

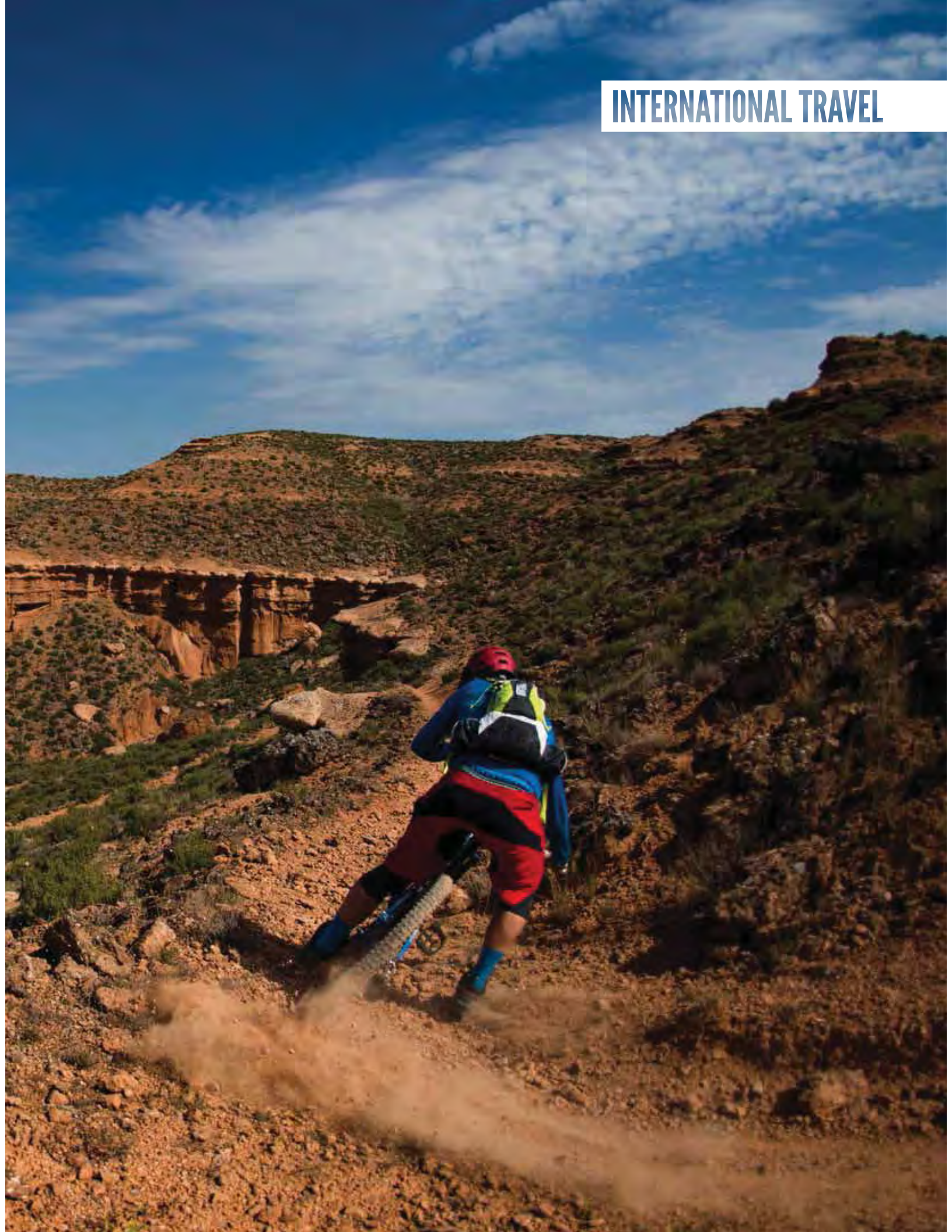


★ ★ ★
SPANISH
UTAH

How hot is too hot? Pete Scullion finds out the hard way in the Basque Country.

Words by Pete Scullion, pictures by Sam Needham.

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL





Long sleeves are for keeping the sun off.



Despite the thunder and lightning, the sky hadn't leaked much and the air was sticky, like Chinese rice – and hot like it too.



Sitting in the passenger seat of the Basque MTB thunderbus as we motored our way south, I was fairly aware that the darkness meant I had no notion of what to expect the following day. The impressive lightning storms that were gathering around us did an even better job of distracting me. Several days into our ambitious trip with Basque MTB's head honcho Doug MacDonald, the combination of early starts and late finishes had begun to take its toll. At this juncture sleep was something we were all very much in need of, but that night wasn't going to offer much respite. Several hours from our last stop in the Pyrenees above Huesca, we had driven towards Zaragoza for long enough for Madrid to not be too far away.

