

how green is my valley

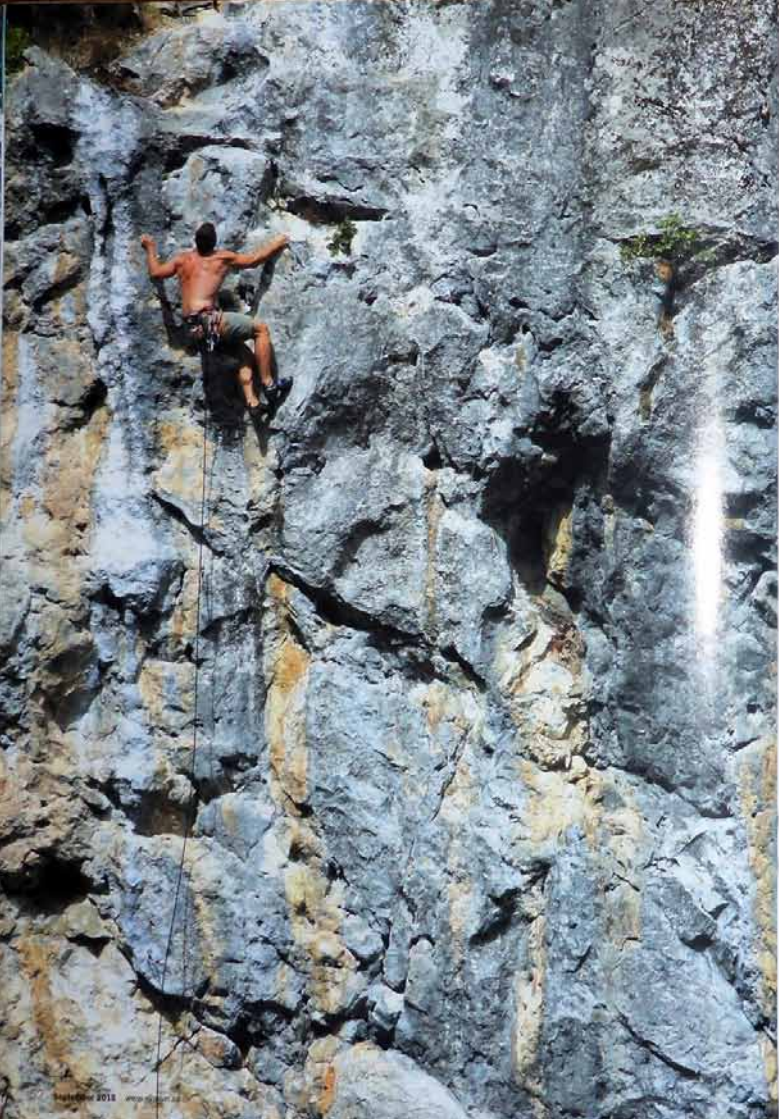
La Hermida

Spain's next big destination

Words and photographs by Richie Patterson

When I started writing the *Roca Verde* guidebook there was a distinct plan and a big part of that plan was to make a guide that included the areas which Asturian climbers (Asturias is the region of north-west Spain where I live) utilised, on a year-round basis. Because, as the seasons change, my partners and I go to the parts of the region that are most suitable for sun, shade and dry rock and I wanted to make sure visitors to the regions had the same options and knowledge to tailor a visit accordingly.

Maik Cocaj on the long quarry and granite
El día del agujero (Fic) on the right side of
Rumores. It's only 77m - to the first bolt and
the full pitch is a 40m masterpiece.



It just so happened that for one of these areas, in the neighbouring region of Cantabria just to the east of Asturias, there had never been a guide and, just like in tales from years gone by, there were stories of amazing crags but unfriendly 'natives'. However, after a couple of meetings and using my British charm, I managed to get the locals on board and could include for the first time in Roca verde the incredible Desfiladero de La Hermita (the gorge of La Hermita).

This impressive valley flanks the eastern massif of the Picos de Europa bordering Asturias and Cantabria. Running north to south between the towns of Potes and Potes it is steep-sided and blessed with plenty of rock. For Brits it has the added advantage that it's also really alive in summer, which has both ferny and cow fields. The other great thing is that in a short time of summer, you can get a decent amount of sun and a decent amount of rain. Close to the beach, but not too close, and you want to miss some of the best and multi-pitch it's a whole lot better than the Picos.

