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ITALIAN MASTERS

THREE HIGH-CLASS ITALIAN-DESIGNED BIKES
TACKLE THE ROUTE OF A STUNNING SPORTIVE
IN THE SCOTTISH BORDERS



The stunning weather of the previous few weeks has imploded into road-flooding sheets of driving rain as we travel up the M6 and over the Scottish border. Thankfully it eases to a low-cloud sulk with occasional bursts of rain by the time we head over Beef Tubs pass from Moffat and meet Chris Wright from the Tour O The Borders event team.

While the Tweed Valley is best known for its mountain biking – the Glentress and Innerleithen trail centres and Golfie trails snake around the forested hills to the east of Peebles – it’s a fantastic place for road biking too. Not least because it hosts The Tesco Bank Tour O The Borders, one of the only fully closed-road sportive events around. We’re here to recce the route before the day in September.

Mist opportunity

While there’s no solid reason that we’re riding three bikes from famous Italian marques – Bianchi, Cinelli and Colnago – the steep slopes towering into the mist from the lakeside have more than a hint of Italian alp about them. Because we’re starting from the bottom corner, halfway round, we’re straight into the signature section of the route, which includes what the locals call ‘The Wall of Talla’.

The slightly swerving 36 per cent maximum gradient, 1.8km Cat 4 ramp is also our first chance to wake the bikes up. The Colnago C-RS wastes no time in proving that its subtly squared off down-tube, big bottom bracket box and tapering rectangular stays don’t waste any wattage on the way to the back wheel. Production-spec bikes have Shimano wheels to match the groupset but the Vision wheels on our sample are stiff enough to shoulder their responsibilities and there’s plenty of grip in the Continental Grand Sport Race rubber on the damp and pockmarked road surface.

At its steepest point the surface starts to ripple and buckle where vehicles have clawed their way up

The Columbus Genius monocoque frame of the Cinelli Strato Faster is similarly stout in its hexagonal down-tube appearance and even has “stiff continuous fibre” stays that give it a very firm ride on the run in. As the gradient ramps up, the sub-kilo weight leaves it slightly light on muscle when it comes to power transfer.

At its steepest point the surface starts to ripple and buckle where vehicles have clawed their way up, and the frame seems like it’s buckling and rippling under the strain too. Conversely, while the viscoelastic resin of the Bianchi’s Countervail carbon fibre really does seem to take the sharp edge off road vibration as claimed, it doesn’t soften the Oltre XR3’s ability to channel your effort through

its big bottom bracket. It’s on the chunky side at 1110g for the frame, and is the heaviest bike overall so it takes a few extra watts to grunt up the Wall. What our guide for the day – and event physio coordinator – Phil Mack – is struggling with are the Vittoria Rubino Pro tyres, which are slipping on the greasy surface.

As we level out slightly at the saddle of the short pass it’s the view back down the valley over Talla that takes everyone’s breath away. Our attention doesn’t linger behind us as the winding descent ahead needs full concentration. Handling that Cinelli designed for the short but brutally steep hills and sharp corners of the 2016 Rio Olympics triathlon circuit, ridden by

Italian triathlete Annamaria Mazzetti and Russians Igor and Dmitry Polyanskiy, make the Strato an intense experience as we sweep down towards Megget Reservoir. Its 74-degree angles are twitchy and while the raised bottom bracket improves pedalling clearance through corners it makes it feel slightly precarious compared to the lower-slung Bianchi and Colnago.

A light steering feel from the slim fork of the Oltre combines with what we now know are particularly slippery tyres to keep the Bianchi on the defensive on this descent too, leaving the Colnago laughing away at the front. While the long Deda RHM stem and gravel bike-slack 71.5-degree head angle of the C-RS can lurch around when you’re out of the saddle at low revs they let it corner smooth and fast. The rollercoaster chicanes and a final scything hairpin where a small burn feeds into the reservoir are a perfect showcase for its confident swagger and Continental tyres.

