

Andalucian adventure

If you're after springtime sun, Spain has plenty to offer, as Ben Searle and Tamar Thompson found when they rode from Seville to Granada by tandem...



Climbing up from Villanueva de la Concepción, a 10 per cent climb loomed as far as we could see. The temperature was 34°C and the sun beat down, with the rocky, arid landscape radiating back its heat in the late afternoon. We had already climbed some 800m that day on our 'leisurely' tour. Perhaps we had overdone our attempt to break out of a run of wet, chilly UK camping trips?

The idea behind the tour was to link two of Spain's great cities, Seville and Granada, via the historic town of Ronda and a range of sierras and national parks. We began in Seville and enjoyed the tapas, busking guitarists and views of sun-dappled plant-strewn courtyards – big plates of caracoles (small snails) were the seasonal dish. However, it was soon time to hit the road. Well, not quite; we decided to hit the rails to escape the city and suburbs. So with our two-part tandem still in its bags, we took the train 40km to Marchena, which was our best jumping-off point for the mountains.

Flat trails or the 'Khyber' pass

Pedalling due south, the road began to undulate, the lorries, cars and industry filtered away and by Coripe the landscape rewarded us with natural forest, including carob trees and groups of bee-eaters – one of Europe's most exquisitely coloured birds. Many of the rivers we crossed were dried up, however the Rio Guadalporcun located at the bottom of a deeply wooded gorge was the exception.

Running alongside it was the enticing Via Verde de la Sierra. Via Verdes (www.ffe.es/viasverdes) are the Spanish equivalent to Sustrans, converting old railways to non-motorised use. This one links Puerto Serrano to the west and Olvera to the east and includes 24 unlit tunnels, the longest 1km in length. From Olvera you could then take a small and relatively gentle road to Ronda. We were set on a different course and ended our first day in Algodonales. This is a well-kept town on the edge of the Parque Natural Sierra de Grazalema. A bottle of tinto was the most lovely Tempranillio we'd ever enjoyed.

Now the real ascent began as we climbed to the pretty white hill-side town of Zahara. During the tour the sweat and effort of ascent was very often rewarded by the sight of a beautiful white hill-top town with its lure of cool shady bars. We settled for

freshly pressed orange juice saving the cerveza for later. It was just as well because Tamar, my wife, thought that the daunting road ahead looked like the Khyber Pass. It was then on through steep gorse-scented hillsides in the heat and up the 1320m Puerto de las Palomes.

Lots of graffiti for Iban Mayo was painted on perfectly smooth tarmac roads which told of the second stage of the 2002 Vuelta when it came this way. Mayo was to come in 9th place on that day just behind Britain's David Millar while Aitor Gonzalez won. As we toiled in the heat we did question our wisdom and the advantages of that Via Verde. Lots of cyclists passed us coming the other way on a training camp or possibly an organised tour. Quite a number of companies run both in the area.

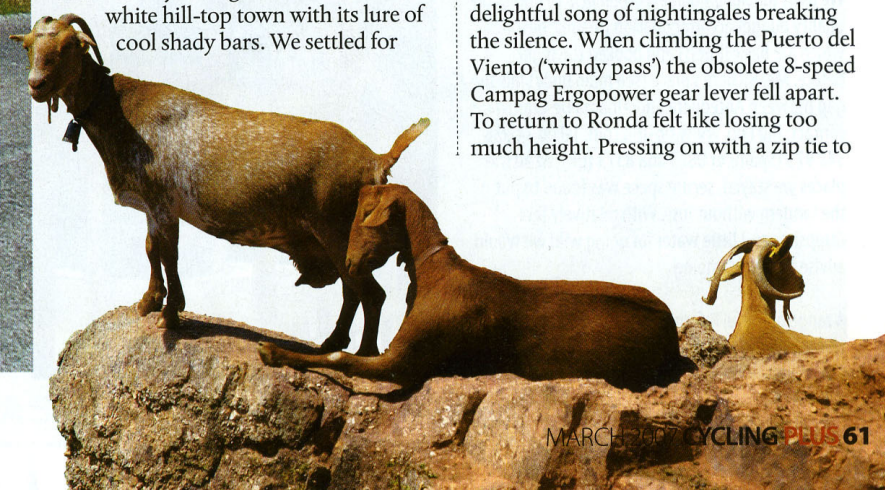
A quick descent went through a refreshing pine forest to Grazalema. It was 3pm and we had cycled as much as we had wanted to – so we went native by taking a siesta at the Casa de las Piedras. A simple room, comfy bed with clean, crisp sheets and a very friendly welcome for just 22 euros was certainly good enough for us. We rarely had to pay much than this anywhere else for the rest of the trip.

