

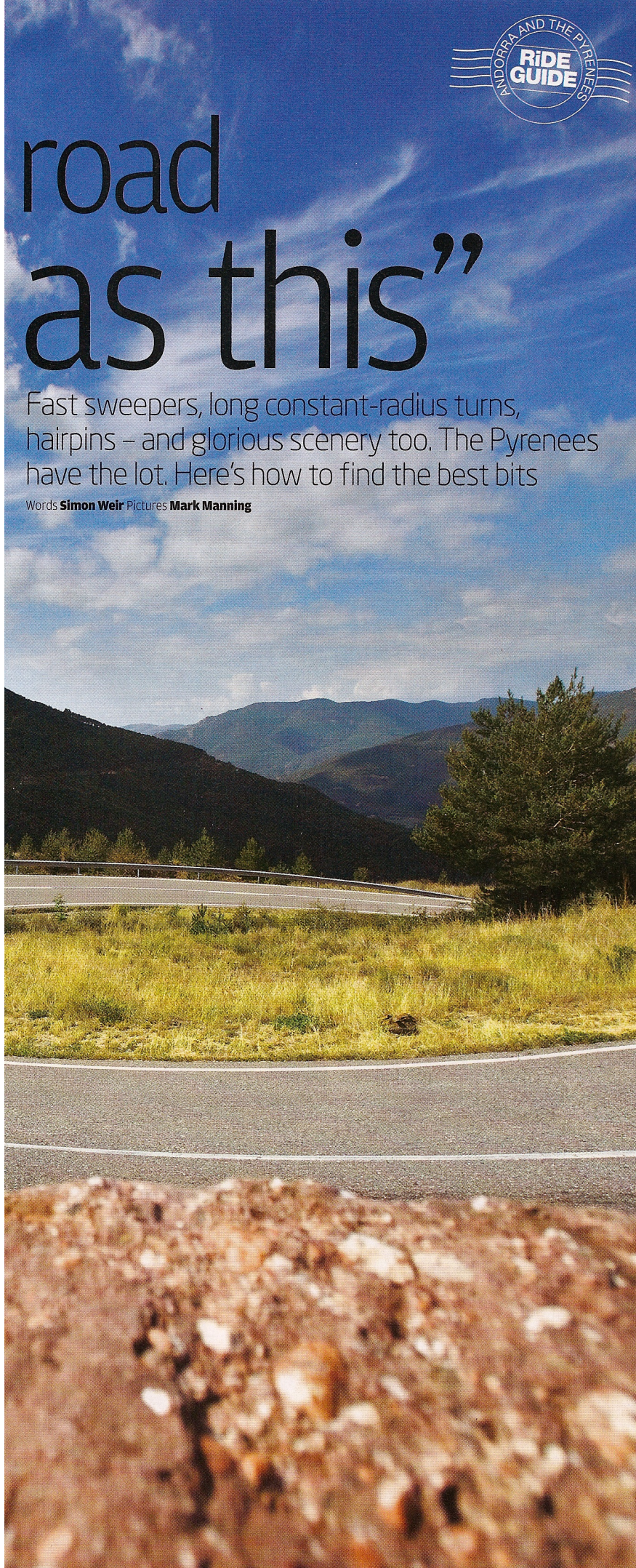
“You could ride your whole life
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Fast sweepers, long constant-radius turns, hairpins – and glorious scenery too. The Pyrenees have the lot. Here’s how to find the best bits

Words **Simon Weir** Pictures **Mark Manning**



There’s an old military saying: no plan survives contact with the enemy. When you’re planning a trip to the Alps on a bike, especially at the tail end of September, it pays to know the enemy – which is the weather. With the route planned, hotels reserved early and Eurotunnel booked way in advance to get the cheapest fares, last month’s big tourers test was planned with military precision. Until I double-checked the forecast on the morning we were due to head to Dover. Rain. Solid, unhelpful rain, squatting over the Alps all week. That’ll spoil things...

Scrap the plan. Where’s it going to be dry – Scotland? No. Wales? No. Germany? Absolutely not. The only glimmer of dryness appears to be a window in the clouds that would waft over the French/Spanish border for about 48 hours before drifting north. If we can get there in time, if the roads are any good, and if the forecast is accurate, we might just salvage the test – and have decent ride.

Trouble is, I’ve not been to the Pyrenees since the late ’80s and I haven’t got the vaguest idea about where to ride. I phone my mate Andy T, who’d been there in the summer and mentioned a road when he came back. “It’s absolutely cracking,” he confirms. “You could ride your whole life and never find a road as good as that. It has everything.” I scribble the name down, cancel the Alpine hotels and hurry off to Dover, in search of sunshine.

