



This quiet road from the seaside village of Portorož to Korte was used for Stage 5 of the Time Trial on the SeAlps.

FOUR DAYS IN SLOVENIA

WILL LEVY AND BEARDY MCBEARD TEAMED UP TO TAKE ON THE INAUGURAL FOUR DAY STAGE RACE THE SEALPS CHALLENGE.



"We knew WE WERE IN FOR A TREAT when we saw the road sign warning of sections of 15-30%."

IN SEPTEMBER OF 2016 WE HAD JUST FINISHED THE

Triple Crown which ended in Venice. Fast forward a year and it was time to head back; but this time a couple of hours north of the City of Masks, to Slovenia.

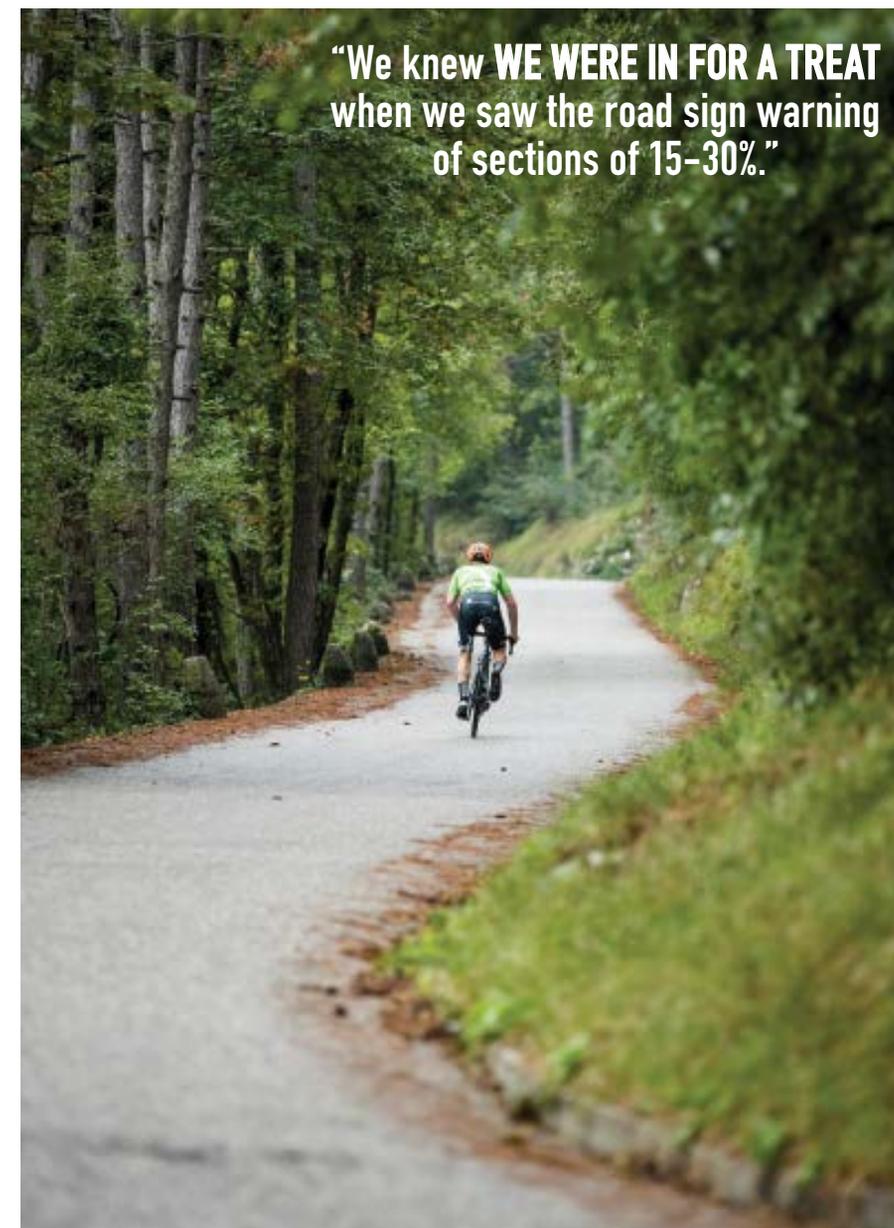
Not to be confused with Slovakia (the home of Peter Sagan), Slovenia shares borders with Italy to the west, Austria to the north, Hungary to the north-east and Croatia to the south. The coastline soaks in 47km of the Adriatic, is famous for its salt pans, fishing and recently renovated villages along the coast. The capital is the picturesque Ljubljana which is situated roughly in the centre of the country. And it's a cracking place for a multi-day bike race.

