

# Sierras of Cazorla, Segura and Las Villas Nature Park, the green heart of Spain

**J**aén is renowned as the province with the largest surface area of natural protected spaces in Spain, boasting more than 300,000 hectares of land classified as natural heritage. As a result of the nature parks of the Sierras of Cazorla, Segura and Las Villas, Despeñaperros, the Sierra of Andújar and Sierra Mágina; the nature spots of the Upper Guadalquivir, the Cimbarra Waterfall and Laguna Grande and the Laguna Honda and Laguna del Chinche nature reserves, the province of Jaén is seen as the green heart of Spain.

Moreover, the natural heritage of Jaén is not only unique in terms of the area it covers, but rather in view of the diversity and splendour of its landscapes, which

collectively present an offer that is as singular as it is enticing. The Sierra Mágina Nature Park takes in the highest peaks in the province and is characterised by its deep ravines and rocky walls, which are home to one of the most valuable catalogues of endemic species, both in terms of flora and fauna. The Sierra of Andujar Nature Park, lying beneath the gaze of the Sierra Morena, boasts the best conserved and most extensive clusters of Mediterranean vegetation within the mountains of Andalusia. These enchanting natural spaces are accompanied by the game reserves of Lugar Nuevo and Selladores, two of Spain's most important hunting areas, and the Sanctuary of the Virgen de la Cabeza, the focal point of Spain's oldest romería [religious procession].

In Santa Elena, the gateway into Andalusia, visitors will find the Despeñaperros Nature Park, noteworthy for its impressive ravine and due to the fact that it numbers amongst the smallest natural spaces in the south of Spain; however, despite its size, the landscape of this area is of great value, in view of its rugged orography.

However, the most precious jewel amongst the natural spaces in the province of Jaén is undoubtedly the Sierras of Cazorla, Segura and Las Villas Nature Park, an area of great biological, geographical and geological importance that has bequeathed a rich natural heritage and which was declared a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1983 and a Special Protection Area for Birds (ZEPA) in 1988. These three sierras combine to form the largest protected natural space in Spain and the second largest in Europe, boasting 214,000 hectares, a fifth of the total surface area of the province of Jaén. The nature park takes in twenty-six municipalities, affording visitors the opportunity of enjoying a unique environmental paradise that houses Spain's most important ecosystem, in terms of its flora and fauna, noteworthy for the large number of endemic species it possesses, such as the Valverde lizard or the Cazorla violet, and other plant and animal species, such as the bearded vulture, the golden eagle, the griffin vulture and deer along with the savine, the yew and the holly tree. Furthermore, this enclave also offers the possibility of taking part in sporting activities in natural surroundings, such as hiking or cycling routes, rafting and hang-gliding. Visitors can also contemplate the beauty of the most characteristic features of the park, such as the sources of the Segura and the Guadalquivir, two of the most important rivers in Spain.



## A unique flora

The park's flora takes in twenty percent of the floral species found in Spain, more specifically, 2170 different plant species, of which 34 are endemic. Particular attention should be drawn to the endemic species *violeta carzolensis*, a violet of extraordinary beauty that grows on cliff faces and rocks to avoid the attentions of herbivorous mammals and which now serves as the symbol of the park. This natural space contains the largest expanse of forest in the Peninsula, wherein pine woods dominate. Moreover, at altitudes under a thousand metres, visitors will be greeted with ilex groves, accompanied by elms, ashes, poplars, hazels and even juniper trees, which are famed as being the trees with the greatest resistance to climatic change, growing in the heights and in stony areas.

The dense clusters of black pines and Aleppo pines provide shelter for a wide



range of mammals, including deer, mouflons, mountain goats, fallow deer and wild boars. The Nature Park's wealth of animal life takes in 36 species of mammals, 125 bird species, 19 families of reptiles, ten varieties of amphibians and nine different species of fish, which collectively account for between twenty and thirty percent of the total fauna present in the Iberian Peninsula. Amphibians such as newts, toads and salamanders are joined by the park's repertory of reptiles, amongst which attention should be drawn to the terrapins, geckoes, lizards and snakes. The Valverde lizard, an endemic species discovered in 1958 that lives at altitudes of a thousand metres, is particularly noteworthy. This natural space has also been declared a Special Protection Area for Birds, as the skies above the Sierras of Cazorla, Segura and Las Villas are filled with many avian species. Particular attention should be drawn to the golden eagle, imperial eagle, cinereous vulture, griffon vulture, eagle-owl and the bearded vulture that can be sighted along the Coronel Tapiocca route, which provides wonderful opportunities of viewing some of

the park's most important avian species and most interesting landscapes.

