

## Enduro heaven on the perfect competition-based trail bike? Could this be it..?

**L**EAVE THE CLUTCH ALONE'. I had to keep reminding myself that the worst thing I could do right now was dip the clutch and send the revs soaring. There was more than enough grip on the jagged granite outcrops for the Metzeler enduro tyres to find purchase, and left in second gear the big 300 two-stroke was making reliable progress up through the tricky boulder climb, accompanied - as it was - by some guttural growling. Most of it coming from the bike. Surely it was gonna' stall: the clutch was fully out, the throttle virtually closed and the path obstructed by boulders

half as high as the front wheel. But somehow it didn't. And like a sabre-toothed tiger escaping from a prehistoric tar-pit, it just kept clawing its way out of trouble. This was incredible, amazing, insane...

I've never really liked 300s. No, let me correct that. Up until this trip I've never really gelled with 300s in the way that I feel totally at ease with a good 250 2T. Oh I understand why you'd like the idea of a 300's stomp, but unfortunately modern day 300s aren't just grunt-monsters (if only), they also generate fearsome amounts of firepower. And it's this power that you sometimes find yourself fighting when you least want to (and feel least able to). But not this time, not today, not on this trip. Because here in this part of southern France, where the earth rises up to greet the sky in a gigantic rocky kiss, the 300 two-stroke is king. Long live the king...

### Three, is the Magic Number

And now I'm a convert. 300s are divine inspiration, the nectar of the gods. And one 300 in particular has converted me to its cause. Husaberg's all new TE300 is the bike the KTM 300EXC should have been, all along. It may be dressed up as an enduro bike - hell it is an enduro bike - but thanks to an engine that's crafted from pure gold and a fuel tank capable of going the distance, it's also one amazing trailblazer too. Hallelujah.

But let's take a step back for a minute - to the beginning of August - and one enjoyable evening in particular. Parked in front of me were two pints of cold Cobra beer, a mountain of food comprising chicken tikka, lamb dhansak, chicken dopi-aza, mushroom bhaji, sag aloo, nan bread and a large plate of



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pilau rice. Oh and TBM's longest standing (and at the same time, shortest-standing) columnist, Chris Evans. In between mouthfuls of murgh, Chris was explaining that for the past few months he'd been quietly developing a new route down in... 'the Lozere!'

He whispered the last bit in a hushed, almost reverential tone because he knew - like me - that the Lozere was at the very heart and soul of French enduro country. This is where the hard men of the sport train and live. It's where the French frequently hold their national and world enduro rounds, it's been the location of the ISDE, and it still hosts the world's best enduro - the three-day Trefle Lozerien. Imagine if you will an event with the history and popularity of The Welsh, the scenery of Romaniacs, the climbs of Hells Gate and the food and weather of Montpellier... in summer. Try to imagine a place where the local motorcycle club is so well established in the community that on Wednesday afternoons, schoolchildren can opt to learn to ride dirtbikes as part of the curriculum; a club so entrenched in the local economy that it can afford to have a fully paid, permanent members of staff whose job it is to simply find and ride new tracks each day. Well that's what happens down in the Lozere. This year the regs for their annual 600-rider enduro (held in June) went on sale at midnight on New Year's Day... And four minutes later it was fully sold out. Hell, even Take That can't match that sort of dedication by fans.

**'Four minutes after the regs went online, the event was fully sold out. All 600 places!'**

Chris has been running tours in the Lozere region for the past seven years on some mighty enjoyable tracks, but as he opined to me over curry that night: 'I just wanted to offer punters something more technical to get their teeth into.'

So now it was time to get serious with a new route devised purely to take Chris' punters to the next level. 'Will this new route be the Lozere Extreme?' I ask him.

'No not really' he replies, 'it's more about sampling some of the tougher tracks the region has to offer. And to give those punters who have already ridden with me in the Lozere, a new route with some, tougher and more challenging riding. For sure it is difficult in places: there's more gnarly single-track which doesn't flow as smoothly as you might expect, some huge rocky climbs, a tricky [slippery and deep] river crossing to negotiate and a lot more technical going than the original Lozere. But it's also very remote and very beautiful in places - and that puts a different perspective on the riding. I'm sure it'll suit those punters who are up for a challenge.' Formidable!

