

MOTOGIRO D'ITALIA 2020: THE RACE IS ON

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“A flag puts him in the saddle, another stops him, between the two flags hundreds of kilometers. He runs with his chest pressed on the tank, his hands clinging to the controls, eyes wide open inside the orbit of the lens. Immense. The road rises, falls, cuts the plains and again unrolls...and the engine beating in his ears, beats, beats, until the eardrums refuse to vibrate and the rumble becomes a bearable hum.” Silvio Ottolenghi, Motogiro d'Italia brochure, 1956

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Proper MotoGiro! In the 1956 edition, Giuliano Maoggi shows fierce determination aboard his Ducati 125 Marianna...and it paid off, as he won the race. [MotoGiro]

The smallest version of one of the most historic road races in the motorcycling world, the Motogiro d'Italia, took place last week. Forty riders departed from Villafranca di Verona/Treviso on September 13 to cover 1700 kilometers over six days through northern and central Italy. Originally planned for mid-May, the Motogiro had to be rescheduled and modified due to the Covid 19 pandemic. Organizers decided not to skip a year, however, saying participants "did not want to give up the great tradition of the historic motorcycle road event, even if it had to be postponed by four months." Although the Isle of Man TT, which was canceled this year, is slightly older (1907 v. 1914) and better known because of the treacherous course that has claimed the lives of more than 200 riders, the Motogiro has retained its connections to the early machines and pilots who earned hero status in post-World War II Italy.

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*Remo Venturi in the 1955 MotoGiro aboard an MV Agusta Bialbero
[MotoGiro]*

Some of the competitors in the recent rallies are racing veterans, such as champion Remo Venturi, who won the Motogiro d'Italia in 1957, the last year it took place before being shuttered for nearly a decade. Into his late 80s, Venturi was still competing on a classic 175 cc MV Agusta Rapido across the scenic roads of Italy, riding alongside women and men many years his junior from countries around the globe. Travel restrictions this year meant the Motogiro could not include participants from the United States, England or South America, previously the source of many riders who'd come to Italy to compete. Versions of the Motogiro now take place outside Italy as well, however. The MotoGiroUSA, for example, has been bringing classic motorcycle enthusiasts together since 2004 for a two-day timed trial ride that



Classic MotoGiro imagery from 1959, as the Laverda team stays close on the roads. [MotoGiro]

The first Giro Motociclistico d'Italia in 1914 was a classic road race a tad shy of 2400 kilometers. That year, fifty-two competitors started the route on bikes of up to 175 cc, but a mere 17 completed the full course. Racing was suspended during the fascist years, starting in 1931, and then came back for its heyday from 1953 to 1957 as the Motogiro d'Italia. Italian motorcycles by Ducati, Gilera, MotoBi, Moto Guzzi, Mival, Beta, Maserati, Laverda, Bianchi, Mondial, Perugina, Moto Morini, Parilla, Benelli, and MV Agusta and riders such as Leopoldo Tartarini and Giuliano Maoggi, who like Venturi participated in the revived competition during their senior years, captured the public imagination. In 1954, Tarquino Provini, later a 4-time Isle of Man TT winner, gained admiration for taking first place despite finding a hole in the tire of his Mondial at the starting line on the last day; legend has it that a competitor's mechanic sabotaged his rival's bike. The Florentine Giuliano Maoggi became a celebrity when, in 1956, he outran and out-skilled 252 competitors on larger bikes to win the 2500 km, 8 part Motogiro on a Ducati Gran Sport Marianna 125 cc single cylinder designed by Fabio Taglioni. Perhaps it was divine intervention; Taglioni named his famed motorcycle in honor of Pope Pius XII's celebration of the Virgin Mary that year. Taglioni wowed again with the 1957 Sport, a 175 cc created with the intention of taking the Motogiro title and becoming an aspirational model for other makers.

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Other times, other rides. The late 1960s saw a scooter invasion at the MotoGiro, which was successful: here a lineup of Vespas and Lambrettas make timed launches from a checkpoint.

[MotoGiro]

During this period of the Motogiro, thousands of Italians began to ride scooters and motorcycles of their own, many of which were not so distant from the motorbikes of the Motogiro. Numerous daily riders closely followed road racing, especially because they could appreciate the skills and endurance of motorcyclists who were able to traverse more than 2000 km over five or more days of intense competition. Adoring fans lined the race routes and cheered on their favorites during the five peak years of the Motogiro and they filled the roadsides of the Milan to Taranto race that gained a large following during the postwar years as well. Racing enthusiasts sought autographs from their favorite riders and asked questions of mechanics. They also became loyal consumers of the motorcycle manufacturers who showcased their new models during the races. Widespread support for road racing continued until the fateful Mille Miglia auto crash in 1957 when Spaniard Alfonso De Portago went off course in his Ferrari, killing 9 spectators, his navigator Edmund Nelson and himself and injuring some twenty other onlookers. Motorcycle racers had also met their end on Italian roads; the 1954 Milano-Taranto race claimed 3 riders in the first two days. But the risks to the public were made real by the Mille Miglia. As a result, the Italian government immediately put an end to road racing, and fans were led to seek thrills vis-a-vis pilots on official closed racetracks.

