

SERRA GELADA

SPANISH TRAD

By Rowland Edwards

IN THE BEGINNING - HISTORY

For many years climbers must have seen the dramatic outline of Serra Gelada whilst climbing on Toix or Penyal d'Irac, its steep outline set against the setting sun is truly impressive and yet few climbers had bothered to visit it. The Serra Gelada is some six kilometres long and 430m at its highest point and its eastern side is mostly steep rock. I know that I was under the impression that the rock quality was terrible, so that just may have had some bearing on the lack of information in the past around the climbing communities.

Our discovery of Serra Gelada started with a close friend, Jose Martinez, a local Spanish climber, who first got us interested in this superb sea cliff. A quick Saturday morning's visit with Jose exploring the sea cliff on the southern end of the mountain, and the easiest part of the mountain to reach, soon provided us with enough evidence that we had just found a gold mine for new routing.

On closer examination, the rock, which we thought was sandstone but later found to be a mixture of both

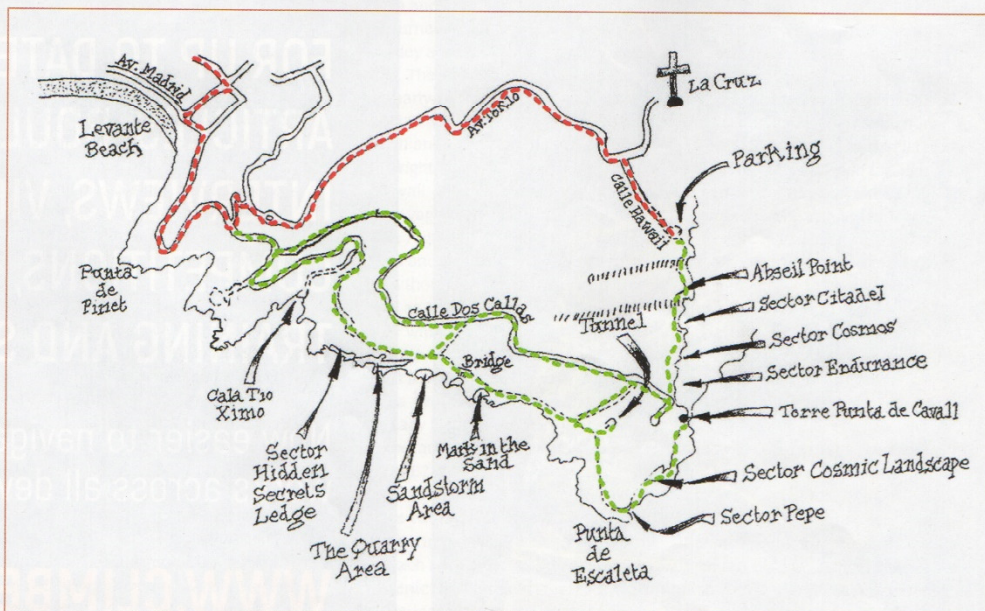
sandstone and limestone, proved to be solid with excellent friction and with vast possibilities for trad climbing. We eventually ended up at Torre Punto Del Cavel, an old Christian look-out on the headland. It is from there one really gets to see the full extent of the amount of rock that makes up Serra Gelada; quite astonishing. It's well worth the walk to the Torre just to get this view. If you thought Gogarth was impressive then Gelada will certainly get the pulses racing. Sadly, not all this rock is available to rock-climbing.

The first routes that Mark (Mark Edwards, my son) and I climbed were along the south coast reaching as far as The Torre (Torre Punto del Cavel) where the rock becomes good quality limestone. It was whilst climbing on The Torre that we had our first contact with the warden of the Parc Natural, Toni Pellicer. At the time we had only been climbing mostly on the lower south side of Gelada and hadn't realised that we were actually in the Parc Natural. Toni informed us that it was prohibited to climb on Gelada. Thankfully for us there

was a small crowd of visiting elderly ladies close by who had overheard our conversation. One of them came close and mentioned to Toni that: "They weren't doing any harm surely." This cooled the conversation down, which gave me time to ask if I could come to see him about climbing in the area. I knew from my past experiences of getting permission to climb on the Ormes at Llandudno in North Wales in 1976 that sometimes, by reasoning with authority, one can get a more favourable outcome.

