

LA LA CUESTA FIESTA

Waves of high, strong, fast partridges flowed over the wild, rugged La Mancha landscape – it's no wonder guns keep coming back to this Spanish estate

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Clockwise from above: the pickers-up; guests in party mode on the final evening; James T Hatfield III; the fabulously comfortable lodge; an obedient spaniel. Previous page: Richard Serisier

I am standing at the foot of a monstrous hill talking to Jesus (think Jay-Zeus) Alberto Muela just before the first drive of the day gets underway at La Cuesta, his family's wild and rugged property in La Mancha region of Spain. The steep bankside in front of us is lathered in juniper, sage and scrub oak trailing fronds of green lichen between rocky outcrops and scars of ruddy soil. "Our guests come here to shoot high birds," he emphasises, "high birds, strong birds, fast birds." Thirty seconds later the first brown specks appear in the grey sky above us and the fusillade begins – and

continues for the next 20 minutes as wave after wave of red-legged partridge soar over the wide valley floor. These are high birds by anyone's reckoning; strong and fast, too, but also astoundingly prolific and consistent. It's small wonder that the loader assigned to each gun sits with his back to the drive so as to concentrate solely on keeping up with the action. If Carlsberg did high birds, this is surely what it would be like. Or, in the words of Michael Searle from Florida, who has been shooting in Spain for 40 years, "La Cuesta is the icing on the cherry on the top of the cake, the best partridge shoot bar none." Such excellence does not happen by chance, and the La Cuesta story is a tribute

to the dedication and sheer hard work of the father and son team of Jesus senior and Jesus Alberto Muela, game dealers who took on the lease of nearby Las Beatas back in 1993. "The topography there is gentle," explains Muela junior, who first joined the beating line aged 12, "and it quickly became apparent most of our guests preferred La Cuesta, where we also had shooting rights, but the birds are much higher." The property was owned by three families who did not necessarily agree, however, the Muelas successfully negotiated the purchase of 3,000 hectares and renovated the lodge in 1999, which now stands "at the heart of the shoot".

And some heart it is. Imagine a Scottish lodge with bells on and every conceivable comfort – well-stocked bar, gunroom, ensuite bedrooms, underfloor heating, Rodger McPhail paintings on the walls – together with breath-taking views that stretch beyond an avenue of olive trees to the ragged peaks of a green sierra rising from the plains.

The Muelas employ 17 full-time game keepers to control predators and ensure their charges remain in peak condition throughout the year. "We release our birds in August and our keepers take good care of them all year round, not just during the shooting season," Muela reveals. "They are fed on specially formulated pellets with different protein levels according to the time of year and are tested regularly for disease and stress."

The family's partridge empire now extends to 17,000 hectares across 22 properties, offering 122 drives. "We try to make the shooting as natural as possible, which is why we need such a large area," explains Muela. "In a good breeding year we also have many wild birds."

If I needed a reminder that this sparsely populated landscape of La Mancha is Don Quixote country, it had been provided at

dinner the previous evening by American surgeon John Garrett, who kindly presented me with a copy of Cervantes' celebrated novel, which is set in an unspoilt rural countryside that appears little changed more than four centuries after publication.

Many have been introduced to the sporting delights of the region by Nick Mason from the Davis & Bowring sporting agency, who accompanies his clients throughout their stay at La Cuesta and is regarded by Jesus as part of the family. Mason's involvement with the Spanish red-legged partridge originates from his resolve back in 1992 to complement grouse-shooting interests in the UK with something less risky. "I realised I couldn't run a shooting business based purely on grouse income, which was just too unpredictable," he remembers. "A Spanish friend recommended Las Beatas, but after the Muela family

expanded their range to include La Cuesta my clients didn't want to go anywhere else. Spanish partridge shooting is typically low and fast but, thanks to the steep topography, it's completely different here. In the early days it was a long walk to every drive but now they are all accessible with bridges, culverts and more than a hundred kilometres of tracks to transport guns about the estate."

As befitting someone who has been around longer than much of the infrastructure, Mason enjoys a close rapport with all shoot personnel, be they beaters, keepers, loaders or secretarios, with a pat on the shoulder for some, a friendly word for others and an anecdote about everyone. Nothing escapes his attention, not even the vehicles. "That's been part of the scenery here for many years," says Mason, affectionately stroking a much-battered Nissan jeep. →

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During the shooting season from 1 October until the end of February full-time shoot and lodge staff are joined by beaters, loaders and secretarios, which makes La Cuesta one of the region's biggest employers. As I discover when I join them for a drive, the beaters are a cheery lot and include a chef, chauffeur, painter and decorator, several agricultural workers and a greengrocer who also happens to be 'el president' of the local bullfighting association. I struggle to keep up with the banter amongst this all-male beating line, which soon becomes risqué and has everyone in stitches. Our vehicle is one of several unloading beaters at different points to bring in a huge tract of ground, during which we pass hoppers suspended so far above ground that partridges must jump up in order to reach the pellets – no wonder they are so fit. As the drive progresses the sound of continuous gunfire draws ever closer until we reach the rim of a plunging escarpment where the guns and their helpers far below us appear small as pinpricks.

