

biciklo **GUIDE TO**

CYCLING TOURS

2011 EDITION

FEATURING

**Randonnee's
Puglia
Self-guided
Tour**

www.biciklo.com



We never thought we'd be craving the mid-day heat like we are right now.

We're in the luminous White Cave, the furthest possible point in the magnificent *Grotte di Castellana* and we're cold, for the first time.

Clad in cycling shorts and sleeveless tops, fumbling in flip flops and carrying our handlebar bags, we're huddled together for warmth but also to lessen the offending sweaty smell that's emanating from us and ungraciously up our fellow tourists' nostrils. We haven't cycled far today, but we've been out for hours in the same close-fitting, sweat-soaked gear.

Outside it's hotter than a complimentary hot towel in an Indian restaurant and about an hour ago we were plunged into these cold and close quarters with unsuspecting strangers. We apologize to the French-speaking German man to our left and brazenly ask if we smell as bad as we think we do.

"Um, oui, a little, like cheese" he nods sheepishly.

Hysterics ensue. And thus our trip unfolds.

IT'S A SEX AND THE CITYESQUE scenario. The four of us are friends, living in a big city and enjoying full lives. One of us is in the throes of starting her own business, one gets married a month after this trip ends, one is curious about starting a family upon her return and one has left her 2-year old twins to come away for her first good night's sleep in years.

Although our names are not Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte or Samantha we are four self-governing, comely and audacious women embarking on a different journey in our lives.

Puglia (pronounced as you see it but without the g) is the heel of the famous boot of Italy. If there's one place Carrie Bradshaw would take a cycling trip, it would probably be the heel of a boot. Blahnik or Choo? Definitely Blahnik.

SUN-SCORCHED AND WILD, Puglia is a coastal region blessed with magnificent scenery, cloudless skies and cobalt waters. Refreshingly free of foreign tourists, Puglia boasts Roman and Greek ruins, Medieval towns and Baroque buildings, framed by grape vines, sandy beaches and

limestone plateaus. We're sold.

The four of us city-slickers have come to this lesser-known region of Italy for a 7-day cycling trip organized by self-guided experts Randonnee Tours of Vancouver, Canada. Randonnee owner Robbin McKinney has been in the cycle touring business for more than 20 years and since 2007 has expanded the company's tour offerings significantly, turning Randonnee Tours into a flourishing boutique tour operator of self-guided cycling and walking holidays around the world.

Randonnee's self-guided cycling holidays offer all the services of bicycles and maps, accommodations, food and luggage transfers, but without the services of a guide.

Does that mean you'll get lost? No. Does that mean you have to carry your clothes and gear in panniers? No. Does it mean you have to be an ace bike mechanic? No. Does it mean you won't learn as much about the areas you ride through? No. It means you'll enjoy all the luxury of a guided tour, just without the actual human guide accompanying you.

Randonnee Tours provide your touring bike

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The **tap water** tastes like bottled water and is very clean. There are fountains throughout the day on all the rides, so don't worry about finding enough water en route.

The Italians enjoy an **afternoon siesta**. If you know you'll need a bank, or food or shoes at some point in the day, go before 1 pm. Otherwise, you'll have to wait until 5 pm.

The bicycles are Cannondale hybrids and are included in the price. You may want to consider bringing your own seat for added comfort.

and reserve your desired accommodations (there's a choice of B&B, classic or luxury). Before your departure, they send comprehensive maps and directions, suggestions for lunch and dinners as well as recommended sites of interest and fascinating information on the regions you'll be traveling through.

At the start of your tour, you're met by their regional representatives to fit your bikes and kit you out with handlebar bags, panniers if you need them (for those unexpected mid-ride shopping trips), tools and all the paraphernalia needed to repair a puncture. These same representatives are only a phone call away should you require assistance or advice along the way.

