

HOUSE & GARDEN[®]

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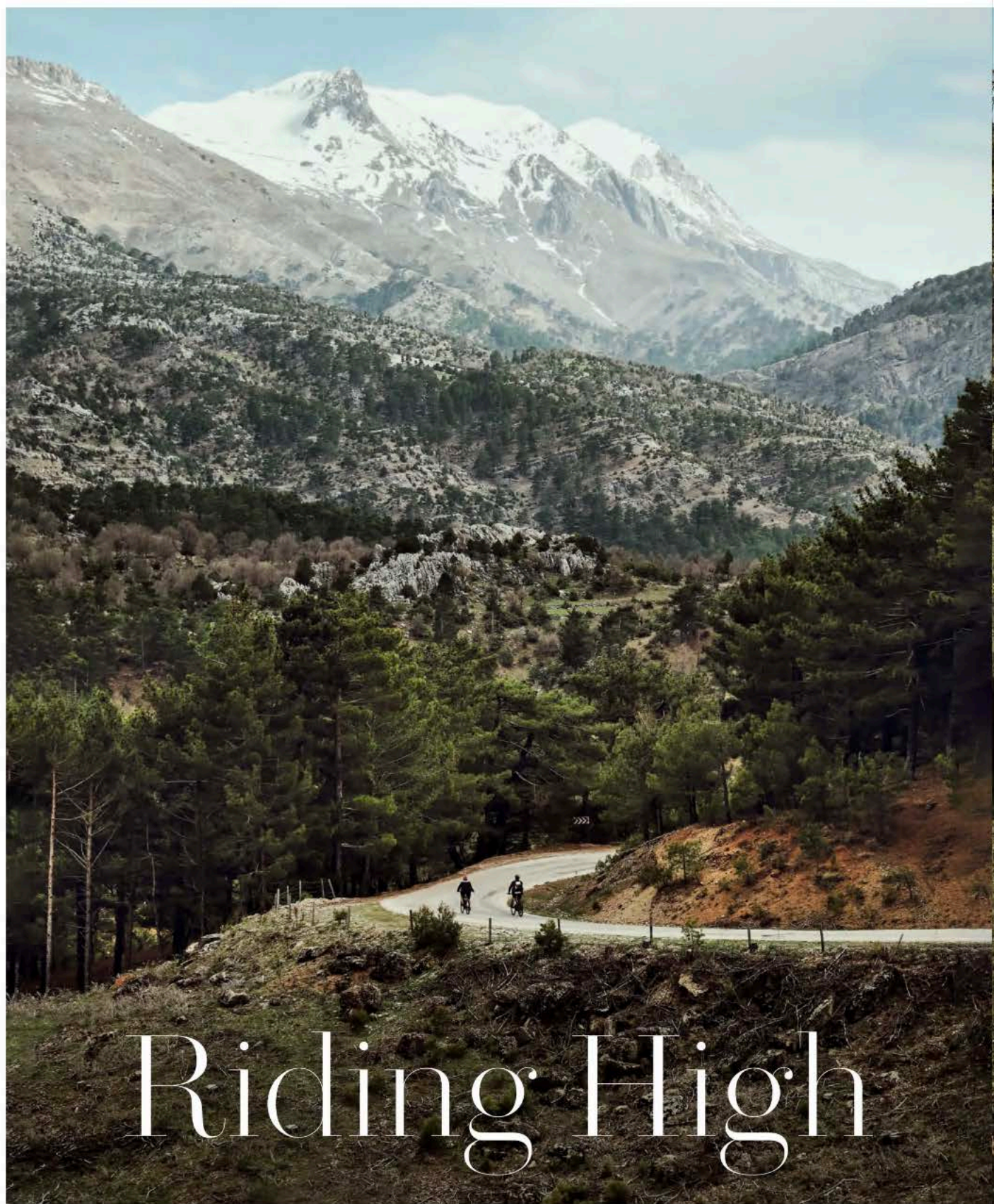
Here comes the sun

Glorious houses in GREECE, PROVENCE and the ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE



The Wiltshire garden of **SOPHIE CONRAN** and the joys of **SLOW TRAVEL**





Riding High



OPPOSITE The winding descent towards Kesme. THIS PAGE Just outside this village, The Slow Cyclist's campsite offers spectacular views

TIM MOORE takes an exhilarating cycling trip through the Taurus Mountains of southern Turkey and discovers a dramatic landscape of otherworldly ruins and remote villages that feel blissfully removed from modern life

PHOTOGRAPHS DEAN HEARNE



An old man in a crimson knitted cap waves as we cycle through Kesme, an especially remote village in the sparsely populated, steeply undulating southern Turkish province of Isparta. Behind him, looming distantly over the dishevelled terracotta roofs, stand the white-veined peaks of the Taurus Mountains. Beneath him is a hefty fluted column top that would have spent its first few centuries supporting some nearby Hellenistic temple. It is hard to tell who is more excited. We have never seen anyone perch on such a majestic municipal bench. He has never seen or, more pertinently, heard an electric bicycle – let alone a small, humming fleet of them.

