

A PEARL IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Story and photos by Gregg Bleakney

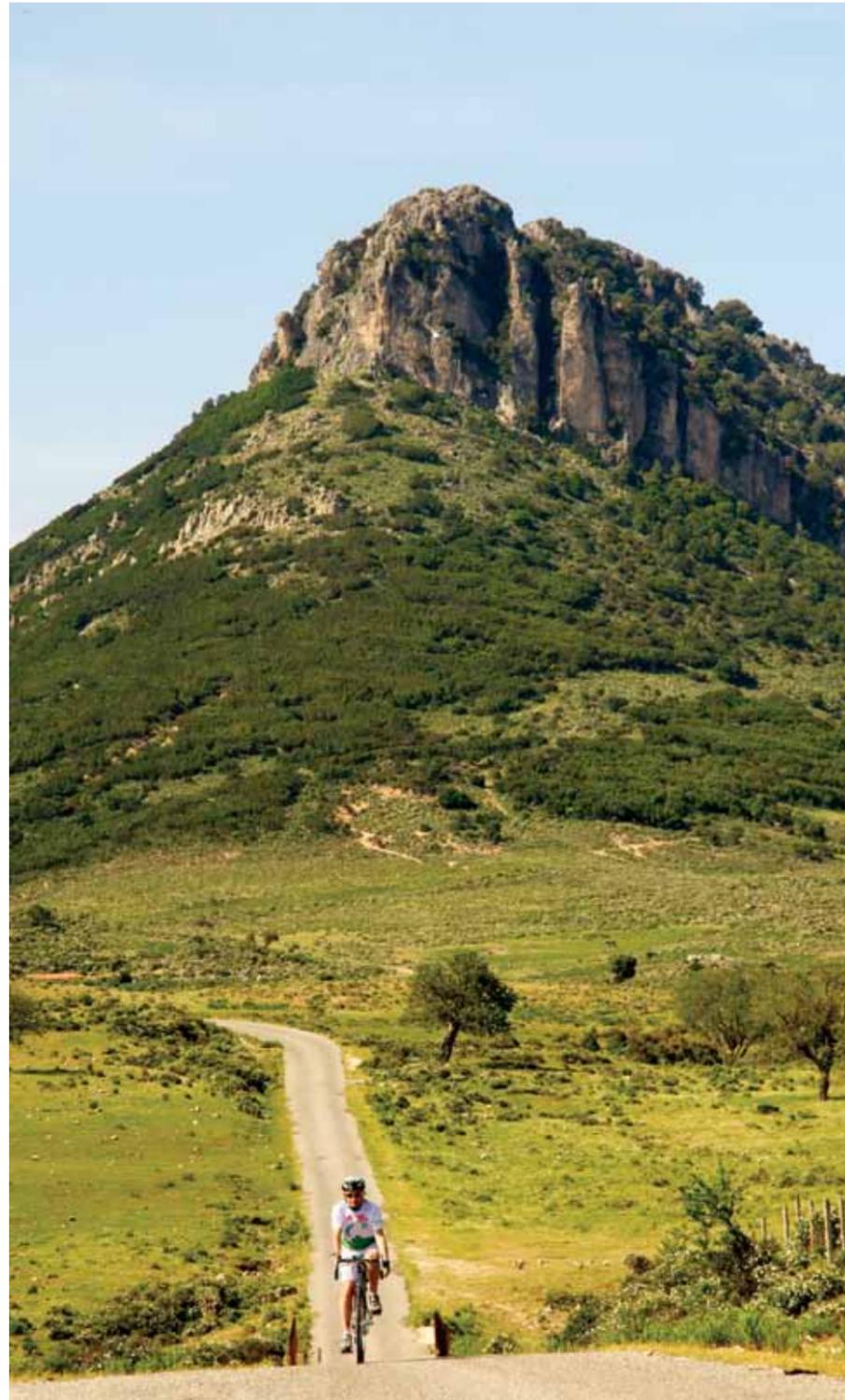


CROSSING SARDINIA WITH THE PRICE FAMILY BICYCLE TOUR COMPANY, EXPERIENCEPLUS!

