

# Dónde Escalar

*Dominic Oughton*

I served a thoroughly traditional climbing apprenticeship, initially in the safe hands of Club Grandses Peters Cockshott and Benson, and then later ‘learning by doing’ with Helen as we both progressed laboriously through the grades (back in the day when Severe seemed a significant step up from Mild Severe!). The Peak was our weekend playground, punctuated by regular trips to North Wales and The Lakes, and the annual summer pilgrimage to the Alps. Everything was what we’d now call ‘trad’ because sport-climbing hadn’t been invented (or at least news hadn’t spread to these shores) and the only bolts we encountered were the ones holding our crampons together.

All that changed with a couple of weeks of appalling weather in Lauterbrunnen in the Bernese Oberland which coincided with our purchase of the first edition of SunRock. This quirky, perhaps even idiosyncratic, guidebook opened up a window on a new world of sparkling white and orange limestone, sunny skies and shirts-off climbing, all protected by gleaming bolts. Our first actual taste of this new continental climbing paradigm was at Sisteron (running away from the aforementioned grimness in the Oberland) and we took in a memorable loop through Provence including Mt Saint Victoire. The year was 1989 and we were hooked!

SunRock (published in Germany in 1987) very much blazed the trail, providing the essential oxygen of reliable information to feed the flames of the Euro-sport climbing revolution for the northern-European masses, documenting not just the crags of the South of France but also what are now recognised as the heartland climbing areas of Spain: Costa Blanca (including the iconic Penyon d’Ifach); Chulilla; Montanejos; Siurana and Montserrat. A mid-winter week of bolt-clipping in the sun became a regular fixture in the Oughton calendar from 1990 onwards, the pre-cursor of our annual SunRock meet, and we continued our bit-wise exploration of the Iberian Peninsula this way over the subsequent couple of decades boosted by a three-month van trip with our then toddler Natasha in 1995. Happily, various publishers (and crag-developers) kept pace with our exploration, with the French-authored Escalades en Espagne (1990) opening up the scope of the known world to ten major areas (adding Riglos, Terradets, La Pedriza and Quirós to those in SunRock). Soon the Brits got in on the act, with Chris Craggs’ guides to Costa Blanca, Majorca and Andalucía in the early 90s followed by the arrival of Rockfax on the scene with their bumper-funbook guide to all three areas in 1996.

Fast-forward twenty years or so and Helen and I are now in the fortunate position of spending much of our time trundling around the continent in our campervan, following the sun where possible and a never-ending trail of bolts, as we ‘Rock Around The World’ (the title of our blog: [www.rockaroundtheworld.co.uk](http://www.rockaroundtheworld.co.uk)). We’ve spent about nine months in Spain over the last three years, and whilst we’ve revisited the popular haunts we’re increasingly drawn to explore less well-travelled spots, where we’re

likely to be the only climbers on the crag or, if we have company, they'll be speaking Spanish. The inspiration for these travels, and this article, has been provided by a wonderful book: *Dónde Escalar*. This is a directory of over nine hundred climbing areas in Spain, providing essential information on location, quality, orientation, spread of grades and local services etc, together with more details and a sample topo for around forty major areas. It has taken us to some magical off-the-beaten-track places and in the remainder of this article I hope to share a few of these with you, working from the southern tip of Spain in a roughly anti-clockwise direction.



*Guidebooks then and now.*

*Photo Dominic Oughton*

## Andalucia

For most Brits, climbing in Andalucia means El Chorro. It's certainly a great base for a week or two, as the Club's SunRockers found in 2014, but like most of the Rockfax-documented areas it's busy (mostly with Brits, Germans and Yanks; almost never Spanish) and many of the longer established (and especially easier) sectors are getting pretty polished. Another hour or so to the west, just past Gibraltar, lies the unheralded gem of San Bartolo near the town of Tarifa. The transition as you leave the Mediterranean behind and round the tip onto the Atlantic coast is marked. As the ocean swell grows the concrete skyline diminishes and you find yourself in a pastoral seaside setting reminiscent of England's south-west.

