

SURVIVE & CONQUER

The Iron Bike event bills itself as ‘the world’s hardest mountain bike race’, so you know it’s going to be tough. But even Matt Page didn’t gauge just how gruelling this eight-day Alpine slog would be...

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**TOUGH
GUY
SPECIAL**





Nervous, me? Not with those two butch, moustachioed fellas watching my back.



It's big out here - and it never lets you forget it!



Alps trails can eat tyres: we had to go prepared



The madness is punctuated by starts and finishes in lovely Italian towns



Some ascents were so tough we had to resort to hike-a-bike...



Like some kind of biking Bedouin, camps and kit were part of our experience



XC bikes were ideal for the miles of Alpine singletrack



Every day is incredibly tough. I'd wake up with tired legs and wonder how I could finish the day, let alone finish the week



I have never, ever felt so exhausted in my life



Late July in Italy? Not exactly the colour sky I was after...



Like a line of marching ants, swearing in all sorts of languages



This is what it's about! Probably the best feeling in the world!



...but every ascent paid off with a cracking descent



Ooh, you can almost hear the cowbells from here!



I was lucky to have a friend to help look after me, my tent and my bike



Cresting the peak of the monster climb I didn't even have a chance to get my breath back before dropping over the other side. Just as I rolled over the edge someone shouted "Good luck!" and I immediately found out why! The track dropped away almost vertically, switching back left, then right before dropping away again at a scary rate and heading into the trees. It was too steep to stop and too steep

to get off, so all I could do was hang tough, brake hard and hope for the best.

It twisted through the trees and went on forever. After five minutes I had to swap braking fingers and from there on I kept alternating my fatigued fingers all the way to the bottom, another 15 minutes later. When I was finally able to stop I took a quick look up in awe at where I had come from and what I'd just managed to ride down. With 60km of the day done and after more than six hours riding, we were halfway through. There was another massive climb and another scary descent on the way. This was one epic day on the bike!

I like to challenge myself...

You can be forgiven for not having heard of Iron Bike before. I hadn't heard of it until I stumbled across it during an internet search for the 'hardest mountain bike event'. Several events claim to be the hardest in the world, but Iron Bike has a bigger stake than most others – eight days over almost 700km with 28,000m of climbing in the heart of

the Italian Alps. While the numbers are big, they alone do not do this event justice.

I like to challenge myself, but I'd never done a stage race before, so maybe entering the event billed as the hardest in the world was a bit optimistic? With only a basic insight into Iron Bike gleaned from a handful of Brits who've entered previously and a borrowed DVD (in Italian) of the event, I managed to grasp that this would be a really hard trip, but I had little idea just how physically and mentally draining this crazy event would be.

As soon as the race got underway the organisers made sure that we were tested right away with a gravel track climb that got steeper and steeper the further it went on. Gears were being clicked through at a rapid rate and before long I was in the easiest gear, still trying to operate the shifter in the hope that a few extra cogs would magically appear. They never did and the climb was the first of many during the day... and that day was a mere warm-up for what lay in store on later days.

Start as you mean to go on

Every day is incredibly tough. I'd wake up with tired legs and wonder how I could possibly finish the day, let alone the week. Recovery started from the moment the stage finished and replacing the 4,000-plus calories lost was vital. It's difficult to compare the event to anything else, as there simply is nothing in the UK that can stand up against a single day of Iron Bike, let alone the full eight days!

During one of the hardest days, ascending relentlessly for four hours and 41km, I eventually reached the top at 3,000m where the air is noticeably thinner and makes even a slight incline feel like a cliff. My only thoughts going up were that the descent had better be worth it. I took a minute at the top, looked around and tried to take in the awesome 360-degree view before jumping back on the bike, dropping the seatpost and tentatively heading downhill.

A steep traverse of a scree slope led to rocky singletrack with steep drops and chutes, but not a single warning sign anywhere on the descent – or at all during the event! Perhaps because they'd end up using too many? Over 45 minutes later I finally reached the bottom and realised that what I had ridden was the best downhill I've ever done. With hindsight, I'd have quite happily climbed for

Iron Bike stage by stage

PROLOGUE

Limone Piemonte
– 4km, 227m climbing.
Time taken: 14 minutes 52 seconds.

STAGE 1

Limone to San Damiano – 93.5km, 3,560m climbing.
Max altitude: 1,861m.
Time taken: 6 hours 18 minutes.

