

Badlands broke me at 367km – but I can't wait to return

After nine months of training, David Bates tackled the 790km race in Spain, pushing his limits to the maximum

There are 20 hairpin bends on the descent of Alto de Velefique. In daylight, it sweeps and it flows and if you like to ride a bike downhill, you could be happy there. But in the early morning darkness of September 2, thick cloud had settled close to the mountainside and I could see little beyond my damp front tyre.

Each corner swung from this haze like the imagined crash that startles you from a waking dream. The rain that had begun gently half an hour earlier was now falling remorselessly. I was tired. I had been riding for 325km and had not slept in a day.

After nine months of training, after 22 joyous hours passing through barren country and fanatical villages, my attempt to complete the 790km ultra-distance gravel race Badlands — which begins in Granada and traverses the mountains and the deserts of Andalusia — had narrowed to this: 20 hairpin bends, in the dark and the rain and the fog.

Perhaps I should have stopped. I had made good time through the night. From Gor (230km into the route), along the forest tracks of Sierra de Baza, beyond the highest point of the race at Calar Alto observatory (2,168m) and into the top 30 riders in the field. And then, after an empty 100km, within touching distance of Velefique (334km), where I planned to sleep, errors and ill fortune had started to accumulate.

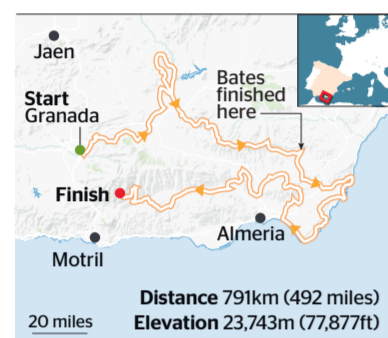
First, a puncture that I was slow to repair under the light of my head torch. Then, the cloud and the rain. Then, the drowsy realisation: distracted by the puncture, I'd forgotten to take my fourth and final caffeine gel of the night.

All at once, I wanted to stop. I wanted to lie down, to sleep; in the forest, on the track, anywhere. But I was sensitive to the cold — and the perils of losing weight — and if I tried to bed down in the rain at 1,700m, I might never warm up again. The track turned to road and I relaxed: here were my 20 hairpin bends; rest was within reach.

I ran the first corner too close to the barrier, and the second and the third. I stopped. I slapped myself, stared to the sky, into my front light. Anything to shock me from the gravity of this fatigue.

I can't be certain how many of those corners I'd passed when I hit a patch of water running rapidly downhill. I pulled too hard on the brakes and flew hands-first on to the sodden road. I was wide

The Badlands route



awake again. From the floor I could see the contents of my top-tube bag — tools, wires, a vital battery pack — scattered on the tarmac. I rose quickly to my feet, checked my head and my bike and gathered my things before they could be destroyed by the rain. I'd grazed my left hand, but it seemed then that I had escaped.



I pulled too hard on the brakes and flew hands-first on to the sodden road



Minimal sleep, treacherous terrain and a wrist injury conspired against David

I arrived in Velefique just as the grey morning announced itself. Beneath an open shelter in the Plaza de la Constitución, I spotted two bodies covered by foil blankets. A place to rest. I cleaned my grazed hand and noticed for the first time that my right wrist was stiffening, beginning to ache. Just sleep, I thought. I set an alarm for 30 minutes and lay down on the concrete bench.

LOOK AT THE MADMEN GO

And it had all started so brightly. Of course, when the race began, I was nervous — my chest was tight and my neck was tense from a broken night's sleep — but once I'd passed from the close, cobbled streets of Granada's old town and into the pine forests of Sierra de Huétor, I could see only the simplicity and the freedom of the day.

Well rested and well fed, I moved through the field over the first 20km, which climbed from 662m to 1,479m, with that rare feeling in my legs — like I could go and go and feel no pain — that occurs once or twice a year.

To prepare for three days of continuous riding, I had aimed to eat 8-10g of carbohydrates per kilo of bodyweight (624-780g; or roughly 1.1kg of pasta) on each of the two days before the race. To prevent bloating, I was advised to abandon all of the usual rules for healthy eating: avoid fibre, reduce fat, reduce protein and, for a few days, make sweets my friend.

Sounds fun, people said to me, a free pass! It isn't. A sugary fur gathered on my teeth. My stomach strained. My heart thumped with the effort of digestion. But as I wound from Sierra de Huétor to La Peza (60km) and on to the imposing Mirador del Fin del Mundo climb — 700m, 15 per cent average gradient, 25 per cent maximum — I felt all of this sweet strength in my legs.

