

Spain in the Summer (July/August 2005)

A sane person would not choose to go to Spain in the summer, but we felt then need to offer both ghostly counsel and physical sustenance to a daughter whom, in the immaturity of youth, had chosen to go there for six weeks to do some geological mapping (and was finding it hard going). The first thing to be said is the most obvious, but also the one that never leaves ones senses, is that Spain-in-the-summer is hot.

Daughter was staying at a place called Buirá, in the southern Pyrenees, a little below and to the left of Andorra. On her advice we flew to Girona (when it turned out Barcelona would have been both quicker and cheaper), an experience that included several hours of tedium at Stansted and several minutes of rather disturbing juddering descent as the plane dropped into the airport – and then it was outside into the breath-of-a-blowlamp heat, with the equator itself shimmering in the haze just on the far side of the airport car park, to queue for an hour at the van that dispensed hired cars. The car (a Fiesta turbo diesel) thankfully had air conditioning, and was actually quite an impressive advert for what Ford have apparently become these days. There followed pay-as-you-go motorways, a sample of Barcelona and its rush hour and finally a long drive north-west through interesting and varied landscapes as the sun descended. The last 50 km or so of roads looked twisty and daunting on the map, but in fact they were pretty good until we finally left the N260 for the last kilometre of vertiginous hairpins up to Buirá.

Buirá, as we discovered next morning (Wednesday 27th July), is set amongst meadows backed by woodland, at around 1150 m above sea level. The settlement consists of a large farm-cum-guest house and a brand new four-storeyed apartment block that seems to have sprung out of older farm buildings; in between the two towers an incongruous rocky knoll topped by a little Romanesque church and burial ground. Tumbled drystone walls and terraces bespeak centuries of agriculture and the background gentle clonk of cowbells is a reminder of long tradition, although in other ways the modern sheds and state-of-the-art tractors (a Lamborghini...), as well as the savvy diversification into tending the cash cow of tourism, show that the local family have had to adapt to survive.

Exploring the area, one becomes aware that, unlike Buirá, many other little hamlets and villages have not survived. Dirt roads twist their way higher and higher up the mountainsides, serving remote hamlets, often with churches. Sometimes one farm survives amongst the ruins, in others all is dereliction. This is not really ancient dereliction; they have the look of having been abandoned maybe fifty or a hundred years ago, a few buildings retaining remnants of roofs. Often crowning hill tops or spurs, some are merely a broken silhouette on the skyline, without any apparent means of access. The map does not show footpaths as such; the roads, just about negotiable by car as long as one does not expect to get above second gear, either peter out into rubbly stream beds, or sometimes end in a single wire strung across from side to side, presumably a statement that casual visitors should proceed no further. The odd vehicle passes by, usually a 4

x 4, or a maniacally-fit cyclist struggling skyward; almost everyone waves or calls out 'Ola' or Buenos dias' ; this is not the Yorkshire Dales..

Most villages have a church. The little one at Buirra, dedicated to St Cornell, consists of a barrel-vaulted rectangle with a western porch and two little side chapels, and, now walled off from the main body, a little eastern apse. There are barely any windows. It is clearly not in its original condition; on the south there is an earlier doorway, and a lancet-like window, their surrounds (like the angle quoins) made up of blocks of tufa. All is vernacular simplicity; there is next to nothing in the way of ornament, except a moulded string inside that seemed to be plaster. At the south-west corner a stone stair rises to a western gallery with a simple wooden balustrade to its front; at the north-west corner was a stone stoup with a little simple carving. Half-way up the zig-zagging walled ramp rising to the church is a modern family vault-cum-mausoleum with six marble-fronted burial places, a bit like a chest of drawers (three below, three above).

