

Sympathetic, rather than condescending, help



The REAL reason we ride

# Dirtgirls

Sue Williams packs bikes and pads and heads off to the Alps in an attempt to become a bit more 'Grrrr!' in the company of other likeminded women.  
Pics by Sue too

In an attempt to become a bit more 'grrr' in my riding, or at least try to develop the ability to spend more time on my bike than off it, I decided to head off on the 'Dirtgirls' skills week in Morzine organised by Sara Burdon from Mountain Bike Holidays (now 'Flow MTB'). Unfortunately my initial visions of myself as a rufty-tufty downhill hammering the mountain trails under blue skies dissipated when I realised that I didn't even know how to put my borrowed knee pads on... Deciding that I could work out the finer details of body armour once I got there, I packed up my bike and riding kit, agonised over whether to pack a dress (too girly?) and attempted to gather together my meagre rations of confidence.

### Arrival

"Are you Emily?" queried a voice from behind me at Geneva airport. Unfortunately, that was the one and only time that anyone confused me with Emily Horridge, our skills instructor for the week and a Dragon downhill champ, as the profound difference in our riding ability would become obvious to all and sundry within

the first hour. However, gathering together the assortment of riders that were meeting at the airport wasn't so difficult. If you were female, with a bike and without a male companion, you were immediately adopted into the group. Meeting up with the other 'Dirtgirls' and Sara was a re-assuring experience, realising that my concerns about whether or not I would be good enough had been shared by just about everyone else. After a twisty, misty journey through the mountains we arrived at the chalet in Morzine, to be greeted by the most outstandingly good food that I've indulged in for a long time. Over a sumptuously decadent chocolate mouse, the conversation soon turned to the important topic of bike paint jobs, or more specifically to who had a pink bike. The star prize went to Jenni for her stunningly co-ordinated vision of pink loveliness.

### D-Day (or Day 1 for the less scared amongst us)

Having realised that the week was about more than just chocolate (is there more to life than that?) the following morning saw the full component of eight Dirtgirls standing in the light rain



Ahh...



Grr!



Ow!



contemplating their bike bags. Now... deep breath... I confess to having always relied on my erstwhile other half to fix, sort out, or otherwise fettle my bike into shape. With my toes curling with suppressed embarrassment, there was no way in the company of other women that I was going to look anything other than proficient when wielding my multi-tool. OK, bike out of bag, upside down, hands getting slightly oily... looking good so far... bugger... can't get the back wheel back in, pesky chain in the way... bigger bugger... damn chain is now completely tangled up.

Fortunately, I was rescued by Claire, an engineer from Aberdeen, who proved to be a dab-hand at sorting out mechanical issues and had the patience to show me what to do. Feeling chuffed that by 10.30 I had already improved my bike fettling skills, it was time for us all to hit the hills.

Having finally got to grips with my knee/shin and elbow pads, but feeling a bit like a stormtrooper from a sci-fi movie rather than a hardcore dudette, I followed the others through Morzine heading for the Pleney lift. Unfortunately, the weather gods were proving to be somewhat unkind, and the blue skies, blazing sun, and dusty trails

that I had been imagining were steadfastly refusing to materialise. Instead, several days of continuing rain had conspired to turn the trails into a gloopy mud-fest, great for sliding, but pants for traction. Having packed my 'summer wardrobe' of shorts, I figured that to start riding was going to be the best way to warm up.

Nooooo...Wrong... this is downhill, where the windchill factor increases as soon as you point your bike, er, downhill. Fortunately, I soon realised that body armour's true value lies in its ability to act like a pair of ruffy-tuffy leg warmers, while the focus required to stay upright drove any other concerns out of my mind.

With some initial tips from Emily and an outline of the trail from Sara, we descended the 'crepery route' on a wide swoopy track, followed by a brisk slither down some steeper sections. We had a brief pause to let brakes cool down (at least I wasn't the only one clutching the levers in a death grip) before whooping down some singletrack; a helter-skelter of ups and downs and switchbacks through the forest, then a final blast across the open fields into the valley. The morning had claimed its first unintentional sideways dismounts, but we had all achieved a sufficient coating of mud to be

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That's Emily that is



able to now stride through the village with a semblance of pride. Unfortunately, my grin from the morning ride was somewhat shattered when lunchtime saw the onslaught of what was to prove be a rather vicious stomach bug. I decided to take a brief break, while the others headed up on the Super Morzine lift and descended down the red route into Morzine. Meeting back up with the group a few hours later down by the river in the valley, it was time for Emily to start putting us through our paces. The emphasis of the Dirtgirls week is to combine guided rides with expert tuition to gain skills that we could then practice out in the hills. Each day was to have a particular 'skills theme' with the first one concentrating on front and rear wheel lifts. With an inner groan, I prepared myself for my usual bout of grunting and heaving at the bars, usually to no avail. But it was here that the focus on skills for women came into its own, as Emily ran through some movements that involved 'making like a spring' in order to use momentum rather than brute strength to lift the bike. Concentrating hard meant that most riders missed the comedy effect of bikes being lifted over imaginary obstacles on a perfectly flat bit of track, before progressing on to the strategically placed 'stick' and 'rock'. Having mastered (to varying degrees) the art of getting wheels to leave the ground, we decided to treat the local strollers to an extravagant display of shape-shifting. Apparently women riders tend to be reluctant to move around that much on their bikes, so with encouragement from Emily, Sara and Libby (our other guide for the week) we swept up the main promenade delighting the locals with our proficiency in thrusting forwards, and swaying our derrieres from side to side. Obviously we prefer to think this was done with style and panache...

