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ON THE WEB

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Finding Nirvana on Two Wheels

By **BONNIE DeSIMONE**

THE riders emerge at about 10 in the morning, wheeling their bikes out of centuries-old apartment buildings and coasting down the cobblestone streets of Girona, the accompanying ticka-ticka-ticka merging with the urban soundtrack. They gather on the steps of the post office or on the Pont de Pedra -- the stone bridge that spans the Onyar River at the southern end of Girona's historic district -- then spin away in a blur of spandex and spokes. Other cyclists take off solo with a support car driven by a coach or a willing spouse.

Among these riders are some prominent athletes, including the six-time Tour de France winner, Lance Armstrong. Yet even when they navigate populated downtown streets or pause for coffee on the pedestrian Rambla de la Llibertat, they are rarely hounded.

"We can pretty much move around town and not be disturbed," said Mr. Armstrong, who has made Girona, about an hour's drive northeast of Barcelona, his training base since 2001. Fifteen North American professional cyclists make up the colony this season, which runs from February to October, including Levi Leipheimer, twice a top-10 Tour de France finisher, and Freddie Rodriguez, the three-time United States champion.

Girona's residents are proud the pro cyclists have chosen their ancient, moody and beautiful Catalan city as their migratory home, but they respect the riders' privacy. "The cyclists are appreciated, but they can live their everyday lives with complete normality," said a former mayor, Joaquim Nadal i Farreras, now an official in the Catalan regional government.

Although Girona will lose its most famous part-time resident when Mr. Armstrong retires after next month's Tour de France, Mr. Nadal said, "We expect there will be new cyclists and the tradition will continue."

The city's live-and-let-ride reserve is one reason the cyclists have stayed. They began arriving 10 years ago on the advice of Johnny Weltz, a veteran Danish coach who lived

near Girona and thought it would be a comfortable place for young American riders to spend the season.

Girona's lures are obvious. Nearly equidistant from Barcelona (52 miles) and the French border (48 miles), easily accessible by air or rail, the city has a gentrified, culturally rich historic district, upscale shopping and dining, a thriving university campus and peaceful, expansive parks. Just a few minutes' ride from the city center are tranquil roads and trails leading into the foothills of the Pyrenees to the west or the beaches of the Costa Brava to the east, with enough rolling terrain to keep the professional riders in shape between races.

The heart of the city's historic district is the Call, one of Europe's most well-preserved medieval Jewish neighborhoods. At its core is the narrow, cobblestone-paved Carrer de la Força, the hub of activity for the Jewish community that flourished here in the 12th and 13th centuries and now a charming streetscape of residences, cafes, museums and stores.

Window shoppers in both the old and new cities, divided by the Onyar, linger at bakeries and high-end boutiques selling linens, designer clothing and leather goods. On the west side of the river, in the modern covered market, butchers carve tissue-thin slices of burgundy-colored Iberian ham from legs that taper down to intact hooves. Back in the historic district, an extensive, eclectic wine cellar lurks in the back of the Colmado Moriscot specialty food store (at 4, Ciutadans), where the proprietor rings up purchases on a 100-year-old brass National cash register.

Girona's combination of city comforts, rider-friendly environs and bike-celebrity glamour makes it a natural destination for recreational cyclists. Several companies have launched Girona-based excursions.

Name recognition is a factor. "People who are into cycling know about Girona, because they're always hearing about some American training at their second home there," said Loren Siekman, general manager of Pure Adventures, an Arizona company that designs self-guided tours in the Girona area.

The retired American rider Marty Jemison was a resident pro in Girona from 1996 to 2000 and still lives there part of the year. He leads bike tours throughout Europe but calls the Girona trips his "core product."

Alan Pruder of Portland, Ore., a former competitive rider, and his wife took one of Mr. Jemison's Girona tours last year and said they intend to return on their own. "The roads are phenomenal," he said.

For beginning or occasional riders, there are plenty of itineraries that won't intimidate. These include the "green paths," dedicated bike trails that follow old railway routes, surfaced with hard-packed dirt.

One 35-mile path climbs gradually to Olot, northwest of Girona. Another wends its way 25 miles on largely flat ground southeast to the coastal town of Sant Feliu de Guíxols. They are ideal for mountain bikes.