The environmental characteristics of these sierras and the wide variety of animal life create ecosystems that are ideal for hunting and fishing. The Andalusian Game Reserve of Cazorla and Segura, one of the most magnificent hunting, forest and botanical reserves in Spain, boasts more than 70,000 hectares of land that provide an ideal setting for hunters. For those who enjoy fishing, the province of Jaén offers enviable locations for trout fishing and many enclaves of singular beauty for anglers.

We cannot speak of Cazorla and its fauna without mentioning Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente, a tireless conservationist and one of the greatest publicists of the beauty hidden within the Sierras of Cazorla, Segura and Las Villas. His television series, "El hombre y la tierra", offered viewers some of the most spectacular scenes of the natural world, such as the scene wherein a golden eagle captures a small kid, or the combats between

male mountain goats. In his honour, the park contains a route bearing his name, which runs through the centre of this green area. The route sets out from the Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente view point, overlooking the island of Bujaraiza in El Tranco reservoir, which houses the remains of a Moorish fortress, and goes on to take in the most beautiful areas amidst these mountain ranges. The route is marked by sign posts and punctuated by information panels and view points that allow visitors to gain a sense of the importance that the deceased naturalist placed on this area.



## Three different regions

One of the unique features of the park is that it takes in three different regions, converting these lands into one of the most fascinating and beautiful areas of Spain. The Sierra of Segura is the largest of the three regions. Amongst the municipalities that lie amidst these peaks, there are localities of singular charm. The Puerta de Segura, divided in two by the waters of the Guadalimar, represents one of the historical entrances into the mountain ranges. Nine kilometres from this entrance point, visitors will find Orcera, which is dominated by the Iglesia de la Anunciación [church], a National Monument with a façade that dates back to the 16th century. Further to the north, a road leads to the localities of Benatae, Torres de Albarchez, Génave, Villarrodrigo and Onsares, a small village lying under the peak referred to as Cambrón, a magnificent area for hiking and horse riding.

Setting out from the village of Siles, where we find the “Traditional Woodland Arts and Trades” Visitors





Centre, and continuing along the Camino de las Acebeas road, we come across an extremely beautiful tract lined by a thick forest of black pines. The road then forks towards the River Madera or Segura de la Sierra, which houses a castle that affords some of the most impressive views of the province of Jaén from its keep: visitors are able to distinguish the lands of Ciudad Real and Albacete and contemplate the peak of El Yelmo. The area at the foot of El Yelmo provides the setting for the International Air Festival, the most important competition of this nature in Spain, wherein visitors can enjoy the screening of films relating to flight and aerial sports along with a fair that offers the best implements for hang-gliding and acrobatic exhibitions, concerts and cultural activities.

The road that leads to the River Madera traverses areas of great environmental importance, which are dominated by the magnificent woodlands made up of Pyrenean oaks, black pines, ilexes and gall oaks. Further