In truth, lesser-known Puglia is actually very well known - but only to Italians, because it's where they come for their holidays. One of the most refreshing aspects of the region is its lack of foreign tourists. Locals express a genuine curiosity about our presence with little expectations, few judgments and no animosity.

Our prescribed itinerary from Randonnee Tours consists of cycling south along the Adriatic and sightseeing UNESCO sites, visiting ancient Roman and Greek ruins, taking a cooking class and enjoying magnificent dinners, cycling into the countryside and immersing ourselves in

Italian and Puglian culture.

Our personal itinerary consists of laughs and wine, food, cycling and music, swimming, getting to know each other better, shopping and more cycling. The four of us traveling together have very different personalities, very different priorities, very different traveling styles and very different items on our "must-do" lists for this trip.

Beth is a backpacker to the core, never wasteful and always open-minded. She jumps for photos, makes lunch out of breakfast and becomes a giddy 6-year old at the sight of water, stripping off her cycling gear and diving into its inviting coolness faster than you can say *mozzarella*.

Melinda enjoys the more decadent things in life, has a stinging wit and thought-provoking questions. Her nostrils and eyes start twitching as she gets closer to unique boutiques and she has an uncanny ability to pick out the one decent wine out of a list of a thousand.

Cherilee is a foodie whose enormous appetite belies her lean and athletic frame. She's come to Italy to embrace her inner and genuinely Italian self. She can smell a fig tree beyond the horizon and talks with her hands more than a 10th-generation olive presser.

And me? I fit somewhere in the middle, here to document in words and images a trip of a lifetime.

This trip offers much more than just 'something' for each of us. It manages to offer everything each of us could ask for in a holiday. Sun, sea, food, wine, culture and shopping.

OUR TRIP BEGINS ON THE southeast coastal region of Puglia in the magical coastal town of Monopoli. Upon our arrival we're greeted with narrow, winding, cobbled streets beaming with life as the locals and tourists get on with their day, post-siesta. Balconies are brimming with plants and spilling with the day's washing. The streets are clean and the residents friendly.







The stark contrast of the pale limestone set against the turquoise waters dotted with blue and red fishing boats makes for an unforgettably picturesque scene. It's hard to imagine a more perfect setting for life, never mind the start of a cycling trip.

We've even managed to time our trip with a lively music festival of traditional Italian and contemporary Spanish music. At first, only the very young and the very old are brave enough to get up and swing their hips to the groove, but eventually the Limoncello takes effect and everyone in the crowd takes to the stone-tiled patio. We simply can't imagine what lies ahead for us if this is our introduction to Puglia. We quietly agree it can't get better than this.

Turns out we're wrong.

Randonnee Tours has choreographed an itinerary highlighting the best of Puglia's coastal and inland beauty. The route wanders from postcard-worthy turquoise waters in cliff-face towns like Polignano a Mare and Otranto to the rich agricultural and fruit-laden lands of Salento and Le Murge and picture-perfect hilltop towns like Locorotondo and Martina Franca.

Having cycled and explored this region for the first time 20 years ago, Randonnee's Robbin McKinney knows the land well. He wouldn't take his clients anywhere he hadn't already fallen in love with, and Puglia consistently provides quality accommodations, cycling, scenery and culture. "When we design trips," Robbin says, "we look for outstanding scenery, quiet roads to cycle, interesting sights, great hotels, good food and wine. Puglia has all this and more."

FOR THE FIRST TWO DAYS of the tour, we ride out of Monopoli's shiny cobbled streets, past its fruit stands and head out along the coast. We visit Egnazia, an ancient Greek settlement, enjoy lunch and a walk around the beautiful *Polignano*

e Mare and marvel at its impressive swimming lagoon.

As we ride inland and uphill, we sample some of the region's bountiful fruit. With its mineral-rich soil and aqueduct irrigation system Puglia is one of Italy's largest producers of tomatoes, salad leaves, olives, citrus fruit, almonds, artichoke and eggplant as well as the country's largest producer of white and concord grapes, olive oil and pasta.

