

Southern Spain via Tandem (Vuelta Andalusia)

After memorable experiences in France, Italy, and Sweden, we decided to explore the dry mountainous region of southern Spain (Andalusia) via tandem. We toured Aug 28 – Sept 09, 2009 with 11 total days of riding (480 miles) plus rest days in Seville, Granada, and Malaga. We enjoyed the scenery (lots of orange, olive and almond trees), food (tapas!), and courteous drivers of Andalusia very much and look forward to touring other regions of Spain in the future. As expected for early September, it was very hot and sunny (high 90's), which contributed to the difficulty of some of the climbs. Timing a month later might have been better, but we all came home with great tans! And despite an unfavorable dollar-to-euro exchange rate, we found the hotels and food to be quite reasonable.

The two teams on this self-guided adventure were Team DL (aka Dos Locos, Duncan and Laura McCabe) and Team BS (aka Bandas Sonoras, Bill Leland and Sara Lundin), from Wilmington & Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina, respectively. Each person had a trip assignment: Sara – tour guide, Bill – hotels, Duncan – route planning, and Laura – daily navigation. Sara first selected the primary tourist sites of interest using the usual tourist resources. Duncan then developed a generally clockwise tour from Malaga to Seville, Cordoba, Granada, and back to Malaga. Duncan used “Cycle Touring in Spain” by Harry Dowdell as a guide, though we deviated significantly from the book's routes.

Normally on self-guided tours we prefer flexibility and only reserve hotels for the beginning and end of the trip. Bill made reservations at the Hotel Monte Victoria in Malaga for the first and last two nights of our trip. This is a charming small hotel with beautiful views of the city. The hotel arranged special transport for us to/from the airport (Team BS is still flying an ancient uncoupled Santana via cardboard box) and stored our luggage while we toured.

Since our tour began in August (Spanish national vacation month), Bill also reserved the second night's hotel, at El Chorro, near Ardales. Since we would never have found this beautiful spot en route, we've learned that for future trips we'll at least research the hotel options in each possible overnight city before leaving the US.

Team DL tours on a coupled 2002 Bushnell. It requires care to keep each tandem suitcase at no more than 50lb to avoid airline luggage fees (Delta gouged Team BS \$300 to fly their box from Wilmington to Malaga). We pack a \$10 portable luggage scale from magellans.com to weigh luggage for the return flight. For this trip we added a kickstand purchased from Tandems East, which we highly recommend.

Cultural observations:

The Andalusian daily schedule created some challenges for our cycle touring. Shops and cafes didn't open until 8AM or later, so an early bike departure (to beat the heat) meant leaving without breakfast. This worked for us when we knew we would find another town up the road an hour or so. Lunch is never served until 12:30 or later, though in the larger towns we could sometimes find adequate snack food at a bar or cafe. We usually ended up riding in the maximum heat of the day, unless we planned a late lunch after stopping for the day. Dinner isn't usually served until 8PM or later, so we often relied on tapas meals at bars and cafes. The Andalusians have a wonderful outdoor café culture. We loved sitting outdoors every afternoon* enjoying drinks and tapas, and watching people. It's apparently common for Andalusian families to spend summer nights out late and rely on an afternoon siesta to make up for the shorter night's sleep.

*In Baena, we were told that “afternoon” *starts* at 6PM!

If you're the type of cycle tourist who needs a hearty breakfast to fuel your ride, you will need to plan accordingly, as Andalusians prefer a light breakfast of bread and café con leche. A common breakfast

sandwich is a bread roll with just a slice of aged cheese and a thin slice of ham, or a lightly toasted roll slathered with olive oil and salt. The Andalusians eat copious amounts of delicious olive oil and it was available at every meal for bread dipping.

We drank the water with no ill effects. Unfortunately the Andalusians still smoke, a lot.

