

Andalucía and its High Sierras

As a regular visitor to Andalucía, and having visited the delights of Granada and its Alhambra, Ronda and Seville, I had always looked forward to seeing the real Spain by bike - its inland pueblos blancos, renowned for their unique beauty and spectacular settings – invariably hilltop locations, with white-washed houses huddled around a ruined castle.

A look at the web and lo and behold the idea came to fruition. I had opportunities of basing myself at Córdoba, Ronda or in The Sierra Nevadas. The latter was dropped like a hot potato, when I realised the altitude -for “an auld dun racer”.

A company called Joy-riders (www.joy-riders.com) who were based in the rural village of Cerro Macho near Córdoba had this year established a second base in Estepona. As luck would have it – that’s where my daughter’s apartment is! No probs. Flight booked and off for five days, three on the mountain bike.

Better still a call to my son Alan, an overseas member of Ayr Roads, now in Bangor, Northern Ireland and a few minutes later his return call revealed that he had booked a flight as well. I thought of big Tom Lynch since he and I had just returned from a great three day tour of The Solway and Galloway, but he couldn’t manage at short notice.

Weather forecast was to be good but not unbearably hot.

Joy-riders cater for MTB and down hillers in a big way. They have a team of ten working the two camps. Normally their deal includes accommodation, bike hire if needed and wait for it a free bar! They were more than pleased to accommodate three days with a guide thrown in and bike hire too on a non-resident basis.

On arrival at Estepona we were pleasantly surprised to find that the bikes were new Specialised Stumpjumpers with full suspension et al. As a traditionalist and with an old hard tail MTB, I was taken on by my new steed, as was Alan. We fitted our own pedals and saddle and were both rearing to go. The second pleasant surprise was that the other party of bikers were serious MTB men and so as novices we were allocated our own guide for the three days.

We both felt a bit conspicuous with our camelbacks – but oh how grateful we were to have them as the days wore on! Nick our guide hailed from The Lakes. The three of us had ridden all of the passes there, including Scarth Gap, Walna Scar, The Dockray Coach and Garburn Roads spectacular Lakeland scenery. Nick assured us we were in for something special in The Sierras!

His backpack looked quite awesome. He later told us he carried all the spares, two radios and a GPS system. It was then I realised how remote we could be in the hills around here.

Day One:

Estepona lies in Cadiz Province on the south-east corner of Spain. Nick took us inland of San Roque and into the hills of the **Sierra de Montecoche**. San Roque was established by Spanish refugees who fled from Gibraltar when it was taken by the Brits in 1704.

Our first Village was Almoraimo where we crossed the Algeciras to Ronda railway. This line was built by the British for the garrison officers at Gibraltar in the 1890's who wanted to enjoy the campo. Nowadays the train journey makes a great day trip through stunning scenery and historic sites. Having travelled it for the first time last year, I would recommend it to anyone holidaying in this area

Nuevo Castellar as its name implies is a relatively modern village and was our next stop. I later found out that it re-housed the villagers of the ancient village of **Castellar de la Frontera** many of whom re-located here in the 1970s.

Despite the nearness to the coast with its golf courses and marinas, agriculture and farming are still the main industries in this area, where a vast quantity of cork is also produced from the cork trees which abound.

Up up and away-and we passed the foothill of the old village of Castellar de la Frontera, with its commanding views over the Guadarranque Reservoir. The old Castle featured in numerous battles between the Moors and The Christians in medieval times. El Cid et al!



The hilltop Pueblo of Castellar de la Frontera

We now left the valley floor by way of an ancient track and climbed through corkwoods. The change in the landscape was remarkable and what made it more so was the verdant colours of the woodlands and fields. We stopped to take in our first views of pueblos blancos behind us, with a lake in the foreground.

One tends to think of Andalucía as being very arid – not here – it was a delight to cycle. The track skirted the southern hillside before crossing a meadow covered in wild flowers. On the northern flank of the valley now, ahead we could see an ancient Finca that seemed tenantless.

We dropped down a fairly good track taking in further vistas to the north.

Nick called a halt to take in refreshments. Then the fun began!

Across a field and sharply down to a burn or arroyo in these parts. Nick cautioned me, now on his tail to take it fast. Not being an adept mountain-biker and although taking it as fast as I dared, I was in for a soaking. A hearty laugh from big Al in the background and it was his turn. Nae probs for the big man, he was through.

Despite soaked feet and other parts, we carried on through a delightful wood before a hard climb and another descent across another burn – this time all intact.

No sooner had we re-mounted than a herd of roe deer crossed our path. There were about twenty or so with a number of speckled young fawns with them. Another fawn left behind scampered after them.

