

# TT on TT II

## Testing times on Trafalgar – Trafalgar

*for George Hanna*

*It took around three months for me to decide to finish off Trafalgar – Trafalgar solo, following my 2003 attempt on the AUK self inflicted road kill championship. The chance comment 'you could always ride the whole thing again' fell (ouch) on febrile ground. Chatting through route suggestions with Simon Jones at the AGM came great news – a restart in Madrid would be possible. 1000k rather than 3100k. As that meant a week's holiday rather than two, suddenly Jan Christiansen was in the frame as well – hey it might even be enjoyable...*

With Jan now based in Stockholm, coordinating travel could potentially have been a little tricky, but we resolved the issue by deciding to do the trip on Airnimals. Jan had had one for 2-3 years, as part of his menagerie of 10 bikes, and had done some quick riding on his; I'd wondered for a while about an Airnimal, not just for this trip but also to be able to zip on and off trains in the UK. After three test rides on Ultegra-equipped bikes, one of 80 km from Mike Dyason's base in Melton, and two from Bikefix in London WC1 in city traffic and then in Regent's Park with the heart rate monitor on, I put in an order with Bikefix.

### Nought to cruising very quickly

The undulating Leicester ride had convinced me that the bike climbed well, once you got used to the ultra-light steering, and disconcerting view of no top tube between your legs. It also went from 0 to cruising very quickly, handled nicely to avoid potholes going up or down and was steadier in a straight line than I expected on the windy days of my tests. Descending was a real blast and, while the rear of the bike felt comfortable going over bumps, it did transmit some road shock through the bars if you hit a hole.

Airnimal do two choices of frame size – for people up to 5ft 8in, or above. I went for the smaller option as I am 5ft 8in and didn't want my back to be too stretched out. Carbon forks would balance the weight I had to have for the luggage rack. I was happy with Ultegra to complete the package, as it had impressed me during the trial, and to ensure I could twiddle when needed, I specified a triple and 11-23 block. As both test bikes I'd ridden felt very low, I needed a spacer to bring the bars up to a comfy height and get the most from my legs.

For AUK rides and the arid rigours of TT, I would need a minimum of two bottles, and it took a bit of messing around to get a setup I was happy with. In the end I fitted a double bottle cage under the seat, with a third

cage on the standard Airnimal position on the frame behind the seat. An Altura rack-top bag would contain the luggage, with micro pump taped on, though it could have been on either bottle cage. I had the bike set up in time for the Elenith but as (a) Dave Pountney requires mudguards and (b) I didn't fancy the Devil's Staircase on a new bike, I decided on the Gourmet 400 km the following weekend as my shakedown ride.

The water bottles were fine when empty but flipped out when filled at the first traffic hump. They stayed put after bending the cages to bite the bottles hard. It took quite a while to get the saddle height spot on – my pelvis felt scrunched up when too low and I felt my rear end was bouncing like a fixer's when it was too high. Riding dingy Kentish lanes with just a Cateye micro and headtorch was kinda scary, but the Spacegrip-bearing light and mapholder did its job, and meant my knees wouldn't hit the bars when climbing full on.

For shakedown ride No.2 – Robert Watson's excellent Pamber Heath 200k – I changed back to my normal saddle, and added bar phat and tape to the existing single thickness for extra comfort.

### £2.50 from local hardware shop

For travel to Madrid the Airnimals would be in hard cases

(Delsey 90179 NB oversized suitcases @ £95 a throw) which would stay there while we journeyed south. For the return by high-speed train, the bikes would be folded into a 'Ghana go' (giant tartan shopping bag so named by Nigerians when Ghanaians were expelled some years ago), folded and cable-tied into the third bottle cage. At £2.50 from the local hardware shop these seemed a better deal than the Airnimal softcase @ £47. Jan took a Trek rack-top bag with fold-down sides – very useful to hold the spare tyre we felt we needed. Stockholm/Heathrow to Madrid was easy and both bikes/rack top bags fitted into one taxi into town.

An hour later we had reassembled the bikes and were having a late lunch by Atocha station. As we had taken nine days to get this far in 2003, Simon Jones [the organiser] had given us up to seven days to complete. Our plan was to do 100k on day one, then average 200k per day for four days and finish with 100k on day five, then relax in Cadiz for a day before returning to sample the delights of Madrid.

