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getting high in Mallorca

Paddy Dillon traverses the Serra de Tramuntana on the brand new GR221, Mallorca's Drystone Route

Massive buttresses above Boal de ses Serveres near Estellencs.

destinations

The rugged gap of Sa Bretxa Vella on an alternative spur to Caimari



A well-trodden pilgrim path up Puig de Maria above Pollença



GIVE me a trail through wild mountains and varied landscapes and I'll be happy. Give me dependable weather and I'll be happier still. Give me history and heritage along the way, a chance to meet local people and indulge in their food and drink, and that would be near perfection.

Over the past few years I've had my eye on a trail through the mountains of Mallorca, and while it's not complete, it's ready to rock, and 'rock' is what it's all about. The bedrock of the Serra de Tramuntana is Jurassic limestone, which to the untrained eye looks and feels like the Carboniferous limestone so abundant in northern England. Being in the Mediterranean, it's dry and it's stony. The Ruta de Pedra en Sec translates appropriately as the Drystone Route, and is numbered as the GR221. Time will tell, but I'll stick my neck out and categorically state that this will quickly establish itself as one of the world's most popular trails.

Mallorca has enjoyed a captive audience of sun-starved northern European admirers for decades, and while many might moulder in Magaluf, more and more are finding their feet on the mountains. Some years ago I stumbled across a freshly-planted signpost for the GR221. A straggly line of waymark posts revealed a lightly-trodden path through dense scrub. At the time, various stretches of the route were being waymarked, but they weren't joined together. I also came across old buildings being restored and converted into refuges for walkers. It was a work in progress... or should that be a 'walk' in progress?

I recently trekked the trail, and while the early stages still haven't been signposted, almost all the route is available to walkers. The refuges that are already open are proving to be very popular, and the refuges yet to open are eagerly awaited. You can either wait until everything is finished, or heft your pack and become one of the first to walk the entire trail. If you just want to cover the distance, it can be done in a week, but to appreciate things along the way, and maybe take in variant routes, allow twice as much time.

So what's the Drystone Route all about? Well, some of it is on dry limestone bedrock, or wanders along stone-paved mule tracks and stone-strewn paths. Massive drystone walls, or marges, support cultivation terraces. The ruined drystone huts of charcoal burners, or carboners, are passed in holm oak woods. Look for sitges where charcoal was burnt, and beehive-shaped stone ovens. Lime-burners and snow-gatherers built deep, stone-lined pits along the trail. Stone was used to build humble huts and grand palaces, wayside shrines and ornate churches, water channels and underground reservoirs, cisternas or aljubs. The Drystone Route is an exploration and celebration of the back-breaking life and work of Mallorca's hardy mountain folk.

The route runs almost coast-to-coast through the rugged, wooded Serra de Tramuntana, visiting several interesting, historic villages far removed from the resorts that blight the southern coast. There are three possible starting points, three finishing points, and variant spurs and loops along the way. New maps highlight most of the options, whether signposted or not.

The starting points are as diverse as the small resort of Port d'Andratx, the large resort of Peguera, or the inland town of Calvià, and all three routes head through the rugged Serra de Tramuntana to the village of Estellencs.

The 'main' route is the one from Port d'Andratx, a fishing village with too many estate agents. The route isn't signposted, but hops easily over a rugged hill called Pintal Vermell to reach the coastal village of Sant Elm. Lying offshore is the island of Sa Dragonera, with its knife-edge rocky crest. Jaume I of Aragon sheltered his fleet of 150 vessels and 16,000 men here during stormy weather in 1229. He later landed at Santa Ponça and wrested Mallorca from the Moors, who had been raiding the island since the year 707.

Walkers who take the 'main' route climb through forest to the hidden Vall de Sant Josep, reaching the ruins of a 19th century Trappist monastery at La Trapa. A refuge is being built from the ruins, funded by

the birdwatching organisation, Grup Ornitològic Balear, but progress is slow. A rugged path climbs to Puig de ses Basses, then an easy track leads to Coll de sa Gramola. Until more work has been done negotiating the route, it's necessary to follow a mountain road, or a grass-grown old highway running parallel, to reach the village of Estellencs.

