



# MARKS THE SPOT

*'Destination X' is a mountain bike holiday promising the best of natural Alpine singletrack — but would an epic hut-to-hut challenge prove a little too much of a good thing?*

*Words: Ben Smith Photos: Roo Fowler*



IT HAD BEEN FOUR HOURS AND WE WERE STARTING TO GET TIRED. THE BEST, AND WORST, WAS STILL TO COME

**W**hat goes up must come down. That was the mantra that was repeating itself in my brain as my aching legs/back/arms/neck struggled their way slowly up yet another almost-sheer rock face, cleated shoes slipping and sliding on smooth rock, 30lb of mountain bike balanced precariously across my back, sweat pouring off my face. Mountain biking is meant to be fun, right?

I'd reached the mid-way point of what was promised to be the final bout of hike-a-bike on a two-day Alpine trek. We were heading for a remote refuge situated in a corner of the Tour de Mont Blanc, a bit of proper adventure offered by mtb tour operator Trail Addiction as an extension of its 'Destination X' itinerary.

Even in its unextended version, Destination X is a bit of an adventure — it's a guided Alpine mountain bike holiday that steers clear of the major resorts and their networks of chairlifts. Instead there's remote, untouched singletrack, van or public bus uplifts, and a feeling of riding something really rather special. Trail Addiction branched out into this area four years ago, and it reckons these trails are the best kept secret in the Alps. The rides are based out of the small village of Areches near Beaufort, not a million miles from TA's more established base in Les Arcs.

### HIT THE HUT

So just how good are these trails? Well, the first couple of days allowed us to find out as we used the local public bus services to carry us (and our bikes) for a very small fee to the top of some of the nearby mountains. The bike park at Les Saïses allowed the guides to suss out the relative abilities of the group before separating us out and heading off to sample some of the trails that lead back to the town of Beaufort — and by heck, they were good! Mostly steep, loamy and riddled with tight switchbacks, what stood out was a lack of other tyre tracks or braking bumps. The unspoilt, natural feel made you appreciate why this area is so special to ride.

Once we were familiar with the type of riding, along came the offer of the 'hut trip', a two-day

refuge adventure. Our guide, Oli, explained that it would be a challenge and a totally different experience from our trip thus far — there would be less of the perfect singletrack we'd been riding, more uphill grind and a healthy dose of carrying, but that would be balanced by an sense of real remoteness, with stunning views and a huge sense of achievement. Most of the group politely declined, but for the eight of us who were 'in', a sense of nervous excitement started to take over.

The next day we were up and away early. With our trailpacks stuffed to bursting with food and fresh kit we were on the first bus out of town for the only bit of assisted climbing for two days. From the nearby town of Les Saïses we hit a fire-road climb that dragged us away from civilisation. A short section of sweeping meadow singletrack raised spirits before the first hike-a-bike of the day, a 45-minute push/carry up the Col de Very, past a herd of cows with their bells jingling away in classic Alpine style, and several bemused French hikers wondering why these red-faced Brits were carrying their bikes up this insanely steep path! The novelty of hike-a-bike meant this part of the day at least passed quite quickly. Most of the group hadn't had to carry a bike like this before, so a bit of trial and error to get the weight resting comfortably on your trailpack paid dividends — but having said that, the summit couldn't come quickly enough.

Over the top, a short traverse brought us to another restaurant whose location on the Tour de Mont Blanc (and stunning views of the mountain itself) ensured a full car park and a lot of people. A spot of lunch and a top-up of our drinks bladders and we were on our way again. It had been four hours since we set off, mostly uphill, and we were starting to get tired. The best, and worst, was still to come... ➔



Rack up for the mystery tour...



