

Tres Amigos Climbing Tres Tres Mil Metre Mountains plus a Metric Corbett in the Sierra Nevada

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Los Tres Mil mountains are the names given to all the 3000 metre peaks of the Sierra Nevada in Andalucia, mainland Spain's highest mountain range.

The Integral de los Tres Mil is a peak bagging expedition to climb all of these mountains, similar to the quest to climb (walk) all the Scottish Munros. In honour of Sir Hugh Munro I have taken the liberty of renaming these mountains in Spain Metric Munros and in honour of John Rooke Corbett I have called all the peaks between 2500 and 3000 metres above mean sea level Metric Corbetts.

As part of my mission to climb all these mountains, on 18th July 2013 I set off with two friends from the pretty ham curing (Jamon Serrano) pueblo of Trevelez (1,486m) in the Alpujarras (Sierra Nevada foothills). Our ambition was a two day peak bagging expedition to climb 15 of these eastern peaks, having already climbed the higher western ones. However, 3 Tres Mil mountains plus a Metric Corbett turned out to be a more realistic target for our venture.

Our route from Trevelez early that cloudless July morning took us from the Barrio Alto in the highest part of the village past the delightfully sited Hotel Fragua on a good but fairly steep downhill path called the Camino de Granada, to the Rio Trevelez valley floor. Coming in the opposite direction we encountered 3 struggling mules each heavily laden with 6 bales of straw. The next day at the same place it would be 3 peak bagging amigos struggling with their backpacks along this track, back up to the pueblo with parched tongues.

The number 3 seemed to have a recurring theme throughout this expedition with 3 amigos, 3 Tres Mil, 3 mules and later in the high mountains we encountered 3 speedy *Capra pyrenaica hispanica*. These Southeastern Spanish ibex or mountain goats, which inhabit the Sierra Nevada, have long horns and are known locally as cabra montes. Unfortunately for us the ibex were travelling too fast to give us enough time to focus cameras for a good picture of them.

Our goal on the first day of walking was the Refugio Postero Alto (1900m) on the north face of the Sierra Nevada range. To reach it we first had to ascend to the Puerto de Trevelez (2798m), one of the Sierra Nevada's most ancient and important foot passes, which links the southern foothills of the Alpujarras with the very old city of Guadix on the northern slopes. Judging by the state of the path and the absence of walkers it is apparent that this path is little used today, understandable since the higher levels must be snow covered in winter while the lower stretches running parallel to the Rio Trevelez are very wet even in July. However, with sunny blue skies and nice warm temperatures the watery path did not bother us much as we splashed steadily up the well irrigated green valley serenaded by countless birds in the lush and shady vegetation.

After about 4 km from Trevelez the valley narrowed and we passed the tributary Rio Culo de Perro, the Dog's Backside River, which flows down from the Siete Lagunas, seven small delightful lakes which lie in a corrie at the southeast foot of Mulhacen (3482m), the Iberian Peninsula's highest mountain. Further along the valley, after about 4 hours of walking, we stopped under some steep shady crags near the confluence of the Rio Juntillas. When we had finished a leisurely lunch the serious ascent began, up a faintly marked path through deep grassy meadows grazed by contented looking long horned cattle. In the distance, high above us, a valley notch in the ridge skyline plus a rough compass bearing seemed to lead us towards the Puerto de Trevelez. With no marked path to follow we laboriously climbed up this steep barranco only to discover, to my great disappointment, that on reaching the high col above the barranco we still had approximately another 2 km to traverse before arriving at the true Puerto.

