



WHERE Tuscany, Italy
START & FINISH Gaiole in Chianti, Tuscany
DISTANCE 205, 135, 75, 38km
WORDS Richard Hallett **PICTURES** Brooks England



Photos: by Brooks England and Richard Hallett

OLD-SCHOOL RULES

Tuscany's retro cyclosporive lets you ride back in time, pedalling your vintage bike on traditional gravel roads. **Richard Hallett** describes L'Eröica

L'Eröica is a European cyclosporive with a difference: period detail. Participants ride renovated road bikes, wear woollen cycling gear, and tackle tar-free roads. The event was dreamt up primarily as a way to draw attention to these picturesque Tuscan roads, the *strade bianche*, which risk being covered in tarmac. The roads provided founder GianCarlo Brocci with the means to recreate the heroic age of cycle racing. Thus was born 'l'Eröica'.

The event has far outstripped its origins, growing in just 16 years from a ride for a few local gravel-road enthusiasts into the world's premier event for lovers of old-school cycling. Perhaps the true measure of its importance may be found in the astonishing worldwide boom in riding old bikes; not only has l'Eröica prompted the birth of similar events such as Belgium's RetroRonde, but it has spawned an offshoot of its own that will take place in Japan in 2013.

TECHNOLOGICALLY BACK IN TIME

Although the first edition was held in 1997, it was in 2004 that it began to attract the attention

IN THE PHOTOS

- 1) Vintage bikes are obligatory
- 2) Brooks have sponsored the event since 2004
- 3) The ride was originally created to draw attention to these white gravel roads
- 4) Woollen tops are de rigueur
- 5) Relaxing on a tarmac section
- 6) Not often you see an Osgear

of the wider world, when leather saddle manufacturer Brooks became an event sponsor. They invited a bunch of journalists along for a ride undertaken by fewer than 500 participants.

The subsequent media exposure did the trick: by 2008, l'Eröica had become so popular that, in order to keep participant numbers to a manageable level, the organisers were obliged to impose stringent regulations governing the age, design and operation of cycles permitted in the event.

At least, that was the reason given at the time for the introduction of the regulations. More likely, perhaps, is that the ride was in danger of being swamped by cyclists taking it easy on the wrong type of machine. Brocci decided to turn the technological clock back to the 1980s, which was when, as we all know, cycling got soft.

The exact date is open to debate: some would suggest 1984 as the year the rot set in with the advent of viable clipless pedals, while others might point to 1980 and the first attempts to hide





3

“L’Eroica requires down-tube or bar-end shifters, pedals with toe-clips, and brakes with external cables”

brake cables from the wind. In any event, l'Eroica requires 'road-racing' cycles to have down-tube mounted gear shift levers or ancient bar-end shifters; pedals equipped with toe-clips and straps or nothing to attach the shoe to the pedal; and brakes with cables left waving freely in the wind. Their frames must be steel or, if aluminium, must be constructed using the methods available to the *constructeurs* of the era, of tubes threaded and glued into lugs. So don't go hunting for an early Sabliere...

FIRST, FIND YOUR STEED

This means there's only one way to prepare for the Eroica, and that is punctiliously. Anything less is likely to result in, if not disaster, then misery. In part, this is because you won't be allowed to compete if you don't acquire a valid cycle.

More important is the fact that old bikes, even the best of them, are simply not as reliable as those of today. Given the punishment meted out by the rough, bumpy *strade bianche*, it pays to ensure that your chosen machine is prepared to the highest possible standard.

It helps, of course, to have a suitable cycle in the

shed. For my first Eroica, in 2004, I had no such thing and was lucky to acquire a complete but neglected 1932 Raleigh Record, which received a complete strip and rebuild along with new stainless steel spokes. It proved such hard work over the 200km route that I looked around for something faster for the following year.

I found it in the shape of the 'Campag-throughout' Roberts road bike I used to race on and had sold to a friend back in 1988. He had barely ridden it in the intervening years and it, too, needed a complete overhaul.