The village of Les Iglesias, down in the valley bottom at the foot of the Buirra track, has a rather larger church, with a bell tower at the west end. Here the door was in the west end, with a small circular window above lighting the western gallery – and this was the only window in the whole building. The stone newels stair to the gallery continues up the belfry. The building is whitewashed outside and plastered within, with no obvious clues as to its age. The settlement, stepping steeply up the hillside, is a mixture of semi-dereliction and recently-modernised properties; also (and this is a sad fact that honesty compels one to mention) it smells, like many others in Spain-in-the-summer. Ignoring this, it is the massing of the buildings and their colours that make these villages so attractive at a distance. Roofs are low pitched and tiled, and there are always a scatter of buildings with one end either completely open or just partially boarded over, above first floor level, exposing the roof trusses.

Avellanos, a hamlet high up around 5 km to the north-east, has an abandoned ancient church, rather like that at Buirra except that it has a bell tower, not at the west end but set, on a skew angle to the main building, against the south side of the apse. The tower had a single belfry opening on three sides but on the fourth, towards the valley, there were two; the bells are hung on beams that actually span the bell opening, rather than in an internal frame. Builders were busy with a new house right beside the church; with the advent of the internet (and the power lines which climb the steep valley side) this could be a highly desirable rural retreat.

Returning to the natural environment, the high pastures are full of wild flowers, and the air above them is filled with butterflies – a far wider range of species than one sees in England. Swallowtails are the largest, with White Admirals even commoner (with an apparent half-size variant, maybe a White Lieutenant, as well). There are also large and small orange fritillaries, marbled whites, blues and yellows as well, a real lepidofest. Many of the wild flowers are variants on familiar themes – many and varied thistles, knapweed, scabious. Some pastures have been cleared within the forest, but at around 1700-1800 m are open alpine meadows above the tree-line.

From Castellnou d'Avellanous looks across the deep valley to Avellanos, c 2 km to the west, and is reached by a separate hairpinning track; it seems to have been one of the circular hill-top villages, perhaps originally built with an eye to defence, but is now all shattered ruin, bar for one farm; we were met by two dogs, one the size of a small donkey (Pyrenean mountain dog?), intent on barking and biting our tyres, but all in canine good humour. This is a real vantage point for the view northwards, up to Pic du Lena and Tossal Larg (2673m); the high ridges are green (with only a scatter of crags and screes) and would seem to offer good walking.

A non-technical word on the geology; as we are here to offer assistance in geological mapping we have seen quite a bit of it. A lot of the mountain roads have been hewn or blasted out of the rock, with the result that the roadside cuttings allow one to strike up quite an intimate acquaintance with the stuff that barely entails leaving the car. There is red rock, and green rock, some hard and some soft, and there are conglomerates with lumps of all these things mixed together. The strata are often steeply dipping or even vertical (alongside the road below Avellanos one thin but resistant sandstone bed stands up on end like a wall). A lot of the original sediments have been metamorphosed and fail to fit into easily identified categories. Sadly there do not appear to be any fossils; maybe too much has happened to allow them to survive¹. There certainly seem to have been times of geological trauma hereabouts, which, had they still been going on, would have rendered the area even more exciting.

From geology to meteorology, and one finds that nature has not all been reduced to England's tameness. This is a good place for thunderstorms. Certainly, one deserves a bit of pay back for having put up with the infernal heat of the days here, and on Thursday night we got it. By late afternoon the sky clouded over, and by mid-evening it was gloomy, with dramatic Steven Spielberg-style skies of swirling and tattered clouds of the type that define the word 'ominous'; the lightning display was suitably laid on after dark and at times was almost non-stop. The encircling mountains certainly aided the acoustics of the thunderclaps; despite the volume, the delay between flash and bang was often ten or fifteen seconds with only one or two much closer. Heavy rain was only intermittent, and in the morning there were only a few puddles, and an hour or two of a cooler and clean-washed feeling before things heated up as usual.

