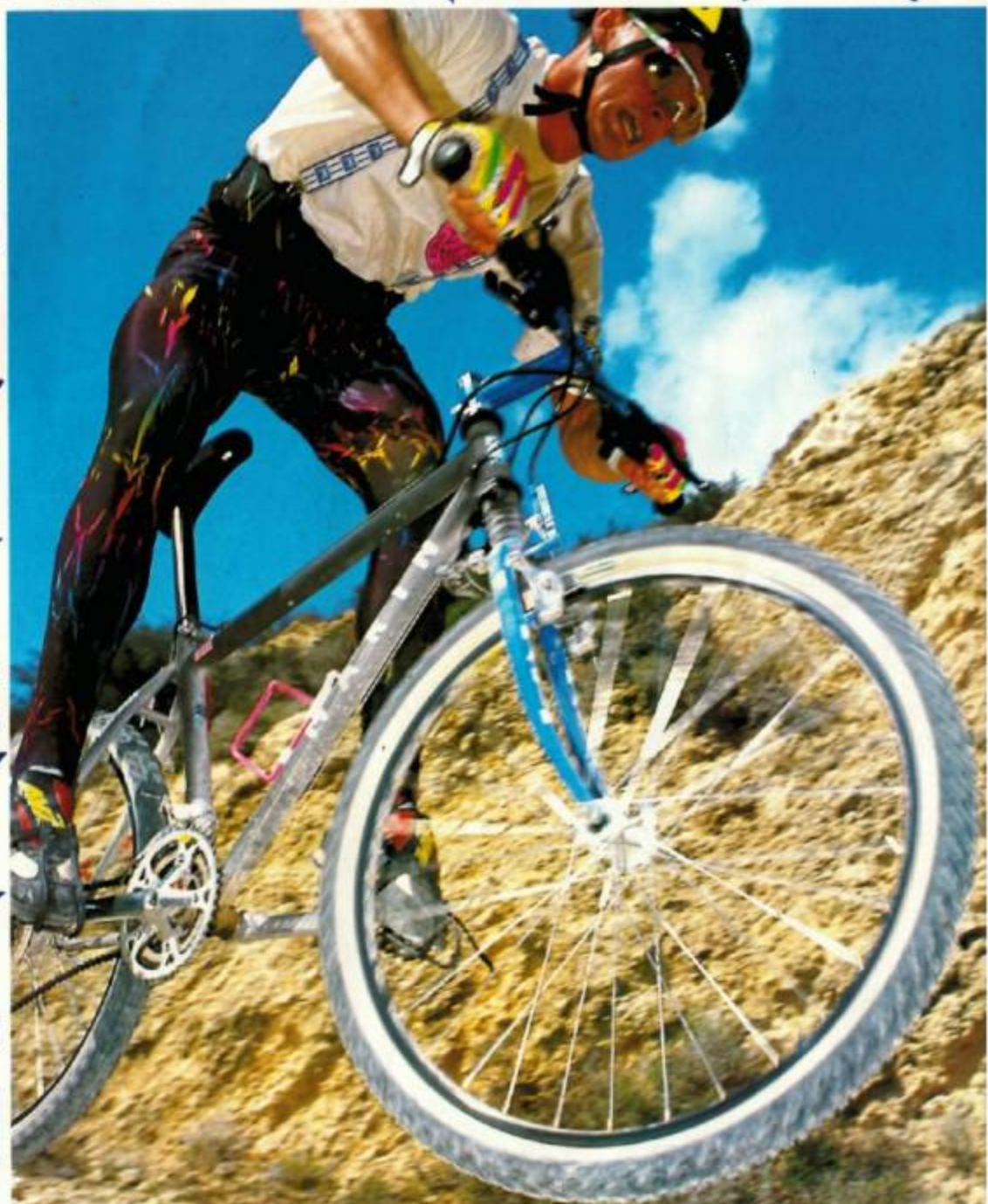


MT. AENOS

DOWN KING UP M



You don't need a visa to go to Greece, just a passport, and for a change PAUL 'Oh, no I've forgotten me passport again' HINTON remembered his. With uncharacteristic respect for international travel regs he went to check out Cephalonia and a Marin Special Edition kitted out with the latest Browning suspension.

Greece, home of fetta cheese, Ouzo, the Acropolis... and some damn wicked mountain bike terrain!!

You don't need a visa to get into Greece, so jetting off with your passport in one hand and mountain bike in the other to do some rad riding couldn't be easier. And unlike the last couple of times I've been abroad for MBUK I *did* take my passport!

CEPHALONIA

From 10,000 feet up, the island looks white and rocky. So it should as it is made up entirely of limestone, with very little vegetation. The vegetation that is present tends to be made up of olive trees and spiky thorn shrubs.

Saying that, I only suffered one puncture in the whole week of off-road riding and that was from a rim pinch. It is advisable to take plenty of fluids with you. Once you get out of the wind and start climbing, you'll start to feel the heat.

WHY ARE WE HERE?

