



The Castles and Battles Route in Jaén province

Jaén's history as a frontier province has made it the territory with the most castles and fortresses in Europe



Over the course of history, Iberians, Romans, Almohads and Christians have loaded the territory now occupied by the province of Jaén with an enormous cultural and architectural wealth. Among its millions of olive trees are unique sites which can be visited today using different sight-seeing routes, one of the most notable of which is the Castles and Battles Route, a journey to the past enabling us to recover old customs and giving us an exceptional point of view of history.

The geographical location of the province of Jaén has meant that over the centuries it has been the

scene of many moments in history which shaped the fate of the Iberian Peninsula. This territory has witnessed such epic conflicts as the Battle of Baécula, where Romans and Carthaginians fought in 208 BC, marking the beginning of Rome's dominance in the Mediterranean; the Battle of Navas de Tolosa, in 1212, a Christian victory which broke Arab hegemony in al-Andalus; or the Battle of Bailén, the first defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte in his bid to conquer the continent of Europe.

This strategic location meant not only that the province of Jaén was the scene of decisive battles, but that it also has an immense legacy



of defensive architecture; indeed, being an area which for centuries was the frontier of cultures and peoples made Jaén the European territory with the most castles, fortresses, towers and watchtowers, including defensive structures built by the Order of Calatrava, such as the Castles of Peña de Martos and Alcaudete, fortified cities such as Alcalá la Real and Muslim castles such as Baños de la Encina. Some of these architectural sites form part of one of Europe's most attractive cultural tourism routes: the Castles and Battles Route.

This route, beginning in the archaeological site of Alarcos in Ciudad Real, first settled by the military

Order of Calatrava, and ending at the foot of the Alhambra in Granada, the final scene of the conquest of al-Andalus, reserves most of its archaeological riches in the province of Jaén. From the Natural Park of Despeñaperros, the Jaén section of the route invites you to visit seventeen towns of the province, until the Fortress of La Mota, in Alcalá la Real. Following this itinerary, it is as if time has stopped, sending us back to other eras, offering a different cultural experience where castles and fortresses once again occupy centre stage.



A walk through history

The Museum of the Battle of Navas de Tolosa, just one kilometre from the municipality of Santa Elena, welcomes the traveller arriving in Jaén from Despeñaperros, the natural entrance to Andalucía by road from central Spain. This museum complex invites visitors, through various themed areas recreating the typical scenes of the time, such as caravans or military camps, to reflect on the dialogue between cultures or the conflicts the world is now experiencing; a proposal for peace and understanding which helps to give a constructive focus to this route through the province of Jaén. From its lookout point it is possible to see the battlefield where the Christian troops of Alfonso VIII faced the Almohad armies of Caliph al-Nasir in the 13th century. This visit can also be combined with various hiking or all-terrain-vehicle routes which let you explore the area, all starting from the nearby “Puerta de Andalucía” Interpretation Centre.

Thus, we can travel towards the Castle of Castro Ferral, near what is now the town of Santa Elena, held by the Muslims before the Battle of Navas de Tolosa. Next to this building we can detect the ancient Via Augusta, a roman road which helped control the passage from Andalucía to the meseta of Castilla during the Islamic period. We can also visit the town of La Carolina, where in the 10th century the Muslims built the Castle of Los Collados (or Las Águilas), with a hexagonal tower fourteen metres high rising from the rock.

A few kilometres from La Carolina and Santa Elena is the Castle of Burgalimar, an imposing building crowning the town of Baños de la Encina, and considered to be one of the best preserved Muslim fortresses in Europe. Its fourteen towers attest to the important role of this town in the 13th century as the Mozarab guard and defence against Christian incursions during the reign of Fernando III. This fortification, declared a site of historic and artistic interest in 1969, also offers exceptional views of the nearby reservoir of El Rumbiar.

The next stop on this route is in Bailén, where on 19 July 1808 Napoleonic troops, commanded by the French General Dupont, met the Spanish army, led by General Castaños. The Spanish side was the winner in this battle, the first defeat of the “invincible” Napoleon in his campaign of conquests. How this episode of the war developed, its protagonists, its consequences, and the situation of Spain in the early 19th century are some of the subjects which visitors can study in greater depth at the Museum of the Battle of Bailén, which also recreates this battle as a model with more than 1200 lead figures.

