

A little bit of history

A little over 10 years ago a lull in the pub conversation was filled with a beer fuelled suggestion that we should cycle from London to Birmingham along the tow path of The Grand Union Canal. This seemed like an eminently sensible suggestion given that canals tend to be pretty flat and blessed with frequently placed drinking establishments. For once pub bravado turned into reality and that September a group of 8 old school mates set off from Little Venice bound for New Street Basin in Birmingham. We didn't really take it that seriously, there wasn't a suspension fork in sight and the rag tag group included a hybrid bike with a solid rear tyre (no chance of getting a puncture) and a light weight racing bike (no chance of avoiding a puncture). The first day consisted of around 35 miles travelled and 8 pints consumed, with the whole trip taking 3 days.

Over the last 10 years the group, and our waistlines, have thinned. We have tackled the delights of The Coast to Coast (in both directions), The Lake District, The Peak District, The Brecon Beacons and Exmoor. The core group of 4 riders has remained consistent and been complimented each year with a few extras to make the numbers up. The equipment has been steadily upgraded so that we are now all on full suspension steeds, with disk brakes and an array of accompanying gadgets such as heart rate monitors, barometric altimeters and bike mounted GPS. The number of grey hairs sported by the riders has also continued to increase.

A cunning plan

This year the job of organising the trip fell to me and to coincide with the 40th birthday year of many of the riders I decided it was time for something more exotic. In the past we have talked about going to the Scottish Highlands or The Alps but given the September time frame and likely weather conditions heading further South seemed like the best option.

So I made myself a large cup of tea, cranked open the computer and turned to the back pages of MBR. Pretty quickly I decided that Spain was to be the lucky recipient as this would provide a mixture of sun and large mountains. I worked my way through the numerous adverts and settled on Ride Sierra Nevada (<http://www.ridesierranevada.com/>), mainly because it was based just 15 minutes from Granada airport and the accommodation has a swimming pool. A brief email conversation with Shaun, the owner, ride guide and chief bottle washer, and I had reserved 6 places on a four day trip heading off in September. Airport pickups, 4 nights accommodation, breakfast, lunch and 3 guided rides works out at around £150 pounds each. Flights on Monach Air also worked out around £150 each once the multitude of taxes and other charges had been added.

Taking your bike on a plane

The last question that remained was "do we take our trusty steeds, or rely on a hire bike when we get there". The consensus was that we would like to take our own bikes so a trip to Wiggle.com and £75 pounds resulted in a large bike bag turning up the following day. A quick call to Monach also confirmed that they would be happy to take our bikes if we were happy to pay them £15 each way for the privilege.

When it came time to pack up the bike I Googled for some bike packing instructions and found some good ones at <http://www.globaladventureguide.com/faqs/how-to-pack-bike>. Only one of the group went to the effort of acquiring an old cardboard bike box, as recommended in the instructions, however next time I would do this as it makes the bag more rigid and easy to move around.

Travelling with the bike bags was surprisingly easy although you do get a few funny looks from other tourists. That said it was with relief when the bag finally appeared on the baggage reclaim belt in Spain.

The arrival

We were met at the airport by Shaun, as arranged, and by one of the locals from Monachil, the village in which Ride Sierra Nevada is based. The bikes, luggage and riders all fitted nicely into the 2 vans and shortly afterwards we were being dropped off at our accommodation, a traditional Andalucían farm house tucked in at the edge of a spectacular gorge. Excited by the prospect of



some riding we re assembled our bikes by the edge of our swimming pool in the late afternoon sunshine (not something I have ever managed to do in Wales !).

The village of Monachil nestles at 800meters in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains which rise up to 3,400 meters in the distance. I hadn't quite realised the scale of the Sierra Nevada range when I booked the holiday, but when presented with it literally

on your doorstep the view is breathtaking. I also had not realised that the Vuelta a Espana passed through Monachil the day before we arrived, apparently the Alto de Monachil climb out of the village is a regular stage, more on this later...

