

Climbing On The Costa Blanca

Ian Christie

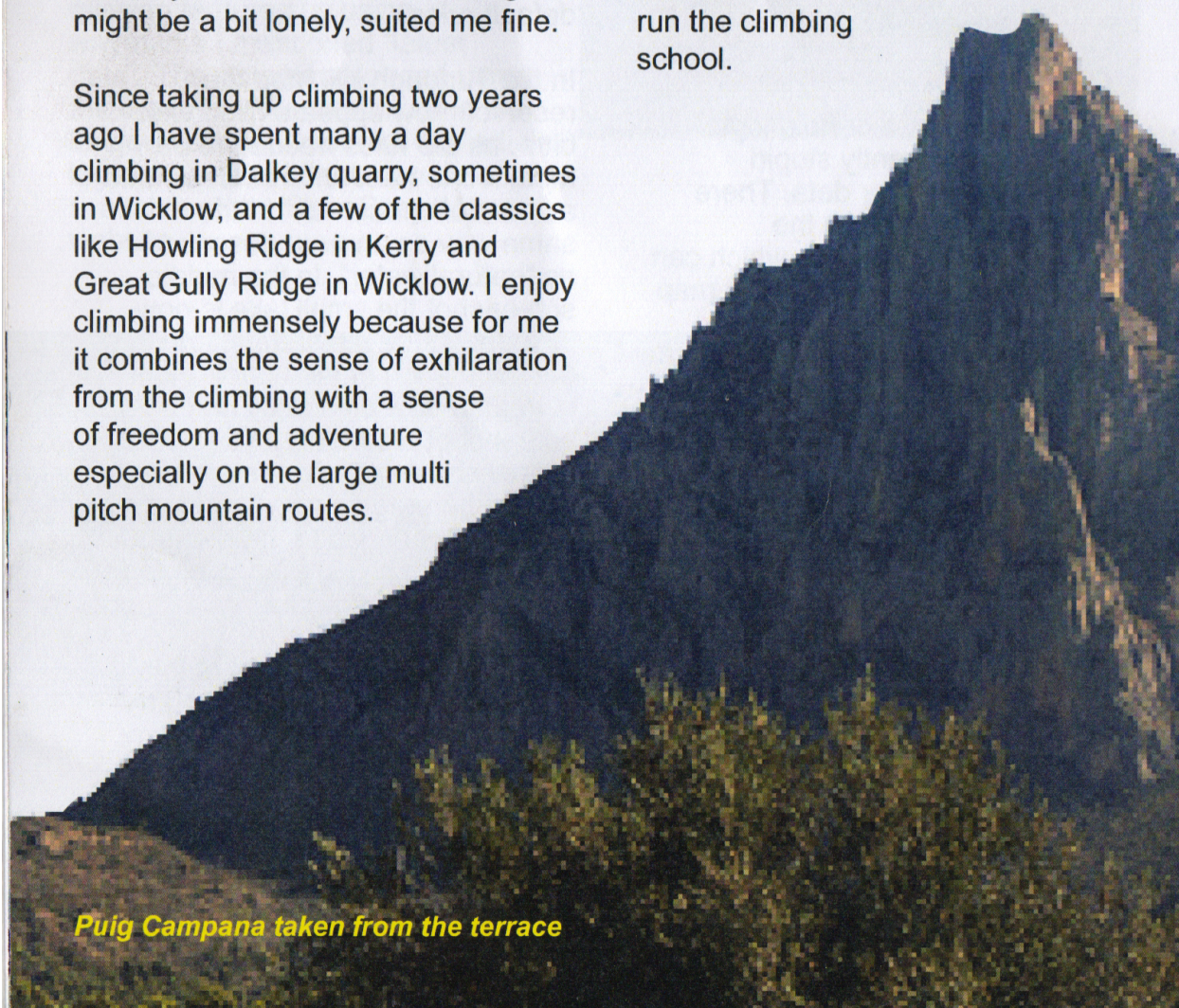
End of February in Dublin. Bouts of rain interspersed with cold damp cloudy days. Having some time on my hands I made the decision to head south to the mountains just a few miles inland from Benidorm on the Costa Blanca in Spain.

I signed up for a weeks climbing course with a company called Compass West. Although they had no other people booked for the course on the week I wanted, they suggested that they would run a course just for me, which although it might be a bit lonely, suited me fine.

Since taking up climbing two years ago I have spent many a day climbing in Dalkey quarry, sometimes in Wicklow, and a few of the classics like Howling Ridge in Kerry and Great Gully Ridge in Wicklow. I enjoy climbing immensely because for me it combines the sense of exhilaration from the climbing with a sense of freedom and adventure especially on the large multi pitch mountain routes.