There was no skimping: I rebuilt the wheels, fitted a Royce titanium bottom bracket (which would have been available in '87), and hunted down rare white outer brake cable. Fibrax brake blocks in place of the rock-hard originals in the beautiful chrome-plated Campagnolo shoes gave me some degree of braking performance. There are some steep, potentially dangerous descents on l'Eroica; don't be tempted to set off with sub-standard stoppers.

OLDER COMPONENTS

Although many riders favour traditional tubular tyres for the event, I prefer clinchers. 700C wired-on racing tyres arrived in the late '70s, so there can be no complaints from the organisers. Finding rubber that looks like an '80s 'tub' is easy enough; Vittoria's Open Corsa SC is available with para rubber-coated sidewall and in a more comfortable 25C width.

Gearing, however, is harder to get right. It is, >



4



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6



CALLING ALL THE HEROES

> CTC member Dawn Ellsworth rode l'Eroica last year.

We opted for the 75km route – at less than 50 miles, how hard could it be? There was the lure of Chianti countryside, talk of wine en route, the promise of October sunshine, vintage bikes and old clothes... More than 5,000 riders took part in 2012, from 33 countries.

We assembled a fine collection of bikes: Dave's from his youth; Gerry's and Richard's bought from auctions; Derek's borrowed; mine rescued from the tip. The day before the ride was a chance to wander round the many stalls selling vintage bikes, woollen jerseys, and spare parts.

The big day

On the Sunday, we were dispatched in huge groups every 15 minutes. We set off at a leisurely pace. The Italians regarded the event as a social occasion, and stopped at the top of every hill for a chat. The trendy wearing of inner tubes was a bit of a clue as to the hazards of the terrain. At least 30km of the 75km was on 'strada bianca'. Round every corner would be a band of cyclists changing tyres.

Our first stop in Radda was a welcome one, although the food was traditional too: slices of bread soaked in Chianti!

Onwards and upwards on more *strada bianca*, including one long section of uphill where just about everyone was trudging doggedly and muttering. The roads winding through the vineyards and pretty towns were stunning but as the day went on we were too tired to appreciate them.

We arrived back in Gaiole with about an hour of daylight left, definitely feeling heroic!



8



7

“The climb is incredibly tough, ascending at 15% in a series of switchbacks marred by deep gravel drifts”

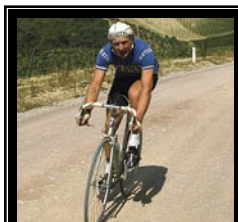
in fact, pretty much impossible to fit a suitably low bottom gear without resorting to a triple chainset, which means finding and riding a period touring bike. I'd rather ride a racer and put up with a bottom gear of 42/24, even if it is too high for some of the stiffer climbs on the ride.

Saddle choice? It's a shoo-in for Brooks, although Selle Italia offers re-manufactured versions of such old-school classics as the Turbo and, for the truly heroic, the unpadding hard Nylon UnicaNitor.

Shoes can take some finding. My Diadoras date from 1987 and feature both a slotted shoeplate and the three-thread LOOK cleat fixture. Beware, though; if you are unused to riding with shoeplates and toe straps, which fix you very securely to the pedals, riding l'Erroica is probably not the ideal way to learn.

Anyone hoping to really impress the organisers should seek out old woollen clothing. Although brands such as Rapha offer a handsome modern take on the woollen jersey, nothing beats a fluffy and perhaps moth-eaten garment bearing one of the legendary team sponsor's logos of the past.

But do not go as far as to ride in woollen shorts with a genuine chamois. Cut it out and sew in a synthetic one; nobody is going to check.