'So anyway', he continued, putting away an onion bhaji in one mouthful, 'how do you fancy being the first Brit to ride the new route? You've always ridden my new routes first, and reported your findings honestly in





collected the Berg from KTM UK, whilst I settled down to meeting the upcoming deadline and booking tickets with Robinair to fly into the nearest airport (miles away from anywhere). Six days later I was sat in the shade outside Rodez airport. The temperature was a heady 34-degrees and the cafeteria had a sign in its window saying: Fermé (closed). I lit up an iPod, shut my eyes and drifted off to sleep. Two hours later I was awakened by a loud honking sound...

'Greetings, geezer', said a chirpy Mr Evans in his best mockney accent, as I slung my kitbag in the back of his van, 'you're gonna love this ride' he smiled. The journey to Mende - the capital of the region - took about two hours (an hour and a half of driving, and a further half hour looking for fresh fruit to satisfy Evans' new healthy 'fruitarian' regime). Eventually we arrived at the hotel located on the banks of the river, and while I set to work crafting a tiring column, Chris took the easy option of spannering the bikes. His KTM just needed the seat changing over and the air filter cleaning, but the Berg needed some wraparound handguards, a bashplate and a pair of mouses fitting to it.

Sadly, my hotel room window overlooked Chris' makeshift work area, and as I toiled away tirelessly on my column over an ice-cold beer in the sweltering heat, I could hear the grunting Anglo-Saxon oaths of Chris below me. Some people can be so selfish about making noise whilst others are working!

Eventually it all got finished and I joined Chris outside just as he was tidying up and we headed off for another cold one and dinner on the terrace. The temperature was still up in the low-30s as we tucked into a delicious Roquefort cheese and walnut salad, followed by baked salmon and vegetables then finished up with poached pear and chocolate mousse (thereby salving Chris' conscience about eating fruit with every meal). By the time we'd had rich, dark coffee and Calvados (a fruit-based liqueur, note) there was barely time for Chris to blag a couple of ciggies off one of the paying guests (he's given up buying cigarettes, apparently), before turning in for the night.

I awoke to cloudy skies but the promise of sun later, and headed down for a delicious continental breakfast consisting of fruit (obviously), chocolate croissant and fresh juice, followed by the obligatory black coffee. We'd arranged to meet 'Duke' from the moto club who was to be our guide until lunchtime while Chris and I checked and cross-checked his new route.

#### **Hit the Road, Jacques**

We were riding the route in reverse - that's to say starting with day three and working back towards day one - though obviously following the roadbook in the normal way. Incidentally, a roadbook Chris had spent much of the

the mag, and I want to try it out on you.'

I didn't need asking twice. Trouble was Bike Magazine had already booked on a tour with Chris for two weeks hence. And we had a deadline right around the corner. I would have to act fast.

'I'm heading back to France in my van in a few days time' Chris added, 'if you had a bike you wanted to test, then I could take it with me and you could fly out and meet me down there'. As luck would have it we had already arranged a Husaberg TE300 two-stroke to test. Editor Barni had ridden the bike at the launch a couple of months previously and liked what he found, so we felt it was a priority to get hold of one and take it somewhere well away from the controlled environment of a 'launch' where we could independently assess the new bike's merits. Besides, I wanted to see if I would like it as much as Big-Bore-Barni did. This seemed like the perfect opportunity to put in some serious graft on the new machine.

We drained our pints, ordered a fresh round of drinks and got on with demolishing the rest of the curry. A few days later, Chris duly

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Col du Trébatut  
Altitude 1100 m.

previous six weeks preparing! For those that don't already know how it works, Chris' holidays work on a roadbook system - a series of mini-diagrams you follow in order to navigate the route. These are printed onto a long scroll of paper which you feed into a roadbook reader which is basically just a clear box mounted atop the bike's handlebars that allows you to read the instructions as you ride. These boxes are also supplied by Chris, and have just been replaced with a whole bunch of new purpose-built alloy ones. Whooh.

There's a short ride out of town each morning giving you and your bike ten minutes to warm up before you hit the start of the lanes, in this case a gravelly run of pistes through open woodland. This is good news as it gets you used to reading the roadbook each day before the trickier lanes arrive. And don't worry because they arrive soon enough. On this day, a descent into proper wooded trails gets steeper by the minute till you find yourself at the top of a properly gnarly climb down to a bubbling river crossing which looks like nothing, but turns out to be anything but...

'Be careful. Everyone falls in here' he said.  
I only had about six feet to go when...'

'Be careful, yeah? It's really slippery.' Said Chris. Duke concurred. 'Go really, really slowly, everyone falls in here.' I was almost across the river, I only had about 6 feet to go when the front wheel slipped on an algae-covered rock and... Well you can guess the rest.

