

# The pain *in* Spain

There are climbs that hurt, and climbs that take you to a new world of suffering. And then there's the Angliru. *Cyclist* heads for northern Spain to take on a contender for the title of Europe's toughest climb

Words **STEVE WESTLAKE**  
Photography **RICHIE HOPSON**





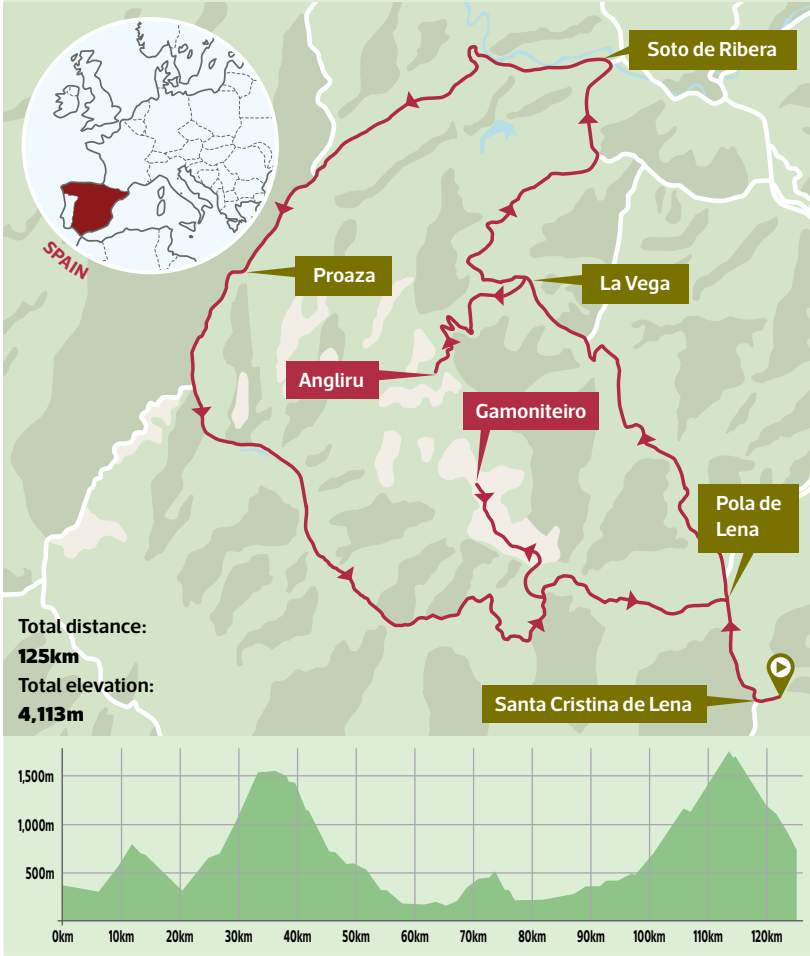
**Left: The Mirador Youth Hostel (far left of the picture) leads to the Angliru's kilometre or so of false flat. Then all hell breaks loose...**

six onwards the average gradient is 13% with brutal ramps of 23.5%, 18% and 21%. At just under 3km to go, when energy and adrenaline are gone, the average hits 17.5% for a full kilometre, then 'relents' to 13% for the next kilometre. The figures are ominous enough, but the reputation of the Angliru has been built on its inclusion in the Vuelta a Espana, images and stories from which ram home the challenge of a road that until recently was an unpaved cattle path. If it was on the flat it would barely be called a road, but because it scribbles itself upwards so suddenly over such spectacular terrain, it has become world famous among cyclists. Look on YouTube and you'll see pro riders weaving across the road at a snail's pace, like debutants startled by the first sportive of spring. It's a climb that's angered pros (see box on p95), and it was introduced to the Vuelta precisely for this reason – a headline-grabbing, heart-stabbing challenge that would appeal to the macabre desire of fans to savour the struggle of others. ▶

## Steeped in history

**Tackle a true Grand Tour monster**

Cyclist's route can be found at [tinyurl.com/kyf5koy](https://tinyurl.com/kyf5koy). It's a loop with two steep out-and-back forays towards the skies. From Santa Cristina de Lena, turn right to Pola de Lena and then left onto the AS231 towards La Vega and the Angliru. From there it's north towards Soto de Ribera, then south west to the base of the long Gamoniteiro climb. Once complete, it's a fast descent back to base.



