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SIR RANULPH FIENNES

MARK EVELEIGH

Vagabond

A HIKER'S HOMAGE TO RURAL SPAIN

ONE OF **NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC'S** TOP SIX TRAVEL READS FOR 2024

VAGABOND

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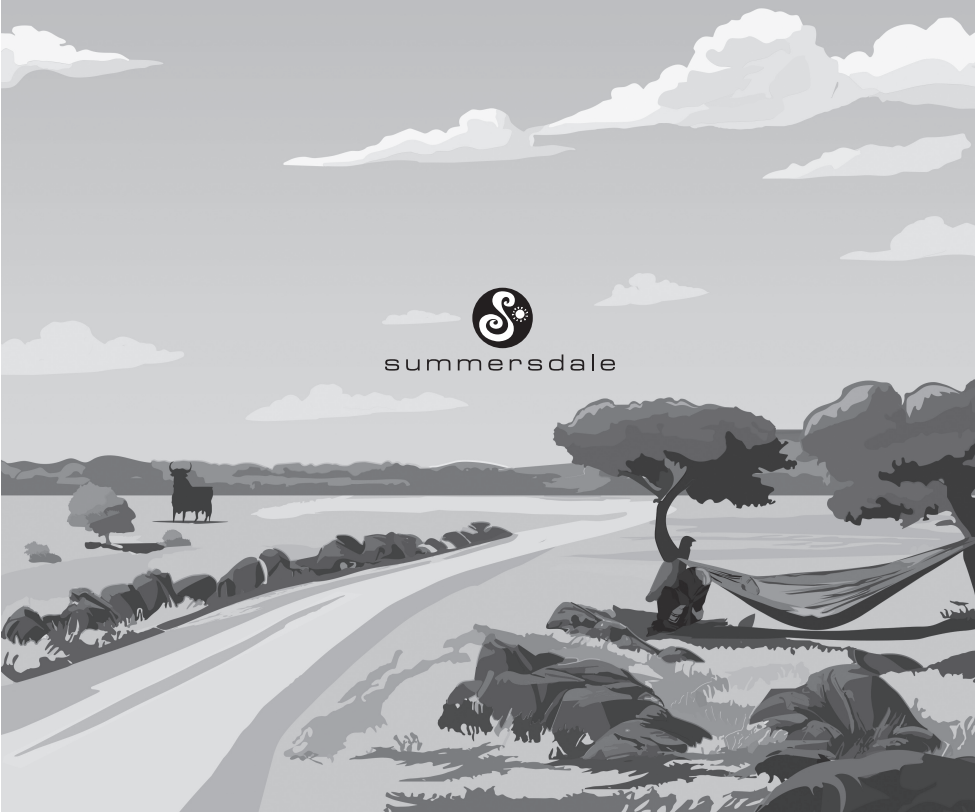

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For Lucía, who inherited her papá's itchy feet

CONTENTS

Foreword
9

Chapter 1 – Across the South
15

Chapter 2 – Up the Middle
119

Chapter 3 – Over the North
247

Acknowledgements
299

About the Author
301

Glossary
303

Bibliography
309

Index
311

FOREWORD

I fell in love with Spain's wild mountains, endless plains and evocative old towns 30 years ago and spent almost two decades there, working as a reporter for international magazines and newspapers. I was so fascinated by the country and its people that I couldn't stay still and through the 1990s and 2000s I trekked – as a backpacker and a budding travel writer – through every part of the Iberian Peninsula.

Every journey soothed my yearning for adventure, but fuelled dreams of another. I explored most of the wildest parts of the Spanish mainland, camping, walking, hitchhiking and even travelling on horseback. I slept in orchards and ruined barns, under bridges and in shadowy nooks beneath the walls of Moorish fortresses.

Mostly I travelled alone but my path often coincided with itinerant labourers, migrant workers, nomadic punks (*punkis* as the Spanish call them) and some of Spain's unique *Gitano* communities. For a few memorable weeks I trekked in Aragon with three septuagenarian brothers who were the last truly nomadic migrant shepherds on the Iberian Peninsula.

During one of my early journeys, I met an unforgettable old man who described himself as a *vagabundo*. We were both almost penniless but fate had somehow contrived to provide us each with the handful of pesetas necessary to catch a train in Badajoz, near the Portuguese border. We chatted in Spanish as the train clanked past a series of dusty sidings. The old man was homeless and owned nothing but the clothes on his back. I was in a similar situation. In my case though it was purely by choice. I was between jobs and don't even recall now where I was going. Nor why, uncharacteristically, I was travelling by train rather than hitchhiking or walking.

The old man also habitually travelled on foot, he told me, around a circuit that he could complete roughly every two years. It was, he

believed, the perfect pace to ensure that he was welcomed back in the villages along his route.

'Hola señora, soy vagabundo,' he'd yell cheerily. *'Necesito algo pa' comer'* – I'm a vagabond. I need something to eat.

In each hamlet he'd be greeted as an old friend and I gathered that his entire livelihood lay in trading laughter and tales of the road for a meal and a glass or two of vino. Then he'd move on. He almost certainly completed his last circuit long ago and has no doubt passed on to other stomping grounds by now.

He had no home, no family and no money. Yet that happy hobo lives on in my mind as the most bright-eyed, contented and fun-loving person I ever met.

