

“...Oh this year I'm off to Sunny Spain, y viva España! I'm taking the Costa Brava plane, y viva España...!”

Well, Costa Blanca actually. A March training camp for a VT sub-section, namely Dylan and Javlar, who kindly allowed the wallowing, part-time cyclist that is the VT Chairman to join them for sun, sea and Café Bon Bons. Oh, and some bike riding. The Chairman kept a diary...

Tango'd

Still in the UK and only an hour and bit into the trip and already Dylan was on the receiving end of abuse. The difference this time was that the assailant was a fast-food operative looking for a customer but not looking where he was going. A second or two later and Dylan was wearing his new eau d'cologne: Fizzy Sticky Orange. Mmmm, sexy.



Yes, Ralph, the big orange fella ran in from the left...

Despite possessing a photographic memory for routes and route planning, Dylan deferred to his VW sat nav to show him the way to the overnight stopover before the early flight to Alicante. And so it was that the Passat squeezed through the narrowest, muddiest and bumpiest lanes of Somerset before finally discovering the automatic gate-entry to a place that worryingly had ‘Worship’ in the property name. It was unclear what type of worship was to be pursued, but Jav opted for the God of Wi-Fi codes, relentlessly pursuing his deity so that he wouldn't be disconnected from Strava for more time than was absolutely necessary.

An uneventful flight to Alicante saw the VT Three dutifully join the hot, slow-moving and very British queue for security and passport control – welcome to EU travel post-Brexit. The queue contained the usual ‘Indignant from England’ who knew the Spanish Border Police were doing this “on purpose.” Well, yes, good sir – perhaps not what you voted for in 2016. Eventually the Pasty Trio were bussed up and moving towards their destination. But not before a detour to drop off the less-selective of British travellers that were “well excited” at the notion of seven days in glorious Benidorm. Yes, Benidorm. What can I say? Nothing, as it happens. An approach consistent with the Naive Three on the bus that day. Stunned silence. Eyes wide and mouths wider. What on earth was this place in mainland Europe that boasted countless opportunities to drink beer, eat chips, drink

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more beer, gorge on 1euro shots of alcohol, eat kebabs, join stag-dos, run away from hen-dos and wear bad shorts and even worse vests? And all in 25deg heat. Vicky's after-midnight show held little appeal for the Troubled Three and it was with immense relief the bus moved on and an escape route become evident. Onward to Calpe.

Swanky Hotels and Fishing Tackle

Dylan had surpassed himself. The hotel was fancy and strange little machines squirted air freshener at you every few minutes. It was sea front, had more lifts than Katie Price and the promise of a food selection that would sorely disappoint any day-trippers from Benidorm. Well played, Dylan, well played. There were muchos complimentary items for guests, some quite usual, some less so...



Complimentary
foot cream, if you
were wondering.

Complimentary
pillow spray. No,
nor us...





Shady characters suck in the view.

The view and inspiration for Close Encounters...



Tools for the week were hired from a friendly, ex-British Cycling chap from Scotland whose years in the region has rendered his Scottish accent null and void. Not. Dylan and Jav opted for sleek, aero and electronically-g geared machines; the Luddite Chairman went for mechanical and non-aero, much like himself. All were disc-equipped and fitted out in that famous Japanese fishing tackle manufacturer's best efforts – two facts of equal sadness to the Chairman. Not a drop of Italian loveliness in sight. What fresh hell is this?

Once settled in, feet suitable creamed and pillows dutifully sprayed, the route-planner extraordinaire revealed his masterplan for the week which was immediately rejected. 86 miles on the first day? That's more than the Chairman rode in the previous six weeks, or possibly in 2023 so far... Panic gripped the Chairman. Fortunately, Jav was alive to the sense of fear (or perhaps the smell of fear, for which the Chairman apologised) and duly interjected with the phrase that would be oft-repeated over the week, "For fuck's sake, Dylan!" Ever adaptable, Dylan re-computed and we agreed a rendezvous for 10 in the morning.

You're in the Wrong Place

Dead-on 10.30 we met up and departed. The Chairman, having a room to himself, slept fitfully; the other two, sharing facilities, did not. In turn, Dylan and Jav described their night of woe listening to each other variously sawing wood and doing bear impressions through the night – it was the Jason Bean experience all over again. Dylan vowed to get ear plugs, Jav did not. This wouldn't end well, the Chairman thought.