Navigating with Garmin: Laura's job on tour is to try to keep the wrong turns to a minimum, and blame them on Garmin. Laura has a love/hate relationship with him (her Garmin is definitely a "he"). Garmin was amazingly accurate at showing the locations of our hotels in Malaga, Seville, and Cordoba, based on the programmed addresses. He also led us efficiently into Seville and Malaga. But Garmin showed the Alhambra in the wrong part of Granada, sending us far out of our way. We have also learned to use judgment before following Garmin's "go to" routes, especially in towns. For an excellent Garmin review, check out Sheila Hoffman's article in the Nov/Dec 2008 issue of Double Talk. And by the way, Laura thinks all you control freak captains (yes, Greg Knecht, this means you!) should turn your Garmins over to your rear admirals and let them do the navigating (Sheila would probably agree).

Trip Diary:

Thursday Aug 27th – travel day – arrived Malaga, put bikes together, and explored on foot. It was obvious Team BS's box had been dropped, but we won't notice the bike damage until tomorrow...

Friday Aug 28th – day 1 riding – Malaga to Ardales – 43 miles.

With the help of Garmin, Laura navigated us through the city, heading northwest. But after only a few miles Team BS began dropping their timing chain. Stopping to investigate, Sara noticed the captain's spider and chain ring were bent, most likely when the box was dropped in transit. Most cyclists would consider this a MAJOR MECHANICAL, but our two captains rose to the challenge. While Laura and Sara sat by decoratively, Bill and Duncan swapped the captain and stoker chain rings (to distribute the misalignment) and straightened out some of the bent teeth. 1-1/2 hours later we were on our way. And after this mishap, we had NO MORE MECHANICALS the rest of the trip, not even a flat! (Note for future packing – line the bottom of the box with foam to protect the chain rings).



A lot of today's ride was through the El Chorro Parque Ardales, with some long climbs, to the beautiful Gorge of Los Gaitanes. We ended with a descent along a reservoir to the charming La Posada del Conde. After checking in at our hotel we went for a refreshing swim in the reservoir.



Saturday Aug 29 – day 2 riding – Ardales to Ronda – 37 miles.

A tough day of hot climbs through the Sierra de Ronda mountains. Around noon we rode into El Burgo looking for lunch. We learned that they were in the midst of their annual multi-day festival, so the restaurants were opening even later than usual for lunch (though the cafes and bars were full of people already drinking beer). We ended up with a less than memorable meal of breaded and fried snacks and some awful potato salad coated with a layer of mayonnaise. We never did learn the name of this dish, but we saw it other places and learned to avoid it! (In retrospect, this would have been a good

day to break out the picnic supplies.)

Our uninspiring lunch was followed by a long, hot climb and then finally a descent into Ronda, where we had reservations at the Parador de Ronda, overlooking the scenic gorge and old Moorish town. We spent the afternoon sight-seeing the historic town and admiring the view across the plains *below* us (despite our long descent into Ronda, we had more descending tomorrow to look forward to!).

Sunday Aug 30 – day 3 riding – Ronda to Montellano – 54 miles. The descent from Ronda to the northwest was an absolute blast. By luck, we left Ronda on a Sunday morning, when even the highway traffic was light. We were really enjoying the morning of riding, and stopped for cappuccinos at a roadside café. But then the climbing and heat started (upper 90s). We descended to a beautiful lake and decided against slogging back up to the fortified hilltop town of Zahara for lunch, though it looked quaint from below. We rode on to a nondescript village, just in time for a classic, long, delicious Sunday Andalusian lunch, surrounded by locals, at the town hotel. The rest of the day was hot climbing, but we were fortified by our great lunch. We ended up in the town of Montellano, a logical stopover en route to Seville. This was our first night without hotel reservations. We found the charming Hacienda El Huerto a couple miles beyond town, but they had no rooms available and sent us back to Hotel La Posada, which was not at all as nice. But it did have a refreshing pool, and that night we had a wonderful gourmet dinner in their restaurant – one of the best meals of the trip.