Fin del Mundo (79km) leads into the Granada Geopark, where the race first touches the ramblas and the ravines that characterise the badlands. From there, it settled into a beautiful and incongruous cadence: long stretch of wilderness interrupted by great hospitality in tiny settlements, where the race has been taken deeply to heart.

In Gorafe (population 474, 127km), riders queued for a street vendor selling ice slushies. By the time I reached Villanueva (population 5,300, 152km), the oppressive heat of the late afternoon had driven many into the dark and shaded Pub Sherezade. From the outside, this was any tavern in rural Spain: whitewashed walls, windows trimmed by terracotta, an Estrella sign above open dark wood doors, protected by a fly net. Inside, there were plates and bowls filled with Haribo and granola, stacks of sandwiches wrapped in foil, and, on a screen above the bar, the race leaderboard.

I ate two sandwiches, several handfuls of Haribo and watched a Spaniard with the strident brow of



Miguel Induráin speak to the barflies about his energy powders. They giggled. Look at the madmen go. It was hard not to be moved.

The track that followed through the Gorafe Desert was hard and dry and for 80km there was no opportunity to refuel. The day continued to gather heat greedily. This was the period of my greatest euphoria. Sated by the sandwiches in Villanueva, I passed riders lying beneath the spare foliage, desperate for shade.

At times it felt as though the only proper response was to laugh at the sheer unlikelihood of it all, at the innumerable divergences in my life that had taken me to that particular place at that particular time. To be there — to survive there! — on that day, the sun arcing slowly behind the massed ridges of the Gorafe. What sustenance for the dark winter

mornings, alone in my living room on a static bike.

For many riders, Gor (population 736) is the final staging post of the first day of Badlands. Here, the locals have a fiesta for the passing of the race; some welcome tired bodies from park benches to spare beds and cool showers. Five kilometres before the town, short of water and low on food, I passed a young family camped by the roadside with bananas and buckets of iced water, who urged me to drink and drink and drink. And so I rode into Gor at 10pm in high spirits, cheered by the crowd outside Café Bar Hogar del Pensionista.

There, I ate two more sandwiches, three muffins and a fistful of sweets and packed a third sandwich in my rear pocket. I took my first caffeine gel of the day and rode into the blessed cool of the night.



Long stretches of wilderness, left, are interrupted by great hospitality in small villages along the

Badlands route. Above, all of the kit that David carried, including energy gels and snacks, tools to fix his bike and

a tracking device. He had to negotiate 20 hairpin bends, below, in the dark, during heavy rain and fog



Carb-loading food diary

Friday (two days until race)

Breakfast

Three scrambled eggs, three slices of bread 150g oats, Fage Yoghurt (0 per cent fat), two bananas, honey

Snack during short ride

Two bananas, energy gel (40g carbs), one slice of pizza

Lunch

Pasta puttanesca (150g pasta), rice pudding, large bowl of Coco Pops, two slices

of toast with Nutella

Snack Two bananas, 0% fat yoghurt, rice pudding

Dinner "Basque chicken" with 150g rice, rice pudding with jam, bagel with jam

Saturday Breakfast Three scrambled eggs, four slices of bread, 150g oats, two bananas, honey, 0 per cent fat yoghurt, two rice puddings with honey

Snack Two rice puddings with a banana and honey

Lunch "Basque chicken" with 150g rice, large bowl of Coco Pops, bagel with jam

Snack One rice pudding with banana and Nutella

Dinner 150-200g basmati rice and chicken, bagel with jam, two rice puddings and a banana

down a narrow track from Velefique (334km) to Ulella del Campo (360km), searching for a smooth line that might protect my wrist from the constant impact of the rock-strewn earth.

Sitting in Los Molinas Café at Ulella, watching riders zip past, with a sandwich, two soggy donuts, a chocolate croissant and an espresso, I still kept the thought at bay. And yet, at points that morning I had been in unbearable, dangerous pain. I could hardly brake or change gear. So why go on? As a rider from New Zealand pointed out to me in the café, there was just no need. "Jeez, mate," he said. "Don't wreck your wrist for 50th place."

The psychotherapist Adam Phillips wondered over this infatuation with perseverance in *On Giving Up*. "We tend to think of giving up, in the



The wrist injury that eventually forced David to withdraw from the race

ordinary way, as a lack of courage, as an improper or embarrassing orientation towards what is shameful and fearful," he writes. "Giving up has to be justified in a way that completion does not.

"It is worth wondering to whom we believe we have to justify ourselves when we are giving up, or when we are determinedly not giving up."

That I had told so many people my plans — not least in this paper — was certainly a factor; in explanation I would have to repeat again and again my failure. And in the absence of irrefutable justification — a broken leg, say — it would be clear that I had weighed my strength against the strength of reality and found reality to be the victor. Whether I had been wise and known my limitations, or I had simply been too weak, would be a matter for interpretation.