DO IT YOURSELF

The 2013 event website is at: <http://www.erroica-ciclismo.it/english/home.asp>. Regulations are at: http://www.erroica-ciclismo.it/documents/regolamento_eng.pdf. Online entry opens on 15 May 2013 and the event fills quickly. Accommodation in and around Gaiole in Chianti is also limited. Alternatively, try Siena, which is less than 20 miles away. You can book onto L'Erroica through a local event partner, such as GustoCycling – <http://www.gustocycling.com/holiday-packages/leroica-2012.html>

CHOOSE YOUR ROUTE

So, which distance should you undertake? Leisure riders would surely do well to opt for one of the two shorter rides, both of which offer a taste of the local scenery and roads. I have ridden the 205km 'Lungo' route each time. It is savage, and fit to compare with any sportive ride in Europe. With some 4,000m of climbing (and descending...) and 110km of gravel roads, it is arguably more demanding than such famous challenges as the Marmotte. Few riders complete the ride in less than nine hours; many take 12 or more.

At the age of 72, my father rode the 135km 'Medio' route on an original Paris Galibier. Obviously easier than the Lungo, it is, nonetheless, a stern test and one that will satisfy most riders' thirst for heroism. It does, however, miss out a section that contains one of the highlights of l'Erroica.

Let's join the Lungo at the point where the two routes part company. On my wheel? Let's go...

THE VIEW FROM THE SADDLE

You are 53km and two hours into a ride that started in darkness. The lamps – obligatory at the *partenza* (start) – have been removed and hidden to avoid spoiling the appearance of the cycle.

A glance at the route card reveals that the next section of *strada bianca* is due at 59km and lasts for 5km. Pushing on, you blast along the flat, surprisingly fast gravel road and emerge at Bibbiano to enjoy a brief section of tarmac.

The wooded mountainside that has been visible for some time suddenly looks a lot closer; the next section of *bianca* descends a little but aims directly at the



mountain. The signpost at its start indicates Castiglion del Bosco. There is little hint of what is to come, although the route card does say that there are *'Tratti di salita impegnativi per almeno Km 4 prima e dopo detta localita...'* (Challenging climb for at least 4km before and after that location)

The climb to Castiglion del Bosco is incredibly tough: ascending at 15%, it climbs in a series of switchbacks marred by deep gravel drifts and the corrugations made by motor vehicle wheels. The sun, by now high in the morning sky, beats down. Dust rises from the wheels of the rider toiling ahead and sticks to sweat-streaked lips, legs, arms. The friction shift lever on the down tube slips forward, letting the chain skip off the bottom sprocket. You reach down to pull it back and almost fall as the front wheel ploughs into the dust. Stopping is not an option; you may not get started again. Nothing for it but to keep forcing upwards until you reach the blessed relief of the short, flat road past Castiglion del Bosco.

On the other side of the village lie another 8km of *bianca*, most of it uphill and much of it steep. By the time you reach tarmac, your legs are almost at their limit. The end of the gravel does not, however, mean the end of the suffering, for the road continues to climb for 4km to the highest point of the ride at Montalcino.

In the 18km from Bibbiano the road has climbed more than 320m and for 14km on gravel. At Montalcino you still have 120km to ride, including the twelfth section of *strada bianca*. Following the feed at Asciano, it is possibly the hardest leg of the ride. The super-fast tarmac descent ends all too soon and you stiffen your resolve; there are plenty of heroics still to come...



IN THE PHOTOS

- 7) A tough ride, but still social
- 8, 9) Low gears on an old racer? Good luck!
- 10) Fit good brake blocks
- 11) Most bikes are lugged steel
- 12) Real food replaces gels

12



FACT FILE L'EROICA

Where: Gaiole in Chianti, Tuscany, Italy

When: Annually, 1st Sunday in October. Next one is 6 October 2013

Distance: choice of 205, 135, 75, 38km

Terrain: Moderately mountainous, long sections of unsurfaced road

Conditions: Generally warm and dry

Getting there/back: The nearest airport is at Pisa; expect a two-hour drive to Gaiole. If you have time to spare and can split costs by sharing a vehicle, it might be

worth considering driving to Tuscany. It's about 1,000 miles. Allow two days to get there from Calais.

I'm glad I had... The foresight to rebuild my bike before subjecting it to l'Eroica

I wish I'd had... Cinelli 64/42 handlebars instead of the deep-drop 66/42 bend on which I used to race

Further info: *Rough Guide to Tuscany* for general information

Where to buy a bike: eBay, car boot sale, bike jumble

