

Welcome to ProVile

Girona, in northern Spain, is home to some of the world's best pro cyclists. When you ride these roads, don't forget your autograph book



Words **MARK BAILEY** Photography **PAUL CALVER**



Cycling in the Catalan city of Girona is not like cycling anywhere else. It's not simply that the weather is better than most places, although the crisp autumn morning when we meet for our ride is perfect for a day out on bikes. Nor is it just about the architecture, although again you couldn't ask for a more beautiful meeting point than the Pont de Pedra, a stone bridge whose three arches bestride the tranquil Onyar River a stone's throw from the cobbled alleyways in Girona's medieval quarter.

No, the real difference comes when we casually nod a greeting at a couple of local riders who are also meeting to head out on their own training ride. On any other morning back home in Surrey the cyclists squatting on their top tubes would be dough-bellied, middle-aged men with delusions of grandeur. Today our faces turn as red as slices of Catalan tomato bread when we realise that the figures nodding back are Garmin-Sharp's Canadian pro Ryder Hesjedal, winner of the 2012 Giro d'Italia, and his American teammate, Tyler Farrar.

To cycle in Girona is to wander into the home of the professional peloton. Nestled between the sun-drenched beaches of the Costa Brava and the jagged peaks of the Pyrenees, Girona has

been fought over, conquered, occupied and besieged throughout history for its strategic location as the gateway to the Mediterranean. Once a Roman fortress by the name of Gerunda, it has since been occupied by Visigoths, Moors and Napoleonic forces. But Girona's latest invading force is an army of pencil-thin men on carbon-fibre steeds who have been lured by the promise of quiet roads, temperate year-round weather and lung-popping climbs.

American riders Lance Armstrong, George Hincapie and other members of the now disgraced US Postal Team made Girona their home in the late 1990s. Armstrong's jersey still hangs in the reception of the elegant Hotel Historic where he once stayed. Britain's Bradley Wiggins has previously lived in the city and it is now the base for around 70 professionals, including other Garmin-Sharp team members such as Britain's David Millar and Ireland's Dan Martin, as well as riders from Orica-GreenEdge, RadioShack Nissan Trek and Team Sky.

As Wiggins wrote in his 2009 biography *In Pursuit Of Glory*, 'Girona is a great place, a real mini centre for cycling, the weather is good, there is all sorts of training terrain and always a mob to train with. Brilliant.' David Millar was equally enamoured when scripting his memoir, *Racing Through The Dark*. 'Girona was perfect; the weather was fabulous, the roads quiet and varied... Waking up to blue skies was refreshing and the Catalans were friendly and welcoming.'

So here I am, nodding sheepishly at pros, ▶

'We nod at a couple of local riders before realising that it's Ryder Hesjedal and Tyler Farrar'



The Girona loop blends ancient towns with stunning countryside and leg-shredding climbs

