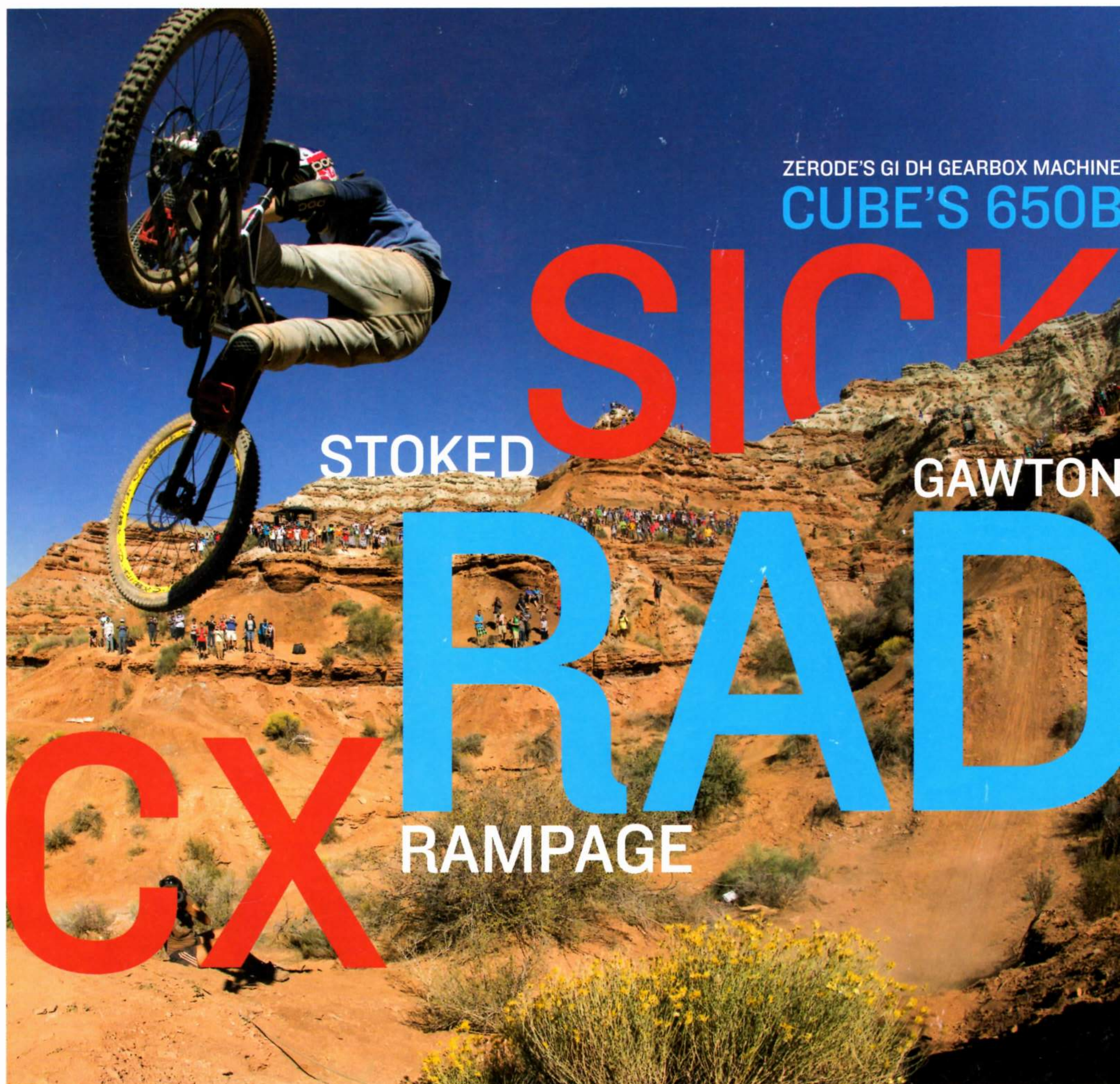


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ZÉRODE'S GI DH GEARBOX MACHINE
CUBE'S 650B

STOKED

SICK

GAWTON

RAMPAGE

CX

here, McKnight...dropping in.

there: Famous faces in a famous place. Team Sky were on tour, taking part in the classic Vuelta a España road race, whereas Frenchmen Damien Nozella and David George of Production Privée were on tour, and showing us some hidden delights of their adopted nation.

