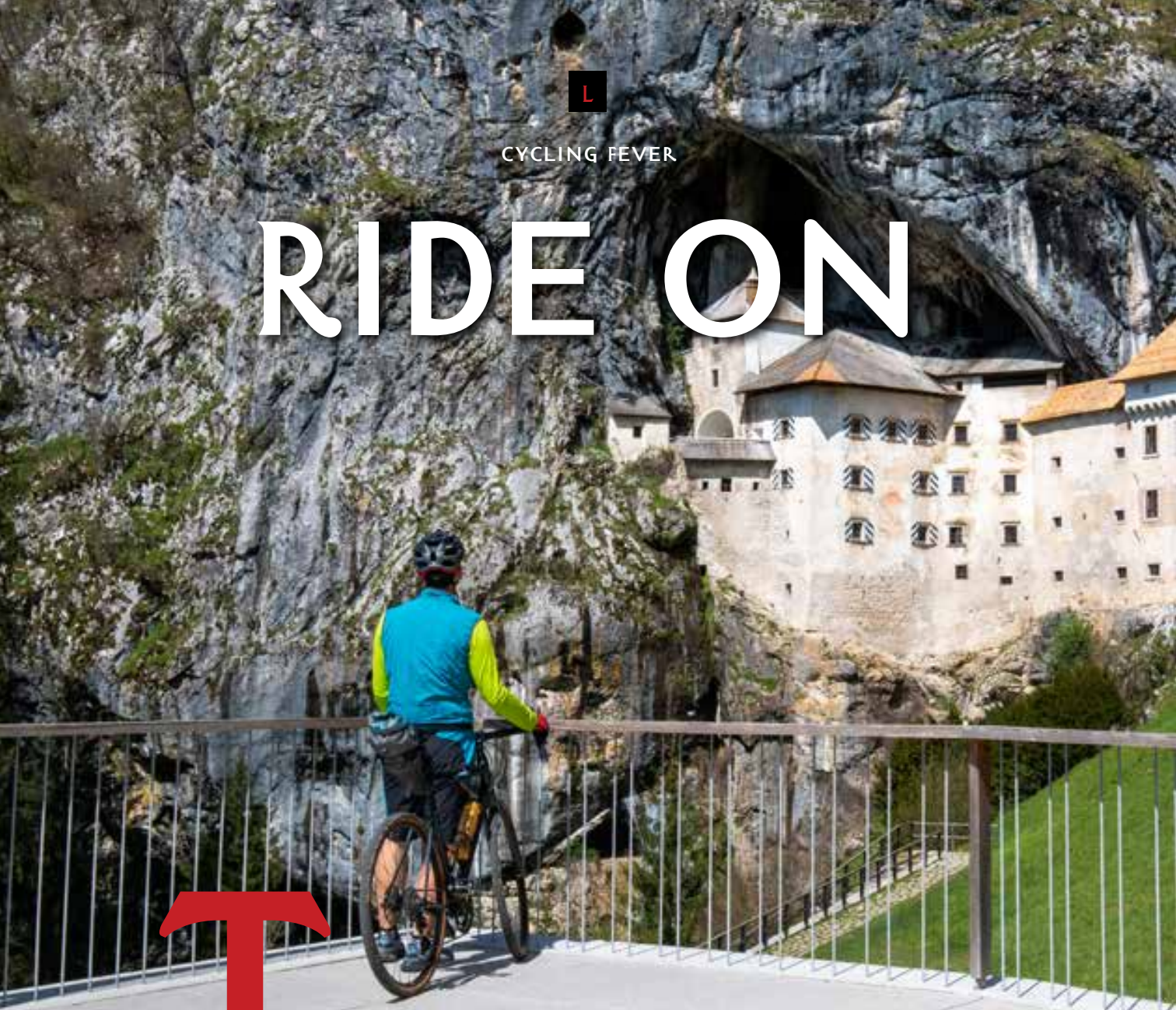


RIDE ON



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Tadej Pogačar didn't win last year's Tour de France, but the hope that he would burned for an unusually long time.

For all that cycling's showcase event is three weeks long, the most likely victor typically emerges early. Not so this year. It took until stage 17 out of 21 for Pogačar's hopes to truly disappear.

CLAIRE READ

Overall victory in the sport's best-known race may have once again proved elusive, but 2023 was another outstanding year for Slovenian cycling regardless.

"I'm gone," gasped the 2020 and 2021 victor into his team radio, watching powerlessly as eventual winner Jonas Vingegaard disappeared up the road. "I'm dead."

TRIUMPHS AND SETBACKS

The Tour – a potent mix of sport, carnival, history, and unparalleled advert for the French tourism board – is the one cycling race of which even non-fans are aware. On hearing that the



FUN FACTS

In Slovenia there are:
5 Tadej Pogačar namesakes,
Less than 5 Primož Rogličs
10 Matej Mahoričs

Photo: Matevž Hribar



Photo: Adobe Stock



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ultimate wearer of the 2023 yellow jersey was Danish, the widespread assumption might be that it was a bad year for Slovenia on two wheels. Nothing could be further from the truth. 2023 was another year of domination.

The streak started in earnest at two of the most prestigious early season races. Paris-Nice and Tirreno-Adriatico are week-long events seen as key indicators of form. Pogačar took vic-

tory in France. Primož Roglič did the same in Italy.

Then to the Spring classics: historic and challenging one-day races. Pogačar took three important wins and went into the prestigious Liège-Bastogne-Liège as favourite. His fortunes were to change there. A crash led to a fractured risk and weeks off the bike to recover.

That did not constitute the disappearance of Slovenia from the top step of

podiums, however. In May, Roglič took the overall win at the Tour of Italy – the first Slovenian to take that title. And then to July, and to a heartbreaking radio confession and concession. Yet one of cycling's many idiosyncrasies is that its followers' hearts are often captured by the rider who comes second rather than first. The 2023 Tour is a case in point. For many, the race belonged to Pogačar and his panache – gracious yet unbowed, it was

he who made it a vintage edition. He'd round off his season with bronze in the road race World Championships (notably the gravel title was taken by another Slovenian, Matej Mohorič) and a win in end-of-season classic the Tour of Lombardy.

BEYOND THE PODIUM

But Pogačar and his pro cycling compatriots – including national time trial champion Urška Žigart, who happens to be his fiancée – aren't just powerful athletes. They are also powerful ambassadors for their home country. Klemen Gerbec is the manager of Slovenia Cycling Holidays (sloveniacyclingholidays.com) and Road Cycling Slovenia (roadcyclingslovenia.com). He says his business has been bolstered by the nation's continued success on the professional stage, with both casual and seasoned riders opting for the companies' tailor-made holidays.

"Not only do we see an increase in people visiting, but cycling itself has become much more popular in Slovenia due to the exposure of the sport," he says. "We've doubled the number of our guests in 2023 from 2022 and next year we will most likely again have a record number."

For Mr Gerbec, it's understandable that this "diverse and beautiful country" should be the birthplace of some of the world's greatest cyclists. He predicts another year of Slovenian cycling domination in 2024. And, as 2023 proved, even when its riders don't take a win this small nation still manages to remain on top.

Photo: Matevž Hribar