Even after all this activity I'm nowhere near ready for a second breakfast just two

“ Individuals pay for the birds they shoot rather than divide the cost among the team ”

hours after polishing off bacon and eggs back at the lodge. As the shoot party files into a tastefully renovated *finca* they are greeted by a blazing log fire and liveried waiters dispensing consommé and sherry before sitting down to a platter of smoked salmon sandwiches, sliced serrano ham, spicy sardines and home-made Spanish tortilla, washed down with claret and coffee. We entered the building under grey skies but emerge 40 minutes later into warm, bright sunshine and the prospect of two more drives before lunch. The seven guns are an international team represented by Australia, France, the USA and Sweden. Most have flown into Madrid airport but Jose Louis and Genevieve Garcia have driven from France on a 13-hour journey with their liver springer spaniel. Many, such as Stewart Siebens from the Cayman Islands, visit so regularly that →

Michael Searle, from Florida, picks a high bird; he has been shooting in Spain for 40 years

“All guns have found form, and splatters of cartridges beside each peg quickly grow into lakes”



they leave their guns behind for safekeeping – in Siebens’ case a treasured pair of 12-bores that belonged to his friend, Wilbur Smith, who was also a frequent visitor to La Cuesta. Most have brought their wives – and why not, for the setting and weather bear no resemblance to a damp autumnal pheasant shoot. In warm sunshine shirt sleeves are the order of the day. I also spot the ubiquitous gilet, cowboy boots, baseball hats and the legend La Maquina – the machine – emblazoned across the back of Searle’s sweatshirt, which is set off by a pale blue bandana. There is no standing on ceremony here.

During this lengthy third drive it’s clear all guns have found form, and splatters of cartridges beside each peg quickly grow into lakes as the shooting continues at a fast and furious pace. The informal dress is matched by a relaxed banter along the line and spectacular shots are often greeted with a resounding cheer, except that guns are mostly too preoccupied with

their own high birds to salute the achievements of their neighbours. Every gun is accompanied by a secretario, whose job is to record on a clicker the number of birds killed by his charge, for in Spain individuals pay for the birds they shoot rather than dividing the cost equally amongst the team. This can be eye-wateringly expensive for a gun on good form, so over drinks on the first evening Mason ensures everyone understands what they are letting themselves in for. “We don’t want any nasty surprises,” he says. “These days are expensive to put on, so there is a minimum overall bag but not everyone can necessarily afford to shoot more than their share. If a gun wants to sit a drive out, share the sport with a friend or

even finish early that’s not a problem for us.” In marked contrast to driven shoots back home, there is a crescendo of noise from the beaters as this drive draws to a spectacular close; “not exactly a gentle tapping of sticks”, Mason smiles. Afterwards, the secretarios fold away discos – spherical metal discs – they have put up to shield guns’ faces from bright sunlight and work their springer spaniels and labradors behind the line to gather the bag.

It’s gone 3pm by the time we enter another fine, stone-built house for lunch, and after such a banquet I’m not the least surprised that no-one sticks up their hand when Mason offers a final late-afternoon drive. Instead, we travel a short distance to inspect the latest addition to the La Cuesta repertoire, a two-kilometre Tarmac runway that will enable guests to arrive straight into the estate by private jet rather than endure a three-hour drive from Madrid airport. From there it’s back to the supremely comfortable lodge and an evening’s entertainment that includes a flamenco dancing display. Ever the consummate host, Mason is up before dawn the following morning looking bright eyed and bushy tailed to see *The Field* contingent safely off. “It’s not an endurance test or competition at La Cuesta,” he reminds us, ushering us into a waiting car. “It’s a holiday.” I’ve only been here for 36 hours but I understand exactly what he means. ■
To shoot at La Cuesta, contact Nick Mason at Davis & Bowring on 07831 256189 or visit: davis-bowring.co.uk



Top: every gun is accompanied by a secretario, who records on a clicker the number of birds hit. Above: attractive engraving on a Kemen. Left: dogs were kept busy retrieving in the rugged terrain

