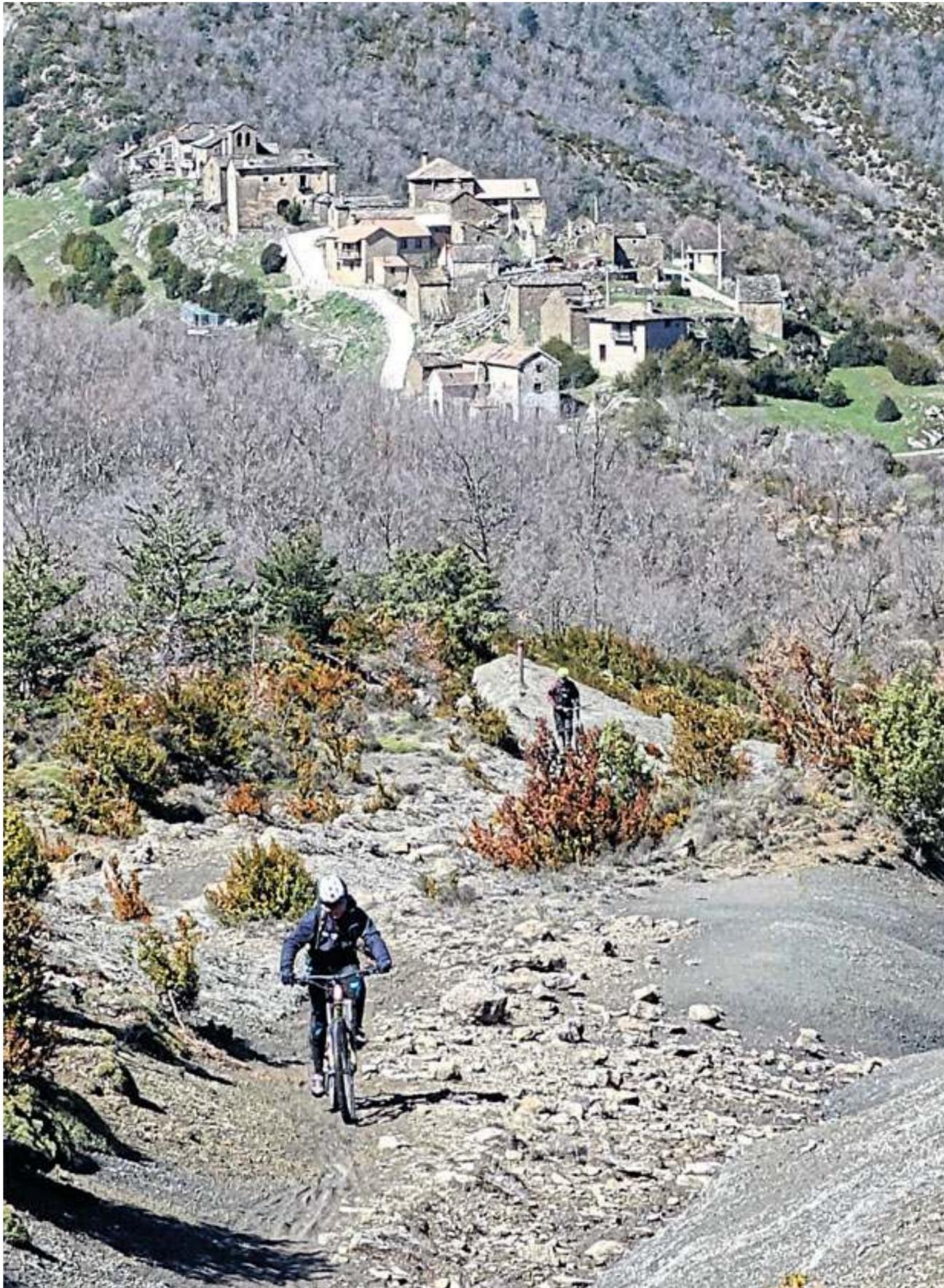


Riding the surface of the Pyrenees

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While Thailand ground to a halt for last month's Songkran festivities, we packed our mountain bikes and headed off once again to sample the riding in a new destination. Following two thoroughly enjoyable trips to the Alps, this time we went to the Pyrenees. This mountain range straddles the French-Spanish border along its entire length.



Photos: JORIS LAPERRE

Mountain bike tour company Basque MTB pretty much had us at "awesome technical trails", but the mention of tapas, remote centuries-old villages and the Spanish sunshine proved the decisive factor. So we made the necessary plans and were off on a road trip deep into the heart of the Pyrenees with six days of riding.

Upon arrival in San Sebastian, gateway to the Basque country and the western Pyrenees, we said hello to the other riders on the tour, and hola to the affable Antonio and Borja, who would be our guides on the trails and take turns at the wheel. Their selection of Spanish pop songs will stay with me forever.

Over breakfast, Borja animatedly pointed far away and high up to a vaguely W-shaped ridge gap, apparently the trail-head of the morning's descent. But we had to get there first. We completed our ascent by first pedalling up a gently sloping scenic fireroad and later negotiating a narrow goat trail. The 700m descent down into the valley set the tone for the riding during the rest of the week: stretches of rock-strewn natural single-track, in parts steep, linked together with switchbacks, but with little in the way of exposure -- just the way I like it. A dip in the sparkling icy waters at the basin of a clattering waterfall halfway down the track would have been dicing with hypothermia, but the rest stop there provided some much-needed relief nonetheless. Before long we were high-fiving each other back at the charming village of Villalangua.