I could live with that. Of the rest I am not so sure. In a way, these events are a kind of evidence to ourselves that life will continue to grow perpetually: we set a target, we control small variables, we progress, and eventually something great —



I had been in unbearable pain. I could hardly brake or change gear. So why go on?

sundown in the Gorafe — becomes possible. To prematurely end my journey was to admit the illusion of that vast potential.

It was what I had to do. Shaking and weeping desperately across a stone track 5km outside of Ulella, I gave up. I pulled to the side, sat cross-legged, alone in the dust, and did as I've almost always done in these situations: I called my mum. Despite my limp objections — "I'll be fine" — she had insisted on accompanying me to Granada, in case of injury. I've rarely been so grateful to be proved wrong.

I slipped quickly into tears. I covered my face with my hands and thought briefly of all the injured footballers to have hidden their faces with their shirts and I realised it was an instinct that I had probably misunderstood: they are not hiding their tears from the crowd, but themselves from reality.

By the time I woke the next morning, safe and rested in the bed of my rented apartment, the winner — Alejandro Martínez (42hr 18min) — had been at the finish in Capileira for a few hours. My wrist, in a cast to immobilise the joint, was bruised and sprained. I was glad by then that it wasn't fractured, but waiting for an X-ray the night before, I had craved the decisiveness of a break.

In her essay *Winter in the Abruzzi*, the Italian writer Natalia Ginzburg tells a short story about a local dressmaker gripped by the myopia of obsession. "Her red face was absorbed in her work and her eyes shone with a proud determination," she writes. "She would have burnt the house down to make her dumplings come out a success."

Sitting in the dust near Ulella, I was ready to burn my house down too. I wanted the dumplings. I wanted to be a success, by whatever obscure measure I had conceived it. In a sense, stopping was easy; I had only to text the organisers and wait to be collected by my mum. Though I know it was right — or sensible — to do so, I regret that ending with the intensity of a bad hangover. I can see only one solution. Put me back on my bike. I've got less than a year to prepare.

Ricciardo's career looks over after losing seat

Formula 1

Molly Hudson Motor Racing Reporter

Daniel Ricciardo's Formula 1 career appears to be over after being replaced mid-season by Liam Lawson.

Ricciardo, the 35-year-old Australian, has eight race wins and 32 podium finishes in a career spanning 13 years and completed his final race in Singapore last week, securing the fastest lap for Visa Cash App Red Bull (VCARB), the sister team of Red Bull.

It was apparent in recent months that pressure was growing on Ricciardo, who had started the season with the intention of winning back a Red Bull seat but had instead been outperformed by his VCARB team-mate Yuki Tsunoda.

Ricciardo is a popular member of the paddock — and is one of the stars of Netflix's *Drive to Survive* documentary series — but in Formula 1 the stopwatch does not lie and he was no longer deemed quick enough with the highly rated Lawson, 22, on the sidelines.

Over the weekend in Singapore the realisation that it was going to be his last grand prix, with talks scheduled in the days afterwards, seemed to sink in and Ricciardo was given a guard of honour as he returned to the VCARB hospitality suite. "I'm aware this could be it," Ricciardo told FITV, holding back tears. "It was a flood of many emotions and feelings. The cockpit is something I've got



Ricciardo has eight career race wins and 32 podium finishes

very used to for many years. I just wanted to savour the moment."

Ricciardo has rejected the chance to be a Red Bull reserve driver, a role he performed after his departure from McLaren at the end of the 2022 season. He never managed to recapture the form he displayed in 2016 to 2018, when he regularly challenged his young team-mate Max Verstappen.

"Obviously last year it made a lot of sense to keep one foot in the door and the big picture was to try and get back to Red Bull. I think if I was to do that again there's not really... I'm not going to restart my career," Ricciardo said.

Lawson will drive for VCARB for the remainder of the season, which consists of six races, with the first in Austin on October 20. The New Zealander has been waiting for an opportunity after impressing when Ricciardo broke his hand last year. He made his debut in Zandvoort and was a standout in the five races he took part in, scoring his first points and finishing ninth at last year's gruelling Singapore Grand Prix. It is expected that Lawson will retain his seat at VCARB next season, but if he impresses enough in the next six races it is understood he could challenge Sergio Pérez for the second Red Bull drive.

There is an outside chance that Ricciardo could return to the grid if Pérez's form deteriorates to such an extent that he is replaced before the end of the season. However, in a post on Instagram yesterday Ricciardo appeared to accept that his F1 career had come to an end, writing: "I've loved this sport my whole life. It's wild and wonderful and has been a journey... It'll always have its highs and lows but it's been fun and truth be told I wouldn't change it. Until the next adventure."