



2 CONTINENTS: 1 DAY

Two peaks — one in Europe, the other in Africa. Can both be conquered on two wheels in the space of a single day? Read on to find out...

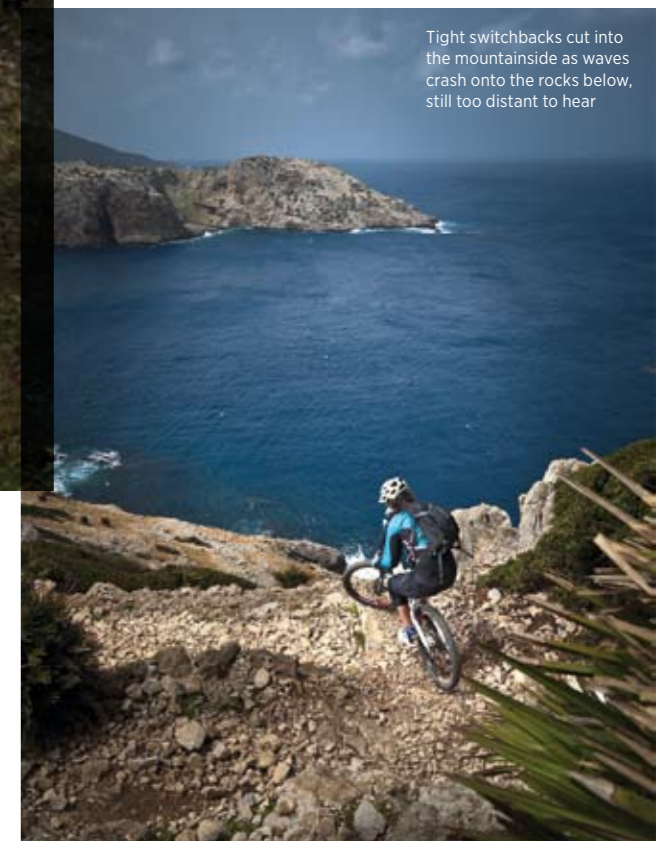
Words & photos: Jim Varney

Migrating storks soar high on thermals, abandoning Europe for the warmer climes of Africa. Since time began, humans have followed their example, travelling thousands of miles in search of trade or a new life. On this occasion, they're inspired by a challenge: to ride in two continents in a single day.

It sounds a Herculean feat: a ride where the Atlantic meets the Mediterranean, Europe meets Africa and Christianity meets Islam. Sierra de la Luna in Spain and Jebel Musa in Morocco — 17km apart but separated by the Straits of Gibraltar — could we climb and descend each in 24 hours? On the European side, Sierra de la Luna is 837 metres high, with cork oaks and energy-producing windmills sprouting from its slopes. Its moss-covered forest floor and fern-lined micro track stand in stark contrast to the African side, where Jebel Musa, exposed and dramatic, rises directly from the sea to its jagged peak via a path of scorched earth and rock.

Full of undiscovered singletrack, this would be a race against time, travel logistics and bureaucracy — not to mention the limits of our technical ability and physical condition.

Shaun Allan, for one, is convinced it's possible. He runs Ride Sierra Nevada, a guiding outfit near Granada in Spain, and hosts mountain biking holidays in the Sierra Nevada mountains. Together with fixer Csilla De Bagota, master of archeology, sometime anthropologist and organisational genius holding all the ferry tickets, our quest for unriden terrain began on Shaun's local turf, before crossing the Straits beneath the flocks of migrating birds.



Tight switchbacks cut into the mountainside as waves crash onto the rocks below, still too distant to hear



Above: Tarifa is home to a wild bunch of windswept folk. Ralf, originally from Slovakia, rides through town with us as far as the square, while Toby, his dog, tries to bite my fingers off.

Right: We set off from Tarifa at dawn. The southernmost point of Europe, Tarifa is only 14km from the coast of Morocco. It's a beautiful and ancient town inhabited by tuna fishermen and windsurfers. Winding through the small cobbled streets of the old town, we begin our journey to Sierra de la Luna.