While the wattle coming through smoothly, the Cinelli can showcase its relatively low weight, although it’s not enough to shake off the Bianchi or the Colnago. As we buzz over the cattle grid at the top, the sheer stiffness of the C-RS makes itself known in terms of back and wrist ache. It cuts into traction on the occasionally raw road surfaces as we swerve and tuck down the far side on the technical descent towards Yarrow. Dry roads mean we can push the Bianchi harder without worrying about its tyres, and the rapid response steering of the Cinelli has its advantages when dodging potholed patches. Despite being soft through the pedals, the Strato is unforgiving in terms of vibration through the saddle and bar, which is disappointing for a frame that costs £2234.99.

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Scotland the bright

The recent rain turns colour contrasts Insta filter crazy with lush greens, blazing gorse yellows and whiter than white lambs as we skirt round the edge of St Mary’s Loch. On the day of the event this will be the third feed station and the split point between the 88km Challenge route and the full 120km. It might be called the Tour O The Borders, but there’s nothing diluted about the sense of wild remoteness as we roll gradually higher up the narrowing valley of Berry Bush.



COLNAGO C-RS ULTEGRA

£2699.95 ★★★★★

SPECIFICATION

Weight 7.56kg (52cm)
Frame Colnago C-RS carbon
Fork Colnago C-RS carbon
Gears Shimano Ultegra 6800 50/34, 11-28
Brakes Shimano Ultegra 6800
Wheels Vision Trimax 30
Finishing kit Deda RHM 01 bar, Deda Zero One stem,

Selle Italia Q-Bik saddle, 25mm Continental Grand Sport Race tyres

HIGHS
 Light climber, decent value descender

LOWS
 Frame is unforgiving over distance

BUY IF
 You want a classic Italian marque that loves to ride hard

The population is so sparse that the red ochre-painted marker stones outside one of the few houses is a major point of conversation as we tap up tempo past sheep tottering around on steep fells to our left and a mix of felled and fine fettle forestry on the right hand side of the valley.

As we roll over the top into Crosslee it’s a different landscape again, with a broad river meandering through broad stony berms and beaches. The winding road reflects the river’s character, but the tapering downslope naturally adds enough speed to get us dynamic in the big ring, dropping shoulders and taking racing lines through corners wherever we can see far enough ahead. This is going to be an absolute riot to ride when the roads are fully closed for the event.

The chance of wandering woolly chicanes round blind bends and the consequence of taking a header into a gorse bush mean you should leave a bit of braking and manoeuvring room in the bag for emergencies. There’s likely to be a bunch up at the water stop just before Ettrick, but that should slow things down to stop folk overshooting the sharp left turn up the narrow road to Witchy Knowe. Today it’s complicated by a couple of large horses to navigate round, but as we curl around the first corner the bowl ahead has a properly Alpine feel.

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Swinging up the climb of Paddy Slacks puts you into the wild again

With a maximum gradient of 8.6 per cent and an average 2.3 per cent tilt over 2.7km it's a perfect mellow warm up, unless you're determined to push the peloton pace.

It's enough for a final showdown between our three bikes, and with the slope not steep enough to flatter the low weight spin of the Cinelli or the blunt wattage transfer of the Colnago, it's the Bianchi that claims the honours. As we cruise and chat up the road to Tweedsmuir, Chris has been surprised by how much difference there is between the three. Even myself and experienced co-tester, Ryan Stockton, weren't expecting as much between handling, frame stiffness or other obvious strong and weak attributes across bikes with such illustrious histories.

The detailing and componentry come in for praise and criticism. Unfortunately, for Italian →



CINELLI STRATO FASTER
£3149.99 ★★★★★

SPECIFICATION

Weight 7.76kg (M)

Frame Columbus Genius carbon

Fork Columbus FEL

Megahead carbon

Gears Miche Race

HSP 50/34 chainset,

Campagnolo

Potenza 11-28

Brakes

Miche Race

Wheels Miche Altur

Finishing kit

Cinelli DNA stem

and bar, Selle

Italia X1 Flow

saddle, 25mm
Michelin Power
Endurance tyres

HIGHS

Sub-kilo frameset with sharp handling

LOWS

Soft under power but firm in the saddle

BUY IF

You're a gear spinner who wants a light, responsive bike

Final furlong

It might be an A-road but the bridging route back to the feed station and route split isn't busy if you're riding outside of the event, and this whole extra section has been a superb loop that's well worth ticking the 120km box to experience.

