



COTSWOLD
Travel



Get on your bike

In a moment of madness around two years ago I had a rush of blood to the head and bought myself a bike, despite the fact I hadn't ridden since pre-teens.

By Sue Smith

BRADLEY Wiggins had recently added Olympic gold to his Tour de France yellow jersey (Maillot Jaune) and Wiggo fever was sweeping the country.

Everyone I knew was getting out on the roads on their bikes and I was swept along in a wave of patriotism and an overriding fear of being left behind.

But theory and practice are very different animals and although I loved the idea of freewheeling my way around the Cotswolds in all weathers I quickly discovered I was

lacking in both ability and confidence.

So in October this year I found myself in Mallorca with SportActive, a company that specialises in cycling holidays for all levels of ability, from the beginner who wants to relax and take in the scenery (sometimes referred to as castles and cafes riders) as well as the effervescent enthusiasts who want to improve their racing technique.

The flight to Palma is less than two hours from the UK with a very easy, fast transfer at the other end to the heart of

Puerto Alcudia where SportActive is based at the four-star aparthotel and spa, Viva Tropic.

We had left rain-swept Britain under the threat of a killer hurricane and arrived in glorious sunshine with temperatures pushing 30 degrees.

SportActive is run by Martin Birney and Flora Mittermair, who from the minute you check in take on the mantle of making your stay as enjoyable as possible.

My spacious apartment had a fabulous



Flora Mittermair, Sean Kelly, Ellie Ervine and Sue Smith before setting off to Ca'n Picafort



Irish road biking legend Sean Kelly and Sue Smith

view over the pool in a beautiful, with generous living space, a lovely marble effect bathroom, air con, a king-size bed with crisp white linen, plenty of fluffy towels and a balcony to sit and watch the sun go down.

So far, so good. There was just the trepidation of the first day on the road looming and as each lycra-clad guest returned from their ride out with tales of steep climbs and average distances of 70/80 km, the more I began to worry.

But Flora was having none of it. We would go at our own gentle pace, she assured me, an appealing trip to Port de Pollença for lunch and back had been planned - a mere 27 kilometres round trip and Martin had already sized a top quality Focus bike for me based on details I had emailed.

The bike was the first thrill of the day. A lightweight carbon model that I began to covet as soon as we set off.

It couldn't have been more different from my heavy hybrid back home languishing and gathering cobwebs under the stairs.

After a couple of laps around the quiet streets by the hotel we were on our way, negotiating three small roundabouts, a miniscule incline out of the town and then we were on the flat coast road all the way.

Two things are striking about Mallorca which has long been a favourite with cyclists and that is the number of concessions that have been made on the roads with cycle lanes for safety and the staggering patience of car drivers who always seem to hang back or give way.

Once we were on our way Flora rode up beside me offering advice as to where to position my feet, when to change gear, talking me through the process and letting me feel the change in the performance of the bike.

I had said I wanted to concentrate on learning how to use the gears better and I was quickly getting the hang of it.

"It's about making it easy on yourself," she said. "Once you feel the bike working for you the hard work falls away."

At Port de Pollença we rested our bikes against the palm trees and sat down on the waterfront for a cold drink as we watched the boats bobbing in the harbour.

