

21 ÁLORA (Estación de El Chorro) • ARDALES

The sandstones of the Sierra de Almorchón, Bobastro and Ardales Cave



ESTIMATED TIME
4 hours 30 minutes



LONGITUDE (km)		ALTITUDE AND ELEVATION (m)			
Length	16.5	Accumulated ascent	635	Final altitude	385
Ascent km	6.5	Accumulated descent	485	Maximum altitude	595
Descent km	7.3	Maximum difference	375	Minimum altitude	220
Flat km	2.7	Altitude at starting point	255	Average altitude	470

» Summary of this Stage «

This stage has a very comfortable length and it leads direction south-west to north-east. It is marked by an initial uphill section of over 375 meters of elevation along 3 kilometres along a somewhat stony path that leads to the Mesas de Villaverde, the highest point of the stage. Then the walk takes you downhill along the road to the area of Las Viñas which is hilly with hardly any vegetation, peppered with fish farm buildings and holiday homes; it is solely altered by the conical calcareous hill where the Cueva de Ardales cave is located. These hills constitute the right bank of the river Guadalhorce, which runs 350 metres below and the track keeps leading away from it at an altitude oscillating around 500 meters. Half of the stage's walk uses dirt tracks in good walking condition; there are three sections of tarmac. Mesas de Villaverde is climbed along a footpath.

» Highlights of this Stage «

The diversity of landscape during the walk is astounding, as the path takes you to various vantage points overlooking the Paraje Natural Desfiladero de los Gaitanes, El Chorro, el Valle del Guadalhorce, La Sierra del Agua and Ardales plus the Turón river valley.

The hydroelectric power station of Contraembalse del Tajo de la Encantada and the Presa de Villaverde are worth the effort you will need to get from one to the other walking along a reinforced pipe which connects them. >

							
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Pictograms description MIDE, pages 11 & 17

➤ Very few walks present a similar opportunity to interact with two historical and archaeological sites of such importance as the Mozarabic ruins of Bobastro, founded by the ineffable Umar Ibn Hafsún, and the Ardales cave (also called Doña Trinidad Grund's cave who was the person responsible for preparing the cave for visitors as an addition to the thermal baths of Carratraca). The cave had been occupied from the upper Palaeolithic, was subsequently blocked off and then rediscovered in 1821 as a result of an earthquake which uncovered the entrance again. More than 50 cave paintings and engravings it contains represent figures of animals, abstract motifs and symbols, even the silhouette of human hands depicted using an airbrush technique.

- **Starting point:** station of El Chorro.
- **Access to starting point:** from Ardales, along a paved track off the MA-4401 road. From Álora and Ardales, the MA-5403.
- **Finish point:** Municipal Museum of the Village of Ardales.
- **Access to finish point:** Ardales is on a detour from the A-357 Málaga-Campillos road. From El Burgo it is reachable by the mountain roads that follow the Turón river: the MA-5401 and MA-5402.
- **Possible "escape routes":** the best place would be the Mesas de Villaverde, where there are the Contraembalse de la Encantada and a Venta (an inn).
- **No return point:** once you have forded the Arroyo del Granado it is better to continue until Ardales, since with every step there are more houses and the track becomes gradually more accessible to any vehicle.
- **Maps:** The entire route is mapped on **1038-III** (Ardales) sheet.
- **District boundaries:** the district of Álora reaches the kilometre point 1.2, at the end of the initial stretch of road. Then you are walking in Ardales district until the end of this stage.

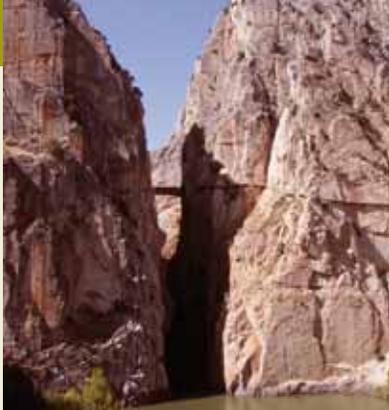
The walkway known as Caminito del Rey entering the Desfiladero de los Gaitanes, as seen in 2014 before renovation works began



• Enjoy the walk safely

The viewpoint placed along the penstock (reinforced high-pressure pipe structure) does not have any railings to prevent falls, and potentially could be the most dangerous spot of the whole stage. Take great care looking out if you do walk along it.

