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## Majorca: Spinning in the sunshine

David Conachy on the Sa Calobra: 'You cycle up through the rocks where the roads rise and twist like a corkscrew over and back for just over 2,000 feet over the course of six miles'

By David Conachy

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There's nothing to it really is there? I mean, you just sit in the saddles, clip your shoes into the pedals and off you go. You could say it's as easy as riding a bike.

Except there's a lot more to it than meets the eye, and even after years of experience on two wheels that have brought me to such iconic places as Alpe d'Huez, Croix de Fer and Mont Ventoux, there is still so much to learn about control, pacing and nutrition. So many roads to discover and so many new places to see.

So when I arrived in Alcudia in Mallorca for a cycling holiday, I knew I'd landed in my spiritual home and was eager for the journey that lay ahead.

I was right in the middle of my comfort zone, surrounded by a gang of MAMILs (middle-aged men in lycra) like myself, and I loved the idea of a holiday dedicated to cycling. I try to cycle to work some days if I can manage it, and am always trying to improve, so the idea of a week cycling on a gorgeous Spanish island really appealed to me.

I flew with Ryanair to Palma airport, and found myself sitting beside two guys from Cavan who were part of a cycling team called The Smugglers. I just thought it was mad sitting beside these guys who

were also going on a cycling holiday, but it proves that Mallorca, also known as Majorca, has become a real mecca for cyclists.

I went with SportActive, which is run by two great people, Martin Birney and Flora Mittermair. I travelled with them before to France, and the advantage of booking through them is that it's hassle-free travel as they arrange everything for you. When you arrive they pick you up from the airport and bring you to the four-star hotel Viva Tropic & Spa in Alcudia, which is right beside the SportActive Cycling Centre and only 45 minutes from the airport.



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Alcudia, where we were based, is just a few kilometres inland from the coast, and is encircled by medieval walls. The remains of what was once the island's prime Roman settlement can be found there, and it has winding, narrow streets and historic buildings, including the neo-Gothic Sant Jaume church.

Located in the north of the island, its original name, "Al Kudia" comes from the Arabic occupation of the island, which was reconquered by the Spanish Empire in 1229. Due to its stunning natural landscape and welcoming climate, Alcudia is a very popular winter destination for sports such as golf, cycling and hiking.

Once you're settled in, Martin meets you, sizes you up, and gets you the most suitable bike. All of the equipment is really top notch, and everything is ultra-modern and up to date. The bikes are

fantastic and either full carbon or steel frame, so they measure you for the right one, fit your pedals and you're good to go. They also have a bike mechanic on hand in case any issues arise.

Once I was sorted with the bike, I had the rest of the day off to relax by the pool and get some lunch. We were on a half-board package and the food was fantastic. It was a buffet so there were all sorts of choices available including, as you would expect, healthy options. Martin, who comes from Donegal, also gave great advice around diet and portion size.

You meet your group every day at 9.30am when Martin gives a team talk and briefing for the day's events and checks in on everyone. The riders are sorted into different groups depending on the level they're at, and each group has a different guide. And there's nowhere to hide either. If you think you can just spin along and let others do the work, then think again. Martin's favourite mantra on the road is 'no soft pedalling' which means you have to keep with the tempo and everyone does their share of the work.

I was in the 30-35km per hour group, but if Martin feels you aren't strong enough for the group you're in, he will put you down to the next one.

The routes are pre-planned and put up on a board in the hotel foyer every day, so you know what's ahead. After we set off, we would ride for an hour and a half, then stop for coffee and meet up with some of the other groups. Once we had a little break, we were off again and we'd cycle until lunch-time.

We met up in a different place for lunch every day, which was great as we got to check out the local cuisine. There is a great sense of safety cycling with such experienced guides, and you feel like you're in a good environment on quiet roads with beautiful scenery all around.

The great thing is that the rides are tailored to your ability and what you want to do, and they cater for everyone. I was looking to improve my stamina, so I was in the advanced group, riding about 120km per day.

Other groups did 70km or 50km and there were people who just wanted to do a couple of kilometres of leisurely cycling per day and Flora would take them out. The tempo of my group was high so you had to push on, but you were cycling with people who were at your own level. There was a great sense of sticking together and everyone supported each other through the challenging parts.

The island of Mallorca is known for its beautiful coastline and beaches, and I really enjoyed cycling around and taking it all in.

The two highlight routes for me were the one to the famous lighthouse on Cap Formentor, and the Sa Calobra which is the showpiece in Mallorca. The climb's official name is the Col de Cal Reis but it is widely known as Sa Calobra - The Cobra - and has become Mallorca's most famous ascent.

It's the most fantastic spin. You start off at the coast and then cycle up through the rocks where the roads rise and twist like a corkscrew over and back for just over 2,000 feet over the course of six miles. It's challenging because it includes a series of steep hairpins, but it's so beautiful. When we reached the peak, we stopped and took pictures of the stunning views across the island and enjoyed a well-earned rest.

We'd get home at about 4pm in the afternoon and would have stretching sessions with Flora, which was important to avoid injury. Then we could relax and there were lots of facilities to enjoy, including three pools and a spa that does after-cycle massages.

You need a massage during a week-long cycling holiday to keep you in tip-top shape. There were organised walks on the beach, and we would all meet again for dinner in the evening, where we'd talk about the cycle that day and what we'd enjoyed.

The legendary cyclist Sean Kelly was with us for the week, and to have dinner with him every night and hear stories from his days as a professional in races like the Tour de France was incredible. He made himself available to everyone and was generous with his time, and very approachable.

Sean came out with us every day, but he would mix it up and give a bit of his time to each group. He rides with SportActive for the whole of April and two weeks in October.

One evening we went down to the neighbouring Puerto Pollensa for dinner to a famous restaurant called Tolo's, and cyclist Bradley Wiggins was there having lunch with his wife. He was training for the Olympics and went on to win his fifth gold medal in Rio. The bike that he won the Tour De France on is mounted on the wall there, and it was great of him to come over and join us. He took pictures with us and gave us some of his time, so that was a real highlight for me.

There is a new town and an old town in Alcudia, and on one of the afternoons, I went up to the old town. It was all winding streets, very historic, and in complete contrast to the beach resorts. I didn't think I would enjoy travelling on my own as much as I did, but my group was fantastic and there was a great social element to the week.

There were people there who brought their families along with them, and if your partner doesn't cycle, there is plenty for them to do while you are off exploring the surrounding roads. Puerto Alcudia has a fabulous white sandy beach with calm waters, and it offers watersports like parachuting, jet ski, pedal boat and sailing. The nearby Pollensa beach is very popular among windsurfers and is known for its higher winds.

You can also visit Alcudia Village, Playas de Muro, the Albufera natural lagoon park and the Inca Village, and there are attractions nearby like the HidroPark, Alcudia Go Kart, Alcudia Mar sports harbour, Aucanada Golf and several diving schools.

On the last day of the trip, I went for a leisurely cycle with another member of the group, John Duignan. We went down along the coast on the beautiful route to the Cap de Formentor lighthouse. It was lovely to end the holiday with a relaxing ride after going hell for leather all week.

I went on my cycling holiday in April, and I felt that the week's training really set me up for the season ahead and gave me a great boost. My fitness levels went through the roof and my confidence went higher as well. Martin gives great advice on ways to build your skills and confidence over the week on the bike, and also helps you to know your limitations so that you don't end up taking risks that aren't worth it.

The season runs from February to October, and I would recommend it to anyone looking to go on a cycling holiday. I had a fantastic time, really improved on the bike, and I feel that the whole week offers great value for money.



Martin Birney and David Conachy