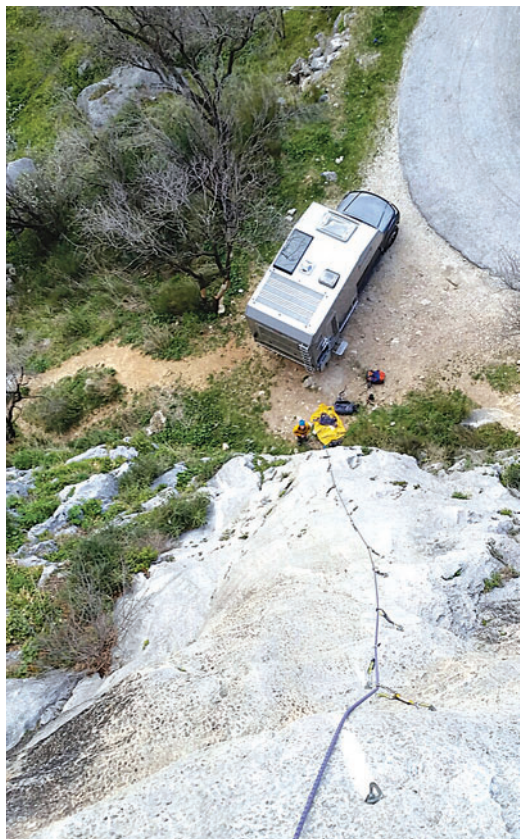
The main crag of San Bartolo Tajo del Buho, or Owl's Ravine, also goes by the name of Canuto del Arca which means Treasure Chest Gorge. This turns out to be highly appropriate, as this rather unpromising sandstone escarpment gradually reveals its hidden treasure as you make the 15min walk up the gorge. Arriving at sector Mosaic I was struck by the fabulous rock architecture; stunning checkerboard patterns etched into golden sandstone. A similar scale to High Neb and texture like the best of Red River Gorge. The eponymous route of the sector, Mosaic, might only be a 6a+, but it packs a real punch into 20m of gently overhanging territory. There are

enough jugs in the regular breaks, but also plenty of disappointments, so you either need the stamina to hang on or good fortune to choose well. One of the best 6as I've ever done, and would easily make a Peak Grit Top 50. Our visit also provided a great insight into the local climbing culture; a popular spot for a Sunday afternoon, with big family outings and a real feeling of community; it was mobbed!

Heading further east, and bypassing the fleshpots around Malaga (and indeed El Chorro) you pass through the hinterland province of Jaen, with olive groves as far as the eye can see in all directions, and a heady smell of extra virgin wafting into the van. It turns out this is the Province of Olives. As we entered the town of Jaen itself, just 10km from the crag, we figured we'd be climbing in ten minutes! Wrong! Thanks to an over-eager sat nav we spent a nightmarish hour in a maze of one-way cobbled streets, barely wide enough for the van and overhung by first-floor balconies. Every turn seemed to spiral us inwards and further from salvation, expecting to arrive any minute at a dead-end and a heap of rusting campervans of previous



*The Author on Mosaic, San Bartolo.  
Photo Helen Oughton*



*Roadside cragging on La Rampa,  
Reguchillo. Photo Dominic Oughton*

victims. Happily, we escaped, and found the steep winding track leading beneath the crag of Reguchillo; and what a crag! It rates four karabiners in Dónde Escalar (a quality assessment that replaces stars with krabs and has a maximum rating of six) but is worth at least a five in our estimation.

