



Details

- **Where:** Chianti, Italy
- **Start/finish:** Siena to Florence
- **Distance:** 116.4km (72.3 miles)
- **Pictures:** Getty Images & Sam Jones



SAM JONES

Senior
Campaigns
Comms Officer

Through bikepacking, Sam manages to combine his love for sleeping out in wild places with cycling

Great Rides

RAISING A GLASS

Bikepacking through the wine country of Italy's Chianti Hills helped **Sam Jones** cope with the sudden death of his father

“Should I go?” I asked myself while packing up my bike and gear ahead of a flight to Italy only eight hours away. I had no answer. Like an automaton, I packed, occasionally freezing to stare off into the distance, unpacking something, only to put it back again.

Should I go?

Everyone was saying I should, that there was nothing I could do here in England, that everything was taken care of, that I should go off and ride the route I had planned for months, that it would be good for me, that it's what he would have wanted. All of which may have been true, but my father had passed away less than 36 hours earlier. Going away didn't feel right. I was in a state of shock. Uncomfortably numb.

STOP, REWIND

Years back, one early March, my Tuscan girlfriend Daria and I walked Il Sentiero del Chianti ('the Chianti Way'), a long-distance trail between Florence and Siena, to celebrate her 30th birthday.

For four days we walked straight through the heart of Chianti before spring had sprung. Famous for its wine worldwide, vineyards crowd hilly slopes that top the heights of English mountains. Trails weave through woodlands where *cinghiale* (wild boar) roam, making their presence known only by the mud baths you see along the way.

“Our bikes drew inquisitive stares... The Strade Bianche Sportif was on. We did not look the part”

In March, the colours are muted. Tiny purples, blues and yellows of wildflowers peep through the undergrowth. Trees are bare, the vines dormant, tourists absent. It was a magical walk. Every year when we return for D's birthday, I promise to return to the trail with my bike.

For a long-time I've wanted to learn the contours of this land that is so much more than a wine-producing region. I've wanted to camp on the high hills, ride the famous *strade bianche* ('white roads'), explore deeper into the woods, and of course feast on the best of Tuscan cuisine! This year was to be the year.

Now I wasn't sure I wanted to go.

Daria convinced me otherwise.

ON THE STRADE BIANCHI

My old pal Ned was already waiting in Florence, having agreed to join me months before. We caught an early train to Siena, a city some say rivals Florence in beauty. My Garmin immediately got us lost, taking us up and down the steep cobbled streets and passageways until we came to the main square, la Piazza del Campo.

Our fat tyres and laden bikes drew inquisitive stares as we rode through this UNESCO heritage site. I'd assumed it was because a bikepacking rig draws attention, but it soon became clear: the Strade Bianche Sportif was on. We did not look the part. Also, our intended route clashed with the sportif...





Main: Sam checks the map on the hills above Florence, near the end of the Chianti Way

Great nights out

Sam has written a guide to wild camping: cyclinguk.org/wildcamping

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Plotting a circuitous route out of Siena, I thought we'd broken the deadlock until a ride marshal waved us to a halt. We waited patiently until there was a break in the riders and he beckoned us on, saying "Vai, vai piano" ("Go, go slowly").

Slogging up the side of the closed-road event on foot was unpleasant for both us and the



Do it yourself

- Fly to either Pisa or Florence, then start your route at either Florence or Siena. If you don't fancy flying with your bike, hire one in Florence via florencebybike.it like Ned did.
- Alternatively, take the train. For advice, see seat61.com/Italy. In Italy you pay a €3.50 bike supplement on regional trains.
- Most villages have a bar, and all towns a little supermarket, so you only need a day's supplies. Just be sure to bring a corkscrew and leave space for a bottle of Chianti for your evening stops!