The trip had two sides to it. One was to check out the off-road possibilities for mountain bike holidays through the Greek Islands Club Holiday Company. The other was to see if I could break a pair of proto-type **Browning** suspension forks.

THE ISLAND

The idea was to spend a week exploring the tracks, some of which the islanders regard as major roads, which lead all around Cephalonia. At the southern end is the main mountain, Aenos, a mere one vertical mile.

We spent the first few days riding to beaches like Mirtos on the west side, and to St. Effimia, close to the Melissani

lake. This clear blue lake used to be underground, until the great earthquake of 1953, when a large chunk of the roof fell in. The water from one side of the island flows to the other here through a very long underground stream.

On then to Sami, the ferry port to Ithaca and the Greek mainland. The road back across to the main town of Argstoli, the short cut, (we thought!), is a long, tough climb on one of the better 'roads'. The surface is still pretty lousy. The road is steep and each bend reveals yet more climbing, until finally the top of the ridge appears, at about the same height as Snowdon, Britain's second highest peak.





THE BROWNING SUSPENSION

Several bike manufacturers in Britain and the USA have shown interest in this suspension fork, instead of just sticking on a retro-fit fork system like **Rock Shox** and in Britain, **Marin's** will probably be the most widely available bikes with the **Browning** forks.

The first thing you will notice about the *Hydro-Pneumatic Fork System* is that the suspension unit is not in the fork blades but in the steering tube. For this reason the bikes have to use *Evolution* size (1.25 inch) head tube. These are not retro-fittable forks unless you already have a bike with the *Evolution* system. Even then you will have to be careful in matching the forks to the bike, as they raise the front end by over two inches. For a start though the forks will only come on stock bikes. **Marin** are looking to attach them to their *Special Edition Pine Mountains* and *Team* bikes.

FRAME CHANGES

Marin make *Special Edition* frames to accommodate the forks to allow for the way that they raise the front of the bike. This of course raises the top tube and bottom bracket.

Marin maintain that to get the correct handling using suspension forks, the frame design must incorporate the

added height. With this in mind the prototype handbuilt (British) frame had to have the front end totally re-designed.

To get a decent stand over height, the top tube slopes back even further than the standard **Marin** bikes, though the seat tube length is the same.

The handle bar height would also be raised by the added inchage, so the handle bar stem had to be lowered till it was almost horizontal. One thing that did strike me was that the stem could be flipped over to raise the handlebar if a different riding style was wanted, though this might affect the handling characteristics.

THE FORK

As on all suspension forks the front brake cable guide has to be repositioned so that the brakes don't come on and off when the forks soak up the bumps. The cable guide on the test bike looks a bit of a bodge job but will be redesigned for the real thing.

The fork is built around a 'Hydro-Pneumatic Spring System'. The gas and spring provide the suspension and the oil (hydro) provides the dampening.

The brilliant feature of the **Browning** fork is the ability to dampen the system further or completely lock it off. This is achieved by simply turning the knob on the top of the steering column, which protrudes above the stem. The action is so smooth that it only takes thumb and forefinger to adjust and all this can be done while riding.

One problem with suspension forks is that the blades need an anti-rotation device to stop them from rotating around the sliders. With other systems, the anti-rotation device is bolted onto the brake bosses and incorporates the cable guide.

As the fork blades on the **Browning** are like standard forks, the anti-rotation device is a pair of specially machined pieces of aluminium. Attached to the rear of the fork blades via brazed M5 bolts and to the suspension unit, it provides the steering with perfect tracking, even on the toughest of terrain.

Cephalonia and Mount Aenos provided me with the perfect testing ground for the forks - nowhere in England will you find roads with such big pot-holes (well maybe in London!), and a mountain so high.

THE RIDE

Suspension forks do things to mountain bikers. The behavioural pattern of normal riding suddenly changes when you find you won't bend a rim or get rock pinch punctures. For some reason you then tend to head for the biggest pot holes, the biggest rocks, the biggest cliffs... ahhhh.

But seriously folks, these forks allow unprecedented rough riding. Probably the worst thing about having front suspension is that if your bike doesn't



have rear suspension then you're going to get your bum kicked as the rear wheel hits whatever your front wheel just glided over.

The **Browning** forks make you want to hit the bumps with a vengeance after all the pain they've caused you in the past. Taking the rutted inside line of a track while your mate slows down or takes the outside line is a joy. The **Browning** fork is also stiff enough not to nose dive when going down steps or the like, which is something that puts me off other fork suspension systems.

There is a noticeable weight difference between the **Browning** and other suspended forks. The **Browning** is about a half pound lighter. The slider is protected from dirt and water by a very efficient rubber gaiter like those on motor bike forks.

To sum up the fork in one word would be very difficult but basically once they've lost a bit more of the weight the **Browning** fork and **Marin's Special Edition** bikes are going to be hot, hot, hot. Watch out next year when the US and British **Marin** teams start riding the real thing!

Thanks to Greek Islands Club for flights and spacious, clean accommodation. Anyone who likes the sound of Cephalonia should give them a call on 0932 220477.