



# Slaying the BEAST

In Croatia, the climb of Sveti Jure translates as 'Saint George'. *Cyclist* mounts up and prepares to do battle with a monster

Words **SAM CHALLIS** Photography **BEN READ**



Croatia is a country of contrasts. The cities have the lively hustle of Turkey, but the people have the relaxed attitude of the Italians. The modern infrastructure feels like western Europe, but the food and culture are of the Middle East. Look in one direction and you could be on the beaches of the French Riviera; look in the other and it's like you've been transported to the barren mountains of the Pyrenees.

According to my ride partner for the day, a strapping gentleman by the name of Ivo Piljic who runs bespoke holiday business More Hvar, even Croatia's bike riders are a contradiction in terms.



'We look like bouncers but climb like Colombians,' he tells me with a wink as we review today's route over breakfast in our start town of Imotski. It's a route that, if his claims are to be believed, will suit him well. Ahead of us is 135km of riding and more than 3,400m of vertical ascent, with well over a third of that coming courtesy of the Sveti Jure climb that begins at around the 80km mark.

The mountain dwarfs anything else on the route profile. In real life, the peak dominates its surroundings in the same way Mont Ventoux looms over the Provence region in France. The two mountains' similarities are extended by the fact that, like Ventoux, Sveti Jure also sports a red-and-white structure atop its summit. It may be a radio antenna instead of a weather station but, viewed from sea level, its impossibly distant stripes are just as intimidating and impressive.

#### Geography and history

The mountain and the Biokovo Nature Park that surrounds it form part of the Dinaric Alps. Thanks to some hefty geological activity between 50 to 100 million years ago, ridgelines of limestone rock were thrown up in parallel ripples that sit like stacked necklaces. As the second highest peak in Croatia, Sveti Jure is a significant jewel in the first 'necklace' of the Dinaric Alps.

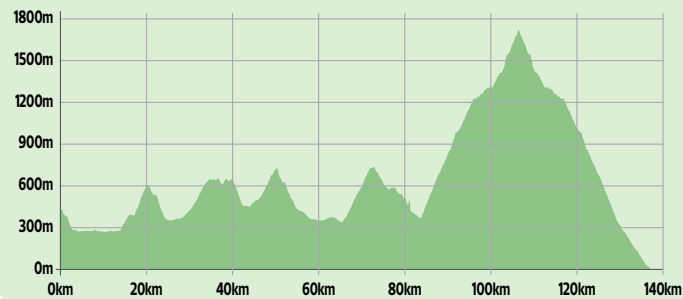
Croatia's history is just as turbulent as its landscape. It has been trampled over by Ottoman armies, passed



## Mountain high

### Follow Cyclist's meandering route to the Sveti Jure

To download this route, go to [cyclist.co.uk/83croatia](http://cyclist.co.uk/83croatia). After a brief stretch south on the 60 road out of Imotski the route turns east, just past a bridge over the River Matica. Stay on this road through Zmijavci and Runović and it will brush the Bosnia and Herzegovina border before bending southwest and climbing up to the town of Slivno. Follow the road until it meets the 76 then head for Zagvozd. Take the turning left just past the town's church on to the 62 road, which you stay on all the way to Kozica. Turn right to climb and pick up the 512, a high-altitude coastal road. Follow that down to the entrance to the Natural Park Biokovo. From there it's a 46km out-and-back climb to the peak of Sveti Jure. Exiting from where you entered, turn right to rejoin the 512, which runs all the way into Makarska.



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back and forth between the Austro-Hungarian empire and its neighbours, was incorporated into Yugoslavia after the First World War and then fought for and regained its independence again in the early 1990s.

Our ride starts close to the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, so much so that my mobile network provider sends me a 'welcome to' SMS and advises me on roaming charges. Usually, we'd look to ride a loop, starting and finishing in the same place, but Ivo is keen to show me the best bits of his home region so he's arranged a point-to-point, and first on his list of sights to visit are Imotski's most famous geological landmarks – its Red and Blue Lakes.

