



Adam Holleyman, right place on the bike, wrong side of the motorway.

Bottom of infamous "Wade's World" track and heading for trouble in yet another of those Benalmadena nights.



Words: STEVE JONES
Action photos: STEVE JONES
Small photos: JON GREGORY

What started as a taste is becoming a rampant addiction. First there were the bikes, then came the good ones. Horizons brought closer, terrain sedated. There is now a need, amongst northern Europeans at least, for undiluted powerful brews of riding. Year round.

That great playground of Europe, the Alps, has seen many villages awake from their brief spring hibernation to welcome the masses of weary and trail hungry Brits. But London would be an underwater tourist attraction before the free-wheel ever overtook the slide-along in those high places. It's no secret that in summer many ski locations are but a shadow of the swarming hives that they are during the darker months of the year. If October and November are the half empty months then summer is the half full.

Sun as well as fun is another need of those north of, well lets guess 48° latitude. The fact is, mountains bring with them their own particular baggage, and that just happens to be weather. It's an unpredictable environment. Now I'm not suggesting for one minute here that riding bikes in the sun is everyone's need, but Malaga on the other hand, no matter which way you measure your glass, is full—on 12 months a year, reaching its steamy zenith probably around late July. Not the time to go I know, but the point is 340 days a year sun is good odds in anyone's book.

That's the time to head east, not for long, maybe two hours tops. That will lead you into the big ones, to the highest mountain in Spain (and that includes the mighty Pyrenees), to the icy peaks of Sierra Nevada towering over

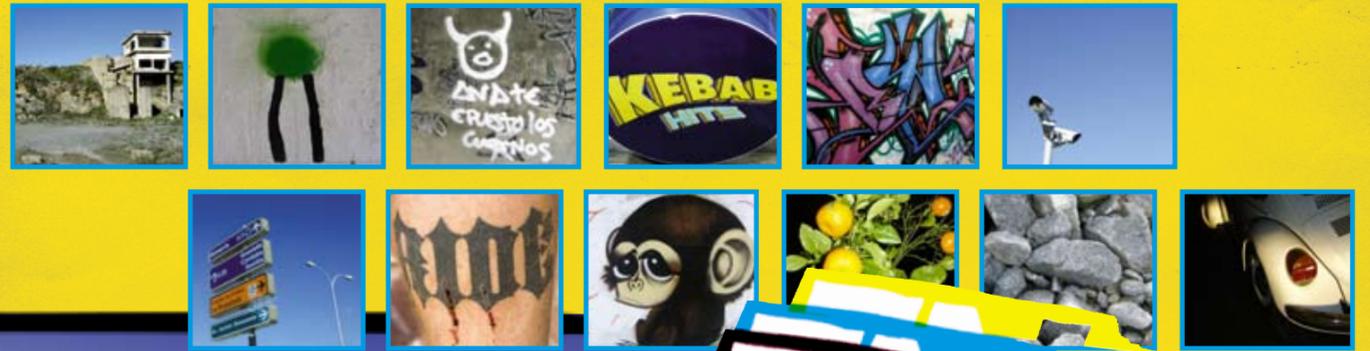
southern Spain at nearly 12,000ft. Yet the lower Sierras don't seem to suffer the cold chill of an alpine valley at any time during the year, not when you can see the Med and Africa. It's all just so different down here. And remember Granada is the same drive time away.

ESCAPE

Malaga is a place of escape not analysis, but unlike the Alps it's a location to come to from October to April. But where the hell to begin in a place of such perilous possibilities on one hand, but within reach a largely undiscovered paradise on the other? And where to place bike riding in that last sentence?

Ironically it could well be in the eye of the storm. Xenophobes might see this as a dark whirlwind, a soaking wet pit of straying meat eaters. A slightly translated version of that might read: kebabs, cider, strippers and clubs, an escape within an escape, a den of iniquity, an island of sin, a place to run from and to all at once.

The dirt jump park bang in the middle of Benalmadena sums up the madness of this place, I mean it's a pretty huge piece of land to be left for playing not paying. In early spring the massive trails are simply stunning. Floodlit with some damn good riding to be seen. It could well be worth Mac Zillions this place, but what the hell. It's a strangely earthy place then. But you'll never forget the paranormal side to this mountainbike location — as Dirt designer Jon Gregory put it, "it's got clubs that are open, definitely not a sausage fest like some summer Alpine resorts, has 24-hour food, and beer at less than a pound a pint. Oh yeah and super hot Spanish birds that you can't talk too because you don't speak the language." It's definitely a place where time gets stolen.



Lower side. Super Tweak.



Mijas. One of the lesser known tracks.

IN^{to} THE eye OF THE STORM SWITCHBACKS MALAGA, Spain 2009 AD



TRACKS

Within a radius of roughly twenty miles there is the possibility of mounting countless sniping attacking runs off the summits and down to the city edge, and then briefly pulling out a few coffees, muffins and the obligatory bottle of Lanjarron water before heading back into the relative safety of the land the other side of the motorway.