**Look on YouTube and you'll see pro riders weaving across the road at a snail's pace, like debutants startled by the first sportive of spring**



Anticipation is a funny thing. You can be prepared, over prepared, underprepared. You can think about things too little or too much. You can be too optimistic, too pessimistic, or if you're lucky you can nail the nerve-jangling sweet spot of expectation and trepidation. In the run-up to this Big Ride, the Angliru gave me sleepless nights. It buried itself deep in my unconscious and occupied my thoughts as only great, imminent unknowns can. I was excited and scared by what I'd heard about this climb, and I was certainly in danger of building it up too much.

Both on paper and on TV the ascent at the heart of this route is fearsome. The climb is 12.5km long and rises 1,266m, giving an average gradient of over 10%. But the real venom comes in the second half. From kilometre



Right: Until fairly recently the Angrilu was an unsealed cattle path, and the animals' movements are still in abundant evidence

Of course, watching all that pain and suffering sows a seed in the mind of any rider: *how would I fare on such a climb?* Which is why I now find myself in beautiful Asturias, or 'Green Spain'.

And so it begins

There's an atmosphere of nervous anticipation as my riding partner Graham and I roll out of the Santa Cristina hotel into a short descent towards train lines. At the bottom of the hill we pass the Santa Cristina de Lena, a pre-Romanesque church built around 850AD and a World Heritage site. With less on our minds we might pay a visit, but not today. The road sweeps under the bridge, then turns right and we spin quickly towards the small town of Pola de Lena.

Out of Pola we meet our first climb, a startlingly aggressive warm-up that gives us a hint that we're in for a serious day. In the mood for omens, we're about to get another visual sign of the seriousness of what's to come, in the shape of an old man walking slowly up the opposite side of the road carrying a large scythe. Graham and I exchange a glance, pedal swiftly past and continue chatting away gently like riders in the neutralised zone, until the slope saps the vigour from the conversation.

A little further up we pass a driveway and suddenly a big dog is barking its 'don't trespass' warning, not that we had any plan to. It makes me wonder what it would be like if people did the same – shouting at any strangers who came within 30 metres of their house. Perhaps some do.

# We get a visual sign of the seriousness of what's to come, in the shape of an old man walking up the road carrying a large scythe



'I don't really trust dogs when I'm on a bike,' says Graham quietly. 'How come?' I ask. 'Well, I was once attacked while I was riding by a German Shepherd that bit deep into my quad and hamstrings and nearly hit my femoral artery. It did quite a lot of damage and I was off the bike for three months. It knocked my confidence a bit to be honest.'

'I'm not surprised!' I say, glancing down at his leg for visible scars.

'Whenever I hear barking I get a bit jittery,' Graham says with admirable understatement. From now on I sympathise with his flutter of agitation when other barks are heard along the route. 🐕

## The rider's ride

Wilier Cento 1 Air, £2,999, [atb-sales.co.uk](http://atb-sales.co.uk)

The designers of the Cento 1 Air claim 'crazy stiffness' for its BB386 bottom bracket, and say it's their stiffest-ever frame in this area. The fork is neatly integrated into the head tube too, smoothing the aerodynamic lines while retaining maximum stiffness.

Certainly I was grateful for this super-solid platform on the slopes of the Angliru as I heaved on the handlebars and levered every last nano-watt through the frame, and not once

did I feel any flex undermining my efforts. This ride was more about climbing than top speed, but Wilier's aero road offering was sure-footed, precise and fast even on the mucky and rough surface of the Angliru descent (see above). Built with stiffness ahead of comfort in the design brief, I wasn't expecting a plush experience from a day in the saddle, but I was pleasantly surprised and returned to the hotel with no complaints. The Cento 1 Air did all that was asked of it.





