

**Five go on foot – a week in the Spanish Pyrenees
walking remote stretches of the Camino de Santiago, 26th September – 3rd October 2012**

Participants

Bett Barrett, Sarah Barney, Helen Crowder (who wrote this report), Claire Hughes and Helen Young.

Leader

Richard Cash

Our hosts in Berdún: Melanie and Peter Rich www.casasarasa.com

The first impression of autumnal northern Spain was of a pale, parched landscape – it had been a very dry summer and the water level in the the Yesa reservoir had dropped to such an extent that the normally submerged thermal springs and the foundations of the Victorian hotel at Tiermas were revealed, creating a temporary free spa where we saw bathers wallowing in the warm, sulphurous mud as we passed. We had stopped on the journey from the airport to our base in Berdún for a walk through the Lumbier Gorge, where griffon vultures, red-billed choughs, black redstarts and a blue rock thrush towered above us and crag and house martins flitted overhead. Arriving at Casa Sarasa as dusk fell, we quickly settled in and enjoyed the first of many delicious meals.



Bathers enjoying the hot springs at Tiermas.

Morning dawned bright and clear and we were ferried up to the high Pyrenees at Somport, on the border with France, where the Camino follows the course of the Rio Aragon down the valley. Immediately we were unavoidably treading on merenderas, stemless autumn crocusses which we were to see in profusion throughout the week. Dippers dipped in the fast-flowing water and clouded yellow butterflies drifted past quite regularly. A golden eagle and a lammergeier were spotted high above Canfranc, where we stopped for coffee and to admire the railway station, built in the 1920s to serve the rail tunnel to France. Then onwards through high pasture and woodland edge to Villanua to complete this 18 km stretch of the Camino.



Walking down from Somport.



Merenderas.

The next day we drove to the remote shrine of San Adrián de Sasabe, the only remaining part of a monastery which was the first episcopal seat in Aragon, built at the point where two gorges meet. Then we drove the short distance to Castiello to walk 7.5 km of the Camino where it follows a drovers' road to the medieval town of Jaca. Once we had all arrived, Richard, our guide, gave us a tour of the museum which houses Romanesque and Gothic frescoes from some of the most remote locations in the district. We picnicked under pine trees at the base of Peña Oroel, the mountain which dominates to the south of Berdún, in company with a flock of crossbills and a nuthatch which was busily secreting nuts behind loose sections of tree bark.

It rained steadily overnight and remained overcast until afternoon – a suitable day to visit inside the monasteries at San Juan de la Peña, but not before we had seen crested tits, crossbills and nuthatch in the extensive, rather soggy, grounds. By lunchtime it had warmed up enough for the ever-present griffon vultures and a few wall brown butterflies to take flight as we descended into the pretty village of Santa Cruz, seeing a cute, dark form red squirrel from the van. In the village several conveniently overhanging fig trees were laden with ripe fruit and we enjoyed hot drinks at the hotel. In the evening Luis Tirado from the Sociedad Española de Ornitología, Spain's main bird conservation charity and the recipient of our Honeyguide donations, gave us a presentation which highlighted some of the challenges faced by a national organisation with only 8,000 members and 50 staff (as opposed to the RSPB's one million members, 2,000 employees, over 17,000 volunteers and, of course, a much smaller area to cover).

Early the following morning Peter drove us the short distance down to the bridge over the Rio Aragon just south of Berdún where noisy flocks of sparrows, several grey herons, grey wagtails, a few red kites and common buzzards were awakening to the blazing sunrise. Spikes of the diminutive orchid Autumn lady's tresses were in flower near the river and there were several ground nest holes of bee-eaters, now abandoned until the birds return in Spring. There was no sign of the little owl which usually sits on the ridge of an old barn, but we did see one subsequently, neatly merging its plumage with the old, speckled roof tiles. Today some of the group opted for a long walk down the Hecho valley, seeing isard (Pyrenean chamois) and booted eagle, while others chose to stay local, witnessing a continuous flow of swallows and martins heading south, and finding swallowtail butterflies, many blackcaps, willow warblers and a kingfisher by the Rio Verol.



Mist shrouding the valley below the hermitage.

Monday, and we were driven up precipitous tracks to the Sierra de Los Dos Rios on the Hecho branch of the Camino. All below was shrouded in mist, to be quickly burnt off by the sun. Wood warblers sang as we marvelled at the tiny ruined hermitage of the unlikely Eleven Thousand Virgins (a wrongly placed M in the transcript). A single spike of dipcadi (brown bells) in full bloom was sheltering behind rocks. We peered into a small, long-abandoned farm dwelling where in the middle of the dirt floor was a wooden pig-scrubbing tub, used for scouring bristles off the carcass, and many other handmade implements lay scattered around. The walk descended through beautiful mountain scenery until we were high over the Binies Gorge, looking down onto griffon vultures resting on narrow ledges. The path quickly descended to a meadow where we had lunch, finding more figs and

seeing a peregrine falcon high above. Then onwards, to the picturesque Binies village, where the castle was all shuttered up and haricot beans were drying on bedsheets in the sun. Most of us ended up at Emilio's in Berdún for a welcome cold beer. After supper there was a treat. On the remote road to Alastuey, despite floodlit tractors – actually farmers taking every opportunity to plough the newly softened soil – we watched as an eagle owl flew over the valley, perched on top of a tall tree and called, a low-pitched hooting, before heading for the plains to hunt. On the pretty way back to Casa Sarasa we surprised a badger, a fox and a marten in the van's headlights.

Our last day, and as we headed south in the Zaragoza region we were lucky enough to spy a family of wild boars at the edge of a field; mum, dad, four little stripeys and one of intermediate size. They quickly realised they were being watched and headed off into the woodland. We reached the attractive village of Agüero which sits at the base of the Los Mallos mountains, and drove up a nearby track to visit the 12th century church. The Los Mallos mountains are formed of conglomerate rock (known locally as 'pudding') with two distinct sections, one at Agüero and the other at nearby Riglos. We scanned the scrub behind the village for black wheatear and Dartford warbler, but with no luck. It was a peaceful 4km walk to Murillo where we had our picnic lunch in the otherwise deserted main square, and a short-toed eagle was spotted hovering above. Onward then, flanked by the occasional dry and dusty almond grove, for the last 5km stretch to Riglos, where we crossed the impressive, newly-constructed pedestrian bridge over the Rio Gallego and the railway line into Riglos village for a welcome cold drink at the end of our brief but rewarding experience on the Camino de Santiago.



Uphill into Riglos.