

To the lighthouse

Mallorca is an island tailor-made for road riding, as *Cyclist* discovers on a trip to its northernmost point

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‘Sean Kelly stays with us six weeks of the year. He’s always happy to stick to the pace of the group, but let me tell you he’s still got legs on him’



The Mallorcans call the Cap de Formentor the meeting point of the four winds. Sitting on the most northerly tip of the biggest of the Balearic Islands, the winds that blow from the Spanish mainland, the European Alps, the Atlantic Ocean and North Africa meet here, and each seems to have left an impression on this tiny outpost. With alpine-esque hairpins overlooking a crystal blue Mediterranean Sea, beating against a shore of jagged limestone rock, it’s no wonder that the road to Formentor has become an icon of European cycling.

Above: The climb to the Santuari de Lluc is a perfect example of sweeping Mallorcan hairpin bends

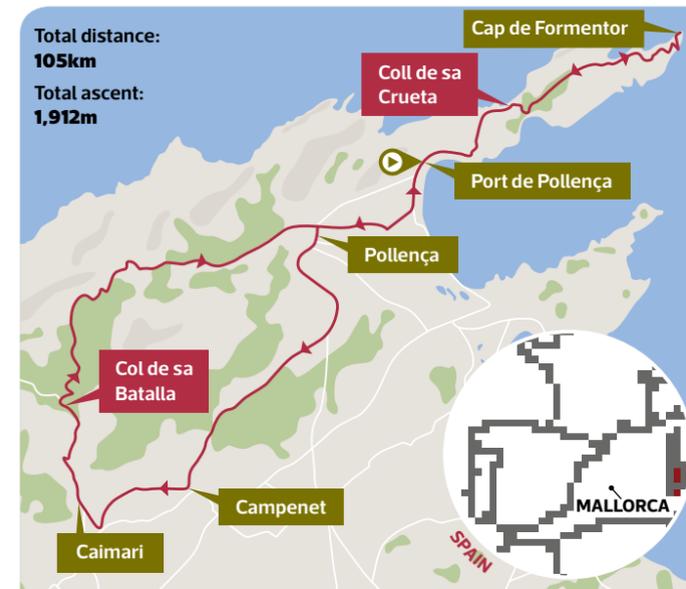
Right: Climbing the Col de sa Batalla, a brief descent skirts along a ledge of road above limestone rock structures

While Formentor may be today’s destination, it’s only one piece in Mallorca’s astounding repertoire of climbs. Indeed, at times the island feels like a custom-built theme park for cyclists, with dinner conversation animated by excited discussion of which ride will be on tomorrow’s agenda – be it the rollercoaster hairpins of Sa Calobra, the dizzying heights of the Puig Major or the more

coastal roads of Alcudia. The wealth of options means that Mallorca can become swamped by cyclists during the peak seasons – the island welcomes around 40,000 cycle tourists each year – so it comes as a relief when Martin Birney of SportActive assures me he can take us on some of the finest roads but keep us away from the crowds.

‘The Germans like to be queuing for the buffet by 6pm,’ Martin laughs, as we set off on a crisp morning from Port de Pollença. He suggests that if we take the road north to the lighthouse at Cap de Formentor in the late afternoon there will be fewer cars and cyclists to contend with, so we’ll begin our ride by heading south to the mountains of the Tramuntana range.

We start on small roads, making our way through farmland towards the town of Campanet. The sky is mercifully overcast, which means we have mild temperatures to warm us into the day’s riding. I need to warm up fast, though, as Martin doesn’t hang around. He’s sticking religiously to the figures on his SRM power meter, which are rather intimidating considering Martin’s slight frame and the fact he is two or three decades my senior. ▶



A corker in Mallorca

Follow *Cyclist’s* rambling route to the lighthouse

To download the full route, go to cyclist.co.uk/52mallorca. Starting in Port de Pollença, ride along the Ma2220 south, before taking a right onto Cami de Llenaire towards Pollença. Join the Ma220 down towards Sa Pobla, turning off onto the Cami Veil de Campanet to Campanet. Here, head north towards Caimari, watching out for a sharp turn that leads up into the Col de sa Batalla. Head up into the mountains along the Ma2130, taking a right turn for Pollença at the summit. Follow the descent along the Col de Femenia and into Pollença. Track back towards the coast and into Port de Pollença. From there the Ma220, parallel to the coast, leads straight into Formentor. Ride to the end of the road, and the lighthouse, and then turn about-face and return to Port de Pollença.





