



Hotel of the champions

THE HOVE MALPERTUUS is not just one of Belgium's most cycle-friendly hotels, it's also the regular haunt of teams and riders during Ardennes Week. CS goes good-fortune hunting

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"THIS is where Mario Cipollini slept the night before he won the World Championships," the manager of the Hove Malpertuus reveals, "while over in that room is where Davide Rebellin slept before winning the

Ardennes triple — Amstel, Flèche and Liège."

For the more sentimental cycling fan, to be able to spend the night in the same bed and to look out of the same window at the same view that a star like Cipollini had looked at the morning he won the rainbow jersey is the sort of fantasy you might have. You might also only admit to it after several Leffe beers.

But at the Hove Malpertuus hotel, deep in the East Flanders countryside, they have no such inhibitions (although the Leffe they sell, we are happy to report, is of excellent quality). They're not shy about the achievements of their guests — each of the 30 rooms is now named after whichever top rider spent a night there before going on to victory, and it is known among bike riders as the 'hotel of the champions'.

FOX HUNT

You can't miss the Hove Malpertuus, there's a three-metre tall statue of a fox leering over the busy highway outside. The hotel is named after the hideaway of Reynard the Fox, the main character of a series of medieval tales about a crafty four-legged thief. In his *History of Reynard* (1485) William Caxton, the first English printer, wrote that the fox

would hide from his enemies in the labyrinthine Malpertuus. "There lay he when he had need, and was in any dread or fear," Caxton asserted.

But while Reynard's Malpertuus was a secret bolthole, the modern-day hotel is anything but, and there will be no getting away from the UCI inspectors here. The hotel manager, too, should be familiar to cycling fans. The Malpertuus is run by High Road directeur sportif Valerio Piva, a former pro, together with his Belgian wife Danielle.

No prizes for guessing where High Road and the former T-Mobile team stay whenever they are in the area. But when Liège-Bastogne-Liège, Flèche Wallonne or Amstel Gold loom large ➤

Double booking: two buildings means that rival teams can be kept well apart



on the calendar, High Road are not the only team trying to get their names into the reservation book. When CS dropped in during last year's Ardennes Week, a Liquigas team list was pinned up next to T-Mobile's by the hotel stairs.

"This hotel is as if we'd created a little corner of Italy up here in Belgium," Piva says in the hotel's cosy bar, "and at the same time, for the Italian riders and the teams in general, it's a bit like staying with *la famiglia*."

"It's difficult with so much travelling in the year for riders, they get homesick just like anybody else. During the Ardennes Classics, they can relax, talk Italian, feel as if they're back home."

CYCLING PAST

Cycling's connections with the Malpertuus, rebuilt in 1959, stretch back over four decades. Piva's father-in-law, Yvo Molenaers, was also a professional cyclist.

"He raced in Italy a little, and Belgium a lot more," explains Piva. "When he retired, he bought this place and changed it from a restaurant-disco into a hotel."

However, it was Piva who gave the Malpertuus its pro racing connection. "I came to Belgium in my last year as an amateur for training before the Antwerp Six-Day and I was recommended to stay here. That's how I met my wife, married her in 1988 and came to live here at the end of my career. Since then, cycling teams began to stay here.

"My former team, Ariostea, would always ask to stay here, so did the Italian national team. We have a nice

letter from former trainer Alfredo Martini on the wall from when Mario Cipollini won the 2003 World Championships. There's also a jersey signed by the whole squad.

"Then, back in 1998, when Michele Bartoli was third in the World Championships at Valkenberg [in nearby Holland] the Italian squad stayed here as well. He wrote us a letter afterwards thanking us for all our help: I've had it framed and put

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T-Mobile (now Team High Road) park up outside the boss's house

Where is it?

■ DIRECTIONS FROM THE AIRPORTS

EASILY ACCESSIBLE FROM the United Kingdom, the Hove Malpertuus hotel is roughly an hour away from Brussels airport or railway station (Belgian railways have no objections to taking bikes on local trains), while it's about 30 minutes to the much smaller Liège airport, which also serves

a small number of European destinations.

Charleroi airport (dubbed Brussels South by some budget airlines) is an hour and a quarter's drive, whilst Aachen and Dusseldorf are about the same distance away to the east.

