

Different worlds

Cyclist tackles a rectangular route that crosses the Cantabrian Mountains, connecting the lush forests of 'Green Spain' with the dry plains of the interior

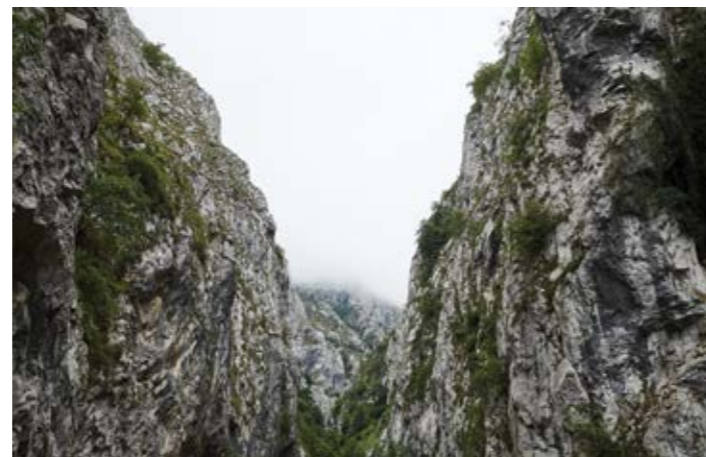
Words **SAM CHALLIS** Photography **JUAN TRUJILLO ANDRADES**





Above: The day's route starts with a 20km ascent of the Puerto de Ventana

Far right: The view from the top of the Puerto de Ventana looks out over central Spain, which is hotter, drier and far more open than the jungle-like greenery further down the ascent



“**Y**es I know that ascent. It's a pretty meaty one," says David, my ride partner for today, as we talk about the day's route over

breakfast. I think it ironic he has used that adjective, considering there's very little meat on David himself.

That's hardly a surprise. David is a guide for tour company Marmot Tours, which operates cycling holidays throughout Europe. Consequently he is the archetypal continental cyclist: lean-limbed and tanned.

He just looks light. Even his breakfast is light. Having ordered bacon and eggs on toast, I watch with increasing shame as instead of pouring milk on his muesli, like most normal people, he splashes orange juice over it, then tops his toast with olive oil (extra virgin, naturally) and chopped tomatoes in place of butter and jam.

Standing astride the top tube of his bike he looks like a slighter Fabian Cancellara. When we begin to pedal I can tell he's eager to dance away, but I ensure that our pace remains suitably pedestrian, for today's ride starts with the aforementioned meaty climb.

