

Top: Canales Reservoir
Bottom: Veleta has snow for much of the year



Getting there

Bringing your own bike? Bagged bicycles travel free on Spain's high-speed trains, so long as the dimensions are no more than 120×90×40cm and you include the 'bicycle add-on' when you buy your ticket. (Those dimensions will be good for TGV services through France too, but until Eurostar starts taking bikes again an all-rail journey isn't feasible.) Granada is thus easily reachable by rail from Malaga, Madrid or Barcelona. You can take a fully assembled, unbagged bike on mid-distance Spanish trains but you have to book (free or €3) and spaces are typically limited to three per train.

blue-white livery of the BikeExchange pro cycling team passed me, followed shortly after by Grand Tour winner Simon Yates.

It was a reminder that, unlike football fans who will never play at Wembley, cyclists can ride on the same roads as our heroes, experiencing the same spectacular scenery and suffering. The climb to Hoya de la Mora was a key summit finish at the Vuelta a España in 2017 and was again decisive in 2022.

Leaving behind the twists and turns of the hairpins, the climb then opened up onto a long drag overlooking Pradollano ski station. For most of the year, these peaks are snow covered; the Veleta summit is only accessible in the summer months.

Having passed 2,000m, the air began to get cooler and thinner. My breathing rate increased. Spotting some food vendors in a parking area near a military refuge, I refuelled with a burger, patatas fritas, and a coke.

END: ON TO THE SUMMIT

As I climbed further, up above the surrounding peaks and the cable cars from the ski station below, the views became even more impressive. The road twisted like spaghetti above and below me. I spotted another landmark: the Sierra Nevada Observatory, its radio telescope a beacon in a desolate landscape.

The road was no longer smooth asphalt but gritty and rougher. Shale and gravel from cliff faces littered parts of the road. I tried to stay focused. I didn't want to puncture up here.

And then, at 2,800m, my speed dropped off completely. My heart rate had climbed to a steady 180bpm. The thin air was taking its toll. Nervousness seeped in: the summit was still 500m higher up.

I rolled along gently in the lowest gear, pausing now and again to acclimatise and take in the scenery. With 2km to go, the road disintegrated into a rocky gravel trail. At first, I steered my bike through tarmac lines among the rubble. Then the road ended and became a trail. I looked up. The top was close. I could see a small pastel-coloured mountain hut alongside the obelisk marking the summit. Around me, ibex were loitering.

I hiked the bike up the final few rocks, placed my bike by the summit monument, and stopped. There were tears in my eyes. A sense of achievement? The otherworldly vista? Or a deoxygenated brain exaggerating fundamental emotions? Who knows?

I wasn't alone at the top. A family spanning three generations smiled and hugged each other. Three jovial hikers asked me to photograph them as they posed at the summit. I asked them the same, then took a video for my family.

Then I put on my gilet and set off downhill. ●

Fact file Pico Veleta

● **Start/finish:** Bicicletas la Estación, Granada

● **Route:** Out and back from Granada via Huétor Vega, with the climb starting in earnest at Monachil. I took the A-395, then the A-4025 to Hoya de la Mora. The final section is a testy, winding gravel path to the summit.

● **Distance:** 92km

● **Conditions:** In mid-July it was roasting hot at the base and cooler further up. From 2,000m, the air was noticeably thin.

● **Bike used:** Hired road bike with a 50-34 chainset and 11-32 cassette.

● **Navigation:** Smartphone attached to rented phone holder. Komoot Premium for mapping.

● **I'm glad I had:** Camelbak for water and a gilet for the descent!

● **Next time I would:** Use a gravel bike: lower gears and fatter tyres to handle the final, rocky 2km before the summit would increase pleasure and comfort.

