

Quiet, Almost Secret, Trails on the Coast

The Basque region of northern Spain has challenging riding for you to discover

DESTINATION

BASQUE
COUNTRY



story and photos by **Steve Thomas**

Yes, I admit it: I was freaked out by the twisty trails on the tightly wooded slope in Basque Country. I did falter a time or two. Naturally, I put that down to the fact I was riding an all-new (to me) rental bike, one that was a million technical miles ahead of my regular hardtail.

We were somewhere just inland from the craggy Basque coastline of northern Spain, neatly squeezed into a slice of impressive greenery between the water and the Pyrenees. I suppose these are technically foothills. As they top out well above 1,200 m, the term small mountains may be a tad more appropriate.

The language and culture of Basque Country is strikingly different than what you'd find just an hour or so

farther inland or along the coast. The scenery is also far removed from your typical Spanish semi-desert-like land. Here it's deeply green, steep, craggy and is often lashed by the wrath of the torrents from the Bay of Biscay, all of which adds up to something a whole lot more wild than you would expect of such a southern European region.

Earlier that morning, I'd risen from the haze of a great night out in the small seaside town of Hondarribia. (There had been a *pincho* [a local take on tapas] and local red wine crawl.)





From the hilltop base of Basque MTB, a local tour operator, we could see an eerie morning mist rising over the rooftops below, which usually signals a sunny day of riding ahead.

Our lead guide for the day was Doug McDonald, who, as you may have guessed, was not a local by birth. He has somewhat been adopted since moving here from his native Scotland a few years earlier. McDonald is a scientist by training and someone who simply loves to ride his mountain bike. After meeting a Basque lass, he decided to ditch the test tubes and take to the trails.

For our opening ride, we drove out of town for around 30 minutes or so, up through a wooded gorge and on to open and rolling high ground, which offered great views of the coast below. We were headed down, eventually. Climbing is kept to a minimum on most days. At the bottom of the descent, vans would be waiting to take us back up for yet another blast of fun. Perfect.

The weather along this coastal fringe is pretty temperamental and can vary from bay to bay. The guides tend to work with the ever-changing daily forecasts to keep things sunny side up as much as possible. From the high ground (if you stop for long enough), you can

actually see the weather fronts sweep in and traverse the coastline, which is quite mesmerizing.

Following a steep and grassy uphill slog, we topped out, and then began following a maze of rolling single-tracks around the hillside, dropping through rocky outcrops. Next was the first wooded section. The trail was slightly downhill over roots and big rocks, with the odd water splash hurled in for good measure. For me,

this run was far more technical than I'd ridden for a good few years. Of course, it ended up with me face planting over one sheep-size mossy root, which later had me unnerved for the day's very long and steep trail dropping down through the trees.

I hung back a few bike lengths here with Carlos, one of the guides, who is also a quality downhill and major contributor to the trail building on this section. It was steep,





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loose, tight and not a place to be hesitant on. Here it was a case of all or nothing, and unfortunately I rode somewhere in between, which was far from ideal. All I can say is thank the big guy for dropper seatposts.

Although it had been an impressive opening day of full-on riding, the images that had lured me to the area were those of pristine coastal singletrack. Head in either direction along the coast and you'll leave behind the urban centres and find yourself rattling through a network of eye-popping singletrack, with very few other trail users to contend with. By combining uplifts with "cross lifts" (transfers), you're able take in the very best of these coastal routes. It's possible to spend a few days riding them without too much doubling up. There are all sorts of trails here: from technical singletrack descents to doubletracks, flowing coastal rides and even long climbs, if you want to pay your dues.

Local riders and groups also use these trails, and have fought hard to keep them low-conflict and open. There is a wise and voluntary ban on posting Strava files and GPS tracks from these routes.

My time in Basque Country had been way too limited, so I'm intent on making a return journey here in the not-too-distant future.





Details

How to get there

Bilbao is the best-served international airport and also links to most European hubs. From the Bilbao airport, there is a regular hourly transfer bus to and from San Sebastián. San Sebastián has a small airport, with regular flights to Madrid and other regional hubs.

Just over the French border is Biarritz, which has connections to Paris and other European hubs. You can hop on a train here to Irun, which is just a few minutes away from Hondarribia.

When to ride

The weather here is far removed from that of southern Spain, so it doesn't have the dry winters and scorching midsummers. The best time to ride is from early April through to October, although it does pay to avoid the mid-August holiday period.

What to ride

Overall, the best bike choice for riding here would be an all-mountain or enduro bike, although there are some XC-oriented routes.

Where to find support

Doug "the Flying Scotsman" McDonald runs The Basque MTB tour company (basquemtb.com). Mostly things are based in a house in the suburbs of Hondarribia. Breakfast is included, lunch is taken on the road and you can either cook up your own evening meals or head into town for some of the world-famous Basque culinary delights. Rides are mostly flexible and are uplifted by vans and trailers, with the bulk of the riding found within 45 minutes of the base. 

MARKETPLACE

British Columbia

Bike Barn

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bikebarn.ca

Ontario

Racer Sportif – Oakville

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