

Spanish speed



John Humphreys picks up the pace as he heads out to Spain where, despite the recent rain, the partridge provide challenging and exhilarating sport for the best of Shots

I knew I was on to a winner when I found that my loader was Jesus. His mate was Raul, the *secretario*, whose job it was to spot the birds, but with Jesus at and on my side changing guns as slick as a mouse I was in good hands. We were down in Malaguilla, in the Guadalajara province, not so sunny la Mancha, because for the first time in my pursuit of the Spanish partridge, the rain in Spain did not stay mainly in the plain, but up in our hills where they had three days of it, about six months' worth in a normal year. Luckily it cleared by morning and our two days were overcast with sunshine later, but the fields were morasses of red mud and the streams, usually dry nullahs, foamed with water. Stubbles glinted wetly and stripy puddles winked sullenly from between old potato ridges. Previous partridge shooting expeditions had been to a dry, brown country where khaki hills reared, sage and thyme scented the air and the horizon shimmered with heat. About 40 minutes' drive from Madrid, Malaguilla is a green and pleasant land with flat-topped hills, rolling slopes clad in misty green with a backdrop of the high Sierras waiting for the first snows to powder their wigs.

Mrs *Country Gun* and the old man were collected from Madrid airport by suave, multi-lingual shoot captain Ignacio, a Count no less, and thanks to his expert ministrations we whistled through the formalities with the Spanish police and those to whom you must hand hard-earned cash for guns to be transported. One rule of travelling with sporting

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guns is that you need to pay everybody along the way and, as none of them has the English and your Spanish is limited to *Vino tinto por favor*; it can be hairy. If you spot an official approaching, just get out your wallet. With Ignacio it could not have been easier and soon we were thrumming along the open road away

▲ Over two days, an endless stream of high and fast partridges provided fantastic sport

from town and into the fertile countryside. The night of our arrival at the shooting lodge it tipped it down, the biblical storms we suffered at Luton airport followed us across, but in the sumptuous, wood-panelled lodge it was easy to forget what was going on outside. Log fires warmed us as we sprawled on leather sofas gawping at amazing sporting trophies of wild boar and roe antlers, all shot thereabouts, which would have a UK stalker in tears of envy. They had a five-legged roebuck in a glass case.

Delightful residential staff served the food; the bedrooms were well appointed and comfortable, the service immaculate and the experience one of pampered luxury. The gunroom was roomy and secure; guns were cleaned for you and apart from when you were actually shooting, you were not called upon to lay a finger on your weaponry. The food was local and the steak and vino tinto (also local) were to die for, though some dishes were less familiar. We went to bed with rain drumming on the windows and we peered through curtains at

puddles that splashed and eaves that dripped. I had no wellies, they are the devil to pack, but luckily such things in all sizes, along with guns and other kit were available.

Back-to-back sport

It was a two-day, back-to-back shoot with an anticipated 500 birds per day for six Guns, guests of Sally and Michael Cannon, who have done so much for shooting in the UK. I first met them a dozen years ago, shooting spur-winged geese and suchlike in Zululand. No rain there, but here it had the effect that rain has on partridges everywhere; they do not care to do the business with wet feathers and, if there is one thing the Spanish partridge is renowned for, it is doing the business. Dawn was grey but dry and we saw no more of the rain, but conditions were dank and still — not ideal. Breakfast was

partridge eggs, bacon, ham, toast, fresh orange juice and some of the best coffee you could throw a lip over. We piled into a fleet of 4WDs and ploughed along tracks that had become rivers,

slipping and sliding, crabbing sideways on trails of red mud. We passed ancient cottages with Romano-Spanish tiles, narrow streets with little taverns and the odd slouching dog, but no people wandering about. At last we pulled into a planting of ancient olives that first bore fruit when the Romans lived thereabouts. The red earth was scored with the splayed hoof prints of wild boar and roe deer. On the slope stood a row of pegs curving round the contour of the hill and at each, already in position, stood our respective helpers, in my case the formidable Jesus and Raul. How could I go wrong?

Each pair, the *cargadoro* and *secretario* were allotted to their Gun for the two days and they had quite a bit of kit to carry and set up. Each peg had a cloth screen draped on three metal poles kicked into the stony ground erected in front of it. On each side was a heavy tin shield on a telescopic pole to protect you from low shots from your neighbours, an insurance requirement, as most of the birds were miles up in the heavens. I inspected mine for pellet marks; there were none. They carried a leather satchel of ammunition, two folding stools and a collapsible seat for the loader so he sat close by with his cartridges spread out before him on a tin tray, an integral part of the seat. Never seen anything like it before. The

► **John with Raul, the “secretario” and Jesus the “cargadoro” or loader; (below) headkeeper Gregorio Moya runs 22 shoot days on the estate**

loader carried your two guns in a double leather slip so one way and another they were well laden. As Ignacio’s numbering system was incomprehensible to any brain weaker than Professor Einstein’s, it was safest to keep my eyes on Jesus — sounds like an old hymn — and head towards his blue overalls and gor-blimey hat. Jesus was always in the right place and, by sticking to him, so was I. I noticed after a while that some of my fellow sportsmen

were doing much the same, watching their loaders rather than relying on the card. We established immediately that none of us had a word of the language of the other but we communicated well enough by arm

waving, mime and shouting, the way most Brits address foreigners.

