

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



It's not About the Tapas

Polly Evans

About the Book

After working for four years at a London book publisher, Polly Evans moved to Hong Kong where she spent many happy hours as a senior editor on the city's biggest entertainment weekly. But fighting deadlines from a twizzly office chair and free use of the coffee machine seemed just too easy. So Polly exchanged the shiny red cabs of Hong Kong for a more demanding form of transport - a bicycle - and set off on a voyage of discovery around Spain.

From the thigh-burning ascents of the Pyrenees to the relentless olive groves of Andalusia, Polly found more adventures than she had bargained for. She survived a nail-biting encounter with a sprightly pig, escaped over-zealous suitors, had her morality questioned by the locals, encountered some dubious aficionados on the road and indulged her love of regional cooking. While she pedalled, Polly pondered some of the more lurid details of Spanish history, for example, the king who collected pickled heads, the queen who toured the country with her husband's mouldering corpse, and the unfortunate duchess who lost her feet. And wherever she cycled, she ate and ate - and yet still she shrank out of her trousers.

It's Not about the Tapas is funny, irreverent and inspiring. It will establish Polly Evans as one of the most exciting new voices in female travel writing.

Contents

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Map

1. Breaking the Chain
2. Four Chorizos and a Tortilla
3. You Call *That* a Mountain?
4. A Very Cantankerous Pig
5. Two Old Trout
6. Anyone Got Any Epo?
7. A Load of Fossils
8. Doña Pilar and Her Very Large Sandwich
9. Who Let the Dogs Out?
10. Where There Is Hair, There Is Happiness
11. Upwardly Mobile
12. The Town Formerly Known as Funky
13. 'Grana-a-a-a-da'
14. Close Encounters With the Tarmac
15. A Lost Woman
16. Lance, Would You Mind If We Swapped Legs?
17. The Mountain Rescue
18. Meeting Michael
19. On the Banks of the Guadalquivir
20. Tigers, Togas, Etc.
21. 'Did You Sleep Alone?'

- 22. A Castle in Castile
 - 23. Three Men and a Cake Shop Lady
 - 24. Tilting at Windmills
 - 25. And a Plain, Black Coffee to Finish
- Sources

About the Author

Copyright

It's not about the Tapas

Polly Evans

To Mum and Dad

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank Jane Gregory and Broo Doherty for their guidance, wisdom and good humour, Francesca Liversidge for teaching me pretty much everything I know about books, and everyone else at Transworld for teaching me the rest.

Thanks to Mum and Dad for the roof, food, drink and company, and Tim and Sophie for offering entirely opposing opinions on my first draft and so convincing me to call in the professionals.

Finally, thanks to Peter Record for encouraging me to take up writing in the first place and for listening sympathetically when I got cross with the computer.

1

Breaking the Chain

I HAD TO get out of Hong Kong.

The city was going crazy, and it was taking me down with it. The second economic crisis in four years was looming. The property boom had bust; the stock market was plummeting and brokers without bonuses were hurling themselves from high windows and making a nasty mess on the streets below. On the pavements, the hordes scurried, shoved and elbowed their way through the summer smog, screeching into their mobile phones in high-volume Cantonese like slowly strangled turkeys. Over the border in big, bad China, the superannuated Party leaders looked on bemused at their new dominion, at this petulant beast called capitalism.

In the market place, fruit and vegetables festered. Fish flipped over the edges of their plastic washing-up bowls and writhed on the blistering tarmac. Tensions simmered and tempers boiled. The stallholders settled their arguments with Chinese kitchen knives, the chopper being the Hong Konger's second-favourite weapon after the pointy end of an elbow, while the triads nervously fingered their tattoos and lopped off the little fingers of those who annoyed them.

In the alleyway beneath my flat, my neighbours tried to improve their chances in these uncertain times by burning offerings on the bonfires of that summer's Hungry Ghost festival. The stock market could no longer be relied upon to

provide riches so they turned to their ancestors instead. The smoke wisped its way past my windows and up to the spirit world carrying the charred remains of paper money, paper sports cars, paper Nike trainers, paper Big Macs and even paper Nokia 8310 phones, complete with paper batteries. Hong Kong is a material town, even in its spirit incarnation, and it doesn't do to antagonize the ghosts with last year's model.

