

Spanish climbing: A prickly business

The moment I did it guilt washed over me. I had for years yearned for a piece of prickly pear cactus as an ornament. As I tore the 'ear' off the succulent specimen John reminded me of the country code – 'take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints...'. I regretted it immediately. I had committed a crime against nature, like white hunters after elephant tusk and rhino horn. Karma would punish me later...

At the end of February myself and a few friends set off for a hedonistic week to the building site that is called the Costa Blanca. I had managed to find a nice villa for 6 of us in the quiet village of Moreira, just 5 kilometres east of Calpe.

On our first day we headed for Sierra de Toix, the favourite haunt of first-time visitors. It seems giant cranes will be forever part of the landscape here much as wind farms will blot the skylines of Cornwall. However both these places are blessed with some brilliant climbing venues. Lots of routes in the lower grades (4+) and ranging from single pitch to 3 pitch. There were about 8 single pitch routes and we managed them all in an afternoon (eat your heart out George Rae). I was pleasantly surprised at the number of old dudes, ex-pats reliving their youth. In fact I felt positively young. For Toix Oeste read 'Pensioners



Beautiful site (view from Toix)

Crag'. We'd had such a good day we started to make plans, Peñon d'Ifach, Puig Campana...

Big mistake. It rained for 2 days. We shopped in Calpe for a pair of rock boots for Robert, who amazingly forgot to pack his. We then walked to the bottom of the Peñon looking for the start of Valencianos, the popular 'easy' route. It looked a bit intimidating to me but Adrian was very keen and set his mind on it for later in the week. Next day we were again thwarted by the weather so we drove up to the Moorish village of Guadalest. But it was closed! We were at 1000 metres above the sea and 6 inches deep in snow. Orange and lemon trees covered in snow made for an interesting juxtaposition.

It was the middle of the week before we were able to get back on the crags so we went back to Toix for some multi-pitch



Bill and John at Toix

routes. It proved to be an epic day that could so easily have been disastrous. What siren called us back to this place? This huge pile of limestone perched high above the Med, a climbers paradise. We were on a route called Lara and John was belaying me at the top of the second pitch, 150 feet up. As I approached the stance I was aware of a slight steepening of the rockface and I looked for the one move that would give me respite and comfort. As my arms began to weaken I chanced upon a huge block an arms length away to my left. With both

John high on Jhonny



At Toix

Hazy sunlight
Drifting clouds
A quiet sleeping sea
And I lost in thought
Taste the warmth of the moment
And reach beyond the everyday



Collateral Damage
Far left the missing block, the rope Robert was to climb on and his helmet.

hands now over the lip of the edge I poised to get my feet high to rock over and mantelshelf onto the ledge. As did so I heard a deep grating noise and in an instant saw a huge block the size of a filing cabinet or Smart car, ease itself out of the crag. The armslength I had moved out of vertical now pendulumed me away from the ton of rock. Those few feet save me a ride into oblivion for surely it would have ripped me from my harness as if it were an umbilical cord.

The block hit a ledge and exploded like a bomb, releasing heat and energy you could smell like cordite. John bellowed 'BELOW', as Robert tucked himself into the crag but took a blow on the head from a piece of shrapnel. His newly purchased Black Diamond helmet had saved him from a serious head injury. "Never climb without a helmet" was the mantra hereupon.

As I swung 150 feet above the chaos below John asked if I wished to carry on or be lowered off. My face, the colour of the surrounding limestone, gave him his answer. Later that day as I read the guide book I noticed that the route next to Lara was Lofi. At the top of pitch 2 it mentioned something about 'loose blocks'. I shall have to email Rockfax to update their guide...

The next day was spent in quiet reflection as we drove to Font d'Axia in the Xalo Valley. It is a beautiful fertile valley with terraced almond groves and orange and lemon trees. It was worth the long drive inland just to relax in the sun. The crag here is a haven for bees and the guide book issues a warning that there are nests in some of the caves. By way of more retribution I, the perpetrator of that abuse of a cactus, was stung on the head giving me a painful headache.

Friday was to be the day of the Peñon. Adrian and Steve made serious plans for an early night and John stayed well within his alcohol tolerance level just in case. For me it was a non-starter and I drank wine whilst contemplating an easy day in the sun.