## The slippery descent is a welcome distraction from the whispering nerves in my stomach as months of anticipation prepare to meet their maker

► Graham is a guide with Marmot Tours, which runs trips to France, Italy and this part of northern Spain. Cyclists being a masochistic lot, the Angliru is of course on Marmot's itineraries, although this will be the first time Graham has ridden it and he's relishing the prospect. Both of us are. We're joined in the car by photographer Richie, and James, who runs Marmot Tours.

After this and another short and steep ascent plus a technical single-track maze of a descent, we'll be hitting the foothills of the Angliru only 20km in to our 125km route. With such a beast in the offing, I've sacrificed all bravado and slip onto the small-ring-big-sprocket combo within seconds of the road kicking up. Our mettle is not going to be proved by macho gear selection today – just plain and simple completion.

And it's not just the Angliru we need to be wary of. As we continue the climb out of Pola de Lena and the magnificent Asturian landscape opens up to our left, we can see hills in the distance, the second layer of which is topped by the radio post of Gamoniteiro with a Ventoux-esque tower at its summit. That climb will turn out to be just as memorable as the Angliru.

We reach our first crest of the day with tree-covered hills all around us and ever-present Armco as testament to the snaking nature of the roads. The descent is more covered than the climb – tunnels of trees throwing us into near darkness, along with wet patches under the trees that demand full attention and a deft touch on



the levers. It's a welcome distraction from the whispering nerves in my stomach as months of anticipation prepare to meet their maker.

### The hard yards

The climb of Angliru starts in La Vega and the first 8km hover manageably below 10%. Graham and I are in preservation mode and slide up the mountain at a conservative pace, staying in the saddle and exchanging ►

**Top: With hairpins like this, it's no wonder the team cars struggle during the Vuelta a España, especially when it's wet**




Left: The industrial town of Soto de Ribera provides a contrast to the greenery of Asturias. It also boasts a very steep bridge

the odd sentence. Things level out at about half way, and we duck into the cafe at the Mirador del Angliru youth hostel for a hit of caffeine before the real fun begins.

We couldn't have chosen a better day to savour the Angliru in all its glory, and we feel especially fortunate considering the variable summer climate in this region. Just over a kilometre of near flat allows us to imbibe the perfect surroundings before the road kicks up and soon I see 12% on the Garmin, then 20%, and 26% in one of the hairpins. After riding in silence at first, our heads are now filled with the sound of our own breathing. To our right is a fabulous view that stretches all the way to Oviedo and the Atlantic, but appreciation of it will have to wait for when we retrace our steps on the descent. For now we're dealing with the vicious ramps that have made the Angliru famous.

My gearing is a little higher than Graham's, and as the mountain bites I have to leave him just to maintain the cadence I need. I know he understands – this is a challenge that was always going to be faced down alone. The kilometres grind by. On the steepest sections it feels like the kind of all-out, knee-popping effort you might exert on a leg press machine in the gym. Pedal stroke after slow pedal stroke, I can feel the bike accelerate and then decelerate almost to a standstill in direct relation to the position of the cranks. Some of the hairpin apexes are obscenely steep, to the point where surely you would flip over backwards if you chose the wrong line.

I hit the steepest prolonged section where the incline rarely dips below the 20s and dig deep, telling myself, 'I will not weave; I will not stop. This is the moment I've been waiting for.' On the outside of one of the hairpins, James and Richie are shouting support and offering water, 

**Pedal stroke after slow pedal stroke, I can feel the bike accelerate and then decelerate almost to a standstill in direct relation to the position of the cranks**







