



Macho Montes of the Homeland

I don't know too many hunters that aren't fascinated by the ibex species of the world, myself included. The challenging terrain they live in, along with the impressive horns they sport make for an intriguing and difficult animal to take on with bow and arrow. In 2013 I decided to bite the bullet and look into the options available to execute this dream hunt. My research (greatly assisted by Neil Summers at Bowhunting Safari Consultants) pointed me in the direction of Spain, which is home to four different sub-species of ibex. While the species much further eEast are typically more impressive with much larger trophies, they are almost in the 'mission impossible' category with the bow, and are generally very expensive. The Spanish ibex, in particular the Beceite variety, offer a challenging yet accomplishable hunt with

archery tackle, which is surprisingly affordable.

In early 2013 I decided on a good quality outfitter (Salvafor Caza) offering bowhunts for Beceite ibex in the stunning mountain ranges not far inland off the eEast coast of Spain, about halfway between Barcelona and Valencia. I'd never been to Europe before, so I combined the hunt with a bit of holidaying and catching up with relatives in my Dad's family's home country. It was an awesome experience meeting part of the family; their hospitality was incredible and you can just imagine what the food was like! It was truly a special experience meeting relatives in such a foreign, unfamiliar land, and being so welcomed by them all.

The few days before the hunt were spent checking out Madrid and Barcelona, plus a day trip to Figueres on the far northern coast (near the French border), which is where the Salleras clan originated. Legendary artist

Above:
Ben with his trophy ibex buck, taken amongst terrace walls built many hundreds of years earlier.

Opposite Page:
An ibex doe and her young having an afternoon graze.



Salvador Dali also hails from Figueres, and his museum there was a real eye-opener for something different.

I had one slightly concerning hiccup (there always seems to be at least one!) during one of my travel legs, which had me questioning whether I'd even get to go hunting at all for a brief moment. When boarding a speed train from Madrid to Barcelona, my bow case went through the x-ray scanner without issue, but when my arrow case went through and the guards saw that I had field points on a couple of arrows, they didn't like what they saw, and wouldn't let me on the train with either. There was a bit of a scene for 10 minutes, my total lack of any Spanish didn't help, and the train was leaving in a matter of minutes. Luckily a friend who was still at the train station was able to grab both cases for me, with the hope of getting them couriered to Villabona (a tiny village in the hunting area) the next day. I made the train, but was without my beloved bow and arrows, which was not a good feeling with only three days until the first hunting day...

There was almost another drama at hand a couple of days later. I was doing the tourist thing around Barcelona (Sagrada Familia was a highlight -- unbelievable) when I got a call from the outfitter. There had been a huge unseasonal dumping of snow up in the mountains where we were to be hunting, and the only road in had been cut. Just the type of freak event that has now become reasonably expectable during my overseas hunts. It was uncertain as to whether they could get out of the mountains to pick me up as planned the following morning. I had everything crossed all day, hoping that the road would be cleared in time.

On an icy cold Sunday morning I met one of the Salvafor Caza guides, Angel, in the middle of Barcelona, and finally was on my way to the hunting area, about five 5 hours' drive south. The road had just been ploughed that morning and 4WD access was open; I was thanking my lucky stars. The road in was a crazy, winding, single-lane goat track through some absolutely gorgeous country. I spotted two ibex does up high in the craggy cliffs watching down on us as we slowly traversed our way through the mountains towards the village of Villabona. Villabona was the most unique little town I've ever seen, practically perched on a cliff overlooking a huge valley. It was as if every house and building in the village was structurally connected; there were no yards or any space whatsoever between the dwellings.

Minutes after passing through Villabona, a bit further up the mountain we arrived at the lodge a bit further up the mountain. The lodge is built into a huge, ancient 500+ year old house up high on the mountain, with breathtaking views in every direction. One thing that's common in these mountains is are the ancient buildings, ruins and terrace rock walls -- they dominate the landscape. The terrace walls are thousands of years old, and were mostly built using slave labour. I've never been anywhere in my life where there is so much ancient architecture, and especially not hunted right around it!

