



Andalucian ACTION ADVENTURE

What's Spain got that we haven't? The original Sierra Nevada, that's what. Ruth Brooker drops in to ride dusty trails under sapphire skies. And there's an uplift too – down we go!

Words: Ruth Brooker Pics Jim Varney

Out in front of me are 3,000m peaks, a Spanish odyssey of sun, er, snow, and sangria. There's not a breath of wind and the sun warms my legs as we cycle up a rocky ridge with a backdrop of mountains shimmering in the haze and a bustling metropolis below us. I'm in Sierra Nevada riding with Shaun Allan who, with his partner Csilla, runs Ride Sierra Nevada from Monachil, a small village up in the foothills above Granada.

These guys used to run a bike shop in London, but seven years ago, they

decided to swap the frantic city streets for the relaxed pace of life and sun-soaked dusty trails of southern Spain. Can't blame them! Over the years, plenty of my UK friends have ridden here and they all come home drooling about the sunshine and amazing trails. I couldn't bear it any longer so I set off to fulfil my fantasies.

We arrive late in the quiet darkness to a tall townhouse that's full of Spanish character and nestled in tight, cobbled streets. After a swift nightcap it's a relief to hear the ride starts at an extremely sociable 11am.

The morning dawns and our shutters are thrown open to reveal cloudless, royal blue skies. The sunlight streams into the kitchen where another group of riders are chatting and laughing over coffee. This is a great day for riding. Our stay has overlapped with a boisterous bunch of 50-somethings, here for a long weekend. We tuck into breakfast and laugh at their stories of how they began mountain biking on rigid bikes in baggy tracksuits back in the 80s. It's an image that's hard to shake, but fortunately there's some top trails to steal our attention. >>

