

VENTURE

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**PEDALLING
PILGRIMAGE**
Gravel biking
from Florence to
Rome, Italy



“Time slows as my front wheel understeers then corrects itself on a set of hairpin bends where overshooting could be fatal”

Charlie Allenby, adventure writer



My tyres struggle for grip on the white road's loose, lunar-like surface and, as its gradient tips into double figures, my heart pounds in my ears. A lingering cloud of dust has turned my throat into sandpaper, making every breath painful.

The terracotta-coloured viaduct that signals the halfway point of the 7km-long climb comes into view. Passing beneath it, I'm given a brief respite from the baking midday sun on this glorious May day in Italy. Pausing for a sip of water on the outskirts of San Quirico d'Orcia, a small

town 45km southeast of Siena, it's as though I've stumbled onto the film set of a stereotypical Tuscan scene: Piaggio Ape vans deliver fresh produce; Italian *nonnas* hang laundry on their balconies; luminous lunchtime cocktails are served *al fresco*.

There's no time to drink it all in, though; I still have more than 100m of elevation on this ascent alone, as well as 60km of relentless cycling along the rough paths of the Via Francigena, before I reach the hilltop Castello di Proceno – my accommodation for the night, and the halfway point on my journey from Florence to Rome.

A medieval pilgrimage route around 2,000km in length, the Via Francigena – in English, “the road from France” – runs from Canterbury in the UK to Rome via France and Switzerland and was first recorded in the year 725 AD. For centuries, travellers have embarked on the mammoth journey to the Holy See (modern-day Vatican City) on foot or horseback. Although overshadowed by better-known paths such as the Camino de Santiago, the Via Francigena is still walked by hardy souls, who follow its distinctive route markers – a red-and-white flag with the symbol of a pilgrim in black – all the way to St Peter's Square.

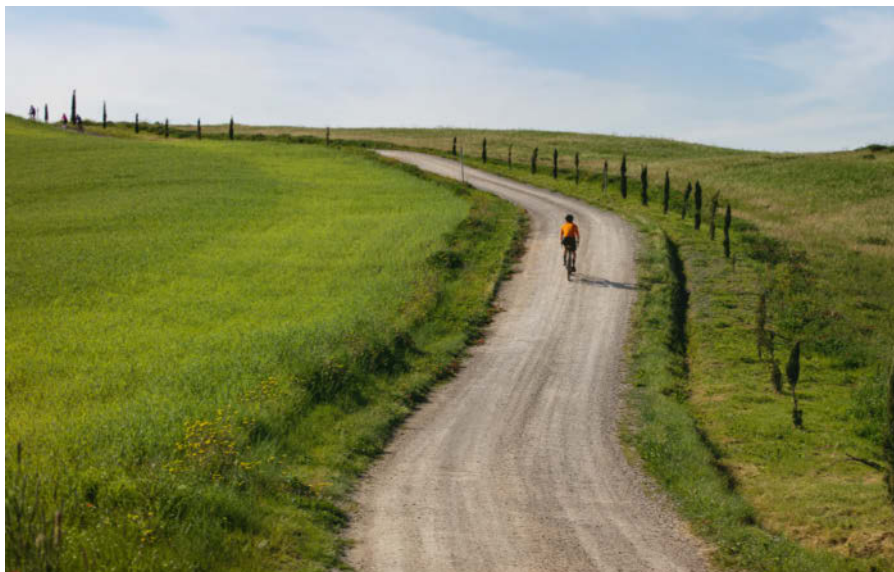
Instead of tackling the Via Francigena in its entirety, I'm sampling the final 400km over four days as it makes its way through the rolling Tuscan hills and down into the arable plains of Lazio. And rather than hiking boots or horseback, I've saddled up on a different kind of steed: a gravel bike. As a keen cyclist who has ticked off a number of ancient long-distance paths in the UK, including the 575km Old Chalk Way from Dorset to Norfolk, I find myself drawn to traversing storied ground, riding along byways and bridleways that have ferried everyone from paupers to princes.