My bow and arrow cases had only arrived an hour or

so before me, which was a massive relief. I settled into my room upstairs and had a few shots at the target to ensure everything was on song. The afternoon was spent talking hunting with the other hunters in camp, including Jan and Truus, a couple from Holland whom I've remained friends with since, and a group of four Danish hunters who definitely weren't scared of a drink regardless of the time of day. I quickly realised that there was no chance of losing any weight in this camp, regardless of how much hunting I did. The food was rich, delicious, and supplied in large volumes. The black blood sausages soon became my favourite, alongside the incredibly tasty jamon.

The next morning it was time to get serious., I was to hunt with guide Juan-Joe, who was a local 3D archery legend but didn't hunt with bow. The landscape was still covered in white --, I wasn't quite expecting this! It made for absolutely incredible scenery in every direction. We drove in a Jeep up higher into the mountains, stopping occasionally to glass certain hotspots. We were right in the middle of prime ibex habitat, and the well-camouflaged critters could potentially be pretty much anywhere around us.

It didn't take long to spot the first group, which included one good buck with the classic side-curl horns., I liked him and the stalk was on. We parked up on the edge of the road and commenced the hike in. The ibex were feeding in perfect cover, small thick bushes with enough clearings in between, on the top of a ridge. In no time I was under 50 metres from the feeding group. Going into super-stealth mode I was slowly edging towards the big buck, and had him at 30 metres but directly behind a bush. Any moment he'd feed out the other side, giving me a clear and simple shot. Suddenly a doe fed out from behind some vegetation around the same distance away to my right., It took her about one millisecond to spot me, blow the alert whistle, and get the mob running for their lives off into the adjacent canyon. I, and it was game over.

We continued to the top of the mountain and parked up at an ancient church. The plan was to hike and hunt our way back to the lodge, which was about 5 kilometres away downhill. I quickly realised that these animals were incredibly difficult to spot when glassing. Their colouration matches their habitat perfectly, and it took me a couple of days to get the eyes trained up enough to pick them amongst the rocks at long distance. The temperature was around zero and the going pretty slippery in the melting snow., I was pretty much floating though while blowing out at the scenery and the fact that I was hunting ibex! We saw about 30 or so for the morning, but had no further stalks on trophy bucks.

The afternoon hunt saw us checking out some different areas. W, we spotted quite a few at distance but didn't get any stalk opportunities. Jan connected with his rifle on his trophy buck that afternoon, so the celebrations went fairly late into the night, especially with the Danish influence!

The following day I teamed up with a different guide,

Opposite Top:
A mature buck taken by surprise pauses long enough for a quick photograph.

Opposite Bottom:
An unseasonal dumping of snow made for spectacular scenery for the first day's hunt.

Jose, who I hunted with for the rest of the trip. Jose is a super-keen hunter, speaks good English and is a top bloke; he was one of the best guides I've had the pleasure of hunting with. Jose had seen a really nice buck hanging around a particular area in previous weeks and over the next couple of days he was our main target. During my first encounter with him, we had been glassing a big clear terraced hillside, when I spotted him feeding with another huge buck from about 500 metres away. We snuck in closer using the terraces as cover. When I knew we were getting close to where we last sighted them feeding, I left Jose tucked in behind a wall and I continued on.

I caught a few glimpses of the big boy as I edged closer, scaling one terrace at a time and slowly getting up to his level. He'd turned and was feeding towards me but many levels above. I caught one last glimpse of him through the foliage at about 80 metres, and by his direction and speed I thought I was in with a very good chance for a shot. I ever so carefully climbed up onto the next terrace, and got into a spot where I expected him to walk into in at any second. I stopped still and scanned my surroundings, hoping for a bit of movement, but he was nowhere to be seen! I was baffled, but continued to stay dead still in case he was behind something and hidden from view. About a minute later, I happened to notice some movement way up high above me at the top of a 100-metre high vertical cliff face – there he was, casually walking along the cliff edge. He had just scaled that cliff in a matter of moments. There was no way I could climb up to where he was so the stalk was over, I couldn't believe he'd been so close one moment seemingly in perfect position for a shot opportunity, to the

Bottom:
A large bronze ibex statue welcomes hunters to the lodge established high in the mountains.



next minute being totally out of reach!