As the name suggests, the SeAlps race starts at the sea and finishes in the Slovenian mountain ranges, a distance of 360km. SeAlps is a race which has different 'rules' compared to other cyclo-sportives. Firstly, riders need to have a partner. This doesn't mean that you must ride with him/her all day. You can drop, or be dropped, by them but if you cross a checkpoint at one of the rest stops or the finish line more than two minutes from each other, your team will be docked five minutes.

Closed roads, and supported by 20 Slovenian policemen on motorbikes who provided a one hour mobile road block, meant we could descend on both sides of the road, ride more than two, three or four abreast and get a true feeling for what it is like to be in a pro-race.

In 2017 there were 100 riders who signed up for first edition. Riders hailed from Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Croatia and two riders from far-flung Australia. Team twowheeltours was made up of Marcus Enno (aka Beardy McBeard) and Will Levy. Marcus had just finished three weeks of shooting the Vuelta a España for Beardy's Caravan. His three weeks on the road amassed 6,000+ kilometres in a car, and two rides totalling a whopping 40km as well as so much jamón ibérico (a type of ham) he felt like Peppa Pig! Not exactly the best preparation for a four day race, but he was up for the challenge.

Fortunately for Marcus, his bike did not arrive from Madrid in time for the opening Time Trial - which was cut down from 17km to 7km due to wild weather. We did however line up for Stage 2 which took us from the coast to the capital Ljubljana. A tough day for your first real ride in over three weeks! Stage 2 saw the riders depart the coast as a large peloton in race neutral. After around 10km the flag was dropped, and the pace picked up. There was no doubting that the pointy end of the race was very pointy. Marcus and I decided



to join the middle peloton to try and ease his legs into action for the days ahead. The 20 police motorbikes began to filter out and each group had their own chaperone. Our dedicated policeman was hell-bent on making sure we were safe! He made sure cars pulled clear off the road as our bunch of eight pace-lined through the valleys, and guided us through roundabouts and quaint filmset-like villages. The vast majority of the houses have flower boxes in their windows, giving off the essence of summer still in the air.

Slovenia has many must see locations, and while they may not hold the same clout as the Eiffel Tower, it is always nice to visit a country that is somewhat different, and a little off the beaten track. When it comes to natural beauty Slovenia has a loaded deck: the spectacular coastline, countless lakes, mountains, rivers, lively cities, skiing and what's more some superb roads for cycling.

The capital Ljubljana is a stand out, beautiful buildings – old and new, sculptures, park lands,

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cobbled streets and a city centre with no vehicles, plus the gentle flowing Ljubljana River. The city was named the European Green Capital in 2016, the first city to win this award in Eastern or Central Europe. It really is a lovely place in which to spend two or three days. It has a very lively pulse being a University city and friendly nature. During our stay we spoke with locals over a few beers as we enjoyed the warm summer evening and began to think about what Stage 3 of the SeAlps Challenge would hold for us.

“We finished our Slovenian adventure not far from the Italian border. The roads were superb; ROLLING HILLS, QUALITY TARMAK AND LITTLE-TO-NO TRAFFIC.”

Stage Three was a blessing in disguise: a shorter and flatter stage which, with just one hill around three quarters of the way through the stage, turned out to be code for a fast 92km bunch ride. Before we knew it, we were home and in Nova Gorica, beating the forecast rain by hours! This allowed Marcus and I the chance to spend the afternoon exploring, looking for the steepest and highest point around - Sveta Gora, only 664m above sea-level. Strava told us that over the 5.4km distance, riders climb a total of 528m, resulting in an average of 10%. Yes there are many other hills around the world which boast higher numbers but for the time being, this would be enough. We knew we were in for a treat when we saw the first ‘welcome’ road sign warning of sections ranging from 15-30%. Brutal indeed, and with the added thin coating of rain it made for a few wheel spins and having to stay seated for the majority of the climb. Once we got back to our Casino hotel in Nova Gorica we checked in with Strava.

