

## Sierra de Grazalema

Rugged limestone mountains, spectacular gorges, pretty white mountain villages, and a network of old drovers and smugglers paths make the Sierra de Grazalema and the Serrania de Ronda one of the finest walking regions in Spain. Yet, step beyond those few routes that have been mapped and waymarked and you will have the mountains and hidden valleys all to yourself – many days you will not see another soul.

The landscape is as varied as it is dramatic. The craggy karst limestone ridges provide a true mountain environment – ascending the peaks or walking the ridges is always a challenge, though one with rich rewards for the views – both of neighbouring ranges or down to the Mediterranean coast. Between the ridges are hidden valleys, surprisingly green and with spectacular wildflower displays in the months of spring., and wooded slopes – with cork and holm oaks and the rare pinsapar firs being prominent. There are deep river valleys and spectacular gorges and, never far away, pretty white villages of Moorish origins, occupying strategic vantage points perched above the river valleys.

The region is home to colonies of griffon vultures and in certain areas you are virtually guaranteed a display by dozens of preying birds, while the river valleys attract a multitude of bird life – particularly during months of passage – this is the route of migratory birds to and from Africa across the Straits of Gibraltar.

The town of Ronda – generally regarded as the “capital” of the Serrania - is on most tourists lists as a must-visit, for its spectacular setting spanning a deep gorge, for its Roman and Moorish history and for its rich bull-fighting traditions (the bullring is considered the oldest in Spain).

### ***Sierra de Grazalema : Outline Itinerary***

#### Day 1

Arrival in Zahara de la Sierra. Depending on arrival time and availability of permits (the gorge is closed at certain times during the breeding season for the local vulture colonies) we will transport you to and from the spectacular Garganta Verde (Green gorge). Here we do a short walk (3-4 hours there and back) into some of the most dramatic scenery of the Sierra de

Grazalema Natural Park, where we are sure to see large numbers of griffon vultures circling above and around us.

### Day 2

A choice of two routes which take us up to Grazalema, the focal point of the Natural Park of the same name. The easier option follows a track which skirts around the northern and eastern slopes of Monte Prieto before picking up an ancient pathway, cobbled in parts, up the Gaidovar valley and over a small ridge before dropping down into the township of Grazalema. The harder option is to ascend on footpaths over the ridge of Monte Prieto, providing us with spectacular views first over the Zahara lake and then towards the peaks of Reloj and Simancon behind Grazalema. (16 kms, 600-1000m of ascent, depending on route).

### Day 3

We walk from Grazalema to Villaluenga del Rosario, the highest village in the park. Again we have two options, the easier being to follow the popular "endrinal" route around the eastern slopes of Reloj, the peak that dominates the skyline above Grazalema. The alternative is to ascend the twin peaks of Simancon (1569m) and Reloj (1535m) before descending to rejoin the lower route and passing through some delightful hidden valleys before dropping down to the village of Villaluenga del Rosario. (13-15kms, 600-900m ascent).

### Day 4.

From Villaluega to Cortes de la Frontera, one of the larger white villages in the park. The easier route follows the path of the GR-7 long distance footpath over a pass into the Libar plains and then along a popular footpath through the Libar valley and down to Cortes de la Frontera. The harder option takes us through one of the remotest parts of the area, following little used smugglers paths around the peak of Salamadre (1303m) and Los Pinos (1397m). (14 km, 500-700m ascent).

### Day 5

The longest days walking – though on the easier option we can shorten it by catching a train for some (or most) of the route. The harder option takes us back into the hidden Libar valley, passing beneath the peaks of the Libar range before crossing a pass and dropping down to the village of Benaolan in the Guadiaro valley. Alternatively we can drop down to the Guadiaro river from Cortes de la Frontera and follow the river upstream to Benaolan. A small railway follows the river valley and we can shorten our route by hopping on the train for one of both of the sectors between Cortes and Benaolan. (21 kms, 200-700m ascent)

### Day 6

We do a circular walk from Benaolan to the spectacular cave system of the Hundero – Gato where the river Guadares passes underground for some 6 kms before emerging at the Cueva del Gato (cat cave) and merging with the river Guadiaro. We pass through the pretty white village of Montajaque and explore the entrance to the cave system before crossing the Mures ridge and returning along the Guadiaro river, past the Cueva del Gato. (15 kms, 500m ascent).

### Day 7

We walk to the famous town of Ronda, perched on a plateau with a spectacular gorge splitting the town in two. This is a half day walk, crossing two ridges before ascending beneath the famous bridge that spans the gorge and up to the old Moorish part of the town, allowing us to spend the remainder of the day exploring Ronda (11 kms, 500m ascent).