Day 1

We saddled up and rode down the hill to the little shop that Shaun has in the village and were met outside by Shaun with a bag of trail food (sandwiches and bananas). After stowing the food in packs the pelaton rode off out of the village on a short tarmac section, just enough to get some heat into our legs. With a sharp left turn we headed off road and upwards along a trail winding through the trees. We needed to gain some height and there is no easy way to do this. The climb was deceptively steep, challengingly long and provided Shaun with a good chance to see what kind of group he had on his hands. The long climb through the woods turned into fire road and the gradient eased off. After an hour or so we had made a substantial investment in height and it was time for some payback. Shaun has his one names for most the single track in this area, our first big descent was down "Dead Bull" a swooping, rocky descent that contoured along the side of the mountain with dramatic views and constantly changing terrain. On minute we were riding along hard rocky trails, the next we were riding on loose rocks and gravel resembled a lunar landscape.



We descended while traversing along the side of the valley then doubled back sharply across the river before stopping for some lunch.

The next trail was rather ominously named “Baptism” and followed the line of the river we had just crossed. This was a rollercoaster or a ride littered with football size rocks and flanked by an unforgiving Spanish gorse and vicious bramble bushes. You had to be precise with the line that you road here but a good choice was rewarded with some high speed technical descending as the trail crossed back and forward across the Dilar river.

Most of the river crossings were attemptable, if not rideable with each crossing plunging us back into the icy water which was very refreshing. We followed the river valley downwards for 40 minutes or so before stopping for a well earned rest in a clearing full of the scent of wild rosemary.

Of course the law of what goes down must go up meant that we had some more climbing to be done. This time we climbed up through vast orchards of Olive and Almond trees as we needed to work our way back to Monachil in the adjacent valley. The effort of the climb was rewarded with a long descent through the woods and through “pinch flat alley” which thankfully did not claim any more scalps. The ride finished of with a very fast section through the low trees. You had to continually on the lookout for low branches, while not wanting to miss the many well placed rocks to boost off for some air.



We pulled back into Monachil tired but all agreeing that it had been an epic day of riding, which was nicely finished off with some Tapas and local beer in the early evening sunshine.

Day 2

When we met Shaun down in the village the next morning we were still buzzing from the day before and challenged him to top yesterday. He replied that today would also be an epic, but different sort of ride. Shaun had enlisted the help of another local with a van and we packed our bikes into one van and us into the other. We drove out of Monachil following the route taken by the Vuelta riders just a couple of days before. The road rose rapidly up the side of the valley in a series of steep unrelenting switchbacks which caused Shaun’s van to struggle in places. The

names of the star Vuelta riders painted on the road in large letters were still visible as we climbed. After about 40 minutes before Shaun pulled into a lay-by just below the ski resort of Sol y Nieve. As we reassembled our bikes you could look back down the valley at the 1,400 meters of height that we had gained.

The first part of the ride followed The Circuito Fuente Alta, a man made circuit not dissimilar to the trails that I normally ride in Swinley forest. However the views were breathtaking as was the thinness of the air at the 2,200 meters we were riding at. The circuit doubled back and we soon found ourselves cycling alongside the lowest of the hotels in the ski resort.

We turned away from the resort and headed down an eye rattlingly fast descent that had the whole group whooping with delight. This gave way to some highly technical contouring along the side of the mountain with incredible views into the valley below.

Lunch was taken at the top of the next peak after a lung busting steep climb which had sections of pushing and carrying. Sitting there high up in the mountains working my way through a large chorizo roll you could really feel the scale of the Sierra Nevada.



We would have stayed at the top of the peak for longer but were all exited about the prospect of all the down that we had earned. After a shortish descent we crested another rise and looked down what appeared to be a sheer drop into the gorge below. Shaun assured us that this was in fact rideable and if you ignored the 50 meter drop on your left hand side then you would be alright !