I say relative because even though that place can turn your life into turmoil its no plain sailing up on the slopes. The tracks multifariously make their way to the city limits. Recklessly fast or needing some protracted line decisions through some pretty choice rock gardens they can be earthy, loamy, sandy or good old fashioned immovable under foot or tyre. Yet that would be making a generalisation as patently untrue as saying all the restaurants are the same. If Malaga's tracks are wildly diverse, then the eating choices bring another altogether bonkers level of peculiarity.

Mijas is a starting point for any visit. This is where RockShox regularly hold test and press camps. Roughly twenty minutes from the airport you'll have half a dozen runs in by lunch time if your flight lands mid morning. At a rough guess I'm thinking anyone living south of Birmingham would be better off coming here than heading north simply in terms of travel time. At Mijas there's one main start point near the reclaimed land of another of those holes in the ground that made possibly the great barrier along this coastline – the motorway again. It begins rapidly over stony, but I'd imagine perennially dry ground, before dipping into switchbacks, hitting a pile of g-outs before dropping steeply and semi technically onto the first road crossing. From here it's a great series of loose switchbacks, flowing corners, rock and tropical plants, a tough descent through rock, world-class in places, before it flattens for a fair old dose of pedalling concluding in a nice series of turns bringing you back to the finish.

Mijas is fun alright. It's low key, easy to get supplies and a regular spot for downhill training for the locals. When we visited a group of Scandinavians had been wintering there with a big van and shop load of supplies. They'd planned to spend another month before hitting the Maxxis Cup races. Props to the Sunn Poc team, the lads saved us with a pair of Formula pads and entertained us with passing banter all day long.

Two other tracks flank the famous Sram track, one to the west, short and sweet, and one on the road to the masts, loose and tight in places, but both equally quick to uplift. In a day Mijas alone would provide a great attacking base to get the eye in, easy on the skin (it's pretty much all in the trees) and is just outside the zone of visible influence of city life. Safety on the fringes. For all its moments though this area would still be a great place to be loitering around on a six inch bike with sporadic moments of full on speedage because, OK, Peaty can probably break the three minute



Howan Sorrell is no stranger to these pages. Forging right off '911'. That was a long day.

barrier, but hey, who's racing? Don't let the pros lead the show; take it at your own speed. Just remember to stay off the brakes.

The masts are a prominent feature on this part of the coastline, at an elevation of many thousand feet they struggle to be anything else. It's a cold place even in summer. From here everything is visible. The old town of Malaga has a consistent mid-rise, mid-distance horizon, with the great Sierra Nevada reflecting its pristine year long snow just an hour away. Underneath. Danger. The motorway remember. But just on from that the land of one-arm bandits, one night stands, multimillionaires and Datsuns, the towns of Torrelinos and Benalmadena look like they have got out of bed in one hell of a hurry. And it shows. Soaring up out of the silt and sand this unstable place is rock and roll and rock bottom and so totally do-able. If you manage to stay at Switchbacks and not have a night (and morning) in this place, then I'm afraid you're either weird or scared.

From the top of '911' there is no choice but rock – be it roll or bottom. It's fast, it's singletrack and it all points downwards. From here a good 20 to 30 minute descent rolls you off the hill, and the further down you get the harder it gets. The classic is the descent into the motorway bridge that begins at a good tempo but leads into difficult terrain, a rather unforgiving wench this one. You'll have noticed the term unforgiving, whilst most of Malaga is that place where the odd swerve will go without pain, this one is definitely no place to get your knickers in a twist. 'Wade's World' is a tough place, come off here and it will more than likely hurt you.

The left-hand fork. 'Leftism' is marvellously different. Fast, faster again and then as sandy as a Belgian MX GP. Riding at tempo is the only way, but it's hell of a hard to do. But then that's the great thing about this place, it draws you into comfort and then stings you into learning new skills. The right fork version leads to 'Homers Crack' – keep an eye out for the doll and concludes with a sweet run into town via berms and a couple of jumps. All the mast tracks – '911' – are about a twenty minute uplift, mostly exposed to the sun.



James McKnight. Quarry action near 'Happy Days'.

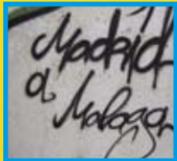


Switchbacks host Mike Saunders.

Some place south of the chairlift, but it's just so much easier to take the Switchbacks hospitality. Kyle Farrow obviously has a lot to think about ahead of him.



IN THE
SWITCHBACKS
MALAGA



In the foreground -- 'Redicator' and behind that the track that leads to the one and only 'Rockadillo'.

HAPPY DAYS

You're just gonna love around the corner at the newly named 'Happy Days'. More of that later, but for now another ultra fast uplift dropping into a two minute tear down. This is hand picked six-inch terrain. Diving, swerving and jumping its way through the forest it's a local uplift that's become internationally renowned. Well if the natives had their way, but for now it's pretty much small-town around here. No in your face bars, just a pleasant backwater sheltered in the eucalyptus, the odd somnolent local dog and a line gaining its name from what it's all about. Orange owner Steve Wade, who spun along with us on our trip, and being a local himself these days (he lives a few hours east), almost crash landed us into a local bar here in the mid-day heat.