When you first investigate, the crag may seem to be all water about 100m up the plus hery is that the sun is shining the day, so swap it for a bit of sun or shade in a valley. The only real downside is that the road is impressive. The valley is one of the best places to park in the Picos and in the middle of summer, the parking can be difficult to get to. It is a great place to climb, and has some really good crags, perhaps the best being Rumeros-Bumeres in the sole-krans crag in this section and it is a great venue for the absence of tufa climbing. However, all the south is wet and there is a choice of sun or shade, determined by the time of year, and by the overhanging or gentle slabs depending on your preference.

Travelling south, the first crag encountered is Rumeros and as mentioned this is probably the stand-out venue of the valley. An amazing venue and the best tufa climbing in Asturias, the walls and routes at Rumeros are phenomenal and amply demonstrate the potential in this valley. A bit of a shock when first viewed, the upper part of the main crag is for the most part laterally tufa-covered and presents a series of long, slaming test pieces. The rock is generally very high quality limestone and although, as with all tufa sites, it's worth climbing gently, there are no significant problems. Perhaps the only downside is that there are few easy routes, though the easier pitches that do exist, slabbier routes on Principianes as well as Espolón, are actually very good making it fine for a mixed ability team. The lower crag is much shorter and may seem insignificant in comparison but the routes are wonderful and well worth a try.

Urdin is next, and situated right next to the road, almost straddling the border of Asturias and Cantabria, this is a good crag with a selection of routes across the gorges. Composed of two distinctly different sectors, one essentially a big cave, the other a gently overhanging wall, there is a wide variety of climbing styles. So from delicate slabs to busy tufa and punny wall climb, all in very good quality limestone, there's plenty to go at and there should be something for everyone. Route length varies and at the base of the face there are plenty of shorter routes. However, there are 25m-plus pitches to have a go at and the variety at Urdin is partly what impresses a popular spot, some of the easier routes are a bit polished now and this is probably due to the fact that the lower sector is also climbable in light rain.

Just below La Hermita and maybe a little underrated, El Salomón is an easy access venue with some very good routes,



- ▲ The La Hermita area.
- ▼ Urdin's crag is the best of the whole Potos de Europa.
- ▼ Also worth a go is El Salomón.

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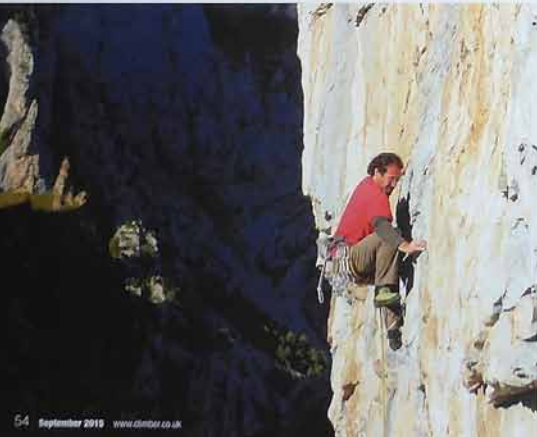
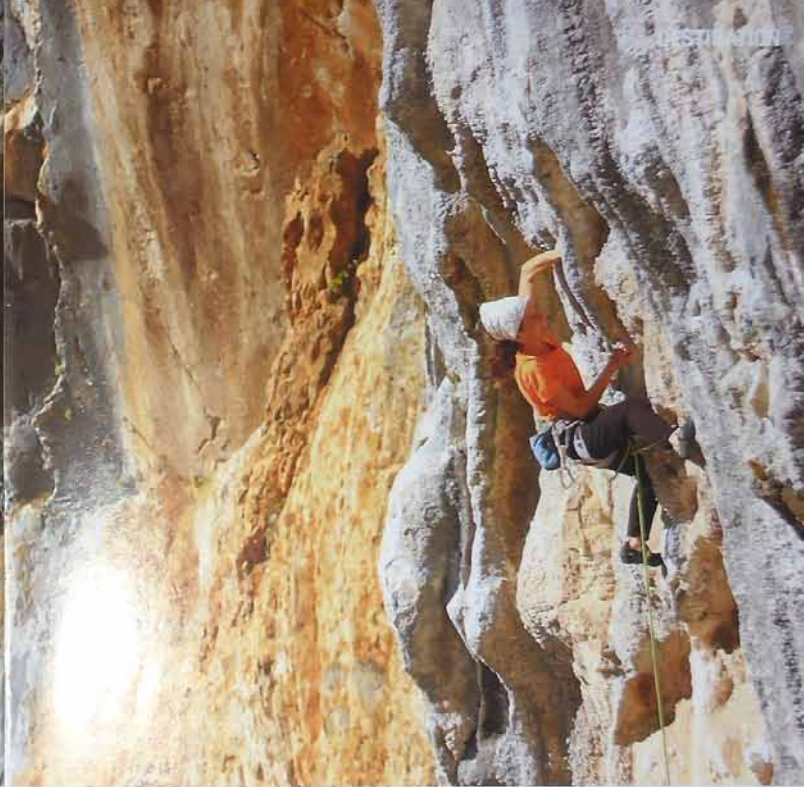
especially in the mid to upper grades, and a variety in the climbing that makes for an excellent day out. Short, steep, tufa routes that pack a punch in next to longer, more intricate pitches that provide food for thought. The lower crag has very few routes for its size and is quite an intimidating venue but, the few routes there are, make for some very good pitches and are as exciting as they look. The rock is generally very good quality and varies between tufa-covered and solid, blocky, less attractive sections and some compact grey limestone. Sometimes overlooked, partly because of the impression given by the rock above, at the base, it's a good crag and well worth a visit.