Eventually - the bike emptied of water - we climbed back up away from the river and into a series of singletrack lanes I can only really describe as technically challenging. Unlike Chris's previous Lozere route, this one requires a lot more concentration. The navigation is the easy bit, it's the mixture of technical rocky climbs, narrow tracks, overhanging branches, buried rocks and the sheer length of the route that will keep you working hard throughout the day - plus the awkwardness of a lot of the going. For instance the track now becomes a series of steep, rocky hairpins - requiring you to keep the throttle open through the turns in order to carry enough speed so that you don't stall. Stalling here would be very bad indeed! But the turns themselves are really tight, awkward and heavily off-cambered, which necessitates the bike to be laid over on its side and powered through them. Too little gas and you won't make the climb, too much and you won't make the turn! It's a balancing act that requires a bit of mental calculation as well as the riding co-ordination to quickly switch weight from one footpeg to the other as you switch sides of the bike in the turn.

A long stony descent follows where you have to have your wits about you to avoid overrunning the corners and crashing into the banks. Some of these descents are so long and so steep that you are on the brakes for minutes at a time, risking boiling them. All the while you're altering body positions, hang-



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ing off the back of the bike while at the same time trying to look up to avoid overhanging branches, feeling for grip from the front wheel and watching out for areas of the track which have been washed away. Often it's a matter of braking where you get chance, before releasing the brakes and letting the bike run-on where the track is loose and stony. A sharp right turn between two long-abandoned buildings deep in the woods catches you by surprise, but having made the turn and exited the woods into a picturesque little hamlet, the roadbook advises: 'Take a Deep Breath!'

[Inhale]

As we climb out of a village a short track turns into *another* awkward rock-festooned climb - but this time on cobbles! The cobbles themselves are worn out, upturned and missing in places, displaced by roots, overgrown with trees and buckled by land-slips - pot-holed and awkwardly off-camber and always extremely slippery. On the TE300 it takes a judicious throttle hand to keep the spinning Metzeler hooked up enough to provide sufficient drive. It's got so much torque it can spin the tyre on pretty much any surface, just by tweaking the throttle. Keeping up momentum on this climb (while at the same time keeping the power-valve closed) proves to be a fantastic challenge. By far the best way is to try and hook third gear and keep the 300 burbling along at low rpm, but the track's so steep in places that I have to downshift and engage second gear before short-shifting into third again.

We make it up in the dry without incident, but god knows how awkward it would be to ride in the wet. It just goes on and on, twisting and

'Round about here, the roadbook advised: Take a deep breath...'

turning to climb the steep gradient, as you carefully pick your way through stocky, opportunist saplings which grow up through holes where the cobbles are missing. As we emerged from the trees we stopped for a breather and I turned to Duke and asked if it was an ancient medieval road we had just ridden? 'No.' he says nonchalantly, 'It's Roman. The Romans lived all round here, there are still Roman tracks everywhere'. Wow... you mean that's a 2000 year old trail I've just ridden!

The cobbles finished where the trees ended, but the Roman road continued its relentless climb upwards, switching cobbles for giant rocky slabs and heading arrow straight up the side of a hill. Eventually it turned at the top and we looked back across a gorgeous, unspoilt valley basking in the late summer sunlight. That had been a continuous climb for over 3.3km!

## The Descent into Hell

Having taken a bit of a breather at the top, refilled my hydration pack from a water trough and tucked into half a Snickers bar I was actually looking forward to going to Hell! Chris had told me beforehand that when he was recce-ing this area for his route, he came across a valley ominously named 'Valley of Hell'. And - as he pointed out the night before - it was aptly monikered. Naturally, he felt he had to include it on this trip. 'Be careful' he said warily as we headed off...

The Valley of Hell began with a traversed descent down the side of a limestone escarpment. With loose flagstones under the wheels, the hairpin bends were - at times - fairly breathtaking, and occasionally bloody awkward. Water erosion in various places meant you were forced down a number of two-foot high rock steps which (when added to the steepness of the descent) threatened to topple you over the bars as you braked. But though the track was technical and steep, the Berg and I managed the entire descent more-or less feet-up in second and third gears, and I got to the road at the bottom wondering what all the fuss about 'Hell' was for.

'That wasn't so bad.' I said to Chris as he caught up to where I'd parked on the road.

'Ha! We've barely even begun' he said, pointing... 'Look the track continues over there.'

I looked to where a short track left the road and tipped off what appeared to be the side of a precipice... 'Oh!' I said swallowing hard. 'I think I'll follow Duke...'

