

VALLE MAIRA

Forget hours and minutes, in this lost corner of Italy time passes in climbs and descents, and eight-course meals.

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Where the heck is Valle Maira? Lots of mountain bike friends have told me about it, but nobody really knew where it was geographically. People who know it, rave about it, but most of their mountain bike stories end with something like: ‘...but it’s brutal.’



INTERNATIONAL ADVENTURE





Go past everywhere and keep going

Karen and I are on our way to check it out. Where is this legendary trail paradise? We have been driving through the green rolling hills of the Piedmont for hours now. We pass by beautiful estates with nice tree-lined avenues, small towns with signposts to well-known wineries. This is the place to be for good wine. The three big Bs come from around here – Barolo, Barbaresco and Barbera. But we are on a different mission.

As we pass by the truffle Mecca of Alba, Karen asks: “How much longer?” We are used to travelling with our kids, and my answer to this question is always the same – ‘Soon’ – without really knowing if it’s true. Our navigation system shifts our arrival time further back with each passage through these little Italian villages. It’s early evening and we are starving, and as time flies by as we drive slowly behind so many Fiat Pandas, we see our dinner fading away. The

further we drive into the mountains, the fewer people we see. The streets are getting narrow and empty, just every now and then there is a bar. But that’s it. Nothing has been going on here for a long time; time is standing still. Emigration of the population has not stopped and more and more people move to industrial cities like Cuneo or Torino to get a good job. We stop at a local tobacco store to buy a map.

Are we still heading the right way? We call Peter, our contact: “Yes,” he says, “in 20 minutes you will be here!” As we roll into a small hamlet consisting of a few grey stone houses, the sun is just setting behind the surrounding mountain peaks. An elderly grey-haired gentleman in a shirt is smiling in the driveway and welcomes us in German, with a Swiss dialect: “Hello, I’m Peter, how was your trip?” he asks. “Forever!” But immediately our talk turns to our plan to explore the trails in this region.

Forgotten world

Because of the war between Italy and France you have a huge network of old trails and military paths, but to access these trails you have to crank up very long climbs. The good stuff is hidden up in the high alpine. At an altitude between 2,500 and 3,000 metres above sea level, this makes for stunning views and great treeless riding. Down the valley sides you are back in the woods, with lots of vertical metres still to go to the valley bottom.

Peter is more than happy to show us around this place. We walk into the 'village' and find ourselves on the mini piazza. There are chairs and benches everywhere and the walls are lovely, decorated with old farming equipment and flowers. It's a warm and welcoming place; we feel instantly at home. Later in the bar, Peter continues "Some call themselves mountain bikers, but they only ride on the road..." He laughs and shows us his bike map. He's invested years into collecting all these routes, so it's truly his map. He raves about the

region's singletrack. Fifteen years ago he came to this remote place and found his personal mountain bike paradise. He loved it, so he stayed, at first only one week, then he extended to six weeks, and at 78 years old he is still here in Valle Maira, retired from his job and permanent resident of this village of Marmora.

We are in the Agriturismo Ceaglio where Fulvia is definitely the boss. Her two sons Massimo and Fabrizio help with the business and her husband Alberto cooks first-class menus for guests. They basically converted an entire ancient village into a hotel, including a sauna and bike room. As a ski touring lodge they have already made a name for themselves and now the bike business is slowly growing. This is where Peter comes into play. He helps, he translates, he researches, he writes articles, and takes care of the website. Before saying goodnight he ensures there are enough trails to ride, and enough courses for dinner. Eight would be our record.

"There are two of us, but only one slice of cake..."





'And here you'll find second dessert...'

If you want to reach the Gardetta Plateau where all the trails start, you have to climb 1,200m on tarmac, following in the wheels of Marco Pantani who was the first to reach the top in the Giro d'Italia of 1999. A memorial in his honour is built on the pass at 2,300m above sea level. A real mountain biker grinds their way up to reach the higher peaks and great trails that start from here.

Valle Maira is part of the Piedmont region and belongs to the province of Cuneo. Almost 1,000 people live on 450km² in the 10 municipalities. Valle Maira is also one of the few Occitan valleys in the Alps, which are distinguished by their own Gallo-Romanic language, architecture, cuisine and music. Hardly anyone speaks Occitan, but our hostess Fulvia speaks this dialect with her mother, and it suddenly sounds like we're on the Catalan coast. The words sound choppy and you can hear a lot of 'X' and 'SCH', a little French, but no Italian, something very special, related to Latin and Rhaeto-Romance. It does not really matter, we can understand what is really important to us: trails, landscape, people and good food.