European spring weather can be temperamental and the blanket of snow that greeted us the next morning was the perfect illustration of that. Wrapped in layers of alternately warm and waterproof clothing, we skipped the usual cursory equipment check, and instead dashed straight out of the van, onto our bikes, and set off down the trail. My inaugural snow ride was predictably entertaining. Wet roots and rocks can be tricky to negotiate at the best of times, but they become a lot more challenging when they're just ill-defined shapes covered in white slush. Hitting roots square on is an essential trail skill you pick up remarkably quickly in those circumstances. Not losing focus is another. Luckily, everyone made it safely down to the Sun-drenched lower slopes, and finally the scenic lake at the bottom.



Travel info

San Sebastian has a regional airport but the nearest international airport is in Bilbao, two hours to the west. There's no direct flight between Bangkok and Bilbao. The nearest airports that connect Bangkok with Bilbao are in Madrid and Paris.

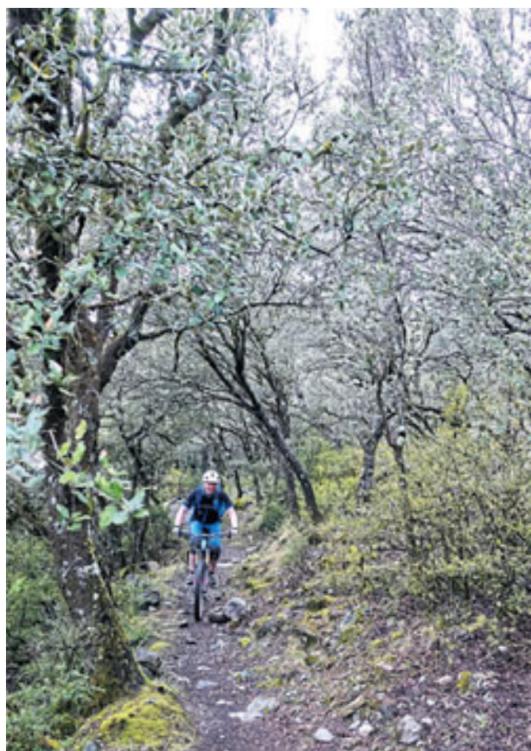


A picnic lunch and a pleasant fireroad climb through a green patchwork of lush vegetation later, we arrived at Ibirque, a surprisingly large abandoned village at 1,350m above sea level and one of quite a few we came across during our journey. In days gone by, these would have been thriving farming communities, but lifestyle changes and the pull of the industrial cities eventually compelled the residents to leave their dwellings behind. Today, the surreal setting of these villages with such wonderful backdrops make them a photographer's paradise, and the perfect place to switch off and soak up the surroundings. Late that afternoon we rolled into Nocito, a tranquil hamlet with a permanent population of five -- I believe we met all of them -- swelling to a few hundred at the height of summer. Our lodgings for the night: a delightful 350-year-old converted shepherd's house. It took the world's largest home-cooked lasagne to draw us away from warming in front of the open fire.

Ainsa is a gorgeous medieval town perched on a hill overlooking the confluence of two rivers, and flanked by the Pyrenees just to the north. More interestingly to us, it is also the heart of Zona Zero ("Ground Zero"), a recently developed network of over 1,000km of mountain bike trails, predominantly single-track. Last September, Zona Zero hosted Round 7 of the Enduro World Series, featuring a spectacular prologue through Ainsa's cobblestones alleyways, and voted best race of the year by an overwhelming majority. On our designated "rest day", we got to ride a few of the trails, including two of the race's special stages (timed stages that count towards a racer's total time for the event).



Having swapped our van for a sturdy four-wheel-drive with bike trailer, we were shuttled up to Collada de Cereza, a mountain pass 1,550m high up in the Pyrenees. Clear blue skies on the day, and from our trailhead we could just about make out our target on the valley floor: we were in for an epic day. Ancient single-track paths contoured their way down the hillside, through high alpine forests that later gave way to scree slopes, and then more pristine single-track. This was mountain-biking at its best, and the very best was kept for last: the home stretch through dramatic grey earth canyons was sensational, and some of the blind corners -- I very nearly ate dust coming skidding around one of them - kept us on our toes and the adrenalin high. A lung buster of a climb up to Plaza Mayor (Ainsa's town square) later, we watched the Sun disappear behind the mountains to end another memorable day.



During our remaining days, we ventured out to some riding spots further afield. Benasque and the nearby idyllic ski resort of Cerler, only just shut down after the ski season, was as far east as we went. Plenty of great flowing single-tracks carve their way through the swoopy forests there. The loamy soil provided excellent tyre traction, although there was also some slipping and sliding in a few of the steeper and wetter parts. However, the day's thrill award went to one of our riders for his last-ditch deer evasion manoeuvre on an unmarked locals-only trail.

Near Villanua, our last destination, we reverted back to riding mostly rocky trails, tight switchbacks and some steep technical sections.

I had anticipated the stunning scenery in and around the Pyrenees, but I was amazed by the variety of mountain bike trails out there, from tight forest trails to rocky paths slicing through windswept hillsides. The rugged terrain of the Pyrenees turned out to hide some real trail gold and we'd only scratched the surface. We need to go back there one day.

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