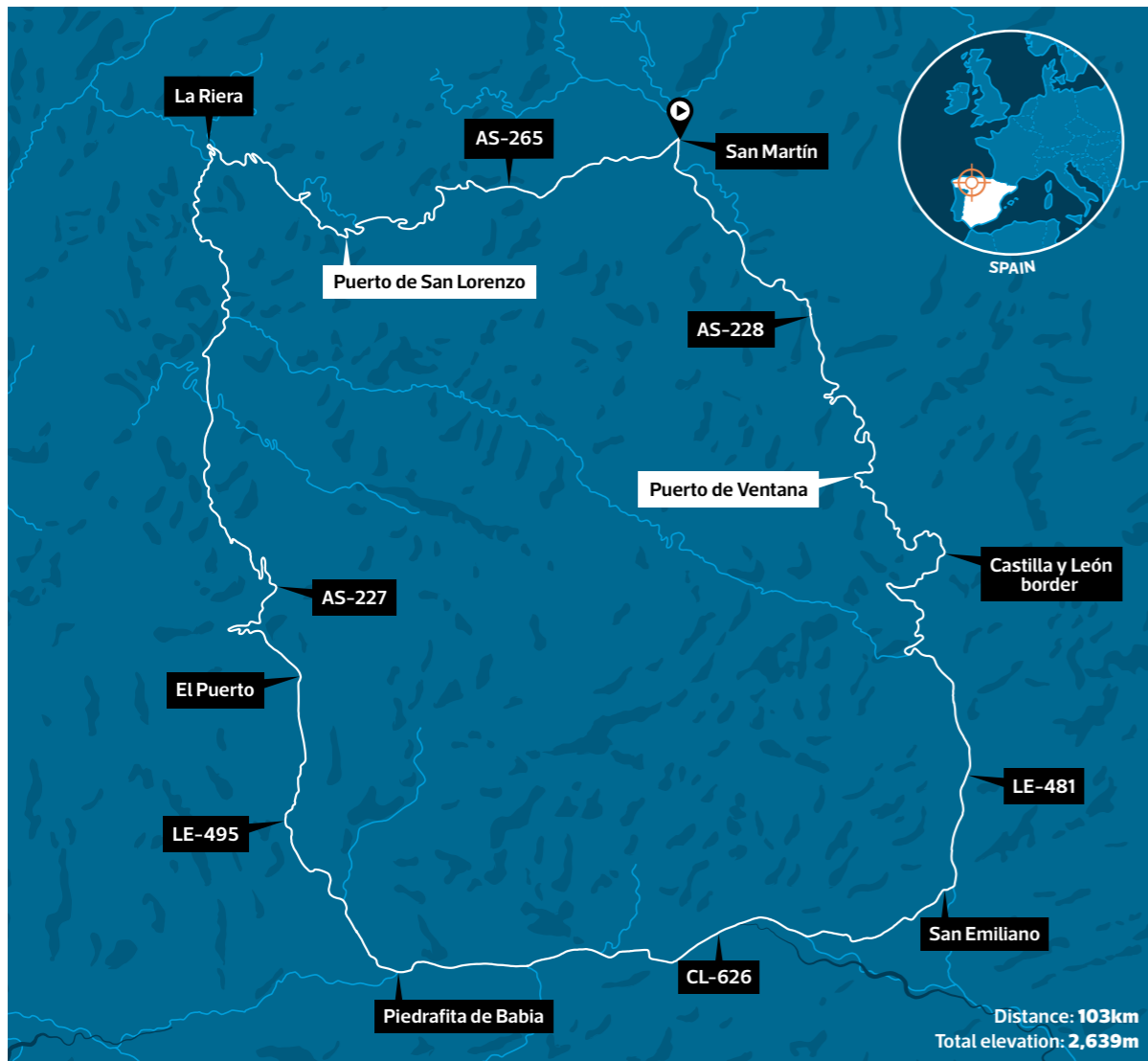
Into the clouds

The ascent in question is the Puerto de Ventana and it begins in San Martín at the top-right corner of our

Gorges loom out of the mist, the appearance of their sheer rock walls sudden and imposing

rectangular route, a tiny village nestled in the leafy centre of the Cantabrian Mountains in one of Asturias's many nature parks, Las Ubiñas-La Mesa. It is smack bang in the middle of 'Green Spain', a lush east-west band at the top of the country sandwiched between the Atlantic to the north and the Cantabrian Mountains to the south. Puerto de Ventana is one of the passes that breaches the mountain range, allowing access to central Spain.

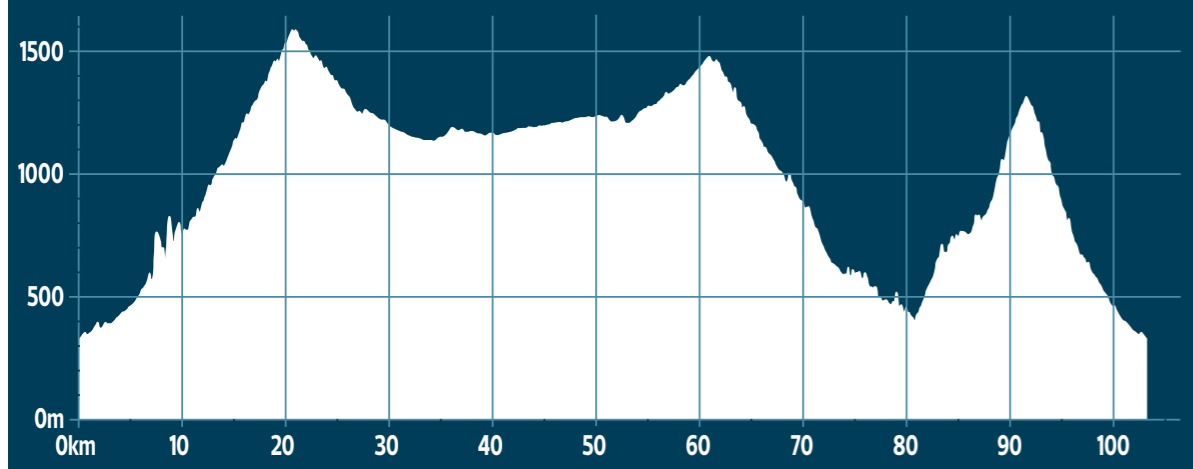
Before arriving here I naively assumed that the area wouldn't be too hilly – after all, it's not the Alps. But a bit of research revealed that the Las Ubiñas-La Mesa park has its share of monstrous climbs. These were the occasional training roads of former Olympic Road Race Champion Sammy Sánchez, who hails from the nearby city of Oviedo. What's more, less than 30km away lurks the Alto de l'Angliru. Yes, *that* Alto de l'Angliru, the ◉



