

Spanish Sport Climbing ²⁰¹¹



A Report by Ross Kirkland

ROSS KIRKLAND



In 2011 I applied for a MCoFS bursary in order to go on a 10 week sport-climbing trip to Catalunya in Spain with Neil McGeachy, Mark McGowan, Robbie Phillips and Calum Forsyth. I would be spending part of the time staying with Tom Bolger and gaining a lot of experience from climbing with him.

The main objectives of the trip were:

- To do lots of sport-climbing mileage culminating in climbing my first 8b
- To use this experience to improve my trad climbing which is my favourite type of climbing
- Help with the MCoFS funded sport-climbing coaching trip for the British Team and Quickdraw kids.

When Neil, Robbie, Calum and I arrived in Spain the plane was on time, landed at 7 in the evening and all was well for getting to our destination at a reasonable time. However, it was not to last. Mark McGowan was coming in on a plane due at 9. After that there was a mix-up with the hire car.

Then, when we finally got somewhere near to Tom and Lynn's place, we couldn't find their house and ended up wandering about the village on foot in the dark. Fortunately we disturbed Tom's dog Harry and, recognising the distinctive bark, we followed the noise to their house, finally arriving at 4 in the morning.

Despite the epic trip the next day we got straight to the important business of climbing and visited Santa Linya cave to warm up on some of the easier routes and get used to the rock. Santa Linya has a lot of tuffa climbing which presents its own challenges. Over the next few days I managed to redpoint Boludo 7b+, Meneo Canario 7b and finally Asaltinbankis 7b+, so I was pleased with the start of the trip.



Neil started the trip as he meant to go on managing his first project, Blomu 8b, in style.

Unfortunately the weather turned on us and it started to rain. Santa Linya, despite being a cave, seeped

endlessly making climbing pretty much impossible. We moved on to a pair of crags called Disblia (1) and Disblia (2). Both were caves but they didn't seep so climbing there in the rain was fine.

While there I managed to flash La Silla Electrica 7a and Montse la Traviesa 7c. Also, after 5 days of trying, I redpointed Celda de Castigo 7c+/8a. I had a lot of fun attempting this as it was so different to the type of climbing I normally do, being a power endurance route rather than a long stamina fest. I finally managed the route on the 4th attempt on the 5th day and felt a great sense of achievement. I knew I needed to improve my power endurance if I was going to climb 8b and this was a good start.



To add a bit more variety to the trip Neil, Calum and I decided to go multi-pitching. We chose an easy five-pitch route, A Donde Vas Vicente, which was 130 metres long. The steep walk-in was much scarier than the actual climbing; it felt like Eive Slabs but with no gear. We had a great day climbing in the sun and chilling out at the belays. Getting back down turned into a bit of an epic as the guide book description was not very clear and we slid and scrambled down a narrow rocky path with long drop offs to one side: just the way to end a long tiring day!

Three weeks into the trip Gary Vincent and Natalie Berry arrived to join us. We now had a hard core female climber in our midst who was capable of out-climbing us and we all felt the pressure to up our game.

We decided to go to Tres Ponts and see what that area had to offer. The crag looked huge and just seemed to go forever. This was my type of crag!

I decided to put my stamina to the test and attempt El Segre which is an 8a if you climb to the second lower-off. There is a powerful crux very low down which gets your forearms pumped. After that the climbing is pretty straight forward for the final 50 metres, but with no rests. By the time I had climbed 30 metres my forearms felt like they were going to explode, but I was determined to get to the chains as I had already done the hard part. I was lunging for holds, just getting them and holding on for grim death with everyone on the ground shouting and encouraging me to keep going. At about 40 metres my foot slipped and I was simply holding on with my hands, desperately trying to

get my feet back on. I could hear everyone gasp and then shout at me to get back on and 'man up'. I followed their advice and, despite the last 10 metres feeling like agony, I found myself at the top only to find the clip just out of reach. However, I could stand on my feet and rest my arms and spent 5 minutes resting before making the final move. There were huge cheers from the whole gang and I was really thrilled to have flashed the route.

After the excitement of Tres Ponts we went to Siurana where Neil had organised a week- long coaching trip for some of the kids from the British Team and the Quickdraw draw club through the MCofS.

I helped out by coaching William Bosi 11 and his brother Alexander 14. This was their first sport climbing trip and I wanted them to have a good time. I spent the first few days putting up ropes so the kids could second the routes and get used to climbing on real rock. The second part of the week was spent encouraging the kids to lead routes. The boys took to climbing on real rock like ducks to water. I had a great experience when William and Alexander felt confident enough to do harder routes. Neil advised me to take them to the Village Crags. It was a great success. William managed to on-site a 7a on lead and a 7b on top rope which he then led. Alexander on-sited a 7a on top rope and made a great attempt at the 7b on top rope.