But I felt some of total immersion is what I needed and some sharpening up of my rope handling, systems, knots etc., so I booked for the week. Also what drew me to this area in particular is a huge lump of rock 1400 metres high called the Puig Campana. Obviously 20 degree sunshine helped.

A Saturday afternoon flight to Alicante and I was picked up by Betty and Rowland Edwards, who, along with their son Mark, run the climbing school.



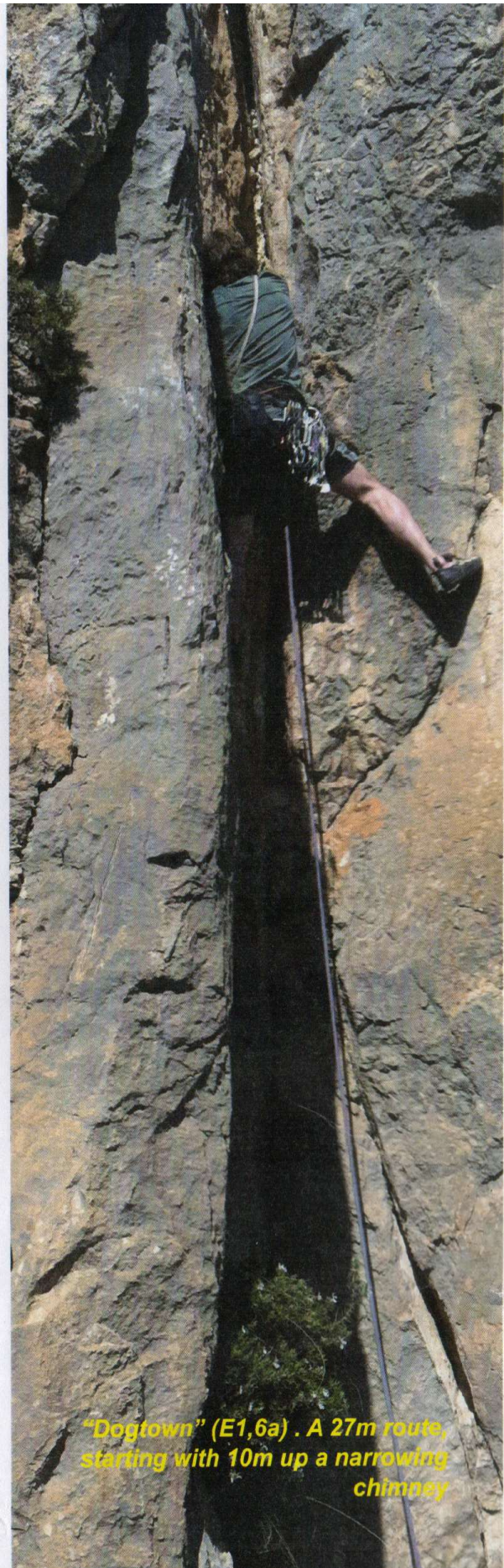
Puig Campana taken from the terrace

A short drive and at 11pm I was shown into my home for the week, a self catering bungalow on the grounds of the climbing school compound in the pretty Spanish countryside about one kilometre from the small quiet town of Finestrat. A nice bungalow, wall to wall climbing magazines, books, guides and DVDs, but best of all a beautiful terrace looking straight up onto the massive which is the Puig Campana. I was excited as I looked forward to the week ahead.


10 a.m. next morning after a sunny breakfast on my terrace I was met by Mark, my instructor for the week. Now in his forties Mark has been rock climbing since he was a child and instructing for over twenty years. An easy going friendly chap, originally from Cornwall, he now lives all year round in Spain. We went through various knots and methods of tying on, also some explanation and examples of types and properties of different ropes.

After lunch in we visited a local crag where Mark went through movement on rock and using some of these techniques we climbed a number of v. diff routes.

The second day and the pace was turned up a notch. We visited the famous climbing area of Sella about 8km away and did some sport climbing on a crag called the Rhino, so named as the ridge formation is shaped like a giant rhino. Beginning



"Dogtown" (E1,6a) . A 27m route, starting with 10m up a narrowing chimney



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at sport grade 4+ I gradually climbed harder and harder routes until we got to "my level". At this stage I was falling off a lot and was at my limit, tiny footholds, not much rests, near vertical climbing on long 25m routes. We did ten routes in all, finishing on a 6c route in which the rope above me played a large part in my ascending to the top!

After good nights sleep the next day Wednesday was a less physical day. In the morning we did various ways of ascending a rope with the aid of a large pine tree outside my bungalow. Then we did escaping the system and hoisting a second climber. All this took place in beautiful sunshine and was explained by Mark in a very straightforward and easy to understand way. In the afternoon a visit to a nearby crag where we went through racking gear and placing protection and I lead some routes.