Over in the office where I worked, tucked away among the antique shops of Hollywood Road, life was no less colourful. I was working as an editor on a weekly magazine. We covered the action-packed life of that non-stop, neon-flashing city; we tried to be incisive, quirky, offbeat, ahead of the curve. It didn't always work.

'This is the most fuckin', *godawful* PIECE OF SHIT that I have seen in ten years,' the publisher screamed at us one day, clutching that week's offering in his hand and shaking it violently as though he were trying to break its neck. The glass walls of his office shuddered; we editors looked sadly at our feet. Most of the men in our office were either gay or in therapy, in many cases both. They weren't afraid to find an outlet for their emotions, to clench their perfectly pert buttocks in indignation, to puff out their tightly T-shirted pecs, to squeal and stamp their cross little designer-shod feet. I was a straight woman; I couldn't afford a shrink. I dreamed of sitting, completely alone, under a solitary, leafy tree where nobody would raise their voice to so much as a whisper. One thing was clear: I needed a change of scene.

I decided to go to Spain. I knew the country and I spoke the language after a fashion, even if my attempts did make the locals laugh out loud. I'd even lived there for a while when, as a university student studying Spanish, I'd been required to spend a year abroad. I knew how to order a beer; I could even ask for different sizes depending on the level of alcoholic refuge the moment demanded. I vaguely understood the words on a menu. Spain would be a nice,

restful destination, I thought. It would present nothing too difficult. It would be fun to go back - it was eight years since my last visit - and the fresh air and sunshine would do me good.

To ensure my recuperation, I'd even take some exercise. I wouldn't just visit Spain - I'd cycle round it. I set myself a target of a thousand miles and six weeks in which to cover them. I'd start at the top, in the chic beach resort of San Sebastián, then work my way east, over the Pyrenees and down to Barcelona where I'd strut along tree-lined boulevards with the beautiful people. Then I'd head south to Granada, and westwards across Andalusia to Seville, before heading up into Extremadura, Spain's wild west. I'd then pedal over to the historic capital of Toledo and finally end up in the modern hurly-burly of Madrid.

After six weeks of the cycling cure, I'd be lithe, fit, suntanned. If my tour took a few ups and downs, if I felt the need to let out the occasional primal scream, well, in Spain nobody would notice. They're used to craziness in Spain. In fact, they positively celebrate it. This is the land of the delusional Don Quixote, the obsessive Queen Joan the Mad, and the stark, staring Salvador Dali. These are the people who have a festival during which merrymakers hurl lorryloads of ripe tomatoes at each other, and another in which they run in the path of rabid bulls all in the name of fun. They drink whisky mixed with Fanta orange from choice.

Cycling in Spain would be a hassle-free adventure. The Spanish are meant to be fond of cycling: it ranks as the nation's second-favourite sport after football. They watch cycling, join cycling fan clubs, sponsor cycling and, yes, at the weekends they even go cycling. Spain, after all, is the land of one of the most legendary cyclists the sport has ever seen, Miguel Induráin. In 1995, Induráin became the only person ever to have won the Tour de France five years in a row. The Spanish, used to scant glory on the world stage, went completely crazy. The press started to refer to Induráin

as a god; the nation duly worshipped him. In the summer of 1995, an estimated *six million* Spaniards sat on the edge of their armchairs and bellowed encouragement at their television screens as the tall, lanky Navarrese pedalled through three long weeks of pain and glory. Thousands more actually travelled to France to see the great man pass before their very eyes. They gazed in awe as Big Mig's long, strong legs hammered up hill after hill; at 1.88 metres, he was ludicrously large for a cyclist. Hormone-high teenage girls screamed and reached out to touch him as he and his rippling quadriceps pedalled by.

When the Tour was over and they could safely abandon their TV sets, Big Mig's followers flocked to the cycle shops and kitted themselves out with shiny new bikes and resplendent Day-Glo Lycra outfits that never looked quite as good on paunchy computer programmers as they did on the pros. And on Sunday mornings, they took to the roads in their droves.

