

The perfect family activity holiday in Spain

In Spain's Sierra Aitana, Ed Douglas finds the perfect family activity holiday: plenty to do but time and space to relax too - and nothing like those institutional outdoor centres



[Ed Douglas](#)

[The Guardian](#), Saturday 6 June 2009

[Article history](#)



Joe Douglas (left) climbing in Spain

'I am in hell,' Rosa tells me, as she is lowered by a rope down the cliff face, 'and I hold you personally responsible.' This isn't what a parent wants to hear on holiday, even if she is - mostly - joking. At least she's not bored. 'Don't worry,' I call down, trying to hide my own anxiety, 'you'll soon be back on the ground.'

The ground, in this case, is the bottom of a deep canyon in the Sierra Aitana, the beautiful limestone mountains north-east of Alicante. It's our mission to navigate its 5km of cool green water and shady white rock. Once we're inside, there isn't really any other way out, what with vertical cliffs hundreds of feet high surrounding us.

Safely down, Rosa, 14, discovers a huge pool of mud and dips her wet-suited body into it, giggling with pleasure. 'It's like bathing in a giant's fart,' she says. Soon we're all paddling through the canyon, sliding down short drops into deep pools, then swimming out. Over the next four or five hours we're one happy family, for once heading in the same direction.

Leading the group is Jonathan, our tough South African guide with the useful trick of tossing rocks ahead of him to scare away any snakes sunbathing in the pools. Our 12-year-old son Joe is agog. This will play big back at school. True, they're not poisonous snakes, but this is no theme park. Jonathan does, however, have a picnic, wrapped inside the dry bag on his back. At lunchtime we bask in sunshine like the snakes, and tuck in.

Family activity holidays can seem almost too good to be true: a series of exciting adventures you can all share in, solving the problem of how to fill those long holiday hours while putting colour back in the kids' cheeks after too much screen time at home. ("Yeah," says Joe sardonically, "quality bonding time.") And all of it happening in a beautiful place. The reality can be disappointing. Some outdoor centres feel institutional, like school, so while the activities are top-notch, evenings are spent in sterile dining areas or bland rooms with bunk beds - for the adults, too. Opt for your own digs instead, and you can feel disconnected from the action.

Then there's the problem of keeping the whole family more or less content. Enthusiasts might know what to expect from each activity, but newcomers can't be expected to enjoy everything that's served up. What if one sibling thrives and the other whines? As Tolstoy said, every unhappy family is miserable in its own way. The ability to bungee jump is one thing, but working with families requires a different skill set.

Minutes after arriving at Hort de Gloria, just outside the village of Sella, I could see that Dartmoor-based travel specialists Spirit of Adventure have found the perfect solution. Hort de Gloria is a 200-year-old farm of terraced orchards converted into a beautiful and relaxed guesthouse. Run by Jonathan Neil and his wife Violetta, who grew up on the farm before moving to South Africa, it's hard to imagine a better base for an active family holiday.

Walking round the terraces, the air scented with rosemary and fennel, I quickly forgot the skyscrapers of Benidorm just the other side of the mountains. But their impact is still revealed in Sella's landscape. Many of the Sierra Aitana market gardens are falling into disrepair. Mass tourism offers easy pickings compared to the graft of a smallholding, and produce grown in Morocco is cheaper.

So Hort de Gloria - the garden of heaven - is a little ray of sustainable sunshine. The farm is organic, and around the table at dinnertime you're likely to find a few "wwoofers", volunteer organic farm workers who swap labour for board and lodging. They tend the farm's fruiting trees - with 20 different varieties, something is bound to be in season. We could see lemons and avocados, but were flummoxed by something that looked a bit like apricots but turned out to be loquats, a kind of medlar from China. Rosa and Joe were soon grazing direct from the branch.

The farm also produces 2,000kg of olive oil each year, and turns a lot of its fruit into jams and preserves. There are a few chickens running around, so the eggs are fresh, too. Not surprisingly, the food is excellent - something of a relief on the Costa Blanca, where meals out can often be expensive or disappointing, or both.

