

# Ring of fire

*Cyclist* experiences the spectacular and the unforgiving on a tour of the volcanic island of Lanzarote

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As the plane glides towards the airport at Arrecife, I'm trying to find the right word to describe the landscape below me.

Lanzarote is barren and rocky, a mix of browns and blacks, and it's pockmarked with volcanic craters that make it look otherworldly. To the north it gets hilly, while the southern part of the island has large areas that are flat and sparse, with little growing in the expanses of dark earth and solidified lava. For a cyclist it looks both inviting and intimidating.

Then the right word comes to me: sublime. It's a word most commonly used to mean 'excellent' or 'beautiful', but if you were to ask 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant, the sublime includes 'the noble, the splendid and the terrifying'. Another German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, suggested that the sublime was 'pleasure from perceiving objects that threaten to hurt or destroy the

observer', and John Dennis, an English 17th century writer, described the sublime as being 'mingled with horrors, and sometimes almost with despair'.

The overwhelming nature of the volcanic vistas below me makes it clear that this is classic Big Ride territory for *Cyclist*: both beautiful and punishing; stimulating a mixture of excitement and fear. Through the window of the aeroplane, Lanzarote certainly looks sublime.

#### Into the fire

Lanzarote sits as the eastern-most island of the Canary archipelago, an igneous ribbon of landmasses 100km or so off Africa's Atlantic coast, thought to be formed by a rogue 'hotspot' due to their relative distance from any tectonic plate boundaries. But geology aside, with such low latitudes comes a favourable bike riding climate, and with average temperatures of 25°C in the summer and 17°C in the winter – a winter that only lasts from January to February, we might add – Lanzarote has become a popular destination for cyclists. ▶

**'The nature of the volcanic vistas below me makes it clear that this is classic Big Ride territory for *Cyclist*: both beautiful and punishing'**



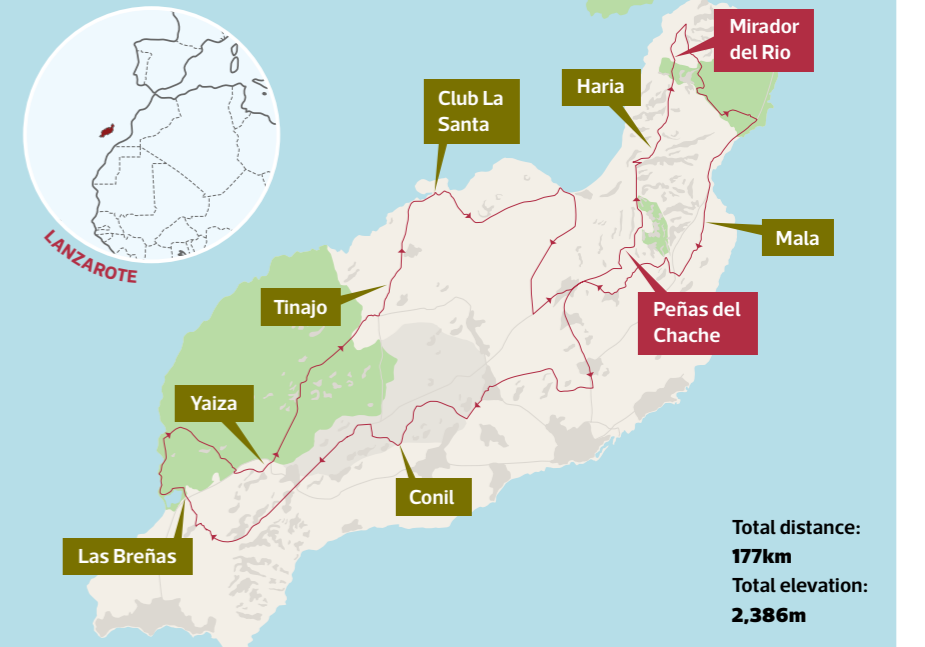
Riding in Lanzarote is typified by long roads, sparse vegetation and punishing headwinds



