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BEST WINTER ESCAPES

Why let Blighty's filthy weather bring you down when you can hop on a plane and be hammering sun-drenched trails in a matter of hours?

Words & photos: Dan Milner

According to Wainwright, "There's no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing," but then the eloquent coast-to-coast walker never tried steering a front wheel along a ribbon of greasy South Downs chalk on a cold, wet February afternoon. Today's armoury of technical outdoorswear might do a sterling job at keeping the misery of the British winter at bay, but slipping down descents and coating your drivetrain with grind paste on

every ride soon gets tiring. Fortunately we are, for the moment at least, still part of Europe, which means travel to warmer, drier climes is still a budget flight away. The fact that two hours on a plane can surround you with dusty trails winding their way down to a gently lapping, azure blue sea and a cold cerveza, is enough to bring cheer to the heart of even the most severe SAD sufferer.

So switch off the UV lamp, dig out your shorts from the laundry bin and book a flight to one of these world-class winter riding destinations.



1

SIERRA GUADARRAMA, SPAIN

It's something of a secret that, just an hour outside Spain's capital of Madrid, there sits an oasis of singletrack, although that's about as far as we can stretch the desert references. Actually far from desert-like, the 150km range of hills called the Sierra de Guadarrama is thickly forested, providing hundreds of kilometres of loamy trails to carve along. With such a long range of hills at your disposal, the Guadarrama delivers everything from open rocky mountainside and shrub-lined singletrack to tight pine tree slalom runs and plunging, rooty descents. The east-to-west orientation of the range means the green, fern-covered, forested north faces contrast with the drier, sun-baked

rocky south faces to offer a truly schizophrenic riding location.

Climate change has rendered the local ski season a mere two months long, but without tapping into the higher trails, above 1,800m, the Guadarrama has plenty to fill a week of trail thrashing. With few trails waymarked on the ground, the best way to pluck Madrid's low-hanging fruit is to join up with local guiding company blacktowntrails.com, which will show you some truly world-class enduro riding and warm Spanish hospitality from its base in El Escorial. Don't expect shuttle rides; this is true enduro pedalling, but the rewards are more than worth the effort for all that climbing.

2 MAJORCA, SPAIN

If you have your sights set on Majorca's 1,445m high Puig Major for your GoPro album then think again, as the army have that summit sealed off. But fear not, this chunky Spanish island has a hundred better spots to ride in winter. For the adventurous, you could do worse than ride the waymarked GR221 Ruta de Pedra en Sec ('Dry Stone') hiking trail as it threads its way through the Tramuntana mountains from Deia to Pollensa. This four-day ride, staying in comfortable, catered refuges en route, is a true all-mountain immersion, with big climbs, long descents and plenty of tech thrown in to fuel the San Miguel-imbibed bar anecdotes afterwards. See conselldemallorca.com for info on the trail and refuges.

If you'd rather sleep under the same duvet each night, then Majorca has dozens of other

trails to offer, all dotted about the western line of mountains. These vary from easily spotted rough hiking paths, that nip off from the roadsides and descend to beaches on Formentor, to gravity flow trails that weave through the forests near Lluc, and circular routes that lap old watchtowers and olive groves on the Alcudia peninsular. While natural trails extend as far as Pollensa and Alcudia, most of the enduro riding is concentrated near Soller, descending both east and west down the flanks of the Tramuntana mountain range, or traversing high above sea cliffs along the west coast. Several 3km-long DH tracks descend the hills near La Palma too. Many trailheads can be accessed by fire road or asphalt road climbs, but a car is handy for getting some trail variety. If guided riding's what you're looking for, contact Andy at tramuntanatours.com.

3 GRAN CANARIA, SPAIN

This circular Canary island is better known for its punishing road riding than its mountain biking, but there are few places so spectacular that deliver such rewarding year-round riding as Gran Canaria. With temperatures hovering around 22°C during the winter months, and dark volcanic rock delivering unbeatable grip in any weather, four hours of budget airline catering is a small price to pay for the rewards that lie in wait.

Gran Canaria's extinct volcano, the high Pico de Las Nieves, sits in the centre of the island like a hub, from which trails radiate in all directions.

To the east, the 15km Guayadeque trail drops a full 1,500m to the village of Aguimes, winding its way through wild canyons and between volcanic outcrops. Towards the south, a dozen different trails thread their way down from San Bartolome, following steep, winding descents before unleashing a fast and furious charge across a plateau to the sea at Maspalomas some 40km away.

Local guiding and shuttle companies (free-motion.com) can get you to the start of these trails or for

those wanting a little more DIY adventure, stay up at the Cruz de Tejada pass (parador.es or hotelruralrefugio.com) and explore the dozens of natural trails that weave their way around the Jurassic Park-like peaks and valleys. These are guaranteed to test man-muscle and technical riding ability alike. The Kompass 1:50,000 hiking map (number 237) will give you a good foot in the door for finding your way about. Fly to Las Palmas.

4 CORSICA, FRANCE

Out of all the Mediterranean islands to choose from, Corsica is the most rugged and mountainous, and that equates to some very real all-mountain riding. Its 2,706m high point, Monte Cinto, is snow-capped during winter (Corsica even has two ski resorts), rendering some lofty trails off-limits between December and March, but even avoiding Corsica's mountainous spine there's plenty of serious riding to be had. Dozens of XC, enduro and DH trails cut through the chestnut forests around the village of Zonza, just north-west of Porto Vecchio (routes available from utagawavtt.com).

