

My decision to walk in Andalusia came about through a long causal chain, beginning with a thoughtful dog walk and ending with me hunched over a map of the Iberian Peninsula. In between these two points there came various necessary stepping stones such as the discovery of Hugh Thomas's book on the Civil War, hearing various accounts of pilgrim's journeys, and my father handing me a Laurie Lee; all were significant in shaping the route that I would later follow. After months of deliberation, I opened a map and began amalgamating various pathways and roads – with the great E4 trans-European walk as my central life line. Once I had finished scrawling, these roads led me from Gibraltar to Granada, on a dog's leg route. Four days after my eighteenth birthday I boarded a budget airline flight, and within a few hours had touched down and turned my back on The Rock.

I stopped for a lunchtime *bocadillo* once I reached Targuilla. Sitting in the cafe window whilst carefully eating my simple portion of food, I could not help but begin to feel overcome by a despair that I had been poorly trying to suppress. Despair which then blossomed into shameless self-pity as I further continued the exercise of considering the journey ahead of me. A month later, a Spanish farm-hand would tell me that the southern coast of Spain is not Spain. By lunchtime on this first day, the truth in his words had not yet become apparent and I looked to the future with deep apprehension.

Several weeks prior to this, I had sat at my planning table in my perfectly temperate room where water was on tap and shade was readily available. Here I had considered the question of how best to catapult myself northwards and onto the E4 from my starting point. A more experienced walker, or simply a more patient human being, might have explored and considered various local footpaths and country roads. I, however, was far more interested in solving this question as soon as possible, ideally before tea time. I scanned the map and quickly spotted a large, alluring, and perpendicular red line that led up north from Gibraltar. With a feeling of self-satisfaction I took out my highlighter and coloured it in, believing myself to have resolved the issue with an obvious and convenient solution. Many weeks later I would follow my highlighted map up to this very same red line, and see in front of me a bustling dual-carriageway. My hasty decision weeks before could not have condemned me to follow a less scenic, or more impractical route. Upon the unsurprising discovery that there was no designated path for walkers, I dejectedly clambered into the only other conceivable pathway - the drainage ditch that ran parallel to the road - and began a four hour long scramble. By midday I had exhausted myself with no reward in sight, and began the morale-sapping task of calculating the exact number of hours until my return flight. But after only a handful of miles my midday blues had evaporated. With each new step away from civilisation, the sunbaked grey palate of the morning withdrew and was replaced by one of rich greens and sharp, prickly browns. The concrete trench that had dominated my peripheral vision was forgotten as grand holm oaks marched in to flank me on both sides; they would escort me for days afterwards. My fondest moment of all was when the tarmac simply crumbled away to reveal the far more ancient red dusted track beneath. Despite the rising afternoon temperatures I was full of hope and continued on until the end of the day without rest.

The evening that followed made the first day particularly memorable. By the time I reached the top of the hill at *Castillo de Castellar* I had walked nearly 40 kilometres. I was exhausted. I had yet to learn about the importance of the siesta - more specifically, I did not understand that only those with a death wish attempt to hike up hills in the Spanish summer between 12 and 5pm. This lesson was learnt the next day when a pounding head and an insidious bout of dizziness forced me to withdraw for the afternoon. After struggling through a thorn bush I popped out onto the zigzagging road just before a hilltop castle; stony faced, drenched in sweat, and caked in dust.

“How far've you come mate?” said an English voice with a Northern twinge, from further down the road. I apprehensively turned, half believing that I had hallucinated an English accent out of the longing for comfort. But there he was, a real Englishman, sitting in a white plastic chair on the roadside, with a pot bellied Spaniard whom he had been chatting to before I arrived. He looked to be about 50, what with this greying, wiry hair, though his glowing tanned skin and recently shaved face nevertheless gave him an air of Mediterranean health.

“From Gibraltar” I replied

“You came from Gib?” he said with a friendly giggle of surprise “well if I had any money I'd buy you a drink, you look like you need one actually” and I did. I asked if I could pull up a chair and soon we

were telling each other our life stories. He called himself “Frog”, said he had been an olive oil merchant who lost everything in the 2008 crash, and who was now homeless. He found himself at the castle during this period and rather romantically decided that if he was going to become homeless, here was as beautiful a place as any to do so, and so Frog had lived there ever since. We ate a meal together during which he showed genuine interest in my trip; asking to see all my maps and giving pieces of paternal advice here and there as he studied them. We cleaned our plates with bread and then he asked me where I planned to sleep that night. Understandably a little nervous, I replied that I had seen a nice level spot on the hill somewhere that I thought would do.

“Well” he began “there's these little caves down the other side of the hill. They're limestone I think, and have lots of room. Oh, and a lake out front too. That's where I was headed for the night, and I could show you if you like?”

