

OFF THE BEATEN PATH IN SPAIN

HAVING TRAVELED to some 35 countries and canoed on all seven continents, I'm sometimes asked: "Where else besides the U.S. would you like to live?" The answer to this provocative question unexpectedly came to me during an October 2013 bicycle tour in a place I didn't expect it — Spain. That eight-day road ride, my very first visit to this southwestern European nation on the Iberian Peninsula, routed me and my three *amiga* traveling companions through the heart of old *España*. For me it was love at first bike.

Our starting point was Segovia, one of Spain's most famous historic cities (declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985), easily accessed via a half-hour high-speed train ride west of Madrid. We had heard that Segovia, a vibrant city of warm terra cotta and sandstone hues set amid the rolling hills of Castilla, was an enchanting city. And we had heard right. In contrast to frenetic Madrid, we found that Segovia was the perfect first place to experience the other side of Spain, the Spain that's far more slow-paced and tranquil.

Before hitting the road, we spent a full day on our feet exploring this ancient city whose most recognizable jewel is its Roman aqueduct, one of the best-preserved monuments in Spain. Constructed around 50 CE of some 24,000 massive granite blocks without the use of mortar, the towering, two-tiered aqueduct carried water 16 kilometers from the *Río Frío* to Segovia. This civil engineering marvel still provided water to the city as recently as 1929.

Other historical monuments in Segovia, all within easy walking distance, are no less stunning. Just off the *Plaza Mayor* within the old city walls is the massive *Catedral de Segovia*, which took over 200 years to complete. And standing atop a promontory that dominates the Castilian plains is the Alcázar, an 11th-century Moorish fortress — and later a royal palace — where



Queen Isabel agreed to fund Christopher Columbus's exploration of the New World. Legend has it that the Alcázar, with its ornate, fairytale quality, was Walt Disney's inspiration for Cinderella's Castle.

After a full day and night of sightseeing, we were welcomed the next morning by an employee of the local bike-tour company, Away from the Crowds, that had organized our "Cycling Segovia: Medieval Villages" trip. As a self-guided tour, we were furnished with quality 21-gear hybrid bikes, rear panniers (our luggage would be transported each day from hotel to hotel), and detailed route information and travel material. Our eventual goal was the historic hilltop town of Sepúlveda, 200 meandering kilometers to the northeast.

"I am certain you will enjoy your ride," the university-aged guide proclaimed while going over route maps with us, and teasing some other popular routes as well. "Maybe you will return to my country next year and try them all! And why not? You are all young and strong."

Now it was our turn to laugh. Young? Two of us had just reached Social Security age, and the other two weren't far behind. Strong? Yeah, well, I guess so. Judy, from Peoria, Illinois, had traveled by bicycle in seven European countries and was addicted



Story & Photos by Larry Rice



*Enjoying a quiet mid-day respite in a rural one-
posada pueblo along our route.*

to CrossFit, a strength and conditioning program that usually takes place in garage-like gyms. With a mountain home just outside of Vail, Colorado, Pat had several long bike trips to her credit and was an active runner and skier. My “almost wife,” Fran, was an avid cyclist from Buena Vista, Colorado, where we both reside, and a former Adventure Cycling Association trip leader who has ridden across the U.S. three times. Although wilderness canoeing and backpacking are my preferred outdoor pursuits, I also have managed to squeeze in a number of bike tours both in the U.S. and abroad.

With anticipation and excitement running high, we uttered *adiós* to our guy, loaded panniers with stuff for the day, and mounted up. It didn't take long to leave Segovia behind. Soon we were on quiet country lanes virtually devoid of vehicles, in an idyllic pastoral setting surrounded by traditional Castilian culture. This was the beginning of my love affair.

Each day was unique as we clicked off kilometers to Sepúlveda, but all were



exceptional. We pedaled past vast plains, fields of lavender and wheat, and open pasturelands where huge bulls, the *toros bravos* bred for the Spanish bullfighting ring, could be seen grazing behind graceful stone walls that lined the roads. We cycled in the shade of impressive juniper forests and crossed age-old Roman stone arch bridges that spanned clear-running rivers. And

often seemed unaccustomed to bicycle travelers, particularly *Americano* bicycle travelers, always greeted us warmly. It might have helped some that we did our best to speak *Castellano*, the official term for the Spanish that is used in Spain. Judy, Fran, and I had been assiduously studying Spanish the past few years. Although we were still at just a basic conversational level of fluency,

B&Bs of Spain. All were tucked away in centuries-old villages and small towns still rooted in an age long past. No fast-food here, no strip malls. Instead, during our evening walks before dinner, we gawked at the timeless beauty of Moorish castles and Romanesque churches and roamed the town squares hunting for a cold *cerveza* or *copa de vino* before gathering some picnic goodies for our next day's ride.

