



Clockwise from left: Cueva Negra, by the Río Quípar, where the Heidelberg Man was discovered. Climbing out of the city of Murcia on Carretera Puerto del Garruchal. Vía Verde del Noroeste between Cehegin and Bullas



After riding on a mixture of nice gravel tracks and some quieter roads, we found ourselves in a steep-sided gorge. The river in the gorge hadn't dried up – a novelty on the trip so far – and it was incredibly beautiful. Above us towered Cueva Negra, the Black Cave, the site of the discovery of the Heidelberg Man (*Homo heidelbergensis*), who appears to be the direct precursor of the Neanderthals. I didn't realise its significance in the moment but found out later when reading more about the place.

The riding from here was a bit surreal. The champagne colour of the fields matched that of the smooth gravel tracks that took us to the city boundary of Caravaca de la Cruz, while green forests loomed in the background. Walking the quiet streets of the beautiful town and enjoying another fabulous meal was the perfect end to another great day.

Day four: freewheeling downhill

On our fourth day we were accompanied by José, a local guide from The Osados. Our route would be longer than 100km, so Louise wasn't sure if she'd once again end up without assistance, but our initial fears were groundless. We rode mainly downhill towards Murcia on the Noroeste Greenway.

“Another welcome difference from cycling in Scotland was the attitude of the drivers”

José knew all the good food stops along the route. After a few kilometres we rolled into our first café, followed by a stop at a bakery and a late lunch in a tapas restaurant. Again, the landscape felt dreamlike: white, chalky terraced cliffs, intersected by the former railway line. The closer we got to Murcia, the greener our surroundings became.

José left us at the hotel, and our bikes found a final resting place for the night in a proper bike garage, which could easily hold up to 20 bikes. After a sunrise loop in the Carrascoy y El Valle Regional Park, I was curious why José suggested another round trip instead of closing the loop by cycling to Cartagena.

Day five: trails to rails

We scoped out a route from Murcia to Cartagena and

Getting there

Environmentally friendly: Edinburgh to Cartagena can be done by train: Edinburgh to London King's Cross by LNER, St Pancras International to Lille by Eurostar, and onward by TGV and other trains through France and Spain to Cartagena. The journey takes just over a day.

Not environmentally friendly: The closest airport is Alicante. There are frequent flight connections to most major British airports. Bike charges: Jet2 £40, Ryanair £60.

Public transport from the airport: Direct coach/bus from Alicante–Elche Airport to Cartagena. Or airport bus to Alicante and then a Renfe train to Cartagena. The direct bus from Alicante Airport to Murcia (operated by ALSA) takes about 55 minutes.

took the train back to our hotel. In comparison to the four days we had just spent in the saddle, the 75km route to the train station was quite boring. It reminded me of a previous trip to Spain, where cycling along the coast turned out to be much less attractive than in the mountains further inland.

Our train fare back to Murcia was only €6, and we had still spent a good day cycling in the sun. While Louise enjoyed the view from the pool on the rooftop of the hotel, I added another loop on the bike in the Carrascoy y El Valle Regional Park to enjoy the sunset.

José picked up Louise's e-bike and gave us a lift back to the airport. He left us with the words 'Mi casa, su casa' – my house is your house. And Louise and I agreed that this surely wasn't the last time we'd be bikepacking here. 🌞