The tricky descent led not off a precipice, but instead down a narrow goat-track which clung to the edge of a steep-sided ravine like a Koala to a Gum Tree. Although technically not all that hard, Chris had warned me about the drop-off to one side which was seriously off-putting. 'You don't wanna' go off the side' he said matter-of-factly, and as I began the descent, standing on the bike's pegs, I realised why. To go off the side would not just bring about an end to the day's riding, it was very likely to bring about an end to all your riding! I kept finding myself dabbing with the inside leg as I leant further away from the precipice. There were still rocks to avoid, roots to clamber up and over, off-camber rock slabs which threatened to sweep away your front wheel and a viciously steep descent to contend with, but frankly, I thought Hell wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Unfortunately I'd only reached the bottom of Hell, and as any lost soul will tell you, getting out of Hell is always a whole lot harder than getting into it!

At the bottom a lovely cooling stream-crossing leads you to the far bank looking up at a near vertical (three metre) climb up from the river. Fortunately a succession of bikes have cut a notch in the bank, but even so, this is not as easy to ride as it looks. The Berg and I powered up through the notch in second gear till the pegs wedged fast with the rear wheel spinning a foot off the ground. Duke pulled me up the last metre. Then it was his turn. Instead of aiming for the notch he tried to finesse his way up the steep bank by attacking it across the camber. Bad move, the result was his bike wedged around a tree near



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the top of the bank (with one wheel either side of the trunk), from which it would never have emerged without help from me (*and he rides these tracks for a living!*)

But that was barely the beginning of the challenge. Because as we found out, that was just the *first* horizon. During many thousands of years this little river had valiantly cut its way deep into the underlying rocks, leaving a steep-sided escarpment to climb out of. We may have just got up the first level but the next bit was gonna' be a whole lot tougher. The only way out was to ride up a much longer, loose-surface, root-infested climb - across the camber - whilst dodging trees, rain ruts and loose rocks. I can't really describe how steep it was, except to say that it was so steep that it was the only time over the three days I was worried that the

300 would loop-out rather than climb! Of course Duke made it to the top - eventually - his little 250 Husky 4T (exhaust glowing cherry red with the effort) proving that sometimes less is more. I gave it a good go on the 300 getting to the point where I was able to jump-off and push to the top (over a period of about ten minutes), but Chris never made it up there that day on his KTM 300. Though in fairness I should point out that he has ridden it by himself in the past. All in all it took us a good hour of messing about, pushing, pulling, descending and re-trying to get this particular hazard behind us. And that was just one of the numerous hazards we faced that day.

Earlier on, I had rounded a corner on the trail, to be confronted by what looked like a solid wall of rock. It wasn't clear at first which way the trail went. I stopped the bike as Chris pulled up alongside. 'That's right' he said 'the trail goes up and over that!' Well this slab was a proper giant - three metres high - you had to hit it at the right angle to get the momentum to carry you up and over it. Just to make things more awkward, the approach was bumpy - over loose rocks - which made accurate front wheel placement difficult, and there was a puddle just at the base of it, so that your tyres were good and soaked just as you hit the thing. As you climbed over the top, a rut had been carved into the stone by countless bikes and this had produced an awkward pinch point which threatened to stop the Berg in its tracks. With a bit of judicious paddling and pushing I finally got the Berg to the top without help, then drained my hydration pack. Lunch couldn't come soon enough. I looked at my watch... it was 4.30pm!

Okay, we'd started out late (we didn't really get going till 11.30am, we'd stopped to empty a river outta' the Berg's crankcases, we'd been stuck at one climb for an hour and we'd stopped to take a fair number of photos, and we'd stopped at most junctions to verify the road book - punters will get to the lunch stop much earlier I reckon. Nevertheless I



Have another go, Chris...

think you can see what I mean about the severity of the terrain. I don't want to put you off, it's not like there's any 'stoppers', or anything that isn't rideable for an enthusiastic clubman, but I do want to impress upon you that this is no stroll in the woods, through leafy French glades. Yes there's some of that, but there's also a lot of other more challenging going.

The descent through ancient woodland was both interesting and challenging - but for rather unusual reasons. This area is part of a 'natural park' where wolves have been re-introduced, and in order not to disturb these beautiful but deadly creatures (it sets them off howling, apparently), Chris insisted we cut our engines and freewheel down the next descent! I wondered about the wisdom of not having a running motor should I be confronted by a pack of hungry predators, but in the end concerned myself with keeping up enough momentum to freewheel all the way down the 1.5km track, which once again was kinda' tricky in places - especially where it had been washed away. The track ended in a giant smooth slab of steeply inclined rock just before the road. Fortunately there was plenty of grip for our tyres, but beware in the wet, water runs down this slab in sheets and makes braking on it rather 'interesting'.

