

Trip Report: Picos De Europa

Date: 22nd-29th July 2012

Group: Mike A, Lesley, Tony, Lynn, Jim G, Philip, Chris, Chrissie, Mike W, Selina, Hugh, Marie

Route: See below

Total Distance: See below

Total Ascent: See below

Weather: See below

Sunday 22 July

While the PICOS BUMS were preparing for their journeys via UK airports, Les and I were already in South West France, having started our journey 2 days earlier. We were only a stone's throw away (30 minutes) from the Spanish border. We set off on our leisurely drive to Spain and within 5 minutes we were aware of a clanking noise while cornering. We stopped in the first available layby to discover one of the cycle racks was starting to become detached from the roof bar. Could there have been some skulduggery in the hotel car park or had the rack been incorrectly constructed? We will never know for sure but we can guess. We re-constructed the bike rack, reloaded and we were on our way.

We entered Spain and the terrain became more mountainous, in fact the entire journey was far less tedious than the majority of our French crossing. The drive up through the Hermida Gorge gave us our first taste of Picos landscape and very spectacular it was. We eventually found a lunch spot at the Picos visitor centre which turned out to be in the village of Tama, about 200m from Posada El Corcal, our accommodation for the week!

We checked in and of course snaffled the best room and then retired to Casa Fofi (our bar and restaurant for the week) for a well earned beer and to watch the final 50km of the Tour de France in Paris . For the record Cav won the stage and Wiggo took yellow with Froome 2nd. While all this was going on, Hugh and Mari arrived, so we then outnumbered the Spanish cycling fans who were fairly quiet anyway.

The four of us reconvened at beer o'clock to plan a walk for Monday, and a wave of text messages and phone calls started to appear from the remainder of the party who had got themselves tangled up in roadworks near Santander. Of course they were concerned that they might miss out on the meal and worse still that the wine would have disappeared. After giving reassurances that they would not miss out on either, the four of us joined the throng at the Fofi to sample their culinary delights.

About an hour later they trooped in and suddenly the noise level increased and the wine stocks decreased. Apart from the traffic jam tales, one interesting titbit of information emerged. Jim had turned up at the car rental desk at Bilbao airport armed with Gillian's driving licence, so disqualifying himself from driving duties for the week. Definite 'marmot' material!

There was more confusion afterwards when the stragglers were all checking in. The Latter's had innocently picked the gay suite which left Jim and Philip only with a choice of double beds! Chris and Chrissie were eventually outed and decency was restored.

Monday 23rd July

For the first day, a walk from Posada El Corcal had been planned by yours truly to avoid more driving. This was one of the routes provided in Collett's brochure which turned to be crucial for the week in the absence of any decent guidebooks. The breakfast arrangements as usual were not slick enough to suit those desperate for a quick getaway but I am sure we will survive the week without initiating industrial action by the staff.

We all set off walking towards Potes alongside the river and 45 minutes later we were in the centre, wondering where the official start was.

There was considerable faffing by several members of the party who required a loo stop (Marie), money (Philip) and even water (Philip again).

As a result the leader who had doggedly managed to find the start point found that 5 members of the party had disappeared. 20 minutes later after phone calls and much muttering all 12 were reunited and we set off on our trek to find the village of Tudes where we had been assured we would find a bar to satisfy our hunger and thirst.

Conditions were fairly hot and sticky as we ascended on forest tracks and trails. Ruins of a monastery and the deserted village of Parciada were reached before we came upon the village of Tudes. It is a beautiful village set in the hills at 500m and possessing The Taberna del Ingles which serves all the usual fare you would expect in the middle of nowhere in a foreign country, including beer, cheese and ham rolls. This was a rare treat for a BUMS walk. Normally this is the sort of luxury expected only on the final walk of a holiday. A new precedent?

The return to Potes was uneventful except that we lost Hugh to feet problems and we didn't find the exact route prescribed however we finished up at the correct place, namely a bar by the river serving 5 bottles of San Miguel for 5 euros. It turned out to be 5 euros a litre, so not so cheap after all.

Fuelled by San Miguel we created the holiday kitty and set off to spend it at the supermercado. 5 of us staggered back to Tama, rucksacks bulging with Gin, wine, tonic water, lemons nibbles and even ice. All were stashed in the gay suite fridge to chill for the next day.

At the planning meeting later Jim volunteered to lead a high level walk on Tuesday bearing in mind the good weather forecast.

Tuesday 24th July

There was complete chaos at breakfast as it emerged that Chris & Chrissie has lost their hire car key. They decided to abandon the walk in favour of regaining mobility. Also Hugh was a no show due to bad back/feet etc.

So the remaining nine of us set off to Fuente De (location of cable car) in 2 cars, Mike W driving the 2012 version of the popemobile, a Peugeot box on wheels. It was a 35min drive to Fuente De where we parked and prepared for the 1000m ascent to the rocky peaks. It was very hot so shady spots were used to regroup and take on water and we made the col without mishap. At this point Mike W, Philip, Selina and Marie announced that they would like to avoid the descent by heading to the cable car. One of the Colletts reps had apparently mentioned that it is possible to connect with our route and indeed it looked feasible on the map.