The nearest town to Buiria is La Pobla de Segur, about 15 km easy drive to the south-east, and 10 km or so further south, down a larger valley, is Tremp. All the way, left and right, is distracting landscape and geology, one minute limestone pinnacles, then great crags of conglomerate, then a huge cliff of horizontally-bedded orange sandstone sitting on top of steeply-dipping strata, with distant glimpses of strange and jagged peaks beyond. Just before Tremp a soaring sandstone scarp is topped by another of these typically-Skyline villages; this one is Talarn. It has been walled; there are several round towers, two perhaps a fragment of a castle, and an arcaded square with an old church that, like many round here, seems to have been knocked around a bit, and lost several appendages. It was locked, but an elderly verger appeared and was delighted to

¹ PFR did in fact find one, that looked a but like an Orthoceras, or perhaps a coral, but the younger and more currently-educated geologists were not fully convinced.

see visitors and show us round; the interior had obviously been modernised to suit current liturgical practice, and was really rather beautiful.

Tremp is less exciting, but does have a big church with an apse with big radial buttresses each with an arched passage through it; once again there has been a lot of 20th century repair, the whole upper part of the tower looking new; nearby a solitary round tower survives from the old town walls.

About 5 km south of Tremp one can leave the main road and ascend to the west to another walled village, La Guardia de Noguera; many of the houses have round-arched doors with big ashlar surrounds and dates in the later 1500s; the east and west town gates are very similar. In the outside face of what must have been the town wall, next to the church, we stumbled on an excellent restaurant 'La Rectoria' with local dishes that did not entail unpleasant dead sea creatures or things that one dare not ask the name of.

Then it was onwards. Twisting ever uphill, to an 800 m high ridge crowned by Castell Mur – in actual fact both a castle and a monastery, a couple of hundred metres apart. The castle is in fact the central one of three, strung out along the east-west ridge. It began life as a Moorish round tower, which subsequent to Christian conversion was enclosed in an egg-shaped curtain wall, which it was then heightened to overtop. We had to wait until 5.00 for a guided tour, with a charming and determined lady who spoke only Spanish. but was determined to give us the full history and an architectural analysis, with the aid of vigorous mime (including giving birth to babies and several means of untimely death), recourse to a Spanish English dictionary, and sketches in the back of my drawing pad. The monastery was intriguing; a simple gatehouse leads into a small open court, and then a beautiful little Romanesque cloister (one walk rebuilt) with a kitchen on the south; at the east end of the west walk one finds the west door of the church, Romanesque as well, but quite heavily restored; some sorry remains of wall paintings are defaced with 1940s (Civil War) graffiti; the finest paintings of all, from the apse roof, are now in Boston, USA; the Americans condescended to leave behind a glossy poster, showing what they had taken. The east end of the north aisle has been replaced by a 14th-century chapel (with filleted roll mouldings) but the south aisle retains its apse. Both east and west gables have bellcotes.

Winding our way back downhill again, we stopped to walk along the descending ridge to the eastern of the three castles, which a signpost told us was the 'Castel de Guardia'. It is further than it looks; the first ruin one comes to, a simple Romanesque church (with the usual apse) is the 'Ermitade de Sant Felie'. The castle itself is little more than an odd tower, with a rounded end to the west, and a piece of curtain; it looks inaccessible, perched on a crag beyond a gap in the ridge, but an easy scramble up on the north gains the interior. To the south and east are big crags; one looks down on La Guarida de Noguera, far below,

A Busy Day (Sunday July 31st)

(1) A Pyrenee before breakfast

Buira is dominated by its own Pyrenee, the Pui de Far (1623m), little more than a grassy dome, its green scalp punctuated by the stubble of a few scrubby bushes. Rising around 500m above the hamlet (think average Lakeland fell from average Lakeland valley) it is easily climbed, and most agreeably in the early morning before the heat of the day. Rising at the first grey of daybreak – about 6.30 – it was still warm, and distressingly, the water in the ‘cold’ tap still tepid however long one ran it. A rough road that rises to the north of Buira allows an hour of steady uphill walking before it eventually contours round the west end of the ridge, whereupon a scramble up a gully soon eases to the gentle upper slopes, studded with thistles and other small but colourful plants. The thistles are painful, as thistles usually are, but really interesting as well; one particular breed is electric-blue in colour, stems, leaves and blooms; as one in creases in height this colour seems to become more vivid, as the plants themselves become smaller. The very top is delightful, with extensive views all around – Avellanos and Castellnou d’Avallanos to the north, Erdo to the south-west and Buira itself to the south-east; the new apartment block, even though 500 m below, is omnipresent; one feels that it, like the Great Wall of China, may be one of the few earth structures visible from the moon. Between the main summit and a slightly-lower one to the east is a stretch of greensward so level that one could even play cricket on it, allowing the civilising influence of that dear game to penetrate even to these sultry climes.