Almost 30 years after meeting him, as I had just tipped over into the wrong side of 50 – about the same age that my 'old' *vagabundo* friend would have been when I met him – I set out to recapture some of that spirit. In fact I realized that I was now older than that famously crazy old Spanish gentleman Don Quixote was said to have been when he embarked on his own errant adventure. Probably I should have been old enough to know better. Was it reckless, I wondered, to be setting off on a midsummer walk that would take me 1,225 kilometres up the length of Spain? The answer, I found out later, was yes. It turned out that it was extremely reckless but I was not to know when I started my journey that I'd be walking through the hottest summer since records began in Spain over a century ago. By some estimates more than 11,000 people died from the heat in Spain that year.

In honour of my old friend, it seemed important that the trek – from Gibraltar to Estaca de Bares (the most northerly point on the Iberian Peninsula) – should be completed in true vagabond style. Wherever possible I intended to sleep in the open air, *en el santo suelo* ('on the sacred ground' as the Spanish call it). Or, preferably, suspended a metre above it in my trusty hammock. I was haunted by the feeling that I would only ever be flirting with

a state of 'vagabondage'. Even as I strung my hammock across a hidden irrigation ditch on the outskirts of a village or curled up on a groundsheet on a remote hilltop, I often had the hypocritical feeling that my sense of insecurity was itself just a mild sham. Part of an act. For countless thousands of people, after all, the state of homelessness was far from romantic.

Nevertheless, I was driven by a hunger to return to my old hobo ways, sleeping rough wherever I could, bathing in streams and grabbing a meal when the opportunity arose. I wanted to sacrifice a rigid itinerary for a chance to regain the love of aimless freewheeling that had motivated my earliest travels.

Estaca de Bares
Lugo
Ponferrada
Astorga
Zamora
Salamanca
Cáceres
Mérida
Seville
Gibraltar
Asturias
Cantabria
Basque Country
Navarre
Galicia
La Rioja
Castile and León
Catalonia
Aragon
Madrid
Valencia
Extremadura
Castilla-La Mancha
Murcia
Andalusia

CHAPTER 1

Across the South

Andalusia
Seville
Los Palacios y Villafranca
Las Cabezas de San Juan
Arcos de la Frontera
Algar
Jimena de la Frontera
Gibraltar

As I peered out from among the cocooning folds of my hammock one May morning, I felt unseasonably cold droplets of dew settle on my face like a cold flannel. I was a castaway in a sea of swirling mist; my little desert island of scrubby grass and stunted olives floated in a soupy cloud.

The weather had been clear the previous evening so I hadn't bothered to string the plastic bivouac roof over my hammock. I'd felt privileged to look up at the stars, ensnared within a crooked web of gnarled branches and twigs. The lights of a distant village had glowed amber on the plain, like the clustered campfires of an entrenched army. Now, at daybreak, the hillside was draped in mist. The only noises were the distant crowing of cockerels and what sounded like the dim clanking of rattled chains approaching along the curve of the hillside.

The sound was vaguely familiar but it took a moment for my sleep-befuddled brain to realize that a herd of goats was moving along the hillside towards me. The heavy bells around the necks of the billies clattered eerily.

It was a dawn chorus that would have been familiar to the inhabitants of this hill two thousand years ago. I'd set up camp near a maze of crumbling walls, the remains of a nameless Roman city that was already considered ancient when Christ was born. The evening before I'd explored the ruins as I searched for a sheltered sleeping spot. Eventually I'd given up on the shadowy cisterns and spooky chambers and had settled on a tangle of olive trees.

I realized now that it was the sound of the approaching goats that had woken me. The males were grunting like gazelles in rut. It crossed my mind that they might well be accompanied by

shepherds – and perhaps even by ferocious mastiff dogs. With this in mind, I decided that it would be wise to break camp quickly and move down the hillside before the herd surrounded me.

It had been three days since I'd walked out of Gibraltar. I'd slogged uphill for most of the first 100 kilometres and only now, on the southern flank of the Sierra de Aznar, could I begin to convince myself that I was on the downhill slope towards Seville.

* * *

Mark Twain must have seen Gibraltar on an unusually beautiful day when he described it in *The Innocents Abroad*: 'majestic Gibraltar glorified with the rich colouring of a Spanish sunset and swimming in a sea of rainbows.'

It had always struck me as fitting that the little enclave – less than 7 square kilometres – seemed to have imported its own British weather. The damp eastern wind that blows up the Strait is known as the levanter and it's over Gibraltar that it invariably delivers its cargo of rain. There are few days when The Rock isn't crowned with its own wispy grey tiara and Gibraltarians will tell you, with barely concealed pride, that the levanter cloud is often the only one visible for 50 miles across southern Spain.

'If you look closely,' they say, 'you can see "Made in England" stamped on its underside.'

But the first hint of dawn was yet to bleach the starry Mediterranean sky when I began walking from Gibraltar's southern tip.

I'd rented a room the previous night in the heart of Gibraltar's old town, savouring what I figured would be my last night in a bed for at least a month. My English landlady Marie had gone beyond the bounds of normal hospitality by suggesting she'd wake even before first light to drive me south to my starting point at Europa Point (Gibraltar's southern tip), thus saving me an added 4 kilometres on my long trek to Spain's more northerly extreme.