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# LA FAUSTIAN PACT

## The ominous Colle Fauniera looms large over the brutal Granfondo La Fausto Coppi

**H**aving grovelled my way up the Italian Alps' Passo del Mortirolo, I thought I'd reached the outer limits of cycling climbs. But then I rode the Colle Fauniera in the second half of the Granfondo La Fausto Coppi and it redefined everything I thought I knew, delivering more anguish than the more celebrated col. Its numbers tell some of the

story, but not all. Average gradients are blunt instruments when assessing the severity of long climbs, often misleading with long flatter sections or even descents. France's Col de la Croix de Fer from Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne is one such climb, with two descents artificially compressing its gradient to 5.5% - it won't feel like 5.5 come its summit. Colle Fauniera is the same. An average gradient of 7.7% over 21.3km is tough enough, but the first 8km is a molehill; flat or not much more. More than half the climb is 9% or steeper, and by the 2,456m summit you've also got altitude to deal with, to a much greater extent than on the



Mortirolo at 1,852m. Other characteristics, such as the fact it's little more than a narrow, rutted track, mark it out as a diamond in the rough – undoubtedly this event's calling card.

**Coppi load of this**

All told, the longest route of the Granfondo La Fausto Coppi is long and high – 177km and over 4,000m of elevation through Italy's Cuneo province (the largest in the region of Piedmont) bordering France. The event has been running since 1987, longer than L'Étape du Tour, making it one of Europe's most historic amateur bike rides. It pays tribute to Italy's great of the post-war period, Fausto Coppi. All 3,000 riders wear the jersey of the race, redesigned each year, making for quite the spectacle on the start line in the impressive Piazza Galimberti, in the centre of the city of Cuneo.

The Cuneo area may not be at the top of your wish list when it comes to planning a cycling holiday in Italy – the Dolomites in the northeast have better name recognition – but seeing its beautiful towns and villages close up, dotted around a vast mountainous expanse and lush valleys, makes me think it just needs better PR. Or not – perhaps the locals prefer it this way.

It's well-positioned for an international gran fondo of La Fausto Coppi's ilk, midway, as it is, between the airport-equipped cities of Turin and Nice (a 90-minute drive from each). The Alps extend in all directions, apart from the east, making for the perfect getaway for the mountain-loving roadie.

I arrived in Cuneo the day before the gran fondo, with time to explore the event expo and, more importantly, stock up my energy reserves, primarily in the form of *gelato* (ice cream, for those who don't know). A marching band added atmosphere, though they were powerless to boost morale later that evening when Italy were knocked out of the European football championships.

The 2024 event offered three routes – the Granfondo (177km), Mediofondo (111km) and the non-competitive Classic (101km). All three subjected riders to the wrath of the Colle Fauniera, so there was no 'easy' option. I'd travelled too far and trained too hard to ride anything other than the full-fat 177km route, and with the loan of an OM1 S bike replete with all mod cons from event partner Officine Mattio, I was all set to go. The cut-off was 10 hours, which at first seemed generous, but with this much climbing, average speeds can be dragged right down.

Like any Italian gran fondo, La Fausto Coppi is treated as a race by organisers and many riders, and the elbows were out before the racing began, with people pushing and shoving to get a position on the start line a full hour before the flag drop at 7am. To keep us entertained, the PA system blared out various degrees of bad Euro dance music, interspersed with some full-throated



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**Left** One of the countless stunning twists and turns tackled on the day

**Above** All riders must wear the event jersey, creating a wave of red at the start line

**Right** A resurfaced section on the brutal Fauniera – a rare treat on an endless climb! >

motivational speaking from various event bigwigs. Most riders looked pretty relaxed at their prospects for the day, basking in the warm morning sun, while a steady stream made their way over the barriers to relieve themselves after one too many espressos at the breakfast buffet.

The opening kilometres were theoretically neutralised, to allow safe passage of riders out of Cuneo – but just try telling that to a peloton of Italian blokes pumped up on adrenaline. Some crazy manoeuvres ensued, accompanied by shouting and swearing as the pace rose exponentially. As an enthusiastic Zwift racer over many years, the frantic speed to the race was nothing new, but this wasn't a virtual world – the falls hurt for real here.

For a mountainous route, the opening 35km was surprisingly flat, a fast procession to the hilly stuff in which you could cocoon yourself within the peloton. The tempo was relentless, which added an urgency and intensity to the ride, dialled up as the once-distant mountains loomed closer. Here was the relative calm before the storm though, with four major peaks up the road, each promising its own unique challenge.

The first two climbs of the day, Santuario di Valmala and La Piatta Soprana, seemed to come in quick succession; in reality, there was 40km between their summits. Both climbs were consistent, averaging 8% with gently winding roads through tranquil, tree-lined landscapes. Occasionally, the gradient would spike into double digits, further spicing up the challenge.