Surprisingly, the Parque Natural Sierra de Grazalema receives more rain than anywhere else in Spain, owing to its proximity to the sea, northerly aspect and dense tree cover. Fortunately, we saw none of it. We headed off east through holm and cork oak woods, the main road followed the mountainside contours and drivers were friendly and cautious. Lots of birds sang and it was deliciously cool – as an alternative starting point to the trip, Arcos de la Frontera further west would give you more time in these woods.

Another perfect cycling road took us towards Benaolán, the trees giving way to more of a Wild West scene with massive rocky outcrops and large cacti. We took refuge from the heat in a bar together with an armed beer-drinking policeman! It's quite a climb up to Ronda, the regional centre, built on a gorge that drops sheer for 130m. Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* recorded how prisoners were thrown alive into the gorge during the civil war. Acrobatic choughs, a graceful type of crow with a curved orange bill, wheel around under its famous bridge.

Nightingales and bandit country

Peaceful roads lay to the east with just the delightful song of nightingales breaking the silence. When climbing the Puerto del Viento ('windy pass') the obsolete 8-speed Campag Ergopower gear lever fell apart. To return to Ronda felt like losing too much height. Pressing on with a zip tie to





we had our gears back with the aid of a cheapo thumb-shifter. However, we'd just missed the town's 'Día del Pedal', a celebration of cycling when 800 cyclists had taken to the streets.

A delayed start meant riding in the heat of the day, up a steadily steepening climb towards the Torcal National Park, with a final 3.5km at 10 per cent. This nearly led to a mutiny from the back of the tandem with mutterings of "it had better be worth it". Thankfully it was. The park is a stunning unique limestone landscape with formations formed by karstic action (erosion and corrosion), and has been used as a setting for science-fiction films. It is also renowned for 30 species of orchids. Don't try the park walks in cleated cycling shoes!

The oddballs arrive...

The descent began with an 'aeroplane window' view of tiny patchwork fields and Malaga in the distant haze. What would have been a quick drop to Villa Nueva de la Concepción was broken up by the repeated necessity to let the tandem's brakes cool off. It was then a long steady climb towards Puerto de las Pedrizas in the boiling late afternoon.

The 1320m Puerto de las Palomes was a challenge in the heat

On the whole, getting out places to stay was cheap and easy, but on the route between Antequera and Alhama de Granada it was impossible to find anything in advance. We ended up going out of our way and staying in a truckers' hotel beyond Villanueva del Trabuco by the Autovia and as the sun began to set we were just grateful to have found a place. On the way, a Brit called Mel flagged us down. He had recently set up a centre aimed at cyclists, among others, and was keen to tell us about it. It is right on the Puerto de los Alazores crossroads and fills the accommodation gap perfectly. If you fancy trying some mountain biking while passing through, Mel is your man (mountain bikes can be hired) – see Essential Information, opposite.

We stood out in the hotel's dining room because each table had a lone trucker glued to a football match on the malfunctioning TV. Our baked trout turned out to be very good indeed and inexpensive, and one of the best feeds of the trip. The waiter seemed very perplexed when I asked for a fork in Spanish and came up with 'horquilla', which actually means a bicycle front

Choosing your route: Seville to Granada or Granada to Seville?