Alas, the weather put paid to that as it was raining early so we went to Salem, a devil of a place to find and really not worth the

Bill acts out the last rites of a memorable holiday at Marin. It's straight to Alicante and home from here



both unless you fancy climbing behind a substation with stunning views of a bottling factory.

The weather saved its best until our day of departure. Just half hour from Alicante is Marin, an isolated peak high above a spaghetti western desert, a completely different valley to the fertile Xalo Valley of the day before. On a cloudless day we did the three star classic Jhonny, with its quirky spelling. It was enough to savour and leave us with fond memories for next year. And the cactus sits on my desk mockingly.

Article by Bill Marsh, photos by Steve Webster, Adrian Daniels and John Parrott, who also supplied the poem.

On Saxon – Kenidjack Castle

The guide book says 'make a sketchy move', and I, like a cautious artist with a blank sheet of paper, hesitate to begin.

Just out of reach of my right hand is a small triangular niche. To reach it I need to move out of balance using a tiny foothold to my left. There is nothing for my left hand. Sometimes there is comfort in the feel of smooth rock, but not today. I am beginning to feel an all too familiar creeping paralysis, that prevents movement, and feeds fear into my brain. I look again at the niche. Chances are it will be flat and my fingers will pull my body up into balance. Then what? I look across to my left. I can see a possible way diagonally upwards, though there is no sign of any gear until I reach a small corner about 5 metres away. I have a friend in a horizontal break just below my feet, but the thought of wobbling gearless across the steep uninviting slab above increases the uneasiness inside me. Adrian sits patiently on the belay close by. He has led the first pitch, a long and intimidating line up a wall that calls itself a slab. All I have to do is finish off the short top pitch and I can't do it. I stretch, reach up yet again, fingers only a few centimetres from the hold. I know I can make the move, but it will commit me to continuing, and in my heart I don't want to. For a moment I am angry with myself, and the self doubt that I'd come to Cornwall to exorcise floods back. I move down to the belay. Adrian has grown cold with waiting and has no wish to continue. I reverse the horizontal break back towards a gap on the arête, steep grass and safety. Taking in the ropes I look down to the sea and listen to it wash into the zawn. Its sound eases the dark cloud within. It really doesn't matter. Success or failure are just thoughts. Our interpretation of something that has already past, before we have it labelled and placed on the shelves of memory. I smile inwardly at how often I allow my own perception of events that have already happened, overshadow the pleasure of the present. I let the thoughts go, and the wind takes them far out to sea. There is a soft light on the sea beyond Cape Cornwall. Across the bay I can see the line of a path bend its way through the bracken towards St Just, and the little miner's cottage that has been my home for the last month or so. I breathe in this moment, content to just be.

We laugh and coil the ropes. Next year we'll finish the route.

John Parrott

Four find entertainment in Lost Valley

"We were doomed before we started out" said Geoff (Deans) with his Touching the Void type analysis. Perhaps it is the sense of grim foreboding that Glen Coe induces which led him to make the statement as we returned to the car. But we weren't doomed in any normal sense. We were only doomed to miss a stop in the pub after finishing in darkness on the hills. Yes, we started late. And yes, despite Geoff's pitiful urges (if that's the right phrase), we were rather slow to ascend up to the Lost Valley. But we successfully traversed streams not in spate even after the previous month of rains and storms.



More than sombre Glen Coe itself, the entry to the Lost Valley is dark, a footpath wedged between the stream and the steep sides of the gorge. Then suddenly, the narrow valley opens out into a broad bowl, and it becomes possible for the first time to see how the MacDonalds might have kept stolen cattle hidden from view. But the valley floor is stony and the sides of the valley don't offer much by way of pasture, so it was hardly that they grew rich on the proceeds of fattening for sale vast illicit herds. Ahead of us (Geoff, Elspeth Bartlet, Debbie Smith and self) appeared a wall of snow inclined by "no more than 45 degrees" Geoff assured us, which led to the ridge

400m above. Elspeth was reassured and with Geoff decided to tackle it. Unnerved, Debbie and I looked to our right and favoured a gentler ascent to the bealach between Stob Coire nan Lochan and Bidean nam Bian. We agreed to meet on the top of Bidean (1,150m), and went our separate ways.