Nearing the trip's end, we cycled across the plains of Castilla to a long ridgeline carved out by the gorge of the *Río Duratón*. Staggered along the rim was the cliff-hugging town of Sepúlveda, known for its cultural attributes and gastronomic delights. In 1951 the town was designated an Historic-Artistic Site by the Spanish government due to its abundance of Romanesque monuments and streets that date back to the 11th and 12th centuries.

The final day was one of the best. Cycling a loop from Sepúlveda, we rolled deep inside Hoces del Río

MAYBE THAT GUY IN SEGOVIA WAS RIGHT. MAYBE WE SHOULD RETURN TO SPAIN TO SEE MORE OF THIS COUNTRY.

we roved through old-world, ochre-hued limestone villages and neatly preserved medieval towns set against the commanding backdrop of the Sierra de Guadarrama with its highest peak, Peñalara, reaching almost 8,000 feet above sea level.

The local Castilians we met, who

it was rewarding to be able to converse in this mellifluous romance language, even if our best efforts were often met with blank, confused stares.

Every adventure cyclist needs a good night's sleep, and fortunately for us, our nights were spent ensconced in charming *posadas* and *casas rurales*, the

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The medieval walled city of Ávila, Spain's best-preserved fortified town and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Duratón Natural Park, a magical place about two kilometers from our delightfully rustic posada at the edge of town. Fringed with poplars, a slender riverside path led us into a gaping canyon hemmed in by high, sheer walls. Upon entering a clearing, Fran, in the lead, braked hard. The rest of us followed her gaze skyward. Spiraling ominously above us — and reminding me of the flying monkeys of the *Wizard of Oz* — were squadrons of griffon vultures, the second-largest bird in Europe with up to a nine-foot wingspan.

Tired but elated, we returned to our posada late in the afternoon, packed up our grimy bicycle gear, cleaned ourselves up, then ambled off to a nearby mom-and-pop restaurant

servicing local Castilian cuisine. There was much to celebrate that evening. Our first bicycle tour to Spain had been a huge success, which got us to thinking: maybe that guy in Segovia was right. Maybe we *should* return to Spain to see more of this country.

A year later, after bicycle touring in Slovenia for nearly two weeks, Judy, Pat, Fran, and I were back in Madrid. Without spending even a single night in this nerve center of Spain, we caught a west-bound train for a quick hour-and-a-half jaunt to the medieval walled city of Ávila, Spain's best-preserved fortified town and another UNESCO World Heritage Site.

A full day and two nights were allotted to prowl this storybook-like,

11th-century stronghold with its eight monumental gates, 88 imposing watchtowers, and more than 2,500 circular turrets that stretch for 2.5 kilometers. Then we braced ourselves for our next Castilian *bici* tour to another off-the-beaten-path region of Spain.

Ahead lay an eight-day, 210-kilometer, carefully hand-picked route coined the "Roman Route to Salamanca." We would be hugging the rugged foothills of the Sierra de Gredos Regional Park, all the while cycling through a staggeringly beautiful countryside. What's more, as we closed the gap to Salamanca in the last few days, we would be funneled onto the "Via de la Plata," an ancient Roman corridor once used to transport silver

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from mines in the north to Seville in the south. Today, this Roman highway, which is more or less the same as it was 2,000 years ago, is a main artery of the famous Camino de Santiago, also known as the Way of St. James.

For me and Fran, the Camino de Santiago held special interest. After this ride, the two of us were heading to northern Spain to bicycle the Camino Francés, the most popular of the routes of the “Way.” Passing through the major Spanish cities of Pamplona, Logroño, Burgos, and León, the Camino Francés runs for more than 800 kilometers from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port on the French Basque side of the Pyrenees to Roncesvalles on the Spanish side. Waiting at the end of this long journey, which is one of the oldest, longest, and most important Christian pilgrimage routes in the world, is the Cathedral de Santiago in Santiago de Compostela. Shrouded in centuries of legends, the grandiose *catedral* is the reputed burial place of St. James the Great, one of Jesus’s apostles.

However, prior to this pilgrimage, Fran and I, along with our two steadfast amigas, still had a week’s worth of exceptional cycling ahead. We would be heading west, then north to Salamanca, yet another UNESCO World Heritage Site, perhaps best known for its glimmering architectural treasures and having one of Europe’s oldest universities, Universidad de Salamanca founded in 1218.

Following a generous breakfast buffet in our hotel in downtown Ávila, we were met by Jaime Bartolomé, the charismatic 43-year-old owner of Away from the Crowds, the small bicycle tour company that we used on both trips. Born in Madrid, Jaime had lived and studied in Scotland and England for 19 years and was a graduate of Edinburgh University. Instead of hurting his ears with our mangled Spanish, we stuck to English and were treated to a lively and informative hour-long conversation while being whisked away in his van.