### Sickness and Rocks

Monday dawned to the sound of rain hitting the windows, and for me a full-on stomach bug (I'll spare you the grim details). Shuffling

back to bed, I left the others to head off up into the mountains for a day of 'rock skills'. Not overly chuffed at being left behind, and feeling like a little kid who's missed the party, I cursed the germs on the plane and thought about how useful rock-riding skills would be to me back in the slate quarries of Snowdonia. The girls returned later that day with tales of high drama, and of rocky drop-offs ridden and off-camber slabs conquered, all thanks to Emily's tuition. Suffice to say, that for most, the day had, well, rocked.

### Roots Manoeuvres

Steadfastly ignoring any malingering germs, and the battering of wind and rain on the windows, I was keen to head on out with the others. Taking the Super Morzine lift up, followed by the vertigo inducing telesiege, we split into two groups, one going off with Sara for a cross country ride over the mountains, and the other going for a 'roots' skills session with Emily. Bundled up in as many layers as I could manage, the bitter wind and rain were making riding a somewhat challenging affair as I joined the group following Emily down a rough track.

Pausing beside the edge of some forest, Emily uttered those magic words... a 'secret section of singletrack' through the forest. What I didn't realise was that the trail had an entry 'qualifier' – a very short but steep and slick fall-line section of trail down into the trees. Under dry conditions, this would be a blast, as there was a straight run-out at the bottom, but with the somewhat treacherous conditions we were facing it was altogether more of a challenge. Emily patiently demonstrated the best approach in, and the best way to descend safely. After a brief collective mince at the top (after you... no, no, after you...), we one by one gave it our best shot, some with great success and some, well, less so. Needless to say, I seemed to be in the 'less so' category. Heading off the top, the next few seconds passed in a bit of a blur, as Emily's advice to not touch the brakes

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## 'Dirtgirls': the facts

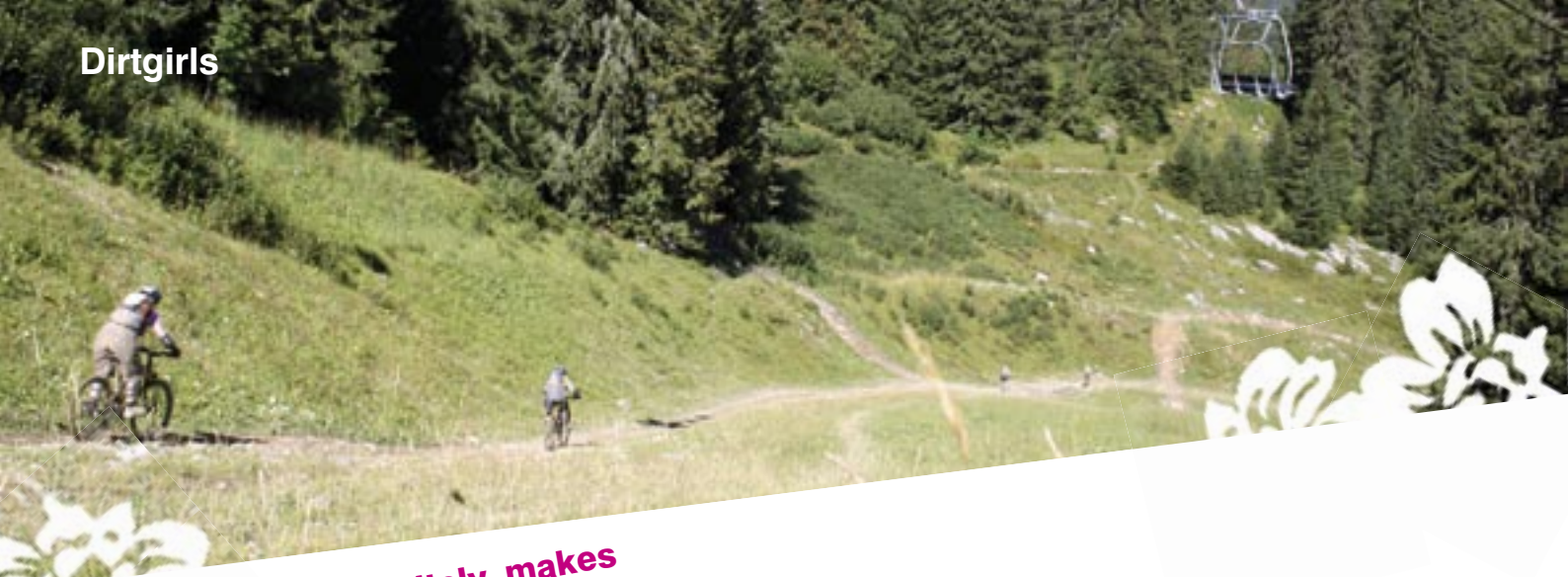
If you fancy learning some new skills, riding in the Alps, and hanging out with a great group of girls (plus indulging in the most fantastic food!), 'Flow MTB will be running two 'Dirtgirls' weeks in 2007:

14 – 21st July 2007: Focusing on skills, this week is perfect for dirtgirls that are newer to mountain biking, nervous on anything technical, or who know they need to perfect a few skills to take their riding to the next level.

