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& Trek big wheelers

**ANDORRA**

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HOLIDAY SORTED**

Ride this trail! See p74

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Hope Valley,  
Dorset and the  
East Highlands



**CHOOSE  
THE RIGHT  
HELMET**

XC or trail, the best  
lids ridden & rated







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ON THE COVER  
(AND VIBRAGOS)  
Ben Smith takes a  
singletrack safari in  
Andorra. See page  
74 for the feature



# UNRELENTING ANDORRA

**mbr** travels to the Andorran Pyrenees to check out the trails of tour operator Singletrack Safari — with expert guidance along the way

Written: Ben Smith | Photos: Grant Smith



**“D**ude, that has to be one of the top five trails I’ve ever ridden!” We can forgive our Canadian snapper Grant Robinson a little North American exuberance, as he was bang on the money. It was our last run of the day and it had a bit of everything: fast rocky fire roads, tight loamy singletrack, boulder fields, rock slabs, stream crossings, you name it. All tackled flat-out and with massive grins on our faces.

For the previous three days, poor Grant had been subjected to some epic XC and DH rides through the Andorran Pyrenees with a massive, heavy camera bag on his back, but now for the first time he was free and determined to make the most of it.

Rolling back into the hotel marked the end of our third day of being shepherded around the pick of Andorra’s trails by Martin Hills. Martin is head honcho of, and full-time guide for, Singletrack Safari, a mountain bike tour operator that runs trips in the Alps and Spain as well as in Andorra. We were there not only to be shown the best Andorra has to offer, but also to accompany the two winners of a competition we ran back in our August issue. Mark Rugg and Graham Holley were the lucky two, and both were testing their bikes — and their skills — to their limits.

### Tips from the top

Andorra is a tiny landlocked country nestled between France and Spain. For somewhere so small, it punches above its weight for mountain biking, with world-class trails and two quality bike parks — Vallnord (a former World Cup venue) and Grandvalira. It was the latter that provided a big hit on our first day. The less established of the two, Grandvalira, is run by former World Cup DH racer Oscar Saiz, and the man himself met us for the day to show us around the trails that he designed and give us some very welcome skills coaching — amazingly, this is something on offer to all visitors. With a decent network of lifts to take the strain, today was about letting gravity do the work, and



Going in big: Grandvalira was a hit on day one

the first few runs coasting down some gentler blue trails behind Oscar were ideal for getting us into the groove. I say ‘coasting’, but with us on trail bikes and unfamiliar tracks, and Oscar on home turf and his DH rig, it was soon a flat-out chase to keep him in sight!

With everyone warmed up, Oscar took us aside for some coaching. Now it’s not every day that you get a top pro giving you tips, but when Oscar’s other job is mentoring the Giant World Cup team — which includes DH World Champ Danny Hart — you pay extra attention. Within half an hour, he had us all thinking about line and body position in a way that we hadn’t before.

And talk about a place to practise: there are some great flowing trails in here, and the ones that drop off the top of the mountain offer spectacular views too. Dropping down off the crown of the hill, they get tighter and tighter with switchbacks heading into the trees offering a variety of challenges, all with the kind of flow that makes even red runs suitable for

all abilities. Sadly for Mark, a small off over a drop caused a recently healed broken finger to split open and start filling his glove with blood. We feared the worst and packed him off to the hospital to get it checked out. Thankfully it was just a flesh wound and Mark would join us for the rest of the week.

After a few runs from the top, Oscar offered to show us a trail on the edge of the park that was popular with trail riders. This sounded ideal, so we followed him down a narrow sliver of singletrack through the trees that had a much more natural feel than the obviously man-made trails in the bike park. With a mixture of rollers, tight turns, rocks, roots and water-splashes, this was my trail highlight of the day, made extra special by the late-afternoon sun beaming through the trees, illuminating the hanging dust. By the time we regrouped at the bottom, we were bushed, and it was all we could do to squeeze a cold beer down before piling into the van and heading home.

### Big hills, tall tales

The next day’s ride was dubbed Big Cat, and after the gravity fest of Grandvalira, we swapped flat pedals and full-faces for SPDs and trail lids. There was no escaping it, we had some serious pedalling to do. The ride would top out at the summit of the category-one climb of Arcalis, as seen in the 2009 edition of the Tour de France. We rode from the hotel on what was basically an out-and-back route that went up-up-up, then down-down-down. Martin promised to make the ups as painless as possible by taking in quite a lot of road, but there were still



Saiz matters: Oscar lays down the law

## When Oscar’s other job is mentoring the Giant World Cup team, you pay attention



plenty of tough off-road climbs as we cut out large chunks of tarmac with the more direct trail route. It took us well over three hours of constant slog to get to the top, and after regrouping at the summit for a spot of lunch, it was on to yet another of the most varied descents I've ever ridden.

It began with a super-technical rocky traverse where line choice and some trials skills were the order of the day. With football-sized rocks, steps and tight switchbacks (with more rocks) this was manna from heaven for our group, although a fairly high level of skill is a prerequisite for getting the most out of it.