Our destination, Jaime explained, was an obscure rural-road intersection about an hour’s drive outside of Ávila. “There you’ll begin your Roman route to Salamanca, traveling through beautiful and genuine landscapes and



NUTS & BOLTS *Spain*

WHY GO

After three bicycle tours to Spain (and more in the planning stages), I can unequivocally report that Spain is heaven for cycling. Whatever your age or fitness level, Spain has suitable cycling options for you, from easy and gentle rides in the vineyard valleys like La Rioja to the strenuous steep trails of the Spanish Pyrenees. The roads are normally very quiet and of good quality, and motorists treat cyclists with respect. In addition the food is great, the people are friendly and accommodating, the wide-ranging landscapes rouse the soul, and the country is blessed with the second largest number of UNESCO Heritage Sites and the largest number of World Heritage Cities of any nation in the world.

WHEN TO GO

The “perfect” time of year for cycling in Spain obviously depends on where exactly you’re planning to go. During the summer, Andalusia and the rest of southern Spain is very hot. However, spring and autumn (March–May, September–October) down south is typically sublime, with the added bonus of fewer vacationers. The best place to go cycling during the summer (as well as from May and

September to mid-October) is the northern half of Spain where you can expect warm, dry, and sunny weather. Along the northern coastline, it rains more often, which is why that area is known as “Green Spain.” The summer months also are the high season when accommodations can be in short supply and prices increase.

WHAT TO RIDE

The type of bike that you need will depend on your planned route. In general the roads range from well-paved, packed dirt and gravel roads, to meandering dirt paths. If you use a tour company, most will rent or supply bicycles with their tours. Common types available include hybrid, road touring, and mountain bikes.

TOUR OPERATORS

A quick Google search will reveal a number of companies offering bicycle tours in Spain, but we found a jewel in Away From The Crowds, a small, extremely capable Segovia-based outfit whose itineraries include off-the-beaten-track places where few tourists and foreigners go. awayfromthecrowds.com.

¿HABLA CASTELLANO?

Unsurprisingly, Spain’s offi-

cial and universal language is Spanish, or *Castellano* (known in Latin America as *Español*). Outside of larger cities and popular tourist centers you are not likely to find many English speakers. However, you’ll be okay if all you know how to say in Spanish is “Where’s the bathroom?” or “Can I have the check, please?” With a good Spanish phrasebook (Lonely Planet’s is excellent), along with a smile, sense of humor, and creative sign language, you shouldn’t have any problems getting by. Most Spaniards will go out of their way to be helpful if you at least say “*hola*” or “*buenos días*” when starting a conversation.

LOGISTICS

Whether you’re traveling with your own bicycle or renting from a travel operator, you can reach almost any destination in Spain by train or bus. This allows cyclists a cornucopia of ride options. The euro replaced the Spanish peseta in 2002. Credit cards (especially Visa and MasterCard) are widely accepted, and ATMs are available nearly everywhere.

MORE INFO

Useful websites to check out include tourspain.org and spain.info.

villages — what I think of as the ‘real’ Spain,” he said.

After outfitting us with nearly brand-new Giant hybrid bicycles and the touring accoutrements we would need, we took a group selfie at the side of the road and set off. Feeling like five-year-olds with big smiles on our faces, we then pedaled off into the *real* Spain, which today was sunny, warm, and wonderfully windless.

As would be the case this day and most days to come, more often than not we had the narrow secondary roads to ourselves. The vistas from our saddles were of a remote and rugged countryside, a true haven of peace and tranquility. Like the previous year’s ride, we were rambling through a part of rural Spain that was seemingly caught in a time warp. We had to forcibly remind ourselves that only two hours to the east was Madrid with its population of nearly 3.5 million *Madriileños*.

It was tempting to stop and savor every village we came across, each with its stone-built houses and streets. But we couldn’t linger too long. Our

itinerary had us spending the next two nights in yet another lovely small town by the name of El Barco de Ávila.

We immediately took a liking to El Barco, known for its rich heritage and simpler pace. And that’s not even mentioning the stellar views from our hotel rooms. Looming not far away was the precipitous Sierra de Gredos, described by one Spanish writer as the “roof of Castile and the stone heart of Spain.” Leaving our bikes behind, in less than an hour we were able to cross a medieval bridge over the Tormes River, ponder a daunting 15th-century fortress, and stand in the shadow of an austere Gothic church and hermitage. I, for one, could imagine myself growing old (or older) here in El Barco.