Best foot forward

Pull on leather gloves, fit the earmuffs, shuffle the feet, kick a stone out of the way, take the gun and face forwards. There was not long to wait. First two roe came skipping through and from then on it was partridges. Many skimmed by low, very much out of character, for their feathers were wet, but along with them were the usual stunners. Make a good start, choose a nice right to left quartering bird, my favourite for it is just like a clay at Sam Grice’s Long Acres shooting school. Hearing Sam’s ghostly voice in my ear I put the feet right, swung through the bird, dropped the right shoulder to prevent “rainbowing” (I shoot from the left shoulder), and fired. Pause of a second and the bird shrunk and tumbled far behind leaving a puff of pale feathers floating on the dull air. *Bueno*. There’s a deal in a good start, which they also say about marriage and horse racing. After that I got some and missed some as ►

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SHOOTING

Spanish partridges

◀ you do, but I was less obsessed with my performance than I used to be years ago. To recount more would be tedious, for other people's hits and misses along with their personal bags are as exciting as watching paint dry. What ought to be said is that large numbers of partridges soared across the line for a long time, giving extraordinary sport, and leave it at that.

Upholding tradition

Malaguilla is a 6,000-hectare estate, 70km north-east of Madrid airport. This is its first year of proper shooting under Ignacio's management. The shoot is run on traditional lines and the majority of clients come from the UK. Ignacio is a hands-on shoot manager, seeing to the needs of his guests — nothing is too much trouble for him. I met him years ago when he ran the shooting for Michael Cannon on the Hundred Valleys estate. He told me, "I like to take personal care of the people, I know my clients well and many of them become my friends."

This year 22 days or so will be shot, but as more of the estate is taken in hand it will increase to 35 days. There are three Spanish keepers, led by headkeeper Gregorio Moya. The shoot charges by the bird, in this case about 42 euros, which is less than £30, and included in the price is accommodation, cartridges, gun fees and transport from the airport and round the shoot, so all the client needs to find is tips (not cheap) and the flight to Madrid. Taking that into account, this represents good value — bear in mind that every bird you shoot will be one that back home you would remember for years.

The weather is likely to be fine and you have the added adventure of a foreign experience. The birds live wild, there is no trickle release, and the shooting experience is a very natural one. The season runs from 8 October to 8 February. Parties may bring up to eight Guns and would expect to shoot in the region of 500 birds a day. Non-shooting partners are welcome for a modest fee. A two-day package is favourite, but a one-day may be arranged, though it seems a long way to go for just one crack at some of the most sporting birds that fly.

There was not a dud drive in our two days, but some were more spectacular than others. Standing facing a wooded hillside at peg No 5 sticks in the mind. It might have passed for a West Country hanging covert were it not for the wild thyme, rosemary, sage bushes and furze. A pair of eagles wafted and glided high above, several woodpeckers undulated over, small birds showered the bushes, a sparrowhawk zipped past and an enormous eagle owl, like a flying pillow, sailed majestically. Halfway through the drive an almost black fox broke cover, followed

closely by the only wild boar we saw all day. Hares loped past, giving Jesus great excitement for his thoughts were on a rich stew. Wave after wave of partridges sailed over, some almost out of range, others comfortable and a few easy ones. Like all good shoots there was something for everyone. The gun-changing was slick, the confidence high and for once I got it about right. The normally unflappable Jesus grew excited *Olé, Doubletti* (a right-and-left), and *Alta* (a high one), he cried, giving unnecessary encouragement. The horn blew and he and Raul scuttled off to gather the slain before their neighbours pinched our birds, a matter of some importance.

Partridges for the pros

Next and finally came the reverse, a mighty climax to the two days. These birds were the highest of the trip, some out of range of the ground, but my companions could shoot a bit. Every so often, a 50-yard redleg would turn into a cricket ball hit by an Australian and sail down in a lazy parabola to bounce on the damp stubble behind. Breaking my own rule, I must report that my earlier brilliance deserted me at this point and my kills-to-cartridge ratio took a nosedive. Up to then it had been respectable, but those ripsnorters damaged it no end. Watching those who got it right made up for this, for it was a pleasure to see high birds dealt with so professionally.

Then the final pick-up and farewell to Jesus with a bag of about 400 cracking birds for each day obtained in five and four drives respectively, and then back to the lodge for lunch. Too soon we collected our freshly cleaned guns locked into travelling cases and went back to the airport hell, the passage smoothed by Ignacio's firm but gentle organisation. Two o'clock the following morning saw the memsahib and me sipping a cuppa-soup back in the Towers after what you might describe as a longish day, reflecting there are some things in this wicked old world that might just be worth hanging on to.

What is more, when the God botherers come uninvited knocking on my door and ask their usual opening question, "Has Jesus come into your life?" I at least can answer with an unequivocal and truthful affirmative. ■

For more information on booking shooting at Malaguilla, visit www.caceriaslosvalles.com



▲ Count Ignacio, who took over the shoot last year
▼ Some of the beaters carried Spanish national flags



Sally Cannon, who, with her husband Michael, hosted the two-day shoot, takes a high bird

