

Spain's Highest Mountains

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Perhaps I was inattentive to my geography teacher at school, maybe I missed that particular lesson, perhaps I *was* present but, as some of my so-called friends assert, senile dementia has already set in. Whatever the reason, I was always under the impression that the highest mountains in Spain were situated in the north of the country, somewhere in the Pyrenees. Hence it came as a bit of a surprise to learn that the highest range of mountains in the whole of the Iberian Peninsula lies in the south of the country, and is the Sierra Nevada. These are, according to the translation, the range of mountains of the Sun, Air and Snow. Yes, *Snow*, for these mountains despite their low latitude are covered in snow for half the year and contain Europe's southernmost ski resort, with 45 ski-runs of varying difficulty, situated between heights of 2,000m and 3,300m. At present there are 19 ski-lifts in place on the north-west side of the mountain range, served by Europe's highest road, from the once ancient and now modern city of Granada only 25km away.

However to escape from the skiing development and to explore and best experience these mountains, I would recommend approaching them from the Alpujarras, the southern foothills, with their delightful assortment of small whitewashed villages, mainly situated above 1,000m, and built into the steep, southern and western sides of the valleys or gorges which drain the high mountains towering above them. The Moors originally established the villages after the Christians expelled them from Granada and Seville during the *Reconquista*, the re-conquest of Spain from the Arabs in the late 15th century. Today, evidence of the Moorish occupation of this country can be still seen in a few ruined castles and mosques. A more striking memorial may be the amazing network of *acequias* or irrigation canals. These run almost parallel with the land contours, watering the terraced fields of vegetables, vines and orchards. Some historians give credit for this irrigation system to an earlier occupation by the Romans some 2000 years ago, but whoever invented it bequeathed a relatively green and productive landscape to future inhabitants. Despite the fact that often in summer it does not rain for at least four months, water from mountain springs pours down the hillsides into this ingenious system in a continuous stream of crystal-clear water.

The *pueblos* or villages of the Alpujarras have square, flat-roofed, whitewashed houses, each connected one to another like a honeycomb. The winding narrow streets, obviously designed for an age before the motor car, are adorned with colourful gardens of hanging pot plants. In spite of their steep gradients, they are an absolute delight to walk through.

Although the villages are relatively close to each other as the crow flies, there is plenty of wild country in between. They are connected by a multitude of overgrown former mule tracks, lined by some of the most productive brambles, offering some of the biggest and sweetest blackberries I have ever met. But there is a price for this luscious fruit, since the brambles have some of the sharpest and longest thorns ever seen and sampled. Therefore, if for no other good reason, a hiking pole is an essential piece of equipment. Perhaps in future years as this area becomes better known and the tourist potential more fully exploited, these old tracks will be restored to their former importance. In themselves they provide the basis for an excellent series of hiking trails, and a happy holiday could be spent exploring them and their charming villages, and sampling the delights of the local food and *vino*, without ever leaving the valleys to venture into the high sierra.

However, for me the goal of my first week's holiday in this area was to scale the three highest mountains of the Sierra Nevada range, including mainland Spain's highest metric Munro, Mulhacen at 3,482m (11,421ft), the height varying by about 5 metres depending on which ordinance map you believe. The other two mountains I had in my sights were Veleta at 3,398m, and Alcazaba at 3,366m. Veleta is the mountain whose northern slopes have attracted all the ski development. Visible from Granada as well as from my holiday village of Bubion, it is appropriately translated from Spanish as the Weather-Cock. There's no doubt about the approach of winter, when glancing up at its freshly covered white slopes.

My base was the pretty village of Bubion, hanging on the sunny east side of the deep Poqueira Gorge, which drains most of the rain and melting snow from the south facing slopes of Mulhacen and Veleta. A short one-km uphill walk takes you to the neighbouring village of Capileira. From here a winding zigzag road leads to the boundary of the recently established (1999) National and Natural Park of the Sierra Nevada. The admirable objectives in the establishment of this park were the protection and maintenance of the natural environment, with reference to the necessary social and economic development of its people, and the encouragement of its use for recreational and educational purposes. These objectives have limited access for vehicular traffic to the highest parts of the Sierra Nevada, except in very special circumstances. However, to ease problems of access for the walker and climber, a park minibus will transport you, for a very modest fare, from the vehicle control gate of Hoya del Portillo at 2,160m to Alto del Chorrillo at 2,727m. This has the advantage of taking you quickly up six kilometres of winding Z-bends along the Loma de Piedra Blanca (the Ridge of White Stone), through rather uninteresting pine forest, and also gives marvellous views to the tiny white villages in the valley below, and the faint outline of the Moroccan

Rif Mountains in northern Africa, far across the blue Mediterranean to the south.

