

Another tough
day in the office



Being a professional mountain bike guide in Tuscany sounds like a right laugh. Four year veteran Oliver Townsend tells us the truth. Actually, it is.

For the last four years, I have worked as a mountain bike guide in the Garfagnana, an area of Tuscany, north-west Italy. To most people this sounds like a dream job. Most people would be right. As ways to earn a living go, being paid to ride your bike on some of the best trails in the world takes some beating. It was a cold wet evening in January when the overseas staff manager from Exodus rang me up to say that I had passed my interview and that Exodus wanted to offer me a job leading biking and trekking trips in Tuscany. This was one of those pivotal moments, where the decision you make will change your life forever. I had been working as an engineer for an environmental consultancy, and had my own house, a career plan, a good base of friends, two cats, and all the trimmings of a normal life.

The problem was that at 25, I wasn't quite ready for living a normal life. I figured that I was too young to be stuck in the mortgage/marriage/car loan rut, and that it was time to pull my finger out and go and see the world a bit. Obviously it was quite a decision. Telling your folks and your friends that you are quitting a steady job with good career prospects, selling your house and shipping off round the world to ride your bike for a living was quite a big move.





undiscovered European mountain bike Mecca and what you are now picturing is the Garfagnana (pronounced Gar-fan-yah-na) or Land of the Giant Forest (in olde worlde Etruscan/Anglo Saxon speak). Garfagnana is an area of northern Tuscany, north-west Italy, as yet undiscovered by mass tourism, expats., caravan owners and time share apartments that seem to typify southern Tuscany.

Garfagnana incorporates densely wooded hillsides, hidden gorges, babbling brooks, picturesque medieval villages and the odd 2000m+ mountain range, in perfect Designavalley™ style. When you add to the mix a good climate, fantastic food, great farmhouse accommodation, short cheap flights and the odd sun dappled, rock strewn singletrack trail or three, you end up with a small but perfectly formed European style MTB heaven.

The Garfagnana was both my home and my office for the first six months, and on and off for the three years since then. I had obviously landed on my feet. I once read that everyone has a country other than their place of birth that they feel a mental and emotional pull towards. For me this is Italy. Whenever I fly in to Pisa, about ten minutes before we land I start to grin like a manic Cheshire cat and physically bounce up and down with excitement at the thought of being back to work. I can't think of many other jobs where almost every day of the week I can't wait to get to work.

Five months after that momentous phone call, having passed my minibus driving licence, completed a mountain first aid course, a crash course in Italian, spent a week in north Wales on a mountain leader course, I was out in the sunshine of Tuscany, trying not to show my nervousness and proving to my first group of clients that I did know what I was doing.

Clients often ask me what skills or qualities Exodus look for in new staff. The simple answer is that there isn't a simple answer. In order to run a trip successfully you have to have a huge range of skills. Obviously in order to run a biking trip you have to be incredibly fit, technically competent on your bike, have good mechanical abilities, and possess endless patience (something that most guides will agree is very hard to keep up permanently). Other more esoteric skills include language abilities, having good people skills, permanent enthusiasm and

energy, being able to think on your feet, being able to take charge of a group and manage potential problem situations.

My first base as a guide was the Garfagnana, tucked into the mountains in northern Tuscany. When you say to someone that you are going biking in Tuscany, you can see in their eyes the mental image that their brain is creating - sun baked fields of golden corn wafting in the sunshine, gently rolling countryside, elegant Cyprus trees and your own body weight in Chianti Classico. Now delete this picture, and stick in its place an



Exodus first discovered Braccicorti, our farmhouse accommodation, in the early '90s, and have been running biking (and walking) trips there ever since. Always popular with clients, these trips attempt to cover some of the delights of mountain biking in northern Tuscany, as well as providing a relaxing base, complete with resident Italian family, an outdoor pool, a pot bellied pig called Divina and a domesticated half-wolf called Furio (who

looks the part, scares the postman, and howls at the moon, but luckily loves clients).

My first biking trip at Braccicorti was a bit of shock. Part of the deal with Exodus is that you have three weeks of training after passing your interview where you have to prove yourself worthy as a biking or trekking leader. My first group seemed huge. Braccicorti is one of our most popular locations and, as such, trips often run full. Group size is limited to a maximum of fourteen people and I was amazed at how much work goes into looking after a group. You get asked questions the whole time, you have to be able to multitask constantly and take on multiple roles. In the course of a one week trip you are guide, mechanic, driver, doctor, confidant, therapist, teacher, party organiser, mediator, diplomat and admin assistant.