Travel arrangements made it more convenient for us to start in Seville. Riding the opposite way offers three advantages; more downhill (Granada is 685m above sea level while Seville is just 12m); morning riding means less sun in your face; because of the placement of accommodation, Torcal National Park is more easily visited in the evening, when the crowds have gone and the setting sun throws the rock formations into sharp relief – then you have a fast descent into Antequera. On the downside, the long straight road and climb out of Granada would make a tedious first day.

Spanish cycling laws

All cyclists are now required to wear a helmet in Spain. However, there are the following exemptions: cycling in built-up areas; periods of extreme heat; when riding up steep hills; professional cyclists in competition or training; if you are allergic to plastic foam (and have a doctor's note to prove it!)

Enforcement is generally very lax. We brought helmets but never wore them (it was 'extreme' heat as far as we were concerned) and were never stopped. A fine of up to €90 can be imposed for non compliance. Helmet use was unusual in towns but was about 75 per cent amongst sports cyclists outside towns.

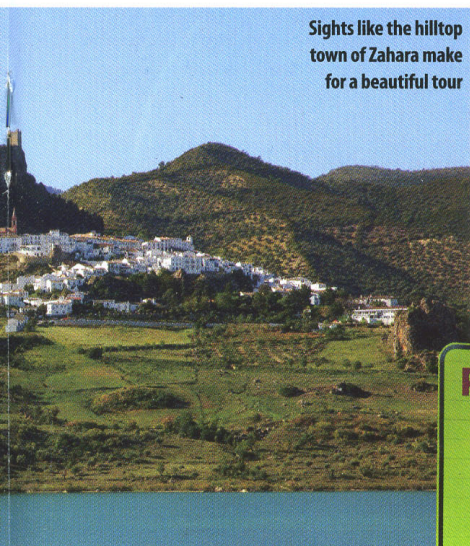
Cyclists are also required to wear something reflective at night, visible from 150m. When turning left the law also requires cyclists to stop on the right-side verge, then cross both carriageways once safe to do so.

fork or pitch fork! It wasn't helped by the fact that despite applying factor 25 sun-block, the long scorching day had produced a sharp distinction between my sunburnt forehead and much paler bald pate that was protected by my bandana. I did look odd, but all the best cycle-tourists have strange tan lines!

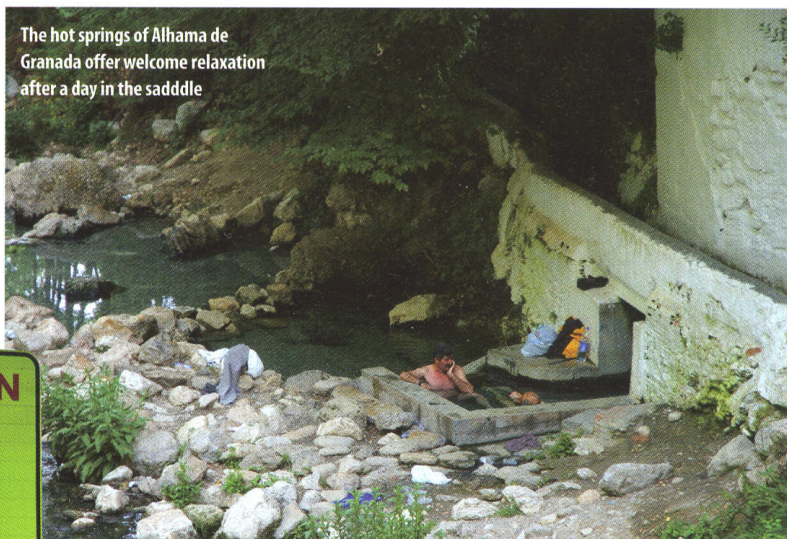
Cantadors and gypsies

The next morning we climbed a valley that turned more into a gorge, not unlike Cheddar but on a grander scale and dropped in at Mel's place for a welcome coffee near the pass summit. It was a

Sights like the hilltop town of Zahara make for a beautiful tour



The hot springs of Alhama de Granada offer welcome relaxation after a day in the saddle



Essential information

How far and how long?

