

High life IN THE Pyrenees

When Angela and Ian Pendry chose to realise their dream of running mtb holidays abroad, they managed to concoct the perfect cocktail of ingredients for the ultimate singletrack hit

▲ & 📷 Danny Milner



I look down at my bare forearms and see the tell-tale needle marks of an addict. These red dots are the physical evidence of a powerful narcotic flowing through my bloodstream. It's a fast-working drug: only a few hours ago I dropped into the first section of tight Pyrenean singletrack, brushed the spiky gorse with my arms, and felt the stimulant infiltrate my system. Half an hour later, the gently contouring singletrack descent thoroughly cooked behind us, I feel the intoxication subside. I need another hit.

The peddlers of this addictive drug are Angela and Ian Pendry. They moved out to this tranquil, traditional region of France two years ago and have been creating addicts out of their guests ever since. Both are veterans of the UK mountain bike scene: Ian worked for Scott in sales and product development for 12 years, and Angela was involved in marketing for The North Face. They were also familiar faces on start lines throughout the Nineties and early Noughties — Angela was one of Britain's leading women cross-country racers, battling in both the National Points Series and World Cup events alongside the likes of Caroline Alexander and Louise Robinson. Off the track, they lived and breathed adventure sports: skiing, windsurfing and climbing.

Following the births of their two daughters, Ella and Shawna, the couple decided it was time to make a new life for themselves and their family, doing what they love: riding their bikes. They knew they wanted that new life to be abroad, they knew it had to be somewhere French-speaking (Ian is fluent), it had to be in the mountains and, of course, have great trails. Finally, to ensure a healthy, year-round, business, they had to find somewhere close to ski lifts.



Lake Tahoe in July? No, try France in April

The Alps were an obvious first choice, but the main French resorts were already saturated with holiday companies and, in the public eye, evoked a predominantly downhill image. By a process of elimination they were led to the Pyrenees, and one area in particular: the Pyrenees Orientales.

"When we began narrowing our search to the Pyrenees, I started Googling the various resorts," explains Ian. "The Cerdagne was one of the first areas I typed into the search engine, and immediately something caught my eye. It turns out this valley is the sunniest place in France, averaging 300 days and 3,000 hours of sunshine a year. When we read that, we knew it was the place for us."

They came out soon after to look at properties and bought the first one they saw: the Mouli del Riu — a former mill-turned ski hotel — in the tiny resort of St Pierre del Forcats. A hard winter's grafting on the neglected hotel brought it up to scratch and by Christmas 2006 the doors were ceremonially flung open and the first paying guests filed in.

TRAIL BLAZERS

The ski hills were already mapped out for them, but the hundreds of kilometres of trail that lace the local valleys were uncharted territory for the couple. Sure, they had maps, but to work out which trails were suitable for bikes would take months. Luckily their neighbours introduced them to Antoine Herencia. Antoine had been riding for the last eight years, and exploring the local trails on foot, ski and trials motorcycle all his life. He's 40-something going on 17, with a wit that's as quick and adroit as his skills on a bike. In short, he was a pedalling goldmine to the Pendrys. And while some people

"It's like a journey through the world's best singletrack. I begin to think of it as trail tapas: a little bit of this, a little bit of that"



Find singletrack salvation in the distant mountains



When the high is as intense as this, you know the come-down's going to smart

might have balked at the thought of introducing their private trail larder to hordes of holidaying Brits, Antoine welcomed the visitors with open arms. That Ian and Ange had chosen his backyard, over anywhere else, filled him with pride.

In the third century BC, Hannibal marched through the Pyrenees Orientales with his 40 elephants and 80,000 men via the nearby Perthus Pass. On 23 April 2008 I arrive by the considerably smoother, if not appreciably more comfortable, combination of Ryanair and the C-16 from Barcelona. It's dark as we pop out of the Tunnel de Cadi, but in the clear night air I can just make out the silhouettes of the mountains surrounding this high-altitude plateau.

As we plough through the cold, clear air, Ian describes the unique composition of the surrounding landscape. "We're at the confluence of three valleys", he explains. "The Tet, the Cerdagne and the Capcir. Each one has a completely

different character. Tomorrow we'll descend the Tet valley."

LIVING UP TO EXPECTATIONS

I'm always a little cynical about places that claim to be the 'sunniest' or the 'warmest' — it just smacks of desperation at the local tourism marketing committee — and I fully expected to swing back the wooden shutters on my first morning and unwrap a murky soup, or worse still, a mountain monsoon. So it was quite a surprise that the weather had actually lived up to its promise and the sun was already blazing above uninterrupted blue skies.

It's mid-morning by the time Ian and Ange have dropped a van in Olette. There are ski lifts in the area, but they are only open in high summer, and few tracks are chairlift accessed. Instead, the riding is self-service, so a combination of shuttle-van and leg-power is harnessed to infiltrate the trail network. The trailhead, for what Ange and Ian describe as the 'Balcon de Tet' ride, is right across the road

from the Mouli. Barely four metres of asphalt and we're on dirt: a grainy, sandy, sun-baked trail through scrubby grazing land. The snow has not long vanished at this elevation, but such is the beauty of the climate here that it doesn't melt, it evaporates, leaving dust rather than mud in its wake. We take a meandering course: ducking through woodland and following narrow paths worn by the hooves of goats and the boots of farmers. After about 10 minutes we pull up at the main trail. Ian explains that it descends the length of the valley, following the course of the Tet and the tracks of the 'Petit Train Jaune' railway (so called because of its Catalan-inspired red and yellow livery).