So, if you forget a snack, fear not. Mother Nature and the good farmers of Puglia have got you covered with their delectable offerings. We stop more than a bushel's worth of times for a

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NEVER KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT.
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quick nibble off a vine's branch.

BEFORE WE'D EVEN SET FOOT in Italy we'd been repeatedly cautioned about Italian drivers. So we brace ourselves for the unnerving whoosh of wind from too-close-for-comfort vehicles and unfriendly honks from impatient drivers waiting to crest a hill behind us.

The reality, however, is very different. We are met with friendly waves and encouraging beeps, warnings of big trucks yelled enthusiastically out of car windows and an unexpected amount of patience on hills and blind turns. Is it because we are four women on bicycles or simply four people on bicycles? We don't know and quite frankly don't care. We're four safe and respected people on bicycles, and that's all that matters.

The great thing about the self-guided format is that every day it takes you somewhere new. Even with the maps, directions and descriptions you never really know what to expect or how long the day will last, what the accommodations will

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For great shopping look out for **Boho** in Cisternino and in Ostuni. There's also really good shopping in **Martina Franca**, **Locorotondo** and **Otranto**. A visit to **Lecce** is also a highlight for its architecture, history and shopping.

The **white wine** is very good and the reds are strong. Even the locals drink white because the reds are very strong. Because of the intense, all-year-round sun the grapes produce a lot of sugar, therefore producing strong flavours.

In **Monopoli** you'd be wise to check out **Il Celliere** for dinner. Apart from having a very good menu and wine list, they also make the most delicious mojitos. If you like seafood, be sure to sample the delicious Mixed Fish.

be like, what you'll have to eat and what you'll see along the way. It's exciting, refreshing and joyously unfamiliar.

In our everyday lives, we're always conscious of the time available. But in Puglia, it quickly becomes clear that our time is ours. Every gloriously long minute of every blue-skied day, we do what we choose. We sleep in (sometimes), we enjoy relaxed breakfasts, we ride for as long as we want, we take long leisurely lunches, we see the sights that we choose to. There is no time agenda, and not surprisingly it takes us no time to adjust to this new, more relaxed pace.

IN OSTUNI, ONE OF THE MOST beautiful towns we visit, evocative corners pull us through archways and up steep alleyways. Church bells chime, green shutters block out the inevitable midday heat as the town accordion player washes his feet in the fountain.

Here we have a cooking lesson, organized by Randonnee Tours in the small open kitchen of Merinda and Anna in the San Filippo restaurant. We get our hands floury making *orecchiette*, simple fresh tomato and basil sauce with ricotta

cheese, a pork-shoulder-wrapped sausage stuffed with provolone and a baked egg and cauliflower dish before watching Merinda sugar almonds to turn them into decadent almond pralines.

It's a joy to see the women at ease with food in their hands and flour in their hair. Full of character and energy, they talk as much with their hands as their eyes. They enjoy our animated reactions as we taste the food, so simple, delicious and healthy.

After our lesson, we wander the streets. A town festival is being set up with crepe stalls and brass bands, decorative lighting and white candyfloss. Once again, a perfectly timed showcase for Italian love for food, music and life seems to be unfolding just for us.

THE LANDSCAPE CHANGES dramatically as we ride inland from the coast. Along the coast it's dry and flat, offering intense blue-green waters, craggy white shorelines and beautiful sandy beaches, not an animal in sight.

The coast is dotted with inlets, *porto di rifugio*. Originally used as refuge by ships in danger, they now offer a safe haven for swimmers and sun worshippers. We stop in many for a swim, a paddle, a photograph and a brief respite from the bicycle.

Inland, the soil turns a deep reddish-brown, the heat intensifies and the animals start to appear. As we ride, we smell mint, eucalyptus and bougainvillea, and pause to eat fruit and nuts. Every one of our senses is invigorated and enticed.