Trail stalking

The next morning we leave early. Our plan is to catch sunrise on the Colle d'Esischie and tour around Monte Tibert. Peter promised more than 2,000m of trail descent. On top, we meet a local hunter with his dog. 'Ciao ciao' is very common, we briefly exchange ideas, we get respect for our beautiful bikes, he gets respect for his beautiful rifle. We take a souvenir photo for his wife and say 'Arrivederci'.

The sun slowly climbs up on the horizon and transforms the landscape into a gold-orange sea of colours. The mountains in the distance line up and move into position, the Mediterranean Sea can be seen far to the south, a few clouds bring on that special atmosphere you only get at that time of day. The Rocca Negra is at about 2,500m above sea level. We have to carry our bikes a little way then we reach a perfect ridgeline trail that goes on forever. Along the contour line we reach a trail junction to Monte Tibert. My thoughts drift away... we are not used to this endless terrain at home. Endless trails in high elevation with spectacular panoramic views make the mountain bike experience here in Valle Maira so special. Today we take in a magnificent view of the highest mountain in this region, the 3,841m Monte Viso. We enjoy the moment, the rising sun warms our fingers, and we rest a little before choosing the singletrack circumnavigating Monte Tibert. From this point on the terrain gets rougher, and fully concentrated we slide through a rocky trail section towards a

wonderful meadow with an old stone hut.

Karen says something like: "Where is the trail?" It seems like it disappeared in the meadow in front of us. Navigation is crucial in these wild corners of the Alps. We are more than happy to use a mobile device with Peter's secret GPX tracks, signs are nowhere to be seen out here. "Trail conditions should get better once we are in the forest," I tell Karen, without knowing if this is true. Luckily, after a couple of really tricky sections, the ground underfoot changes from rough and rutted to fun and flowy. We shoot through a larch forest and twist and turn our way down. As we come across an open café in the small hamlet of Celle Marca, we stop for coffee. After all, we are in Italy.

After a little break there is a super nice trail section through the woods down to the valley floor. One turn chases the other until we end up at the bottom. After crossing the River Maira we grind back up to the village of Stroppio, where Massimo awaits us with his pickup truck.

Happy that we liked the tour, Massimo explains how he traded his Golf GTI for this truck and that he really only started biking just a couple of months ago. He is a full-on ski alpinist and grew up in this valley so it's more than natural that he became a passionate mountain biker as well. Back in the Agriturismo we have beers and a big grin. So far so good. After dinner we plan for the next day.



Elva climb to get there

The Elva Trails on the other side of the valley from Marmora are our goal. Peter suggests a trail called Napoleonica, a flowing forest trail that starts just above the accommodation. Paulo, a local dairy farmer, invites us to help him milk the cows by hand, but we opt to ride, pedalling the strada Napoleonica into the forest. After a couple of short climbs we get rewarded with great turns and pristine singletrack.

Happy about this great trail, I start thinking about the people in this area. Why are they so incredibly nice? They don't have much, but they are very open-minded if you are interested in their region and their way of living. Life is always so fast forward in our world, everything goes by in a blur, maybe this is a good way to relax? Unfortunately, this trail also flies by too fast, and now we pay the price for all this fun, because the climb on the road to Elva is long. It winds spectacularly along a gorge up to Elva and leads through some dark galleries and tunnels. Officially it's closed to traffic, because it is no longer maintained – there is no money for

road construction in this region of Italy. For the locals it is the only connection to the outside world, so they drive up and down anyway. Almost 800m of climbing later, we are lucky to find a little bar in Elva next to the famous historic church.

After a quick lunch we climb another 300m to the Col San Giovanni from where there are spectacular views down to the gorge. And finally, yes, the start of the descent. The trail starts gently and crosses the small asphalt road again and again until we finally disappear into the forest. Technical stony passages alternate with forest floor. A perfect trail mix leads us through the small hamlets of Conta and Ciàmino and finally down past Stroppo to the valley floor. The terrain is a bit rougher on this side of the valley and the trails have a different character with lots of round cobblestones. The after-ride beer is welcome, then unwelcome as we return to Marmora, a last hard climb to our accommodation tiring us again. I'm already dreaming of dinner, and we ask ourselves: how many courses will we have tonight? ■

For more information, visit vallemaira.org