Far right: Ducking in and out of the forest canopy, we traverse rock gardens, fern-rimmed switchbacks and dense, mossy gullies. This is woodland singletrack at its best. Each corner brings a new challenge, and it takes huge concentration to keep up the pace as we navigate our descent.

Below: Emerging from the forest cover on the ridge of Sierra de la Luna, we're buffeted by strong winds. There are two kinds here: El Levante and El Poniente. We're struggling with El Levante from the east, a wind of such relentless ferocity that a wandering shepherd says it can drive the sheep mad.





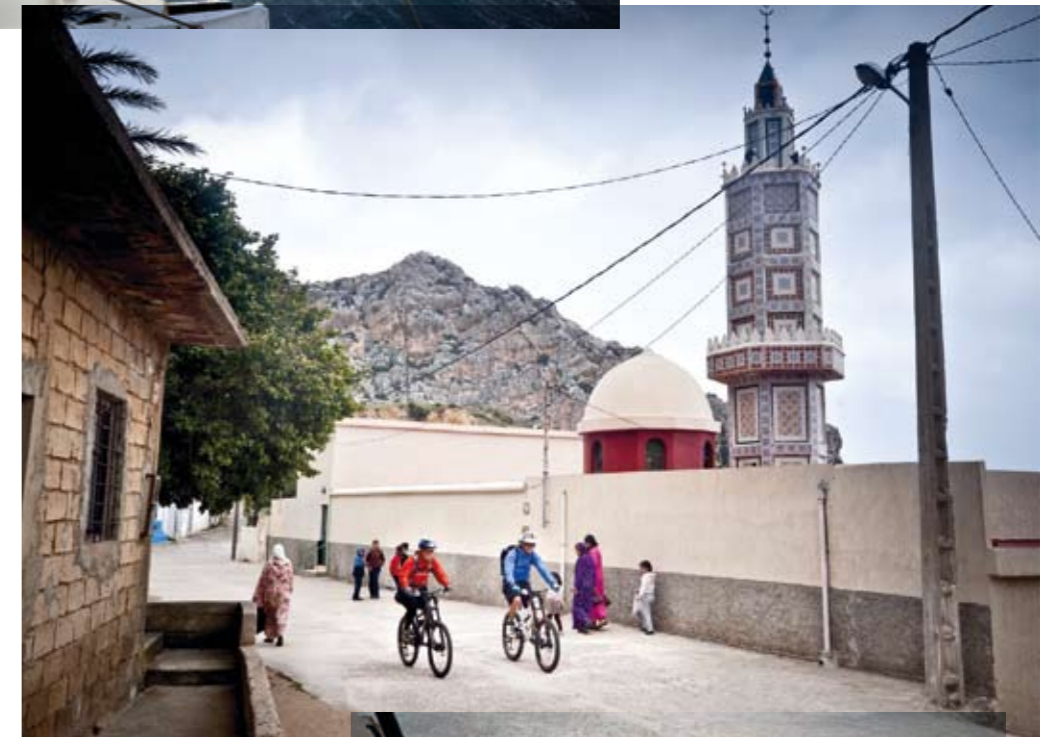
Above: As we near the summit the cloud comes down, and at times visibility drops to nothing much. We're lucky to be on fireroad through the worst of the cloud, and make good progress in spite of this unexpected challenge.

Right: Circling a small waterfall, the trail becomes a steep staircase for a section, and I'm grateful for the Bionicon's variable geometry. We've got a ferry to catch and there's no time for hanging around — we follow the stream for a while, then veer off on a different trail to skirt the mountainside and down to Algeciras.

Top right: As the wind whips the sea into a frenzy, the African coast gradually appears and we get our first glimpse of the next challenge. Jebel Musa (Mount Moses) looms into view, a blanket of cloud obscuring its rocky peak.

Middle right: We ride through Beliunechas the muezzin announces the call to prayer, and the small town comes to life as people gather at the mosque.