Emerging back into sunlight, we stopped at a little bar where the owner directed us to a beautiful wooden terrace overlooking a river. Scented jasmine and honeysuckle assaulted our nostrils as we ordered a round of beers, followed by strong black coffee. The day was still only partly done.

### Easy Piste-y

A shortish (4km) section of road leads you through a little town and then back onto easy (sandy covered) tracks. After our exertions to get here it was great to hook the bikes into top gear and leave long lurid slides on the sandy corners. The track was open, easy going and deserted and just what we needed to let our bodies unwind. I took the opportunity to let the 300 loose and 'growl' it through a bunch of turns, leaning forwards and steering with the throttle. Boy that felt good. After a few miles of slidey fun it was onto an altogether different type of going: grassy fields, littered with gigantic round boulders through which you had to pick your way as best you could. These fields would have been relatively simple were it not for the fact that they were steep and muddy in places, oh and stocked with bulls! Naturally enough we were keen to get the gates shut behind us as quickly as possible.

'These fields would have been simple to ride had they not been stocked with bulls...'

Eventually we found our way through the mass of fields, gates, rocks and bulls, and emerged once again onto stony, sandy 'piste' for the remainder of a 30km loop. And as the sun began to set on an amazing first day, a tough single-track rocky climb up to a quarry was the crowning glory of an arduous day spent on the trails. It was all downhill from here - literally - via smooth, black tarmac back into Mende and a quick dip in the hotel's relaxing indoor pool before a well-earned meal on the terrace again.

### Day Two

Day two for me - or as it will be known to punters - Day One - begins in typical fashion, a short ride up and outta' town on mainly traffic-free roads leads you onto some smooth/sandy/gravelly tracks to get warmed up and then... All hell breaks loose. A gnarly, rock-filled descent to a small stream crossing gets the blood pumping through your fingers, but it's nothing compared to the climb which is to come. Short, sharp and unbelievably awkward, thanks to rocks which fall badly for a bike's wheelbase and jut out in all the wrong places. These fellas kick you off-line and generally just make life a misery for you. Imagine the 'boulder-field' part of the course at the Tough One extreme enduro and you won't be too far from what this climb is like. Bloody awkward. All this within the first 20mins of setting off on a morning, it really is one of those rocky climbs that makes you question why you'd want to ride a trail bike in such obviously harsh terrain. And I bloody loved it!

The good old TE300 lapped it up too, though I did have to revert to first gear at times to pick my way over some of the more awkward boulders. Fortunately the Berg feels light, because it's all-too-easy to get knocked off line and find yourself propping up 115 kilos of machine with your leg. Here's where you want a bike that works with you to help you out. Something that doesn't stall, doesn't need many revs



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to get it moving and won't burn through your trousers if it falls on top of you. I'm sorry thumper riders, but here's where a two-stroke excels - in the rocks - especially where you have to reach your leg forwards, touching the expansion pipe, in order to position yourself for the next section of the hazard. Extreme riders already know this, which is why the 300 stroker is king of the extreme circuit too.

Frankly it's hard to believe that this is a trail at all - such is the difficulty in getting through it - but you can tell it is by the grooves worn into the rocks over the centuries, first of all by cart wheels and hooves and subsequently by bikes, bicycles, feet and yet more horses hooves. It's a great trail, made all the more special by the solid effort it requires to get up it. Once at the top however a series of easy, tracks awaits and there's nothing more onerous until you make the stop for coffee in a beautiful little village half an hour later. This will be a refuelling checkpoint, but for Chris and I - without the benefit of a support truck laden with jerrycans of fuel - it was nothing more than the chance to have a cola and some homemade biscuits from the nearby patisserie.

I mention fuel because it becomes crucial later in the day. Chris' 300 KTM was fitted with a long-range 13L fuel tank, but the Berg had the standard 11 litres - far more than most enduro bikes carry these days - and enough I hoped, to see me through the bulk of the day. I was nearly right!

Suitably refreshed and with caffeine and sugar coursing through our veins we set off for what must surely be the highlight of this trip. I have ridden in the Lozere region numerous times (not least having completed two Trefle Lozerien enduros a few years ago), but I never cease to be amazed by some of the scenery - which is truly unique. And now you can get a chance to sample it too. Because - like most of Chris' trips - this is not just scenery glimpsed from afar, but mega-scale, awe-inspiring scenery through which you can ride your trail bike. Let me take you there...