Getting down posed an interesting choice; of course the route of ascent offered a no-risk inside-the-hour option, but to the south, on the opposite side of the cluster of gullies and valleys radiating up from Buira, was a gentle ridge topped by open meadows that looked to offer a pleasant alternative, on the presumption that there were some tracks that would offer a descend from the meadows through the thickly-wooded hillside below. Getting to the meadows posed a slight problem; an area of craggy fellside had to be rounded to the left, with a little picking ones way through scrub and the odd minor scramble, but this was not difficult. The meadows themselves were as gentle underfoot as they had seemed from afar, but the problem was what came next. The slopes below were steep, and thickly clad with impenetrable vegetation; such footpaths as there appeared to be simply plunged into this jungle and eventually expired, leaving the perspiring explorer to retrace his steps to higher ground again. At last he found a gully carrying a trickle of water; it was steep, stony, and festooned with the usual spiky plants, but passable, and at last debouched upon a track; a few more wriggles under the ubiquitous electric fences, and Buira was only twenty minutes away. By now the oven door was open (even if welcome clouds denied the sun itself more than the odd withering laser-shaft) and breakfast (in its lowest recognisable form of a bowl of cornflakes; where my muesli? where my porridge?) was waiting.

(2) Gorges and a Monastery in the Midday Sun

North-east of La Pobla de Segur the main road to Sort runs into one of those spectacular gorges typical of the Pyrenees, where the landscape rears up and the valley sides close in to sheer walls leaving barely enough room for the river to

thread its way between. When there is more water around rafting is the popular sport here. The modern roads escapes the most tortuous parts of the defile by periodically plunging underground in tunnels, a couple of them over a kilometre long; we parked and walked along the old road where, despite the towering rock walls, the sun glared down from virtually overhead and there was little shade. In places the rock seemed conglomerate, in others it was obviously limestone, as there were yawning cave entrances set high in seemingly-inaccessible walls and buttresses, although to the modern breed of rock climber whose playground this is, normal human concepts of accessibility clearly do not apply. They clearly did not apply either to the engineers who planted their electricity pylons high in the faces of the gorge, the most dramatic of eyesores.

Then on a few kilometres to Gerri-du-Sal, a little town still caught within the confines of this narrow sheer-sided valley. Its chief claim is a Benedictine abbey; only the church survives, aisled but only three bays long although there is a good western narthex/porch pent-roofed against the west gable which is carried up as a giant bell-cote ('bell wall' seems to be the term hereabouts). As is usual in the Pyrenees, everything is Romanesque, but all a bit battered and abraded. Outside there are hints of a cloister on the north, but no other extant buildings other than an odd square tower built up against the east wall of the central of the usual trio of eastern apses.

From just north of Gerri-de-Sal a minor road winds back west towards Senterada, spiralling high above the town and providing dramatic glimpses back into the gorge. It passes by the village of Paramea; highly picturesque – arcaded houses, odd little (locked) church, a central square, some timber-framing, gaggles of playing children and a scatter of sleeping dogs. The road goes on, hardly more than a single-track ribbon of tarmac, but with quite a bit of traffic coming the other way – always met on bends, as there is little road other than bends. What does one do? Emergency stop seems to be best procedure, then think how to inch past.

