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# GHOST FOOTSTEPS

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**With lungs and heart still desperately trying to make the most of what little air remains well past the two thousand metre mark, we finally top out. A seemingly endless descent is laid out ahead of us. Here, high on the French/Spanish border, we make our own tracks down the trail-less scree, carving sweeping switchbacks around the boulders scattered across the face of the mountain.**

Naughty, but nice.

Peaks laden with ore give the vast lumps of rock a distinctive hue and personality, scraping the heavens in all directions. This is where the Basque Country draws its wealth. The morning light catches the dark schist scree dancing off our tyres, and we push the switchbacks beyond the limit of grip. A trail emerges from the formless slope beneath a sheer cliff, home of the vultures. This is where the fun really begins. No distractions; full concentration. One eye on the ribbon ahead, and one eye on the sheer drop to our left [sounds like a recipe for going cross-eyed - ed]. Allowing our bikes to surf the boulders, rocks and pebbles, we do our best to keep front wheels pointing in the right direction, aiming for the tall limestone spires ahead.

The tallest peaks of the Pyrenees stretch off into the distance, but here, shallower mountain sides fall to a gorge that even the high sun can't reach. Groomed singletrack, apparently perfectly honed just for our pleasure, stretches well beyond the treeline. The sun has a way to go before it's at its high point, the day is young, and we'll be playing cat and mouse blind down endless turn after endless straightaway. You couldn't ask for more.

It's here, two and a half kilometres above the sea - where we've crossed a mountain with no trail to find something that most certainly is a trail - that I'm reminded of something that's been bugging me for a while. It's a simple question: where do trails come from?

These days plenty of riders are familiar with the concept of a stroll through the woods to link together natural features, before hauling mattock and spade in to get creative. Having said that, the vast majority of us will be unwilling to admit that we've never dug in anger. It's most definitely the few that see it as a challenge, a calling even, to be the creators; the industrious few that turn visions of sweeping trails into terra firma-shaped reality. On the whole, we take trails for granted. In the context of our just-discovered Pyrenean flowfest it only makes the puzzle more, well, puzzling. How, in the vast empty wilderness, does singletrack of this calibre appear out of nowhere, only to fizzle out into what only nature has created?


Opening spread - Pass of Wood. Approx. 2500m above the sea on the French-Spanish frontier. Pete leads Paul Humbert from French outfit Vojo Mag up the pathless scree, rich in iron ore, to the top of the Pass of Wood. Thin air and vultures.

Page 14 - Trekking Mule's able beast Peregrina loaded up for the hike from the haunted lake to the pass littered with Mauser cartridges high above the Valle de Benasque.

Opposite - Day one's first descent. Pete leads Basque MTB's main man Doug McDonald down a brake-less rock slab at warp speed on the school run. Everyone was finding their place and pace in the pack early in the week.







**“Enlightenment, trade,  
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In our six days in the Pyrenees we've spent more than 48 hours without meeting another soul. And yet, so many trails have come our way; trails that have only felt the pressure of a rolling bike tyre in mountain biking's relatively recent expansion. These routes have long histories that stretch way back into a utilitarian past that bears little resemblance to the simple enjoyment of pedalling a push iron. Centuries – millennia, even – before the bicycle was a glint in a Victorian entrepreneur's eye, man and beast have hammered these trails into the dirt and rock for a variety of purposes. Enlightenment, trade, war, work. No two trails have the same story, nor have they been used by the same people for the same reason.

The Iberian Peninsular is a country with a turbulent history. The Pyrenean territories have their own distinct identities and unique histories. Rome sought to establish itself here, before being troubled by Hannibal and his elephants. The Moors brought a very different culture to this deeply Christian land, only to be driven out by the Reconquista. More recently, the Spanish Civil War devastated Spain and saw the first flexing of Nazi and Soviet muscle, leading to one of the longest and most oppressive dictatorships in modern history. But, throughout this tumultuous past, normal Spaniards still needed ways to get to market, church, school or work.

