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**SCRAMBLING ON
BENIDORM'S
ROCKY RIDGES**

**SPANISH
HIGHS**

CREATED BY HILLWALKERS FOR HILLWALKERS



Spanish highs

Tony West shoulders far too much camera gear in an attempt to capture one of Spain's most delectable ridge scrambles

The mention of Spain's Costa Blanca inevitably

conjures up images of high-rise apartment blocks, packed beaches and ceaseless construction projects. Benidorm epitomises this image and perhaps for good reason, but today the resort's shimmering profile is but a mere smudge on the distant horizon as I stand astride one of Spain's most graceful limestone ridges.

It's all too easy to dismiss the hillwalking potential of the Costa Blanca but the region's hinterland offers stunning mountain scenery. Parting company with the coast is well rewarded with dazzling limestone peaks, craggy spires and winding crenulated ridges that pierce clear-blue Mediterranean skies.

Verdant woodlands of pine and oak sweep down into valleys that were terraced by the Moors a thousand years earlier. Orchards of almonds, cherry and olives surround sleepy villages that cling to the mountainsides or are precariously deposited on rocky outcrops. Such images couldn't be further removed from the package-deal frenzy of the coast, yet the fleshpots of Benidorm are within easy grasp of those who want them.

Most of the peaks in this area range from 1000m to 1500m and all are fairly easy if getting to the top is the objective. Bernia, where I am standing today, reaches 1226m, with its summit situated at the west end of a 7km ridge which eventually drops into the azure blue of the Mediterranean between Calpe and Altea. However attractive the summit may look I'm more interested in the challenges presented by the ridge: a long, skinny and complex scramble with a sustained height of about 950m.

Even a moderate knowledge of abseiling and easy climbing can add a fresh dimension to hillwalking, and practising these skills once in a while will make you a more confident walker and better prepared to tackle hills like An Teallach or Skye's Cuillin Ridge. As I really want to immerse myself in photography on this scramble, I've enlisted the help of a friend and local guide, José Miguel García Fraile, who has warned me to be prepared for a photographic field day! We're joined by one of his employees, hiking guide (and occasional TGO model) Nuria Alberola.

To reach Bernia's sinuous ridge it

is first necessary to traverse east under towering walls of gleaming white limestone and weave our way along the tree-line. The pines softly sway and hiss in the early morning breeze of a clear blue February morning. It's warm enough to be peeled back to base layers and I can hardly contain my smugness as I imagine what the weather will be like at home in the Lakes. As the traverse continues with no apparent sign of a break in the mountain's defences, I ask José how we get up on to the ridge. He answers simply: "It's a surprise".

Twenty minutes later José's surprise is revealed: a natural cave that bores 100m horizontally through the ridge. Its southern entrance is enormous and looking outwards, it impressively frames the coastal headland next to Altea. All too soon though, the cave narrows and I find myself on all fours with a cool breeze hurrying me along. We emerge on the much cooler north side, where a path climbs steeply to the ridge and back into the sun.

As I turn and take a look at what lies ahead I am in for another surprise. I had no idea how narrow the ridge is; this is going to be fun! A keen wind picks up and it's time to get back into fleece and put a harness on, because the first of three abseils lies just ahead. The views are inspiring and it's a great opportunity for me to piece together familiar geography from a new angle. To the south-west lies the great Aitana massif, its ochre-coloured cliffs sparkling in the morning sun. Further south of the Aitana, the towering Puig Campana stands as a lone sentinel defending the rural hinterland from the developed coast.

We meander along the narrow ridge to our first abseil. It looks very short and down-climbable but you wouldn't want to make a mistake here as the ridge pinches into a slender metre-wide col with huge drops either side. José unpacks the rope and attaches it to the fixed abseil chain. With all my photographic kit loaded in the pack and a buffeting wind I feel just too unwieldy for delicate manoeuvres so it is a great comfort to be connected by rope. Once down on the narrowest section, and still attached, I make my way to safe ground. This really is quite some scramble and I relish every moment but at the same time I'm trying hard to keep my wits about me. There's a good

deal of fractured rock about and it pays to test anything that looks suspect – as the last thing you want is a handhold coming away!

After another half-hour of meandering in and out of convoluted pinnacles and shattered flakes it is time for an early lunch. A bank of high cloud has drifted over and flattened the light but I can see more blue sky lining the horizon. It makes good sense to eat now. Today it's fresh baguette, split and drizzled with olive oil and filled with sheep's cheese, Iberian ham and sun-ripened tomatoes. This is washed down with José's sweet black tea, which he confidently tells me is a healthier option than tea with milk. Oranges, hand-picked from his garden, and Valor chocolate from nearby Villajoyosa complete the feast as the sun starts to filter through once again.

Abseil number two is the longest and drops off on the south side to the base of a steep ramp, which is more of a stiff scramble than a climb. As there's a huge precipice below, a rope makes for more security.

The third and final abseil avoids some really awkward and steep ground. That's followed with a good stiff hike before losing height for the first time in the day to a saddle that boasts three great limestone fins all running parallel to each other with the highest defining the crest of the ridge. This is the crux of the day's route.

To regain the ridge it's necessary to climb up the side of the highest fin and work your way along its narrow crest until it meets the mountain. Descending the ridge from this area is not an option, as further below and out of sight are some really big cliffs.

José, armed with half a dozen quick-draws, is belayed to me and is off like a monkey. Like the experienced climber he is, he makes it look so easy. Perhaps I should have paid more attention to his footwork because when I get up on to the fin it's clear I'm struggling, particularly with the huge pack on my back. Halfway up I can feel my feet slithering on the virtually non-existent holds and at the same time my arms feel as though they're giving out. I just can't see any hold that could be of use and my spirit ebbs as I take the inevitable fall. Now what? I can't stay here. José rescues my pack to give me a sporting chance and I



‘ The hinterland
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reappraise the footwork. I can see it now; I just need to be bold and go for it. José signals that he's ready and in a series of fairly fluid moves my chin eventually levels with the top of the fin and I peer over.

I can't believe how narrow this edge is – we are talking about a mere six inches of width. I also realise something that I hadn't previously appreciated – how the entire fin leans over a gigantic black abyss. While José climbs up on to the edge and walks, albeit carefully, along its length, I prefer the less dignified tactic of straddling it like a donkey and shunting myself along.

With light failing we have to get a move on and, after a steep and roped scramble, we regain our previous height, untie ourselves and

clamber out of the harnesses. It's easy scrambling from here to the base of the main summit from where we can descend. Had we not been delayed by my endless photo stops and an hour's wait for the cloud there would easily have been time for the main summit as well, but for me it is a case of mission accomplished. I had wanted to photographically document this, one of the finest ridge scrambles of my life, and I had happily achieved my objective.

With darkness now enveloping us, we make our way down. At some point the path – if you could call it that – is lost. We are all locked into our own worlds as we stumble downhill, first over scree then down a slope covered in prickly knee-high vegetation with

loose, ankle-twisting boulders thrown in for good measure. It isn't a quiet descent either, as rocks clatter downwards around us. I feel so relieved to meet the traverse path we used in the morning. Exhausted, I suggest that we park ourselves for a minute under a lone oak tree. Deep from inside my pack I extract some very carefully stowed goods: the last chunk of a homemade Christmas cake and a small bottle of 15-year-old Bruichladdich. It had been a great day and a gem of a walk. As we share the treats, the lights of Altea sparkle below us and out on the inky blue Mediterranean water, brightly lit fishing boats make their way back to harbour. Under a starry sky we toast the day and Bernia's unforgettable ridge. 