When Rick Price met Paola Malpezzi at a high-school football game in Newport, Oregon, he never could have predicted that she would be the first and only person with whom he'd fall in love. It was a Friday night in September 1965. Rick was a 17-year-old from a drizzly fishing port on the Oregon coast. Paola was a popular exchange student with a return trip ticket

to her hometown of Forli, one of several small villages dotting an old Roman trunk road in a sleepy region of eastern Italy. Somehow their unlikely courtship would accidentally pioneer a new category of European travel for North Americans — guided bicycle tourism.

45 years after the couple's first encoun-



Sardinian solitude. Just because it's an organized tour doesn't mean it's always group time.

ter, I was standing across from Rick on the rooftop terrace of the aging three-star Hotel La Margherita in Alghero, Italy. He was clad in a yellow jersey, matching socks, and black cycling tights that had inched up to reveal an early-season tan line. Orange-tinted Oakleys hung from neckstraps under his enormous beard, which was not so long that its character couldn't be transformed from counterculture to distinguished with a few well-placed hand strokes and a brief closure of the eyes.

It was the first morning of a 10-day, 400-mile cycling tour through Sardinia. 12 clients sat in a semicircle nodding through Rick's briefings for hand signals and daily procedures. Their attentiveness was just an exercise in civility. Save for Jane from Victoria, Australia, they were all repeat customers. During the past two decades, the members of this particular group had clocked 84 tours with Rick's company, ExperiencePlus!, and they'd heard his safety shtick before.

Looking down on Alghero from La Margherita's crown, its brightly colored Catalan architecture, plazas, and maze of alleyways seemed patched together like a Cubist-inspired Legoland attraction. I'd spent the previous evening strolling the 16th-century city wall that edged along the teardrop blue Mediterranean Sea. It was May, and the tourist horde had yet to arrive. Fishing boats anchored to seaweed-coated cannonballs lulled in the harbor. Italian lovers whispered libidiously under dimly-lit stone archways. Children skipped across Piazza Sulis and giggled as they stuffed gelato cone wrappers down the muzzles of Spanish cannons.

There were glitzier accommodations outside of Alghero's center, but Rick wasn't interested in those. His decision was not based on price — these clients could all afford a five-star tab. It was because the hotel's roof, with its faded plastic golf turf flooring and chipped railings, had the best view in town. It was also the most convenient base camp from which to explore the city on foot, straight from the lobby entrance. There was no need to rely on guides or a shuttle service. Rick told me later that afternoon, "My cycling tours have never been about luxury accommodations or fancy bikes but rather designed on a belief that travel should be about serendipity and the freedom to explore one's curiosity. And that's why certain people keep coming back."

The safety meeting adjourned and cus-

tomers descended to their rooms to prepare for the day's ride. Rick was taking in the vista. He looked at ease, perhaps because he didn't always have time to enjoy these quiet moments. This was his first tour with ExperiencePlus! since selling the company. He'd been hired to assist with rider support, the itinerary, and interpretive details. Monica, the new company co-owner (along with her sister Maria Elena) bee-lined out of the elevator and handed him a neatly organized staff agenda with instructions to mark the day's route with chalk arrows. Although she had only recently purchased the company, she was no stranger to its operation or the eccentricities of its founder. "Okay babbo (dad), I'll see you at lunch. Ciao," she said with a kiss on the cheek.

Rick's gaze returned to the cityscape. He cracked a slight smile. In the salty breeze, his white beard bowed back as if it were a ski jump, with Jerry Garcia giving points for style.

By 1968, Rick had traveled to Italy to visit Paola. They were engaged later that year and married in 1969, two months after he enrolled at University of Pavia in Lombardy. In the spring of that year, the two of them decided to bike back to



Meeting of the minds. Daily map meetings are about more than just logistics.

Paola's hometown for the weekend. They bought two clunker bicycles that had been spray-painted silver, pumped up the tires, and strapped luggage to the racks. Rick remembered, "We quickly discovered that riding a loaded bike was hard ... and that you get tired after a while. We also realized that the trip was going to take longer than

we planned, so we quit after a few hours and hitchhiked home."

The failed attempt only fueled the couple's wanderlust. During the next two years, they blurred the line between study and travel, driving a beat-up Volkswagen camper bus all over Europe, North Africa, and the Sahara Desert. They lived in the

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Port of call. Sardinia offers the sailor of the Mediterranean many delightful bays and harbors in which to set anchor or dock.

bus while wintering in Ireland, where Paola wrote her thesis and Rick nursed a case of hepatitis he had contracted from an infected needle in a public health clinic in Morocco. After Paola finished her degree, they decided to move back to U.S. so that Rick could complete his studies at the University of Oregon, but not before attempting their bike trip again. In June

1971, the now-seasoned travelers pedaled away from Paola's graduation ceremony near Pisa toward Florence. They cycled over the Apennine Mountains and enthusiastically rolled into Paola's hometown of Forli four days later.

