

# **Sport climbing:**

## **Spain 2012**

By Ross Kirkland

For the last three years I have visited Spain in the spring to do some sport climbing, mainly because it means I will be climbing outside in a warm climate after a winter of climbing indoors and also because I find it a good warm up for the trad season.

This year there were two main aims of the trip:

1. To work as an assistant coach on the MCoS/ReAch climbing event
2. To consolidate my grade 8a climbing

The destination was Siurana and as usual I ended up arriving at the campsite really late and had to put the tent up in the dark. Surprisingly it was also freezing cold, and I ended up sleeping in my thermals, t-shirt, hat and in my three season sleeping bag. Here was me thinking I had left the cold in Scotland.

I had travelled out with one of the families who were part of the coaching trip and as we were a couple of days early I decided to help the kids and parents who were already there get used to the climbing. I did this by putting up top-ropes and clips on easy climbs. It was also a good chance for me to get accustomed to climbing at Siurana so I got lots of easy climbing done on the first two days as did the kids both top-roping and leading.

The coaching week started on the third day in Siurana and each coach was assigned a group of kids to work with. I was an assistant coach working with Neil McGeachy and the group I was helping him work with contained William (13) and Alexander Bosi (15), Angus Davidson (13) and Jack Graham (12). I have worked with William for about 2 years and I have known his brother Alexander for 2 years as well, I also know Angus from Ratho but I had not met Jack before so it was an interesting experience working with all of these very different climbers.



The boys heading out to the crag

The week was very successful with everyone in the group succeeding in their goals. William managed *Punyetera 8a* on his 3<sup>rd</sup> attempt a truly excellent achievement, Alexander climbed *Viagraman 7a* flash, Jack managed to red point a new 7b+ called “*El prado del rey*” and last but not least Angus climbed *Hot Knife 7c*. On the day William managed *Punyetera* I also managed it on my 3<sup>rd</sup> go it was a great route both technical and powerful, with a very intimidating move involving a mono and a roof, good thing I have strong fingers and was able to pull through. It was the first 8a I managed on the trip and I was really happy I had managed it so quickly.

After the coaching week was over I could start focusing on my own climbing. Neil McGeachy left shortly after the kids so I decided to climb with Natalie Berry and Robbie Philips. The first 8a I tried with them was *Marihuana*. It was a long slabby route with small holds which is what I am good at. I got about half way up on my first attempt but read the sequence poorly. The second attempt went better but the top crux threw me off so it was the 3<sup>rd</sup> attempt I managed *Marihuana*, my 2<sup>nd</sup> 8a of the trip.

Shortly after *Marihuana* Niall McNair arrived in Siurana so I started climbing with him. On the first day with Niall we went to Margalef where we warmed up on the hardest 7a I have ever climbed, very technical and powerful, we later realised that the climb was 7c not 7a, the 7a was next to it, but by then it was too late. I found *Gravity Man* 8a and managed it 3<sup>rd</sup> go, it was slightly overhanging with a bulging roof near the top the route. There were a couple of blind moves to get round the bulging roof which were pretty tricky just what you want when you are pumped, the route was also more powerful than *Marihuana* and not my style at all so it made a nice challenge. I was delighted to manage it 3<sup>rd</sup> go and felt I was starting to achieve my aim of consolidating my climbing at this grade.

After climbing in Margalef we changed to climbing in Siurana valley. I was trying *Pren Nota* another 8a. It was a sustained climb which included some very strange and awkward sequences as well as a couple of mantles which resulted in me having my knees beside my ears. It was a brilliant climb and on my first attempt I got to the last clip I had missed the 2<sup>nd</sup> last clip because it was hard to clip and I was boxed out of my mind. The top section is on small crimps with bad footholds which spits off so many people on the onsight or red point and so it was with me. I was disappointed as I was so near yet so far from the chains and it would have been my first 8a onsight.