The current holder of the KOM is Matej Kravos - Slovenia. Matej is also the 2017 World Amateur TT Champion which were held this summer in Albi France. Coincidentally Matej was also taking part in SeAlps and unsurprisingly he and his teammate were in the number one ranked team.

Stage Four was by no means a champagne-sipping ‘roll into the village’ ride. In front of us was a stage with 2,300m of ascent, guaranteed headwinds, some long ‘flat-ish’ sections, cold weather and maybe even rain - these are the days you remember. Adding a little more suspense to the stage, just two days prior the hilltop finish of Vrsic was covered in snow, but a bit of wet weather and a heavy frost was not going to stop this peloton.

Rolling out from Nova Gorica (aka ‘new Gorizia’ - located just 2km from the Italian town of Gorizia), we headed against the flow of the Isonzo River into a brutal headwind. The pace was fast as the top three teams tried to drop each other in the quest for supremacy. 50km later, the front bunch was still all together. Then as we started the first big climb the peloton split.

The scenery we were riding through was breathtaking; billiard-table-smooth roads with perfectly shaped hairpin bends through a National Park and its iridescent blue river. Tiny villages held locals who cheered us on as we climbed even higher through beautiful forested areas which were on the cusp of Autumn colours. Vrsic is a truly memorable climb - far nicer than some of the ‘classic climbs’ we all hear about and see during pro-races.

As we got closer to the top we were happy to see that the snow had gone: it had been replaced by mist, a touch of rain and the temperature was a balmy one degree C. At the top team twowheeltours crossed the finish line together. We were no longer racing. Yes, teams had finished before us but we were there to enjoy the climb. We were already reminiscing and telling war stories from our SeAlps adventure. Time really does fly when you are doing a multi-day race.



FROM LEFT: Cruising the coastline near Koper - a revitalised port town.

Heading for the hills outside Bovec towards Triglav National Park.



Post tour, it was time to visit some other jewels of Slovenia. Lake Bled is like something out of a fairytale movie. The lake is fed by glacial springs and in early September they hosted the 2017 World Rowing Masters Regatta. On the lake is a small island with a 17th century church. You can hire a boat, row out to the island and walk up the 99 steps to the church. If you get married on the island it is said to be good luck if you carry your bride up these stairs all the way to the altar. From the island you can look back over the turquoise waters and see the medieval Bled castle sitting atop the cliff, it is truly a magical place.

We also visited Lake Bohinj and its Slap Savica waterfall – more stairs to conquer. Sadly Mangart, a 12km climb with sections of 22% on our must-climb list, was closed due to recent landslides. We ventured on through the National Park of Naravni Spomenik Loska Stena and the towns of Log pod Mangartom and Bovec. With such spectacular scenery, you would be excused for thinking that you may have been in Switzerland. **BA**

WHY SLOVENIA

The people in Slovenia are amazingly open, friendly and generous. Name the last time you visited a hotel and you received a present when checking out? We stayed in a family owned three star hotel in Lake Bled called Alp Penzion. As we left, we were presented with a handmade bell with Bled Castle painted on it. Add to that the care with which they served breakfast, an insane amount of homemade pastries, eggs with smiley faces and of course the traditional preserved meat and cheeses. Nobody is leaving that hotel hungry in the morning.

The adventure had to conclude at some point. We finished our Slovenian adventure back down near the coast around the area of Komen, again not far from the Italian border. The roads were superb, rolling hills, quality tarmac and quiet, with little-to-no traffic. The vistas of vineyards, old Roman villages and the Gulf of Trieste made me wish that we could spend more time exploring ... then again, twowheeltours will be back in 2018 with a tour which will include entry for the SeAlps race plus a few extra days pre and post the event to explore Slovenia.

For more information on the 2018 event go to sealps.com