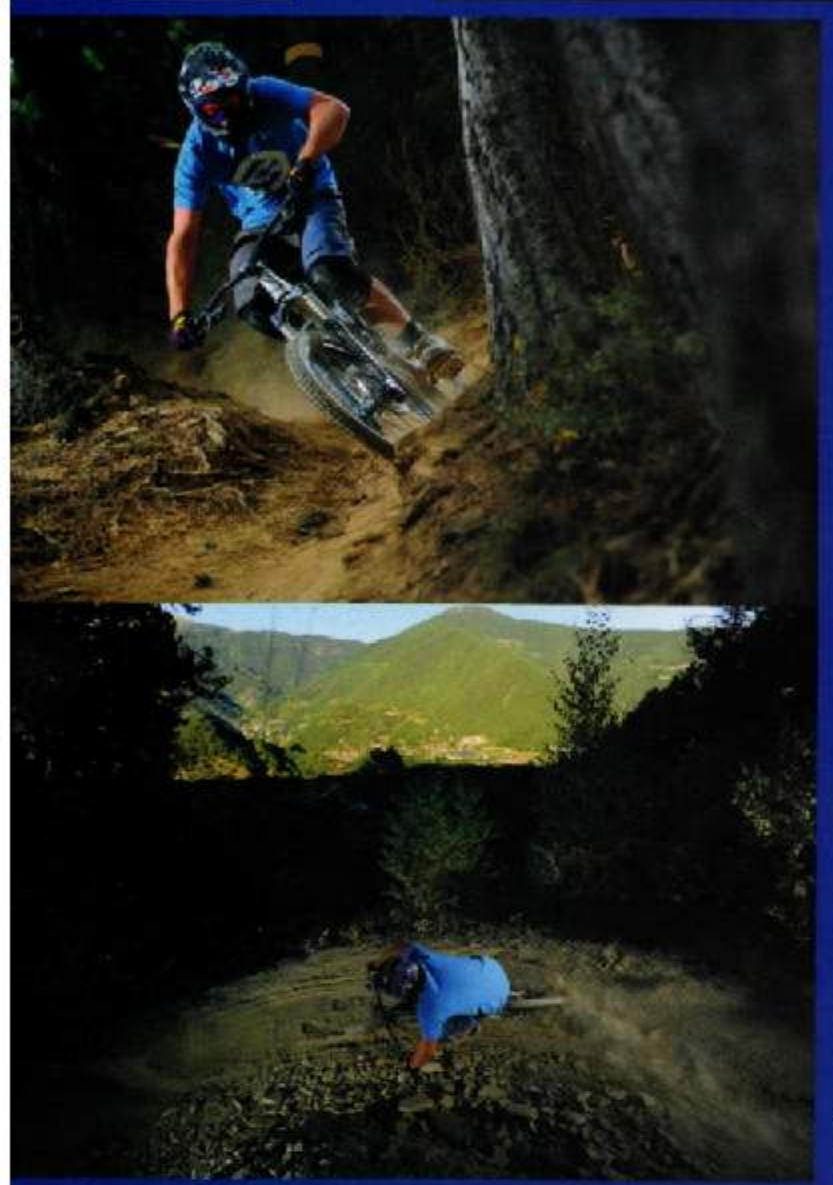


WORDS BY JAMES MCKNIGHT
PHOTOS BY ANDY LLOYD

DROPPING IN TO ANDORRA



Three kilograms of condensed milk, one kilogram of coffee, four kilograms of cheese. Neither a shopping list nor a recipe. These are quantities with which you are permitted to exit the tiny and intriguing country of Andorra. Once you have read the following article and booked your stay though, be very sure not to attempt a cross-border smuggling operation involving more than 2.5kgs of powdered milk, in excess of 400grams of pipe tobacco or greater than 200grams of tea. You do not want to even contemplate the consequences... »



We were shown around Soldeu by ex-World Cup downhill racer Oscar Saiz, a super cool and friendly guy who has partnered up with the resort and has helped to create some superb tracks.

