

HARD ROC CALLING

The world's biggest mountain bike event provided a spectacular backdrop for a first ride of Canyon's new enduro-ready machine

Words: Mick Kirkman Photos: Mick Kirkman, ASO/Sébastien Boué



Welcome to Glastonbury in an alternate universe. It's not about music, it's about bikes. There are 150,000 people here, racing, spectating, shopping, partying. It's like the legendary music festival but with thousands of metres of Lycra, pizza instead of hash cakes, and the miles of mud replaced by dust, rocks and scorching sunshine.

This is Roc d'Azur. Spawned from a 60km mountain bike mates' race in the early 1980s, it has since morphed beyond all recognition. The first event saw just seven riders race cross-country between Ramatuelle and St Tropez on the French Riviera, and it's grown so much since that it's now organised by Tour de France owner ASO and is probably the biggest mtb event in the world.

Visitors come from all over Europe, but Brits are few and far between. That's a bit weird considering the sheer scale of the event, but it probably stems from the fact that Roc d'Azur has been regarded as so typically 'Euro' that it's not for us at all. Many of us are old enough to remember it appearing in magazines back in the day as a bit of a 'racing snake' get-together, and that's probably put a fair few people off.

But that was then and this is now, and the mountain bike climate has changed. Whether it's the 'spirit of enduro' or the versatility of modern bikes, my theory is that trends are edging us back towards the sport's roots in the middle ground. This 'ride everything' democratic attitude brings us nicely back to the modern-day Roc.

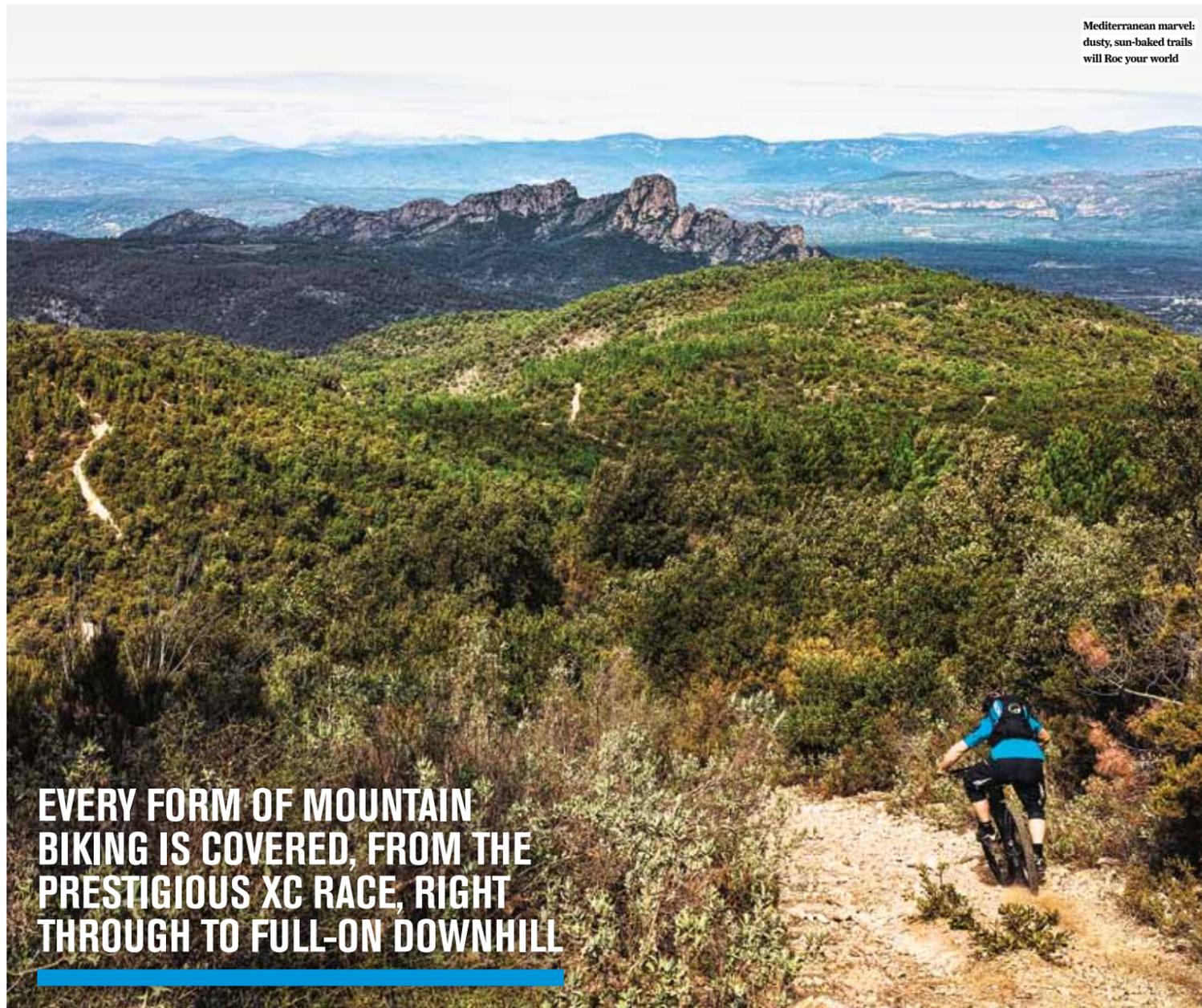
Next to the beach in Fréjus, every form of mountain biking imaginable is covered, from the prestigious XC race, right through to full-on downhill. The expo area boasts huge, bike show-sized halls and pits with extensive demo fleets. And alongside the main event there are tandem races, marathons, dirt jump contests, trails, pump track racing, kids' races, fancy dress events, a triathlon, BMX and scooter competitions, and no doubt a whole load more stuff that passed me by.

