



Off the beaten cycle path



In a yurt amid the peace of the Taurus Mountains, tired from cycling and replete with *meze*, a good night's sleep is guaranteed

I RECENTLY returned from the Taurus Mountains in southern Turkey after a magical week with The Slow Cyclist, a specialist tour operator I know well from previous travels in both Transylvania (Romania) and the Mani Peninsula (Greece).

What draws me back, you might ask, to which I could offer a number of responses. For starters, Slow Cyclist locations are always unusual and interesting, side-stepping well-trodden tourist tracks in favour of the obscure and remote. Next, I might cite the healthy combination of cycling and walking each trip affords—although panic not, I'm talking easy-to-ride electric bikes and comfy trainers, not sweat, Lycra and technical hiking boots. Perhaps, however, the greatest pull of a Slow Cyclist trip is the attention to detail, the intricate planning of each moment of every day.

The Taurus Mountain route, I am told, took a year to fathom, pulled together by The Slow Cyclist founder Oli Broom and

a team of Turkish destination experts, many of whom now guide the trips. Between them, they scoured the mountains and villages, measuring distances and gradients, discovering little-known pathways and forgotten ruins of antiquity, forging relationships with local mayors, farmers and villagers for dining and lodging options, all in an area where tourism is an unknown concept and foreigners barely seen.

In many of the villages where resident numbers have drastically declined at the exodus of younger generations in search of a better life, The Slow Cyclist has thrown a lifeline of sorts. We are greeted at every stop with broad smiles and lashings of Turkish coffee. Houses are thrown open to us and feasts prepared, always with the freshest of produce garnered from nearby fields and orchards.

Lunch with the mayor in Çukurca is a memorable one. There are no young people here at all among the village's 30 inhabitants and life is harsh. The

mayor is a jovial chap, however, with a twinkle in his eye and a wife who, he explains with pride, he kidnapped from the neighbouring village when she was 15. It is a love match for sure. With the help of two friends, she prepares our lunch of cold *meze* and warm

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flatbreads—whipped straight from the oven to the table—sitting back thereafter to beam alternately at her husband and at all of us as we eat, delivering with a final flourish, a plate of homemade, rose-tinged Turkish Delight.

We see the mayor again when he joins us one evening for music and merriment at our tented camp on the edge of the village. His role was pivotal in working with The Slow Cyclist to bring this camp

to fruition—no mean feat when you see the location. Without wishing to give too much away to those considering signing up for 2024, let me just say that this is the *pièce de résistance* of the Taurus Mountain trip: canvas yurts, creature comforts and a landscape so mesmerising it feels profligate to close one's eyes.

As the days rolled by, the details continued to astound: bikes perfectly lined up even if we were only off them for a minute or two; water bottles that never ran dry; surprise drinks in isolated locations; wild swims in mountain rivers; our guide's impromptu playing of his ancient, flute-like *ney*. I wondered, even, if the shepherd had been primed at the camp to walk his goats past our tents, bells gently tinkling, as our morning wake-up call.

On our final day, as we were led through the eerie labyrinth of monolithic rock formations at Deli Sarnic, we were told we were passing through the gates to another world. If only it were true. 🐏