

As Easter fell rather early this year, Gill & I opted to climb in the area round Calpe in the Costa Blanca, rather than the customary trip to the South of France. We didn't have perfect weather, but climbed every day except one and felt our decision to go to Spain was justified.

We teamed up with Gil and Gail Male, their daughter Joanne and her friend Lizzie. Gail's parents were also in evidence to look after the girls, so Gil & Gail could climb. We all met up at Bristol airport for a "Go" flight to Alicante. This wasn't particularly cheap and, irritatingly, a week after I had confirmed the flight, "Go" started operations from East Midlands and from here we could have saved over £100 between us.

Calpe is a one-hour drive north from Alicante and approaching via the Muscarrat Gorge, with the Bernia Ridge behind, the town, dominated by the magnificent monolithic *Peñon d'Ifach*, is in a fine situation. Unfortunately, the growth of high-rise buildings and seemingly endless developments of holiday villas in the most precipitous locations, detract from the ambiance. Yet it is pleasant enough and with many crags within easy reach, it has become a popular centre for visiting Brits and other northern Europeans. We had a comfortable apartment in Apollo 7 (one of the high-rise buildings) rented from Ian & Rosemary McKernan and an almost new Peugeot 306, so we were well set up to explore the wealth of climbing in the area.

I was reasonably familiar with the area, having climbed here three times previously, but it was Gill's first visit, so she was keen to sample everything. *Toix West* is a good introduction, because it is not too steep and has some enjoyable routes, even if they have rather boring names:

*Route III*

*Red Route II, Green*

and so on. It was very hot on our first day, but we didn't knock it – this is what we had come for! Yet we wilted and didn't achieve the pitch count of seven, which those who climb with me know

is my aim for a satisfactory sport climbing day! Plenty of time to catch up later in the week.

Next day we headed for *Sella*, a 45-minute drive from Calpe into the hinterland. This is a great area, far from the tourist crowds and with enough climbing to keep you happy for a whole holiday. It was also higher and significantly cooler. The three pitch

*Marion*

is not too hard and an excellent route and with other routes in this area, we kept the pitch count up to speed.

Back at the coast we found our way through the villas to the top of Sierra de Toix and had *Toix TV* to ourselves. There is an impressive bowl of overhanging red rock, flanked by pleasant grey slabs. Today we pushed the grade to 6a+, as we had become used to the rock, but finished by climbing into the bowels of the overhanging area on

*Short and Sweet*

. With totally different rock, this route had a slightly sinister feel.

Now Gill and I felt ready to tackle a bigger route, so on another warm and sunny day we made the effort to get up early so that we were starting up the *Peñon d'Ifach* by 8.30am. I had climbed *UPSA* a couple of times,

so I was keen to do

*Valencianos*

, another classic route with nine pitches to the top and a crux at a reasonable 5+. Above this we actually strayed onto

*Polvos Mágicos*

and Gill led the crux corner of this route at the same grade. A fine outing, which we finished quite early. So after negotiating the crowds of tourists on the top of the Peñon, we joined the others for our one and only beach session of the week.

The weather then deteriorated a bit with strong easterly winds, but still OK for climbing and we were now fired up to climb *El Dorado I*, an absolutely magnificent classic on *Raco del Corv*, one of the crags comprising

*Toix*

*Sea Cliffs*

. With the wind driving the waves, the ambience was more like Gogarth on a wild day. Again we had the crag to ourselves and it seemed quite a big and serious cliff. From the edge of the sea there was an introductory pitch to a ledge below a long and very overhanging crack – just my sort of pitch! I thought it was magnificent, very steep with hand jams, bridging moves and some strenuous pulls that eventually brought me to a hanging stance below the top slab. This was Gill's territory, but the start was quite steep and an intimidating place to begin to climb after the long crack pitch below. Some tricky moves, then easing climbing to the ledge at the top. Both pitches rated 6a+. Two abseils brought us back to our start point, with the wind taking the ropes into the sea. I posed for a photo on a rock, underestimating the waves, so Gill managed to snap me getting soaked! Although this route had taken about 3 hours, we decided to satisfy my obsession with maintaining the pitch count and moved back to

*Toix West*

for a few more routes.

The weather now cracked up for a day and I had a lazy morning reading in the apartment whilst Gill went for a run in quite wild weather along the beach front, planning to follow the tourist route to the top of the Peñon. However, this was closed off because of the weather and she had a truncated run. Later we set off for a walk on *Monte Olta*, which overlooks Calpe. We followed a poor track to the northern end of the plateau and found ourselves in cloud reminiscent of a poor day on Kinder. We managed to find the summit cairn and then a way-marked track that took us down to the south end of the peak, finally returning along glutinous forest tracks to our start point. A soggy business, but at least it got us some exercise.

After this aberrant day, it was back to fine sunny weather and a visit to *Moraira Sea Cliff*, further northeast around the coast. Once again climbing with Gil and Gail we had the crag to ourselves, out of sight of the high-rises and delightful views out to sea and along the coast. This hasn't been fully developed, contrary to Chris Cragg's expectations mentioned in his guide book, but perhaps because the rock is suspect in places. I found this out to my cost, after several enjoyable routes, when I tackled

*Mellizo Bomba*

and pulled on a loose hold. I was quite a long way from the last bolt and to one side, so I took a fair fall and as Gill wasn't expecting this, my weight propelled her up about ten feet significantly increasing my descent! I thumped into the rock that was exceedingly sharp and lacerated my back somewhat impressively, as well as a superficial head wound that bled profusely. However, I had no major ill effects and after completing this route we climbed out via the three-star route, *Chulla*

The week was almost up and our final trip was to climb the excellent south ridge – *Espolón*

*Central Direct*

– on the

*Puig Campana*

. This is the prominent mountain (1406m) that is situated between Alicante and Calpe, not far from Benidorm and yet in magnificent countryside with fine views. There is quite a strenuous walk in, and we set out early enough to beat any potential competition for this route. We found the Direct start easily enough and in three pitches this joins the regular route. The mountain is quite complex at this point and we wasted a bit of time following false lines, eventually getting going, although it is possible to climb a variety of lines until the ridge narrows and the route is obvious.

The climbing is never very hard, but in magnificent position and very enjoyable. A dozen pitches lead to easier ground and a complex way off. Although we followed cairns, I'm not sure we took the easiest line, roping up at one point and abseiling at another. It took us 5 hours on the route and another one and a half-hours to find the way off, so no speed records broken here. This was just to reach the scree gully that descends to the foot of the face. The gully was extremely unpleasant, with big bouldery scree that didn't "run" at all. The RockFax guide shows a lower descent line that brings you into the gully at a lower level and would therefore be much better.

Once off the scree we lingered, taking in the fine views of the East face and across the country beyond - a pleasant finish to a superb mountain day. This was quite a contrast to the intimacy of the smaller crags close to Calpe and different again from the bigger routes on the Peñon. The variety of climbing here is the reason so many people are drawn to climb in the Costa Blanca and we certainly enjoyed ourselves during this week.

Chris Radcliffe