My main Roc focus was to race the enduro event on the brand new Canyon Spectral 650b bike and then write a review from the angle of testing it within a timed, stress-inducing race situation. As it turned out there was no shortage of stress, and the plan fell to pieces faster than good intentions at Glastonbury — but I still managed to get a handle on the bike on some excellent rocky trails.

FULL FACE-OFF

The first hurdle to racing was a lack of the required doctor's letter or race licence. Despite racing a lot of DH years ago, I'm more likely to be organising or photographing nowadays, so the old BC race licence has long expired. Thankfully, since the organisers wanted the coverage, they promptly drove me across the site on a golf buggy for a full-on health check.

The advantage of a huge event like this one is that they have a makeshift field hospital. There, a doctor ushered me into a chamber, instructed me to undress, stuck pads and wires onto my chest and abdomen and hooked me up to a heart monitor.



Mediterranean marvel: dusty, sun-baked trails will Roc your world

EVERY FORM OF MOUNTAIN BIKING IS COVERED, FROM THE PRESTIGIOUS XC RACE, RIGHT THROUGH TO FULL-ON DOWNHILL



Cross-country inspires religious zeal in some colourful characters



Lycra-clad festival fans roll up and get ready to smoke it

CANYON SPECTRAL AL 9.0 SL

£2,999 / 650b / canyon.com



Cable routing is so clean and neat it's hard to spot

Best quality Black Chili compound Conti Mountain King IIs

Seat tube entry hole for stealth dropper posts

Lack of ISCG mounts less of an omission in today's climate

Ultra-lightweight 1,460g DT Swiss Spline 90 wheelset

The Canyon Spectral AL is a new trail/all-mountain bike with 140mm travel and the increasingly popular mid-size 650b wheels. A key objective in the Spectral design process was to keep things simple and lightweight, and this is reflected in the extremely clean, smooth lines of the aluminium chassis.

I rode the most expensive bike in a six-bike 650b line-up at the Roc d'Azur, but the other options (including one female-specific) start at £1,699 plus postage. The 9.0 SL is pretty understated but carries stacks of bling too, so it's refreshing that it comes in at under £3,000 (including a super-light DT Swiss wheelset, Kashima-coated Fox suspension and carbon cranks and brakes), when we're getting used to regularly seeing £5k price tags on high-end machines.

SL presumably means 'super light', and the 9.0 Spectral pays close attention to trail-riding efficiency in climbing and descending, with light wheels and a 2x10 speed drivetrain.