Our route totalled 400km (250 miles) of riding. We gave ourselves a week plus extra time to spend in Granada and Seville. This felt about right for a leisurely tour, with mainly early afternoon finishes to avoid the heat.

When to go

We went at the end of April/early May. From our experience we would recommend going a month earlier. During December to February you run the risk of snow on the higher passes. June to September is not recommended for cycling because the heat can be unbearable.

Traveling logistics

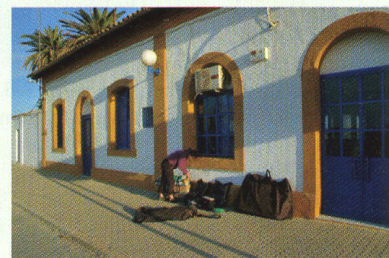
BY AIR We went by Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) London Stansted – Seville and returned Granada – London Stansted. There is a £15 charge per cycle each way – the tandem counted as one bike.

BY TRAIN AND BUS Renfe, the Spanish railway, generally only carries cycles on regional and local services, which connect Seville to Granada. The rules can be found at www.renfe.es/atencion_cliente/faq_bicicletas.html (in Spanish). However if you book exclusive use of a cabin on the Paris to Madrid TrenHotel then bagged cycles are accepted (120x90x50cm is the generally accepted European size limit, including on Eurostar). The website www.seat61.com is a very helpful starting point.

Spanish long-distance bus services carry bikes (often un-bagged), if you register them when you buy your ticket. The Spanish pages of Via Verdes (www.ffe.es/viasverdes) include information on public transport access to railway paths. The CTC (www.ctc.org.uk) publish a useful information sheet 'Taking Your Bicycle on Public Transport in Spain' for members.

Maps and navigation

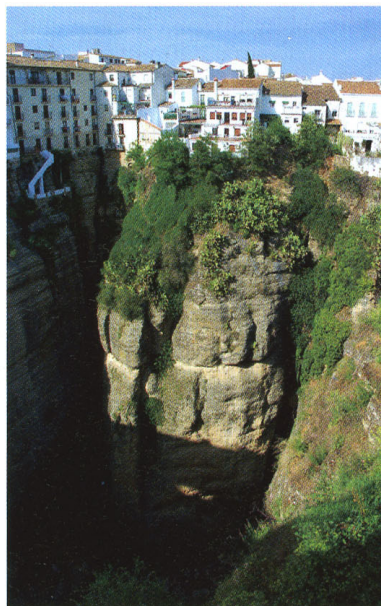
We used the GeoCenter 1:200,000 map of Andalucía for the trip, the best general map we could find in the UK. In almost every town we had to ask the way out as signing is often discreet or non-existent.



Accommodation

We used the *Rough Guide to Andalusia* to find good quality budget accommodation (mainly 'hostales' which are basic hotels) and booked the night before. Mel Richard's place (see main body) fills the gap between Antequera and Alhambra De Granada, contact; Rio Frio, www.rio-frio.com. Tel 00 34 958 348 973 (Spain) or 0870 068 8173 (UK). At all the places we stayed, secure space was found to put the tandem without fuss. With relatively few campsites and little water for going wild we would advise against camping.

A range of useful information can be found at www.andalusia.com



Above left: The historic town of Ronda perched on the edge of its 130m-deep gorge
Above: The flat roads were glorious on a tandem

pull the cable taught and engage the largest rear sprocket, we at least had use of the triple chainset. The three low gears got us up the climbs, while a loaded tandem freewheels just fast enough down even gentle descents for leisurely touring.

There was no compelling need for more gears because there was a fair bit of flat land to be had. At the summit we met three lively Dutch mountain bikers who engaged us with tales of some of the tracks they had tried, their way sometimes blocked by high wire fences. They were nevertheless enjoying their Spanish adventure.

A quiet undulating road to Ardales led us through a varied and green landscape that had been bandit country until the 1930's. It was one of the last in the area to receive tarmac. Parts of an older road were visible in places hinting at the bygone character of the area.

