

BRITAIN'S BEST-SELLING MOUNTAIN BIKING MAGAZINE

Mountain Biking UK[®]

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**WILDMAN
WARNER**
OUTRAGEOUS, OUTSPOKEN,
AND BRUTAL AS EVER!

KICKSTART 2017
**NEW YEAR
RIDES!**

Snowdonia
South Downs,
Exmoor, Cairngorms & more

THE BEST TESTS:
4 FAST & FUN XC RIGS
16 TRAIL SHOES
6 WINTER SHORTS

HOW TO...
- RIDE STEEP CHUTES
- HANDLE SNOW & ICE
- BLAST THROUGH WATER

GET IN THE ZONE

HIT TRAILS SMOOTHER & WITH MORE FLOW

WORLD BEATER
WHAT MADE DANNY HART'S
MONDRAKER SUMMUM
SO DAMN FAST?

**IMMEDIATE
MEDIA^{CO}**





HEADING TO ANDORRA, WE DISCOVER
THERE'S A WEALTH OF HIGH-ALPINE
SINGLETRACK TO EXPLORE BEYOND THE BIKE
PARKS – IF YOU CAN RESIST THE LURE OF
THE DANGEROUSLY CHEAP BEER!

Words: Ed Thomsett Pics: Andy Lloyd





Where are we?

Andorra is a tiny principality in the middle of the Pyrenees, between Spain and France. Its mountainous geography and warm, sunny climate make it an ideal mountain biking destination. There are trails nearly everywhere and its small size means you can stay in one location and do day trips across the whole country. We were based in La Massana, which is the main hub for mountain biking and the home of Vallnord Bike Park.

Getting there

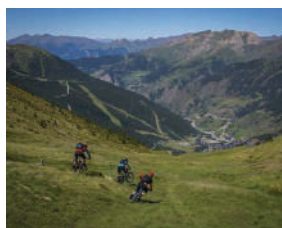
The closest airport is Barcelona. From there, it's a two to three-hour coach journey to Andorra. Transfers are fairly regular and are likely to be included if you book a package holiday.

Singletrack Safari

These guys provide the full package for riding in Andorra. Airport transfers, three or four-star hotel accommodation, uplifts and guiding are all included for a stress-free holiday. For 2017 they're starting the 'Andorra Enduro Project', a collaboration between Singletrack Safari, Rider's Boutique Bike Shop and Cedric Gracia. The aim is to provide everything from bike hire/maintenance and shuttles to the trails, to guiding and entertainment courtesy of CG!



Guides Kieran and Martin lead the way down some prime Pyrenean singletrack.



As you can see from his face, Ed loves blowing up berms! Wonder if he rode this one out?

W

hen snapper Andy Lloyd called the MBUK office to say that he was organising a trip to Andorra to explore what he'd heard was an untapped trail bike paradise, it wasn't exactly a hard decision to join him. He didn't disclose much, other than saying that we'd be venturing up to the higher altitudes beyond Vallnord Bike Park. But we'd heard good things about the riding in this tiny principality between France and Spain. And as a tax haven, it ought to be a nice, cheap trip!

Turning up at the airport at 5am, as instructed, we still didn't know any more about the itinerary, but found that Andy had also roped in BikePark Wales co-director and top Welsh racer Rowan Sorrell. He knew no more about Andorra than we did, but is an expert at winding Andy up, so he sat down and ordered a cooked breakfast just as the last call for our flight was put out. After some panicking on Andy's part and indigestion all round, we ran to the plane and were soon leaving the dreary British morning behind.

A short flight and coach trip later, we arrived in the town of La Massana, where we were hit by the full heat of the Andorran summer. The landscape in this part of the Pyrenees is different to that of the Alps, in that the valleys get progressively steeper as they descend. So, looking up from the town, the mountains didn't give much away in terms of what they had in store. Decamping to a bar at the base of the ski lifts, we met our guides for the week, Martin and Kieran from Singletrack Safari.

The tables were filling up, thanks to a constant stream of riders descending from the bike park – Vallnord is popular with French and Spanish riders, thanks in part to the patronage of Cedric Gracia and the fact it's hosted several World Cup rounds, as well as the 2015 World Championships – and the cheap beer (less than £1.50 a bottle) indicated that we'd probably be regulars there by the end of the week. Sure enough, it wasn't long before our very limited Catalan stretched to a slurred, "Tres cervezas, por favor..."

THE MORNING AFTER...

When we emerged from our hotel to meet Martin the next morning, we were all a little bleary eyed. He looked a bit disgruntled with our lateness, but cheered up when we reminded him that we were now operating on 'MBT' (Mountain Bike Time). There's an unwritten understanding that the time you agree to meet is when you start fixing your broken bikes or, in our case, start unboxing them. Finally, after much sweating (alcohol) and swearing (tubeless tyres), the shuttle van was loaded and we were on our way.

Although the temperatures were cool in the morning shade, the sun was creeping down the valley sides and we reckoned it wouldn't be long before we'd be sweating out more than the previous night's cervezas. Luckily, the van did most of the hard work, dropping us off at the high point of El Pas de la Casa, a pass on the Andorran/French border which, only a few weeks before, had heralded the start of the Tour De France. We saddled up for the last steep climb to the top, and the effort of pedalling at such a high altitude,

combined with the azure sky and spectacular view, meant our hangovers were soon forgotten.

A short climb led us into the first trail of the trip – a ribbon of rocky singletrack that traversed a clifftop meadow. It started natural and grassy, with a multitude of line choices, but as we descended, the density of rocks and trees increased, funneling us into twisting woodland singletrack that spat us out in the resort of Soldeu on the valley floor. From there, we enjoyed the luxury of a chairlift to take us up to the next descent, which was aptly named 'The Ridgeline'.