And so Frog and I descended the hill to reach the promised caves. Here I saw the great spacious holes in the hillside, in front of which lay a small, clear body of water. We slept at different ends of the cave, and I woke to the rising sun after a surprisingly comfortable night. I slipped out whilst Frog slept on, leaving a small thank you note behind.

The landscape continued to be fairly dramatic for the duration of the trip. After this initial day, I continued my route through the valleys and over the peaks of sierras – the concrete wasteland seemed a bad dream from long ago. The people became increasingly friendly too, and looks of disdain from the coast were replaced by inquisitive friendliness. I had a broken English conversation with some farmers at an old fountain one evening. They had come to stock up on water for their isolated hill huts and our conversation began simply because they wanted to know what material my hat was made from. Sometimes people ran out of their houses to hand me bottles of water, or food, or on one instance an ice cold can of beer. Farmers were rarely impressed by my decision to walk through July: they considered it stupid rather than brave. But nonetheless they always wanted to hear about it, and it seemed to serve as a rite of passage; they would always relax and become more amicable after their necessary but brief chiding.

When I walked into the natural parks I was left entirely to myself. Nowhere was this more apparent than on the Llanos de Libar track after Montejaque. I walked for over two days without seeing a soul. The route consisted of a path through a tea-coloured grassy plain, then a steep ridge with two peaks, followed by a climb down into an incredibly flat and searingly hot valley. This valley was inhabited by terrifying free-roaming bulls, doomed to become a part of the booming *Ubrique* leather trade. The plain was littered with grasshoppers; every step caused half a dozen to spring up into the air from their dry, grassy bed, like dust on a snare skin. I had a broken night's sleep up on the ridge, as I attempted to ignore the ominous rustling that came and went during the night. The following morning I descended into the valley. All this time I had been completely cut off from civilisation. My water supplies were low, and since I had arrived on the plain the previous morning my food bag had only contained a banana, breadsticks and some olive oil. I rejoined humanity after another night, during which time everything ran out; but despite this I was perfectly happy. It is hard to feel lonely when your mind is occupied with primal matters like food, water and shelter.

Several days later I was in Ronda. The last two weeks had been an opportunity to appreciate an unadulterated, rural Spain. As such, visiting Ronda was my first chance to admire the manmade structures, which had been shaped out of this barren landscape. Few places offer such a rich display of man's ambition in the face of environmental challenges. Ronda looks down upon a vast and deep gorge, into which various enemies at various times have been thrown. My natural reaction upon leaning over and looking into the deep, rust coloured rock face was one somewhere between awe and fear. Yet someone at some point had peered down into the same depths and declared that here was as good a place as any to found a town and bring up children. What a hardy man he must have been. It was certainly a place of great dramatic beauty, but I had itchy feet. I had grown accustomed and fond of broken Spanish conversations, sleeping rough, and the familiar daily struggles that walking presented. Ronda was, quite understandably, a tourist hot bed. This brought conveniences such as English translations for signs and comfortable campsites; things that I both welcomed, and wanted to be rid of as soon as possible. I therefore left Ronda after only three nights and slept soundly the following day when I finally found myself in the misty hills that surround El Chorro, where the air

smelt of stewing plums and where vultures swooped in the valleys below. That night I was tormented by a brigade of ants and had a grey fox which ran straight into my legs, but I laughed these things off as necessary parts of enjoying the peace of the Spanish countryside once more.

Many more miles were walked and countless small adventures were had. Temperatures rose and fell, as did my food and water supplies. Friendships that lasted minutes or hours were made and then forgotten, acts of kindness and cruelty were witnessed, campsites were constructed and then dismantled. I reread *For Whom The Bell Tolls* during this walk, and upon my second reading, one of Robert Jordan's realisations struck me as profoundly true. As he contemplates his near inevitable death in two days time, he considers how he will miss out on a life he that he was very much looking forward to. He then stops himself. It dawns on him that all the events and emotions and relationships that he has experienced in the last few days and will experience in the following two add up to make a life that amounts to all he ever desired from living. "A good life is not measured by any biblical span" he tells himself. Though I was lucky enough not to have it forced upon me by impending death, a lengthy period alone and on the move brought me round to a similar conclusion. In six weeks I felt a greater range of feelings, and met more new faces, and saw more awe-inspiring vistas than I think I have in any previous six years of ordinary living. Though all I seemed to think about whilst walking was home and its luxuries, having now arrived back and once more grown accustomed to them, I find my self looking back to Spain as I once looked forward. Life may have regained its convenience, but living has become less condensed. My walk in Spain was no great feat compared to what others have done, or probably what some do everyday. Yet on a purely personal level it was the greatest thing I have ever undertaken, and only in a nostalgic sort of retrospect have I come to appreciate this. I consider myself hugely lucky to have had such a life-intensifying experience, and all credit for this is due to the unforgiving yet profoundly noble landscapes I encountered and the richly passionate people who lived within them. After this first trip, I cannot help but count the days until I return.

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