“**SOLDEU IS ONE CRACKING BIKE PARK, SERVICED IN WHAT I HAVE LEARNED TO BE TYPICALLY EFFICIENT ANDORRAN FASHION BY THE FAST AND MODERN LIFTS AND FAVOURED BY LOCALS AND SPANIARDS IN THE KNOW. QUEUES ARE NON-EXISTENT AND THE TRACKS ARE QUITE SIMPLY, FUN.**”



Martin Hills of Singletrack Safari, a great host and organised beyond belief.

CROSSING BORDERS

Driving in from the Spanish border, having arrived at Barcelona airport, an ascent through the built-up overspill of Andorra's main town, Andorra La Vella, could easily lead you to a hasty conclusion that the country is entirely over-populated, the allure of a tax haven seemingly tempting so many to its gold paved streets. This is an assumption that rapidly changes once through the 'sprawl', as a series of tunnels, bored through vertical and mighty mountains, drops you straight back to the wilderness, or as close as you are likely to get in a country of such small proportions.

The majority of summertime visitors fail to make it past the potential bargains on offer in the valley and rarely venture up and beyond. Mountain biking in Andorra is thriving just beyond the fringes and late this summer I was fortunate enough to sample it along with Dirt photographer Andy Lloyd, under the expert guidance of Martin Hills and Keevin Thine of Singletrack Safari. Martin provides the planning and owns the company, Keev provides guiding and plenty of big, ear-to-ear smiles. A great duo who play off each other and love the mountains equally.

Rowan Sorrell visited with photographer Victor Lucas back in 2008 to report for Dirt on the riding in the Pyrenees and Andorra in particular, but things have changed a little since then and the bike parks have extended greatly.

SOLDEU

Landlocked Andorra is a 'microstate' in the eastern Pyrenees, it is the sixth smallest nation in Europe and its population stretches barely beyond 85,000 (up from 5,000 in 1900). Funny then that there should be two brilliant facilities for mountain bikes – two bike parks – in such a small area. Having said that, when you consider the country's average elevation of nearly 2000 metres, its highest point soaring to nearly 3000, its 300 days of sunshine and its influences from residents past and present that include some of the sport's greats (Cedric Gracia being the best-known local), all becomes clear.

Soldeu is a funny town in a strangely bare valley that extends in a slight curve towards the crossing into France on Andorra's easterly border. The high-rise buildings on the main road through town aren't the nicest looking, but then they aren't particularly offensive either. Sniff around town a little and you'll find 'cute' slate roofed buildings and a quaint series of streets. The town thrives on skiing in the winter and ticks over on bike, health-spa and golf tourism in the summer. We checked into a superb hotel and were treated to a five-star spa, not the sort of extravagance expected from a bike trip but the kind that Andorra can provide for a lot less money than you'd expect.

Checking back out of such a swanky and brand-spanking new pad (somehow every single building in Andorra looks like it has only just been built) and saying goodbye to a buffet breakfast is never a task achieved without great effort for someone of my inclination. Nonetheless, we eventually threw kit in bags, cobbled bikes together and rolled the ten seconds from lobby to lift station, handily placed directly underneath the hotel itself.

SOLDEU RIDING

A gondola, complete with the simplest roll-in, roll-out bike carriage system that I have seen, and then a lonely chairlift above a baron hillside take you to the peak high above the town which provides a view over to both the French and Spanish borders. From the highest point of the bike park there are a number of options, all of which cross the open 'wilds' atop the mountain, and which cater for riders of all abilities and disposition. For our sakes (not only were we jaded from travel, but also far too stuffed full of high-class breakfast to be riding bikes) our guide for the day, Oscar Saiz (ex-pro downhill and trainer to such riders as Danny Hart and Andrew Neethling), first showed us the green graded run which is mellow enough for the most amateur of riders, yet fun, fast and flowing enough for even the most experienced.