Luckily Saunders (Switchbacks man) kept us focussed amidst intimidating pressure to sit down and chill, and within seconds we were winging our way west at a hundred knots towards Montes De Malaga, the range of hills east of the city, the ones that famously empty into the classic drainage channel wall ride shot taken by many BMX photographers.

This hill offers something for everyone, it's even rumoured to harbour a secret track known as Champery 2, but on such a tight schedule we only managed the main line that drops off at one of the first hairpins -- 'La Herradura'. After a minor drop-in not far from where the locals despatch oranges around the suburbs, the track is an earthy mix of ghetto berms, booters and fly-offs. It pretty much rips down the hill at a fair old lick crossing under the motorway through a wallride tunnel and yet again into a 'hood.

A more sociable area you would find difficult to beat and to ride. The eastern environs are quickly developing varied riding. Further up the mountain we managed to ride three freeride type trails based on rabbit, goat and mule tracks linking up and uplifting. There is no end of possibilities.

The best day we kept until last. 'Rockadillo' meets 'Redicator'. The latter as the name would suggest is one for the eccentrics. Unless you're not blown off or blown out in the first three minutes you'll enter the not utterly forgettable valley mid-section before hitting the road shortly peeling off to re-cross it onto a mellow thirty foot table. Thereafter it mellows into some cool low-level single track. It's an OK run but its neighbour -- Rockadillo -- is definitely where all the action is. A snarl of smash-hits of many mutations, it's very simply a hard place to ride a bicycle. Speed it has not much of, but to learn the skill of carrying it has plenty. Heavy on rim and not really the place for the hungover rider, it's a track very much kept until late in the week.



Jon Gregory, the Dirt designer, made this choice off the fork at '911'. It was a good one.



Upper east side of Malaga. Sorrell takes the hit on the lower part of 'La Herradura', one fast and smooth line with super quick access. A great evening session spot.



Nylo Farrow, same corner as previous page, ten minutes later he's in town.



Holleyman again. 'Super Tweak' corner offside to high side. Or is it?



SWIT
MALAG
20

BURN. Tom Deacon on the just-dug Mijas, another of the super quick open tracks.



SLASH. Sorrell slashing the factory Orange on the 'Ridicator'



The host, Mike Saunders, always there for you. 'Rockadillo'.



Gregory taking the big hit down 'Rockadillo'.



James McKnight, Malaga. Anything can happen.



WHAT ELSE?

There were a couple of other tracks which we didn't get the chance to ride, but Michael from Switchbacks described them, "the short one off to the left driving up to the top of SRAM is called err 'Mad Dawwwwwg'. Then more tracks, which you didn't ride, are close to Ojen, which is just this side of Marbella. We have Bubion, which is a techy little number, and then Little Bubion, which is an uber long very techy track ending up back at the motorway. Both named after a waitress in the bar where we eat close to the tracks". You get the picture.

Take a detour into the backstreets of Benalmadena and on a wet day you'll find a labyrinth of fast-living full of pious pub owners and petulant dirt jumpers (or is that the other way around?). This rare old mix, once a pipe dream, now has a Magner's-own cold reality attached.

Coming to a place with so many Brits might all come as a bit of a contradiction to many riders bored of hoards of riders dominating Alpine resorts. Just remember it's Spain and it's definitely no sausage party. Yes it has an element of Vegas meets Rotherham, but only after picking up a few stragglers from the trailheads. It's no comparison to Sin City, but is built on tourism to the nearest inch and as a biker that's definitely a good thing. Maybe it's safety in numbers, it's possibly the fact you're a downhill rider in a very un-mountainbike location. You can see that as a visitor riders here are much less prominent and so it's all a bit looser than the small town mentality rampant of French and Swiss villages out of season. Like I said, the tourists are simply too pissed to notice.

If your need is to ride great tracks that are different every hour of every day, on a variety of surfaces and severity, with fast uplift, reasonable weather, food and beer, easy to get to and easy to escape, then this is your place. Whatever the reason why, Malaga is very different and it works. The Switchbacks trip has to be the ultimate because it's the full deal and is a fair dinkum offer.

WHAT. HOW. WHERE. WHEN

- Contact Switchbacks for a date
- Book a plane to Malaga
- Don't eat for a month
- Get a bike, six inches upward
- Put it in a bag or a box
- Practice your Spanish
- Pack a full face and some body armour
- Some nice after shave
- Dancing shoes
- Practice these words 'Uno rollo kebab, menu uno, por favor' - just in case
- Take a small camera
- Get off the plane and through customs. Wait outside for a large white van and a man with MICHIE written across his face
- Be careful
- Ride your bike like you've been subjected to eight runs of the same three-minute track all winter
- Ride your bike as much as you've spent the last six months pushing your bike to the tops
- Look at the sun
- Sit in it even
- Avoid girls asking you for a dance in places with no dance floor
- Drink lots of water
- Don't be like Steve Peat. Remember how to get back to your hotel
- Don't be a twat

Get on the SwitchbacksDH website to get all the information, and remember, if it all gets a bit too much there's the traditional Switchbacks trip in the mountains.

www.switchbacksdh.com
www.switch-backs.com