Another encounter with the same buck occurred a couple of days later, when by total luck while glassing a valley we spotted just one of his quite distinctly-shaped horns poking out from behind some rocks where he was bedded for the day. Knowing I only had a few days left to hunt and with time ticking away, I put on the super stalk, climbing down through a series of cliffs and into the patch of bush he was hiding in. Jose was watching through his binos from above me. About a minute before I got into range of his bed, he randomly decided to get up and walk back towards Jose's position. As I was approaching the spot where I thought he was still laying, he suddenly appeared at 50 metres directly to my right, whistled at me and vanished. Another fairly close shave but no shot offered.

Amazingly, just the week after I was hunting, my mate Mark Buehrer of Bowhunting Safari Consultants nailed this very buck (an absolute cracker) on his first day hunting, a result I was stoked to learn about!

The next day Jose and I hiked up an ancient trail along a creek, higher into the mountains and into an area we hadn't checked out yet. There was a natural mineral lick out in a small field not far from an old stone house. Jose had used this old house to glass from before, and reckoned it would be worth a try. We spent the afternoon hiding in the 500+ year old house (there were still old ploughs, wooden pitchforks and other artefacts lying around inside), peering through a small window at the mineral lick about 200 metres out in an open field in front. Not half an hour into the sit, the first ibex came in to feed. Throughout the afternoon we looked over about 30 animals, with several young bucks that didn't quite meet the mark amongst them. One of the does was in season, and one particular buck put on the most unique rutting display I've ever seen. At one stage a doe and her kid came feeding so close to the wall we were behind they were almost within arm's reach!

On the second last hunting day I awoke thinking about the fact that time was slipping away for me to realise this dream. We'd been close a few times but hadn't quite been able to get a shot away at the type of buck I was looking for. After a fairly fruitless, drizzly morning we headed back to the lodge for a feed and siesta before the afternoon hunt. I was now down to one and a half hunting days.

Around 2pm we drove out along the main road through Vallibona, glassing the many cliffs and huge valleys along the way. While glassing a huge terraced slope from afar, Jose picked out a small group of ibex, with one very nice-looking buck amongst them. A plan was hatched to drive a few kilometres back the way we'd come from, before hiking down the major river below us towards where the ibex were positioned. Within about an hour we were getting closer, eventually spotting the group of four ibex feeding in similar position to where we'd initially spotted them.

I climbed up the terraces to the same level they were on, and with minimal cover, commenced a belly crawl



ABOVE:
Beceite ibex can display a wide variety of horn shapes.

from about 250 metres out. Inch by inch I got closer, eventually getting in to about 80 metres, when for no real reason they decided to feed further away and climbed up to the next terrace level. They were all out of sight for a few moments, which gave me a chance to get up and stalk quite fast, closing the gap to about 50 metres where they'd disappeared over the terrace. Suddenly one of the younger bucks emerged from some bushes, and spotted me stuck out in the open. He stared but didn't whistle, but his gaze caught the attention of the other three, who started looking in my direction. The big buck jumped up on top of a rock and scanned in all directions, giving me a chance to draw. Without time to use my rangefinder, I judged the distance at just over 50 metres, putting the 50-pin high on his shoulder. I let fly but watched in horror as the arrow just cleared his back, smashing into rocks behind. The rate at which spooked ibex run up near-vertical slopes is something that needs to be seen to be believed; they were 300 metres above me in less than 30 seconds.

Slightly disheartened after yet another close shave, I marched back to Jose even more determined to make this happen. We got back to the vehicle and drove back up the main road toward the lodge, stopping to glass a huge terraced face on the opposite side of the main valley. Almost immediately, Jose spotted a small group of three bucks, that hadn't been spotted when we glassed the same face only two hours earlier.

