

The River Valleys walking area near Ronda, Andalusia, Spain

The mountain ranges are split by two river valleys – those of the rivers Guadiaro and Genal, which ultimately join, south of Gaucin, before flowing to the coast near Sotogrande. These offer some less strenuous walking options and, particularly in the case of the Genal valley, much variety in the vegetation and some of the prettiest and spectacularly-located white villages.

The river Guadiaro begins, in name, just north of Benaolan, but is in reality the confluence of the rivers Guadalevin (from Ronda), Guadalquivir (from the plains around Arriate) and Gaduares (from Grazalema). It therefore has a large catchment area and heavy water flows, particularly during the winter months. There are good and popular walking routes from Benaolan to Ronda and, further downstream, following the river to Jimera de Libar and then onward to Cortes de la Frontera. The former is a small and pretty village, though with limited amenities, while Cortes is something of a bustling township of over 2000 inhabitants. South of Estacion Cortes the river enters a deep and steep gorge – called La Buitrera – before emerging in the oak forests at El Colmenar.

No discussion on the Guadiaro valley would be complete without a mention of two cave systems. The first is the lengthy underground passage of the Gaduares river (some 6km), between its entrance at the Hundidero cave and exit at the Cueva del Gato. Both these caves can be visited on foot, but the traverse of the underground system (for those so inclined) can only be undertaken with permit and guide. The second cave – the Cueva de la Pileta, on the road from Benaolan to Cortes, is famous for its prehistoric wall paintings and guided tours are offered every day.

The valley of the river Genal is a real gem. It passes through three distinct zones – from the barren treeless karst of the upper valley below the peak of Jarestepar (1427m), through the chestnut plantations around the villages of the upper Genal (stunning around November, when in autumnal colours) to the oak forests of the lower Genal. The real attraction, however, is the white villages – fifteen of them dotted prominently on both sides of the deep river valley. There are a network of pathways connecting these which make for great walking in stunning landscapes – usually easy underfoot, but with some savage ascents, particularly if crossing the river between villages! Every village has its charm and attraction, but if one has to single out a few they would be Alpandeire, Parauta and Igualeja (where the source of the river is to be found) in the upper Genal valley and Benalauria, Jubrique and Genalgaucil (a village loved by artists, with sculptures on every street corner), in the lower valley.