The scenery is a mix of fields and hillocks that reminds me of the Yorkshire Dales

The descent of the Col de Femenina is open, sweeping and fast – one of the finest on the island

➤ Martin is Irish, and lives here in Mallorca throughout the spring. Perhaps with his Irish blood, his determination on the bike is no surprise, especially given the company he keeps. ‘Sean Kelly stays with us six weeks of the year,’ he tells me. ‘He’s a very courteous rider, always happy to stick to the pace of the group, but let me tell you he’s still got legs on him.’ I don’t doubt that, and some of it has clearly rubbed off.

Coffee in Caimari

The plan for today is to do a loop of around 60km from Port de Pollença to Campanet, then across to Caimari where we will make an ascent towards the Lluc monastery, before descending via the stunning sweeping bends of the Col de Femenina back to our start point. From there, we’ll add on another 40km with an undulating journey to Mallorca’s most northerly point, the Cap de Formentor, before returning again to Port de Pollença.

As rides in Mallorca go, it’s not too brutal, but while plotting the route last night I noted the substantial elevation gain of 1,900m over only 105km against a forecast of strong wind. That makes for a ride tough enough to keep things interesting, but hopefully mild enough to soak up some scenery, and perhaps a couple of coffee stops, along the way.

We emerge from Campanet on small roads hemmed in by hedgerows, but occasional gaps in the foliage reveal the mountains that we’re heading to, with a hint of grey cloud hovering over them. On this flat stretch the scenery is a peculiar mixture of fields and hillocks that reminds me of the Yorkshire Dales, combined with chalky roads lined with olive trees that feel like an Arabian desert. ➤



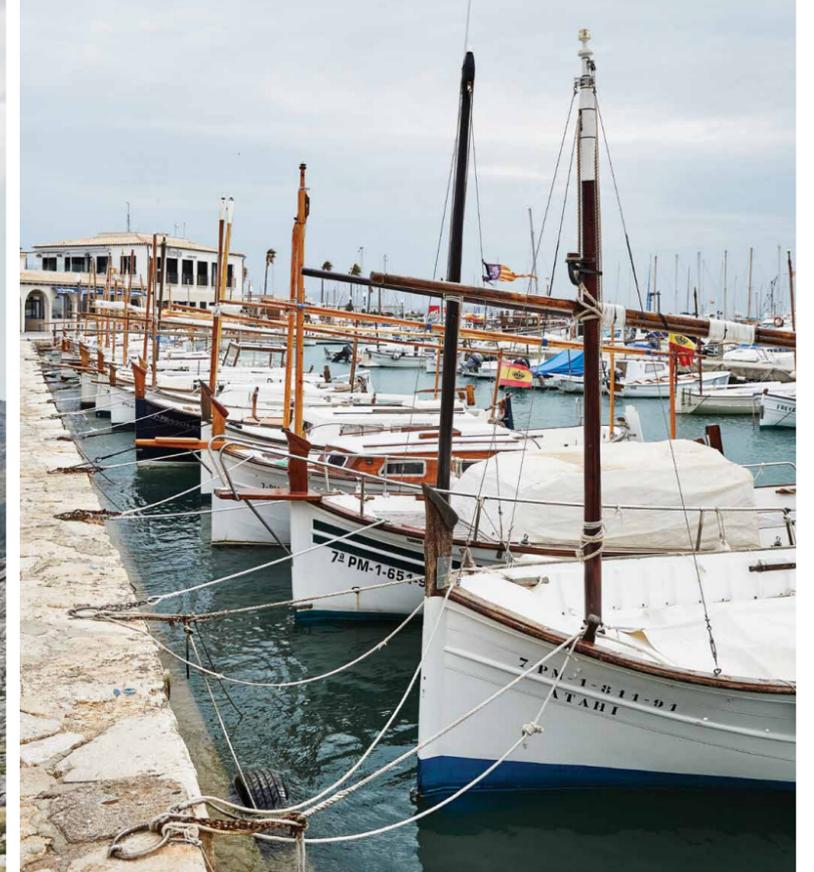
The rider’s ride

Ritchey Break-Away Carbon, £2,475 frame only, approx £5,900 as tested, paligap.cc