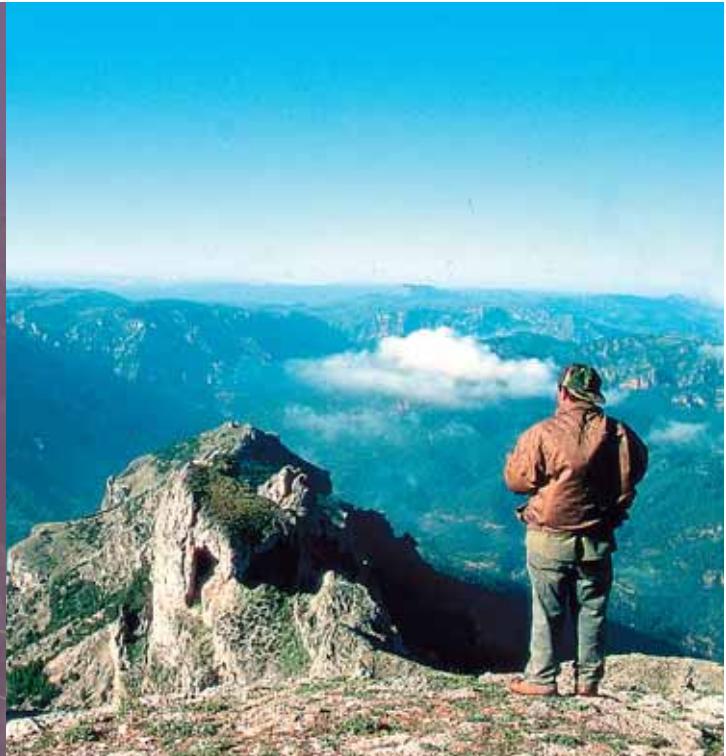
along the road, visitors will come to Santiago de la Espada, the starting point of a route that winds its way through hamlets such as Los Atascaderos, Los Teatinos, La Matea, El Cerezo and El Patronato, where tourists can contemplate interesting examples of the region's traditional architecture. Particular attention should be drawn to the Moorish slates used to tile roofs, the black pine timber used for windows and doors, the thick stone walls and the white-washed façades. Close to Santiago de la Espada and forming a part of the municipality of Santiago-Pontones, visitors will find two hamlets of extraordinary beauty: Pontón Alto and Pontón Bajo. The source of the River Segura lies nearby, amidst a wide, clear landscape filled with light. In its infancy, the small stream falls over gullies and narrow passes of extraordinary beauty and then, swelled by the waters of the River Madera and the River Zumeta, it makes its way towards Murcia.

Perched aloft a rock overlooking the waters of the Tranco reservoir, where boat excursions will soon be available, visitors will come across Hornos de Segura, a beautiful village classified as an artistic and historical complex, as is the case with Segura de la Sierra. Like Segura, Hornos is dominated by a castle, which will be converted into an astronomical observatory in the near future. Close to Hornos, we find Cortijos Nuevos, where Jaén's most characteristic tree, the olive, grows on the steep slopes surrounding the village. The oil from this area is amongst the most acclaimed in the region. From here, the itinerary moves on through the villages of Cañada Catena and Cuevas del Ambrosio, towards Beas de Segura, which, whilst outside the confines of the park, has always been linked to this mountain area in view of its history, monuments and traditions. Beas de Segura boasts several noteworthy artistic features, such

as the Convent of Carmelitas Descalzas, founded by Santa Teresa de Jesús in 1575, which houses a visitors centre focusing on mysticism.

The Sierra de Las Villas is perhaps the least known area of the Nature Park of Cazorla, Segura and Las Villas. It is here, at El Tranco reservoir, that the River Guadalquivir changes course and heads towards the region of La Loma, where we find the two cities that are inscribed on the World Heritage List: Úbeda and Baeza, which house the most important buildings and edifications from the Renaissance period in the south of Spain, such as the Hospital de Santiago and the Chapel of El Salvador in Úbeda, or the Palacio de Jabalquinto and the Cathedral in Baeza.

In this area of the largest nature park in Spain, visitors will also come across the locality of Sorihuela del Guadalimar, which boasts interesting architectural features such as the stately homes in the Plaza Mayor, the Church of Santa Águeda and the Moorish castle, which has been classified as a National Monument. Villanueva del Arzobispo, another municipality in this area of the mountains, boasts a church dating back to the 17th century: the Church of San Andrés. The Sanctuary of the Virgen de Fuensanta, founded in the 13th century, can be found in the area surrounding this locality. The town of Iznatoraf, which stands on a hill at an altitude of over a thousand metres amidst an immense forest of olive trees, is an enclave that traces its roots back to the Moorish era, housing an edification that dates back to between the 16th and 17th century: the Church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, wherein particular attention should be drawn to the choir stalls and the Baroque chapels. Heading towards Úbeda, we find Villacarrillo, which houses the Church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, attributed to



Vandelvira, where the Chapel of the Cristo de la Vera Cruz, patron of the town, and the sacristy, the work of Alonso de Barba, a disciple of Vandelvira, are particularly noteworthy.

Close to Mogón, which forms a part of the municipal district of Villacarrillo, visitors will come across Osera, a spot of extraordinary beauty that consists of a series of waterfalls where some of the most important plants within the nature park can be found. From Mogón, a winding road leads us into the Sierra of Las Villas. The road runs for approximately sixty kilometres before it reaches the Charco de la Pringue beauty spot, which lies next to the road that runs between Villanueva del Arzobispo and the El Tranco reservoir.