Roads at the beginning and at the end of the stage usually do not have much traffic, but the hard shoulder is narrow or lacking. The entrance to Ardales does have much more traffic. The rest of the asphalt or concrete sections are actually paved country tracks. If you look at the icon representing type of surface at this stage, roads as such do not cover as much of the itinerary as it may suggest. The ford across the Arroyo del Algarrobo, at km 10.5, normally poses no problem, since here it is a dry stream bed, but be careful in rainy season just in case. The water spring of the Fuenfría is the only water source, which hasn't, of course, been treated for human consumption, and in addition it is difficult to locate. Finally, at kilometre 4 there is the Embalse de Villaverde. It is forbidden to walk along the highest perimeter



The outlet of the Gorge of Guadalhorce river out of the Desfiladero had been known before it was dammed and regulated at El Chorro

track at the top edge of the reservoir and any fall into the reservoir's basin is very dangerous.

• Connections to other footpaths and trails

The GR-249 y the GR-7 E-4 coincide entirely along this itinerary however in opposite directions. In case of the other GR it is its stage 6, Ardales to El Chorro, 15.5 km long.

At the Mirador de Ardales, almost at the end of the stage, the walk intersects with Camino de los Azulejos, and, and the asphalted track is known in the area as the track to Cueva de Ardales.

THE RIVERS AND THE WATER

In the previous stages you got to know the three Embalses, although from afar, plus the flood control reservoir Embalse del Gaitanejo. You will discover the other two during the current stage.

The walk allows for very different views of the Contraembalse del Tajo de la Encantada, the one located at lowest height (the top of the dam is at the lowest altitude of the day, 200 metres above the sea level). From El Chorro you will see the reinforced pipes shaped to adapt to the changing terrain of the eastern flank of Mesas de Villaverde and Chimenea de Presión. During the ascent the walk comes in contact with the pipe and gives you an exclusive view of its section



The back view of the penstock seen from a bend in the path, on a slope leading towards the Embalse de la Encantada

below, the steepest, and of the power plant. Beside the great sandstone cliff there are a few half-hidden constructions which are annexed to the pipeline and some remains of anchorage nailed to the ground which hold in place the pipe that supplies water for maintenance and

construction work. You can also gaze south-east from the climbing ramps of the electric substation Tajo de la Encantada and, a little higher up, you can have a closer view of the Chimenea de Presión. But certainly the most unexpected experience is being able to admire the upper dam, occupying the entire length of the Mesas de Villaverde, with three peaks which together give the basin a Y-shape of a pointy mushroom.

In comparison with the earlier water displays, the rest of the walk presents devastating dryness. The only stream you will wade across is the Arroyo del Granado. Around the halfway point of the walk there is, on your right, (until you ford the stream) a sort of a dry stream bed, northbound and enclosed between two walls of clay and sandstone. But, a little further down, where the path twists to the east, a little away from the walk, this streambed starts carrying water permanently towards the Hermitage of Nuestra Señora de Villaverde and flowing into the reservoir at the level of the Desfiladero de los Gaitanes outlet. In this section it coincides approximately with the limits of the Natural Area.

Though generally of insufficient flow, the water of the Fuente de la Fuenfría has been



The cliffs known as Placas Frontales and one of the most beautiful railroad bridges

very important for the inhabitants of the area, Las Viñas farmers and shepherds of the surrounding hills. As they were far from any other source of water, it was completely forbidden to water cattle at the Fuente. This water spring is somewhat famous among the Ardales inhabitants. Perhaps the most striking feature though is the compelling riparian wood the Fuente sustains and the waterfall that flows into a trough carved out in the tufa deposits (the water contains a lot of lime) a few metres below the source. There is maidenhair fern here, Blue Throatwort and numerous climbing plants. From the pool there comes out an irrigation ditch surrounded by tall white and black poplars and elms.