It is a ride-by encounter that encapsulates a week-long cycling odyssey deep into what was Pisidia, an ancient province in western Anatolia, the classical heyday of which seems both unimaginably distant and thrillingly current. When the collapse of Rome and a salvo of devastating earthquakes brought a millennium of bustle and prosperity to an end, the locals were largely cut off and left to their timeless agricultural devices. Once-grand cities were reclaimed by nature, or lightly repurposed by nearby farm communities. Somehow, this wondrous isolation has persisted despite the proximity of Antalya, an ever-stretching parade of beach resorts and apartment blocks that now draws over 10 million foreign holidaymakers a year.

Up here, we can drop our bikes by the road and find ourselves wandering in awed silence through barely explored, sometimes entirely uncharted ruins: temples and amphitheatres lost in the trees, the forest floor strewn with shards of ancient pottery. Striding down a steep gorge on mighty Roman slabs, our surroundings an unpeopled arcadia of wildflowers and junipers, we feel like pioneering grand tourists in an oil-painted vista.

There is no more rewarding way to engage with an environment than in the saddle – all five senses placed on full alert. The ululating echo of a muezzin's call to prayer bounces down a canyon's walls, the bright blue point of his minaret jabbing into the sky. Our noses alert us to the dominant local crops – now lavender, now apples, now almonds – and our hands indicate an election must be coming up, as the potholes have been filled in.

But if the white-wigged mountains that stand guard over every horizon are largely responsible for keeping the outside world at bay, their considerable foothills make a poor fit with fun times on a conventional bike. When your legs and lungs are locked in an attritional fight to the death with gravity, the outside world shrinks to the metre of tarmac you are forever reeling in with agonising, Sisyphean sloth. How magical to neutralise inclines – and headwinds – with the flick of a switch and to survey an imminent stack of hairpin bends without spirit-sapping, shoulder-sagging dread. At the end of each day, we are pleasantly exercised and politely peckish, with none of the ravaging, shivery delirium that can besmirch the après-cycling scene.

The delight aroused at every refreshment stop is more about content than calories. Arranging a group tour through this off-piste region has obliged our trip organisers, The Slow Cyclist, to improvise, with the input of local communities grateful for a rare chance to supplement their agricultural incomes – and winningly proud of the produce that earns it. Every lunch

table – outside under cherry blossom, or inside under a faded framed photo of Atatürk, the glowering father of the Turkish nation – is a vivid cornucopia. Lamb and pomegranates; honey on the comb; stuffed flatbreads sprinkled with sorrel; and gleaming sheaves of spring onion. Dishes are laid out with bashful dignity by at least three generations of the hosting family. 'Suleiman would like me to tell you about his proudest achievement,' says our lead guide and principal translator Mert Günal, with an arm round the grandfather's hunched shoulders. 'It is that he has built his family a house from concrete, not wood.' Every day provides humbling insights.

We spend our nights in clean and comfortable homes and guesthouses, with one standout exception. At The Slow Cyclist's magical campsite just beyond Kesme, the individual bell tents – with proper beds dressed with linen, Turkish rugs, candles – are surrounded by a steeping panorama of pine-studded rock. In the dining pavilion, its curtains drawn back to frame the vista, we feast on trout from the turquoise waters that froth through the fundament of the gorge far below us. After dinner, we emerge under a profusion of stars, serenaded by the frail hoots of pygmy owls and a goatherd's whoops and whistles.

The Pisidian scenery is muscular and tirelessly strange. Whole valleys are stacked with bulbous grey mounds of conglomerate rock, like elephants sleeping in a heap; monochrome eternities of bare granite are interrupted with irrigated blurts of greenery; boulders have been extruded and eroded by the elements to create troll armies, marching drunkenly across tilted pastures. It feels primaevial and almost artificial, sometimes a half-finished *Flintstones* theme park, sometimes a fantasy landscape created by some overexcited celestial AI.

On our final morning, with the bikes back on the trailer, we follow an ancient trail up and over the last eminence of the Taurus Mountains. A 2,000-year-old staircase, hewn into the rock, ascends a steeply pitched forest of black pine and mossy stone giants, natural menhirs that loom over us like shrouded grey ghosts. At a hamlet near the head of the pass, sipping hourglass beakers of tea around a family's twig-fired stove, I finally grasp what lured the Romans, Greeks and their pre-Classical predecessors to this well-hidden, hard-bitten corner of the Mediterranean hinterland and led them to clutter its bleak plateaus with temples. The village is huddled among those towering monoliths, with some houses built flush up against them. Beside the mosque stands a particularly compelling example, halfway to an Easter Island head, which until the 1990s served as its minaret, accessed by a rusty iron spiral staircase still riveted into its left cheek. Pisidia was – and remains – a land shaped by strange forces, where other worlds seem to have touched down, where a leap of faith is no more than a walk in the weird woods □

WAYS AND MEANS *The Slow Cyclist* (theslowcyclist.com) offers a six-night trip to the Taurus Mountains from £3,350 per person for up to 12 guests. This includes all meals, transfers, a support vehicle, a host, two English-speaking guides, and e-bicycle and helmet hire, plus a one per cent donation to local causes aligned with *The Slow Cyclist's* values, and excludes flights.

TOP ROW FROM LEFT Heading to Yenikoy on local transport. The Roman forum at Sagalassos. An eye-catching installation beside Lake Egirdir. MIDDLE ROW Ruins of the Roman agora in the ancient city of Adada. A typical meal of rustic dishes. Bridge across the Koprucay river near Caltepe. BOTTOM ROW The folk museum at Bogazkoy. Lunches are provided by local communities. The interior of one of the well-appointed bell tents