In either case, head for the Liège ring road, then take the E313 motorway towards Antwerp. After roughly 20 minutes drive, come off at exit 32 then turn right onto the N79, towards Herderen and the Dutch city of Maastricht. The Hove is 10 minutes drive away, on the right-hand side.

Bettini drops in for mid-ride refreshment wearing his rainbow jersey



A signed Italian national squad jersey takes pride of place on the wall

A garden retreat

■ THE RURAL IDYLL OF EAST FLANDERS

THE HOTEL ISN'T just good for soaking up the pro atmosphere in the afternoons and evenings. Head out of the Malpertuus, take a right or a left off the A-road, and you will find yourself in the thick of an almost insanely dense network of Flemish cycle paths and quiet roads.

"East Flanders isn't anything like the western end of Belgium," Piva explains. "It's far less industrial. Some people call it the Garden of Flanders, like Kent in England. So it's famous for cycling and its cycle paths, too."

Take a quick spin down any of the roads and you can see what he means. Miles and miles of fruit trees line the road on each side and there isn't a factory in sight.

But it's not just the orchards that make it all so bucolic. Quite apart from the odd castle and vineyard, lush meadowlands filled with peaceful herds of cows flash past our car windscreen as well.

It's not dramatic terrain, but while there's none of the stark beauty of the Ardennes, say, the countryside is pretty without being too tame. The road dips and falls just enough to hurt the legs a little and break the gentle rhythm of pedalling, but it's always pleasant going.

Deep history lurks beneath the rural surface. Nearby Tongeren has a booming antiques market, one of the biggest in Europe, boasts both medieval and Roman museums, huge religious festivals, and was the birthplace of Gaulish hero Ambiorix.

"They also do good coffee and cakes in the bars," adds Piva slyly, aware of the overriding interest bike riders have in all things gastronomic. "And there are some good beers from round here as well."

If you fancy slightly more challenging terrain than the Garden of Flanders can offer, head north-eastwards and before you know it you're in Maastricht, and Holland's little-known hilly southern region of Limberg.

"It's ideal for a pro team to train here" Piva points out, "because you can choose the kind of riding you want: harder, steeper routes down towards Liège, or the easier stuff for in-between races."

"If the boys just want to do a few hours turning the pedals, then they can do that."

up on the wall. The Italians always come and stay here. But when a team that stays here succeeds, we're happy whatever the nationality."

As for Piva's trade team, he says, "T-Mobile came here too when the Tour de France and Tour of Italy have come through the region. A few years ago we were over at Maastricht, when I joined T-Mobile, and I said I had a hotel here and invited the squad over to eat. They were so impressed they insisted on coming back the next year, but to stay the whole week!"

Apart from being quiet with good country roads heading off in different directions from the hotel, the location itself is perfect for the Ardennes races. The start of Liège-Bastogne-Liège is 20 kilometres down a fast motorway in one direction.

Amstel's start at Maastricht is just eight kilometres in another. Flèche Wallonne's finish, too, is less than an hour away, as is Brussels airport.

"We've had lots of former winners of Flèche and Liège staying here, too. That helps make it popular," Piva says. "In addition, teams know they'll get top-class riders' food. As a former pro, I give Danielle advice about what to cook — good, fresh pasta, risotto and so forth — although with her family background she knows a lot in any case.

"She runs the kitchen together with a chef. My mother, who has a restaurant in Italy and knows how to make pasta, helps out as well. The team soigneurs, too, will talk about what the riders want to eat that night. Everybody helps everybody. It's been such a success we often get riders from other teams coming over for supper, because they're confident we know what they want to eat."

It turns out that for the superstitious among the professional cycling community, a visit to the Hove Malpertuus is almost obligatory. So popular was the hotel during the Ardennes week last year that even Astana leader Alexandre Vinokourov,

staying elsewhere, came over to soak up what Piva calls "the good fortune of Malpertuus".

It turns out that when Vino outgunned Jens Voigt to take Liège in 2004, he had stayed at the Malpertuus. (But given what happened to him later on in 2007, we can safely say it didn't work too well the second time around.) And while *Cycle Sport* lurks in the lobby, Paolo Bettini drops in for a quick Coca-Cola and a chat mid-way through a training ride.

