

## South from Granada

*Brian Davey*

*South from Granada* is the title of a famous classic book (ISBN 0-14-016700-5) by Gerald Brenan, set in the Andalucian village of Yegen in southern Spain between 1920 and 1934. For walkers and navigators the title should really have been *South-East from Granada* since Yegen is situated some 60km. south-east of this once magnificent medieval, now modern, city. The route from Granada with over 8,000 feet of ascent across the high Sierra Nevada, “mountains of the sun and the air and the snow”, was walked by Brenan in an incredible 19 hours during one long-past September!

The main subject of the book is the village of Yegen, only five km. from Mecina-Bombarón, my adopted white-washed Spanish pueblo, which, along with the hamlets of Golco and Montenegro, is part of the present-day administrative municipality of Alpujarra de la Sierra. Las Alpujarras are the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, mainland Spain's highest mountain range, and are situated in the province of Granada in Spain's second-largest autonomous region of Andalucía. The hills are studded by eighty or so of these delightful white villages established by the Moors when they were expelled from Granada in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century during the Reconquista. They stand high above the Mediterranean, approximately 30km. inland, typically at altitudes similar to the summit of Ben Nevis at 1,343m. (4,408ft.), but are separated from the sea by two beautiful coastal ranges of lower mountains, called the Sierra de la Contraviesa and the Sierra de Lújar.

Away back in time when *South from Granada* was written, there were few roads and it usually took two days to reach this region from Granada, a journey which now takes less than two hours by car. Travel in the past was usually by foot, mule or horse-back along tracks which still exist today and which form the basis of the GR7 or *Gran Recorrido Siete*, the Spanish part of the E4, a long-distance trans-European footpath, which stretches all the way from Tarifa near Gibraltar to southern Greece via Andorra, France, Switzerland, Germany, Romania and Bulgaria, a journey that could take many months or even years! However, walking and exploring part of this route through the Alpujarras can be a very enjoyable and rewarding holiday experience. This article provides some useful information to those who may be tempted by a temporary escape to warmer climes from our *somewhat* colder UK weather.

Great good fortune, *y mucho trabajo duro*, has bestowed on me the privilege of a *cortijo* or farmhouse and ten thousand square metres of terraced land, including a small vineyard, at 1,432m. (4,700ft.) above sea level in the Parque Nacional de la Sierra Nevada close to the GR7 route and just below a wonderful range of mountains with summits soaring above 3,000m. Highest of these is Mulhacén at 3,481m. (11,425ft.), just 16km. (10 miles) distance away by crow transport, the highest peak of mainland Spain, named after the penultimate king of Muslim Granada, Abu al-Hasan, who died in 1485. He ruled during a period of decadence and intra-family intrigue before his son succeeded him and finally in 1492 handed over the kingdom of Granada after its capture by the Christian monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella. Legend says that Muley Hacén, as he was called, was buried at the Mulhacén summit, but today there is no visible evidence to support this theory.

Proximity to these superb summits has afforded the opportunity to gradually build up a knowledge of the region over recent years, to walk a sizable section of the GR7 in Andalucía, and to ascend many of the 23 named 'Sierra Nevada Metric Munros'. The challenge of climbing all these in the shortest possible time has been taken up by the English fell-runner and Cicerone Guide author Andy Walmsley, who completed the traverse of all the Sierra Nevada 3,000m. peaks, the *Integral de los Tres Mil*, in a mere 15 hours and 5 minutes in 1989, a record which I believe still stands today. And there are also the 'Sierra Nevada Metric Corbetts'. Cheap air travel and a three-hour flight time from the UK has made these routes and mountains almost as accessible as the Scottish Highlands but, as is necessary with our home-grown mountains, some careful planning is essential regarding when to go and where to stay when you get there.

From Aberdeen, around 1,400 miles almost due south brings you to a latitude of around 37 degrees, and a location in the south of Spain around about 20 miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea. This location has given the Alpujarras and the Sierra Nevada a very special climate which varies greatly with altitude. Lower-level parts can broil in high summer at temperatures of 35°C and above, while at the same time on the higher Sierra summits you can encounter a very pleasant walking temperature of 10 to 20°C and even suffer from wind chill and buffeting, along with a little oxygen starvation, as I have experienced in the month of August in past adventures. Humidity levels are generally very much lower than in the sticky, moist, midday on-shore sea-breeze atmospheres of the nearby Costa del Sol and Costa Tropical, so it is imperative that you always carry adequate drinking liquids to avoid dehydration.

Also essential to stave off the Spanish sun is a sombrero or wide-brimmed hat, most important for those like me with balding pates, but any

other exposed bare skin should be protected with a high factor sun cream to avoid serious sunburn. Dehydration together with heat exhaustion can be as life-threatening as the other extreme of hypothermia. However, even in summer some lightweight waterproof, windproof clothing should also be carried, as at high altitudes the weather can sometimes quickly change, with afternoon showers producing thunder, cold rain or even snow. On the other hand, for lower-level routes the best walking times are spring and autumn, March to early June and September to October. Spring time is attractive for everyone, especially the aspiring botanist, as a great multitude of wild flowers are in bloom, aided by the limited use of herbicides in this rural region where agriculture is still very traditional and mostly organic.