LLANDUNDO AND FIRST ORMES CLIMBING GUIDE

I was fortunate to be one of the first to climb on The Ormes at Llandudno, North Wales and was about to write the first guide to the area. I had been invited to a meeting with the local council and Mostyne Estate, owners of Little Orme and Great Orme. My first thought was that I was about to gain some sort of financial support for the guide. I was soon deflated when they said that they would not agree to having any guide



Access map to the area with the current approaches. Artwork: Mark Edwards



written for climbing on any of the Ormes as many of the areas were protected. To cut a long story short they didn't want me to write the guide and threatened legal action if I did and would close all areas for climbing.

Fortunately, I had come prepared with the first drafts of a guide to the Ormes, in which I'd included the first Green Guide to a climbing area. This had identified areas which would need to have climbing bans for nesting bird and areas of vegetation. Some of these areas the council didn't even know about. At the time I had also avoided wholesale climbing above the Marine Drive where climbers could drop rocks onto passing cars or walkers. At that time I was just one climber seeking permission and any incident of the public being involved in an accident would have led to climbing having a hard time getting further permissions in the future. I knew that the wealth of rock available for the future would be restricted. In the end they did agree to me writing the guide.

NOW BACK TO GELADA

Having already gone through a similar situation with the Ormes, I wrote up a project to present to the Parc warden and gathered together all the info I could put together to demonstrate that climbers could be trusted to care for the area of Serra Gelada. I had, of course, a copy of my first little green guidebook to the Ormes with its section on bird nesting sites and vegetation, etc. This was the first climbing guide to publish bird nesting protection. I also had my *Cornish Rock* climbing guide where again I had placed a large section with seven pages in the guide identifying birds' nesting and vegetation protection.

This was the second guide, after the Ormes guide, with bird nesting protection in any UK guide. Fortunately, in the project notes I had also included that there would only be adventure routes, trad climbing to UK climbers, and no bolted sport climbs. The local wardens already recognised that bolted sport climbing made areas very popular and

this popularity increased the amount of damage to the environment. This turned out to be one of their main concerns, Serra Gelada being a Protected Natural Area with Zones of Special Interest.

Thankfully when we had first started to climb on Gelada it had been our intention to use mainly leader-placed gear. We at Compass West ISR (the climbing school in Spain where we run courses) mainly teach the use of leader placed gear (trad) with sessions mixed in with bolted sport climbs to give a whole climbing experience. It was obvious that most of the rock on Gelada would take natural leader-placed gear so avoiding fully bolted routes wouldn't be a problem. The written climbing project that I presented to the Parc Natural warden demonstrated the need to take care of the area and its environment. We would avoid any fully bolted climbs, bolts being used only for belays, abseils or the occasion protection.

The Parc wardens asked that we placed in the guide the number of climbers being allowed to climb in each sector ►

Rowland Edwards leading the magnificent *Diedro Edwards/Martinez* (VS 4c/F5) in The Citadel area. Photo: Mark Edwards

at any one time. This would be limited to four climbers per sector. Climbers should also first contact the warden's office before a visit. Many climbers may object to having their freedoms to climb anywhere controlled. It would be a case of being able to visit a wild unspoiled climbing paradise or not at all. In Spain these park officials do have the law on their side. Permissions were eventually given.

LET'S PROCEED WITH THE CLIMBING

What is the rock really like? Well, it certainly isn't like the usual sandstone rock, this sandstone is as hard as granite and usually with plenty of gear placements, if sometimes hard won. On first acquaintance it looks intimidating with its steepness and overlaps, although that said not all sectors are like that and some, in fact, show a welcoming aspect. Like most sandstone rock it sheds its skin over time and if left alone and unclimbed it will become sandy.

Fortunately, there is little vegetation on the actual rock faces and in the surrounding areas where climbing takes place. With just a little care climbers have no need to damage this. Up to now we have not found any bird nesting areas. What is required is that visiting climbers leave no rubbish and help to remove any rubbish that they find. After several years of use the climbing areas are thankfully still looking good; well done climbers.