When I got back on *Pren Nota* I was with Niall, Natalie and Robbie. Robbie wanted to film me and Nat on the route and I was happy to agree so I made my 2<sup>nd</sup> red point at the start of the day, bizarrely I messed up some of the sequences I found straightforward on the onsight attempt but I was much faster at climbing it so when I got to the top crux I was far less pumped and I knew the sequence so I managed to get to the top, it was still an epic climb but it felt easier than on the onsight which is what you hope for when red pointing stuff. After I got the red point Robbie started filming Nat and me on the route.





Nat on Pren Nota with me belaying



I decided that as the 8as were going so well I would up my game and go for an 8b. The 8b I chose was called *Pati Pa Mi*. It was a similar climb to *Zona 0* the 8b I climbed last year, however this route was much more sustained. It made a nice contrast to some of the 8a's I had climbed. It was also harder than the 8a's I climbed which is not surprising but it was nice not getting a route in 2 to 3 go's, I do like a project. The start had a powerful and technical move to a wet hold which is apparently permanently wet, this proved to be my first obstacle since I had to find a way to hold it or bypass it. The next hard bit was getting off of a ledge but I got a good rest on the ledge so after I worked out what to do it was fairly simple. It was after that sequence I came to the crux which was both very powerful and technical the part I kept falling off at involved a big move from a small crimp to another small crimp. It was awkward and I was finding it really hard to get my feet in the right position. I had to find a way to make the move so that I could do it when tired and I ended up changing my plan 3 times before I was happy with it.



Pati Pa Mi

On the day that I finally managed *Pati Pa Mi* my first attempt was pretty much the same as the last several; I got to the crux and fell off on the hardest move because I was tired, despite my latest technique. After that initial disappointment I went with Robbie and Nat to the other side of the valley where they tried some last routes since we only had 2-3 days left. I didn't climb until about 4 or 5pm as the redpoint attempts on *Pati Pa Mi* were wearing me out.

We went back to the route and I was still feeling tired, the kind of tired that might make you give up for the day and start again tomorrow. This was a good sign since I have managed many hard routes feeling like this including *Zona 0* so I was psyched to get back on and when I managed the hardest part of the crux I was ecstatic, however there were still about 6 hard moves in the crux without any rests it was difficult to make the moves on crimps especially as I was nearly boxed. I managed the crux but it was not over yet; there was 6 metres of easy climbing at the top but it was balancey, awkward and I was tired. It required a great deal of concentration far more than normal which was annoying but hey ho nobody said 8b was easy and it was better than more powerful moves. The last stretch passed without incident despite the tentative climbing and I finally got to the top after 5 days of trying, making it my 2<sup>nd</sup> 8b red point.

With just one climbing day left Nat, Robbie and I were trying to decide on the best plan of action. In the previous two days we had all completed our projects which meant a relatively relaxed last day with no pressure! On the second to last night we were woken up by the biggest thunder and lightning storm I have ever experienced – no matter how good our skin might have been today it was definitely destined to be a rest day! We spent the day in the café eating bocadillo (a Spanish omelette in a baguette, basically!) and chilling out before our final day in the valley!

I had only climbed 4 8a's and had wanted to climb 5 so instead of a day of easy climbing I persuaded the others that we should set off on a long trek to try *Memorias de una Sepia 8a*. I was hoping that I would flash *Memorias de una Sepia* since my first 2 8a's I got 3<sup>rd</sup> go, the next two I got 2<sup>nd</sup> go, so getting the last one 1<sup>st</sup> go would be pretty cool however it was not to be it was a very hard 8a possibly the hardest I managed as it had very powerful moves and was difficult to read. It took me three go's to manage it which was fine by me as the start was very hard and it took both Nat and Robbie quite a while to do it as well, so I wasn't feeling bad about my climbing it was just a really hard route.