Just before starting my new career, one of my friends from the UK commented that he too would like to do my job. However after actually coming on one of my trips as a client, he quickly changed his mind. Although life as a biking guide is pretty tough, what with long hours; the physical and mental demands of the job; being away from home for long periods and the pretty low financial rewards, the positive side of the job far outweigh the downside. The positive group karma given off by the group after a hard but successful day out on the trails is immense. When biking clients go home visibly fitter, more skilled and with increased riding confidence, it is a huge buzz to think "I did that". Job satisfaction when trips go well is huge (although obviously from time to time you can have a nightmare trip too).

With larger biking groups there are always two guides, normally a British guide and a local guide. For my first trip, the local Italian guide was a professional mountain bike racer, who has since become one of my closest friends. As quality guides go, Alessandro Iori was pretty high up the list. When I first met him, he had been Tuscany Cyclocross champion for the past four years, was ranked in the top ten in Italy for elite level XC biking, and had only missed out on selection for the 2000 Olympics by one place. His riding skill and fitness was phenomenal. Mind you weighing less than 60 kilos and having raced (first BMX, then MTBs) since he was 10 years old probably gave him a bit of a head start.

I had spent the time between being offered the job and flying out to Tuscany trying to push my fitness levels ever higher. However, when I met Ali, I had a sneaky feeling he was going to give me a good run for my money. Rupert, the other Exodus leader at Braccicorti, had already



been working there for two years and knew the area intimately. Looking back to my first biking trip at Braccicorti, it seems indelibly burnt into my brain. As a new (and still very green) guide I spent my week rushing around trying to keep everyone happy, fixing mechanicals, suggesting riding tips, trying to be everything to everyone. Bike guiding is a very steep learning curve, and looking back now I realise how much I have learned in the interim period. Most Exodus leaders last three or four years in the field, and during that period we all alter our leadership styles, and learn new ways to run trips more efficiently, without killing ourselves, yet all the time trying to give the clients the best trips of their lives. Now in my fourth year, my enthusiasm for the job hasn't diminished and the buzz of meeting a new group still takes some beating.

When I collect a new group from the airport on arrival day, there is always a slight feeling of nervous tension in my stomach. You try to sum up freshly arrived clients in the first few seconds after arrival, and guess their skill and fitness levels from the bike they ride, or how many biking trips they have been on before, or whether they race or whatever. Most of the time this approach fails miserably, as one of the characteristics of a mountain biker is that they don't like being pigeonholed. In the course of a week-long trip, people's fitness and skill level can improve so dramatically that your first impressions can be (and normally are) proved wrong.

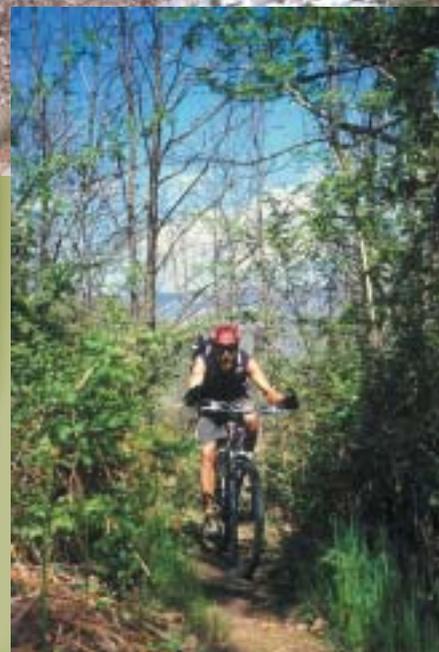
Everyone who has ever been to Braccicorti will confirm that time moves at a different pace here. A week-long trip will pass incredibly fast, yet equally by the time departure comes around you feel like you have been there forever. Braccicorti

attracts clients from all over the world, with the ability to speak English being the only common denominator. In the course of a week, strangers will often become life long friends, and although as yet I haven't had to rush out and buy a wedding hat à la Cilla, it's not unknown for relationships to be struck up too.

Clients choose to come on a biking trip to Italy for a mixture of reasons. For some, the lure of fantastic home cooked food, rocket-fuel strength espresso and world famous gelato is enough. For others it's the superb scenery, or the great light for taking photos, or the friendly laid-back attitude of the locals. However for a good majority it's the magnetic pull of fast, twisty, swoopy singletrack that convinces them.