WALK DESCRIPTION

» Between two Embalses, the Lower and Higher reservoir

El Chorro train station marks the beginning of the stage, along a service road that passes over the dam of the Contraembalse del Tajo de la Encantada and turns right along the road. Just at the km marker 11 of the MA-5403 road, a dirt track splits off westwards (km 1.2) that quickly changes into a path. After a couple of bends you reach the penstock (reinforced pipes) viewpoint where you have to take extra precautions and then continue

Train stop at El Chorro, Placas Frontales and the pine forest you walked during the previous stage



climbing through a clear pine wood sometimes interspersed with olives, where Mediterranean Dwarf Palm, Broom-like Kidney Vetch, Retama and Osyris quadripartita have started to thrive as of late. Passing under a rocky cliff you have the opportunity to see the composition of this peculiar mix of yellowish-coloured sandstone and conglomerates, predominantly calcareous rock, but also you can see slate, shale and peroditite boulders. In the cliffs of the upper zone there is opportunity to locate the vaults and holes left by soft clay inclusions as the rocks eroded, some of great dimensions. Such a hole is technically called a tafone. Smaller holes tend to clump forming panels due to alveolar erosion.

All around here there are spectacular views of El Chorro, Valle del Guadalhorce, the Placas Frontales and the pine forest of the previous stage. The track widens whilst it leads through a pine wood with larger size trees and some Savin junipers. Suddenly, the track encounters the concrete wall of Presa Superior, the upper dam. Take a junction to the right which eventually leads to the top edge of the dam at its northeast end (km 4), where transit is restricted but then continue along the perimeter track circling the base of the dam. A clearing among

The sandstone cliff shows a different granulometry



pine trees allows you to gaze now and then at one of the best views of the Desfiladero de los Gaitanes. The two gorges are visible, the Sierra of the Huma on the right and some of the mountains of the Almorchón with the sharp silhouette of the Pico del Convento. In the north-west corner of the reservoir's Y shape you will note a prominent hilltop observatory called Observatorio de Vigilancia del Chorro, belonging to the plan "Infoca" to prevent forest fires. The track then turns south and passes through a natural pool surrounded by many tamarisks.

A guided tour of the ruins of Bobastro, in a quarry of masonry blocks



»» The ruins of Bobastro

At 5.6 kilometre marker you will access the MA-4400 service road of the reservoir, which optionally you could follow to the left to reach an area of viewpoints in the Mesas de Villaverde, close to the excavated site of the Bobastro ruins and a ledge containing cave dwellings and Mozarabic quarries (which are difficult to access), known as the Casa de la Reina Mora. Our walk, however, descends to the right along the road and in less than a kilometre arrives at the information point of the Ermita Rupestre de Bobastro. During the Pulgarín Alto to Alfarnate stage you passed

by the Cortijo de Auta farmhouse, which some quote as the birth place of Umar Ibn Hafsún (Omar Ben Hafsun in Spanish historiography); now it is time to see the capital of his rebellion against the Caliphate of Córdoba and the Umayyad dynasty, which is what Bobastro was. The fortified town is located on top of las Mesas. The construction of the dam in the seventies of the last century has resulted in the loss of some of the site. From this 6.6 kilometre marker of the stage you can access (during the opening hours) the ruins of the Iglesia Rupestre de Bobastro, of Mozarabic origin, located in a strategic place protected from the winds and looking towards the west. The construction of a church by this Andalusí leader corresponds with his conversion to Christianity after a long journey during which he had been looking for strategies to conquer the capital of Al-Andalus and overthrow the dynasty in power.

