

Coasting all the way

Mountain biking in the heat of the Algarve might sound like hard work, but with a descent that goes on for miles this course is more about exhilaration than perspiration

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Wheelie free ... long stretches of the route follow the coast. Photograph: Chris Moran

The essential ingredients for a good mountain bike ride are simple: fantastic views, great paths, interesting features to roll over, and a damned good cafe at the end of the ride. There are plenty of good sites springing up in the UK of course, but Lagos, Portugal has several additional selling points: it's warm, the food and drinks are ludicrously cheap, the trails are empty, and the downhill

tracks are very, very long. Cashing in, The Mountain Bike Adventure set up two years ago when Jim Carroll - an ex pro-rider who helped build the Hopton Castle trails in Shropshire - arrived in Lagos on a surf trip.

He met Toby Gornall - one half of The Surf Experience (who have been taking UK customers to the best surf breaks around Lagos since the early 90's) - and a recent convert to mountain biking. After several rides together, a plan was formed. "I was sick of riding in the rain," says Jim, looking out over the impressive sea stacks at Ponta Piedade. "So I moved here and we started the company."

It's a good business. Turn up in Faro airport and either Jim or Toby will pick you up and whisk you to Clotilda's B&B in the centre of town. Next, you're given a serious-looking Specialized mountain bike, and then Jim will take you out on a gentle ride along near the cliffs just outside of Lagos.

Mountain biking seems to be split into several camps. There's park riding; with jumps, gaps and logs to ride over. There's cross-country riding through single or double tracks; which includes a fair bit of peddling and some downhill. There's tourist track riding; essentially cruising on rarely-used tarmac roads. And then there's downhill; where you're dropped off at the top of a hill, and rarely need to peddle.

I plumped for downhill, and the next day found myself on a full-suspension bike at the top of Monchique, a 3,000 feet extinct volcano half an hour outside of Lagos. At 16km, the run down was incredible: ridiculously fast in some sections, tricky in others, and all the while dusty, remote and beautiful. We passed enormous wind turbines, derelict farm houses, fields full of flowers and had to duck under fallen tree trunks. "When we do this ride in the height of the summer," says Jim, "we always end it at the dam so everyone can jump in the lake to cool off."

Perhaps the key to their success is their flexibility. There are no set routes, just Jim and Toby asking what you want to do the next day and offering up different ideas based on what they think you might like. "The ride to Zavial is really popular," says Toby. "It's about 30km all along the coast but we can stretch it out to 45km with a few diversions into interesting trails. At the end there's an amazing cafe, then we normally go for a swim or a surf in the sea and take the mini bus back."

And then there's Lagos town itself, a surfer's paradise, with cobbled alleyways, tapas restaurants and plenty of hidden bars. We ate in O Franguinho, which served easily the best chicken I've ever had in my life, and my plate with four beers came to just €8. "Don't worry about that," said Jim as I paid for my meal with arched eyebrows. "The drinks will be cheaper at the next place. And by the end of the week you'll probably get local prices too."

I staggered back to Clotilda's with a full stomach, a fuzzy head, and the knowledge that I'd be adventuring my way along the Algarve coast the next day. And as I slipped along the soapstone cobbles, my body aching from the day's ride, I knew I was in for an active, healthy, but ever-so-boozy week. Just my kind of holiday.

· Monarch Airlines (08700 40 63 00, flymonarch.com) fly to Faro from Birmingham, Gatwick, Luton and Manchester from £66 rtn inc tax. The Mountain Bike Adventure (themountainbikeadventure.com, +351 918 502 663) charges £250 for a week's stay (starting any day), including B&B, a packed lunch on the ride, guiding, airport transfers and as many tours of the restaurants and nightclubs of Lagos as you can handle. Hire of a Specialized Hard Rock Sports bike (and helmet) costs £50 extra for the week. Day trips start at €40pp. Rides usually last from 10am-4.30pm