Trips

Exodus run five monthly biking trips to Braccicorti during 2003. The trip, Tuscan Trails (trip code MWT) costs between £539 and £565 (plus a local payment of £135). This covers flights, accommodation, most meals, transfers, and all guiding/tuition. The season runs from May until mid September. Group size is limited to a maximum of 14 clients and will run with a minimum of four. For larger groups, two MTB guides are used. To request an Exodus biking brochure, telephone 0208 673 0859 (24hrs), or email sales@exodus.co.uk or visit their website at www.exodus.co.uk



In an article in a sadly defunct mtb magazine, Seb Rogers, the Singletrack photographer, was once quoted as saying that he would ride all day just for one bit of fantastic singletrack. If Seb ever ventures out into the Garfagnana, I don't think he'll be disappointed. Italians have a somewhat relaxed attitude to laws, and consequently rights of way legislation isn't quite so strictly observed as it is in the UK. The unofficial policy is that any trail that you can physically ride is fair game. The Garfagnana has been inhabited since pre-Roman times, and consequently is covered with a dense network of trails. All tastes can be catered for, whether it be quiet tarmac mountain roads, wide fire road trails through beech and chestnut forest, ancient paved or cobbled drove roads, logging trails, shepherds tracks or mind-blowing seemingly purpose built singletrack.

Weather

Weather wise, the Garfagnana has good weather throughout the year, getting progressively hotter from early summer until September. Most days will be warm/hot and sunny, though there is a risk of thunderstorms in the evenings. The last departure of the year, on 13th September, would allow you to see the start of the autumn colours and would be cooler, though with a slightly higher chance of rain. The trails are pretty well drained and even after periods of rain, remain for the most part rideable.

In the course of a week's biking at Braccicorti we will cover a vast array of trails. Each trip follows the same general outline, but the actual daily rides are left to the discretion of the guides and will depend on the group's fitness, level of technical skill and prevailing weather conditions. Each day contains a mixture of tarmac, fire road and singletrack. My own preference is fast, twisty singletrack. In the time that I have worked at Braccicorti I have spent most of time-off riding with friends in an attempt to find that perfect trail. My favourites depend on my mood, but include the dense network of fast, flowing, twisty, sun-dappled woodland trails of I Frati; the steep, narrow, rock strewn nirvana of Sentiero Numero 56; the sheer speed of the fire road descent between Refugio Battisti and Silano and the my favourite, the Teddy Bear's Picnic. This trail, so named because if you go down to woods today you're sure of a big surprise, takes the form of a narrow twisty rock and root strewn singletrack complete with bedrock steps, a narrow wooden bridge, a fathomless gorge, tight gaps between boulders, hairpinned bends with dry stone walls on each side...

Obviously no day out biking would be complete without the obligatory session of sitting around afterwards with a cold beer, bragging about the day's exploits, and how you managed a two wheel drift through the apex of the bend on that rocky singletrack, with a 600m drop off to your left...

After a day in the saddle, food is top priority. Luckily food is a vital ingredient of Italian life, and the enormous home cooked dinners created by Mama and her daughters will satisfy even the most ravenous mountain biker (Mama loves MTB groups as they eat seconds of everything.).

Each night Mama creates culinary delights such as Zuppa di Fagioli (Tuscan bean soup), Salsiccia a rosto (local sausages roasted with potatoes) and Panna Cotta (a delicious set-cream desert). Locally grown Chianti wine and a post-dinner shot or two of Grappa or Ammareto should help the evening go with a swing. During the summer months (or at least when the weather is warm enough) Mama organises a barbeque dinner one night during the week. Braccicorti is surrounded by agricultural land, vineyards and woodland, with huge marble mountains forming the backdrop. In the summer, when the sun sets over the mountains, the fireflies congregate in the fields below the house, the frogs croak in one of the nearby ponds, and Furio the resident half-wolf prepares himself to howl at the moon. Sitting outside, with a plate of freshly barbequed food in one hand, and a cold beer or glass of Chianti in another, it's hard not to bang on about "another tough day in the office".