My journey won't stick rigidly to the Via Francigena, but that's no bad thing. Painstakingly plotted over the course of three years by tour company Rolling Dreamers, the route begins in Florence, which makes the start more accessible and means I can sample the olive grove-and vineyard-lined roads immortalised by the vintage cycling race L'Eroica. Also, sections of the foot-and-hoof-centric path deemed unrideable by Rolling Dreamers' founder Matteo Venzi have been swapped out for asphalt. “I'd rather people were riding their bike than pushing it,” explains the former pro triathlete.

This doesn't mean the route is a walk in the park, though. Roughly 70 per cent off-road, the terrain pushes me to my limits as it throws up everything on the 'gravel' spectrum, from the iconic hardpacked *strade bianche* (white roads) to huge, uneven slabs of basalt the size of dustbin lids, which were laid by Roman legionaries more than 2,000 years ago. While the climb through San Quirico d'Orcia on the second day strains every sinew of my calf muscles, the knife-edge, 10km-long gravel descent from Radicofani to Ponte a Rigo 35km later leaves me with my heart in my mouth, time slowing down as my front tyre understeers before correcting itself on

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Retracing history: Allenby takes a rest in a Tuscan village; (below) millennia-old basalt paving; on the Via Francigena; (opposite) the gruelling climb to San Quirico d'Orcia



How to get there

You can book a direct flight from London to Florence or Rome. A high-speed train connects the two Italian cities – the journey time is one and a half hours.





Anatomy of a gravel bike

The 3T Exploro RaceMax: an all-road touring essential

The carbon-fibre frame combines lightweight construction with rock-solid strength to handle anything you throw at it

The wide-ranging SRAM Rival 12-speed gearing is fast on the flat while leaving enough in reserve for super-steep climbs

Chunky 2.1in mountain bike tyres are paired with smaller 650b wheels, allowing you to tackle any terrain

Hydraulic disc brakes ensure you stay in control from the first kilometre to the last

Fit for purpose: a gravel bike with wide mountain bike tyres is perfect for the route's varied terrain

a gut-wrenching set of hairpin bends where overshooting a turn could be fatal.

Each day takes on a formulaic pattern of riding interspersed with stops for Italian delicacies – espresso, cured meats, gelato – but it's far from predictable. Sheer natural beauty appears around unsuspecting corners as I follow the white squiggle up and over undulating duvet folds southward to the horizon. Cypress tree-dotted peaks and troughs are replaced with meadows full of wildflowers as I cross into the region of Lazio and skirt Lake Bolsena, Europe's largest volcanic lake. Trailside blooms of wisteria and irises provide purple flashes in my peripheral vision.

Hikers raise a hand as I whizz past, their snail-like pace on foot much harder on the body than the cushioning provided by high-volume tyres. But my mode of pilgrimage is not without personal suffering. By the final day, my palms burn from persistent vibrations, every pothole sends a shock of pain through my right foot, and an unfamiliar saddle has left its mark in the way that



Papal trail: St Peter's Square marked the finish line of the four-day, 400km ride

unfamiliar saddles do after more than 300km of rough terrain.

As I enter the outskirts of the Italian capital, the picture-postcard wilderness I've found myself in since leaving Florence's 14th-century city walls takes on an industrial hue and the prehistoric path rubs shoulders with 21st-century

urban sprawl, flanked by factories instead of endless fields.

I join a raised cycle path that follows the River Tiber all the way to St Peter's Square, the pan-flat parcours providing time for reflection. Finding myself back amid the blare of car horns, I have the sudden urge to turn around and retrace my steps, returning to the hinterlands where the only sound was the crunch of gravel beneath rubber.

Pilgrimage complete, I glance at Google Maps and zoom out to see just how far I've come under my own steam. The various blobs of green and twisting yellow lines don't tell the full story, but the jaw-dropping scenery and, at times, gruelling terrain that lies beneath the rudimentary illustrations will certainly live long in my memory.

Charlie Allenby is a London-based running, cycling and adventure writer; Instagram: @charlie.allenby. Rolling Dreamers hosts fully supported and self-guided bike tours across Europe, with more Via Francigena tours this year and next; rollingdreamers.com