

BASQUE LAID BARE

Strip away the surf beaches and tentacled tapas and the western Pyrenees have lots to offer, from soaring peaks to coastal singletrack

Words Pete Scullion Pics Sam Needham

Massive grey vultures hang lazily on thermals high above us, making the drop into the canyon below even more forbidding. The ancient mine track we're riding hugs a tall limestone cliff and takes us over rough bedrock pockmarking what's essentially a scree slope. Switchbacks, tighter than tight, are a test of cramping hands and concentration. The hot sun brings sweat to our brows, nibbling at our ability to focus on what lies ahead. The trail is challenging our upper body strength and bike handling, yet somehow it's used by local farmers to move their cattle to the high summer pastures. After 20 minutes of intense concentration the path opens out,

allowing some flow, and the cool air under the trees brings our smiles back in earnest.

Where mountains meet the sea

Most visitors' experience of the Basque Country is of wide, crescent moon beaches, fantastic surfing, dry cider, and weird and wonderful tapas, all hemmed in by the tall peaks of the Pyrenees. Leave the perfect sand and the laidback vibe of the beachfront bars behind though and you'll be welcomed by a cool Atlantic breeze, vast alpine pastures and the gentle clunk of distant cowbells. Known as El País Vasco to the Spanish and Euskal »

We pick our way down the cliff, watched greedily by the vultures soaring above



It may be 1,200m up a cliff, but people have been riding bikes along this former railway line for decades



Joe Flanagan makes some shapes on the coastal singletrack from San Sebastian



Getting There

EasyJet fly to Bilbao from Stansted, Bristol and Manchester. A bus to San Sebastian from the airport costs €16.50 and they run every hour from 7.45am to 11.45pm. If you want to drive, Brittany Ferries sail from Portsmouth to Bilbao and Plymouth to Santander. There are few waymarked trails so your best bet is to book a guided trip with BasqueMTB.

Herria to the natives, this autonomous region is one of Europe's finest mountain bike playgrounds. But despite having all the right ingredients for a great summer trip, it's not high on most riders' list of destinations.

It may lack the downhill pedigree of the Portes du Soleil, but that's not what this place is about. If you're prepared to earn your descents and make your way skyward under your own steam, it's hard to beat soaking up the late afternoon rays after riding all through the morning and well past lunch from higher up than the UK's tallest peaks. What makes this part of the world so good for a 'normal' holiday makes your downtime on a riding trip even more spectacular too. If you ever get the chance, try the squid ink risotto. It may look awful, but it's delicious beyond measure!

Coastal crew

Less than four hours after leaving Manchester, Joe Flanagan, Sam Needham and I are winding our way from the alder-lined avenues of Bilbao to the fishing port of San Sebastian to meet Doug from Basque MTB (www.basquemtb.com), our guide and fixer for the week. As we build our bikes under a scorching sun the sea seems very inviting, but before long

we're on our bikes and whizzing between ancient port buildings to our water taxi, then winching ourselves atop the tall sea cliffs.

We spend the day on a thin slither of singletrack that hugs the Atlantic coast for hundreds of miles. Here the high sun is countered by a constant sea breeze, making for ideal riding conditions. After climbing the steep, narrow road from the water taxi, we play cat and mouse for miles as the trail rises and falls, and the cliffs turn to inlets and then back to cliffs once more. Long, flowy traverses are interrupted by steep switchbacks that hug the hillside or more direct, technical pitches that take us more quickly to sea level. The climbs are just as severe, and our chains crunch noisily up our cassettes as we labour upwards. As the light fades and our legs tire we make an about-turn and enjoy the torturous climbs as sweet descents, and vice versa.

It's only this first afternoon and our final day back on the clifftops overlooking the Bay of Biscay that are even remotely similar. Sandwiched between are five days of unrivalled variety, complexity and adventure, taking in everything from the baking hot, red sandstone interior to limestone mountains overlooking the sea and 2,000m peaks with epic descents through

abandoned towns. More than one is the kind of day that'll live on in tall tales.

A trail to remember

A half hour, second gear drive takes us to a place where the alder trees grow tall and unclipped, and wild horses wary of our presence rustle noisily under the canopy. These limestone hills above the coastal towns are the seat of the Basque Country's ancient wealth. The iron kilns now sit silent, but the access tracks, cut by hand centuries ago, make great bike trails, and it's here that we pick our way down the cliff, watched greedily by the vultures soaring above. As we wait for our ride back to the apartment the pale blue sky turns dark with thunder clouds – we timed our descent perfectly.

The next day is one that'll remain in our memories. El Cebollar sits some 2,200m above sea



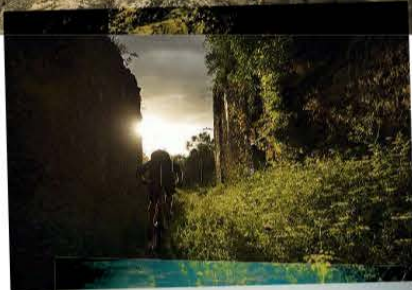


Joe gets airborne on a natural step-down – this lad'll sniff out airtime just about anywhere!

A deep, rocky riverbed offers the exposure we've come to expect as we vie to stay as close as we dare

level and over a kilometre above the valley floor. So steep is the mountain, the village below can't be seen from the summit. As we lift our bikes from the van we find ourselves short of breath, and we're again joined by large birds of prey.

Abandoned refuges tell of a trail walked long before the arrival of bikes, and feet have worn a ribbon of prime singletrack across scree slopes and alpine grassland, through broad-leaf woodland, across exposed cliffs and into dark, damp scrub forest. As we plummet back to the start point, the swollen Rio Ara thunders towards the sea, its waters so turquoise it doesn't look real. We make our way to Ainsa, high up above the mighty Ebro river. This ancient medieval town hosted an Enduro World Series round in 2015 and we sample grey earth similar to that found in the Trans-Provence.



Essential riding kit

A trail/enduro bike with 140 to 160mm of travel is best for the Basque Country. 'Lift-assisted' isn't a phrase that's used often in these parts, and we only got a van uplift once when the trail started at 2,200m above sea level. Knee pads are a must, as are full-finger gloves. Go with a reliable tubeless set-up or bring plenty of inner tubes. A spare mech hanger would be a wise move as well.

No rain on the plain

A long, late drive into the interior is accompanied by impressive lightning. We spend the night in an old staging post straight out of a Spaghetti Western, and it's as hot and sticky as the day that follows. A pre-dawn start fails to take the edge off the oppressive heat, and we wind our way past a Moorish castle and up dry riverbeds to 'Spanish Utah', where red sandstone cliffs rise spectacularly out of fields of young corn. The stifling conditions and our lack of breakfast are soon forgotten as we start to descend. The airflow feels too good to mention. A deep, rocky riverbed offers the dose of exposure we've come to expect on this trip as we vie to stay as close to the man in front as we dare.

Back in San Sebastian, the roasting heat is soon forgotten as we kick back with a beer and reflect on some of the most challenging and varied riding we've ever done. The slow pace of life in the Basque Country takes some adjusting to, but once you've found the rhythm it all starts to make sense. Just don't go expecting an evening meal at 7pm – you'll feel very British indeed! ☘

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