So we parted company and 5 of us headed across a meadow, the Vega de Liordes, towards a hut where we were met by a couple of Spanish lads telling us that there is an injured climber up in the rocks and they needed a mobile signal to call for help. No signals were available on the plateau so we were pretty useless. We left one of them running to the col we had recently left in search of a mobile signal. In the meantime we continued on our route, climbing out of the plateau to the highest point of the day where we stopped for lunch. As we made our way down, the sound of the helicopter meant that help was on its way to the injured climber.

It was downhill all the way after that and we arrived back at Fuente De expecting to find the other 4 in the bar. There was no sign of them so Jim phoned a disgruntled Philip and it turned out there was no route through to the cable car and they were now descending on our original ascent route. The 5 of us retired to the bar for an hour to speculate on the cause (blame) for the disaster. They eventually appeared, footsore and with aching joints to offer some explanation for the debacle. It was caused by the map, the compass, misinformation and a plague of locusts but there was apparently no human error involved!

For the record, the walk was 13.2 km with 1000metres of ascent, an excellent day out in the high Picos mountains.

So it was back to base for a debrief and a few drinks where it transpired that the Latter's car keys had mysteriously appeared in Chrissies rucksack just as the car rental guy turned up to assist. Another potential marmot?

Wednesday 25th July

Following yesterday's high level exploits, it was decided to visit the "must see" Cares Gorge which is an hour and a half drive away. Chris & Chrissie decided to catch up on yesterday's mountain walk, having refound their car keys and Marie was a no show, struggling with hay fever.

Les and I travelled in the Quinn's Corsa which struggled desperately to get over the mountain passes but eventually we arrived in the lovely village of Cain from where the walk started. The gorge walk was 18 km but was an out and back route. It was another baking hot day and any hopes that there would be shaded stretches were quickly dispelled. Also, it turned out that it was a public holiday in the region, and we also discovered that due to a landslip, the path had been closed up until a few weeks ago. This must have accounted for the hordes of Spaniards also on our route.

The gorge is of course a natural feature, but there was also a man made water course engineered alongside and above the gorge which provides irrigation to lower valleys. There is without doubt spectacular scenery available and the walk out was a fairly leisurely sightseeing and photography extravaganza. It was pretty flat with a small rise to a point overlooking the last few Kms of the gorge which we had been advised to miss out. So lunch was taken at this point and we then turned back to retrace our steps.

There was very little lingering on the return leg as basically there was nothing new to see. As we yomped back, the cloud cover increased and as we sat in a bar in Cain the rain arrived. It failed to disrupt the rehydration and we set off back to base - only 90mins to keep Tony awake!

Wednesday's are the Colletts staff day off so we had booked our evening meal in a restaurant in Potes. The girls were very impressed with taxi driver who spoke passable English and turned out to be a better weather forecaster than a combination of all the Picos weather web sites. Marie even obtained his phone number but hopefully that was only so that we could rebook him for the return.

The meal turned out to be excellent and as we had been seated in a separate room, we could make as much noise as we liked. The evening was concluded in the Cafe Fofi with brandy and beer.

Thursday 26th July

Wednesday evening had definitely taken its toll on the BUMS. It could not have been the food so could it have been the drink? Plans to climb the local Via Ferrata were quickly binned and most of the group signed up to do a Colletts guided "Flower/namby pamby" walk.

Mike W went for a solo ramble, as did Marie. Hugh stayed flat on his back in his room, Chris hired a mountain bike and went on a guided mountain bike tour with a couple of Dutchmen, and Les & I decided to make use of our road bikes. We rode up to the Fuente De cable car station for a coffee and then back to Potes and then up to Tudes, for lunch (hopefully) at the bar we had discovered on Monday. It was a hot and steep slog up to Tudes and miraculously the bar was open. The other thing I noticed sitting outside the bar was a sort of familiar figure who turned out to be Marie, waiting for Hugh to rise from his bed and drive up to meet her for lunch. She of course didn't recognise us in Lycra until we were very close! So we enjoyed a sociable lunch and then it was downhill all the way to Posada El Corcal where most of the gang had already reassembled after their walk. The evening was a very low key affair with alcohol intake at a record low as batteries were recharged.

Friday 27th July

Somehow Friday did not get written up in the almanac while we were away, therefore I am writing up notes based on a fuzzy memory and photos. Even the map has been thrown out - my plan must have been to use that to bring it all flooding back.....

What I can say is that it was Marie's walk and the whole squad were present in her honour. The route was in the vicinity of Fuente De again, but not so far up the valley and therefore not so high. I think it started from the village of Pombes. Les & I were in the lead (leader's car) and the journey was notable for taking a right turn too early and ending up in the dead end of a private house. Funny how we remember the things that go wrong!