» Las Viñas and la Cueva de Ardales

The pine forest ends just as you take a left junction off the road, having walked



Watercourse of Arroyo del Granado surrounded by dry farmed crops and sparse scrub

along the road for a kilometre. The track is in good condition, leading along the watershed line between the basins of Arroyo de los Granados and the river Guadalhorce, which flow in opposite directions at this point. There is a succession of clay and rocky hills and sandstone crags dotted with farmhouses

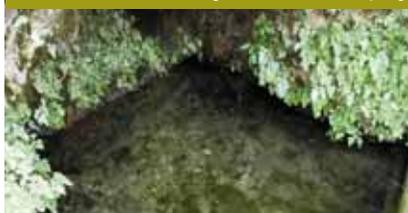
The slopes of Las Viñas which you have already travelled along, and the ridge of the Huma mountains in the background



The beautiful endemic *Rupicapnos africana* on the sheltered sandstone face



Maidenhair fern surrounding the Fuenfría water spring



and sheds with farming implements. You will pass one by one the Casa Bolero, Zamarrilla, Merchano and the Rancho del Boina. The old vineyards lost during the phylloxera epidemic have been replaced by dry farmed crops, predominantly almond trees, and uncultivated areas dedicated to the grazing of goats and sheep between retama and hedgehog vegetation.

There are numerous junctions left and right, always choose the track that goes up and along

La Casa de la Reina Mora, out of the way but accessible from the Mesa de Villaverde (not sign-posted)



the slope. If you turn around and look back, you will be awarded with an excellent view to the Sierra de Huma, Central Limestone Arch with Torcal de Antequera, and the Guadalorce Valley with the infrastructure of the Ave speed train. Looking ahead you will see the Sierra del Agua and its row of wind turbines.

At kilometre 9 the footpath of Arroyo del Granado approaches our path, with a few little houses scattered on its slopes and some groves of pine trees. A kilometre and half later cross a watercourse where the track narrows and another climb starts adding on to all the previous twists and turns. You are now back in the Monte Público, the common land. You will thus reach El Puerto de la Riela pass, and la Alamedilla area, where, having crossed a little stream and before passing by gravel quarries, you will find Fuente de Fuenfría. Here the terrain undergoes a radical change as limestone and dolomite of the Sierra Blanquilla of Ardales appear.

Up to the natural spring you were headed south-west, from here you turn progressively north-westerly until reaching an incline (km 13.2 up to the main track. Following the left fork you reach Cueva de Ardales cave. A pyramidal construction of brick at the end of the road, to the West, locates this significant prehistoric site which was the first tourism-oriented cave in Spain. It is possible to tour it contacting the officials of Ardales. What is left to do now is to admire the landscape of the Valley of the Turón River from comfortable downhill track to the village of Ardales, which can be accessed after passing below the road A-357. The proposed end of the stage is the interesting Museum of Ardales, at the northern end of the village crossing the Arroyo de la Torre. ○



Campanula mollis flowering in the vicinity of Bobastro

LIST OF GPS POINTS OF THIS STAGE (UTM)

1 Estación de El Chorro	30S 033261 4086029	255 m	2 Embalse del Tajo de la Encantada, reservoir	30S 0343149 4085798	220 m
3 End of road MA-5403 at Km 11	30S 0342821 4086023	220 m	4 Mirador de la Tubería Forzada, viewpoint	30S 0342744 4086150	275 m
5 Sandstone cliff	30S 0342382 4085926	375 m	6 Mirador de las Placas Frontales y El Chorro, viewpoint	30S 0342140 4085801	410 m
7 Mirador del Contraembalse de la Encantada, viewpoint	30S 0341805 4085912	575 m	8 Mirador del Paraje Natural Desfiladero de los Gaitanes, viewpoint	30S 0341860 4086067	560 m
9 Access to ruins of la Iglesia Rupestre de Bobastro	30S 0341343 4085227	485 m	10 Mirador de la Sierra del Huma, viewpoint	30S 0340667 4083946	510 m
11 Mirador del Arroyo del Granado and El Búho, viewpoint	30S 0340329 4083356	460 m	12 Vado del Arroyo del Granado, ford across the Arroyo	30S 0339371 4082768	470 m
13 Fuente de la Fuenfría, natural spring	30S 0337961 404082369	540 m	14 Access to la Cueva de Ardales	30S 0337579 4082564	565 m
15 Mirador de Ardales, viewpoint	30S 0337187 4083069	525 m	16 End of Stage at Museo Municipal de Ardales	30S 0335521 4083209	380 m



The retaining wall of the unfinished dam of Río Turón, in la Laja

The Gran Senda de Málaga along Río Turón and the Biosphere Reserve of the Sierra de las Nieves

The Great Malaga Path uses the Turón River Trail in stages 22 and 23 to connect El Burgo with Ardales and then Ronda through 47 kilometres of roads, which pass partly through the Natural Park and biosphere reserve of the Sierra de las Nieves.

