



Easy riders

Turkey | A new e-bike tour offers a laid-back way for *Tim Moore* to explore the ancient sites and grand vistas of the Taurus Mountains

Most of the 13 million foreigners who come to the Turkish resort of Antalya every year never venture beyond it, going home happy with a suntan, and maybe a hair transplant. Rare is the visitor who goes north into a very different world of epic, lonely landscapes and barely explored classical ruins, where wolves roam and headscarved grandmothers work the soil with hand tools. Rarer still, given the soaring, snow-veined serrations that stand in their way, are those who do so on a bicycle.

Yet there's a way of riding up the steep scenery that doesn't involve appreciating it through a veil of sweaty tears, and it's provided by The Slow Cyclist on its new Hidden Anatolia group tour, launched earlier this year. The company's name is less of a clue than the low drone emanating from between the pedals as our 10-strong senior peloton breezes over the rocky, pine-studded foothills of the Taurus Mountains. Hair-shirt graduates of the no-pain-no-gain school of cycle touring look away now: we're all on electric bikes.

There's no better way to savour an environment than in the saddle: you're up close and personal with every sight, sound and scent. An e-bike democratises this experience, opening it to cyclo-sceptic partners who might not associate holidays with physical suffering, or reopening it to riders with willing spirits but weakening flesh. Our hybrid bikes offer three levels of assistance, activated by tell-tale beeps that chorus through the pack whenever the tarmac tilts upward.

"Eco" has the approximate physiological effect of halving my age; its two superiors, topped with "boost", incrementally transform me into the supremely talented endurance cyclist I've always pretended to be in those inner-monologue commentaries. "Moore's got the race-face on today, Phil, and when he's in this form no one can live with him."

It's a surreptitious and wonderfully seductive experience, like riding with your own personal tailwind, taking the smooth without the rough. At the end of our longest day – 70km, with regular stops for sightseeing and refreshment – my legs feel no more than agreeably exercised, and I've worked up a healthy appetite rather than the typical coma-flirting calorific deficit. For anyone with experience of riding a bike all day, it's a wonderful novelty to appreciate meals with genteel restraint, rather than cramming them in with clumsy, pallid urgency. In every sense, an e-bike is a great leveller.

Pisidia, an ancient region of Asia Minor hemmed in by the western



Taurus peaks, was a bustling agro-commercial crossroads for millennia, from preclassical times to its medieval role as a Byzantine off-ramp near the Silk Road's western terminus. Its subsequent decline to a thinly populated and very insular realm of orchards and hamlets is, for our purposes at least, the thrill that keeps on thrilling.

As cyclists, it means that the traffic-alert shouts our guides school into us as we saddle up on day one – "Car up! Car back!" – prove largely redundant, soon modified for comedic effect into warnings of forward or hindward cattle and goats. As sightseers, it means we have the plunging canyons, hillsides of bulbous, alien rocks and some of the world's most dramatic, off-piste classical sites almost entirely to ourselves.

Sagalassos, our first stop, was a city for 3,000 years, with a population that



Clockwise from main: workers in a rose field along the route; the campsite outside Çukurca; a picnic for the group near the village of İbışler; the ruins of Sagalassos; the Kale peninsula on Lake Eğirdir; riding through the foothills of the Taurus Mountains, heading for Kesme

Alamy, Shutterstock

hit 50,000 during the Roman residency. Abandoned since the 7th century, its yawning marble squares, fractured by cold winters and earthquakes, are pierced with high weeds. Water cascades from a fountain at the centre of a superlative Corinthian colonnade, recently reassembled from 3,000 fallen fragments by Belgian archaeologists, and all for the benefit of us and a small group of passing rambblers.

To access the world's loftiest amphitheatre, and a panorama of distant, misted valleys 1,500m below, we must clamber over a giant heap of toppled masonry. It feels as if we're pioneering tourist explorers, wandering through a Piranesi print.

This mood intensifies in the days ahead: Sagalassos is the only site we visit with a ticket booth or any attendant staff. Many of the rest have never been excavated or otherwise investigated; some aren't even marked on the map.

