

Given the number of alternative Mediterranean venues for walking and climbing, it is worth reflecting on why we keep returning to the Calpe area. For at least one member on the meet it was their seventh week in the area but only on one day this week were they repeating a previously visited ascent. It is not only the many locations for outdoor activities within reasonable driving distance but their variety which is attractive: coastal and inland walking, spectacular ridge and canyon walking, sport and traditional rock climbing and abseiling down canyons. Added to those are the cultural sites such as the castles and hill villages besides the opportunities for swimming and mountain biking. It is a great area with something to suit every taste and ability, even full English breakfast and lager in Benidorm if you want it.

So popular did this meet prove that the familiar large Villa Perles used on the last meet lacked sufficient capacity and a second was required. This arrangement was less than ideal but proved satisfactory with some groups consisting of individuals from both establishments heading off to walks or climbs. One couple seeking greater luxury were ensconced in a hotel. Villa Perles' location, close to the main coastal road, gave ready access to the hills and was only a few blocks from two supermarkets.

Albert's 83rd birthday was celebrated on the first day of the meet with a chocolate cake and sparkling wine. Towards the opposite end of the scale it was noted that summing the ages of the youngest three attending failed to reach Albert's years by a long chalk.

The Climbing

Michael and Richard Smith got in a couple of sport routes at Marin, near Alicante during their drive up. On the Sunday, two parties, the Champions and then M&R Smith, Kjetil Tveranger and Tim Josephy drove the short distance from the villas and walked up to Olta, situated high above Calpe and with fine views out to sea and the 330m Penon. Several routes of 4 to 5+ were done before occasional showers encouraged a relatively early finish. Later in the week the Champions had a productive day at Toix, climbing routes up to 6a. On Friday, after doing the Ponoig via Ferrata they climbed a couple of routes in nearby Echo Valley.

Two of the great traditional routes for which this area is justly famous were also done. On Monday, we climbed Via Valencianos, 250m VS, which wends its way up the awe inspiring South face of the Penon taking a devious route to avoid excessive difficulties. The early start may have been a shock to Aaron but it meant that we were up there showering bits on those below rather than down below being showered upon by those above.



Via Valencianos team on top of the Penon de Lfach

We climbed in two ropes of three, R&M Smith and Kjetil, then the Campions and Tim Josephy. Apart from a short but desperately polished crux crack, the rest of the route was enjoyable steep slab climbing with a spectacular belay about 170m up on a knife edge ridge overlooking Calpe. It was a bit of a shock to reach the summit to find it thronged with visitors who had walked up the tourist path to invade our peace.



On the way down we met a YRC party making their way up, an ascent of the Penon is a must for any hill walker visiting this area.

Later in the week on Thursday, the Campions and Richard Smith went to the Mascarat Gorge to climb the Llobet-Bertomeu route, 250m HVS. When you drive through the gorge it is impressive enough. To climb there is a unique experience and one that Ged had wanted to have for many years. After a fairly easy introduction the climbing soon became steep and sustained at VS with one pitch considerably harder. All of this was spectacularly positioned right above the road and the trio were acutely conscious of the risk of knocking stones on to the unsuspecting motorists below.

The walking

Parties were out and about every day making the most of the wonderful limestone scenery. Most had a crack at the Penon and most of those made it up the slippery track to the top. Christine Marriott was very pleased to get to the top end of the tunnel which is a feature of the route, Jim Harrison got a bit further and Albert, who had a leg injury following a recent car accident, made it nearly to the top.

Sun: Ascent of Carrascal de Parcent from Parcent: Mick, Helen, Arthur, David, Jim & Christine Harrison and Ann-Karin

Els Arcs walk: Bill, Richard Sealey, Paul Dover, John & Carol.

Mon: Ascent of Penon de Ifach: Paul, Billy, John and Carol

On Monday morning we had a relaxed start to the day. Billy Sarakun led us across the beach at Calpe to the start of the Penon; it was there we bumped into Alan and Angie Linford. We compared notes then adjourned to the nearest tapas bar for beer and a tasty bit of lunch before our scramble

up this huge chunk of limestone rock. Richard Sealey decided to go elsewhere, so our team consisted of Paul Dover, Billy, John and myself.

It was thronging by the time we reached the trail: a whole coach full of excited French school kids had arrived. I thought they'd probably not go any further than the tunnel but I was wrong. John and I had been up the Penon over 30 years ago and only saw a couple of people, but now it's a major tourist attraction. Not far after the tunnel we bumped into our climbing team on their way down. We were on a rocky ledge with great views and steep sea cliffs. John took a group photo before we scuttled off to the Guard Post where I was in charge of the camera. From there we scaled the main path which now has chains, as the rock is polished and quite unforgiving. It was so noisy at the top that we only stayed long enough to take quick snaps then we left Billy to admire the view.

Ascent of Malla del Llop from Famorca: Mick, Helen, Arthur, David, Bill and Ann-Karin

We headed further inland to tackle another ridge traverse at the eastern end of the Serra de Serrella. This excellent route climbs past abandoned terraces into a valley with interesting rock formations leading to another bare limestone ridge which was followed over the summits of El Regall (1319m) and the Mallada de Llop (1361m) passing plenty of hedgehog broom.

