



# SPANISH INVASION

Forget the tourist tat and Red Lion pubs – Malaga offers some of the fastest, dustiest, rockiest downhill riding you've never ridden...

Words Ric McLaughlin Pics Jim Varney

**O**ur guide and Switchbacks DH owner, Michael Saunders, is organising lunch – he laughs and chats into his mobile in fluent Spanish before signing off and declaring, “Boys, it’s rib o’clock!”

Twenty minutes later we’re eating the tastiest rack of BBQ slow-cooked ribs I’ve ever paid less than a fiver for. Silverfish UK’s Pete Drew and I are into

our second day’s riding on a mid-winter break to Malaga with our downhill bikes. We are now both coated in sea-salt and pork.

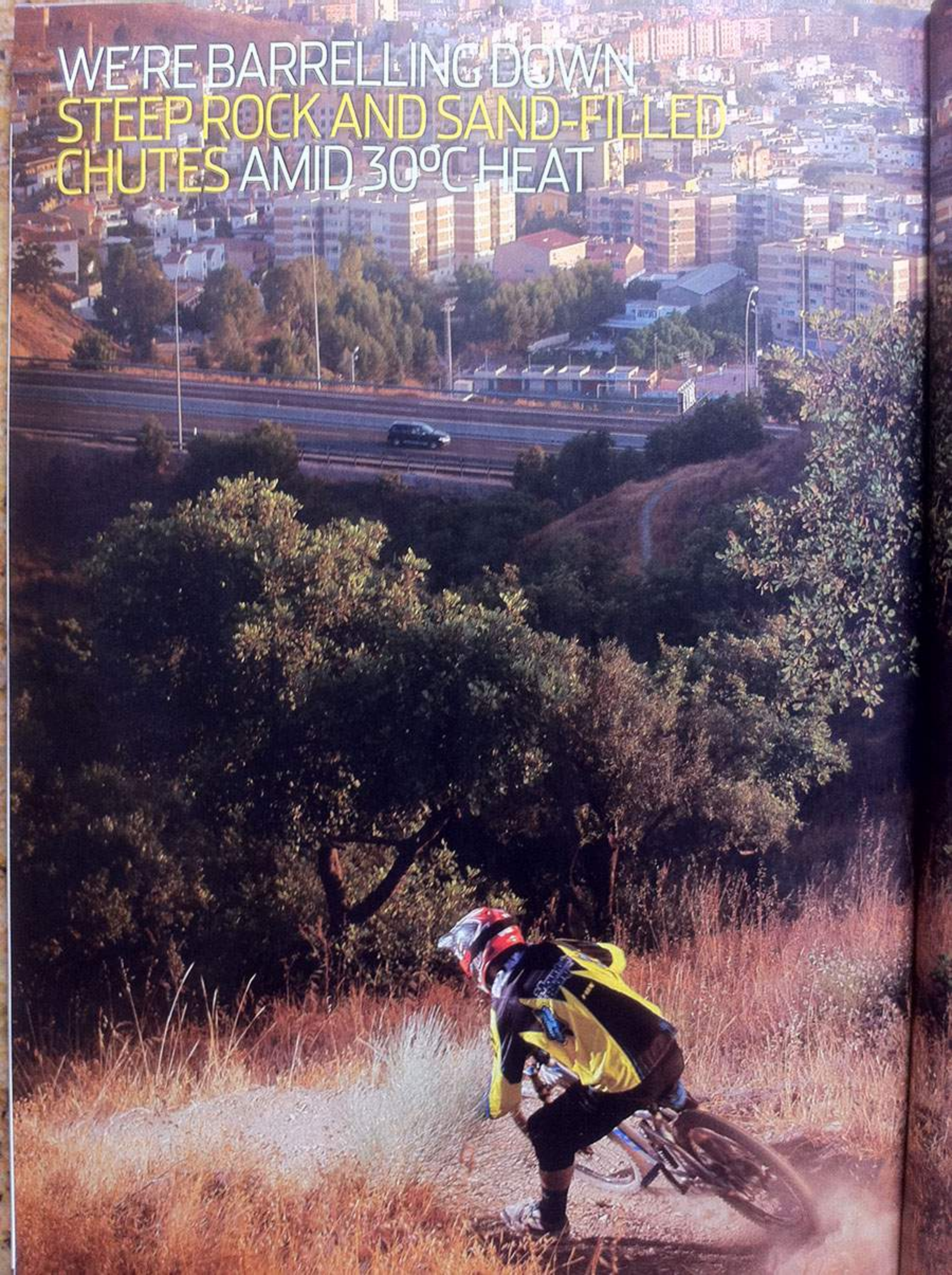
The *tinto de verano* (a chilled combo of lemonade and red wine) is soon flowing before half-an-hour later and packed with protein, we stumble out of the taverna and over to the van. It’s time to hit The Ridiculator! »







WE'RE BARRELLING DOWN  
STEEP ROCK AND SAND-FILLED  
CHUTES AMID 30°C HEAT





9/11 carves a sandy trail through the Spanish greenery



It's not what it looks like! Michael pops Ric's dislocated finger back into place



The gondola provides welcome respite for Ric and his Glory

### Ridiculated...

The climb to the top of the track is long and perilous. Our driver Lucky takes the continental approach however and fires the big Mercedes uplift van up the narrow, quarry roads one-handed, apparently unfazed by the altitude.