Crampons fitted and ice axe in hand, Debbie and I enjoyed the sheltered approach under bright January sun, but also found trudging through the snow hard work. We



reached the bealach, and soon joined Elspeth and Geoff on the top of Bidean. They had arrived by a glorious ridge walk just five minutes earlier and were delighting in the Brockenspectres (shadows thrown by sun on mist, including a halo round the head) visible on cloud swirling below. Not just beatification but sanctification now seems certain for us all as three haloes and not just the usual one appeared over our heads. We debated whether a hypothetical Dr Brocken was the first to have seen, described or analysed the phenomenon, but in fact the name derives from the Brocken mountains. To the east, there were fabulous views of ridges and tops, but the west was covered in threatening cloud. Being the last ones up to the summit, we were alone in the

weakening orange rays of winter sunlight. We had initially planned to descend over Stob Coire nan Lochan and afterwards by Aonach Dubh. But impenetrable cloud and failing light obscured the path. So brimming with a sense of achievement and satisfaction we decided to descend the way Debbie and I had come, this time having huge fun sitting down and tobogganing on the snow slopes. On the way down, looking over at the route taken by Elspeth and Geoff, it was clear that it was nearer a 60 degree incline and they confirmed that it was practically corniced at the top, adding to a sense of adventure.

After the valley floor, the light faded completely and we missed the obvious path. As a result, we unintentionally and frustratingly ended up in the dark on an assault course of rocky outcrops and fallen boughs concentrated randomly along a dried up stream bed ("entertaining scrambling in a chaotic boulder field", says guru Ralph Storer). As we got back to the car seven hours after starting (for a walk which should take five or six hours in summer including the longer Stob Coire nan Lochan descent), we were glad to have taken the shorter option. And we didn't even mind missing the pub because saintly Elspeth prepared a full, heart warming, Burns night dinner of haggis, tatties and neaps.

Matthew Taylor, February 2005



Ed speaks his mind

Well I did warn you but you didn't heed. Yes, you women I'm

referring to. I asked for articles but got no response. Ok, I know you've got knitting and flower arranging to do but take a leaf out of my friend Jude's book. Not only does she write for climbing magazines she also partakes in the growing sport of Naked Climbing. Oh, and she also manages to bring up children! Now that's what I call a woman!!

Here she is with her friend Kate Cooper. For samples of her writing visit her website www.loudlush.com. The photo was taken by her partner Brian Trevelyan.

And if you persist in electing me as your Crux Editor expect more of the same. Has there ever been a female editor? Come on put your hands up at the AGM and give it a go.



Bill

View from Venus

Ann Peden, Lady Chairman



Hi there, Bill. I am so sorry that I am unable to contribute my 'View' notes this issue. Work has been hectic and what with all my pastimes like knitting and flower arranging I just haven't had time. You'll be pleased to know I've moved on to crochet and even patchwork quilting. It's a pity you weren't able to make the Annual Dinner this

year. We stayed in this ab-fab castle with turrets and towers and things.

My choice of Member of the Year went to the hard-working secretary Geoff Deans. I'm sure you will agree he thoroughly deserved it. (Yes I do agree. Ed). See you at the AGM.



The **Legendary** HMC Banders & Mash



Ann lets her hair down in the kitchen and contravenes all Health and Safety regulations



Stepan & Ali contemplate life back in the Republic



Caption Competition
What was Melissa about to say?
Answers by email to BillM@thehmc.co.uk