As with many 'off-the-beaten-track' crags, much of the fun (and sense of achievement) is in even finding the crag and then working out what routes go where at what grade. Reguchillo was a case in point, piecing together a jigsaw of partial and out-of-date information from Dónde Escalar; an ancient guide by David Munilla; and some Googled web resources, we managed to find some great routes: A striking long pitch up the obvious ramp feature at sector La Curvilla (probably La Rampa 6b) and a couple of excellent 7as to the left: Apuesta Duro & La Julia del Bubo on gently overhanging 'Velcro' rock. There looked to be a couple of hundred routes of similar quality, so we settled in for the night, only to wake to driving rain. We'll be back though. Other notable areas which would each be worthy of a week's trip include Cacin; Los Vados; Espiel and Alfacar.

### **Valencia and Murcia**

Valencia is best known for the climbing on the Costa Blanca, around Calpe and Benidorm, where many Brits of my generation first cut their SunRocking teeth, and indeed still do judging by the throngs of long-stayers in the Bar Arenal in Calpe every New Year. Despite averaging at least a week here every year for the last couple of decades, we still manage to climb on a bunch of new crags every time we visit; testament to the huge quantity of rock and the enthusiasm of local and ex-pat climbers. Not that information is always easy to come by; crag locations and hand-scribbled topos are passed on by the cognoscenti under oaths of secrecy, lest they fall into the hands of the 'topo vampires' as the Rockfax team are perhaps unkindly known. Check out our blog for some of the 'Crag-Xs' around Redovan, Pego, Bolulla, Cocentaina and Alcoy for inspiration and get in touch for more beta and the Non Disclosure Agreement!

Leaving the 'Blanca behind and heading north past Valencia, the capital of this autonomous community and Spain's third-largest city, you get out of 'Rockfax-range' and into some of the country's finest cragging. Chulilla, one of the original SunRock crags and a hotbed of development in the 90s, has undergone a renaissance to become perhaps the most fashionable area in Spain, thanks to the magnificent new sectors developed by refugio patrons Pedro Pons and Nuria Marti: Oasis; Pared De Enfrente and Las Lamentaciones - 'off-the-beaten-track' a few years ago, but now firmly part of 'the grand tour'.

Instead, I'll focus on another of the established 90s crags that has slipped into obscurity. Montanejos, just an hour over the hill from Chulilla and blessed with at least as many routes and fabulous scenery to match, sees barely a fraction of the traffic. Just like its now more celebrated neighbour, it has its share of somewhat tired and polished sectors with sandbag grades, but also much new development. We stumbled across El Laberinto de los Dragones when we were climbing at sector Mazmorras (also a decent crag)



just across the gorge. Checking our guide, there looked to be half a dozen routes at the left-hand end of this awesome piece of rock. Hard to make out in the afternoon shade, but there seemed to be some kind of walkway along the base. A bit of Googling and an updated topo revealed thirty routes spread across the whole width of the crag, accessed by wooden staging. It is somewhat vertiginous on the 'passarella' boardwalk that has been constructed to access the bulk of the new routes here, but well worth the effort; a couple of dozen outstanding lines from 6c to 7b+ with really cool climbing and some fun dragon-themed names: Me Anamore de un Bombera 7a/+ was a highlight, something like 'I'm in love with a fireman'.

A much more recent development, but I suspect destined to be a major crag, is Araya; another lucky find thanks to a posting on the UKClimbing logbook. Hidden away up a 2km dirt track and a 25min walk through stunning scenery and chest-high rosemary, it was a lucky day when the equippers (apparently a couple of Brits - thanks guys!) found this superb venue. Currently about fifty routes spread across five sectors on a curving wall, catching the sun all day and sheltered from any wind, it's a prime winter destination. There's probably a good couple of days' worth in the 6s and then a lot of 7a/b to go at, not to mention huge scope for development, and a range of styles from crimpy walls to tufa tussles, all to about 35m. What's not to like?



