

# NO TURKEY SHOOT





## JOINING A CREW OF MOUNTAIN BIKE GUIDES ON THE BLACK SEA COAST OF TURKEY, DAN MILNER FINDS THAT HUNTING OUT NEW TRAILS IS TOUGH AND SWEATY BUT OCCASIONALLY REWARDING WORK



**Q**he rhythmic dripping of sweat has become my metronome. Every 10 seconds another bead of moisture forms on my helmet before splashing onto my bike. The pace of this unrelenting drip-drip-drip seems weirdly matched to my pedal cadence. When the hill ahead steepens, I spin faster and the drip rate increases to match, and I find myself pondering why the hell we're riding bikes uphill in Turkey in July. I always knew this expedition would be a hot one. Before committing to the trip I questioned the sanity of joining a trail-hunting group heading to the Black Sea coast in midsummer. But something – call it inquisitiveness or a sense of adventure – had me drawn to the idea. After all, if you don't go, you'll never know.

So here I am, pedalling my 150mm-travel enduro rig up a long, arduous, sun-scorched jeep track alongside one Turkish and six German mountain bikers in search of new trails. It's hell, but it's giving me an insight into the investment a bike guiding company makes to find a new destination. I've joined the guides behind the company Inselhüpfen ('Island Hopping') for a week-long reconnaissance of a rugged corner of Turkey. We're venturing into virgin territory with no guarantee of success. It's a risk, but risks can have rewards.



We drive out of Istanbul at 6am, getting a jump on the traffic and heat at the start of our five-day, 900km trail-hunting roadtrip. Our first ride is six hours away so I'm glad we're equipped with a comfortable, air-conditioned minibus. Alongside me Lars Adam, one of Inselhüpfen's guides, is powering up his laptop and a portable 3G key, and we crowd around the screen as he outlines the plan for our first few days on Google Earth.

"... And then we'll try to find trails in the Küre Mountains National Park," says Lars, stressing the word 'try'. "There are some trekking trails there, so we hope they'll make good riding." A bulging folder of maps and a rack of GPS units suggest this trail hunt is one serious mission. Meanwhile, on the other side of the bus window, horse-drawn carts and a rural Turkey where crops are cut by hand rush past in a blur.

We start out with a short ride up a hot, dusty fireroad before spiralling down a steep, loose singletrack trail to our lunch-stop restaurant for a meze of local dishes.

**Left** There's no questioning the beauty of the region, just the quality of the trails

**Above top** Finding new routes requires a mixture of map reading, Google Earth research and guesswork

**Above bottom** Each night we rounded off fantastic meals with thick-as-mud Turkish coffee



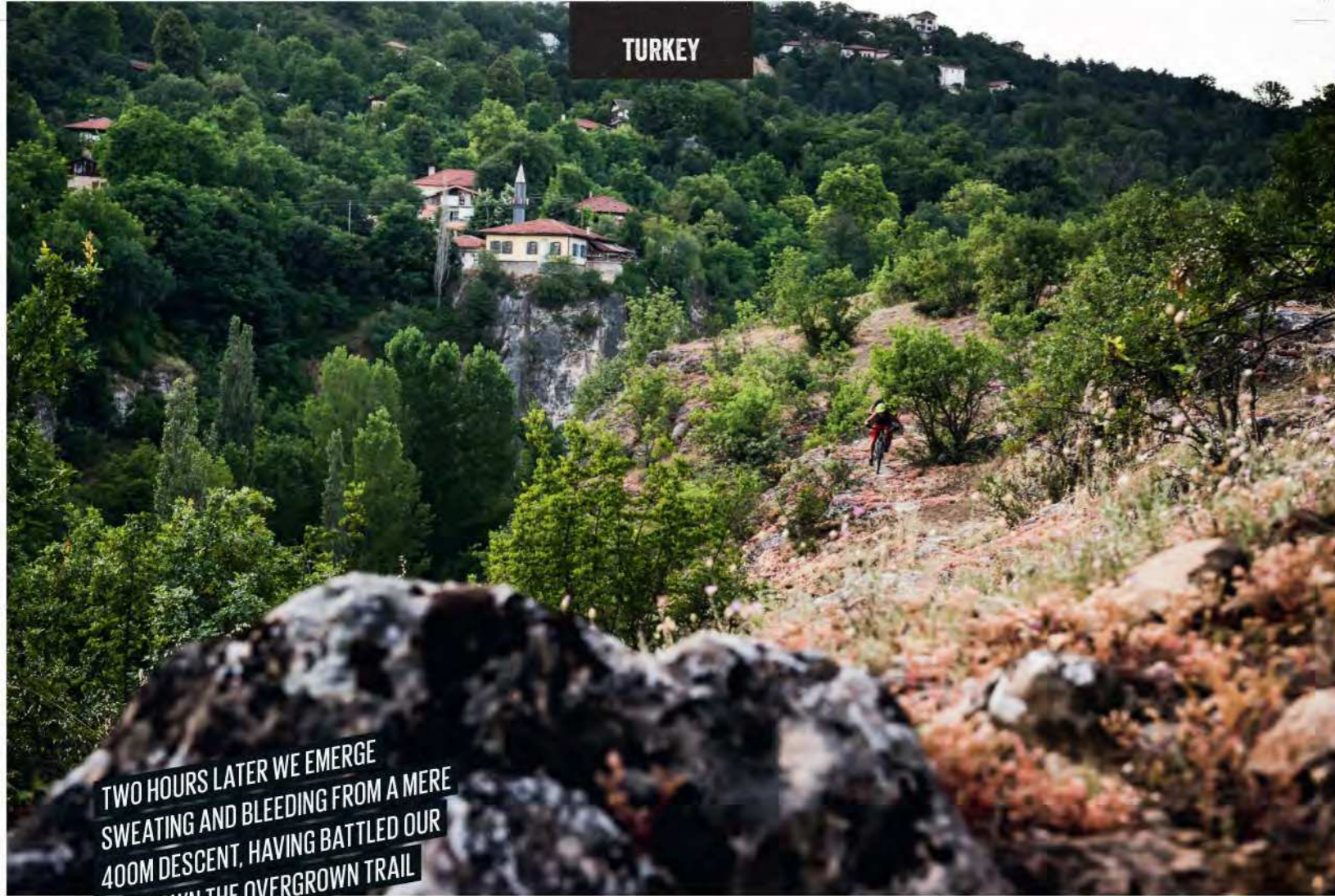
**IN FRONT OF A 2,000-YEAR-OLD AQUEDUCT, OUR LOCAL TURKISH RIDER AND FIXER NEGOTIATES OUR ENTRANCE TO THE CANYON**