A little more exploring opened our eyes to the impressive array of riding on offer here. The range of trails, some 'natural' and some full-on jump tracks, is extensive, and their upkeep is somewhat better than certain Alpine counterparts. You can session the top part of the mountain and smash turn after turn on a relatively mellow gradient, or you can bang out laps on the gondola down low. The latter is mostly in the trees and has a mixed gradient from shallow to super-steep, and was definitely my favourite as there are more natural features, more jumps and plenty more turns.

Soldeu is one cracking bike park, serviced in what I have learned to be typically efficient Andorran fashion by the fast and modern lifts and favoured by locals and Spaniards in the know. Queues are non-existent and the tracks are quite simply, fun. I love the place and I'll be back there to ride the dusty, twisty flow-tastic trails hopefully very soon. »



ORDINO AND VALLNORD

Glamour never suited me, a downgrade from the swankiness of Soldeu's hotel was bound to come and wouldn't have been ill-received. Downgrade, however, is not in Martin's vocabulary. We took a mountain pass from Soldeu over to our next destination, Ordino, which sits in the second of Andorra's two main valleys. Andorra really is a small place, but it sure packs in the peaks, and this particular road took us over one of the highest and most spectacular. We were blessed by an evening display of light as the sun set on the hillsides all around us. Later we arrived into Ordino's popular and inventively named Hotel Ordino. 'Posh' is not the right word, but pleasant, welcoming and well-equipped for bikes it most certainly is. The bike cellar with hooks, tools and workstand was good to see. Also a welcome addition to any hotel is a great view out the window, and there's no lack of vistas around Ordino. Steep-sided valleys disappear into the distance in any direction you look and there is an altogether more 'natural' feel to the area than in Soldeu. Rivers flow, forests thrive and, oddly, tobacco is cultivated on every spare patch of land.

The cruise down from Ordino is a pleasant five minute freewheel in the morning, which brings you to the town of La Massana, a picturesque, vibrant little town with direct gondola access to the Vallnord bike park – the site of several previous World Cup races and venue again in 2013. As part of his package deal, Martin offers accommodation directly adjacent to the brand new gondola and as central as is physically possible.

Weekends bring throngs of Andorran, French and mostly Spanish bike riders to the slopes of Vallnord, and the place is positively teeming with all sorts of folk; men, women, kids and adults all ride the bike park and it is unbelievably busy on first sight compared to the impression that I had in my mind before visiting.