Playing the angles

Follow *Cyclist's* rectangular route in luscious Asturias

To download this route go to cyclist.co.uk/101asturias. Starting in San Martín, head south on the AS-228 and climb the Puerto de Ventana until you reach Asturias's border with Castilla y León. The road then becomes the LE-481, which you follow to San Emiliano. Take a right on the CL-626 to head west. At the last of the 'Babias', Piedrafita de Babia, take another right onto the LE-495. You're now over halfway through and climbing until El Puerto. There the road crosses into Asturias once again, turning into the AS-227 and an incredible descent. You won't need to pedal again until you turn right at the third corner of the route in La Riera, but then you'll need every pedal revolution you can muster to climb the first half of the AS-265. After Tuiza at the top of the Puerto de San Lorenzo it's then downhill all the way back into San Martín.



Right: The Cantabrian Mountains hold back the colder, wetter weather of Green Spain from venturing further south



Keeping it local

Eat, drink and be merry in Asturias

TRY THE LOCAL DISH...
 Similar to French cassoulet, *fabada asturiana* is a flavoursome stew made with pork and beans. It's a rich, dense dish so isn't eaten frequently by the locals. For hungry cyclists, though, it's a perfect dinner to refuel your muscles after a punishing climb or two.

ORDER THE LOCAL TIPPLE...
Sidra asturiana is cider with a twist. Sour crab apples give it its distinctive twang – the drink is light, musty and bitter but sweet enough to be refreshing after a day in the sun. The pour is just as curious as the drink – a bartender will raise the bottle high above his head and pour a thin stream into the glass held low with the other hand. Unless you want to spill more than you drink, it's a technique best left to the professionals.

DOSE UP ON CULTURE...
 The Cantabrian Mountains have historically isolated Asturias from the rest of Spain, and culturally the area has a Celtic influence. Architecture often features Celtic symbols and the folklore stars dragons and fairies. Asturias may be the only place in the world where you can play castanets as you dance to a bagpipe.



This is more how I expect Spain to look. Gone is the green; grass is scorched

Top right: The first third of the Puerto de Ventana climb winds through a number steep-sided gorges

Middle right: The route involves border-hopping between the Asturias and Castilla y León regions of northern Spain. The border runs along the spine of the Cantabrian Mountains, which explains why the regions aren't just different in name, but in nature too

climb regarded by many as the toughest in professional cycling, with several ramps over 20%.

Discovering the Puerto de Ventana has that beast as its neighbour instilled in me more than a little trepidation as to what this climb would hold, but I find that intimidation largely misplaced – at least in the early stages.

It has been a regular feature in the Vuelta a España over the last 25 years, but the pros have always ridden it as a descent. It is unclear why, because the stats suggest it would make a nice climb. Its 20km length scales well over 1,000m vertically, but the lower half of that altitude is gained steadily, before steepening later.

Despite its proximity to the fearsome Angliru, in truth the Ventana strikes an ideal balance between being easy enough to ascend without going into the red, and hard enough to warm us up on a morning that has dawned misty and fresh.

All around, the Las Ubiñas-La Mesa park is dense and verdant. The slopes that flank the road are bursting with beech trees and smaller vegetation. Hamlets are tucked into the side of the mountains, seemingly barely able to hold nature back. It lends the environment a tropical feel as the cloying smell of wet tarmac and forest fills our nostrils. While the air is not yet properly warm it is humid, and we already find ourselves coated in a film of fine moisture that turns our arm hair silver.

