

GIBRALTAR TO MADRID BY BIKE, JANUARY 2013.

January 7th. Martin & I (Rob Foster) get a lift to Gatwick for the 07.10 flight to Gibraltar. Our bikes (matching Dawes Galaxy's) are in cardboard bike boxes. The plan is to cycle the 500 or so miles to Madrid, over two weeks, staying at cheap hotels, as it's too cold for camping.



ROB & MARTIN SETTING OFF FROM GIBRALTAR FOR MADRID, JAN 2013

On arrival, we reassemble the bikes. Mine has a wonky rear wheel, so obviously got damaged en route! Lacking Geoff Boxall's wheel building skills, I enquire about a local bike repair shop – luckily there is one in Gib. (Raleigh Bikes); luckily they can help, so we leave the machines there while we tour the Rock. The sun shines, its warm – English winter far away! Cable car to the top, views of Africa, apes, all very good. Returning to Raleigh, a new wheel has been fitted, so off we go.....

We spend the night in scummy La Linea, just over the Spanish border, but quite OK. Bikes safe in our room. Rooms in Spain cost around 40 Euros/night, so that's about £17 each. Generally things are cheaper than the UK. Tuesday we head north – a quiet valley is pretty with groves of orange trees, and we picnic by a river. Then it's all uphill to Gaucin, to a pension behind the local garage. Breakfast in a local bar (coffee & toasted bread is the norm). More big hills, as we are crossing the coastal mountains, with passes at over 3,000ft – some walking/pushing! There are 'white villages' to see, but the highpoint was Ronda where we spend the night, only 103km from Gib. Ronda has a huge river gorge, with a historic bridge.

Much downhill today, which was lucky, as nowhere to stay in our planned stop – on to the next big town made it a 104km day. The Spanish roads are mainly new, well surfaced, wide

and have little traffic. The countryside is rural, with millions of olive trees, smelly pig farms and quiet simple villages. A shorter day takes us to Montilla. Saturday we take the cheap and efficient bus into Cordoba to see the famous Mezquita mosque, now converted to a Christian cathedral. A picnic supper in the hotel – tins of lentils in a meaty sauce, heated over the camping stove are very tasty. The Spanish eat late in the evening, so it's better to get a menu of the day midday, and a picnic supper.



Sunday is chilly, so full leggings worn. Montoro Hostel is right by a motorway, full of truckers, with hearty grub. Then a pretty quiet lane winds uphill all morning, until the usual modern road is met. Two climbs to 3,000ft, then a rest for a good lunch. The night is spent in an industrial town, Puertollana. Wednesday starts fair, but rain falls heavily all afternoon as we fight a headwind on a busy straight road to Daimiel, and fall into the first hotel we find, which is actually a good choice. Hang stuff up to dry....

Weather better in the morning. More empty rural landscapes, and a good tailwind gets us easily to Cosuegra, which has windmills and Don Quixote connections – even a few tourists! By now we are a bit ahead of schedule, so we spend Friday doing a circular tour, which is notable for strong winds. Saturday was meant to be dry, but the rain is lashing down, and we are booked in at Toledo, 77km away! Don waterproofs and go for it – no choice. A long hard day, but a few coffee stops help warm us up.

Toledo is wonderful – go there if you can! A charming old town, river in a deep gorge, city walls, lots to see. And our hotel has a buffet breakfast so we stuff ourselves..... Tour the Alcazar fortress (OK) and Cathedral (V Good). Resist the shops selling huge swords, but Martin buys a fan for his daughter.

Monday we transfer to nearby Madrid, by coach; we didn't fancy cycling across the capital city. 2 tube train journeys, and we reach an Ibis Hotel near the airport. Check in, store bikes, then more journeys into the city centre, to scrounge bike boxes from a bike shop. And a quick look at the city park. Back to hotel – cook supper (in the loo, as smoke detector above the beds!). 721 km cycled.

After breakfast, we dismantle the bikes and pack them in the boxes, in the hotel lobby. This entertains passing guests. Then courtesy bus to Terminal 1, Madrid airport. Reach Gatwick at 6pm, snow everywhere!! Difficult journey home, but make it eventually.

All in all a great trip, but I'll try to avoid flying with a bike – too much hassle!

Rob Foster