Eventually we dropped down to the road we'd climbed hours before, though we soon turned off it again and made our way on to some of the most perfect sun-dappled loamy singletrack any of us had ridden. Sadly the section was only a couple of kilometres long but the next bit was still good as the turns became steeper and rockier, speeds dropped and technical skills once again came to the fore. The final few kilometres were a mix of single and double-track but we were riding along the valley floor now, tired and ready to stop. The descent had taken a fraction of the time it took us to get up, but we agreed it was worth the slog.

Tales were tall over dinner that night — and probably getting taller still; some of us doubted anything could touch that day's descent. But Martin was still talking up the rest of the week — we wondered what he had in store. It turned out to be The Balcony and The Basement, so called because a short drive over the Col d'Ordino to the valley by Grandvalira would see us climbing (on road again) to the top of the valley, traversing across the top to Grandvalira before descending down through the bike park and back along the bottom of the valley to the village of Canillo.

## Calories earned and burned

With heavy legs from the day before, the climb was brutal, as expected, but it gained height fast and



Hacking a path through the trees

allowed us to soft-pedal at our own pace. Once at the top, though, we were on to an undulating trail that hugged the hillside, each bend revealing a view more spectacular than the last. There was still a lot of climbing to be done, and when we arrived at the top of the bike park, we'd certainly earned our lunch. It bode well for the return journey, though, and with bellies full, we set off down through the park to begin the run back through the valley floor. We rode out the back of the tiny ski resort of Soldeu and on to a massive slickrock section, again offering something different from anything we'd ridden over that week. The whole run back to the van kept throwing up singletrack of every variety: narrow and rock-stepped, super-tight and hugging the edge of a steep drop that had me walking nervously; tree-covered and loamy and a rockslide section that looked alarmingly temporary. For good measure, we even found some sweet wild raspberries during a stop to fix a smashed rear mech. Sublime.

Eventually we rolled back into Canillo, the whole



Gulley! That was close

group shattered by the unrelenting pace. Bikes were packed into the trailer and we piled into the van for the journey home, which took us back over the top of the stunning Col d'Ordino. It was here that we hopped out of the van again and set off for Grant's top-five-scoring run. I'm still not sure where the energy came from...

## Back to flats

After a rest day and a visit to the Caldea spa in the capital city of Andorra la Vella, we swapped back to DH gear and headed for the Vallnord bike park for more lift-assisted fun. Martin had once again arranged a treat for us, this time in the form of Roger Gonzalez, elite Spanish downhill and Vallnord Bike Patrol member. Roger was to be our guide and informal coach for the day. And like Oscar three days previously, he made us all work hard to keep him in sight despite his just cruising.

Another big name, Cedric Gracia — DH nutter and all-round good guy — lives in Vallnord and has a lot of input into the trails here, particularly with a World Cup-standard 4X course that bears his name. According to Martin and Roger, Cedric's influence can be seen in a lot of the off-piste trails too, some of which we'd get to experience the next day. But on the fourth day of hard riding, all we wanted was the simple pleasure of bermed turns, rollers and a bit of speed and flow, so we stuck to the regular trails. Martin speaks highly of a trail called Route 66, which runs from the very top to the very bottom



With football-sized rocks, steps and tight switchbacks (with more rocks) this was manna from heaven for our group



Moon safari: singletrack gives way to boulder fields





**Our brakes were working overtime to try to keep the speed manageable**



Mark rides under Roger's watchful eye

of the bike park. It's graded red and takes over 25 minutes to get down. Sadly, the top section was out of bounds, as the lifts to the top had closed the week before (bad timing!) but the lower section was open, so we pointed our front wheels downwards and went for it. The top of the trail is out in the open and as fast as you dare over the rocks. Then it drops into the forested lower slopes and gets steeper and steeper.

This was an absolute grin-fest, as our brakes were working overtime to try to keep the speed manageable through the maze of dusty switchbacks. Braking bumps battered our forearms into every turn, so much so that poor Grant with his camera bag riding pillion was suffering arm pump for the first time in his life. Mostly avoidable, they didn't ruin the fun and

## Mark Rugg

39, Leeds

Rides: Lapierre Zesty 314

**Best bits of the trip?** The long slog up the mountain on the second day was tough but the three-hour descent was ample reward. Day four at Vallnord, with us being the only people at the top of the mountain, was pretty special. And day five — the quick uplift and fast trail back to the hotel was class, followed by the afternoon enjoying some of Cedric's favourite black runs.

**Worst bits of the trip?** The lack of oxygen at altitude making me look horribly unfit! There weren't really any bad bits other than having to go home!

