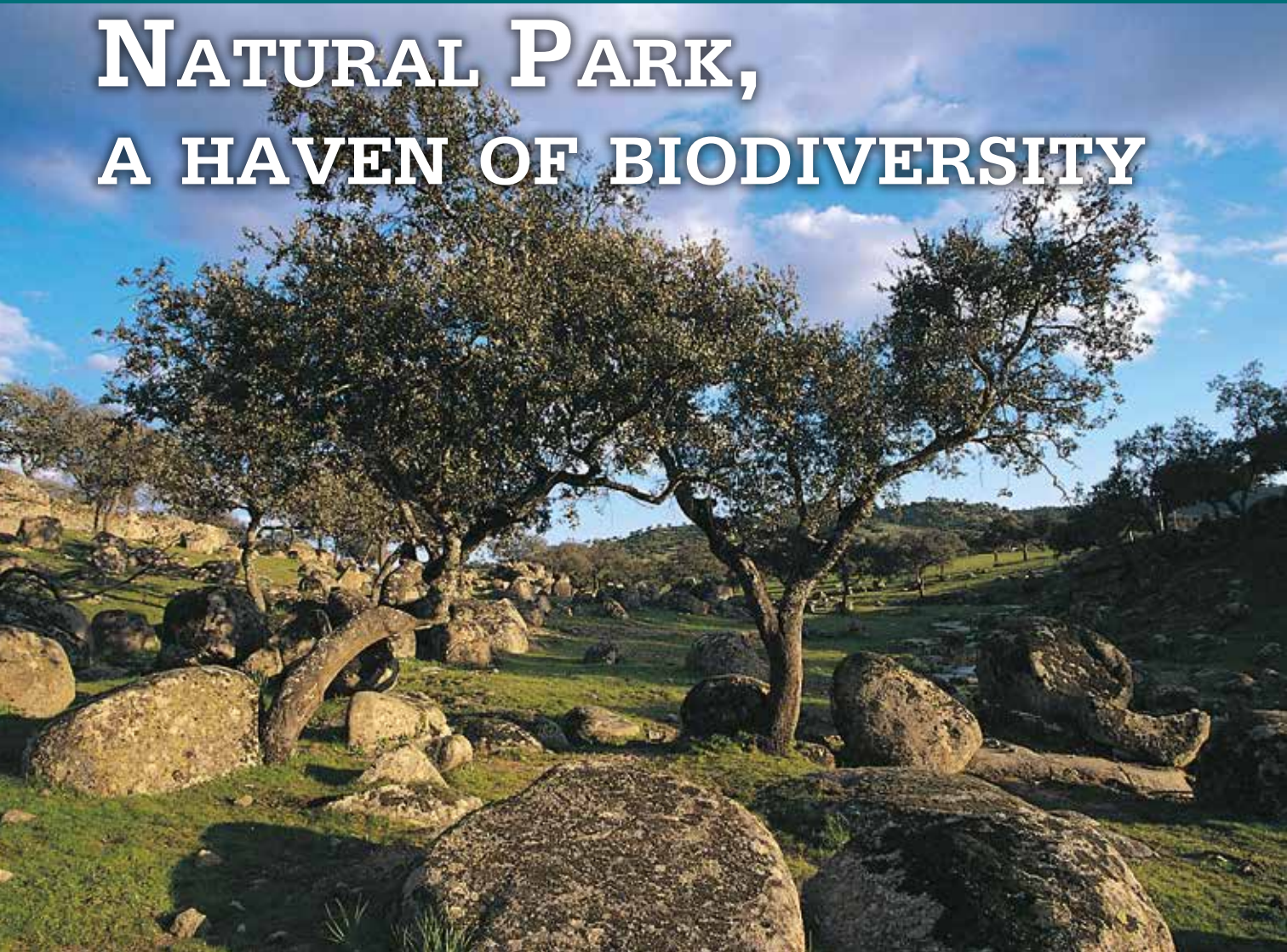


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SIERRA DE ANDÚJAR NATURAL PARK, A HAVEN OF BIODIVERSITY







In the north-west of Jaén, Sierra de Andújar Natural Park is one of the four nature reserves making up the inland paradise of the Spanish province with the most protected areas. A UNESCO Biosphere Reserve since 1989, this beautiful Natural Park is the refuge of endangered species like the Iberian lynx, the wolf and the Spanish imperial eagle, and is a dream destination for hunting and fishing holidays.

