





International Basque Force

Mark and his trusty Scottish accountant, Sanny, take off for a lesser-riden corner of Spain.

The Pyrenees Mountains are often overshadowed from a mountain biking perspective by their bigger and more uplifted Alpine neighbours. Marking the border between France and Spain, they are perhaps a neglected mountain biking destination by the majority of the mountain bike tourists who exit our country once or twice a year. It was for this reason, and the prospect of learning a little more about the politically charged situation in the Basque region of Spain that we accepted the offer from BasqueMTB.com to pop over on a cheap Easyjet flight to Bilbao to see for ourselves what was on offer.

Doug is a Scottish ex-pat who happened to end up with Amaia, a lovely Basque native who happened to be working in Scotland. Through visiting her 'homeland' as you would do, he literally stumbled across the trails of the western-most tip of the Pyreneese mountains just before they drop into the sea at the city of San Sebastian. We flew out at the beginning of September, looking forward to the pleasure of getting away from the absolutely awful British summer weather and into the sunshine and warmth of the Spanish north-western coast. Imagine how totally pissed off we were to land in pretty much the same conditions we had left behind in the UK. San Sebastian lies on the Atlantic coast and the climate here is markedly different to the rest of Spain; the vegetation is green and lush through the summer because contrary to the rhyme, rain is not restricted to the plains. That's just another package holiday company conspiracy theory. It was also bloody cold! Luckily I had packed a waterproof jacket at the very last minute. I felt a bit silly at the time but I was feeling pretty smug the following morning as we stood in the rain packing our bikes into Doug's van.



Nearly at the bottom of the climb now...



All yours... they've not discovered bikes here yet.

We were only around for four days and the last two of those days we were being joined by Mark from Reset Films and Rowan Sorrell (see issue 52 for our interview with Rowan) who were coming to shoot footage for the follow-up to Mark's first film, Home. Since filming and photo shoots tend to completely cock up any chance of getting decent riding done, Doug had a tight itinerary planned for our first two days. Today's ride was straight up a mountain to the summit. In fact, the first climb of the day was the only climb of the day. There's no skiing in these mountains as the climate is typically warm and wet in the winters and consequently, while there may be mountains, there's no way to the summits other than on foot. Uplifts are for pussies. In fact it seemed that blue skies and warm sunshine are also for pussies and a 4000ft climb in the pissing wind and rain was not the kind of introduction to Basque country mountain biking I was expecting. It's also not the kind of ride that Doug would normally take guests on the first day. It was a highly technical ride that, owing to us being journalists, he had automatically assumed we were up for. After several hours of up, the final push turned into a carry with a brief stop for lunch at a stone bothy-style shelter just below the summit. Doug was determined that we should get to the top and ride back down the same path we were about to carry our bikes up. I'm afraid I was less than enthusiastic...



They'd heard Mark was coming.



They weren't wearing helmets...

Summit of the doomed?

The summit was littered with crosses and memorials to mountain regulars long gone, and yet amongst the sobering tributes there was the graffiti of ETA as if to demonstrate that even in the most remote and peaceful of places you are unlikely to stray far without a reminder of the struggles and political turmoil of this unique landscape. It was an eerie and thought-provoking place to be as the clouds rolled in and visibility and temperature plummeted.

The descent was, well... technical. I watched Sanny and then Doug set off down the huge stone slab steps from the summit before I mounted up to follow them. The penalty for failure at the start came in two flavours. Either falling to the left into the rock face or to the right into, well, nothing... at least nothing for several seconds.

I fell right.

I managed to avoid the void. I ended up on a slab with my stomach and legs on the mountain and the rest of me flapping in the air. It was still grey with cloud all around and so I was spared the view down to the rocks. I was doing a human version of the bus at the end of the Italian Job. I think a bit of wee may have come out of me. The other two were clattering down the mountain. I actually felt like a right tool for stuffing up the launch before I'd even got my right foot clipped in. 4000ft of joyless winching in the pissing rain only to come a gnat's chuff from killing myself before I'd even got both feet on the pedals! When I caught up, I didn't tell them how close it actually was. It's not really an impressive story for day one.

Back up, breathing deep and slow and yet still a bit shaky, I finally got both feet clipped in (should have brought some flats) and was heading down to join the others. After a few hundred feet of pin-balling between rocks I punched out of the cloud base and for the first time saw a view that will stay in my memory for a very long time. First impressions count, but this place before me was now a whole world away from the grim wet start to this trip I'd just been winching through. I could see the entire mountain plummeting down in front of me and the narrow ribbon of rocky singletrack gradually turn into a brown line through green hillside as it meandered for

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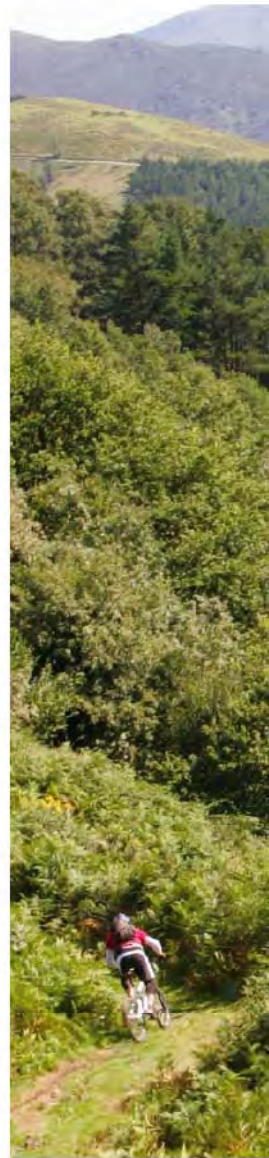
All negative thoughts of long climbs and howling winds were gone. It was suddenly all worth it.

miles into the distance. But most of all it was ALL downhill. In the distance I could see the Atlantic. The coast was over 20 miles away and yet the surf was so big I could make out the breakers on the beach. I could see Sanny and Doug picking their way down the rocky trail several hundred feet below me and I set off after them. All negative thoughts of long climbs and howling winds were gone. It was suddenly all worth it.

