



Singletrack⁹⁵

2015

OBJECTS OF DESIRE

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& SANTA CRUZ

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TEACHING AMERICANS MUD

LIVIGNO

THE HIGH LIFE

WINTER
£100

ADVENTURE

DUNKELD



MEETING WINTER FULL ON

Dave and Sim travel to Livigno, Italy just in time to catch the first sprinkling of snow.

Words by Dave, pictures by Sim Mainey



No brake larch.



Messing about on bikes never felt so good, a combination of the quality of the riding and the scenery it's embedded within.

After leaving the summer of the south of France, the coolness of the air is the first little shock of the morning as we head out to prepare for our first day of riding. We're not in short sleeves and shorts country any more, Toto. It's a little reminder that we've traded in sea level for somewhere with a bit more altitude. The gain in height is evidenced by the seeming fast-forward through the seasons; a quick perusal of the mountains that surround the town reveals a landscape that is popping in its golden autumnal best.

Pockets of larch in the forests that carpet the lower slopes of the peaks are positively glowing yellow in contrast to the more sombre green of pine and shrubs. It's a landscape that's got Sim's shutter finger twitching at the possibility of a day's worth of photo shooting in among this photographer's wet dream of a backdrop. Bikes loaded into the van, we drive north of town and head up into the side valleys above the Lago di Livigno.

The trails are empty now – we're at the back end of the summer season when the town closes briefly before the ski season begins. There's a carpet of larch needles covering the stoney path we head up, and the ground is damp from overnight rain. Despite this, traction is high on perfect among the roots and rocks that litter the trail allowing corners to be hit fast and confidently. As a first taster of the local riding it's a promising start, with trails that offer plenty of pop and hop opportunities and just get better the quicker you hit them. The climbing is steady as we head up the valley, scoping lines for photos and taking in the views around us, each corner revealing another possible shot that needs lining up and riding and re-riding until we've got it covered.

For pretty much the whole day we've got the valley and its trails to ourselves. I'll happily give up the warmth of the summer high season in return for the empty trails and colours of autumn – it's a trade-off I'm willing to make. An extra layer may be needed but it's still not particularly cold, though there's a nip to the morning air. We ride, and shoot, then ride some more, settling into the pattern and making the most of the chance to try alternate lines as we repeat the same bits of trail – slowly inching further up the mountain, but making the most of the trail as we go. Messing about on bikes never felt so good, a combination of the quality of the riding and the scenery it's embedded within.

By the end of the day we've got a decent amount of riding in our legs, a head full of plans for tomorrow and a couple of cards' worth of photographic bangers. I'm starting to feel like our gamble may just work out. After a day of riding it's a pleasure to just drop the bikes in the bike store; thanks to the stony substrate of the trails the only evidence of activity is larch needles accumulated in suitable nooks and pivots. Nothing more than a quick lube is needed.



Super flow.



You can see the pub from here.



Contouring at its best.



Like an earth salmon.



And it was all yellow.

Optimism is always the best policy when it comes to planning road trips. I always find it best not to look too closely at the detail, but plan in broad strokes that allow plenty of spontaneity to occur along the way. So it is when planning a trip to Roc d'Azur and an invitation to Livigno drops into the inbox. We're going to be close to Italy, so surely it's possible to fit it in 'on the way home'? Vagueness-abetted planning at its best. At this point all I know of the location is that it is high up and Hans Rey has been involved there for some time.

Vague facts and optimism converge into a rough plan; having sat out the 2014 summer on the sidelines thanks to an unavoidable sentence of non-saddle time due to an arm in a cast, I've a need to get back on the right path and claw back lost ride opportunities. I'm owed, goddamn it. The promise of flow-country trails and the possibility of snow-capped mountains is too much to resist. There's the small matter of current and forecasted summer conditions in the Alps, but I've got faith in the change of the seasons that's overdue. Believe in it strongly enough and it'll come. If we take the gamble it'll be bound to pay off. That kind of thing.

The grand reveal.

So after sunburn conditions, dusty rides and dry trails in the south of France we head north-east through the beautifully chaotic and erratic Italian autostrada network, following TomTom as the night draws in, along with the accompanying downpour that makes driving that little bit more tense. It turns out to be a fair old way as we leave the flatlands behind and head

into the mountains. We leave Italy for Switzerland before slowly climbing through the night, with fingers crossed that the pass is still open and we'll be able to make it to the hotel that's our destination.

The final 30 kilometres are of continuous ascent in the dark of night, the sort of journey where anticipation of what's going to be on offer starts to build. The road snakes as it gains altitude, and glimpses of forest and pasture are grabbed in the headlights as we continue upwards, straining to make out the silhouettes of the peaks that are out there beyond reach in the gloom.

Arriving anywhere after dark is always a mix of anticipation and disappointment. Part of me wants the instant hit of a daytime view so we can begin to scout for lines, potential trails and possibilities among the mountains. Build up the bikes, get straight out there and ride 'til we drop. But there's a pleasure to the anticipation, the lingering, the daydreaming of what's hidden in the dark beyond, waiting to be revealed with the morning sun. A view untainted by the familiarity of travel through it, all new and waiting to be ridden.



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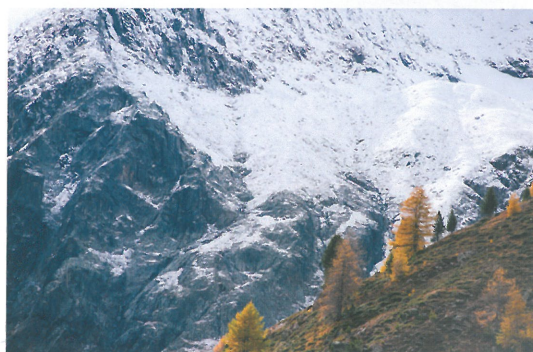
Galleria Grindig.



