

# SUN, SEA & SINGLETRACK

*Four hours travelling in the UK can guarantee you some amazing riding, but hop on a plane and you can throw blazing sunshine into the bargain, not to mention the glorious trails of Spain's Bay of Biscay*

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Atlantic motion:  
Joe surfs the clifftop  
against a setting sun

**T**he Basque Country might not be top of everyone's list for a sunny riding holiday, but it should be. Three hours from Manchester will see you in Bilbao, rather than the Scottish Borders or South Wales, and the air will be considerably hotter. A further hour from the airport will take you to the bustling port of San Sebastián, where one quick water taxi from the old town will see you atop some impressive sea cliffs

with a sublime ribbon of dust running for miles ahead of you. This well-worn path hugs the coast as the cliffs rise and fall into the many inlets and bays, running along most of the northern coast of the Iberian peninsula and making for some superb bike riding.

Of course, a few hours' travel can sound considerably easier in theory than it is in practice. The reality of stepping onto Spanish tarmac was that my body was still hurting from the sleep I'd snatched in the boot of the car atop my bike box on the way to Manchester airport, and the scorching sun I'd been seeking suddenly didn't seem so welcome after all. In just over four hours I had been transported from that less-than-comfortable slumber, and a typically rainy British morning, to the baking heat of the Basque Country. We'd only had our feet on the ground for an hour, but the early start and a speedy breakfast in the departure lounge already seemed like a distant memory. Now the more pressing matter was



Getting some  
fresh air by the  
infinity pool

## MY EYES, UNFAMILIAR WITH SUN OF THIS STRENGTH, TOOK TIME TO ADJUST TO THE BRIGHTNESS

trying to find space for our bike boxes aboard the coach to San Sebastián.

Before long we were hauling those heavy cardboard boxes onto the pavement at the bus terminal, thankfully shaded by the high canopy of sycamore trees that lines the streets of the town. Almost on cue, the BasqueMTB van pulled up, handshakes were exchanged, bikes and kit were launched into the back of the van and we were off to find our first ride of the trip. With no real

concept of where we were or where we were going, I kept my eyes fixed on the window, trying to take as much in as possible. My eyes, unfamiliar with sun of this strength, took their time to adjust to the unfettered brightness. As we wound our way through the streets, dodging erratic drivers on the crowded roads, heat and unfamiliar smells filled the air. We were a long way from the morning's scent of fresh rain on tarmac; we reassembled our bikes in a large, open courtyard, taking the







opportunity to sample some pinxtos (Basque tapas) at the same time.

With bikes assembled, we cruised through the streets of San Sebastián's port, passing the huge metal smelter at the shore as we made our way into the older streets. Old stone walls closed in, almost claustrophobically, before we reached the water taxi that would take us across the inlet. Passing bikes over the gap between the small fishing boat and the pontoon, my less than long legs were struggling already. Falling in would have been nothing short of embarrassing, even if the water below looked fairly inviting. Across the bay, we started on a long, steep climb to where the singletrack would begin in earnest.

## CAT AND MOUSE

Leaving the roasting hot tarmac and tall sycamores behind, we were now whipping along wet, sandy singletrack under the shade of pines overhead. The smells of the hot forest air were all around us, while a carpet of pine needles deadened the sound of our tyres. With our legs now warmed up from the stiff climb and a fast cruise through the woods, we were quickly at the start of the good stuff. There was a fair drop to our right, but the cool ocean breeze did a superb job of taking the worst of the sun and we could turn our full attention to maximum attack.


Before long it was a game of cat and mouse. Each rider was trying to get as much wind as possible between themselves and the rider behind, while keeping the rider out front in check. Leading the charge was Joe Flanagan, making everything look a bit too easy, seemingly oblivious to the sheer drop a verge's distance from his driveside crank. Intrepid snapper Sam Needham was hot on Joe's

## A CARPET OF PINE NEEDLES DEADENED THE SOUND OF OUR TYRES



It would be rude not to style this one up

heels, matching his speed if not his control. But the Needham freight train rolled on regardless while our host and guide Doug MacDonald kept his lurid Orbea in sight of the leading pair. An ailing freehub meant I'd need to make my own fun, while trying not to get dropped completely.