Both sit at the bottom of steep-sided sinkholes that are thought to have been created when enormous caves collapsed. The Blue Lake is the smaller of the two, and I'm told its water level varies wildly with the seasons. Wet winters see it rise dramatically, while hot summers

cause it to dry up totally, with adventurous locals climbing down to play football on its bed. The Red Lake is a bit more of a mystery. It has been explored to a depth of 530m but no one knows for sure how deep it actually goes, and some geologists believe it is connected to the Adriatic, which is around 30km away as the crow flies.

Our route to the Adriatic Sea is a convoluted one, so despite the lakes' natural beauty we don't linger, and it isn't long before we roll back through the town of Imotski to continue our ride. As we pass through, Ivo informs me that Imotski boasts the highest proportion of Mercedes-Benz cars per capita in the world, and there are plans to erect a statue to commemorate the fact in the town square.

Sure enough, almost every car I see as we scoot downhill through the town's streets bears the three-pointed star of the German marque. Most, however, are at least 20 years old and look pretty beaten up. 🚗

Above and far left: Cyclist descends through the town of Zagvozd, where our guide Ivo spent many of his childhood summers. We stop to appraise the house he used to call home



## By the numbers

Croat stats



135

distance in kilometres

3,470

altitude gained in metres

23km

climb of Sveti Jure

1

essential lunch stop mid-ascent

2

donkeys with designs on our lunch

31 km

descent from Sveti Jure into Makarska

1

beautifully prismatic sunset



## From this angle it looks as though the road overshoots the rocky slopes altogether, and that we will simply career over the edge

Out of town, things get very rural very quickly. We pass through vineyards that stretch along a fertile valley, separated by dense patches of stunted pine trees. We see barely any cars, the roads are smooth, and the temperature is already nudging pleasantly into the high twenties.

‘Cyclists don’t often consider riding here,’ Ivo says. ‘Croatia is well known for its beaches but few people are aware that as a riding destination the roads and landscape inland are as good as anywhere.’

I’m not about to disagree, partly because I need every breath I can take as we weave upwards for a few hundred

metres onto a ridge. Startled lizards scamper from our path – that they have been basking on the road is testament to how sparse the traffic is – and soon we pass over the ridge top and drop into the next valley.

The rollercoaster of climbing and descending continues for a few kilometres, until eventually we allow ourselves a short stop by the roadside for a drink and some carbs. As I climb off my bike, a familiar fragrance rises up to greet me. Ivo informs me I’ve just crushed some wild oregano under my cleat.

‘There’s wild sage over there too,’ he says, pointing to a white shrub protruding from a limestone shelf. ‘Local chefs don’t need to go to the supermarket to flavour their food here.’

### Road for any occasion

Passing through the small municipality of Slivno, the road turns northwest and we catch sight of Sveti Jure in the distance. The going is a little less rolling now, and we make good time past the town of Zagvozd and into a long, open descent skirting along the northern boundary of Nature Park Biokovo.

At the southeast corner of the park, we take a right turn and the climbing begins again. The road is meandering and we take it chunk by chunk, measuring our progress

Above and left: Cars are a rarity on the road that connects the towns of Runović and Slivno – a thrilling stretch of tarmac that ducks and weaves through dense woodland

Below left: Battered old Mercedes are a common sight around the town of Imotski, where it is said there is the highest proportion of Mercedes-Benz cars per capita in the world





This stretch of the 512 coastal road is 15km of cycling heaven

by the increasingly expansive view back into the valley that we’ve just sped down.

Gradually the gradient peters out to nothing and we ride out of the shadow of the trees and into the scorching midday sun. On this next section the vegetation becomes a little more sparse, a sign that we are getting nearer to the coast. Despite the warning, it still comes as a shock when we crest a ridge and the sea suddenly comes into view.

From this angle it looks as though the road overshoots the rocky slopes altogether, and that at the speed we’re going we will simply career over the edge and drop into the sea. The effect is rather disconcerting and Ivo delights in my momentary shock at the perceived termination of the tarmac.

‘This is the best bit of the 512 coastal road,’ he says. We round a corner and the Dalmatian coast reveals itself in all its glory. While the sea is still some distance away, from



# Even the road we’re on is incredible. The 512 is considered to be one of the world’s best coastal roads to drive

our vantage point several hundred metres up it seems like we could throw a stone and watch it splash into the water several seconds later.