It's a promising start and a taste of what these rolling hills could offer, if the plan works out. The afternoon ride begins at a popular picnic spot, from where we're going to try to descend to the town of Safranbolu. Through lingering barbecue smoke and to surprised glances from startled picnickers, we pedal off through the cool shade of the forest. Beneath our wheels a carpet of pine needles releases the smell of a hundred toilet fresheners. We climb a rocky singletrack trail that rises to an overlook before turning south and letting gravity take the reins. Our trail cuts across an open hillside, velvet with golden grass, before leading us to the entrance of a deep canyon above Safranbolu.

In front of a 2,000-year-old aqueduct, our local Turkish rider and fixer Ali Sonay negotiates our entrance to the canyon. After respectfully walking the first flights of boardwalk steps, we saddle up for the remaining 8km of singletrack. I'm pretty sure this is the first descent of this trail by bike. It undulates and twists before spitting us out into cobbled streets on the edge of town. By the time we reach our hotel it's almost dark, and we're unaware that the best day's riding of the week is now behind us.

After dinner we walk through the bazaar, sipping muddy Turkish coffees and trying local goat-milk ice cream. Trips like this, if nothing else, are a chance for new experiences. Bridging Europe and Asia, Turkey is an eclectic mix of old and new, and Eastern and Western cultures. Mosques sit alongside beer-selling cafes, and photos of Atatürk – the country's founding father – dangle from vehicles' rear-view mirrors while Western pop songs blare from their stereos. While the Mediterranean coast has become a hotspot for beach tourism and the rock towers of Cappadocia a big draw for mountain





TWO HOURS LATER WE EMERGE SWEATING AND BLEEDING FROM A MERE 400M DESCENT, HAVING BATTLED OUR WAY DOWN THE OVERGROWN TRAIL

**Above** The scarcity of good natural trails made us appreciate those we did find all the more

**Right** The deep canyon gave us an awesome 8km singletrack descent

bikers, the Black Sea coast is largely outside the Western radar. The holidaymakers here are predominantly Turkish or Ukrainian and, as we begin to appreciate, these aren't tourists who hanker after trekking trails. We'll soon learn that if you don't use a trail here, it rapidly disappears beneath a jungle of vegetation.

While Safranbolu could make a good base for a trip, two trails don't make a week's worth of guiding. We spend the next two days pounding along unrelenting, scorched jeep tracks and floundering on overgrown trails, wiping blood from scratches left by impenetrable thorn bushes and scattering swarms of butterflies in our wake. We assemble bikes under the shadow of a minaret at the tiny village of Catak before trying to pioneer a route to Kunari following each of the three canyons that descend to this town. Our tourist map of the area shows possible trails, but they fail to materialise on the ground.



We climb 800m of jeep track in vain, our rewards coming only in the insight we're given into the lives of locals – a horse-drawn cart, its cargo a half dozen kids on their way to school; mud-rendered houses that sport satellite dishes; classic 1980 cars rattling by with timeless men in shirts and well-polished shoes behind the wheel. It's like being in a time machine set to 'destination – random'.