The Quarry

The easiest areas to reach are along the south end of the mountain with south/southwest-facing cliffs. All the sectors lie hidden below the coastal path. Taking them in turn as you approach, the first is The Quarry. This was originally quarried for ochre by the Phoenicians and maybe the Romans. Originally this quarry had many more routes and, being a quarry, some bolted sport routes. Unfortunately, we found that the bolts at the start of some of these routes became corroded due to being in a different rock type. All the bolts were removed from these routes except four which were on a completely different rock type.

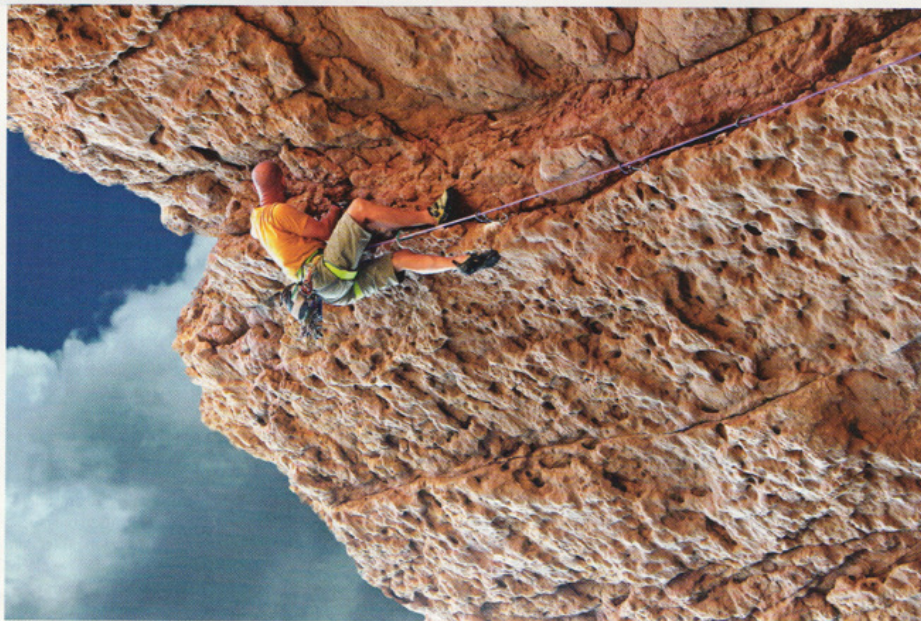
The route *Burnt Sienna* (F8a, 20m) is a stunning overhanging groove on solid rock and, to its right, is an overhanging wall taken by *Golden Dawn* (F8a, 20m) with some spectacular exposed climbing. The only trad route there is the chimney entrance pitch to *Hidden Secrets Ledge*, *Entrance to Hidden Secrets Ledge* (VD/F3, 20m). *Hidden Secrets Ledge* is certainly well-named. Until you are actually on the ledge itself you never get the true extent of this sector. Once below the crag itself it presents quite an intimidating aspect and yet most of the climbs aren't that hard and protection is good. There are many routes for both intermediate to easy Extreme climbers. A good route to test the climbing is *Hidden Secrets* (VS 5a/F5, 35m) – a rather intimidating start with a superb steep juggy top wall and excellent protection.

Moving on east along the coast is Sector Sandstorm and this is a far different proposition than the previous sector as it is far steeper with harder climbing. When approaching the cliff you cannot fail to be impressed by the astonishing main overhang. This is taken by *Mark's Roof* (E6/F8a, 20m) – a true classic overhang using just trad gear. If it was back in the UK it would certainly be on most hard climbers' list. There are other less steeper and easier routes but none for the beginner. All routes are steep with overhangs but again well-protected.

Torre Punto Del Cavel

Continuing east along the path we head towards the Torre Punto Del Cavel. An old Moor/Christian look-out tower. To reach this point one has to make a choice between reaching the base of the climbs or their top. To reach the base one can either walk around the headland, which is the way we will take or to use the tunnel which exits just below the tower. Word of caution – the tunnel is **not to be used** after a good rainfall as it becomes filled with water and is not pleasant at all.

