



MOUNTAIN BIKERS...

Trail riding doesn't come much better than this: TBM heads south for a Pyrenees Up...

STORY & PICS BY MELBERRY

Despite more than ten years working in the dirt bike industry, I've never actually come face to face with a Vulture before now. But then again I've never ridden in the Pays Basque region of France before - that little corner of SW France which borders the Pyrenees and Spain to the south, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. But that's exactly what happened as I rounded a corner on the very first day of the latest Sport Adventure trail riding holiday in the Pyrenees. There it was, all bald and ugly - I thought I was looking at a picture of Chris Evans at first, until with a few gentle beats of its gigantic wings it took off on a low trajectory and sloped off to find a thermal to play on. I almost felt like whistling that song out of Jungle Book...

Mistletoe and Whine

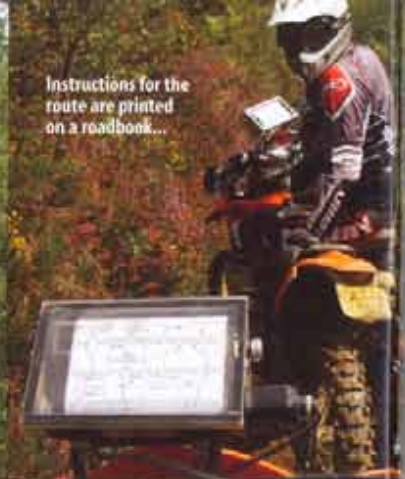
Rather like the annual release of the specially-brewed Carlsberg Elephant Beer, or a dodgy Christmas single, the periodic announcement of a new Sport Adventure route is both a pleasure and a pain... A pleasure because Chris Evans (for it is he who runs Sport Adventure) has a knack of finding the very best regions of France in which to ride dirt bikes. And a pain because after ten years of running such tours, Chris knows exactly what it is that British riders want - a technical and interesting challenge that they'll remember for a very long time...



MOUNTAIN BIKERS...

78 TEM

Instructions for the route are printed on a roadbook...



And with his new route, Chris doesn't disappoint. Before the ride began, Chris said to me that: 'If afterwards, you've had three better days of trail riding anywhere in the world, I'll eat my KTM, Si.' Well to save Chris from indigestion, let's just say that although I've been lucky enough to ride dirt bikes all over the world - from Iceland to South Africa, and from New Zealand to Brazil, I've never encountered three continuous days of trail riding in such amazing scenery as this.

And at the risk of blowing a bit of smoke up Chris's backside for a moment - let me inform you how this tour came about. Most readers know Chris as TBM's couch-potato columnist, some will be aware that he's employed every year on the Dakar Rallye as a competitor-liaison agent, and some might also know that he 'manages' a French rider by the name of Cyril Despres (yes, the same Cyril Despres that won the Dakar this year). That gives Chris an enormous amount of credibility among the dirt biking fraternity in his adopted home of France. So when Chris went looking for a new 'route' late last year, he was offered help by none other than David Castera - former winner of the Gilles Lalay Classic (the world's toughest one day enduro).

Not only does Monsieur Castera live and work in (and help promote) the Pays Basque region, he also has access to large amounts of the landscape (for his Shark X-Trem Enduro). Land which he's made available for Chris to use. So you can see how it is that the riding was not only very spectacular, but also very intense.

Allo Allo

Like all Sport Adventure tours, this one began with the dishing out of 'road-book-readers' and numerous pithy insults as we congregated at a hotel not far from the resort town of Biarritz.

Chris's riders' briefings are legendary and consist of an extended period of insults (as he gets to know you), followed by just enough information to keep you abreast of what's happening. Each rider gets issued with a daily 'roadbook' which is a long scroll of paper containing the route directions (in the form of printed mini-diagrams). Each of these mini-diagrams has a distance (marked in KMs) from the last instruction as well as a running total distance. And each schematic diagram consists of a set of arrows showing the direction you're coming from, the direction you want to go, and any distinguishing landmarks (a cross-roads, derelict barn, a



MOUNTAIN BIKERS...

chained-up dog, that sort of thing).

The beauty of this system is that it allows riders to team up with their mates and ride at their own pace without having to play follow-my-leader at the speed of the slowest. To ensure that no-one gets horrendously lost there's a sweeper who can help riders with broken bikes/bones etc, and during the course of the day there are usually two or three checkpoints (CPs) manned by Chris's long-suffering and hardworking (not to mention easy on the eye) assistant Yasmina ('Papa...? Nicole?'). These allow the riders to re-group and grab any spares/fuel/sustenance they need from the back-up van.

