

OVERSEAS MEET REPORT - ALMERIA, SPAIN

20-31 March 2016

Typical YRC! The week-long meet was first agreed the previous year in Calpe, Spain, when Tony and Val offered to organise it in the caving and walking area of their winter home in Andalucía. They fixed the Sunday start date to fit in neatly between their other commitments. Not one of the ten members flying in from the UK to Alicante arrived on Sunday: four on Friday, one Saturday and the rest on Monday. YRC members are individuals not sheep.

On the outskirts of Garrucha, in groups of three or four, we had apartments within 100m of one another and these groups took turns to provide an evening meal. As we were twelve and the apartments catered for four we arrived carrying crockery, cutlery, a table or chairs to the surprise of a passing estate agent. We enjoyed the usual high standard of catering despite everyone having active days on the hills or in the caves of the Sorbas plateau. Everything was arranged at the 'right price' with off-season accommodation costing £65 each for the week and, for example, an excellent three-course lunch with alcohol and coffee being €10 at a locals' transport cafe. We also ate out a couple of evenings at 'The Wok' in Vera and Los Contreros, Villaricos – the latter a 'final meal' half-way through the later arrivers' week.

Our meet leaders and membership secretary had been busy in advance of the meet. The local *ex-pat* caving group were primed to help get us to and down selected potholes in the Sorbas Karst area and those with GPS had been provided with digital maps and routes for scores of local walks. The weather forecast though was less encouraging, with cooler days than we have often had and some rain in prospect. In fact, the rain was mostly overnight and temperatures were suitable for walking and hotter towards the end of the meet. Rather than detail individuals' day-to-day activities an overall impression of the activities is given in outline.

Full day walks started with an outing from Alfax bridge and linked ramblas (dry stream beds), coniferous woodland, ridges and firebreaks. While not the most impressive start we did find a tortoise and got some good views. Overnight rain had left slippery glutinous mud and raised stream levels which impeded progress in places. A better mountain walk was had from Mojácar, a typical white village perched high on the northern end of the Sierra Cabrera. Beyond a radio mast were abandoned terraces leading to broad ridges with a few rocky sections and decent tracks through thorny

maquis. The high point of Arraez, 919m at the southern end was reached and a more westerly return variation gave a couple of sections of bashing through the scrub which left an impression on those walking in shorts. Red-legged partridge were being encouraged as game birds and we saw a shepherd with a large flock of sheep and goats. About an hour's drive north was the 2000m+ Sierra de Maria which was approached from an Ermita on the northern side. Access is controlled and a permit is probably needed though in this season we met only one other walker. Skirting west round the botanical reserve a good path (with small purple crocuses) was left for a direct approach to the snow covered col. The rock here was limestone and the snow covered clints and grykes required care. The summit is some two kilometres from the col with no great height gain but, expecting UK summer walking conditions the trainer-clad rambles were distinctly challenged by the strong biting-cold wind *en route* to the Maria summit. We were all pleased to turn and have it blowing on our backs as we returned to the col to find shelter and have lunch, then delighted when we decided to abandon the windswept ridge ahead and drop back to the woodland-edge traverse path below the col. At the end of the sierra we descended to return via almond groves, cherry orchards and flower-strewn paths.

Shorter walks provided plenty of interest. Below the hill village of Bedar we walked good tracks linking villages and many mines and quarries. Several mines were entered and most got pretty dusty. From Sopalmo was a 'Rope and Tunnel' walk which dropped into a rambla before entering a 500m tunnel leading to the beach and a 300m ascent via a rambla with some steep clambering which would have been rope-assisted if anyone had taken one or if the *in-situ* one had not disintegrated. Just around the corner from the apartments was a lagoon and reed-bed which entertained some birders.

Another half day was spent walking to Tenerife. No, not the island, but a summit overlooking the heavily mined Jaroso valley in the Sierra Almagrera. Interest was maintained by inspecting the extensive nineteenth century lead and silver mining remains, whilst avoiding falling into any of the many deep open shafts. At the Chimenea de Moro, we visited a restored steam winding engine manufactured by Reading Ironworks in 1837, a silent tribute to British engineering. On our return, we passed a herd of goats and sheep gorging themselves on a carpet of oranges, onions and tomatoes.

Getting to the caving area went well until we left the surfaced road. Thankfully our President's hire car was left there and his party squeezed into the other vehicles. The rain had turned dips in the rough track into mud-baths and it was mud-splattered cavers who headed for the entrances having fought to get Tony's van out of the mire. The caving is in gypsum karst. Gypsum is quarried locally and exported on a large scale. Indeed, the quarrying now abuts the Karst en Yesos de Sorbas protected area though there must be economic pressures to encroach further. Six million years ago the area was in the Mediterranean then precipitation and uplift left the 100m thick layer of gypsum for rainwater solution to form over 1,000 caves. We tackled only four. The first cave, System Ruedo, followed a steeply descending rift with climbs and four pitches to end in an chamber with a fine stal flow some 20 ft high.

The second one, System Tesoro, was a through trip enjoyed by a large party. There were three pitches, a number of interesting side passages and some impressive chambers before we exited below a line of high and crumbling cliffs. Wise heads counselled going south to a grassy area; Tony rushed off north into more and more difficult terrain through huge boulders. He had to be restrained.

Later in the week, two more shafts were investigated. One, Cueva del Agua, became too tight even for Ged, the other, System Gep, was explored to a fine stalactite chamber. One hazard was the crumbling of the gypsum forming the top of the shafts where it was exposed to water, air and sunlight. Pressure from feet or ropes sent showers of debris on those below to the extent that most chose to crawl out along a low ramp passage through blocks rather than prussik up the main shaft of the first cave. Once into the caves

however, the rock was solid, made of gypsum crystals ranging from a few mm to about 60 cm which sparkled in the lights. It was a delight to change after the trips in sunshine and warm air.

There was more to the meet than walking, caving and eating. A bird list is appended and on the Sierra Cabrera we came across clear animal tracks with paw prints a good 10cm across and spread across several miles of track. The spoor lacked claw marks except in a few places where extra traction would have been needed on a slippery uphill slope – so that rules out dogs. The 10cm size is twice that of a wild cat. That leaves the Iberian lynx but they are not supposed to be within scores of miles of the area and the prints are large even for those. These remain something of a mystery.

Despite being, at two hours, a longer drive from Alicante than our other recent visits to Spain, this area had plenty of interest within easy reach to keep us busy. Thanks go to Tony and Val for making the local arrangements and their welcoming meals.

Attendance

Val and Tony Penny (meet leaders)

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| John Whalley | Richard Sealey |
| Carol Whalley | Ged Campion |
| Mike Smith | Aeron Campion |
| Helen Smith | Tim Josephy |
| Richard Smith | Mick Borroff |

Birds:	House sparrow
Black redstart	Kestrel
Black vulture	Little egret
Black wheatear	Magpie
Blackbird	Mallard
Black-winged stilt	Marsh harrier
Bonelli's eagle	Mediterranean gull
Cetti's warbler	Red-legged partridge
Chough	Robin
Coot	Sand piper
Cormorant	Spanish sparrow
Crested lark	Spotless starling
Egyptian vulture	Swallow
Great tit	Tree sparrow
Greenfinch	White wagtail
Grey heron	Wren