El Parque Natural Sierra de las Nieves occupies a privileged position in the province of Malaga defining regions as emblematic as the Guadalteba northwards, the Guadalhorce Valley to the east, the Costa del Sol to the south and the Serranía de Ronda to the west. In each one of them the mountain area of Sierra de las Nieves generates one or several river headwaters. In its area major watercourses of Malaga are born, such as the Guadalteba in the north, and, in the clockwise direction the Turón and Río Verde (and others that flow into the Mediterranean Sea) plus the Guadiaro.

The Natural Park, declared as such in 1989, is characterized by a high altitude plateau. At its southern end rises the cone-shaped peak

of the Torecilla, (1,919 m) which works as a recipient of abundant precipitation, sometimes in the form of snow. Here are located the most important potholes of the southern peninsula, such as the Sima Gesm Sima de la Luz system (1.101- m) and the Sima del Aire (- 640 m), both still being discovered, that drain water to the various springs at the foot of the sierra. On the Meseta de Quejigales (Plateau of Gall Oaks) there is a high altitude version of this *Quercus* species, and in the hillsides surrounding it, especially to the north and to the west, you will find the most extensive Andalusian Spanish Fir forests, the Pinsapar. The Great Path of Málaga takes you through it by the municipal district of El Burgo, the last piece of land which had been annexed to create the current 20.163 hectares. In fact, the GR-249 runs along the entire Río Turón Valley, from one of the sources in the Lifa Valley to its delta at the reservoir Conde de Guadalhorce. The walk however follows the river direction upstream.

The Río Turón has two main tributaries. The Arroyo de la Higuera is born in the fir forest of Ronda, in the Cañada de las Animas, and by the Cuesta de Gazpacho it reaches the area where The Great Málaga Path crosses the watercourse immediately after its union with Arroyo de Lifa (or the Sabinal). Both streams dry out in summer. Further down, from the farmhouse Cortijo de Hierbabuena, the stream gets the name of Río del Burgo and acquires its status of a permanent river. The successive retaining walls and re-planted pines attempt to stabilize the sheer drops of easily eroded rocks with high contents of clay. There are also some course-changing dams with irrigation ditches meant for orchards which, already near El Burgo, begin to settle on river banks.

The river surrounds the town of El Burgo from the south creating an escarpment on which the Castle used to reside, and then it continues down already carrying the name of Turón between Prieta and Alcaparain mountains to the south and Ortegicar in the north. A few kilometres before being dammed at the old El Chorro reservoir (today called Conde de Guadalhorce) it passes under a Roman bridge and passes Ardales by on the right. If not for the Aleppo pine forests the valley would be

mostly composed of dry agricultural landscape. There are some other dams between these two villages, and an unfinished work in the area known as la Laja which is worth mentioning. It is a reservoir placed in the narrow space between two gray limestone escarpments which close the watercourse halfway between Ardales and El Burgo. It was designed by the same engineer who created the Conde de Guadalhorce, Rafael Benjumea. From the road that joins both towns and from the stage 22 the reservoir is accessible. It is possible to see the huge unfinished dyke, quarry area and service buildings.

The Great Path of Málaga helps the traveller discover this important river in the two stages of the walk, walking up to the hills with pine forest planted for public use and seeing the watercourse at different points, with its lush vegetation, finally visiting one of the most curious forests of Andalusia, the Lifa Cornicabral (Terebinth Tree).

These stages also invite you to do any additional walks through the protected site in order to catch a glimpse what the heart of the Park has to offer as it climbs the vast mountain pass where there are examples of Spanish Fir in close proximity, mountain maples and spiny scrub close to the summit. ○

One of the Río Turón "acequia" channels covered with Maidenhair fern

