

Best Sella

Padraig Love goes walking in Spain's Aitana mountains.

The village of Sella.
Photo: Terry Kenny
(www.sterling-adventures.co.uk).

The village of Sella is 16km from the coast on Spain's Costa Blanca. It lies in the shelter of two mountains, the Aitana (1,557m) and the Puig Campana (1,407m). The water is clean and pure, the people are friendly, and the views, across the almond terraces of the Sella valley, are spectacular.

At last, the day of our walking trip had arrived and our group of eight walkers arrived early for the afternoon flight to Murcia. It was to be our fifth walking trip as a group. Our last holiday in Poland, while wonderful, was very cold, so we had vowed that this year we would get some sun on our bones. Our guide, Jonathan, of Aqua Ventura, was there to meet us in Murcia as arranged and we piled onto the bus, full of expectation.

As we got closer to our destination one mountain in particular seemed to dominate the landscape. Our guide informed us that it was Puig Campana (Bell Mountain), the second highest mountain in the area. This mountain would haunt us during our stay, until we finally climbed it.

The road down to the guesthouse was not for the faint-hearted and had to be seen to be believed. Needless to

say, it posed no problem for our guide. Our home for the next seven days was a 300-year-old Moorish farmhouse. It had a beautiful garden and freshwater pool and overlooked a valley of olive and almond trees. The views were amazing. That first evening, we planned our walking schedule for the week. We decided to start off with a leisurely stroll and build up to the Puig Campana on the last day.

The next morning, we headed off on our first walk. It was a five-hour circular trip from the guesthouse, finishing up in the village of Relleu. It was very pleasant, with tracks to follow the whole way. I was amazed at how green the area was, with an abundance of butterflies, wild flowers and herbs. I had always thought of Spain as arid and dry. We picked and ate nisperos at an abandoned farm. These are juicy, yellow, peach-like fruit that grow very well in this area. The farm had been abandoned because the water supply was too salty, yet the fruit had survived and returns each year. After a few ice-cold beers in the laid-back village of Relleu, we returned to the guesthouse and had a swim in the pool. I have to say it was the coldest water I have ever swum in. That evening, after a lovely home-cooked meal, we relaxed with a glass of wine and admired the beautiful

valley below.

We awoke the next day full of the joys of spring, and without an ache or pain, thanks (I suspect) to the ice-cold swim. Our guide for the second day was Pau on an 18km walk, taking in the Pollop Valley. Starting at the Refugio, the hut where the rock climbers based themselves, we headed immediately upwards. There was quite a hard pull uphill for at least an hour, though, as on the previous day, we had a gravel path all the way. It was a most beautiful and tranquil place and we passed a Buddhist community who are based there. We descended via El Contador, which is an area used by shepherds for counting their sheep. Although we had been out for five hours and had reached 1,220 metres, we still had some energy left, so Jonathan suggested that a spot of rockclimbing was in order. We agreed, reluctantly, as all of the group were novices at this. Under the scorching heat of the evening sun, our patient guide persevered in coaxing us to scale heights varying from four to 12 metres. That evening, we slept like logs!

We were joined on the third day by a Spanish walker and her very reluctant 13-year-old daughter, Maria. Our objective was to be the Aitana Ridge which, at 1,557m, is the highest mountain in the area. As it was a very

warm day, we commenced the walk at Port de Tudons at 900m. We headed up a forester's track for the first 7km. Up and up we went, the sun beaming down on the backs of our necks and not an inch of shade in sight. We passed some local people picking wild herbs in the ditches, releasing the wonderful scent of thyme and camomile into the air.