# ‘On that humungous 23% ramp I ended up sitting down and weaving while shouting motivational stuff to myself and hoping no one else could hear’

but it seems like they are in another dimension, hazy and translucent. After one terrible final flourish where the Garmin tweaks 25%, the summit arrives almost as a surprise. No sign, no finish gantry, no press conference. I keep pedalling alone to the car park turnaround point, ecstatic in the way that perhaps you can only be when severe hardship has ended. As the sun burns the sweat off my face and my individual heart beats gradually become discernable once again, a golden feeling washes over me as I sense that this accomplishment is not mine

at all, but belongs to the combined gene legacy of all of my ancestors – the shared attributes of all mankind. I know these thoughts are overly grandiose, but that’s what an Angliru-sized endorphin rush does for you. Graham has had a similarly moving time. As a dedicated member of the support crew from Marmot Tours, he’s very used to giving roadside encouragement to clients who are going through their own personal battles on climbs. This time he was the focus of his own coaching though. ‘On that humungous 23% ramp I ended up sitting down and

Above: Terracotta rooftops and empty A-roads are the order of the day in Asturias, as *Cyclist* approaches the final climb

## ‘Impossible. Barbaric’ What the pros have said about the infamous Angliru

To add drama to their race in the late 1990s, the organisers of the Vuelta a Espana went in search of ever-harder mountaintop finishes. They found their jewel in the Angliru and introduced it in 1999. It caused immediate controversy. Leonardo Piepoli, an Italian climber, called it ‘impossible’ after a recce prior to that initial inclusion in the Vuelta. Kelme team manager Vincente Belda said, ‘What do they want? Blood? They ask us to stay clean and avoid doping and then

they make the riders tackle this kind of barbarity.’ Some thought the Angliru wasn’t actually good for racing. Former French pro Patrice Halgand said, ‘I find it ridiculous. Differences in the riders would show just as well on a col that’s less steep and on a wider road. It would also be better for the spectacle, because on the Angliru the guys go too pitifully for the climb to have any sporting interest.’ Alejandro Valverde agreed that strategy goes out of the window as

**VUELTA WINNERS ON ANGLIRU**  
**1999 José María Jiménez (ESP)**  
**2000 Gilberto Simoni (ITA)**  
**2002 Roberto Heras (ESP)**  
**2008 Alberto Contador (ESP)**  
**2011 Juan José Cobo (ESP)**  
**2013 Kenny Elissonde (FRA)**

you hit the Asturian slopes: ‘Angliru is a demanding climb where the only strategy is finding your own pace and forgetting about your rivals.’ The fans loved the drama it provided, however, including a

rain-lashed ascent in 2002 that saw team cars unable to retain traction on the paint the fans had daubed on the road, with riders caught behind the cars and others riding with flat tyres because their team cars couldn’t reach them. In fact, so popular was the spectacle of the Angliru that the organisers of the Giro d’Italia, in an attempt to reclaim the accolade of having the toughest Grand Tour climb, chose to include Monte Zoncolan (see box on p98) in 2003.



The Gamoniteiro radio tower stands at 1,782m and comes after a climb that started 25km previously

weaving while shouting motivational stuff to myself and hoping no one could hear,' he says as we bask in the view.

The descent gives us time to take another look at the Angliru. The setting is incredible, with the road dropping away like a stone bouncing down a cliff face. And it's a road that's covered in cattle mess. This is no super-highway Alpe d'Huez. We see only one other road cyclist during the 90 minutes we're in Angliru's company and, despite its notoriety, it feels like an undiscovered treasure.

#### Back to level ground

We wind our way through the pleasingly named Vegas de San Esteban and then on to Parteayer, where we turn left onto the N630. This is the only stretch of relatively busy main road on our route today and it's a bit of a culture shock after the narrow, empty roads we've been treated to so far. But it's still quiet by British standards and serves as a useful contrast to remind us of how good we've had it – and indeed the rich pickings still to come.

It also gives us a moment to relax. Up to now, it's been almost exclusively up and down – and totally absorbing both from a scenic and riding standpoint. Now we can just spin along gently and relax into the ride.

## Have I been drinking enough? Am I going to bonk? Have I got any gears left? Am I going to be dropped? Do I even care?

But not for long. Our exit from the main road in the industrial town of Soto de Ribera takes us over the steepest bridge I've ever encountered. It disguises its incline well, but on the short span beneath the classic suspension arches both Graham and I find ourselves puffing unexpectedly, with a glance at the Garmin revealing 8%.

