

FEATURE
*Spring sun-
seekers*

Right Greek mountain bikers will welcome you and may show you their trails in person. Visit the website on this guy's shorts!



PHOTOS BY ED, BENJI AND DAVE

EARLY-SEASON SUN

Enjoy summer cycling conditions now! **Benji Haworth** and **Ed Oxley** go to Greece with mountain bikes, while **Dave Barter** heads to Majorca with his road bike

GREEK MOUNTAIN BIKING

Plenty of us have been to Greece on holiday. It's one of the most popular destinations for the British tourist. Fewer will have gone during late winter or early spring. And even fewer will have been with the express intention of riding a bike.

For bikers, as with beach holidayers, Greece is extremely well set up for tourism. You can find cheap flight deals all year round. The tourist infrastructure isn't restricted to the summer months. Which is just as well, as the best time to visit Greece for a bit of mountain biking is early in the year or in the autumn.

The summer months are just too hot for cycling. Even the locals don't venture out on bikes much in the day during summer. A lot of Greek mountain bikers stick to nightriding then. Either that or they head out at dawn. Spring and autumn temperatures are milder, ranging from 15-25°C. Ideal.

RIDING OUT FROM ATHENS

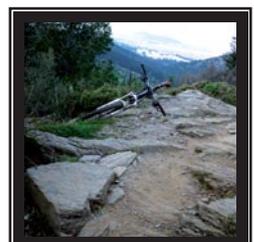
Now we don't want to mention the dreaded 'R' word, as the chances are you won't encounter it, but if it does rain during your visit it will only be for an hour or so. And the trails are so dry that, for a British biker not

used to the parched earth, a sprinkling of rain damps down the dust and arguably makes the riding a bit easier. What's more, you'll probably have the trails to yourself; the locals will wait until the day after to ride.

There is plentiful accommodation, and good accommodation at that. The cost of staying there is still decent value, despite the relatively poor sterling-Euro rate of recent times. As well finding somewhere to stay being as easy as sticking a pin in the map, it's nigh on impossible to find poor food and drink. The Greeks are blessed with amazing fresh ingredients – meats, cheeses and herbs. There are bars, cafés and restaurants everywhere. So you don't have to worry too much about carrying food on you during rides.

Athens is the place to fly into. It's served by lots of airports and budget airlines across the UK. All airports and airlines are used to boxed-up bicycles these days.

Athens is fantastic for sightseeing, since it was the centre of the ancient world. The Acropolis is right in the middle of the city. On a bike, getting around the place is swift and surprisingly straightforward. Yes, traffic can be quite heavy at times but cycling around the city at night is lovely. The traffic is much quieter. The classic tourist destinations are also quieter and arguably even more striking in their floodlit guise. >



DO IT YOURSELF

» Any time between February and April will be fine. Book your flights (approx £150 return plus bike fee). Book accommodation in the heart of Athens that has some bike storage. Purchase some 'overseas minutes' from your mobile phone provider. Blag a cardboard bike box from a bike shop. Fly into Athens. Meet up with your new riding friends from cyclist.gr. Enjoy!

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› Although in its relative infancy as a mountain biking location, Greece already has an impressive network of rideable trails. And it's growing year on year. There's a lot of riding that can be accessed directly from Athens itself.

DUST OFF YOUR SKILLS

The area of Ymmitos is the most popular riding spot for the Athenian mountain biking locals. The trails on the mountain above Ymmitos go up to about 800m (the summit itself is a bit higher). There is a café at around that altitude that does a roaring trade in spinach and cheese pies, spicy sausages and chilled drinks. The trails of Ymmitos offer a mixture of loose, rocky tracks of varying steepness and narrowness.

Some of them are hurtlingly fast, rocky trails, which are best approached with a degree of caution until you get used to the drift, skittish conditions. It's a bit like riding in mud but without the drag! These dusty conditions may feel unnerving at first but, provided you stay rubberside up during your first day there, you'll get used to it. By the end of the second day you'll be drifting about the place with a big grin on your face.

Lower down the slopes of Ymmitos, the trails become a bit smoother and swoopier, snaking past picture-postcard olive trees. In the spring, the trails are lined with wildflowers such as cyclamen. There are lots of herb bushes too. Rosemary, thyme and sage plants that you brush past as you ride release intoxicating scents.

GREECING YOUR WHEELS

If you feel the need to explore further afield and have access to a hire car, another mountain an hour's drive north of Athens is Mount Parnitha. The car hire and drive are well worth it, as the place is one of the Greek mountain biker's most loved spots. Probably the best riding in the whole country can be found on Mount

Above Greece is too hot for mountain biking in summer, but early or late season it's just right. The lack of traction on dusty trails takes a little getting used to for UK riders familiar with soggy conditions

Parnitha. The terrain here offers a slightly different type of riding. These are smoother, hard-baked trails with a bit more flow to them.

