

COSTA BLANCA: Beyond the Beaches

Travel inland from the sun and sands of Spain's White Coast and you'll be rewarded with stunning countryside and wild mountains – perfect hiking country

WORDS ROBIN MCKELVIE



Mention the Costa Blanca and the images most often conjured up are of bronzed holidaymakers reclining on the region's famous sandy beaches, enjoying the year-round warm resorts. What if I let you in on a travel secret, that the region's hinterland is alive with world-class walking, from spectacular hikes up hulking peaks higher than Ben Nevis, through to remote ravines ravaged by salt-encrusted streams and lagoons lined with elegant flamingos?

It took me over a decade after my first visit in the 1990s to discover that there was more to the Costa Blanca and Alicante province (in which the Costa Blanca is tucked) than 300 sunny days a year and Benidorm. I've not looked back, though, since first heading beyond the beaches and inland a couple of years ago. I was instantly captivated by a true wildscape bursting with exotic flora and fauna, from majestic Bonelli's eagles and those flamingos, through to weasels, wildcats and even wild boar. All this in mountains that you can gaze down from and see the bustling resorts surreally blinking back below.

The Costa Blanca mountains really are remarkable – they are over two million years old and there are over 50 peaks that vault over 1,000m for a start. The mountains are characterised by cavernous ravines, little streams that scythe down through the permeable rock, and vast canyons that just invite exploration. On the lower slopes, pine forests spread their life-giving and affirming oxygen and nature becomes more fertile as orange and olive groves bring a splash more visible life to the landscape. Explore Alicante Province and you will find a wealth of flora, as the area is home to over 3,000 plant species.

I'm afraid I'm going to have to tear you away from the epic mountains until later. On my latest trip I arrived back into Alicante's airport in search of something more than just the striking Aitana, Serrella and Bernia mountain ranges and their near cousins. I found it in the expert hands of Rod, a guide with Ramblers Walking Holidays (www.ramblersholidays.co.uk), and his knowledgeable local counterpart Fran, who guided me further south from Alicante on a brand-new group walking tour, 'From The Spanish Sierra to The Sea'. So new in fact that this trip late in 2017 was their first-ever adventure here.

Our base was in Guardamar del Segura at the Hotel Meridional, which was geared up to the needs of walkers, lying right next to the beach for warming down afterwards. It also had a rooftop bar that came complete with a hot tub, very useful for easing hiking-strained limbs over our seven days.

The week showcased the diversity of the Costa Blanca, our first hike taking us pioneering to the little-known Escalona Mountain (a baby compared to the northern mountains at just over 300m), which >>



even the hotel reception staff had never heard of. It is renowned amongst ornithologists (as is the province in general) for its birdlife, including the rare eagle owl. We didn't see any owls, but neither did we come across any other people on our 10km adventure – rare in the popular Costa Blanca.

The week was graded a difficulty rating of 4. Although that is a relatively-moderate Ramblers Walking Holidays grading, Escalona proved testing with a ripple of a rugged ridge to negotiate. The next walk, deep into the heart of the Salt Ravine Albaterra, brought challenges of its own as we snaked across narrow viaducts that used to carry the miners into this salt-rich desert. In this remote ravine, the 21st century quickly dissolved as our mobile signals were lost and the only sounds were from hungry eagles and buzzards high above.

Albaterra proved unlike anything I'd seen before, not just in Spain, but anywhere in Europe. This wildscape was awash with all sorts of sedimentary rocks quite unlike the limestone of the big Costa Blanca mountain ranges. In this water deprived world salt rules. We lunched by a little stream that was encrusted with thick deposits of salt and then traced its path to find a striking bright white waterfall where salt crystals cascaded along with a trickle of water.

By our third walk I was expecting another type of scenery again and I was not disappointed. The Torreveija Lagoons Nature Park is renowned throughout Spain for its rich smorgasbord of birdlife. We strolled along flat trails enjoying the relief for our calves as we took in the twin lagoons and their multifarious feathered inhabitants. Cormorants swooped in over our heads from the nearby Mediterranean, which the lagoons are connected to by salty channels, and there were those flamingos. Then there were also unusual duck species, such as marbled teal ducks and white-headed ducks.

My last day of walking with Ramblers Walking Holidays took me back to the northern mountains, easily the most dramatic walking country in the Costa Blanca and amongst the most spectacular walking country anywhere in mainland Spain. We were bound for the stark limestone crags of the Aitana Mountains, which I'd been eyeing up for the best part of a week from my hotel balcony.

Our bus transfer proved handy as it swooped us up to around Munro height (914m), which meant that we only had a short section of steep uphill on a narrow trail before the wide path levelled out and we could concentrate on the views rather than our feet. And what views they were as a vast mountain panorama

Opening page: Hiking in the Costa Blanca mountains
Clockwise from far left: This wonderful mountain region of Spain remains largely undiscovered; Alicante marina; pointing the way in the dramatic massif of Sierra de Aitana, with stunning views over the Mediterranean
Below: Olives are a feature of the countryside



unfurled all around, and in the distance we could even make out the Balearic island of Ibiza sparkling like a diamond on the tablecloth-smooth Mediterranean.