An alternative start from Peguera heads inland to the village of Es Capdellà. The recent purchase of the huge estate of Finca Galatzó, and its dedication to public use, now allows a splendid route to be followed straight up a wild valley between the mountains of Mola de s'Esclop and Puig de Galatzó. A descent leads past an isolated property, Sa Coma d'en Vidal, which might one day serve as a refuge. The onward descent leads to Estellencs.

The other alternative start is from Calvià, crossing forested hills to reach the village of Puigpunyent, then climbing up an old stony highway to the forested Coll d'Estellencs. Any continuation is on private ground, but walkers are facilitated with stiles and it's an easy matter to link with public trails on the slopes of the mighty mountain of Puig de Galatzó to reach Estellencs.

Disaster occurred in recent years beyond Estellencs. The trail was signposted past a property at Es Rafal, which was promptly closed by the owners. However, a huge private estate at Planícia has just been purchased and opened for public use. Trails are already being established and it's quite possible that the GR221 will be diverted through in future. Any re-routing might miss the lovely village of Banyalbufar, which would be a great pity.

Old stone-paved highways are a feature of the GR221. The Camí des Correu, or Post Path, links Banyalbufar with Esporles, working its way through dense holm oak woods. Anyone interested in historic houses should make a short diversion to La Granja, which was a Cistercian property in the 13th century, becoming a country mansion. Esporles needs a refuge as a matter of urgency, as the only hotel in the village is ridiculously expensive.

Signposts have been planted either side of the forested plateau of Mola de Son Pacs, but 'private' notices guard approaches to the highest part. However, the way is regularly used by walkers, though care is needed as the only descent is via a hidden rocky gully. The route reaches Valldemossa, where an extensive monastic site was established in 1399 and it certainly draws the crowds. As a result, lodgings in town are the most expensive on the trail. In 1838, the unlikely lovers Frédéric Chopin and George Sand spent their 'Winter in Mallorca' here, the story being available in many languages. If tempted to press on, at least stop long enough to sample the local delight – coca de patata dipped in a cup of hot chocolate a la taza. You'll be given a thick wad of serviettes to mop up all the chocolate you'll dribble everywhere!

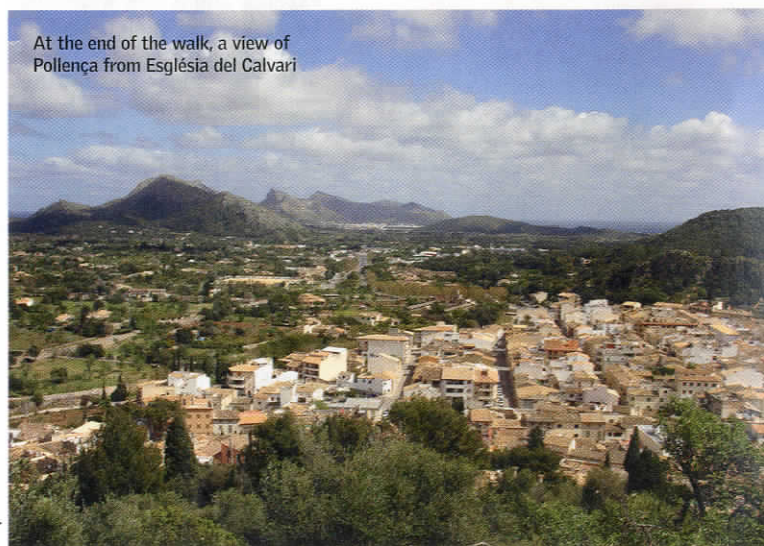
A steep climb leads to a remarkable mountain trail, Camí de s'Arxiduc, or the Archduke's Path. This was created for the Hapsburg nobleman Ludwig Salvador, philanthropist and conservationist, so that he could ride around his Mallorcan estate from the sea to its highest mountains. It's now very rugged underfoot in places, and care is needed to leave it and locate a crucial path negotiating overhanging cliffs at Cingles de Son Rullan, enjoying stunning scenery until engulfed by woodlands and olive groves. This stage finishes in the Deià, where there is a refuge, and where Robert Graves died in 1940.