Later on there as even tighter centimetring past, buildings not traffic this time, in La Pobleta del Belivel, back down in the valley near Senterada. The village street has a '30' sign, but 5kph would be optimistic; a Fiesta can just fit between the buildings; at one point, where advance was the only option we were faced with the street (outside a bar) full of chairs and tables and people eating meals ; that all had to shuffle sideways to allow our embarrassed passage. How to be popular.

(3) A Cave in the Evening

Driving down to Senterada, a couple of km below the Buira turn we had noticed what looked like a huge cave entrance or overhang on the north side of the valley, supported by a series of concrete piers. The rock is conglomerate; are there caves in conglomerate? While the evening meal was under preparation, PFR persuaded Dom, one of Megan's fellow students., to come and have a look. The expedition armed itself with a tiny pencil torch. The grassy track that runs alongside the cliff here was apparently the main road up the valley until five years ago, when the present highway (on the other side of the river) was built.

But access was only a five-minute walk from one of the new bridges, past an odd little ruined building with a picture of St George and the dragon in tiles on its gable. At first the recess just seemed a big overhang, floored by huge fallen slabs, but then we found a hole at the east end, down behind the slabs, issuing a delightful cool wind; scrambling down, one entered a low and complicated chamber with a cracked floor and the air a-flutter with bats. Wonderful! There seemed to be cavities extending in several directions, but we were not really equipped to explore much further; however, the main way 'in' did seem to be a big sloping bedding of about hands-and-knees size. What does it do? where does it go? Presumably something as obvious as this has been explored and surveyed, but how does one find out?

Monday 1st August

The Drive back to Girona

This was one of those drives with time to do a little bit (but not too much) on the way. Thankfully it was a cloudy morning; packed the car, paid our dues, said farewell, and set out down the now-familiar road to Tremp, then cut away east. We had planned to take a more scenic route along the mountains, but the sky was gloomy and cloud low, so we settled for one a little further south. Soon it rained, then the rain intensified and lightning crackled round, and in the end the downpour became deluge such that we had to stop for ten minutes whilst the roadside concrete drain became an orange-brown torrent. It soon abated, and we were mobile again, along winding modern roads through intriguing landscapes. A short diversion led to a hilltop capped by the Er..... Which consisted of a Romanesque church (very much of the standard type – triple apse at the east end, pilaster strips, wall arcades, tufa blocks for the architectural detail) separated by an open court (with old stone benches shaded by trees; some sort of event clearly takes place here) from a much-altered domestic building that looked older than its '1615' date. The church was locked, as they usually are outside the towns. Half an hour, after a long descent, just before the town of We glimpsed a ruin and diverted to the Again everything was closed, but could be pretty well inspected from without. Quite a sizable church, again of the standard Romanesque plan and detail (although claimed as 'XIII' century) but it had lost its vaults and parts of its walls; a series of modern concrete steps and walkways rose to viewing platforms, the highest topped by a flag. On the south the cloister survived as an open court, with its arcade extant on the south; the buildings, much altered, include a tourist information office, but it was only 10.30, probably far too early for it to open.

Roads became faster but much busier as well in the broad lowlands north of Barcelona; the speed limit is 100 (kph) which means everyone drives at around 120; on the hills there is a crawler lane for the lorries, but it is not always well signed where these end, so one finds oneself overtaking a whole line of them when one suddenly swerves out in front of you; at one stage this happened in a tunnel, which was especially disconcerting. There is more hill country, and tunnels, before the final descent to Girona; the airport is very easy of access, just off the main road several km short of the city itself, and, leaving the dirty and mud-spattered car, we rejoined the tourist hoards in the inevitable queues at the terminal.

Impressive cloudscapes on the way back, but broken to allow an interesting view of the Cherbourg peninsula and Channel Islands. After a shorter wait at Stansted, wasted too many photos on clouds, so that the battery died just as we emerged directly over Riding Mill before dropping into Newcastle airport unusually from the west, so there were five minutes when avid interest in seeing very familiar places from increasingly-lesser heights (decreasingly-lesser?) struggled with the usual terror of will-we-get-down-in-one piece. Really, I don't like flying.