

SEVEN HEAVEN

Team Fisher waited months for their new CR7s, they won't even let you breathe on them.

So how do you get your Test Editor a ride on one of the first three in this country? By offering a team rider a trip to Borderline Holiday's new MTB paradise, that's how!

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The Fisher CR7 in the Hautes Pyrenees

During the Pyrenean stages of the Tour De France Robert Millar, 35 minutes before powering over the Col du Tourmalet on his way to a stage victory at Super Bagnères, passed through a small village called Barèges. To Millar, Barèges was probably just another hamlet full of noisy people who got in his way. To MTB riders, Barèges should soon take its place alongside other names such as Chamonix and Verbier in the Big League of MTB hot spots.

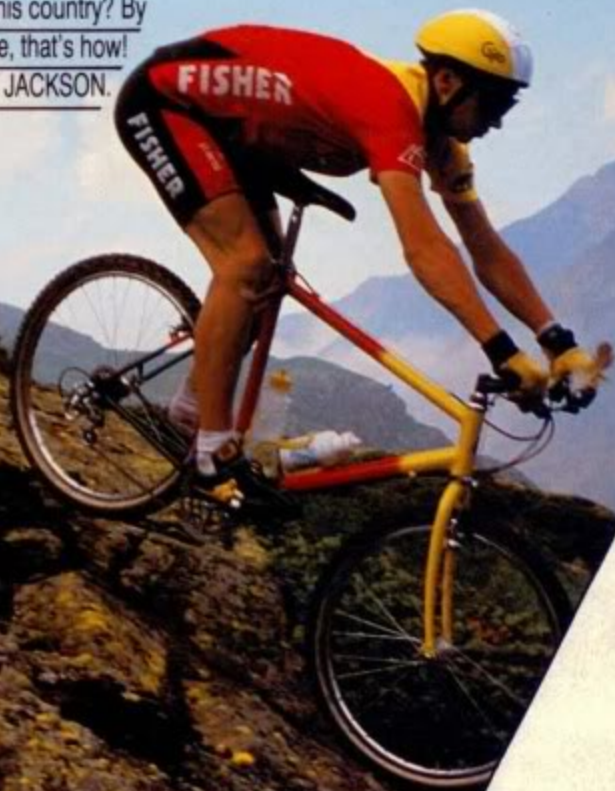
BIKE ACTION

Barèges has a resident population of 220, a figure that has changed little since Napoleon built baths there. Baths to help his wounded soldiers make a speedy recovery by bathing in the sulphur-rich water that bubbles from nearby springs. The baths are still in operation and work wonders on tired legs!

Although only 30km away from the ultra-touristic Lourdes, the Barèges Valley may as well be in another world – at least a different era. Here the hay is cut by scythes, to the slow jangle of cowbells as the cattle move between pastures.

Life is conducted at a relaxed pace under the hot sun and the rocky peaks of D'Ourdegon and Lurtet. Occasionally, from dizzying heights, a parapenter will descend lazily into the village. Colourfully clad rock climbers assemble in the cafes before and after a day's climbing.

But a keen-eyed observer, looking high upon the valley walls, would see a two-wheeled object flash silently down the hillside – bursting through the slow pace of the mountains, spitting up rocks and raising dust in a thrilling descent. Because this area means ACTION for mountain bikes.



GETTING THERE

Travelling time from my doorstep in London to Barèges was under five hours, MTB and all. This was due in part to travelling on a scheduled air service, which is not so prone to delay as chartered flights, but also it helped being collected at Lourdes Airport by the **Borderline Holidays MTB Guide**, Patrique Abadie. The airport collection service is available to all MTB riders staying at **Les Sorbiers** – the small, friendly hotel owned by the company and run by Pete and Jude, who are mountain walkers themselves – our base for the week.

FEELS GOOD

The difference between a good time and a great time (anything else is highly unlikely) was made by Patrique, guide extraordinaire! Born and bred in the region, Patrique knows all the best areas

for riding and, with two years experience as an MTB instructor, has the skill to show how it's done.

Without a guide (and you can go it alone) an MTB rider may not find the best of the terrain, but one thing that is impossible to miss is steep descents!

After one hour of descending you really start to feel the burn in the hands and arms. Hit one of the rocky pitches now and you are fighting for survival! You want to avoid putting a foot on the ground, but to lose balance and fall could send you on a long, unhealthy descent. One thing: never look over the edge, it is very bad for balance and morale alike.