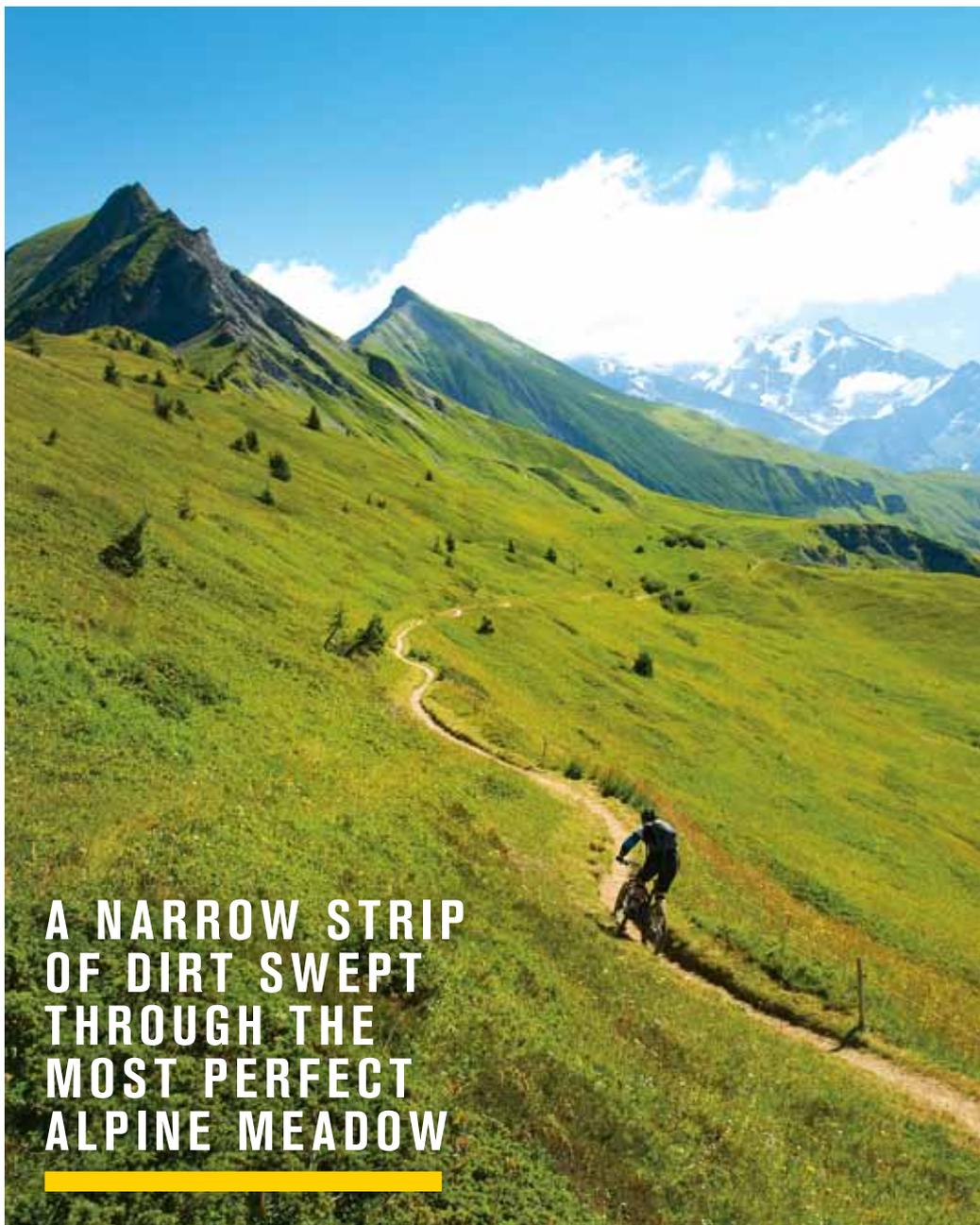
Not used to carrying? Don't worry, you'll get plenty of practice

The trail here was busy with families and couples taking on part of the famous Tour de Mont Blanc, and as we edged past we were straight into another push/carry up over the Col du Joly, followed by a tough, pedally traverse onto the Col de la Fenêtre. Here the trail got 'interesting', as guides like to say. At the top of the col is a narrow gateway between two rock faces, where we went from one side of the ridge to the other. Once through the gateway we were faced with a super-tight switchback descent on loose, bouldery scree that had us walking most, if not all, of the trail, although some of the lower turns were just about do-able with some triallsy hoppity-hopping.

Once down the scree slope we were into the trail-riding highlight of the day. After a gnarly rock garden we flew along a fantastic narrow strip of dirt that swept through the most perfect flowery Alpine meadow. The trail twisted and turned, dropped over huge smooth boulders, squeezed between rocks and switched back on itself half a dozen times before it finally spat us out onto a fire road. It may have lasted only a few minutes but it restored the smiles on our faces ready for one last effort... and what an effort that would turn out to be.

The first few hundred metres of the climb were rideable, but soon we were into a push, which soon became another hike-a-bike. Up and up we went, across streams, across ice sheets, up rock steps in a cliff face, a steady stream of sweat draining the last drops of moisture from our dehydrated bodies. This is where this story began, with calf muscles screaming and heels rubbed raw by the backs of my shoes. But the climb went on. And on. Battered bodies spread out as far as the eye could see. And then, finally, it was over, or so it seemed. We had reached a ridgeline and piled into a handy shed for rest and a chance to regroup. Barely a word was spoken — the exhausted glances we swapped were more than enough to convey our feelings...