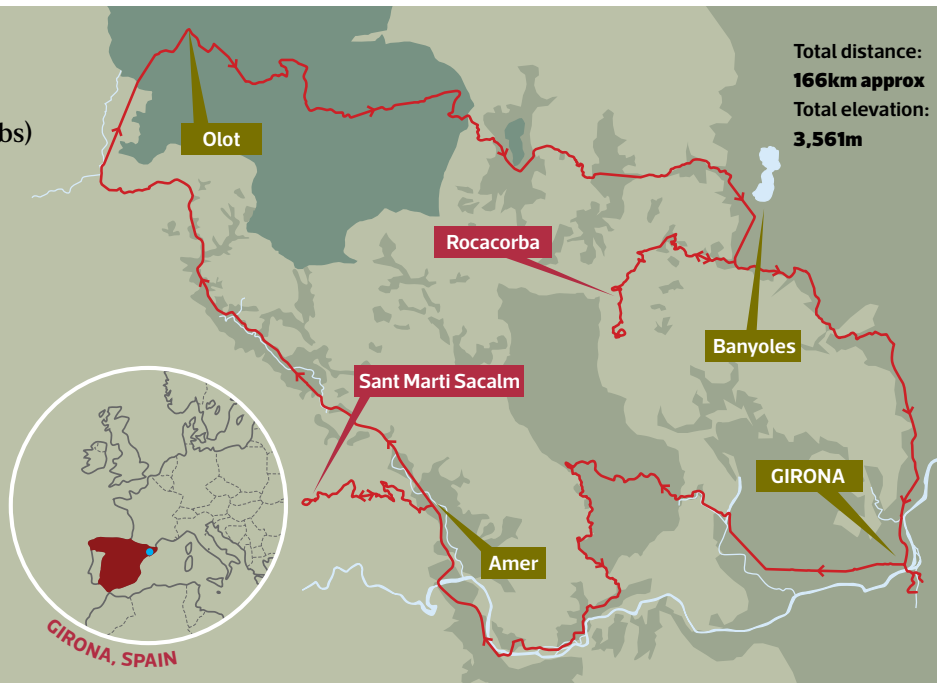
Go with the pros

This loop is popular with pros (so don't worry if a stranger drops you on the climbs)

The *Cyclist* team completed a 166km clockwise circuit. From Pont de Pedra in the heart of Girona, aim north to join the 531 heading west for the village of Sant Gregori. Stay on this road, passing through Llorà, before turning onto the 532 at a sign to Les Serres and Bonmati. Keep going until you hit the C63. Turn right towards La Cellera and Olot.

In the town of Amer, look out for a left turn to St Marti Sacalm to tackle the first major climb (819m). On returning, follow the C63 and C152 to Olot. Follow signs to Santa Pau on the 524 and follow it all the way to Banyoles lake. Turn right at a sign saying 'Pujamol 5' to do the Rocacorba climb (970m). Return and follow the C66/N11a back to Girona.

Other popular climbs in the area include Sant Hilari, Els Angels and Sant Grau which are all easily accessible from Girona.





Left: Deniz feels the heat as the Mediterranean sun burns away the morning clouds

Right: Descending the iconic Rocacorba climb, a favourite test piece for local pros

By the numbers

Because everyone loves stats

166.3

kilometres of riding

3,561

metres of climbing

9

pros nodded at

89.1

kph maximum speed

27.8

kph average moving speed

154

Questions about training fired at Astana's Tanel Kangert

and eager to explore cycling's new mecca. Following a two-hour flight from London, via a tapas feast of patatas bravas, prawns and carpaccio in the restaurant Placa del Vi 7 and a sound night's sleep at the Hotel Peninsular, we assemble at the Pont de Pedra. I'm joined by Deniz, the owner of Hadron Cycles in North London, Jaume from Bike Cat, a Girona-based company which offers guided tour rides and the chance to rent ex-pro bikes, and his Catalan friend David. Today I'm renting a Cervelo S3 which used to belong to Garmin's Heinrich Haussler, who famously lost the 2009 Milan-San Remo race to Mark Cavendish by a solitary inch. Jaume also has bikes that used to belong to David Millar, Dave Zabriskie and others.

We're also excited to be joined by Tanel Kangert, a 25-year-old Estonian professional who rides for Astana. Pros aren't easily coerced into riding with amateurs but I'm friends with his London-based sister, Elen, so I don't think he had a choice. He's friendly and patient enough to put up with us for a few hours. When we meet him by the bridge under an Astana-blue sky, his pedigree is instantly evident – and not just from his team kit. At 5ft 10ins, he is the same height as me but weighs a stone less (10 stone). His limbs are lean and sinewy. I'm embarrassed to see I'm wearing the same Specialized S-Works shoes. Mine propel me at mundane speeds up Box Hill. Kangert's were employed this summer to power his way through the Giro d'Italia, where he

finished 26th, and to win Stage nine of the Tour de Suisse after an epic 160km breakaway.

'I moved to Girona because I knew there must be a reason all the other pros lives here,' explains Kangert. 'The roads are safe and quiet and there is great variety for rides.' The atmosphere is relaxed too, according to Jaume: 'Although there are so many pros, the city just continues its own life so they enjoy the tranquility to train.'

