

GIRONA, SPAIN – CYCLING TRIP 18 to 23 APRIL 2018

There I was, recovering from a wet and cold November ride to Brighton. We had just completed the vintage car run but I wasn't wearing my warm fur-lined car coat, flying helmet, goggles or driving gloves. My fellow MAMILs and I from the cycling section were dressed head to toe in Lycra. We had cycled from Woodcote and were glad of the warm of welcome we received from the Thomas Kemp pub. I had just started my second glass of recovery-Malbec when I heard John ask if we'd considered cycling somewhere warmer and perhaps we should kick off next season with a cycling trip in Girona?.

To be honest, I wasn't too sure where Girona was – perhaps I muddled it up with Verona, Genoa or Geneva – but if it was warmer than winter in Sussex, I was in. Later I researched Girona and discovered it was near Barcelona (in Catalonia which, despite all the flags and slogans calling for independence, remains part of Spain). It is also regarded as one of the premier cycling destinations in Europe, home to many professionals. Originally used as a base by the US Postal team in the late 90's it has been home for everyone from Lance Armstrong to Bradley Wiggins. It now boasts training camps for Cannondale and Rapha among others. As we were to discover it's as easy for advanced riders to find others of a similar standard to push their training along as it is for an average Sunday cyclist to find fantastic roads and coastal vistas to enjoy.

By March, a lazy winter meant I was approaching the April 18th leaving date with more trepidation than I had expected. Was I fit enough? Would that extra slice of turkey at Christmas prove my undoing? As it turned out I was in good company and anyway there were choices on how hard and far to ride. I needn't have worried. The first overseas cycling trip was going to be a great success.

Most of us boarded a plane from London's Gatwick airport to Barcelona on the Wednesday morning though some chose different departure and arrival points. Some took bikes and others, like me, decided to give up on planning and to rent a bike from the local shop – all organised as an option on the booking form.

The 4*Star Marriott Hotel in Girona became our base and welcomed the ten of us with a nice glass of Cava and a view of the sunset over the city and distant mountains from the modern terrace. The view from our hill-top city-centre location both enthralled us with its magnificent beauty and provided a portent of what our legs might have to conquer.

Early on Thursday we tucked into the generous breakfast and headed to the cycle shop to receive our bike fittings, grab a coffee and join a large contingent of locals and holiday makers on the organised shop ride. There was a choice of rides from 40 to 100KM with a welcome stop for more coffee in the middle. It was our first taste of the sweeping roads, varied hills and friendly grin-inducing descents that are the hallmark of the region.

The shop ride is a public event and we met other keen amateurs including a couple from Hampshire, a party of Tuborg swilling Danes and some chaps from Iceland

(they travel often because their weather never gets above 10 degrees, and then only for 3 months each year). Over the next few days we'd encounter our new friends as our paths criss-crossed and we enjoyed exchanging cheery greetings and words of encouragement.

The shop had arranged for cycling guides and a support van. Josep and Des were highly competent cyclists – in a previous existence one had been a professional cycle-sprinter, and the other a sergeant in the SAS. Our rides for Friday, Saturday and Sunday followed a similar pattern. Retrieving the bikes from the locked hotel storage after a hearty breakfast we would set out into the cool Girona morning air and were led through the cobbles of the ancient city, onto the cycle paths of the suburbs and out onto the smooth tarmac of the quiet Catalan country lanes. Every day we would cycle for about 90 mins and stop for coffee. The day would heat up to a very pleasant mid 20's as we pedalled through countryside enjoying fabulous views until it was time to stop for Lunch. After a break we would loop back to Girona in time for a shower and a lie down before watching the sunset with a G&T in hand. We would then depart to explore the back-streets and artisan shops of the old town and reassemble for an evening meal and a welcome glass of wine or a "long beer". On Friday we rode westward to the coastal town of Sant Feliu de Guíxols for a round trip of about 80KM. Our route included a long, gradual 8KM climb to the top of Massís de Cadiretes. This is a long winding slog but it rewards handsomely, giving a magical descent framed by the deep blue Mediterranean 1,700 feet below. Pausing at the cross roads sign to Tossa de Mar we regrouped for the spectacular undulating ride along the cliff road to lunch.

Our Saturday itinerary led us Northwards in the direction of Banyoles where we stopped for coffee by the lake before heading out into the gentle hills around Mieres. We headed back to Banyoles for a very well prepared lunch in a grand waterside restaurant overlooking the scene of Britain's 9 gold medal wins in the 2009 Rowing World Cup.

Saturday was also the day when the club Tennis coach, and captain's drive cycling champion, Mark Nash decided to show the locals what the club was capable of. With a couple of quick calls our guides arranged for a local professional to guide/race Mark up the 10KM climb of the infamous Rocacorba climb up Puigsou. He recorded a very impressive 47mins for the climb using a borrowed bike. Well done Mark!.

Our last day of cycling for the trip was Sunday and saw us take a more leisurely trip around the valleys to the east of Girona and circle around the north taking in Brunvola, Angles, Les and Planes d'Hostoles before stopping for an heroic lunch in Llorca which, luckily, marked the end of the serious cycling for the trip with only a gentle 30KM downhill roll back to our hotel.

On Monday we checked out of the hotel, boarded our coach to Barcelona and flew back to Blighty. Fitter than when I left, slightly burnt where I'd missed with my application of sun block I was tired but happy – ready to start the 2018 summer cycling season.

This was an excellent trip that and I'll be going again. We didn't try it, but the cycle store told us there are equally impressive off-road routes available. So there is

cycling for everyone in Girona with different routes and options for people of all abilities, the locals are used to bicycles. When you occasionally encounter cars on the beautiful country roads the drivers are respectful, waiting to pass leaving ample space and giving you a cheery wave. Next time you find yourself in Catalonia, don't forget to bring a bike.

If you are interested in cycling please visit the cycling section on the club web page and come along to one of the organised rides that set out from Woodcote park. We're a friendly group with a wide variety of experience, ability, fitness so you're sure to find something that appeals to you.

By Gareth Davies April 2018