I wasn't exactly expecting the kind of reception that Miguel inspired - to be honest, teenage girls have never done it for me anyway - but I held out high hopes for the occasional friendly smile, an encouraging toot of the horn, cosy chats with new-found friends in rustic bars overseen by ruddy-faced, perpetually smiling barmen, ever ready with a refill of Rioja, a bowl of olives, a spicy slab of chorizo. My friend Sheena had a most exciting dream in which I had a wild and tempestuous fling with a bullfighter, a prospect I didn't dismiss out of hand. Romantic entanglements had been thin on the ground over the last year or so (I had had quite a steamy cyber affair with a policeman in New Zealand, but after a while even he had to be downgraded from cyber lover to e-mail buddy) and bullfighters, let's face it, have very nice bottoms.

Only one small but vital ingredient for my recovery was missing: I didn't own a bicycle. And so I e-mailed Mr Chang, a bike builder over in Taipei - one of my Hong Kong friends

had bought a number of bikes from him and Mr Chang promised to give me a good deal. Better still, he was travelling to Hong Kong on business and would hand-deliver my new acquisition to my door for no extra charge. He would build me, he said, a top-quality road bike, a truly cosmopolitan machine whose parts were sourced from the best manufacturers around the globe: a hand-made frame and Selle Italia saddle from Italy, clipless pedals from Germany, Shimano gearing from Japan, ultra-slim racing wheels from Taiwan. He'd fit a triple chain ring, enough to power me up the most gruesome of hills. The bike would be so light I could lift it with a single finger. It was to be a veritable lean, mean speed machine. A few weeks later, at 11.30 at night, the telephone rang. I was given a car registration number and told to bring the cash. Mr Chang and the bicycle were waiting in the alleyway downstairs.

Mr Chang beamed and nodded; his grey, thinning ponytail bobbed up and down. With his orange-patterned cycling jersey and yellow-tinted wraparound glasses, he looked as though he ought to have cycled all the way from Taipei rather than landed just an hour ago at the airport like everyone else. His accomplices rummaged around in the back of the van and produced wheels, then a frame. They gave a few practised turns of the spanner, and we all stood and gazed at the gleaming, pale-green bicycle before us. Beneath a dim orange street lamp I handed over a thick pile of banknotes. We nodded and smiled some more, then we shook hands and went our separate ways.

I handed in my notice at the magazine. I stoically survived the tantrums and hysteria that broke out around me. Three more issues to go, then two, then one, before I would be blissfully alone, away from the whole crazy bunch of them, adrenalin pumping not because the deadline passed five hours ago and the incensed printer, facing a long night ahead, was about to take his chopper to the lot of us, but from the wild exhilaration of haring down mountain

switchbacks, from whizzing carefree through olive groves and vineyards, concerned only with where my next beer might come from and what I might like for lunch. There'd be no more sandwiches gobbled on the run, no more congealed noodles delivered from the takeaway on the corner and scooped in seconds flat with disposable wooden chopsticks and inadequate quantities of soy sauce squeezed out of ridiculous fish-shaped droppers; in a few days' time I'd be leisurely tackling plates piled high with tapas, hearty rabbit stews, slithers of perfectly cured ham - and drinking cold beer after cold beer in the recuperative sunshine of Spain.

Four Chorizos and a Tortilla

'AH, YOU LIKE to cycle,' muttered the airport security guard, spotting the helmet dangling by its strap from my hand luggage. He whispered secretively, breaking the unwritten rule of the uniform that dictates he should never be friendly, his eyes cast low as he fiddled with his night stick. And then I knew. This man too had another form, a different identity. On Sunday mornings, he shed the olive-green uniform, the heavy black boots, the power-toting gun and the belt full of bullets and dressed up in figure-hugging, bright yellow Lycra – and went out *in public*.

It was disappointing, however, to find that the Spanish enthusiasm for cycling hadn't extended to the taxi drivers of Madrid's Barajas Airport. Perhaps these guys were out plastic shrink-wrapping their cabs' back seats as Induráin chugged to the top of *col* after *col*. Wherever they were, they clearly weren't bonding with bikes.

