

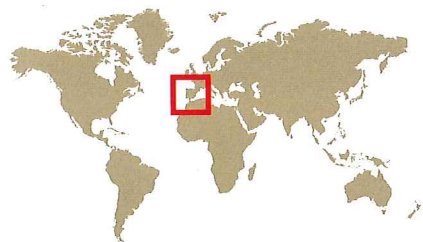
FROM THE ROAD

Letters, tips, photos & exploits from you, our endlessly adventurous readers

■ Your Story

Small wheels, big hills

Our latest online Readers' Writing Competition was all about bikes: in his winning entry, **Rob Howe** discovers the Camino de Santiago isn't known for its flat bits



Ah, you'll be alright, they said. The Pyrenees are behind you, they said. It's all flat from Pamplona to León, they said. It'd be really cool to do it on a folding bike, they said.

A few weeks before, I'd joined a group on a day-ride out of Madrid. One of the guys was using a folding bike – but tricked out like a proper tourer. It had pannier racks, numerous water-bottle cages and even an internal hub generator that could power a GPS unit, MP3 player, whatever.

I had something of an epiphany. Firstly, I thought it was über-cool; and secondly, given the prohibition on carrying rigid-frame bikes on intercity trains in Spain, I thought of the portability and fun I could have on a folder! Simply fold it up and take a train away for the weekend – two panniers full of tents and olé!

So, I scoured the Spanish second-hand sites and found, by coincidence, a folding bike that was designed with touring in mind. Rugged, it had relatively big 20-inch wheels, 24 gears and all the requisite ironwork. It was like a folding Land Rover.

I had already walked the first few stages of the Camino de Santiago in February, from France to Pamplona, and I thought the next few stages would be better seen from the saddle. Fortunately, I had a long weekend coming up at work, so I booked my place on an early train one Saturday morning in June.

Even upon arrival at roam, it was hot. Pamplona was already climbing up through the 20s. I bought about five litres of water, lathered myself in factor 50, and hit the road. I wanted to be at my

first night's stop before mid-afternoon, when Spain gets really hot.



The heat was soon forgotten as I rode downhill out of Pamplona, which sits on a *meseta* (plateau) at an altitude of about 450m. Thereafter, I hoped it would flatten out. But, after a few kilometres, I began to see signs for the Alto de Perdón. *Alto* means height and *perdón* means forgiveness, and however I constructed that, I couldn't make it sound good at all.

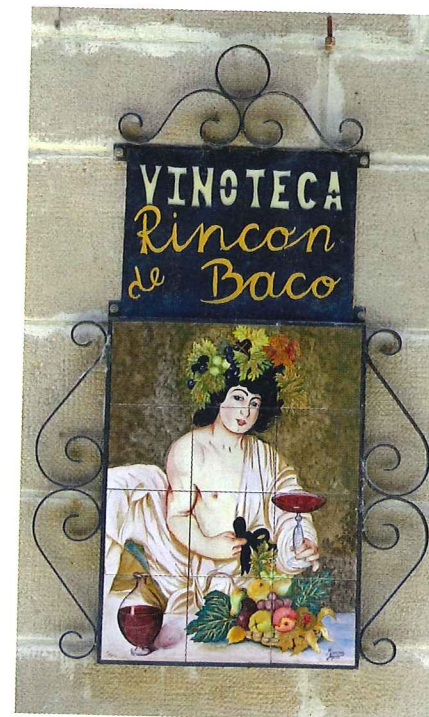
Gradually the road began to rise. And rise. And rise. It became clear that I wasn't going to skirt the giant hill, but go straight over it. The mercury was climbing too – already 33°C according to my GPS, and the road kept winding up, up, up. It never got particularly steep, but it was *long*, and while little wheels might be alright on the flat, they're not much good for going uphill. Also, a long handlebar pole makes it difficult to get any leverage. Pull too hard and you'll snap it!

With the breath rasping in my throat, the sweat stinging my eyes, and my thighs feeling like they were being worked on by the Inquisition, I drove on. Lycra-clad road cyclists would come flashing past, either coming down or going up. Alto de Perdón is not exactly Mont Ventoux (of Tour de France fame), and its crest is only 780m high. Nevertheless, it was well-named. Not even half-way up I was already begging forgiveness and cursing all my friends who had told me this stage would be flat.