Mediterranean cruise

We roll over the Pont de Pedra, where a larger throng of Garmin riders has now assembled. Today we're tackling a 166km loop that will take in Catalanian farmland, volcanic landscapes and two up-and-down climbs that are popular with local pros. As we head westwards out of the city and through the village of Sant Gregori, the smell of coffee fills our lungs from a giant Nescafé factory, the largest in Europe. Within just a few kilometres we are in the countryside and our hamstrings and glutes stretch into life as we cruise by a field of sunflowers before carving through neat blocks of farmland which knit together in a rural patchwork of ochre, olive, amber and chocolate. We zip past dusty football pitches and white stone farmhouses with terracotta roofs, wooden shutters, piles of freshly-chopped firewood and tethered horses.

The region has a distinctly Mediterranean beauty – rural, rugged and relaxed – and it's easy to see why the pros are happy to drip sweat on



► these fast, grey tracks that urge you on ever faster as if cycling on a giant conveyer belt. Not surprisingly, Kangert is the subject of much interest. We gawp when he somehow removes a leg warmer without breaking his pedal stroke, and pepper him with questions. He says he only takes two to three weeks off per year, his climbing suffers if he puts on just three kilos and he admits, with a smile, that if anybody tries to draft him when he's training, 'I will drop you.' Fortunately, today he's on a recovery day.

A sweeping bend takes us over the Riera de Canet river and we plunge into thick forest past grey slopes of rock before completing a steady climb to Les Serres at 312m. As we sweep over the top, we encounter a deceptively fast, swirling descent, with blind corners and switchbacks. With Kangert's skill and Jaume and David's intimate knowledge of the roads, Deniz and I are dragged along faster than we'd like and we exchange nervous glances when we veer across the road. My back wheel starts spontaneously breakdancing as I strive to keep up.

After reaching the safety of the valley, we join up with the C63 – seemingly a main road on the map, but eerily devoid of traffic – and the pace quickens as we head northwards. Mountains now loom on all sides and a left turn takes us to our first major climb at Sant Martí Sacalm, an 8km slog to a height of 819m with gradients of up to 8.9%. 'This is where a lot of the riders do their lactate testing,' explains Kangert. He promptly disappears skywards, with Deniz

heroically in pursuit, Jaume and David chasing and me trailing behind. The road is a twisting-climb past thick forest, red soil and damp walls of rock. Autumn leaves litter the road and the only sound comes from a trickling fountain located halfway up. With my leg muscles flaming, I suffer the shame of seeing Kangert kindly descend back down to help me up the final stretch. There is a telling moment when he answers a phone call and rides no-handed while I struggle to breathe. 'Not Box Hill,' he giggles.

As I pant over the summit I'm rewarded with a spectacular Mediterranean vista of fields, mountains and valleys. The summit of El Far, a stark flat-topped mountain reminiscent of South Africa's Table Mountain, dominates the skyline. The descent is again nauseatingly rapid. On one blind turn I slide sideways, narrowly missing a collision with a cliff wall at 55kmh. Confidence in tatters, I dawdle down before I realise the error of my ways: I'm riding a European bike and the brakes are set the other way round. When I've been meaning to feather my front brake, I've inadvertently been locking up my back wheel with potentially skin-shredding consequences.

Burning through the volcano

We continue north along the C63 with a steady 367m climb over 16km to Coll de Bas. Now the midday sun is toasting our legs and arms and beads of sweat splash onto my handlebars. As we plunge into a tunnel, drops of deliciously cool water drip onto our backs from the chilled ►

Tips from the top

Get more from your Girona trip



FEEL THE BURN

By lunchtime, the Mediterranean sun was threatening to barbecue us as we rode. Our solution was Garnier's Clear Protect, which is water resistant, meaning it won't fail you when you start sweating, and it has a non-greasy, clear formula, so after

160km in the saddle you won't feel like you've spent the day bathing in lard.

£14.49, from any decent chemist



FUEL UP

Chasing the wheels of pro cyclists means you'll need all the help you can get. Sucking on SIS's Go+ Nitrate gels will enhance your body's nitric oxide production to boost your power output and stop you being dropped quite so quickly.

