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TAMING THE TECHNOTROCITY

Pete Scullion, Joe Flanagan and Sam Needham head to Northern Spain to tackle one of the most technical and exposed trails in the area "Technotrocity". Guided by Doug McDonald they find that despite their bounteous skills the trail is a match for even the best of riders. The heat, the loose gravel and the ever-present plunging drop to the left of the trail serve as a constant reminder that they are well and truly outside their comfort zones!

It took just three hours from stepping foot on a Boeing passenger plane in Manchester to hitting the trails above the lively Basque port town of San Sebastian. Hectic the town is not, busy it certainly is. The Spanish and to a greater extent, Basque, way of life is certainly more relaxed than other countries in Europe.

The trip would demand a suitable bike, somewhere in the region of 140-160mm with sensible angles to deal with the seriously long, tough descents we'd be experiencing that week. Doug, our guide, had an ambitious schedule lined up for us. The bikes, as well as our bodies, would need to be able to take a week of abuse. What we would have to deal with alone would be the heat. Even on the coast with the sea breeze rolling in off the Atlantic, the temperature was pushing well into the thirties in early June. Oppressive heat is something unusual for two chaps from the Yorkshire Moors and another based in rural Scotland.

“ SOON WE WERE PASSING THROUGH THE CLOUDS STILL SITTING LOW IN THE VALLEY, MAKING THE GOING EERIE TO SAY THE LEAST.”

Once off the dual carriageway and onto the single-track roads, the feeling of remoteness soon set in. Most Basque towns hug the coast or valley floors, and our route to the summit of a tall ridge would take us well away from the hustle and bustle of the beach resorts below. As the time passed, I noticed Doug rarely shifted the van above third gear, the road torturous on the engine as we climbed relentlessly. Soon we were passing through the clouds still sitting low in the valley, making the going eerie to say the least. We're soon above the clouds though and the sun, despite the early start and the altitude gain, was already fairly fierce.





Our start point seemed like any other place to start a ride; a secluded car park high in the hills. All around us were tall Alder trees providing shade from the fireball above, while semi-wild horses move noisily through the crisp, dry leaves of the forest floor. As we start to get our bikes together, Doug mentions he would never normally take groups down this trail, known as Technotrocity, this early in the trip, if at all. Having spent much of our time riding the more technical parts of the Lake District and the Scottish Highlands, a trail needs to be fairly wild in order to fluster our party of three, the trail ahead certainly had some surprises in store however.

Out of the trees and onto the bikes, we climb high above tree line without seemingly too much effort; the only complaint is that perhaps the sun might be a little too hot for our British skin. The gravel road to the start of our single-track foray is not steep,

but long and loose, so maintaining traction is a game of shuffling weight around the saddle to ensure the rear wheel keeps on delivering power into the ground. Above the tree line it's now possible to see the huge, warped limestone shelves that make up the peaks and valleys of the area. The shelves don't sit flat as they once did, this former seabed having been shunted upwards millions of years ago by forces beyond us. The air this high is fresh and cooler now that we have gained considerable height, and the fast, short grass drops us down to the first natural amphitheatre amid the on-looking cows.

“ SEEMINGLY ABLE TO RIDE UP OR DOWN PRETTY MUCH ANYTHING ”

By now, our group had settled into the order it would follow for the remainder of the trip. Joe would lead out,

out, far faster and more relaxed when the going gets wild, as it would further on down the gorge. Sam would always be hot on his heels, his camera pack not slowing him down at all, but looking considerably less controlled than Joe. Our guide and host, seemingly able to ride up or down pretty much anything but perhaps without the ferocious pace of the two ahead would do his best to keep plenty of wind between the two of us.

The path here isn't well defined, and only once we reach the farm where the valley starts to narrow into a gorge does the path present itself clearly. Past the farm, the mental sheepdogs and the minefield of cowpats, we find possibly the last place we'd expect to find Angry Bird merchandise. An ancient spring tapped into the limestone provides crystal clear, refreshing water for the farmers and mine workers that have walked this route for centuries.



Low slung steadings provide shelter for the farmers when they bring their herds high into the mountains to enjoy the summer grass, the path below cut into the rock by hand to allow access to the iron ore that gives the Basque Country its wealth.

“BOULDER-STREWN AND WITH AN UNFORGIVING DROP INTO THE RIVER THUNDERING SEVERAL HUNDRED FEET BELOW US.”