A week in Mallorca was the perfect test for the Ritchey Break-Away, a carbon frame that can be split in half for easy travel, with cunning joins in the seat tube and down tube. Travelling with the bike was a dream, as it fits into a normal-sized suitcase and was thus cheaper to transport by plane. It was also easier to fit in trains, cars and hotel rooms, greatly easing the logistics of travelling. When it came to the ride, it was light enough to do me good service on Mallorca’s toughest inclines, and sharp enough to push my limits on the descents. The build came in at a respectable 7.35kg, which was suitably feathery for the steepest hairpins of Col de Sa Batalla. It lacked a little stiffness on the undulations of Formentor, but for a bike that could split in two it was astoundingly capable. The Campagnolo Chorus groupset also performed with clockwork efficiency. I was a big fan of the Challenge Criterium Open Tubular tyres, which were perfect for the smooth and debris-free roads of Mallorca.



Our descent is on an open and wide road. Some steep 10% sections project me close to 80kmh



Above: Climbing the early slopes of the Coll de sa Creueta offers a striking view of Port de Pollença, and a consistently tough gradient

Right: A lunch stop in Port de Pollença is a welcome relief for tired legs, and a chance to sample some excellent Balearic paella

🔴 We're approaching the first climb of the day, the Col de sa Batalla, which will take us up nearly 400m over 7.8km into the Tramuntana range, and promises to electrify our morning legs. With the summit at 570m, it will put us in proper mountain territory. The ride from Pollença has soaked up 25km already and, with the prospect of a long day ahead, I convince Martin that a stop for coffee would be a good idea. As it happens he has the perfect place in mind.

We pull into a cafe in Caimari called Sa Ruta Verde, and like many on these roads it is finely tuned to cyclists, with a track pump beneath our well-shaded table and a selection of tools to put a pro workshop to shame. We settle down for a couple of cappuccinos, but owner Lennart insists on feeding us some homemade cake too. It's unnecessary weight for the climb ahead, and so Martin sensibly refuses. I waste no time working through both slices.

By the time I've hoovered up the last crumbs, Martin is already remounting his bike, and so I hurry to join him

and prepare for the climb towards the Lluc monastery. It's a favourite training climb of many pros in this area.

'Fabian Cancellara overtook me on the Col de sa Batalla,' Martin says. 'He was behind a motorbike, but he was riding like he was on the flat.' It's got quite the leaderboard on Strava – even 2014 World Champion Michal Kwiatkowski falls outside of the top 10.

Climb to the monastery

We tackle the incline confidently on fresh legs, striding through each hairpin. This sort of climb tantalises rather than torments. Hovering around the 6% mark, it enables me to put my head down and grind out a healthy cadence that neatly extracts a threshold effort from my legs.

I certainly feel a lot fresher than on my first visit to Mallorca a few years ago, when I experienced one of the most excruciating rides of my cycling life – a 312km sportive around the island called the Mallorca 312.

'I loved it!' Martin exclaims to my utter shock when I mention the event. As it emerges, Martin is a fanatic of masochistic ultra-endurance events. 'I've done the Mont Blanc sportive five times,' he adds. Mont Blanc boasts a distance of 330km and over 8,000m of climbing. With that in mind, I decide to nestle behind his wheel and let him do the work, but true to his guide experience he keeps an eye on me with a mirror on his drop bar, to check that he's not pushing me into the red.

Having taken on the first batch of hairpins the road flattens out and gives way to a stunning view of inland Mallorca to our right. The rocky limestone mountains create a complex and striking landscape, dotted with fig and olive trees that cling to the mountainside. It's no wonder the mountain range has been awarded UNESCO World Heritage status.

We roll along through a passage carved into the cliffs, with 10m walls of rock on either side. As we emerge on 🔴

The view from the Cap de Formentor is a favourite, with the rocky peak of El Galerot overhanging the tiny island of El Colomer. The road that descends it is undulating, winding and mirror-smooth



On the other side, we stop by the edge of the road to take in the views, but the peace of the moment is shattered by a shriek from behind us: 'Out the way!'

