



## Sun, Sea and CYCLING

By Stephen Dyster

**In the heat of Mallorca, four middle-aged, married men behave very nearly impeccably**

Tandeming to Petra.

**W**e are all probably aware that Mallorca is something of a cycling mecca. There are some folk who find its winter climate preferable to the briskness of the UK in February. Regular contributors Gerry Frisby and Paul Wagner are amongst them. It was Gerry who first pointed out to me that the government of the Balearic Islands had decided to promote cycling in a very big way: cycle routes, designated cycle tracks, road closures and so on. Add to this broad, generally well made roads, a speed limit of 25 mph (40kmph) on most minor roads and a law keeping motorists 1.5 metres from cyclists when overtaking, add mountains, a gently undulating interior and sweeping bayside roads and weather that can almost be guaranteed to be

pretty good at worst. You can see why it appeals both to the gentle tourist, as well as racers and triathletes whacking out those early season miles.

The four tramp cyclists who arrived at Palma Airport had little in common with the triathletes. I had cycled a good few miles this year and had ridden in Spain before; Mark had ridden a lot, but was short of miles in 2011; likewise James; Steve is a runner, lean and fit. Having arrived on a budget airline with stringent baggage limits and having an individualistic approach to cycling, we weren't equipped with the latest gear. My lycra shorts did not make me look the part when combined with ill-coordinated, though practical, gear. Mark also wore lycra, but with a difference; he had managed to create baggy lycra shorts, the remarkable effect enhanced by efficiently



Well-made cycle lanes.



One of Pro Cycle Hire's best.

aero-dynamic legs. James tended to the baggy shorts and old, more or less sweaty, tee-shirt. His approach was generally muscular and vigorous as opposed to the stylishly sleek Steve who had a more sporty look and impressive aerobic fitness, especially in the mountains.

Which brings us to the bikes. We hired bikes from Pro-Cycle Hire in Puerto Pollensa. A hire car came included in the cost of the villa, so we drove to the villa and then picked the bikes up in stages. Due to my desultory and careless booking we had a mixture of bikes matching our irregular get up. To the credit of Bruce at Pro-Cycle Hire, where things were exceptionally busy, we were rapidly equipped with a hybrid, an MTB (which quickly gained the epithet "James' Tractor") an alloy framed racer with carbon forks and a full carbon racer. As editor I bagged the latter. Gossip spread about by jealous and bitter individuals suggest that I would not allow anyone else to use this. The truth is that I offered, but they did not wish to take advantage of it or didn't hear my quiet voice, the latter brought about by an occasional sore throat due to the dry climate. The others were fortunate

enough not to suffer such epiglottal complaints, and so shared their bikes. Actually, the contrasting bikes were a source of great interest and pride.

In the heat of summer cyclists are advised to store their bikes in the shade to avoid exploding tyres. It wasn't summer, but we stowed the bikes in the villa hallway in any case. There was plenty of space. The villa, provided by Sealand Villas, owners of numerous properties in the "unspoilt" north east of Mallorca was meant for six, but even that number could have rattled round like peas in a pod. Three huge en-suite bedrooms, a lounge area we barely used as we lived in the kitchen or by the pool, air conditioning, barbecues – even an outdoor fridge. Whilst the pool was chilly, it was used several times at the end of a sunny day's cycling. Although we never really got to grips with the automatic gates we all had the feeling that this was a bit too good for the likes of us. Car hire is included in the cost and at £1000 for the week in early April, coupled with self-catering some nights and cheap flights with Ryan Air, made this an eminently affordable trip. The baggage limits on the budget airlines mattered little as the

villa had a washing machine. The weather is pretty reliable, though not necessarily hot. A waterproof jacket was worn once on a chilly day in the mountains, but a couple of sets of cycling gear and some casual clothes were more than enough.

Many of the cyclists we met were on trips organised by Max Huerzeler. These take over a number of island hotels at this time of year, some with over 500 cyclists staying there. Temporary bike parking rails featured in many places on the routes they used, all with the Huerzeler banner. We pondered whether we would have preferred to have gone on that type of trip. Since none had it was, of course, a theoretical exercise. On the whole we felt that the villa gave a break from cycling and flexibility less likely in a hotel. Whilst we all find fellow cyclists are generally good company, there is sometimes the, from our point of view, danger that one gets into long conversations about bottom brackets.

So, delayed by the luxury of a palace from home, we generally cycled off later than expected into the early spring sunshine. You might want to have a gilet or such like if you are setting off early, even in a Mallorcan April. You'll soon shed this, if you're anything like me. We tended to go pretty lightweight.

James' Tractor got a couple of punctures, but the roads were pretty clear of debris and a minimal toolkit was perfectly adequate. Pro-Cycle Hire provided a spare tube, tyre levers and, with a bit of negotiation, a multi-tool and repair kit. Anything more and a call to the shop would bring help, so take a mobile phone.