Around 4pm we borrowed a street map from Betty d'Cruz, who had kindly agreed to look after our bags and put us up the following Saturday, and beetled off southwards in temperatures in the high 20s. The ride out of Madrid was as uneventful as any ride can be which takes in one rubbish dump, two parks





and a footbridge over the river. Eventually we found the right road south and relaxed.

Around 50k from Toledo we were stopped by the police, along with all the other traffic, as a local road race flashed by. Thirty kilometres out we followed Toledo signs and ended up on a dual carriageway with motorway characteristics. Eight kilometres later we exited back onto more relaxed tarmac and pootled into town around 20:00 for two dinners and several beers to get reacquainted. Before we'd left, Jan had been keen to stay in Toledo as it is a centre of knifemaking. Luckily for me, all the sharp-blade shops were closed when we were there.

Breakfast in our prebooked hotel was disappointing but after a quick trawl through the backstreets we got enough food to guarantee no stop would be needed for two or three hours. A 'Black Country' lunch of huge pork sandwich in Consuegra was followed by a pantomime search for a stamp, eventually provided by the local police.

Digestion was disturbed by the washboard climb from Urda to the summit of the Montes de Toledo, and another warm day. Advice from previous TT riders suggested we had little chance of finding food or

accommodation in the 70k south of Puertollano, so we called it a day here, after a relaxed 112m in 10 hours on the road. Finding dinner in this lively town proved none too easy on a Sunday night – even Jan giving some pensioners the 20-yard stare didn't work.

An early start beckoned next day so we could shoot for Granada and leave the 47k climb of Sierra Nevada for the following morning. After a 25k warm up the Sierras Puertollano, del Ray, Madrona and Moreno, a series of well graded 8-900m climbs through pleasant, almost Alpine scenery, hove into view. Needing to replace a missing bolt from my luggage rack after 50k allowed time for a rest atop the last climb. Shortly after this we entered Andalucia on a fantastic generally downhill road towards lunch in Marmolejo. After a quick visit to the local supermarket for cold water and lots of fruit juice for the rack packs we hit the bar for sandwiches and more of our regular tipples of cold water and orange juice (me) and juice, coffee (Jan).

## ...another ride on the motorway...

A hot afternoon's ride followed on the A311 to the



The castle, Toledo

outskirts of Jaen after 160k, where roadworks and a 2k detour on delayed us a little. We considered but thought better of wading a milky and smelly stream to avoid the roadworks and eventually found a friendly bar by the cathedral for our stamp. Sipping cold drinks, we silently pondered the wisdom of racking up a further 93k through a gap in the Sierras. From earlier reports we knew we would definitely have to ride on the motorway standard N323 for some time, but luckily for us, impeccable directions from the bar owner led us out of town on the minor road which ran parallel. It was too good to last and after km 64 the surface began to degrade. Using intuition and two pairs of sharp eyes we tracked the slip road over the motorway twice (our 1:400 000 map showed this happened only once) and through one tunnel between here and km 74. Shortly before the tarmac thinned, went to gravel then became a drainage ditch which ended at a 2m high fence. The only way forward was to limbo under the fence and ride on the motorway shoulder for 200m to the next junction.

## I saw it late ...

The next 5 km of slip road included a couple of short climbs and a cracking descent with a bed of gravel and 5cm high concrete hump thrown in to catch the unwary. I was still doing 50kph when I saw it late and yanked the bike into a bunny hop. Yanking the Airnimal front end up didn't make the back end move because of the fold so while the front went over the bump, the back caught it at an angle of 45°. At least Jan, following a respectful (ie, safe)

distance behind, was able to get over safely. We cruised to a halt at a roadside fountain while I got my heartrate back to near normal. On the drag up from Noalejo at km 79 we were doing a whacking 10kph on the motorway, and Jan started chuntering about a midnight finish. I feared he was right but kept my own counsel.

An hour later our mood changed as we found the gentle rolling descents distinctly to our liking and stayed on the motorway to km 126 on the outskirts of Granada around 20:45 after 163km. Had we been stopped by the Guardia Civil, Jan's defence would have been 'Regarding the motorways, we only resorted to those when the drainage ditch became too cumbersome. Also, as a safety measure we kept our speed at around 50kph on the Sierra Nevada section so as not to look out of place. And when they took away the hard shoulder on the dusky approach to Granada we decorated ourselves with highviz. Very mindful about safety me and George.'