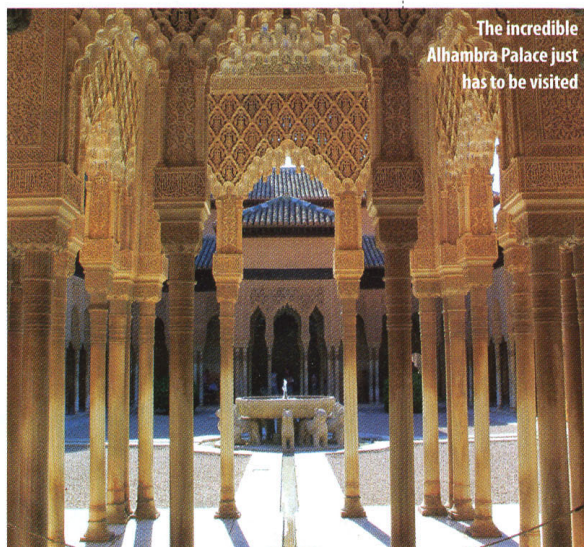
Pink Mohican territory

Southern Spain is becoming well known for its water shortages, so the huge Embalse del Guadalteba reservoir was a welcome site. It is noted for its flamingoes but now the water level has

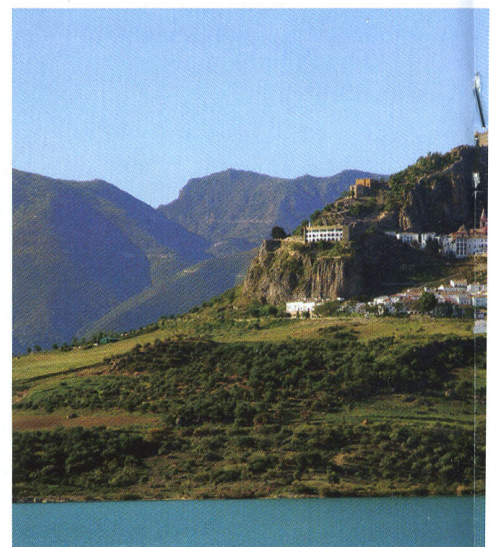
receded a fair distance. Still, the scene was picturesque as undergrowth had grown down to the water line. Soon we were descending the El Chorro Gorge, where we were joined by lots of other riders as we twisted and turned through large rounded limestone formations.

Climbing steeply out of the gorge olive trees, holm oak, almond orchards and the odd holiday villa covered in flowers added interest. A dazzling pattern of black-and-white signalled a disturbed hoopoe bursting from the bushes. These are birds we encountered regularly along most of the route. With a pink body and oversized 'Mohican' crest it's an improbable creature that appears badly put together. Valle de Abdalajis proved a hard place to find lunch – it's worth taking care to stock up before the universal siesta (1:30 to 4:30-ish). Luckily, with some food in reserve we still managed a picnic by a refreshing natural spring.

It's always nice to hit a 'big' town after some time in the hills and a pretty good Indian in Antequera went down well. It also seemed to be the gathering place of all the homesick ex-pat Brits. A bike shop took some seeking out but at last



The incredible Alhambra Palace just has to be visited





quiet run down to Zafarraya famous for the Ventas de Zafarraya pass, where the main road towards the Med passes between two large rocky outcrops. Here lettuces were being cultivated in back-breaking fashion on fertile plains. The 'white' road to Alhama de Granada crossed a new landscape of rock-strewn hill-tops, followed by more flat and fertile plains. It was then that we caught our first glimpse of the awesome snow-capped Sierra Nevada.

Alhama de Granada is a tranquil town situated in a spectacular setting on the edge of a deep gorge with a rare sight: a fast-flowing river surrounded by olive and almond-covered hills. The old town consists of grand old churches and substantial, slightly crumbling, balconied houses. The sky was full of hundreds of swifts screaming about overhead. What made our visit special was La Seguriya Hospederia (www.laseguriya.com). Paco, the owner, is a

retired flamenco singer and was a complete natural at looking after us in his beautiful and peaceful house.