At Adada, Graeco-Roman temples rise from overgrown meadows, half lost in the trees. Hunks of fluted Doric column lie among rusted beer cans by the road. It's almost too much when Mert Günel, our perma-smiling, multitiered lead guide, squats on a granite block in the desolate agora and plays a haunting, timeless tune on his ney, a bamboo flute with a 5,000-year heritage.

We leave the bikes and walk south through a juniper forest arrestingly strewn with shards of amphora and more delicate Roman tableware, before the trees part to reveal a dumbfounding vista: a towering gorge of cork-textured rock, with a steep, broad road of mighty Roman slabs somehow tacked to its right-hand side, trailing away to the green hillocks beyond and below. Clumps of euphorbia and wispy wild clematis, a cobalt sky, the white-wigged mountains that stand guard over every horizon. From some far-off, unseen settlement a muezzin's amplified call to prayer echoes frailly up the canyon.

The coming days include rather more walking than expected – it's often the only way to access such remote spectacles. Nobody minds. By common consent, that 3km descent on ancient stones is the ramble of a lifetime.

All this splendid isolation has an inevitable impact on logistics. At the end of our first day in the saddle, by the lightly touristed shores of Lake Eğirdir, we eat in an actual restaurant and stay in an actual hotel. Thereafter we don't.

Out in the Pisidian sticks, where every far-flung settlement is no more than a cluster of ramshackle roofs huddled around a blue-tipped minaret, there is absolutely nothing in the way of relevant infrastructure. These are places where donkeys haul carts full of kindling, where the simple sight of a few foreigners on bikes brings every child into the street, waving and shrieking: "Hello! Bye Bye!"

The Slow Cyclist's imaginative and commendable solution is to travel through a year or more in advance, can-



vassing village mayors for potential food and lodging options, and offering funds to help local families arrange them. Our homestay accommodation is clean, comfortable and – in the bathroom department – on occasion communal. Lunches are a perennial delight, presented with a bucolic sense of theatre. Long tables are laid out under blossoming cherry trees, the linen a kaleidoscope of wildflowers and vivid local produce: pomegranates, olives, flatbreads intricately stuffed with herbs and feta, hazelnuts and pecans, tomatoes, lamb and aubergines combined a dozen ways.

Mert always takes the time to introduce our shyly smiling hosts, generation by generation, explaining at one village that the sorrel we're about to sample kept their grandmother going to 114, singing along at another as a grandly moustachioed paterfamilias in a bobble cap strums his lute-like saz.

After baklava and a few small hour-glasses of tea, a proud daughter might emerge from a barn with a newborn calf in her arms, or a son might call over a sheepdog to show us the terrifying spiked collar he wears, a defence against wolves bent on tearing his throat out.

It soon becomes clear that our support-crew guides – two on bikes, three in a pair of vehicles – like to surprise us.



i / DETAILS

Tim Moore was a guest of The Slow Cyclist (theslowcyclist.com) and easyJet (easyjet.com). The Slow Cyclist offers a six-night journey to the Taurus Mountains from £3,350 per person including airport transfers and a support vehicle, guides, six nights' accommodation, meals, e-bicycle and helmet hire. EasyJet flies from London to Antalya up to seven days a week from about £150 return

Hot coffee in copper goblets at the bottom of a cold, damp descent; a mystery walk that delivers us to an otherworldly plain cluttered with Hellenistic tombs and monumental boulders, sculpted by the elements into rough-hewn Henry Moores.

Returning to our homestay after a post-ride dip beneath a jade-coloured forest waterfall, we find a Turkish barber waiting to offer us alfresco grooming. You haven't lived until you've had a sunset nostril wax in an orchard.