## Ride like the wind

### Follow *Cyclist's* tour of the island

From Club La Santa, turn left towards Sóo, then left again onto the LZ-401 to Caleta de Famara. Head inland on the LZ-402 and join the LZ-30 northbound. At Teguiise take the LZ-10 to Haría. Turn left onto the LZ-201, then take the LZ-202 for the Mirador del Río loop. Once back on the LZ-201, continue south before turning left onto the LZ-204. Turn right on the LZ-1, then turn off at the Mala junction to pass through Mala and Guatiza. Turn right, back over the LZ-1, onto the LZ-405 to El Mojón, then right onto the LZ-404 towards Teguiise. Rejoin the LZ-10 through Nazaret and turn right again on the LZ-34 after Tahiche. Turn left at the LZ-301, left onto the LZ-503, and right on the LZ-501 at Conil. Take the LZ-30 to Uga, where it turns into the LZ-702 and takes you through Femés and Las Breñas. Continue onto the LZ-703 and follow the lava trail to Yaiza, then take the LZ-67 north through the national park to Mancha Blanca. Turn left to Tinajo, and then left on the LZ-20 back to Club La Santa.



But the year-round holiday weather doesn't mean this is a tame environment. There really is no place to hide on the barren expanses that comprise most of Tytheroygaka (as Lanzarote is known in the native Guanche language; apparently it means 'One that is all ochre'). With next to no vegetation, the desert-like plains, rocky volcanic outcrops and sprawling expanses of lava fields provide little shelter from the unrelenting sun and wind. But the contradiction of the place is that these are the elements that contribute so hugely to its attraction.

Like a trio of innocent lambs, we (Kate, Stu and me) set off from our base at the sports resort of Club La Santa on the island's north coast. It's early in the morning and, after arriving to glorious sunshine the day before, it's with a slight sense of disappointment that we squint into the mist that has rolled in overnight. As we push away from the resort, it's straight into the island's infamous northerly wind.

Once over the initial drag out of La Santa, the vastness of the landscape becomes immediately apparent. Wide, empty panoramas fill the void on one side of the road, while the cascading, buttressed cliffs of the Famara mountains ramp up from the other, their reddish hues dimmed



Stu waiting to pay  
– or is he resting?

## 'The sprawling expanses of lava fields provide little shelter from the unrelenting sun and wind'



You'll appreciate having a wheel to sit on when riding into the headwind on Peñas del Chache

Right: Climbing out of Los Valles, we're treated to the rare sight of some vegetation



by the morning haze. A groggy bunch of hooded surfers sip coffee at a coastal cafe, their feet up on stacked boards while their eyes gaze longingly out to sea. Their heads trace our path from left to right as we break their hypnosis, and we greet them with a cheery 'Hola' before skirting away from the coast to make our assault on the island's highest point, Peñas del Chache, at 672m, via an immaculately laid stretch of tarmac running from the small town of Tegüise.

As we begin to climb I notice the graffiti. Anyone who has ridden in classic cycling destinations is used to seeing scrawled messages on the road, but rather than 'Allez Wiggo' and 'Forza Vincenzo', I'm seeing 'Come on Charles' and 'Go Henry' emblazoned across the tarmac below. It's then that it occurs to me that we are riding on the course of the Lanzarote 70.3 Ironman triathlon, one of the big Half-Ironman events on the calendar. In fact, a lot of our route is due to follow the triathlon course today. I look around to check that we're not being chased down by someone on a TT bike in swimming trunks and knee-high socks, but the road is blissfully clear of any other traffic.

We continue on up. With less than 40km in our legs, we're still feeling fresh and enjoying the climb through the village of Los Valles, around a short sequence of hairpin bends, and finally through a veil of mist onto the Peñas del Chache plateau. The final drag up to the top is mercilessly exposed, and the ferocious rotations of the turbines on a neighbouring wind farm confirm as much. The little ring is engaged and

we press on to the summit. We're getting close to the coast again and the fog is whipping over the headland to our left, passing beneath our wheels, and then being sucked forcefully down the slopes to our right that lead to the warm inland plains far below.

At the top we stop and breathe in the atmosphere for a bit, then embark on an electrifying descent. We fly downwards through clouds that warp and distort our vision, making it tricky to see the upcoming hairpin bends. The sharp corners reveal gaping drops beyond the road, and we need to remain alert for the occasional bleating goat, but we're having fun. There are very few switchback roads on Lanzarote – most climbs are painfully straight and gradual in their incline, spawned from the gentle flow of molten lava – so we make the most of this twisting descent, leaning into the bends and crouching low over our top tubes.