Daniel Coyle, an Outside Magazine contributing editor who spent more than a year in Girona writing a book that chronicled Mr. Armstrong's 2004 season, recommends a day trip he took that started on the Sant Feliu green path. He cut over to "reliably deserted country roads" at the village of Cassa de la Selva and took a winding, mostly downhill route to La Bisbal d'Empordà, known regionally for its pottery. From there, he headed for the beach hamlets of Llafranc or Calella de Palafrugell, parked the bike, took a swim and ordered a restorative plate of calamari at a waterfront restaurant.

Cyclists who want to try a climb frequented by the pros can head for the village of Amer, about halfway between Girona and Olot, and make the twisty, steep five-mile ascent to Sant Marti Sacalm. Raspberries grow by the side of the road and there is a water spout about two-thirds of the way up.

Dede Demet Barry, the American silver medalist in the Olympic time trial last year, lives in Girona with her husband, the Canadian rider Michael Barry. She prepared for last year's Games in Athens by grinding out intervals on the climb, which she estimates averages a 7 percent uphill grade.

For racing fans, Girona is a convenient base to see the Volta a Catalunya, a Tour de France tune-up race, or the Pyrenees stages (July 16 and 17) of the Tour itself, a two- to three-hour drive.

The Vuelta a España (Tour of Spain, Aug. 27 to Sept. 18) route passes close to Girona before and after a Sept. 4 time trial in Barcelona. The Vuelta finishes in Madrid, where the men's and women's World Road Championships begin on Sept. 21.

On wheels or on foot, the compact nature of old Girona makes it easy to see a great deal in a short time. The walk along the top of the fortified wall that overlooks the city's dense stone heart offers spectacular perspectives of the Cathedral, the Call and the surrounding countryside.

At the Museum of the History of the Jews, ask to be directed to the second-floor window that looks out on the Carrer Hernandez. Steep and barely wider than a hallway, the street is sealed off at both ends. Ivy trails down its walls and moss softens its steps. It is a remnant of a treasure that Girona began unearthing in the late 1970's.

The city opened long-blocked passageways and pinpointed the locations of forgotten synagogues and family residences. Private owners restored abandoned, crumbling homes, including one eventually bought by Mr. Armstrong, who wrote in the second installment of his autobiography that he was "stunned by its wrecked beauty."

Now the dreamy labyrinth testifies to the time before Jews were evicted, killed or forced to convert in the late 15th century. Some homes are opened to the public on special summer tours of the neighborhood.

The Call is Girona's main tourist draw, but a patient traveler will find much more. Stones quarried by the Romans, identifiable by their bulk and uneven surface, are visible in several structures. Another, more idiosyncratic stone found throughout Girona is naturally inlaid with white marine fossils.

The watery surface of an octagonal well in the Arab Baths -- a Romanesque structure with elements of Muslim design -- reflects the same image it did 800 years ago. Scale models in the Cathedral's 75-foot-wide unsupported Gothic nave, the broadest of that style ever built, show the hilltop's evolution from Roman temple site to the present day. The graceful wrought-iron curves of a footbridge across the Onyar give away its designer, Gustave Eiffel.

Several restaurants and tapas bars in the Plaça de la Independencia, across the river from the historic district, overlook the Onyar. The facades of the row houses lining the river are painted brick red, ocher, pale yellow and soft blue to replicate the time when pigment came from natural dyes.

Yet they are not museum pieces, as evinced by laundry hung out to dry, firewood stacked on balconies and an occasional political banner. Girona prides itself on being "a living city, not a theme park," Mayor Anna Pagans i Gruartmoner said.

Re-use is a constant theme in Girona's history. The 12th-century Monastery of Sant Pere de Galligants is now an archeological museum. A building at the foot of the Cathedral's wide Baroque stairs began life as a Jewish butcher shop and bakery, then became a Catholic shelter for the poor and now houses the regional architects' guild and the bohemian-chic Bau Bar.

Researchers studying the city's archival ledgers 15 years ago discovered parchments with Hebrew writing stuffed into the covers, literally used as filler. Much detail about everyday life in the Call has been reconstructed from these accidentally preserved documents, which continue to be restored and translated and can be viewed by special request.

The city's gentle juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary makes it easy to pick up shards of history and gently blow away the dust. It provokes a state of sensory vigilance. As Mr. Armstrong said recently, "I think it's always been an inspired place."

