



SPAIN'S TRANSNEVADA GETS A NATIONAL PARK PASS

280-mile marked off-road route in a national park sets precedent for Euro mountain biking

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Just 24 miles north of the tacky, sun-soaked beaches of southern Spain, the Sierra Nevada mountains stick straight up out of the level landscape, an eternal blue dot on Spain's heat index that pierces the illusion that in Spain, there are mostly plains. The area was declared a national park in 1999 and the Sierra Nevada National Park holds rank as Spain's largest national park.

Hundreds of miles of double-track wind their way through the park; climbs sweep upward as high as 11,148 feet, and descents can be white-knuckled, death-cheating affairs if you're unaccustomed to loose gravel, baby head-sized pinecones, and curves that are easy to underestimate. Unfortunately this vague, snarl of paths is practically un-navigable without a map or a local guide and it is easy to get perilously lost. Last spring, mountain bikers were shown the way out of this happy mess via the TransNevada off-road circuit. Initiated by Andalusia's Council on Tourism and supported by the Sierra Nevada National Park and the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) of Spain, these collaborators stitched together a 280-mile/450-kilometer route that encircles the compact, toothy range, and they marked it really well. The self-guided circuit is divided into eight stages, each between 45-80km, which circumnavigate the park's perimeter. There are also 11 complimentary one-day routes, each between 16-36km, which access areas just off of the TransNevada.

This unprecedented project to establish a mountain bike route in a national park took five years to complete, including numerous meetings between park and government officials and IMBA.

"The role of IMBA was to facilitate signage in the model approved and sanctioned by the French Cycling Federation, which granted

Spain permission to copy the system through an agreement signed by IMBA and the FFC in 2008," explained Victor Tarodo de Echenique, vice president of IMBA Spain. "Throughout several meetings with park officials it was concluded that the IMBA Spain signage system, i.e., the French system, was the most suitable and international, and one which European cyclists and those from elsewhere would be able to follow. As a result, the plan to mark the TransNevada and its 11 one-day routes was adopted. This was the first time something like this had been done in a national park in Spain."

More than 1,000 signs mark the route and are in place not only to guide cyclists on their way around the TransNevada but also to help them access the route as well. Maps and route markers that point the way to the TransNevada have been placed in nearby towns, some of which can be up to 10 miles off-route.

This signage system, along with the May 2012 inauguration of IMBA Europe, go a long way in advancing a vision of a continental trail network that could one day connect Portugal with Russia in an organized, uniformly-marked fashion. Spain's TransNevada circuit set a precedent when it became the first trail in a national park to be marked within the proposed framework of a larger plan. Now, not only is the TransNevada a 280-mile off-road circuit where you can dial up (or down) the suffering as much as you like, the TransNevada has become a model that mountain bikers can point to if opponents use "never" and "in a national park" in the same sentence.

The nine stage maps (there are summer and winter options for Stage 4) and 11 one-day route maps can be downloaded free from the website for Andalusia's government council on the environment. **DIR**

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