But the hard work wasn't over. The path meandered along, maintaining its altitude via a few short, fun bits of techy singletrack followed by short, sharp climbs that, by this point, were just opportunities to get off and walk. In the late afternoon sun an eagle soared low overhead. Was it a mirage? We must be near the end by now, ➔



## A NARROW STRIP OF DIRT SWEEPED THROUGH THE MOST PERFECT ALPINE MEADOW



Sometimes it's less about pushing the envelope than just pushing full-stop



Graffiti's not an option when you're too tired to hold a pen



The sign that points to salvation

## FEATURE

mustn't we? Please? Oli assured us that we were close, and at every brow we expected to see the refuge in the distance. When at last we did, the relief and joy were overwhelming. We'd actually made it. The last short descent to that lonely building in the middle of nowhere felt like heaven. As we parked our bikes, knowing that we wouldn't need to go near them until the next day, smiles started appearing on our exhausted faces — the ordeal was over.

### LEFFE'IN MARVELLOUS

The refuge was an amazing place, a big open communal space with two dorm rooms full of simple bunk beds. It was chock-full of hikers, now with the addition of our small bunch of crazy British mountain bikers who began the important task of rehydration by ordering a round of celebratory Leffes (pints, of course). Big bowls of soup and stew disappeared as we sat chatting merrily with the hikers who seemed amazed at what we'd done, after which we sat and watched the most perfect sunset over the most beautiful unspoilt backdrop. We soon forgot the pain we'd endured to get here and started to feel sorry for those who hadn't taken the trip. It may have been the beer and the altitude, but the sense of achievement was something else. And from here, surely, the only way was down.

That's where we were wrong. After the kind of deep sleep that only total exhaustion and Belgian beer can offer, a hearty breakfast was scoffed as we watched the sun rise. And with no time to spare we were straight into a push up a narrow ridgeline path leading to the 2,700m Col de la ➔



Alpine apparition: this mountain refuge is too good to be true



Belgian beer and bravado send spirits soaring



Even the moon looks pretty full-on



Groundslog Day: morning brings yet another testing Alpine hike-a-bike



Eyes on the prize:  
don't look left!

Croix du Bonhomme. The views were stunning, a complete 360-degree panorama of peak after peak disappearing into the distance, all under a perfectly clear blue sky. No doubt about it — this was *proper* mountain biking. And no doubt, too, that I am a proper wuss when it comes to heights.

The start of the descent was unforgettable for many reasons. The view was one, the narrowness of the trail another, and the drop to the right, some 300-400m straight down, was by far the most compelling. From harrying Oli at the front of the pack on most of the downhills I found myself creeping along at the back, feet unclipped, bars death-gripped. I was bricking it. I am clearly not good when it comes to exposure — and photographer Roo made me go back and do it again, twice, for pictures!

Once we were off that ridgeline the descent was more traditionally 'Alpine'. The trail took a snaking line across a fast grass meadow before we dropped down a narrow sandy switchback track to the village of the Col du Sauce.

After yesterday's 5,600ft of climbing we were expecting a similar amount of descending, so when Oli pointed to a doubletrack that climbed steeply out of the village we were understandably confused. The climb was a drag — select first gear and engage winch. We climbed for almost an hour, but the view while we waited for the stragglers (almost) made up for it.

All too soon we were off again. The trail for the next couple of hours followed a mixture of hiking and cattle paths across fields before it became a highly entertaining, technically tricky traverse. We finally lost our height on a switchback fire-road track to the edge of the incredibly beautiful Lac du Roselend. Another gentle climb took us to a lovely restaurant overlooking the lake, where we collapsed into chairs in the shade and ordered food, food, and more food. For a day of supposed descending we'd climbed another 2,700ft and we



What goes up...  
'Got Wood' offers  
blessed relief

were tired with a capital T. And we still had the Col du Pré to descend!

Trail Addiction calls the final descent 'Got Wood', and it's a sublime, wooded, loamy switchback-fest riddled with roots and rocky drops that tested our aching bodies to the limit. When we arrived back at the cafe in Beaufort we were more than ready for a well-earned, post-adventure beer.

## UNFORGETTABLE EPIC

This trip had been two of the hardest days I've ever had on a bike. We had pushed ourselves to the limits both physically and mentally. Despite some mega bits of singletrack the riding would probably have been more fun had we stayed with the others in Beaufort, but that would miss the point of the trip. When asked if we were glad we did it, we were almost unanimous in saying yes. The sense of

achievement that two long, hard days in (and out of) the saddle brought us was huge, and describing how we felt that evening in the refuge as we rested our weary limbs and talked about our travails is beyond my meagre vocabulary. This was a proper adventure, and one that I've been boring people about ever since my return. Epic. **mbr**

## BIG THANKS TO...

Thanks to Ali, Chris, Oli and everyone at Trail Addiction ([trailaddiction.com](http://trailaddiction.com)). Destination-X trips run from June 28 to August 23 and cost £649 (including transfers, food, accommodation and guiding). Hut-to-hut challenge is an additional £40. Flights not included — Geneva is the nearest airport. Thanks also to [savoie-mont-blanc.com](http://savoie-mont-blanc.com).