



Off the beaten track

There may be more famous mountain biking destinations such as the Alps, but HFM headed to Slovenia for a pedalling adventure of a different kind – underground

WORDS Bruce Newton

Think mountain biking, and Slovenia may not be the first place to spring to mind. But this tiny country at the base of the Alps, bordering Austria, Hungary, Italy and Croatia – and once part of the now-defunct Yugoslavia – is a tempting proposition. There may not be a lot of land mass here, but it's lumpy and covered in forests. Slovenian mountain biking has emerged primarily through the evangelising efforts of one Dusan 'Dixi' Strucl, who's a geographer by trade and mountain biker by passion. Dixi runs a mountain bike tour company (BikeNomad; www.mtbpark.com) and ecohotel out of his base on a beautiful farm in Jamnica, in the very north of the country. Up here the hills are steep, the valleys deep and the views gobsmacking. Dixi and his son Anej assure me there are hundreds of kilometres of forest roads and single tracks snaking their way across, up and down the local Karavanke mountain range. You can go out and ride on your own if you want, but the smart way is with a guide – a role Anej usually occupies these days, though Dixi still gets out when he can.

Taking to the trails

The Strucls are very aware that riders with hugely varying skills and confidence levels come to stay with them, so the first outing is always in the local forests close to the farm, where such variables can be gauged. From there, a programme that suits the group will be worked out for the duration of their stay. Whatever your skill level, this feel-out session is a lot of fun. After the initial climb it's onto a pine forest where the single track is relatively smooth, fast and sometimes quite narrow, the loamy surface often covered in pine needles. At the end of it you'll be grinning, whooping and ready for more; that could involve any one of a number of options. If you simply want to cruise, then the beautiful forest roads that link storybook villages are ideal, especially as there are shuttle services available to avoid the most laborious climbing. For riders with advanced skills, there are trails that hug the ridge-tops and then plunge narrowly back into the valleys, often with substantial drop-offs to catch out the unwary.

Going underground

A true highlight – despite the name – is Death Valley. It earned this title in the days when a steel plant spewed various poisons into the air, killing off the vegetation. But the factory is long closed and the trees and grasses are back. As the trail heads gradually downwards you can see for miles in all directions. Mountains and valleys stretch to the horizon. The flow is awesome and the going pretty smooth. Then you duck back

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into the trees and plunge through a series of challenging hairpins. But everyone who comes here, whether a cruiser or a racer, has to go underground riding. Yes, underground riding – negotiating a single track in an old lead mine. Closed in 1994 when it became uneconomical, it now hosts riding tours that take you 6km from one valley to another. First operated in 1665, the mine has 300

entrances, 20 levels and 1000km of tunnels. We were on the fourth level, at 645m above sea level. 'Outside I must watch over everyone as the guide, but here in the mine everyone must watch over me because I am the only one who knows the way out,' laughs Anej. Initially, the tunnel is wide and high, but soon we duck off into a more compact research tunnel used for exploring. My helmet even scrapes on the roof. At one point we park the bikes and go clambering into a giant cavern and collect crystals from the floor. Later we stop and switch off our lights. Inky blackness envelops us. For miners who got lost in the labyrinth I can only imagine how terrifying it must have been. It takes about an hour to make the journey back, the last few hundred metres completed in an ethereal fog. What a way to finish a great riding experience. **HFM**
The Slovenian mountain biking season runs from April to October. The Strucl's host around 1000 riders at their ecohotel annually. Find out more online at www.mtbpark.com.

WHAT LIES BENEATH

Hold onto your handlebars – Slovenian mountain biking not only includes scenic forest and mountain trails (left), but also subterranean cycling in old mines (below)

