

Iago Garay sliding through the corners above Málaga, Spain. With a season of racing cancelled and global travel off the table for the summer, Iago took to the places closer to home that tend to be overlooked.



BACK TO THE ROOTS

A CHANGE OF PACE WITH IAGO GARAY

Words by Cal Jelley | Photos by Kike Abelleira

Sipping a cold beer with Spanish enduro racer Iago Garay on the terrace of our local brewery in Madrid, Spain, is a rare occurrence. Iago's just returned from shooting the second episode of his video series, *Not Far from Home*, which follows he and his friends as they explore the abundance of great riding in their home country of Spain.

Normally, Iago would be spending his summer traveling around the world to race in the Enduro World Series (EWS), with breaks to film with his Santa Cruz teammates or chill with his lady in Seattle, Washington. But this year's COVID-19 travel restrictions forced him to change plans and get creative.

Iago grew up in a small town on the outskirts of Madrid, the capital city of 6.6 million people that is bordered to the north by three different mountain ranges. Accordingly, the city has a fervent mountain bike culture that thrives on the region's often ancient singletrack. Iago was introduced to the sport at a young age, riding cross-country laps with his family on weekends.

"I hated it," Iago laughs into his beer. "I just wanted to watch cartoons!"

It wasn't until he was 11 years old, when his father took him to a downhill race, that he became truly hooked. Riding downhill without having to climb was much more appealing to him, so he spent his teenage years touring Spain's downhill racing circuit until he left the country to attend college in Cincinnati, Ohio. While living in the United States, Iago made a point of traveling to the seasonal kickoff races in Monterey, California, as well as many other national DH races.

Several years ago, when enduro racing started to gain traction with the advent of the EWS, Iago began to shift his focus from DH to enduro. By the time he'd finished college and moved back to Spain, he had an offer from Santa Cruz Bicycles to race for them on the EWS circuit. Despite his early disdain for pedaling, he real-

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ized that with enduro he’d get to race on six different tracks in a weekend instead of just one. And he’d spend much more time riding his bike, hanging out with fellow racers on the liaison stages and generally having more fun than he would with DH racing.

The 2019 EWS season was Iago’s best to date. He finished with the Trophy of Nations race in Finale Ligure, Italy, alongside his Spanish teammates and entered the off-season ready to rest, train and come back even stronger this spring.

“I like to start running in the winter, mainly to change it up, you know?” he says. “After that, I start working biking back into it, five to six days of training a week until we start racing again.”

Iago trained hard over the winter, and after returning from the Andes-Pacifico—a six-day, enduro stage race in the Chilean Andes—he was fired up to race the first EWS event in March. Just two weeks before that race, however, Spain’s government placed the country on a complete lockdown due to the rapid spread of COVID-19.

“In the beginning, I didn’t think too much about it,” Iago says, “But once we went past the first two weeks, I realized that we weren’t going to go back to normal any time soon, and that we probably wouldn’t be allowed to travel very far. It was unlikely that we’d be racing, either. So, I started to think about what I was going to do to keep my job!”

He decided to make the most of Spain’s diverse geography, from the high mountains of the Pyrenees to the lush forests of the northern Basque Country, making a web-based video series called Not Far from Home. The idea was to travel with some of his best friends to some of Spain’s premier riding locations and showcase what his home country has to offer.

“I feel like I spend so much time riding all over the world, that maybe being ‘trapped’ in Spain would be a great opportunity to explore all the riding that I’ve never had the time to go check out,” Iago says.



Less than four hours north of Madrid, Spain’s Basque Country has an established mountain bike scene and is a destination for locals and visitors alike. BMX legend Sergio Layos leads Iago and Igor Eskudero through a chute of the region’s finest loam.



Just because the EWS season was postponed doesn't mean Iago took a hiatus from destroying corners. The roots and rocks never stood a chance.

Iago and Doug McDonald of Basque MTB enjoy a couple of cold ones after an afternoon of riding—not a bad way to spend the day.



He pulled together a production team of Kike Abelleira, a photographer from the EWS circuit, along with up-and-coming filmmaker, Nacho Trueba. They compiled a list of destinations they would hit as soon as the Spanish government allowed its people to start moving again. To kick off the video series, in May they released an edit they'd filmed in January in the southern city of Malaga.

“Launching the first episode in lockdown, the feeling was pretty low in Spain, and I imagine in lots of other countries, too,” Iago says. “People wanted to get out and travel again, but also people were struggling at home due to loss of income, etcetera. I thought, ‘what better way to help than to show how much people can do in their own country.’ Instead of going off to the Alps in the summer, why not go ride the Spanish Pyrenees or even a spot a couple of hours from your home that you’ve never ridden before because there was always somewhere else to go first?”

After 50 or so days of strict lockdown, the country slowly began to allow limited domestic

travel, so the crew set out immediately. Within a couple of weeks, they'd traveled to the Pyrenees and the Basque Country to get the clips they needed for the next few videos. The experience helped to rekindle his connection to his homeland and made him appreciate all the little things he'd so often taken for granted.

Though Iago has loved creating this series, enduro racing is still where his heart lies, and after six months without a race, he was looking forward to the limited schedule of enduro racing that was tentatively lined up for this autumn. If everything went to plan, he would travel to a half-dozen races throughout Europe before the snow began to fall. After those races, however, he and his buddies are planning to milk the last bits of fall for another episode of Not Far from Home.

“I have some spots I really want to hit up when I'm back in October,” he says. “I want to continue to show people what an amazing place for riding Spain is, both to the Spanish people and the people outside of Spain. Also, the beer is as cheap as it is cold, and the food is the best in the world.” 🍻