The Picos de Europa

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Only one range in Europe bears the continent's matronym – the Picos de Europa. Virtually unknown to the commonalty of British climbers until recently, these mountains lay claim to being the most dramatic minor range of Europe. Ptolemy knew of the range as 'Vindius' in distant *Hispania Terraconensis*. To Phoenician sailors, Spanish mariners returning from the New World and fishermen of all ages alike, their snow-whitened peaks have heralded European landfall.

Running parallel to the coast for some 40km on an EW axis, the Picos rise over 2600m to form the apex of the Cantabrian Mountains – the dominant feature of the geography of N Spain. Many are now familiar with the range in summer, but of winter ski tours I could find only one account, and that a traverse undertaken by the French Grand Raid specialists Derrieux and Parmentier. They had warned of mist, Atlantic weather and dangerous ground, yet without having seen the place for oneself it was difficult to know what to expect. Along the Costa Verde that marches with the Bay of Biscay, the rainy season is from October to January, with further unsettled weather in April. As annual precipitation in the Picos exceeds 60 inches, lack of snow was unlikely to be a problem, notwithstanding the range's modest altitude and the comparatively narrow skiable zone that lies within a 1200m band above the 1000m contour. But with the Atlantic lapping the foothills, the outcome of any short ski trip will depend on the weather and, in particular, the vagaries of the 'nodest pardo', a wind of ill repute that can persist for days.

When the choice of epoch is critical, business commitments inevitably determine start date and duration. Roger Childs, Rupert Hoare, David Seddon and I settled for a nine-day break from 7 to 16 February 1986. A week before departure, the blizzards then sweeping Europe marooned a party of school children in the Picos. Certainly, we got more snow than we bargained for, but the weather overall was kinder than expected. Two bad days out of seven is a better average than for the Pyrenees. Maybe February forms a weather window, but I would not bank on that. From our limited experience, I guess that March could be a safer though less spectacular month in which to tackle these formidable mountains.

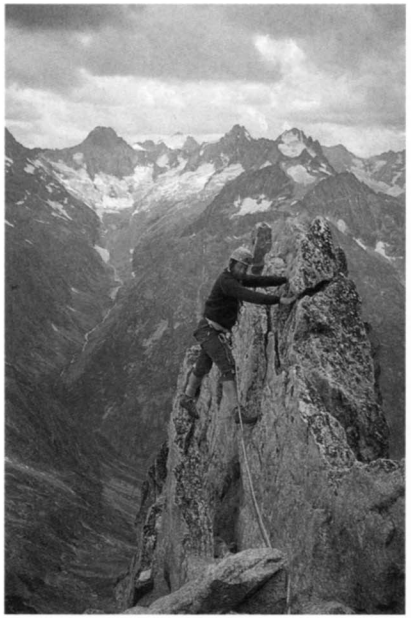
Weather apart, a signal problem for ski tourers in the Picos is the terrain. The basic structure of the range is simple enough. Three limestone blocks – the Eastern Andara Massif, the Central Orrielos Massif and the Western Massif of Covadonga – are delineated by four rivers, the Deva, Duje, Cares and Dobra, which have carved through the rock to form some of the most spectacular gorges in Europe. Within this framework, the detailed topography is bewildering. Each massif is dissected by a chaos of transverse and converse valleys, gorges, defiles and sink holes – the 'canals', 'gargantas', 'desfiladeros', 'jous'

and 'hoyos' of local nomenclature. Up above this maze rise containing walls – a complex of crenellated ridges, needles, towers, pinnacles, spires, obelisks and monoliths. There are few easy ridges or cols and a paucity of good paths, even in summer. The labyrinth of the Picos has presented travellers past and present with unusual navigational problems. Even today, the published maps of the area – save that of the Central Massif – are mostly incomprehensible or misleading. For the ski tourer, route-finding in winter is a serious undertaking with a daunting avalanche risk in anything but settled weather.

