

Seeking an escape from Scotland's autumn rain, **Markus Stitz** and his partner Louise spent five days bikepacking on Spanish Greenways

**T**he scent of pine trees filled the warm air as our tyres scrunched over a dusty gravel track. The mountains of the Sierra Espuña towered above, the highest peak 1,583m. It was hard to imagine that this was once nothing but barren desert.

Ecologist Ricardo Codorníu started reforesting the area in 1889, the same year Scotland's iconic Forth Bridge was completed. His efforts earned him the title 'apostle of the tree', and they provided us with a very pleasant second day of cycling in Murcia.

While we had originally planned this trip for June, I was more than happy that we had postponed our journey to the end of September. On the night we arrived, it was still hot and muggy. Two days into our trip, the air had cooled down significantly, signalling the start of autumn in Spain. We both agreed that the conditions for cycling were close to perfect.

### Travelling light

Our five-day trip started from Cartagena and took us on gravel paths, quiet roads, Vías Verdes (Greenways) and singletrack paths to the holy city of Caravaca de la Cruz, then on to Murcia. For me, it was a short break before running my last event in the UK, the Dunoon Dirt Dash, and then heading off on a monthly work visit to the US and Canada.

**Opposite page, clockwise from top left:** Gravel track near Las Palas. Arroyo de Burete viaduct on the Vías Verdes del Noroeste. Sierra Espuña Regional Park. The holy city of Caravaca de la Cruz



My partner Louise, currently on a sabbatical from her work at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, joined me for this credit-card bikepacking trip. We both needed time off after a busy summer – and from a September that had been very wet in Scotland.

I wasn't sure what to expect, but there were good reasons to visit: an extensive network of former railway lines that would form the backbone of our journey; the opportunity to visit one of only five holy cities in the world; and the ability to order food well after 8pm. We were not disappointed.

Day one started with an early breakfast at our hotel in Cartagena, followed by a quick bike assembly session and the usual realisation that, even with only one piece of checked luggage between us, we had packed too much. We had rooms, dinner and breakfast booked in advance, and with temperatures like a hot Scottish summer, we didn't need to carry much. Half our stuff stayed behind in the hotel as we set off.

### Day one: terrain hilly, battery flat

With 1,300m of climbing packed into 86km, the first day was also by far the hardest, with the longest

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climb right at the end. About halfway through the day we joined the Campo de Cartagena Greenway, one of many in the region. This was cycling heaven, a traffic-free track with smooth gravel for about 15km. On the edge of the Greenway,

we spotted lots of chupaeros. These small snails, found in orchards and fennel fields, are commonly used in the cuisine of the region of Murcia, although harvesting them in the wild is banned.

I had the suspicion that the first day would be a bit too much for Louise's e-bike. And as we rolled into Totana, our last big town for the day, the battery was down to 3%. Thankfully, Louise and I can easily swap bikes. Shortly after we left the town boundary, I found myself reminded of my singlespeed trip around the world. This time I had gears but was pedalling 400m uphill on a heavy bike with no motor assistance.

Later than anticipated, we rolled into our accommodation just as it got dark. We were delighted to find a wonderfully decorated room in the Mirador de Aledo Hotel, nestled in beautiful countryside, with a view towards the mountains of the Sierra Espuña. Even better, this wasn't like Scotland where ordering →