To reach the actual Torre and the top of the routes you have to follow the path upward onto the road above, this ends at an information display and gives an astonishing view along the base of Serra Gelada, truly magnificent and well worth a visit. Unfortunately, not for us climbers as only one small part of the sea cliff is available for climbing but one can ▶



Opposite page: Check out the exposure. Mark Edwards space walking on *A Dream in the Making/Un sueño en la fabricación* (HVS 5a/F5+) at The Citadel. Photo: Rowland Edwards

▶ Mark Edwards on the first ascent of *Cosmic Landscape* (E5 6a/F6c) at Sector Cosmic Landscape in the Cara Del Torre area. Photo: Rowland Edwards

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only hope that in the future this too may be opened to climbing. One can reach the base of the climbs from there by a scramble down the gully of Barranca Cristalis.

Once at the headland a short descent to sea level reaches Cueva Pepe sector with its steep overhang. This sector can become sea-washed if the sea is rough. There are only short routes available but all are on excellent sea-washed rock and all take good gear. The three-star *The Drifter* (HVS/F5, 25m) is the easiest and there is plenty of room for more climbs. Walking the path north below the crag is Sector Sur and Sector Cabeza del Lobo but there are only a couple of good routes in these sectors with plenty of potential for new ones.

Moving north again along the path below the crags one eventually ends up below Sector Cara Del Torre (Face of the Tower). This is when one really gets to see the full extent of rock available for climbing. When you reach the end of the path immediately below is the exit from the tunnel. Above, is the major area of limestone rock on this section of the Gelada. Everything above is limestone and all to the north is made of sandstone. Limestone again appears as a layer at the top of the mountain and descending

northwards towards Albir. The actual physical construction of Gelada is very complex which makes it so interesting to climb on.

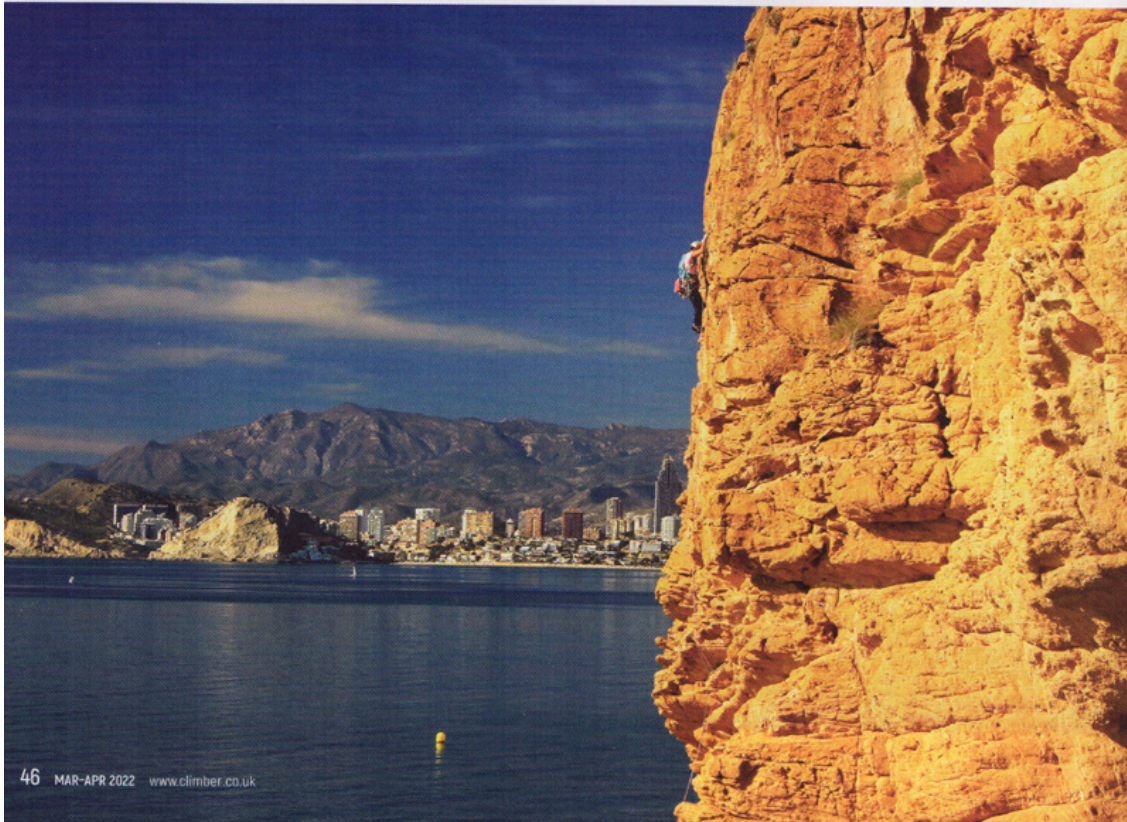
The Cara Del Torre has some of the longest limestone routes, three pitches long. Unfortunately the top pitches are not now possible unless one is willing to climb up four metres of wire netting placed over the top of the crag. This was perhaps done to protect the rock and Tower from falling into the sea? Just right of the Cara Del Torre is an area of astonishing limestone - Sector Placa Inmaculada. This rock is some of the most astonishingly solid and has the best friction in the area. To reach this sector one can either scramble up the gully of Baranco Cristales or climb one of the routes on Cara Del Torre such as *Samphire* (E2 5c/F6b, 68m). One can avoid the top pitches easily by traversing down the ramp below the top pitches. An easier approach is to climb the first pitches of *Deidro Edwards* (HVS 5a/F5+, 85m) or *Iron Bells* (VS 5a/F5+, 30m); all end up below Placa Inmaculada. All the routes there are quality climbs of around 28-30m. Many of the routes on Cara Del Torre have had large bolts drilled into the rock. These are part of the rock conservation project. To the left of the top pitch