The track begins with a fabulous boulder climb. This time however it's different - more impressive and less energy sapping than the ones before it. The huge granite outcrops appear from nowhere and loom up on the horizon as you get closer to them. Mammalian in structure, they sit like pendulous breasts atop a soft belly of heathery ferns painted purple with scented flowers at this time of year. The track weaves between rocks, occasionally taking you up and over them where there is no alternative.

But the rocks are easy to ride. The granite itself is uniformly weathered, so it's not so much craggy, as smooth from a distance and grippy up close. Riding through the ferns is like walking on freshly-laid carpet - a smooth uxuriating pleasure after the bone-jarring shakes of the earlier rocky climbs. Up here at well over four thousand feet, the landscape is magical. The air is clear and crisp

and assaults your lungs with its freshness, the giant sky a deep azure blue that fills your goggles with incredible light, and way above you, huge birds hang lazily on the rising summer thermals. We had to stop to drink it all in. It was a wondrous moment: trail riding has taken me to some truly amazing places - and this must rank among my top five places anywhere in the world!

We stopped to take pictures, to reflect on the majesty of our surroundings and to simply gather our breath in anticipation of the rest of the ride. Having crested the highest point, the track then heads gracefully downhill on soft grass, before turning into the woods where soft sand gives way to hardpack and the gorgeous scent of real pine.

These woods are beautiful, strewn with dappled light the trail is easy to follow and fun to ride. Better still it goes on for the best part of 20km like that. We hopped, whipped and yumped over humps in the track, our brains still heady with the altitude and ferociously fresh air. But - as ever - there was a sting in the tail of this track. For as we descended the rocks appeared again, and this time awkwardly placed and tricky to ride - just like the climb which had begun our day, but this time leading downhill. Rocksteps falling three-feet at a time dissected the trail, giant boulders and awkwardly placed roots forced the bikes wheels where you didn't want them and meant that once again we were reduced to first gear as we picked our way down the track.

'Frankly it's hard to believe that this is a trail at all, such is the difficulty in getting along it...'

At the bottom we emerged blinking into streaming sunlight and found a beautiful little stream crossing to splash through to refresh ourselves from the sweat of the previous few minutes. Of course a descent like this meant that a climb surely couldn't be too far away. And sure enough another rocky-slab-laden climb led, first up, and then steeply down again to a village. As I pulled off the track and onto the road the Husaberg fluttered and died. It had been on reserve for most of the past hour. I opened up the tank cap and peered inside, it looked as parched as my throat. There was less than a cupful of fuel in the bottom and it was way below where the reserve tap drew its fuel. I tipped the bike on its side, swished it around and got enough to make a further ten metres before it died again. Up ahead of me -



A break from riding... French style!

maybe 80m away I could see a petrol station. Phew. Sadly it was all uphill to there!

#### Cheese and Whine

Exhausted, and panting heavily from my exertions and the 35-degree heat, I pushed the bike to the pumps and collapsed in a big heap. My body said it was lunchtime but my watch told another story: 4.45pm. We decided to stop for refreshments, so ordered up some ice-cold Cokes and a couple of black coffees. Thoughtfully this petrol station stocked a range of 'artisan' provender including delicious blue sheep's cheese made here in this very region which went wonderfully with a baguette I'd picked up earlier and stuffed in my rucksack. Chris took one look at all that healthy tucker and opted instead for a 'plastic' sandwich made in a factory, from processed bread and filled with an unidentifiable meat paste. Needless to say he didn't finish it. Large chocolate ice-creams rounded out our pit-stop and a quick fuel refill and we were away again.

The next part of the ride took us first up a steep rocky climb, before a left turn and a second less awkward climb and then on to the top of another 'moor'. This part was tricky to navigate as the heather was higher than when Chris first surveyed it. But after a few wrong turns we quickly established the correct route and set about enjoying ourselves. An old special test, this part of the route was heavily whooped out and it was great fun launching the 300s off the top of the whoops trying to clear as many as possible. In fact it was so much fun I barely had time to react when an old Husky came outta' the bushes haring

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There are some easy tracks too, where you can catch your breath...

towards me and flashed by in an instant as I whisked the Berg off to one side. It was a scary reminder that these trails are open to the public and subject to use at all times of day. So far on our ride we'd met barking dogs, kids on quads, tractors taking up the full width of the trail, cars, walkers, horse riders, cyclists, hunters, gatherers and now dirtbikes. If you can't see what's around the corner, then imagine a tractor with a couple of hay-forks sticking out and ride accordingly.