Another stand-out model in the Spectral range, the EX, looks like it has been built for the cool kids. It shares the same chassis, but in a similar vein to what Specialized does with its EVO series, rocks a more aggro build and enduro race-ready RockShox Monarch Plus rear shock with a larger oil volume,



142x12mm bolt thru axle with low profile mech hanger



Extremely clean, recessed aluminium pivot hardware

SPECIFICATION

- Frame** Canyon Spectral AL 140mm
- Forks** Fox 32 Talas CTD Factory FIT 140mm
- Shifters** SRAM XO
- Gears** SRAM XO
- Chainset** SRAM XO Carbon 2x10-speed
- Brakes** Avid X0 Trail Carbon
- Wheels** DT Swiss Spline XM 1450
- Tyres** Continental Mountain King II
- Bars** RaceFace Turbine 730mm
- Stem** RaceFace Turbine
- Saddle** Ergon SM30
- Seatpost** RockShox Reverb Stealth
- Sizes** XS, S, M, L

GEOMETRY

- Size tested** M
- Head angle** 67°
- Seat angle** 74.5°
- BB height** 334.5mm
- Chainstay** 430mm
- Front centre** 708mm
- Wheelbase** 1,138mm

a 150mm-travel Revelation fork, fatter Conti tyres, a 1x11-speed SRAM X01 drivetrain and stubby Renthal Duo stem and FatBar combo as standard. It's priced at £2,699.

Fortunately, the printouts established I wasn't likely to die, so, certificate in hand, I picked up my number board, a shiny new Canyon Spectral 9.0 SL, and hitched a lift to the event.

The first stage started above a beautiful town called Roquebrune and looked quite steep, rocky and intimidating viewed from the huge queue that had formed at the start. I've ridden these dry, dusty Mediterranean trails before, but only having had the Spectral for the sum total of one steep climb I started to feel a bit apprehensive. Another worry was the need to overtake a lot of people if I wanted to set a decent time, and that could get very dangerous. I suddenly remembered how competitive I am and why I don't do this any more. I could feel the old racing pressure to perform rearing its ugly head.

The queue was dragging on a bit. The friendly riders were all shapes and sizes — a mixture of XC lads on an away day right through to full-on enduro types spraying dust out of the turns. All were wearing full-face helmets.

This was for good reason, and at the head of the queue I was not-so-politely informed of the rules when someone yelled: "No open helmet, Monsieur!"

What? I protested in my best pidgin French. I attempted to communicate that I'd emailed and specifically asked the organiser about open-face helmets, and I'd been assured it was 100 per cent OK. We'd been chauffeured up to the start by an ASO driver and, "Monsieur, stand aside please!"

Well, that was that. I wasn't going to get timed by this fella today, but in the 'spirit of enduro' I wasn't going to let a small issue like that end my fun. Stage two started from the same place heading in another direction, and no riders had made it back up the liaison yet. I had my number board and timing chip on, so I dived straight in.

FEELING THE FLOW

First man down, riding blind. Steep corners, and the Canyon was definitely in the ballpark. Good grip and braking traction, nicely balanced. The bars felt a bit narrow, but otherwise it was doing a good job on a hectic, rocky chute. Suspension tracked well while the loose trail was threading down old farming terraces with multiple drops and jumps. The steepness eventually mellowed into a long fire-road traverse, before dipping into some high-speed, sketchy forest tracks peppered with rain gulleys.

At the finish I knew I'd just ridden a new, unfamiliar bike at a pretty fast pace (for me) and felt very comfortable. I sipped a drink, shifted down and plodded on up towards the start of stage three. A couple of leading racers overtook me on the climb and, suddenly, I'd assimilated myself back into the race. The next timing guy didn't bat an eyelid about the open-face helmet, so I lined up at the clock and cranked flat out into the stage aiming to score at least one proper timed run.

The first loose corner felt weird. Anyone who has raced will know why. It's bizarre what that clock does to your head and, together with the 100 per cent sprint effort, it had sent my body into shock. Limbs felt stiff as I tried to control breathing and relax, instead of focusing on the trail ahead. I was still bouncing down the upper part of what was becoming a great stage though, and the Spectral was keeping good speed, riding high through technical rock zones and feeling tight and punchy working the land.



Bringing the Spectral down to earth

Around two minutes in and into a smoother rhythm, the trail crossed a firebreak and plunged into a hairy rocky section with huge holes. Spectators lined the twisted, tree-lined chute hoping for some carnage. Dropping in, I could see straight away I was on the wrong side of the trail and things were going to get wild. Most times you can wing it, but a lurching bunnyhop down rock steps wasn't enough and the front wheel jabbed at a deep hollow, ejecting me over the bars onto my helmet. Offers of help came in a blur. I somehow just grabbed the bike, still stumbling, and set off into the lower section. A fantastic bit of flowing trail in a narrow gully ridden with dodgy brakes from the crash followed, before eventually I broke out onto some scrubland at the end.