'No,' the taxi driver pronounced, directing a reproachful glare towards my shiny green bicycle. With his whiskers set and bristling, he bundled a well-groomed couple with manageable wheelie suitcases into his car instead.

'No,' said the next. '*That*' – an accusing stab of the finger – 'won't fit.'

'No way, José,' said a third – or something like that.

Things weren't getting off to a very relaxing start. I begged, I pleaded and I cajoled. I had a go at anger and

indignation. I tried lying through my teeth: 'It fitted perfectly well in the taxi I took yesterday.' Nothing worked. In the end, I reverted to type, and just stood around getting in the way.

When enough of a bottleneck had been created outside the arrivals hall, a kindly policewoman took the matter in hand. She took aside the next cab with a roof rack and told him he was to take me away from there with no further ado. Perhaps she was a closet Lycra case too.

The driver was a stout character, with a spiky little moustache. He shook his head with some vigour.

'No,' he said, glaring at the bothersome bike. 'It won't fit.'

How about the roof rack, I suggested. The driver puffed his cheeks, let out a mighty sigh that sent his facial hair a-quiver, and grudgingly set to with the ropes.

'I don't like it,' he grumbled some minutes later when the bicycle was fixed firmly and securely to the rack. 'I have to warn you, I think it will fall off.' He gave a much-practised shrug.

'Well, perhaps we could chance it,' I ventured. And off we went, all the way to the city's Chamartín train station, listening out anxiously for telltale scrapes and thuds as we wended our way through the traffic.

My bicycle never did fall off the taxi's roof, so I was still wheeling it when I arrived in San Sebastián some hours later. It was early evening. The sun was shining, the weather was perfectly warm, the birds were singing in the trees and the elegant people of San Sebastián were out strolling in that calm, leisurely way I hoped soon to emulate.

I had a few things to do in San Sebastián. I needed to find a bike shop to fix my gears which I'd destroyed before leaving home in one of my very rare attempts at bicycle maintenance. That episode had ended, I'm ashamed to say, in a not-very-self-controlled fit of temper in which I shouted at the bike and called it names. I also had to eat lots of tapas, and that would take some time, so I checked into a

hotel for a couple of nights. Unfortunately, it turned out to be San Sebastián's annual film festival that week, so all the desirable hotels were fully booked. I checked into an undesirable one instead, which featured among other things a rubber mattress cover, bed sheets with holes, and a yellowing piece of paper pinned to the wall which demanded, in wavering block capitals that suggested a hand that doesn't hold a biro very often, SILENCE AFTER 11PM. ANY DISTURBANCES AFTER THIS HOUR WILL BE DEALT WITH BY THE POLICE. I thought it quite delightful.

It was not, however, the kind of place in which to spend many minutes freshening up. This suited me well, as freshening up on arrival at a hotel in a new town is something I've never been able to fathom. When I arrive in a brand-new destination I'm beside myself with anticipation. In the taxi from the airport, I have to exercise every restraint to stop myself from telling the driver to drive faster . . . yes, it's desperate, no I can't wait. I'm dying to get out into the streets, to check out everything all at once, to eat from each and every one of those amazing-looking roadside stalls whose food would, in reality, strike me dead with a single bite, to get horribly lost because I'm too excited to stop and look at the map. Finally, eventually, we arrive at the hotel; I bite my lip through the entire, laborious checking-in process, and then somebody says brightly, 'Let's all go to our rooms and freshen up, and meet back in reception in, ooh, let's say an hour from now, shall we?'

An hour? How dirty did they get during that three-hour flight in that pristine, sterilized cabin? What are they going to do for *a whole hour*? Cellophane wraps? Deep pore cleansing? Full-body exfoliation? The gruesome-sounding Power Peel? It's all I can manage to dump my bags on the bed, take a thirty-second comfort stop and, on occasions of extreme self-control, a cursory wash of the hands before all the exuberance fuelled by unknown adventures surges inside me. I can't contain myself; I have to rush into the

street and stride around energetically until the adrenalin supplies are sapped and I collapse, exhausted, to regain my composure with a cold beer in the sun. But then patience has never been my strong point.

