



CHASING
BANDITS

DAN MILNER FINDS A HIDDEN TRAIL
NIRVANA DEEP IN OUTLAW COUNTRY
IN SPAIN'S SIERRA DE GUADARRAMA



WE'LL CRAM OVER 5,000M OF DESCENT INTO FOUR DAYS, BEGINNING WITH A STEEP, ROOTY AND COMMITTING TRAIL

that the Sierra de Guadarrama has seen more than enough blood. I'm keen to avoid adding any of my own to it.

Joining local guiding outfit Blacktown Trails, we'll cram over 5,000m of descent into four days, beginning with a steep, rooty and committing trail. As it twists around the hillside like an eel hauled out of water, I find myself chasing the furiously-paced rear wheels of Scott pro rider Holger Meyer and regional enduro champ Rafa Molina. I'm forced to use the excuse of taking photos to slow things down a little, and, stopping for a shot, I glance around at the thick pine forest that's effortlessly swallowed us up. As a bandit or resistance fighter, I can see how easy it is to hide in here, but it would be just as easy to get lost too.



Luckily we have fireman-cum-trail-builder Alberto Sepulveda, or 'Sepu', leading our way. Sepu voluntarily builds and cleans many of the trails that cut across these hills. Needless to say, he rides them like he owns them. We chase him between shady oak trees and through valleys carpeted with lush ferns, along traverses above steep ravines and up tough rocky climbs. Within an hour I'm lost, but despite the rugged topography of these mountains, the impenetrably thick forest and the 30km-plus we ride today, I don't see Sepu consult a map once. So I'm surprised when we finally pop out of the trees right at the door of the old stone cabin that's the base for our



through the darkness I pick out a town's glowing lights far below us, sparkling like a thousand jewels scattered through the ink of a November night. I imagine the warm houses, their occupants sprawled on sofas in front of televisions or sliding under duvets for a comfortable night's sleep. Here on the Cueva Valiente mountain, 1,900m up in the Sierra de Guadarrama, the starry night sky is my Netflix, a rapidly congealing mound of pasta is my TV dinner and a dewy sleeping bag unrolled between rocks is my bed for the night. For a moment I'm grasped by feelings of isolation, but then I smile, remembering that my exile is self-imposed, like that of the countless bandits who've slept here before me.

For centuries this barren summit was the hideout for outlaws, or *bandoleros*, including the notorious Antonio Sanchez, known as *El Chorra al Aire* (which translates as 'cock out' in English). Whatever fruity reason for gaining this dubious nickname, Sanchez and a dozen other bandit gangs used this vantage point to spy on the king's envoys travelling between nearby Madrid and Segovia during the 18th and 19th centuries. From among these rocks that are now a bivouac for a Brit, a German and three Spanish mountain bikers, the *bandoleros* plotted ways to part the rich from their wealth.

Today, Chorra's antics are retired to the annals of history and Spain's cash is moved by bank transfer, but these mountains still offer rich pickings. Rising to nearly 2,500m, the Sierra de Guadarrama forms an 80km east-west ridge that's criss-crossed by hundreds of miles of footpaths. Scouring bandits, 19th Century militias resisting Napoleon's occupation and 20th Century Spanish Civil War republicans fighting Franco's fascism all plied these trails. As we roll past ruined civil war bunkers at the start of our first descent, I'm reminded

Opposite page, top
These hills have seen a lot of gunfire over the centuries, but nowadays you need to duck for better reasons

Opposite, bottom
A mountaintop bivouac brings the reward of finishing the day's ride among the peaks, not in the dark valleys below

Above Ancient villages, hermit hideaways, mountain bivouacs and stone bunker refuges — the Guadarrama's Airbnb options are endless!



WE CARVE BETWEEN THORNY BUSHES AND CLATTER ACROSS SCREE, LEAVING DUST HANGING IN THE AIR BEHIND US



bivouac. I swear the guy has a built-in GPS – he's like a homing pigeon.

We have five hours of riding and over 1,000m of climbing behind us by the time we reach the cabin, and we're feeling like we've earned a comfy bed. But earning isn't the same as having. Thankfully our inflatable mattresses and sleeping bags are mercifully hauled up by 4x4 to within a kilometre of the summit by Blacktown's head honcho Emilio. Within minutes of arrival he sets up a kitchen and before long our modern-day international brigade is sharing food, laughs, anecdotes and several bottles of good red wine. "This is a bivouac, Spanish style," I'm told.

It's with universally heavy heads that we crawl from our sleeping bags just after sunrise to launch into a 45km ride. Today we'll pack in another 1,000m of climbing and nearly double that in descent – the reward for yesterday's assault on this peak. Thankfully, we begin with a descent, our trail leading us past stone trenches and bunker remnants of Spain's civil war before inevitably launching us into a steep climb, up what's not much more than a wild boar trail, which reminds us of the excessive breakfast we've just consumed.