In La Hermita itself the crag is known as 'El Gallinero' (the chicken coop), a very popular crag that can be seen from the centre of La Hermita and only a five-minute walk from the climber's bar. Maybe not the most aesthetically pleasing venue, but actually pretty good and there is a wide selection of grades to make it a decent venue for a mixed group. Split into two small sectors, the first sector contains the best routes while the second is a bit scrappy and has the hardest V+ around. ▶



Dartford: Nairo Alvarez Garcia is one of the many superb, well-known and unpretentious guides at the compact Placae de Esquilieu a great beginner's venue ▶

Local (don't miss): Ocho Berrokaldu, where climbing allows the visitors of La Herradura in Plaza Verde high up El Zaldibanderu (400) at El Suroeste ▼



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The rock is good overall but can seem a little plain in the base of some of the routes on first acquaintance. Another advantage of the crag, also known as El Gallinero, is that it may dry in heavy downpours and is a great spot to 'camp' on a wet summer day.

Directly below La Herradura are two contrasting venues accessed from the same parking area. Sector Clonico is a small crag with a clutch of well-protected high-quality limestone in an accessible spot. Mostly in the mid-grade six, there are also a couple of harder pitches and a fun multi-pitch which can be done with one rope. In summer it's possibly too hot unless there's some clouds but in late autumn it's always dry and fun around.

In contrast to the very steep Cueva del Crestador, an intimidating crag with a selection of brilliant, super-steep 6000 climbs that make for a testing, 'experts only' venue.

Last but not least, just further down the valley towards Potes are the smaller venues of Placae de Esquilieu and Puente de Lebeña. Placae is a smaller venue, one of the most recently developed and very popular that is the very accessible selection of climbs, with 10, 15, and 16 abscussing. A superb slab is the highlight there and for those starting out or looking up through the guides there are a lot of great friction climbs that require good footwork and a cool head. This is a pretty good family

venue as well, with great starter routes for kids. Finally, the crag at the Puente de Lebeña is another recent addition and what it lacks in aesthetics it compensates for with some choice guide pitches.

A couple more useful tips is that there are plenty of 'half finished' crags in the area that are slowly getting finished and so it's worth checking out the folders in the popular members' bar in La Herradura, Pasaño de la Caballería, the adventure activity centre Guaretek in Campo and El Bar Neuronas in Potes. There are some fantastic areas and for the recently opened 'Sector Inferno' another ultra crag near Burebarrio and for the lush, hard but amazing Cereas ▶

Short, steep and sweet: Nairo Alvarez Garcia leads the climber Nairo into Cereas (400) on the north-western side of El Suroeste.



Probably (but not) the most popular route El sujeto mamificado. If five/10 starts really, but leads to a stone art treasure here.

Finally, it's worth mentioning that it's only a short drive to Arenas de Cabañales, one of the 'gateways to the Picos', and the nearby and very popular venue of Pico de Cabrales, where there are yet more superb wall climbs as well as another blatantly outrageous tufa sector. Overall, the valley is a great place for a climbing trip with plenty of great rock, uncrowded venues, well-bathed routes all in a superb environment. It's also a stone's throw into the Picos and the big mountains making La Hermida a great option for mixing it up.