Keeping eyes firmly on the obstacles and negotiating the path as it tumbles awkwardly down the hillside is totally absorbing. Reaching the end of the pitch you feel a mixture of relief and exhilaration, hands off the brake levers,

the fingers rejoice. The bike skims along on a smooth section of track and you plummet down through the woods. Now it is hard to restrain a smile.

HAMMERHEADS

Although there is an abundance of easy, laid back riding terrain to choose from, Nigel and I requested the sheer, white knuckles stuff. A typical day saw us loading bikes into the van then driving to the bottom of the mountain, where we would finish our ride. There Patrique unloaded a moped and chained it up, ready for him to go and retrieve the van at the conclusion of the ride.

Thirty minutes later we'd pile out of the van at the top of the mountains. The world of the peaks is an arid, eerie place. From the high windswept tops you can't help marvel at the panorama.

Sometimes a rolling sea of clouds covered valley after valley through the clammy midst of which we would pass on our descent to the valley floor. More often it was a clear sunlit view down into the valley bottom where everything looked so tiny and flat.

We lathered on the sunblock to protect us from the sun – most fierce in this rarified, tonic air – then began the long, winding descent. Patrique went first, after a rider's briefing:

"Near to ze top is a leetle technic, very deep, you say? No steep, wiz rocks, then after it is more sympatique, you understand? – I think you enjoy it."

TWO HOUR DESCENTS

Two hours later, still descending! Having traversed steep slopes on narrow tracks (remember: never look down!) and ridden straight down vast slabs of sloping granite which were rideable in the dry, but neither of us would have attempted in the wet – the following slope was too long and too steep.

We soon discovered the sections of track that were Patrique's favourite, those down the wooded walls of the valley, where narrow traverses down steep slopes are precariously linked by sharp hairpin bends, that appear unrideable. Here our guide showed spectacular form. The technique was to turn the front wheel around the steep bend, lock the front brake on and allow the rear of the bike to lift high into the air, then pivot on the front wheel, bringing the back end to ground in line with the front wheel. Sounds difficult? It is! Better not to wait until you need the technique before trying it. Instead, practice on a small slope where a tumble over the edge will produce only bruises.

RIDE OF YOUR LIFE

Nearing the bottom we shot a couple of long woodland staircases. Whilst requiring concentration this was also tremendously entertaining – which basically sums up the riding we did there. Such delights as crystal clean water, tonic air, hot sunshine, spectacular scenery and alpine flora, are all most noticed and best appreciated before starting and after completing a ride. But in the Pyrenees, when you are on your MTB, expect to have the ride of your life!



SEVEN



HEAVEN



THE FISHER CR7

What do the initials CR-7 stand for? Most people who've ridden one guess at "comprehensively responsive" or "champions ride"! In fact initials do bear an indirect relationship to performance, for they are those of Richard Cunningham - who is to MTBs what Steven Spielberg is to cinema. Cunningham helped Fisher in designing the CR-7.

The ?? Well the main-frame is made of 7005 aluminium but that is guesswork.

FAT YET THIN

7005 aluminium I was once told, when doing some research into X-C ski racing poles, optimizes strength, rigidity and lightness in aluminium. The CR-7 is all three: ultra rigid, easily strong enough to carry my 12½ stone bulk across the bumps, and weighs in at around 26lbs - one of the lightest bikes on the market.

Gary Fisher, using thin-walled tubing, has made the front triangle FAT. As well as maximizing the three mentioned qualities, fat tubing creates a good visual impression, that of a sturdy and reliable machine. Other MTBs look undernourished beside it.

The main-frame is good - very good, but the two strokes of genius on the Fisher are the rear triangle and the steering system.

REAR TRIANGLE

The rear triangle is not aluminium like the main-frame. Instead, Gary Fisher sought the assistance of Richard Cunningham to attach a Chromoly back end to an aluminium body. These two materials cannot be welded so they decided to use a bit of motorcycle technology and bolt the rear end on. The seat-stays are attached to the top tube with extra-tough allen bolts, which screw into heliarced inserts. The chainstays have investment-cast fittings that slot, with microscopic clearance, into the bottom bracket shell. Again extra-tough allen bolts are used, extending from the bb shell and screwing firmly into each of the cast and threaded ends of the chainstays.

Adjustment to the chainstay bolts can be made by removing threaded plugs in the front of the bb shell and inserting an allen key. This should not be necessary however, as there has been no record of the bolts coming loose in the 18 months that Fisher has been making these bikes.