The old 'uns tell the young ones how it was in the old days



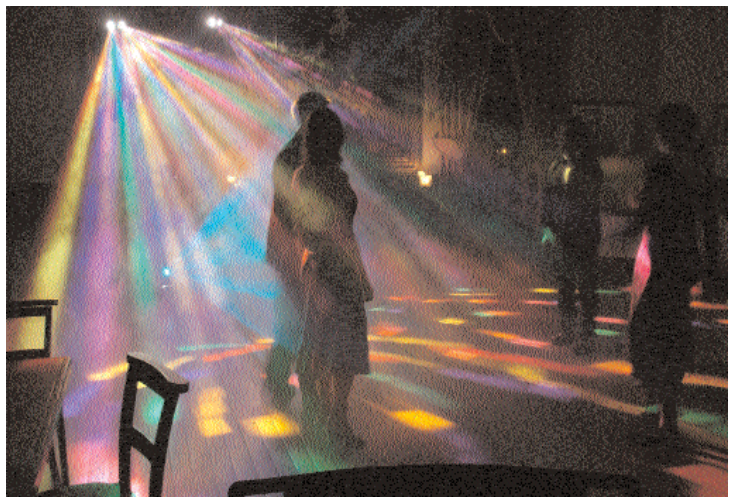
Charming Charles chats chick



Using this comfortable action I found that I could comfortably sink a dozen pints after the game

Competition Winner

Congratulations to Albert (Webmeister) Sillwood for this disco shot from the Annual Dinner at the Craig-y-Nos Castle. He wins an HMC T-sheet (when available).



Climbing Sharp's Ridge

On a Sunday with the shortest daylight hours, ten hardy HMC members set out on a bright but bitterly cold day to the most westerly part of the County of Hertfordshire to climb the east ridge of its highest mountain.

Setting out from within sight of the Full Moon (No, the pub, silly) in Cholesbury we headed for the summit of Hastoe, bravely without any ropes or other climbing gear. This was to be a soloing event, no crampons or ice axes, just plain walking boots. We climbed the ridges of horses imprints over many a bridleway and scaled the heights of several stiles with just finger tip holds, till finally the summit was in sight. With a steady plod without the use of oxygen we reached the top, a full 244 metres high.

After a collective hug MOTY was cheered when he produced the celebration mince pies (seen being eaten on the summit in the photo) no not MOTY the mince pies. This approach to the summit of Hastoe has not been recorded before so it is suggested that from now on it should be known as Sharpe's Ridge in recognition of Geoff Sharpe who organised this adventure, guided us to the top and eventually got us back down to the Full Moon where we arrived just in time for a well deserved Christmas Lunch.

Eddie Cornell

Sally, Elspeth, Geoff Sharpe, Tom, Kevin, Andre, Phillipa, Lucy and Alex stand on top of Hertfordshire



French Alps 2005

this year's trip is to La Grave in the Ecrin Mountains for one or two weeks. Accommodation is either 6 person chalets (with a central Club House with sauna, Jacuzzi and fitness room) or camping at Le-gravelotte in La Grave. Easy access by car (2 hours) to the main western valley of La Berarde (Barre des Ecrins 4102m) or to the eastern valley of Aillefroide and Mount Pelvoux (3943m). For serious walkers there is the GR54 Tour de l'Oisans. The massif it encircles is that of the Ecrins, the bulk of which is a National Park. The landscape is stupendous. There is also white water rafting, awesome mountain biking & the Via Ferratas. Contact Chris Cook on 01582 462294.

PURCHASE DISCOUNTS

HMC has obtained discounts with the following shops:

Cotswold

91 Victoria Street, St Albans
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Countryside

118 High Street, Stevenage
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La Passportes du Soleil VTT 2005 25th & 26th June

For all you wet fish bikers or anyone else interested in real mountain biking:
The Portes Du Soleil is a large ski area north of Chamonix straddling France and Switzerland. It has very easy access from Geneva airport.

Ok so what is the event? Well its most definitely not a race. It is very relaxed with all types of bikes and riders from weekend hardtailers to full body armoured downhillers. There is a simultaneous start from 6 towns -Châtel, les Gets, Morzine (France), Champéry, Morgins, Torgon (Suisse). The idea is to complete a 75km circuit where you visit each of the 6 towns. The route is very well waymarked and involves 12 ski lifts, 6 feeding stations and 6000m of descent! Think about it- 6000 metres downhill!

Lifts open at 8am and close at 6pm. Cost is 30 euros including lifts and food (and medical attention). The food, organisation and goody bags were excellent. There is also a big MTB festival with stands, bands, demos and downhill races.

I did this event in 2003 and it was totally awesome. There were over 4500 riders. In 2004 I did a similar event in Les Deux Alpes but unfortunately this wasn't a touch on the Portes Du Soleil.