Day One of cycling took us down to Puerto Pollensa, again. This is the gateway to the road out to Cabo Formentor, a fabulously rocky peninsula. The road rises in a series of zig-zags, with a specially constructed viewpoint at the top. The descent begins immediately afterwards, winding tree-shaded back to sea level, where a short diversion leads to Formentor; beach, café, hotel. For the lighthouse one climbs again, across slopes wooded and barren by turns, through a tunnel beneath beetling pinnacles of rock. Switching from side to side of the narrowing spine of land, trying hard to keep eyes on the road, the scenery is a treat.

The mass of cyclists were more or less seriously putting in some fast miles, but the pure number of cyclists demonstrated the "safety in numbers" principle. One car driver blasted a horn at a group of triathletes from Essen, but the demand was ignored and the driver had to take time and care.



Homeward bound and heading for the hills.





On the Road to Formentor.

The lighthouse – with café – sits on cliff tops, with views away to Menorca. If the views weren't brilliant, the almond and lemon tart from the café came in enormous slices at very reasonable cost, would compensate for any disappointment. Almonds are prominent in Mallorcan pastries, with several million trees on the island. I was pleased to see that only the most serious speedsters were ignoring the delicacies on offer and bolting down an energy bar and belting back home. Mind, I sense a tinge of jealousy that I can't bolt very rapidly!

Having never ridden a full carbon bike before, I found the unnerving twitchiness of high speed descents a new experience. That's the trouble; high performance bike ceases to be so when ridden by

moderately performing cyclist. The climbing was, however, easy and smooth. James, on his tractor, however, found the reverse; speeding down the hills one-handed whilst taking video footage.

Stopping at Formentor for refreshments, we noted the wooded peninsular across the bay and that became our objective the next morning. Sadly, a steel gate at the entrance to a tunnel and forthright military notices put it out of reach, but it was a good ride whilst it lasted. Heading south we ran the gauntlet of the more touristy Puerto Alcudia to Can Picafort stretch. Even here the broad roads had plenty of space for the small amount of motor vehicles and the large number of bicycles. Between Puerto Alcudia and Can Picafort, a nature reserve stretches

alongside the road. There is a visitor centre. Although more touristy these things are relative: this was a far cry from the gruesome urbanisations that put me off parts of the Mediterranean coast.

We then headed inland, taking in a number of small towns, Santa Margalida, Santa Maria de Salut and Sineu, before heading north through LLubi, where we did not stop for a LLubi snack. This distant pun on Scooby Snack adequately demonstrates the quality of wit on offer as we rode, as well as the childlike joy there is to be had when awheel in the sunshine. Mark and James also discovered humour in pretending that they had grown cactus ears. This was not as surprising as the fact that we did not get a puncture from a spine, though they spent

the evening pulling minute spines from their fingers. Matters were not improved by our next destination being, undoubtedly innocently, named Bugar.

Eventually, we found our way to Campanet. From here a beautiful cycling road, running parallel to the main road the other side of the hill, inclined gently through wood and pasture. This was part of one of the official cycle routes. A map is available, and it is as good a map as you'll get for cycling on the island. I've often used the 1:100 000 Provincial Map series, though the one for the Balearic Islands is mostly sea blue and the detail not always sufficient to pick up very minor roads. The cycle routes are signposted. Keep a keen eye out, as the signs are wooden and not always easy to see if you are



Safety in numbers for cyclists.

speeding along. In some cases the cycle routes seemed to add unnecessary distance, especially as the main roads were rarely busy and certainly not intimidating. However, they did get off the beaten track.

Deciding to go and have cold beer in Pollensa towards the end of a ride became something of a ritual. For the northern European the experience of sitting in the square of a Mediterranean town on an early April evening, with tapas being served and the hubbub of children playing and families meeting and eating, can be one of life's great pleasures. We debated whether this was due to the weather or due to the apparent shortage of drunken youths. Mind you, we did see a couple of extremely skilful BMXers attempt to ride up the vertical wall of the Church. Wait 'til confession, I thought.

Next day we headed up into the mountains. These are serious mountains, too. The highest point, Puig Major can be reached via a turning off the main Pollensa to Soller road. Topped by Ben Nevis by a few metres, it would be

an impressive ride. We didn't get that far. Nor did we ride down to Port de Sa Calobra, reputedly beautiful though it is. There are serious climbs in the Sierra de Tramuntana. That from Sa Calobra would suit the sort of cyclist who has recently ridden out of somewhere like Crackington Haven and wishes to up the anti a good deal. The point is that these are serious mountain roads. It was a cloudy morning and it was the one day we went equipped with waterproof jackets. These remained unused.

As the ascent began, a group of workmen repairing some crash barriers waved us through the traffic control signs. They were smiling and seemed to be enjoying allowing us to progress without a forced rest. I tend to lose sense of direction on mountain roads and allow myself to enjoy the exercise and the changing vista that comes with each rocky contortion.

Stopping for coffee at Lluc, we were a little surprised to find the famous monastery at the centre of a commercial development. We shouldn't have been. Monasteries have

attracted and sought to profit from visitors for centuries. The café served Sabrosada Baguettes. Sabrosada is amongst my favourites, a spicy pork liver sausage perfect for mashing into a sandwich.