Three cyclists sprint past us, clearly upset that we are blocking the racing line up the slope and potentially adding fractions of a second to their Strava times.

'Sometimes I worry cycling here is wasted on cyclists,' Martin laughs. We watch them disappear up the road, heads down, oblivious to the beauty around them. I don't fancy their chances of topping Kwiatkowski.

At the top of Col de sa Batalla is a Repsol petrol station that has become a famous haunt for cyclists. Instead of queues of cars, the forecourt is littered with high-end custom frames and deep-section carbon wheels. Inside the shop are racks of gels, flapjacks and inner tubes where usually there would be car polish and engine oil. This truly is a cycling haven.

We're not far from the major attraction of the area - the Santuari de Lluc. It's a monastery that was founded in the 13th century when a Moorish shepherd happened upon a statue of the Virgin Mary on the spot where it currently stands. A quick diversion from our route

Martin gives me a warning: 'I've slowed down a lot. I've met a few too many tour buses coming up the other way'

could take us down a single-track road to the monastery itself but, with the knowledge that a steep descent down means a steep climb back up, we decide to save this particular tourist attraction for another day.

Our descent is on an open and wide road with a mirror-smooth surface. Some steep 10% sections project me close to 80kmh. Martin sticks with me, but on a shallower stretch gives me a quick warning: 'I've slowed down a lot these last few years. I've met a few too many tour buses coming up the other way.'

He follows the example of Sean Kelly, who rolls down the descent at the back of the group. 'They're fantastic roads, but it's easy to get carried away,' he adds. With that in mind I rein in my speed and, sure enough, around one bend I meet a family of sheep wandering lethargically into the road, and with a screech of brakes on carbon wheels I manage to come to a stop as they complete their crossing without looking up.



It takes no time to roll into the bustling town of Pollença. It's approaching lunchtime, so we plot a course for the coast in search of some seafood.

In Port de Pollença we order some mixed paella at the Marina restaurant. It's a heavy meal, but we can see light seeping through the cloud, and we're eager to take on the best of today's riding under the warmth of the spring sun, so we're happy to wait while the Germans clear the roads en route to the buffet.

Finding Formentor

Formentor, the meeting point of winds, is certainly living up to its name today, with a headwind roaring at us from the coast. The journey to the first climb is a short one from Port de Pollença, and as we ride towards it a thin streak of tarmac slowly starts to form into view on the mountain up ahead, glinting in the sunlight and spurring us on into the headwind. ▶

► The climb, often called the Coll de sa Creueta for the viewpoint at the summit, is surprisingly persistent. It starts with grades of 7% or 8%, and rises to an elevation gain of 223m over 3.3km, and the wind is fighting us. It doesn't seem like a chore though, as each hairpin treats us to a view over Port de Pollença, with the sun breaking through cloud onto the beachfront and the yachts and stony white buildings that crowd the coast.

With burning quads I roll up to the viewpoint at El Mirador de sa Creueta and gaze out at the towering rock structures that poke out of the sea off the coast. El Colomer, a little island, and El Galerot, a rocky peak that overhangs it, dominate the landscape ahead. The last time I came here I fell off my bike trying to take a picture of it on the fly.