We pass through gorges that loom out of the mist, the appearance of their sheer rock walls sudden and imposing. They stretch up vertiginously, their summits shrouded by low clouds that look heavy with rain. Being July, it might seem unusual for the Spanish weather to be so moody but this horizontal strip along the northern coast of Spain has a wet and cool maritime climate. It is in distinct contrast to the Mediterranean climate more commonly associated with the rest of the country.

We rise to meet the clouds. Even sounds are dampened – the clicking and chirping of the local wildlife recedes to leave only the sound of our increasingly laboured breathing. The yellow central line in the road is all that demarcates a winding route into apparent nothingness for several kilometres. It's all very ominous, not least because David chooses this moment to tell me brown bears are common in this part of Asturias.

The gradient of the road ramps up towards double figures and I feel the atmosphere of the ride change from jovial to serious as the task of ascending – and keeping a lookout for bears – takes ever more effort and attention.

We punch clear of the cloudline abruptly just before the top of the pass, and it acts as a pressure release valve. Glorious blue skies are revealed above for the first time today, and behind we can look out over the cloudline. Mountain peaks protrude like islands from a lake, while the wider valley holds the cloud inescapably, like tightly cupped hands cradling water.

The direct translation of Puerto de Ventana is 'Pass of the Window', and while I'm not entirely confident in the translation's accuracy, it certainly seems appropriate. The road now winds lazily downwards, and mountains either side frame a diorama that feels continents away from what we have just left behind, such is the disparity between the landscapes.

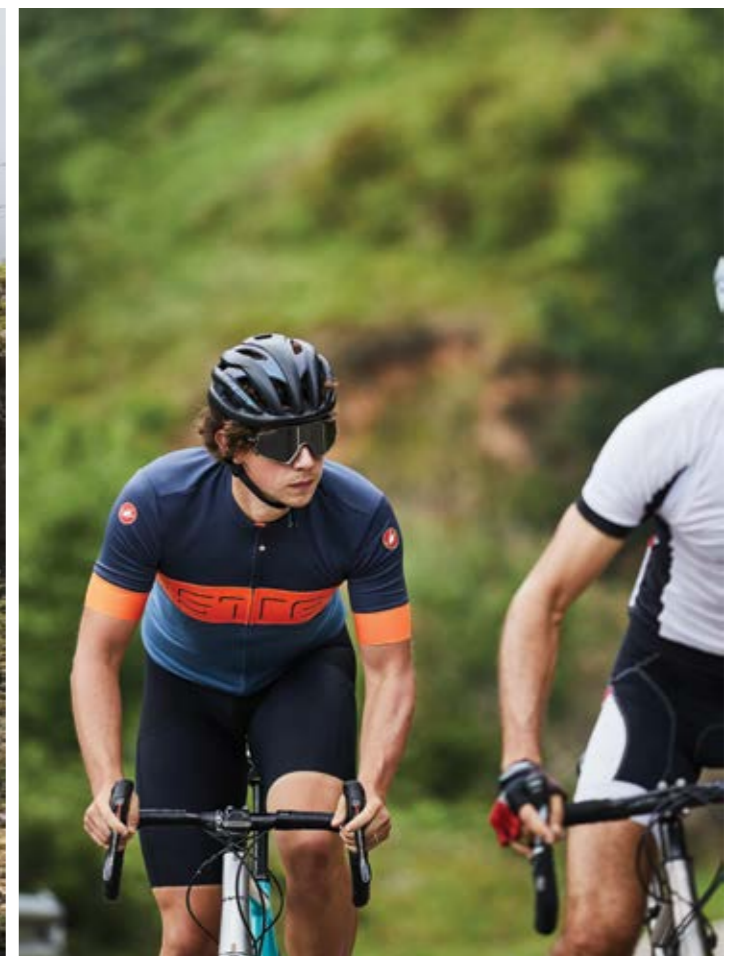
The top of the pass serves as the border between Asturias and Castilla y León, and it couldn't have been clearer if the black dotted line demarcating the territories on the map was painted large across the ground. The Cantabrian Mountains form a wall that blocks cooler, wetter weather from travelling over them and further south. Consequently we now enter a Continental landscape in the grip of midsummer.

