

The scent of wild flowers accompanied us as we descended into low woodland and to our boutique hotel in a dry, dusty village, where the charming owner cooked especially for us.

ACROSS THE HIGH PLATEAU

We stayed with the River Ebro the next day, as it ran through a deep gorge with spectacular rock formations. There was more climbing, and a headwind made our going hard. All around were fields of yellow-leaved, dying sunflower plants, ready to give seed, and in the distance their colour was everywhere. In this big landscape the agriculture was of a type and on a scale I had never seen before.

We spent a night in the beautiful cathedral city of Burgos, riding out of it on another via verde, this time with a less forgiving surface. We opted to switch to a main road but had it almost to ourselves – the very few vehicles that there were gave us a good margin of safety as they overtook us. Even the tarmac was beautiful, with its honey-coloured aggregate. All around the big landscape was painted in ochres and greens. There was colour wherever we looked.

Gradually we approached a huge escarpment. At its highest point, around two dozen vultures were circling on air currents. We kept stopping just to admire it all. But rain caught us. It fell heavily for what were, fortunately, two of our shorter days.

With the wet weather behind us, the sunflowers were now joined by purple heather and low, pale trees, which together with the red earth created a heady cocktail of colour. We began to see vines laden with grapes, looking nothing like the twisted black dead versions we see during our winter visits. But we picked up the unmistakable smell of pigs, too. They were hidden from the sun in long, ventilated barns. There were so many of them that now I could see why the Spanish seem to eat so much pork.

MEDITERRANEAN WARMTH

When we rolled into Teruel, a place we know well and which we have often used as an overnight stop when driving down in winter, it was a pleasure to see it busy with people on a warm, sunny day. We chatted to a Spanish cyclist there, the only other cycle tourist we saw throughout the whole trip.



Maxine and Paul on their Hase Pino Steps tandem, passing the El Torico fountain in Teruel

We were coming to the end of our tour, but our penultimate day was remarkable in many ways. The temperature climbed from around 9°C to 30°C as we descended more than 1,000m down a series of steep hairpins between the bases of an extensive wind farm, the power of which we could almost feel.

We stopped in Valencia city for lunch, and found it at a locals' café serving the Spanish customary 'menu del dia', an €11 bargain (three courses, wine and coffee) that we seek out whenever we can. Then we carried on down the coast. With full stomachs and with a following wind to add to our downhill advantage, we covered more than 100 miles without flattening even one battery.

On our last day we cycled on roads we knew, picking our way along flat, coastal lanes to a triumphant finish on the shady main street at Dénia. The ride had been a joy from start to finish. I hadn't wanted it to end.

Six days later we flew back to the UK, leaving our tandem in Spain, ready for our next winter visit. Now I can't help looking forward to our next tour. Maybe we'll ride the route in reverse! ●



Sailing to Spain

We used the Plymouth-to-Santander overnight ferry at a cost of £494 for a full flexible fare (fixed fares are cheaper) with a two-berth cabin. There were plenty of other cyclists on solo bikes. There is no difference in price for a tandem but it is necessary to tell them in advance. Availability of bike carriage and price varies with the season. Routes also vary, from Portsmouth or Plymouth to Bilbao or Santander. Some routes involve two nights on board. There are also cheaper and more expensive cabin/ accommodation options. brittany-ferries.co.uk