Four municipalities in Jaén province – Andújar, Baños de la Encina, Marmolejo and Villanueva de la Reina – form this large wilderness area of more than 74,400 hectares, outstanding for its unique landscapes and its wealth of flora and fauna. Holm oak, Portuguese oak and cork oak dominate this Mediterranean forest, with white oak on the highest hills. But undoubtedly, what makes this park unique in Spain is the diversity of its wildlife. Almost all the large and mid-sized mammals of the Iberian Peninsula are represented in the Sierra de Andújar, which is also home to 178 bird species, 21 reptiles, 14 amphibians and 10 freshwater fish species.



This little-known haven of biodiversity is criss-crossed by paths and hiking trails, letting visitors enjoy the peace and quiet of this exceptional setting, only broken in the last weekend of April when crowds of pilgrims join in musical processions to the Santuario de la Virgen de la Cabeza, a shrine in the heart of the Natural Park, to pay tribute to Our Lady of Cabeza. The hilltop shrine on Cerro del Cabezo is visited by pilgrims throughout the year, but especially during this romería, officially a pilgrimage of National Tourist Interest and considered to be the oldest of its kind in Spain.





During the festival, La Morenita, as the figure of the Virgin is known, is carried in procession through hundreds of thousands of devotees who climb the hill in carts, on foot or on horseback, following the Ruta del Peregrino, one of the most iconic and unusual paths in the park. Other paths recommended for hiking and walking in general include Camino Viejo, Camino de Los Rubiales, the Zumacares trail and Ruta del Santuario. The environmental complex Cercado del Ciprés is also a must-see for visitors who



want to explore the biodiversity of this Sierra in the north of Jaén and enjoy a day out in nature.

The offer is also complemented by the Villas de Peñallana visitors' centre, which gives an introduction to the spaces, flora and fauna of the Sierra de Andújar, and four leisure areas – El Encinarejo, La Recta, El Jabalí and La Aliseda – and eleven viewing points, including Camino Viejo, El Peregrino, El Tamujar, Pozo Nuevo and Los Alarcones, which are well worth a visit.

Alongside its plants and varied landscape, the park is also notable for its rivers, the Yeguas, Sardinilla, Cabrera, and the largest, the Jándula. The waters of the Jándula flow into the Jándula and Encinarejo reservoirs, two very popular destinations for anglers in the province of Jaén and the rest of Spain.



A tour of the Park's four municipalities

While the natural wealth of the park makes it one of the most attractive in Spain for visitors, there is also plenty to see and enjoy in the cultural heritage of the four municipalities that comprise it. The town of Andújar gives its name to the park, and its municipal area is the largest of the four. With origins in the Iberian and Roman eras - local tradition has it that one of its picturesque bridges over the Guadalquivir



was built by the Romans - it flourished in the Islamic era, growing to become one of the most populous towns in the province of Jaén by the 16th century, as it still is today.

The old town centre, officially designated a Historic Site, is full of lordly mansions such as the Palacio de los Niños de Don Gome, now the home of the Profesor Sotomayor Archaeological Museum, and La Casa del Alfarero or Potter's House, with a large and varied collection of traditional Andújar pottery,



produced in the town since the first century CE. Other mansions include the 13th-century Palacio de los Coello de Portugal, with two stone doorways and beautiful wrought iron on its windows and balconies; the 16th-century Casa de los Cárdenas y Valdivia, known as the “House of the Tower”; Casa de los Sirvente de Mieres, now converted to tourist apartments; and Casa de los Cárdenas, which is now the town Court.