The Castelletts, a 5km knife edge ridge just out of Finestrat was our destination the next day. We were joined by Marks dad Rowland, and also by a friend of Marks named Ian, a very accomplished E5 climber, and a keen surfer. Ian spent some years instructing climbing with Mark in Cornwall. Using his climbing skills he moved over to rope access work, and now travels the world descending into chimneys, bridges, dams, etc for a living. He was heading off the following week for a month long stint in the Ivory Coast.

The Castellet's south face, which we were climbing on, has over 160 routes. There is also the unclimbed north face, with massive untapped climbing potential. A lot of the routes are in fact first ascents by Mark or Rowland and we got to work knocking them off.

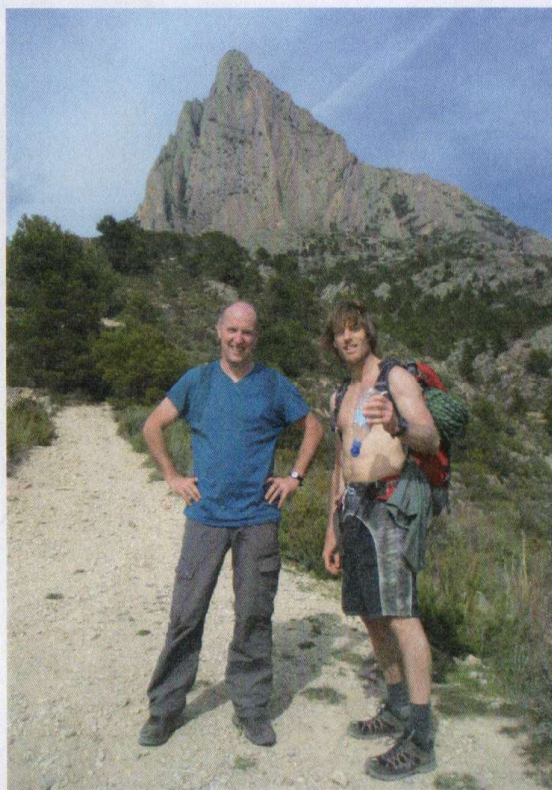
Cracks, faces, chimneys, hand jams, foot jams, they had it all, and sometimes in the same route.

One route I particularly enjoyed was "Dogtown". A step right onto a near vertical face, but with small two finger size pockets in the rock, typical of limestone. This face then forms into a laybacking crack. After 5 meters this crack widens, the rock bulges out and presents a strenuous overhang to finish. A fabulous climb, we'd give our eye teeth for it in Dalkey!

We also did a great bolted 40 metre arête "Edwards Edge". Other climbs were Nostradamus and Independent. The last we did was El Mossel (the owl). This one so named because on

Mark's first ascent he was surprised by an owl in the crack half way up! Each one of these climbs classics. A great day but at this stage my knuckles, fingertips, shoulders, feet, arms and various other parts of my body were starting to feel the strain.

The next day, our last day of climbing, and we were to do a long multipitch on the Puig Campana.



*The two lads after climbing Anglada/Cerda/
Gallego(E2)*

This is the mountain I have come over to climb, a massive one with many facets and many many climbs, 80 in total, from the 20 m single sports route to the 34 pitch "Bivvy route" which is 1650m long and is usually completed in two days with an overnight bivvy on the way. Mark has climbed them all but one and has first ascent on many.

If allowed he will talk for hours about the mountain and clearly is in love. One day while climbing he told me about the day he soloed the 13 pitch epsilon central in 22 minutes while waiting for his lift home. Climbing



is his job and you can see it in his professionalism, but climbing is also his love, and that is fairly obvious also. That night I hit the bed early, I was tired and I had a big day ahead.

6.30 a.m. and the familiar crackling sounds of the expanding roof tiles as they are hit by the first rays of the hot morning sun. The cockerels have been crowing since early and the dogs, well the Spanish insomniac dogs have been up all night. I waken to my last day in Spain and it's going to be a long one. Nervous expectation I suppose you would call it.

Mark and Ian collect me early, a short drive through the sleeping town, an hour walk and we are at the

vertical base of the Puig. We will do a four pitch E2 climb called Anglada/ Cerda/Gallego , named after the three climbers who climbed it first. We rope up and we are climbing pitch one, a nice easy introduction, but the second pitch gets meaty. We climb through the morning and by early afternoon we are topping out with a marvellous view over the mountains into the Manhattan like skyline of Benidorm, and down the coast to Alicante overlooked by the cliff-top Castillo de Santa Barbara.

A few long steep abseils and we are are back down having our lunch and chatting about seventies disco.