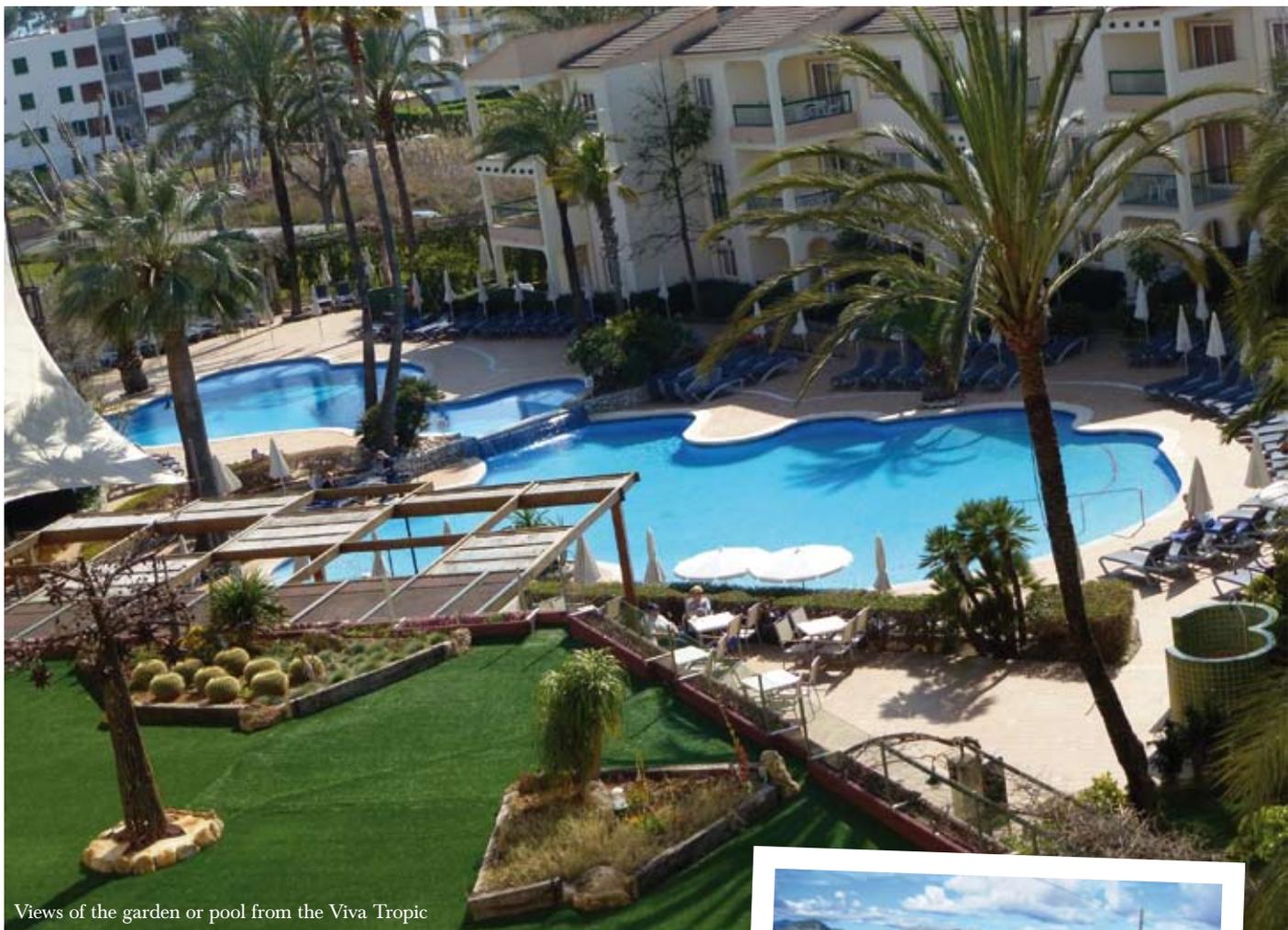
Reaching lunch at Hotel Llenaire proved to be a bit of a challenge for me as all my knowledge of gears fell by the wayside as soon as I got onto the hill heading up to the beautiful old converted house with its breathtaking views.

But Flora was encouraging and patient when I had to get off and push.

"If you are tired, walk for a bit, there is no shame in that, it's not a competition," she said.

There was no sense of urgency and I hopped back on for the final ascent. Flora made me smile when having reached the top and puce in the face, trying to catch my breath, she asked if I wanted to go back down and try it again in "the right gear."

As it was my first day, I declined politely but I could see how I might be tempted to try that



Views of the garden or pool from the Viva Tropic

if I had a longer trip booked.

After 27 kilometres we were back at the hotel and in the pool, followed by a few hours sunbathing before a sumptuous buffet dinner.

Myriad choices await the hotel guests every day for breakfast and dinner with a seemingly endless choice of vegetarian, meat, salad, paella, kedgeree, pasta, soup, cheeses, fruit and desserts.

And then it was time to hear the stories of derring-do on two wheels.

Fellow cyclists had achieved great distances and speeds in the company of their expert coaches and guides all offering varying routes each day, and all were happy to share their tales of personal challenges and achievements.