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Not enough off-road scooter trials these days! The Motogiro typically included a few rough sections in the 1950s and '60s. [MotoGiro]

By the late 1960s, street competitions again garnered favor and the Motogiro returned, although this time in a time trial version run under the direction of the official national entity the Federazione Motociclistica Italiana (FMI). In 1989, organizers from the Moto Club Terni L. Liberati – P. Pileri, a member of the FMI, re-introduced the historic roots of the 1950s Motogiro and encouraged the participation of motorcycles from the golden years. The event shifted from being an all-out race to a timed ride with checkpoints and skills tests. The idea was to promote the small cylinder motorcycles that had been so important in shaping postwar Italian culture. Soon a few hundred riders were back on the roads competing on their prized motorcycles. In 2001, Ducati and its affiliate Dream Engine joined with the Terni Moto Club and re-designed the event by dividing the motorcycles into four classes: Historical Re-enactment (1950-1958); Vintage (1959-1969); Classic (1970-1980); and Motogiro (1980-). The historic motorcycles had to stay under 175cc but could be of any make, not only Italian. Modern motorcycles with larger engines were allowed in the touring class but with start times staggered to try to keep them separated from the older, smaller bikes. Many riders consider the Historical Re-enactment category the most prestigious to win. Marco Bonanomi captured this year's title on a MV Agusta CSTL, a model produced between 1953 and 1957.

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Nice to start at a castle! The locations of the contemporary MotoGiro can't be beat. [Domenico Vallorini]

Ducati's role in the Motogiro included using the event to introduce new motorcycles, much as they had done in the 1950s. In 2006, for example, two Ducati Sport Classic models, the Paul Smart 1000 and the Sport 1000, debuted at the Motogiro, ridden by then Ducati President and CEO Federico Minoli and Gianluigi Mengoli, President of the Fondazione Ducati. As in the past, Ducati's marketing through the Motogiro worked well for the company and they moved the event to July to take place during World Ducati Week in Bologna. The maker's relationships with Dream Engine, which had largely been responsible for the event's tourist arrangements, and with the Moto Club Terni that had taken care of the bikes and the riding side, suffered, however, and the three entities parted ways. The Terni Club, as the FMI member, held onto the official Motogiro d'Italia name and returned the event to the spring and to its origins based on the participation of motorcycles from earlier eras. Ducati and the new Dream Engine 2 organized their own events, focusing on tourist class bikes and attracting more non-Italians for a week-long Italian moto-cation experience.



Hard to beat the scenery in northern Italy at any time of year. Spectacular territory is a hazard for one's concentration on timing!
[Domenico Vallorini]

Robert (Bob) Coy of the United States Classic Racing Association rode a Motobi 125 cc in the 2003 and 2004 Motogiro d'Italia and so much enjoyed being in the company of other historic motorcycle riders that he decided to create a similar event in the United States. The first MotoGiroUSA took place in 2004 in upstate New York and soon Coy began running spring and fall versions on the east coast. Most years 100 riders compete over two days in a timed ride and skills tests event that brings them together on pre-1969 motorcycles with displacements under 305 cc. Coy notes that the popularity of small Japanese motorcycles in the US during the 1960s has contributed to their prevalence in the MotoGiroUSA rides, but motorcycles from the 1950s and 1960s by BSA, Triumph, Velocette, BMW, Bultaco and his own Italian favorites such as Motobi and Moto Guzzi, among others, are competitive against the numerous Hondas and Yamahas. A Motogiro di California launched in 2008 with input from Coy and Ducati/Dream Engine 2 and there are numerous similar rides across the US and Canada.

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Time check stations can be anywhere on a timed rally, including the courtyard of a castle. [Domenico Vallorini]

What these events have in common is the spirit of the 1950s Italian Motogiro, that is, of uniting riders who appreciate the sensation of opening up the throttle on a small bike along scenic roads, much as Ottolenghi described 64 years ago. This year, however, brought new challenges to organizers who wanted to maintain continuity without compromising the integrity of the event or the health and safety of the participants. Fewer riders, the option of completing just a portion of the itinerary, social distancing and the wearing of masks during limited social gatherings plus discouraging onlookers from lingering around the riders characterized this year's Italian and American Motogiri, which were reported to be enjoyable even with such restrictions in place. As a representative of the Moto Club Terni put it, "We think this is a way of coming back, if slowly, from the terrible period we've all been through." And Bob Coy reported from Virginia that "the roads were fantastic — very rural, twisty, excellent pavement, very few cars and with beautiful vistas from the mountains." Just what riders wanted as they escaped the strangeness of 2020 and headed into the past for a few days on their classic machines.

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A scene from the MotoGiro USA, which includes water crossings and a lot of gorgeous scenery. [Bob Coy]



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