This trail followed a precipitous path along the top edge of a sloping alpine meadow, with 100ft cliffs on our left-hand side. At points, it veered uncomfortably close to the abyss, which made us more than a little apprehensive – especially as Andy encouraged us ever closer, in search of 'the perfect shot'. Rounding a corner, we came across a herd of goats who didn't seem to share our fear of heights. As we rode towards them, they jumped into the precipice, landing on perilous-looking ledges, from where they stared back up at us unblinkingly.

Riding away from the cliffs, we could relax and enjoy the next trail, a disused shepherd's path named 'Helter Skelter', which contained a total of 72 switchbacks. The conditions were bone dry and Rowan's back wheel kicked up plumes of dust that lingered in the still air as we wound our way down through a gully surrounded by lush, green undergrowth and pines hanging with 'old man's beard'. The

temperature rose noticeably as we descended and by the time we broke from the cover of the trees near the village of Canillo, it must have been pushing 35°C despite it being 5pm. Dehydration and hunger led us to the nearest bar, where, being diet-conscious athletes, we carb loaded for the next day, consuming plenty of cervezas and patatas bravas (fried potatoes in sauce).

PASS OF THE COWS

The following day, we bade farewell to the shuttle at the same point and headed north through the Pas de les Vaques ('Pass of the Cows') on a route that circumnavigated the mountain. The crest of the pass sits at around 2,650m and the air was noticeably thinner up there. At the trail's highest point, we happened across a retired South

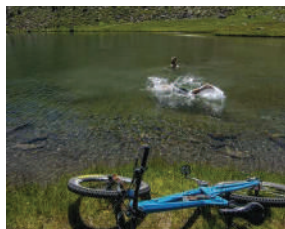
African couple who'd sold their house six years previously and had been on the road ever since. Enthused by their energy and passion for travelling, we all hoped that at their age we'd still be keeping those pedals turning.

There wasn't much pedal-turning that day though. Most of our time was spent dragging the brakes as the steep trail snaked down scree slopes and we fought for traction on the loose surface. The terrain was far rockier than the previous day and the jagged rocks lining the trail were just waiting to catch one of our pedals during a lapse of concentration. Beside a crystal-clear lake, the trail flattened out and we stopped for a break. As we sat there, admiring the view, the South African couple caught us up. Without hesitation, the husband stripped off and dove straight into the icy water. After that, we just had to follow suit...

Martin promised that the views from the peak on the next trail would surpass everything we'd seen so far. It was a bold claim, but he wasn't wrong. The panorama that faced us at the top was what mountain bikers' dreams are made of. A pristine ribbon of dirt curved through the grass in front of us, before disappearing over the horizon. Behind this enticing scene, layers of hazy blue mountains stretched as far as the eye could see. It couldn't have looked more inviting, and we dropped straight in. We picked up speed fast and natural undulations in the trail made for some decent-sized kickers



Rowan gets airborne on the Parabolica track at Soldeu Bike Park



Even experienced riders can't help but have fun smashing the turns on the green-graded Commencal trail



Ed and Martin descend to Canillo in the baking heat of the Andorran sun

when hit full-on. Airing over blind crests, we prayed there were no hidden rocks lying in wait in the grass. Just when the pace was getting scary, the trail tightened up and we followed a progressively rockier path down into the heat of the valley.

LET THE LIFT TAKE THE STRAIN

As much as we'd enjoyed a week of watching Andy sweat as he lugged his 20kg camera bag around the mountains, by this point we had to admit that the early starts and long days were catching up with us too. For our final two days we decided to stay in the La Massana valley and make the most of the lift-accessed trails there. As the home of Commencal Bicycles as well as Vallnord Bike Park, the valley is the epicentre of riding in Andorra. You can take your pick of bike park laps on one side of the valley or, if you've got the benefit of some local knowledge and a van, shuttle up to the Coll d'Ordino on the opposite side for some amazing hand-cut trails.

The hillside is criss-crossed with lines and, depending on which turn-off you take, you can find yourself on anything from a flowing singletrack descent to some seriously steep downhill gnar. Going in blind, you'd better hope you make the right choice or possess the handling skills to ride out a wrong turn! The hill is one of the major testing grounds for Commencal, which says

something about the calibre of the tracks there, and we all agreed that it was one of our favourite locations of the trip.

Speaking of Commencal, they've just put their name to a freshly opened green trail in the bike park. Despite its novice grading, it's

like no other beginner trail we've ridden, consisting of a seemingly endless series of tabletops and groomed berms. Or, should we say, they were groomed until Rowan came along. Despite building trails for a living, he seemed to rather enjoy exploding corners in big clouds of dust. Exiting the woods by the lift station, the trail provided a moment for us to shake off our hands before we were thrown into another 15 minutes of flowing berms, all the way back into La Massana. At points, the track was so deep in powdery dust that our wheels were surfing across the ruts. Some 10 minutes in, the burn in our arms and legs was reminding us that we'd done several long, consecutive days of riding. There were a few sketchy moments, as our bikes understeered and wheels drifted unnerveingly close to the edge of a steep drop. After one

too many close calls, we decided it was probably time to call it a day. This came just as the first raindrops we'd seen all week begin to fall and it seemed like an appropriate time to end the trip, plus all that dust had given us a terrible thirst. "Barman! tres cervezas, por favor..." ☺

"A PRISTINE
RIBBON OF DIRT
CURVED THROUGH
THE GRASS BEFORE
DISAPPEARING
OVER THE HORIZON"

