

HUELVA
LA LUZ
Andalucía

Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche



Gastronomy

The most famous Iberian ham on the peninsula is produced in the heart of the Sierra de Aracena, where the free-range feeding habits of the pigs guarantee a savoury product. In addition to this undisputed star of mountain cuisine, there are other delicacies such as winter gazpacho, sopas de peso (hearty soups) and superb anise liqueurs.

The gastronomy of the Sierra boasts one delicacy that stands out above all the rest – jamón ibérico or Iberian ham, protected by a designation of origin that includes 31 townships in the mountain region. The Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche contain a magical geographic and culinary triangle and the town of Jabugo is at its heart.

The cured hams of Iberian free-range pigs, whose diet is based on acorns, have brought international fame to the towns responsible for discovering the miracle of the well-known “pata negra” or “black-hoof” ham. A Museum of Ham now exists in the town of Aracena, which offers a comprehensive look at this region’s particular cultural and gastronomic heritage.



Iberian pork is the featured ingredient in many of the delicacies that can be sampled in the towns of the Sierra; in addition to ham, there is also caña de lomo (dried cured pork loin), morcón (chunky pork sausage), chorizos culares (large pork sausage), chacinas (various dried pork products), morcillas (black puddings) and other cured and fresh sausages that should always be served with a healthy chunk of good mountain- baked bread. Prepared in many different ways, Iberian pork is the main dish on menus offered in restaurants in many towns.

But we must remember that the mountain region offers other gastronomic delights, such as winter gazpacho garnished with coriander or hearty soups. In Spanish, these soups are called "sopas de peso" or "weighty soups" because they were prepared to nourish the young men who had to hoist the pigs onto the scale at weighing time. Mushrooms are also an important ingredient in local cuisine; the Sierra de Aracena is one of the most important regions of mycological production in Andalusia and is visited by mushroom harvesters from around the world. Caesar's mushrooms, Saffron milk-caps and parasol mushrooms sprout up after the autumn rains, although the most highly-prized mushroom in these parts is actually the gurumelo (*Amanita ponderosa*).



This culinary treat is harvested in February and March, when it is often served in towns such as Encinasola. Goat cheeses, honey with rosemary and lavender aromas, chestnuts and walnuts – used in stews and baked sweets – are other typical products, and an excellent virgin olive oil is also produced in Arroyomolinos.

To top off an excellent meal in any town of the Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche, we recommend an anise liqueur, of which there are many local varieties with different levels of alcohol content. Eau-de-vie of figs, morello cherries or black plums such as those abounding in Higuera de la Sierra will leave your palate with the pleasant sensation of having enjoyed gastronomy of renowned quality and authentic local character.



The Castle Route

The Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche are located in the westernmost part of the Sierra Morena mountain range, in the north of the province of Huelva. In the Middle Ages, this region was the setting for many frontier battles with neighbouring Portugal. The historical legacy of those armed conflicts has been preserved in the form of numerous fortresses which comprise the so-called "Galician Strip".

In the 13th century, a time of frequent border disputes with the neighbouring kingdom of Portugal, King Sancho IV (also known as Sancho the Brave) decided to organize a solid line of defensive strongholds. Most of these defenses were located in the Sierra de Aracena, given the region's strategic geographic importance.

This military plan was known as "The Galician Strip" because many Spaniards from Galicia and Leon had been encouraged to repopulate the area after the Muslims were evicted. It was organized in three semi-circular rings of fortresses established in numerous townships, which were primarily designed to protect the city of Seville from Portuguese invaders.



The Castle Route is an excellent way to experience the historical value and heritage of the towns and regions of the Aracena y Picos de Aroche Natural Park. This route can be taken at any time of year. The best option is to use a private automobile or public transport to visit the various towns along the way, which include: Aroche, Cortegana, Almonaster la Real, Encinasola, Cumbres de San Bartolomé, Cumbres Mayores, Cala, Santa Olalla de Cala, Zufre and Aracena. Although there are several possible approaches to this route, we suggest an east-to-west itinerary that will allow you to visit a dozen of the fortresses that were once part of these three historical lines of defense. These castles are spread out across various townships and their state of conservation varies.

