

30 DAYS IN THE LIFE OF A 'WHIRLING DERVISH'

(FINAL EPISODE)

Day 13. Wednesday 24th September - Weather hot.

'Cabo de Ronda' was the scene of a bloody event during the Spanish Civil War, Genaro told me. The body of an unfortunate war victim was dropped in the cave; however with the vast volumes of winter flood water every year nothing but his spirit would now remain.

Neil, Andy and I started the descent and still in daylight penetration we were confronted by a deep pool with a right-hand bend going out of sight. In the meantime Sue and Wendy stayed at the cave entrance under the shade of a cork tree keeping an eye on the weather for the system is very, very flood prone. It appeared that no previous SRT descent of the system had been made and without a boat a traverse line would have to be rigged over the pool. Working in turns, Neil and I started bolting around the obvious left-hand wall. The water obstruction passed, we progressed on and down a steep passage, the stone carved out on all sides to incredible shapes, reminding one of the sheer force of water. Leslie, JR, Ian, Martin, Paddy and Gary joined us but another obstruction halted progress. Peering cautiously over the edge of a curiously shaped rock lip we could see an impressive pitch dominated by more sculptured limestone.

The rhythmic tapping of hammer to bolt pervaded the cave again and a traverse line to a nice 'Y' hang was rigged. Neil descended, rigging a deviation en route. I followed on down making further adjustments. With so many ledges and drops in all directions it was difficult to know which way down to go next. I explored one good possibility with a temporary rig but by now we were running out of time and made good our return uneventfully.

Whenever I think of Cabo de Ronda I remember those incredible shapes which even Picasso could not have dreamed of.

Day 14. Thursday 25th September - Weather hot.

A group of us explored the ancient town of Ronda which is built on the edge of a huge gorge spanned by an old stone bridge 100m high, and visited the Arab Baths complete with fourteenth century saunas.

Later Gary and I prepared for a long overnight camping trip in Gato. Our heavy loads gave me a touch of hypothermia and I was glad to reach Dune Chamber where we set up camp. Sand has the advantage of making a comfortable bed but the disadvantage of getting in every corner of your kit. We enjoyed a cooked supper before settling down for the night.

We purposely left our alarm watches unset with the result that we both overslept and our intended exploration had to be curtailed. However the trip was an interesting experiment. Upon exiting the cave a Spanish army group was on exercise in the area and had rigged various Tyrolean traverses across the mouth of the cave. A chat with the officers resulting in us being invited to try the lofty traverse which, of course, we did.

Day 15. Friday 26th September - Weather hot.

Sadly the caving was over and the group departed for home but for Sue and I the adventure was not quite over. We headed south again to Algeciras.

Day 16. Saturday 27th September - Weather extremely hot.

We sailed across the Straights of Gibraltar to Cueta (Sebta in Moroccan) which is still under Spanish control. Unable to hire a car for the day a taxi took us to the Moroccan border where we stepped across into a truly different world belonging to another age. A lot of hustling and shouting went on and we found ourselves southbound in an old taxi, sharing with two Arabs. Typical scenes of palms, dunes and camel trains completed the atmosphere of Morocco.

At Tetuan we were escorted by one of the unwanted Arabs into the heart of the medina. We did eventually manage to rid ourselves of the escort but only to be tagged by another, and another and it became very hard to match their persistence with courteous rejection. The medina is a fascinating place where time has stood still for many centuries. During our brief visit to this land we gazed at the Rif mountains (home of hashish) and planned one day to return to do some walking there.

Day 17. Sunday 28th September - Weather very hot.

We camped for the night just outside Granada and that evening visited the city where we were lucky to witness a huge religious procession wending its way through the streets.

Day 18. Monday 29th September - Weather very hot.

We devoted the day to admiring the Alhambra, the only remaining Moorish palace in the world and which is a wonder to be seen with its flowers, fountains, pools, courtyards and beautifully carved and decorated plasterwork; a place we were sure that you could return to and be entranced all over again.

Days 19-22. Tuesday 30th September - Friday 3rd October - Weather cool, drizzly, and cold on the mountain tops.

For the next four days we moved around the Sierra Nevada touring and exploring the area, culminating with an ascent of Mulhacen the highest peak in Spain at 12000ft. Sierra Nevada seems to consist mainly of shattered slate and the approach to many peaks is vast, boring and featureless, making navigation a challenge, especially in limited visibility with a Spanish map as was our experience. Nevertheless the views from the peaks (weather permitting) were quite spectacular.

Days 23-25. Saturday 4th - Monday 6th October - Weather hot but overcast.

We journeyed to Sierra Morena and from a base camp at Santa Elena we spent two days visiting the mining village of Centenillo and surrounding hills where my ancestors mined galena for over a century and I spent my first thirteen years. The mines, now disused for over twenty years since my father retired, and stripped of all machinery left me with mixed feelings of nostalgia and melancholy. However I did meet a few people who remembered me, including one incredible old man of 85 who spent a day climbing the hills with us, but their generous hospitality made up for my sad feelings.

Day 26. Tuesday 7th October - Weather hot.

We arrived in Madrid during the late afternoon where I visited my old boarding school. The headmistress, now a young 75 year old, remembered me and welcomed us with outstretched arms. After a tour of the old school nostalgia got the better of me and we headed north for the Pyrenees.

Days 27-30. Wednesday 8th - 11th October - Weather variable.

After an overnight camp near Zaragoza we crossed into France and made our way via Objat and Paris where we visited friends before sailing to Portsmouth and home for a reunion with Oliver who could not accompany us on such a long holiday because of school commitments and, much to his disgust, had to stay with his aunt.

Conclusion.

Southern Spain, despite the distance from our land, has much to offer us speleos. Petrol, food and accomodation are cheap, the natives are friendly and the areas of Karst are vast and mostly unexplored with excellent depth and length potential. I am sure I speak for all who attended in conveying gratitude to our Spanish hosts and we very much hope to avail ourselves of their services again.

by Mike Haselden