

CHORIZOS, CHUBASCOS AND CONTREBANDEROS – FROM MORTIX TO THE SEA (ALMOST)

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It's amazing the information you pick up in the papers. I was sitting idly in the supermarket car park in Pollenca reading the local freesheet, while Harris was giving both the wine and the *chorizo* sections a good dose of the Victoria Beckhams. With the help of the small ads my Catalan vocabulary was coming on by leaps and bounds.

"Nuevas chicas...striptease privado...discretion totale..." promised the "Mustang Ranch" over in Magaluf. So much – thanks to the photo of a scantily clad lady – was easy enough to interpret. More difficult was the local weather forecast for the next couple of days, which majored pretty heavily on something called "*chubascos*".

I eventually worked out from the context that "chubascos" meant rain showers, and it appeared we were going to have rather a lot of them, including some pretty dire "*tormentes*". This proved true, the next day being very wet and the day after apparently little better, a real change from the sunny start we had had to our Mallorca meet. Helen, Bryan, Steve and I planned to take the train from Inca via Palma to the port of Soller that morning, but sitting in the main farmhouse Paul and Christine persuaded me to abandon the train and come with them and Mike Gavin on a half day walk from Mortix to the sea.

So began the most distinctive day of our holiday and a real adventure. We were to follow the "*senda de contrabanderos*", an old smugglers path that led down to the north coast of the island, from the tiny hamlet of Mortix about 3 miles west of Pollenca. The guidebook gave a high grade to the walk, and promised an experience "about as far removed from the tourist beaches" as you could get. Navigation was said to be difficult, but the rewards were a trip through amazing karst limestone scenery.

The route, at this stage a dirt track road, started at the rather strange and forbidding gates of the Mortix vineyard. The farm seemed deserted but there were rows of well tended vines. Strangely, this is the closest I have ever got to the source of my favourite drink! Further on, as we left the intensively cultivated land and came to a gate into old olive groves, it was clear that this would be a walk with a difference.

Before us appeared a Balearic Government Health Warning. Heavy smoking: that's OK; lots of wine: better still; this walk: could dramatically and terminally shorten your lifespan. A large yellow notice board talked of dangers in the Torrent de Mortix and on "adjacent precipices", recommended special equipment and noted that "in the last years, even people with a lot of experience have died". The sun had by now emerged, and we laughed this off confidently – "must just apply to the river gorge; we'll be alright..."

We picked our way through the groves of twisted trees and tumbled-down terraces on what was now a small path, marked every so often by a small cairn or by fading

paint marks in a wide range of colours. After a while we came to a ladder stile and emerged into still wilder country. Around us the ground rose into towers and crazy tottering pinnacles, some a couple of hundred feet high. The whole area was a vast plateau, eroded into a maze of rocks and gulleys. On a smaller scale, almost all the rocks around had themselves been carved into flutings like the surfaces of a medieval knight's armour. Some resembled cloaked and hooded figures carved in rock, lurking in the usual Mallorca mix of thorny scrub, aromatic plants and spiky tussocks. To the south, the main mountains formed a black backdrop, capped with cloud, a sharp contrast to the dazzling white limestone around us.

The path was reasonably easy to follow in the pleasant sunshine, the going a mixture of rough walking with the occasional very mild scramble over boulders, gullies and low rock walls. This was once a secret way: a dig in the internet shows that even pre-war Americans, sated on the doings of Al Capone, could get all excited over smuggling in Mallorca...

"NEW YORK TIMES: BARCELONA, March 7 1934. -- The smuggling of tobacco from the African coast has been one of the time-honored industries of the Balearic Islands, particularly of Majorca. Whole towns derive substantial sustenance from it and their citizens have come to regard it as a legitimate business..."

...and we reckoned that in those days the cairns and paint would have definitely been absent!

So clad in shorts and t-shirts (me in my blue jeans worn for the train) we gradually picked our way through the maze, and eventually around the side of a great bowl in the plateau, and down towards the blue of the sea. We could see that the sea cliffs at the end of the route were massive. Also out to sea were a few dark clouds and a rainbow. "Hey guys", I quipped, "looks like we're going to have a *chubasco*!"

In the last section of the route we could actually see the Torrent des Mortix below us in a steep valley above which reared a large pinnacle like a fossilized sea stack. A path with some minor scrambles took us finally onto a zig-zag mule trail heading down to grasslands above a ruined farmhouse overlooking the sea, with a sward of grass outside. 3 hours from Mortix and ideal for a break!

Just as we reached the farmhouse a few fat raindrops fell; we looked inside and then suddenly a great roll of thunder shook the almost roofless building. A *tormente*! We sat cringed down inside the graffiti'd walls, on a heap of old timber, sheep fleeces and sheep turds. The remaining roof consisted of huge stone slabs on rotting laths; not encouraging as thunder crashed and the rain hammered down and soaked into the ceiling plaster which crumbled onto our heads. I struggled out of my useless jeans and into shorts with overtrousers on top, balletically avoiding most of the turds.

I was really glad when after about 30 minutes the downpours eased and we were able to emerge into a totally different world. What had been white was black, what had been dry was wet, and the clear was now obscure. Very obscure. Around us on all sides flash floods poured down the bowl of cliffs surrounding the farmhouse. It was like a November evening and the cliffs were topped with cloud. There was no sign of the path back and suddenly the Balearic Government sounded a lot wiser than we thought. Immediate retreat was agreed.

Our first barrier was a river crossing of what had been a 9 inch-wide stream. I was last over and Mike reckoned it rose three inches in the time it took me to cross on the

few boulders that still emerged. Next came a confusion of massive tussocks through which we stumbled, the path and cairns buried amongst them. It took us 20 minutes to work out from the position of the great pinnacle where the path must be, and then we managed to retrace our steps up to the mule trail, simply because the torrents had calmed down enough for us to see where it was. It was much to my relief that there were no more rivers blocking the scrambly section back on to the plateau. I'm convinced had the storm continued we'd have been pinned down by the floods below the cliffs - benighted, cold, wet and very uncomfortable, a passage of the plateau in darkness being impossible.

As it was the plateau was hard enough. Although the rain almost stopped, all colour and contrast had been drained from the land and the cairns and waymarks were hard to spot. The white rock was now dark grey and there seemed to be no light at all in sky or landscape. We each took turns in the lead for 10 minutes or so at a time, sharing the job of staring out for the marks, with those behind checking out for the leader. Fortunately the limestone wasn't of the polished, slippery variety you get in the Dales, and remained reasonably easy to walk on, and as we made steady progress my confidence returned.

It was great to finally see the fence and stile, even though beyond in the olive grove the path was flooded, with 12 foot wide shallow washes running over it. We were cheerful enough to do a quick bit of line dancing in the flood, and even managed a bit of ironic laughter at the Balearic Government Health Warning!

What a walk – totally different and probably the neckiest thing I've done for a while. Clearly good weather is needed, but not so hot that you can't cope on the plateau. I wouldn't fancy it in summer and less so in winter, so I guess we were there at just the right time. Thanks to Paul, Christine and Mike for a great day and for some good team navigation!

[PS – If you google “Torrent Fondo de Mortix” you'll get a brilliant YouTube video of a descent of the river gorge itself, a real adventure film. That's what the sign was about as you'll see!

PPS Also a google of “Nadal al Puig Tomir” gives a nice contrast that will be appreciated by those who did that trip.]