It didn't take me long, then, to discover that San Sebastián is a wonderful place. It has an old-fashioned charm - a broad promenade and wrought-iron balustrades along the beachfront, and an atmospheric maze of pedestrianized streets making up the old quarter. Despite its antiquated style, San Sebastián is still the most chic beach resort in Spain. The town elders were either very wise or very slow, and they never installed those games arcades and fast-food joints that have turned other formerly fashionable locations into neon-flashing infernos. And so the beach remains much the same as it must have been a hundred years ago. Close your eyes, and it's easy to envisage the elegant ladies of bygone times emerging from changing huts in those voluminous black swimsuits (think Judi Dench in *Mrs Brown*) that assured the wearer's propriety. Open your eyes, of course, and it's not like that at all. This is a European beach resort, where acre upon acre of ample flesh bursts forth from frighteningly tiny bikini bottoms. The Spanish, let's face it, have never been great ones for the pale, starved image of heroin chic. That would involve forsaking chorizo.

In the old quarter, I made straight for the tapas for which San Sebastián is famous. There are various stories about the origins of tapas. Some people say that once, a long, long time ago, one of the kings of Spain was becoming concerned about drunkenness among his subjects. In an attempt to keep them sober, he ordered bartenders to serve little snacks with their drinks. Others have it that eighteenth-century innkeepers, who would rush out with refreshments for their customers as they stopped to change horses, found that flies would get to the wine before the patrons had a chance to drink it. So they took to covering

the glass with a little piece of bread or cheese – the word ‘tapa’ literally translates as a cover or lid.

But frankly, who cares? However they started, tapas have become a culinary institution that’s imitated across the globe, from California to Canberra. The problem is that when you eat tapas outside Spain, they’re never quite the same. International-style tapas restaurants linger unsettlingly in the fashionable parts of town: they’re chic, expensive, and not like a real *tasca*, or tapas bar, at all. A Spanish *tasca* is an egalitarian institution: futures traders vie with farmers for the last marinated anchovy – but then the bartender brings another plateful and the problem is solved. The Spanish like to drink for hours on end – it’s perfectly common to start with a tippie at breakfast time, and the bars often don’t close until dawn – but they don’t like to get drunk. And so they snack.

If you want to eat tapas, San Sebastián is the place to be. The old quarter of town is packed with *tasca*s that are heaving with hungry customers every night of the week. After about seven p.m. their counters are covered with plate after plate of tapas (or, as they’re known in Basque, *pintxos*) of every persuasion: little rounds of bread topped with *bacalao* (salted cod), cheese, ham or chorizo, eggs with mayonnaise, squares of potato omelette. The array is such that it can almost be overwhelming for the uninitiated. For those who need a little help, here’s an eight-step guide to eating your fill with tapas.

1. Stroll the streets for quite a while working up an appetite and looking as beautiful as you can manage.
2. Select the most crowded, smokiest *tasca*. It is very important that the bar has a messy floor. In Spain this is considered a sign of a popular establishment and not an indication that the cleaner has just walked out in a huff.
3. Order your drink and ask the bartender for a plate.
4. Deliberate.

5. Consider the fact that the tortilla looks good . . . but then the *croqueta* might be nice instead . . . or perhaps a slice of ham or a hunk of sausage.
6. Pile the plate with all four.
7. Don't gobble or drink too fast. Remember, you've got to keep this up for several hours yet.
8. When you've finished, remember above all else to chuck your paper napkin on the floor as a courtesy to the establishment.

Any self-respecting Spaniard will pay up at the end, having returned to the bar a couple of times for refills. If your Spanish is shaky, however, and you don't know how to say three pickled herrings, two marinated eels and a small slice of tripe, you might find it easier to stick the plate under the bartender's nose while it still has food on it, so he can tot up the bill before it's too late and the whole lot has disappeared down your gullet.

But the elegant San Sebastián waterfront also has a darker side, for this is the heart of Basqueland. It can be a little tortuous trying to figure out exactly where the Basque country is. You might be forgiven for thinking that the Spanish region known as the 'País Vasco' is the land of the Basques. But it's not, or at least not all of it. The so-called Basque Country consists of only three of the seven Basque provinces - Guipúzcoa, Vizcaya and Alava. A further three are in France. The seventh, Navarre, was declared an autonomous region all by itself in the Spanish Constitution of 1978. The Navarrese speak Basque and look Basque, although, apparently, only a minority of them actually consider themselves Basque (or, indeed, Spanish) and prefer to be known simply as Navarrese. Confusing? Absolutely.