The first 45 kilometers of the Sardinia tour twisted south from Alghero along a

barren coastline before intersecting with Bosa, a palm-lined outpost at the mouth of the island's only navigable river. Next, the road tilted east, topping out after 1,000 feet onto a plateau and finishing at a small, family-run guest house. For the next nine days, the itinerary followed a similar pattern, dipping and rising back and forth between coastal and inland communities.

At dinner, riders received a map and information sheet for the following day. The sheets included daily highlights, suggested eateries, cultural and natural history bits, and difficult loop-ride extensions. Missing were start and stop times for the group and spreadsheet tables with turn-by-turn mileage instructions. After organizing some of his initial tours, Price discarded these traditional navigation methods and adopted chalk arrow hashmarks.

"I got tired of chasing people and trying to keep a group together," he said. "My customers didn't want to ride together anyway, especially as groups got bigger."

Jeff and Jane, an Australian-American couple living in Lucca, Italy, have each logged three trips with ExperiencePlus!. Over a glass of the local Malvasia dessert wine in our hotel near the small town of Tresnuraghes, Jeff revealed, "The chalk arrow markers allow us to do our own thing within an organized-tour framework. We can enjoy the day's ride at our own pace without committing to a group timeline. That's really why we keep doing these trips."

Throughout the tour, I observed participants exploring the island on their own terms. Ellen from Washington, DC, opted to test herself on the first day with a 2,500-foot bonus climb that rocketed above the coastal road. John, a doctor from Boulder, frequented gelaterias along the route, fine-tuning his Italian with the locals. Chris from Huntington Beach often pushed the pace, rewarding his swift pedaling at the end of the day with a few cold beverages, a book, and a cozy lounge chair at the hotel. Don and Jane from Seattle were early risers and the first to hit the road each morning. I caught up to them on day six snapping photos at an overlook above Orgosolo, a place formerly dubbed "Village of the Murderers" because of its reputation as the hub for the island's bandits and bad guys. I took my time dropping into Orgosolo and spotted Price on sweep duty in my rearview mirror. He interpreted a handful of the hundreds of murals painted with sharp political commentary between the town's weathered wooden doors and window shutters.

Tagging along with Price during his sweep duty provided a fascinating study in human interaction. From Orgosolo's plaza rubberneckers to an old man selling vegetables from the back of his three-wheeled Ape truck, nobody along the route who displayed signals of a worthy story was



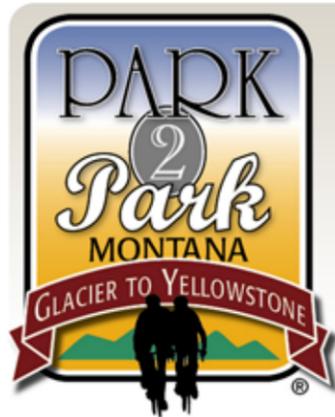
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spared Price's inquisition.

For as long as she could remember, Monica said, her dad has made these chatty pit stops. "It's interesting to watch because these are typically reserved people just doing their own thing, and along comes my dad, obviously not from the area, biking straight at them with this huge beard that



can be pretty intimidating. Then he starts speaking in perfect Italian, and they all end up loving him."

I asked Price what he liked to talk about. He responded, "In Italy, I always ask the locals where to eat. They will



Howdy stranger. A funny juxtaposition – American on a bike, European on a horse.

defend you to the end."

At lunch on the final day of the trip, Rick explained the choice to move back to Italy in 1972, just nine months after relocating to the U.S. "To steal a line from Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*. It was February, and it was raining, and it was Oregon." He recalled lying in bed one night trying to figure out how to make it happen. "I was flipping through the back of *Harpers* and *The Atlantic*. There were ads for these exotic trips — sailboat charters in the Caribbean and Villa rentals on the Mediterranean — and it occurred to me that I could do the same thing for a cycling vacation to Italy."

