
The Sierra de Gredos

J. G. R. HARDING

Enthused by the Picos, the core of the same party – Roger Childs, Rupert Hoare and myself, reinforced by Arctic Luminary Derek Fordham – determined to break further ski-touring ground in Spain the following year, 1987. Childs's choice of the Sierra de Gredos reflected the sort of local knowledge that is earned by owning a prime chunk of Spanish realty – the *Finta Prado Lobero*, or Wolf's Meadow Estate. This refuge of good things half forgotten sits high in the Gredos foothills amidst groves of olives, figs, vines and citrus trees above the little town of Candelada – the Courmayeur of the Gredos. Thus was the scene set for further induction into Spanish *montes* and *morales* over an extended weekend, 5–10 February 1987.

Although AC member John Ormsby visited the Gredos back in 1866, the range remains to travellers generally, and to the British in particular, the least-known of Spain's major sierras – *pace* the publication of Robin Collomb's 1987 guidebook which just postdated our visit, and the collective experience of those illustrious AC members who bait sly traps for any traveller unwary enough to claim priority. There is nothing here in size and scope to compare with the limestone extravaganza of the Picos. But for those who like sound granite, unusual surroundings and what, in summer at least, must be guaranteed good weather, the Gredos has much to offer. One obvious reason for the range's neglect is that its bigger rivals can offer more spectacular attractions. But the aura of inaccessibility and the unknown which still clings to these mountains, reflecting their earlier sanctity as a hunting ground of kings, gives them a special flavour. Both Carlos V and Alfonso VIII of Spain were keen sportsmen, with the latter regarded as the first conservator of the Gredos. As was the case in Britain, royal hunts preserved much of Spain's once extensive primeval forests, so ruthlessly cleared from other parts of the range. The hunting lodges of kings have become the huts and paradors of the Gredos National Park.

Some 150km long and composed wholly of granite, the Gredos is the highest of several sierras that traverse Spain's Meseta. Typically 'alpine' scenery such as arêtes, head walls and cirques – in these parts adorned by limpid tarns set deep in polished granite – will be found only in the innermost recesses of the range. Initial appearances are deceptive. Looking south to Al Manzour across the Tormes Valley, the impression is one of rolling whaleback ridges capped by the occasional tor surmounting a thick skirt of pine forest. Enthusiasts of that tiresome game Topography Snap might draw analogies with the Cairngorms, or even Dartmoor. But if you penetrate the upper reaches of the Gredos and Pinar Gorges you will find scenery of genuine grandeur. Radiating from a clutch of distinctive peaks – Al Manzour (2592m), Galana (2568m) and La Mira (2343m) – is a complex of ridges, walls and pinnacles that includes the locally famous Galayos and Los Hermanitos Towers, boasting 300m climbs on clean granite.

Unusually for ranges in the Northern Hemisphere, the southern approaches of the Gredos are the more impressive. From the plain of the Tietar, a tributary of the Tagus, the mountains rise as a 2000m wall deeply riven by wild gorges – Tejea, Blanca, Labrega and Pelayos. Here the paradox of the Spanish landscape flaunts its contrasts. Down in Candeleda, where lace makers and potato crisp merchants alike are recognized as artists, you can pick oranges off the trees that line the avenues and sit about in the main square shaded by date palms. But above the town, framed by the dark troughs of its narrow streets, a range of snow-mountains hangs as if suspended from the sky. Against this backdrop is silhouetted Candeleda's pride set high on a granite plinth – a bronze *Capra Montes Hispanica* – the ibex which is at once the symbol and talisman of the Gredos.

In February 1987, the cost of a British Airways flight to Madrid worked out about the same as a British Rail sleeper to Aviemore. Three and a half hours on from Madrid, beyond the road bounded by olive and evergreen oak where deer jumped through the headlights' beam, beyond the sump-breaking track that stopped short of the house, we celebrated our *bien venido* at Prado Lobero round a hearth of smouldering oak boughs. A vigorous Cuvée Childs was followed by a smoother Cypriot libation that claimed its lineage from the crusading Knights Hospitallers.