On the August day which I had chosen for my first expedition up Mulhacen and Alcazaba, the other thing I observed in the excellent visibility of the clear high-mountain air were the *virga*, trails of precipitation falling from the overcast layer of altostratus cloud covering the sky above, but not reaching the ground. Given the long-term records of zero days of rain during August in the Costa del Sol, and my limited Spanish, I had rather contemptuously neglected to obtain a weather forecast. I should have known better, and on reading the sky above I didn't like what I could see. The high winds buffeting the park minibus were not a good sign either. Stepping out at Alto del Chorrillo, the wind was near gale-force and this soon increased to severe gale-force as I gained height, almost taking me off my feet in the frequent gusts. The mountains were still clear of cloud and almost free of snow save for what the Westhill Walkers' current Chairman, Keith Masson, calls a little Indian snow (Apache here, Apache there).

Anyhow, initially the ambient temperature was not too low, probably about 10°C, not allowing for wind chill. At this stage I was still dressed in shorts and tee-shirt, as appropriate for the high temperatures of the valley below. The route I had chosen to climb my two mountains was based on the careful study of a 1:40,000 Mapa Excursionista Turistico, Sierra Nevada La Alpujarra, obtained by post from Stanfords, 12 Long Acre, London WC2. Although fairly detailed, some of the features this map does not show are cliffs, crags and scree. On discussing this point on the minibus with a Park Guide, who was taking a group of ill-equipped British visitors up the tourist track of Mulhacen, he suggested I climb Alcazaba first, before tackling the 116m higher Mulhacen. "Porque?" (Why?) I was assuming that wind direction and strength might have been the reason for this advice. "No," he replied in his pretty good English, "it might be an easier descent to the Col between the two mountains." This led me to the immediate suspicion, later confirmed, that my map might be a wee bit misleading. The 20m non-touching contours indicated a nice, uniform 1.75km distance for the descent and re-ascent of 469m of height between the two peaks. "Is a rope needed?" I enquired. "No, but you will certainly need two hands."

As it turned out three or four hands would have been handy, and the company of someone with a rope would have been doubly reassuring. Anyhow, with the very strong south-south-westerly wind in my back, I set off alone and soon found my first map feature, *Laguna Del Penon Negro* (or Dubh Lochan translated into Gaelic). It was here that I was delighted to see one of the fairly rare wild ibex, a species of mountain goats I had read about. It was having a quiet drink before I disturbed it, then timidly

disappeared into the crags above. Until recently these goats were regarded as fair and prized game by local trophy hunters.

Another 2km of rough walking took me to my next easily identifiable map feature, *Canada de las Siete Lagunas*, the Glen of the Seven Lochs. From the route I was taking I couldn't see them all, perhaps some evaporate completely during the long dry summer months. But I did walk past the largest with its easily remembered (shades of car) name, *Laguna Hondero*. Near this collection of lakes, I was soon to experience the full brunt of the fierce wind as I struggled up *Loma Culo De Perro*, amusingly translated as the ridge of the dog's backside. Around the 3,000m contour a large gust of wind blew me over. With just over 300m of ascent before me, and three minor 3,000m plus peaks to transverse before La Alcazaba, I was feeling a little apprehensive about whether I would achieve my goal or not. I was also beginning to feel a little chilled, and the first drops of rain were just reaching the ground. However by dropping down to the more sheltered east-facing leeward side of the ridge, I was able to have a quick change into my wind and waterproof mountain gear, wisely carried in my rucksack. This was then followed by a small snack, while pondering the reassuring thought that I had experienced a lot worse in the Scottish hills in my time. Also the rain did not amount to much and was evaporating almost as fast as it fell. So I was soon confidently able to proceed onward and upward.

The terrain, not unlike the Skye Cuillin, was very rocky with little or no vegetation. Nevertheless despite the lack of a path, navigation was easy since the peaks were still clear of any cloud. Having reached my first goal of La Alcazaba a little breathless (because of the thin atmosphere rather than my level of fitness, I would claim), a more substantial meal, consumed at leisure among the sheltered rocks below the summit cairn, quickly recharged my energy tanks. I was soon off again heading for Mulhacen, Spain's highest point, a mere 116m above me, but separated from me by a steep rocky col.

