

From crutches to stilts

Just seven weeks after taking the first tentative steps on crutches to test my new hip, it's wonderful to be back in Menorca, strolling through our favourite spot, the Albufera of Es Grau. Early morning, before the heat of the day, is the best time to stride along the empty beach and slip into the nature reserve backdrop. The feet feel cushioned on the forest floor. Spongy bark chippings, leaf mould and scatterings of pine needles create a mattress effect, but there are hazards too for the newly-mobile. Tree roots, rocks and stones, and patches of loose ground keep my eyes focused downwards. There are plenty of other fresh tracks, hinting at creatures of the forest hunting for their breakfast, and soon we spot the first tortoise of many, chomping at foliage that's vibrant green against the earthy tones underfoot.

Further on, there's an option to veer off onto a boardwalk over marsh and lagoons. The firmer, more regular surface and helpful handrail encourage a lifting of the vision and deeper engagement of the other senses. Time to take in the magnificence of countless species in a plethora of greens and browns: juniper, jasmine, swaying reeds and grasses, tamarisk, gossamer soft and damp with dew. Time to take in deep lungfuls of fresh air, boosting levels of vitamin D and wellbeing. Time to consider new beginnings, a sense of waking up, regrowth, positivity and optimism, from both a personal and environmental perspective.

Suitably inspired, back to more challenging terrain with a climb up steep stone steps to the viewpoint of Sa Gola. The vista is worth the effort, from the tidy white town of Es Grau in the distance on the right to miles and miles of watery wilderness in all other directions. Kites circle over the peaceful lagoon, herring gulls call and waders prowl the water's edge. From this vantage point we could be on top of the world. Retracing our careful steps we take a well-earned breather on perfectly placed tree-trunk benches, in the shade of fragrant eucalyptus and pines, and watch fish jump.

We rejoin the boardwalk to complete the circuit. By now the sun is beating down from a cloudless blue sky and the soundscape matches: cicadas buzz in the trees like a thousand dodgy electricity pylons. Silently, huge yellow butterflies flit about like saucers wearing hi-viz jackets.

There have been few other humans around on this walk, but I now spot a khaki-clad park ranger, perfectly still, training her camera towards a small group of chirping waterfowl in a nearby pool. At first, I think I recognise oystercatchers with their long orange legs, but then realise the beaks don't match and the limbs are elongated in the extreme. I wait until she's finished then ask what they're called. She volunteers a choice of Catalan and Castilian Spanish, both unmemorable long names full of umlauts and tildes, but understandably she doesn't know the English. So we fall back on the Latin scientific name: *himantopus*, with an 'h', she's keen to stress. Google tells me they're stilts. With a smile at this logic, I reflect that I'm more than happy to be back on normal-length legs.