Eventually, a bridge marked the top of the ascent. A white smiley face sprayed on the road pointed me in the direction of some shade, whereupon I immediately collapsed in its shadow. After drinking just about all my water, I set off again and saw a sign that depicted a downhill gradient of 8%. With my head down behind the handlebars, I hit over 60kph on the descent. On a folding bike!

My ride was well received on the Camino. Every other biker had fully-laden mountain bikes or inter-continental tourers. My little folder got lots of attention. Like a cute puppy, it was photographed and petted and generally fawned over. After arriving in Logroño two days later, it was folded up, and put on a bus back to Madrid. It'll certainly come with me on the next stages, from Logroño to Burgos.

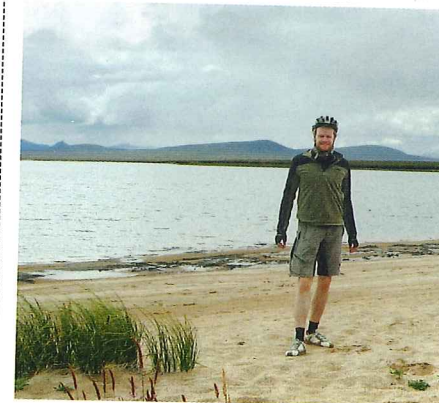
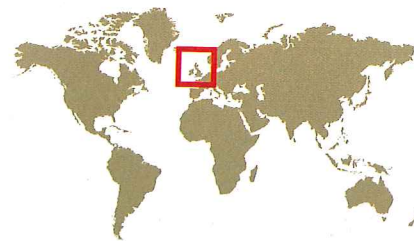
After all, they tell me that it's flat.



■ Your Story

One man and a bicycle

Riding off alone into the Scottish wilderness was a gamble worth taking, says reader **Colin Baird**



There was plenty to be nervous about – not least whether the driver would remember to stop the train. I was waiting by the doors and holding my bike against the sway of the carriage as we made our approach to Altnabreac, one of the least-used stations in Scotland. This was a 'request stop', meaning the train would only halt if a passenger had specifically asked to get off. I had shown my ticket to the guard and she had written a reminder on a scrap of paper, but that was hours ago.

Altnabreac is one of very few stations in Britain where you can be guaranteed to be the only person using it. Without a village nearby, should the weather turn nasty, there would be no shelter. If I got hungry, there would be nowhere to buy food. If something broke on my bike, there would be nobody to help. Nervousness collided with excitement to make my heart tumble – this was what adventure felt like.

But its isolated location was what drew me. Months ago I had scanned a map to look for remote roads to cycle on. About 160km north of Inverness I found the perfect one. It was a road with no designation, a nothing road plonked in a world of peatland and wetland.

I stepped off the train into a swarm of midges. I waved my hands, but they were too numerous. On the platform was an information panel that warned me to 'take precautions', but condensation made it difficult to read, so I just set off.

The dusty gravel track out of the station passed a former school. This had closed in 1986, thus ending any useful purpose for the station. But it was then that I spotted the best parody of town twinning I had ever seen – a sign that read: 'Altnabreac DC, twinned with Washington DC.'

The road wiggled along the shores of a small and uninspiring loch, brought to life by the sudden and unexpected appearance of a slew of Victorian towers, turrets, gables and chimney pots. This was once a hunting lodge called the Loch Dhu Hotel, and was now a private home. Up until the 1970s you could get off the train in the foulest of weather, trudge two miles through the brown and barren moorland and still be sure of a single malt, a roaring fireplace and tips on what to shoot in the morning.

I could not go fast because the road was bumpy, with potholes that seemed more like gouges – as if someone in a tantrum had taken a hatchet to large sections of it. But it was fun to ride. I found an abandoned cottage sitting all alone in an ocean of bog and snuck inside. Therein I discovered a flagstone floor, fireplace and timber panelling, and wondered who had last stayed here and what conversations had taken place by the crackling and glowing fire.

The sky was a mishmash of colours as I crossed a causeway where the River Thurso emptied into Loch More. There I found a tiny beach. My feet crunching on the sand almost drowned out the only other sound – the wash of the water.

A few minutes more pedalling brought me out of the wilderness. Altnabreac had been worth the nervous start, and knowing that it was just me and a bicycle between a barren land and shelter was a thrill that you rarely experience in normal life.

These were entries in our regular online writing competition. Keep an eye out for the next one at wanderlust.co.uk/mywanderlust