We crossed a meadow again and climbed up past the Finca. It was tenantless, but was being used as kennels. This part of the route was another delight, through corks and scrubland. What was either a wild boar or goat scampered through the undergrowth to the right of us.

Nick told us we were nearing the summit, so it was a bit of a race to the top.

What a view before us – **Gibraltar** and the other Pillar of Hercules of **Jebel Musa** on the African coast clearly visible. **The Atlas Mountains** of Morocco, where Alan and his wife had been last year were also clearly visible. In the foreground, lay La Linea de Concepcion and Algeciras. Truly stunning. We were about the 1500 foot mark.



The Pillars of Hercules and the Med.

It was downhill all the way with yours truly the tail-gunner, taking in the delights of the magic of the scenery all around.

We finished the day off with a visit on foot to Castellar de la Frontera – not to be missed.

With five hours or so on the bike we had not seen another person since leaving the valley floor. And we think Glenalla can be lonely!

If the first day was anything to go by, we were in for a great three days.

Day Two:

The Sierra de las Nieves was to be our starting point today. Chauffeured by our mechanic Scot from Estepona to the San Pedro de Alcántara – Ronda road we climbed towards Ronda. Bikes assembled we took into the hills which make up the Park Natural of Sierra de las Nieves. The park centres on Mount Torrecilla (6,000 ft) with magnificent mountain scenery.

Across an upland valley the Flora was more alpine. Clearly May must be one of the best months to see such a variety of wild blooms. For the botanist it would be a field day (sorry for the pun), I was aghast at the species and colours.

We took a right fork and followed a dried up arroyo, through a steep pass, climbing all the way. I thought of bandit country and Dick Turpin. I was pleasantly surprised to learn later that it was bandit country until as late as 1932. A bandit by the name of Flores Arrocha used to stalk this route as it was an ancient highway from the coast to Ronda.

We passed two occupied Fincas at the top of the valley. Nick pointed upwards to a pass with two ancient pines acting as sentinels of the valley. He assured me it was the top!

We continued the climb, before coming to a spot called **La Fuenfria**. A secluded oasis, with an arroyo and natural spring amidst a clearing in the forest. This spot was also a strategic post before the conquest of Ronda.



La Fuenfria

Before climbing to the summit we stopped to take in the views of the mountains of The Sierra de las Nieves behind us.



Alan Stops to take in the views



At the summit

It was now onwards and downwards for as far as we could see ahead. For the true mountain bikers or downhillers this must be something special. Drops of hundreds of feet were to our left and again yours truly was tail-end Charlie.



Downhill

We still had a long way to go before nearing San Pedro de Alcantara, but Nick took us further off road to visit **The Castano Santo (The Holy Chestnut)**. This is the oldest tree in the Sierra de la Nieves. Its age is estimated to be 1000 years old. Nick told us to lower our saddles since there was some “technical” riding ahead. I’m sure young Chris McConnell would take this in his stride but for me nae thanks. I was off and slithering down. Nick amazed me with his bike handling skills!



Castano Santo

We were on the last leg of the day – fantastic views – some challenging tracks – and technical for those who dared. Even a four foot snake!



Alan on the descent

On the outskirts of **San Pedro de Alcantara** now and we partook of Tapas and ice cold beer.



Refreshments at the end of the day!

Day Three:

Today was to be much shorter.

Immediately behind **Estepona** lies the **Sierra Bermeja** mountain range with an average height of 3,000 ft. The climb from Estepona takes you the **Puerto de Penas Blancas Pass**. It is a stunning climb of about 17 kms. A great road surface too. We cheated getting a lift to the top of the pass and since it was a Saturday morning the road was busy with club cyclists heading towards the inland villages of Jubrique and Genalquacil. Some of these guys were really suffering, but there were a few Bahamontes among them, mirroring The Eagle of Toledo's style.

We left the Pass and climbed up to the summit, passing the **Refugio de los Reales** on our way.

At the top we were above the 3,000 foot contour and it was quite chilly. The panoramic views around us were truly magnificent. Wild goats in abundance.



Los Reales

After spending sometime taking in the views, we headed downhill. For a few miles on the tarmac and then left the road for a track to the valley floor. The run down was tremendous.



The Descent from The Sierra Bermeja

And finally our customary refreshment at the end of the ride.

We may just re-visit the area next year, with in mind the Córdoba region. Anyone interested in using Joy-riders can view their web-site. Alan and I would recommend them. Great guys, experienced and with a fully supported mechanic. You can if you wish take your own bike, but we can certainly vouch for the quality of machines we had. They cater for all types so Chris if you read this – you could have a ball out there! **Viva Espana!**

PS: No English is spoken in the rural villages, so have your phrase book handy!

Arnie T.

“Auld dun Racer”