Whilst many British hillroads pass through barren moorland, bereft of victuallers, the continental mountain road is rarely totally bereft of café or hotel. We ignored these, though a second lunch would not have gone amiss, and crossed the Coll de Sa Batalla and sped out of the mountains to Calmari, Campanet and back along our delightful road to Pollensa.

Earlier in the week we'd been chatting about doing some serious mileage, but our hearts weren't really in aiming above the sixty mile mark. In any case Mark and James were up for a spot of tandeming. Thus we rode off to Pro-Cycle Hire in Puerto Pollensa, to swap the bikes around. There was a Massi racing tandem leaning against the wall. Head shakes from the guys at the shop. What you get is a Dawes Edge. Quite right to. After a brief coaching session from the closest thing

in the party to an expert, James and Mark were away at considerable speed. The Massi might have been calamitous.

Running round the bay with tandem in the lead, training peletons in our wake, and the sea deep blue in the morning light, we went for coffee in the walled town of Alcudia, capital of the island in Roman times. Heading south along roads already cycled, we were having another lowland day. Not that it was ever flat. Moreover, the lush and productive fields gave way to spaghetti-western aridity as we crossed low hills on the way to Petra. Not the rose red Petra as old as time, but a Petra with a square full of colourful bicycles and riders in club shirts shimmering in the sunshine or brightening up the shaded corners. The latter were in demand, with insufficient supply. We bought some food from a shop and went into a churchyard to eat it, sitting on benches by the softly pink walls of the church.

A series of supposedly main roads took us to Muro. Shortly after leaving Muro, towards Sa Pobla, we achieved a notable landmark. We have probably all overtaken a milk float and even a car when the driver is looking out for house numbers, but the opportunity arose to overtake a car moving on the open road at a reasonable speed. Whilst said vehicle would have struggled in Formula One or even Formula Twenty, it was a proper car. We raced past and were not retaken for several kilometres. By then, we were, in any case, turning off the main drag.

The farm roads we now followed roamed amidst a forest of old iron windmills, used for pumping water to irrigate the numerous small-holdings. In varying states of repair they would have suited Don Quixote if he'd had a tank. The contrast of skeletal iron masts and the mighty rushes of the watery Parc Natural de S'Albufera de Mallorca (not to be confused with the Reserva



Natural de S'Albuferata to the north of Alcudia) was peculiar. The twisting road through the marsh might not have appealed to cyclists who had recently read Stephen King's "The Children of the Corn". However, it brought us back to Puerto d'Alcudia and thence to Alcudia. Refreshment was taken in the shade of the town walls that seemed to hold the warmth of the setting sun in their ancient stones.

On the final day of cycling, we decided to head toward Inca, and in doing so ride the delightful road to Campanet in reverse. This began well. However, halfway to Campanet disaster struck in the form of two farmers building a wire fence at the roadside. As we approached they uncoiled a new spool of wire. Springing across the

road in front of us, but almost invisible in the bright sunshine, Steve alone managed to miss it. The tandem was ensnared and James did well not to slice his ankle badly as the wire wrapped itself around his pedal. Behind the tandem, my bike became entangled and despite applying the brakes I slammed into the tandem's rear wheel, lifted gently into air and landed, without grace, in a heap. A few cuts and bruises and a painful wrist were the outcome. Concern was for me, but it was the tandem that, as we climbed the hill into Campanet, turned out to have suffered the worst. Noticing the rear gears were slipping badly, we found that the impact had taken out a spoke and that the wheel was already wilting. Obviously, time for cake and coffee



Alcudia.

in a café in the square at Campanet. Loosening the rear brake to allow it to function whilst the wheel was able to turn, we prepared to head back. We phoned Pro-Cycle Hire, just to check that they'd not prefer to come and collect the tandem without the return journey causing any further damage. Their driver was way down south and, in any case they suggested what we'd already done and said take care on our way home. The bikes were returned safely. A disappointing last day, but these things happen and it couldn't detract from a great trip.

With car hire thrown in with the cost of the villa, plenty of sunshine and plenty to do

apart from cycle – strange concept – this would make a good arrangement for families or mixed interest groups. Sealand's villas come at a range of prices. Steve hired one for the following week at around £500 for his family of six. Pro-Cycle Hire deal with all kinds of bikes, so don't be intimidated by the smart lightweight models that dominate the showroom. They are as supportive of the novice as they are of the experienced rider. Their prices for weekly hire were very reasonable and hiring was more convenient than shipping our own, though not necessarily cheaper. Spring or autumn would be best for cycling any real distance.



One of Sealand's best.

**Steve Dyster travelled with Sealand Villas and stayed in Can Fiol, a luxury three bedroom villa with large swimming pool, close to the historic town of Pollensa.**

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in 2004 they have built a reputation as Mallorca's leading supplier of road and mountain bikes and cater for a range of requirements and sizes.

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