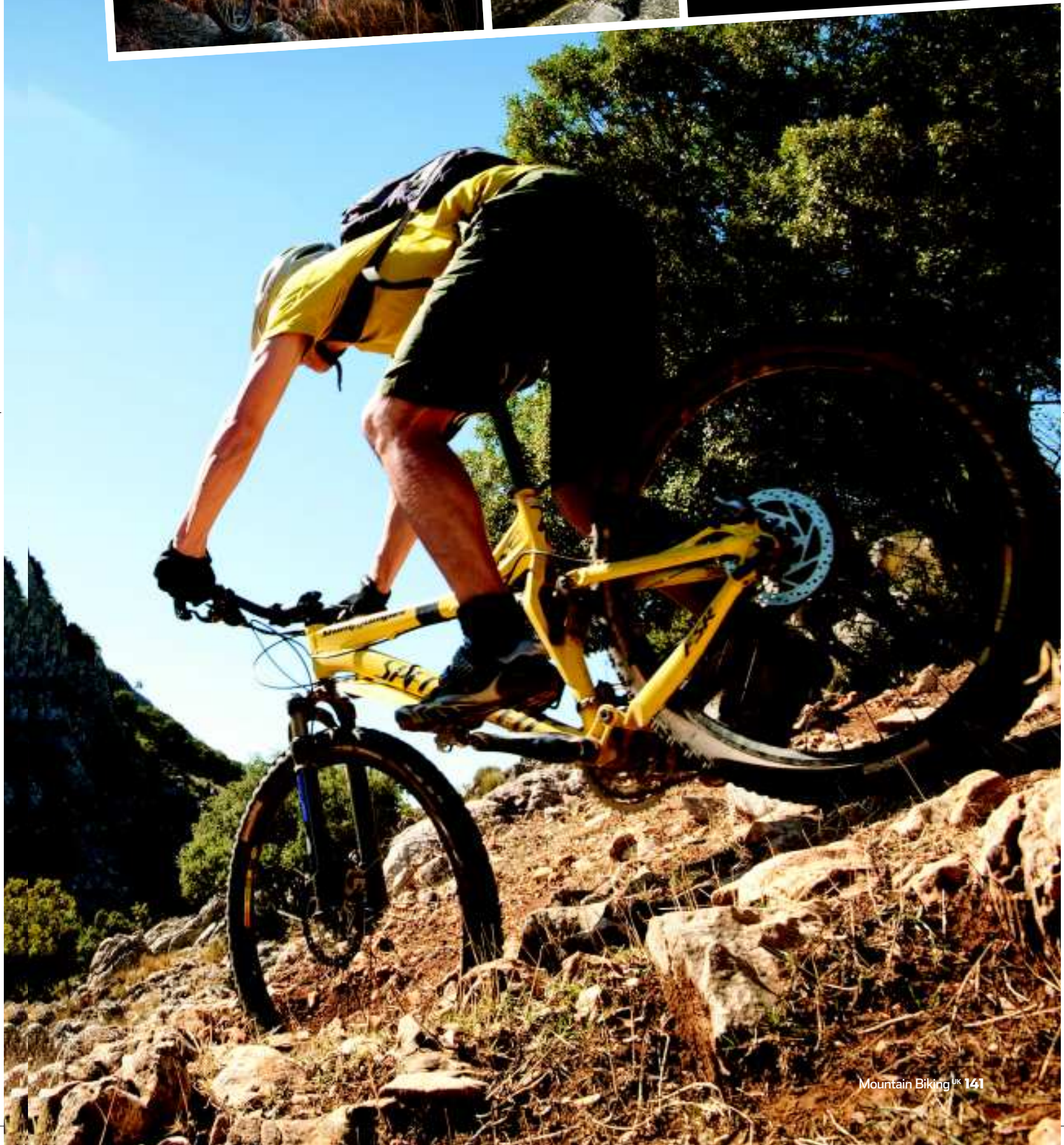


Just... keep... pedalling...



Monachil is full of Spanish charm and character

Forget the beach, all you need for the perfect Spanish holiday is sun and trails





The group rides through the tight streets on the way to the off-road action

Peaks, plateaus, rocks and trees – the ideal riding companions

and feels unnervingly out of control. I chant ‘speed is your friend’ in my head. The trail then firms up into a technical rocky rollercoaster where I suddenly find myself – albeit unintentionally – only riding on the front wheel. I stop breathing for a few seconds, but somehow hold it together and bounce through it.

At the top we’re met by a stunning panorama of peaks, and a bright indigo butterfly skips in front of my wheel. It’s the perfect place to stop and see off Csilla’s sandwiches – they’re made with produce from her garden, and especially with the calories we’re burning, they’re a daily highlight of the trip. Not having to make your own butties somehow feels like luxury. On DIY bike trips you also have to map read, things often don’t turn out as expected and all the best trails can seem tantalisingly out of reach. Here it’s all so indulgent – you only have to get dressed, eat what’s put in front of you and follow the ever-enthusiastic Shaun.

No brakes

It’s now mostly downhill with a cracking fast, flowing descent through the woods. Shaun suggests, “You should ride this with no brakes or pedalling,” and disappears into dust. If steered well it’s so smooth it feels like flying, but I admit I cheated on the no brakes bit. I bet I wasn’t the only one. After dropping into the village, we hit the terrace bar for



Enrique Iglesias’ latest concert was another flop... best to just ride on by



Beer and tapas are not far below



Time for a quick respite under Sierra Nevada’s royal blue skies

Despite it being the first day, I’m glad to get an uplift out of the steep village – my preparation for riding in big Spanish hills was pootling around Bristol’s comparatively flat Ashton Court. This is on another scale. On the way up we pass a sweaty, ashen-faced bloke who rented a bike earlier and hasn’t yet reached the start of the hour-and-a-half off-road climb. Yep, sitting in the van is the place to be.

Speed is your friend

After filling bottles with cool spring water, we begin tackling the long grind that winds up gently through the lush valley. Compared to the UK, where the ups tend to come in shorter bursts, it’s a pretty big start for a mixed bag of riders, but it’s OK as long as you just keep the pedals turning. Our effort pays off with a tricky descent through a dried-up riverbed, which has revealed an unearthly lunar landscape to navigate. It’s like surfing a bike on shifting sands

Stay off the brakes on the descent and it feels like you're flying



Euro zone

Cycle travel ideas with our European pals

ANDALUCÍA: An alternative cycle guide in the Sierra Nevada area is www.freeridespain.com

SLOVENIA: Despite being neighbours with Austria and Italy, the trails here are relatively undiscovered – www.mountain-beach.co.uk

THE FRENCH ALPS: For classic, popular Alpine trails head to Morzine – www.flowmtb.com

SPANISH PYRENEES: Enjoy cycling, surfing and a mix of French and Spanish culture – www.basquemtb.com

ITALIAN DOLOMITES: If you fancy a truly epic ride, try a 10-day ride from Austria to Italy – www.transalpriders.com



In case your Spanish is bad like ours, this is where you hire bikes

après-bike beers and nuts. All rides finish with afternoon beer – it's perfect.