The crew are masters of understatement. "Two nights in a campsite" is a billing that does no justice to the most winsome and magical under-canvas experience any of us have known. Just outside the tiny hamlet of Çukurca, our individual bell tents are decorously tricked out with wild flowers, candles, fairy lights and Turkish rugs, with proper beds and big plump duvets. Before them stands the grandest prospect I have ever beheld through an unzipped tent flap. Tilted pastures dotted with pines, goats and outlandish boulders, backed on all sides by a colossal arena of steeping rock. In our dining marquee we feast on grilled trout from the waters that gurgle through the gorge far below, and emerge beneath an overwhelming profusion of stars. Stooping into my tent, I discover that a turndown service has been implemented, complete with hot-water bottle.

On the last day, coasting south from the village of Çaltepe down the final Taurean descent, we abruptly find ourselves on a pleasant but predictable Mediterranean holiday. The air and the light are warmer; poppies blurt out from verges and wafts of orange blossom caress our bald nostrils. The traffic thickens to the point where nobody minds when our bikes are put on a trailer, and we all decamp to the Slow Cyclist minibus.

The classical sites persist – a graceful, slender Roman bridge vaulting a deep chasm, the vast Selge amphitheatre, a pediment-topped tomb entrance halfway up a mountain – but on this side of the mountains we have to share them with coach-loads of bored-looking foreigners.

Only when Mert directs our driver to a lonely, majestic length of sun-gilded aqueduct at Aspendos, do we recapture something of the much-missed mood, freshly squeezed by an old farmer with chickens darting round his feet.

In the shade of a soaring Roman arch I gaze back at those snowy peaks, trying to tap into the potent sense of accomplishment endowed by riding a bike over enormous lumps of geography.

There have been times in the saddle, drunk on glory and undernourished exhaustion, when I've surveyed a lofty rearward horizon with ugly triumphalism, an enemy I have taken on and defeated. But in these battery-assisted circumstances, that's a stretch. We came, we saw, we kind of conquered.

Inspired by Le Tour but need a helping hand? More e-biking holidays

Sicily Inntravel's new itinerary takes e-bikers through the baroque towns of south-east Sicily – Ragusa, Scicli, Noto and Siracusa. It's self-guided, meaning you are given route notes and maps, and luggage is transferred between the two guesthouses and two hotels along the way. The six-night trip costs from £1,556; departure dates flexible; inntravel.co.uk

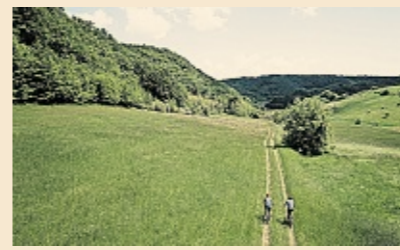
Romania Since it was set up in 2015, The Slow Cyclist has expanded to offer

trips in seven countries (recent additions as well as Turkey include Crete and the Basque Country). But the company continues to run holidays in Transylvania, its original destination, where founder Oli Broom lived with his family for much of 2016 and 2017 and which he calls "a second home". Guests e-bike between unspoilt Saxon villages in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, staying in restored traditional guesthouses, enjoying picnics

in forests and riding on quiet back roads and trails. A six-day guided trip costs from £2,600, with the next departure on September 17; private group trips are also available; theslowcyclist.com

Switzerland As well as easing road journeys, e-bikes have become increasingly popular away from the tarmac. Swiss-based E-Alps offers a range of off-road trips on electrically assisted mountain bikes, including

An e-biking tour of Transylvania with The Slow Cyclist



two-wheeled versions of classic skiing and hiking itineraries such as the Chamonix-Zermatt Haute Route and the Tour of Mont Blanc. Those with moderate mountain-biking experience can take on the Graubünden Haute Route, from Lenzerheide to St Moritz, over five passes higher than 2,300m. The four-night guided group trip covers 170km and costs SFR2,950 (£2,615), with the next available departure on September 4; e-alps.com

Greece Toronto-based tour operator Butterfield & Robinson has been arranging European cycling trips since 1966. Its Northern Greece e-biking trip takes guests west across the mainland, from Thessaloniki to Ioannina, via the ancient tombs at Vergina, villages on the flanks of Mount Olympus, the caves and cliff-top monasteries at Meteora and the dramatic limestone gorge at Vikos. The six-night trip costs from \$8,595; next departure September 6; butterfield.com