

Raphael Albrecht, Sneak Peaks Dolomites-Triglav

Raphael Albrecht is a freelance project manager, an ultra-cyclist, cyclist, and adventurer. He is also a founder of a cycling project Orbit360. SNEAK PEAKS is his new event and the first outside of his native country, Germany. It covers the large portion of the Eastern Alps between the Dolomites, and Triglav Mountain in the Slovenian Julian Alps. The event features checkpoints at rifugios, where participants can meet each other, eat and drink, stay overnight, and continue their journeys.

- **Age and place:** born in 1989 in Berlin, Germany. “This year I’m living in a van traveling around Europe, then... who knows where I’ll end up”.
- **Job, education, activities:** he studied in London, UK; Potsdam, Germany; and Sydney, Australia. Besides SNEAK PEAKS, with Orbit360 he does other smaller events, cycling festivals, tours, and other activities in Germany. He started cycling in 2019 with a focus on ultra races. He took part in Bikepacking Trans Germany, Silk Road Mountain Race (SRMR) in Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia, and Atlas Mountain Race (AMR) in Morocco, North Africa, and others.
- **Bicycles:** Rose Backroad, Rose XLITE, Rose PDQ, and Rose Hobo (he is an ambassador of this German brand).

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– Why did you choose to do an event in Italy, in Bolzano, and in Slovenia, and not in Germany or another place? What is your personal relationship with these territories and the people on this side of the Alps?

– First, creating events in Germany is generally painful from a legal point of view. The organizers, as such, risk a lot if something happens. It is very difficult with insurances and stuff.

But it is also because I LOVE Italy — it's my favourite country. I have spent months here in all chapters of my life so far. Compared to Italy, Germany can be quite boring for cycling. I was looking for a great bikepacking challenge.

Another important fact I was considering is that I don't want to make people fly with a plane to any of my events. I was looking for a start and finish location that is easily accessible by train or car. Bolzano is perfect for this.

As for Triglav Mountain, I had never been there, but I knew that it's very beautiful [Triglav is the highest peak of the Julian Alps range of the Eastern Alps and Slovenia, 2,863 m]. When I started scouting from Bolzano to the east, it was a no-brainer for me to check Slovenia too. I loved it! So I included it in the route.

There is no personal relationship yet with these areas other than I like the landscapes, people, food, and vibes.

It's also very important to me to have an inclusive approach where no cyclists are feeling excluded based on location, gender, income or any other parameters. For example, I'm offering cheaper tickets for local riders from Italy and Slovenia.

– Your route is interesting because it covers the Dolomites, which need no introduction, and the Sloven-

ian Alps, which are lesser known. What do you think of this contradiction?

– Triglav Mountain is only included in the Adventure route with the longest distance: 1,093 km, 36,760 m of altitude gain.

Indeed, there is a big change when you turn right after Lake Predil and soon enter Slovenian territory. Architecture changes quickly, the vibes are quite different.

But I don't think it's a contradiction: riders will have to keep going with climbing. I also only met very nice people along the way.

– I assume that agreeing with rifugios to make them checkpoints was not easy, even if you are a German. I mean, mountain people are usually described as “closed”, it takes longer to connect with them. What was it really like?

– The checkpoints are the most important part of the event for me as its organizer. In ultra events, riders usually don't stop often, they try to be as efficient as possible. The checkpoints are always the places where you meet other riders, tell stories to each other and spend a bit of time together. I met awesome people during these events. They became very good friends. For me it is more important to bring people together and encourage them for a challenge, then having the fastest racers in the world on the starting line. So the checkpoints have always been a key thing in the whole SNEAK PEAKS idea.

I spoke to 35 rifugios and “only” included 11 in the route. I agree, mountain people can be “closed” sometimes. When I had the feeling that they were not 100 percent interested, I kept looking for rifugios who would really like the idea. For them there is also an economic benefit – riders eat and drink

a lot. They usually don't have high expectations. So for the rifugios it is quite "easy" money.

Also, I do this for the similar reason as why I include local riders. If I, as a foreigner, host an event in another country and benefit from the landscapes, culture, people — I want to include locals and give them something in return in this way.

— "Help is regarded as trail magic" — I like this phrase you said. Please give an example.

— The Silk Road Mountain Race in 2019 was only my second race. I finished it, that made me very proud at this time [a self-supported bikepacking race through the mountains of Kyrgyzstan, a country in Central Asia, named after one of the oldest system of trade routes in the world, which was actively used for more than 1,500 years, from about 130 BCE until 1453].

An older couple tracked me during the race. They were on vacation and somehow heard about the event.

They checked Dotwatcher and saw that I wasn't very far away from them [an ultra-distance cycling site and app that combines real-time updates and live-tracking with community conversations].

They stopped me on the road and kindly wanted to know "what's wrong with us" and why we are doing this. Don't get me wrong, they were really nice. They just couldn't believe that riding those distances with minimal sleep and no outside support is possible.

I was pretty tired at this moment. Nearby there was a small shop. They invited me for a coffee and gave me some halva [a pastry product widely spread throughout Turkey and the Middle East]. They were very, very nice people.

We exchanged numbers. They texted me when I reached the finish line. We never saw each other again, but last month

it turned out that they are the parents of a good friend that I met two years ago. I'm just about to cry while writing those lines.

— You shared a thought that the spirit of bikepacking events was slightly different when you started doing them in 2019. What has changed or is changing? Do you like these changes or not? What would you like to keep from the past if anything?

— It was more of an “adventure” style when I did my first events.

Now most of them are backed up by huge media that only focuses on the top three riders. The spirit is a bit lost. There are only a number of races that are keeping it.

The gravel and ultracycling community is quite big now. As with everything in the world, capitalism reigns. At some events I had a feeling that social media is more important for organizers than caring about the riders in the middle and party pack. More trash from bars is on the road, because riders “lost” it. Things like this changed the mood. It's a new playground for racing people now, which is generally fine.

SNEAK PEAKS should be different. I put my time, money, and heart into this event and its communication to make sure we will create something special.

Okay, that's big words in the end. I hope I don't disappoint people in September. I'm very much looking forward to the start in Bolzano.

June 14, 2024