Our trail-finding journey begins deep in the pre-Pyrenees in a region known as Sierra de Cuara. It's here, where the geological expansion of the Bay of Biscay forced Spain into France, propelling the sedimentary rock skyward, that the smaller ripples make their mark. Compared to the towering peak of Aneto, just shy of three and a half kilometres high, these two thousand metre mountains are tiddlers; low fat Pyrenees, if you like. But they mark the start of the Pyrenees proper, rising sharply from the plains above Zaragoza.

Prior to the 1930s the fertile land between the low and full fat Pyrenees was dotted with small clusters of farm buildings. Larger clusters might sport a school and a church, maybe even a market. Metalled roads didn't make their way into this part of the world until well after the car became commonplace. Trails fan out from the well at the centre of these clusters in the direction of the nearest villages.

Ainsa, now famous for its Enduro World Series races, would have been the final destination for much of the excess produce from these farmlands. Sitting on the confluence of the Rio Ara and Rio Cinca, this important market town has sported a castle since the 11th century and a church since the 12th. Almost all trails in these parts lead, in some way or another, to Ainsa. This simple fact, combined with a lack of high mountain passes, meant trading routes made long, winding journeys through the valleys to their destination. It was a long way to get to market. Before farming largely became mechanised this tough existence was, for many, the only option.

Large towns weren't the centres of opportunity they are today and, in any case, they were too far away to travel to in the hope of work.

High on a hill sits the spire of a church, crumbled and derelict, long since abandoned. Mother nature has been reclaiming what was once hers. The timbers, ridden with woodworm, slump under the weight of the stone walls before finally giving way. Next to the church sits a plain building, but its proximity to the church is significant. In medieval times, the church was the centre of a community's universe. Life and death was sacred; entry into and exit from the mortal world was controlled by the church. The clergy were often the few who were educated enough to teach others. Children would travel from the surrounding villages and back every day for school, in all weathers.

Tall columns with thin crosses at their head mark the way to the church and keep the kids on course for class, not a parent-piloted SUV or lollypop lady in sight. Every journey made would be on foot. Horses were needed for working the land or carrying goods to market; there were no roads that could take a cart. Countless little feet would have hammered this trail in both directions every single day of the week, over countless decades. Even at the weekend, because the smaller villages lacked a church, these kids would make the same journey to attend services.

Trail builders here clearly didn't have wheels in mind, but longevity was certainly a consideration. Tyres rarely meet dirt at any point in the long, winding descent below the church, the crumbling steeple at our backs. Bedrock is king in Sierra de Cuara, the mottled rock at odds with the bright purple hue of the wild saffron that carpets the tree-less hilltops. Any foray off this anorexic ribbon will certainly end in tears. The harsh climate favours plants with dark leaves and hard, spiky branches. Shrubs hug low, offering a carpet of spines to fall into.

Riding blind in this terrain is a real challenge. Carlos, one of our guides, stops me letting any air out of my tyres, knowing that I'm going to need every tenth of a bar pressure to overcome the unyielding rock that underpins the trail. I'm glad he did. As we hammer down the ancient school run into the valley below, square edges seek out extremities of bike and body. We wince through narrow gaps, hoping our bikes might be a little narrower if we simply wish them so. Grip is as high as the rock content though, so a keen eye for riding what's in front pays dividends. The October sun still offers some ferocious heat, and dust kicks off our tyres as the rock, finally, gives way to a rare glimpse of dirt.

Rolling out into the turning circle at the trail end, the dust is choking. But wide eyes and big grins are proof positive that this might have been the best school run going. Those kids toiling their way to church lessons in past centuries would doubtless have been astonished, had they any idea what would happen in the future. The odd thing is, if Doug, our master guide, hadn't pointed out that we'd been retracing their steps, it would've been all too easy to hammer bikes down it without a second thought.

Previous spread – Canal de Cinca – Doug McDonald leans her into the canal access track (that used to sport a railway) with one eye on the massive drop to his right. The sky was thick with vultures that day. For some, tiredness had started to creep in.