That'll do.



It's an easy landscape to fall in love with – like the Lake District on steroids.



Friends in high places.

It's on the first night that we discover what will become our home from home – the Birrificio Livigno, the microbrewery responsible for Europe's highest beer, brewed at 1,816m in all its varied flavours. It's a stone's throw from the hotel, it serves good beer and food at a decent price and there's the unique atmosphere created by the clientele who, having got stuck into the free monkey nuts on offer, proceed to litter the floor with the redundant shells. It's the buzzing nightspot of the town and perfect for a post-ride chill out.

Day two dawns to more good weather and a plan to head up high to get a taste for the flow country trails that Livigno prides itself on. We climb up past the wooden castles of the bike park which mark the recent circus of the Nine Knights freeride event. Heading higher behind the now-closed Mottolino Bike Park, we climb the trails that lead up to the Crap de la Parè, which sits at the foot of the lake and makes up the furthest point of the ridgeline that we intend to ride. Here the singletrack contours the 2,300m ridge of Monte Crapene and offers views out over the Swiss National Park on the far shores of the lake in one direction and a multitude of riding opportunity in the valleys below.

It's easy from our start point to link into the flow country trails, developed with Hans Rey, which contour along the east edge of the valley high above the treeline through browned-out alpine meadow. There's a good mix of short sharp climbs and long gentle flowing sections of trail that allow you to accelerate up to speed to make the most of the sinuous nature of the riding here. Beautifully flowing and with killer viewpoints all the way along the ridge, it's an easy landscape to fall in love with – like the Lake District on steroids. We enjoy flattering trails and the hint of bigger adventures just a bit beyond the confines of the valley; bigger, harsher alpine peaks that promise bigger rewards for a bit more effort.

We stop at a perfect little alpine hut for a quick snack and to take in the view around us. It's all weathered wood and slate with a wood-fired stove and basic ingredients waiting for its next guests – a welcoming shelter if the weather decides to turn. Today we're lucky and there's a hint of warmth now we're nearing the middle of the day. From the hut the trail takes on a more downward trend and we gradually drop into the side valley below. Just as we're acclimatising to the beauty of the alpine scenery, we're hit by something special in the mix of dwarf shrub, larch and the torrent-mirroring trail we find ourselves on. It all combines into something nearing trail nirvana.

KONA PROCESS

The Process family of do-everything mountain bikes grows into new genres for 2015. Introducing the new Process 167, a long-travel 26-inch wheel model that's sure to get the gravity fiends among us excited, the Process platform steps up as one of the most comprehensive all-mountain/enduro platforms currently on the market. Whether you're all about the down, or love the pedal efficiency of a good climbing bike—29-inch, 27.5-inch, 26-inch wheels, big travel or short travel, there's a Process bike for you.

ENDURO



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#livingthestream.

It's a
question of
priorities
and on this
call I reckon
we've got
them nailed.

We set off down what must be one of the most scenic trails in Europe, with an almost perfect backdrop of mountains making up the head of the valley behind us. We head back in the direction of town on a rocky trail that undulates alongside the river to begin with, small rocky outcrops providing perfect launch points scattered along its length. As we near the main Livigno valley the trail steepens and switchbacks, the needle-covered rocky base offering perfect corner sliding conditions. It's fast, it flows and it's nigh on perfect to ride. Every corner slowly widening the grin on your face until eventually we bottom out and it's all over. We hit up a few trails on the opposite side of the valley, before spinning along the riverside path to head back into town. It's another perfect day in paradise.

Reality bites.

Day three is a write-off. Dark, low clouds dominate the window view at breakfast, hiding the mountains and much of their lower slopes, and the rain bouncing on the pavement outside spells a frustrating day of thumb-twiddling and map-perusing. The weather is set in; it's cold and the rain doesn't let up all day. We're due to begin the long drive back tomorrow and I'm trying to resign myself to the fact that maybe two good days is what we'll have to settle for. As cabin fever sets in, we head to the brewery.

Sun is glinting through the curtains on the final morning and a quick peek outside reveals a definite snow line. A quick map consultation ensues, followed by a hurried breakfast and speedy pack of the van. We should be setting off driving home, but instead we're going riding. We're prepared to compromise the journey north for one more ride alongside the Li Mina river. It's a question of priorities and on this call I reckon we've got them nailed.

We're headed on an out-and-back ride; we know where we need to be and we know just the photo we're out to get. It's a joint enterprise, a shared goal; we're determined to get the snowy peak shot that's been delivered just in time, nature's reward for us taking the chance. The sweet switchbacks of yesterday's ride are now a hike-a-bike as we head back up the valley until the gradient eases enough to ride. We climb higher and higher up the trail with this perfect snow-capped alpine vision in front of us, clouds streaming over the lower peaks from the Swiss border beyond.

We've time to sit and watch the cloud lift as the day progresses, slowly revealing the fresh snow that dropped during the day and night before. It's time to ride the trail and get the shot. The finale to a vague plan, a rough idea, a gamble that's just been pulled off. We spend hours dissecting the ride and repeating sections, every angle covered for the perfect nugget of capture. And once it's in the bag we ride it once more from the top; this time unbroken, savouring it, one last soaking in of everything around us. It's the chance to share a perfect ride and make the most of it. We're going to be replaying the moment a good few times on the long drive, and winter, ahead of us. ■

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We stayed at the Hotel Concordia, one of three hotels within a group lungolivigno.com/en