Let me know if you are interested as we need to sort hire cars and accomodation ASAP. We are proposing to stay in Morzine. I have just booked my flight going out 7am friday 24th June and returning 10am monday 27th June. This was £68 all in (including the new £10 per flight bike carriage charge). Contact Chris Cook on 01582 462294.

(Pictured below looking like its great fun)



MTB Sierra Nevada

With gritted teeth we rode tight snaking switchbacks, rock gardens, drop off's, fast steep single track and loose rocky downhill through forested trails, down steep river valleys over open hillside and along mountain ridges. The days normally started about 10am. A steep climb would take us to one of the high passes or hill-tops where we rested for a few minutes before nervously padding up. A gruelling descent would take us either to a village, or a viewpoint for lunch and a well needed rest. Another steep climb after lunch and another descent normally ended with us exhausted, at a bar drinking cool beers and nibbling tapas.

Our base was Bubion, a small white Adalucian village which clings like a beehive to the hillside and is only three hours from Malaga on the southern slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. We went in October when the heat of the summer had past and the early autumn snow dusted the higher peaks. Some of the days were still very hot and some were shrouded in a cold mist for a few hours in the morning. There were 10 people in the party including my brother Mark his mate Brice, Dave and myself. We had plenty of instruction from our guide Mike to help us ride the trails. We were exhausted by the end of the week and a good time was had by all.

Dave O'Gorman



Gary Bebb



MTB weekend in the Quantocks

w/e May 13/15

Staying at Base Lodge, Minehead, Somerset, the weekend is for both novices and experienced riders. Price per night from £12.50 pp. Spaces for 20 - 25 people. Bike hire is available - but needs to be booked in advance. Contact Fast Tracks (who are leading the riding) directly www.fast-tracksmtb.co.uk
See Ann Peden or Alex for more details.

Second Failure in Great Gully

by Adrian Jones



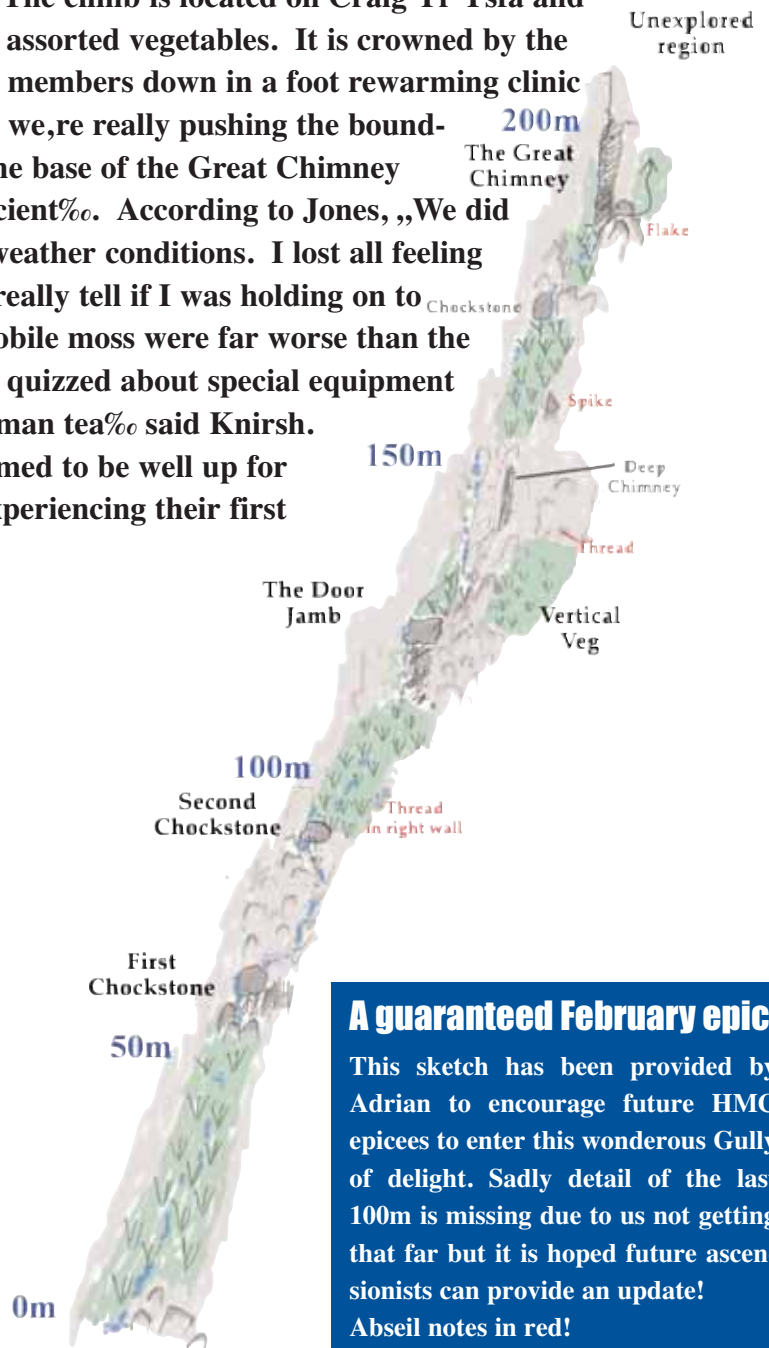
Tim on last year's highest vegetable point