*Passarella at El Laberinto de los Dragones. Photo Dominic Oughton*



*Helen on Pajaro Loco, 6a+, Araya. Photo Dominic Oughton*

## Catalunya

Catalunya's four major regions: Girona; Barcelona; Lleida and Tarragona, together have more climbing than most countries, which might come in handy if their separatist ambitions are ever realised. Montserrat is perhaps the most iconic of Catalan venues, looming above the Barcelona skyline as a vast serrated ridge. Tarragona has the huge Sierra de Prades to offer, with iconic crags like Siurana, La Mussara and Mont-Ral now being rivalled by the poster-child upstart of Margalef. However, both these are well known to the travelling Brit sports-climber. The region of Lleida sprang into the consciousness of the climbing world more recently, with Adam Ondra's 2013 ascent of the world's first 9b+, La Dura Dura, at Oliana. Whilst neither the route nor the crag is likely to be on the tick-list of too many, the publication of Pete O'Donovan's excellent Lleida Climbs around the same time opened our eyes to the tremendous scope at a more amenable grade in this area.

The major venues of Terradets and Vilanova de Meià both feature multi-pitch adventures and single-pitch test-pieces aplenty, and there are many cutting-edge routes at Santa Linya and Tres Ponts if that's your bag, but I'm going to focus on the less well-known crags around Àger. This is a modest village which is world-famous as an extreme sports venue, but for paragliding rather than climbing. The stable weather and towering cliffs which attract flyers from around the globe, also make for great cragging, as we discovered when Bill Deakin and Steve Gregory came out to supplement the RockAroundTheWorld team last November. One of those 'it's a small world, isn't it?' moments saw the Rucksack contingent boosted further when we bumped into Alan 'Spuz' Spurrett and his mate John; the only other guests at the Àger campsite.

Our first day dawned clear but chilly, with clag on the crags high above Àger (at well over 1,000m), so we decide to leave them for another day. Instead we headed to Os de Balaguer, which turned out to be a great decision. The climbing is in a tight gorge, with routes on the south and north facing sides. With temperatures struggling to get above 10°C it was the south side for us! The climbing is excellent, on vertical rock with plenty of positive if sharp holds, and some fine natural lines. Kin-Matao was a great 6b+ up a blunt rib, and Fanatic (7a) and Vasectomia al Dia (6c, and I didn't make the route name up!) taking intricate lines up an orange bulging wall. Shame it got chilly when the sun went below the northern rim of cliffs, so we settled in for beers in the van and watched the setting sun turn the Montsec d'Avers flaming red. This prompted a follow-up visit with Bill and Steve, when Helen experienced a day of highs and lows: On-sighting a tricky 6b in great style but then tweaking a finger tendon when reaching for a distant clip on a tough 6b+. Time to find a bar: ice for the injury and beer for consolation.

After being camped in Àger for almost a week, staring up at the miles of limestone ridge of the Montsec d'Ares, we finally got the perfect weather window for this high crag; sunny and still, around 17°C. After a zigzagging drive up the dirt road approach, we found ourselves admiring the Baranc de Grillon next to the remote hermitage Mare de Déu de Pedra. The climbing is

superb, with heavily featured rock with the occasional hidden pocket, just where things look hopeless! There are also a bunch of slabby 4s on the right-hand side, where Helen could make some hands-free ascents, to keep loosened up. Despite the wonky finger, Helen very kindly turned belay-bunny and held my ropes on a couple of monster 40m pitches: Morlaco 7a and Guantanamo 7a+, both absolutely outstanding; super-sustained without any really fierce moves; just how I like them. Bill and Steve climbed like men on a mission, covering acres of rock until dusk, while we wandered back down to the campsite; a pleasant downhill ramble through olive and almond groves.

### Aragon

Aragon climbing is perhaps most famous for Los Mallos de Riglos, and rightly so. These magnificent towers, with their ever-present guardian vultures on patrol, provide thrilling long adventures on improbable conglomerate rock. I covered a couple of these in *Paroís de Légende* (Journal 2011:176). The other very famous areas here are Rodellar; acres of rock set on either side of a narrow canyon giving the unusual option of year-round climbing, and Albarracín; Spain's bouldering Mecca. However, there are another hundred sites described in *Dónde Escalar*, and tucked away in the Val de Cinca in the Pyrenees we discovered a great one.