As we pushed on I thought how inhospitable the landscape looked to man, but then we chanced upon massive manmade pits, which had our group flummoxed. Head away from the beaches and the Costa Blanca is always full of surprises. Fran explained that these pits were used historically to 'make ice' from compressed snow, at a time when there was no electrical refrigeration.

This last day gave me a taste for the Costa Blanca mountains proper again and reminded me of my first week spent hiking the region a couple of years ago. Since I was last here there has been no visible development in a landscape that has changed little since prehistoric man first eked out a life in the region.

It is possible for experienced walkers to strike out into the wilds of the Sierra de Aitana and the Sierra de Serrella on their own, but you really need to know what you are doing. I hiked independently, embarking on a village-to-village eight-day odyssey. The idea is wonderfully simple. You start the day with breakfast in one village and then set off on a walk towards the next, or hike and then take a transfer back for another night where you have just slept.

The mountains of Alicante Province are an area that is still not that well known to most Spaniards, never mind tourists. In winter the mountains can be a bleak and inhospitable place and life was hard for its early inhabitants, whose footsteps you are literally walking in as you make your way through the landscape. Today you are still certain to see more birds and goats than people.

Alicante is also a province where the Moors spread their influence and indeed ruled for the best part of five centuries. In these more peaceful times the locals

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like to commemorate this Arabic past with 'Moors and Christians' festivals that light up the local villages. Another legacy are the place names: Beni means 'son of' and it is used frequently with the likes of Beniarda, Benifato, Benimantell and, of course, Benidorm.

The mountain trails themselves are generally in good condition and not too strenuous to walk, usually with gradual gradients, so generally little climbing experience or specialist equipment is necessary. The Bernia Ridge can be a tough one, though. A local guide told me on the way up it was like Skye's notorious Cuillin mountains.

Although they proved nowhere near the test of those Alpine-like ridges in Scotland, the exposure was significant and not for the fainthearted. The full-day traverse is arguably the most testing day walk in the region, well worth it for the views and the thrill. The ridge and surrounding peaks also attract serious climbers looking to test themselves on the sheer faces.

The local walks vary in length and level of exertion. One of the hardest, but ultimately the most rewarding, is the walk up the Puig Campana. This peak strikes up into the clouds, a towering 1,410m above sea level, making it higher than Ben Nevis. From up here on a clear day you can take in a panoramic sweep of the surrounding mountains, the city of Alicante, Benidorm and even the outline of the Balearic Islands in the distance across the blue canvas of the Mediterranean.

I tackled this mighty peak with a group. It worked well as the coaxing and encouragement of others helped everyone get to the top of a peak that can look pretty formidable from a distance. The effort of tackling this rugged monster is worth it as you savour a hearty picnic taking in a view that will stay with you long after you have returned home.

Each village in the Alicante Province mountains has its own charms, whether it be a traditional olive



Above: Simple fare in the mountains

INFO

Suggested maps
Good maps for this part of Spain are scarce. The Cicerone guide (see below) features parts of the areas covered here. The best maps are produced by the Geographica Militar de Espana.

Further Reading
Walking on the Costa Blanca, published by Cicerone, covers fifty walks in the area with detailed walk descriptions and some rudimentary maps.

When to Go
It's best to come in winter or the shoulder seasons of spring or autumn when it is cooler, but there is still usually plenty of sunshine. In winter the mountains can get very cold indeed so make sure to pack proper protective gear.



Above: Looking down on Benidorm

oil press or an eccentric miller who idles away his days in his charmingly-ramshackle water mill, but Guadalest for me is clearly the highlight. The old streets are just made for wandering around and from the main village a path snakes its way up to the historic fortress that houses the old quarter. This is one of the most attractive mountain villages in the whole of Spain and it also offers epic views. From the ramparts you can peer out over the lake that shimmers deep below.

I found it quite surreal after a few days wrapped in the world of the high mountains to suddenly be rubbing noses with the coach-loads of tourists who snake up to Guadalest from the resorts just to visit this one village. By nightfall, though, they were gone and calm returned to these serene mountains.

On both weeks I've spent hiking the hinterland of the Costa Blanca I headed for the airport not remotely ready to leave. It's hard to leave somewhere with such great beaches that is so well set up for tourism. It's nigh impossible to get back on the plane when you know that world-class walking adventures tempt in the deeply-dramatic, wildlife-rich mountains, lagoons and nature parks of the Costa Blanca.



WHERE TO STAY

El Tossal

This little hideaway in the picturesque mountain village of Guadalest is an ideal base for walkers as you can walk to the neighbouring village on trails. Single and double rooms available, as well as triples and even quadruples.

www.alojamientorural.casa

La Morena

An ideal base for tackling the mighty-looking Puig Campana. Indeed the mountains loom large from the public spaces and bedrooms. An excellent restaurant awaits hungry hikers with superb steaks and a variety of paella dishes.

www.lamorena.es

Melia Alicante

This four-star is ideal for those looking to make day trips both into the mountains and the lower-level walks to the south of Alicante. It has swimming pools and a well-regarded restaurant with car parking next door.

www.melia.com

More information – www.alicanteturismo.com



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