The hot springs just west of the town are a welcome treat after a long dusty day in the saddle. You can either pay to use them in the luxury of the hotel or just immerse yourself in the river with the locals, just outside the hotel grounds.

Leaving Alhama behind we were on the final leg. The 'main' road was a good one to ride contradicting our initial reservations that it might be busy. What made it so splendid was that after more climbing we had miles of the perfect tandem downhill gradient, the dwarfing Sierra ahead just puncturing some wispy clouds. Tandems pick up a fair lick on even a gentle descent and we were cruising at around 30 to 40mph yet rarely needing to brake – real wind in the hair stuff.

One last push brought us to the ancient Moorish city of Granada, where



Touring by tandem

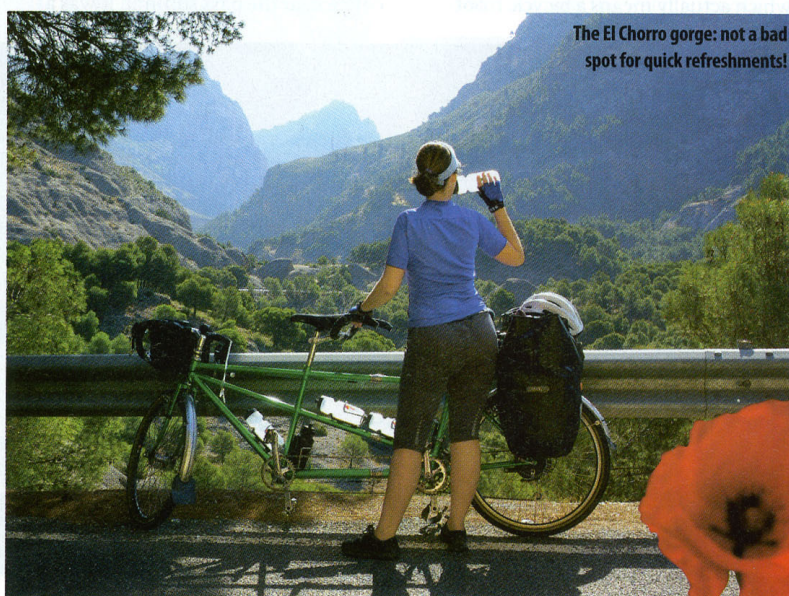
Tandems are excellent touring machines, particularly for riders of varying ability, including children – the weaker rider goes further while the stronger feels that they have had a proper workout. A crew can also then attempt a more challenging route; Tamar wouldn't have chosen to do this tour on her own bike. Two riders of equal strength can really fly. You always ride together and you avoid the dispiriting catch-ups the slower rider can otherwise experience. Conversation is never difficult, the stoker gets to really enjoy the view and your rhythms harmonise. Once you are working well as a team you can keep up a steady pace for miles and the whole event feels more of a joint adventure.

Nothing beats the exhilaration of even a slight downhill that tandems can uniquely take advantage of with double the weight but much reduced overall wind resistance. Last but not least, you are always made welcome because a tandem is an unusual sight that intrigues people. In Britain it seems to bring out many a reminiscing couple, happy to tell you about their courting days on a tandem – riding one is romantic!

A camping load for cooler regions can be quite an art to carry and the weight can make the handling tiring – a trailer can help. Travelling to and from the start of your tour with a tandem can be more restrictive than taking solos. That is why we had S&S couplings fitted to ours which enable it to be disassembled and transported by most forms of transport, each piece packing down to less than 1m long – see www.sandsmachine.com

a huge gypsy carnival was assembling. Rooms are plentiful and we soon found a convenient one at the bottom of the road to the Alhambra palace – our tour was complete.

For us now it was time to relax off the tandem, replace lycra with civvies and explore the town on foot, while our tanned skin was almost longing for some nice cool British drizzle... only kidding! With our batteries now fully recharged the journey was done. ■



The El Chorro gorge: not a bad spot for quick refreshments!