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Getting there

Delta, (800) 221-1212, www.delta.com, has a daily nonstop flight from New York to Barcelona; a 21-day-advance-purchase ticket for late June was about \$1,300. You can pay less on other airlines with stops in other cities. Girona is about an hour drive or train ride from Barcelona.

Ryanair, www.ryanair.com, the discount airline based in Dublin, offers flights from London, Paris and other European cities (though typically not from major airports, like Heathrow), to the compact Girona airport, 15 minutes from town.

Where to Stay

Prices do not include 7 percent tax.

Hotel Carlemany, 1 Plaça Miquel Santaló, (34-972) 211-212, www.carlemany.es, is a 90-room, upscale hotel that is a 10- to 15-minute walk from the historic district. At \$1.26 to the euro, double rooms range from \$126 to \$145, and breakfast is \$12.60.

Hotel Ciutat de Girona, 2 Carrer Nord, (34-972) 483-038, www.hotel-ciutatdegirona.com, is across the river from the historic district. The 44 rooms have a sleek, contemporary design and amenities like hair dryers and high-speed Internet access. Doubles are \$163, with breakfast.

Històric Hotel and Apartments, 4A Carrer Bellmirall, (34-972) 223-583, www.hotelhistoric.com, is down the street from the Cathedral. It was lovingly renovated by the husband-and-wife team of Casilda Cruz and Francisco Moreno. The six double rooms are \$143; breakfast is \$5 to \$11. The seven apartments are good deals at \$75 (single) to \$150 (for four).

Where to Eat

Lizarran, 14 Plaça de la Independencia, (34-972) 218-150, is part of a chain with 140 locations in Europe and Mexico, but it's anything but fast food, and the back room overlooking the Onyar is a place where time seems to slow down. Regular tapas are \$1.20 and special tapas \$1.50, distinguished on serving plates by differently-sized toothpicks. Leave them in a pile on your plate since your food tab is calculated by counting them.

Boira, 17 Plaça de la Independencia, (34-972) 219-605, offers tapas downstairs, tablecloth dining upstairs with river views. Dinner for two with appetizers, shared dessert and a half-bottle of wine: \$70

The interior of Galligans, 4 Plaça Santa Lluçia, (34-972) 209-654, is painted in vivid shades of raspberry, chartreuse and lemon. The food is artfully presented new-wave Catalan like tuna tartar crusted with puffed wild rice; cod tagine; pig's feet stuffed with potatoes and foie gras; and white chocolate and pistachio soup. Appetizer, entrée, shared dessert and a bottle of wine: \$90 for two. Prix fixe menus \$28 to \$45.

What to See and Do

A wealth of information is available online at the city's Web site, www.ajuntament.gi, and on-site at the Tourist Office, 1 Rambla de la Llibertat, (34-972) 226-575. Open weekdays 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., Saturday 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 4 to 8 p.m., Sunday and holidays 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Museum of the History of the Jews, 8 Carrer de la Força, (34-972) 216-761, www.ajuntament.gi/call, is open Monday to Saturday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Sunday and holidays 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. General admission: \$2.50. Information on guided tours is on the Web site.

Bike Tours

Pure Adventures, Scottsdale, Ariz., (800) 960-2221, www.pure-adventures.com, offers eight-day self-guided tours year-round in the Girona region, except in August. They start at \$820, including most meals and B&B-type lodging.

Marty Jemison Cycling Tours, Park City, Utah, (800) 492-9159 and www.martyjemison.com, has eight- (\$2,999) or nine-day (\$3,399) trips in May and September split between Girona, the coast and the mountains.

Trek Travel, Waterloo, Wisc., (866) 464-8735, www.trektravel.com, leads six-day trips in May, September and October that begin with three nights in Girona and go to the coast and the foothills of the Pyrenees. The cost, \$2,175, double occupancy, includes most meals and rooms in mid-level hotels, including the Ciutat de Girona.

Espana Cycling Vacations, Auburndale, Fla., (863) 968-0470 and at www.espanacyclingvacations.com, has an eight-day trip to Girona and Barcelona starting Sept. 1 that includes viewing of the Vuelta a España. The cost is \$2,500, double occupancy; lodging is in a large renovated country home with a pool just outside Girona and a hotel on the Costa Brava.

More information about the "green paths" starting at Girona is available at www.costabrava.org/ang/esports/e--vies.htm. BONNIE DeSIMONE