We drove back down to the village and commenced a hike up towards the face. There were a few ancient shrine-type structures built into the hill that would serve as perfect landmarks to relocate the feeding ibex.

We hiked up to the same level then along a terrace to a shrine I'd picked out to commence my stalk from. I left Jose there and commenced a very slow stalk up over the next terrace levels, straining for any movement or signs of the ibex. They could have moved just about anywhere by now, and I had lost the advantage of glassing them from the opposite face. After a few minutes I spotted the first one (followed by a few imaginary fist-pumps), the smallest of the three, feeding casually on a terrace about 100 metres up to my left. I knew the other two, which were the bigger largest of the three, would be close by.

I was tiptoeing across football-sized rocks, edging my way up higher, when suddenly I spotted the biggest of the three bucks about 100 metres above me, would you believe it, facing directly away with his head in a bush browsing on shoots. I watched for about a minute; he didn't seem to be in any rush to move. The wind was gently blowing down the slope; I had minimal cover to use but enough to get into range. I placed every foot with extreme caution, as not to crack any rocks together. Within no time I was right on top of him behind the last cover, and he still hadn't moved much at all. Ancient rock walls either side of me hid me from the view of the other two feeding bucks; there was one either side. At about 40 metres I had no further cover, the ground covered in rocks between him and I. He was still facing directly away, offering no shot, busily browsing in the late afternoon sunshine.

I made the split-second decision to take my chances and leave the cover, to get right up close behind him. This was a real gamble at this stage of the game, but sometimes your instincts just take over and the stalking



*Above:
The author
displays his
ibex trophy in
the traditional
Spanish style.*

part of your mind goes into autopilot. I could hear my own heartbeat clearly as the adrenalin surged; there was no returning now. If he turned, I was busted. If he kept feeding the way he had been for the last ten 10 minutes, he was toast. I edged in across the rocks, and before I knew it I was standing at 10 metres right behind the unaware ibex. On cue he repositioned his back half slightly, giving me a really tight quartering shot. The time had come., I drew back and settled the top pin tight next to his hip, and watched the Muzzy-tipped shaft disappear to exactly where I wanted it. He lunged forward a few metres and stopped to look around, then dropped to the ground. It was all over in under ten 10 seconds. That extreme feeling of exhilaration and relief took me over, as I looked over the valley behind me at the remarkable surrounds. I'd finally done it, a dream come true, and a stalk that provided a really serious shot of adrenalin!

Jose and I took in the moment. W, we'd toiled pretty hard the previous five 5 days and were both stoked to finally have the job done. Jose aged him at about 11 or -12 years, a good mature buck. While not a monster, he was a nice representative buck with the style and shape I was looking for., I was over the moon. A quick photo session ensued in the dying light and, we recovered some meat

and the cape before hiking back down towards Villabona in the dark. The lights of the village looked surreal in the blackness of the night. The celebrations went late into the night as one could imagine. The next day was very relaxed., Wwe caped out my buck and basically ate amazing food all day. It would soon be time to drive down to Valencia and start the long journey home.

Hunting the 'Macho Montes' of Spain will remain one of my fondest hunting memories for the rest of my life, there is no doubt. It was a new and unique feeling I experienced, while hunting around the ruins, thinking that this is was the same land my own ancestors would have hunted these same animals on (along with jabali – wild boar) with bows and arrows thousands of years earlier. I felt connected to this place in a different way to anywhere I've hunted before. The history of the place is just endless, and the ancient ruins scattered everywhere in the mountains made for spectacular scenery while hunting. Interestingly there were also quite a few fossils scattered on the ground, mostly shellfish. Paul Southwell has just finished my buck, an awesome pedestal mount with the fossils I picked up set into the habitat on the timber base. This will be a unique piece that will bring back special memories for the rest of my life, memories of hunting the mighty Macho Montes of the homeland.