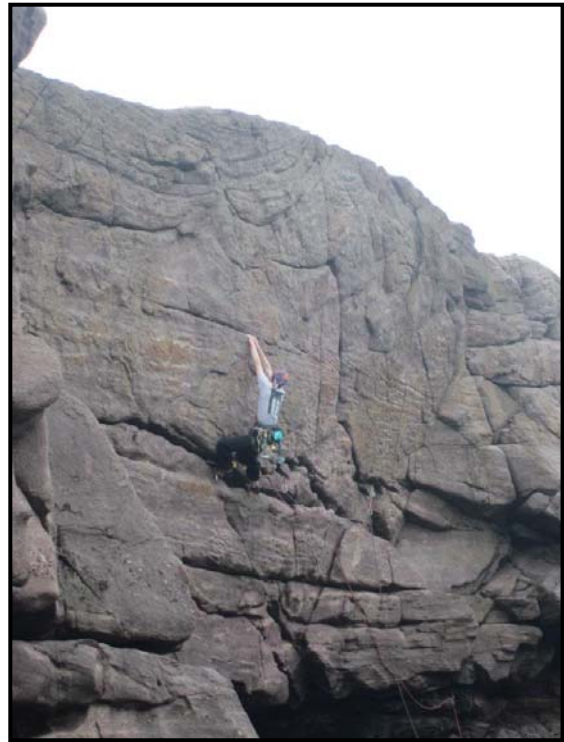
The trip was a resounding success; I managed five 8a's and one 8b in the course of 3 weeks.

I was feeling fit and strong after my time in the sun and looking forward to the trad season and pushing my grades...

# POSTSCRIPT:

## Climbing Trad Back Home

I met up with Niall McNair again and we had trip to Reecastle Crag in the Lake District where I on-sighted a couple of E4s, *The Executioner* and *Inquisition*. I then had a trip to Skye and on-sighted *Jugs of Deception* E4; this was character building stuff, it involved plenty of awkward moves on poor hand and footholds and not much gear, I struggled mentally and physically to complete this climb and it took a lot of determination to stick with this route. This set me up well for my main goal this year which was to on-sight E5.



Neil McGeachy came up north to trad climb with me at Reiff which was good fun. While he was there he got me on *Toad in the Hole* (E5 6a) my first E5; I was delighted to on-sight it, it was a great climb.

It was the following day that Neil recommended *Absent Friends* (E5 – see photo above) but this one is 6b - a grade I had never climbed on trad before. Technically it was more intimidating than *Toad in the Hole* since it involved a traverse over a drop and some very difficult climbing on small holds with big moves up to the top of the face, there was plenty of good gear during the traverse but the gear was scarce going up the face. I found this particularly unnerving as that was the part which gave it 6b but despite being scared I got a good nut placement which gave me the confidence to go for the top making *Absent Friends* my 2<sup>nd</sup> E5.

The rest of the trip was fairly uneventful except for two instances; the first was when I gave *The Mystic* (E6 6b) a go. I had heard that it was a classic route and very safe, it did prove to be safe as I took a fall near the top and my gear held. I decided to get back on but for some reason once I had passed the place where I had previously fallen, I felt really freaked out and became intimidated by the route, despite having good gear below me. I had decided that I had bitten off more than I could chew and would come back and do battle another day.



The next E5 I decided to give a go was *Free Base (E5 6a)*. It was one of the most enjoyable routes I have ever climbed - it was a great crack spanning the length and breadth of the wall; truly impressive to look at and even more so to climb.



Freebase E5 6a

The main problem with climbing it is getting gear in the crack. There are reasonable hand holds but there are few foot holds and as your gear must be placed in the crack this involves pulling yourself up so you can see what you are doing and getting horribly pumped in the process. It was one of the few trad routes that I have climbed where at the end I have felt truly pumped. Topping *Free Base* meant that in one trip I managed to on-sight three E5s making it my most successful trad trip yet and on top of my Spain trip it made my most successful year of climbing.

### **THANKS:**

I would like to thank the MCofS for their support for the Spain trip which I very much appreciate, without the bursary I would not have been able to stay on and work at improving my own climbing as well as coaching the kids.