However, the town’s real claim to fame are beans, the large, white Judías del Barco beans, proudly known as the “Queens of Beans.” Grown in the surrounding well-drained fields, the dried and shelled legumes are in high demand as staple ingredients for many traditional Spanish dishes. A man of simple tastes, I couldn’t wait to sample

some of these hearty and healthy home-grown *frijoles*.

With the Queens of Beans still rumbling in my stomach from dinner the night before, right after breakfast we set out on a 45-kilometer lollypop loop in the surrounding valley and foothills. What we thought would be a fairly leisurely spin turned out to be one of the most strenuous rides we had done on this European vacation. These weren’t foothills, they were mountains!

Now and again, we’d come upon a small, isolated hamlet. The very few people we encountered were all geriatric, looking to be in their 70s or older. And they all seemed surprised and curious to see four brightly dressed, helmeted road warriors rolling through their narrow streets backed by centuries-old simple dwellings. When passing a couple of aged men on ladders slowly plucking apples off a tree by the side of a lane, Fran shouted in her finest Castellano, “Are they sweet?” “Of course, they’re sweet, *señora*,” they

CONTINUED ON PAGE 50

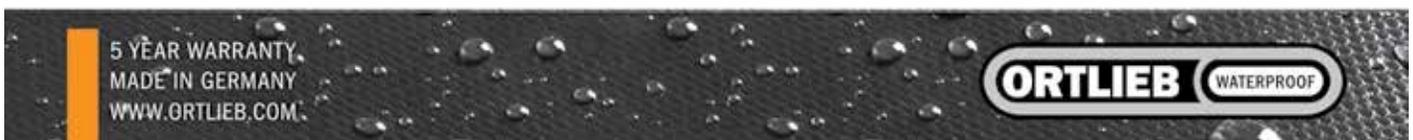


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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 45
REEB

Adventure Cycling members would be interested in — the Sam's Pants, which he describes as a gravel grinder. The Sam's Pants fits up to 2-inch tires, has a relaxed geometry with a longer wheelbase than other REEBs, and even clearance for rack mounts.

"It works great for touring and packing on dirt roads, pavement, whatever," Moore said. "For adventure riding, it would be right up their alley. That one works really well with the Rohloff or chain and derailer. We do it a lot with the Rohloff and belt drive."

Moore explained the back story on the name of the Sam's Pants. Katechis buys every employee at the brewery a REEB on their two-year anniversary. For years, the choice was a mountain bike or a fat bike because that's all REEB made. But then an employee came along who just wanted a bike to ride to work — basically a city bike that could handle a little off-road action. The Sam's Pants was born.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 39
OFF THE BEATEN PATH IN SPAIN

shouted back. "They're Spanish apples — the best!"

Upon returning to our hotel late in the afternoon, we counted our euros and strolled the relaxing streets of El Barco, looking to purchase some food and drink for a picnic dinner. In much of Spain, restaurants rarely open before 9:00PM, a tad too late for saddle-sore, hungry riders.

Stuffing our daypacks with salad fixings, sheep cheese, two types of bread, black olives, thin strips of richly flavored air-dried *jamón*, apples, grapes, sticky and ultrasweet cookies, and a couple of bottles of outstanding local wines, we returned to the hotel and dined outside on the unoccupied *terrace*.

Streaks of shadows and soft yellow light danced across the mountains, river, and castle fortress as the sun slowly set over this strange and handsome land. Raising our glasses, we toasted our good fortune to be traveling through this colorful country

"At that point, we knew a young local kid named Sam who wore skinny pants, an urban hipster," Moore said. "The name came from him — Sam's pants."

Sam, said Moore, owns a REEB, but not his namesake bike.

"He's a great mountain biker," Moore said.

Inside the chainstay of every REEB bike you'll find the following: "Ride Bikes, Drink Beer, and Go ..." — the last phrase being profanity not suitable for publication in this magazine, which instructs anyone reading it what they can do to themselves. And that pretty much sums up REEB. Great beer, great bikes, and anything but a pusillanimous attitude.

"I don't know — it's just a place you want to stay," Tim Moore said of REEB and Colorado. "A great place to ride and finish up with a beer. I'd be happy doing the same things anywhere, but it works out really well here. We get lots of sunshine." **AG**

Dan D'Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist magazine.

with its friendly inhabitants, its relaxed lifestyle, its abundant and world-famous cultural and historical sites, and its widely varied landscapes. I still knew



far too little about Spain, but day by day as I traveled by bicycle toward Salamanca, and then on to fabled Santiago de Compostela, I was on the long and winding camino to knowing more. **AG**

Larry Rice is an avid canoeist, backpacker, and cyclist from Buena Vista, Colorado, with some 450 magazine articles to his credit. He considers traveling under one's own power as one of life's greatest pleasures and one of the best ways to see the world.