When we arrive at the white buildings in the small market town of Haría, it's tempting to turn around and do the climb and descent all over again, but Stu has sniffed out an opportunity for coffee and is keen for a cafe stop. The sun's out now and we've still got over 100km left to ride, so we all agree that a break would be welcome and park up at a cafe on a blossomy corner for a round of cappuccinos.

The ride's photographer, Juan, originally hails from Spain, and amid befriending the waiter in unintelligible, arm-flailing conversation, he also accidentally eavesdrops on our neighbouring table's mutterings. 'You see that guy?' Juan



**'We fly downwards through clouds that warp and distort our vision, making it tricky to see the hairpins'**

## The rider's ride

Pinarello Dogma K, £4,799, [yellow-limited.com](http://yellow-limited.com)

The Dogma K is the bike that Pinarello originally rolled out as a cobble-crunching machine akin to Specialized's Roubaix and Cannondale's Synapse. But much like those other two, the Dogma K will find an equally appropriate owner in those who are after a comfortable, sportive-orientated bike.

The long, slack head tube provides a high front end, and it combines with a more angled seat tube and thin seatstays to create a naturally absorptive frame that's perfect for long days where comfort is paramount. It also helps when negotiating Lanzarote's more gravelly roads. There is plenty of clearance for wide tyres – again a significant plus point for those in search of comfort. The Dogma K is an ideal weapon with which to tackle everything Lanzarote has to offer.





It might spoil the view, but the rolling mist certainly adds to the otherworldly atmosphere

◀ says, gesturing at a leather-skinned codger eyeing up our bikes. ‘He’s telling his mate how good he is at climbing, even with groceries on the back of his bike.’ The bored look on his companion’s face is now explained. As we pay up and leave the cafe, I catch the eye of our self-assured friend, and the look he gives me as I swing a leg over my top tube says, ‘Yes, I’m probably faster than you, too.’

The lethargy induced by a sun-baked coffee house is always a hard thing to shake off, but after a few lazy turns of the pedals we get back into the rhythm of the ride and continue northwards. The wind hasn’t relented, and though we make light-hearted banter about its ferocity, I’m sure we’re all secretly harbouring concerns at the prospect of another five hours under its torment.

A doglegged detour takes us back towards the coast again, on the road to the Mirador del Rio vantage point at the northernmost tip of ▶

**‘Quieter roads mean the tarmac is considerably worse but I, for one, love these opportunities to “ride dirty”’**

## By the numbers

Get your stat fix

177

kilometres ridden

2,386

metres of altitude gain

25.8

average temperature in °C

1

active volcano on Lanzarote

15

million – the age of the island in years

4

sharp new tan lines per person

71

max speed in kmh

By all means take the road less travelled. Just watch out for bike-swallowing potholes

◀ Lanzarote, where the views are some of the most scenic on the island. That's what we're told, anyway – the mist is still lying thick over the headland and obscuring any view we might have of the cliffs that plunge into the sea and over to the island of Graciosa.

We carry on along the road that snakes along the coast. At times it runs perilously close to the cliff edge, and as we pick our way along its gradually inclining path, my mind returns to yesterday's musings in the aeroplane. This is a sublime moment: the stillness, the closeness, the unnerving emptiness of the mist punctuated with glimpses of bronzed rock and blue sea below. It makes for a spine-tingling few kilometres.

When we arrive at the Mirador del Rio viewpoint the mist is still thick and so we have little reason to linger. The sharp U-turn at the crest of the climb marks not just the most northerly coordinates on the ride, but the start of a new landscape, and also – more importantly – the point at which the wind will begin blowing on our backs, for a while at least.

It's with a collective sigh of relief that we coast through the apex of the turn to face



downwind for the first time since leaving over two hours earlier. Not for the first time today the descent is lightning fast.

### Just deserts

La Corona, one of Lanzarote's many dormant volcanoes, materialises as we speed south-east across the island. Finally we are leaving the murky skies behind us, and the sun is our welcome companion on the descent. The wind-assisted, gentle meanders of the road are eaten up with greed as they guide us down off the highlands and into La Corona's maze of inhospitable lava fields.