The tour begins in Cala and Santa Olalla de Cala. Although the stronghold in Cala is quite deteriorated, the walk up the hill and the magnificent view of the mountain range from the castle makes it a worthwhile-le visit. In Santa Olalla de Cala, the castle perches imposingly upon the peak of a hill overlooking the town; the building itself occupies an extensive surface area and is flanked by ten towers.



This and the castle of Cumbres Mayores are the only two castles that were built expressly for the lines of defense, rather than on the sites of former Muslim fortifications. Just fifteen kilometres to the southeast, you will find Zufre, a town whose name and layout reflect its Arabic heritage. It was once a walled city fortified by the Almohads, and some fragments of that wall, such as the Torre de la Harina (Tower of Flour), are still standing. This strong-hold was not created as a result of border disputes with Portugal, although the walls did later serve to protect the town's inhabitants from the advancing armies of their ancient foe.

Located in the very heart of this mountainous region, Aracena is probably the most tourist-oriented town in the region and the main crossroads of the Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche Natural Park. Rising above the town is the Cerro del Castillo (Castle Hill), upon which are perched both the Iglesia Prioral del Castillo (Castle Priory Church) and the ruins of the ancient fortress that was once of great strategic importance. Hidden beneath the hill is the Gruta de las Maravillas (Grotto of Marvels), an immense karstic cave that constitutes one of the Natural Park's main attractions. The southernmost limit of the three defensive rings runs almost parallel to the Seville-Lisbon road (N-433), which you can take west from Aracena to Cortegana, where a perfectly restored castle will immediately catch your eye.



This castle is open to visitors year-round and houses a museum of archaeological treasures and period furnishings. In August, this castle hosts the popular “medieval days” that offer food, festivities and exhibitions. A few kilometres to the south, Almonaster la Real boasts one of the few surviving examples of Arab fortresses from the caliphate period. This particular edifice is part of a complex that includes a mosque dating from the same period and the more recent bullring built atop the former military parade ground.

The N-435 road from Huelva to Badajoz will quickly take you north along the second ring of the Galician Strip until you reach “Las Tres Cumbres” or three hills. These towns – Cumbres de San Bartolomé, Cumbres de Enmedio and Cumbres Mayores – came into being when an ancient Roman citadel named Concordia Julia Nertobriga was abandoned and its inhabitants took up residence on three nearby hilltops. Cumbres Mayores is the largest, and the highest point of its fortified perimeter is crowned by a monumental castle known as the Castillo de Sancho El Bravo (Castle of Sancho the Brave), which occupies a full hectare of land behind its ten-metre high, three-metre thick battlement-topped walls. The castle was declared a National Monument in 1985. In the neighbouring town of Cumbres de Enmedio, you will discover the ruins of an artillery wall dating from the same period.



This tour of the mountain castles ends with a visit to the outer defensive perimeter, the one closest to Port-gal, which extends across the townships of Frenegal de la Sierra in Badajoz, Encinasola and Aroche. Encinasola is home to the ruins of a castle whose former importance can be inferred from the abundance of towers and the thickness of its walls. In the 16th century, several defensive bastions were built in this town; the only two that remain standing are the Fuerte de San Felipe (St. Philip's Fort) dedicated to King Philip II and the Fuerte de San Juan (St. John's Fort) dedicated to the Prince John of Austria, both of which have been restored and are open to the public.

The Carretera de las Contiendas (Road of Conflicts) will treat you to lovely views of the Múrtigas River valley on your way to the last stop on the route – the village of Aroche. This quintessential mountain settlement is surrounded by a colossal walled perimeter built in the 17th century; no less interesting is the nearby Castillo de las Armas (Castle of Arms) of Aroche. Originally built during the Almoravid period, substantial structural changes were later made by Spaniards as well as the Portuguese, given the castle's proximity to the volatile border region. In the early 19th century, a bullring was also constructed in the castle parade ground, where bullfights and equestrian shows are still held today.