It wasn't just education that drove the need for paths, of course. At the turn of the 20th century, the then King of Spain was keen to prove that his country was modernising at pace with the rest of Europe. Electricity was becoming more commonplace and this, in turn, allowed more widespread use of aluminium. We take this light, strong material somewhat for granted these days, but more than 100 years ago the production of aluminium was a point of pride and an indicator of a nation's power and prestige. To that end, the King ordered the construction of an aluminium smelter in the town of Bielsa. These days it's linked to France by a tunnel, but at that time it was effectively the end of the line, sat at the head of a valley.

The Rio Cinca charges down the mountain through Bielsa, providing the kinetic energy needed to produce electricity for the smelting process. A viaduct - known as Canal de Cinca - was built high above Bielsa, reaching almost a kilometre above the valley floor, to send water hurtling into the turbines below. A narrow gauge railway was laid as the canal moved across the hill and, once in place, workers would cycle this trail to ensure that the canal remained clear and the water would continue to feed the turbines. It was all terribly cutting edge. With construction finally completed in 1914, this route has been cycled for over a century.

It's fair to say that anybody with a fear of heights wouldn't want to go anywhere near the disused railway's route across the cliffs. Grey vultures circle lazily on thermals, bringing an ominous tone to proceedings. The cliffs are sheer, precipitous. Steady, measured riding is the order of the day here. You'd be in several pieces and a long way downstream before anybody found you after a tumble [best not do that, then - ed]. Even the singletrack that brings walkers to the old railway has its moments. Oak gives way to pine as we skid our way down this rock- and root-strewn tunnel. The bright limestone across the valley contrasts with the darkness of the woods as our tyres struggle to maintain traction down consecutive loose, tight switchbacks. Trying to stay in touch with the wheel ahead loses its importance; as the corners queue up to test us it becomes a matter of pragmatism over gnar.

The trail eventually spits us out at the bottom of the valley. Catching our breath and looking across the river to the buildings beyond shows the scars of a different time in Bielsa's history - destruction, rather than advancement. Old stone makes new buildings in Bielsa. It seems odd, but this quiet corner of northern Spain saw one of the most violent actions of the Spanish Civil War. After a fierce pitched battle the entire town had to be rebuilt. This wasn't a battle for any real strategic reason, just opposing forces occupying an area that the other side wanted to destroy.

A Nationalist advance cornered a Republican division here when

Opposite - As Doug says, you have to carry your bike to get to the best riding. He wasn't wrong. High above Bielsa, our group, led by Carlos here, are about to top out to a singletrack bonanza that would go on for hours.

Overleaf - Million Star Hotel - The haunted lake sucked every last iota of heat from the air after the sunset, but offered a crystal clear sky with artificial light blocked by the tall limestone cliffs. ... "I've never seen a sky rammed with stars like this."







the Nazi-backed forces split the lines during a concerted thrust into Aragon. Despite being cut off and outnumbered, the Republicans halted the Nationalist advance by making the most of the difficult terrain, including using the Canal de Cinca to flank the opposition. While they eventually fled into France, the stand-off – which lasted from mid April 1938 until early June – was a massive morale boost for the Republicans.

The Pyrenees doesn't really have any low mountain passes. It's here, high above the Valle de Benasque, that both the Moorish conquest of Iberia and the Spanish Civil War meet. A glacial lake sitting under high limestone cliffs, oddly reminiscent of a National Geographic stock shot from Yellowstone, holds the ghost of a Muslim woman. Legend has it that the apparition appears only to those pure of spirit. We don't see it on this occasion, so best not to try to read too much into that. Locals bathe in the lake for health and good luck, although we opt to hit the tents early as the water leeches the heat from the air and, not long after sundown, we're battling sub-zero temperatures. With tall cliffs surrounding our campsite and any conurbation far away, we're treated to the most magnificent view of the Milky Way before turning in.