The Basque nationalists claim that here on the sophisticated San Sebastián beachfront, in the prison

overlooking the water, Franco's guards shot 21,780 Basques in the eight years that followed the Civil War. Franco hated the Basques. They resisted him during the Civil War; he called in the German planes that bombed Guernica, killing in a single afternoon nearly seventeen hundred people in a town with a population of seven thousand. The Basques had fought throughout history to keep a level of autonomy, to rule by their traditional legal code, the *fueros*; Franco insisted on a united Spain ruled by one man - himself. He outlawed the *euskera* language, the very essence of Basqueness, and persecuted those who defied him.

Nowadays, San Sebastián is known for its frequent confrontations between ETA supporters and the police - and sadly it's ETA, the Basque liberation movement, that most people think of when you mention the Basque country. Set up in 1959, while Franco still ruled Spain with a vice-like grip, ETA was originally an intellectual, cultural movement whose most violent activity was to enliven walls and monuments with graffiti. It didn't take long for its tactics to change. In 1961 its members derailed their first train. In June 1968 two *etarras* killed their first policeman when he stopped their car for a spot check; two months later the group carried out its first planned assassination of a hated San Sebastián police captain. Franco died in 1975 and Spain became a democracy but the *etarras* are still outraged by their lack of autonomy and what they consider to be state persecution. The violence continues; to date, they've killed more than eight hundred people.

That first night in San Sebastián, I had just put my first forkful of tortilla in my mouth when an almighty bang rang out in the street outside as the police, dressed in helmets and ski masks to hide their identities for fear of terrorist reprisals, fired off blanks to break up an ETA demonstration outside.

'Hostia puta!' screamed the bargirl, clapping her hands over her mouth and rushing to the door, past which terrified tourists were careering at a sprint. Her fellow bar-dwellers leapt to their feet, spilling their beer, and craned to see through the windows. I struggled with the urge to hurl myself under the stout wooden table and huddle on the floor with three weeks' worth of used paper napkins and fluff-encrusted hunks of chorizo. Call me a coward, but I'm just not used to gunfire in the street on a Monday night.

A few more reports rang out. We shuddered collectively, gasped, muttered profanities. And then, within seconds, it was all over. The pedestrians outside let out a little chuckle, feeling foolish about their over-reaction, and went back to strolling elegantly once more. The bar-dwellers returned to their beer.

'Oh my God! What's happened? What's going on? What was that noise?' I quavered.

'Bah. It's nothing,' said the bargirl, rapidly regaining her composure.

Nothing? In the roads surrounding the old quarter, police vans sat bumper to bumper, their blue lights flashing, while groups of helmeted, gun-toting reinforcements stood around looking mean - and their guns were *huge*. Let Arnie get his hands on one of those and he could annihilate the entire universe in minutes. And, while I knew my fight-or-flight receptors were over-sensitive right now, well - wasn't that *normal* when people started shooting at each other in the street?

The people of San Sebastián seemed not to think so. After the initial excitement, they seemed not to notice that their pretty, cobbled streets had been taken over by swarms of very fierce-looking armed men, and continued eating their anchovies and sipping their beer as if nothing were amiss. These people weren't just cool. They were going on refrigerated. Feeling positively hot-blooded after only one

day in Spain, I scurried back to the safety of my rubber-sheeted bed.

There were no corpses or blood stains littering the street the next morning, which I took to be a good sign. It might, however, just be a question of time. I had woken early, leapt eagerly from the rubber sheet, showered in the grungy communal bathroom without catching any skin diseases that I knew of yet, then shoe-horned myself into my tightest, brightest Lycra and hurled myself fearlessly into the roads of San Sebastián in search of the bike shop the hostel owner had recommended.