Bailén gives the traveller access to the Campiña Norte district by a road with views of the beautiful landscapes of the Sierra de Andújar Natural Park, which has a unique set of flora and fauna. Towns like Andújar, Lopera, Porcuna, Arjona and Arjonilla offer a long and diverse historical legacy, consisting of such attractive settings as the tower of Fuente Gorda, in Andújar, the watertanks of the former fortress of Arjona,



the tower of Boabdil in Porcuna or the spectacular castle-palace of Lopera, of Calatravan origins. As well as the architectural heritage, visitors can explore and imagine the dozens of legends and romances which still survive in these places. Troubadours, kings, knights, valiant women, peasants and saints are the heroes of the many stories of these lands. Thus, in Arjonilla the songs of the troubadour Macías to his secret love Doña Elvira are still remembered, a romance which inspired the pens of famous writers of Castilla such as Lope de Vega and Mariano José de Larra.

In the Castle of Santa Catalina, in the capital of Jaén, they say that the saint appeared in dreams to King Fernando III to tell him he would soon receive the keys to the city of Jaén. Strolling around the historic city centre of the city, we find the emblematic lizard of Jaén, which terrorised the people of the city and kept them away from the water until it was defeated by a heroic shepherd. Our visit to this city must include a visit to the Cathedral, the masterwork of the architect Andrés de Vandelvira and a treasure



of the Andalusian Renaissance, which inspired many of the great cathedrals built in Latin America.

If we end our journey in the city of Jaén, we can take the opportunity to spend a quiet night in the Parador of the Castle of Santa Catalina, considered by the users of the largest online travellers' community to be one of the ten best castle-hotels in Europe. From its balconies there are spectacular views of the capital and most of the province. The castle consists of three fortifications: the castle of Abrehuy and the Alcázar Viejo, on which the Parador was built, and the Alcázar Nuevo, with six towers, where archaeological finds are exhibited alongside other examples of the city's heritage.

From Jaén the journey can continue towards the Campiña Sur, where we find towns like Torredonjimeno, with its old town centre conserving a medieval street plan, and Martos, a city crowned by a Peña or high rock, on which stands a castle with views as far as the Guadalquivir Valley. In this area

the knights of the Order of Calatrava had a great deal of power, and they left a significant architectural legacy in the province. To find out more about this knightly order we can visit the Castle of Alcaudete, a few kilometres from Martos, where an interpretation centre is devoted to the institution which was central to the conquest of al-Andalus by the Christians. This offers information on the origins of the order and the defensive role of the castle as a fortress on the frontier of the Nasrid kingdom of Granada.

After this tour of the many fortifications of the towns of Jaén, the route ends in the Fortress of La Mota in Alcalá la Real, one of the most unusual and values monuments of Jaén province. The archaeological site of the Alcazaba shows the traces of the original districts, the castle and the Abbey church, spaces which have become an interesting interpretation centre about frontier life.

Food and medieval festivals

The Castles and Battles route not only offers visitors an exuberant and exceptional heritage, it also invites travellers to try the excellent and wide-ranging dishes of the area. Extra-virgin olive oil plays a starring role in local cooking, and the province of Jaén is the world's leading producer of the oil. From the Iberians to our times, this liquid gold has been an essential element in the traditional recipes of the province, a

legacy of the continuous and overlapping influences of Christian, Arab and Jewish cookery. It is impossible to imagine such local and deeply rooted dishes as *ajoblanco* (almond *gazpacho*) or *pipirrana* salad without this beloved treasure. Another culinary legacy is sweet and sour dishes combining honey and salt, and fruit and vegetables such as figs, pomegranates, grapes or aubergines. Liqueurs derived from fruit trees such as almonds, chestnuts, orange or peach complete this exciting culinary experience.

Food is one of the attractions during the medieval festivals and markets held in most of the seventeen towns making up the route. During these festivals, famous historical characters and legends come to life to take us through time to the Middle Ages in shows, activities, theatre, concerts, tournaments and guided visits which supply the province of Jaén with a unique, multicultural tourist experience during the last weeks of spring and the first of autumn.

The towns of Santa Elena, La Carolina, Baños de la Encina, Linares, Vilches, Bailén, Andújar, Arjona, Arjonilla, Lopera, Porcuna, Torredonjimeno, Torredelcampo, Jaén, Martos, Alcaudete and Alcalá la Real offer a dynamic and attractive variety of tourism, with an exciting itinerary which has become well-established in the province and which offers tourists the opportunity to have a unique experience in unforgettable settings. Places where history resists the passage of time and the modern-day visitor can enjoy and reflect on this past, and in this way, learn from it.

