

Wish *YOU* were here?

You could be. If the view from your window doesn't make you want to ride the bike, it's time to look out of a different window. **RiDE** investigates the fly-ride phenomenon

Words **Simon Weir** Pictures **Mark Manning**

A STAGGERING PANORAMA OPENS before me - grey-green hills dropping to a glistening blue lake, a serpentine ribbon of immaculate fresh tarmac snaking its way downwards invitingly. The road is so perfect in the way it loops and hairpins across the mountainside it's practically a cliché: you dream of roads like this, never expecting to actually find them.

Barely 12 hours earlier this kind of road seemed like an impossible dream, as I shivered my way through a miserable November drizzle on a British motorway. Yet now here I am on one of the best roads I've ever ridden, bathed in warm Spanish sunshine. I'm on a brilliant bike, drinking in staggering views, with two days on amazing, traffic-free roads in

front of me. Riding a motorcycle simply doesn't get any better than this...

It's low-cost air travel that makes this experience practical. Even the dreaded Ryan Air Stansted to Malaga flight (other airlines are available, remember) was fine: pack light, get on early, sit back. No frills, no fuss, no hanging about: take me to the sunshine, now. It's not luxury travel but it's all that's needed to get a taste of summer riding even at the start of winter.

In the past, I was always put off fly-ride trips as the hire options seem to be Harleys (not ideal for the kind of quick, corner-heavy riding I like) or silly little bikes I wouldn't want to ride. Things have changed in recent years, with more diverse bikes available in many places - the most common alternative to Harleys seems to be ▶



BMW's. Fine for me, as I love the GS.

I'm staying at La Calera, a small group of self-catering apartments with a million-dollar view in the small town of Teba, an hour outside Malaga. Owner Mark Comer runs www.bmwmotohire.com, offering various flavours of GS, an RT and, from next year, a K1600GT. Packages of accommodation, bike hire and airport transfers keep costs down, so I've gone for the top-of-the-line R1200GS Adventure - a perfect bike for these roads.

"We started doing self-catering accommodation eight years ago, then three years ago some friends rode down on Goldwings," Mark explains. "They persuaded me to get a bike to hire to guests. After that first year, hiring to bikers overtook normal holiday lets. Now we have 10 bikes, all BMWs."

So what's the attraction of fly-ride holidays? Michael Pretswell was staying in La Calera at the same time as us. "I've been to this region twice before," he says. "Once on a fly-ride with a guide and once riding my Triumph Sprint ST solo down from Bilbao. Mark's package is perfectly suited to what I want to do, which is ride, ride and ride. I did 1700 miles in six days, almost all of them on twisties."

Time spent on good roads, not on dull ones getting there, is the big attraction of

fly-ride trips. Dave Pretswell has been to stay in La Calera three times. "I live north of Glasgow. To get south to catch a boat is the best part of 1000 miles, not to mention two wasted days," he explains. "Cheap flights make it accessible, the bikes are good quality and there are great roads to ride in every direction. I wasn't prepared for that - on my first trip I took an RT, intending to do big miles, but ended up doing lots of day-trip loops instead."

"You waste 48 hours on the ferry or riding through France just to get to northern Spain," agrees Richard Holland. "To get down to Andalucia would take three days at least - not practical if you have just a week's holiday."

"For 14 years, I'd done weekends with a group of friends," notes another La Calera regular, Steve Bucksey. "Until we had enough of crap weather in Scotland and France, so we decided to make sure... And this is real Spain, not the tourist stuff."

"We do get groups of guys just looking to ride," says Mark, "but we still get plenty

Organised tours take the fear-factor out of riding in places that might otherwise seem daunting

who come with the family. They can have a normal holiday together - but for a day or two, while the wife sits by the pool or goes into Ronda, the husband takes a bike and has a great ride. And we get couples - it's a great place for partners to try going pillion for the first time."

Is it easy to combine riding with pillion-friendly stuff on this kind of trip? Craig Simpson was at La Calera with his girlfriend Vivian when we stayed there. "It's a doddle," he confirmed. "Spain's such a bike-friendly country and the pace of life is so relaxed, so long lunches were balanced with long rides in the morning and shorter trips in the afternoon."

Of course, Spain isn't the only destination where you can have a riding trip. Most holiday destinations will have some kind of bike-hire available - and if you go to countries with a genuine motorcycling culture, your chances of hiring a proper bike increase. "I hired a Harley in Florida, on the spur of the moment," says RiDE reader Dan Cheetham. "It was so easy and surprisingly cheap - it was a fantastic experience. Just stay off the interstates."