£11.40 for six, www.scienceinsport.com



A pro's eye view

Tanel Kangert, Astana

'It was an easy decision to move to Girona. I'd been in France, but the roads were busy and the weather was sometimes bad. Here the roads are quieter and safer. I think I've only had one or two punctures all year because the surfaces are so good and every second driver is a cyclist so people respect you. I can ride in the mountains or go to the coast which is really beautiful. Also, the weather here is very good. Of course it gets cooler over winter but for most of the year it's warm and dry and you never feel like you don't want to go out. For cyclists who want to come here I would recommend going to Dolce Vita, an Italian restaurant in Placa Independencia that serves pasta, pizza and salads, and a café called La Gioconda in Placa de Catalunya, which is great for coffee and ice cream.'

'It's easy to see why the pros are happy to drip sweat on these fast, grey tracks that urge you on ever faster as if cycling on a giant conveyer belt'



► rocks above. When we emerge we relish the long sections of flat roads, as much for the accompanying breeze as the adrenaline rush, and start drafting at 45kmh. Forests of oak, beech, hazel and alder shimmer on the horizon.

We say farewell to Kangert, whose recovery ride ends here, and as we head towards the town of Olot the landscape changes. We are entering the volcanic region of Garrotxa, which contains 40 volcanic cones and 20 lava flows. Jaume and David take us away from the main roads along narrow, sun-baked tracks. The smell of manure and hot earth fills the air. We roll past the walls of the 682m Santa Margarida volcano and the horseshoe-shaped Croscat volcano.

The region is filled with churches and monasteries that can be explored at leisure, but with 90 kilometres already in our legs we head to the town of Santa Pau for lunch, where we sit in a square that overlooks the old town's jumble of medieval stone towers, archways and balconies. We wash our faces in a fountain and sit at the tables outside Bar Can Pauet to refuel on cheese tortillas and bocadillos of Iberian ham while we drink in the views. Inside the bar, old men play cards, watch football and smoke.

After lunch we are rewarded with a 25km descent from 500m to 179m which feels like the perfect post-lunch treat. We fly past fields of ochre soil and dense forests rich with shades of green and purple, like florets of broccoli. The stretch is punctuated by three short undulations before we hook south at El Sallent. Near to Sant Marti de Campmajor, we encounter a quirky

stretch of descent that meanders left and right, leaving alternate knees almost scraping the ground. We weave around the turquoise Banyoles Lake before taking a right turn off the main road for the final climb of the day.

The ascent of Rocacorba is one of the most famous in Catalonia. It is a 13.8km journey to a height of 970m with 881m of climbing. Despite an average gradient of 6.5% its steepest sections rise cruelly the further up you climb, from 10 to 15%. This is the climb after which David Millar named his private cycling club, the Velo Club Rocacorba. When in Girona, you do as the pros do: this is a climb to attack. The record of 28 minutes and 38 seconds is held by Dan Martin.

Shrouded in forest, there are few views to reward your efforts, but as the lactic acid rises and I haul myself out of the saddle to pile more weight onto the pedals, the satisfaction comes from knowing I'm tackling a climb on which the local professionals hone their fitness. As I emerge onto the summit, which is decorated with pylons and satellite dishes, a vista of pristine Catalan countryside yawns before me: lush forests and mountains dotted with old castles and rustic farmhouses. The Lake of Banyoles sparkles in the late evening sunshine. It makes the jelly legs and spittle worthwhile.

Cobbled together

We descend back down the mountain – a technical, twisting chaos that leaves my arms aching and wheel rims burning. With the sun setting, we complete the final 30km dash back ►



'This is the climb after which David Millar named his private cycling club'

The rider's ride

Cervélo S3

approx £3,500, www.madison.co.uk



This particular frame used to belong to Garmin-Sharp's sprinter Heinrich Haussler and is one of several pristine ex-team bikes available to rent from the Bike Cat tour company in Girona. Its blistering pace made my heart race as soon as I opened it up in the valleys of Catalonia. OK, simply knowing that I was planting my cheeks on a pro's bike made me feel quicker. But there are justifiable reasons for the thought. Stiff and responsive, with knife-like aerodynamics, it's a brutally powerful bike. The oval Rotor Q rings and Rotor 3D cranks, which minimise your pedalling dead spot, gave me turbo-heels every time I accelerated and I couldn't help but ponder how this bike would rip to shreds the roads of England.

