

BAAD COMPANY

Sheep thrills on the Iberian Peninsula

by Willie Weir

I never should have broken the rule — “Never wild camp on private property without first asking permission.” We were less than a week into our three-month bicycle journey in Spain and Portugal. Three months in Europe can be expensive. Really expensive. But we were armed with my favorite bicycle-journey budget stretcher ... a tent. Lodging can be the most expensive portion of any trip if you stay indoors. If you are willing to camp, especially

wild camp, you can stretch a three- to four-week budget into three months.

Our budget got off to a rocky start. We had flown into Madrid and spent four nights in a hotel.

Ka-Ching!

Then we pedaled to Ávila for a couple nights in that walled city.

Ka-Ching!

Then three nights in Salamanca at a budget, but still pricey, hotel.

Triple Ka-Ching!

Euros were exiting my wallet faster than flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*. This spending rate was not sustainable, but it was okay. We would soon be pedaling in the Spanish and Portuguese countryside where our tent would substitute for a \$40 to \$80 hotel room.

The countryside northwest of Salamanca consists of wide open undulating golden fields dotted with the silhouettes of huge solitary oak trees against a bright blue sky.

The cycling was spectacular, but I began to worry about our prospects for camping. All the fields were fenced (barbed wire mostly) and there weren't any farm houses near the road.

We began to search for possible tent sites but each one was exposed, and the entire countryside appeared to be fenced.

We coasted down one of the many undulated hills and spotted the perfect



site. Up at the peak of a grassy hill was a small grove of trees. There would be shade. There would be a view. There would be no Ka-Chinging!

But there was barbed wire as far as the eye could see, and not a farm or ranch house in sight. I laid down my bike and walked up to a gated section of the fence. Was all of Spain and Portugal going to be this way? Nothing but fenced fields with no access? I imagined yet another series of hotel stays, and my frugal heart sank.

I looked closely at the gate. It was latched, not locked. The loop of wire holding the post closed was barely over the adjoining post. I gave it a little bump and the wire came loose and the gate swung open. The little voice in my head that was saying, “Remember your rule about wild camping?” was drowned out by another, which shouted, “Wow. Check out that free campsite!”

I quickly convinced my wife Kat that we could enter the field, close the gate behind us, walk our bikes up the to the crest of the hill, pitch our tent under the cover of the trees, wake up early, and be out of there before anyone would know.

“I know we should ask, but the gate was barely closed. It's not like there is a huge ‘No Trespassing’ sign posted.”

Kat was willing to accept my reasoning. I was the older and more experienced traveler, after all.

The site was spectacular. The ground was soft beneath the trees. And we had a 360 degree view of vast fields of pastureland and the upcoming sunset.

As we set up the tent and tossed the panniers inside, we could hear the far away bleats and tinkling bells of a herd of sheep. No worries. Sounded like they were in the next county.

But as I unpacked the stove and filled our cooking pot with water, those sheep noises got louder and louder.

Suddenly a small herd of sheep (no more than 20) crested the hill, munching on the brown grass.

“This is a problem,” I said. “What if a sheep dog or shepherd is right behind them?”

I waved my arms, and then took off my shirt and waved it. A few of them looked up, startled, and the whole group trotted away down the hill, there little

bells tinkling away.

“That was easy,” I said.

We busied ourselves with the tasks of camping — blowing up air mattresses, hanging up sweaty shirts to dry, and unpacking the cooking gear.

We heard the bleats and baas again. But there was a deeper resonance to them. What crested the hill this time was not a small herd, but an army of 300 determined Spanish sheep. It became quite clear that we were camped in their favorite hilltop grove of trees.

The waving of arms did not work this time. Some of the largest animals led the charge and they came right for us. We laughed ... but it was nervous laughter. The herd spread out and surrounded us on three sides. I had no idea sheep could make that much noise.

Then they stopped. Not just their forward progress, but their bleating as well.

Now let me make this clear, I'm not afraid of sheep. I think their cute. I grew up in the suburbs, but have always felt comfortable around animals. But when a huge herd of sheep surround you in a for-

mation that could be illustrated in a Civil War strategy manual, and then suddenly fall silent, all gazing in that vacuous sheep stare, it's eerie. No. It's frightening.

Holding our ground, outnumbered by a vast sheep army, it was beginning to feel like the final scene of *The Alamo* or *Night of the Living Dead*.

I whispered to Kat, “Maybe they'll just go away.”

Before she could comment, the largest sheep, the general I assumed, let out a loud sustained “BAAAAA!” and the whole group advanced forward with a cacophony of bleating.

I yelled, “We've got to get out of here!”

The next seven minutes were chaos, as we each took turns fending off aggressive sheep, while the other worked on taking down our tent and packing up our gear. The sheep were relentless, even nipping at the corners of our tent. Clothes, food, and camping gear were thrown into panniers in a haphazard frenzy.

Kat and I were yelling at each other and laughing at the same time.

Once all the panniers were back on the

bikes, we quickly retreated down the hill.

As a small group pursued us, I yelled, “I can't believe we're fleeing sheep.”

We went out the same gate we came in and I firmly latched it behind us.

It was already dark, so we had to find a place nearby to camp. The only flat ground was near a ditch at the rocky edge of a field.

Throughout the uncomfortable night on our rocky site, we could hear the satisfied bleats of sheep from high above us. Sheep are as dumb as rocks, but I knew they were taunting us.

We'd lost the Battle of Sheep Ridge. It was a humiliating defeat. But we had survived to wild camp another day.

“NEVER WILD CAMP ON PRIVATE PROPERTY WITHOUT FIRST ASKING PERMISSION.”

Believe me. It's a good rule. **AC**

Willie Weir has been writing for Adventure Cyclist for 15 years. His first book, Spokesongs: Bicycle Adventures on Three Continents, is now available in digital format. He and Kat are currently avoiding sheep in Southeast Asia.

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