



Sun, sea & singletrack

Cyprus basks in Middle Eastern sun for most of the year. **Ian Warby** escaped the gloom of a British autumn to explore its mountain bike trails

Tyres kicked up summer-dry dust under a summer-blue sky. Mountain biking in autumn or spring usually means mud. But like the Canary Islands, Cyprus is warm and dry for most of the year. At 10am in October, the temperature had already climbed to 30 degrees.

The 20-mile view, flowing descent and lung-busting technical climb could have been any Sunday morning ride at a UK trail centre. Here, though, we were in shorts and short sleeves – and we wouldn't be going home via the jet-wash.

Cyprus sits in the eastern Mediterranean just south of Turkey. It's home to popular tourist resorts like Agia Napa but also mountains that rise to 2,000 metres, including a Mount Olympus (no, not that one). There's great potential for mountain biking here, although the lack of maps with the detail we're used to from Ordnance Survey means that a guide is all but essential if you want to ride the best trails.

Ours was Thomas Wegmüller, a Swiss ex-road pro who runs

bikeCyprus from the Atlantica Oasis Hotel in Limassol where we were based. The flight here had taken about four hours – less than the time it would take to drive from London to the Scottish Borders. Road and mountain bikes were available to hire.

INTO THE HILLS

It took only a short spin along Limassol's seafront cycle lane to escape the hotels and souvenir shops and get into the rolling hills that shadow the coast.

Soon we left tarmac behind and joined a dirt track. Following Thomas's directions we (journalist Luke Weber and I) began to descend. A super-steep descent to our right looked to good to miss, so we diverted down that. The pay-back was a longer climb to make the hilltop, where lunar-like white rock lay under bright sunshine.

We hooked up with Thomas in the next village for a quick drink before heading back to Limassol on fast dirt tracks. The terrain was rolling, with plenty of flat-out, loose, dusty,

drifty corners to keep us happy.

That first day's rolling trails were just a taster of Cyprus's singletrack. Cyprus has proper mountains too – the Troodos Mountains – with four ski lifts to cater for winter sports. There's no lift-assisted access for mountain bikers just yet, but I don't think it will be long before the lifts are opened up to bikers when there's no snow.

"We were in shorts and short-sleeves in the October heat – and we wouldn't be going home via the jet-wash"

At just over 2,000 metres, the views from the top of the Troodos were incredible as we kitted up. Being so high, the temperature had dropped but it was still a mild 18 degrees.

We set off down a hidden singletrack trail, which picked its way along the contours of the mountainside. Big, technical rocky outcrops helped to keep us focused.

It was mountain biking heaven – some of the best singletrack I have ever ridden.

After just over an hour of this we were back where we started. Our lunch rendezvous point was a few hundred metres below us still. Steep tarmac switchbacks lead down to more dirt trails. Fast and open was the order of the day as we continued on our descent, rapidly losing our elevation.

We stopped mid-way to take in the view out across Cyprus, and of an impressive waterfall nearby. Then we continued down on more fast dirt roads. It wasn't quite on a par with the morning's singletrack, but what the trails lacked in technical sections they more than made up for with speed.

MOUNTAINS TO THE SEA

Lunch was expansive. With stomachs full, Luke and I headed on out for the afternoon. We climbed up into the mountains again, where we found more stunning forest track climbs and even more great singletrack. Stopping here and there for photographs, we eventually freewheeled down to our hotel for the night.

We were guests at the Forest Park Hotel, high in the mountains, with great views down to the coast. The Troodos Mountains might not be up there with Whistler and the Alps on your list of top five must-visits, but if the riding I experienced is anything to go by, the developing mountain bike scene in Cyprus isn't going to stay a secret for long.

A storm the night before had cleared the air and the warm sunshine had already dried the roads. The trails were drying fast too. The Mountains to the Sea is the route that an annual mountain bike challenge takes. I envisaged an all-out downhill from our mountain top start to the ocean's edge. Thomas was quick to point out that there was a fair bit of climbing to do en route too.

Rolling out of the hotel and down through the mountain village we made our way on singletrack through a lush green ravine, a contrast to the first day's dry and dusty trails. At the end of the ravine we climbed alongside a rocky gorge to a mountain-top village perched on top of the cliffs.

Nearing the next village, the dirt trails made way for some heavy-duty steps. There were more

than I could count, and the Trek's suspension was working hard for a few hundred metres or more. We continued to lose height fast, via flowing singletrack and forest tracks. We freewheeled through one sleepy village after another until we hit our first climb.

SNAKY SINGLETRACK

Pedalling slowly, we arrived in a village that wasn't so much sleepy as frozen in time. The streets were narrow. A house we were allowed to walk around was more like a museum; it had been in the same family for generations.

Here we caught up with the road group to compare notes before heading out of the village. A dog followed us for a while, still eager after five kilometres. We finally persuaded him to turn back.

Another quick blast downhill and there was still no sign of the sea. One more climb and we could see it sparkling in the distance. Open dirt tracks wound down to meet it. 'This is snake alley!' shouted Thomas. Knowing that Luke is afraid of snakes, I reminded him all the way down, watching with interest as he planned every step and looked behind every rock.

Aside from a one small dead snake on the trail we didn't see any others. The only thing that threatened was a thunderstorm, but though it chased us down to the coast it didn't break. We dipped our toes in the sea before catching a bus back to the hotel.



(Above) A dry climate means some dusty, lunar landscapes (Below) Cypriot villages are timeless



FACT FILE: CYPRUS

WHEN TO GO: Summer is very hot and dry, while winter is mild and sometimes wet. April/May and September/October are best for mountain biking.

GETTING THERE: Flights to Larnaca or Paphos (from BA, Cyprus Airways or other carriers) take about 4 hours and cost around £200-250 return.

LANGUAGES: Greek and Turkish. English is widely spoken.

CURRENCY: Euro, as of January 2008.

TIME DIFFERENCE: Cyprus is 2 hours ahead.

ACCOMMODATION: Tourism is big in Cyprus, so there's accommodation to suit all budgets, from five-star hotels to sleepy villages.

MORE INFORMATION: www.visitcyprus.com (Cyprus Tourist Organisation); www.cyprusairways.com (Cyprus Airways); <http://www.atlanticahotels.com/article.php?id=185> (Atlantica Oasis); www.forestparkhotel.com.cy (Forest Park Hotel); www.bikecyprus.com (bikeCyprus)