Breakfast next morning, 6 February, was alfresco on the terrace. The sun, which at dawn had suffused the snow-pyramid of Al Manzour pink, now warmed our backs and melted the frost that lay heavy in the fields. Floating across a shallow valley came the tinkle of goat-bells and the bark of dogs. Al Manzour, set tall in the north, rejoiced in the sun. To the south, emerging through the early morning haze, a series of receding ridges stretched away and downwards to merge in Tietar's dark plain.

In winter – and no doubt in summer too – the Central Gredos peaks are best approached from the north via the Tormes Valley. From Candeleda the mountain road winds a leisured course across the range through forests of oak, ash and pine. Where this has been cleared and abandoned a Spanish maquis of rosemary, thyme, lavender, cistus, gorse, heather and broom has taken over. Past the fairy-tale 15th century castle of Mombeltram the modern road climbs by a series of hairpin bends shadowing its near-perfectly preserved Roman model – the Calzada Romana – whose matchless engineering it strives to emulate. So to the watershed through the gates of the Puerto del Pico (1395m), framed by El Toro's colossal granite slabs, to drop down to the Tormes Valley for a last draught and 'tapas' at the bar in Navarredonda before engaging the High Gredos.

From the roadhead at La Plataforma, the Llano hut is barely 40 minutes from your car boot. The Llano is a solid structure built of local granite, complete with guardian and rudimentary restaurant facilities in season. If the exterior is uncompromising, the interior is spartan with no concessions asked or given for either cooking or washing up. The corners of the hut were filling up with an accumulation of mouldering refuse but, as its only occupants, we were content enough. Having spread ourselves over the bare boards of the second tier, we took an evening stroll to the top of Antinuelo (2081m) to watch the sun

set mauve on La Mira (2343m), objective for the following day. At peace with ourselves and seemingly detached from the world, we returned to the hut to settle down for a silent night, oblivious to the realities of the Spanish weekend.

The fun started around midnight and reached its crescendo at about 3am. From the ebb and flow of disorientated souls searching for empty spaces on the body-littered floor, one thing at least was clear: anyone with ski-touring pretensions – and many without – throughout the provinces of Avila, Salamanca, Segovia, Toledo and Madrid had forgathered at the Llano that night. The place became a disco of flashing head-torches with the discordant accompaniment of crunching boots, falling ski and untranslatable oaths which signalled the contact of cranium with seasoned chestnut beam. All this with an underlying base beat of groans from the tormented. When at last the numbing cacophony was stilled, the snores of the *compañeros* left only the sleepless to construct wild scenarios for an insomniac's revenge.

Once up and out of the hut next morning (7 February), never did the hills look more inviting. Skis coursing through virgin snow, we glided past monoliths and erratics of pink granite to make light of the climb to the crest of the skyline ridge. From this viewpoint the entire Central Gredos unfurled. South the ground fell away steeply to wild gorges that debouched into the Tietar Valley marked by a veil of haze. West the spiky peaks of Al Manzour and its satellites delineated the horizon. North-east the gendarme-studded spine of Los Campanarios led inexorably upwards towards our goal, La Mira.

With an annual precipitation often exceeding 70 inches, the Gredos does not lack for winter snow. The southerly slopes of the ridge were icy, but traversing to the north in the shade below the crest we ski'd powder and avoided the rocks. Once in the sun, snow conditions were reminiscent of a Scottish spring. It took three hours from the hut to reach La Mira whose summit is famous for its panorama. When we had stopped awhile to survey the scene and the magnificent Galayos Towers, a cold wind hastened an effortless ski descent on perfect snow to the ridge below. Following this to the Puerto de Candeleda, the eye of faith might have discerned the Prado Lobero. From this low point on the ridge a hot, laboured ascent towards Morezon (2381m) brought us to the Refugio del Rey. At this former royal hunting lodge, with the sun at its zenith, we met a genuine Saint Bernard collapsed in the snow and panting as we were. But in this hour of our need, the dog was found to lack the accoutrements of its trade. Lesser men stayed put to rest, but Hoare pressed on to bag his third Gredos 2000er – the Navasomera (2305m). If the dynamics of this feat were flawed by his unwitting descent on skins, Rupert would say that he can do it equally well with or without. The rest of us ski'd down without this handicap to take advantage of the unexceptional snow to meet up at the Llano by various routes, but at much the same time, to complete the 19km round trip.