As dawn breaks we're joined by Peregrina and Paloma the mules. We saddle our bikes on the long, steady hike to the top of the pass, well beyond the two and a half thousand metre mark. This is how most trade would have moved through the mountains here. Mules are sturdy beasts, and they seem to make easy going of it as we wheeze heavily behind them. As the path tops out at the head of the pass, Mauser cartridges litter the broken scree, indicative of how important control of the passes were during the three years of Civil War. Tall limestone cliffs that flanked our campsite and allowed us an unfettered of the stars now offer a unique vantage point from which to stop any unwanted enemies passing through here.

Funny how you see things differently, depending on your reasons for being here. For us, clearly, this is very far from being a matter of life and death.

Even so, the run off the top of the pass seems as threatening as trying to get over here in the late 30s. Scree has swamped the pasture and we're left to try and pick our way down through the mass of boulders by a combination of blind luck and faith. We're searching for a trail that isn't there, really, and it's not until we reach the refuge where the valley head splits that we enjoy any sort of distinct trail. From the refuge down, rock is once again king, albeit something we're altogether more used to by now. Big boulders are ridden over where possible, rather than squirmed around. This trail truly tests our stamina. We're not paying all that much attention to who's ahead or behind. We're just trying to keep tiring hands in

Opposite – Pass of Wood – 30 minutes of descending off the top of the pass of wood and we probably weren't even half way down the mountain yet, Pete chases Doug into a grassy turn that offered nothing but massive, controllable drifts.

Overleaf – Another 15 minutes after the shot (opposite), the trees take over and we're treated to grippy roots instead of dirt. Muriel











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control of the bike and brakes, as hit after hit and corner after corner come at us through the tall pines.

And again, other than some elderly walkers, we've been alone for the duration. The significance of this pass has faded, post-conflict, and roads handle the trade through the mountains. What we're left with is more mind-blowing, traffic-free singletrack.

Our final border raid sees us again high on the Spanish / French border, but there's nobody to be seen at passport control [ah, the joys of EU membership - ed]. We're retracing the steps of the Trans Nomad, the Spanish used to haul lumber over the mountains from their ancient and widespread woodland to where, on the French side, there was a dearth of suitable trees. Centuries before cheap Norwegian pine dominated the lands where trees had been felled to fuel the furnaces of industry, animals would drag felled timber high into the mountains from the valleys below to sell in what is modern day France. A causeway on the final approaches to the threshold into France is the only real sign of human interference in this deserted corner of the mountains. The pass itself, like all other Pyrenean mountain passes, sits high on the mountain and draws its name from the commodity that used to pass through here.

Thankfully for us, the causeway built by the lumberjacks leaves the route clear for the duration. We're approaching terminal velocity down slightly sunken singletrack that looks, for all the world, as though it's covered in cement dust. Grip is in no real shortage, so we're stuffing the bike into corners with no real idea of what's hidden in the clouds of dust hanging lazily in the still afternoon air. Once we reach the treeline, dust is swapped out with a carpet of roots that entirely fail to live up to the frictionless reputation of the British tree root. Grip is plentiful, so we charge on happily. This is (more) Pyrenean singletrack gold.

It's staggering, back on the valley floor after an hour or so of descending at speed, to think how long it would have taken to lug wood in any real quantity to the top of the pass. Our route back to the van has, for the most part, been mellow. Those responsible for cutting this path centuries ago were doing it out of necessity. The low route would have taken weeks, not days to tackle. The high route was shorter, but harder. Much harder.

The conclusion is inescapable: trail fairies don't exist. It's only thanks to the hard (and sometimes back-breaking) work of those committed to carving trails into mountains all across the world - usually for a purpose that has nothing to do with bikes, and often centuries in the past - that we now have the opportunity to ride in their footsteps. Trade, education, war: it's all given us places to seek that elusive high. Take a moment to doff your cap to those that never got to turn a wheel over what is often the very best riding on offer. I did. It was an enlightening experience. ■

Opposite - Pete leads Doug out down towards the top of the Pass of Wood. "Doug is fast and as my front wheel indicates, I was doing my best to keep ahead. We were passing in and out of France and Spain with every turn of the wheel here."