



Trip report 20 - 31.10.09 Andalucia & Extremadura

I think we can safely say that this tour was a wonderful success, with great weather, super birds (courtesy of Angus), excellent hotels and, as ever - most congenial company. It was not without its hiccups at the organising stage, with costs moving about like a yo-yo whenever the pound sterling took a nose-dive, then recovered, and fell again! The two original hotels had to be changed too, the first choice of the Parador in Ronda becoming much too pricey, and the hotel in El Rocio not having enough rooms. In the end, the replacements were more than acceptable and we hope everyone would agree that the rooms and the cuisine were all very good and that they were all totally different in character. Our favourite was the Hospederia Parque de Monfragüe - mainly for its setting and unique design, but also for the superb food. Naturally, one could not fault our last night at the Parador de Antequera where perfection in all things was the norm. We could have stayed here longer of course! If we do a repeat of this tour in the spring sometime, we would consider a two-night stay at this Parador first with a visit to the nearby Laguna de Fuente de Piedra - to be there early in the breeding season when over 8,000 greater flamingos (and often double that number) are present. Little bustards are also found around here all year, so another reason to visit. The rest of the tour could be done in reverse, finishing at Ronda for two nights (which would add one more night to the trip - no bad thing).

Angus's report on all sightings is attached, so we will record other highlights, the landscapes, the towns, the food, the company - but still mention the outstanding views we had of certain species - and this happened to be every day! Angus calls this another winning "Tony trip" and it pleases me (us) to hear that, but I think we call this one a "double-A" success (that is - an "Angus & Antonio trip") See below.



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So, to begin at the beginning! Glasgow Airport on the 20th of October at an unearthly hour. Still, check-in and security went smoothly and by the time we got aboard our new easyJet Airbus 319 (admittedly about 60 minutes late due to the illness of two crew members), we still got away at 07.25 - around 75 minutes behind schedule. **Arrival in Malaga was at 11.40** and we were soon out in the busy pick-up area outside the airport. No sign of Manuel with our 55-seater Volvo. No wonder I couldn't contact him on the mobile - I was using a Spanish code and he and his bus were Portuguese, a fact that had not been passed on to us. However, from this point onwards everything ran like clockwork and we were soon bowling along the Autovia del Sol before heading into the hills for our hotel in Ronda.



El Tajo Gorge - Ronda



Chough on a roof in Ronda



Here we go.....outside the Maestranza Hotel



Tony & Manuel with our coach



We arrived in **Ronda's** narrow main street, with Manuel having to turn the coach outside the *Plaza de Toros* before parking up on the actual pavement. We could not have been closer to the entrance of the **Hotel Maestranza!** Our room allocation and keys were awaiting us and by 14.20 we were sitting in the very traditionally furnished dining room awaiting lunch. Starting with *Escabeche* - a marinated fish with potato and vegetable salad, followed by chargrilled swordfish (*Pez espada*) with a garlic and herb sauce, wild mushrooms, tomatoes and saute potatoes, and finally a fresh fruit salad - we were set up for an afternoon walk around the edge of this Andalucian hill town. As a matter of interest, the name of the hotel derives from the order of knights who laid down the rules for early bullfights performed on horseback. The knights were known as the Maestranza.

Built on an isolated ridge of the sierra, Ronda is truly spectacular and to approach the path which leads along the edge of the town and around to the **El Tajo Gorge** is breathtaking. After some initial light-hearted photographs outside the hotel, we made our way through the park where a **blackcap** was singing and on to the stupendous panoramic view to the Sierra de Ronda. From here we had some of our first views of **griffon vultures**, a distant **short-toed eagle**, a **sparrow hawk** and a **peregrine**. As we approached the **Parador de Ronda**, large numbers of **red-billed choughs** began to appear, as well as **crag martins**. By the time we got to the **Puente Nuevo** which spans the gorge, the **choughs** and the **crag martins** were everywhere! We reckoned to have seen at least 40 **crag martins** and 80 **choughs**. A great start to the holiday. We had plenty of time to explore, as dinner was at 20.00 hrs and we met for a drink in the lounge beforehand. *Sopa de Picadillo* was on offer first, a chicken and vegetable broth garnished with egg and smoked ham. Roast loin of pork with a creamy mushroom sauce, red and green peppers and fried potatoes was next followed by a fairly typical *Flan* (creme caramel). Angus, Mary, Gerda and I tried a (recommended) local wine "Seis & Seis" (six months aged in barrel and six months in bottle) from the wine region Sierra de Malaga D.O., Serrania de Ronda. We were not disappointed! To round off the meal, *café solo or cortados*.

