

OVERSEAS MEET - CALP, COSTA BLANCA

16 - 24TH MARCH

This meet provided a welcome break from Britain's winter weather for relaxing walking, canyoning, ridge walking and climbing in impressive warm, dry scenery with a refreshing wind on the hills. It gave a welcome and active start to the year after a couple of wild-weather meets in Scotland.

Initially it was all change for this meet: a shift of date to a day earlier to accommodate the employed and a move from a planned hotel base to a large villa so that we could self-cater and socialise more easily on an evening. The latter change reduced costs and the in-Spain costs for shared car hire, villa, food and drink totalled around £150. Flights cost around £100.

The villa was chosen to be close to the N-332 road for easy access to different locations. It was spacious with its own pool, tennis court, two-hole putting 'green' and airy atrium with large fountain. There were two sitting rooms we never got around to using. We could eat breakfast outside with a view of the Peñón de Ifach and later lounge in the evening light as the sun dipped behind Olta.

Each day groups went off in different directions with someone calling in at a supermarket to ensure we had sufficient provisions. The evenings were spent socially in the main room.

Rather than describe where each person went each day this report lists and briefly describes the main activities. The sources of information which helped us decide what to do are listed at the end of this report.

Sport Climbing

Olta crag was just above the villa so was chosen for the first full day. Two parts of the south crag were visited and gave pleasant climbing.

Toix was visited yet again for a half day's climbing on easier routes on a cooler day after overnight rain. Even the west-facing crags were dry by 9am. We were soon joined by a larger party from Dresden with ages ranging from in the 60s to 86. A loud long cry of agony was heard and we saw the rope go tight on one of their number – thankfully he was only suffering from cramp in a leg.

Ridge Walking

Our old favourite, the saw-toothed Bernia ridge, was again visited. One party traversed to ridge from the east col to the summit with a couple of abseils and the short crux climb at the fins. The scrambling is excellent and gives sustained interest. They arrived at the 'descent' col near the middle of the ridge at roughly the same time as the walking party who had passed through the natural tunnel through the ridge, slogged up the scree to the col and inadvertently

explored the cliffs beyond before returning to the steep scramble over a minor top towards the summit at 1,126m. The rough descent tested everyone's balance, especially the coarse scree through gorse to the ruined fort. The swing round a couple of shallow cols round right to the starting point went easily. Jonquils were seen high up and orchids lower down.

The Aitana ridge from Font Moli Ondara, near Guadalest, gave an entertaining round initially through terraces and over a small ridge with impressive nearby crag and on to the Font del la Mandas. The party then split taking either the direct way up to the highest point in the Costa Blanca at 1,558m via the Simas de Partagás or circling left via the Fat Man's Agony rock formations and back along the broad summit ridge to the radio installations by the summit. That listening station was originally built by the Americans to eavesdrop on Russian communications during the Cold War. That summit ridge gave the easiest part of the route, east towards the coast for a couple of miles with grand views. Well beyond the obvious track crossing a col, we took a clearly indicated narrow cut back left back to the start.

Canyoning

Barranco del Infierno, Hell's Gorge, in Vall d'Ebo proved most entertaining but was at the end of a few miles of a rough track. The technical section of ten abseils and two roped traverses took two hours of movement though we were held up for 45 minutes by an under-equipped Cleveland MC party who we were able to help out with improvised cowstails and etrier. There was no flowing surface water in the gorge but several slowly drying pools were passed. Both the walks in and back out were easy enough though the latter involved hundreds of well-graded zig-zags. The route provided a thorough introduction to abseiling for one prospective member

Hill Walking

From the Alta Olta campsite the tracks were taken to the hermitage and then paths up to the Sierra de Olta plateau's extensive limestone pavements. After visiting the summit, taking in the 360° views and lunching by a compound, the descent spot was located and the far side and northern pillars and old gabbro quarry passed to get back towards the southern side and Calp. Later in the week, almost the opposite round of Olta was completed anti-clockwise by a convalescent on crutches. Their views were best first over to the Peñón de Ifach and nearby Salinas, the Moraira headland then later the stunning Mascarat Gorge. Their return over Little Olta was via the gully just west of the crags. The bulk of these routes stays above 300m.

In the Bernia area, from the Jalon Valley the Mozabaric trail was followed to Alt de Ample, 598m. The route crossed abandoned olive growing terraces and passed many fincas in good repair, wells, vats, gin wheels and a well on a ridge presumably filled each winter. Flowers included iris and orchids.

A little to the north, the Lost Pinos, Marnes, Sella de Cau round was completed at a sedate pace by the convalescent and partner.

Further south, a threesome enjoyed a lovely scenic walk above Polop from a suburban area initially through woodland to a col with views of the prominent volcanic plug, Puig Campana. Then the circular route took them up the Barranc de la Canal and gradually over Mont Ponoig. The descent was to a pass then through the Collado del Lamp to good tracks following the Barranc de Gulabdar into Echo Valley where some had climbed on a previous visit.

Closer to Calp, the three-hour coastal circuit from Cumbre del Sol taking in Castell Granadella was surprisingly varied and interesting taking in an attractive inlet, rugged cliffs and the coastal defence tower ruined by the English in the Napoleonic wars.

The Peñón de Ifach's polished paths provided a sociable final afternoon walk for our largest party in the worst weather we endured – a few spots of rain and only intermittent sunshine.

