

From stage 8 of the 2014 Giro, a 179km race from Foligno to a mountaintop finish at Monte Copiolo.

Today's stage starts in Foligno, not terribly far from Assisi, and ends at Montecopiolo, not too far, really, from San Marino, passing through, among others, the provinces of Perugia and Rimini.

Assisi is a timeless village, spread out up the side of a mountain, not changed too terribly much since the times of the saints who were its most famous residents, St. Francis and St. Clare. They were friends in real life, coming from wealthy families in Assisi. Francis bolted first, renouncing his life of military conquests and luxury for a much simpler life of prayer, poverty and relying upon the charity of others. He would ultimately be ordained a deacon, but in his humility, refused to be ordained a priest. He is known for his love of God's good creation, brother sun, sister moon, and a dog who followed him everywhere. Clare saw his example and after a few years left her family to live in radical poverty and constant prayer, and other women were attracted to this life and followed her. In one of the cloisters in which Francis lived, there is a white dove, which sits on her nest, despite pilgrims and tourists passing a few inches below. She and her predecessors have always lived there in tranquillity.

The town of Assisi is a place of tranquillity and recollection, and an occasional crazy motorist or motorino driver, but this is Italy. Several churches and monasteries are built on the sloped drives of the town, in the ascent up to the top. The stronghold of Assisi, castle if you want, or perhaps fort, lays across the crest of the mount. Years ago my brother Gary and nephew Daniel came to visit, and we toured and prayed and toured and prayed and ate, making our way ultimately up to the top of the mountain to visit the castle.

The castle had not (yet) been electrified or touristified, so there were no fees, but no guiding brochures either. It was a great experience, with some challenges which excited a 12 year old boy, but gave my brother and I pause. While in the castle we passed through a long tunnel, in darkness, with light only coming from the loopholes, and then reached a spiral stair going up into the parapet.

As ascended we slowly, clutching the wall, we descended, indeed, into absolute darkness, but still we went up, stair by stair. When we were about

halfway up, I estimate, we met people who were coming down the stairs, with their dog. Zut alors! We didn't know what kind of a dog it was, we only knew it was BIG, too big, that is, to pass on a spiral staircase, as strangers, in absolute darkness. It was a distraction, though, and by the time we had gotten past that couple, we started entering the ever so faint dimness of light, which grew until we reached the top of the tower. My brother, who was waiting at the bottom of the stairs until we called down to him (at my insistence, we needed an emergency person, and a survivor who knew our story LOL), saw the couple come out into the tunnel with their German Shepherd. A dog. Too. Big. To. Meet. In. absolute. Darkness.

The view from the parapet was absolutely beautiful. The village of Assisi, spread out below us. The other side of the mountain, and mountains beyond. Sunshine. A clear July sky. All was perfect, and perfectly arrayed for our enjoyment. Fortunately we had no medieval warriors marching up to attack us, but if we had, my nephew Daniel, 12 at the time, was all ready with the rocks he had collected in his pocket.

Today, for our brave cyclists, we should hope for equally clear views, blue skies, no wind, and lack of medieval warriors, or road furniture, to stand in their way. As I make my way north to Camp Darby to celebrate Sunday Mass for the troops, I will miss most of today, and probably tomorrow. Keep up the banter, the NRRBBB, the tech talk, the cycling criticism, so that I can enjoy it tomorrow evening, along with the many, many others who follow what you do, after hours! Enjoy the day.