Around the volcano's base is a sea of craggy knee-high rocks, partially covered in shrubbery and resembling a parched coral reef. Slicing through the middle of it, a newly laid single-lane road stretches all the way to the east coast, and before long we have traversed the island and are turning right onto the main LZ-1 highway, heading south. Due to a combination of the luxurious tail wind and a need to get off this stretch of busy main road as quickly as possible, we enter into three-up time-trial mode for the 7km blast to the junction at Mala.

## 'I see us playing out a modern-day version of Lawrence Of Arabia'

We escape from the main road by taking a detour through the small towns of Mala and Guatiza, but it's not long before our deviation threatens to spit us back out onto the highway again. Fortunately Stu, who is designated navigator for today's ride, assures us he has found an alternative route that will draw us back inland on quieter roads. Unsurprisingly, quieter roads also means that the quality of tarmac is considerably worse than we've been used to today, but occasionally you have to make sacrifices to find the best route.

I, for one, love these opportunities to 'ride dirty'. It's a sense of enjoyment reserved for when you ignore the GPS, turn away from the pristine tarmac onto the rutted side roads, and give free rein to the childlike explorer inside you.

Sure enough, the road is a patchwork of craterous potholes and speed-sapping gravel ▶



Descending into the sun with the wind on our backs – there are few better feelings



The volcanic island makes for some truly unique riding territory, and the Los Hervideros lava field is no exception



► patches. We thrash along it, dodging and weaving, sometimes even jumping the obstacles in our path. Before long, Stu's bike computer pops out of its mount and we have to stop and search for it in the grass by the verge.

For about 5km we play on the crumbling surface, before the smooth tarmac arrives again as we enter the town of El Mojón. 'This town translates as "The Turd",' cries Juan from the car as we coast past the low white buildings. He explains later that while 'The Turd' is the literal translation, 'it can also be translated as a stone that marks a distance between one place and another.' A milestone, in other words. In either case, it doesn't paint El Mojón as a place to hang around in, and we roll on through to continue our way southwards.

### Seeking sanctuary

After the hills of the north of the island, the area we enter as we ride south is flat, barren and arid, known locally as the El Hable desert. The sweeping dunes and blackened lava flows are accompanied by occasional outcrops of curiously-formed rock, created by volcanic activity and fashioned by the endless wind that blows across the plains. These rock sculptures provide some roadside interest amid the monotonous wasteland that surrounds them. Our trio of intrepid *pedalleurs* must look tiny

and exposed amid all this vast emptiness, and in my mind I see us playing out a modern-day version of *Lawrence Of Arabia*, leading the charge across the desert.

As we venture further south into the La Geria region, we notice small, arc-shaped walls dotted around the lava fields, and evidence of human activity. It seems that this scorched land is actually being used to grow vines for ►

**There's no middle ground when it comes to road surfaces. They're either immaculate or non-existent**







◀ Lanzarote's established wine industry. Free from the prohibitive lava crust that dominates most of the island's interior, the layer of ash that has settled on the landscape here is known as *picón*, and its ability to trap and retain moisture is used by farmers in an area that is otherwise unsuited to most kinds of agriculture. Foot-high walls have been built to keep the vicious wind from destroying the produce, and the vines are grown horizontally, close to the ground, so they can hide behind the low walls.

In the space of about a kilometre our surroundings are transformed from an arid, scorched landscape into sprawling pastures of grapevines, with thousands upon thousands of these uniform drystone walls spanning valleys and creeping up the mountainsides.

By now the sun is at full strength in a clear blue sky and the effects of 120km of riding are taking their toll, so we're happy to see a restaurant shining like a mirage among the fields of black. Without any discussion, we all pull into its tree-covered forecourt and dismount.

'*Qué le gustaría?*' asks the waiter while we pore over maps and Garmin data. 'What would you like?' My eyes are immediately drawn to the house *tinto*, Bodega La Geria, which goes from vine to bottle entirely on site, but it isn't the thirst-quencher that my body is craving. And judging by Kate's mumbles of 'I don't think I'm after goat's leg,' it appears the food menu is

equally unsuitable, so we settle for colas, coffees and scrambled egg on toast. There will be time for wine and meat later on...

After an appropriately lengthy lounge in the shade, we rejoin the rolling road south, the smooth tarmac ironing out the gentle rises and falls of its course. The heat haze makes everything on the horizon look blue and fuzzy, but eventually we pass through the town of Femés, and there in the distance we can make out the sea. It's a welcoming sight after what feels like an age in the desert.

