

# El Despeñadero

## SHOOT

### SPAIN

*A redleg retreat near Madrid which will inspire those with the sporting wanderlust.*

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La Albina was one of four scintillating drives on this January shoot day.



The opportunity to explore the ancient city of Toledo cannot be missed.

It felt strange to be standing on the porch of a Spanish hunting lodge in January, the driveway before me lined with Cypress trees arcing away into the distance, seemingly endless rows of olive trees either side, their bases guarded by rocks that littered a peach-coloured landscape that stretched farther than a blinding sun would allow my eyes to search.

I had arrived the previous afternoon as a guest of Craig Denman, an East End City boy turned Dumfriesshire-based sporting agent (Craig owns Cowans Sporting) whom I had first met at Raehills near Lockerbie in 2008.

It had been at least six years since we had last seen each other – Craig had scaled down his involvement in shooting for five years to run his own restaurant in that time – but once we were together again outside Birmingham Airport’s departure lounge we were immediately swapping shooting stories and sharing thoughts about what lay ahead. Craig had already surveyed our destination once

before while a guest of Darío Vallano Jr, shoot captain at El Despeñadero, the 5,000-acre farm around two hours from Madrid and around 25 minutes or so from the ancient city of Toledo, our base for the long weekend. We met Darío Jr, an ambitious 27-year-old Spaniard and lifelong sportsman with the air of an affable Tony Montana about him, at Cigarral de Caravantes.



Cigarral de Caravantes sits in the hills above Toledo.

The hotel sits in the hills looking out across the Toledo skyline where sand-coloured rooftops stand humbly in the shadow of the Primate Cathedral of Saint Mary of Toledo on one side and Alcázar of Toledo, an ancient fort, on the other. The architecture and the multicultural character of the city, with its tight, winding streets, tapas bars and warmly lit thoroughfares, were as

much talking points as the cured meats and zesty cheeses we enjoyed between sips of beer at Hacienda el Cardenal. Our evening meal mirrored that which Darío and his father, Darío Snr, hope sporting parties will replicate as word of their offerings spreads around our shores.

### A SPANISH FEAST

We rose early the following morning to head out to El Despeñadero, neon sunbeams marking a path towards the farm that has been in the Vallano family since the 1700s. It was here we would meet Darío Snr, a broad, welcoming man who has entertained dignitaries including King Juan Carlos at his home over the years. It is difficult to measure just how much hunting Darío Snr has enjoyed throughout his long life, the walls of his lodge each covered with an assortment of boar, deer and mouflon trophies, photographs from safaris in Africa, Asia and the Americas probably telling less than half of the story that might match those of Selous, Ferdinand or Hemingway

“The Vallanos have entertained dignitaries including King Juan Carlos over the years.”

if committed to paper. Darío Snr’s English is better than he thinks but his is the language of hunting. Old friends of the Vallanos are greeted with a huge bear hug that almost lifts them off the floor, new friends with a warm handshake and a hope they will breathe in every moment of their time in his company. We were the first to arrive on this, a friends and family day, the sartorial elegance of the arriving ladies especially, some in subtle suede or canvas trousers, soft leather waistcoats or snow white shirts and fedoras with golden, black and grey feather motifs, a reflection of the effort made for the occasion.

There was talk of snow in Valencia while a small fire chipped and clicked in one corner of the softly lit dining room as everyone settled in for breakfast. Food was to play a huge part in our time at El Despeñadero. We would, if my memory serves, enjoy a breakfast and dinner at the lodge, as well as three sit-down tacos (essentially elevenses) after each drive. The food was light and tender; a breakfast of eggs, ham and migas (a kind of fried bread) and churros packed with sugar and taken with coffee or even a small glass of red wine, followed later in the tacos by octopus, omelettes, lamb, wild boar, prawns, breads and cheeses – all Spanish. “People come to Spain for shooting, and to relax, and I want to offer them a nice experience,” Darío Jr told me during one taco. “Everywhere in life there is a rush, but not here, here we have fun.”

### RUBÉN, ALVARO AND THE SPORTING BIRDS

There were three of us on each stand: my loader, Alvaro, oozed Spanish cool, his gelled black hair and black shades the kind of look you’d normally find outside the players’ entrance at the Bernabéu. My secretario, Rubén, had a smile as bright as the diamond in his ear which periodically caught the sun’s rays, which can reach up to 30°C at the start of the season in October. Basic in design though sturdy in construction – essentially bamboo and wire – each stand sat roughly 30 yards apart from its neighbour, each with two metal



Clockwise from top left: Angel Lumberas, Craig Denman, Darío Vallano Snr, Darío Vallano Jr & Shooting Gazette’s deputy editor Martin Puddifer.



Reminders of the family’s history and passion for hunting are everywhere.



The cavalcade of beaters made its presence known throughout the day.

discs on poles either side to protect the occupant and remind them of their arc of fire. It's an usual tool but reassuring nonetheless.

The partridges at El Despeñadero, which come from La Patirroja in northern Spain, are not the stratospheric ones you might enjoy elsewhere in the country. On the contrary, these fireworks burst out

of the rocks and brush, tearing the contours of the landscape as they shoot towards you. There was sometimes less than a second between picking up your quarry and pulling the trigger, difficult for anyone new to this side of the sport but exhilarating nonetheless. The partridges were driven by a loud cavalcade of beaters wearing yellow bibs and blowing horns with gusto,

the din bookended by men carrying Spanish flags aloft on long poles, the thin air and the rocky, undulating ground carrying their “pee, pee, pees” and “aye, aye, ayes” across the line – it was a great lesson in safety. I stumbled away from that first drive, La Albina, after 40 minutes, punch drunk, exhausted at having failed to keep track of so many partridges over me.