We rolled late into a town that, despite having learned Spanish for 11 years, I couldn't pronounce and can't recall. The bullring and the tall buildings lining narrow streets are the only indelible reminders of this township deep within Aragon. Our beds for the night would kick off the Wild West theme that would continue well into the following day. The doors that greeted us were well-built, armoured oak beasts that stood a good 20ft high and had no doubt seen a fracas or three in their time. The town was quiet when we arrived just before midnight; no gunfights tonight. Through the doors looming over us, the building was reminiscent of a staging post from our favourite spaghetti westerns. A high central courtyard overlooked by balconies that led to the rooms. Exposed, tarred beams at odds with the baby-blue wash of the walls. Not a cathouse, honky-tonk or craps table in sight, though.

As Doug and his right-hand man, Antonio, peeled off to their room, our rather pasty trio lumbered with heavy bags on tired shoulders up to ours. Joining me on this trip would be a brace of Yorkshire folk. Sam Needham is known for his lens work, and Joe Flanagan is known for his bicycle riding and numerous overseas jaunts: a fine combo indeed.

Our first problem was one not familiar to us Brits. Having got dibs on the beds fairly quickly and showers rapidly dispatched to ensure more sleep, the main problem was that of oppressive heat. Despite the thunder and lightning en route, the sky hadn't leaked much and the air was sticky, like Chinese rice – and hot like it, too. Windows were flung open but offered nothing. The air was still and just as unpleasant outside, but little did we know what heat we would be subject to the following morning...

Duelling banjos.

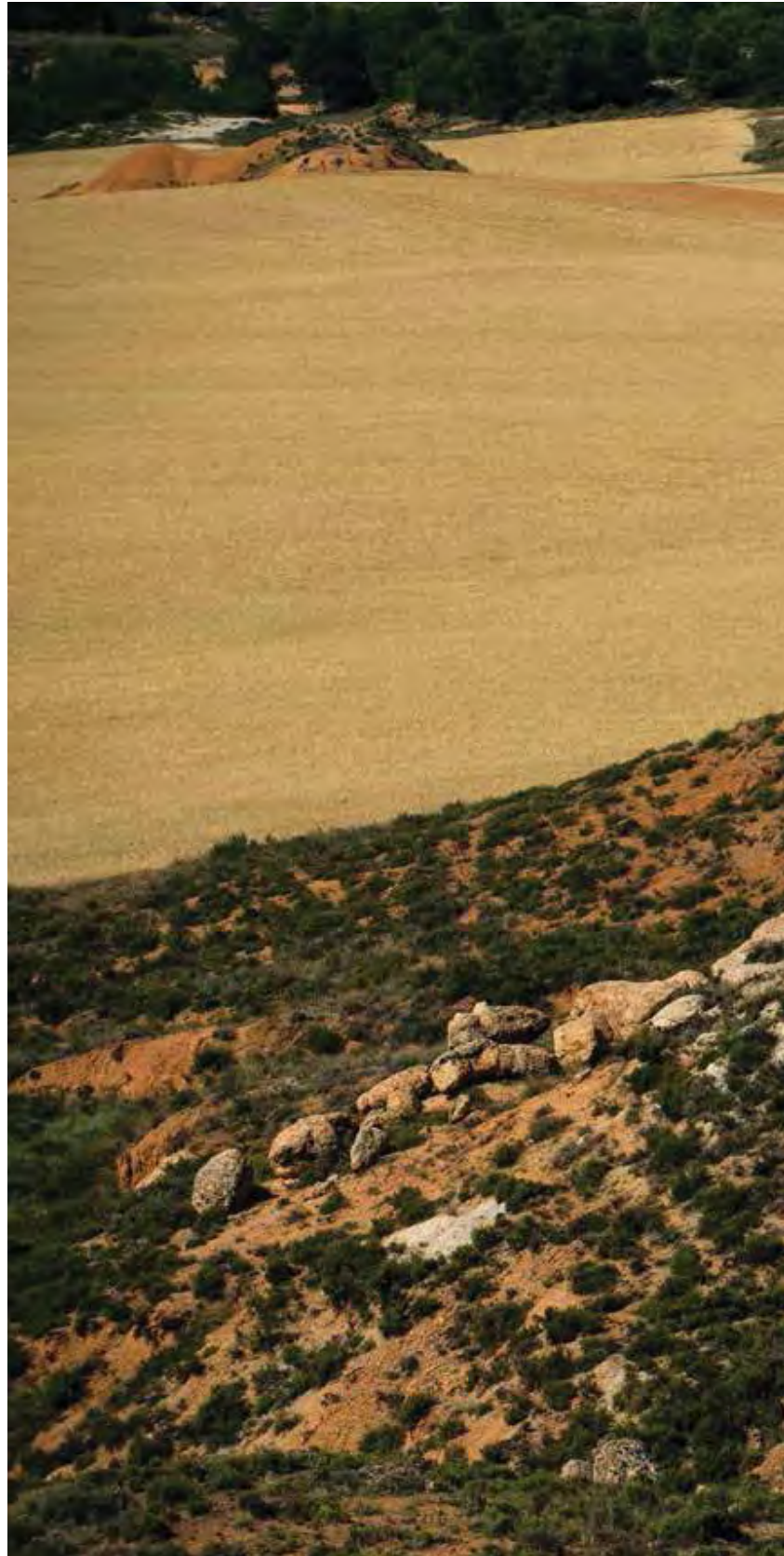
As we made our way through the deserted streets shortly before sunrise, moving through the air for the first time in hours seemed like a luxury. Rarely have I been happier to be on a bike, and that is saying something. The tall buildings and the narrow alleys and streets gave the journey out of town a claustrophobic feel. Many of the buildings lay empty, the signs of subsidence written all over them. It was too quiet. Were we being watched? Was a raiding party about to attack our train? Unlikely, but our room for the night had my head full of six shooters, Eastwood's scowl and Ennio Morricone. One last water stop before we ventured into what would become a baking hot ride in the Spanish interior and we were off.

