

## Denia, Spain 21/04-28/04 by Rodney Perry

### Day 1 - First Afternoon

I arrived in Spain fairly nervous, not knowing what to expect or the other people on the trip. Having been a member less than a month and having only ever tackled the less than mighty Surrey Downs, there were a lot of unknowns. But the nerves were misplaced as everyone was extremely welcoming and I immediately started to feel like part of the group. The first port of call on arrival was the bike build followed by a trip down to Café Ciclista. A brief stop and introduction to the starting point of all group rides was followed by a leg-loosener and bike check ride along the coastal road heading north. After a steady 30km ride most of us headed back with a few deciding on a short excursion up the Montgo.

In the evening before dinner we received our first briefing of the trip and met the Maison du Velo crew from Reigate they would be joining us for the first-half of the week. John of Café Ciclista described the following day's route and explained that there would be three groups: fast, faster and fastest. Groups 1 and 2 would follow the same route and group 3 would take a slightly shorter loop but the main climbs would be the same.

### Day 2 – First Café Ciclista ride up Vall de Gallinera

With the pre-ride photo taken of everyone looking fresh in their 700 gear and Nick sporting his Café Ciclista guide kit, we headed down to the café to join the other 20+ cyclists.



Picking the medium group, we left after the steady group whom we'd encounter cheering us on from a café halfway up the Gallinera which I'll remember purely for the thoughts of "this is tough" and "those numbers can't be right". The Vall de Gallinera is a steady 25km climb from Pego at 2.3% and after the first 5km I was in uncharted territory. The pace at the front was strong and I was quickly doing my best yo-yo Froome impression, dropping off the back on the rises and getting back on when it flattened. However, that could only go on for so-long and I saw the road pitch-up around a hairpin and I knew my fate. I was dropped for good but at least I had company in a couple of Maison du Velo riders. At the top I made the decision that a 135km ride at the start of the trip was a little tough and slipped back into the steady group for the remainder of the day. It was a wise choice to take it easier on the windy plateau towards lunch. Lunch was a learning experience - cafés in villages do not have menus, you just need to know enough Spanish and guess what they have. Learning some Spanish will definitely be helpful for next time, "tostada queso y jamon" or "tostada atun y queso" becomes a little repetitive after a while.

We headed down the Vall d'Ebo where I finally got to experience a true mountain descent; there was definitely room for improvement. We arrived back at the café after a nice 100km introduction to Denia's mountains that wasn't too tough.

### Day 3 – Coll de Rates & Collao

The second Café Ciclista ride was a shorter but equally tough ride in the sunshine, heading up the much talked about Coll de Rates with the option of adding the less-travelled Collao Lugar after.



We set off from the café in the direction of Parcent via the Llosa de Camancho with 5km at 4%. The pace was quick but steady all the way to Parcent where we stopped by a ticket machine. It's not for parking but for times up the Coll de Rates. Get your time-stamped ticket at the bottom and then get your finishing time at the top – I presume this is how cyclists lived before Strava.

The climb itself is fantastic, a nice steady ride with great views as you get higher and higher, the group split up on the climb with the guys going for efforts flying off the front and the stragglers like myself just pacing ourselves up at the back.

After regrouping at the top we headed for lunch on undulating roads that included some very steep pitches of 15% and then a long descent to

Castell de Castells. Another “tostada queso y jamon” later and I made the decision to take on the Collao. We’d been informed apart from the first 200m the road had been resurfaced making for a quiet, narrow 5km climb at 8% with sections at 15%. I definitely wished I had an 11-32T cassette on the back as I wrestled the bike up the hill looking on enviously as Alan rode past spinning his easier gear.

The view from the top was worth the pain of getting there. The descent was equally narrow and challenging until we reached the main roads to continue the quick pace back into Denia to complete another 100km ride.



#### Day 4 – Fageca & Planes



Our final day with Maison du Velo riders was a long one, a 135km ride that contained more drags than clear-cut climbs. After the first 10km the road started to rise until we reached Fageca 40km later. This was manageable due to a drinks stop in Castell de Castells. Lunch was taken in the small village of Balones with amazing views overlooking the valley.

After lunch we just had to negotiate a 5km climb at 3% from Planes up to the top of the Vall de Gallinera. After suffering up the Gallinera for an hour earlier in the week it was great to head down the quick, windy descent stopping briefly in the village of Patro to fill up water bottles from the water fountains.

## Day 5 – Rest Day

Some people decided to go up over the Montgo and down into Xabia in search of the Austrian Bakery which was well worth it, before chilling out in the old part of Denia for the afternoon.



## Day 6 – Val d'Ebo, Muro De Tollos and the Rates Descent

The first ride without the Maison du Velo riders changed the structure of the group rides, instead of a fast and medium group; we clubbed together and set off together.