TIME OF YEAR

Probably best from May to December but can be all-year round depending on the winter. Summer is hot but climbing in the shade is fine. For me, though, the autumn

HOW TO GET THERE

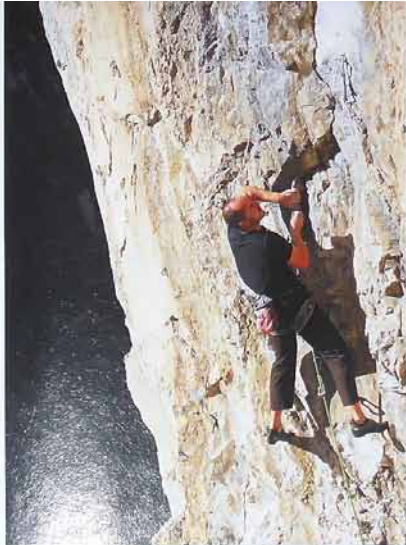
bitrary ferries from Portsmouth to Santander is the most popular option for those wishing to take their own car. Or you can sail to Bilbao about 90 minutes' drive away. Ryanair fly from Stansted to Santander and, as well, easyjet fly to Bilbao from Manchester and Gatwick.

SERVICES

The big bonus of the valley's popularity is that tourists are well catered for and there is a wide selection of hotels, from four-star spots to very reasonably priced hostels and albergues. As well as this there are plenty of bars and restaurants. (La Cuadrón in La Hermida is the friendliest hang-out spot and does reasonable room rates. La Remota in Potes is another climber's favourite.) La Hermida is just about the epitome, but because the valley is so compact there's little problem travelling in it if you are staying either side, in Potes or Potes or further afield in Unquera or San Vicente on the coast. There's also a hidden campground on the eastern bank of the river accessed by a wooden bridge a couple of kilometres past the town. The valley, though densely populated, is actually quite manageable in cars. Bars and most of the crags have parking spots but enough for them. However, recently the Guardia Civil have been known to fine people staying in unapproved spots so it's recommended that you use the large parking areas, just as you exit La Hermida.

REST DAYS

On rest days you can enjoy the views, keep fit or sit at the arts by relaxing in the hot springs, located under the bridge to the 'Baño de' just south of La Hermida. In the height of summer the river that bisects the valley is a teeming, with loads of swimming spots where the chilly mountain water will give itariano-busted bodies a good flush. The magnificent beaches at San Vicente and plenty more spots are not far away where great surf sofas in rows of the year and there's plenty of surf schools and rental. In the valley itself there's a burgeoning via ferrata scene and there are also accompanied canyoning trips and more for those looking for adventure. At the head of the valley there's also the stunning mountain cog of Cuelo Negro. One of the big crags of the Picos yet set in a more amenable spot there are a multitude of high quality adventures for anyone who wants to mix it up a bit. The guidebook with a car can be easily found in Potes.



There are a few routes in the Picos that are actually quite manageable in cars. Bars and most of the crags have parking spots but enough for them. However, recently the Guardia Civil have been known to fine people staying in unapproved spots so it's recommended that you use the large parking areas, just as you exit La Hermida.

Roca Verde is designed to publicise one of the best kept secrets in European climbing: the fantastic sport climbing in and around the Cordillera Cantabrica mountain range in northern Spain. In Roca Verde we have selected the best crags in Asturias, Cantabria and León, to create a guide which incorporates the complete necessary areas most utilized by the region's climbers. Roca Verde contains over 40 selected venues, over 190 different sectors and nearly 3,000 routes. Just as importantly it includes the information the locals know, how to choose the right venue for sun or shade, summer or winter and for whatever grade you climb.



L-R: Javier Fernández Zúñiga on the epic and broody groove of La Cuadrón. Photo: J. Salvo

Another climb: Javier Fernández Zúñiga, Rumanian pioneer of rock. Photo: J. Salvo. Long, but never too technical but the decision is all in the falling up!

Roca Verde is available from all good climbing shops at £20 or online from www.rocaverdeclimbing.com

Rocher tips are just opened, a great bonus to add with your visit of the Roca Verde region's most popular crag. See more at www.casaparcos.com.uk

On rest days you can enjoy the worst kept secret of the area by relaxing in the hot springs

is the best time as the temperatures drop and all the tufas should be in perfect rock so September, October and into November. The obvious problem in winter and early spring is seeping lufas at some venues, yet most other spots will stay pretty much bone dry.

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