TUBE WISE

The main reason for this unorthodox design is that while aluminium has proved to be a remarkably good main-frame material, providing strength,

rigidity and lightness, it is not so good for the rear triangle. This is because smaller diameter aluminium tubes allow too much flex with cantilever brakes, and adequate wheel clearances can be achieved only by drastic re-shaping and flattening of the chainstays.

Fisher Snakebite tubes in Tange chromoly are very rigid, allowing positive braking, and they give, in conjunction with an extra wide bottom bracket, the most tyre clearance that we have seen on any MTB. Without deformation too - the right chainstay has a slight dimple to prevent the large chainer from touching, that's all.

STEERING SYSTEM

Up front the design innovation is, if anything, even more impressive. Here we encounter the Evolution steering system, already considered a major design breakthrough. The Evolution headset is an oversize unit which already has been copied by one big S and could be on general release as early as next year.

The headset and steering column are about 25 per cent larger in diameter than conventional units. This makes an astonishing difference to the steering characteristics.

CONCENTRATED STRENGTH

The design is based on tests that showed the major stress point on bicycle frames to be around the bottom of the head tube. Fisher saw this as the obvious place to concentrate strength. This he achieved by making the whole unit bigger, as has been done so often before in main-frame

design. Gary Fisher stuck his neck out, produced a unique headset and brought in a winner. Although spare parts are available through Fisher dealers for all non-standard components, nobody has yet succeeded in destroying an Evolution headset by simply riding the bike.

The fork blades are also oversize, combining with the rest of the steering to produce the unusually predictable ride. Tight radius shoulder bends continue a theme of massive clearance for wide tyres and muddy conditions. Investment-cast fork ends, also designed by Gary Fisher, are an added bonus, contributing to the steering response. This is the basis of a truly remarkable MTB.

SPECIAL FEATURES

This bike boasts more special features than the Cannes Film Festival. Here are some of the more notable:

- In response to the trend towards smaller frames, the CR-7 has a long top tube and a 350mm seat post, that is a massive 31.6mm in diameter, allowing minimal flex yet great extension.

- The bottom bracket is 15mm wider than a conventional unit, this is where the exceptional tyre clearance starts at the rear. Mud will never clog this bike.

- Cable routing is just right: at 11 o'clock along the top tube, and mounted far enough down the main tube to be well clear of the head tube. The guides are all attached using lightweight aircraft rivets.

THE RIDE

There are no secrets to the ride of the CR-7. Simply step on and the bike welcomes you aboard. The great thing is that although the

initial impression is very good, it gets better and better.

Paul Skilbeck considers that racing this bike gives him a clear advantage over his nearest opponents, but the CR-7 is certainly not inaccessible to novices. The extreme good nature of the bike allows the first-time rider to relax and enjoy.

The steering is predictable from low-speed tight corners to high-speed tight bends, always obeying commands and forgiving of minor mistakes.

The fun begins when one starts to plumb the considerable depths of the CR-7. Paul reports: "I am still building up the courage to take the bike closer to the limits of its control. Speeding down unpaved descents faster than I could pedal I had to apply the brakes. The bike was completely unworried, it was me who was flustered!"

The CR-7 soaks up rock-shock and ruts, tracking and hanging on where other thoroughbreds skid and stumble and, with chainstays under 17in, it climbs beautifully.

COMPONENTS

The components are of the highest standard. 32-hole Araya RM17 rims, at a slim 17mm, create a more effective tyre profile for cornering and the difference is noticeable. Kevlar beaded Fatrax 1.9in tyres guarantee sure footedness on climbs and corners alike. Double-butted spokes lead to Shimano Deore XT11 hubs.

The Deore XT11 groupset is, as we have mentioned once or twice before, the state of the art groupset for '89, led by the slick Hyperglide rear gear change.

NON STANDARD

On the bike pictured there are a couple of non-standard parts. Shimano Biopace HP chainrings are standard, but we fitted custom made EGG Rings because Paul thinks they offer a better purchase on the steep, rocky climbs we were doing in The Pyrenees.

Also non-standard is the rear derailleur guard, which was installed for protection on the narrow and rocky trails that we liked to ride most of all.

The standard colour for '89 is metallic-grey main-frame and black rear and front ends. Colour schemes for '90 are expected to be violet/chrome and black. Prices are not likely to change though, and the Fisher CR-7 should retail at £1,200. This price tag is in "cycle exotica" terms and the bike is very good value for money.

Really, though, the best advocate for this bike is a test ride. The CR-7 speaks most eloquently for itself.