Jogging

Our prospective member jogged most mornings generally heading up towards Olta and finding adequate tracks once she had crossed the main road.

Besides the above, the tennis and the golf, there were other more relaxing activities. The south shore at Calp gave an acclimatisation stroll with archaeological remains, the fish market and a stop for coffee. There was bird watching by the Salinas inland from the north shore. Picturesque crag-top El Castell de Guadalest was visited though some only made it to the cafe by the car park. The castle in Denia and the sea front at Altea were explored. Less relaxing for the one-and-a-half brave people who tried it was swimming in the villa's unheated pool – too early in the season.

Self-catering was abandoned on the last evening and the seafront seafood restaurant, El Faro del Puerto, visited for a communal meal (30€ with wine) with orders of swordfish, paella, calamari, hake, salmon, mussels, whitebait, langoustine, prawns with banana and steak.

Our return to Britain with rain, hail and temperatures below 10°C was something of a shock.

Attending were:

John and Ros (G) Brown
Peter Chadwick
Deena Jefferys (PM)
Tim Josephy
Alan and Angie (G) Linford

Tony and Valerie (G) Penny
Michael and Helen (G) Smith
Richard Smith and Laura (G)
Kjetil and Ann-Karin (G) Tveranger

Sources of information:

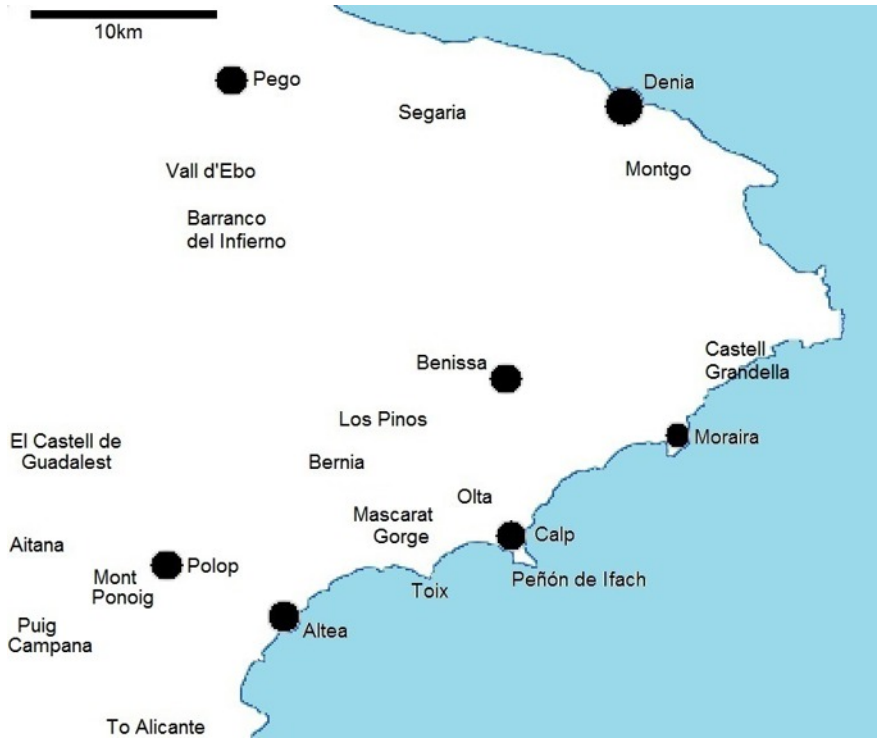
- Rockfax, Spain: Costa Blanca new climbing guidebook
- Sunflower, Costa Blanca car tours and walks, John and Christine Oldfield
- Cicerone, Costa Blanca mountain walks, volume 2: East, Bob Stansfield
- Costa Blanca Mountains 1:40,000 map, super-durable edition, Discovery Walking Guides Ltd
- Walk! the Costa Blanca Mountains, Charles Davis
- Route descriptions and maps from Jean and Bob Hall (www.bobandjeanhall.com)
- Gorge descriptions are available online (<http://theorangehouse.co.uk/online-topos/barranco-del-inferno>, <http://costablancaclimbing.com/canyoning.html>)

Birds identified:

Alpine Accentor	Hoopoe
Andouin's gull	Kestrel
Black Wheatear	Mallard
Blackbird	Mediterranean Gull
Black-headed gull	Pochard
Black-winged Stilt	Redshank
Blue Tit	Sandwich Tern
Bonelli's eagle	Serin
Carrion Crow	Shelduck
Chaffinch	Shoveller
Chough	Skylark
Cormorant	Spanish Sparrow
Crested Tit	Whimbrel
Flamingo	White Wagtail
Green Sandpiper	Yellow Wagtail
Green Woodpecker	Yellow-legged Gull
Grey Wagtail	

Butterflies Identified:

Brimstone	Provence Orange Tip
Cleopatra	Scarce Swallowtail (Iberian race)
Escher's Blue	Small Copper
Green Hairstreak	Spanish Apollo
Mallow Skipper	Swallowtail
Provence Hairstreak	Wall



1) Most of the party atop the Peñón de Ifach
Photo Alan Linford

2) Richard, Peter, Kjetil, Tim and Deena scrambling the later part of the Bernia Ridge
Photo Michael Smith

3) John safeguards Helen in the Barranco del Infierno watched by Richard
Photo Michael Smith

4) Richard belays Kjetil on the crux fin of the Bernia Ridge
Photo Tim Josephy