Arriving at Santander in a downpour at 11.30pm on 7 February after a train journey that had taken four hours to cover the 80km from Bilbao, Roger telephoned Robin Walker in Oviedo for a situation report. That call averted the fiasco of attempting to make our roadhead the village of Sotres which had been cut off from the outside world by snow for days. My original Grand Design had envisaged a modified traverse of both the Central and Western Massifs, emulating that of the French. Robin Collomb's *Picos* guide carried fore-warnings of what we might expect, but neither literature nor imagination are substitutes for actually seeing the ground. Having once grasped the nettle of the Picos under an unusually heavy mantle of snow, it was clear that we would have to settle for something less. A new sport plan was conceived, and with taxis supplementing ski we at least circumnavigated both the Central and Western Massifs, making slight incursions into the hard core at points of weakness.

Potes, second choice base after Sotres, was humiliatingly abandoned when Childs took flight from the Hostal Lembrana after an encounter with a dog 'bigger than a bear'. Having convinced ourselves that Potes was a touch *louche* and too low in any event, we decamped to Espinama and moved into the excellent Hostal Remona. This snow-bound hamlet whose denizens walked above the snow on six-inch high three-pronged clogs was of a genre that combined the pastoral and the picaresque. From here, on our third day out from Heathrow, we took our first steps on ski up the Rio Nevandi to the new Aliva hut through a metre of new snow and bad weather. There was never so much as a glimpse of the Pena Vieja (2613m) but several close encounters with live chamois.

With the barometer rising, next morning dawned crisp and clear. Start line was Fuente De, 'the Spring of God', which has, as its backdrop, a 3km long 800m high cirque whose ice-glazed limestone walls reflected the early sun. From here, on a magical day, we traversed 12km along the southern ramparts of the Central Massif to reach Valdeon via the col of that name in just over seven hours. Early on, ski tracks ahead revealed what must have been the only other ski party in the Picos. But the mere presence of a harmless *équipe* of Parisians, led by their Golden Age style guide, roused Hoare to paroxysms of competitive energy. First manifestation of this was an unorthodox route through beech thickets intended to secure the high ground. Thereafter there was only one team in it. The end-game was secured by our making Valdeon a night ahead of the French and bagging the best Fonda in town – the Begonia which became our base for the next three nights. Roger's Spanish and knowledge of local *mores* capitalized our initial advantage and ingratiated him with the Mistress of the Begonia, the incomparable Leandra Perez. Here, indeed, was a jewel – a



59. *Top of Aiguille Dibona (climber, Mike Pinney).*



60. *Pena Santa de Castilla (Picos de Europa).*

martinet with a soft heart and the best cook in the Picos. Her table d'hôte on that first evening, Picos Bouillabaisse and 'Chorizo' with eggs piquante, served as an entrée to what David ate next day for breakfast.

From Valdeon we made two excursions. The first an 18km exploration of the stupendous Cares Gorge, principally on ski. The Cares is one of the wonders of the Picos. The valley walls are easily 1000m high, but the vertical interval from the valley floor to the highest peaks – of which little was visible that day – is almost 2000m. Eight kilometres down valley from Valdeon in a clearing upon which several precipitous valleys converged, just before the gorge reaches its narrowest point barely an arm's span in breadth, lies the hamlet of Cain. This Spanish Shangri-La, the remotest habitation of the Picos, had been cut off for the past 15 days by snow, and we were its first visitors that year. Cain is still renowned in these parts and in some beyond as birthplace of Gregorio Perez, 'El Cainejo', the chamois hunter who in 1904 with the Marquis of Villaviciosa first climbed the grandest monolith of the Picos, the Naranjo de Bulnes (2519m). This feat became legend in the annals of Spanish mountaineering and is commemorated in the hero's birthplace by a bronze plaque that led us inexorably to a bar – the Pena Santa. The bar was swiftly opened by Senora who dispensed home-cured *jamon* and *chorizo* with canned beer. The man of the house, perched atop a stove, studied us incuriously as he whittled away at a gnarled piece of wood that, in time, would become an artefact – perhaps a garden rake.

Back in Valdeon that evening we made the two discoveries of the tour: first, that Senora Leandra was the granddaughter of El Cainejo himself; secondly, at Leandra's table over a glass or two after dinner, the real truth about Naranjo de Bulnes surfaced. As was condescendingly explained by a local savant, Naranjo had been climbed at least 50 times by hunters before the 1904 ascent. Many had fallen in the attempt and on hitting the ground had exploded into small bits to have their remains carried away in sacks . . .