Although the summers are generally hot and dry, by mid-September the settled dry weather begins to break down. Winters in the high Sierras can be extremely severe, with blizzards and most of the snowfall occurring between October and February. Expeditions then will require the full Scottish winter gear, including ice-axe and crampons, plus an awareness of avalanches. Nevertheless, with an average of 320 days of sunshine a year, conditions in winter can often be very settled, with clear blue skies and light winds producing the ideal weather for mountaineering, walking and skiing. A current free 5-day prediction from the Spanish State Agency of Meteorology is provided for the Sierra Nevada (in Spanish) at the following website:

<http://www.aemet.es/es/eltiempo/prediccion/montana?w=&p=nev1>

In summary, depending on the altitude of the intended hike, good walking opportunities can exist throughout the year. Generally it is very hot and dry in the summer months of June, July and August, so this is the best time to walk the high Sierras without the risk of extensive hill fog, blizzards and widespread snow underfoot. Small snow fields can persist throughout the summer, but these are usually melted by the month of August. The snowmelt is vital to support human domestic water demand as well as for agriculture. On the lower terraced slopes of the Alpujarras a series of ingeniously constructed *acequias* or irrigation channels, running almost parallel to the contours, bring water from the high-level rivers and springs to the land below. The credit for the construction of these *acequias* goes to the Moors, though some sources claim that the thanks may belong to previous civilizations, or to the Romans, who also left their mark on the landscape, for example in the still-standing bridge near Mecina-Bombarón, which dates to the Roman occupation of Andalucía between the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC and the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. Andalucía apparently became wealthy under the Romans, as Rome imported many products such as vegetables, wheat, grapes, olives, fish and metals.



*Almond Blossom Time in the Sierra de Contraviesa*

Today the abundance of water from the melting snows through the *acequia* system, as well as an ideal climate, permits the cultivation of beans, peas, potatoes, onions, tomatoes and all sorts of fruits such as raspberries, mulberries, cherries, apples, apricots, pears, plums, peaches, figs, grapes and at lower levels, lemons, oranges, olives and custard-apples. Along with the traditional shepherd-escorted sheep- and goat-grazing, plus a Serrano ham-curing industry assisted by the dry atmosphere, the village economies are still driven by agriculture, with rural tourism beginning to play a minor role. In summer the shepherds take their flocks into the *borreguil* or verdant higher-mountain pastures. Above the *pueblo* of Bérchules, you may even come across some real cowboys on horses with herds of cattle in the mountains, with some of the cattle looking like Spanish fighting bulls. Although in the past I have found these cattle to be quite docile, I suppose discretion is definitely the better part of valour, so any cattle herds encountered may demand a wider berth.

Other life in their natural habitat that you may meet, apart from some sociable Spaniards at the numerous village fiestas, are ibex or mountain goats, wild boar, foxes, badgers, golden eagles and vultures, plus a wide variety of smaller birds, since Andalucía is on the migration route from

Africa to Europe, making it a paradise for ornithologists. Lizards and smaller geckos are extremely common and there are supposed to be 13 different types of snakes in Spain, five of which are venomous, but any I have met on my travels have been very timid and quite harmless, as they slithered away to their nearest hidey-hole.

Villages in the western Alpujarra, such as Pampaneira, Bubión and Capileira in the Poqueira Gorge, are more tourist-orientated than those in the east of the region, but most villages have small hotels, *hostals* or *pensiones* (small guesthouses), *apartamentos* and *alojamientos rurales* (self-catering apartments) or *casas rurales* (country houses let out on a self-catering basis). A few official campsites also exist such as at Orgiva (el Balcon de Pitres), at Trevezes (whose Alto Barrio at 1,600m. claims to be the highest village in Spain) and at Laroles, a busy little *pueblo* on the GR7 on the way to Puerto de la Ragua, a 2,000m. pass leading north through the mountains.

Wild camping is allowed, though there are some important restrictions, for example you must be above 2,000m., on land without trees, in a group of less than 15 people, and you must have filled in an application form for the *Consejeria de Medio Ambiente*, the Environment Agency, whose fax number is 958 026310. Otherwise you must stay overnight in a refuge or bivouac. There are two manned refuges in the Sierra Nevada. Refugio del Poqueira at 2,500m. lies at the foot of Mulhacén with capacity for 87 people (tel. 958343349). In the east, Refugio Postero Alto at 1,900m. (tel. 958 066110) has a capacity for 60 people and is a base for ascents of Picón de Jerez and other eastern 3,000m. peaks.

There are also two excellent purpose-built non-manned refuges, both with capacity for 16 people sleeping on alpine benches. One is these is situated at 3,050m. at the foot of Mulhacén near the beautiful Laguna de la Caldera and the other is Refugio La Carihueta at 3,205m. at the south side of Veleta, the Sierra's third highest peak. Both these refuges may be difficult to locate when covered by snow in winter, and in recent years English climbers have perished near Refugio Caldera in adverse winter weather. Other non-manned refuges exist, but some of these are in bad condition and cannot be recommended. Camping on lower-level private land is also possible, but permission is first needed, as well as a little Spanish, since, in contrast to the Costas and other tourist areas, not much English is spoken.

However, if you do not speak Spanish a small phrase book is a useful asset and a few easy lessons on a tape or CD based beginners course is all that's necessary to inspire confidence in simple bar, restaurant and shopping situations. Also a few greeting words or phrases are all that are

needed to break down the language barrier and instigate the return of a beaming smile instead of a blank stare at that chance meeting on *un camino de montana en Espana*.  
*Suerte! Buen Viaje!*

The Cairngorm Club