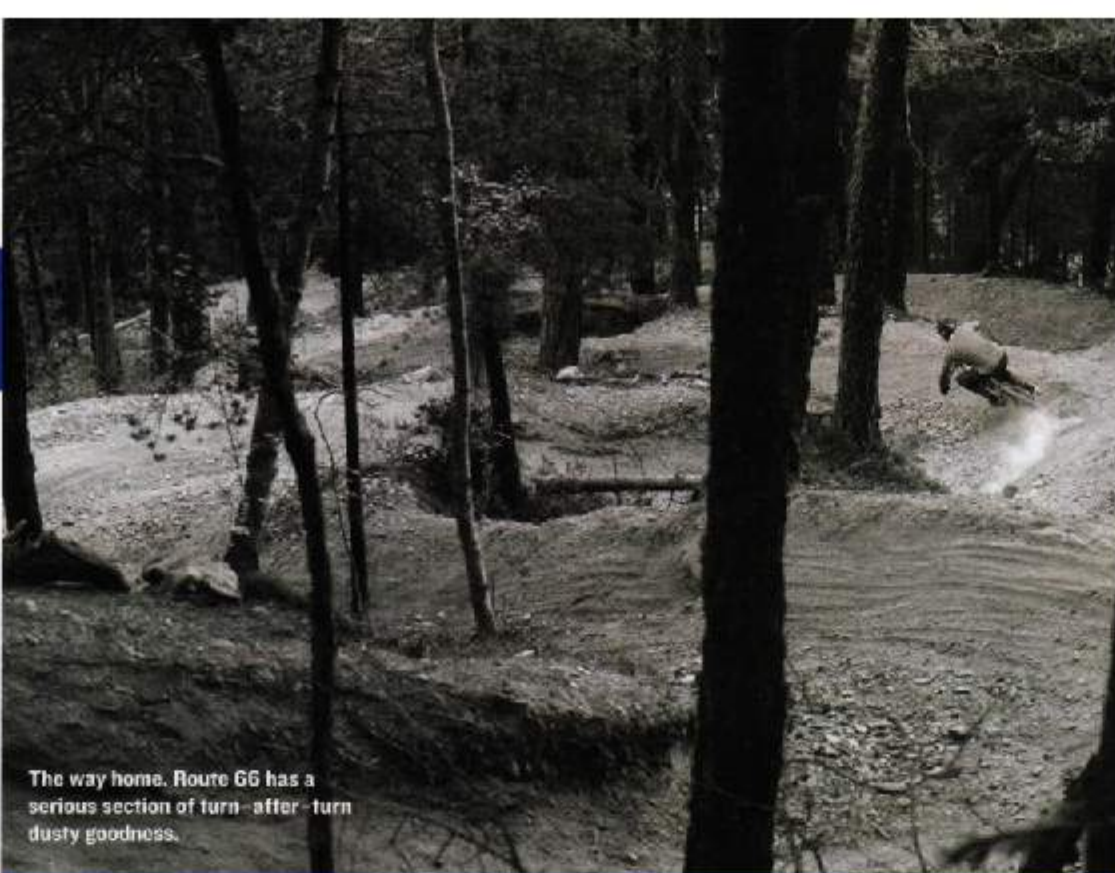
VALLNORD RIDING

In his report for Dirt, Rowan Sorrell warned not to huck into the World Cup track, Sam Hill style (remember his massive crash into a well-placed pile of snow). But I would be more inclined to advise you not to bother with that track at all, and make the most of the dozens of others (upward of twenty) instead.