**FIRST AND ONLY**

The mercury rose steadily during the Soprana climb. It was no scorcher, but the feed station was a welcome sight, with bottles running dry. With the main climb of the Colle Fauniera on the horizon, my mind was awash with thoughts of fuelling.

As already described, the Fauniera opens subtly, with a long, barely perceptible incline along a main road, immediately following the descent from Soprana. Riders naturally formed groups, and the pace picked up as the route weaved through quaint little villages, the last of which, Pradleves, marks the start of the climb proper, as the gradients sharpen and the road morphs into a dramatic gorge. A road sign delivers a sobering reminder – 22km remains before the summit.

The Fauniera was a new one on me. I'd neither ridden it nor even knew of its existence. Climbs like the Mortirolo get international recognition because of their inclusion in prestigious races such as the Giro d'Italia – the country's national pro race. The Fauniera has featured in the race, but only once, back in 1999. That year, Marco Pantani put on a display of climbing that was full of bravura. A statue of him – a rather ugly one, which depicts the late Italian as a Gollum-



**Left** The upper section of the Fauniera is narrow, wild and isolated

terrain for the modern peloton and its fleet of hefty support vehicles.

**Scared stiff**

Without warning, my so-far-serene ride was interrupted by the worst cramp I'd ever experienced, as both legs locked out and refused to budge. Stretching, walking, massage – anything but pedalling a bike was needed. I wasn't the only one to surrender to the incessant slopes of the Fauniera, and I soon learned to yell "Crampo!", as grimacing riders checked on each other on the side of the mountain. My mind drifted to the prospect of the broom wagon and climbing into it. Never before had I quit an event and I was determined to not start now. Slowly, the cramp relented and I was able to remount the bike and finish

the last 6km or so to the summit and that odd statue of Pantani.

The Fauniera is a formidable climb, isolated and peaceful, yet undeniably dangerous, with a road surface that's patchy at best, its ruggedness only adding to the challenge. Much of the descent was neutralised due to ongoing repairs, with several gravel stretches replacing the tarmac. This event plays a crucial role in keeping the Fauniera alive, helping to fund these essential repairs. Without this support, the road would slowly fade away, it's not-so-pristine surface crumbling into total disrepair.

After a long, technical 30km descent off the Fauniera, there was one final climb to conquer. The cramp episode and slower pace since meant I was now flirting with the time cut. A few riders were just managing to reach the start of the climb before the lights were turned off. Those who failed to make it in time were directed straight to the finish line, bypassing the final ascent.

The final climb of the day, Madonna del Colletto, was an 8km stretch at a consistent 8%, which might as well have been a vertical wall for me at this stage in the proceedings. Fortunately, I wasn't alone – I was in a group of five riders working together, pushing each other to make it to the finish within the time limit. After tackling the Fauniera, the Colletto was almost a blur, and before we knew it, we were speeding along the main road back into Cuneo. We managed to roll over the finish line with a moving time of just over nine hours, arriving just as the organisers were beginning to pack up their equipment. It was a close call, but we'd made it.

This was an incredible event that shone a light on a region I hadn't considered before, and it completely blew me away. It feels distinct from other parts of Italy, and unlike anything you'd encounter in the French Alps. The area holds countless roads and climbs waiting to be explored, though I'd be surprised if I encountered anything else of the scale and sheer ferocity of the Colle Fauniera. [PLUS](#)



**“ The Colle Fauniera opens subtly, with a long, barely perceptible incline along a main road, immediately following the descent from Soprana ”**

like figure – sits at the summit, yet this was the race where he was ejected due to a high haematocrit level. The climb's first and only appearance in the Giro is attributed to the dangerous nature – narrow, steep and broken – of the descent (neutralised for the gran fondo). It was due to feature a couple of years later, in 2001, but a riders' strike put paid to that. Not prompted by its dangerous descent, but by police doping raids.

Like Mont Ventoux, there are three ways up to the summit. It makes for a tougher day out than the Giant of Provence, not least due to its substantially higher altitude (almost 600m). The length of the Fauniera makes a mid-climb feed station essential, and it duly came at Santuario di Castelmagno, a beautiful sanctuary in remote wilderness where the landscape becomes increasingly Alpine with every twist and turn. By now, the average gradient is hovering at low double digits for long periods, making a mockery of that advertised 7.7% average.

Post-feed, 9km from the summit, the road narrows significantly. This stretch feels worlds away from the smooth, pristine asphalt of your typical Grand Tour climbs, and you begin to get a sense of why it's only ever featured in the Giro once. This isn't

**Above right** The fastest riders were back in Cueno in 5hrs 44mins

**Right** You get cheered into town after the tough day in the saddle

The 2025 Granfondo La Fausto Coppi is set to take place on 29 June. It's open to 3,000 riders and, until 31 March, entry is €65 (rising to €75 after that).

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