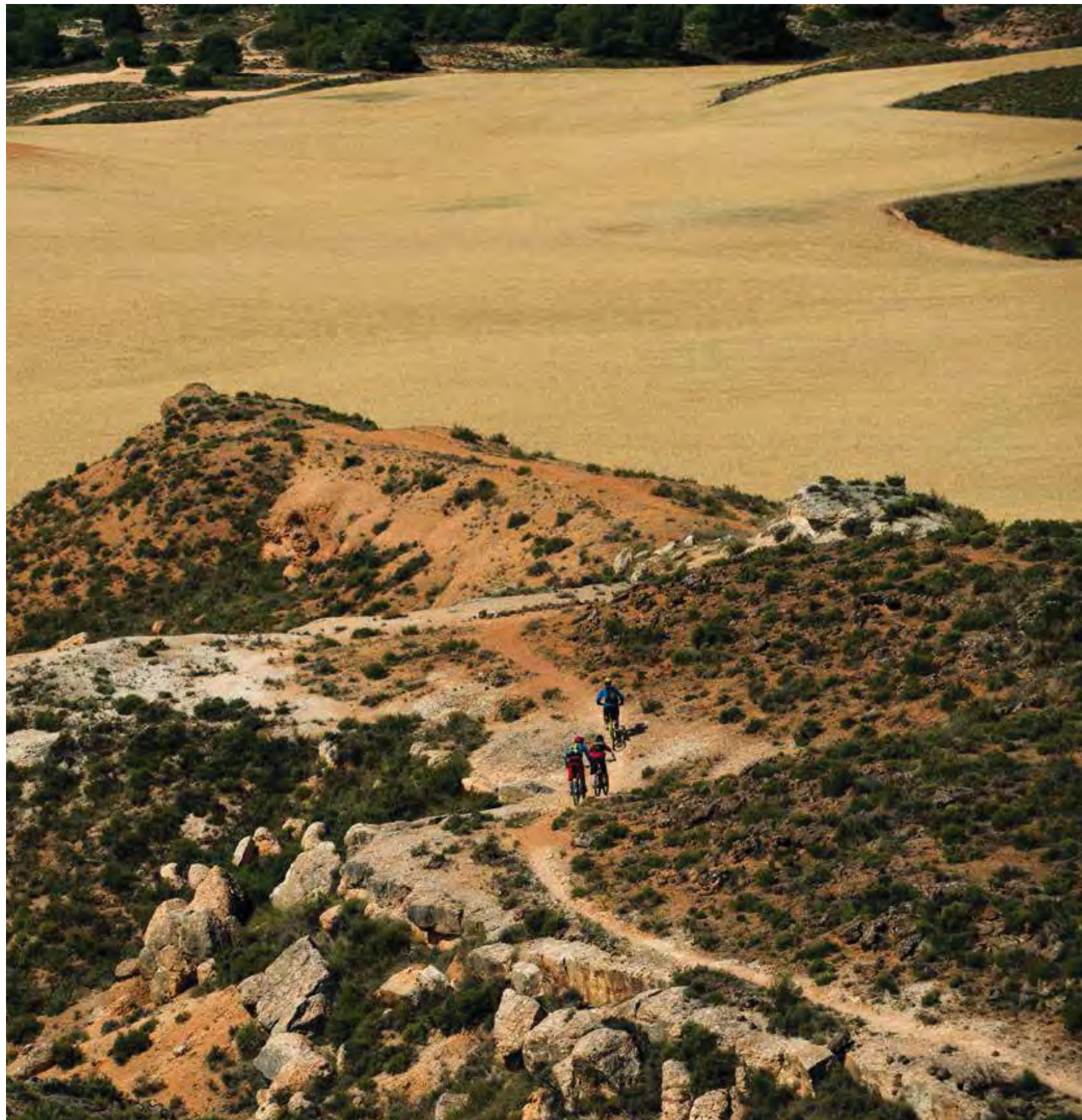
As with many rides, regardless of where you are in the world, you will inevitably have to ride through or past farms. The farms here are completely dissimilar to the low stone affairs we're used to in the countryside of the UK. For a start, there was tarmac, and smooth tarmac at that. The courtyards of the farms were high-wall cinder block numbers with large steel doors. Simple, yet effective, although lacking the rustic charm of dry stone. One constant though was the mental Collie dogs. As soon as we were within earshot, the barking started; a dash towards the steel door arrested by the tightening of a chain.