Bottom right: We scramble the last few metres to the pass on Jebel Musa as the trail turns into a hard climb. Luckily the cloud appears to be lifting, and we convince each other the wind is dropping too. I'm beginning to understand how it could send sheep crazy, and I'm happy when we drop down from the col and find shelter under the ridge.



Right: Climbing from the village of Beliuech on old cart track, the coast below drops into the mist. Just a few kilometres in the distance is the enclave of Ceuta — a tiny dot of African mainland which has been Spanish territory since 1668.

Below: Downhill at last — our descent is mostly a cliff-top traverse of the northern slopes of Jebel Musa. This looks like purpose-made singletrack, but is actually a regular commuter run for local villagers who walk into the Beliuech to work or trade loads of cactus, fish and firewood. In contrast with the solitude of the Sierra de la Luna, we frequently meet people along the way, all eager to talk at length in a blend of French and Arabic which only Csilla is able to understand.





Above and right: Between a rock and a hard place: the trail threads its way along the coast. The riding is fast and flowing and the views are spectacular. On a clear day you'd see the Spanish mainland from this point, but today there's only sea and sky.

Bottom: Challenge complete and life's a beach. Fishing boats line the shore at Beliunech and we're able to take a break at last. There's a bar here, and we sit and sip mint tea in the dying light while we wait for our taxi to the ferry port of Tanger Med. On the drive back we're stopped at a police roadblock and our documents examined. The officer is incredulous that we arrived just a few hours ago to ride up Jebel Musa then leave. We show him our bikes and he waves us on our way, not quite believing our story. Why would anyone come here for that? I'm too tired to think of a coherent reply.



FACTFILE

Getting there

Ryanair, EasyJet, Jet2, Monarch, Bmibaby and British Airways fly into Malaga from all over the UK. Or use Gibraltar — there are fewer flights but it's nearer to Tarifa, so transfer times are shorter. EasyJet fly from Liverpool and Gatwick; Monarch from Luton and Manchester. Book ahead, take your bike and you could find return flights from around £100-£150. Or rent a bike in Spain and fly for around £50 less.

Tarifa is around two hours' drive from Malaga, one hour from Gibraltar. In Tarifa we stayed at a beautiful house in the old city, with rooms from £30 a night. See www.casalunatarifa.com.

Can I ride it?

Stamina and fitness are requisites. Be prepared for a very long day, much of it out of the saddle and all of it pushing to the max. Take two days and you can ride more trail and soak up the scenery and culture. There are technical sections — red and black route riders would enjoy this most, and experience riding natural trails would help. Harder sections can get a bit hike-a-bike.

What to take

A versatile 120-160mm full-sus bike would be the best tool for the job. Knee pads are a good idea. Bike shops in Tarifa and Algeciras can re-supply the basics, but always carry a spare mech hanger, tubes and trail tools specific to your bike. A wind stopper or light waterproof jacket is essential.

Temperatures rarely drop below 10°C in winter and rise to around 30°C in summer. This route can be done over a weekend at any time of year and in 24 hours in spring and summer, but the winds can be unpredictable, the weather being part of the challenge.

Other rides near by

Andalucia is an mtb paradise: highlights include Sierra De las Alcornocales in Cadiz, Sierra de las Nieves in Malaga, Sierra Nevada in Granada and Cabo de Gata in Almeria. On the Moroccan side, the Rif Mountains around Chefchaouen and Azrou's Middle Atlas offer fantastic virgin singletrack.

Thanks to

Shaun and Csilla from Ride Sierra Nevada; Lisa and Tony for great hospitality in Tarifa, and Fouad and Mustafa for our Moroccan logistics. Ride Sierra Nevada offers a long-weekend Two Continents package with airport transfers, three nights' accommodation (two Spain, one Morocco), breakfast, trail food, return ferry and a guide from €420 per person (£370), based on a group of four. They also have Bionicon Edison2 full-sus bikes to rent. See www.ridesierranevada.com, or call Shaun on (+34)660 884 073