Four rocky descents followed, each one steeper and more challenging than the last - thanks to the overgrowth of summer vegetation. The final one was incredibly difficult as the whole trail was loose surface and off-camber, and zig-zagged its way down a steep hillside between narrow trees. At the bottom we crossed a piste-like track and then began what turned out to be the final climb of the day. I looked up and saw five or six giant rock slabs, slung at an angle across the track. Foot high rock steps linked them and here and there were tennis-ball-sized rocks, just waiting to get beneath a wheel and spin you off. I stuck the Berg in second and gunned it up the start of the climb. The tyre spun then gripped launching me forwards over the loose stuff at the bottom as the first of the steps hove into view. 'Leave the clutch alone' I thought to myself and simply tweaked the throttle - gently - then eased it off again. Up came the front and dropped onto the edge of the step, and a 'Braaaaap' of power was all I needed to get it up the step. Onto the next one and the same technique, but this time, more confidently and with my feet on the pegs. A giant root with a hole dugout just before it was dispatched in the same fashion and I finally reached the top with a resounding 'whoop.'

'Four rocky descents followed - each one steeper and more challenging than the last ...'

Chris was next up. Rev, spin stall. Rev, spin, clatter, swear. Rev, spin, clatter, stall, swear. Rev, spin, clatter, crash lots of swearing. Eventually however we were both up. Now all that remained between us and a late, late supper was one final descent.

Not just any old descent mind. Nope, this one was a special test from the WEC a couple of years back, and had to be ridden in reverse by the world championship boys. Wow! That's all I'm gonna say. Bloody wow! And respect to those guys. More than a kilometre in length it drops down slabs which are metres high at times. The descent is scary enough, clambering up them must be bloody hard work. I did suggest to Chris that we return the following morning and see if we could try and get up it, but the look on his face said it all... It's the crowning glory to the most amazing trail riding trip you could hope to take. A trip which will challenge all your perceptions of trail riding back home in the UK. With breathtaking scenery, hardcore climbs and descents, rivers to cross and incredible trails to conquer it'll tax all but the fittest of expert riders. But having completed it, you will really understand what enduro heaven is all about...

# Going the Distance



**T**his bike completely changed my perception about big stokers and how they can be best exploited to your advantage. Why? Because I spent two and a half days riding the bike off the pipe - in other words burbling along on a whiff of throttle. I don't mean at walking pace - frequently I was burbling along in sixth gear on the trail - but burbling is what this bike does best. Open the throttle (and powervalve) and you'll quickly find you've got a roaring tiger on your hands. But stick it in a tall gear, aim it at the horizon and roll on and off the gas, and pretty much nothing will stop the thing.

On the climbs it was incredible, pulling from the very bottom like a trials bike and refusing to stall in the same manner. Amazingly the torque at the very bottom end was less than I was expecting, so it rarely spun-up as you set off. And if you were forced to a halt on a technical climb, it made getting going again an absolute doddle. The midrange was where it did its hardest work pulling from a few thousand rpm to the point where it would take off like a lit firework. For most of the day's trails however, you can more or less stick the thing in third gear and leave the transmission alone if you want to. But as a measure of the engine's amazing flexibility, how's this for a trick? I tried setting off in top gear (sixth), and it will do it without any sort of complaint whatsoever. So after that I tried taking off in sixth, but this time uphill... and it will still do it! Incredible. That said I reckon it's slightly undergeared for most trail work. First was only used very occasionally, and I would have been happier to lose a couple of teeth off the rear sprocket to gain a bit more relaxed cruising on the road.

Of course with the addition of a sixth cog in the gearbox, this bike has been pitched squarely at the leisure end of the market rather than at out-and-out racers. But... good though that extra cog is, this is not a bike you'll want to ride for extended periods on the road. It hunts badly on a steady throttle, accelerating and decelerating again all of its own accord as the power-valve flutters, so that it's very difficult to be smooth on tarmac and keep a steady pace. It's all right when you're accelerating up to speed, or decelerating for a corner, but for steady cruising it's frankly just a real pain, and not as good as a thumper in this regard.

In every other respect however, it's way better than any thumper. It's lighter (and it feels it), it's much more responsive to input from the rider, and crucially it still feels light at the end of a tough day on the trail. The seat is comfortable, and in fact the entire riding position's superb. For years we've complained about large fuel tanks hogging

the space where you want your knees (and b@lls) to go, but on the Husaberg there's no such problem. The 11L tank segues seamlessly into a cockpit which is brilliantly designed and executed. The seat height is about right for the average-height rider, and the riding position lets you move around the bike without thinking about it. And although we did eventually run out of fuel, you can reckon on getting a good 80-odd miles out of that decent-sized tank on mixed riding - much more if the going is flat and easy.