We'd ignored Las Devotas in the German 'selected climbs' book we'd been using, as the hand-drawn topo and only mildly enthusiastic description hadn't got us very excited. However, I'd just stumbled across a local French topo which made it look much more appealing, and it would get afternoon shade; ideal for the final day of a heatwave before a forecasted break in the weather. What a crag! Steep orange rock lines either side of the deep Devotas gorge, which contains the main trans-Pyrenean artery in this part of the world, through the tunnel north of Bielsa, though in October it's a sleepy backwater with barely a car to be



Steve Gregory on Kin-Matao, Os de Balaguer. Photo Dominic Oughton



seen. Just a few minutes' walk up the well-made path brings you above the tree-line to the base of the crag, at which point a neck-brace might be advisable for viewing the top. This is steep territory. Standing 10m out from the base of the routes, the occasional drip from high-up tufas reinforces the point. At first sight, the rock doesn't look too great; there are few extensive tufa pipes but instead a chaos of short columns, stalactites, bulges and tufa pockets stirred in with a bunch of what look to be loose blocks. Actually, these have been well cemented in by eons of dripping calcite, and provide really interesting and often juggy sharp holds which contrast nicely with the pinches and lay-aways on the tufa. The mixture allows some very steep territory to be covered at a remarkably amenable grade.

We warmed up on a juggy 20m 6a, pumpy but great fun. Then a 30m 6b which is more of the same. The next couple of routes are amongst the best I've done in Spain - La Balade and Personne both start with a 20m pitch of 6b/6b+, at which point you can bail and bank the tick, or roll the dice and press on for another 20m of steep thuggery and get a 7a. With eyes bigger than my biceps I decided to try my luck again and make it a three 7a day with 'Talia', partly motivated by the beautifully painted route name at the bottom. I made it to the top clip, but ran out of juice and plopped off, eyeballing the chain. The forecasted heavy rain arrived the following morning



*Tufa tussles on Las Devotas.*

*Photo Helen Oughton*



*Locals out in threatening weather,*

*San Fausto. Photo Dominic Oughton*



and what we needed was a great crag, near the road, and with a built-in 15m umbrella... Luckily, we knew just the place! Back to Devotas and the first drops of rain were arriving bang on schedule. We made it to the shelter of the crag before it started in earnest, warming up on a 30m 6a+ which covers completely unfeasible ground for such a reasonable grade. Then it's a revenge meeting with Talia; I arrive at the crux after 35m of unrelenting steepness, but this time feel really fresh, the poor flake that I couldn't hang the day before feels like a jug, and I motor through the tricky move to the belay without drama. What a difference a good rest makes! Gazing out across the gorge, the moody maelstrom continues beyond our 'umbrella' adding to the special feeling of being in the right place at the right time.



*Helen on Cuevas de la Mar.*

*Photo Dominic Oughton*

### Navarra, La Rioja and the Basque Country (País Vasco)

These areas are better known for their bodegas than their crags, but Dónde Escalar reveals that there's more rock here than you can shake a stick at. If you can tear yourself away from the wine-tasting, major areas include Etxauri near Pamplona, and Anguilano and Clavio in the heart of the wine country. Perhaps our favourite discovery, so far, is San Fausto near the town of Estella. One of the attractions is the free camping area set aside for climbers by the local village of Eraul. It is a great reflection of the good relationship between climbers and local communities in Spain that there are so many such arrangements, and perhaps also related to there being so much space, but I can't see it happening at Stanage.