18 – 25th August 2007: Focusing on riding and getting to cover more of the amazing terrain around the area. There will still be some skills sessions, but these will be shorter and focus on sessioning bits of trails. This week is for dirtgirls who are confident on technical ground, including rocks, roots and steep sections, but who want the chance to ride with a pro, learn from her and meet other great girls to ride with.

For more details see: [www.flowmtb.com](http://www.flowmtb.com)





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seemed to flee my mind. One quick grab (I swear I didn't even know I'd done it) and my beloved bike seemed to take an instant dislike to me and flew out from underneath to slide off down the slope on its own.

Re-united with my bike and the rest of the group, we proceeded sliding down the singletrack through the forest. Breaking us in on an easy section of roots, Emily took us through the techniques of getting over them, even in the wet and mud. Having mastered 'basic' root riding, we progressed onto 'roots and drops'. Faced with a section that would usually have had me off my bike and pushing, one by one we rose to the challenge, although Mandy's determination not to fall off saw her adopting a novel off-piste approach as she missed the corner and headed off the track into the depths of the trees. Descending further, we took in a bit of cornering skills, before the wet trail conditions took their toll and Kate took a nasty tumble. After some expert first aid advice from Libby, we dropped down into Morzine, to find that the 'cross country' ride had also claimed a victim, with Yvonne coming off over the bars. With the rest of us retreating out of the weather to the chalet and cake, Yvonne and Kate were whisked off to the doctor's, for a diagnosis of one broken nose and a substantial bump to the head.

**Four-cross**

After a well-deserved rest day, Thursday saw the sun emerging... Hurrah! With the trails beginning to dry out, we all wanted to make the most of hitting the trails. With 'cornering' techniques being on today's agenda I happily visualised weaving gently downhill cruising around bends in the trails. Reality kicked in when midway between Morzine and Les Gets the words 'Four-cross Track' penetrated my daydreaming fantasies. Gulp! Resisting an urge to turn tail and run (well it would have meant pedaling back up hill), I turned my bike in the direction of a wide,

innocent looking track. With the thought of being pursued by gung-ho dudes in full-face helmets and extra baggy shorts (quite a disturbing image), I swung round to the first berm; "Er, they're a bit high... I'll just trundle round this slightly lower bit... nooo... there's a plunging descent with a ridiculously steep climb up the other side...shit... more berms... oh my god... I've made it!" Adrenalin, most definitely, makes you grin, but only when you've safely come out the other side.

**Alpine cruising**

Our final day saw us putting a week's worth of skills into practice with an epic cross country ride out over the mountains. With the grinometer pushing up to 100, the sun shone, the trails were dry, and the scenery was gob-smackingly outstanding. Heading off from the top of the Super Morzine lift, we swept immediately along the perfect Alpine trail of my dreams, a swoopy section of singletrack with views of pointy mountain tops under a clear blue sky. A slightly rocky, technical descent soon led into a steeper flowing singletrack route that plunged down the mountainside to Les Lindarets. Punctuated with short lift rides, we followed Sara and Emily along more outstanding trails, alternating cruising along with more challenging rocks and roots sections. A steep technical climb saw all of us giving it a bash, cheering on those who made it to the highest point. After so much descending, the opportunity to pedal up hill was almost welcome, if only to give our brakes a rest. Descending into Châtel, we re-grouped at an azure blue lake, complete with picturesque fountain, before heading back over the mountains to Morzine, via the utterly bizarre 'goat village'. Taking in some optional 'jump' practice, we headed down on a rut-riding extravaganza. Fortunately following Claire's excellent rut choice, we swung back into Les Lindarets to laze in the sun while bikes were fettled along the valley. to the river and a cruise back along the valley.

**Emily says...**

We asked Emily to give her view on her students: Everybody did really well, particularly considering the weather. There were a few issues with brakes getting a bit hot and bothered, but no one let it get them down. The greatest day was the final day when we did a big XC-type loop in lovely weather and everyone was left more or less to their own devices rather than having coaching like earlier in the week. It was really good to see people trying to put into practice some of the things we'd covered throughout the week, and seeing them ride a little faster and little more confidently. So yeah, mostly they did take instruction well and there were definite improvements to be seen. Some were more subtle than others - naturally with a more experienced rider it's harder to see improvements, but I'd like to think everyone got something out of the week skills wise and apart from that had a great week riding some awesome terrain.