On the way home Mark dropped me off and I had a wander around

the narrow streets of the town of Finestrat and a coffee in a cafe with wifi. I checked my emails, plugging back into life back home. I have had a great week, strenuous climbing but also in another way very relaxing. That evening we all had lovely paella at a local restaurant. Rowland and Betty Edwards, Mark and his girlfriend Andrea, Ian and his girlfriend Di. A lovely evening in great company. I chatted for a while with Marks girlfriend Andrea. Although from Holland and with no Irish roots, she speaks Irish fluently and is quite the accomplished Irish dancer, having spent two years living in Ireland and embracing all things Irish. Afterwards, a beautiful evening and a full moon, and we drive back to the house. As we stand in the garden saying our goodbyes and chatting Rowland recollects the many times that himself and Mark were called out to rescue people on the mountain. One particular bright full moon night they climbed without the need for head torches to rescue a benighted man on the upper slopes.

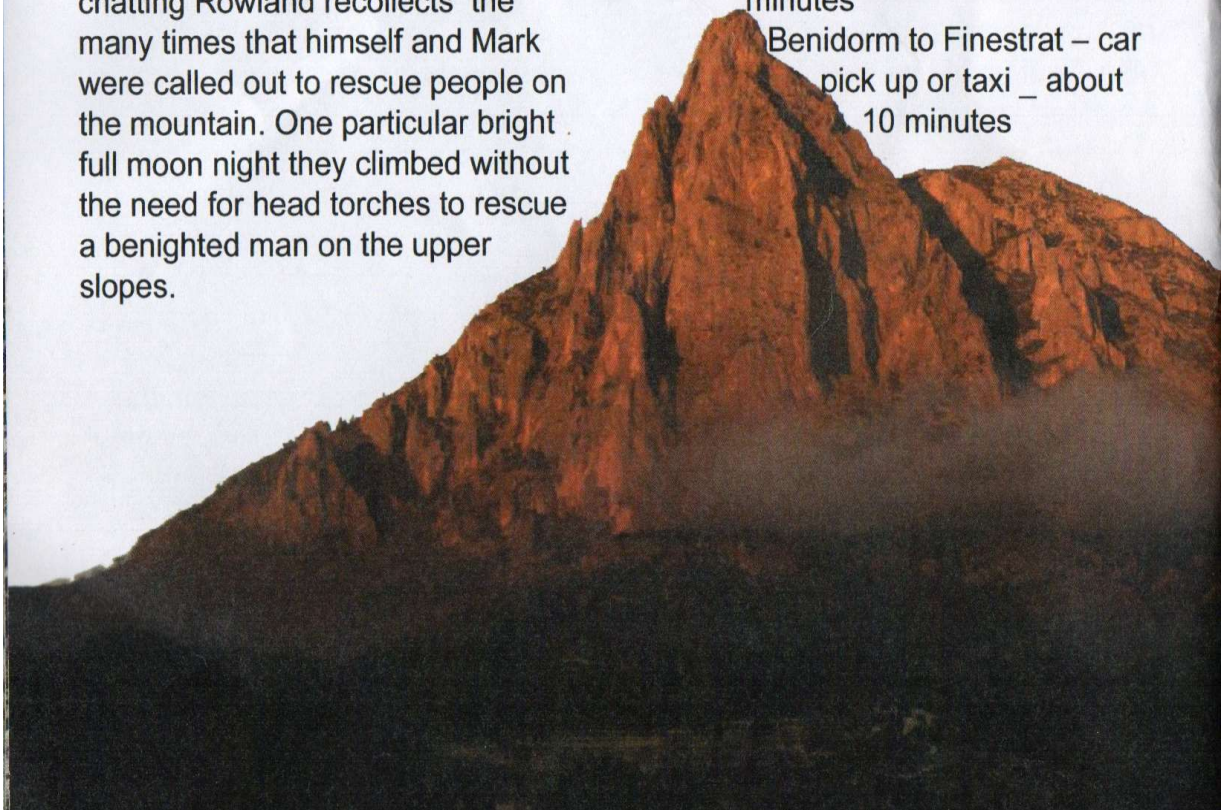
After our goodbyes I am left alone gazing up the moonlit mountain for a few minutes.

The air is warm and a light breeze blows down through the valley but otherwise the night is still. I am struck by the beauty and sheer complexity of the mountain, the north face with its many intricate nooks and crannies, its large pine-clad ledges, and the sheer cliffs of the south face, with its difficult long multi pitch climbs and all day sunshine. The magic of the moonlight mountain grips me and for a moment I am transfixed. I made a promise to myself that I would return.

Travel Details

Flight Dublin to Alicante with Ryanair
Bus from Alicante to Benidorm - 50 minutes

Benidorm to Finestrat – car pick up or taxi _ about 10 minutes





Climbing on Serra Gelada



Climbing Lower Tier Castelletts



Multi pitch climbing Cabazon de Oro.



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Diedro Edwards - Serra Gelada sea cliffs

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Rowland & Mark Edwards

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