

# Dust DEVILS

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BRITAIN CAN BE A DARK AND DEPRESSING PLACE DURING THE WINTER MONTHS, ESPECIALLY FOR US OFF ROAD TYPES, SO WHEN SWANNY WAS OFFERED AN ESCAPE FROM THE COLD AND MISERY – A TRIP TO SPAIN FOR A FEW DAYS OF FIVE STAR DIRT BIKING – HE WAS ON A PLANE IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE...





Like many, after a strong cup of coffee I start my working day by turning on my ancient, coal-fired computer, logging into my email account and opening my inbox. Still half asleep before the lovely caffeine works its magic, I'm usually confronted with a wide range of exciting opportunities. Would I like to bulk buy Viagra at competitive prices? Cash in my eight million dollar Nigerian Lottery winnings? Furnish myself with a Thai bride or increase the length of my penis? All tempting, granted, but I hit delete.

This leaves me with only one or two emails. One of which will invariably be from my gullible mother, who, until recently, thought hotmail was a letter that had been left too close to an open fire. More often than not, her message will be one of those that claims to reward you with world peace or good karma if you promise to forward it to ten of your closest friends. Or it'll contain a video of a cute kitten getting scared by a cardboard box. Once again, I hit delete.

And so I'm left with a phone bill or two, an invite to a tedious midweek meeting and some work-related correspondence. Nothing too exciting. But then, one day last November, I received a gem of an email that immediately woke me from my slumber.

At first glance it looked ordinary and innocent. I didn't recognise the sender's name nor the subject heading 'Dust Devils' so, unsuspectingly, I opened it with a curious click of my computer's mouse to be greeted by one warm and welcoming paragraph...

"Hi Simon, we've recently started a new off-road adventure company that's based in Marbella, southern Spain. We have a fleet of brand new KTM's and we take dirt bikers to ride in the Andulucian Mountains above Puerto Banus. The

trails are awesome and there's something for everyone. Would you like to come out and sample our hospitality before Christmas?"

This was somewhat more appealing than penis enlargement surgery or giving my new Nigerian friend \$16,000 so he could fly to the UK and personally hand me my lottery cheque, so I hit 'reply' immediately: "you bet I fucking would..."

Within seconds I was Googling 'Dust Devils' and familiarising myself with its website. The firm's outlook is simple: combine top quality bikes and equipment with first class trails and five star accommodation in one of Europe's most rugged yet attractive regions. What's more, it (somehow) manages to do this at an extremely competitive price. But more about that in a minute.

Naturally, the prospect of swapping a damp and chilly British winter for a warm and pleasant Spanish one saw me shoo the moths from my wallet, retrieve my credit card and book the first flight available (a healthy £90 return from Manchester to Malaga).

With that done I emailed the team my arrival time and they did the rest: organise airport transfers, hotels, and prepped my 450 EXC-F. Sweet.

Fast forward a few days and I was sat on my kit bag at 10am outside Malaga airport's main terminal. It was already 18-degrees and, with the sun on my face, I felt both relaxed and energised. Today was going to be a good day.

Moments later a Land Rover Discovery pulls up and the driver, having no doubt clocked my Alpinestars T-shirt, asked if I'm Simon. Although it was still relatively early in the morning (for a freelance journalist) I knew the answer to that one, so I chucked my bag in the back and clambered into the passenger seat.

Turned out my taxi driver was none other than Robert Hodds, Dust Devils' owner, who took me straight to the five-star Gran Hotel Gvadalupe to drop off my bags while enthusing with tales of the trails he had in store.

Sans bags, and having been suitably blown away by my room at the beachfront hotel, we arrived at Dust Devils' HQ, which is located on an industrial estate outside Puerto Banus, where the fun really starts.

In a nutshell, Robert's aim was to start an adventure tour company that didn't compromise on the quality of its bikes, the quality of its kit, the quality of its food, its accommodation, its instructors... and, in short, he's not failed. Walk into Dust Devils' HQ and you're greeted by a fleet of KTM's latest four-stroke enduro bikes, all maintained to the highest standards, and, if that's not enough, there's box-fresh gear from Alpinestars and Acerbis. There's even a pool table!

Genuinely excited, I got suited and booted quicker than Bill Clinton after an Oval Office brush with Monica Lewinski, absorbed the obligatory and admittedly quite useful safety lecture - which fills you in on the lie of the land, the wildlife, the police, and the local's attitude to dirt bikes - and warmed up my gleaming 450.



*"As days in the saddle go I can think of few that have been so challenging and enjoyable. I had fun, but more than that I learned a thing or two..."*

That morning I'd scraped the ice off my frozen windscreen and driven to a cold and snowy Manchester airport and now, just a few hours later, I was gunning along a loose, dusty fire road with the sun warming the water in my Camelbak. If I had questioned my decision to plump for this trip over a bigger penis before, any doubt had now subsided. This was ace.

At first the going was fast and flowing; the trails that hugged the hills of Benahavis - to the west of Marbella - were dry and hard, and littered with rocks. Soon, though, we chanced upon a 16-mile enduro loop halfway up a mountain and things got considerably more difficult, but none less enjoyable.

The uphill climbs were tough, made even more challenging by steep staircases formed from rock, while the downhill descents were even more hair-raising.

Out in the mountains there really is something for everyone and Bob and his team, who know the area like the back of their hands, made it their mission to show me a good deal of what's to offer over two days of intense and demanding riding.

For the novice, there are acres of wide-open fire roads and undulating valley floors to play on, while, for the more experienced, there is everything from tight woodland going to ridiculously steep climbs, rocky rivers and mile upon mile of technical trails. Enough for even the most accomplished of experts. In fact, a few of the guys that had joined us on that day were there to get into shape for this year's Erzberg. Say no more.