Another huge dinner and bed by 01.00 ready for our big climb next morning. The rack packs stayed off and tools were kept to a minimum as we headed south-east at 09.00 on a lovely sunny morning. Several photostops and four hours of slow, steady climbing later we were at 2,550m altitude and the tarmac was breaking up. As we continued up, the road reappeared, between 3m high walls of snow this time. A couple more kilometres later, at the ski lift, we called it a day at around 2,700m. We reckon we could probably have continued up a bit higher, but did not want to chew gravel on the



The old road finally gave out at a 2m high fence after 400m of roughstuff. Luckily we could go under and only had 200m on the motorway



slushy descent. As we took the obligatory photos, the clouds thickened, and the temperature dropped rapidly.

We each bought gloves at the stamp stop at the café by the Parador as our fingers were already freezing. Even with four layers and gloves on the bike was barely in control on some sections of the descent, but an hour of grinning madly saw us back to base camp for a late lunch. As I repacked my luggage I noticed a two-inch gash on my rear tyre, with beading showing through. My bunny hop of the previous night could have caused this, or going through one of the rough sections on the Sierra Nevada. Either way I could had come a cropper had it blown out on the 60kph descent.

## ...pop gun blow out...

Needless to say, the rest of our day's riding wasn't too sprightly with a 47km climb in our legs, but at least my tyre chose to blow out like a pop gun on a gentle ascent with some shade nearby. Twenty minutes later we set off again through the scenic Sierra de Pera to the super scenic Embalse de los Bermejales. This wonderful scenery in early evening heat made the 900m climb to Alhama de Grenada almost enjoyable. Sadly for me the bonk quickly followed and I dropped away as Jan powered along at 35kph into the wind towards the well-named notch in the hills at Ventas de Zeferraya.

I needed a stop here for some carbo, and as I didn't fully recover on the next descent, we took a collective decision to head straight on for the coast at Velez Malaga/Torre del Mar, rather than inland towards Mondron and into territory where Danny Fisher had had problems finding accommodation. Velez looked a lovely touristy town, but that meant no accommodation, so we settled for a four star hotel one block in from the seafront in Torre.

Over a late dinner in a great backstreet restaurant we reflected on a decent day's work. 121 km, including the fantastic climb, and even more fantastic descent, of Pico Veleta. Since noticing the slashed tyre in

Granada I'd been hyper-sensitive to the feeling under my rear wheel, and reckoned it had happened the evening before when I bunny-hopped the concrete hump.

Torre, to the eastern outskirts of Malaga, was uneventful save for our overtaking a roadie out for a spin who quickly joined us for a three-up. Hitting the main road east of Malaga sent our stress levels up, and they stayed there until we found a bar by the station 30 minutes later.

Exiting westward in more high speed city traffic was tricky as well until we found the right road. By Pizarra we were more relaxed, if slightly frazzled as the day hotted up, and the road bent upwards towards white villages tucked under steep scarps. Aloizana beckoned as early lunch venue and Jan found us a cracking bar where we were treated to the usual freshly-squeezed orange, and fresh home-made potato and seafood salads. Two kilometres on, roadworks signs appeared and the tarmac turned gravelly. Two kilometres further up the climb and we began to wonder just how far the roadworks lasted for. Nothing for it but to get in the big ring and plough on upwards out of the saddle Paris-Roubaix style. Eventually, after 9

km of assorted gravel, potholes, occasional patches of tarmac and dust storms when buses or trucks went past, we crested the top of the Puerto de las Abejas. Did it get better on the descent? Not \*\*\*dy likely – amid cursing from Jan we had more of the same all the way down. At least the traffic was relatively light and we were able to ride all over the 'road' to find the least bad line.

Eighteen kilometres later, at El Burgo, some tarmac at last and blessed relief even if we'd no idea how long it would last. Dark thoughts of how sore our braking fingers were and how lucky we'd been not to get a puncture on the descent were banished as the road continued then went nuclear on us again. The 30-minute climb to Puerto del Viento at 1,306m was an exquisite bottom gear gravel, and reminiscent of the Ystwyth valley except it was 30°, and we saw vultures not kites.