**Would you come back again?** Like a shot!







Dust devils redefine it through the turns

## In one direction Spain finished and Andorra began and, in the other, Andorra finished and France began

**Graham Holley**  
47, Jersey  
Rides: Orange 5 AM

**Best bits of the trip?** I enjoyed it all immensely. It was the best all-round mountain biking holiday I have been on. The long natural downhill singletrack was superb, technical and demanding in places, with fast and flowing bits. In both bike parks, there was more than a good day's riding. I thought the riding in Vallnord was better than in Grandvalira. The last ride of the holiday on the Cedric Gracia trail was well-demanding but I enjoyed it. Roger and Oscar made me feel more than welcome, and I appreciated all Oscar's tips.

**Worst bits of the trip?** It was a bit of a pain waiting for the photoshoots sometimes. I enjoyed the day at the spa but it's not something I'd normally do — I would have probably preferred another day's riding.

**Would you come back again?** Definitely!



we finally rolled back into La Massana at the bottom of the mountain to catch the cable car back up for more.

The lift may not have been running all the way to the summit, but Roger wouldn't let us leave without at least one full run down, so the bikes were loaded into the back of a pick-up for a 10-minute bumpy drive to the top of the park.

The view across the Pyrenees was spectacular, with Roger pointing out in one direction where Spain finished and Andorra began and, in the other direction, where Andorra finished and France began. The terrain was pretty barren up here but the trail was typically good, flowing at high speed down the mountain with big-bermed turns interspersed with some none-too-troublesome tabletops that begged to be cleared.

After multiple photo stops, time was running out, so unfortunately we had to hightail it back to the visitor centre and say our farewells. Another run down the bottom section of Route 66 brought us back to bar *Mon Bohemi*, populated with other bikers and decorated with all kinds of random retro nonsense. It had been another great day's riding which prompted another bout of ever-taller tales to be replayed over several cold beers and on into dinner that night.

### Maxi for five

Our final day's riding started with some uplift-assisted downhill. Martin drove us up to the top of one of the mountains overlooking the hotel, with the promise of a trail he called Local's Only — a 10km descent that lost over 900m of vertical height as it plummeted back to the hotel in La Massana. Had he saved the best for last? Martin told us how many guests rate this ride as the best of the week, and riding up through sun-dappled forest, it seemed it

It was super-steep, twisty, and dusty, with plenty of rocks and roots thrown in



Vallnord: fit for World Champs and more

might live up to the promise. Again, these wooded trails felt noticeably different from everything else we'd ridden that week. Fast, open ribbons of dirt interspersed with steep rocky sections, all 100 per cent natural, had us whooping all the way down. Flowy and fun, it whetted our appetites not only for lunch, but for one more hit of riding, so we boarded the gondola and headed back up into the Vallnord bike park. To give us a different perspective from the previous day's pure DH experience, Martin took us on a tour of the park's more natural-feeling singletrack. This took in some of the Maxiavalanche course — a mini version of the Megavalanche enduro in Alpe d'Huez — which hugged the contours of the hill more than the conventional red and black runs. This suited our trail bikes as there was less of a technical challenge but had us pedalling hard, as befitting a race like the Maxi. It wasn't long, though, until we were guided down one of Cedric Gracia's off-piste trails. This brought back the technical challenge in spades. It was super-steep, twisty, and



Summer sun... remember that?

dusty as hell with plenty of rocks and roots thrown in for good measure. Needless to say, it pushed the abilities of our trail bikes to their limits! It was only a couple of steep rock-slab chutes near the valley floor that had us walking and questioning our lack of body armour and DH rigs, but other than that our final trail of the week had also been one of the best.

Our time with Singletrack Safari had certainly showcased Andorra's key strength — the variety of trails in such a small area. The natural trails we rode on the cross-country days offered some of the most technical riding I'd ever done. And on top of that are the two bike parks — the gravity set are certainly spoilt for choice and, as a week's lift pass is valid in both, there is easily a full week's descending to be had within the two. This quality and quantity of riding offers an excellent alternative to more established mountain bike destinations, including those in the Alps; I for one will definitely be back for more. **MBR**

## FACTFILE

### Getting there

Andorra is midway between the airports of Barcelona and Toulouse, although Barcelona is the easiest for transfers and for choice of flight operators. We flew with EasyJet but plenty of airlines fly there from the UK. We advise you check how much it costs to fly with your bike if you are taking your own.

### Climate

Being on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees, the weather is generally hot and sunny with little rain during the summer.

### When to go

The best time to visit Andorra is between late May and late September. The bike parks are open from mid-June until late September.

### What to ride

We were all on 140/150mm trail bikes that were ideal for the cross-country days and sufficient for bike park fun. Terrain is dusty and rocky, so big dual-ply tyres are a good idea too. Good quality hire bikes are available, from hardtail through to downhill bikes.

### Thanks to

Andorra Tourism, Oscar Saiz at Grandvalira, Roger Gonzales at Vallnord and Martin at Singletrack Safari ([singletracksafari.com](http://singletracksafari.com)). Martin has spent years speaking to local riders and hiking around the mountains of Andorra to find the best biking trails. He deserves credit for putting together a great package, whether you visit for natural riding or for a gravity week in the bike parks.

Also thanks to fellow guests Bernadette, Ben and Keith for putting up with our media invasion of their holiday!