

Once one of the world's scariest hikes, the Caminito del Rey in [Málaga](#) has reopened after extensive safety improvements - so you can now look out at the views rather than down in fear, says Ami Sedghi

The king's high way

Wind whips my face and pushes me into the wire sides of the hanging bridge I'm attempting

to cross. At 105 metres high, with the river flowing below and steep rock walls on either side, it feels a little daring, but not terrifying. And I had come here expecting terror, for I'm walking Andalucía's infamous Caminito del Rey footpath.

Dubbed "one of the world's scariest hikes", the walkway attached to the steep walls of El Chorro gorge in the province of Málaga, southern Spain, reopened to the public last week after a €2.7m refurbishment. Built at the turn of the 20th century to give workers access to two hydroelectric plants, the path - the name translates as the King's Little Pathway - was closed in 2000 for

more than a decade, after a number of people died attempting to cross it. The dangerously worn-out path earned a reputation, though, as thrill-seekers ignored the closure and dared the crossing, despite a fine of up to €6,000 for trespassers.

Now, secured wooden walkways and stony paths make up much of the once-dilapidated route. We approach the walkway from the village of Ardales; the route is linear and there are two entrances, one in Ardales, the other a few kilometres south, in Álora.

We are handed hard hats. Safety is key on the new route. Indeed, I feel so secure that I find I've been walking for a few minutes along the new boardwalk before I look down and glimpse the 100-metre drop to the floor of the gorge - at this stage it feels more like a nature trail on a family day out

(although children under the age of eight are not allowed and there is no wheelchair access).

Videos of the old route had left my palms sweaty; this new path gives me a slight flutter but more of surprise than fear. I am so consumed with taking in the views, I forget I'm so high up. The wind is blowing hard though, so I'm more afraid of my camera equipment flying off than I am of pitching over the side.

The first part of the path - a boardwalk with great views of the cliffs and turquoise water of the Guadalhorce river swirling below - eventually turns into a stony track that gently runs down before sloping gradually upwards. Among the trees, some benches have been erected. It's a sign of its new calm ambience, with walkers able to sit and take in the views. A group of locals are traversing the route - they have been invited to come and see the new tourist attraction before it opens to the public - and the mixture of ages reflects the new accessibility.

Marrying the old path with the new construction was very important, says Luis Machuca, head architect and director of the project. This can be seen on the second part of the boardwalk, pinned to the mountain walls. Through the wooden slats you can glimpse the rocks and water below, but the real stomach-churner comes from seeing the old path snaking beneath. It is riddled with holes, and entire chunks have long rusted away or fallen into the ravine - you wonder about those who walked along it over the years, and those who lost their lives here. A memorial plaque to three young men who died in 2000 is screwed into the rock wall, a poignant reminder of the path's tragic past.

The climax of the 7.7km walk comes

around two-thirds of the way along. After the tranquil stroll through the Hoyo valley, there are steps on to the next part of the boardwalk. It winds around a corner and curves along the

rock and I'm stunned by the sheer scale of the spectacular steep sidewalls of the gorge.

This, Machuca tells me, is his favourite part of the route. To our left is a view of the mountains and the river. To our right the glass-floored section hangs over the cliff, giving walkers a clear view of the gorge. Machuca says this part makes him feel like a mouse entering a cathedral: "It's not only the view and the surroundings, but the emotion of walking the Caminito del Rey."

The reopening is of huge importance to the area. "When people think of Málaga, they think of the sun and beaches, but now this is something totally different," says Francisco Vázquez, an engineer who worked on the project. "It's another experience. A pretty special experience concentrated into a short time."

Selected as one of Lonely Planet's top new travel experiences for 2015, the reopening of the pathway has been anticipated for years. Already the route is booked up until June. Groups of 50 people are allowed to enter every half an hour, and the organisers expect to see 600 people walking the path each day.

It may not be the world's scariest hike any more, not even close, but El Caminito del Rey's true attraction is still there. Stunning views and an awe-inducing sense of scale from the sheer rock walls and dizzyingly high pathway will stay with you long after you've stepped down from the hanging bridge and walked away.

Adventure-seekers may be disappointed by the makeover but for those looking for a bit of excitement mixed with beautiful views it may just be the ticket - if you can get one.

● caminitodelrey.info. Open Tuesday-Sunday from 10am, a visit lasts four to five hours. Entrance is free until



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PHOTOGRAPH BY JAVIER CALZADILLA

▲ Treading the boards ... the newly reopened Caminito del Rey is 100 metres above the gorge of Los Gaitanes