A long, water-damaged traverse, littered with cowpats and the beasts that produce it keep us well on our toes, as does the constant din of the river crashing towards the sea deep in the gorge to our right. The herd of cows, happy where they are basking in the hot sun seem indifferent to our presence and we have to take the long way round. Hugging the steep face of the mountain, the trail pitches and rolls with the contours, giving back whatever the rider puts in. Bedrock separated by thin limestone gravel makes the going fast, every rotation of the wheel throwing up dust and small stones, urging the bike forward. Soon we're into the disused iron mine, the huge stone furnace towers above us, long since cold. The bleached beams of the tramway, once used to carry the firewood up and the processed ore down the mountain, creak and groan in the wind, giving the place a spooky feel. Massive grey vultures circle ahead; inquisitive enough to check us out but wary enough to stay high, circling constantly on the up draughts.

Before long, the mine access track narrows with the valley walls, soon becoming a sheer-sided gorge. Our route down the mountain is now well defined, but boulder-strewn and with an unforgiving drop into the river thundering several hundred feet below us.

After a brief stop to throw the obligatory European ham and cheese baguette down our necks, while a wild-eyed mountain dog does its best to scarper with Doug's dubious looking pâté, we get ready for what would be a long, crazy ride. Almost immediately the trail demands our full attention. A complex of steep, narrow hairpins laden with wheel grabbing rocks sit low in the long mountain grass, the river far below reminding us not to mess anything up.

“ A PRECIPITOUS SCREE SLOPE THAT CLINGS TO THE CLIFFS ABOVE THE RIVER CRASHING WAY BELOW US.”

There is no time to relax with the hairpins dispatched however, as a chute cut into the bright white limestone with a massive wheel catcher rock at the bottom sees every one of us looking amateurish. With the chute behind us, the gradient relaxes a little, but everything else is turned up to 11. Our route down the gorge is propped up on top of a precipitous scree slope that clings to the cliffs above the river crashing way below us. To our right is a sheer cliff that rises several hundred feet above us, certainly little if no margin for error here.







From here on down, rock surfing is the name of the game. Staying relaxed and allowing the bike to dance over the ever-shifting surface is key to not launching off into the crevasse. Countless hours of doing just this in the UK has the pastier part of the group going well, Joe and Sam disappear into the distance, clearly on a charge. Doug opts to follow me down this first long traverse, and from the off I start to build a gap between the two of us. Just as I begin to find the flow everything goes very quickly wrong before I can even think.

A large, loose rock catches my front wheel and sends me hard left, the one direction I didn't want to travel

today. The first thing my mind can think to do is reach out and grab something. Luckily some scrubby Silver Birch trees kill my speed before I can fall any further. Doug looks horrified, knowing full well what would have happened had I not caught anything. Shaken and bruised but okay, my hands are quivering like leaves and a large, bloody egg on my right shin will bug me for the remainder of the ride. Joe and Sam immediately take pictures while laughing hard before asking me if I'm alright. What are friends for eh?

“ AT LEAST THE THREAT OF IMMINENT DEATH HAS GONE FOR THE MOMENT. ”

With much of the ride left to go, Joe and Sam streak ahead again, while I'm left to hit every square edge on the trail. My flow is gone and Doug is hot on my heels once more. By now we've dropped enough height for the trees to thicken up and at least the threat of imminent death has gone for the moment. A series of switchbacks cut into the steep face offer a completely different challenge. Higher up, speed was king, now slower than walking pace, trials skills come to the fore. My head is still a mess from my lie down earlier; I struggle a little with my mental issues while Sam's freight train method approach offers a good chuckle and fails miserably.

Below the trail straightens and steepens, and I find my flow again. Long, flowing turns goad us to leave the brakes alone as the speed increases inexorably. Thin, loose gravel allows some flair to our riding for the first time and corners are roosted and drifted with reckless abandon, shouts come from near misses or turns carved to perfection. A final charge through a cool stream under the shade of the silver birch and we get wet feet for the first time, a most pleasant way to battle the ever-increasing temperature.

“NOTHING IN THE UK COMES CLOSE TO THE SEVERITY, LENGTH AND ALTITUDE LOSS”

Rolling into a small town almost a kilometre below the starting point, wide eyes exchange stories of moments from high on the mountain. Chat soon turns to just how ferocious the trail we have just completed was. Nothing in the UK comes close to the severity, length and altitude loss. While Sam and Joe bask in the late afternoon sun as the storm clouds roll in, I go on the hunt for painkillers. As former pro Sky team rider Greg Henderson once said; “Training is like fighting with a gorilla. You don’t stop when you’re tired. You stop when the gorilla is tired.” It certainly felt like we’d fought a silverback.