I won’t pretend a solid day of French autoroute is thrilling. It’s not – in fact, it is quite literally a pain in the arse. If you have more time, there are definitely better ways to get across France. At least until you get onto the A75 south of Clermont Ferrand – the motorway that thinks it’s a B-road. From there to Millau, it slaloms its way through the Massif Central – a high-speed, two-lane rollercoaster with next to no traffic upon it. Perfect.

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We break our trip in Millau. “We need to find a hotel,” deadpans road tester Kev Smith, pulling up opposite a Campanile. Wordlessly, I point at it. Yes, it’s a hotel. They have rooms. And a restaurant. And a bar. Job done – who needs to plan ahead?

When we get up next day, it’s still a fair slog to our destination – N-roads and autoroute making it fast, if not the kind of riding to write home about – but at least we reach the mountains by lunchtime on our second day. At first, I’m worried that the Pyrenees aren’t going to provide the epic roads we’re looking for. From Perpignan we head up into the lush green hills above Ceret – or rather, along the crowded valley roads between them. They’re dull, heavy with traffic and we crawl past shoppers and gendarmes in mirrored sunglasses, cradling shotguns.

Then suddenly, as we leave the wonderfully named Prats de Mollo, everything changes. The traffic disappears, the road lifts towards the peaks like a gundog scenting game and we begin to twist our way up fragrant wooded slopes. The sun breaks out from behind the hazy clouds that have shielded it for much of the day. This is better – this is the kind of riding we’ve crossed Europe to find. Epic vista after epic vista unfurls before us, every third corner opening another majestic view. This is the kind of scenery we don’t get in Britain, even in the Highlands. It quite simply takes your breath away.

And the road... crossing the border into Spain the road becomes the N152 and we definitely don’t have roads like this in the UK. It’s as if a drunken planner had dropped an inky string on a map, then decided he’d better spend some EU subsidy money turning it into a highway before anyone noticed the mistake. It traverses steep hills cut by ravines, clinging to the contours like a tramp hugging a bottle. I’m drunk with the direction changes, flicking the Honda Pan European from one side to the other at a dizzying rate. 📍



We're heading north-west, into the setting sun. One moment the road is bathed in glorious warm evening light, golden and invigorating. The next, it twists away into chilling shadow. As fuel lights begin to flash we head down into the foothills in search of petrol and when we stop we take the chance to fit clear visors. We know we're heading in the rough direction of Andorra and at the tiny village of Sansor we pick up the road we've come all this way to try: the highly recommended N260.

I've been looking forward to this. Andy T's a tidy rider, so if he rates this road that's a recommendation I trust. Even in the gloaming, with headlights sparkling on the oncoming cars, I'm enjoying it. I've pinched the BMW K1300GT and it's galloping along on the perfect surface, turning easily and instinctively. This is real high-speed, open stuff, mountains glowering to the right of us, plains cut with wooded rivers opening up to the left. It's a road you can lose yourself in, fast and involving. The miles simply fly past.

It's fully dark when we reach the small Spanish town of La Seu d'Urgell - it'll do as a destination. No point riding into Andorra in the dark, especially as we'd only have to come back here to pick up the N260 again in the morning. As I struggle with the language, the receptionist in the Hotel La Seu smiles, nods, points at the affordable tariff on the board and hands over room keys.

After an evening of Spanish cuisine (and decent Spanish beer) we rise early - we have a long way to go today. It's hazy, a slight chill in the mountain air promising that autumn's just around the corner. I look nervously at the sky, but there's no sign of rain clouds. So far the forecast's been spot on - it was a good decision to come here.

No, it was a brilliant decision. The N260 from La Seu to Sort is epic - an oversized version of the kind of roads you get in the Yorkshire Dales. There are lumps, bumps, tight turns and open sweepers, not

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to mention the occasional cow wandering across the road. As we climb back towards the mountains the road's lined with strange angular plants, red rocks and dusty red soil. Definitely not the kind of thing you get in the Yorkshire Dales. And the views - well, happen I like the Dales but there's nothing oop there quite like this.

At Sort we have to decide: carry on along the 260 to El Pont de Suerte and head for France there, or turn north now on the C13/C28. We opt for the first turning, which is an inspired choice. The road drops into the lush Rio Noguera valley, towering grey cliffs rising above us. The freshly laid road surface is amazing - jet black, grippy and flowing beside the river in an endless series of gently cresting curves like something altogether more organic than a man-made road. We have it almost to ourselves, save for a construction team polishing the rock retaining walls at the massive multi-hairpin complex that marks the start of our ascent to the French border.