After 3km tracing the route of the Rio Nalon we take a sharp left turn and begin our next ascent. It's only 3km long and rarely goes beyond 10%, but without prior knowledge and with the sun beating down, it's a tester.

'Have I been drinking enough? Am I getting sunburnt? Am I going to bonk? Have I got any gears left? Am I going to be dropped? Do I care?' is the internal dialogue that's on repeat in the sweltering heat. We're glad to find some shade of trees, and revel in the cool breeze before dropping into another valley. The road widens and we enjoy a rapid, smooth and largely bend-free descent to the Rio Trubia, with beautiful views of the hills to our right.

Rolling along the flat valley floor to Proaza, we're looking for a lunch stop now. Everything has fallen into place so far, and sure enough we luck out at lunch too.

In spite of our pitiful Spanish, the welcome at the Penas



## Killer climbs

The major Tours compete with each other when it comes to the severity of their mountaintop finishes. Here are the pain contenders

### GIRO D'ITALIA

#### MONTE ZONCOLAN

Length: 10.1km. Ascent: 1,210m.

Average gradient: 11.9%

This can be approached from three directions, all of which are savage. The one from Ovaro is arguably the toughest, and was featured in the Giro for the first time in 2007. After a manageable 2km it hits a debilitating average of 15% for five agonising kilometres, with a maximum of 22%. For our reaction to riding this climb see *Cyclist* issue 22.

### TOUR DE FRANCE

#### MONT VENTOUX

Length: 21.8km. Ascent: 1,617m.

Average gradient: 7.4%

Ventoux can't compete in terms of sheer gradient, but it makes ruthless amends with its duration. After an easy(ish) first 6km, the climb locks riders into a gruelling, soul-searching battle for 16km at an average of 8.9%. Add in the wind that gives the climb its name and few would argue against its inclusion on this list.

### VUELTA A ESPANA

#### ALTO DE L'ANGRILU

Length: 12.5km. Ascent: 1,266m.

Average gradient: 10.1%

Unlike Zoncolan, there's only one way to climb Alto de l'Angliru (otherwise called La Gamonal), which is probably just as well. The first half is gentle in relative terms, but from then on it's brutally steep right to the summit, with severe and prolonged ramps up to 23.5% making the 15% intermissions feel like recovery periods.



I can tell by James's body language that we're not done yet. I try to hide my dismay. 'The concrete sections are interesting too,' he says chirpily

Above: The greenery of the landscape gives way to rocks and cattle

◀ Juntas restaurant is friendly and efficient. We're shown to a vast dining room that looks like it could probably seat the entire town, but this lunchtime we have it to ourselves. The cool darkness is refreshing, and Graham and I are happy to shed some of our bodyheat and tuck into fresh bread and olive oil, pasta and sauce, chicken, Coke and sparkling water. All for €8 a head.

After lunch we continue through the gorge on a main road that's joyfully quiet. The river is to our left and rock faces rise to the sky on our right, with occasional strong wire nets above us to catch falling rocks, and a few tunnels to add to the variety of this endlessly engaging ride.

#### Last climb of the day

Almost unnoticed, the road begins to tilt gently upwards, ensuring that we're soon back to full warmth after the lunch break. Despite its innocuous start, this is a climb that will evolve relentlessly and steadily into another ascent that I'll remember forever. The road is perfectly surfaced, and although it's a two-lane carriageway it's empty enough to feel like a quiet back road. The temperature drops a few degrees as we pass the Valdemurio dam, with the asphalt curving gently and getting progressively steeper.

At the same time, the immaculately clear day we've had so far recedes and we find ourselves moving into cloud and fog. I keep my gaze on the tarmac ahead and concentrate on turning the pedals, and when I look up I realise that I've lost Graham in the murk. Again this is a battle against gravity we'll be fighting alone, as gearing and personal rhythm takes precedence over solidarity. After what feels like an age, I see James and Richie as the road crests, and I'm relieved that this final climb is over. I'm also deluded.