Around the bustling Plaza de Santa María, the square at the heart of the medieval city, and the neighbouring Plaza de la Constitución, there are more notable buildings, including the Town Hall, the Clock Tower, and one of its most important churches, Santa María, where you can see El Greco's painting of *The Agony in the Garden*.







A remnant of the splendour of the Almohad era, the remains of the 11th-century city walls remind us of the town's Moorish past, and the former Jesuit House, the Trinitarian Convent and the Convent of the Capuchinas are also worth a visit. Travellers in Andújar will also find excellent examples of the culinary traditions of Jaén, especially game dishes, as this area is renowned for hunting.

There are numerous estates in the park devoted to hunting, which has deep roots and enjoys great prestige in this part of Jaén province. Red deer, fallow deer, wild boar, rabbit, hare and partridge are all abundant and available for hunting on the Sierra de Andújar range.

Visitors looking for culture in the Natural Park will also enjoy the town of Baños de la Encina, with narrow, winding streets and noble mansions, dominated by its imposing castle, one of the most unusual in the province and among the oldest in southern Europe. The most recent estimates place its origins from 1120 to 1230, but its age is belied by the excellent conservation of this Almohad fortress and its fifteen towers, the setting for films such as *Capitán Trueno*. It is part of the Castles and Battlegrounds Route, a cultural tourism itinerary which runs from north to south in the western side of Jaén province, going through seventeen towns, including Andújar.





Before climbing the hill to the castle, visitors can explore the medieval and aristocratic past of this small town with a stroll through its streets and squares. Plaza del Rosario features the fortified house of Poblaciones-Dávalos, and from there, you can go along Calle Trinidad to Casa de Guzmanes, another historic mansion which is now a country hotel. Very close by, the Town Hall was built in the reign of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, and the Church of San Mateo features a camarín or altarpiece-shrine



of the Virgen de la Encina, the town's patron. After visiting these buildings in the lovely Plaza de la Constitución in the town centre, you can continue to the AlmoHAD castle through the street and arch of Santa María, one of the most picturesque areas of the town.

While Baños de la Encina is noted for its imposing castle and historic centre, Marmolejo, another town in the Sierra de Andújar Natural Park, was once famous for its springs of curative mineral water, which

made it one of Spain's biggest tourist attractions in the first third of the 20th century. Charles Chaplin, José Ortega y Gasset, Santiago Ramón y Cajal and Rudolph Valentino were a few of the illustrious guests of the town's spa. Thanks to its fame as a health resort, early 20th century Marmolejo featured a casino, numerous hotels, countless shops, and even a tram line. Today, the Gran Hotel Spa Marmolejo continues to attract visitors with its treatments and facilities.

As well as relaxing in this town, travellers will also enjoy its artistic and cultural heritage, including the 17th century Church of Nuestra Señora de la Paz, the Renaissance bridge, and the Baroque chapel Ermita de Jesús.



Villanueva de la Reina completes our tour of the four Jaén towns in the Sierra de Andújar Natural Park. In antiquity, this region was on the busy road from Cástulo to Ilturgi, part of the Roman Via Augusta, and it was also the scene of one of the most important events in the Peninsular War, the signature of the surrender of the French troops after the Battle of Bailén in July 1808, in the Casa de Postas, which is still a guest-house and restaurant today.

Some of the most interesting buildings in the town's heritage include the Chapel of El Rosario, an example of 18th century Andalusian rococo; the Town Hall; and the façade of the Cortijo de San Nicolás chapel. It has deeply rooted traditions, such as the popular pilgrimage procession in honour of its patron Saint Potenciana, and the mononas, folk songs which have been passed down over generations and were sung by the squads of workers during the olive harvest.