This is more how I expect Spain to look. Gone is the green; the grass is now scorched to the colour of straw. The view is far more open, dotted with sprawling farms sitting in arable land instead of tight-knit communities beating back sloping forests. The road is wide and traffic-free so we make good time on the rolling terrain, reaching the bottom right corner of our route quickly. A dog bounds alongside us a while, patrolling its land diligently before peeling off, its job done, and for the first time today I feel true sweat on my brow instead of clammy dew.

It's said Spain is the most climatically diverse country in Europe and I'm not about to disagree – the temperature must have jumped at least 15°C in as many kilometres.

Worlds apart

There are still mountains present but they are much less frequent and dramatic. They bulge lazily up between small settlements and fields with grasses burnt to a beige





By the numbers

Worth a thousand pictures

2

Nature parks cycled through

2

HC climbs on the route

103

Distance ridden in kilometres

55

Number of those kilometres spent climbing

25

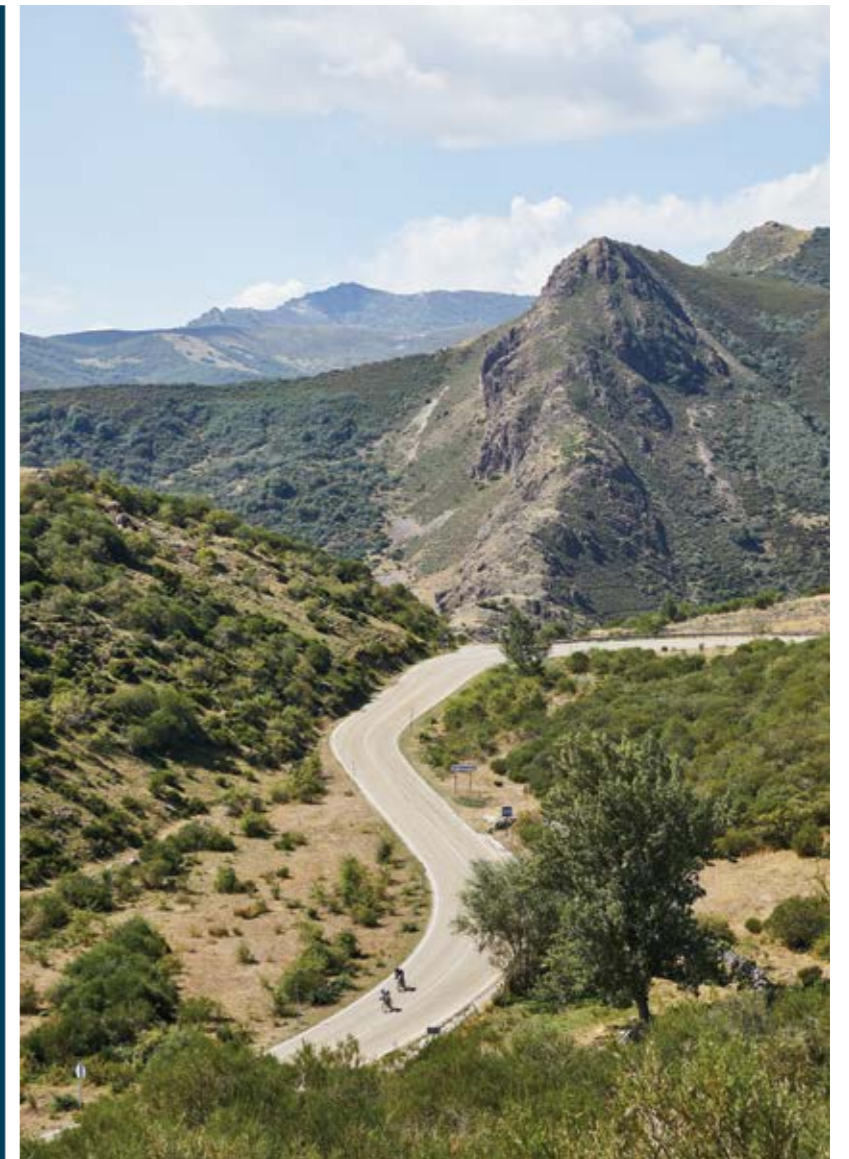
Estimated difference in kilograms between David and *Cyclist*

250

Estimated number of brown bears in Asturias

0

Brown bears actually encountered, thankfully



The rider's ride

Sarto Asola Disc, £9,900, sartobikes.com

I first rode the Asola Disc back in the summer of 2018 and found it to be one of the first disc brake bikes that didn't incur a penalty in weight or ride quality over rim brake designs. Many mainstream competitors have achieved similar feats since then, as disc brakes have become standard on road bikes, but the Asola Disc still manages to be special.