Carving down a loamy trail past an old hermit's cave under an enormous overhanging rock, we stop to refill our hydration packs from a spring before diving into another 15-minute descent of drifty corners to El Espinar. I'm glad of the shade of towering pines for the tough climb back up to the Guadarrama's main ridgeline and the long-distance GR10 hiking trail that snakes along its crest. Here we sit to absorb the

panoramic views and let the hot Spanish sunshine dry our sweat-soaked backs.



The lush vegetation and pine-needle carpets of the Guadarrama's northern flanks sit in stark contrast to its sun-bleached, arid southern faces. Joining the GR10, we pump wheels over bedrock outcrops, traversing high above Franco's Valle de los Caídos (Valley of the Fallen). Beneath the 150m-high cross are buried the remains of 40,000 people killed in the 1936-39 Spanish Civil War. Controversially, the dictator himself lies here too. He's the only one buried here who wasn't killed in the war.

An hour later any thoughts of conflict have been lost in a shared rush of endorphins triggered by yet another 600m descent that spits us out alongside the 18th Century palace of King Philip II in El Escorial. We emerge dusty and grinning manically outside the enormous doors of the palace, conspicuous among the tourists meandering across its courtyard. We swap high fives before heading to a nearby bar for beers and plates of

Above You want a bike park? You've got it. The Guadarrama's trails have plenty of interesting natural features to play on

Left We're probably not the first to plot a raid on the palace from here – but I doubt it was tapas that they were after

Right Alpine-style treats just an hour north of Madrid – Emilio and Rafa at home in their backyard





local tapas. “You’ve got to try the fried pig’s ear,” says Emilio, forgetting my almost life-long vegetarianism.

“I’ve got something special to show you,” says Emilio on our third morning, leaving me worrying that he’s somehow related to Chorra al Aire. He’s a selector for Madrid’s DH and enduro teams, and as an ex-DH racer himself, he’s no slouch on a bike. With huge vultures circling low above our heads we begin climbing and, between breaths, Emilio sheds light on why we’ve driven an hour deeper into the Sierras. Today’s ride will end in Patones, a tiny ancient village built of black slate. Hidden within a steep-sided gorge, this ‘invisible’ village remained unoccupied by Napoleon’s legions of troops who naively traversed the flat plain below. Patones was a rare hiccup in Napoleon’s 1808 occupation and resistance from the Spanish people to the Frenchman’s empirical desires was the first recorded use of guerrilla warfare. It’s where the term came from, ‘guerrilla’ meaning ‘little war’.

We zigzag our way up through pine plantations and juniper scrub to reach the rugged jumble of boulders that decorates the Cancho de la Cabeza peak. Far below us to the north is a patchwork of azure lakes and rich, green forest – not what I was expecting from Spain’s hot, arid interior. The brake-searing descent turns up the heat though, leading us on a fast sprint across an open hillside.

We carve between thorny bushes and clatter across scree, leaving dust hanging in the air behind us.

Half an hour later, as we roll into Patones’ narrow alleyways, it’s not hard to imagine turning the clock back a few hundred years. The village’s clandestine location made it a perfect bandit hideout too. I imagine them hauling their swag across the cobbles to spend their loot in one of the local taverns, and we need little encouragement to follow in their footsteps. Slumping onto chairs

outside a bar, we down a couple of well-earned post-ride brews. My newly-made friends are raising their beers for another toast and I readily join them. For centuries this 80km chain of hills has been the staging ground for bloodletting vendettas, ambitious and ruthless robberies, and political struggle. Today it’s brought together several nationalities to share laughs and adventure. Here we sit, five tired, grubby but smiling mountain bikers – the new *bandoleros* of the Guadarrama. 🌀

Main Rafa and Holger roll out of camp at first light on day two. After enjoying too much local hospitality the night before, it’s lucky the ride begins with a descent

Top Bunkers, hideouts and old mines are even more ways to get lost here, so it’s good that we have a guide.

Bottom The bandits are gone but the pillaging of trail gold continues in the hills above Patones



WHO ARE BLACKTOWN TRAILS?

Based near El Escorial, an hour from Madrid, Blacktown Trails take their name from the dark slate of a favourite riding spot, the ancient village of Patones. The company are new to the guiding scene and draw on co-owners Emilio Garcia and Felix Torija’s decades of riding and racing experience. They have hundreds of miles of world-class, year-round riding on their doorstep, led by very capable and caring guides like enduro champs Rafa and Sepu. Rides typically begin with a shuttle to the trailhead and can include anything from 500-2,000m of climb and descent in a day, depending on your preferences. Enduro is a key word in Blacktown’s vocabulary – you earn your descents by pedalling up. Their guided weeks start at €795. The only extras are your flights and some beer money. A 150 to 160mm-travel bike is recommended to get the most from the Sierra de Guadarrama – you can rent a Santa Cruz from them if you like.

www.blacktowntrails.com