Soon we were out of the trees and back under the relentless heat of the sun, but that was a secondary concern. The initial mile or so of the trail is well-trodden, meaning a fairly loose surface where erosion has been fixed. Numerous switchbacks snaked their way down the side of the first cove as we headed west, each trying to keep our front wheels in check on the unpredictable surface. I spotted the numerous lines of the three that had gone before me and none of them looked right, the cinder dust clearly getting the better of each of them. With the switchbacks behind us, the trail opened out as it traversed, allowing some serious speed made all the more exciting by the 





Black, white and red all over: Pete rips it up on the coast of Spain



Doug's getting sick before he's even turned a pedal



Doug takes the quick route to the taxi bank





Blazing the dusty trail down from San Sebastián's lighthouse

fact we were riding blind. Tall grass flanked either side of the trail, meaning that looking far ahead wasn't always an option.

Back into the trees, the trail flattened off and we were soon atop an old aqueduct that followed most of the path around the cliffs. Up and over again, we were soon back charging hard down the singletrack, the occasional scuff of a locked wheel giving warning of something interesting ahead. Dropping down into another cove, wider and deeper this time, the bamboo surrounding us seemed out of place but at least offered some welcome shade.

A steep, narrow natural staircase led out of the cove and we had bikes on our backs for the first and only time. The slightly slower pace allowed us to scope lines for the return journey. Back atop the cliffs again, the Bay of Biscay seemed to go on forever, and the singletrack appeared equally never-ending. Into the woods again, now broadleaf, along a much steeper hillside, the smiles started to come thick and fast as the trail encouraged the finding of a second downslope for some extra points. Double drops and perfectly angled large rocks littered the lengthy descent. Cat and mouse was abandoned as everyone took a clear run that ended in a shallow left-hander with supreme exposure. Down and down we went, the Basque walkers allowing us through, cheering us on as the dust kicked off our back wheels.

Another long drop into a small inlet, and more sublime, dusty singletrack brought us to a natural infinity pool beneath a waterfall that was as tricky to ride across as it was beautiful. We took a moment to admire the perfect reflections, then cracked on across open pasture. Trees seemed a world away, cows and sheep keeping the larger vegetation back, the ground rocket-sled fast. Long, shallow turns wound their way across

## BACK ATOP THE CLIFFS, THE BAY OF BISCAY SEEMED TO GO ON FOREVER

the contours, and at no point were they severe enough to force us to back off the power. A thin layer of dust was the only thing between tyre and considerable grip.

The last few miles were covered at a ferocious pace, the contours more consistent, allowing all our horsepower to be deployed. The light was beginning to fade, and it was time to retrace our steps, albeit with a few diversions along the way. We pushed the limit of grip and control on some wide tracks littered with small jumps that were just like the trails we cut our teeth on many moons ago. All the tricky climbs on the outward leg now offered new challenges in the opposite direction; the pace still high as nobody wanted to be last back to the van. To be honest though, we didn't want to be back at the van — that ride could and should have lasted forever!

So next time you're exploring your options for a bike trip away, from London to South Wales or Manchester to the Scottish Borders, remember you could be enjoying far more than just great trails in the same time. Everyone loves a good local ride, but there's something truly special about the sun, the dust, the Atlantic breeze and the Basque pace of life. Trust me, and try it for yourself. [mbr](#)



A body shift helps to thread the needle



Happy as sand boys: larking about on the beach at last

## BASQUE WHERE?

BasqueMTB offers mountain bike holidays, including accommodation, out of San Sebastian from May to October. Vans and trailer uplifts mean the flavour is very much gravity-assisted, although not DH, ranging from moderately difficult through to extremely technical. [basquemtb.com](http://basquemtb.com)