

El Chorro and Caminito del Rey (The death walk)

We were at one of the pub meets at The Inn on the Wharfe when Roy got out his phone and showed us some pictures of a place in Spain called El Chorro. Here there is a very dangerous walkway through a narrow gorge over 300ft high stuck on the sheer rock face in a state of total disrepair and over 100 years old. Some research said that the walkway was called the **Caminito del Rey and was officially closed in 2000** after some fatalities. The most dangerous hike in the world and the death walk are two of the names now given to it. I was totally hooked.

This looked serious stuff and very dangerous. My information said the walkway was only accessible to climbers and that Via Ferrata style protection should be used. I don't climb or abseil but I do have a head for heights – I use the don't look down principle.

El Chorro is a small village about an hours drive from Malaga airport up in the mountains. It has its own railway station and little else. The area is renowned for climbing and some of the Worlds top climbers can be found on the crags around here. My idea was to hire a guide to take me around the walkway. Unfortunately for me this was the end of the season and the mass of climbers who frequent this area had moved on to cooler climates. Guides were not available or just didn't want to take me as an individual.

Dawn and I decided to go and have a look at the start and see if access to the walkway was possible. The walkway can be accessed along a railway line through several tunnels but this is strictly illegal and at busy periods guards are posted at the entrance of the tunnels to prevent this. The other alternative is to climb up to the walkway. This involves traversing along a rock face below the walkway with a perilous drop of around 150 – 200ft and then an unprotected climb of around 70ft. To get off you have to abseil the 70ft off the end of the walkway (23 metres a guide told me in the car park)

The traverse along the rock face and climb up looked impossible from where we were standing. There was a group being guided across the rock face and up the climb to the walkway. They were all roped up on the climb. Perhaps as well with the sheer drop below. It looked like this was one challenge beyond my capabilities.

That night Dawn and I were sitting by the pool and I was going over and over in my head how to traverse the rock face and climb up onto the walkway. My thoughts were only interrupted by the resident goats having a drink of water from the pool and a nibble on just about anything they could find to chew on. At one stage they even took a fancy to us. What more could a man want. Two goats and Dawn for company. I didn't get much sleep during the night and kept visualising my climb up to the walkway. **At least it was achievable in my head.**

The only problem now was to tell Dawn that I was going to attempt this on my own with no guide and no rope for the abseil off. I thought this was a selfish act because of the dangers involved. A fall would be fatal. The morning came and after more than 26 years together Dawn already knew that I was going to attempt the walkway on my own.

I parked the car up and walked the half a mile or so to the starting point. After checking my harness and Via Ferrata kit were secure I put on my helmet and made my way down the scree slope. I approached the ledge before the traverse across

the sheer rock face to work out how I could actually get across and then climb up the other side. This was even before getting onto the dangerous walkway.

After a couple of climbing sessions with 'dangerous' Joe Mcnamee I had managed to scale a whopping 15ft at Witches Quarry. The 15ft wasn't on a John Wilmot route either. This climb was over 70ft with a 200-250 ft drop straight down. I didn't have a rope either. There was no obvious way for me to get up. Fortunately the traverse along the rock face looked easier close up than it did from a distance with some staples and a rope Via Ferrata style to clip onto. The group we had seen the day before also seemed to climb up with no difficulty. If they could do it then I could.

My research did say most people turned back at this point.

After carefully traversing the sheer rock face I was able to assess my chances of making the climb up to the walkway. Surprisingly there were iron staples attached to the rock that would ease my progress up. This was much safer than what I was expecting and offered some protection on what turned out to be an easy 70 ft climb. Soon I reached the walkway itself and was able to attach myself to the Via Ferrata style cable that had been put in place for protection. This was thinner than normal and I didn't want to be the one who tested its strength by falling. I was now over 300ft up on a 3ft wide walkway with no rails that was in a serious state of disrepair.

Proceeding with caution the first test was soon upon me. A section of the walkway was missing but had left a metal beam about 3 inches wide to scuttle across. This was quickly followed by another section that had to be crossed by leaning onto and tensioning a metal cable as the rock face was out of reach here. In no time at all I was crossing over a large water pipe to the other side of the Gorge. The view straight down was fantastic. More of the same followed. Short sections of the walkway could be followed before you reached a part that had fallen away. Some were difficult to cross some were easy. I now had the confidence to look down and enjoy the view. In what seemed like minutes I had reached the end of this section of the Caminito del Rey and had emerged into a large valley with the railway line across the river up to my right. To reach the next section of the walkway involved a short trek through the valley. This wasn't as high as what I had just done and I believe is in a much better condition.

I decided Dawn had been worrying about me long enough (or I would like to think she was) so chose not to do this section. Instead of returning along the walkway I had read that there was an old water tunnel around here that you could use to get part of the way back. Having taken my head torch I made the decision to walk down a tunnel that I had found. There was an eerie silence in the tunnel. I was afraid and had to fight the demons inside my head. What if this wasn't the right tunnel? What if it was to flood? Are the spirits of those that have perished with me? It certainly felt so. The hairs on the back of my neck were standing on end and there was a cold chill throughout my whole body. I was relieved to reach the end of the tunnel.

After emerging from the tunnel I crossed over the water pipe in the opposite direction and made my way across the missing sections of walkway back to where I had climbed up. Abseiling down was out of the question. I didn't have a rope. The only option open to me was to climb down and be careful not to fall. It was as easy climbing down as it was up and soon I was traversing back along the rock face to safety. Here I met a group of climbers on their way up onto the walkway. One of the party asked if I had just done the Caminito del Rey on my own and I told her yes. She responded by saying that I must be very brave. I replied by saying that I had figured out having someone with me would not have helped if I had fallen. But they

could have called for help was her response. The consequences of a fall were perhaps lost on her.

On arriving back I met our host who was a trained guide and he enquired how I had gone on. When I mentioned that I had returned part of the way through the old water tunnel he looked surprised. He told me not a lot of people chose this route back because they were afraid of it. This came as no surprise to me. Dawn was happy to see me and was pleased that I was back so soon. Unfortunately I had forgotten my camera and had only managed a couple of pictures on an old mobile that I was carrying.

In the end I had found it to be an easy adventure so Dawn and I went back the next day to take some photographs. Dawn wouldn't come down to the ledge where the traverse of the rock face started and instead opted to stay a safe distance up on the scree slope. Soon I was posing for pictures on the rock face and then on the climb up to the walkway. Finally Dawn was able to look long enough to get a photograph of me on the walkway itself. When I got back down Dawn told me she had been having kittens just watching me and had looked away several times on my way up. What a vote of confidence in my abilities that was.

The Caminito del Rey does have a dangerous reputation and the videos on you tube only add to this. There is no doubt that this can be dangerous. It is a walkway in a very unsafe condition 300ft high attached to the Gorge sides. You need a head for heights and the bottle to do an easy rock traverse and climb at the start. If the proper equipment is used then most of the time you are clipped on to a wire cable. This is in effect a very easy Via Ferrata. It is an adventure of a lifetime for the many that walk its length.

Is it very dangerous? If you fall it would be!

I am still deciding when we are going back. Thanks for the introduction Roy.

Graham and Dawn Howarth
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