Husaberg have fitted their 2011 bikes with the cartridge fork from

their cross-country model, and while I admit it did seem reasonably stiff at first, the forks soon bedded in and a session with the clickers gave me a front-end which provided plenty of grip on the rocks, yet enough feedback on the faster sections to allow me to enjoy my riding. I backed off the compression 20 stops on the forks (from stock) to soften them off, but otherwise left well alone. The rear shock was backed off six clickers on low-speed compression and felt perfect to me for the entire trip. And al-

'A session with the clickers gave me a front-end with plenty of feel on the rocks...'

Going the  
Distance

though Chris rode the bike for a further three days and didn't like the suspension - claiming it was still way too firm compared with what he's used to - I thought it was just perfect. His bike is set-up very soft to cope with the type of riding he does all the time, whereas I found the Husaberg's slightly firmer springing and damping rates better suited my riding style and allowed you to hit bumps harder and faster, and jump off the whoopy ones without bottoming.

In terms of build quality this bike is everything you expect of a Berg - nothing whatsoever broke or fell off during the six days of punishment it received. It got filled with water and carried on running. It took a small dent to the exhaust, and that was about it. We added handguards (which should be standard fare in our opinion) and fitted mouses as added protection against punctures, but other than that, the bike is strong enough to handle pretty much anything you throw at it.

So how come it has changed the way I view 300s? Well, with the changes parent-company KTM have wrought from the bike that spawned it (the 300EXC), they've made the TE300 far less about raw power, and far more usable at the same time. Don't get me wrong, at times the power can be a little overwhelming, but this bike is not hard to ride - even for a novice. Yes there's a searing top-end, but there's also a sweet-spot far larger than that

offered by most other machinery. Here's where the bike pulls, but doesn't pull hard. In other words it's got torque but not an overwhelming amount. The motor appears to have a virtually flat torque curve that can be exploited brilliantly on difficult climbs. And when you don't have to worry about balancing throttle and clutch, wheelspin against grip, or worry about stalling the engine, then you

Super-slippery stream crossing



can be far more delicate with the throttle. And that in turn lets you feel for grip and exploit what you have to best effect. At times the TE feels like a big ol' trials bike, all soft and plush and brilliant at searching out grip. Chris' old 300EXC by contrast was ballsier at the bottom-end and that made it slightly harder to control in the rock climbs in my opinion.

So now you can have a fast bike, which can be a pussycat at times, has the suspension to match, the very latest machinery, an awesome cockpit, the tank range of the best trailies around, a sixth gear for cruising, and to top it off, it's blue not orange... What's *not* to like?

**Watch out for more off-road tours in the mag soon...**

#### Sporting Times

Chris Evans' new Sport Adventure tour of the Lozere is open to competent riders who are able to look after themselves and are confident about taking on new challenges. It's not a competition and it's certainly not a race. It's a chance to sample some world-famous enduro terrain in a pleasant and enjoyable manner, but be aware that days are long and the challenges tricky at times. Riders use their own bikes and are responsible for looking after their own machinery. Help is on hand at regular checkpoints with fuel, tools and occasionally some mechanical assistance. But essentially you need to be capable of riding sensibly, riding within your abilities and looking after your machinery on the trail.

Chris has known the guys from the local moto club for 11 years and has been running tours in the region for the past seven seasons. As he says, they are proud people with a lot of respect for nature and the land they live in, and they expect others to respect it too. What most of you won't know is how much Chris puts back

into the sport. For each rider that joins him on a tour of the Lozere, he pays a sub to the local moto club to keep the sport alive, and to keep their tracks open. And it's not just a few quid either, it adds up to a few thousand euros a year! Many of the tracks Chris rides are on private land, and though the farmers allow the moto club to use them, they are closed to others, so this really is a chance to ride terrain like no other. Chris' other Lozere tour is already well regarded by punters wishing to dip their toes into this awesome region of France, but if you fancy notching it up a couple of points, then call him on 00 33 662 487 190, email him on [chris.evans@sport-adventure.com](mailto:chris.evans@sport-adventure.com) or better still come and talk to him on the TBM stand at this Year's Dirt Bike Show, where he'll no doubt be happy to answer all your questions, calm your fears, and empty your wallet...