of *Deidro Edwards* is a superb steep wall with some of the best hard trad climbing. *A Touch of Glass* (E8 6c/F7c, 35m) is a good example with immaculate rock.

The next sector lies blow at sea level. For followers of overhanging rock this sector surely can't be bettered. From the tunnel entrance a scramble down leads to Sector Cosmic Landscape - a truly astonishing area of futuristic overhangs. All the routes there have been true trad climbs. The most obvious line is the central crack line of *Cosmic Landscape* (E5 6a/F6c, 50m). This was the first one climbed by Mark and me, in fact, all the routes there have been climbed by us. There are so many starred routes that it would be hard to choose. The climbs all take natural lines so are easily identified. The easiest is a traverse of the whole back wall ending up with a superb overhang pitch, *Astral Stroll* (E3 5c/F6b+, 85m).

From there on are the sandstone areas. From the base of Cara Del Torre, and the tunnel entrance, one traverses north along ledges onto the hillside beyond. A very unusual and interesting geological feature is the light, sandstone-coloured rock along the edge of the sea. This is a fossilised desert, the remains of a desert when the Med was much smaller or even when Europe was joined to Africa.

An unknown climber enjoying the trad climbing on *Jazz* (VS 4c/F5+) in the Hidden Secret Ledge area. Photo: Rowland Edwards



Sector Endurance

The hillside above now leads to Sector Endurance. The name gives an indication of what to expect from climbing there. Overhanging, steep, intimidating, but with superb solid rock with astonishing natural lines. The easiest climb is a very exciting overhanging chimney with a headwall finish, *Dancing in the Dark/Bailando en la noche* (HVS 5a/F6a). The start can be a bit earthy but a short rope has been left in place to reach the start. Another rather harder route is the incredible crack line of *Dance of the Ghosts* (E3 5c/F6c, 30m). The hardest route would be *Interstice* (E8 6c/F7c+, 20m) and a real powerhouse of a route. Keeping low down and traversing further north reaches the start of the easiest route in this sector, *The Long Route* (VS 4c/5a or F5/5+, 164m) which is a real classic. This ends halfway up the face but if joined to the upper climb of *Deidro Edwards Martinez* (VS 4c/F5, 115m) it becomes a major outing.