The far-reaching views from the crest were splendid, especially to the Castellet ridge, where a steep descent brought us into the spectacular Barranc de la Canal, a wide and steep sided valley draining Mallada de Llop to the east. A mule track descended through more disused terraces and brought us back to Famorca and then a beer in front of the log fire at the Coll de Ratesventa.

Tue: Serra de Olta: Paul, Billy, John, Carol, Richard Sealey

Scramble on west ridge of Monte Ponoig: Mick, David, Bill, Helen, Ann-Karin, Arthur and Jim & Christine Harrison

The Ponoig is a fine isolated summit giving a choice of a direct scramble or a walk up the west ridge. Having located the correct track up from Finestrat, we left the cars on a path up to the Refugi Vera Catral, a spartan tin bivvy hut used by climbers tackling routes on the adjacent Puig Campana. The Col del Pouet was soon underfoot and the next innominate col gave access to Ponoig's west ridge. Dave and Mick went for the scramble up the arete, meeting the others at Monte Ponoig's summit cairn (1182m) and all returned to the col by the path. At the Col del Llamp, a group of lovely dark purple and lime fritillaries (*fritillaria lusitanica*) were seen, their drooping heads nodding in the breeze. An easy return was then made down forestry tracks.

Wed: Walk to Els Arcs natural arches – Mick, David Hick & Christine Marriott

Thu: Traverse of Serra del Ferrer ridge: Mick, Tim, Mike & Helen, Ann-Karin & Kjetil, David, Arthur and Billy

This grade 1 scramble is rightly considered one of the best walks in the area. Pleasant walking up dry stream valleys steepens to a pull up to the south end of the ridge. This leads over a narrow and vertiginous section, rather steeper and longer than Crib Goch, to a complex route through rugged and spectacular scenery to the descent col. We carried on to the summit around a kilometre further north, disturbing a herd of goats on the way.

Further progress looked unpleasant through trackless scrub and thorn so we returned to the col and so down to the cars which we had fortuitously left in a restaurant car park. It would have been churlish not to have had a beer.



Vall de Laguar (fabulous gorge walk) with : Bill, Paul, Richard Sealey, John & Carol. The original plan for the day was to walk along the Cavall Verd ridge. However, once we were parked in Benimaurell the conditions were proving to be far too windy to make that walk a pleasure. As an option we chose to do the walk through the gorge Barranc de Racons.

The route from Benimaurell was taken in an anti-clockwise direction downhill via a concreted road leading north-east which lead on to a dirt track narrowing to a path which eventually led to the start of the downhill stepped Mozarabic trail carved into the mountainside by the Moors centuries ago. The steps led down to the dry river bed of the Rio Girona at which time we came off the main PR-CV147 to follow the river bed through the gorge. The river bed provided some stunning rock formations carved out by water and some superb scenery.

All too soon the way out of the gorge was marked by a cairn in the middle of the riverbed. At this point we headed up hill on a steep narrow and in places airy path taking us across the steep hillside with views down into the Barranc d'Infierno. This path eventually met another beautifully constructed stepped path that continued uphill towards a road that led down to our start point in Benimaurell.

This was a fantastic walk with tremendous scenery and interest throughout.

Castell d'Aixa: Jim and Christine Harrison

Jim & Christine Harrison had a couple of days on their own, one on Monday to the Pas Tancat area where Christine would later “enjoy” a descent of the eponymous canyon. They went to see the eagles but had forgotten to tell them they were coming. The eagles were not in. They also climbed Castell d'Aixa with splendid views. After the initial disappointment of finding the pool at Font d'Aixa completely empty this was an excellent walk, mainly in sunny weather. The first part of the walk was a steady climb with a short but narrow shelf section before gaining the first ridge with its splendid views to Val de Pop and the further climb up to Castell d'Aixa. This proved an excellent place to pause and take in the views towards Montgo, Ferrer and the sea. Following the descent to a well (sadly with a lost bucket) the walking was mainly easy providing views of an ever changing landscape, including the encroachment of development into a wild area. There was an interesting and slightly twisty finish to the walk, mainly through olive terraces which are being restored. A striking feature of this were the number of burnt and blackened tree stubs which Jim found strangely arresting.

Fri: Bernia circuit: Bill, Richard Sealey, Paul

Ascent of Pla del la Casa from Facheca: Mick, Mike & Helen, Ann-Karin & Kjetil, David and Billy
We returned to the Serra de Serrella to climb Pla de la Casa, named after its enormous nevera (pla meaning level and casa meaning snow-pit in Valenciano), some 11m in diameter and 13 m deep constructed in the 18th century to take advantage of the altitude. We passed a huge walled-in cave used as a goat-fold and stopped for lunch at the nevera. We signed the summit book on Pla de la Casa (1379m), admired the extensive views and headed down the old ice-cutters mule track to the Font Roja spring. A traversing path then took us back to the village descending via the customary abandoned terraces.