We parked up opposite the church, with a good deal of faffing, much to the amusement of two locals who were hanging around. We set off on a gentle rise through fields and forest trails until we came to a clearing where regrouping and coffee break took place (as usual no coffee in sight). We continued up towards the highest point of the walk and made a

short detour to bag a summit which gave us great views in all directions towards the high ground of the Picos. We then retraced back to the main route which followed a broad track and contoured around the base of a craggy ridge which was starting to become ominously cloud covered. The weather was still fine when we stopped for lunch however, and Hugh was desperate to get out of the sun and found himself a small hole to sit in a short distance away.

I should mention that the flying insects were becoming a bit of a nuisance which particularly seemed to irritate Lesley. She seemed to think that by dressing up in bracken camouflage, the flies would not recognise her as an edible human. It probably didn't confuse the flies and it did give us a laugh.

After lunch there was a potential detour mooted by Tony who wanted to add at least 4 miles onto the walk so that we could visit the refuge near the top of the ski lift. The response was underwhelming, not least due to the possibility of storms moving in, and the rebellion was quickly quelled. It was therefore, the easy descent back to Pembes and the landscape took on the familiar forest trails. The weather was closing in and there was even a donning of waterproofs towards the end. So no dramas and a fine display of navigation by Marie (with the backup of Hugh's GPS).

On our return, it was the usual attack on the gay suite 's fridge whose stocks were disappearing rapidly. Philip in particular seemed to be on a mission to prove to himself that he could drink copious amounts of alcohol without falling over. By the 7.00 "Office Hour" he was causing mayhem, smashing glasses and frightening the ladies with his bare torso. He disappeared to have a shower and failed to reappear for dinner at the allotted time. We were amazed to see him reappear 30 minutes later in the restaurant ready for action.

After dinner it was the opening ceremony of the Olympics so we all piled into the bar to watch the proceedings and to polish off the kitty whilst making a lot of patriotic noise over the Spanish commentary. A late and alcoholic evening was enjoyed by all.

Saturday 28th July

A very late and alcoholic night watching the Olympics opening ceremony has taken its toll on the BUMS who drifted into the breakfast room in dribs and drabs or not at all. The weather has become very British and a high level ridge walk has become unpopular. The Latters and Willises decide on a walk with lunch and Hugh has decided on a lying down day to try and regenerate his failing body. The rest of us chose a lowish level walk starting from San Pedro, only 10 mins. drive away. Lesley takes up

the leadership challenge and off we go at the unbums time of 10.00. Lynn had failed to make the official breakfast but has made a miraculous recovery to be with us.

It is mizzly and claggy a we make our way up through sodden forest tracks and after 2 hours we are at a small hamlet of Salarzon where we stop for lunch in the grounds of a derelict looking church. It would now be downhill all the way but Jim announces that this is a definite contender for the "namby pamby" walk of the week so Lesley sets about finding an extension. It looks like there is a possibility to throw in a loop that gets us up to the foothills of the Plan A ridge with a couple of hundred metres climbing. Everyone is up for it and the baton of leadership is passed to me as we are now off the official route and I have the GPS. No problem, however, there is a bit more climbing than estimated and there is a bit of faffing in finding and then leaving the village of Corbena. Philip has started to lose his sense of humour and scrounges some painkillers for relieving some mystery pain. By this time the vultures were circling and we were working on a plan to stop them swooping to finish him off. The original route is rejoined and Lesley retakes the baton and we pick our way down through the forest to the village of Pumarena, only half an hour away from the end. Pumarena boasts a bolero which is a rectangular dusty area where a game which is a cross between skittles and bowls is played. The bolero is very scruffy and hopefully the game is more attractive.

Post walk we managed (eventually) to find a bar in Potes where we took coffee? and cake and watched the climax of the Olympic men's road race which sadly did not feature Team GB.

Everyone convenes at 7.00 for the ceremony of the Golden Marmot. It is the Quinns privilege to pass on the marmot for an act of outstanding misbehaviour or stupidity. There are many contenders but Jim takes the award for the driving licence incident. The final evening is a bit of an anticlimax after the previous night's shenanigans. Nevertheless it was enjoyable and the hardcore drinkers managed to toast the holiday with a bargain brandy (2 euros for at least a treble!) in the Cafe Fifo.

On Sunday morning, Hugh and Marie disappeared at the crack of dawn to catch their flight. Tony and Lynn set off for their second week in Northern Spain and Les and I headed to France for our 2 week extension. The rest of the party enjoyed a leisurely drive to Bilbao Airport for their afternoon flights.

We all thought the Picos is a beautiful area but the general feeling seemed to be that it did not have the walking and climbing attraction of the Dolomites or the Alps. The accommodation was superb, probably the

best we have experienced with Colletts but there were mixed views about the food quality. Despite these minor whinges, the holiday was as enjoyable as ever with the BUMS.

Mike A