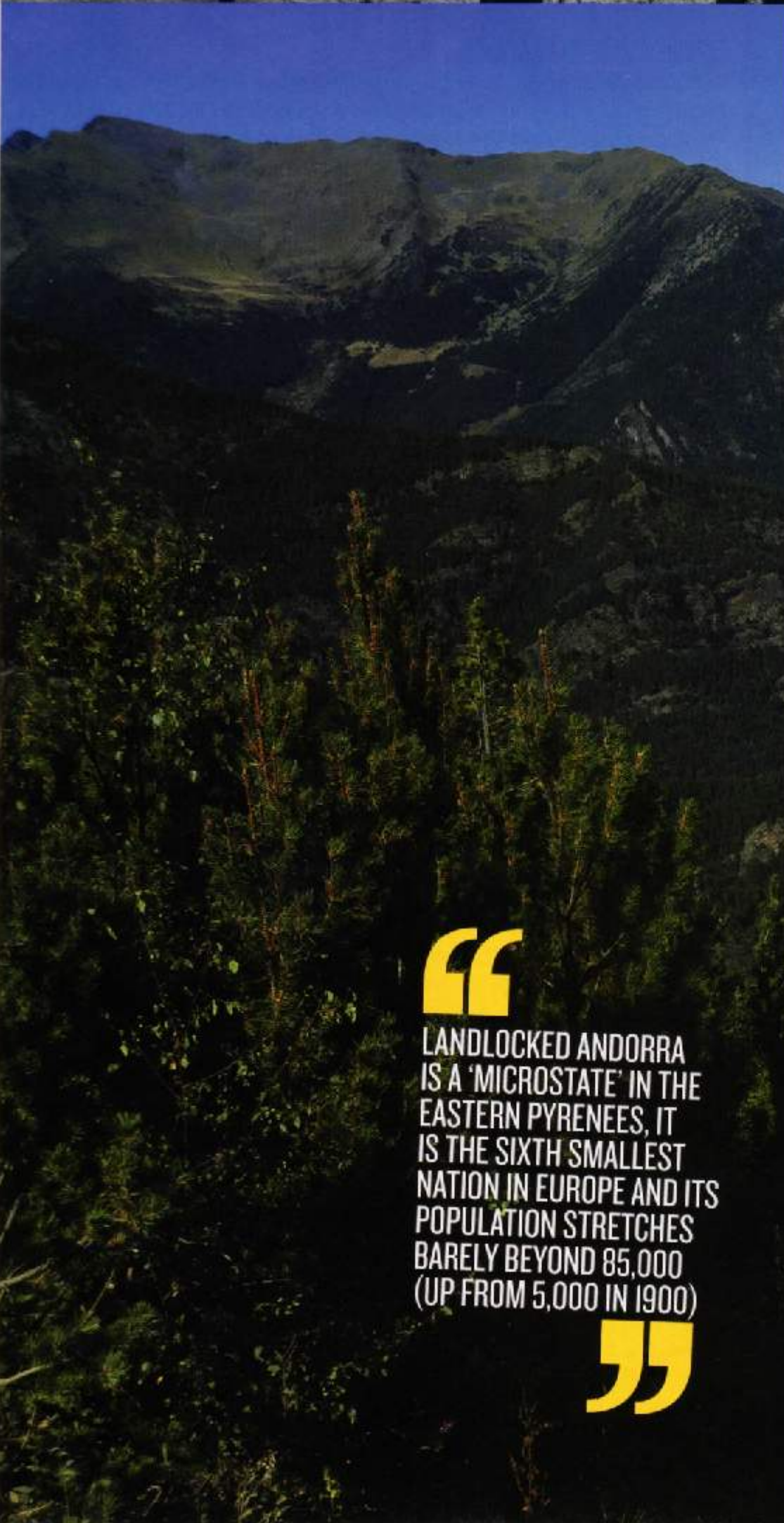
Just like Soldeu, this mountain is split into two sections, although it takes a series of lifts to reach the summit. Personally I could ride the steep, rough tracks under the gondola all day, but nearly everyone prefers to stick to the higher slopes and the two chairlifts that link up to give access to the entire upper hillside. From the middle-station, where families do their summer thing (walk slowly, eat, get the lift back down) and dozens of bike riders take '5' to soak up some rays and make the most of the relaxed vibe, a short ride down either the old 4X track or one of several trails brings you to the main chairlift. With 'lifties' (lift attendants) on hand at every station, bike shops where you need them and numerous, ridiculously fun tracks to ride, you get the feeling that these Andorrans don't half know how to do the whole tourism thing properly.

Taking the main chair up you start to spot the familiar sights – Sam Hill's huck, Steve Peat's corner (from a 2009 cover of Dirt) and the pine trees that cling to any slopes that haven't been developed for the sake of skiing. You also get quite an astounding view over the country's majestic range. It's hard not to like Vallnord.