So: how to find the trails? The best option is to ask a local. You can do this online before leaving home. There's a website called cyclist.gr that has an English-speaking forum, populated by Greek mountain bikers who are happy to show you their riding spots. Brits post on there saying 'I'm coming on holiday to Greece and would like to do a bit of mountain biking, can anybody point me in the right direction?' Without fail, they get a response. Local people hook up with them and go riding. By far the best attribute that Greece has to offer the British mountain biker is the Greek mountain biker.

SUN SEEKING

Greece isn't the only great destination for early season mountain biking.



Where: Andalucia, Spain
Temp: 20°C (March average high) **Flight costs:** £77 approx to Malaga (British Airways) **Guide:** Head away from the Costa Del Sol and up into the Sierra Nevadas. The hills are covered with excellent singletrack 'donkey trails'. The weather can throw in some rain but it never lasts long.



Where: Gran Canaria, Canary Islands
Temp: 21°C (March average high) **Flight costs:** £130 approx to Gran Canaria **Guide:** Beloved of road cyclists, there's plenty for the adventurous mountain biker. Head away from the coast into the gorgeous National Park. It's lush and loamy for a volcanic isle.



Where: Finale Ligure, Italy
Temp: 15°C (March average high) **Flight costs:** £78 approx to Genoa **Guide:** A real hotbed of technical singletrack mountain biking. Much loved by Italian bikers and anyone who's ever ridden there. One of the hidden gems of international mountain biking.

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MAJORCAN ROAD RIDING

An endearing feature of my cycling club is its determination to ride whatever the weather. We brave wind, hail, snow and rain throughout autumn and winter, consoling ourselves that it won't be long until our annual migration to warmer climes. This usually occurs in May, though we have gone earlier. We've travelled far and wide as a group, covering the Alps, north and south Italy, and have even considered a USA coast-to-coast. This time our collective fingers pointed at Majorca.

Majorca's climate is classed as 'Mediterranean', no surprise given its location off the coast of Spain. Between February and May, average high temperatures range from 15-22 degrees Celsius. Early or late in the cycling season, it's one of the places to be – as the 55,000 or so cyclists who make the trip annually to join organised training camps there prove. Partly it's the warm, stable climate; partly it's the fantastic cycling. Majorca has a mix of flat, undulating, mountainous and coastal roads, many of them relatively traffic free and well-surfaced.

WINDING DOWN

Many cyclists head straight for the north coast on arrival as this gives the widest variety of riding options. We made no exception to this rule and rented a villa in Pollenca capable of sleeping our group of nine. Three hired people carriers allowed us to squeeze ourselves and our bikes within, and our early

Above Spanish tarmac is billiard table smooth compared to UK roads – ideal for 23mm tyres. While much of Majorca is fairly flat or rolling, the mountains in the north offer excellent cycling. Since it's a popular tourist destination, there are plenty of cafés

morning flight meant that we were unpacked and ready to make our first ride late in the afternoon of the same day.

Our orange peloton wound out of the villa and up the road towards Sa Pobla: destination, a market square bistro that our ride leader Malcolm was familiar with. Quiet roads and keen riders made short work of the relatively flat route, and we were soon sipping espresso in the late afternoon sunshine and planning the subsequent day's expedition into the mountains to the northwest of the island.

The road down to the coastal village of Sa Calobra is one of the island's most renowned cycling features. It was constructed in 1932 by the Italian engineer Antonio Piretti, who defied the steep slopes with





“BASE LAYERS WERE SWAPPED FOR SUN BLOCK. IT WAS GOING TO BE HOT”

beautifully curved roads laid upon reconstructed cliff faces in a dash down to the sea. The road drops from the Coll de Cals Reis to sea level in 10 kilometres of riding, losing 723 metres in the process. The only cycling route back is to return the way you came. We couldn't wait.

COFFEE, CLIFFS, SPARKLING SEA

We were up early in eager anticipation, only a brief fight for the breakfast cereals interrupting our haste to get out into the sunshine. Majorca has a relatively stable climate when compared to the UK, and on this day we relived the stereotype as base layers were swapped for sun block. It was going to be hot.

We left Pollença and it wasn't long before we were climbing a long, rolling road, winding through a jumble of scrub, tended fields and small rocky gorges. The route began relatively traffic free and we relaxed into the rhythm of club cyclists, swapping the lead and taking it in turns to become butt of the current joke. Road surfaces were particularly impressive, almost as if they had been expecting us and laid out the cycling equivalent of a red carpet: smooth,



DO IT YOURSELF

» A return flight to Palma with a big bike box will cost around £250. Car hire will add a further £80 to £200 per week to this.

