

Fred had read about a fellow Safari Talker's trip to Northern Spain that took his interest so we decided to book the same Casa near Huesca in the sub Pyrenees. Given our liking of train travel we thought to combine the two and so "We went to Spain by Train". And bookings were made. Given time and travel constraints from the Isle of Man we devised a route out by train and back by plane. It was somewhat convoluted but by and large it worked as well as it could.

Let us say at the outset that European long distance trains are not what they were. These modern things



go so fast that there is little need to have Sleepers and those delightful carriages are heading for the scrap heap of so called 'Progress'. Long gone is the romance of the night train and in comes the TGV/ICE/AVE and its 200kph cross country dash. Restaurant Cars? Don't make me laugh! Those enticing promotional images of a loving couple sat at a table set with food and wine whilst lovely mountain scenery drifts by their window are a thing of the past. They would bugger up 'Brief Encounter' if they knew how. It's probably an optional extra for them to clean the windows. Bah! The upside has to be the ease of booking all tickets and seats Online and all did work well except Eurostar.

But it was not all bad news. Our journey started well enough with a drive down to Ronaldsway and an EasyJet flight to Gatwick which was nice enough. We then transferred to rail and caught a through train to St. Pancras which took just on the scheduled hour. We now had some time to kill so had a nice lunch and a bottle of wine before checking in for the cattle market known as "Eurostar" and the start of our International travel. Despite booking months ahead 'They' had changed trains and our reserved seats were different. We now were stuck at the back so it was just as well I nodded off and missed most of this trip to Lille. We alighted and found our booked Hotel nearby but not without some difficulty as it was in a modern complex and not apparent from the street. We had a decent room and slept. We skipped a dinner as we still were enjoying the nice lunch we had back in St. Pancras.

Next day it was back to the scrum of Lille Europe for our 9.03 TGV to Nimes and where the crowds and French habit of refusing to queue in an orderly manner were annoying. So some guy got my knee in his back to remind him there were other travellers as well as himself. The Train came and we got to our booked First Class seats with minimal fuss and so began our four and one half hour ride to Nimes. It was comfortable and more or less on time. That's about all you can say. At Nimes we booked into our pre-booked Cite Hotel just a step from the Station. Lunch would be nice? Err! Hang on! The Cafe and bars were closing 'for lunch'. So we had to wait until an Italian place opened at Seven pm. Happily service and food were excellent.

Next morning after an early breakfast we were down at the Station for the 9.04 AVE train right through to Zaragoza. All that way in just over five hours in reasonable comfort and had we had clean windows we could have admired the scenery flashing by.



On time into Zaragoza and the Ebro Valley was most interesting.

Now came another wait for our local train up to Huesca of which there was no sign on the Departure Board. However after some false hopes it did arrive and we took two seats in a crowded compartment. This was a Rural train and very pleasant with our fellow passengers very friendly.

On arrival in Huesca we embarked on the last sector of our journey which was a taxi for the 15km or so to Sipan, where after following the helpful directions from Johan our Dutch host we found the Casa Vivian in this remote small village. We found out how to switch on everything and thought to find a shop to buy provisions. No luck - no shops! However a friendly lady took us back into a supermarket in Huesca so we did not starve. The Supermarket was fun and the goods comprehensive so we stocked up and set off back to our new home and a nice log fire to cheer us up.

Our plan for the week was to laze on Sunday before being picked up by our guide Alberto to seek out the wildlife. This is why we had not hired a car for the first three days of our stay. So our first day



found us being domestic and putting the first floor flat roof to good use with binoculars and camera and fortified with nice red wine. The local bushes held lots of warblers such as this **Blackcap** who looked quite picturesque among the apple blossom. Overhead were several Raptors including one of our target birds **Griffon Vultures**. Things were looking up especially as a walk down to where Fred saw some Red Kites also yielded a pair of Firecrest in the riverside bushes. Too far for a decent photo and there is no point in



cluttering up this report with poor stuff.

Next morning Alberto arrived promptly in his wife's ancient Peugeot and we set off for The Ebro Steppes around Mon Negros. This was really wild country



with our target birds being both Great and Little Bustards plus anything around such as the variety of larks and Raptors. We were successful on all counts with both Bustards, **Golden Eagles**, Grey Shrikes and both Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sand Grouse which I had not expected at all. Alberto even found a **Spectacled Warbler** which was a very welcome second lifer for me. We had found Great Bustard easy enough, too easy, as we flushed them at first, but Little Bustard were proving harder to find. However as we were having our



picnic lunch, watched by a shy Little Owl and shyer Lesser Kestrels Alberto suddenly saw two Little Bustards over the small valley we were sitting on.. They were very elusive but we could get good occasional views with binoculars as the moved through the meadow.