Onwards and upwards, slowly but surely. The mountains here, less prominent and precipitous than the ones of the previous day, might only be the ripples from when Africa crashed into Europe millions of years ago, but they certainly do sting. Much like the Calder Valley, Exmoor or Dartmoor, the lack of vertical is made up for by its percentage. The trails here either sling themselves along the dry riverbeds, or up the steep faces of the valley walls.

Our sunrise mission was grounded before it even took flight. A solid bank of cloud lying east denied us what would have been one of the most stunning views of the trip. We were primed for mountains, a Moorish castle and an endless horizon – but 'twas not to be.

Wasting no time getting moving, we dropped quickly into some singletrack that offered a truly unique experience. Dirt like crumbly clay offered masses of grip before giving way into controllable slides, allowing a rate of knots that would otherwise be impossible. Elbows in as the riverbed narrowed, ant nests saw the trail turn black and move beneath our wheels. Out of the wind in the shelter of the trail's low-slung position, a complete lack of moving air made remaining stationary far from pleasant. From the fire track of our aborted sunrise view, singletrack was all we rode for mile after mile. The dry riverbed now offered the fastest way to Apache territory, the shallow gradient allowing us to cover the ground quickly and the whole time I couldn't help but keep my eyes up for an ambush. Too many westerns watched, I think... Tall reeds and small trees clung to wherever the water had come to a stop as the rains receded, the green starkly contrasting with the bleached white clay. Rustling under wheel, plant life also offered the only sounds other than that of a passing kestrel or egret. The massive grey vultures of the Pyrenees were long gone now. Static air, now hotter than before, ensured our skin continued to leak, and all the while the humidity meant the sweat stung the eyes long before it evaporated.





Riding the lake of custard turned out to be a mirage.



Natural kickers need to be exploited.



Monument Valley, Spanish style.

The heat was starting to take its toll and I found myself becoming irrationally angry.



The universal allure of singletrack.

After a solid 10km spin along the riverbed, we climbed a short, sharp, technical climb into the trees and were afforded the first cover from the roasting hot sun. By now the temperature was well into the 30s and still rising. Every now and again a gentle breeze would move through the widely spaced conifers. As soon as the cool air hit the skin, everyone would stop, and look like they were in a trance, so unrelenting the heat and so lovely the moving air. Still in a tall gully, but with the edge now less than a few feet above our heads, the singletrack turns darted their way down the hill, dips and crests allowing us to forget the fireball above us and have some fun. All the noise of our tyres searching for grip on the rock-hard dirt was softened by a thick layer of ginger pine needles. The gentle crunch of these accentuated the feeling of speed and the smiles started to come thick and fast. It's amazing what a few fast, flowing turns can do to transform the mood of five horribly sweaty men in seconds.

Once we'd ridden the life out of the gully turns, we hopped up onto a fire road and I swear I could sense a rotten climb coming. Thankfully, we were at the top of probably the biggest surprise of the trip. Doug had spoken of Spanish Utah prior to heading out, and on every other ride we'd been on, but I don't think I've ever seen the landscape change as abruptly as it did that day.