There is a huge choice of accommodation options across the island. Useful websites include...

- mallorca-cycling.com
- globalspokes.com/Mallorca/mallorca-routes.htm
- allaboutmallorca.com
- ownersdirect.co.uk/balearic-islands-mallorca-2bed.htm
- lodging-world.com/sp/mallorca/bed-and-breakfasts
- bedandbreakfastworld.com
- velosportmallorca.com
- majorca68.co.uk

unbroken tarmac.

We gained height easily, wending our way to the Sa Calobra descent. And what a descent it was, some of the tightest hairpins I have ever experienced on a road. The first major descent of the holiday was taken tentatively by most as the road was shared with holiday traffic and buses full of sightseers. We regrouped at a café overlooking the sea and fuelled smiles with coffee and pasta in anticipation of the climb back up to the top. Surrounded by huge vertical cliffs and crystal clear water, our motivation to leave was difficult to find. But the climb to the top provided equal reward: long, occasionally steep, scattered with views, and perfectly surfaced.

Retracing our steps to the villa proved a fast and furious descent down the long climb we had laboured up earlier in the day. We dared each other faster down a relatively safe descent, whooping our way back to base. We hoped the following days would follow a similar pattern. They did.

DRIVERS DON'T HATE YOU

Majorca feels like it's been designed to provide variety for the road cyclist. We completed long, flat routes, moving rapidly as a peloton, practising the maximisation of our speed with minimal energy. The Majorcan motorists appeared to be well-acclimatised to bunches of lycra-clad cyclists moving at speed. We were generally treated with caution and most rides passed without incident.

We visited historic sites, such as the monastery at >

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Left and above
Majorcan drivers are used to encountering cyclists in groups. There are some great views as the island rises to 1,445m at its highest. Author Dave catches some sun

“THE BEST WAS SAVED UNTIL LAST: AN ASCENT INTO THE MOUNTAINS ABOVE SOLLER”

› Puig de San Salvadorp, reached after a brief alpine-style climb. We rode alongside the coast, including a beautiful route that took us out onto the peninsula of Cap de Formentor, where we rested and admired the lighthouse that sits near the end. Café and bar stops were plentiful, and welcome in the humid weather.

The best was saved until last: an ascent into the mountains above Soller, including the Coll Puig Major, which at 880m is the highest public road on the island. This was everything a foreign bike ride should be. It was a long and demanding ascent up into the mountains, with time to visualise oneself as part of a professional peloton attacking a hard mountain stage. But as amateurs we allowed ourselves the distraction of opportunistic photo stops to capture the scenery.

An old hand-cut tunnel takes the road through the top of the mountain and then down into the town of Soller below.

RIDE, EAT, SLEEP, RIDE

Wearily we retraced our steps back to the villa with a long and involved route of back roads, small towns and frequent cries of ‘Are we there yet?’. Nine cyclists collapsed by the villa’s pool and attempted to

BOXING CLEVER

Most of us took expensive bikes and opted for hard case bike boxes for maximum protection. I used a Roof Top Touring Bike Box (£225, but less from ctcshop.org.uk). It is smaller than most boxes but required more bike disassembly. Others had Scicon Aerotechs (£632) – much more expensive but much easier to pack. Our bike boxes added about £30 to the airfare and required a mini-bus and trailer to get to the airport plus three people carriers at the other end. It may have made economic sense to hire bikes instead. But would you do a week on someone else’s bike? The boxes took a beating on the flights; mine arrived home minus a wheel.



nominate each other as chef. But that night, like most evenings, we ate out.

Over pizza, we reflected upon our week’s riding. Majorca had provided us with everything we needed for seven days on the bike. English is widely spoken and we’d had little issue buying cycling snacks or evening meals. The island is well-scattered with bike shops, some of them complete with English proprietors.

The road network is well-maintained and diverse. Route finding is straightforward, with most roads well-signed and detailed paper or electronic maps available. We found it easy to construct loops based around the group’s daily requirements and also to take the odd shortcut when legs ran out of steam. There are plenty of websites recommending a wide variety of routes and providing advice to visiting cyclists. We were based in the north of the island, but had managed to include rides that took us all the way down to the south coast.

The ‘do-it-yourself’ approach had worked for us. We had ridden the week by group consensus and nobody went home feeling they had been forcibly dragged around the island. Many package tours are run as training camps, with riders split into groups according to speed and ability. These are a cheaper option but they weren’t for us – our peloton would have been scattered across the groups.

It was great to spend the time together. We still got in plenty of cycling, as our ‘cycling stripes’ – razor-sharp tan lines matching shorts and jerseys – proved when we returned home. ☺