My original itinerary had sported a traverse of the Western Massif from Valdeon to Covadonga via the Vega Redonda hut. But now, apparently, this staging post no longer existed. The weather looked unsettled and, with one member suspected of malingering by our uncompromising medic, we changed course and settled for the Cebolleda (2050m). This peak is not of the Picos but rises to the south in the main Cantabrian Range. Although a touch less spectacular, this wild, off-beat country with three national nature reserves offers scope for touring and provides sanctuary for deer, boar and other wild beasts. Our ascent, involving nimble foot-work through dense groves of beech and oak, at one point followed spoor that was unanimously agreed to be that of wolf. Above the tree-line there emerged mysterious, rolling hills which promised for the future. In descent, Childs swore that he had ski'd over a hibernating bear.

It was difficult to break the spell of Leandra's cosseting, but three Begonia breakfasts had sated even David's appetite. Early starts are inimical to the spirit of these parts, but ours to Covadonga was delayed even beyond the statutory 10 o'clock by driver Miguel's discovery that two bullets had riddled his Land-rover's bonnet. Throughout the dizzy descent, from the top of the snow-

blocked Puerto del Ponton to the bottom of the stupendous Los Beyos Gorge, there was speculation as to the culprit's identity. It emerged that this was not the work of some Asturian irredentist but of the Mayor of Oseja who, in the course of yesterday's boar hunt, had scored an inadvertent Inner. Down-valley we ran into the Mayor himself, sporting binoculars and directing the second day's drive. Godfather-like, he dismissed the incident but promised fulsome reparation.

Covadonga, gateway to the Western Massif, commands the entrance to the Onis Gorge leading to the heart of the mountains. Here it was that the Visigoth hero Pelayo defeated the Moors in 718 after a legendary battle waged for days through the gorges of the Picos. Pelayo's victory marks the start of the *Reconquista* that ended seven centuries later with the capture of Grenada in 1492. As the eldest sons of the Kings of England take their titles from mountainous Wales, so is the title of the heir to the Spanish throne Prince of Asturia. The Basilica of the Virgin of Battles at Covadonga, crowning a rock buttress above the Onis Gorge, recalls the historic memory and religious significance of that ancient victory. So did the Marquis of Villaviciosa, conqueror of the Naranjo de Bulnes with El Cainejo, create this area as the Picos's first national park in 1918.

Pelayo has lent his name to Covadonga's best hotel – a Parador in all but name. With a reception hall adorned with stags' horns, animal pelts and stuffed bear, the Hotel Pelayo achieves an improbable synthesis between Scottish Baronial and Spanish Ecclesiastical. The walls of the grand staircase are darkened by imaginary full-length portraits of fabled Asturian kings – Alonso, Oldovo and Ramiro – who resisted the Moors those 1200 years ago.

The Picos's one guarded winter hut is only three hours up the valley from Covadonga beside the Enol lakes. Owned by the Municipality, it was guarded by a mountain aficionado, guide and author – Juan Louis Somonao. His inscription in my copy of his *Fifty Selected Excursions in the Asturian Mountains* was a reminder that Spain was a land of mountains as well as of bullfighters and flamencos. But this we knew even before our last Picos excursion, to El Diadelliou. This belvedere gives a grandstand view of the N face of the Queen of the Range – the Pena Santa de Castilla (2596m). The mountain's outliers, so choked in snow as to resemble a gigantic mogul field, led to a fantastic summit wall surrealistically encrusted in ice, tantalizingly close yet quite inaccessible.

To essay forth on ski in the Picos in high winter was a touch presumptious. These mountains do not oblige the ski tourer. But few ranges have more drama, and each day brought some new spectacular. A pervasive sense of wonderment enhanced the senses but numbed logic. Hoare swore that the Rio Deva flowed uphill, Childs saw the dog as big as a bear and perhaps the bear itself. Certainly, all bore witness to the deer that clean jumped both Miguel's Landrover and then an eight-foot snow bank; all had been the guests of El Cainejo's granddaughter and had watched in the fading evening light the purple snows of the Cordillera Sueva merge with the Atlantic. Legend will always have a place in the Picos.