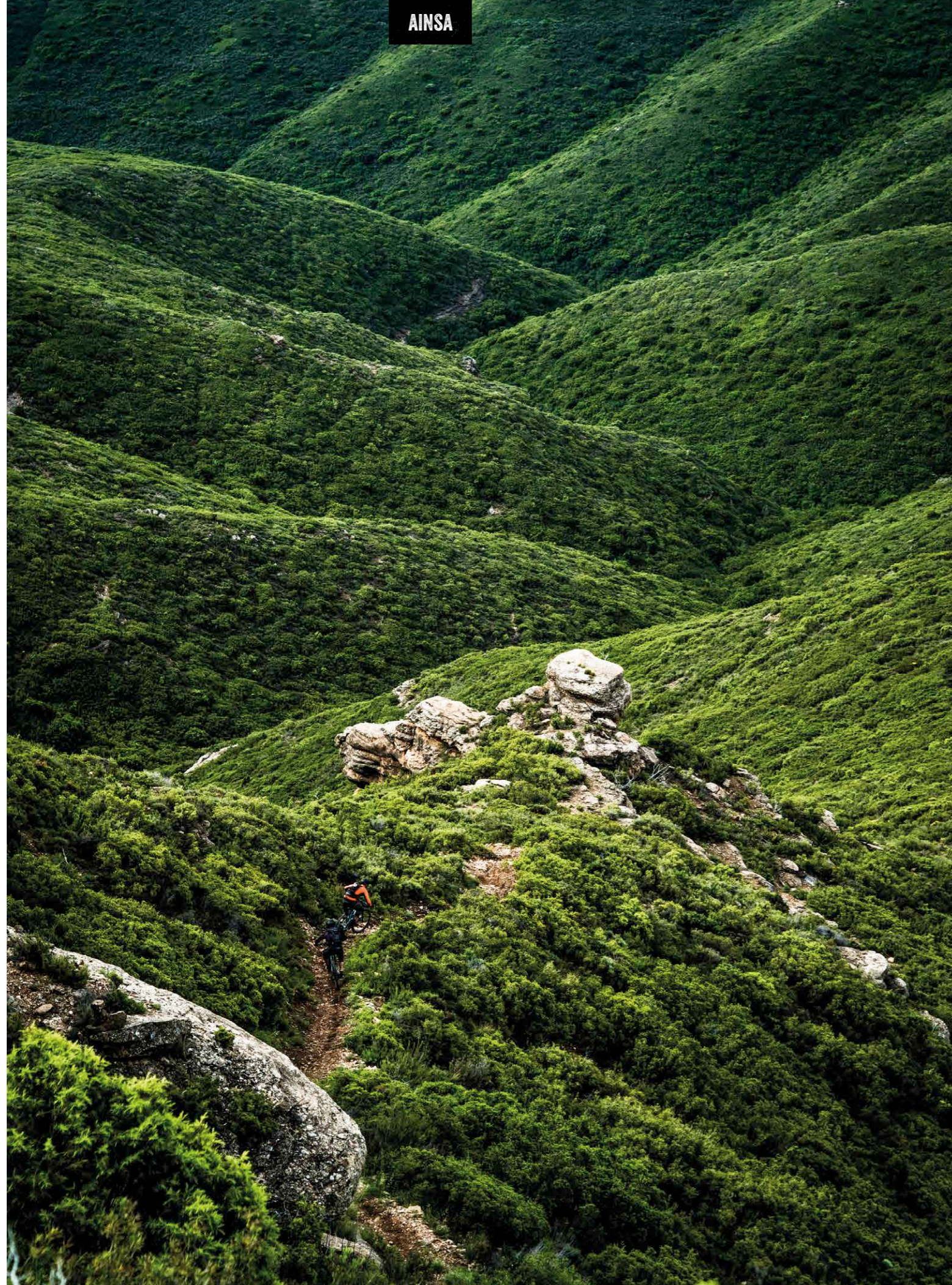


LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

Words and pics Dan Milner



THRUST INTO THE SPOTLIGHT BY THE ENDURO WORLD SERIES, THE SPANISH VILLAGE OF AINSA IS EMBRACING MOUNTAIN BIKING WITH OPEN ARMS, AND HAS INCREDIBLE TRAILS TO DISCOVER



Emilio is eyeing up my waterproof shorts enviously. His eyes narrow like *Jurassic Park's* scheming velociraptors plotting a kill. Together, we're facing a barrage of horizontally-slung rain, our sights set on the 2,300m-high Comodoto Peak ahead. The gusting wind threatens to throw either us or our bikes – and sometimes both – off the narrow ridge and into the precipice on our left. At least, I think it's a precipice. The fog is doing a good job of screening it and shielding us from feelings of vertigo. Somewhere in the mist at the other end of this ridge is the start of a full vertical kilometre of descent – the gravity payback for our discomfort.