The pathless descent to this connecting col was not easy. Intimidating cliffs and crags blocked my route, but I somehow managed to find a way down by traversing along a series of fearfully exposed ledges, never quite knowing if I would reach the bottom or have to re-ascend to try another route. Thankfully I did get there safely, all the while strongly pumping adrenaline. Mulhacen was now towering above me at the top of a jumble of rocky crags and very loose scree. Again there was no path, but I was able to pick a suitable route, involving some fairly difficult scrambling while setting off the occasional mini-landslide on the screes, which eventually led me triumphantly to the summit. Nearby were a few roofless ruined stone shelters, also a large fallen iron cross, no doubt the victim of the hurricane-force winds likely at this height, or a massive bolt of lightning. Here I met a young Spanish couple who had climbed the



The Summit of Mulhacén

mountain from the west, the first people I had encountered since leaving the park minibus that morning. After taking a few photographs, a rapid 43-minute 5km descent had me back at Alto del Chorrillo with just 2 minutes to spare before catching the 5 p.m. minibus back to the Hoya del Portillo. In the hotel swimming pool about an hour later, it was great to have a quiet swim while reflecting on the day's adventure and gazing upward at my next target, Veleta, exactly 2,000m above.

The ascent of Veleta (3,398m) from the village of Bubion is quite straightforward, since there is a good road and land rover track which goes almost to the top. On this 22km expedition a fellow hotel guest from County Durham joined me, and although we didn't stick strictly to the track we didn't encounter any serious difficulty, apart from laboured breathing in the thin air. On this day there was very little cloud, but we were well equipped with hats, plenty of water and high-factor sun-tan cream. Interesting stops en route were two purpose-built refuges, Refugio de la Caldera at 3,050m sited near the beautiful mountain lake of Laguna de la Caldera (although the lake looked inviting it was just a little too chilly for a swim), and Refugio La Carihuela, sited just one km below Veleta at 3,229m. The refuges were very well designed, constructed to be almost vandal-proof and well insulated with a thick layer of natural stone over their Nissen-hut, corrugated steel frame, and a stout door and double-

glazing on the windows. Inside, two pine-wood platform beds, one above the other, ran the width of the tunnel-like shelter to provide the sleeping area for about 30 people, while a stone base overlaid by a thick layer of wood served as a large table. Adjacent benches of a similar construction were used for seating. However there was no fireplace or chimney to tempt a freezing visitor to burn the wood of the structure for heat, as regrettably happens in some of our Scottish mountain bothies. Despite their admirable design and construction, the one feature these bothies did not possess was any sort of toilet facilities. In the rocky terrain, the provision of a spade was of little use, and the absence of any vegetation made matters worse. Nevertheless, these shelters could perhaps, some day in the distant future, be the prototype for bothy construction in the National Parks of Scotland.

Another interesting find was a meteorological rain gauge. I didn't recognise it at first, due to its height above the ground, but on reflection I soon realised that it was constructed for a location with heavy and deep snow cover for much of the year, and that our present sunny and fairly warm environment was not typical. Views from the top of Veleta were superb, with the city of Granada spread out in the plains 25km to the north-west. To the east and north-east were the other high peaks of the Sierra Nevada including Mulhacen and Alcazaba. To the south far below in the Poqueira gorge we could just make out the village of Bubion 12km away, though to have recognised our hotel, not to mention its pleasant cool swimming pool, would have been impossible even with a good pair of binoculars. Nevertheless later that evening it was a great feeling as I chilled out in that very pool looking up at Veleta and musing to myself, "*Been there, done that, what a great day!*"

El Teide

If you have read this far, I must confess to having misled you slightly, for the Sierra Nevada does not after all contain the highest mountain in Spain, but only in the Iberian peninsula. In fact Spain's true highest mountain lies in the middle of the Atlantic, on the island of Tenerife, and is El Teide, at 3,714m 236m higher than Mulhacen.

One of the amazing wonders of our modern world is our ability to walk aboard that thin, long, cylindrical piece of metal we call an aeroplane, on a bitterly cold, grey, January day at Dyce. Then after being comfortably transported southwards for nearly 2,000 miles at great speed, we re-emerge some four hours later at the foot of this giant peak, into the year-round warmth of the Canary Isles. Only a century ago such a scenario would have seemed impossible, except perhaps by magic.