At 10.35 we'd stopped – Jav heading back to the hotel to collect his bidons. Annecy-flashbacks started, but he had remembered his helmet to be fair. We were headed, seemingly, towards a 'testy' climb, recently tackled by the Pros during the recent Volta a la Comunitat Valenciana. A climb on which massive cogs and slow speeds were *de rigueur*. This was the re-calculated, easing-in approach Dylan had come up with. The Chairman felt tears welling up.



The smiles are not consistent with the previous 20% efforts. Gentle beginning, my arse.

The fishing tackle-based equipment was proving problematic on this inaugural ride, so much so that arrangements were made to call in with our Scottish chum for a health check on Jav's electronic wizardry. With the bike in the workshop, the VT coffee-hounds took advantage of the generous hospitality available and chatted with Glasgow's finest. It became apparent that, in Scotland's view, our base location was sub-optimal. In fact, quote, "the pro's fucking hate it there," unquote. Being chums with Mathieu van der Poel's entourage, to name but one reference thrown in to the conversation, who were we to argue?

Doing what
he does
best.



It was time to depart our convivial host's company and also that of the added Scottishness from the visitors from Ayr, and complete our easy day. Our breaking-in day. 60 miles later we were back at our base in The Wrong Location.

Carrot Cake and Butt Plugs

The next day saw a slightly later meet time to allow for post-snore faffing. We were headed for the Coll de Rates, a 'local' climb on which many Pros tested themselves and their form. This didn't bode well for the Chairman and his under-prepared legs, especially coming, as it would, after a reverse-climb of yesterday's slog that, in itself, was after the long slog out of The Wrong Location. En route was a promised stop-off at a well-regarded cycling-friendly café where the baked goods were to die for; Dylan had already earmarked his stodge of choice and his usual puppy-dog enthusiasm led the way. Sadly, the cake was all vendido which only served to enrage our tour guide and super-charge his legs on the return to The Wrong Place. The last 20km were a feast of blurred legs and repeated calls of, "for fuck's sake, Dylan!". Another 50 miles or so under the wheels, the tan lines were beginning to appear and the Chairman hadn't died. So far so good. A new bike arrived for Jav too. Which was nice.

Coll de Rates.
A testing
climb.



Javlar sports the latest
in nose-wear, fresh
from crushing the Coll
de Rates. Too fresh, to
be honest. Git.

Happy-ish,
despite the
lack of
carrot
cake.



That evening, Dylan made plans to procure ear plugs. Tackling the language barrier head-on in the local pharmacy, albeit from behind the mandatory face mask, he was lucky to come away with the desired ear-wear. We feared the assistant may mistake his man-gang for something more than a group of middle-aged men with a penchant for bicycles and offer ‘enhanced’ plugs, shall we say. And this was, of course, the rumour we set running in the hotel about Dylan’s preferences for plug-based hotel room shenanigans. We are horrible people.

Geraint’s Recommendation

Suitably impressed that the Chairman had, so far, not died, Dylan conceded the next day as an easy day to sample local coffee shops and to soak up some rays. Clearly a distraction technique for the monster day he had planned to come.

Heading out of The Wrong Place, it was only a matter of minutes before the now standard call was issued by Jav, “for fuck’s sake, Dylan!” In leading us up and away, Dylan assumed that because his compatriots were sitting on his wheel on the climb, they needed him to go a bit quicker. Which he did, hurting himself and us in the process. How we laughed.

Spotting Astana and Trek Segafredo riders en route, it was all we could do to stop Dylan from giving chase – his ability to spot, identify and name pro riders at distance never fails to impress and concern in equal measure. We think the restraining orders have expired, but we were never sure. The day turned into a tourist-y ride around, taking in the sights and slurping up the ambience (beer). Origins Coffee Shop was visited, as recommended by South Wales’ finest pro cyclist – and it was good, albeit with the waitress being from Essex, perhaps not the full Spanish experience it might have been.

Dylan with the 'scalps' of stalking-past. None of these riders were ever seen again.



The "Hunk Shot" as shared on the VT WhatsApp group. Inspiration for so many things.

Obligatory beer photo.





It remains unclear if this sign was associated with the rumours abounding about Dylan's pharmacy shopping trip.

The three phases of head-loss.





The distant Sodom, or Gomorrah, you choose. Or ask Vicky.



Arseface.



After the day of sight-seeing, bird-watching and general faffing, Dylan declared it was time for bed – a big day was just around the corner. In preparing for said *gran día*, he went on to describe the need to go and “prepare the beast.” This may or may not have involved items from the pharmacy trip, we didn’t ask, suffice to say we slinked away, slightly trepidatious of the day to come.