The hiking trails route

With its temperate climate in any season, gradual inclines and numerous cultural and natural attractions, the Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche is the ideal location for enjoying recreational hikes. Over 700 kilometers of clearly marked hiking trails allow explorers easy access to the entire region.

The Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche region was declared a Natural Park in 1989. The park covers a vast territory of 186,827 hectares that spreads across twenty-eight townships with a total population of approximately 41,000 inhabitants. In this setting, man and nature have joined forces to offer visitors a harmonious landscape of tremendous beauty; the blending of cultural riches, historical vestiges and ecological treasures make this the perfect place for enjoying botanical, historical or ornithological hikes.

There are many advantages to hiking in this particular region. It is a mountain chain running from northwest to southeast with gradual, easy inclines and an average peak height of seven hundred meters, although a few peaks measure as high as one thousand meters.



The relative proximity of these mountains to the Atlantic Ocean makes for a moderately more humid climate than can be found in neighbouring regions, which explains the abundance of streams and river gorges flowing through the landscape, carrying water down into the Guadiana, Guadalquivir and Odiel Rivers.

Hiking fans will be hard pressed to find a time of year that isn't suitable for exploring the Sierra de Aracena. Although springtime and autumn are the ideal seasons, summer is also pleasant and temperatures rarely drop below freezing in the winter.

The mountain vegetation is richly diverse. Groves of holm oaks growing in open pastures are a common sight in these parts – the result of a longstanding symbiosis of man and nature, with forests and man-made clearings for grazing existing side-by-side.

In more humid areas, cork oaks – which are stripped of their bark every nine years to harvest the cork and whose trunks exhibit varying shades of red – frequently intermingle with holm oaks in large open fields or grow together to form cork oak groves. Other indigenous species are the Portuguese oak and the less common Pyrenean oak.



The mountain climate is also perfect for chestnut trees in shadowed locations, and if the hiking trail you choose runs close to rushing waterways – which is sure to be the case, given their abundance – you will also enjoy seeing black poplars, alder trees and ash trees along the banks, which can at times form lovely canopied corridors. This unique landscape is criss-crossed by a network of natural trails, paths and old livestock trails that still connect villages, towns and rural estates.

The increasing popularity of a new mentality that seeks a certain dose of harmony and physical exercise in contact with nature has revived the use of former routes and mapped new itineraries that make use of traditional throughways.

Promoters of organised hiking, supported by various associations, town councils and local authorities, have provided clear signage for over six hundred kilometers of hiking trails in the area of the Natural Park, giving this region one of the most complete, closely-woven trail networks in all of Spain. There are trails of varying distances and every level of difficulty, thus allowing a wide range of people with different interests and levels of personal fitness to enjoy this activity.



International standards divide these trails into two different categories: long-distance, with red and white signage, and short-distance, with yellow and white signage. Long-distance trails are anywhere from fifty to thousands of kilometers long.

There are five such trails running through the Natural Park, and by following any of the different available routes, one can hike the entire mountain range. Short-distance paths are, as their name indicates, shorter trails that usually lead to a town, specific lookouts or places of cultural interest. These trails are less demanding, and they often allow hikers to circle back to their starting point. The Park has around twenty such trails, which range from two to twenty-one kilometers in length and connect practically all of the towns in the region.

At the Natural Park's Main Information Centre in Arcena and the Information Centres in Santa Olalla la Cala, Almonaster la Real and Aroche, you can find more detailed information and acquire maps and guides for all blazed hiking trails. In addition to trails with signage, there are also scores of local paths and tracks for strolling leisurely through the woods, fields and secret landscapes of the mountain area.



Tourism Offices Information

Oficina de Información Turística de Huelva
959 650 200

Oficina Municipal de Turismo de Arcena
663 937 377

Gruta de las Maravillas Gruta de las Maravillas
663 937 876

Centro de Visitantes 'El Cabildo Viejo' (Arcena)
959 129 553



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