Further north, old, broken mule trails through the red rocks of the World Heritage Calanche di Piana make a gob-smacking playground to test your tech riding skills, finishing with a rollercoaster ride out on the nearby Capu Rossu.

If nadge-tech wets your chamois, then the Gorge de Spelunca should be top of your bucket list. Beginning in Evisa, this 700m descent is a spectacular, writhing serpent of switchbacks that will unleash your inner MacAskill. Meanwhile, weather permitting, an 800m fire road climb out of Calacuccia takes you over a 1,600m col to descend to what is perhaps Corsica's shining all-mountain jewel: the Tavignano Gorge. Following this 20km long singletrack through this spectacular canyon will deliver you sweaty and exhausted, but beaming, to the town of Corte, where you can organise a taxi ride back to Calacuccia.

With daytime temperatures around 16°C, Corsica might not seem the hottest winter escape, but its Mediterranean sunshine will make it feel like a balmy English summer day.



5 SIERRA ESPUÑA, SPAIN

Only an hour's drive from the bangers-and-mash cafes and Irish theme pubs of Alicante lies a perfect, but little-known riding spot: the Sierra Espuña. This densely forested regional park dishes up more riding than you can shake a shock pump at. Basing yourself in the village of El Berro puts you in the heart of the action (campingsierraespuna.com for camping and self-catering cabins) letting you roll out the door onto a mellow road climb with 100km of trails on your doorstep. Arming yourself with the locally available 1:25,000 map (€9) will give you some routes to follow, but hooking up with local riders will show you the real gems of the park, like the Los Lobos area. Luckily the campsite is the daily meeting point for most of the locals' morning rides, leaving at 10am.

Flowing singletrack descents through forest loam, and loose limestone challenges, are earned by easily graded 300m climbs that suck up the vertical struggle via dozens of switchbacks. Whether you flow the fast Qual Saltos trail through shady pine forest, or pump your way along the dry riverbed-routed Dos Barrancos trail, the Espuña has riding for everyone and caters for every style. Literally top it off with a ride from the summit of the 1,400m high El Morrón down the Pomegranate trail and you're likely to finish your week wondering why you don't just move here for good.

With most rain falling in April and October, you can expect to encounter mostly dry and dusty warm winter sun in the Sierra Espuña, making the climate perfect for a riding getaway. Fly to Alicante or Murcia.



6 SOSPEL, FRANCE

The Italian Riviera resorts of Finale Ligure and San Remo are well known for their shuttle riding, but just over the border in France is the lesser-known playground of Sospel. Put on the map by its appearance in the Trans Provence enduro stage race, Sospel's quaint medieval cobbled streets sit a mere roulette-wheel spin away from the glitz of Monte Carlo. The hills that surround Sospel are part of the Maritime Alps, the same range that runs right past DH and Enduro legend Fabien Barel's front door. And if you're wondering how Barel got his skills, one visit to this area will answer your question. The Maritime Alps' trails are a heady mix of rock gardens and buttery smooth flow, meaning

that rewarding riding, whatever your taste, is guaranteed.

Sospel itself boasts both a solid jump-filled bike park and a dozen local marked bike trails, colour-coded from green to black and up to 28km long. Many can be accessed by riding from town, or a short drive out to nearby cols. While some of the higher, longer routes above 1,200m might be snowy for a month or two in winter, the lower trails should stay snow-free, and with several hundred metres of descent in one hit, better than anything you're going to get to ride at home. For trails and routes check espace-vtt-sospel.com. Fly to Nice for a one-hour drive to Sospel. See sospel-tourisme.com for accommodation options in town.



7 ELBA, ITALY

This ruggedly beautiful and crinkly shored island, 10km off the Tuscan coast, is where we first sent Napoleon when he started becoming a nuisance. He spent his 18 months of exile raising an army for another bash at being powerful and improving the island's infrastructure. Whether we have him to thank for the dozens of footpaths that criss-cross the island is unknown, but their existence makes this a compelling winter riding destination if natural, all-mountain trails are your bag.

A set of waymarked, colour-graded trails make up Elba's official 'bike park' — a mixture of singletrack and fire-road linked routes covering the south-eastern peninsular of Capoliveri. Grab a trail map from the bike shop in Capoliveri village, down an espresso and nip out for a 30km cardiovascular workout on these XC trails. For more engaging, enduro-style riding, head

to the GTE (Grand Traverse of Elba) hiking trail. Between Porto Azzurro and the island's northern tip at Cavo, the ridgeline GTE crams in 1,200m of climbing and an equal amount of descending, on a mixture of broken cobbles, twisting singletrack and Mediterranean rock gardens. After that, check out the hiking trails that dot the southern flanks of Monte Capanne, between its 1,018m high peak and Campo nell'Elba. While the hiking trails off the summit are double-black diamond tech, lower trails such as those numbered 7, 34 and 35 feature endless flow.

Elba is small, but you'll need a car to get to the trails. Fly to Pisa with Easyjet, rent a car for the one-hour drive to Piombino and 30-minute ferry to Elba. Winter is low season, but while the holiday resorts and campsites are closed, there are enough accommodation and eateries open in the big towns to take care of life's essentials. **mbr**