On our way down we had passed one or two small lakes where we had found Red-crested Pochard, Marsh Harriers hunting the reeds and other waterbirds just out of reach of my camera. We called in again on the return drive but it was much the same. However the village of Sarinena had many **White Storks** nests so we took the opportunity of a photo shoot to one of the more obliging birds. We got back home after a very interesting and satisfying day. We lit the log fire (it was March and the temperatures dropped after sunset.) and prepared another meal



Next morning Alberto was to try Vadiello Gorge for more vultures and raptors as well as cliff dwelling birds.

We saw plenty of Griffons (90% of Europe's Griffons live in Spain) and the occasional **Egyptian Vulture** gave us a flypast. But despite their being at least three pairs of Bearded Vulture in the area we completely dipped on that. Nevertheless there were other birds such as the Spanish "brookerie" sub species of Peregrine which we saw perched on a rocky crag high up.



Also seen here was our first of many **Blue Rock Thrushes**, several Crag Martins, Firecrests and Blue Tits. Even the lake had a lone Yellow-legged Gull. After a while Alberto felt we should try elsewhere and took a long drive west to a large formation of rocky outcrops created huge pinnacles popular with Rock Climbers called Los Mallos de Riglos. This is also a good

breeding area for Griffons so the Rock climbers are only allowed to climb in certain areas away from the nesting birds. Not that I think the Vultures would really mind if the odd climber fell and provided a take away meal.



We had little better luck here and even the hoped for snack and a beer was not available as the only Cafe/Bar was closed. So we retraced our steps back towards home where Alberto took the car up a winding track through a forest to a small Monastery set on a cliff. Here we were lucky to see one of the six Bonelli's Eagles said to be left in the Pyrenees. We also saw lots of Cranes flying overhead plus Wagtails and Jays and Ravens. Here is the Monastery from the path.



On the way home, we were quite close to Sipan by now, Alberto diverted again as he hoped to find me a **Dartford Warbler** and he did. What a beauty it was as after a bit of manoeuvring we managed to get it to sit and pose in the afternoon sun.



So we came to the end of our two action packed days with

Alberto and it was time to head back to Sipan with him for the last time and say goodbye to a great guide and friendly man who was very happy to pass on his knowledge to us.

Next day we went into Huesca where I had arranged to rent a car for the rest of our stay in Spain. Pick up was straight forward, we noted any dings in the car and took to the roads of Spain for our own explorations. Of course Vadiello Gorge was high on the list of places to go to so, after a visit to the Supermarket and packing a picnic, this is where we went. The Griffons were there in plenty of course and we got further good views of them and the Egyptians but still no Lammergeyer came by. But I did see lots of smaller birds, Willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs etc., including this cute little **Blue Tit**. We



also had nice views of a **Short-toed Eagle** as it thermalled up among the Vultures.

After sitting with our picnic and letting the afternoon wear on we reluctantly decided to leave without our Lammergeyer. It was a "dip". Or was it? As I picked up our picnic box and set off towards the car parking I chanced to look up to the rock above where we had been siting.....



Blow me there was a **Lammergeyer** sitting on the rock. How long had it been there above us? Out came the camera and hoping to control the shakes and after holding my breath for the slow zoom I took



a few (many) photos despite those darn twigs. Mission accomplished. Not a lifer but so desirable to see. What a perfect end to our visit.

We returned to Casa Viva rather elated for a celebratory drink and dinner before preparing to pack and clear the house for our drive south in the morning. A good night's sleep ensued and we will miss our Casa a lot. An excellent property in an excellent location.

We now set off to drive down through Spain to Finca da Molina, which is the home of a British couple just inland from Costa del Sol, where we had arranged to rent their Casita for a further eight days. John is a keen birder so I had high hopes of further Spanish birds.

To break the journey we had booked two nights about half way and as we had long wanted to stay in a Parador we had chosen by chance to book in at Parador Almagro. Our drive south was punctuated by many signs to towns and places that had familiar names such as Zarragoza, Aragon, Burgos, La Mancha and Toledo so it was far from a boring drive even on the A roads.

