

# Adventure

## Mountain biking Andalucía



# She'll be coming round the mountain

Cycling through the Sierra Nevada is surprisingly relaxing, when there's a support vehicle to deliver cold drinks and cakes

It's not easy being an active person trapped inside a lazy person's body. Your grand plans are constantly undermined by the reality that you are neither as fit or as brave as you'd imagined. So you have to compromise, to admit that although you don't mind a bit of exertion, you want to be pampered as well. In return for a little effort, I want to be plied with cold drinks, cake and encouragement. I want a big bed to sink into at the end of the day and lie-ins every morning. Oh, and I want someone else to organise everything from kit to maps to picnics. So, it was with some trepidation that I found myself being driven round ever-tighter hairpin bends, Dire Straits blaring on the stereo, deep into the mountains of Andalucía.

We were heading to a remote *cortijo* in the Parque Natural de Sierra Nevada for a week of mountain biking. A little ambitious, perhaps, given that my cycling experience consists of short rides across south London on a fold-up, but Jenny Mayhew, who runs the trips, had assured me it would be a breeze.

We were impressed when, after a bumpy ride up from the village of Bérchules, we finally reached the farmhouse, a lone, stone building 1,700m up a mountain, with rooms that open on to a courtyard, complete with tinkling fountain and two happy, lolling dogs. It ticked all my boxes

— big beds, airy rooms, tasteful decor, eco-friendly (solar-powered, off-grid, water supplied by natural spring) — with the added bonus of a glorious, uninterrupted view across the valleys of the Alpujarras.

This area has captured the imagination of numerous writers from Gerald Brenan, who wrote about his experience of living in the village of Yegen in the 1920s, to Chris Stewart, who described converting a remote Andalucian farm in *Driving over Lemons*. It's not hard to see why. In spring red poppies, yellow broom and pink sweetpeas colour the fields; wild thyme, lavender, sage and rosemary scent the air. In between shimmering fields of wheat and barley, rows of olive trees march down terraces. Across this timeless land run hundreds of mostly unmarked and unmapped tracks — perfect mountain biking territory.

On our first night, over glasses of rough local wine in Bérchules, Jenny and her partner Tim quickly established that none of us — me, my boyfriend, a 23-year old gym fanatic called Kama, and Rob, a thirtysomething who works in insurance — were experienced bikers. But they didn't seem bothered. In fact they were unnervingly optimistic and jolly. All the same, our first

**Giving up meant getting in the 'van of shame' — and that was not an option**

venture out the following morning came as a bit of shock — a long, hard uphill slog. We groaned as each corner revealed yet more dusty track winding further up the mountain. But just as we were about to run out of steam, Tim announced a pitstop. The back-up Land Rover appeared, chairs were set up next to a stream, drinks handed round, banana cake scoffed and, suddenly, tired thighs were a distant memory as we basked in the mid-morning sun in the wild, empty landscape. Better still, the climb was rewarded with 10 glorious kilometres of downhill, ending in the whitewashed hamlet of Mecina Bombarón at siesta time where Jenny led us down steep, narrow streets to the bar for a much-deserved beer.

Four years of exploring the Sierra Nevada has given Jenny and Tim an encyclopaedic knowledge of the best routes and places to stop. Between rides we picnicked by streams, in forest clearings and by a waterfall where the spray provided the perfect natural cool-down. Most of the tracks were broad enough for us to ride two abreast and chat — Kama, the fittest among us, had a habit of starting a conversation just as we were heading uphill. I tried to keep up with her and talk at the same time. “No, no idea — gasp — how many — gasp — calories we've burned off.” “No — gasp — you're bum doesn't look big in those padded shorts.”

One of the hardest climbs was through a sandy river bed that felt like cycling through treacle, but we were determined to stay on our bikes. Giving up would mean getting into the “van of shame”, aka the Land Rover, and that was not an option. Even when we were tempted, a change of pace across flower-studded meadows or wooded slopes gave us time to catch our breath and take in the scenery, which was nearly always dominated by the snowy peak of Mulhacen, the highest in the Sierra Nevada at 3,497m, named after Abul Hassan, the last Moorish king of Granada. Every hour or so we'd reconvene for more sustenance and stories about the local area: the rocky outcrop of Los Tajos de Reyecillo, for example, is where the Moors made their last stand in 1568 led by Aben Humeya, the boy king who hurled himself off the edge with his horse.

At night back at the farmhouse, we dined together on hearty, homemade soups, lasagne, fish pie, chocolate tart. Not particularly Spanish but tasty and filling. One night Jenny drove us to an agriturismo and restaurant on an organic finca, Alquería de Morayma, where we got our Spanish fix of jamón serrano and manchego cheese, rabbit stew and grilled kid.

So, did *nothing* go wrong? Not exactly. On day three my boyfriend broke his collarbone. Hurling downhill, he hit a sandy patch, lost control and went over the handlebars.

When the rest of us caught up with him he was a sorry sight, caked in dust, his top ripped and wincing with the pain. Jenny and Tim morphed from jolly PE teachers into a crack medical team, arranging an ambulance to the hospital in Motril, translating doctors' instructions and offering all the sympathy an invalid could want. It won't go down as the best holiday in my boyfriend's book — it's back to city breaks for him. As for me? I'm thinking

about signing up for the advanced biking week.

● *Easyjet (easyjet.com) flies to Almeria from £49.99 rtn inc taxes. A seven-night biking trip costs £550 or £325pp for a four-night long weekend through Pure Mountains (00 34 958 064 052, puremountains.com). The price includes airport transfers, full board and guided biking. There are trips for novices and experienced bikers. Bike hire extra.*

Isabel Choat

### Three more intermediate trips

#### Himalayan adventure, Nepal

It may sound extreme, but this holiday is designed to make conquering the mighty Himalayas a piece of pie. Described as a “taster” trip, it features low-level trekking, mountain biking and whitewater rafting. If your bravery improves with altitude, you can add a spot of bungee jumping and canyoning, but there's no pressure. ● *Eight days costs £849 including meals but not flights with High and Wild (01749 671 777, highandwild.co.uk). The next trips depart October 20, 26 and 28.*

#### Riding in Turkey

On this week-long horseriding holiday through Turkey's rocky Cappadocia region, guests ride 15km to 25km a day through weird rock formations and cave cities. There are three levels of accommodation — basic camping, stone guesthouses, or a luxury option — which means someone else prepares and untacks

your horse each day, a support vehicle arrives each lunchtime to prepare a hot meal under a nomadic tent, where you can also take a siesta, and you stay in beautiful Ottoman guesthouses. ● *ridingholidays.com, 001 215 659 3281. Camping £400pp, guesthouse £547, luxury £870.*

#### Walking in Umbria

Self-guided walking holidays mean that no one can give you flak if you decide to fill your thermos with wine and spend most of the day taking rest stops in the sun. A flexible six-night trip staying in Assisi and Spoleto offers walks of three to four hours from each town, where you stay in traditional hotels. You'll see ancient sites, hamlets, hills and olive trees, and plenty of restaurants no doubt. ● *01242 254 353, worldwalks.com, £365pp including hotels, some meals, train tickets and luggage transport but excluding flights. Departures daily until November.*



Happy valley . . . (clockwise from top left) Isabel conquers the Sierra Nevada; breakfast on the terrace of the farmhouse; the view across the Alpujarras

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