For a first timer in Spain with a British game shooter's hat on, I initially found it difficult to judge when a shot was both sporting and safe. “More shooting!” Alvaro encouraged, and more often than not, he was right. Opportunities to admire a neighbour's shooting during the drives, even for a second, were virtually zero, such as the speed and spontaneity of the coveys pouring over the line, the one



The lengthy tacos acted as a break from the high-octate sport...



...and there was plenty to choose from.



There was little time to rest during Las Hoyas, and guns took their chances well.



Alvaro was one of the indispensable loaders present on the day.

advantage of shooting at the angles we were was that you knew your quarry was dead in the air in front of you every time.

Laughter and talk of shooting were

“The Spanish obviously take their time on shoot day, but not at a snail's pace...”

shared between three languages during our breaks, each one the perfect length to climb down from the clouds and compose oneself before boarding dusty 4x4s and heading across to another corner of the estate. Examining the partridges between drives, it was obvious these birds, all hand fed by the two Daríos and the estate's three wards, were of the very best quality. One gun stroked the rich feathers on the bird in his hand as he explained the difference

between a hen and cock partridge to his wife, each one in the row at his feet appearing to be hand painted as they were then crated and placed carefully onto a battered pick-up.

Frantic cries of “Pee! Pee! Andale! Andale!” soon swirled around the air like a tornado as partridges shot past us in all directions on Miguel, the next drive. Despite this frenzy during drives, it was obvious to me that the Spanish take their time on shoot days – not snail's pace of course, but if either Darío ever looked at their watches during our breaks or fretted about needing to set off as another glass of red wine or a second helping of prawns or meatballs was offered I for one never noticed it.

We only seemed to go when everyone was ready, which appeared to be all at once. When the horn blew for the final time to draw the shooting to a close I felt as though I had been ➤



Many of the guns had shot Miguel before, so knew of the challenges it presented.



There were a number of venerable guns presented within the shooting party.

outside for no time at all, but in fact we had been shooting or dining for over six hours. I jokingly enquired about shooting the following day, a Sunday, but as the beaters laid the redlegs out in a circle at the foot of the lodge steps I knew all of us had enjoyed ourselves enough. No sooner were the birds laid out in a large, near perfect circle than they were collected up again, this time in bags ready for the dinner table or the restaurants and bars of the surrounding areas. Our time at the lodge concluded with another feast, this one of vegetable soup, partridge and rice washed down with more beer and finished with apple tart with a cream and chocolate sauce.

As we loaded our things into the back of Darío Jr's car the whole

landscape was silent, save for the faint sound of leaves turning in the breeze or redlegs scurrying around the bushes whose shadows were beginning to lengthen on the ground.

My shooting and interaction with the day was enough to earn a hearty handshake from Darío Snr, Craig glad to find himself trapped in a huge bear hug until he promised to return. That night our small party – Darío Jr, Craig, photographer Simon Woolley and myself – wandered the cold, winding streets of Toledo hopping from one tapas bar to the other where cheese, olives and ham abounded, me watching on as locals in scarves and puffa jackets caught up with one another, Craig giving Darío Jr an hilarious crash course



The refreshments taken in the lodge were some of the highlights of the day.

in Cockney rhyming slang, all of us watching in amazement as barmen mixed cocktails and used blowtorches to decorate glasses with rainbows of colour and fruit. The town's population seemed to double just as we were thinking about heading back to Cigarral

de Caravantes for an early start the next morning, the opportunity to see this ancient wonder, the towering El Valle and the River Tajo in crisp daylight for the first time just before our hop back home too good to miss. The same applies to El Despeñadero. 🦅

Shooting at El Despeñadero takes place between October and February, with up to 60 let days available. Teams of English speaking guns are hosted by Craig Denman and Darío Jr. For more information, visit [cowanssporting.co.uk](http://cowanssporting.co.uk).

## The area guide *How to get there, where to stay and what to eat.*

### TRAVEL

*Shooting Gazette* flew to Madrid Barajas Airport from Birmingham Airport in just under two-and-a-half hours with Iberia, an airline that permits firearms and ammunition in the hold ([iberia.com](http://iberia.com)). Madrid-Barajas Airport is just over an hour from Toledo, which is in turn around 25 minutes from El Despeñadero. Darío Jr arranged for transportation from Madrid to Toledo and also to and from the estate on shoot day. It is possible to reach Toledo from Madrid-Barajas Airport by train, a journey that lasts around 90 minutes - a useful option if you're arriving later than the rest of your party ([trainline.eu](http://trainline.eu)).

### STAY

If you're planning on shooting at El Despeñadero it would be foolish not to be as close to Toledo as possible. Darío Jr recommends five hotels to visiting guns: Hotel Cigarral de Caravantes; Hilton Buenavista Toledo; Hotel Domenico; The Parador and the Hotel Villa Nazules 10 minutes away ([caceriasibericas.com](http://caceriasibericas.com)). Each hotel can cater for various budgets but those closer to Toledo surely have the edge for their proximity to the ancient city.

### CATERING

You may never eat or drink a more varied range of fare than across a whole day at El Despeñadero. There couldn't have been a moment during one of the tacos when an empty glass or plate wasn't offered a replenishment of some kind. Even though there was plenty to choose from – food came from land, sea and air – everything sat well on the stomach, leaving one always wanting that little bit extra. The catering team's attention to timing meant that they were always one step ahead of the party between drives and went about their business with the minimum of fuss.