Our Parador was in an old Franciscan Monastery and was lovely. Even the small town of Almagro was pleasantly rural and historic. Look at our courtyard, that's the Hotel ahead, and our bedroom. A great



experience and a big plus, that I only found out when there, is that one of the best Waterfowl reserves in Spain was 20km away. Los Tablos de Damiel is a strategic wetland in a very dry country and well laid out with walkways etc. Just don't visit at weekends if you want peace and quiet. Of course we

went there on our 'day off' and enjoyed the day out.

Next day we continued south passed more evocative signs such as Granada, Cordoba and Seville and less evocative ones like Malaga, Marbella, Stewponey (Estepona) and Torremolinos. We were running early for our scheduled meet at the Finca and having taken a wrong turn, our first and last of the trip, we happened upon a nice looking roadside inn or "Venta" and thought of lunch. The welcome was very

warm and the wine cool so we had found a nice way to pass a couple of hours.

After the lunch we found the Finca easily enough with the aid of our hosts directions and Gladys Garmin and it was as lovely as we had imagined. Our home for 8 days.



Our days here were divided into self-drive and being taken to birdy spots by one of our hosts. It is hard to remember them all but two that stand out were west to Babate and north into the hills around Ronda.

The former was more coastal and wetlands with many waders including Stone Curlew, **Storks**, **Flamingo** and **Kentish Plover** and a place where the odd looking



Bald Ibis have been re-introduced and have established a breeding colony.

The inland place was more scenic and typical of

the villages of Andalusia seen on post cards etc. Birds seen here were mainly raptors and passerines such as **Grey Wagtails** and



Rock Buntings. Other birds of note were Rock Thrushes, Black Wheatears and many leaf warblers that were starting to arrive from Africa. One trip was especially interesting as we came across a small almost white bird in some riverside bushes. We had it in view for some time and managed some decent photos as it seemed quite unafraid. I nick named it an **Andalucian Pied Warbler** but as you can see in reality it is 'probably' a

leucistic Sardinian Warbler. Closer to home, indeed only a few km drive, was the valley of the River Genal which was very productive indeed. As the weather warmed, the upper slopes held many arriving species such as **Black-eared** and **Northern Wheatears** while lower down the river valley held



Zitting Cisticola, and normally plumaged **Sardinian Warblers.**



As the week progressed we saw one and then several **Woodchat Shrikes** as they obviously were arriving back from warmer climes. The first one I had ever seen had been in Uganda some time ago.



The gravel beds were home to several pairs of **Little Ringed Plovers** and other waders such as Redshank and Common Sandpipers. This was a very productive little valley and was a good place to sit and just watch the comings and goings of birds and people so we spent some pleasant afternoons down there when not touring further



afield. One afternoon we had some time just watching a **Hoopoe** seek around a small farmyard for food. It was quite unafraid as long as we remained quiet and often approached quite closely.



On another occasion we were treated to a flypast by a **Booted Eagle** with his landing lights quite prominent as it turned towards us.

On our last day John took me down to the nearby coast where the Guadiaro



meets the sea and is a mass of Golf Courses and high rise apartment blocks in amongst which were a couple of 'Nature reserves' to placate the planners and environmentalists. (The place is really awful to behold!) We were seeking some Swamphens that lurked in the meagre vestigial wetlands that are now ever shrinking in



the face of 'development'. Wisely they were not at home. However one of the last ticks of the trip were a colony of **Monk Parakeets** around the River Bridge. More bloody Ex pats!

And so that was our last outing in Spain. Basically we liked the inland areas but the almost continuous built up coast line was awful. The area around Finca Molina was really nice and the historic town of Casares well worth a visit as was the little Venta we found to the east and where we had some nice meals.

Now on our last day we rose early and cleaned out the Casita (Little Casa) to hand back our home to the owners. We then descended for the last time to the coastal Highway and blew small change on the Toll Road (**AP7 autopista/peaje**) to reach Malaga Airport for our flights home. We had problems finding Avis's Offices for returns which was buried in some vast Multi Car Park Complex but finally triumphed. The car was given a cursory glance and we were free to check in for the flights. Jet2.com an experience to have once in your life! What an outfit. You know that when the Voice from the cockpit starts with "Hello Guys and Gals!" It passed. There was no food or drink but it WAS cheap. As Elizabeth wrote in her Diary "Best forgotten!" After a meal in "Joe's Cafe" in MAN we caught our flight back to Isle of Man and were home and in bed by 22.30.

Stats. 133 species of bird including 26 new species for Europe.