The road across the top of the Pyrenees, from Vielha in Spain to St Beat in France is hardly the highest pass in Europe. It's not even the highest pass in the Pyrenees (that's Port d'Envalira in Andorra). But it has to be one of the most picturesque; with the mountains assuming dignified poses on either side of a landscape it's easier to imagine Heidi romping through than Don Quixote. But for us, it's all downhill from here. We're more than 1000 miles from home with only a day and a half to get to the Eurotunnel. It doesn't matter. We've had a full day's ride in the mountains - the kind of riding that'll give us memories to sustain us through the winter months ahead.

Getting back to England tired, I speak to Andy T. That N260 - brilliant road, I assure him. "But you didn't get to ride the best bit of it," he exclaims. "You want to do the other stretch, around Ainsa. That's a road worth crossing Europe for..." Now he tells me. I don't know what's planned for next year, but I know I can scrap it. I need to go back to the Pyrenees.





Andorra and Pyrenees Fact file

Getting to the Pyrenees

There are three ways to get to the Pyrenees from the UK.

- 1 The first is by boat to Bilbao or Santander in northern Spain, taking you to within a short ride of the western end of the mountains. See www.Brittany-Ferries.co.uk or www.PO-Ferries-uk.co.uk.
- 2 The second option is to get a ferry or Eurotunnel to France and start riding. It's a long way - allow two days, or three if you want to cut out the motorway drudgery and plot an interesting cross-country route. We'd suggest a Caen or Le Havre ferry, then down through Le Mans and either Limoges or Bordeaux.
- 3 The third option is to get a crossing to France and take an overnight train to Narbonne from Calais or, if you ride to Paris, to Biarritz. The advantage is that for less than you'd spend on petrol and hotels to ride south, you get there really fast and without wearing out your tyres. The downside is that you have to take your own food - the French Motorail trains sell wine and coffee, but no nosh. See www.raileurope.co.uk.

When to go

Avoid winter. The presence of ski resorts tells you all you need to know about likely road conditions from November to March. Between May and October the roads and skies should be clear, though the best weather will be in high summer.

Where to go

Mountain touring expert John Cundiff of Alpine TT (www.alpine-tt.com) runs regular trips to the Pyrenees, usually basing his trips just outside Lourdes. Here are three routes he recommends.

"One of the most famous climbs in France, the Col du Tourmalet frequently features in the Tour de France. I normally approach it from Luz St Sauveur on the western side. It joins up with the Col d'Aspin. Marbre is a good choice for lunch. Both cols offer great views." **Road: D918.**

"From Arrens, the Col de Soular runs along the mountain face, going through two short, damp tunnels and becomes the Col d'Aubisque. From Eaux-Bonnes, head into Spain along the jaw-dropping D934 - over the border it turns into the well policed A136, which takes you to Biescas where you pick up the N260 to Boltana." **Roads: D918, D934, A136, N260.**

"But for the finest four roads you can ride in one stint, start in Laguiche-Restoue and take the traffic-free D26 to the border, where it becomes the N2011 and NA140. Fill up at the end of the NA140 and take the N135 to Pamplona - it's only 12 miles long but it's without doubt the best road in the Pyrenees." **Roads: D26, NA2011, NA140 N135.**

Accommodation

Normally firm fans of the planned, pre-booked trip, we proved with this jaunt that heading off without reservations is simple. Budget hotels and affordable non-chain B&Bs are common and usually well signposted on both sides of the border, even if you don't have a sat nav to lead you to the nearest hotels each time you arrive in a new place.

Camping is an option - though obviously timings need to be adapted when planning routes to allow for pitching and packing. Most French towns have municipal campsites and the resort areas on the Spanish side of the border have equally well signed camping options.

Fuel

Don't risk running dry, especially on a Sunday. Start looking for fuel as you hit half-full - don't pass up an opportunity to put even half a tank in.

Health cover

Make sure you get a European Health Insurance Card - this takes the place of the old E111 card. Call 0845 606 2030 or visit www.ehic.org.uk.

Insurance

Most policies will cover sort trips to Europe, but in all cases it pays to contact your insurance firm before you set off, to let them know where you're going. If a supplementary charge is necessary, it's likely to be small anyway.

Breakdown cover

Before you set off, make sure your bike is serviced, running well and on decent tyres with plenty of life in them. If you have UK breakdown cover, that may cover you in Europe - if not, a small extra fee should add it. Note that no breakdown cover will get you off a French autoroute: a separate firm has to get you off the motorway (not cheap) and then your breakdown cover can kick in.

Speeding

There are fewer police and cameras, but if you're caught you'll face an on-the-spot fine - though if you're more than 50km/h over the limit, your bike may be impounded. Ouch. Speed limits are 130km/h on dry motorways, 110 on wet ones, 90km/h on A-roads 50kph in towns/villages. Take your licence and a photocopy of your registration and insurance documents with you.