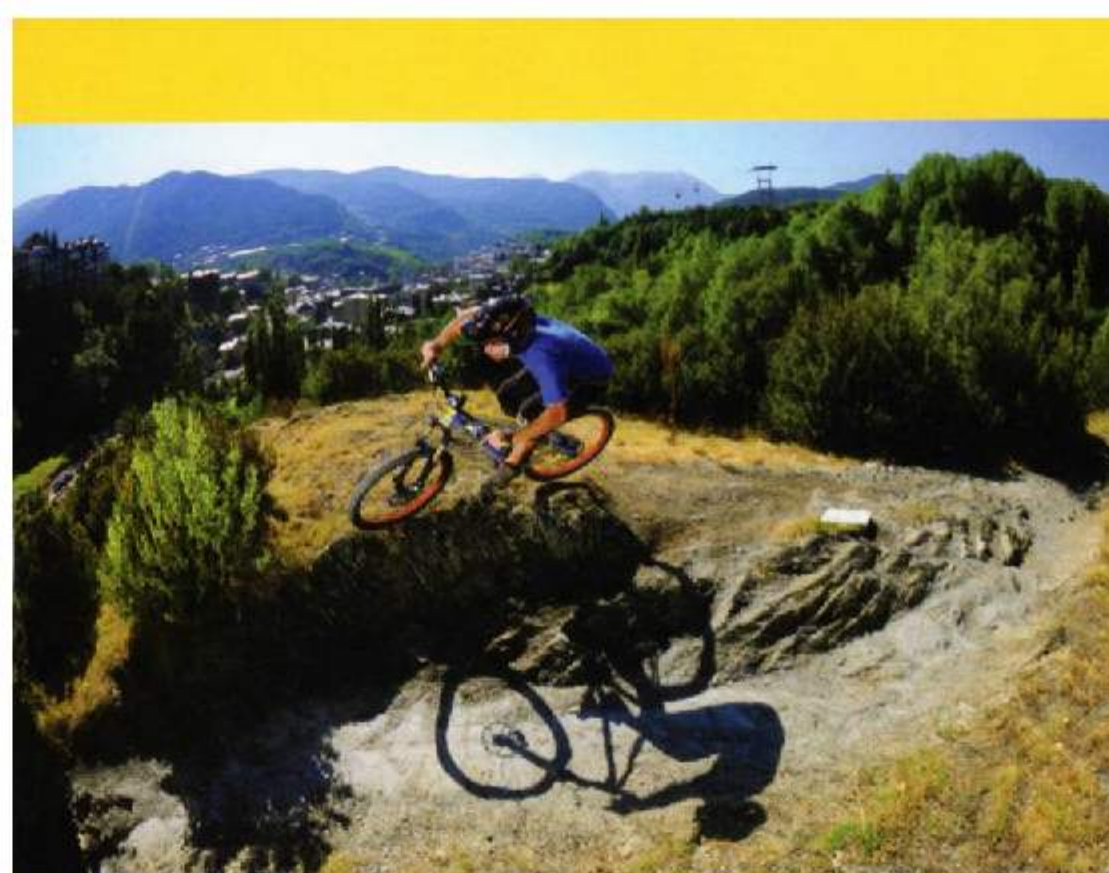
The second chairlift is less used and plonks those who do brave it right up high on a desolate peak at the top of Vallnord. From here, it's hard not to imagine that you're in Southern California – the air is clear, the sky is blue and the ground is bare and bright. Plumes of white dust kick up as you set off down the trail and warm, dry air feeds into your lungs. The trail from the Pic del Cubil meanders down the mountain and is Andorra's answer to Whistler's 'A-Line' with jump after jump, berm after berm, and not a great deal else. Not that that's a bad thing of course! It then links in to any of the multiple dusty, rocky, techy and flowy main trails and you have yourself a lot of options. »



The way home. Route 66 has a serious section of turn-after-turn dusty goodness.



“LANDLOCKED ANDORRA IS A 'MICROSTATE' IN THE EASTERN PYRENEES. IT IS THE SIXTH SMALLEST NATION IN EUROPE AND ITS POPULATION STRETCHES BARELY BEYOND 85,000 (UP FROM 5,000 IN 1900)”



Vallnord's scenery is mind-blowing, like something from a typical Californian panorama, which only makes the bike park an even better experience.



ANDORRA 77



Kevin Thino enjoys some spa time and ambassador to Vallnord. Cedric Gracia demonstrates a local tradition... beer pong.

Vallnord is an understated and misunderstood bike resort. It's not a rainy place with only a small hill and a non-existent riding community as the early-season World Cup races have previously portrayed, but rather a bustling mountain full with riders of various nationalities all enjoying the typically great weather, the cheap eating and the huge array of tracks. There are tech-fests, jump trails and flat-out freight trains down the hill (Route 66 is ridiculously fast). But overall there's just a nice feeling to the place. Locals are all out in force every lunchtime and it just feels like everyone is having a great time hammering out runs on a perfectly graded, well maintained and modern mountainside.