I can tell by James's body language that we're not done yet. I try to hide my dismay as he tells me it's another 10km to the top. 'The concrete sections are interesting too,' he says chirpily. I didn't know there were any. Graham arrives shortly after, and he too has to steel himself for the finale.

We turn off the main road following a little brown road sign saying Alto de Gamoniteiro, once more onto a single-track road to nowhere. We climb through clouds for a few kilometres and then the world opens up into a mesmerising panorama. The landscape is peppered with white rock, with cattle chewing lazily beside the narrow road that threads its way towards the sky like a scene from a fairytale. With weary legs we hit the first section of concrete – seemingly laid specifically to test ▶

## By the numbers

The figures that matter

# 124.8

Kilometres ridden

# 4,113

Metres of ascent

# 8

Cost per head in Euros for a bread, pasta and roast chicken lunch. Soft drinks included.

# 28.6

The highest gradient figure registered by *Cyclist's* Garmin on the Angliru

# 1

Old man with a scythe spotted on the road

# 16

Nights' sleep lost to the prospect of the Angliru





## As we climb higher than the distant hills on all sides, we see the cloud filling the valleys below us conjuring an otherworldly environment

our commitment. Like cobbles, but to a lesser extent, it requires some extra speed to prevent the bumps bringing the bike to a halt.

As we climb higher than the distant hills on all sides, we see the cloud filling the valleys below us conjuring an otherworldly environment that, combined with our fatigue, creates something magical. In many ways it's a more visually impressive climb than the Angliru.

The Gamoniteiro radio tower at the summit is a huge red and white striped carrot marking the end of our day's effort, because we know it's almost all downhill from here – once we arrive. A cruel final stretch of concrete makes the last 200m tough going, but our work is done. We shake hands and feel the waves of euphoria wash over us.

From here it's a fast descent to the main road, and then a last blast home – although with energy and attention well below optimum levels we're happy to cruise at pace to Pola de Lena, and roll back to the Santa Cristina hotel.

This was a truly memorable ride. Like all the best experiences, the reality surpassed all expectations. The Angliru was an epic battle – the Gamoniteiro an unexpected treasure. I would do them both again tomorrow, given a bit of preparation. 🌸  
*Steve Westlake is production editor of Cyclist, and is still preparing himself for a return to the Angliru*

## How we got there

### TRAVEL

Cyclist flew with Easyjet from London Stansted to Asturias Airport near Oviedo (from £60 return, plus £70 for a bike bag). You can also fly from Heathrow and Gatwick to Asturias, from Edinburgh and London to Santander, or from Glasgow, Manchester and London to Bilbao.

### ACCOMMODATION

We stayed at the Santa Cristina ([hotelsantacristina.net](http://hotelsantacristina.net)), a quaint and friendly hotel 20km from the foot of the Angliru. Bikes can be stored in the garage and cycling parties are welcomed warmly. Double rooms start at €53 with breakfast €5 extra.

### THANKS

The planning and logistical support provided by James at Marmot Tours

([marmot-tours.co.uk](http://marmot-tours.co.uk)) was invaluable, and he also did his fair share of stoking up the reputation of the Angliru too. Marmot Tours offers friendly, fully guided and supported Tours in Asturias, as well the Alps, Dolomites and Pyrenees. Graham from Marmot Tours was the ideal riding partner.

Thanks also to Jesús Ruis Martínez from the Spanish Tourist Office ([spain.info](http://spain.info); email: [spaininfo@tourspain.es](mailto:spaininfo@tourspain.es)) and to Ana Villasuso from Asturias Tourism for local knowledge.

### BIKES AND GEAR

We hired our bike from Carma Bikes ([carmabike.es](http://carmabike.es)) in Oviedo. A Felt Z85 will cost you €30 a day, but we went for a brand new Wilier Cento 1 Air at €100 for the day.