We drop into The Ridicator and soon find ourselves barrelling down its steep rock and sand-filled chutes amid the 30°C heat. Strangely lush green trees pepper the otherwise Martian-esque moonscape.

As I'm training behind Pete, a huge rock crops up in the middle of the trail, right in front of me. I smash into it and flip off the bike, hitting the ground hard and taking a big dig to the ribs.

Pulling myself up, my hand is numb and as it turns out I've dislocated a

### Getting there...

...and other such tiny formalities

**FLY** We flew from Bristol Airport to Malaga with our bikes, but you can fly to Malaga from various other UK airports too. Prices vary, so you'll need to book in advance to get the cheapest deal, wherever you fly from. There was a flat rate of £37 for bike carriage though. Oh, and arrive even earlier than normal at the airport to deal with the lengthy wait for oversized baggage.

**SLEEP** Michael at Switchbacks ([www.switch-backs.co.uk](http://www.switch-backs.co.uk)) sorted out our accommodation. Their apartments were comfy, bike-friendly and they had a pool. They were also up in the hills so you can get to the trails in minutes and avoid the tourist grot.

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# IF EVER YOU DON'T WANT YOUR BIKE TO FAIL, IT'S HERE



Michael on flying form at the bottom of The Ridiculator



## Run to the sun

Book it, pack it, disappear!

## Les Gets, France

The British favourite for downhill summer sun – Les Gets offers everything on all budgets and is comparatively easy to reach by van. Think chairlift connected, alpine speedfest and you're not far wrong.

## Finale Ligure, Italy

More fun than a 'sexy party' round Berlusconi's! There are a couple of really good companies offering amazing shuttles down fast and loose goat tracks. *Belissimo!*

## Winterberg, Germany

The Bike Park at Winterberg is one of the lesser-championed European thrash spots. As with most things German though, they weren't messing about when they built this – it's lederhosen-ruining stuff.

## Champery, Switzerland

The home of one of the most challenging World Cup tracks of all time is definitely worth a click. Forget cuckoo clocks and multi-knifed pocket implements and start checking out the Portes du Soleil!

## Sierra Nevada, Spain

Some of the most epic descents in mainland Spain can be found right here. Granada is a hot spot for nightlife while the massive national park and Andalusian mountains offer more riding you could ever hope to fit in a paella. Oi oi!

finger – Michael expertly pops it in on a two count and I roll the final 10 or so minutes of trail back to the van. I can feel the blood coursing into my finger as we go, and by the time we hit the van it's black and nearly twice the size.

The day's riding isn't over though – we climb up through the suburbs to the track known as 556 or Herradura (The Horseshoe). A load of ratty local kids rattle about the road drop into the track, rubbish is strewn all around and it looks and feels shady.

Once the drop is out of the way though it opens into one of the most fun tracks I've ever ridden. The fast

section offers a few kickers into floaty fade-away landings and some stunning ridgeline singletrack. The middle section comprises eight perfectly sculpted berms one after another. Slamming the bike into them and picking up speed is amazing fun. The bike seems to be constantly sideways.

## The twin towers of Mijas

The final morning of the trip sees us tackle the much-hyped 9/11 track (morbidly named for the twin radio towers which sit at its top) near Mijas. We're now high above Malaga City and the beach stretches off into the





## Hydrate or die!

Well, get really ill anyway...

You can not underestimate the importance of drinking plenty of water when riding in 30°C-plus temperatures. It's also well worth investing in decent sweat-resistant sun cream and taking regular breaks in the shade to help your body cope. Electrolyte effervescent tablets are a good bet too before the post-ride beers dehydrate you further. We also recommend freezing your water bottles the night before – they'll gradually defrost so you'll have icy cool water by the end of the first run.



The rocky chutes provide plenty of opportunity for getting loose

The scorching heat makes muddy UK trails seem half a world away



## WETHER SPAINS!

Well, you'd have to wouldn't you?!

Pete and Ric are two classy guys, and where would two classy guys go for lunch in Malaga?! Wether Spains of course! The menu featured 'tapas' that included chicken nuggets, black pudding and fish fingers, and everything came with chips. *Deal or No Deal* was on the telly and no one spoke any Spanish. What more could you want?! On holiday. In Spain.

distance seemingly miles upon miles away. That's where we're headed...

Clouds blow in below us and the feeling of altitude only increases. We push off and are soon blasting through stunning loose singletrack.

"Don't get carried away," Michael warns at a water stop. "A lot of people bin it to the left-hand side because they're not concentrating. You go off that and you'll be at the bottom way before the rest of us!"

I lose my chainring a third of the way in and whip the chain off to make a daunting descent now into the realms of silliness. The switchbacks are terrifying – unbelievably tight and rocky they force you to go slow and tight as the sandy earth on the outside crumbles away to the valley floor with the slightest sniff of a tyre. The final section is forearm-sappingly tough.

Massive rocks litter a tight chute. As you thump through them you can feel the heat bounce back off the surrounding rock walls. If ever you don't want to fall off your bike it's now.

## Happy endings

We all make it down and roll down the road at pace. Ancient churches and sun-bleached houses fizz past, and gradually the Irish bars and combined Italian/Indian restaurants creep in. The quaint Iberian feel crumbles and makes way for tacky British and Danish tourist watering holes.

We crack a beer on the beach and stare out at the water. Everything aches but Malaga has surprised me no end. Take our advice – book a flight, pack the bike and ring Michael. It may just be the best weekend of riding that you ever encounter. ☉



If only they had