Here to the north a superb view stretched out below us: the Marquesado forest, a vast plateau with its immense solar and wind farms and various pueblos plus the ancient city of Guadix. Also visible, although we did not recognize it at that time, 900m below was our accommodation for that night in the Refugio Postero Alto, built in 1996 in a forest firebreak to resemble a mining village with a number of dormitory modules clustered around the main building. Before descending the steep well-marked zig-zag path down the Loma de Enmedio (Middle Ridge), a quick assessment of our next

day's quest presented nothing too ominous looking but of course we had to first re-climb 900m to the col before we could embark on the next stage of our expedition. The descent to the Refugio was easy but a bit hard on the knee joints despite our walking poles, so after 10 hours of walking that day on what we had estimated would be a 7 hour journey, we arrived at our destination very tired but contented and more than ready for a cool beer.

Early next morning, well fed and rested with fresh supplies of food and plenty of water, (at least 3 litres each), we set off again for Puerto de Trevezes having decided that a direct assault on Picon de Jerez (3121m) from the Refugio looked too steep and strenuous. My 100 euro offer for a ride on his horse, humourously made to a Spanish cowboy who overtook us on his way up to his cattle herd in the high sierras, was rejected with a smile, but nevertheless we eventually reached the pass on Shank's mare, (Fig1).

A cool, moderate, southerly breeze and a temperature of 15 C at the Puerto made for excellent walking conditions despite a blazing sun in a clear blue sky. This was in contrast to the 25 C measured on the thermometer attached to my map case at the start of our walk from the Refugio. In the near distance the Metric Corbett, La Piedra de los Ladrones, (The Rock of the Robbers) loomed up in front of us and with a brisk pace and an easy scramble I was soon standing on top of this impressive big lump of rock at 2944 metres above sea level.



Figure 1
Cowboy in the high Sierras.

A quick drink and snack had us on our way to our first Tres Mil, Cerro Pelao (3144m), the Bald Hill, with its small stony cairn. From this central peak spurs lead off northwards to Picon de Jeres (3090m), the Great Peak of Jeres, and southwards to the higher summit of Horcajo de Trevelez (3182m), The Yoke of Trevelez. This was very pleasant walking with tremendous views in all directions despite the thin atmosphere at this altitude and the fact that we had to retrace our steps back to Cerro Pelao, having ticked off Picon de Jeres. Our original target of 15 Metric Munros stretched out invitingly to the west before us but we knew this was impossible given the time available. Our third Tres Mil, Horcajo was easily climbed and it was an excellent vantage point to visually survey the large snow fields now rapidly melting on Mulhacen (3482m), Alcazaba (3366m) and Veleta (3398m), the big 3 mountains of the Sierra Nevada, (Figs.2&3). Meanwhile a glorious golden eagle surveyed us, soaring some 100 metres above the summit. Having left it some barra de pan from our lunch, we departed for our long trek back to Trevelez.



Figure 2
Summit of Horcajo de Trevelez, (3182m).

Our plan was to descend down the east ridge of Horcajo, then pick up the proper path that we could not find on our ascent to the Puerto de Trevelez. Underfoot there was much stony scree with a

few grassy summer pastures or borreguiles below the melting snowfields, grazed by long horned cattle along with their calves which we passed at a respectful distance. The correct path was eventually located but again, as on the ascent, it became indistinct and eventually disappeared in steep deep grassy slopes. Far below, the Rio Trevezal valley beckoned, but it was a hard struggle to get down there and when we finally arrived at the valley floor a change of socks was necessary to remove the unbearable torture of hundreds of needle sharp grass seeds which were sorely pricking my feet and ankles.



Figure 3

The three highest summits in the Sierra Nevada, Mulhacen (3482m), Alcazaba (3366m), and Veleta (3398m).

The final trek was a fast downhill splashy march fuelled by another quick drink and snack. This trek was achieved in only 2 hours, less than half the time we had taken for that same stretch on our ascent. The speedy time was probably driven not so much by our energy levels, but by that waiting drink in a Trevezal pub and the prospect of a dinner party that night back at our home base in that wonderful white-washed Moorish village of Mecina Bombaron. Altogether it was an excellent, enjoyable though strenuous expedition, in great company, accomplishing Tres Tres Mil metre mountains and a Metric Corbett.