The bike's tube-to-tube carbon construction produces a wonderfully smooth ride quality that is augmented by Pirelli's 28mm Cinturato tubeless tyres. On the 20km descent from El Puerto I found plenty of grip on the technical section near the top, and then found that the bike handled unflappably on the high-speed lower slopes.

The bike's 6.99kg weight, which even today is uncommonly light, was an advantage on the Puerto de Ventana and Puerto de San Lorenzo climbs, and Campagnolo's excellent disc brakes were appreciated on the hair-raising descents down the other side of both passes. It might not be a first-choice race rig, but the Sarto Asola Disc's balance of attributes make it an ideal partner for a Big Ride such as this.



Above left: The descent into Castilla y León is long and open

Above right: We barely see a car all day - the stretch south near Torrebarrio is particularly quiet







colour. The fields ripple in the breeze as we pedal along the base of an open valley. It feels a bit like riding in North Wales, with a dose of African savannah.

The barren nature of the region's mountains offers some clues as to their geological composition. Some are sedimentary, with fantastic wavy striations like folded raspberry ripple ice cream. Others have had a more turbulent formation, their layers broken into staccato sections like a giant geological Vienetta. I relay this to David, who questions why my metaphors are dessert-related. A telltale rumble in my stomach confirms it must be time for lunch.

We stop in a village called San Emiliano and David orders a spread of what he labels 'fast food'. It has me expecting a wilted burger and cardboard-like chips, but happily the Spanish definition of the term is wildly different and far more nourishing than that. What arrives turns out to be the best chorizo I've ever eaten, accompanied by fried homegrown potatoes, eggs from the chickens pecking around the garden next door and fresh salad. Afterwards, we feel suitably reinvigorated and ready to pedal once again. It is my second rather dense meal of the day (probably featherweight David's first of the week), but thankfully the road is largely flat until we reach the second corner of our rectangular route to begin the journey north, which also means I have plenty of open miles to burn it off.

We weave through and past a set of villages all with the 'de Babia' suffix. Babia denotes this area of Castilla y León but throughout Spain is also a colloquialism – if you're in 'babia' you are 'daydreaming' or 'happy

with your lot'. Given the varied riding and beautiful conditions, I can confidently say I'm *babia* in Babia.

The road barely dips downwards at all for the next 15km but the gradient remains sociable for much of it, so David and I happily plod up towards the jagged wall of Cantabrian peaks looming ahead. After a time we gain enough altitude to be able to see beyond the mountains' shoulders to the voluminous clouds swirling and lurking just beyond the ridgeline as if held back by some magical meteorological forcefield.

Tipping into the descent and back over the border into Asturias is like plunging down the start ramp of a rollercoaster. Everything switches in an instant. Our speed quadruples, the landscape goes from calm pastures to stormy mountains and the open, idle road curls up on itself like a boa constrictor as it tries to navigate its way down the mountain range.

David points northward. 'The valley winds up here directly from the coast some 50km away,' he says. 'I'd recommend putting on a gilet because there will be a chilly wind and we won't be pedalling for a while.'

He's right. Finally we get a descent as meaty as the day's first climb. We're heading into another one of Asturias' nature parks, Somiedo. This particular one is known for its multiple small lakes, whose appearance is so beautifully glass-like that they've been deemed natural monuments.

Somiedo is just as mountainous but far less forested than Las Ubiñas-La Mesa, and from some angles could be mistaken for the French Alps. Indeed this descent is the rival of any Alpine one. It seems to go on forever, ◻

The descent is a technical challenge that transitions into a test of nerve as we reach increasingly eye-watering speeds

Glutton for punishment?

If this route isn't hard enough for you, here are some other brutes in the area

ALTO DE L'ANGLIRU, 13.1KM, 9.4%

The toughest climb in pro cycling – arguably – is in the next valley over. The first half of the ascent is easy, which makes the average gradient deceptive. The second half is uniformly in the high teens, with spikes of over 20%. It makes finding a rhythm (and a low enough gear) near impossible. An out-and-back route from San Martín would be around 120km – a perfect second day's riding.