Monday Aug 31 – day 4 riding – Montellano to Seville – 44 miles. Duncan warned us that today would likely not be idyllic cycling, as all of the bike tours bus their clients in/out of Seville. But we were focused on the destination and made short work of the flat terrain, ignoring the Monday traffic as best we could. The surrounding fields were brown and harvested, but apparently sunflowers are grown here, so this ride might be very scenic earlier in the summer. We entered Seville from the southeast, the roads becoming bigger and more congested, until we merged onto a high speed highway. But the drivers were unbelievably courteous, and the posted signs indicated that bicycles (as well as pedestrians and tractors!) were allowed on the road (though we didn't see any). Finally we entered the city and were surrounded by scooters and other bicycles. Despite the congestion, we were always given our fair share of the road.



Seville is such a big city, finding a hotel was overwhelming. Bill used the computer at the too expensive Hotel Alfonso XIII and found the charming, affordable El Rey Moro hotel in the Barrio de Santa Cruz, and we settled in for two nights.

Tuesday Sept 1 – rest day – Seville. We used our first day off the bike to play tourist and give our legs and butts a break. The top attractions are the Alcazar, a 14th century palace and gardens where you can spend a couple of worthwhile hours, and the cathedral (third largest in Europe). But we were unimpressed with The Big Red Bus tour as it mainly seems to sit stuck in traffic in the modern parts of Seville. We picked up a map of city bike paths to help plan our route out tomorrow. We tried, but couldn't find the energy to stay up late enough to watch flamenco!

Wednesday Sept 2 – day 5 riding – Seville to Palma del Rio – 57 miles. This morning we had an adventure that we'll talk about for years. We left the hotel at first light (7:30am) to try to get out of the city as early as possible. Laura was navigating via the bike path map and Garmin. Suddenly, the bike path ended and we were confronted with a major highway blocking our way. Just then, a little white police car pulled up. We told them the name of the next town up the road, our intended breakfast stop, and ended up with a police escort (with lights flashing) for several blocks as they took us through town and to the quieter road out of town. We got a

picture of Bill with the two cops, thanked them profusely, and headed on our way. Up the road we found a traditional and cheap breakfast at a working men's café.



While researching hotels in Seville, Bill found Monesterio de San Francisco, a 15th century monastery converted to a hotel in Palma del Rio, a logical stopover northeast of Seville and en route to Cordoba. Today's riding was very pleasant on deserted, relatively flat rural roads. After arriving we enjoyed a classic, gourmet two-hour Spanish lunch at the hotel, and then hit the pool, where we met a group of single riders on tour via countrycycling.com.

Thursday Sept 3 – day 6 riding – Palma del Rio to Cordoba – 36 miles. We enjoyed very pleasant riding on good rural roads, mostly flat with a few short ups. The weather was a little cooler

today, too. The Hacienda Posada de Vallina, which Bill had reserved while in Seville, was charming and conveniently located directly across from the Mezquita (8th century Great Mosque). We had planned a short cycling day to arrive early and use the afternoon to see the Mezquita, which is a very unusual and interesting Muslim building with an elaborate Catholic cathedral plunked into the middle of it. Enjoy wandering through it, but don't bother renting the audio guide.



Friday Sept 4 – day 7 riding – Cordoba to Baena – 44 miles. Today we began heading southeast on great roads with no traffic, hot but with a bit of breeze. We arrived in Baena, a commercial olive oil region. We stayed at Hotel Casa Grande, a former mansion converted to a large business hotel in the center of town, and toured the local olive oil museum.

Saturday Sept 5 – day 8 riding – Baena to Granada – 68 miles. Since it was Saturday, traffic was light even though we were on main roads most of the day. We were finding the main roads had more traffic but more gradual grades and a clean wide shoulder. The rural roads were deserted but much more challenging, with more steep ups and downs. The weather was cool in the passes, and started getting hot as we dropped into the plains before Granada – a screaming descent. We had not made hotel plans and so began a late afternoon search in the old town near the Alhambra. We ended up splurging on the Alhambra Palace. It was pricey but convenient for walking, and had a gorgeous view of the city and surrounding plains.



Sunday Sept 6 – rest day – Granada. We spent all day touring the Alhambra, a historic Muslim palace and fortification, and one of Europe's greatest attractions. The audio guide helped us get the most out of the place.

