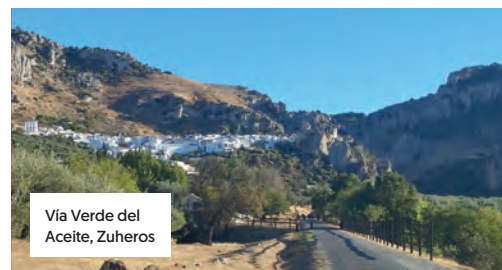




Church of St John the Theologian, Kaneo, North Macedonia



Via Verde del Aceite, Zuheros

Spain

Glorious greenways

David Mytton discovered a different side to the mountainous Iberian country

IF YOU'VE BEEN to Spain, you'll know it's mountainous. Even on a city break in Barcelona or a costa beach holiday, the peaks are visible inland. Hills can be great when you're cycling, especially downhill, but I'd say a change is as good as a rest.

Vías verdes ('greenways') enable you to escape hills and traffic. There are almost 3,000km of them around Spain. They're on former railway lines but, unlike Sustrans routes here, they don't seem to be linked into a network. Some are only a couple of kilometres long but I spent more than a day following one.

I'd climbed for a few days from Almería, then had a further climb and a search around the city of Jaén to find the start. I was then rewarded with two days of peaceful cycling. Named the Vía Verde del Aceite, then the Vía Verde de la Subbética for the last few kilometres, it goes for an impressive 128km from Jaén to Puente Genil.

The name roughly translates as 'the oil line'. It's less industrial than this implies, as much of its cargo was olive oil en route to the port of Málaga. There are more embankments than cuttings and so there are many good views, often over hillsides of olive shrubs. The railway line was built in the 1880s. As well as new bridges across busy roads there are several original viaducts and old stations; the one at Doña Mencía offered cycle hire.

My hotel turned out to be only a couple of minutes from the line, but you pass close to several towns with places to stay and without too many other visitors. After Puente Genil I was back in traffic and hills, and I reached Algeciras a few days later. The vía verde was one of the highlights of the tour. These routes are well worth exploring. www.viasverdes.com/en/.

The Balkans

An Aegean-to-Adriatic C2C

Last September **Stephen Psallidas** cycled from Thessaloniki in Greece to Dubrovnik in Croatia

My solo tour took 18 days, 13 of them riding. It was a wonderful trip, including coastal cities, pretty farmland, remote mountain passes, spectacular valleys, jagged fjords and medieval mosques and monasteries.

It encompassed a huge variety of cultures, histories and languages. I travelled from ancient monuments and resolutely anarchist backstreets in Thessaloniki to an up-and-coming North Macedonia; from crumbling Communist-era statues and factories in Albania to Kosovo's melting-pot of East and West; from Montenegro's tiny Alpine-style villages and glitzy coastal resorts to the stone towns of Kotor and Dubrovnik.

The multiple languages and four different alphabets used increased the challenge. Few people spoke English outside of the tourist towns. My basic Russian helped... plus sign language when needed!

I travelled light, with just a single pannier. I was grateful of this when sweating over some of the highest passes, which were not far off 2,000m, and when I once inadvertently ended up riding for hours on steep, forested dirt tracks on my 28mm touring tyres.

The people I met were all kind and generous. An Albanian mountain guesthouse owner invited me to eat with

his family. A friendly restaurant owner gave me a discount after I spoke to him in broken Serbian about Newcastle United. And a farm-stay owner offered me home-distilled raki moonshine for my birthday.

I bumped into some interesting fellow travellers, ranging from a bedraggled and lost Israeli hiker to a lovely American nutritionist. I met a handful of cycle tourists, including a couple who'd towed their young kids from Holland. Unlike me, all were heading south towards the sun. Having said that, the weather was mostly good, and although chilly in the mountains (snowing over one pass!), it was warm on the coast. I got a decent cycling tan.

When, finally, after 1,150km of riding and over 16,000m of climbing, I rolled across the medieval bridge of Dubrovnik at the end of my own C2C, I was a tired but happy man.

www.tinyurl.com/balkanride-part1
www.tinyurl.com/balkanride-part2



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