That night Doug and Amaia took us into their local town of Hondarribia. It is not a tourist resort and yet the nightlife was varied, lively and very welcoming. We felt like visitors out with local friends rather than tourists with a bike tour company, such was the way Doug and Amaia treated us. We gather that's pretty typical and it's testament to the ethos of BasqueMTB in that so many small holiday guiding companies are mountain bikers first and guides second. You are among friends with a common passion here to guide you through the whole holiday and not just the trails.

He said 'undulating...'

It was still wet the next day. But today Doug had a more undulating route planned. It was no less technical for the lack of altitude. As the day went on I was struck by how difficult to spot all the trails were. Round the back of an old farmhouse, stepping over a stream, following one of many identical looking options at bracken shrouded



intersections... In many Alpine resorts the trails are easy to follow and often you just need a guide for a few introductory rides to get you started before you head off on your own and work it all out for yourself. Navigation there tends to be pretty simple, but not here. There's no chance of just rolling up at a Basque B&B and then heading out, hoping to find these trails. Local knowledge is essential; a guide hardly optional. That got us thinking about how lucky we are as mountain bikers and reliant on fortuitous chance events. If Doug hadn't met Amaia in Glasgow years ago he would never have discovered this region. As it stands right now Doug offers the only guided holidays in the entire Basque area and ergo, but for a drunken introduction in a Glasgow pub, I'd be sat at my desk pushing paper around, this feature would never have been written and precious few people would be aware of the amazingly technical and spectacular trails the Basque Pyrenees were currently showing us. But that's the whole bike world summed up really. It starts with passion for riding (or passion for a woman in Doug's case) and leads to discovery and then sharing. There are thankfully precious few people in the bike industry who aren't riders first and entrepreneurs second.

Let's get scenic!

Day three led us to the airport to collect Mark and Rowan. We needed fewer big routes and more scenic and photogenic sections of trail as we were going to be endlessly re-riding the best bits over and over to get 'The shot'. Clearly because Mark was shooting video and not stills the weather gods had deemed it good enough reason



Big landscapes.



It's like that one, perfect, British summer day, only more frequent.

The idea was to wait for sunset although there was a stubborn layer of cloud sitting annoyingly above us while out to sea the skies were clear and blue.



El slick rock.

to give the sun a chance to appear. The landscape was transformed. It was almost instantly dry and dusty and VERY warm. This was now the Spain we were expecting. Doug had a mountain location in mind and in typical media photoshoot style we didn't actually set off until after lunch to scout out the spot. The idea was to wait for sunset, although there was a stubborn layer of cloud sitting annoyingly above us, while out to sea the skies were clear and blue. As we sat at the grassy summit of a mountain overlooking the sea the wait proved too much for Rowan and he began to explore the humps and rocks on the trails around us. One particular natural jump proved his undoing as he overcooked the landing and somersaulted into the thick gorse. Seemingly unbroken he proudly showed off his rash of gorse scratches all over his body while telling us how he was actually allergic to gorse. His body began to visibly redden and swell and Mark was clearly concerned that his shoot plans could have been scuppered before he'd removed the lens cap. Thankfully anaphylactic shock turned out to be nothing more than a mild shudder and, as if we were really pushing our luck, the skies cleared and we managed to get the shoot done. With the town of San Sebastian beginning to light up in front of us we rode the 5km descent down rocky singletrack literally into the sunset.

On our final day we went to the beach. There was a trail that Doug had told us about that followed the coastline for several miles. The fact we had spotted huge breakers crashing into the coastline from over 20 miles away meant the chance to ride in their spray was an opportunity not to be missed. ■



Whowhatwherehow?

Travel

Easyjet schedule regular flights into Bilbao (119km) or Biarritz/Bayonne (35km). Or take the ferry and cruise to Bilbao or Santander.

Basque MTB

A week of guiding, transfers and rather smart 'basic' accommodation starts at €495 and rises to a peak of €680 in their luxury house (with pool) in the high season. Doug will be happy to work out other options for you too.

www.basquemtb.com

A Brief History of the Basque Region

ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna Translated to 'Basque Homeland and Freedom') is pretty much the reason why most of us are familiar with the Basque Region (that and the Basque flags waved during the Tour de France) and parallels have been drawn between the so called 'struggle' of the Basque Separatists and the troubles in Northern Ireland, although the histories of the two are quite different and distinct. The cultural development of the Basque region can be traced way back to the invasion of the Moors in the middle ages. As the Moorish invasion from Africa spread through southern Europe it would seem in their efforts to push north into France they kind of missed the North West region of Spain out. The result was a continuation of the existing culture, relatively free from this new 'immigration'.

Through the centuries this has led to a powerful sense of Basque identity that many in the region naturally want to protect. The Basque region has retained its own language that is very distinct from the Spanish language (or any others) and it is these cultural distinctions that have led to the movement to campaign for an autonomous government for the region; a campaign that has, in recent times, become violent through actions by ETA, which some would argue is a consequence of mid 20th century attempts by the Franco regime to quell the Basque 'issue'. It must be pointed out that the violent actions of ETA are also countered by peaceful political organisations with the same ultimate goal. It's a complicated political situation for sure and certainly a passionate issue for many who live in the region.