When our bus stops at a roadside bazaar high on the hillside above the coastal town of Amasra, we jump out to buy fresh hazelnuts and spot a trail disappearing into the tangled forest. A wrinkled woman in a headscarf, dwarfed by her baskets of plump vegetables, tells us it descends to the port, our night's destination, and we take the bait. Two hours later we emerge sweating and bleeding from a mere



400m descent, having battled our way down the most overgrown trail I've ever tried to call 'mountain biking'.

Our days become a mix of pleasant trail surprises and frustrating slogs. Each evening becomes an information and opinion exchange, lubricated by Turkish wine and an excess of amazing local dishes. Drawing on the day's experiences, a plan for the next day is formed, changed, reformed and remoulded in the hope that it'll bear the singletrack fruit we're hoping to find. Google Earth is pored over, GPS units are primed and maps consulted for our attack on the Küre Mountain National Park.

This 370km<sup>2</sup> park is the area that has the most potential for mountain biking in the region. Maps show hiking trails and I feel positive when we're joined by a group of local bikers, two of them park rangers. At our drop-off point, a village at the western end of the park, we split into three groups to triple our chances of finding a good trail and set off armed with the GPS information we need to reach our accommodation in Ulus, to the south.

The mountains here are deceiving. Dense beech forest blankets the flanks, hiding the ruggedness of the terrain ▶

IN FIVE DAYS WE'VE CLIMBED 4,400M AND DESCENDED 6,000M, MOST OF IT ON JEEP TRACKS. IT'S BEEN A TOUGH WEEK, BUT WHILE THE RIDING REWARDS HAVE BEEN FEW, MOMENTS HAVE MADE THE TRIP MEMORABLE



only relinquishing its siege to allow vertical, castle-like peaks to surface for air. We're soon reduced to pushing bikes through tangled bushes, aware that our presence is hard to hide from the local population of brown bears. We retreat to regroup several hours later at our hotel. It's proving to be a frustrating ordeal. In three days of riding, we've scored maybe only 20km of singletrack.



I'm no stranger to heading into the unknown. I've shouldered my bike over high passes in India and pushed through snow in Afghanistan, and such places have eventually delivered hard-earned trail rewards. But this time it seems different. In 30 years of mountain biking I've never come across a place so devoid of rideable trails as this. We sit down to discuss our options. By now a GPS plot of our daily backtracking and U-turns must look like a hyperactive child let loose with a pack of Berols. For the next day, we'll turn our attention to the eastern end of the park and the touristy area around the Ilica waterfall. Photos of the falls show an abundance of trails. It's a start.

Despite the best efforts of our driver, he can only get the minibus so far up the jeep track that leads to the 1,134m peak that's the focus of our ride on day four. With wheels spitting gravel and some hair-raisingly steep drops to our side of the track, I'm glad to finally jump out and ride the last 400m of the ascent, despite the heat. Our goal is a trail marked on a map that descends from the peak almost to the waterfall. We climb for 90 minutes but when we reach the summit we're still surrounded by thick vegetation that obscures any sight of the fabled trail. We consult the map, squint at GPS units and scatter in every direction looking for any indication of singletrack. I'm praying we don't have to descend the same jeep track we climbed.

Luckily, a flaking, worn remnant of a signpost indicates a flaking, worn remnant of a trail hidden between two

bushes. Pioneering is a gamble, but this one pays off. We ride down twisting singletrack between natural berms and across blown-out streambeds until we emerge dusty but grinning 700m below. A half-hour later we join Turkish families bathing in the clear waters below the waterfall.

Ultimately, mountain biking is about cost and reward, but sometimes the balance is too off-kilter. In five days we've climbed 4,400m and descended 6,000m, most of it on jeep tracks. It's been a tough week and we all agree the area doesn't have the potential for guided trips. But while the riding rewards have been few, moments have made the trip memorable – a wild tortoise wandering from the undergrowth to take shelter under one of our bikes, eagles soaring overhead, storks nesting on a telegraph pole, the cold realisation that a pile of bear crap on the trail is still warm, being woken by the 5am call to prayer, admiring an old man's hand-forged steel tools in Kastamonu bazaar...

I sip on my beer, look out at the sun dipping below the Black Sea and wonder whether biking clients, wherever they're riding, will ever know the amount of sweat that dripped from the guide's brow when they were finding that trail. Drip, drip, drip... ☀

## ISLAND EXPERTS

Fortunately Inselhüpfen ([www.inselhuepfen.de](http://www.inselhuepfen.de)) have some well-established mountain bike itineraries in their brochure that don't involve bushwhacking through Turkish wilderness in 38°C heat. Operating from one of their 17 luxury ships, they offer guided riding trips on the islands of Croatia and Greece. Week-long, all-inclusive holidays start from €940 (approx £730).

**Above** Our Turkish sojourn was typified by bushwhacking, blood and butterflies – and blimmin' miles of jeep track!