

Monte Castellet. Finestrat on the Costa Blanca.

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Winter is here again and many climbers start to dream of visiting the winter sun and fun of the Costa Blanca. This area has now become the major destination for rock climbers from all over northern Europe, not so surprising really when you consider the amount of climbable rock and good weather that this area has. Few of these visitors realise that the Costa Blanca also has some of the best ridge scrambling and mountain walking in Europe. As many will already know my home and climbing school (Compass west) is based in Finestrat, a small village below the mighty Piug Campana. This mountain is now one of the major destinations for those who want long multi pitch climbing in a classical style

(using gear). Just south of Campana is a ridge that forms a long chain of peaks and spires. Most of those who see this ridge are so impressed and yet few bother to delve into its secrets. It is about eight miles long and most of its length is made up of a sharp classical knife edged ridge. If this ridge had been in Scotland, Wales or the Lakes, it would have formed the basis of many a picture book, being in Spain, where there is so much rock, most climbers just give it a brief glance and then pass on to the nearest sports climbing venue. When I first saw the Castelletts I had a burning desire to complete the whole ridge, particularly when I heard that a very famous climber had spent eight years completing it. Eight years for god sake!!! How long or difficult could it be? I was soon to find out, and now having completed it I can well understand the time scale required to climb the whole length of this magnificent ridge. Although the ridge is very long it is very conveniently broken up into short escapable sections, each section giving a good days climbing and scrambling. All of the sections need the skills of rock climbing and expert rope management; rock-climbing gear is essential. To complete the whole ridge in one push would require about thirty to forty hours of continuous climbing.

The most enjoyable and easiest section is perhaps the south end of the ridge that forms the highest peak, Monte Castellet. 698 metres above sea level. Not very high but what it lacks in altitude it makes up for in spectacular scenery and exhilarating situations. Go in February or March and the flowers will knock your eyeballs out. This section gives about seven or eight hours of really excellent scrambling /climbing, with four abseils. There are two approaches each needing a car, although it is possible to reach the ridge on foot from Finestrat and would require a long, though very beautiful, walk along metal roads. The most convenient way is to have someone drop you off at the beginning of the climb and then collect you at a predetermined time further along the ridge(see map). The first part of the ridge is a pleasant scramble that would present little difficulty to anyone who has done Crib Coch etc. As you make your way up the broad ridge, that forms the southern end of the whole chain, the height you gain starts to bring in the spectacular views of the Puig Campana. In fact this mountain makes its presence known throughout the whole day with its ever changing moods. Once on the top of the Monte Castellet you get the first view of the sharp ridge formations that will challenge you for the rest of the



day. The first section is the sharpest, and hardest, so if you get across this you can manage the rest. The rock is not perfect but quite manageable for experienced scramblers. Many will pitch this section (using ropes etc.) as the drop on each side makes it presents known, usually in the stomach.

Once across the sharpest section the ridge becomes a pleasant

rocky walk to the summit of the next peak. On reaching this you will see a small ruined building just below the crest. This was built by Arabs and used as a lookout. Many of which are situated on similar peaks throughout the region. It must have been a hard life walking up here daily to man this it. You would need water, food and all the basics for living up there. They obviously found this place had excellent views of the surrounding countryside and like them you to can take advantage of this position and enjoy the fantastic views which extend north as far as the Divino, south towards Cabazon. De Oro and east across to the Mediterranean..

Just after leaving the summit the ridge ends in a steep drop off which gives the first of three abseils. Those with more experience may elect to down climb the ridge, around very difficult. Just below the edge a bolt will be found that can be backed up with a sling. One long absiel (50 metres) reaches the easy ground, should you use a 25m rope you will need to do some down climbing. The ridge starts to get sharp again and your climbing and scrambling skills are needed to negotiating some very dramatic pinnacles. Another short absiel leads to more scrambling and even more pinnacles. Eventually these pinnacles end above a very steep wall where a bolt and back-up can be used for an abseils. A 25 metre absiel lands you on a broad col with a further summit ahead. This

summit is in fact a false lead, although some may wish to visit it as a completion of the whole ridge. Make in the direction of the summit between small ridges of rock. This ends at another col. There are two alternatives here, either follow the red paint slashes down across the steep hillside. These eventually end above a deep



gully. The other alternative is to descend right of the summit and onto the sharp ridge which eventually leads to a small col with a peg and back up sling. You now make a 20 metre abseil to ledges lower down. Walk down the ledges left to reach The drop off into the gully as above. Climb down this (Difficult) and follow the ledges down to the hillside below.

If you wish to continue following the ridge proper, which can add another six or seven hours to your day, you need to continue from the base of the down climbing bit, at the top of the gully. The climbing on the next section requires climbing of very severe standard.

Once on the open hillside you can make your way down towards the almond trees and Cassetas. You need to take care when making your way through the almond trees as the local land owner do not like you trampling on their land below the trees. Keep to the wilder parts, tracks and ridges.

Time. Allow about six/seven hours with a partner. Groups will take longer and soloing takes about two hours.

Grade. The climbing never gets above very difficult and can be soloed by the competent.

Equipment . You will need to have a 50 metre rope for absiels. This can be avoided if you make detours below the ridge itself-which defeats the object of visiting this ridge. A few nuts etc. will be useful. Spare cord for the back-ups on the abseils. Rock boots are



not really necessary but if you do use them you'll be changing them a lot. A peg hammer can be useful and also the odd peg if you have to make a retreat. Take plenty of water .

Best time to visit. You can visit anytime but mid summer ,July August , will be hell for hot weather. The flowers are out on the ridge all year but it is best in February to May. Take a camera for the views are astonishing.

What to look out for. Loose rock ,although this will disappear as more climbers visit the ridge. In a storm get off it as soon as you can . You will notice many areas along the ridge where lightning has taken huge chunks out of it. Snakes , these are big but present little danger although they can bite and it does hurt. If you come across giant lizards do not approach them for once cornered they will attack and have a fearsome bite. Now a word of warning about striking a line directly up or down the hill, and this goes for any walking in the Costa Blanca.. Don't be tempted into finding a direct route through the open country, try to find the paths or coat tracks. It is harsh, prickly and thick, it really hurts if you have shorts on. I always travel in long trousers.(coward!!)

Climbing the Castellet and other ridges form part of some of the courses run at Compass West (Spain) Finestrat. Anyone wishing to have details of these courses , Mountain rock, Rock climbing. and mountaineering should get in touch with me at ;

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