The first climb was the challenging Val d'Ebo which will be remembered by me for a great sustained effort and Steve for a bee sting. The weather had come in a little after some rest day rain, making for a chilling and misty final kilometre and an even colder descent.

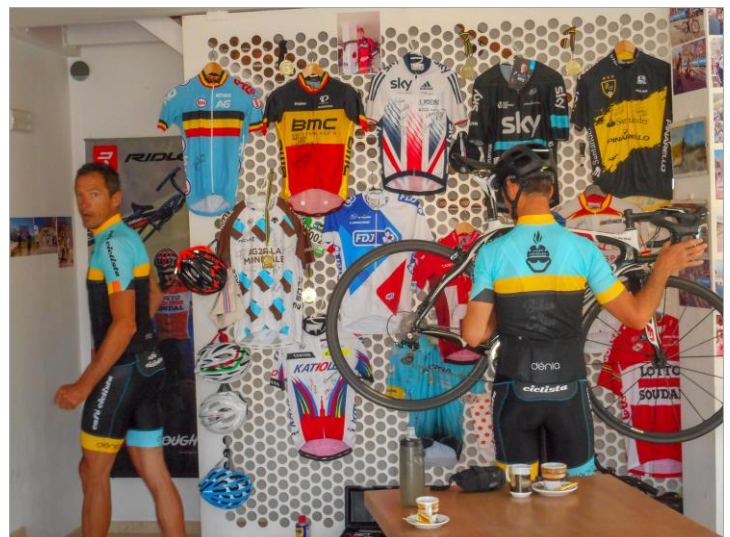
There wasn't much time to recover on the descent before hitting the undulating roads towards lunch, stopping in the village of Alcala de La Jovada, which surprisingly had a municipal swimming pool.

The climb after lunch required plenty of mental fortitude. The short, steep and entirely unexpected Muro De Tollos with its final ramp of 18% saw my cadence drop to 34 and legs scream in agony. The descent to Castell de Castells was much welcomed and

the breather before the next climb was needed.

We had descended the climb previously when we had ridden the Coll de Rates and I knew there were a few very steep hairpins in the middle. I took this opportunity to cut my break short and head off up the climb before everyone else. It was nice to the relative strengths of everyone going uphill as they came past me, something I hadn't seen until now because I was always the first one off the back. I can now aspire to be as strong as Neil, our 68 year-old guide. We finally reached the top of the Coll de Rates and I'm sure some speed records were broken on the way down but not by me. I enjoyed the view and took it well within myself, even though my descending improved throughout the week, there is still work to be done.

At the bottom we regrouped and headed back to Café Ciclista for a well-earned Radler.



### Day 7 – Bernia, Cumbre del Sol and the end of the line.

We left Café Ciclista with a couple of Dutchmen swelling the ranks for the Bernia, an 11km climb at 4% and within minutes of starting it I knew I was in trouble. I'd been giving it my all to hang on all week and I had nothing left in reserve. I struggled up the climb with cramp in hands and feet, but knowing I had the safety net of Nick bringing up the rear and the van if things got too much.



A long time later I reached the top and the group was split in two, a faster group and a slower group before heading towards Benissa for lunch. This was the most interesting lunch stop of the trip, with the town ready for the bull-run. Massive barriers were ready to block all the side-streets and there were cages in the central square for people to shelter in. It made negotiating the town more difficult but provided a unique cultural experience. There was one nervous moment when hundreds of kids came charging down the street past all our bikes being chased by men pushing fake bulls' heads on wheels.

After that eye-opener we headed towards the final major challenge of the week, the brutal 4km climb used in the Vuelta called Cumbre del Sol. I came around the corner after the first ramp and saw what can only be described as a wall in the distance. Sometimes not knowing the gradient is a good thing, had I known there was a short section at 35% I'm not sure I would have attempted it.

At the top we got the obvious photo opportunity with the Vuelta finish line markings on the ground and I thought that was it. One terrifyingly steep descent later and I was home and dry but we still had the Montgo to negotiate. It was here



that the group split in two, those heading back the normal and those of us not thinking about the well-being of our legs heading up through the houses on a shorter but considerably steeper path. During the all too brief easier stretches it was possible to look out across the harbour and take in the clear blue sky and sea, I remain amazed by how quickly we can gain altitude cycling and get so many phenomenal views.

The descent of the Montgo took us back to Café Ciclista for the final time of a phenomenal but knacker trip.

### Final Thoughts

I'd just like to thank everyone from 700 for a truly great experience, the Maison du Velo cyclists, John from Café Ciclista and all the guides. I've definitely caught the bug and will be back for more!