Iberian bikepacking
 Read about MTB touring across Spain: cyclinguk.org/article/great-rides-costa-costa

Main: The Piazza del Duomo and Giotto's tower (centre)
Below: Ned by the River Arno

► sportif riders. Our escape from the skinny-wheeled hordes onto a different strade bianche was a relief. We began to encounter ramshackle farms, unripe vines lining the hills, loosely held-together paths, and long, steep climbs. We were in true Chianti.

UPS AND DOWNS

A regular rider in the Surrey Hills, I thought I was accustomed to climbing. A laden bike, 1,000 metres or so of climbing off-road over 30 miles – a doddle, right? Ah, hubris, how it loves to trip us all!

Riding in Tuscany is tough, especially with occasional hike-a-bike sections. There's not much singletrack but fire-roads and trails make up for the lack. It was just the right side of hard, and enjoyable enough to shake the blues out of me for a while. It's difficult to be down when whooping along trails with a lifelong friend.

Golden light was shining on the vines as we emerged from the woods above Gaiole-in-Chianti. A wine shop was open, so we had to visit to sample the wares. The saleslady's patter was good and we left with a €30 bottle of wine – too English, despite our grasp of Italian, to exchange it when we realised we'd chosen the dearest wine on offer!

We paused long enough in Gaiole for an aperitivo and a supper of *ribollita* (Tuscan bread stew), steak, and tiramisù, before groaning our way into the hills above to make camp in the unknown dark.

As Ned snored in the dull dawn light the next day, I busied about our barren campsite preparing tea. It was a time to be left alone with my thoughts, and inevitably they turned to my father. The exhilaration and exhaustion of the previous day meant I'd not had much of a chance to think about him. I wondered what my life would be like without Pa, knowing his favoured armchair by the fire would sit empty and I'd never hear one of his familiar tales again...

"Is there breakfast?" As would happen so often throughout the ride, Ned managed to shake me from the rising tide of melancholia.



"No, just tea."
 "I'd prefer coffee." It was hard not to laugh.

UNDER THE STARS

Breakfast was a sketchy descent, followed by a lung-busting gravel climb. An edible breakfast was still four miles away, and I cursed the Sam who'd planned an hour's worth of climbing first thing.

We stocked up on breakfast and lunch in Radda-in-Chianti, then followed the SP72, a quiet road through rows of vines and olive groves that climbs towards a small village at Badia a Montemuro. Up to this point, we'd largely climbed on tarmac, but taking a track to Monte San Michele (892m) saw us up through the conifers to a summit sadly marked by a TV aerial.

After a brief lunch and snooze in the rare sun, we started descending to Greve-in-Chianti. Forest tracks merged into swooping switchbacks along the strade bianche, and we had to take care not to overcook the corners and fly off into the vineyards!

Three kilometres and 600 metres lower, we rolled into Greve, tired, elated and just in time for

Fact file
Il Sentiero del Chianti

- **Distance:** 116.4km (72.3 miles) over three days, with 3,489m (11,449ft) of ascent
- **Route:** We loosely followed Il Sentiero del Chianti from Siena to Florence but chose off-road climbs and descents using ridewithgps.com and a map. We passed through Gaiole-in-Chianti, Radda-in-Chianti, and Greve-in-Chianti.
- **Conditions:** Mixed in March: hot, cold, sunny, overcast, rain, and snow! Trails largely dry until the snowfall when they were mucky as hell.
- **Accommodation:** Bivvying in the woods.
- **Bikes used:** Surly ECR (Sam); Haibike Seet HardSeven 5.0 (Ned).
- **Maps/guides:** Kompass Firenze, Siena, Chianti 1:50,000. Also ridewithgps.com.
- **I'm glad I had...** An understanding friend and a bivvi with a hood!
- **Next time I would...** Swap my front tyre for a less aggressive tread, spend more time visiting the vineyards, and hopefully go under happier circumstances.
- **Further info:** visittuscany.com

i More online
 Cycling doesn't just lift your spirits when you're sad, it can help with depression and more: cyclinguk.org/tags/mental-health