Wednesday 21 October

The day dawned cloudy and a temperature of 10C, which actually dropped as we drove into the Sierra de Ronda. Beforehand though, a hearty breakfast from an excellent buffet with a good choice of fresh fruit, yoghurts, *Jamon Iberico* (as well as York ham); cheeses, rolls, the usual hot international items and a choice of sweet baked goods. By 08.30 we were aboard our coach for a very exciting drive into the mountains and through a number of the famous "white towns" clinging to the steep-sided hills. The **Serrania de Ronda** is a ruggedly beautiful area, giving way at times to wooded ravines below awesome crags, and forests of cork oaks providing abundant habitat for a variety of flora and fauna. Our large coach seemed rather oversized for some of the narrow, twisting roads we traversed, but Manuel coped brilliantly - although for those of us at the front, there were one or two almost heart-stopping moments! Birding was wonderful as we stopped at a number of places to view **cirl** and **rock buntings**; **blue rock thrush** and even two **black wheatears** at one of the higher points along the route, along with a party of 25 **crag martins** which appeared to be migrating south. We drove past (or through) the small white towns of **Cartajima**, **Juczar**, **Farajan**, **Alpendeira** and **Algotocin**, almost touching the walls of the buildings on each side as we scraped through - villagers gazing at this purple monster in awe and wonderment!! We had excellent sightings of **griffon vulture** from the **Mirador de Fraile**, our first stop on the A369 down to **Estapona**. **Willow warblers** were seen at a previous stop before Algotacin, as well as an **Orphean warbler**, **jay**, **song thrushes**, **blue** and **great tits** and two **great-spotted woodpeckers**. From the Mirador we drove directly south via Gaucin and to the (wet and windy) coast at Estapona.



Our first birding stop, Serrania de Ronda

Orphean warbler seen here



We just squeeze through the 'White Towns'



Griffon vulture in the Serrania de Ronda



Paella in Estepona

As we drove through the town looking for a place to stop, Angus noticed a large gathering of gulls on the beach. Half of the group decided to find out what was amongst this grouping and had great views of **Mediterranean gulls** and, off shore, **Northern gannets** following some fishing boats. Panning to the right - a clear view of **Gibraltar** was to be seen. The other half of the group had different requirements - toilets and a place to eat! Both were found in the well named **Plaza de las Floras**, a pretty little square adorned with flowering plants and beautiful tiles. The **Restaurante Casa Pablo** was also sighted in a far corner of the square and a bee-line was made for this most welcoming of seafood restaurants. We enjoyed an absolutely superb *Paella Valenciana* with mussels, king prawns, clams, squid, chicken and peas in an excellent saffron rice. Delicious! Monica said the same about her fresh fillets of sole, and Selwyn (as always) enjoyed his *Calamares Romana*.

We found our other half still in situ on the beach, having watched the gulls from a seafront café with *Cerveza* and *Bocadillos*! The weather had changed and it was now much warmer, with the sun peeping through from time to time. During this time they had also picked up **Balearic shearwater**, **cormorant** (Robin saw it first), **sanderling**, **sandwich terns** and a variety of more common gulls. Now it was time to head back up the road to Ronda, adding in a stop at the **Mirador del Genal** - where we had a superb view of 60 or so **griffon vultures** heading to their roost. The view from here of the white towns dotting the hillsides were also very attractive. We arrived back in Ronda in time to explore the town a little and buy a few postage stamps and post cards.

Our bird list was done for the day (and yesterday) in the comfort of the lounge at the Maestranza, with a glass of wine or a San Miguel from the keg. Dinner was at 20.00 hrs again and guess what was on the menu? (Paella!! - but a pale shadow of what we enjoyed at lunchtime). Tonight we tried another local Vino Tinto - El Niño Leon (Coto de la Viña San Jacimo - Ronda) with Tempranillo and Cab. Sauvignon grapes. After dinner, an evening walk through the town to Puente Nuevo and over to the old part of the town - La Ciudad completed a most enjoyable day in Andalucia.