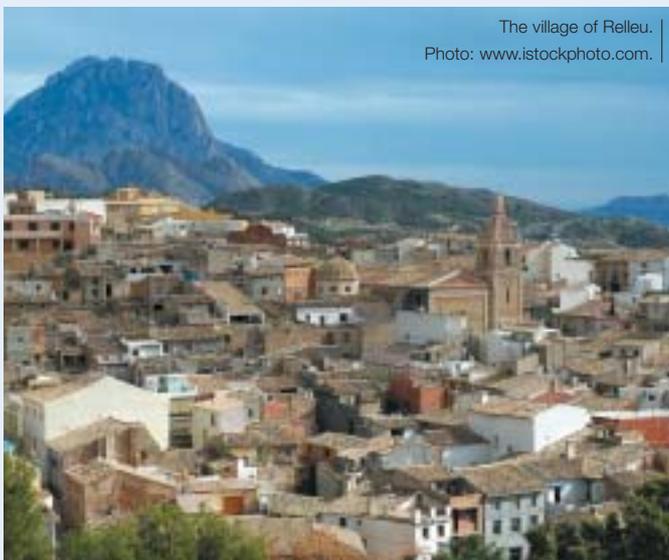
At the Font de Forada we stopped to watch two elderly locals filling thirty plastic 5-litre bottles with water. At this point we berated Jonathan for telling us to carry three litres of water with us when he knew that we could have refilled at the Font. He replied that he reckoned we needed the challenge!

From there we took a shepherd's track for 5km up to the bottom of Paso de los Rabosas. There was only a small gap at the top and we had to remove our rucksacks so that we could squeeze through. While a couple of members of the group found this unnerving, we all passed slowly through and arrived safely at the top at Las Semas.

Las Semas is a geological fault running in changing directions. It was 1m wide but about 300m deep, so we had to be very careful where we walked. Our guide informed us that some climbers go down into the cracks, where they can experience a totally different microclimate. Fortunately, this was not on our agenda. Instead we relaxed in the beautiful sunshine, amid the wild flowers, and shared some sweets.

Our path down was by way of a forester's track. This proved to be quite challenging as it was very long and difficult to walk on, with lots of small stones underfoot. At this stage, our little Spanish friend became very tired and cross with her mother for bringing her on such an endurance test. Even the last of the sweets could not comfort her. Eventually we spied the bus, and as Maria ran over to hug her father we all happily removed our walking boots and piled onto the bus. We were very pleased with our time of 6.5 hours for the day's walk.

Due to the heat, the next day we cancelled our planned walk in the Barranc Del Infer (Hell's Canyon) in favour of a coastal walk from the seaside town of La Villa Joyosa to Benidorm. With the sun beating down on us, we headed down along the coast. There was a path all the way and, other than having to relocate the path at times, the walk is very manageable. With the cool breeze and the lovely unspoilt views of the Mediterranean coast, it proved to be a very pleasant four-hour walk. We climbed down to a little hidden cove where we had a swim. After a lovely lunch of tapas at the Yacht Club, we had the opportunity to go sea kayaking, a speciality of Aqua Ventura. This proved to be a great experience as, unlike some of the others, I had never tried it before. I discovered that, unfortunately, I am a better walker than kayaker, but some of the



The village of Relleu.
Photo: www.istockphoto.com.



A view east from the Aitana Ridge (1,557m).
Photo: Jackie Price
(www.btinternet.com/~dandjwalks/).

women in the group proved to be quite good at kayaking and we all had a very enjoyable day.

Our fifth day was free for R&R and, having availed of all the bargains at the local market, we relaxed on the beach.

Then, at last, the day had finally arrived for us to tackle Puig Campana. At 1,407m, it is the second highest mountain in the region and legend has it that a giant called Roldan kicked a piece of rock out of the mountain to give his wife more sun,

otherwise she would die.