That's the one thing to remember when riding overseas: when you don't know the roads, you need to make sure you find the good ones to make the most of the experience. One way to ensure that is to take an organised tour. As well as being designed to give you good riding, it can make everything easy; the lunch and fuel stops and the hotels are all sorted as well as the routes. Some tours even have a support vehicle following behind, allowing you to enjoy the ride without being loaded down with your luggage.

American rental giant Eaglerider have years of experience not only of putting riders on Harleys (and other bikes) but also of organising and leading tours. "I've had too many great moments to adequately list, from Monument Valley to Joshua Tree National Park to Glacier National Park," says regular tour customer Howard J. "If there's any drawback to organised tours it's that sometimes you'd like to stay longer in one place, but Eaglerider plan it well and we have revisited places we enjoyed."

Organised tours also take the fear-factor out of riding in places that might otherwise seem daunting - places where the language will be strange, conditions and local customs alien, where riding the right road will be great but getting lost might be dangerous. In destinations like India and Africa, having a guide to keep you on track and deal with the locals for you can make it easy to enjoy the kind of riding experience that used to be open only to hard-core round-the-worlders.

After riding there from the UK, former RiDE staffer Damon I'Anson now runs riding holidays in India and Nepal through

FLY-RIDE TO THE USA

It's one of the most popular destinations for fly-ride trips. Quite apart from the iconic images of biking associated with America, the US has the great appeal of speaking the same language as us (more or less). It is a huge place, but that means there's scope for all kinds of riding - from the deserts to mountains.

The language makes it easy to explore on your own. "It's worth learning about local traffic laws (you can turn right on a red light, for instance) and biking etiquette - for instance, they don't like filtering," advises reader Bryan Symons.

Going to America, you have to ride a Harley, right? Actually, no - hire-giant Eaglerider offers all kinds of bikes. However, most people do take

Harleys. "I'm a Triumph man and own a Rocket III, but you have to try a Harley in America," notes reader Andrew Tavener. "Just make sure you hire from someone reputable."

Distances are huge in America, but a planned tour should let you see the sights without too much time slogging along dull highways between destinations. "Remember to check the kind of riding and daily mileages first and make sure you know what's included in the price," says reader John McCombe. "Fuel, lunch and booze will all add to your overall bill."

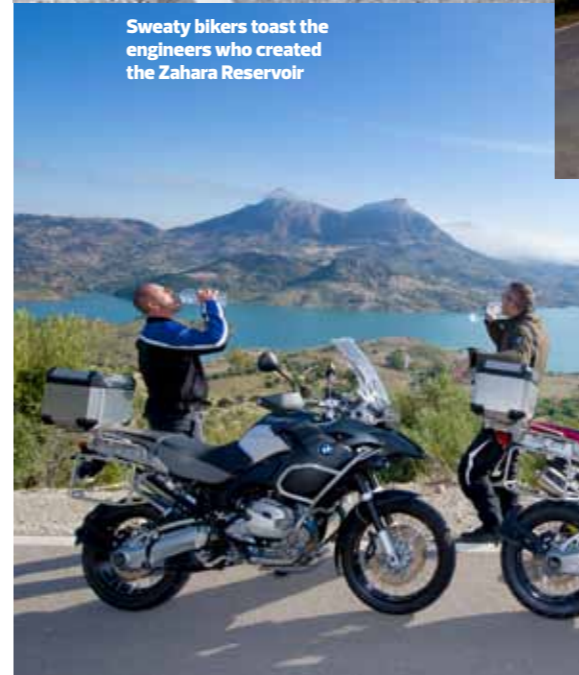
Top tip: Even if you hire the rest of the riding gear, do take your own crash helmet. For more information visit www.eaglerider.com.



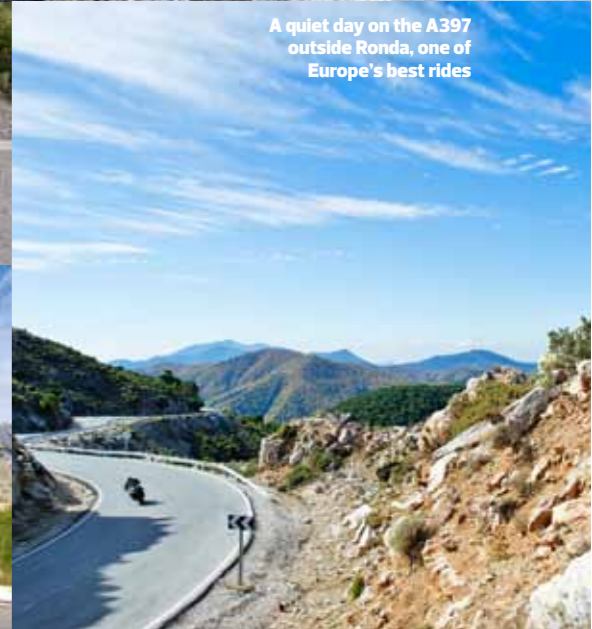
Don't make a mistake: vultures circle above the Ronda road