The riding distances are not long. They range from 22 kilometers on the first day to an optional 100 kilometers on the sixth day. All of us are experienced cyclists, so we assumed we'd be riding the longer options - provided the longer options still took us to the sights and towns we wanted, and were recommended, to see. Another tip of the hat to Randonnee Tours for providing not just two or three cycling options





each day, but ensuring the worthwhile sights and places are on both routes.

Our riding days end navigating our way through narrow streets with the locals slowly spilling out from their obligatory siestas. Shutters reopen on shop fronts to reveal shoes, baked goods and gelaterias, children bound out of their afternoon slumber and tablecloths are laid out ready for the arrival of evening appetites.

Our beautiful accommodations are always situated close to town, within walking distance to shops, restaurants and main squares. During the trip we stay a mix of charming B&Bs and stunning hotels, each one a wide-eyed surprise, far too clean and luxurious for our sweaty, smelly bodies. Luckily, we scrub up well.

IT'S HARD TO COME UP WITH a single highlight for the trip, but the final day's ride south from Otranto is simply spectacular. We ride along a rugged and rocky coast dotted with pine forests and barren farmlands, blessed with turquoise waters and draped with bronzing bodies on the beach.

Before we leave for the southern spectacle with our bathing suits, we take a left turn at Orte to see an Uluru-inspired rainwater well just off the main road, wholeheartedly believing we've just taken a left turn into Africa, Australia or Costa Rica. It's a huge ochre-coloured well with green bushes and trees sprouting along its rustic walls and dark turquoise water at its base. Set against the bluest of blue skies, the well makes for a dramatic scene.

We also stop at the *Banyo Marino* swimming lagoon, taking the steps down to the left where it's free and as beautiful as the side you have to pay for. We enjoy its clear and refreshing waters before setting off once again. Further along the coast, the large and impressive anchialine cave *Grotta Zinzulusa* is another beautiful spot for

WHAT RIDERS SAID

"One of my favourite things to do was stop at the many vines along side the road for a handful of grapes, or at the blackberry bushes for a quick nibble. I even cautiously bit into a prickly pear once. Not my best idea of the trip." **Cherilee**

Melinda's favourite hotel was in Locorotondo. "Having a lovely and luxurious place that we could all enjoy and gab till the wee hours was brilliant. The ladies in the morning cooking us breakfast weren't so bad either!"

"Having the freedom of being able to swim at just about any point along the way for as long as I pleased was as close to heaven as I could get. One day alone I swam in four different locations! Perfect." **Beth**

OUR RIDING DAYS END
NAVIGATING NARROW STREETS
WITH LOCALS SLOWLY SPILLING
OUT FROM THEIR SIESTAS.





a swim, a tour or a gelato. As suspected, Beth strips and dives in. It's a long climb out from Zinzulusa back to the main road, so we're careful not to overdo the post-swim gelato.

AND SO WE COME TO THE END of our once-in-a-lifetime trip and prepare to leave. We depart open-hearted and blue-swathed Puglia with fuller jeans and deeper friendships, with less money and more respect for it than we arrived with. We leave behind tire tracks and take with us a greater understanding of a culture with ancient roots and deep hearts, of people living in harmony with the land and seas and of a language spoken as much with hands and faces as with mouths and minds.

Carrie Bradshaw once said, "if you are a single woman there is always one thing you should take out with you on a Saturday night ... your friends." Well, I say "if you are a woman there is always one thing you should take with you on a cycling tour ... your friends." For Beth, Cherilee, Melinda and myself this has been much more than a trip down the shimmering Adriatic on our trusty steeds; it has been a journey into each others' lives, limits, loves and longings. We've accepted and disagreed, questioned and backed down, cried and hugged. We don't know if we'll ever do this again but we all hope to get the chance again, one day. 🚲

ESSENTIALS: Randonnee Tours | Vancouver, Canada
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Randonnee Tours Puglia 7-day 2011 Tour, Monopoli to Otranto: tour runs any date March-November and ranges from \$1,790-\$2,660 USD depending on the luxury level of the accommodations you choose. Price includes bike rental, all breakfasts, one dinner and a cooking class with dinner included. Single supplement \$445-\$650. There is also a 9-day tour available ending in Lecce for \$2,390-\$3,540. For those wanting a guided tour, consider Great Explorations, Randonnee Tours' sister company also owned by Robbin McKinney. Great Explorations offer cycling tours around the world, including Puglia - but with a guide.