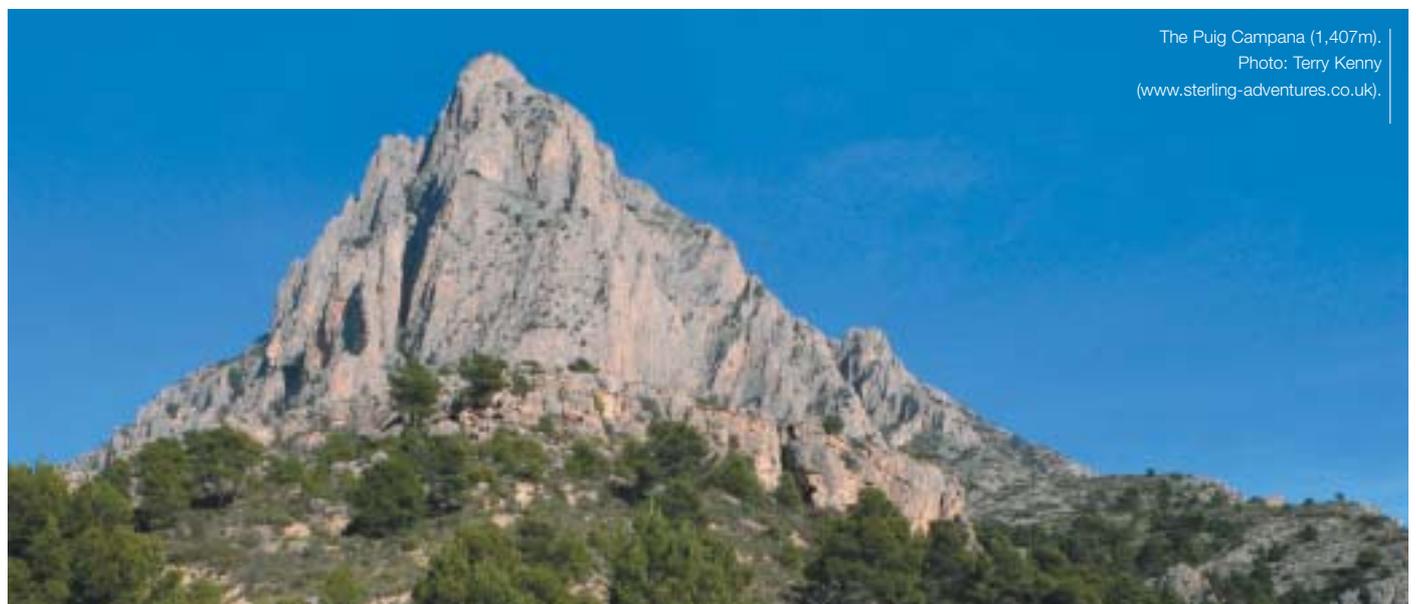
As it was estimated to be an eight-hour walk, we started off at 8:00am in the hope of being ahead of the sun. We started the walk at the Buddhist retreat, taking the forester's track up to an abandoned farmhouse at La Carrasca. After admiring the amazing views from the farmhouse, we found the shepherd's track that leads up towards the base of the Puig. We arrived at a junction of many paths and chose the one that would take us up the mountain. The path was very steep and winding and the walking was very tough for an hour and a half. An abundance of wildflowers on each side of the track proved a pleasant distraction. One would swear they had been planted and tended by a gardener, so wonderful was the colour coordination, blues with yellows, pinks with whites. It made me believe that nature is the best gardener of all.

At last we reached the top and were rewarded by the most amazing views of the Mediterranean – on a clear day Ibiza is a hazy ghost in the distance. Our other reward was a swarm of tiny black flies that appeared as soon as we produced our lunches. We took our photograph for posterity, signed our names in the notebook that is kept in a plastic bag on top of the Puig, and beat a hasty retreat.

We returned to the base of the mountain by the same path, taking a different shepherd's track down around the Castelletts (Castle Mountains). On our way down, we passed two different groups just beginning the climb up (mad dogs and Englishmen, as the saying goes). For my own part, I was very happy that we had made an early start as it was now very hot. The walk back to the bus was pleasant enough and we were delighted to have completed the 17km and 1,200-metre ascent in seven hours.

That evening, we hit the highlights of Benidorm. The hustle and bustle of the resort was in complete contrast to the peace and tranquillity that we had got used to and, personally, I was very happy to head home to the hills that night. Our flight was not until Saturday afternoon, so Jonathan had arranged to bring us abseiling in the morning. After a lovely lunch on the terrace of the farmhouse we took some last photographs of the beautiful valley below and bade our farewells. The journey back to Murcia was quiet enough, with each of us deep in our own thoughts about the wonderful holiday we had had. ■

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The Puig Campana (1,407m).
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