On our first visit we climbed on sector Prehistoria. All the routes we did were excellent, with 'No Ordinari Love' being a really outstanding 6a+, highly entertaining and sustained at the grade. We also managed a rarity in ticking the hardest route at the crag; a pretty straightforward 6c. We vowed to come back, and had reason for a repeat visit when we were rained off Etxauri on the last day of a later trip and consoled ourselves with what we expected to be 'just a recce'. Helen reported that Sector Akerzulo was not only dry but also looked excellent, and so it proved, with 30m to 40m routes on heavily featured pockety rock. Really fun climbing, albeit always with an eye out for the next big rain cloud.

### **Asturias, Cantabria and Leon**

Famous for the Picos de Europa, the region along Spain's northern Atlantic coast is also blessed with plenty of valley cragging. Another area which is little known outside of the local climbing community, it has been recently put on the map with the publication of the Roca Verde guide which brings together the best of the climbing across these three provinces into one well-produced book. Perhaps another reason for the infrequent visitors is the reputation for unhelpful weather, and certainly the green wooded hillsides contrast starkly with the desert conditions found across much of the south of the country. We may just have got lucky, but we enjoyed immaculate climbing conditions throughout a month's tour of the area, finding an abundance of quality crags and very few fellow climbers.

The Desfiladero de la Hermida is an impressive gorge that runs along the eastern edge of the Picos d'Europa, from Panes down to Potes; a charming touristy village. The windy road up the gorge gives access to half a dozen crags along its length; Rumenes being the pick of them, but with Urdon, El Salmon, Placas de Esquilleu and Clonico all having good sport. Over on the coast, Cuevas del Mar provides the kind of beach plus cragging option we'd have killed for when the kids were small. South of the Cantabrian range, the arid region of Leon provides a refuge from the coastal weather systems and some aesthetically gorgeous crags; Valdehuesa is stunningly picked out in silver and orange streaks against blue skies. Be warned though, the weather isn't the only thing that's dry as we found the grading to be extremely 'sec'!

However, for the very best of Costa Verde you have to leave the Picos behind and head a couple of hours further west, where the Valles de Trubia which run south from the city of Oviedo, are home to the two most important climbing areas in Asturias. The most established of these is Quirós, which featured in *Escalades en Espagne* and, whilst very charming, is very much of that era: a bit polished and with old-school grading. Teverga, on the other hand, is probably Spain's best-kept secret, with a huge selection of crags, almost five hundred routes, and even a free camping spot complete with toilets and a shower! Everyone we met there was really taken with the place, many of them Spanish and on their first visit just like us. There's a ton of climbing here, from tufas to slabs and caves to big walls; plenty for a week or two, with a major new sector each day, though to enjoy much longer than that you'd really want to be climbing into the 7s.



The most popular and accessible crags are Entrecampos, dominating the view from the parking, and Esplanado, next to the bike track, the Senda del Oso, which is a local big attraction; running for 50km along old mining tracks, it's Spain's equivalent of the Monsal Trail. Further along this, sector Canal gives the sinew-shredding 50m 7a Via de Velasco, a very long way in one run-out and one of the routes of the area. Across the valley are the Etergo crags including Depuradora (which means sewage works - sounds better in Spanish!) where we found the routes really fun, though the grading slightly random.

### **...and the rest of Spain**

The foregoing covers some of the highlights from our recent explorations. As well as the well-known hot-spots, I've also left out Mallorca (outstanding climbing but very much ON the beaten track); the Canaries (ditto and we haven't been recently enough to report new developments); Galicia (a Spanish Cornwall that we've barely scratched the surface of); and the whole of the centre and west of Spain - Castilla la Mancha, Madrid and Extramadura (on our schedule for 2018). Leafing through our now battered copy of *Dónde Escalar*, I reckon we've climbed in around two hundred of the nine hundred zones that are listed, with almost a hundred of those visited in Autumn 2016 through to Spring 2017. We're a long way from running out of rock, but I was at least thinking we were making a dent in it; that is until I spotted Edition 2 of *Dónde Escalar*: 'MÁS DE 1000 ZONAS'.



*Free camping at Teverga.*

*Photo Dominic Oughton*