Appraising the complete panorama, whole towns seem like little more than white specks set among lush greenery that is divided from the Adriatic by a thin, ragged filament of golden sand. The dark green islands of Brač and Hvar protrude from the sea off the coast. Everywhere I look the most striking things are the colours. They are just more vibrant than normal, like some higher power has turned up the contrast.

Even the road we’re on is incredible. The 512 is considered to be one of the world’s best coastal roads to drive. It’s hewn into a rock face and hugs the bulges and depressions of the cliff at a steady downward pitch to our ride’s end in Makarska, which is 15km and 500m in altitude below our current position. It’s tempting to





Right: The Dinaric Alps rise in parallel ranges away from the coast. This road connects two ranges near the town of Župa

Far right: Near the top of the Sveti Jure climb. The gradient is never consistent and the road never straight



ride this wriggling snake of tarmac all the way home, but there's the small matter of the Sveti Jure to deal with first.

#### Out and up

Ivo signals a right turn as the entrance to Nature Park Biokovo hoves into view. The park is a protected area of some 196 square kilometres that contains more than 1,500 plant and animal species. As such, access is tightly controlled and the only traversable route to the Sveti Jure peak is via one single-lane road. There is a toll to pay to gain admission. Cars must pay 50 Croatian Kuna, which is about £6. The climb is recognised as a popular challenge for cyclists, so we only have to pay half that.

It's this regular interest in the climb that motivated race organisers to include it in the 2017 Tour of Croatia. The peloton wasn't as lucky with the weather as we are today so the stage was shortened by 15km, with the finish line moving to Vrata Biokova, a plateau of sorts that houses a restaurant that will be our lunch stop. That stage was won by a Croatian – Kristijan Đurasek of UAE Team Emirates – with eventual GC winner Vincenzo Nibali finishing third, three seconds behind him.

Determined to show off the best of Sveti Jure, the race revisited it in 2018, where it was included as the summit finish of the third stage. Former Team Sky rider

## Sveti Jure is very different to any climb I've ever ridden before. There are so many false summits

Kanstantsin Siutsou won it, covering the 31km from Makarska in 75 minutes. I realise very quickly that it's going to take me far longer to conquer this beast.

The road tips up from the tollhouse to around 8% and stays there for the next 8km. Just into the park, prolonged hairpins navigate a blackened pine forest punctuated by green saplings. Ivo tells me in the wake of occasional forest fires, the Nature Park's conservationists are reforesting with other indigenous species – oaks and olive trees. Species usually so disparate thriving together seems possible only in the melting pot of contrasts that is Croatia.

While our talk of Biokovo's flora provides a temporary distraction, there's no escaping the growing burn in my thighs caused by the gradient. With our increase in altitude, the environment has transitioned from woodland to exposed, sheer rock faces that remind me of the Italian Dolomites. After a long day's riding on nothing but snacks I'm running on fumes, so when Vrata Biokova emerges from behind the tail end of a cliff I gladly dismount and slump into a seat on the terrace.