A juicy apple on the road staved off the bonk and we hit Ronda around 16.45 for bottle refills and a stamp. In Ronda we decided our target for the night was Gibraltar even though it was still 100k away. Five kilometres later that seemed hopelessly optimistic as we were in bottom gear again grovelling into the stiffening early evening



Ronda Bridge



Viking in Sierra Nevada

breeze up the Sierra de Ronda. Once over the summit, things eased and we found ourselves sailing along close to 30kph on a wonderful road which flipped to and fro across heavily wooded ridges. Many photo stops beckoned as white villages appeared here there and everywhere, with no obvious roads linking them. Maybe I might just visit Malaga again and head off west to Ronda to ride these roads again...

All good things come to an end and we eventually dropped off the ridge following the lightly-trafficked and smooth A390 towards Algeciras. The Gibraltar turn at San Roque Estacion was easily found; the turns for La Linea less so as they were through a petroleum plant. Seeing Gibraltar across the bay was impressive – a clear microclimate being generated by the rock jutting up 150m into the blue sky. Sadly this meant it would be cloudy while we were there. Around 9:30 we rolled to a halt at the Hotel Bristol, a dump of the first order, and twice the price of any other hotel on the trip, even the four star in Torre. After 147m and 10:15 in the saddle I hardly needed beer to make me sleep, but everything closed early so dinner in Gibraltar consisted of several pints of Kilkenny with some local nuts. And some peanuts.

## New Nordic sleepwear v. rubber mallet

Were I mad enough to go back to Gibraltar I would stay on the Spanish side of the border.

Gibraltar also made a big impression on Jan. It had been a



long previous evening followed by a long day in the saddle when we arrived at that depressing rock, only to find that Fawly Towers is even worse in real life and that there would be no dinner tonight. Despite making a serious attempt to take away all their beer I was unable to sleep through the barrage of noise emanating from Jan. With my earplugs hopelessly inadequate I thought (as best as I could after many, many pints of Guinness) through my options:

1. Sleep in the corridor – deemed physically unsafe after unwanted propositions from local species
2. Drink remaining beer - I was drunk so seemed pointless
3. Terminate George's life.

I landed several vicious blows and kicks to his bed, my accuracy was appalling but it was dark.

The only solution was to block out the noise and I came up with some headgear that actually seems to work.



*Tomb of the unknown randonneur, Trafalgar*

### How was the Airnimal?

Fifteen minutes' packing fitted the bike and wheels into the bag for travel back to Madrid via high speed train. It even fitted through the metal detector on the platform. Great fun to ride, and quite a head-turner, but having a rack pack on the back makes it feel slightly sluggish. Bunny hops over obstacles aren't practical due to the folding frame and gave me a gashed tyre. My bottles stayed put, despite the bumps, but the backward reach and twist to take a drink gave me a shoulder ache until I had perfected the technique. I had to keep adjusting the saddle height as I had exactly 6in of clearance above the rack and the bag was 6.5" with maps in top pocket. I'd not rule out using Airnimal for a 1200k but I wouldn't want to use a rack-top bag.

### Would I recommend Trafalgar-Trafalgar?

Not sure. Some parts of it were very enjoyable, eg, the climbs through Sierra Morena, Sierra Nevada, Granada to Ventas de Zafarraya, Pizarra to Ronda to Jimena de la Frontera, but we'd had one section of motorway per day since Madrid.

While I'll never forget my 50kph bash on the motorway to Granada it would not be to everyone's taste.

photo stops bang on target at 16:00. The ride to Cadiz was mostly a pancake flat A-road but not unpleasant until we hit increased traffic volumes on the edge of the city. Cadiz proved to be a great place to relax, and comes highly recommended.



Fit earplugs supplemented with as much toilet paper as possible. Take two arm warmers and join them at one end with a bandana, wrap around your head and tie at the front. Now fit a pair of shoe warmers in the ear area and shove yet more toilet paper up there. Finally, hold it all in place with leg warmers.

The reason we'd ridden our buns off to get to Gibraltar was to set up an easy last day.

A detour to another municipal dump in the hills above Los Barrios, and 40k on the newly upgraded and now motorway-class A381 towards El Castano didn't dampen our spirits as we had a huge tailwind and the ride was in the bag. After a long lunch in a nice café full of locals (we were getting good at finding these by now) in Benalup we potted off to Cabo de Trafalgar for the obligatory stamp and



*Airnimal at Faro de Trafalgar*