The good news at the Llano was that the guardian and entourage had surfaced and were dishing up lomo and eggs on call; the bad was the coincidence of Saturday night. Yesterday's hut intake had vanished, but their places were fast being filled by new arrivals. Noises off that night reached a new decibel level with the advent of two Alsatian dogs. If this was hallowed Gredos tradition, it induced in us symptoms of Hut Agoraphobia and a craving to

escape. The mystery of where everyone got to in the Gredos was partly unravelled next morning (8 February) when we quit the Llano for the high route across the Cuerda del Cuento to the Elola Hut. Yesterday in perfect weather the matchless viewpoint of La Mira had been deserted. Today, the trail to the Elola was like some Pennine Way. But the pilgrim's justification is simply to reach the Elola, for its setting is unrivalled in the range. The backdrop of the hut, built at the back of the Gredos Cirque just above the Laguna Grande, is an amphitheatre of granite headwalls capped by the crenellated ridges of the Ballesteros and Hermanitos which converge on Al Manzour, at 2596m the highest peak in Central Spain.

As every Alpine Fundamentalist well knows, 'Al Manzour' means 'The Victorious' in the Arabic vernacular. Manzour was the sobriquet of Mohamed ibn Ali Amir, the brilliant Moorish general who temporarily restored Islam's dominion over Iberia in the 10th century. The first recorded ascent of the peak commemorating Al Manzour's fame was as recent as 1899, only one year short of the 20th century; by this date every major peak in both the Alps and Pyrenees had long since been climbed. Childs's modest claim to have made one of the earlier British ascents was like a gauntlet to the rampageous Rupert. As Al Manzour had been the bane of medieval Spain's Christians, so did this Gredos zealot scourge the medieval mountaineers. The Elola had offered the promise of lunch in the sun. But the victor of Artinuelo, La Mira and Navasomera would have none of it. Was it not already 12.30 hours? Onwards and upwards . . .

Apart from occasional chunks of ice coming off the walls of the upper couloir that winged past, easier to hear than see, no real problems presented themselves until the Col de Crampons. This we attained within guidebook time, but then the character of the route changed. Footsteps in the snow leading round a bulge suddenly petered out in a steepening gully. This was overcoated with a thin layer of snow on underlying ice. Dripping icicles and precariously plastered accumulations of snow festooned the containing walls, but not so far above the summit was surely visible. What had started as a recce had become a bid but, with only a metre or so to go, the crux heightened that instinct for self-preservation well-developed over the years. Retreating to easier ground to reassess the situation with Derek, we were astonished to see that Rupert had already swarmed up the rocks like some frenzied Nike and was now bestriding the summit ridge. Even as we marvelled at this latest feat, an ice avalanche, as if directed from on high, descended on our unhelmeted heads. This was the last straw. Youth not only knew and could, but had harnessed Providence besides. Rupert had become Al Manzour himself: the rest were nowhere. We deliberated on the conditions and took the mature decision to head straight down. With the first British winter ascent of Al Manzour secure nothing would restrain Rupert now, although in one rare lapse he lost the lead in the inevitable race back to the hut. In trying to regain it he had to be dissuaded from the extravagance of jumping a 30m rock step which would inevitably have resulted in self-destruction. It was as good a ski descent as I remember.

The Elola's friendly guardian Ignathiou was surprised to see us back so soon. The hut was emptying fast of weekenders moving back to Plataforma over the ridge, through the chill evening shadows, in a long crocodile. Once

again we had a hut virtually to ourselves, and this time undisturbed. The storm that broke that night brought an abrupt end to three days of unblemished weather and scuppered plans to penetrate the mysterious Five Lakes Basin. Return to Plataforma next morning through snow flurries, shifting cloud and breakable crust was a course of different mettle to the carefree crossing of two days back and a reminder that the Gredos are not just fun mountains. To commemorate deeds ancient and modern we indulged in that quintessence of hedonism – a double *parador* day. Lunch at the *Parador Nacional de Gredos* was followed by dinner at the *Virrey Toledo* with fellow raptor spotter Julia Kemp. Whether or not we had made the first British ski-tour of the Gredos, all would remember a sunlit weekend on La Mira and Al Manzour, and some the memory of a great Islamic champion from an age long forgotten when art, agriculture, science and every form of civilized refinement flourished in Moorish Spain, while the rest of Europe still languished in the Dark Ages.