"Each year we get at least one win for the hotel," Piva comments. "It doesn't matter who, but somebody finally gets it, and that's been going on for nearly 20 years now, right back to the days of Moreno Argentin [three times a winner of Liège] and Gianni Bugno who won Flanders ahead of Museeuw in the mid-1990s.

"That gives a rich sense of nostalgia to this hotel, and the fans know it too. We always have local riders turning up just so they can see the Italians and other riders, asking for autographs or to get their jersey signed. There's always a real atmosphere the night before the races — you can feel the tension. Then afterwards, if anybody's staying here after maybe Amstel or Flèche, there'll be a slow, comfortable analysis of the event, starting with the antipasti and finishing with a cafe solo. Maybe even a grappa for the team officials."

In 2007, the hotel's winner was Danilo Di Luca, finally victorious for Liquigas in Liège-Bastogne-Liège after years of trying. It was the first time he'd stayed in the Malpertuus.

Quite apart from victories, the atmosphere when Bettini turns up could almost be that of an Italian trattoria: *Il Grillo* and his Quick Step teammates laze around and gossip in the sunshine on the wooden benches outside. Their bikes, at least for half an hour, are forgotten. Meanwhile, tantalising smells of the lunchtime asparagus with rice — an in-house speciality — waft over from the kitchen.

"What gives the Malpertuus its unique appeal is its rich heritage of connections with so many top bike riders from as far back as the mid 1980s"

Endless paths

■ CHOOSING YOUR ROUTES

SHOULD YOU FEEL tempted to go Flanders, you may find yourself overwhelmed by the abundance of routes to be ridden. There are estimated to be 2,000 kilometres of cycle paths alongside Flemish waterways, let alone other routes.

We recommend you look on two websites beforehand: www.fietsroute.org is a thorough, detailed breakdown of bike trails, accommodation of all types and even the weather you can expect. Rain and crosswinds, perhaps.

"All of the routes are numbered, which means that after riding for 100km and following a particular number, say, you'll know you come back to your start-point," Piva says.

Another view is offered by veteran American cyclo-tourist Dan Gamber in his far-reaching and well-constructed website specialising in Belgian towpath rides. There are dozens of them, of all shapes and sizes.

Check it out at www.gamber.net/cyclebel/index.htm.

The Hove Malpertuus hotel itself can be found at www.malpertuus.be.



BIG BREAKFAST

Stroll inside, and the hotel itself is a mixture of the rustic and the practical. Spacious bedrooms in two separate buildings are all set well back from the road, ensuring peace and quiet throughout the night. If there's one thing pro cyclists want the night before a race, it's peace and quiet.

There are two restaurants, one à la carte with the kind of wine list that brings a smile to anyone's face, while the 'tavern' has a log fire and more basic but equally delicious food. The breakfast buffet, though — enormous and high quality — is probably what will impress cyclists the most.

The one downside of the hotel is that being out in the country (and on a busy road as well) it is a bit isolated from any other kind of entertainment. If you want to go anywhere, or eat somewhere that isn't in the hotel, it's really a question of taking a car, a bike or an expensive taxi.

That, though, is the sort of disadvantage that most bike riders value as they know that being cut off means a much quieter night's sleep.

However, Piva and Danielle do make sure they don't overdo their welcome. "We used to take three teams, but now we only take a couple of teams at most," Piva insists. "Quite apart from the question of rooms and logistics, it's more important that they like it and come back or spread the word than overstretching ourselves.

"We do go out of our way to help cyclo-tourists as well. I get out on my bike as often as I can, even in the off-season, and I know the roads both as a rider and as a directeur sportif," Piva points out. "We also hire out bikes for those who can't come here with one themselves."

What gives the Malpertuus its unique appeal is its rich heritage of connections with so many top riders staying there from as far back as the mid 1980s. And if sleeping in the same room as Cipo, Bugno or Bartoli inspires you to get out and ride your bike through the Flemish countryside, well so much the better. ➔

Piva and Danielle are dedicated to providing the perfect haven for cyclists