The source of the River Guadalquivir, the most important river in Andalucía, is located in the Sierra of Cazorla. The Puente de las Herrerías [bridge] marks the starting point of a route that leads to the source of the river, on the hill named Navahondona, in an area referred to as Aguas Frías within the municipal district of Quesada. In its infancy, the Guadalquivir is a small stream that, as it flows through the Sierra of Segura, becomes a river, fed by several small tributaries, subsequently increasing its volume of flow as it passes through El Tranco reservoir. Close to the reservoir, visitors will find the Collado del Almendral game reserve and the Torre del Vinagre Visitors Centre, which marks the boundary between the Sierras of Segura and Cazorla. The visitors centre provides information on the natural features of the park and houses a hunting museum that displays the trophies won since the national game reserve was founded. The botanical gardens, amongst the most magnificent and varied in Andalusia, contains specimens taken from all areas of the park, whilst the River Borosa Information

Centre houses a trout fish factory and one of the most impressive beauty spots within the Sierra of Cazorla.

The protagonism of water in this mountain range is evident in areas such as the Charco de la Cuna [a small lake], the Arroyo de la Truchas [stream] or the lakes of Valdeazores, where water forms settings of extraordinary beauty. Heading towards Cazorla, in the area surrounding Arroyo Frío, we find a road known as Empalme del Valle, which divides into several routes. One of the routes leads us to the Puerto de las Palomas, where the view point affords a spectacular panorama of the upper valley of the Guadalquivir, before descending towards the villages of Burunchel, a point of entry into the nature park, and La Iruela, a municipality that is noted for its historical and artistic importance that is dominated by a castle erected by the Knights Templar. Another of the routes leads us to some of the most famous and acclaimed spots within the Sierra of Cazorla, such as the Cerrada del Utrero, the waterfall of Linarejos or the Poyos de la Mesa, close to the Parador of “El Adelantado” [a state-owned hotel in a historical building].

One kilometre from La Iruela, visitors will find Cazorla, one of the localities with the greatest number of tourist attractions in the province of Jaén. In addition to monuments such as the imposing Castle of La Yedra, which houses an art and popular customs museum, the ruins of Santa María and the imperial fountain of Emperor Charles V, visitors can take in the Cazorla Blues Festival, which has been running for over ten years each July, featuring performances by some of the most important national and international blues artists. Close to Cazorla, we find Peal de Becerro, a municipality that houses one of the most important Iberian mausoleums ever discovered: the Toya funeral chamber. There are



other historical remains in the area: Bruñel houses an archaeological site on the ruins of a Roman town. The new museum that houses the works of Rafael Zabaleta and the churches of San Pedro and San Pablo are the main attractions in Quesada, a municipality with many caves containing prehistoric paintings, which have been inscribed on the World Heritage List. In the Tíscar pass, very close to Quesada, visitors will find the Sanctuary of the Virgen de Tíscar, which still conserves its original Gothic door, dating back to the 14th century. The Cueva del Agua, a naturally formed limestone cave, is found nearby, and provides the perfect setting for concerts in view of its excellent acoustic properties.

In addition to its charm as a privileged natural setting, the Nature Park also offers a wide variety of tourist services focusing on various sporting activities. Thus, the park includes six cycling routes that take in the most important peaks and municipalities within this natural enclave. The park also includes a dense network of traditional routes that allow visitors to acquire a greater awareness of the territory, along with more than thirty hiking routes that traverse the old walkways used by shepherds, traders and woodsmen, which are currently

being linked to form a single hiking route that will take in the three sierras within the park. The province of Jaén, and the park in particular, represents a magnificent destination for several adventure and nature sports, such as rock climbing and canyoning in mountain areas and rafting, canoeing and hydrospeeding, along the River Guadalquivir and on El Tranco reservoir. Practitioners of aerial sports are afforded four flying areas, including the peak of El Yelmo, at various locations throughout the province that provide optimal conditions for engaging in these types of activities.

In short, the Sierras of Cazorla, Segura and Las Villas Nature Park houses an incredible botanical and zoological treasure in its interior, along with a rich catalogue of artistic and historical features and a singular ethnographical heritage, offering tourists the possibility of experiencing a natural paradise wherein their five senses are in complete harmony with an idyllic enclave. The park, as is the case with the remainder of the territory of Jaén, produces an internal change in visitors: as the new promotional slogan of the province says, once you visit Jaén, “You are still you, but something has changed within you”.