The problem was, I wasn't really very good at riding my bike. I still considered clipping my cleated shoes in and out of the pedals without falling off to be a magnificent feat of timing and co-ordination. And, well, didn't those speeding Vespas seem to be going frighteningly fast? Did the driver have to turn his head so carelessly to the side to smooch with the girlfriend clinging on to him from behind? Is that spotty teenager with a bum fluff chin really old enough to ride a moped? Shouldn't he be wearing a helmet? And put out his cigarette? And . . . bloody hell! *He's coming straight at me!* I flung the handlebars to the side and veered precariously into the opposite carriageway. And then I remembered: in Spain, they drive on the right.

Finding the bike shop wasn't easy. I managed to get swept up onto a dual carriageway and had to clippety-clop back on the hard shoulder in my bike shoes - the kind that snap very nicely into your pedals, but transform the simple act of walking into a whole new sport. But it was worth the search. Should the Pope ever find they're short of a saint in heaven, or that the Virgin is in need of a little extra company, I'll come right forward and propose Javi from the Jaia bike shop in San Sebastián. Javi examined my muddled, botched gears and resisted looking at me with horror and disparagement.

He just tinkered and tested, tinkered and tested, and tinkered and tested some more.

‘These gears have half-notches,’ he explained patiently. ‘They work like this . . . click . . . you see . . . click . . . and again . . . click. Now you try . . . there you go, that’s right . . . click . . . try it once more . . . click . . .’

And, without a flicker of an accusatory glare: ‘You might find the brakes more effective if you closed this little lever here. It brings the brake pads within three light years of the wheel. They work better that way . . . click . . . you see? Click . . . and again . . . click . . . now you try . . . click.’ You see, that way you might stand more than a snowball’s chance in hell of actually keeping all three of your brain cells inside your thick skull instead of sprayed over the tarmac of Spain, he might have quite reasonably added – but, being charming, didn’t.

He even gave me a special valve so that I could pump up the tyres using the air machine at a petrol station instead of tiring out my inadequate little arms. And when the tinkering and teaching were all over, he charged me one euro for the valve.

Javi even suggested a test run for my first day in the saddle, a short, simple ride from San Sebastián, over the hill to Orío, and westwards to the scenic fishing village of Getaria. It was a delightful little route, he said, featuring quiet country lanes and glorious ocean views. This road, as it happens, is the first snippet of the course of the Clásica San Sebastián road race, one of the most prestigious one-day races on the pro cycling calendar. It was the first race Texan golden boy Lance Armstrong rode in after turning professional in 1992. That day, the rain came down in buckets and soon turned to freezing sleet; Armstrong came in dead last – although nearly half the field didn’t finish at all – and the Spanish crowd jeered him as he crossed the line.

Looking at the Clásica course profile, the first ascent – the only hill I had to climb that day on my own severely curtailed route – is shown as little more than a pimple. It seemed closer to a full-blown boil in the flesh. An old man drove by in his van.

'Ánimo! Ánimo!' Come on! he called out, winding down his window and thumping the side of the van with much gusto and the occasional guffaw as I gasped and groaned, my face becoming pinker with every revolution. I got off and walked. This cycling business was turning out to be a little more difficult than I'd thought. My sleek, ultra-light road bike didn't seem to be carving up the hills quite as single-handedly as I had anticipated; it was beginning to look as though my legs were going to have to play a rather more active role than I had hoped.

I never made it to the pretty little fishing village on the coast. At Orio, I turned round and headed home. The pros do the whole of the 227-kilometre course in not much over five hours; I did about a tenth of that distance and, if you count my rather leisurely lunch on a hilltop overlooking the ocean, my time wasn't far different. There seemed to be some room for improvement as far as my cycling was concerned. My legs were burning, my lungs were wheezing, my brain was crying out for a cold beer on the beach – and my tour didn't even start till tomorrow.

You Call *That* a Mountain?

NINETY-ONE KILOMETRES didn't seem a terribly long way when I planned my route, the maps spread across the entire floor space of my tiny Hong Kong flat, but then I had a glass of wine in my hand and anything would have seemed like a good idea. Perhaps it was the wine's fault; perhaps it was the overexcitement that comes before an adventure, but in my planning I made one significant oversight: I forgot that the Pyrenees has mountains. I forgot to consider that cycling ninety-one kilometres through the Pyrenees might be rather more taxing than cycling, say, ninety-one kilometres through Holland. I forgot that, while the cycling pros might do two hundred-odd kilometres a day in the mountains during the Tour de France, I am not a cycling pro, nor anything approaching. And I forgot that on the first day it's a good idea to take it easy.