Swinging up the climb of Paddy Slacks puts you into the wild again, climbing between high moorland and forestry, with the Innerleithen forest mountain bike routes to the right. As we drop down again and hit the quiet, twisting wood-shrouded roads from Traquair towards the event finish in Peebles, it's time for the Bianchi to prove its worth. Powerful drivetrain delivery and aero sculpting is balanced against a smooth ride from the Countervail-enhanced carbon frame, and with elbows tucked it soon strings out the soft feeling Cinelli and chattery Colnago.

While Peebles will be the finish line in September, we're still only halfway round so press on southwards round a loop of twisting, rolling roads around Cademuir. Even without the coned cordons that will be there to guide you round and keep traffic off the event, it's an easy route to follow and once you've nipped back along the main road a bit before heading south towards Stobo, it's blissfully map/GPS free for miles. They're fantastic miles too, heading towards the right fork up what will be the first big climb of the sportive (but our last) at Dreva.



Once you've nipped back along the main road a bit before heading south towards Stobo, it's blissfully map/GPS free for miles



The bikes' detailing and componentry come in for both praise and criticism



Between the super-light, super-fast handling but soft-feeling Cinelli Strato, the seriously stiff but slack and stable Colnago C-RS and the smooth, high-velocity Bianchi Oltre XR3 there's potentially a classic Italian marque bike around that's a great match for a wide range of different riders.

Talk turns to which we'd have ourselves and having swapped around between all three, Ryan and Phil come to the same conclusion as I had in the weeks of test riding before our Tour lap. While the tyres are slippery in some conditions and it's slightly heavier than the others, the ride quality of the Oltre XR3 is a superb balance of easy speed and comfortable cruising that's ideal for clocking a fast time round a challenging route like the one we've ridden today. [PLUS](#)

shifting fans this tester felt that Campagnolo's new Potenza gears on the Cinelli and Bianchi were let down by a degree of lever swing before it actuates a shift. It's a shame as the hoods are comfortable and the swing upshift, thumb button downshift is intuitive on more expensive groupsets.

The Colnago should also come with heavier, narrower Shimano wheels rather than the £560 Vision wheelset on our test bike, but even if you added them at full price it'd still be a comparable price to the other two bikes.

The big opening under the bottom bracket of the Cinelli is a grit trap but the oversized Megahead tapered fork means the sharp steering is super-accurate if you like your handling fast.

While some elements of the Bianchi frame, such as the down-tube fins that blend into the fork back and subtle facets on the head-tube, are super-neat, the chain catcher on the seat-tube is ugly and the Di2 battery bolts under the down-tube seem crude on such an otherwise sculpted frame.



BIANCHI OLTRE XR3 £3299.99



SPECIFICATION

Weight 8.06kg (55cm)

Frame Countervail carbon

Fork Countervail carbon

Gears Campagnolo Potenza 50/34, 11-28

Brakes

Campagnolo Potenza

Wheels Fulcrum

Racing 7 LG

Finishing kit

Bianchi Reparto

Corse stem and bar, 25mm Vittoria Rubino Pro tyres

HIGHS

Naturally fast frame that's smooth and comfortable all day

LOWS

Slippery tyres

BUYIF

You want a fantastic all-round frame for future upgrading

TESCO BANK TOUR O THE BORDERS

The 2017 event rolls out of Peebles on September 3. As well as the 120km-long, 1430m vertical route we rode, there's an 88.8km, 890m Challenge route that misses out the extra Berry Bush, Witchy Knowe loop on the south-east corner. Both are stunningly beautiful courses with challenging climbs and superb technical descents.

To work with the rolling road closures there's a 16kph cut-off point, but to help you hit that target, event physiotherapist, and our guide, Phil Mack, has put together a training plan for riders and leads TFOB virtual training rides on Strava every Wednesday. For more information go to touroftheborders.com.