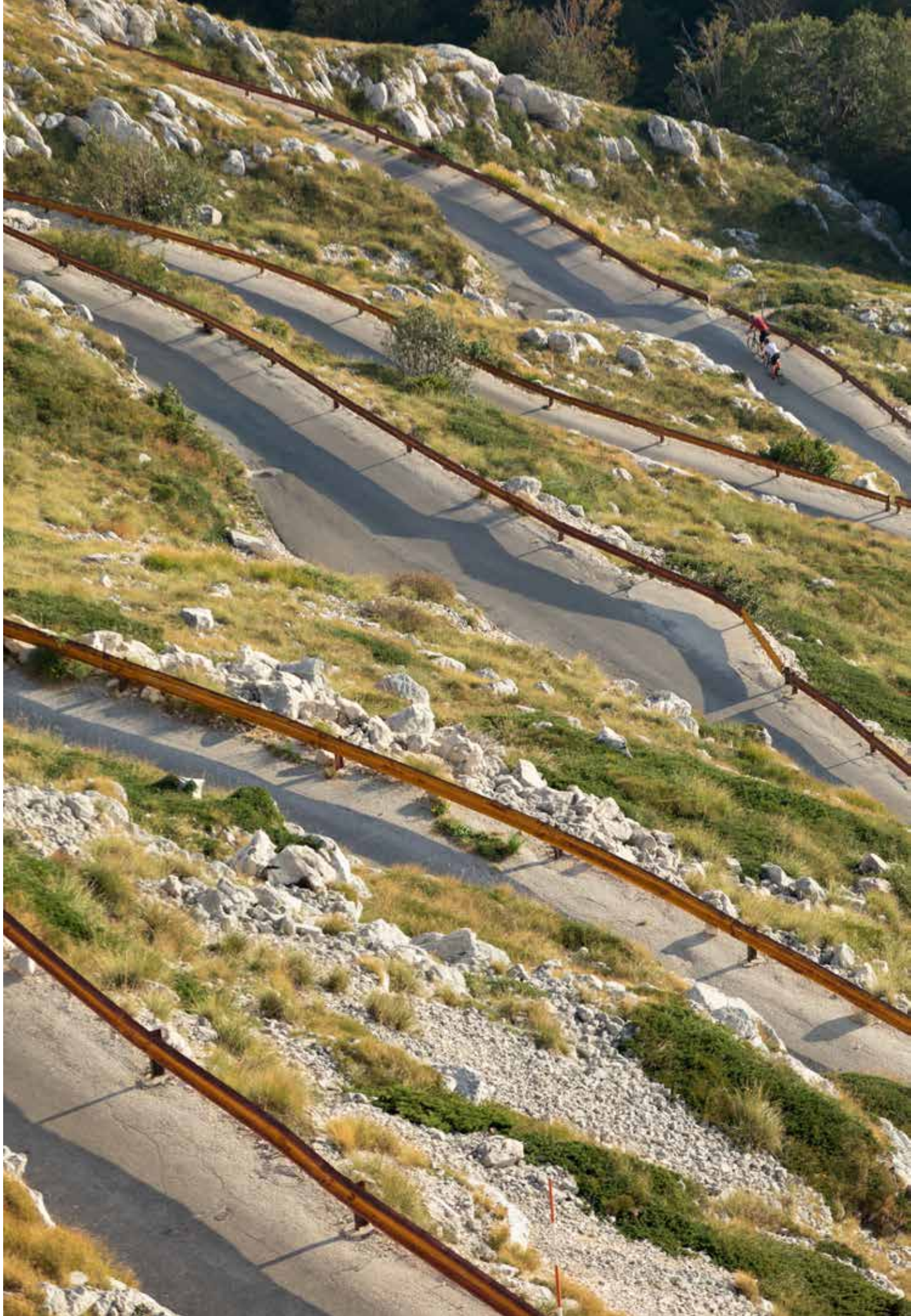
A couple of donkeys appraise our bikes. One uses Ivo's Ultegra shifter to scratch a hard-to-reach spot on his back, and we tuck into large plates of delicious grilled meats, vegetables and sauteed potatoes, all locally reared or grown. As I wash it down with some Coke I can feel life being breathed back into my body, which stimulates me to ask Ivo how much ascent is still to come. That turns out to be a mistake.











Left and above: The final switchbacks at the top of Sveti Jure punish weary legs

‘Still around 1,000 metres,’ he says wearily, clearly feeling how I must look.

#### Twists, turns, ducks and dives

From Vrata Biokova the ascent takes on a markedly different atmosphere. Where the sea has been a constant companion to one side, now it disappears from view as we head inland. The road winds around lesser peaks along the ridgeline, making us feel like ants crawling up and around the plates on the back of some mighty Stegosaurus.

Sveti Jure is very different to any climb I’ve ever ridden before. There are so many false summits. The road hops and weaves through scrubby meadows, past plunging depressions and up the sides of jutting slopes. There’s no pattern – a prolonged flat is followed by 10% ramps around corners that precede shallow descents through tunnels of trees. Even the light is inconsistent. The late-afternoon sun is low in the sky so the landscape is full of moody, shadowy corners but also peaks bathed in gold.

All the unpredictability causes mental and physical fatigue to return quickly because there’s no opportunity

## We look up to view a set of switchbacks so tightly coiled they might as well be on top of each other

to dig in and find a rhythm, but after what feels like an interminably long time the final peak and its red-and-white antenna comes into view. We spin around to its northern face and look up to view a set of switchbacks so tightly coiled they might as well be on top of each other.