We rode until the light began to fade and Bob finished the tour with a blast up a fantastically flowing fire road that meandered its way to a view point, from which you could see where the Costa del Sol's rugged landscape met manicured golf courses and country mansions before densely populated towns gave way to the Mediterranean sea. Beautiful, and certainly a fitting end to an afternoon of seriously good enduro riding.

On a high, we spent the evening taking in the very different sights of Puerto Banus. Forget panoramic scenery and pretty vistas. Think supercars, multi-million pound yachts and women with Hermès scarves and surgically enhanced breasts. All of which kept us entertained as we ate pizza and drank nine too many beers.

Despite a thick head, the promise of a full day's riding meant I was up and about early, and, once I'd figured out

how to work the Jacuzzi bath, I had a strong cup of coffee on my very own terrace (overlooking the sea, no less) before heading down to breakfast.

After a heavy night my stomach was turning, but, knowing that I'd need the energy on the trails later that morning, I pigged out on eggs and bacon and hoped it would stay down. You, and the hotel's housekeeping, will be pleased to hear it did.

Marginally refreshed and sober, I downed four gallons of water and waited for the boys to pick me up. We hotfooted it over to the Dust Devils' HQ and were ready to hit the mountains before you could say "hangover."

Fortunately my fragility lasted seconds once aboard the KTM and, with adrenaline pumping through my veins and the cool morning breeze rushing through my Shoei, I felt recharged as we rode out of Marbella and headed east.

Our first stop was an enduro park of sorts in La Canada (pronounced La Canyada), where we mucked about for half an hour before riding into the hills along a winding valley.



## Dust Devils

Established by British biker Robert Hodds, Dust Devils cater for riders of all abilities, from the absolute novice to off-road demigod, and will tailor its tours to suit you.

Dust Devils prides itself on having the best bikes, the best kit and the best instructors. Safety is paramount too; all guides are trained to paramedic standards, while the company is fully insured and registered with the region's air ambulance service.

Prices fluctuate depending on the time of year, but get in quick before April 2010 and you can get yourself a bargain - bikes, kit, guide, fuel, lunch and five-star accommodation for 199 Euros. That really is exceptional value for money.

For more details call: 0034 952 908 201; visit: [www.dustdevils.net](http://www.dustdevils.net); or email: [enquiries@dustdevils.net](mailto:enquiries@dustdevils.net)



The total climb was around 5000 feet and, once up there, we bombed along the rocky hilltop ridges to an area known as Elviria.

We continued along a dirt track to our lunch spot, a restaurant called Kudu that's located high in the hills of La Mairena, from which you can see North Africa. The view from up there was worthy of the trip alone.

Full to the brim with pasta, we rode towards the white village of Ojen, before retracing our path and heading back – exhausted but on a high – to Marbella.

What a day's riding. What a landscape. What a country. We'd blasted along dusty trails at full whack. Bucked and skipped our way up and down steep jagged paths. Chugged through dense woodland. Dodged boulders and wild goats while traversing narrow mountain tracks. Practiced wheelies and skids in wide-open valleys. Hell, we even joined the main motorway to get home quickly that evening when the sun suddenly disappeared behind the hills.

As days in the saddle go I can think of few that have been so challenging and enjoyable. I had fun, but more than that I learned a thing or two about riding in that terrain. Not least about bike control and sticking to your side of the road around blind mountain bends in case a Volvo – or a horse – comes hurtling around the corner (it did and I survived, just)...

So as I handed my kit and my KTM back at the end of the day I did so knowing that not only had I had a great break in a wonderful country at a top-notch hotel, but also with the knowledge that I'd gained more than just fond memories of the truly excellent and seemingly endless trails. I was going home a better rider, with some raw but nevertheless hard-earned slow speed trials skills. Which I thought was pretty neat.

So there you have it. If you want to ride great trails in stunning surroundings on brand new bikes while sporting brand new kit and sleeping in five star hotels then Dust Devils is the tour company for you. And come on, who wouldn't want to do that?



## Bikes and Gear

You can, if you wish, take your own riding gear with you, but it's pointless really as Dust Devils' wardrobe is superb, with top quality, clean and fresh-smelling Alpinestars clothing and boots, Acerbis helmets and body armour, and Camelbaks built into the 199 Euro package. Hint: save yourself the excess baggage fee and use their gear.

The bikes are equally impressive and meticulously maintained. What's more, the whole fleet is changed every six months so you're guaranteed a decent set of wheels. Choose from KTM's 250 or 450 EXC-F, both of which are perfectly suited to the hard-pack trails.

The only question is really one of wonga: how much is it? Well, for what you get, I reckon Dust Devils' packages offer remarkably good value for money.

If you book before the end of April this year you get a day's bike hire, a tour guide, fuel, lunch and overnight bed and breakfast accommodation at the five-star Gvadalupe Hotel in Puerto Banus for just 199 Euros (based on two sharing a twin room). Taking into consideration the condition of the bikes and Dust Devils' gear, the sheer variety of the trails, the friendly, encouraging and knowledgeable guides, the food and accommodation at one of the Costa del Sol's best hotels and the reliability of the Spanish weather I'd say that was stonking good value.

So much so, in fact, that I plan to put my money where my mouth is and go out there again this year, hopefully before Easter. Me thinks you should consider cancelling your viagra or Thai bride and come join me...

## Flights

Flights from the UK vary but Malaga is a very popular destination so there's never a shortage of budget airlines vying for your custom. I flew from Manchester with Monarch, which cost less than £100 return, but there are equally attractive options from virtually all major UK airports.