consists of 300m of chockstones, chimneys and assorted vegetables. It is crowned by the infamous Great Cave pitch. We tracked party members down in a foot rewarming clinic near Capel Curig (the Pinnacle café). „I think we're really pushing the boundaries this year%00, said Gledhill, „We reached the base of the Great Chimney pitch and our abseil retreat was extremely efficient%00. According to Jones, „We did particularly well considering the ultra-Welsh weather conditions. I lost all feeling in my hands from the first pitch and couldn,t really tell if I was holding on to anything. The rain, cold flowing water and mobile moss were far worse than the verglas we had to deal with last year.%00 When quizzed about special equipment required, „I,m just glad I took my special German tea%00 said Knirsh. Great Gully virgins Goodey and Moulding seemed to be well up for another attempt, reporting particular joy in experiencing their first avalanches of moss and mud.



A typical pitch. They,re not icicles ^ it,s a waterfall!

News has reached Crux of yet another epic failure by HMC members to climb Great Gully in 'Winter'. Last years team consisting of Tim Gledhill, André Knirsch and Adrian Jones achieved the stunning high point of around 150m. This year, with a team augmented by Richard Goodey and Jon Moulding, success should surely have been guaranteed. The climb is located on Craig Yr Ysfa and



A guaranteed February epic:

This sketch has been provided by Adrian to encourage future HMC epicees to enter this wonderous Gully of delight. Sadly detail of the last 100m is missing due to us not getting that far but it is hoped future ascensionists can provide an update! Abseil notes in red!

HMC Annual Dinner at the Craig-y-Nos Castle in the Brecon Beacons



Ann Noone, in pink, echoes Adeline Patti's portrait in the painting and Geoff Deans (inset) lifts the coveted Member of the Year tankard.

The castle was once owned by Adeline Patti, an opera diva in the 1880's. She extended the castle and built a theatre in one of the wings, where she put on shows. After Adeline's death, the castle was used as a TB hospital in the 1920's.

All arrived Friday night, and after a few drinks in the bar, were shown to their rooms. Most people were in the main bunkroom, the old Ward 1, whilst a few people were in double rooms. Albert was in the theatre left, probably an old dressing room for the theatre. The people in ward 1 had the use of some novel bunk beds – a double bunk at the bottom with a single bunk on top.

On Saturday, after a large cooked breakfast, everyone decided to go up the same local peak, Fan Foel at 802m. In true HMC style, lots of small parties were formed and the peak assaulted from several directions, most people meeting up at some stage along the cold windy snowy ridge 'Bannau Sir Gaer'. The different parties eventually found their way back to the castle, after a few detours, and prepared for the evening dinner in the main room. The obligatory picture of the group was taken under a very large portrait of Adeline Patti.

After a very good meal, Ann made her speech, and presented the member of the year tankard to Geoff Deans, for all his hard work as secretary for the last two years. A disco followed, which went on until 1am, with some retiring before the last waltz.



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Photo: John Norris