



LEFT
Taking on the trails in the Algarve, Portugal

BELOW
Jim Carroll, with The Mountain Bike Adventure in the Algarve, Portugal, shuttles riders around in his Portuguese jeep

BOTTOM
Riding the pristine singletrack along the Basque coast in summer



DESTINATION

IBERIAN PENINSULA

Bask in the Trails

The deliciously nasty mountain biking of northern Spain and southern Portugal

by **Malcolm Howe**



The Iberian Peninsula is dominated by Spain and Portugal, two countries with world-famous food and drink and strong road cycling traditions. But trust me on this: the region also has wicked off-road options. While my summer road trip required air travel and around 4,500 km of driving, which you might find arduous, you need to add this one to the checklist.

My group started in the Basque country, in the north of Spain, with San Sebastian as our base. The beach town is about 30 km from the French border. The area is rich in history as the Basque culture and language predate modern European nations. The Basques seem strongly independent. While the violent separatist movement Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) has conducted thousands of attacks in the region, the group declared a permanent ceasefire in early 2011. The area is filled with high-quality culinary options and yet another form of alcohol I didn't need to fall in love with. It's also a beautiful, lush, green

Photos: www.themountainbikeadventure.com, www.themountainbikeadventure.com, www.basqueMTB.com



ABOVE
Riding the Blue Pill, a trail not far from the Basque coast

RIGHT
Riders take a small ferry across an estuary mouth during a trip with Basque MTB



mountain scene. The area may have the most rainfall in Spain, but even when wet, the trails are tacky and completely rideable. Two days of serious riding only had us wanting more.

The first day was more scenic than nasty, but still offered plenty of obstacles, cliff edges and wildlife. We traced a route called All Along the Watchtowers that follows the rocky coast of the Bay of Biscay from Irun, near the French border, to San Sebastian. The ancient military paths connected old signal towers used during years of conflict. The entire trail is a photo op. Doug McDonald, owner of Basque MTB, was our guide. The route actually has multiple options based on rider ability and taste. We had originally planned on checking out the more advanced options. Our Orbea bikes were ridiculously fast and light, but pretty under-gunned for the nastier stuff McDonald had in mind. Based on his advice, we opted for the intermediate route. Still, the trails offered plenty of exposed cliffs and rock obstacles. Our lunch break at a local spot included some great coffee and the biggest chicken sandwich I have ever seen. We followed the rugged coastline for 30 km of mountain bike bliss past cows, goats and wild horses. The cross country route was packed with fun ups and downs and occasional scary exposure. At one point, we dropped into a tiny cobbled village to take a small ferry across the Ria de Pasaia before continuing our journey. After some more climbing and a pretty hairy descent, we found ourselves rolling onto the beach in San Sebastian. McDonald assured us that the ride always ends with *pintxos* (Basque tapas) and beer at one of the countless spots along the waterfront.

Photos: www.basqueMTB.com

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"The trails were nasty enough that everyone had a chance to sample the soil."

Details

Getting around

Bilbao or Santander are the best airport options. Doug McDonald at Basque MTB is happy to arrange for airport shuttles and often does it himself as part of the full-week package. We had a rental car that was great for exploring, but unnecessary for the riding days. I normally resist driving when travelling, but I must admit that driving in Spain was a blast.

Where to stay

San Sebastian is filled with accommodation options that range from super high-end to more mid-market. Expect to spend \$80–\$500 per night. We booked using airbnb.com and had great success at minimal cost all across Spain.

Where to eat

Restaurant options fill both the old and new town of San Sebastian, which are separated by a bridge across the main boulevard along the waterfront. *Pintxos*, or tapas, are the central feature of Basque bar-hopping. Groups of friends wander the town stopping at every place that catches their attention. Typically, the options are laid out on a huge bar where visitors pick what they want and let the bartenders figure out the tab. You can order a drink and a *pintxo* (ranging from two to five euros) and move on. Seating and tables are reserved for a full meal. Three or four *pintxos* will be plenty of food. Don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone. Our favourites included veal cheeks, octopus salad and pig's ear. The best advice is probably to ask each place what their specialty is and go for it. For a regular sit-down meal, check out La Fabrica and don't miss the wild mushroom ravioli. Basque breakfast is pretty simple. We stuck to a high quality coffee and a chocolate croissant for most riding days. The local beer is light and tasty. The local wine and cider are world-class.