We started descending into the “los cahorros” gorge and then hit the “switchback section”, which is like taking the “corkscrew” trail in Swinley and running it down a 45 degree slope. Not for the faint hearted, but something you definitely look back at and say “wow I rode that”. Take a look at Shaun’s video for a better view...

<http://www.ridesierranevada.com/fresh-snow-mojito-intro.html>

After the switch backs we had become acclimatised and thought nothing of the remaining descent into the valley floor along trails that were barely clinging to the side of the mountain.

We crossed the river at the floor of the gorge and climbed back up the other side towards Monachil. Again the views were awesome as we crested the last rise we stopped to look down into the river 100 meters below.

Truly another epic day, I think this was the best days riding I have ever had.

Day 3

If day 2 was a down hill epic, then day 3 started as an uphill epic. The short road climb out of the village was followed by a steep 4 km climb up through the woods and out onto “The Rim”



This trail runs along the edge of a massive escarpment leading away from Monachil. We had been able to look back on this as we descended back into Monachil the day before but when you are up close and personal riding a few meters away from a long sheer drop focuses the attention.

We climbed up along the side of the rim as far as we could go and then back into fire road which rose via a series of switch backs up the side of the mountain. This was just a case of grinding your way up turn after turn without trying to look at the top. We had a short stop at a mountain spring to refill the Camelbacks and douse ourselves in the icy water but were quickly back on our bikes and heading upwards again. 17 km, 2 hours and into the climb we passed the 1,000 meters vertical ascent that signalled the top, it had been hard but ultimately fulfilling.

As we crested the climb I was looking forward to the payback on the way down. After a short decent dropped steeply onto a trail named “the beach”. This a fast gravel descent during which you are never really in full control. As long as you are comfortable with the general direction you are heading and don’t touch the front brake then you will probably make it down in one piece.

After another short, sharp climb through the woods we reached the top of the col and were able to look back down at Monachil over a 1000 meters below in the valley floor, another truly awesome view. Reluctant to lose the view we headed off downwards into a headless fast descent through the woods. We screamed down the tree lined path, touching 50Km/hour and having to make an occasional last minute manoeuvre to avoid the odd rock or two.

The woods opened out into another dramatic view where we were able to look back down onto the Baptism trail deep below us. The trail contoured along the side of valley, but by this time we were used to riding quickly without thinking about the steep drop off to your right hand side.

The last short climb of the day gained a little more height that we lost down a 45 degree shingle slope that was so steep you either had to go for it or get off and walk. Shaun headed off down the slope, seemingly not concerned by the sharp right hand turn at the bottom, or the nasty looking rocks that beckoned if he failed to make the turn. At the bottom he carved his bike round the turn like a downhill skier and headed off into the distance. Slightly less elegantly we made our way down the slope.



The last trail of the day was a fast downhill section that had been used that morning by Greg Minnaar and the Honda Pro Team for a training session. An awesome ending to the day, this trail dropped 300m meters in height over a couple of kilometres while twisting through the trees and dropping into an old river gully. There were jumps and rocks to boost off and air galore. Taking the trail at speed you had to make instant decisions about choice of route. On a number of occasions discretion got the better part of valour such as when presented with the opportunity to ride a 2 meter vertical drop off with the need to carry 4 meters before finding a landing spot. We were spat out at the end of the trail whooping like kids, much to the amusement of the local free riders waiting at the bottom.

Conclusions

It is 2 weeks since I got back from Spain as I sit and write this review. Enough time to weigh up the differences between my regular Swinley riding, occasional trips to Wales and the epic riding of the Sierra Nevada. They all present different challenges, living where I do there is nothing that can prepare for the duration of the climbs you will face or the feeling of riding high in the mountains.

On reflection these 3 days have to go down as the best riding trip so far. The memories will be there forever. Hopefully I won't be picking the thorns out of hands for much longer, but I will have a grin on my face when ever I think back.