On the other hand, maybe my early demise was due to eating the wrong stuff. As I sat on San Sebastián's La Concha beach in the low, early-morning sun, watching the men with their tank-like machines clear scraps of rubbish from the deserted, deep-yellow sand, I chomped my way through a chocolate pastry and a strong, sweet coffee and remembered the wise words of my athlete friend, Laura.

'Whatever you do,' Laura warned in tones that threatened doom and damnation, 'don't eat sugar.'

Sugar would do terrible things to my blood glucose levels. My energy would soar gloriously for one brief and giddy moment, then plummet to hideous, uncharted depths leaving me a burnt-out wreck. Laura should know about endurance because she's one of those truly insane people who think it's fun to run through snake-infested jungles and desolate mountain ranges for days on end - and she doesn't take medication to cure the compulsion. She once found herself competing in an Ironman race *by accident*. (An Ironman consists of a 3.8-kilometre swim, followed by a 180-kilometre bike ride, and then you top it all off by running a marathon. Not the kind of thing I've ever found myself doing intentionally, let alone by accident, but I suppose life's full of surprises.) I was secretly quite pleased, anyway, that Laura's guilt-provoking little voice crept up on me only when I had very nearly finished my breakfast. By that time the harm was no doubt done so I scoffed the lot and called it good. And then I got on my bike.

It was only now that I discovered that riding with laden panniers is not at all the same as pedalling along with just a puncture repair kit and a mobile phone. I had exercised every austerity with my packing. On top of my two sets of very tiny Lycra bike kit, I had allowed myself just one set of clothes. But somehow, the accessories piled up. The tube of travel wash was indispensable. And, while I might be able to manage for six weeks without a change of clothes, rinsing them out in the sink and, on some unfortunate occasions when my laundry logistics went awry, wearing them again damp, I didn't think it would be advisable, or indeed pleasant, to go without the Eve Lom cleansing cream and accompanying muslin cloth, nor the Aveda hydrating lotion, nor indeed a small pot of nail varnish and a tube of cuticle cream in case the going really got tough and I felt the need to soothe my nerves by painting my toenails.

In an attempt to prevent myself from carrying too much, I had steered away from the conventional double panniers

and gone instead for the single bag that sits on top of a rack above the back wheel, and a small front handlebar bag. Packed so full that every extension bulged, my rack pack wasn't the most aerodynamic of accessories. The weight, positioned high off the ground, threw off my balance and, until I was used to it, turned riding into a precarious affair that would have been much improved by a set of stabilizers. I wobbled so unnervingly and made progress so slowly that, by the time I reached Hernani, ten kilometres south of San Sebastián, nearly an hour had passed. If I kept going at this rate, I calculated, it would be another ten hours before I arrived at my bed for the night. From deep within me, the tiniest sensation of doom began to claw its way into my consciousness.

Hernani might seem a boring suburb best known for its cider, but one particular cider mill in the village has a valiant past. The owner of the mill, Juan Manuel Larburu, provided a vital link in Operation Comet, the Second World War resistance movement that smuggled Allied pilots shot down in northern Europe across occupied France, over the Pyrenees and to the British Consulate in Bilbao. His mill was a safe house and rest stop where pilots slept and refuelled before continuing their hazardous journeys.

There was only one part of the French-Spanish border where crossing was feasible. This was the tiny section on the western coast, in the Basque country, which was governed by occupied - as opposed to Vichy - France. The Basques were having a particularly rough ride under Franco, who had banned their language and dashed their hopes for self-rule. Seeing the war in Europe as an extension of their own battle against right-wing dictatorship, many of them were prepared to face the dangers involved in working for the Allied resistance movement. This was a risky endeavour even in Spain because, although the country was supposed to be neutral, Franco was in practice an ally of Hitler. (The two men only met once after which Hitler commented to