I crossed the finish line totally wired and totally spent. It was only one enduro stage that didn't mean anything, but it brought a lot of satisfaction knowing maximum effort had gone into it. I'd forgotten that there's a buzz you get from racing that's totally different from day-to-day riding.

GRAND CANYON

Breathing heavily and sweating, I realised I'd spanked myself a bit crashing, and, nursing a rear brake lever pulling to the bars, decided it was best to just enjoy the rest of the race at a safer pace. Nothing

changed my positive view on the Canyon on the final stages, and despite the major hiccups the event was really enjoyable — even if I never did get an official time after all that effort on stage three.

The next day I took the Spectral back out to Roquebrune and rode the best three stages again. The bike climbed effectively up and around the hillside and inspired the same confidence when descending. My overriding impression was of it being well balanced between fun and flickable, but also predictable, reassuring and secure on the ragged edge. The size medium tested was a bit small compared to some, but the compactness and stiff chassis did make it feel very lively hopping off little edges and pumping out of berms. One gripe with the 9.0 build is that the twisty 150mm Fox 32 forks aren't stiff enough for how hard you can push things on those 650b wheels, but other than there's not much else to complain about. I really rated the new Spectral and it's definitely my favourite Canyon of the ones I've ridden so far.

Overall the Roc is well worth a visit too, and would serve as a great substitute to visiting a huge bike show in the UK. There's so much going on that you can dip in and out and choose what you fancy. It obviously doesn't hurt that you're by the sea in lovely sunny weather — just don't forget your full-face helmet.



Gravity warriors line up for inspection



Canyon rider Joe Barnes tears it up



A rock garden offers the perfect photo op



Tandem cross-country is double the fun



Life's a beach on the Côte d'Azur

THE STORY OF THE SPECTRAL

Behind Canyon's new bike is a heap of input from the company's successful Enduro World Series race team, and in particular legendary champion Fabien Barel. We asked him how the bike came about.

mbr: What's the Spectral been designed to do?

Fabien: We targeted the all-mountain sector as the first part of our mission, and the 140mm Spectral is the first bike from the process.

The geometry and suspension has come from feedback from the team riders. We've worked hard on the kinematics, not only to optimise it for enduro racing, but also to work well for trail riding and everyday fun stuff.

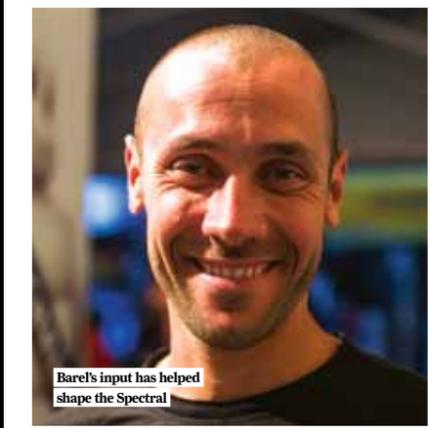
Both Joe [Barnes] and myself love the tighter feel of less travel, but racing shorter travel bikes on long descents is different from downhill. It's fine to muscle through tough terrain at your maximum for a two or three minute run on a DH bike, but you need more comfort on an enduro bike. You need the air spring and the damping to cushion you from the rough ground, or else you get too fatigued and your performance and times suffer.

For this reason, we tuned the Spectral with a more progressive curve, so that the suspension is quite supple at the start to increase comfort and control across bumps, but then tight enough deeper in the stroke to allow you to be dynamic and playful with the terrain. It still pedals really well, and I'm very happy with the compromise we found.

mbr: How did the 650b wheel size impact on the design?

Fabien: Bigger wheels are better at rolling over obstacles and trail vibration is reduced too, so there is less need for outright sensitivity. But we think the bike's stability needs to be balanced with manoeuvrability, which can come from the reduced rotating mass of the smaller wheels, or from a more compact frame on bigger wheels. It doesn't need to come from both, so there is less need for super-long front ends and slack head angles on the bigger wheeled bikes.

I ride fast and like to have slack angles, so sometimes I use a bigger 160mm fork for the severe courses. But for the average riders and customers, we think we've found the right compromises on the Spectral.



Barel's input has helped shape the Spectral