Mist and rain may have caught Emilio out, but I didn't envisage it either – not during a four-day ride in Spain in June. I'd pictured dust, sweat and balmy post-ride beers. But mountains have their own dictates, forcing either change or adherence to the ethos of 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger'. We're somewhere between the two, so we've pushed on, challenging our VW executive minibus with ambitiously rocky dirt roads to reach the trailhead, adamant that adventure's rewards are rarely easily won. But now we're on the bikes, dust has become slippery clay and sweat has turned to rain that drips from helmet peaks. Only the post-ride beers remain as planned – that goes without saying! Later, while still enveloped in the fuf of warm, damp clothing, we'll sink bottles of Tronzadora ('chainsaw' beer), proud that for every one we buy, the local brewery donates cash to a trail-building group.

Warm welcome

I've teamed up with Emilio García, Rafa Molina and Pablo Irigoyen Claver from BlackTown Trails. Together, we're trying to leapfrog across the rugged Pre-Pyrenees in an area strewn with deserted villages, abandoned following the Spanish Civil War. The epicentre of our traverse is Ainsa, a postcard-perfect medieval village that was cast into the spotlight when it hosted a round of the 2015 Enduro World Series.

Overnight, this little-known family holiday destination earned a place on the mountain biking bucket list. Drawn by its 1,200km of trails, more than 20,000 riders now descend on Ainsa annually, where once there were fewer than a couple of thousand. After enduring decades of economic hardship and abandonment, the locals are happy to embrace this new-found popularity. We sink our well-earned Tronzadoras in the shadows of Ainsa's incredible thousand-year-old walls – ancient stonework

that will, in September, form the start gates for another stage of the EWS.

Expect the unexpected

Despite Ainsa's racing credentials, we're a long way from start gates and cheering supporters now, but this solitude is what we've come looking for. We edge cautiously into a steep slither of singletrack, our tyres scrabbling among loose scree, and let gravity pull us down into the mist. Five minutes later, we emerge below the heavy blanket of cloud to cut across the open mountainside on narrow singletrack. We wind our way down a dozen switchbacks before hurling ourselves into a dark forest of boughs hanging with moss. It's a greasy, frantic and squirming descent that ultimately spits us out at the doors of a cafe

WE'RE A LONG WAY FROM START GATES AND CHEERING SUPPORTERS NOW, BUT THIS SOLITUDE IS WHAT WE'VE COME LOOKING FOR

Main Rafa Molina and Daniel Irigoyen Claver have 99 more corners to roll on the Salto del Roldan trail above Huesca

Below It's easy to see why Pablo gets excited about riding the Sierra de Guara trail network

Bottom A shuttle drop-off in the clouds spells a wild descent to follow



THE LOWDOWN: AINSA

With its unique mix of Old World charm and gobsmacking trails, Ainsa should be on every rider's bucket list. Flights to Barcelona start from as little as £39 return, and from there it's a three-hour drive. The Zona Zero trail app will help find your way about, or get BlackTown Trails (www.blacktowntrails.com) to cherry-pick the best trails for you across the wider Benasque, Zona Zero, Sierra de Guara and Huesca area. Their one-week, all-in guided packages include airport shuttles and cost €1,097 per person.



Below Abandoned villages make for a peaceful night's sleep, give or take a muesli-stealing fox or two!

Bottom Pablo's cooking is as good as his guiding – which, by the way, is pretty darn good

Main Rafa and Pablo high above the Cinca Valley, with only 800m of descent standing between them and their lunch



distance, north-east of Ainsa, on the glacier-capped Pico Aneto – the Pyrenees' highest peak – and finishing among the Arizona-like rock gardens above Huesca, to the south-west. It was an ambitious plan that, if ridden for its entirety, would take eight or nine days. We had four. Clearly something had to give. We set out to traverse four distinct zones, each of which would give me a flavour of the variety to be found in the Aragon region, along with a fair few surprises.

Snow dome

The rain that made me reach for my waterproof shorts on Comodoto Peak turns to snow higher up. The next morning we find every mountain above 2,300m blanketed white, scuppering our plan to camp at altitude among the black scree fields of Sierra Negra, the most easterly point of our planned ride. Instead, we huddle in a tiny stone hut at the foot of our climb and weigh up our options.

Alvaro Yaque, the muleteer who's been organised to haul our camping gear up to the high-mountain plateau, huddles with us, his two animals standing patiently outside. I look at his wellington boots. "His feet must be freezing," I think, before realising my own wet bike shoes are faring little better. Alvaro throws his cigarette into the fireplace and turns to the group for a decision. "Strap the bikes to the mules and let's go!" we say.