Monachil has a friendly atmosphere and a proper rural Spanish identity. It's refreshingly un-touristy and nobody speaks English. My Spanish is pathetic but luckily Shaun trots off to order. At Ride Sierra Nevada there's a very laidback attitude – Shaun goes the extra mile on hospitality but always manages to make it feel like he's your mate, not a guide. And he's totally passionate about riding – he and Csilla even go mountain biking on their holidays.

We head out on a bigger point-to-point ride on day two that feels like a travelling adventure. It involves two big climbs, one of them an epic thigh buster. But while we're grinding up there's time to take in the view – a family of deer skittering down a vertical mountainside – and the perfectly fresh air. On the final descent we're all riding on the edge of our ability – skidding off the steep, loose summit and teetering down exposed switchbacks without brakes fully locked and eyeballs bulging. There was blood loss from several knees that day.

Sierra Nevada translates as 'snowy mountain range' and at the foot of these peaks is the cosmopolitan and historic city of Granada, which makes it a unique cycling destination. In one ride you could potentially play in the empty mountain wilderness and a few hours later be sipping sangria and eating tapas. Our last ride before a rest heads straight from the door via sublime singletrack to Granada. My legs are struggling to keep up now, but today's cycling is a lighter



workload. The route is a mix of urban and rural tracks through hills, alongside the river and down into the flamenco quarter. It finally emerges next to the spectacular Alhambra Palace. We then zip through tight city streets, bump down steps and scare tourists.

On our last day I avoid imminent death on a steep, sketchy switchback by accidentally shoving my arm into an extremely prickly bush. Nightmare. It might sound pathetic, but the spines here are like massive needles. I suppress a wail and lever it out, but will be picking splinters out for days.

So my stiff legs and stinging arm are not sorry to be heading home but I am. The trails here are some of the best I've ever ridden – there's so much variety and almost limitless potential for adventures. Strangely, the hills are empty. The Spanish wear tight team lycra to burn up the firetrack... and then back down the firetrack. Weird. We were only once interrupted by a shepherd and his goats. But the best bit? No bike washing! ⚙️



This man, his dogs and his goats were the only other beings on the mountain

Essential equipment

What you need to know for a top trip

WHEN TO GO: Andalucía is an all-year-round riding destination, but cycling during the peak months of July and August will be very hot. The best times to visit are spring and autumn when it's sunny but cooler.

WHAT KIT TO TAKE: Helmet, gloves, pads (optional), several pairs of padded shorts, water bottles, pump, two spare inner tubes, jacket, puncture repair kit, SRAM Powerlink (or equivalent), multi-tool, sunscreen, cycling glasses. In winter, make sure you pack

extra clothing to wear higher up the mountain where it's much colder.

BIKE SPARES: Shaun does have a workshop, but it's difficult to find specific bike parts should there be kit destruction. We took spare rotors, brake pads, rear mech hangers, chains, and one tyre, just in case. Take a pedal spanner for putting bikes back together.

BIKE HIRE: If you leave your bike at home, you can hire bikes. Shaun has Kinesis Phaze 5 hardtails or Kinesis xc120s for 25 Euros per day.





The hazy mountains loom 3,500m into the sky

Travel details

"Carry your bags, sir?"

Flights: EasyJet and RyanAir both fly to Andalucía. We flew with EasyJet to Malaga. RyanAir fly to Granada, which is much closer to Monachil. Expect to pay between £120-170 per person including bike carriage, depending on the time of year. Check out www.easyjet.com or www.ryanair.com for more information. These airlines request that your bike is dismantled and contained in a bike box or bag. For a cheap solution, visit your local bike shop and grab a cardboard bike box, but make sure you tape it up well.

Holiday package: We stayed with Ride Sierra Nevada in Monachil: www.ridesierra.com. A week's trip costs 430 Euros per person. This includes seven nights accommodation, airport transfers, breakfast, five guided rides, uplifts and sandwiches for lunch. A long weekend costs 250 Euros per person. This includes three nights accommodation, airport transfers, breakfast supplies, three guided rides, uplifts and sandwiches for lunch. Non-riders are also welcome – contact Shaun for prices.

You know you're in Spain when you see a giant cut-out of *el toro*...