THE OTHER BITS

It's hardly a secret that bike brand Commencal is based in Andorra, they play on their geographical placing in every piece of marketing after all, but it's interesting to see what they bring to the area and who else sits alongside them in Andorra's mini mountain bike industry. I think it's fair to say that Commencal have done a lot for the area's bike scene, and now there is a small but devoted crew of resident riders who hit the trails on a daily basis and who mostly work, or have worked for the brand.

La Massana has one of the best pubs I have been to outside of the UK called Mon Bohemi, which is a central meeting point for all bike riders in the area and an after-work drinking hole for a large number of young locals and tourists alike. Martin seemed more than familiar with the place and Keew knew every person there. It's good to see what beer and a smile can do for public relations. Here we met up with our friends from Andorra based Production Privee; a small products and frame manufacturer run by Damien Nosella and David George, two guys who certainly love the mountain lifestyle and undoubtedly have their own seats in the pub. They

talked us through the process of design, the daily testing that takes place on the singletrack all around the country and eventually led us down a dangerous path of destruction that ended with a game of 'beer pong' against a leathered local man on crutches by the name of Gracia (Cedric).

I could happily live in the country, if it wasn't so hard to do so (that is). You see, in order to live in Andorra you must have a reason to be there – a job – and seeing as it isn't all that easy to land a job in such a glitteringly perfect playground then that is not going to happen. Furthermore, to apply to become resident you must have lived for twenty years in the place. Also not going to happen. Andorrans like to keep their great country as it is and the work local, which is great to see and reassuring to know that its quirky underbelly will probably never change.

Which brings me to the slightly bizarre side of Andorra. I think that the tobacco 'industry' illustrates the country's oddities nicely. I was surprised to hear that the abundant fields of tall green vegetation were in fact the result of local families cultivating their 'fair share' of tobacco; harvested annually to be sold to the Andorran government and then...burnt or sent on to the Canary islands for cheap, low-grade fags. The government, by way of an ancient local law, are obliged to buy local tobacco in equal quantity to that which they import, which keeps the families happy, rich and ensures the lack of quality in the production of their crop.

It's a funny old place, but everyone's welcome and the bike riding is almost unbeatable, food and fuel is cheap and the beers are served in frosted glasses. It's not all about bike parks either. Singletrack rides feature on every slope and under every forest canopy, tiny valleys reach away from towns and villages and hide within them tracks and trails to nurture every bike rider's tastes. Martin knows them all and will gladly show you around his favourite corner of Europe.

Just look at those blue skies and empty trails. Head up high in Vallnord and you get a different perspective on the place and the kind of views over Europe that only the Pyrenees can provide.

“THE GOVERNMENT, BY WAY OF AN ANCIENT LOCAL LAW, ARE OBLIGED TO BUY LOCAL TOBACCO IN EQUAL QUANTITY TO THAT WHICH THEY IMPORT, WHICH KEEPS THE FAMILIES HAPPY, RICH AND ENSURES THE LACK OF QUALITY IN THE PRODUCTION OF THEIR CROP.”



BOOKING YOUR STAY

Singletrack Safari is run by Matin Hills and the season is from early June till late September.

Insanely low prices are as follows:

Four nights B+B including transfer, guiding and lift pass: £210.00

One week B+B including transfer, guiding and lift pass: £299.00

One week half-board in a 4* hotel with transfer, guiding and lift pass: £440.00

www.singletracksafari.com
01453 542377

Lifts are open weekends from early June and everyday from July until mid-September, then weekends only until the end of September. We recommend booking a stay with Singletrack Safari for their unrivalled knowledge of the area and to make use of their shiny VW Transporter for uplift to singletracks that the lifts won't take you anywhere near.

THAT BIKE

It would have been rude to visit Andorra and not ride a Commencal, so thank you to Max (Commencal) and his team for the loan of their bike park shredding machine: the Supreme Fr. It performed perfectly and unsurprisingly lapped up the bike park trails on which it is tested daily! 77

