

## Una casa forta sobre el curs del Ter

From a mountainside at daybreak when it has rained in the night, you look out across land bathed in cloud. What is solid and dark swims in what is pale and insubstantial. An unremarkable heap of rocks emerging from the mists enjoys its moment of prominence as an Ararat after the Flood. A line of trees stands out as though it were alone, floating in unreal isolation between sea and sky. Rags of cloud fold themselves between the ridges, interleaving hard silhouettes with strips of soft white, layering the landscape. Each dark edge seems cut in cardboard, packed in cotton wool.

To a man walking alone in the bright morning air above this sea of vapours, every perspective is new. He pauses here above the swirl. Steam rises from the woods and flecks of fog are draped across lake and marsh below. He stares and stares in wonder. When it is time to walk on, he resolves to return.

L'Avenc was not ours when, on such a morning thirty years ago, I first stood at the great arched entrance to the ruined house. As yet unacquainted, l'Avenc and I looked out across the forested valleys and gorges of the River Ter 2,000 feet below.

[...]

But there was something different about this place: something enchanted. It hit you between the eyes. There was something striking in this solitude, too. Rounding that bend in the track, I had stumbled upon a sort of domain.

I swung round and looked where l'Avenc looks: southward, out over the Ter valley and Montseny mountains. You could see into the heart of Catalunya: to the east, where the river flowed out of the mountains and through the walled city of Girona, on its way to the Mediterranean. Was that the sea, fading into a horizon? To the west, past the small city of Vic, I recognized the mad silhouette of Montserrat, the holy mountain, all Gothic jagged rocks, the spiritual home of not just Catalan Catholicism but the Catalan identity itself.

Only the ridges and peaks of the Montseny mountains, breaking through the clouds, hid the city of Barcelona, hot and humid on the coast to the south. To the north the land behind me rose towards the snowy ridges of the Pyrenees and France. I could see as far as the mountains above Andorra.

And almost at my feet – just down the meadow which sloped away from where I stood – was the cliff's edge. The cliff over which the valley dropped away was sheer, brutal, magnificent. It looked like something from a science-fiction movie. Dark green Mediterranean oak forest frothed from

the mist at the cliff's foot. A waterfall from the night's rain splashed over the rocks.

Cliff, mountain, lake and river; forests of oak and beech; Barcelona, the ski-slopes of the Pyrenees and – just out of sight – the Costa Brava; variously busy or serene, these worlds lay not far away, all around the points of our compass. L'Avenc was at the still, silent centre of this compass.

[...]

It was by coincidence that we had found ourselves beside one of Spain's and Catalunya's great national walking paths, but the discovery triggered in my mind an idea which in time was to become one of the most straightforward parts of our plans, and the most easily realized: converting the ruined cowsheds attached to l'Avenc into a line of stone cottages for walkers and tourists.

Right past l'Avenc's front door ran a road which was as old as any in Spain. Excavating around the house we scraped clear the big flagstones which once paved it. Beneath the cellar...we found traces of what an architectural historian told us was probably a Roman track. It was hardly surprising that there would have been a road running along the top of these immense cliff-systems for as long as there had been human beings there, but this one was important: it was the continuation of a commercial and trade route up from the valleys and plains into the mountains.

Iberia, where distances are large and towns and villages often sparse, is criss-crossed by the ghostly traces of what was once an immense network of packhorse routes, whose habit is to take the most direct line between settlements – any path, however steep, up which a horse or mule can pick its way – where modern highways will take the long way round. Some of these old routes have found a new incarnation in the form of walkers' trails, called (in the world of hiking and rambling) *Grandes Rutas*...L'Avenc is on the GR2.

The path climbs up through a gap in the cliffs by Tavertet. It has come from the other side of the Montseny mountains to the south, wound its way over the mountains, down into the valley of the River Ter, and then, after scrambling up over the cliff-system's edge and into Tavertet, it turns right and heads for Rupit, running along the clifftops and beneath l'Avenc. After that it winds down another cliff-system on to the plain of Olot, and heads for the Mediterranean end of the Pyrenees.

It is a popular route – but so are most of the GR paths. Catalans love outdoor walks and nature-trails, and town and city people are especially keen. They take their pastoral pleasures rather gravely, buy the right walking gear, get the necessary information and are proud to behave as responsible hikers. To Catalans, *excursions* (the word is the same in Catalan but has a more derring-do ring) are more than a pleasant day out

in the country: they are felt to be a sort of homage to the natural heritage of Catalunya....

In the Collsacabra the fences are usually pretty rudimentary, and higher up in the Pyrenees there are no fences or boundaries at all. But Catalans are rule-conscious people and (unlike some of their militant rambling English counterparts) would feel uncomfortable to be off the beaten track. So the set walking routes are hugely popular, ancient tracks and bridleways with a history of their own, and a range of maps and guides direct walkers down them, advising on flora, fauna and history, and the places to stay along the way.

[...]

Then the path climbs again, up to the top of a ridge where the most amazing castle, Sant Llorenç del Munt, sits on top of the world. This ridge takes you above Vilanova de Sau. The old town was transported here to create two enormous lakes, the upper about seven miles long, the lower closer to ten, both snaking round the corners cut by the old gorge of the River Ter.

High above here sits l'Avenc: you can just see it on top of the red gritstone cliffs, distinguished until recently from the surrounding woods by the huge piles of rubble and earth created by our building work but now, thankfully, blending back in as the greenery returns. At night from the house we can see the occasional flash of a car's headlights as someone returns home to Vilanova or a late visitor searches out the remote Parador de Vic-Sau, a traditional hotel on the water's edge deep in pinewoods at the end of a dirt road.

On foot, though, you take the path crossing the big concrete dam holding back the upper of the two lakes, the Pantà de Sau. From June to September it is hot and humid, almost tropical, down here, utterly different from the mountain air on the cliffs above.

Down here by the Pantà de Susqueda everything has reverted to nature. Trees clothe the steep hillsides and crowd the shores, and in summer the valley is alive with butterflies. The only trace you will see of its human history is the occasional glimpse of stonework, throttled by roots and trees; or an unexplained copse of flowering cherry trees, apples, walnuts, figs or sweet chestnuts, once tended but now gone wild....

It was sad. We are very used in our era to bewailing the spread of humanity, the retreat of nature and the advance of all the works of man. But...men and women had a place down here by the Ter. They made their gardens, their habitations and their fields here. It was not the kingdom of rats, ants, foxes and snakes alone. They cut back the throttling ivy and cruel brambles; they kept the nettles down.

I regret their departure. The earth is ours also. Those who deify nature with a capital N should reflect on the paradox that just as surely as it is in the nature of a cat to hunt or a bird to fly, so it is in the nature of man to keep "nature" at bay...

Matthew Parris, *A Castle in Spain*, Londres, Penguin, 2005.