#### The volcano's back garden

Tempting as it is to blast down the long, straight road that leads to the cooler shores of the south coast, we instead swing to the west and head for the destination that most non-cycling tourists come to Lanzarote for, the Timanfaya National Park. A product of volcanic activity from the island's only live volcano, Timanfaya, the park is now the centrepiece of the *Montañas del Fuego*, the *Mountains of Fire*, and a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve that covers the entire island.

We first pass the curious formations of a salt mine, *Salinas de Janubio*, before entering the lava-strewn hinterland of *Los Hervideros*. The road winds into the park and back out again for no other reason than to allow tourists to see the vast, dark, rocky nothingness that is left behind after a volcano blows its top, which this one last did in 1736. The crystal waters below provide a stark contrast in tone as they crash into the rock whose path they halted many years ago, but it's hard to imagine them doing much damage to the might of these blackened cliffs now.

After our detour the road leads us back inland, and as we swing north at Yaiza we're painfully reminded of the wind that, for the 100km since *Mirador del Rio*, has gone unnoticed – as it tends to while blowing in your favour. By now we've been riding for five and a half hours, and the feeling of dejection as we crest a small rise out of Yaiza to be confronted by a seemingly infinite and snooker cue-straight road, disappearing into the shoulders of the *Mountains of Fire* far ahead, is a mutual one.

'Oh my God,' Stu exhales as his head bows between sunken shoulders. 'You can quote me on that, too,' he says with a glance over at me. There's not much else to do in a situation like this, other than put your head down and ride... then glance up to the horizon, which inevitably hasn't moved, and ride some more. The aforementioned 'coral reef' lava scrubland has made a comeback, engulfing us from every direction for miles around and making any ▶



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Above: The changing nature of the landscape will keep your head up throughout the ride

Right: Vineyards Lanzarote style. Vines grow horizontally behind low walls that protect them from the wind





◀ sense of progress entirely impossible. It's as though time has forgotten us, and we're caught in the middle of some cycling illusion where no matter how much we pedal, we never seem to get any closer to the end of the road.

On and on it goes, into the headwind, until eventually we're overjoyed to come to a slight bend in the road that at least offers us a change in scenery. We're at the base of Timanfaya and the landscape morphs into fields of rock, sand and scree. The tones change from blood-red to iron, mahogany, slate and charcoal as we make our way through the corridor Del Fuego, the last leg of Lanzarote's ring of fire.

As we leave the volcano behind for the final descent back to the coast, it occurs to me that the last section through the national park is like a condensed version of the island. It has desert-like savannahs, craggy lava graveyards, towering coastal cliffs and bright amber mountainsides. It's a place where the volcanic vistas make it menacing, yet the roads – where they exist – are as smooth as a pint of Tropical, the local beer, and the sun is virtually guaranteed whatever time of year you choose to come.

At times our ride has been challenging, even dispiriting when toiling into the wind, but it has also been inspiring and spectacular. And it is, after all, the combination of these sublime elements that a Big Ride is all about. 🌸

*Joshua Cunningham is like a cycling volcano – explosive on the bike, but dormant off it*



## How we got there

*You're barking if you don't, barking if you do*

### TRAVEL

Flights to Arrecife depart from airports across the UK, with both budget and major carriers flying from around £100 (without bike). The easiest way to travel on the island, especially with bike bags, is with a hire vehicle. We rented a van from Arrecife airport, which is served by all the major hire companies.

### ACCOMMODATION

For a trip based around cycling – or any other sport for that matter – Club La Santa is without doubt a winning place to stay. Bike hire, masseurs, food halls and friendly folk are all sheltered within its walls. The only reason to leave is to ride your bike. That said, try not to make eye contact with the fitness instructors at breakfast or you'll find yourself being roped into a yoga class. Visit [clublasanta.co.uk](http://clublasanta.co.uk) for details.

### FOOD AND DRINK

Not much grows on Lanzarote, so it's no surprise that seafood is high on the menu. You should also try the local wine, made with Listán-Negro grapes for red and Malvasia for white.

**Top:** A day in the Lanzarote sun means a fresh set of tan lines

**Left:** The Timanfaya park provides a final dash of colour