Monday Sept 7 – day 9 riding – Granada to Alhama de Granada – 37 miles. We enjoyed nice roads with minimal traffic but no shoulder, with some climbing, though nothing horrendous. We picnicked by a lake, and saw few other food options for lunch. We climbed into the center of town and ended up at the modest and quaint Casa de la Sonrisa, run by a Dutch family.

Tuesday Sept 8 – day 10 riding – Alhama de Granada to Colmenar – 41 miles. The climb out of town was exactly as described – long, with lots of switch backs, but very scenic and well worth it. We descended into a huge agricultural valley and rode for miles past fields of ripe tomatoes, peppers, artichokes, and lettuce. The combination of road quality, scenery, and temperatures made this the best day of riding. We stopped for a nice lunch with the locals, but then ended up at a nondescript hotel. Colmenar is an industrial town with little to offer tourists, though we did have a good dinner at the Balcon de los Montes hotel, where we wish we'd stayed.



Wednesday Sept 9 – day 11 riding – Colmenar to Malaga – 20 miles. The morning started with some decent climbing to the top of the pass, where we stopped for a herder guiding his goats across the road. We also noticed the recently harvested cork trees lining the road. After stopping at a café for cappuccinos, we enjoyed the glorious descent into Malaga. The views of the city and Mediterranean were spectacular. The road is so steep it even doubles back over itself twice, which looks like two curlicues on the map! The mid-week traffic was light (this probably would not have been as much fun on a

weekend). With help from Garmin and the signs for Hotel Monte Victoria, we cruised right to the hotel and had the afternoon and evening to sightsee.

Thursday Sept 10 – rest day – Malaga. We spent the day like tourists (Picasso museum, Big Red Bus tour), shopping and packing the bikes for our flight the next morning.

PROLOG: AH, THE “JOYS” OF TRAVEL...

The trip home started with a smooth taxi ride to Malaga airport. We checked in, and were delighted when Team BS was not charged for their bike box. We landed at Charles de Gaulle airport on time, but with <1 hour layover. Unfortunately, we arrived at the gate for our flight to Charlotte <15 minutes prior to departure to find that they had already shut the gate. Air France Customer Service then spent the next two hours trying to figure out how to get us home. (Note for future: when a connection is tight, request seats near the front of the plane!)

We've learned on previous travels that it's usually better to get a flight - any flight - and start making progress towards home, rather than to accept a 24-hour delay on the original itinerary. We've also learned you have to help them with options, such as alternate airports and airlines, especially if you're flying to a small place. For example, the Customer Service rep asked what other cities were “near” our final airport, when the right question was “what airlines fly to your airport, and from where?” We were eventually booked to Boston several hours later, arriving late evening. We were not allowed to re-check baggage for our domestic flight the next morning, so we opted for expensive hotel rooms at the airport Hilton and schlepped our luggage there, to get some rest prior to the next morning's 5AM flight.



At 4AM the next morning, the US Airways ticket agent tried to send us and all of our luggage to United, at another terminal. The Air France customer service rep probably re-booked us on United, but we confirmed that

only US Airways had a 5AM flight to Charlotte, and eventually got our boarding passes. (The airlines' code sharing sucks - sometimes it is impossible to tell ahead of time which airline will actually fly the route.) Fortunately, Team BS's box had already been tagged all the way to Wilmington, so no extra luggage fee.

Our flights to Charlotte and then Wilmington were uneventful. Instead of getting home late Friday night, as originally planned, we arrived home early Saturday morning. One of Team DL's bike suitcases ended up going to Moline, Illinois but was delivered a few days later intact. Why Moline? Maybe because Wilmington's airport code is ILM, and Moline's is MLI...?

FINAL WORDS: We know we are very fortunate to have each other as traveling companions, and look forward to exploring Puglia, Italy together next April!

Team Dos Locos
Duncan & Laura McCabe

Team Bandas Sonoras
Bill Leland & Sara Lundin