To reach the summit crater of the volcano of El Teide is not difficult, at least in theory. A cable-railway, the *teleferico*, takes you from a point

on the mountain road at 2,356m, up the steeper part of the mountain to La Rambla at 3,555m, an altitude change of just under 1,200m in only eight minutes. Here on a clear day an overpriced café gives magnificent views over the southern half of Tenerife. Peeking up from the surrounding Atlantic Ocean are the adjacent islands of La Gomera and El Hierro to the southwest, also Gran Canaria to the southeast. A mere 163m ascent up a steep path from this point is all that is needed to bag Pico Del Teide. But as you might have guessed, it's not that simple. El Teide, being an almost extinct volcano, still emits sulphurous fumes and puffs of steam from what are technically called fumaroles. So from La Rambla access is restricted to protect the summit's fragile ecosystem, and I suppose the gullible general public. Joe and Josephine Public troop out at the top of the *teleferico* in attire suitable for the beach at Los Americas around 11,500ft and 20°C warmer below. Many people just do not realise that temperature generally falls with height gained, wind speed increases the wind chill factor and the air becomes rarefied. Or perhaps they do not bother to read the multilingual warnings at the bottom of the *teleferico*. But then there are people at the top of Ben Nevis in tee-shirts and flip-flops. Here on El Teide, smugly snug in my full mountain gear, I observed a great array of beautiful goose pimples on certain scantily-clad females anxiously awaiting the next cable-car back down the mountain. Please don't accuse me of being sexist at this point, but for some reason I just didn't notice the scantily-dressed men.

Anyhow, once suitably kitted out, the real difficulty from here is the uniformed guardians of the mountain who spring up from nowhere and block further ascent unless you can produce a permit, plus passport or ID. To acquire a permit involves a bureaucratic nightmare. Needless to say, for me that's not what holidays are all about. But for future reference, and for those of you with more time and patience than myself, after some research I did discover how to obtain a permit. First get yourself to the Island's capital of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, then find the office of the Parque Nacional Del Teide, Servicio de Uso Publico, on the 4th floor of 5 Calle Emilio Calzadilla between the hours of 9 a.m. and 2 p.m., Monday to Friday. Take along a photocopy of the personal details pages of your passport or ID and you will be issued with a free permit. This specifies the date and the 2-hour time slot during which you are allowed to get beyond the barriers on the path at the top of the cable car. And remember to take along your passport or ID when you actually do the walk. Apparently the permit scheme allows only 50 people at the summit during any 2-hour time slot, only a very small proportion of the 3.25 million people who visit the Parque Nacional Del Teide each year.

But as I've already suggested, the hassle involved in climbing those final 163m is probably not worthwhile. A much better day in Tenerife can be spent at the slightly lower altitude of around 2,000m, walking across

the crater of what used to be a much larger volcano than El Teide. Yes, countless million years ago before mankind had been invented, when the El Teide volcano wasn't even a twinkle in its parent's eyes, a much larger volcano existed at this very place. Now the gigantic sunken crater of that volcano, considered to be one of the largest on earth, forms a relatively flat area, which is a mixture of sand and rock known as Las Canadas. In the clear, thin, unpolluted atmosphere which this altitude offers, Las Canadas provide a delightful 15km walk, through an extraordinary weird and colourful lunar landscape. Planet of the Apes was filmed here and there really is no other place on earth like it that I've seen. The walk starts at the Visitor Centre of El Portillo Alto. In the guidebooks it is given the category of 'strenuous', not so much for its length, but for the noticeable lack of oxygen at this height. Before you begin, I would recommend viewing the free half-hour film in the Visitor Centre, describing the amazing geological events that brought about today's landscape. The walk also provides magnificent vistas of El Teide, a few kilometres to the north, at almost every turn of a very good landrover track.

Thus on a calm and cloudless January day we parked our hire car at the Parador de Canadas del Teide, the location of the finish point of our walk. At this state-run hotel we sampled the local pastry and washed it down with a welcome mid-morning coffee. We then caught the once-daily bus running from the resorts on the southern part of the Island to the Visitor Centre at El Portillo where our walk began, which meant that we were not dependent on catching the one and only 4 p.m. bus back to our vehicle. Thus we could proceed at a leisurely pace and enjoy our strange environment. The vegetation was very sparse, as in a desert region, but we did see a few unusual plants among the even more bizarre rock formations. We met a charming young German lawyer along the way, who had just descended from Guajara a 2,715m peak along the rim of the old crater, having taken a day-off from her temporary job at a Puerto de la Cruz law firm. For us the ascent of this peak, and a future walk along the outer rim of the old crater, will be reserved for another day.

When we arrived back at the Parador, the bus had already left, proving the wisdom of our strategy. After changing out of sweaty boots and clothes, our hired car had an easy task transporting us 2,211m downhill, through magnificent pinewoods to our resort hotel at Playa de Fanabe. Here, over evening sundowners, we could relax and reflect on another very enjoyable walking expedition which can be recommended to all Club members who in the depth of a cold Scottish winter may somehow dream themselves to that wonderful Spanish Canary Island of Tenerife.