STAGE 2

San Damiano to Barge – 118km, 4,076m climbing.
Max altitude: 3,000m.
Time taken: 8 hours 47 minutes.

STAGE 3

Barge to Torre Pellice – 101km, 4,262m climbing.
Max altitude: 2,369m.
Time taken: 8 hours 3 minutes.

STAGE 4

Torre Pellice to Pramollo – 72.5km, 3,500m climbing.
Max altitude: 2,400m.
Time taken: 7 hours 40 minutes.

STAGE 5

Pramollo to Rif Selleries – 93km, 4,520m climbing.
Max altitude: 2,679m.
Time taken: 8 hours 32 minutes.

STAGE 6

Rif Selleries to Sestriere – 111km, 4,626m climbing.
Max altitude: 3,121m.
Time taken: 9 hours 51 minutes.

STAGE 7

Sestriere to Sauze d'Oulz – 68.1km, 2,968m climbing.
Max altitude: 2,679m.
Time taken: 5 hours 4 minutes.

TOTAL

Total distance: 661km, 27,739m climbing.
Total riding time: 54 hours, 29 minutes.

I passed one of the top riders, Elias from Belgium. His face was cut up, one eye was closed shut and he could hardly walk



I got through a few sets of brake pads in the week



You know that James Dean poster, the one with the rifle...



A friendly face, a video camera and some food – yay!



"I'm ready for my close-up"

another four hours just to experience it all over again. I soon learned that no matter how brutal the uphill were – often too steep to ride – you could be sure of a fantastic descent on the other side.

The only thing that could possibly make the event harder is poor weather, so when rain came in on day four I guessed we were in trouble. It was cold and wet in the bottom of the valley at just 400m, so at 2,400m it was going to be very cold, maybe even snowing? Grinding up a never-ending climb riding into the clouds, visibility was almost zero. With no sense of height all I could do was look at the Garmin GPS on the bars and watch the metres tick by slowly. By 1,900m up, I was cold and wet, and I began to question my sanity. What were the race organisers thinking bringing everyone up here in such horrible conditions? My pace slowed to 1 or 2kph at times, but the climb went on and on, I could hear the sound of cowbells all around me but the cloud was so dense I couldn't see a single

cow. The noise was deafening and drove me mad – it would make a great form of torture!

Beyond belief

I began to think I'd never see the top and thanks to the horrible rain and mist I never really did, but eventually we started heading downhill. Yet again the murderous climb was redeemed by a great – if a little scary and super slippery – descent. I escaped unscathed, but not everyone was so lucky. I passed one of the top riders, Elias from Belgium. His face was cut up, one eye was closed shut and he could hardly walk. I got off my bike, walked with him and checked he was OK. He insisted he was fine to get to the next checkpoint a few km away, but not only did he manage to make it to the checkpoint, he even finished the day, riding for another 40km. This kind of bravery is what makes Iron Bike competitors so tough!

The camaraderie during the race is pretty special, despite this being an event everyone is here to survive and finish (which is easier said than done!) There were 140 riders on the start line, yet seven hard days later fewer than 50 people would be classed as finishers, the rate of attrition is higher than anything I've ever seen. Some riders struggle on the long, steep, loose climbs while others surrender to the crazy descents. A downhill bike wouldn't be out of place on some of them, in fact one descent was a waymarked downhill course yet everyone was riding lightweight short travel XC bikes, simply because hauling anything like an all-mountain bike would be an impossible struggle.

After the seven hardest days racing of my life, I finally crossed the line in Sauze d'Oulz and could class myself as an Iron Bike finisher, which I'm very proud of. I pushed myself beyond what I thought I was capable of, both physically and mentally and I loved every single minute of it. It might be a race, but it felt more like an adventure and is without a doubt the best thing I have ever done! 🌀

HATS OFF TO BEN

I COULDN'T HAVE DONE IT WITHOUT...

Iron Bike is a race that can be tackled as a solo rider or in a pair. I was riding solo, but like many of the riders I had a supporter with me: Ben is a Team Wiggle mechanic and followed the race from stage to stage. Having someone take care of the bike, set-up and take down camp, cook food and keep me motivated was vital to keep me pedalling each day.

Thankfully the bike stood up to the punishing terrain well – I only needed to swap out the brake pads a few times because of the extreme nature of the descents, and a full clean and check over of the bike was done following each stage. Many other people were not so lucky and the event mechanics were working 24 hours a day to keep people riding.