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**Is Biking in Europe Safe?**

**Duff's Question.**

**I was wondering about biking conditions on Italian roads. I am thinking country, not city roads. Is Italy a fairly safe place to go biking? Are there some good routes to see a good deal of the country?**

— Duff Davis, Naperville, IL

**Ethan Gelber's Answer.**

In general, the roads of Europe are excellent. In fact, on the whole, they are as good as (and sometimes better than) equivalent roads in the United States. After all, farming and trade are just as important in Europe, and trucks and tractors have to be able to move their products swiftly and safely. In addition, vehicles and bicycles are such an important part of contemporary European lifestyles that well-maintained avenues are vital. Basically, the long-held fear that Europe may not be quite up to the level of the United States in anything is very old news!



Of course, there are exceptions — the back roads in Portugal are notoriously atrocious — but no more than there are in the States — the off-the-beaten-path tracks of deep rural America are not quite the slick pothole-less sweeps either. But no matter where you go in Europe, there are good roads. If you find yourself on something particularly bad, there is probably an alternative road. Or, if you stick out the overland trek, you may find that you end up somewhere more spectacular than you had previously imagined. Europe's true marvels are the private castles and villas lurking behind a cypress grove at the end of that gravel path.

As to safety, once again, rather than speaking about Italy in particular, I think it is best to discuss Europe in general. Many Americans still plan for travel working on old assumptions about safety. While scofflaws, shysters, and con men certainly abound, they are no

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more common or pernicious in Europe than they are anywhere. You have to trust your instinct.

If you are concerned about your property, all I can say is the following: In almost ten years of work as a bicycle tour guide, I am the only person from my trips who ever had anything stolen from a pannier. I would never want to insinuate that it cannot happen and that you should leave your most precious valuables to sticky-fingered petty crooks. But there are just some things that I have learned not to worry about. I always carry all of my money, papers, and valuables in a bag that can be easily removed from the bike if I am going to get lunch, visit a museum, or just step away for a moment. I always use good locks and take care to find a secure place in a highly public area. My panniers and the stinky clothes they hold have just never been touched. I would hate to hear that this happened to anyone (and I am sure it does happen all the time), but in all my years, I have only once been subject to such theft and it was my own fault (I left money exposed in an open bag . . . duh!).

If you truly can't cope with the anxiety of being separated from your goods, travel with friends and always leave one person with the steeds. Or, if you are alone, ask local merchants or hotels if you can temporarily stash your bike in a garage or private, secure hallway.

The final safety concern top on anyone's short list is road safety. Germans are notorious for speeding. The Spanish, French, and Italians are famous for erratic driving. For the most part, these reputations are based on reality. However, keep in mind a couple of essential details that might make the speed and apparent foolhardiness of some drivers seem less dangerous.

Most Europeans are quite accustomed to seeing cyclists on the road, since cycling in Europe is much more widespread than it is in the States. As a result, motorists do not necessarily slow down or push as far to the left as Americans like when they pass a biker. In Europe, especially on weekends in bike-worthy areas, the roads can be thick with Day-Glo jerseys and the clickety-clack of spinning gears. These European road cyclists are more experienced with road etiquette than most Americans. They travel fast, in straight lines, and are predictable. Drivers have been trained by such cyclists and thus expect such behavior from all muscle-powered two-wheelers. They do not look for slow-moving pedalers who might wobble under their tires.

[One important road rule that all Americans need to keep in mind: In Europe, priority is from the right when entering a road. That is, when a driveway or crossing road hits a major thoroughfare and a driver wants to turn right onto the thoroughfare, the driver from the right has priority. Don't make the mistake of cycling in front of a car coming in from the right. In the States, we really do have priority. In Europe, we don't.]

It is incumbent on the biker to be alert and pedal with confidence. If you are confident about your own abilities, you will find that the perceived road dangers are not as bad as you thought.

Finally, in answer to the question about good places to go for Italian cycling: There is much more than can be summarized in this limited column of space. Check out my article about [Biking in Northern Italy](#). For southern

destination, think about exploring: the off-the-beaten-path challenges of Umbria and Abruzzo; the unparalleled majesty of Napoli, Vesuvius, and the Amalfi Coast; the charm of southern Italy's Puglia; and Sicily. (For more about cycling in France, see [A Biker's Reverie](#).)

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