There are keen cyclists here, many are regulars with SportActive and have joined the guides in France for the Geneva to Nice ride every year in June or the Mont Ventoux Challenge (different levels) in Alpe d'Huez in July or for La Marmotte, the toughest sportive in the French Alps.

But all abilities are celebrated and there is a refreshing lack of competitiveness and no-one was laying claim to any bragging rights.

Some keen cyclists arrive alone but quickly slot into the structured rides. Retired cyclists enjoy the low-impact activity and the sociability.

Other experienced cyclists might come along with partners who like the idea of a break in the sun but are a bit apprehensive about the cycling.

But it doesn't matter if one of them is really a strong cyclist who wants to train in the fast group, the other can just as easily ride with the beginners learning technique and skills.

The couple can then meet up after their respective rides to spend the afternoon and evening together and each will have had the best day, riding at their own level and maybe enjoy a massage from SportActive's resident masseur Jose.

Being able to cater for couples and friends of varying ability is what makes SportActive stand out from other specialist riding holiday companies.

Many cyclists don't start until they are over 50 and SportActive has even had some success with a guest who had never ridden a bike at all.

"It is never too late to start," says Flora, "and the stamina you



A typical studio at Viva Tropic

build up through cycling carries over into your daily routine giving you more all-round stamina."

The team at SportActive are not fazed by any level of competence. There is no pressure to keep up as Flora and Martin will arrange routes to suit all requirements.

"I would rather you did five miles on your bike than nothing at all," said Martin encouragingly over dinner.

"Five miles is five miles and has more chance than no miles of becoming ten miles."

There was a frisson of excitement the following morning as everyone was anticipating the arrival of Irish road biking legend Sean Kelly, one of the most successful road cyclists of the 1980s who won Paris-Nice seven years in a row and was ranked No.1 in FICP (Federation Internationale de Cyclisme Professionnel) for a record six years.

Sean has been involved with Sport Active since it began ten years ago and he is a frequent visitor who rides with all the groups regardless of their ability.

Unassuming and gentle, he is generous with his time and his advice and will ride alongside cyclists offering tips and encouragement.

“SportActive is great because it caters for everyone no matter what level and cycling is one of the best ways to stay fit,” he says.

Our second day was back to Port de Pollenca with a detour to the beautiful old town where we rode alongside the wall defences and criss-crossed the boutiques and cafes of the pedestrian areas to get back on the coast road again to our destination at Tolos Restaurant .

This is a regular Friday haunt with all the

groups of cyclists who make it back in time from wherever they are riding that day for a celebratory meal together prior to change over day which is usually on Saturdays.

The extra few kilometres left me feeling a bit weary and Flora sweetly offered to ride back to the hotel and come back and get me in the car.

But after food and refreshments I was restored and on the road again and managed to tick off 29 kilometres that day and was left feeling pretty pleased with myself for having made the effort.

A gentle ride on the flat to Ca'n Picafort on day three with Sean Kelly joining our small team saw a surge in my confidence on the road.

Averaging around 22 miles per hour I was beginning to feel at one with the bike and after a lunch of traditional Majorcan favourite, Pa am boli (bread topped with anything from roasted vegetables, or Seranno ham or any number of other choices) I was feeling slightly sad to be heading back to the bike garage.

Although we had clocked another 29 kilometres that day, I felt I could keep going and was tempted to rack up another 27

going back to Port de Pollenca - the same trip that had been enough to exhaust me on a previous day.

But there wasn't time and it's best to leave on a high, wanting more.

But what a difference three days makes. In that short space of time I had gained confidence and strength without really doing anything too taxing at all.

I soon realised where I had been going wrong back home.

“Don't jump on the bike for the first time and try and do 50 miles,” said Martin.

“You will be exhausted and you will hate it and it will put you off. You won't want to go out again and that will be the end of it.”

Martin's advice is to go to the local park and ride around, increasing the distance as you feel able and before you know it you will be clocking up the mileage.

Whether you have a personal best to beat or you like the idea of a cycling holiday but have lacked the courage, SportActive has something for everyone.

SportActive offers organised cycling holidays in Mallorca from February – May and in October. For more information go to sportactive.net



All levels of ability are catered for at SportActive