With a marketing budget of \$300, Rick and Paola drove down the West Coast in a borrowed Datsun pickup, putting up flyers on college campuses advertising a bike trip across Italy. 25 people signed up for the two-week, \$245 tour. They flew to Italy, bought a fleet of four-speed bicycles with hard plastic saddles from racing legend Mario Vicini, and fine-tuned the route they discovered after Paola's graduation. By the end of the summer, the tours had paid for Rick and Paola's plane tickets, bikes, and expenses leaving \$2,000 left over to stay in Europe and travel.

For the next 12 years, they dabbled with leading more bicycle tours but they ultimately fell into a pattern of alternating



The deep blue sea. Sardinia is famous for its beautiful sparkling waters and its long sandy beaches.

traveling in Europe and with higher education and teaching in the U.S. It wasn't until 1985 that they seriously began leading trips in Europe again. By 1989, the business grew to include five different Italian tours and 100 clients. In the early 1990s, customers started asking for more destinations, and Rick responded by expanding to Costa Rica, Greece, France, and Spain. The company experienced 50-percent yearly revenue growth all through the late 1990s. Monica and Maria Elena spent their high-school and college summers in Europe, helping Rick develop new tour routes. In 2004, when Lance Armstrong was in his prime, the company had 18 vans and 40 tour leaders on the road at the same time during the Tour de France.

Armstrong's success and a strengthening Euro helped buoy the company. But by 2006, Armstrong had wore out and so did Rick Price. In fall 2007, sales were down, and Price saw black clouds on the horizon as the current recession approached. He told the girls, "I just don't have the energy to pull this off any more. If you want to buy the business, now is the time. I'll cut staff, sell the office building in Italy, and get the cash flowing again." They took him up on the offer. Monica gave up a career

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in international development to manage daily operations in Europe, and Maria Elena completed her master's of business administration degree with the intention of running the business from the U.S.

"Nothing else we tried outside of ExperiencePlus! was as exciting or interesting. The company had become a passionate lifestyle for us," Monica said.

An MIT study examining long-term business sustainability reported that only 30 percent of family-run companies survive second-generation succession. The study stated that a family firm's succession value and longevity can be positively affected if offspring are willing to carry on the traditions of the first generation while reacting to changes within the marketplace.

Watching Monica lead ground operations in Sardinia, I could sense that she was navigating a tough and uncharted course between maintaining her parents' original vision and adapting to a modern customer base. On the third night of the trip, she booked a brand-new four-star resort with a swimming pool along an idyllic pebbled beach in Putzu Idu because Rick's favorite farmhouse-style accommodation in the area



Sardinian sun protection. The ExperiencePlus! group enjoys shade, snacks, and a drink.

had gone out of business. The resort owner forgot that the tour group was arriving and lectured Rick for cutting through the parking lot on his bicycle. Rick was still bent out of shape in his room later that evening.

"They call this four-star and there's not even a runner under the bed? What a scam. You'll see a real four-star Sardinian

hotel with people who know how to make their guests feel welcome in a few days," he said. I never heard any of the tour participants complain about the new hotel in Putzu Idu. In fact, they all seemed to love the place.

Another debate between the Price generations was over the use of digital naviga-

tion devices. While driving the support van one afternoon, Monica explained that ExperiencePlus! had just run its first tour with one guide and every customer using a GPS system. "I think a GPS as opposed to a traditional road book is absolutely a part of our future. They can help to reduce trip prices, make self-guided tours possible, and open the doors to new customers ... who also happen to be asking for them right now," she said. Rick was sitting in the passenger seat, lightly shaking his head, with a paper map of the island in hand.

On the last day of the trip, after shutting customers to the airport and crossing back to the Italian mainland, Monica parked the van at the Livorno ferry loading zone. She had decided to send her dad off to research a new trip plan in southern Italy. Rick pulled his bike from the rack, made a few adjustments to the panniers, said his good-byes, and eased away. He stopped to take a picture just before disappearing between a line-up of freight trucks carrying payloads of firewood.

"Hey, guys, look at this," he shouted over the engine noise. "The Romans are still stealing wood from Sardinia just like they did thousands of years ago. But now it's for making pizzas instead of hot baths." Then he trundled off into Italy. It was a fitting farewell, I thought, and one that no cyclist would ever find in the spiritless pixels of a GPS track. Some things will never change. **AC**

Gregg Bleakney is an avid cyclotourist, writer, and photographer. You can find out more about him and his latest adventures at www.gbleakney.com.

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