Sat: Walk up Barranc del Cint above Alcoi : Mick and Albert

This short walk above the university town of Alcoi took in the best bit of the steep-sided Barranc del Cint which continued into a nature reserve. Four griffon vultures circled overhead, signalling time to return to the car to get back to the airport.

The Canyons

Barranc del Pas Tancat (by Christine Harrison)

On Wednesday a party of 7 set off to abseil down the Barranco del Pas Tancat. We were Smiths three, Michael, Helen and Richard, Tim Josephy, Kjetil and Ann-Karin Tveranger and Christine Harrison. On the way we had dropped Jim Harrison and Albert at Guadalest to explore its culture and history.

Among our party were two absolute beginners, Christine and Ann-Karin and Helen who had one previous canyon under her harness. We'd had a short lesson, delivered by Michael, the previous evening on the villa's marble staircase.

The entrance to the barranco was well concealed but we soon encountered the first pitch, fairly easily negotiated. However, the description of the length of the drops didn't reflect what we actually found and it turned out to be much more difficult and longer. The advertised 300m length was actually the depth - it was about 2km long! After a couple of pitches a more difficult one appeared. It was in two sections with a scramble up a rope in between. Tim was on hand to haul us three up the rope. The second section was a long drop, about 30 metres into a huge space. Dangling there, my heart was in my mouth. By this time it had been raining for a while and we were getting cold. Kjetil had sustained an eye injury from a flicking rope and could only see from one eye. The second long pitch started down a slippery chute and looked quite short. Richard set off down only to find the rope dangling well above the ground and had to climb back up to re-rig. There were about 10 pitches altogether with two being about 30-40 metres.

The beginners found it hard going but were ably assisted by the experienced members. Michael, the anchor man, even did a few mid air poses, circus style, for the cameras. The scenery was stupendous and I've never seen or experienced anything like it. It had been a long day and we were all glad to reach the bottom and see the green bridge where we'd left our cars.

PS Kjetil's eyesight improved over the next few days and we hope continues to do so.

Barranc des Llidoners and Barranc de Racons

On Friday Richard Smith and Tim Josephy, armed with much rope and in the latter case faltering courage, drove to the little village of Benimaurell. The canyon was only a few yards from the road and started with a 60m drop over a huge amphitheatre. We had to make a diagonal abseil of 14m to a hanging stance on the edge of the overhang with the unnerving knowledge that if we missed it, the ends of the ropes were a long way from the ground. The remainder of the drop was in space with ample opportunity to take in the magnificence of the scene.

Another 50m abseil and several smaller ones led to the junction with the Barranc de Racons, a gentler place but with fine sculpted rock in the bed and just one abseil. Eventually we reached the junction with the Barranc del Inferno, which we had done the last time we were here. The return was the same way Bill and his team had gone a few days previously. Exciting abseils, jaw dropping scenery and ancient paths. A great day.

The Via Ferrata

Monte Ponoig

R&M Smith, Kjetil and Tim did it on Monday, the Champions on Friday. This modern and well equipped route is very steep and exposed, making it a full on introduction for Tim, who hadn't done this sort of thing before. It climbs 200m, mostly vertical or bulging- a good workout for the arms!

The first team ignored the abseil descent and thought they might find a way to the top of the mountain. They didn't. Eventually, after following goat tracks across the steep hillside they had to bite the bullet and descend through scrub and thorns into a dry river bed, climbing the other side to reach the top of Echo Valley and a good path home. They left several pints of good English and Norwegian blood for the local denizens to feed on.

**Kjetil on the Ponoig
via ferrata**



The Rest

From time to time various people had easier days, exploring Calpe and the area. Christine took the bus to Benidorm and was so impressed she spent 40 minutes sitting reading at the bus stop waiting to get back to civilisation.

On Wednesday Jim and Albert were dropped in Guadalest by the canyoning party and experienced a cultural tour of the Old Town and Castle. They took advantage of the initially beautiful sunshine, though it was coupled with strong winds. Every viewpoint was explored to absorb the beautifully

blue reservoir and the spectacular 360 degree view of the surrounding mountains. Within the house of Orduna there was a thought provoking exhibition of digital collage produced by the Tancasian Canyonista Collective. After separate explorations the parties reconvened over a relaxed lunch and as the weather had turned inclement set to waiting for a lift in a bar. The atmosphere turned distinctly theatrical, particularly after the last tour bus left town, descending into Samuel Beckett territory only for Godot to eventually turn up driving a Nissan Qashqai.

This was an excellent and very active meet in a wonderful area to which I'm sure we will return.

Attending: Helen Smith, Michael Smith, Mick Borroff, Christine Harrison, Jim Harrison, Bill Gibbs, Paul Dover, Billy Sarakun (G), Alan Linford, Angie Linford (G), Carol Whalley, John Whalley, Richard Sealey, Ged Campion, Aaron Campion, Albert Chapman, Arthur Salmon, David Hick, Christine Marriott (G) Kjetil Tveranger, Ann-Karin Tveranger (G), Tim Josephy



Top left - Serra Ferrer TJ

Els Arcs - C Marriott, Mick Borroff
DH

Top right - Richard Smith
Du Darfst Olta TJ

Ponoig and Puig Campagna
from Ferrer TJ