Out of the woods, just like any other Mediterranean pine forest, the smell of hot pine as thick as the needles that carpet the forest; onto a fire road, as nondescript as any other, a means to an end if anything. Then, boom! Bright red, weather-worn, sandstone cliffs rose up from the still-green wheat fields below, the Pyrenees now looking more stunted on the horizon. It was almost as if someone had whisked us to Monument Valley: the sandstone maybe a deeper hue of burnt orange, and the cliffs a little less vertical in their prominence, but spectacular nonetheless. Again for a moment, even our guides seemed to take the time to enjoy the view.

After checking the ridges for lone horsemen and potential ambush places, we were into the singletrack proper. Below the upper cliffs was yet another odd surface under wheel. Lighter sandstone gravel, baked hard and very predictable in spots but loose and unruly in others, brought back the smiles. Everyone had found their place in the freight train by this point in the trip. My ailing freehub meant myself and Antonio kept up the rear while constantly trying to keep Joe, Sam and Doug in check. Pine trees like before but no longer in neat rows offered some shade from the now clear sky and the ever-present sun, which was now pushing the heat past the 40° mark. Out into the open again, the trail dived into a series of switchbacks, each one progressively tighter and more technical than the last. Again, with Joe in front making everything look supremely easy, the Needham freight train was close behind but considerably more sketchy with Doug breathing down his neck. By this stage I had started to wilt and decided to ride at my own pace, while Antonio, ever the professional, kept an eye on me so I didn't droop too much. The turns kept coming and only the front runners cleaned the lot. With no exposure to worry about and the grand view at our backs, the trail was the only thing to focus on. Braking needed expert timing to not fall foul of the broken surface, and loose rock on bedrock made the going tough.

With the turns dispatched with varying degrees of skill, the trail flattened and started to undulate below another set of aged sandstone cliffs. The elements had shaped the stone here into some impressive shapes and rock formations of all shapes and sizes sat almost at random about the head and base of the cliffs. Climbing out of the bowl we'd dropped into, the heat unrelenting and bodies suffering from the lack of breakfast, we decided to cut the loop short, more than likely for my safety and sanity. The afternoon heat was starting to take its toll and I found myself becoming irrationally angry. Doug took to keeping Sam and Joe happy, their sense of direction not being particularly acute, while I set about taking my mind off things by practising my Spanish with Antonio.



Reserved for hunting (...mountain bikers?)





Enjoying the shade of the valleys.





¿Dónde está el limonada?

One short, horrible climb later and one of the best descents going offered another smile-heavy break from the brutal heat. With the front three long gone, finding their energy where I could find none, I took to doing my best to keep as much wind as possible between Antonio and myself. Sublime, dusty singletrack took the sting out of cutting the ride short and the competitive edge took over once more. Atop another riverbed, rockier this time, with some fair exposure off to our right-hand side, this was one for the books. Riding fast down singletrack, blind, with someone who knows where they're going hot on your heels was a fantastic buzz that certainly perked me up. I would rather have succumbed to the heat or become raspberry jam on the rocks below than be caught. Prior to setting off, we had been warned about a corner that could go terribly wrong and had done for one of the locals. Forgetting the heat, the fact that the toys had almost ejected themselves from the pram and the prior warning, I set off down the trail with renewed vigour only to hear Antonio's cries reminding me of the danger as I went in hot. Luck was on my side thankfully – the obvious line was the safest option, although poor Antonio was given a fair fright!

As we busted out onto the last fire road, we all fell to the ground under the shade of a line of trees before the final plunge back to the hotel. After taking on the remaining water in my pack in a single gulp we set off in convoy down some rocket-sled-fast singletrack that offered little remorse for a bad line or an over-the-bars incident. Shooting out onto the road we'd climbed up hours before, the smiles from Sam, Joe and Doug said it all. Fists were bumped, and chat soon turned to the lucky escapes, the near misses and the awesome corners. Despite our overexcited, wide-eyed chat of the trails above, our minds soon turned to an icy cold Kas Limon, our official beverage for the trip.

As the frosty drinks helped return our core temperatures to something more acceptable, I remember feeling about as unattractive at that moment as it's possible for a human to be or feel. While I feel pretty daft cutting rides because the weather was 'too good', it took an experienced eye in Doug and Antonio to realise I wasn't doing so well. To put it lightly, I felt like hammered shit. It does go to show though that the best or most memorable rides aren't always the perfect ones. 🍷