Today's climb up to Sierra Negra is a walk in the park for the pack animals, accustomed to carrying camping gear for five-day mountain treks. They set a pace up the steep hillside that leaves me breathless. I look up to see them stoically romping ahead into the snow, led by Alvaro in his rubber boots, another cigarette dangling from his lips. Like the muleteers who historically plied the trails

in the Cinca Valley. We're wet and muddy, but grinning. I'm not sure it's what I expected from Spain, but I'm not complaining.

The inhabitants of Ainsa aren't complaining either. Even if, like a pimple-faced adolescent pop idol wheeled out in front of the paparazzi, they haven't yet worked out how to deal with the fame that's been thrust upon them. There's no bike rental here yet, but BlackTown Trails is one of a handful of guiding companies now operating out of Ainsa. While local group Zona Zero manicures trails for all riders – from Lycra-clad cross-country racers to full-face-helmeted downhillers – the area's natural, rocky, rollercoaster singletrack has found its true calling among enduro riders.

Shuttle uplifts are popular here, but I felt sure we could find real adventure among these heavyweight mountains. BlackTown Trails and Pablo stepped in to link some of these enduro trails, starting within spitting

THE MULES SET A PACE THAT LEAVES ME BREATHLESS. I LOOK UP TO SEE THEM STOICALLY ROMPING AHEAD INTO THE SNOW

between Aragon's villages, Alvaro is no stranger to taking on the might of the mountains. We climb 600m until, just shy of Sierra Negra's 2,700m domed peak, the mules discharge their unorthodox cargo, about-turn and begin their skip back down the mountain. We're left in silence to survey the scene around us. Now under miraculously cloudless skies, we squint across the blinding snow at the descent into the Benasque Valley far below.

Grins all round

"The trail goes down here," says

Pablo, launching into a snowy expanse of nothing. A half-hour of freeriding brings us to the snowline, where slush dissolves into black scree. We carve down a steep trail of soggy, ash-like dirt before being swallowed up by a vibrant forest. From snow to valley floor, we drop 1,300 vertical metres, to finish sweatily among the ski and climbing shops of Benasque. We start the drive towards our next ride with the minibus air-con turned to max. Yesterday's mist and rain may as well have been on a different planet – a feeling that's repeated on the next leg of our traverse.

"Now I have a treat for you," smiles Pablo, as if this morning's whoop-filled descent was in some way



Left Ainsa's trails are manicured by a dedicated team of builders. Rafa and Pablo show their respects the best way they can

Centre Rafa has a new best friend and she has four legs

Above The snow line express waits for no one



humdrum. Pablo is a kayaker and is as much at home paddling the steep, technical creeks that finger their way down his home valleys as he is riding Ainsa's rock gardens. My experience of following kayak guides is that when they say they have a 'treat' for you, it means you're about to nearly die. But Pablo has read me well, and our afternoon is spent threading our way along a twisting, undulating traverse that becomes a three-hour grin-fest.

Beginning at the tiny village of Matidero, the ride quickly becomes a constant onslaught of technical features hurled at us from the scrubby hillsides. Snaking around the edge of the Sierra y Cañones de Guara National Park, the arid landscape we're pedalling through is a far cry from the snowy peaks and pine forests of the past two days. It's more the Spain I was expecting, helped, no doubt, by a searing sun overhead.

New blood

We ride a maze of steep gorges, their spiralling chutes proving as exhausting as the punchy climbs between them. "This is Guara riding!" says Pablo, proudly. A little of the guide's brimming pride stems from his ancestry – his grandmother came from one of the now-abandoned villages, not unlike the one we camp in that night. "Very few people ride here," he adds, underpinning our sweaty afternoon with a sense of achievement and helping to explain the wild, untamed character of the trail that's now behind us.

As dusk draws in, we set up camp amid some ruins, under the inquisitive gaze of a fox (which later makes off with our breakfast cereal), and chat about how these ancient trails could bring new lifeblood to these villages. It's as perfect a night as we could hope for, and our surroundings drive home the adventure potential of these hills. "Tomorrow, the trail towards Huesca will be different again," says Pablo – and he's right. Twelve hours later, we'll roll through 101 rocky drop-offs on a trail called Salto

del Roldán, while a dozen griffon vultures soar overhead, waiting for one misplaced wheel or bad line choice. Like the fox, the vultures know how to seize an opportunity. It's a necessity among these uncompromising mountains, and one that the people of Ainsa know well. ⚙️



Main Just because you're on an adventure doesn't mean you have to skip the EWS trails above Ainsa

Centre Hiding from the rain may not be what old stone huts in the Pre-Pyrenees were built for, but they work well for it

Above They didn't plan Ainsa's old streets for mountain bikes, but they sure make a great start gate