The Citadel

The Citadel is the next sector of rock and requires a different approach. One can either climb from the top downwards or from below from the Torre Cavel. Once at the actual Torre you walk uphill, heading for the obvious wall above until a small col is reached. From there a good view of the crag is seen. To reach it from above required a short abseil and scramble down to the same col. Reaching the car park above is far too complicated to describe here and I leave it to the on-line guide to do that. There is one more sector which you pass by on the way up to the col. This is Sector Cosmos with just one impressive overhanging route, *Saturno* (E6 6a/F7a+, 30m). There is much more potential there left to climb.

Once at the col the whole of the upper section of The Citadel comes into view and one cannot but be impressed by the amount of rock there; truly gob-smacking. The most impressive line is that of *Dieidro Edwards/Martinez* (VS 4c/5a/F5, 115m), a route first climbed with Jose Martinez, remember him? This was the climber who first introduced us to the potential of Serra Gelada. This route is perhaps the most popular climb on Gelada and has had scores of repeats. It has a rather tenuous approach but with astonishingly good climbing, obviously the superb crack being the main attraction.

To the left of the crack is the Left Wall Sector which again gives really good routes from VS to E5 and all on superb, solid rock. Another popular climb to the right of the *Dieidro* is *A Dream in the Making/Un sueño en la fabricación* (HVS 5a/F5+, 102m) which gives a sort of space



walking exercise. To left of the *Dieidro* is The Left Wall, which again gives some astonishingly good steep but well-protected classic trad routes. Over on the right side of The Citadel are some more long hard routes all approached from the same area as *Deidro Edwards/Martinez*. The most striking route there is *Aquarius* (E4/5 5c/6a/F6c+, 118m) and with a direct finish, *Aquarius Roof Direct* (E6 6b/7b+).

The Cwm and Routes Beyond

The next area lies well to the right of The Citadel routes yet is still part of the Citadel buttress. The best way to enter this sector is an approach from the top just as one would for The Citadel, and what a build up the entrance to it gives. Overhangs predominate and you will be either impressed or oppressed with the routes there. The most obvious line is the first pitch of *Spirit of no Limits/Espiritu de sin límites* (E4/5 5c/F6c, 100m). The first pitch is a superb classic jamming crack but if unclimbed can become a little sandy although well-protected. This same pitch is also the start to two other routes - *Oblivion*, an 85m three-pitch E7 6b/F7b and *The Ice Temple/El Templo Helado* (E5 6b/F7a, 116m). As you can see from their grades this is a place for hard and experienced climbers. Having said that there is one easier route, *The Cosmic Journey* (E2 5b/F6a+, 5c/F6a+, 5b/F6a), a 93m long traverse of the back wall of The Cwm with superbly exposed climbing, something like *Astral Stroll* in Cornwall but without the sea below.

The last sector of the guide lies to the right of The Cwm and to the right of descent gully, Sector Placa del Barranco and another long easy route, *The Sandman* (VS 4c/F5, 172m), starts from sea level. At the base of this barranco (gully) four more routes climb the buttress on the right of the barranco. The routes vary from Severe to E3, all end up on top of the cliff close to the car park.

Velcro Slabs

The approach to this sector is mainly from the top car park as for The Citadel although, like that sector, it can also be approached from the Cara Del Torres. Velcro Slabs is a complete change from what one finds climbing on the main faces of Gelada, slab routes dominate there but with steep wall finishes. All are in the sun with easy access and retreats. Just as the name implies the rock is just like Velcro and seems to suck one's rubber onto the rock. The grades of routes vary from Severe up to E2 so there are climbs for most climbers.

So now you have the low-down on this magical climbing area. Please download the online guide available on our web site www.compasswest.co.uk in that you will find all the details for getting permission to climb on Gelada. Plus how to approach it both from below and the top, all of which can be problematic. Don't leave your trad gear behind on your next visit to the Costa Blanca. You will be missing out on some great climbing. ■

Rowland Edwards seconding the third pitch of *The Ice Temple/El Templo Helado* (E5 6b/F7a) in The Cwm area. Photo: Mark Edwards