78 TBM

Mousse no Chocolat

I'd like to say that day one of our three day adventure began with a gentle introduction to get us all in the swing of things, but I'd be lying. Beforehand, Chris had confessed to me in the hotel room we were sharing, that a lot of the going was on clay soils - 'it'll be alright as long as it doesn't rain' he said. So when I awoke early on the first morning to the gentle thrum of rain-drops on the hotel window I knew we were in for a tricky time. Of course that was the least of my worries - first of all I had to prep both mine and Chris's bikes.

Being the week before TBM's deadline, it was


impossible for me to find enough time to drive down (and back) from this inaugural event, so Chris had generously agreed to loan me one of the mounts from his vast (and expanding) stable of KTMs. What he'd neglected to tell me beforehand was that neither bike would be prepped for the job in hand. So before we even went near a trail, myself and a couple of other 'punters' found ourselves changing four moussets and prepping his bikes. Plus ca changes.

La Tour


The day began in earnest with a tricky loop through a very slippery and rutted forest

culminating in the first of the day's climbs which crawled its way out of a muddy stream and then straight up the side of a rutted hillside. A climb which would no doubt have been far easier had Chris not stalled right in front of me, half-way up. As it was this was the first of a few parts of the route where it was necessary to get off and push...

Once clear of the rutted forest, the going opened out to magnificent soft rounded peaks with spectacular views. Unlike almost anywhere else I've ridden, the route took you not only towards the peaks but actually right up and over the summits. One of the climbs just after lunch



Believe it or not this was the view from the hotel balcony on the second night...



It doesn't feel like a proper ride unless there's been a bit of pushing and shoving...

TBM 79

required a tricky little scramble over some large quartz outcrops to a remote summit offering magnificent views towards where we'd been riding all morning.

In fact the scale of the place was amazing, not just in its vast open beauty, but also in the sheer 'verticality' of many of the climbs, not for nothing is this part of the world a skiing region. And

frequently our climbs would take us up to a summit from where you could see the power-lines for a chair-lift disappearing over the horizon. And of course where there are climbs there are also steep descents, and Chris had chosen a route which tested brakes, suspension and nerves to their limits.

As Chris pointed out at the first day's briefing -

Although you don't have to be an expert rider to take part in a Sport Adventure trail riding holiday, it helps if you are fairly competent on a dirt bike and self-sufficient enough to look after yourself out on the trail in a foreign country. Having ridden all of Chris's holidays I'd say that this particular one is arguably the most challenging (especially if you elect to do Chris's optional extreme loop - which is at the discretion of Chris). NB it's likely that this loop will only take place in summer when drier conditions prevail and the hours of daylight are greater. It's also looking likely that demand will outstrip supply for next year as Chris is planning to keep the price the same for 2006 (though the non-refundable deposit part will rise from £120 to £150 next year).

To book yourself a place on one of Sport Adventure's tours, log onto the website: sport-adventure.com or call Chris on 07900 826719, and tell him we sent you...

Basque & Ride

Sport Adventure's Pyrenean tour costs £320 for the three days, which includes the cost of two nights' (half-board) accommodation. You ride your own bike, so on top of the initial cost you need to budget for getting there and back (most people team up with mates and share a van), the cost of fuel for three days, plus the cost of lunches and a few drinks (Chris pre-arranges lunch which usually costs €10-12 a day). You'll need to own any modern and reliable single-cylinder trail/enduro bike (two-stroke or four-), which needs to be registered (duh!), nice and quiet (standard pipes only), and preferably fitted with road legal FIM enduro tyres and mousers. Most riders take a small selection of spares (levers etc), and a decent toolbox for carrying out any repairs on their bikes. Obviously you need to have European-wide third-party insurance, a valid driving license and a passport.



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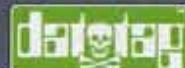
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one of the best things about riding the inaugural trip is that a lot of the technical stuff gets 'tried out' on the punters. Stuff which I'm happy to report will be staying in the roadbook and which drew plenty of praise from the assembled riders. And of course gave 'em lots to talk about at our hotel in St Palais on the first night, as we tucked into the speciality of the region - potato soup, followed by roast duck, and then tarte Basque (a sort of apple flan).

Va Va Voom

Day two was the hardest, and longest of the planned route (especially so, given that Chris had mentioned the possibility of adding an extra 20km 'extreme loop', for those that wanted it). The day began with some incredible climbs followed by more incredible climbs, so that at times you felt like you were up in the gods. Most of the time the trails consisted of open tracks on a mixture of grass, clay or rock but with a good sprinkling of chunky boulders just to make things

interesting. At one point the trail headed straight through a boulder-field, where you had to pick your way across and around the smooth boulders as best you could. It's fair to say that the navigation on this first tour was (at times) a little tricky, but none of the riders seemed to have any problems following the route and the standard of riding was universally high.