Sweaty bikers toast the engineers who created the Zahara Reservoir



A quiet day on the A397 outside Ronda, one of Europe's best rides



“Time spent on good roads, not on dull ones getting there, is the big attraction of fly-ride trips”

his company Blazing Trails Tours (www.blazingtrailstours.com). “A good tour operator makes the most of limited time,” he explains. “Their years of knowledge and experience let a customer get straight onto the best routes to the best destinations.”

And there’s a tour for every taste out there – from a laid-back cruise through the American West on Harleys to gravel-road tours of Eastern Europe or South America. Globbusters even offer 24,000-mile guided expeditions from the top of North America to the tip of South America, or from London to Cape Town, or to China...

Of course, organised tours are proper, big-commitment riding holidays – and the more exotic and time-consuming they are, the bigger the price tag will be. They may deliver what used to be money-can’t-buy experiences, but they’re not jump-on-a-plane, make-it-up-as-you-go-along trips you can do on the spur of the moment.

For my limited budget and limited free time, only short trips make sense. I’m not able to take 10 weeks out to ride across the Andes but, though it still requires a bit of saving up, a long weekend in Andalucia is achievable. It still feels exotic and exciting, walking out of an air-conditioned airport into a sultry Spanish evening’s heat.

Next morning, sipping coffee on the La Calera terrace as the rising sun paints

orange highlights on distant hills, it feels a world away from November in the UK. As my morning’s ride sees one empty, well-surfaced road flow into another in a glorious succession of sun-kissed bends, I’m left asking myself two questions: why didn’t I try this years ago? And, my riding buddies would love this, so when can I get them over here?

At least, that’s what I’m thinking as I ride the “Ronda” road – the A397 between San Pedro on the coast and Ronda in the mountains, which I’ve ridden on plenty of bike launches over the years.

But when I leave that beaten track behind, climbing into the Sierra de las Nieves on new and staggering roads that are utterly deserted, I start to think in more selfish terms. This is just so perfect, I don’t want to share it... it’s amazing... I should really keep it secret...

I can’t do that though – it wouldn’t be right. After the two best days’ riding of the year, I return to grey Britain and sit down to write this feature. But my head is still out there, on the warm, perfect roads of Andalucia. The escape has lasted far longer than the long weekend; the memories are warming me still. And ultimately, if there’s a reason to do a fly-ride trip, that’s it: you’ll have a truly unforgettable experience.

MORE INFO

To learn more about bike hire in Andalucia, with details of Mark’s accommodation package at La Calera, visit www.bmwmotohire.com

FLY-RIDE TO MOROCCO

Perhaps the most easily accessible and affordable of the exotic tour destination is Morocco. Riding there is manageable, fly-ride from southern Spain is even easier, taking the 45 minute Algeciras/Ceuta ferry across the Straights of Gibraltar.

You know you’ve left Europe almost as soon as you leave the port, riding dusty roads beneath a relentless North African sun. There are some excellent roads with immaculate surfaces, but it’s easy to find challenging alternatives if you decide to leave the main roads to discover Morocco, especially in the scenic Atlas Mountains.

Again, a guided fly-ride tour makes both the organisation and the routing far easier, providing the reassurance that you’re not diving headlong into the unknown, but riding with someone who knows what they’re doing. “Riding in the mountains and confronting raging floods in the desert was technical, to say the least, but it was the best adventure I’ve ever had,” says Raymond Linch. “Our guide David was excellent, I learnt a great deal and feel more confident as a rider.”

Top tip: Take seamless micro-fibre underwear and drink lots of water.

Further info: www.bmwmotohire.com



Morocco: another world but easy to reach

OTHER EXOTIC DESTINATIONS

ICELAND Dramatic riding on empty roads and off-road across a staggering volcanic landscape. www.ridingiceland.is

INDIA Huge, diverse, beautiful and also challenging. Riding an Enfield is practically compulsory. www.blazingtrailstours.com

AUSTRALIA Another massive, warm, beautiful and English-speaking destination. www.bikeroundoz.com

EVERYWHERE Want to do the round-the-world thing but not sure where to start? America to Africa to Asia, who you gonna call? Globbusters! www.globbusters.com

ANYWHERE Want help finding bike hire or planning a tour? There’s only one British travel agent who specialises in bike-based holidays. www.travel.com

The CA531 in the Grazalema National Park. Ever seen a better road?