Yes, my back ached after six hours of steep climbs (I'm used to a compact), but that's a basic set-up tweak. Once I'd become reacquainted with SRAM Red's double-tap gear changes the shifting felt sharp and it handled superbly on Catalonia's winding descents (after I'd figured out the opposite European brake set-up). It's a bike that encourages you to flick the Vs at the notion of comfort and race like a madman.

Right: Pro racer Tanel Kangert (at rear) uses the Catalan roads for hard training and today's recovery ride





‘Today I’m renting a Cervelo S3 which used to belong to Garmin’s Heinrich Haussler’



‘There’s a telling moment when Tanel Kangert answers a call and rides no-handed while I struggle to breathe’

► to Girona with Jaume and David generously pacing us home like loyal domestiques. The ride finishes with a beautiful climb up the cobbled alleyways of the old town and we finish in the elegant square by Girona’s Gothic Cathedral, where Jaume’s bike shop is located. My last thought is to make sure I don’t wreck his bike with a tired tumble on the steep cobbled paths.

As we walk back to our hotel, with the sound of clanking cleats echoing through Girona’s narrow medieval alleyways, I reflect on the day’s ride. This summer I’ve sweated up 2,000m climbs in Tenerife, conquered 200km stages across England and tackled epic 90kmh descents in the Alps. Today’s ride doesn’t compete with those numbers, but it was more enjoyable than any of them. Perhaps it’s the quiet, peaceful roads that kid you into thinking this is your private training ground. Maybe it’s the diversity of scenery, from rural farmland to volcanic domes, or the simple childish pleasure of nosing around the pros’ back yard. But above all I think it’s the way the Girona landscape enables you to spend hours soaking up the scenery, before unleashing lung-busting efforts on climbs when your mood and the landscape permits, so you

work hard without realising it. Girona is part training ground, part playground. Cycling here is a pleasure. Always keen on independence, in Catalonia the landscape doesn’t dictate to you, it presents you with choices. How hard you push yourself is up to you.

I’m reminded of a passage I read in David Millar’s book, in which he reminisces about a memorable winter he spent cycling in Girona with Michael Barry in the 2009-10 off-season, during which he shook off his demons of the past and rediscovered cycling for cycling’s sake. ‘The Catalunyan landscape is sublime at times,’ he wrote. ‘Now I’m older there’s no longer a direct correlation between my fitness and enjoyment on the bike. I didn’t really care any more if we had to go slow because we couldn’t go fast. We’d stop at times and take photos, we had tried enough cafés to whittle them down to trusted regulars, we had mountains we’d climb simply to get to the top, and routes to complement the accompanying weather. Out on the road, we’d talk and talk. It was fun.’ 🌸 *Mark Bailey is a convert to cycling journalism, and has done more miles on his bike this year than the rest of his life put together*

How we got there

TRAVEL

Ryanair provides direct flights to Girona from London Stansted, London Luton, Bristol, Bournemouth, Birmingham, Manchester, Doncaster and Newcastle. The city centre is just 18km from Girona airport and you can take a bus to the city centre for €2.50 or hire a taxi for €20-25. It’s also possible to fly into Barcelona, which is served by Easyjet and British Airways, and then drive 1.5 hours to Girona. Avis, Hertz and Europcar all offer car hire services from Barcelona airport.

HOTEL

We stayed at the Hotel Peninsular, which was clean and central. The rooms are simple but do the job, and there was no whinging about taking bikes up to the rooms. Breakfast is a buffet of meats, cheeses, bread, cereals and fruit to help you fuel up before a ride. Prices start from €59 (www.hotel-peninsular.com).

FOOD AND DRINK

There are hundreds of cafés, restaurants and bistros in Girona. Wander through the collonaded square of Placa Independencia and you’re likely to spot pro cyclists feasting on tapas or sipping coffee. We ate at Placa del Vi 7, a wine and tapas bar, and Dolce Vita, a cyclist’s dream that serves up giant portions of pasta and pizza.

BIKES

Bike Cat (www.bikecat.com) offers guided road bike tours in the Girona region from €45 per person and the chance to hire ex-team Cervélo and Felt bikes from €45 a day. It’s backed by the European Project Res’pir (www.respireurope.eu), which encourages active, sustainable and nature-based tourism.