THE IDEAL TOUR FOR:

- Those who like to be flexible with their route rather than being pointed in the right direction
- Those who like a little pampering along with their active adventure and those who like to shop, eat and enjoy wine
- Every type of rider from beginner to advanced. The inland rides are somewhat hilly, but the local guide can assist you if you need a transfer

CYCLING ITALY AT A GLANCE

THE NORTH - VALLE D'AOSTA, PIEMONTE, LOMBARDY, TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE, FRIULI-VENEZIA, VENETO AND LIGURIA

The North is for those unafraid of cycling's challenges. **Valle d'Aosta** is home to the Matterhorn and Mont Blanc; mountainous. **Piemonte**, comprised of more mountains and hills than plains, is one of Italy's renowned wine-making regions. **Lombardy** is characterized by mountains, hills and plains. Flatter routes are found along its rivers and magnificent lakes including Italy's largest. **Trentino-Alto Adige** is an extremely mountainous region covering much of the Dolomites and Alps. **Veneto** has something for everyone: flat plains, rolling pre-Alps, towering Dolomites and easy coastlines. **Friuli-Venezia** is characterized by mountains in the north, central plains and some hills in the south.

TUSCANY, LAZIO, UMBRIA, ABRUZZO, LE MARCHE, EMILIA-ROMAGNA

The central regions offer hills, the Apennines and coastal terrain where every riding ability is satisfied. **Emilia-Romagna** provides mostly flat plains but does have the Apennines running through it for some hilly routes. **Tuscany** is surrounded and crossed by the Apennines, dominated by hills especially in Chianti, with few flat plains along rivers and coast. **Umbria** is also hilly, dominated by the Apennines. Neither region are to be avoided for the hills though, they're not long or steep, just rolling and fairly consistent. Undiscovered **Le Marche** offers flat river valleys, a narrow coastal plain, inland hills and the Sibillini Mountains. **Abruzzo** is characterized by a beachy and rocky coastline and the Apennines. It's one of the most mountainous regions in Italy but if you want flatter terrain, stay close to the coast. In **Lazio** you'll find hills, with lots of mountains and beautiful coastal plains.



THE ISLANDS - SARDEGNA AND SICILY

Sicily has three main landscapes: coasts, mountains and valleys. The northwest is the wine region, characterized by endless rolling farmlands and salt pans. The northeast offers Mt. Etna and two mountain ranges, southwest the Hyblaean hills and inland fetures rugged beauty and hilltop towns. **Sardinia** is hilly, and if you're looking for challenges, you'll find them here. The island has high coastlines with mountains in the center, in the northeast and running across towards the north. For a more relaxed tour that avoids the climbs, head to Lake Omodeo and the island's west coast.

THE SOUTH - CALABRIA, BASILICATA, PUGLIA, CAMPANIA AND MOLISE

The South is known for beautiful coastlines, unique cuisine and rich culture. **Calabria** is mostly hilly with magnificent coastlines. **Basilicata** has a relatively small coastline and covers an extensive part of the southern Apennines, giving it the dubious distinction of being southern Italy's most mountainous region. **Puglia's** amazing coastline is mostly flat to rolling in the south and inland regions are moderately hilly. **Campania**, home to Naples and Vesuvio, is mostly hilly, with some mountains and plains. Undiscovered and traditional **Molise** is fifty per cent mountainous as it rolls from sea to plains and into its hilly inlands.