Thursday 22 October

After breakfast and a check-out time of 08.45, we were all ready to leave Ronda and the luggage was safely stowed. The weather was not typical of the area, but it would have done the west of Scotland or even Manchester proud - with constant heavy rain, grey cloud and a strong wind blowing. It would change later in the day, but these conditions continued for a good 90 minutes or so. **We descended from the heights of Ronda**, speeding along the A374 to Algodonales, the A384 to Villamartin, the A371 via San Bernardo to junction 44 of the Autovia AP4 near Las Cabezas. **We were heading for the coast and the Parque Nacional Doñana**. First though - a short coffee break at the next service area (great coffee!) and on around the Sevilla ring road where the sun was now shining and the band of blue sky was getting ever closer to us. We left the motorway and passed by the towns of Almonte and El Rocio, arriving at the resort of **Matalascañas** at around 12.30. Our **Hotel Tierra Mar Golf** was slap bang on the sea shore and the wind was still blowing strongly, despite the bright sun and temperature of around 24C. Apparently there had been heavy rain and gales along the coast last night, but the weather was changing for the better now. Within the first thirty minutes of arrival, Angus had picked out a **Balearic shearwater** which was close to shore (thanks to the high winds). At 14.30 we would drive out to **Doñana** for an afternoon exploring this national park. First though, time for a spot of lunch in the poolside bar, and time enough for a beer too - the local brew being Cruzcampo from Sevilla. A little time sorting out things in the room - and then off to **El Acebuche, the park centre**.



Audouin's gulls
Matalascañas



Stone pine woodlands in Doñana



Wild boar



Doñana dunes



Our Unimog

By 14.50 we had arrived at **El Acebuche** and were leisurely wandering towards the visitor centre when one of the drivers from a small group of four-wheel drive minibuses came running over to us. He asked if we were from the Gullivers travel group. Yes we were. Well, we were booked on to **a tour of the national park** at 14.30 and it was now 15.00, so would we like to get on board? This came as a surprise, as I had cancelled our original whole day tour of the park - and neither Angus and I were expecting to join a tour this afternoon! However, it was paid for. We got on board and we thoroughly enjoyed it. Our driver-guide was most knowledgeable and was well versed on the bird life of the park and knew all the English bird names. The Mercedes-Benz Unimog was an amazing vehicle which could run through water and over sand dunes, so we found ourselves in some interesting places! We set off along the beach from Matalascañas, running close to the water - sometimes in the water. The waves were still crashing into shore and the drive was most exhilarating. We would stop to view various groups of seabirds and the vehicle was turned around to let photographers and binocular users get good angles from each side of the bus.

We were amazed to see so many **Audouin's gulls** - over 400 in fact, as well as one **Mediterranean gull**, 50 or so **sandwich terns**, **yellow-legged** and **lesser black-backed gulls**, **dunlin**, a few hundred **sanderling** and more. We drove as far as the estuary of the **Rio Guadalquivir** with the town of **Sanlucar de Barrameda** across the water. At this point we turned inland and into the park proper. We took a track through forests of stone pine and cork oak woodlands, where both fallow and red deer were seen. We stopped at a clearing where we could alight and walk to the edge of the river, and also view a re-created settlement of thatched dwellings. On from here onto the dry Marismas where we had a distant glimpse of **Spanish Imperial eagle** on a nest. Our guide - noticing how keen we were to get closer, broke the rules! He drove the Unimog into some scrubby woodland where we surprised a group of wild boar. He managed to position the vehicle at fairly close range to the eagle's nest! From here we had superb views and our only sighting of this truly magnificent bird. From here we reached the sand dunes which seemingly went on forever. Sand dunes with deer - an amazing sight! All too soon - the four hour journey came to an end (and to think we even considered not doing this trip!). It was one of the highlights.

We returned to the park centre and then to the hotel where we met for drinks at 20.00hrs (we only arrived back at 19.30). Dinner was at 20.30 and pretty good for a buffet in a large holiday hotel. Cream of asparagus soup to start (**Gazpacho** was also on offer); a good selection of cold items such as prawns, sardines, artichokes, olives and a wide variety of salads. Main dishes included a wonderfully tender pork casserole - and partnered with spinach and chickpeas, was a treat! The wines here were not bad, but a fairly short selection. The 2006 Rioja from Arnegui (Crianza) was one of the better reds. We attempted the bird list after dinner - but decided not to compete with the musical 'local talent', opting for a coffee and brandy instead! What a day this has been!



Matalascañas beach - on the edge of Parque Nacional Doñana