While the antenna still seems high above us, road markings suggest there’s less than a kilometre to the peak. After darting up a number of hairpins in quick succession we find ourselves at the base of the structure.



## The rider’s ride

*Trek Domane SL 7, £4,300, [trekbikes.co.uk](http://trekbikes.co.uk)*

On big days out it’s always prudent to opt for a bike that’s a little less aggressive and more centred on keeping you comfortable. In that respect Trek’s Domane fitted the bill perfectly. It looks pleasingly similar to the racy Émonda, but the Domane’s stack is a little higher and reach a little shorter, which puts the rider in a more sustainable position for racking up the kilometres.

While it’s a bit portlier than most race frames, neat design features such as its clearance for wide tyres and Isospeed Decoupler in the seat tube meant the bike soaked up the worst of Croatia’s occasionally broken roads. It also meant that after several hours in the saddle my hands, back and posterior all felt a lot fresher than they had any right to be. It was only my legs that were in bits.





► Having been staring almost exclusively at my stem for the last few kilometres, looking out at the 360° view is staggering, and the total silence of being somewhere so remote makes it all the more powerful. Being so close to the coast, the peak divides the vista in half.

Looking southwest the blue of the Adriatic consumes my view. It is said that when the weather is very clear you can see Monte Gargano in Italy, 252km away. Northeast is all dark green vegetation and stark limestone – a sweeping summary of all the details we took in to get here. In the far distance is Imotski, while above it the Red and Blue Lakes peer back at me like a teddy bear’s mismatched eyes.

With the sun dipping towards the horizon we turn our wheels back the way they’ve just rolled. We relish the opportunity to spend the metres we’ve earned, but for a long time the route is not about descending in its pure sense. Being so technical it’s about concentration, reactions and bike handling, which turns out to be no less rewarding than the thrill of speed.

Riding out of the park and back onto the 512 satisfies our need for speed. Motorcyclists might be more common



## We aren’t required to touch our brakes for 8km – or eight minutes – until we reach the coast

## How we did it

**TRAVEL**  
Split’s airport is best situated to access Nature Park Biokovo. We flew from London Gatwick with Easyjet, which cost around £250 return. If you don’t want to pay to take a bike, you can hire one from trektravel.com. From Split it’s around 85km to our start town of Imotski, which isn’t much more than hour’s drive down the E65 highway toll road. If you prefer to do a loop, the Sveti Jure can be easily tackled from our finish town of Makarska.

**ACCOMMODATION**  
Cyclist stayed at Hotel Venezia in Imotski (hotel-venezia.hr) and Hotel Park in Makarska (parkhotel.hr). While Hotel Park is modern and Hotel Venezia more traditional, both offered spacious rooms, bike storage and delicious, locally sourced food.

**THANKS**  
Firstly to Luka Kolovrat and Hloverka Novak Srzic of the Imotski and Makarska tourist boards

respectively for helping to plan our trip, and to Elvis Prgomet of Vrata Biokova restaurant, who also runs a bed-and-bike chalet in Nature Park Biokovo (vratabiokova.hr). Post-ride recovery was aided by some fantastic seafood at Konoba Kalalarga in Makarska, and we must thank Bozidar Strihic at trektravel.com. All of this was coordinated by Ivo Piljic, who plans and organises bespoke holidays around the Dalmatia region of Croatia. To contact him about a trip of your own, go to morehvar.com.



Above: Sveti Jure’s final few switchbacks don’t go on for long, but the gradient does hover at around 10%

Above right: The climb is tough and the view is beautiful – more than enough reason to slump on the rocks at Sveti Jure’s peak

on this road but I don’t think they descend much faster than us on the sweeping bends. We aren’t required to touch our brakes for 8km – or eight minutes – until we reach the harbourside in the coastal town of Makarska.

The sun is setting and the sky is a storm of oranges and purples. The hues are reflected in the harbour and the beautiful scene it creates illustrates why Croatia’s coast is so popular. I feel lucky to have discovered today that this beauty extends far deeper into Croatia than the beach-goers could ever imagine. 🌸

*Sam Challis is staff writer for Cyclist and is our very own knight in shining armour*