Support and guidance

For guided rides around San Sebastian and other support, contact Basque MTB (basquemtb.com). For information on Mountain Biking in Portugal's Algarve region, go to The Mountain Bike Adventure (themountainbikeadventure.com)

On Day 2, McDonald and his assistant Dave took turns shuttling and riding with us on some super fast and rocky enduro-style trails through spectacular forests. The morning had us flying down Celtic Flow, UHR and Cross the Stream for a little less than 1,000 m of descending. These trails were McDonald's babies, constructed with maniacal love. As you might expect, Cross the Stream was a rugged ridge trail that skirted alongside and across a mountain stream multiple times. One spot even sent my son Phoenix off his bike into a high, side barrel roll with an

TOP

A gentler downhill leg of the Convent Run in the Algarve, Portugal

CENTRE

Riding past wild Basque horses, or *pottoka*, on an oceanside trail

BOTTOM

Riders get a view of the Basque coastline on All Along the Watchtowers trail, which runs from Irun to San Sebastian

Photos: Chris Jackson, www.basquemtb.com, www.basquemtb.com

MARKETPLACE

in-the-creek landing. No worries, though. He's young and hasn't yet learned how to hurt himself when crashing badly. It really was magical alpine riding that would rival anything I've seen in B.C., Colorado or Utah. An extended lunch break at another local restaurant loaded us up with a delicious three-course menu of local specialties. The post-lunch shuttle led us to Blue Pill, a 550-m descent through ancient beech trees and old mines. The steep trails pushed the XC race bikes to the limit, but McDonald assured us we hadn't yet touched the really tough stuff. For my tastes, a 140-mm travel bike and light padding would have been a perfect match. Still, even strong intermediate riders would have a blast on these trails. The last section of trail alternated between ancient mining tunnels and killer views into the valley below. It featured a classic ending on cobble to our shuttle vehicle. Both Doug and Dave were incredibly skilled and helpful in letting us know what was ahead. In the end, it felt like having a buddy show you his local secret trails. This buddy just happened to ride like a pro, have a great shuttle van, a love for food and drink, and knowledge of the area that is impressive.

Most riders come to this area for a week's worth of riding, which is exactly what I'd recommend. Two days just left us wishing we could change our plans and stay longer. Trail maps are nearly non-existent; most local shops just aren't prepared for anything other than townie rentals. This really is a spot where a guide is invaluable. McDonald has piles of trail options ranging from easy to nasty, cross country to enduro. He also arranges skills weeks and trips into the Pyrenees and beyond. Bookings are arranged online and I found communication to be excellent. The expat from Scotland not only showed us great trails, he introduced me to Basque cider, which is dry, bitter, uncarbonated and worthy of many nights of further study.

After an extended beach break on the Costa del Sol, we decided to work off some paella by riding in the Algarve region in Portugal. This area is home to some incredible mountainous topography. Some brief chatting on Facebook got us hooked up with Jim Carroll from The Mountain Bike Adventure in Lagos. Jim is a British expat who has been guiding in the area since 2005. He is a certified instructor and a very professional guide. His shuttle vehicle is a crazy-cool Portuguese jeep that holds eight. Although Jim offers a range of routes (and even family rides), we focused on the stuff that could hurt you. All the riders in our group held their breath at the nasty spots. The first descent down Convent Run included frequent stops to show us the nastiness and discuss options. A second run followed in which we could open it up and air it out. The trails were nasty enough that everyone had a chance to sample the soil. Frequent rock gardens were separated by soft dirt trails with occasional roots, ruts and fallen riders. One rider lost a lot of skin but still refused to stop smiling. It was just that kind of day. Our lunch break was local cold cuts, cheese, buns and fruit, in a spot with a stunning view down to the ocean. We followed lunch with more rocky descending on a 10 km downhill from Fóia to Monchique. Dirty and slightly bloody, we were able to walk back to our apartment, lick our wounds and catch a late evening dinner in one of the town's many restaurants. 

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Crossword Answers

Across

1 DELGADO, **3** JULIO, **6** BONK,
7 CANNIBAL, **9** CASARTELLI,
12 TESTICULAR, **15** CLINCHER,
16 EDDY, **17** SWISS, **18** ALSO-RAN

Down

1 DUBOC, **2** LONGSHOT, **3** JAN
ULLRICH, **4** LUBE, **5** ORLEANS,
8 FRANCESCOS, **10** POULIDOR,
11 CANUCKS, **13** ROYAN, **14** MIDI



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