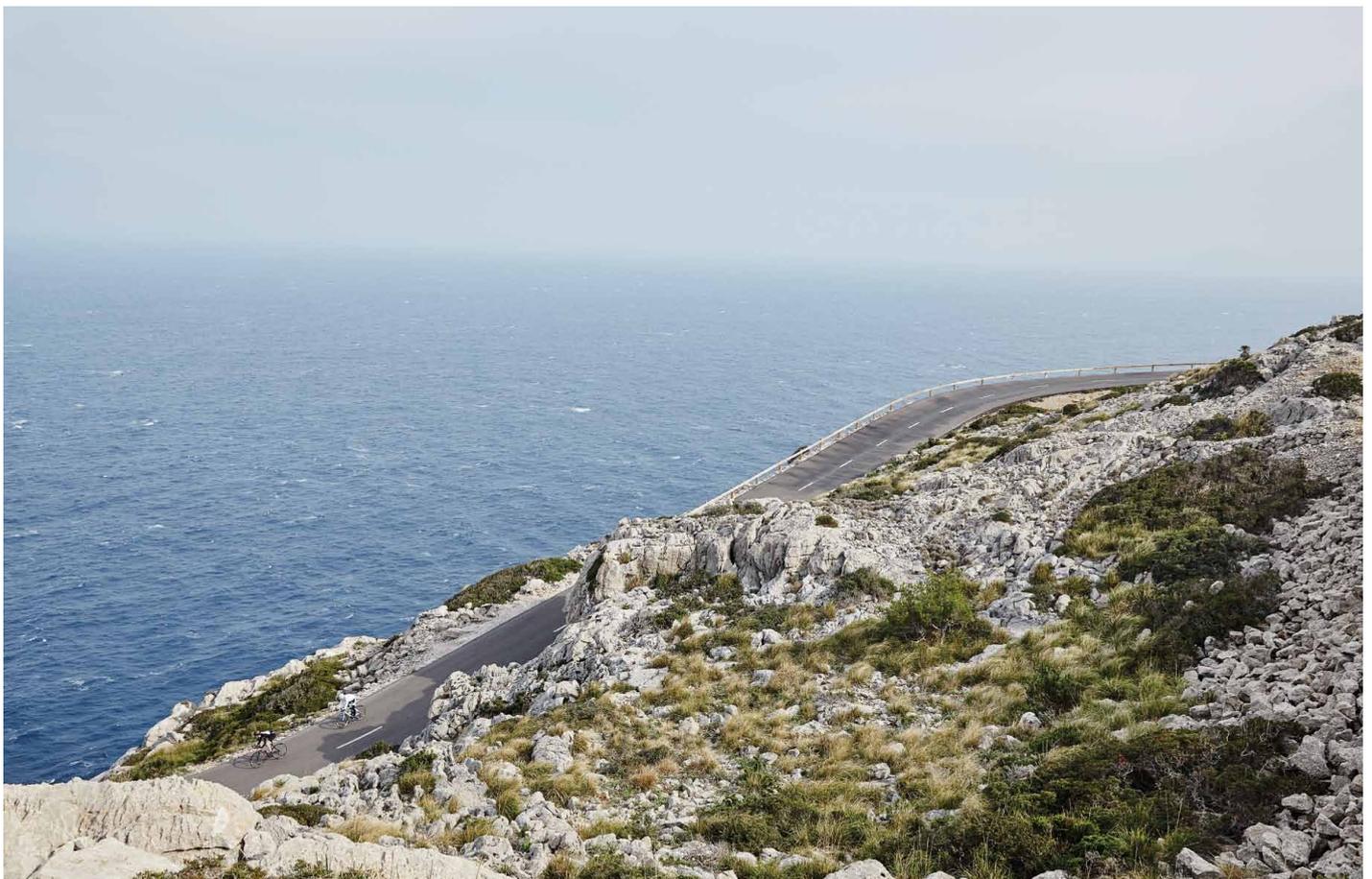
The road from this point onwards is a display of architectural brilliance. The lighthouse at the edge of Formentor was built in 1863, and it was once accessible only by boat or by a mule track. If that were still the case it would make the mountain bike fraternity gleeful, but a road was built to reach the lighthouse, and we couldn't be happier for it. It's the work of architect Antonio Parietti, who built the road in the 1930s. He was also the mind behind Sa Calobra, the infamous twisting climb from the northern coast into the Tramuntana mountain range. His place in the history books seems well justified given the jagged and gigantic rock structures he needed to build over to create this road. ►



Set against mountains and clear blue waters, it feels as if we're in a painting of how cycling should look

Above: Cut into the coast of Formentor is the rocky beach of Cala Figuera, a hiking hotspot

Below: The road to the lighthouse features a series of climbs and descents in quick succession – this last stretch offers a speedy descent





By the numbers

Maths made fun

105

distance ridden
in kilometres

1863

date the lighthouse
was constructed

1

seasoned photogenic goat on
Formentor

576

highest point of the ride in
metres (Col de sa Batalla)

6

cappuccinos consumed
during the ride

1,912

total elevation gain



▷ Dropping down through the first hairpins from the Coll de sa Creueta, it's easy to see the similarities between this road and the Sa Calobra. We don't descend for long, however, and soon we are climbing up through forests and fields crowded with goats.