All those fruit trees thrive on a deep, sweet spring, which also feeds a cooling 25m pool and the well in the guesthouse kitchen that is still drawn with a bucket. The swimming pool is home to noisily amorous frogs, and the trees outside our room came equipped with a nightingale, which kept up its musical genius for much of the night.

With children of their own, and parents and grandma living close by, Hort de Gloria is habituated to family life and the chaos that can involve. Jonathan was a construction project manager in South Africa and a keen paddler; Vio was a design journalist. Those skills have been put to good use.

If Hort de Gloria is a heavenly place to wake up each morning, then it's well placed as an adventure destination, too. Sella is famous among climbers as having some of the best rock in [Europe](#), but it's also a great place to try climbing for the first time. And despite the mauling Valencia's coastal landscapes have suffered in the last few decades, the Sierra Aitana are still wildly beautiful and a popular destination for walkers.

There are plenty of mountain biking trails and, being a limestone landscape, the mountains are seamed with canyons and caves to explore. And a short drive south are all the water-based activities you can imagine. You can do most of these things in North Wales, but you aren't guaranteed a warm, friendly sea or sunshine - or an ice-cold gin with lemon that was still on the tree five minutes beforehand.

On our first morning, we paddled in double kayaks for an hour or so along the coast from the marina in La Vila Joiosa. A weak swell rocked the boat as we emerged from behind the breakwater, provoking a few squeaks of alarm from Rosa in front - "Is this normal?"

Paddling behind Rosa was a valuable parenting lesson. It was no use getting frustrated if she missed a stroke or her attention wandered. I just had to fit in around her for a change, timing my effort to match hers. Soon we were moving along nicely, passing a nudist beach - the children somewhat slack-jawed - while the coast gradually revealed some steep cliffs ahead.

The plan was to pull the kayaks on to a flat rock below the cliffs, have lunch and swim, but the swell was building under a strengthening wind and Jonathan decided it was too awkward to land, so we elected instead to go back to a beach. First, however, with Rosa proving the star kayaker, Kate decided we should swap boats.

So I found myself jumping reluctantly into a sea heaving under the lee of the cliffs. It was beautifully warm, and bobbing about in the waves was good fun, but the children looked rather forlorn alone in their boats, so we cut the bathing short. With the wind now at our backs, we paddled easily back to La Vila Joiosa, where Jonathan took us to a staggeringly good ice-cream shop. Paradise.

The trick Spirit of Adventure seems to have managed is providing enough structure to fill your days and keep you active, but enough room to relax together as a family. As well as kayaking down the coast we also took a boat trip and went snorkelling, explored a cave, climbed rocks, rode mountain bikes and spent a day scrambling through that canyon.

And yet, as busy as all that sounds, I never felt that the activities had taken over from the spirit of the place. Sella still feels very Spanish, and the easy pace of life was immensely relaxing. There's a feeling around now, promulgated by stunt monkeys on television, that adventure is all about adrenaline and biting the heads off snakes. (Although Bear Grylls would probably like our digs.) Some activity holidays can play up that quasi-military side of things. But the beauty of this holiday is that it focuses on the accommodation and location, not simply dazzling guests with excitement. I prefer kayaking with a man who knows how to build a house rather than blow one up. And while Hort de Gloria could, in all its organicness, seem rather self-righteous, Jonathan and Violetta are too down-to-earth - and fun - to allow that to be the case.

The acid test of how the kids felt came on our last day, spent on the coast. After a trip to a shopping mall for Rosa to buy a dress, we headed to Aqualandia, the water-slide theme park on the eastern end of Benidorm. In front of us were the canyons and sheer cliffs of tower blocks. The scent of herbs at Hort de Gloria was replaced by the smell of fast food.

For two or three hours we ran up ladders and slid down slides like lemmings on espresso, along with hundreds of others. Rosa and Joe seemed back on familiar ground and loving it - as did their parents, I admit. But, as we drove back to Sella, Rosa said: "Yeah, fun, but I couldn't do that all week." Kids today, eh? No stamina.