The coaching sessions gave me the opportunity to learn about working with kids when at a crag, making sure that they are safe when climbing and walking around at the bottom, as well as picking suitable routes and coaching the kids up them.

After the kids had gone we got back to climbing ourselves. I did some 7bs and a 7c to get back into the groove, but my main aim was to climb 8b and I needed to decide which route was going to be my project.

After a discussion with the others I decided to try Zona O 8b. The route is a mix of power- endurance and technique, so I knew it was not going to be easy. On my first attempt I got about a third of the route done before coming off. Then the real battle began as I worked the first crux. This is a mix of powerful and technical climbing and it took me about 6 days before I was able to climb past it and progress fairly easily to the second crux where it all started to go horribly wrong again.



This was my first attempt at a project which was really hard and way out of my comfort zone. I had no idea if I was going to be able to do it, but after managing the first crux it felt like it was within my grasp.

I managed to work out the second crux after 3 attempts and now all I had to do was climb the route from the ground up.

On the last day in Siurana, after two days of rest, I was ready to give it everything. The first attempt was a real disappointment as I fell at the first crux. I decided to go down to rest and prepare for the next attempt by glaring at the route in the hope of scaring it into submission.

The second attempt went slightly better as I made it past the first crux to the second crux. I was really excited and forgot what I was supposed to do and went for the wrong part of the hold and next thing I knew I was hanging in mid air. I got back on and worked the crux to embed the sequence in my mind.

After that I was so tired I ended up resting for most of the afternoon to prepare myself for my final attempt before we left Siurana.

Gary Vincent got me psyched for this last attempt by managing his own 8b project. Then Neil managed his 8b project so I walked up to the route determined to complete my project. I stormed up the route getting through the first crux with no problem and making it straight into the rest just before the second crux. When I started climbing through the crux everything was going well but when I moved to grab the last hold of the crux my foot popped and I was in the air again! Lots of very bad words followed.

It was now getting dark and I was contemplating climbing the route with a head torch.

We worked out I could rest for 45 minutes before my last attempt. This time that route was going down! Calum was belaying and cheering me on along with the others as I started up the route for the last time.



Again I climbed the first crux without difficulty, it just felt a bit tiring, but the next section also seemed to be draining my energy so by the time I was at the big jug rest I was exhausted. I rested for a good 5 minutes before attempting the last section and I went into the crux determined to triumph.

The start of the final crux went well, but the last move felt really difficult. As I got into position I made sure my feet would not come off and I also used a hold I had never considered before. It was a tiny crimp barely worth noticing right at my chest but I bore down on it nonetheless and lunged for the final hold on the crux. YESSS came my cry as I hit the hold and stuck it.

The final section is a few metres of 6c climbing, but as I was really tired it felt very difficult. I rested on this section as much as I could to make sure I would not slip off and slowly made my way to the chains. When I finally clipped the chains Calum shouted up "are you at the top", I shouted back "I think so", he started pulling in rope, then suddenly thought he was going to pull me off the route as he was not sure if I had finished it or not and started throwing it out again.

I shouted for him to tighten the rope and that I had got to the top. I was lowered down and felt really shaky from all the adrenalin that had been pumping through me. Everyone gathered round to congratulate me and it felt great to have completed the main aim of my trip.

The last week of the trip we just lazed around as everyone had achieved their aims and did some easy climbing at Football Crag at Santa Linya.

Thanks to the MCofS for giving me a bursary so that I could spend 10 weeks in Spain and achieve my hardest route to date.

POSTSCRIPT:

The Spain trip was a beneficial experience for me because it gave me the chance to coach younger kids outdoors which was an experience I had never had before. It broadened my horizons and highlighted the fact that there was much I still needed to learn if I wanted to be a professional coach. I also learned about scoping out crags to make sure that they are safe and suitable for using for the group you plan on taking to the crag as well as choosing routes suitable for the individual climbers. Overall I think that it was a great chance to get vital experience in outdoor coaching and I am grateful to have been given this opportunity by MCofS."

Since coming back from Spain I have been putting the experience to good use and have been trad climbing at Reiff in the North West of Scotland I managed a number of E3s and an E4. Fortunately the weather was good and the rock was dry.

Mark McGowan (ReAch) Interview with Ross at:

<http://reachclimbingcoach.blogspot.com/2011/05/flashing-8a-at-18-ross-kirkland.html>