Soon the greenery gives way to dry and rugged terrain that reminds me of the Rocky Mountains. We're quickly on the coast again and on our left is the Cala Figuera, a beach where crystal blue water sits neatly in a cove. I'd like to stop and soak in the view, or indeed in the water, but not today.

A tunnel cutting through the mountainside leaves us in darkness for 300m. It's a refreshing break from the sun, with cool air blowing through and the noise of our deep breathing echoing against the walls. Emerging from the tunnel, we climb back into the forested inland of the peninsula, carving around the twists in the road. As the sea appears to our right, it's a crystal-clear day and Martin points to the island of Menorca in the distance.

The undulations in the road, combined with the wind, are starting to drain my legs, and I peer up the road in the hope of seeing the lighthouse that marks the end point. We cross from one side of the mountain to the other, and as we sweep through a bend Parietti's finest work emerges. A set of hairpins crosses back and forth ahead, like a framework holding the lighthouse atop the horizon. It's a strangely grand view for such a humble building.

We slice down the descent towards a tiny valley in the limestone rock. The wind batters us and we can hear the sea roaring against the rocks below. Then we begin

A set of hairpins crosses back and forth ahead, like a framework holding the lighthouse atop the horizon

to ascend a set of stunning switchbacks and, set against mountains and clear blue waters, it feels as if we're in a painting of how cycling should look.

Last light at the lighthouse

'Who would have thought a lighthouse would become such a moneymaker,' Martin puzzles while we queue for a coffee to enjoy out on the terrace in front of the structure. Although this is our third stop in less than 100km, Martin explains that island etiquette dictates we must stop here, and I'm not about to argue with him.

Outside we're greeted by a goat, which prods us eagerly for some leftovers. 'That goat really knows how to work the crowd,' Martin laughs. 'He's here every day, I swear. I've seen a thousand selfies with him.'

True to Martin's prediction, as the early evening sets in, the lighthouse becomes deserted, as do the roads, giving us a free run back to Port de Pollença. The road ahead winds ▷



Returning from the lighthouse throws us straight into an 800m 10% climb. It may be the same road back, but it's a very different journey



The rapid descent we enjoyed to the lighthouse is now a climb going the other way, with several spikes of 15%

and weaves in front of us like a convoluted junction, and even with tired legs it couldn't look more inviting.

The rapid descent we enjoyed to the lighthouse is now a climb going the other way, and rises 90m in less than a kilometre, with several spikes of 15%. It warms up our increasingly lethargic legs, and thankfully the wind is behind us. We round back towards the mainland, and make a nerve-tingling dash through the pitch-black tunnel.

Our final challenge is the 3.4km climb back to El Mirador de sa Creueta, with its winding maze of hairpins. It proves to be punishing for tired legs, but from the top we are treated to more views of Formentor and the rocky structures of Galerot and Colomer in the evening light.

As we begin the descent back to Port de Pollença, I'm left feeling that there's something very special about Formentor, a fusion of stunning scenery, testing rocky inclines and masterful modern architecture. It's a road I'm eager to return to, even though my legs are still throbbing from the 1,000m of elevation gained in the 40km stretch.

I consider my schedule for the following morning, and with a few hours spare before my flight home, I know exactly where I'll be heading. 🌸

Peter Stuart is commissioning editor for Cyclist and nearly missed his flight back



We return to some stunning views of Formentor and a welcome descent into Port de Pollença in the evening light

How we got there

TRAVEL

Cyclist flew to Palma, which is operated by several low-cost airlines as well as British Airways – which can be cheaper when travelling with a bike. We rented a car to make the short drive over to Port de Pollença. SportActive offers a transfer to Port de Pollença, or a free shuttle service when booking one of the company's trips.

ACCOMMODATION

SportActive works with the four-star Hotel Viva Tropic in Port de Alcudia, which even boasts a workshop for cyclists. Half-board accommodation is included in SportActive's package rate, which starts at €630 for seven nights for a shared studio room in March.

THANKS

Many thanks to Flora and Martin from SportActive for supporting our ride, creating our route and offering advice on the region. As well as packages, SportActive offers bike rental from €155 for a range of carbon bikes, with cheaper prices for aluminium builds. Throughout April and for a few weeks in October, Sean Kelly rides with the group. Visit sportactive.net for more details.