Stone-paved tracks and paths have been restored between Deià and Sóller, crossing cultivated and wild areas, passing little houses and big mansions. A spur route leads to a refuge at Muleta above Port de Sóller, or lodgings can be sought in Sóller itself. Mountains tower above the town, and one of the most remarkable paths on Mallorca reaches them, climbing endless stone-paved zigzags up the deep and rocky Barranc de Biniaraix to Coll de l'Ofre.

An easy stretch runs past a large reservoir at Cúber, then there are decisions to be made. The only refuge is off-route at Tossals Verds, which can



An old path at Voltes de'en Califer was rebuilt at considerable expense



At the end of the walk, a view of Pollença from Església del Calvari

FACT FILE

Distance: 88 miles/142km, with 50 miles/80km of variants

Ascent: 18,455ft/5625m with 11,170ft/3405m of variants

Maps: Editorial Alpina 1:25,000 Tramuntana Sur, Tramuntana Central, Tramuntana Nord

Guidebooks: *Trekking through Mallorca, GR221 – The Drystone Route*, by Paddy Dillon, Cicerone

Mallorca Hiking Guide, Jaume Tort, Editorial Alpina (with 1:50,000 map coverage of the GR221)

Accommodation: Hotels available in all villages. Refuges are open at Deià, Muleta, Tossals Verds, Lluc and Pollença. (Refuges must be booked and paid for in advance.)

Refuges still to be opened at La Trapa and possibly Estellencs, Esporles and Sa Coma d'en Vidal.

Two long-established hill-top pilgrim refuges are available on Puig d'Alaró and Puig de María. There are Monastic cells at Lluc, where there is also a campsite, the only one on the GR221

Public Transport: Buses serve every village on the GR221, tel 971-177777, or <http://tib.caib.es>

Websites: www.conselldemallorca.net/mediambient/pedra/senderisme.php (the official site) and www.gr221.info



An attractive Mediterranean bay looks land-locked at Port de Sóller

either be reached by an easy woodland trail, or a rugged short-cut, where the rocky Pas Llis has to be negotiated by hanging onto a cable! Plenty of backpackers simply pitch in the woods and avoid going to Tossals Verds and retracing steps. A spur route has been suggested from Tossals Verds to Puig d'Alaró, offering an alternative finish and the chance to stay in a mountain-top refuge.

The highest part of the GR221 is the rugged gap of Coll des Prat at 1220m, below the cliffs of Puig de Massanella. Snow-pits abound here, and at other nearby passes, formerly filled each winter by snow-gatherers, for use in the summer. They all fell into disuse following the advent of modern refrigeration. A remarkable zigzag descent at Voltes d'en Galileu was restored at great expense and is now well-used by walkers heading to and from Lluc.

History is vague about the foundation of Lluc, but it was mentioned in the 13th century and is probably much older. The monastic site is huge, and has been established long enough to offer a range of services. It's worth enquiring about lodgings in monastic cells, and dining in the splendid refectory. There is a new campsite and new refuge nearby, and the refuge contains an exhibition about the developing trail network around Mallorca. Apart from the GR221, there is also

the GR222, already open across nearby mountains, running down to the village of Caimari, famous for the production of olive oil. At the moment, the route offers an alternative finishing point. This route is currently being extended across the plains to the distant Serra de Llevant.

The GR221 leaves Lluc and wanders through pine and holm oak forests to Binifaldó. It picks up an old highway and descends across the steep forested slopes of Puig Tomir to land in the cultivated Vall d'en Marc. New footbridges span rivers, avoiding a road-walk, taking the route to the bustling and densely compact old town of Pollença.

The route ends on the outskirts at a refuge near the ancient Pont Romà, but I would urge further explorations. Climb to the nearby church, Església del

Calvari, and walk down the 365 Calvari steps into the town centre. Pop out of the other side of town and climb the remarkable steep-sided hill of Puig de María, which allows splendid views of the town and surrounding countryside.

The most recent maps of Mallorca mark the course of the Drystone Route, while guidebooks offering detailed route descriptions have only just been published. Those parts of the trail already fully signposted and equipped with refuges are already proving very popular, but only a few backpackers trek the early, unsignposted parts of the trail. Hardly anyone has explored the vast Finca Galatzó estate, or Planícia, since they were purchased for public use. If you're looking for a great trail before it's 'officially' open, then you'd better hurry! ■

