer sun, with sea temperatures high enough for long swims, and cafes on hand for espressos and ice cream. That was my last minute plan. I bought a cheap flight and arrived, as it turned out, in rain.

But with the morning came the sun, and easy valley roads led inland, then steadily southwards to a final heave up to the lovely hilltop town of Volterra. A day of heavy showers gave an excuse to drink lots of excellent coffee, enjoy speaking Italian and find out more about those enigmatic Etruscans in the town museum.

Two's company

Dawn rain and hill fog made the plan of continuing south over the strenuous switchback of hills to Massa Marittima pointless, so I zipped down the hill to Salina then on to Cecina to follow the coast road south. There's quite a climb over the headland before you can drop down to the ferry-port of Piombino, but the sight of another pannier-laden cyclist ahead gave my legs some energy and I began to reel him in.

From Brittany, Sylvaine was young, fit and keen. Though this was his first multi-day bike tour, he was an experienced back-packer and his '10 kilo max' rule for panniers, including his camping gear, made my loaded bike seem very heavy.

Elba looked more like an island off the west coast of Scotland than Mediterranean Italy, with jagged ridges wreathed in clouds. But soon after leaving port the sun appeared, the clouds dissolved and we rode

into Portoferraio in T-shirts. The hour on the ferry was time to strike up a friendship, so we took a room in the cheap and cheerful Albergo Api Elbana, festooning the courtyard with drying tents and clothing.

Surrounding a superb natural harbour beneath a rocky headland crowned by a castle, Portoferraio's walled town has seen ships of every Mediterranean trader and conqueror since time began. Today, billionaire's floating gin-palaces take the prime spots in front of the short row of glitzy harbour-front boutiques, while just 200 metres away battered fishing boats set out on their nightly trawls.

Hairpin climbs

A few weeks earlier it would have been swarming with tourists. In late September the town was merely bustling. For just a few busy kilometres, all roads lead south from Portoferraio, but once we'd forked right the traffic was soon left behind. Well, most of it: climbing over the headland away from the sea, the road narrowed into a series of *tornante* (hairpins), which overtaking drivers screeched around, leaving the smell of burnt rubber.

Eventually the last of the budding Jensoni Buttonis left us to pedal quietly up through the chestnut trees to the top of the ridge – and a lot less sedately down the other side to the sea at Procchio. Another 2km climb and we were cruising the clifftops, with stupendous views over our shoulders to Capo Enfola, then we were whizzing downhill again to Marciana Marina.

Refreshed with another espresso,



it was time for the climb of the day – 8km of hairpins winding up through shady trees to Marciana. Though so far the sea had rarely been out of sight for long, after crossing two more minor ridges we had our full reward for riding anti-clockwise. From the western tip of the island, for 16km there was nothing between us and a still Tyrrhenian Sea but a low wall and the cliffs below. We dawdled along above rocky headlands and isolated coves, where the crews of yachts lounged in the sun or swam to shore. Keen swimmers ourselves, by Cavoli we could resist it no longer.

In the centre of the south coast are three large, beautiful bays edged with golden sand. Suitably provisioned in the first of these at Marina de Campo, we cut across to the second – the Golfo di Lacona – to the perfectly named Spiggia Grande ('Big Beach'). Its two campsites must be heaving tent-cities in August, but for now it was almost deserted, and it was quiet as the stars came out above the still waters of the bay.

Summer's sunset

A pre-breakfast swim in water like silk and just one more coffee meant the sun was already climbing high before we put lycra to saddle again. The heat climbed into the upper 20s as we toiled uphill to Capoliveri. Described as 'perhaps the loveliest town on Elba', in reality there's little to distinguish it from hundreds of other Mediterranean villages.

Back on the main route and heading north, we tacked up the beautiful, forested side-ridges that radiate out from Elba's rocky, crenellated backbone – the remains of long-extinct volcanoes. We freewheeled down through the rusting remains of abandoned iron-workings to remote harbour villages.

The last of these, Cavo, lies close to the most



northern tip of the island, and from there it's 10 kilometres and 170 metres back up onto the ridge to Rio nell'Elba. One of the most ancient settlements on the island, its churches, town square and views over the sea deserved much more than a fleeting glance. But late September days are short and with the sun low in the sky a flash of reflected light caught our eyes.

Was that a car passing just below that peak up there? It was, and that was where we had to go... But thanks to the skill of its engineers, a series of cunningly graded hairpins took us painlessly up the last 150 metres to a narrow passage sliced through the rock. Higher still, perched on the cliff-edge, was the castle of Volterraio. But even more spectacular – waiting to slide behind the mountains to the west – was a great orange sun reflecting across the bay of Portoferraio.

Fact file

Elba, Italy

GETTING THERE:

Numerous carriers fly to Pisa from UK airports. I flew from East Midlands with Ryan Air, taking my bike in a CTC plastic bike-bag – though at £40 each way you could find your bike costs as much as your seat. Moby Lines and Toremar ferries run between Elba and the mainland for about £36 return, including bike.

THE ROUTE:

The Elba Circuit (ride anti-clockwise) was 120km in two days with the hilliest sections at the beginning and end of the ride. Pisa to Volterra was 70km, with Volterra to Piombino/Elba 86km.

WHEN: May/June and mid-September/early October are usually perfect for cycling.

WHERE TO STAY: Plenty of campsites on Elba at about £10 each per night. B&B accommodation at Albergo Api Elbana was £45 per night each.

MAPS: Touring Club Italiana 1:200,000

Toscana. Free maps of Elba are available on the ferry.

GUIDES: Lonely Planet's Cycling Italy has some useful information.

(Above) You're never far from the sea on Elba. Riding anti-clockwise around the island provides the best views. Fishing boats still head out nightly onto the Tyrrhenian Sea.