Never Mind the Big Ones

Great climbs abounded today. When I say great, I mean long. When I say long, I mean flippin' long – like the first effort, a mere 25 miles of uphillness. The appearance of a young (well, younger than us) Dutch group scorching upwards got us over-excited in the early miles as we latched on for the tow. The Chairman soon realised however that his legs wouldn't sustain the pace without the use of banned narcotics and duly dropped off the back and, to be fair, Dylan and Jav sympathised and waited up for "I'm not going into the red" Davies – muchas gracias mis amigos. This set the tone for the day, Jav smashing the climbs then dutifully waiting whilst Dylan nurtured the Chairfool upwards (without the need for plugs of any description). Descents then being tackled with gay abandon where the running order reversed to some extent. At least until the point that is, where the Chairfool ran out of talent, the [horrible] disc brake/hard tyre combo relinquished their grip of the road and the cursing Chairman was left to revert to cleats and the concrete block barriers to make it around one particular steep, fast and tightening bend. How they laughed.

Dylan,
nurturing.





One of the descents, suitably equipped with Davies-restraining devices.



“Are you not dead yet?”
Dylan ponders the Chairfool’s lack of ability.

Now Dylan’s almost eidetic memory for geographical features as they pertain to routes and roads is near legendary. Less epic however, is his ability to completely ignore the in-between bits that link the great climbs he has committed to memory and made the feature of days like today – a 90 mile monster that had the Chairman reaching for extra bum-cream as well as a dose of tranquillisers to numb the fear. Notable was one particular roller coaster of a linking valley road that did its very best to crush the souls of all riders heading along it in the direction we were moving. Or sort of moving. Crush the souls and then gather up the powdered remains only to reform the riders and then pound them to dust once more. Holy moly.



Javlar carefully avoids the Davies-restraining devices.

With a break taken in the company of the Royal Navy's finest, albeit retired, Booties, it was time for the final push homewards, sadly along another minor oversight of a climb that saw the famous phrase being uttered again in Dylan's direction. But not by the Chairman who was, at this time, smug in his measured effort catching as he was, Javlar the Hillbeast who was in dire need of sustenance rather than any more climbing surprises. Another stop saw Jav fed and watered, Dylan Café Bon Bon'd and the Chairman swapping pleasantries with the locals – a fat bloke from Leicester and a large, asthmatic lady from Hertfordshire, both living the Costa Blanca dream, albeit mostly through the medium of an English ex-pat bar, it seems.

Espressos, MSR and the Oirish

Milan Sanremo day and the Chairman opted for an easy coastal effort until such time that a suitable café could be found to sit and watch the mid-phase of MSR in the comfort of tasty coffee and maybe a beer or two. And perhaps a tortilla bocadillo. Dylan and Jav opted for further torture and headed inland to add more data to the Strava monster.

Re-convening mid-afternoon in The Wrong Place, MSR was seen out in big screen glory (beast of a ride, Mathieu) and we then switched to Six Nations action, donning our green wigs and terrible Dublin accents to support the only other rugby team worth supporting i.e. whoever's playing England. Glorious win lads, to be sure.



Being Oirish.

A Last Hurrah with Rocketman

A final day in the mountains beckoned and what a fabulous day it was. A return to the Coll de Rates, up and over, then the long descent to Altea. On the way down was a stop off at a proper locals' bar (Fatty from Leicester would never make it up this high) where drinks were absurdly cheap, all the neighbours gathered to talk in excited (loud) voices and, sat in the corner on an elevated patio, was Elton John. Resplendent in fur coat, floppy hat and pink glasses, he didn't say much and definitely didn't do a turn on the Old Joanna, but we're sure it was him.

You can see Elton John's house from here.



Onwards and downwards.

El fin

So how does this region compare with, say, Mallorca? On balance, we'd say better by dint of quieter roads and greater options for different riding routes. And chance meetings with aging rock stars, obviously. Is Calpe the Wrong Place? Not really – routes in and out are perhaps a little limited, but that is the same for any location on the coast; there is definitely more traffic in and around Calpe (or is it Calp?) but almost without exception, our experience of the traffic was that it was respectful of

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cyclists and we never once felt threatened by an imminent death. Which is a good thing, right? Would we go back? Oh, I think so. If only so that Dylan can collect his butt plugs left behind in error.

Salud!