A week long trip to Braccicorti combines five guided rides with a day off to sample a bit of Italian culture. Italians have an amazingly friendly, laid back attitude to life, where an almost obligatory siesta and a post-siesta passeggiata (the period after the siesta finishes where Italians dress up in their finest clothes and stroll about the local town looking fantastic and socialising) are all about relaxing with your friends and taking it easy. With this in mind, day four of the biking trip is scheduled as a rest day. With three days' worth of trails taking their toll on your legs, most clients opt for a day away from their bikes. Braccicorti comes complete with a self-service bar, an outside pool (with mountain view and resident sun loungers), a small library of trashy novels and a free six hole golf course. The local historic walled city of Lucca also provides a perfect day out solution for both sights and shopping

(sometime local Sting likes it too and can be seen on the obligatory three speed shopper).

Of course, some people just live to ride. Braccicorti is situated in a predominantly mountainous area, and only a few kms down the road is one of the hardest climbs in the Giro D'Italia road race. The Cat. 1 climb of San Pelegrino has a magnetic attraction for some clients, and although 90 to 120 minutes of solid pain won't be everyone's idea of fun, it provides a suitable challenge for the fit and slightly deranged. With super keen groups it has been known for Rupert and I to organise a 'come and ride my favourite bit of stupidly steep and scary singletrack, only don't tell the office' ride.

In my time at Braccicorti, I have been taken on countless 'day off' rides, where former local guide Alessandro and his world class elite level racer friends have attempted to snap my legs off and scare

Bikes

Bikes can be hired locally (2003 model Lee Cougan aluminium hardtails with RockShox forks) or you can bring your own from the UK with minimal hassle (just remember to have them serviced before you travel, bring any unusual spares, such as disk pads, with you, and pad the bike well when you pack it up, to stop the baggage handling boys from destroying it in transit). If you have a couple of bikes, a lightweight XC full-bounce bike is the winning choice. Tyre wise, the local pro-riders get away with semi-slicks year round, but something with a bit more tread would give you increased comfort and puncture protection.

me silly, not to mention inspire me to ride more, eat less, be smoother, think faster... The upshot of these rides, is that Rupert and I now know pretty much every piece of singletrack within about a 30km radius, and for the price of only a small bribe, we are sometimes persuaded to take groups out to ride our favourite trails.

The final couple of days of the trip always pass too quickly. More superb trails (including some epic ridge top singletrack riding right along the highest point of the Apennine mountain ridge on the last day), great views, and glimpses of typical rural Italian life are guaranteed. One of the best parts of guiding in the Garfagnana is that, even in my fourth year, I still get a buzz from riding with a group. The light changes constantly, I might find a new trail or help the group to see some exotic wildlife (deer, wild boar, buzzards, golden eagles and the illusive wolf - re-introduced back into the mountains here) or perhaps I can top up my karma levels by teaching the group a few new tricks. One of the highlights, both for groups and for me, is interaction with local people. The local shepherds, woodsmen and villagers are a constant source of good stories and long term memories. During the final day of the first biking trip in 2003, at the bottom of a two hour descent through some fantastic beech forest, we came across a group of locals energetically celebrating a saint's day. We were almost forcibly made to join their party, and plastic cups of local vino rosso were put into our hands. They probed us about where the group came from, where they were staying, how come my Italian accent was so anglicised, and what we were doing out riding our bikes when we could have been drinking heavily in the afternoon sunshine. A demand for us to return later to join them in a barbeque



was made, but graciously declined (as the wrath of Mama is fearsome, and not turning up to dinner would certainly incur this wrath.)

The final night's dinner is your chance to regale all of those "You wouldn't believe what happened to me today" type stories. Mama's shop, selling Braccicorti's produce, is always open after dinner in an attempt to help you take a little piece of Tuscany home with you (apart from the suntan, a few scratches or war wounds, improved fitness and a big grin).

Post-holiday blues are a normal occurrence after a good week in Tuscany, but what most clients don't realise is that guides get them as well. Probably the worst part of the job is that after a great week, where the weather was kind, the trails dry and dusty, the group fit, enthusiastic and evenly matched, and the buzz tangible, is that the group go home, and the whole thing starts again. Next time you say cheerio at the airport and get onto your plane back home, having had a (hopefully) superb holiday, just spare a thought for me, as I have to kindle some enthusiasm from somewhere, pretend I'm not as tired as I feel, greet a new group and start all over again.



Jobs

Exodus are always looking for new guiding staff, though demand changes throughout the year. In the first instance send a copy of your CV along with a detailed covering letter, to Lucy Roller at the Exodus office in London. Check out the company website for details of current vacancies and job opportunities.