ALTO DE LA FARRAPONA, 18.6KM, 5.6%

This pass isn't as well known but is still a must-do, and it actually branches off *Cyclist's* route from the heart of the Somiedo park. The gradient is gentle for 13km but the final 5km are well over 10%. Your reward is a view that's up there with the best in Asturias.



Above: The descent from El Puerto is huge, and carries on even after you reach the valley floor

Right: The descent after the Puerto de San Lorenzo climb completes the route. The road is steep and twisting, presenting a stern test of cornering technique



tightly coiled at the top with some precarious drops that have me hovering over my brake levers, before opening out as the altitude drops. It's a joy – a technical challenge that transitions into a test of nerve near the bottom as we reach increasingly eye-watering speeds.

Even when we get to the valley floor the descent has more to give, tracking a gorge that finally peters out as we cross a bridge over the Somiedo river. It's here that we turn 90 degrees right to begin the final stage of our route.

Squaring the rectangle

As I found out this morning, studious research of a route may introduce overly nervous anticipation, but the day's final climb convinces me that information should always be preferred to ignorance.

Because the Cantabrian Mountains house so many notable climbs, the one that has just rather brutally introduced itself to us, the Puerto de San Lorenzo, flew under the radar of my internet searches. Consequently its initial 12% section from La Riera de Somiedo, which lasts for 3km, totally blindsides me. And things don't get any easier from there.

To find its way up a seemingly sheer rock face, the road folds on itself again and again. Initially I welcome the hairpins – we cyclists are conditioned to appreciate hairpins, because they serve to break up an ascent into manageable chunks and the bends usually offer some respite in gradient. But the architects of this climb can't have read from the hairpin handbook before they laid this road. If anything the bends are steeper than the straights in between, making it feel as if the climb twists up the mountain like a corkscrew for much of its 10km length.

It's a full-body effort to wrestle our bikes up the ascent – one that even David struggles with – but the gradient flattens as we get higher and eventually we are able to look up from our stems. In the time that we've been climbing the environment has switched once



The architects of this climb can't have been reading from the hairpin handbook

again, back to the low cloud, humidity and jungle-like greenery of the Las Ubiñas-La Mesa park that our day started with.

It is incredible that such disparate landscapes can coexist in such close proximity. I for one am thankful for the biodiversity – not only is it visually arresting, it makes for a brilliantly varied day's riding too. And the best bit? It's downhill all the way home from here. 🍷

Sam Challis is tech editor at Cyclist and he can frequently be found pedalling squares

Left: The scenery resembles the Alps at the top of the descent from El Puerto. The road does too – it's tightly coiled initially as it navigates the mountainside, before opening out lower down



How we did it

TRAVEL

Cyclist flew into Oviedo with Vueling from London Gatwick. Expect to pay around £200 return plus £40 each way to travel with a bike (pre-lockdown prices). To travel to San Martín from the airport it is easiest to rent a car and drive the 50km south.

ACCOMMODATION

There are several small hotels in and around San Martín, but for this ride Cyclist stayed about 50km east in Langreo, in the spacious and modern Langrehotel and Spa. Staff were welcoming and relaxed – it's no trouble to store a bike in your room. Cyclist was even lucky enough to get the chance to visit the spa, to aid post-ride recovery, of course. We can highly recommend it.

THANKS

Onofre Picquero from the Asturias Tourist Board deserves thanks for organising

Cyclist's stay at the Langrehotel in Langreo. For more information about the Asturias region, visit turismoasturias.es.

Huge thanks must also go to Sophie Baker and Helen Snell of Marmot Tours for the time and effort they put into organising the logistics of this trip. They freed up our guides Katia Knight and David Sota from their busy summer schedules and played a huge part in making the trip as successful as it was.

Speaking of David and Katia – our thanks to both for their help on the ground during the trip. David was great company as a ride partner (and watching him eat breakfast was entertaining, too), while Katia displayed near-telepathic support car skills in knowing exactly when to pull over and provide snacks during the ride.

Marmot Tours offers a dizzying range of cycling holidays throughout Europe, which are all fully supported. For more information visit marmot-tours.co.uk.