One excellent trail turned off the road and straight up a short, steep climb over an outcrop of vertically-bedded metamorphosed rocks on which tyres seemed to find no grip whatsoever. As the sun was by now, starting to climb fairly high in the sky, the combination of warm weather, high humidity and technical trails meant that more-or-less everyone chose to ride in just a race-shirt, but still managed to get a sweat on.

The descent was just as spectacular, forming part of the route of the Shark X-Trem enduro (they go up it); with boulders, stream crossings, narrow paths and fallen trees just some of the hazards encountered. After a great lunch

(consisting of potato soup, followed by roast duck and then tarte Basque - speciality of the region, monsieur!), we headed out for the afternoon on a lovely trail which began with a track consisting entirely of polished rock steps worn smooth with the passage of wheels over hundreds of years continuous use. This trail gradually deteriorated into a fantastic washed-out gravel track which crossed and re-crossed the new road the French authorities had replaced it with.

Re-grouping at the top, riders divided themselves into those who wanted to do the 'extreme loop' and those who didn't (about half 'n' half), and we headed off on our respective ways.

Perrier? No Perrier

So began one of the most memorable afternoon's trail riding I've had in a long time. Carrying my camera equipment on my back I was unable to use a hydration pack - something I was to come to regret that day. The ride started ominously


enough when Chris led us down a bracken-covered slope which was in excess of 45 degrees (yes, really), albeit we were traversing. And we were barely a third of the way down when Chris realised we'd somehow missed the goat track we were looking for, and everyone was forced to back-track. After half an hour of sweating, pushing and cursing, we finally got all the bikes back up the hill again and picked up the right track which meandered its way down and across the hillside, and which was at times so steep that my left boot (hill-side) was often dragging through the rocky soil.

But if the descent was memorable, the climb back up was truly challenging. Large boulders littered the path and made keeping up any sort of momentum virtually impossible. It wasn't long before the first of the bikes boiled up and progress was slow and tortuous as bike after bike got stuck and began to steam. But the severity of this climb was nothing as to what was to come. Rounding a corner we were faced with a second





MOUNTAIN BIKERS...



(steeper climb) and then a third (even steeper climb) to reach the true summit.

I think it's fair to say that everyone was looking well-worn by the time we all made it to the top, but now we had to get back down again. The trail led across the top of a few rounded grassy summits before following a knife-edged ridge (with drops to both sides) to a tiny peak from which the only way was down. Vertically down. About three metres. After which the descent shallowed to just a steep curve. And it was followed a few minutes later by a second drop and curve - only this one had a dog-leg in it halfway down, which meant that you had to brake (back brake only, otherwise you'd wash the front), and then flick the bike sideways. Awesome stuff.

The rest of the 'extreme loop' was equally as spectacular though fortunately not quite as challenging, and after two and a half hours we eventually got back on the main roadbook for the final couple of hours run back to the hotel.

But even this had some amazing highlights including a couple of very long rocky descents, some great single-track going, and one trail which approached a craggy summit through which two giant granite intrusions towered above you. The trail took us right up and in-between the twin peaks before dropping down the other side again through a boulder-field. Unbelievable.

Those of us who'd elected to do the extra loop



The quality of light
was amazing...

MOUNTAIN BIKERS...



Menage a Trois

Day three was warm, sunny and spectacular in the extreme. And although there were plenty of good challenging trails to ride, it was a day for sight-seeing and enjoying the ride. Away from the hotel we rode first around, and then across the nearby peak before descending steadily back down to the road. After a short section on tarmac and another good climb and descent across fields and down a goat track, a sinewy road took us to an excellent long grassy climb straight up the side of a valley to a rocky outcrop from where you could view the whole valley.

But the best was yet to come. A tiny tarmac road at the top of the climb revealed spectacular views of the surrounding high peaks which glistened and shimmered in the late summer sunshine. As the road became a track, the roadbook revealed one final surprise. Another long, bumpy grass-covered climb led to the summit of a peak - on top of which a large rock outcrop provided the foundations for a tiny chapel. The views from this chapel were sublime and as we stood and watched the vultures circling hundreds of feet below us, there was a sense of having ridden in a truly wondrous landscape.

Fortunately no ducks were injured during the making of our lunch, and afterwards as I headed off for the airport leaving the rest of the party to follow the final few kilometres of track back through the forest to the rendez-vous at the hotel, I marvelled at where we'd ridden for the past three days and what you could still do on a dirt-bike in mainland Europe. Long may it continue...

didn't reach the hotel that night until nearly 8:00pm and after a great supper of (yup, you guessed it) roast duck, albeit preceded by a plate of Serrano ham and Chorizo, and followed by a rich chocolate pudding, we fell asleep to the sound of a waterfall as the nearby mountain stream cascaded over the rocky substrate...