Pico Ruivo Interlude

Tony Husbands
Plate 67

Towards the end of January 1985, I was staying in Madeira for a few days and one afternoon went on a coach tour to see something of the eastern part of the island. The coach first went practically up to the summit of Pico de Arieiro, which, at 1810m, is the third highest point on the island.

At about 1500m we drove into some cloud but eventually emerged above it, and the appearance of the peaks above the clouds was rather a fine sight. The nearest ones were pretty jagged and reminded me a little of the Cuillins.

A dotted red line indicating a 'recommended walk' was shown on my map as going from Pico de Arieiro to Pico Ruivo, 1861m, the highest summit, and I asked the girl on the bus if she knew anything about it. She said that the previous week two people had done the walk in the reverse direction in about 3½ hours, but that if I was thinking of doing it it would be as well to take a torch because of the tunnels. I found this rather intriguing.

It had been noticeable that clouds usually seemed to form inland in the afternoons, but there was a good sunset that evening and the next morning was very fine, so I took a taxi up to the Pico de Arieiro and asked the driver to go round to Achada do Teixeira and wait for me. The distance between the two summits appears to be about 3km as the crow flies, but the distance round by road must be about 35–40km.

A very cold wind was blowing as I set off down a well-defined path and I had not gone far before I came to a lot of steps cut in the rock, although it could hardly be called that as it was really solidified lava. In the more exposed places steel rods had been driven in on either side to support 1cm lines of stranded wire which could be used like a hand rail.

I imagine I descended about 300m or perhaps a little more and, except in a few places where the gradient was gentle enough for a path, it was a case of going down steps all the way. Of course the route twisted and turned frequently and as I went along I could see a great wall of smooth vertical rock in front on the right. The left side did not look too promising either, but on rounding a corner I found the entrance to a tunnel about 100m long. This was evidently why the girl had suggested taking a torch, but one was not necessary as the tunnel was straight and it was possible to see the light at the other end. In places there was quite a lot of water on the floor.

Not long after leaving the tunnel I came to a large white signpost lying on the ground, broken, and although the path seemed to go straight on upwards there was a gate on the right, and on going through this I could see that there was a path here also. The map, which was only 1 : 70,000, seemed to indicate the route to the right and from the Pico de Arieiro I had seen another white signpost, so I eventually decided to follow this path which, although it seemed



Photo: Tony Husbands

67 *Afternoon clouds forming in the mountains of Madeira.*

to be less used, had the merit of being in the sun which was now quite hot and I discarded a pullover.

After a while I realized that the path I had taken was not in fact much used but I eventually came to the white signpost which merely showed that there was a water outflow on to the path and it was admittedly a little icy. This section had been fairly level but I eventually started to climb up a whole lot more steps cut into the rock. After about 300m and a few places where short sections of vertical rock had been cut away to make the path, I came to a sort of col and here for the only time I had to use a little judgement, as the up to now well-defined path more or less disappeared amongst a mass of scree. This was genuine rock and not lava and after zigzagging about and descending for about 100m I came to another well-defined path. I could see this contouring round the hillside at the head of the new valley I was in and I walked along more or less horizontally for about 20 minutes until, coming round a corner, I found another signpost and a gate leading to the left through another short tunnel. The sign indicated that the route through the tunnel was indeed the shortest way to Pico de Arieiro and I had come round the longer way skirting below the Pico das Torres.

There was now quite a climb up but it was not too steep as, for the most part, the path consisted of stones cut to roughly the same size and carefully set to make a very good path. Eventually I reached a house built in 1939 by order of the Official Tourist Bureau where it is possible to stay the night for 200 escudos (just over £1) including hot water, but one has to take one's own food. People do in fact do this in order to see the sunset and sunrise.

From the house an ascent of about 120m brought me to the summit which was fairly flat and reddish (Ruivo means purple), lava-like soil and plenty of small trees and bushes about 1m high. The view was somewhat limited to the other high points as cloud was by now filling the valleys and it was not possible to see the island of Porto Santo, about 45km to the NE. It had taken me 2 hours and 20 minutes and was one of the most surprising walks I have done at that sort of altitude. How long it must have taken to cut all those steps and lay all the paths it would be interesting to know. I reckoned I must have walked about 8km of which about 6km had been man-made.

Most of the rain falls in N Madeira where the mountains and forests are. Centuries ago, levadas or small canals were cut in the rock to channel this water to the places where it is needed for irrigation. Apparently on sheer rock-faces men were suspended on ropes to chisel these levadas out of the rock and there are literally miles of them as they have to follow the contours, so I suppose that making a path from one peak to another was considered a relatively simple matter.

When I returned to the house five men were lying on the ground outside asleep in the sun having their siesta, and from the house down to the place I had asked the taxi driver to go to, the path was even better, being about 1m wide with stones all neatly set in cement built, like the house, by order of the Delgação de Turismo da Madeira. Anyone could walk up, the only care needed being in one or two places where there were damp patches which were icy, but then it was 31 January after all! Altogether a very pleasant interlude and there are several longer walks from Pico Ruivo, but I had no time to do them.