

Exploring northern Italy

If you prefer action over relaxation, an activity-based group trip might be an option for you this year. **Luke Delahunty** talks about a trip he took to Italy to take part in a handcycle event, and the problem he faced trying to pay toll charges en route to his destination!

At the start of 2014 I was told about a handcycle ride in Italy and was asked if I'd be interested in taking part. It was hoped that it would be an international event, with people invited from the USA, Italy and the UK. I was excited by the prospect of another multi-day, long-distance ride, and got in touch with the organisers immediately. They were keen to have me on the team and asked about my previous cycling experience. I explained that I'd done a fair bit and had cycled from London to Paris a couple of times, including on one occasion to raise money for SIA. I had also taken part in the Soldier Ride New York, so I was confident that I'd be able to do the distance. The ride in Italy was in the run up to an international conference on SCI in Turin, so the course was mapped to finish at the conference centre. The start point was approximately 500 kilometres away in Treviso, but first I had to get there.

I haven't yet flown with my handcycle and I quite liked the idea of sticking the bike in the car and driving all the way to Italy. I'd done the journey a couple of years beforehand and made a bit of a road trip of it. Previously, I stopped overnight in a hotel just on the Italian side of the Franco-Italian border, having driven from Aylesbury to Aosta in one day, making the remainder of the journey on day two. This time round, I stayed with friends in Dover and caught an early ferry so I could maximise driving time.

I learnt an important lesson on my previous trip, so pay attention. If you're travelling unaccompanied in a right-hand drive car, the toll booths that are



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Luke's handcycle event finished in Turin

common on the French and Italian motorways are all on the 'wrong' side of the car. They're also largely automated and unmanned. It was an interesting experience, having to lift onto the centre console of the car to lean out of the passenger window and insert my card into the machine. I subsequently learned that you can buy a transmitter that you pay for and 'link' to your bank account so that tolls are automatically debited when you pass through. No awkward transfers, no stretching out of the window and hoping that you don't drop your debit card. These are available for both French and Italian motorways. Alternatively, you can lessen the awkward transfers by going through Switzerland, where there are no toll booths but you pay a one-off annual fee of €35.

So, having found a hotel to stay at overnight, I rested after a long day's driving. I just used my trusty smartphone and searched for accessible hotels and made a few

phone calls. The next day I was in Treviso with my friends who conveniently live nearby. I had a couple of days catching up with my friends before cycling to Turin over the next six days. It was an amazing trip. That particular area of northern Italy is extremely flat with plenty of cycle paths. We loosely followed the River Po, which has a cycle path next to it and is beautiful to cycle along. On some of the days our core group of five cyclists and two handcyclists were joined by other cyclists or handcyclists. It was a great experience. We arrived in Turin, were welcomed, congratulated, fed and watered. We were then driven back to Treviso to start the long drive home, but I stopped in Zurich overnight because I'd never been there before.

All in all, it was a great adventure with newfound friends and discovering new places in new ways. Driving and handcycling in Europe is eminently manageable and highly recommended. Safe travels.

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