I peer through the trees at the precipitous walls of the valley, dropping 800m from peak to floor, and wonder how they managed to fit a railway alongside the river and road. About 10 minutes down the contouring, pine-carpeted, singletrack I get my answer. The narrow gauge railway spans the gorge on an

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE

Flying is the most popular option. Perpignan is the closest airport with a 1hr 15mins transfer time, although Barcelona (2hrs 15) and Girona (1hr 45) are options. Airlines to check out are Ryanair (www.ryanair.com), BMI Baby (www.bmibaby.com) and FlyBe (www.flybe.com).

You can also drive or take the train. Eurostar to Paris, then SNCF to Perpignan. www.eurostar.com and www.sncf.co.uk.

ALTITUDE ADVENTURE

Accommodation in the Mouli del Riu consists of five en-suite rooms with free wi-fi access and mp3 compatible speakers. There is a large dining room with pool table and a separate lounge. The outside garage is secure and includes a workshop. All meals, including wine and beer, are included in the cost of the holiday. Prices for a week's stay (per person) go from £375 (2008 prices). In winter, Altitude Adventure turn the whole shebang into a skiing operation with a range of resorts within walking, or driving distance. Check out www.altitudeadventure.com or call Ian or Angela on +33 678 238130.

BIKES AND GEAR

If you've ridden the average UK trail centre, you'll cope fine out in the Pyrenees Orientales. The kind of terrain Altitude Adventure usually guide on mainly consists of long, contouring singletrack broken up by the odd climb or technical section. A sturdy trail bike — we took a Commençal Meta 55 — is ideal for the job. Just make sure your tyres and brakes are sturdy enough (and take suncream and a large hydration pack).

improbable hammock of wood, stone and steel 100m above the swirling waters. It then burrows into the rock and re-emerges to cross the statuesque viaduct at Sejourne. No wonder they call it one of Europe's great rail journeys.

Standing watch over the valley, the church of Notre Dame de la Merci at Planes is a beautiful edifice with an intriguing past. Originally historians thought it was a Catholic Church. But later examination suggested that Muslims had actually built the initial structure, then, as the Catholics spread their influence over Europe, further annexes and a spire were bolted on to create a more traditional layout. As an example of how the identity of this region has shuffled back and forth over the centuries, it's a good one. The Romans, the Visigoths and the Arabs all colonised the Pyrenees Orientales, while in more recent years, the French and the Spanish played tennis with its sovereignty. Catalonia was born in 988AD, and this northern part has basically been part of France since the 17th century, but the money still comes from Barcelona. On the Spanish side, locals consider themselves Catalan first, Spanish second while in France the pride is strong, but no one is campaigning for political autonomy.

BATH TIME

After slicing through the conifers a clearing reveals one of the Tet's many sub-valleys. In an instant I go from seemingly limitless traction on tacky loam to a 'woah-there' slide down a shale



With trails like this it's no wonder so many people have fought over this land

gutter. To emphasise the (unwelcome) transformation in surroundings a pungent, eggy aroma rises up from the cluster of buildings below. This is Saint-Thomas les Bains which, even if the only bit of French you learnt at school was 'voulez-vous coucher avec moi?' shouldn't be too hard to work out is a natural thermal spring. We polish off the descent dropping down beside the sulphurous complex, before we join a short, steady climb up to Prats-Balageur.

Elevation topped up and stomachs refilled, we plunge once more into the loamy forest. This time it's a vintage trail, all-but-abandoned until Ian, Ange and Antoine (with a little child-labour from Ella and Shawna) resurrected the mix of fall-line mulch and rock-strewn grass. It hits the floor in Fontpedrouse, almost at the backdoor of the local bar. I don't believe it's a coincidence. We all indulge in a little of the local tippie: a Monaco. Lager, lemonade and Grenadine is the straightforward recipe, but despite looking

"In the clear night air I can just make out the silhouettes of the mountains surrounding this plateau"



The accommodation is bristling with rustic charm

like cherry Panda Pop, it tastes pretty damn good.

Over the next few days I make the acquaintance of the other areas in the vicinity. I'm guided along alpine singletrack beneath limestone bluffs the spitting image of the Dolomites or the Canadian Rockies, along precipitous terraces overhung by ochre rock formations that resemble parts of Colorado, and through pine forests scattered with huge granite boulders that remind me of Lake Tahoe. It's like a journey through the world's best singletrack, condensed into a 25km radius. I begin to think of it as trail tapas: a little bit of this, a little bit of that.

IN THE GUTTER

With every turn of the crank, the narcotic effect builds, but it's not until the end of the third day that I'm lying in the gutter like a proper junkie. Ange has dropped Ian and myself at the Col de la Llose Nordic Ski centre on the northern flanks of the Tet valley. We're bound for Olette, some 20 kilometres and 1,400m down the gorge. A gentle climb winds through the pines, leading us the last hundred metres or so to the crown of the range. A clearing

marks the top of the descent. A faint trail scratches through the windblown trunks. It looks flat, but it only takes a few pedal strokes to get up to speed and we're soon jinking through the pines, chasing the lazy shadows, dancing between stumps and logs and rocks and carving the sides of gullies. The doors fly open and we're out of the darkness; shafts of golden light slice the valley like a scimitar, picking out every detail in the terrain and ping-pong off our dust trails as we contour gently downhill. I feel the syringe pierce my flesh and the drug pump into my bloodstream. For the next 40 minutes I'm floating on air, gradually being pulled down from that magical high on a trail that never seems to end.

On the flight home I notice the pinpricks on my arm are disappearing. The physical evidence of my addiction is fading, but inside, the withdrawal symptoms are kicking in. I'm not sure whether it's the air-conditioning or going cold turkey, but I'm starting to shiver. Re-entering normal life is going to take some time.

Watch the video of the descent to Olette at <http://tiny.cc/5zMM6>.

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