



GR-48. PROVINCE OF HUELVA

STAGE 1 :

BARRANCOS/ENCINASOLA



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GR-48Huelva

This first stage of the GR-48 Path (long distance trail) is the beginning of a singular hiking route through Sierra Morena mountain range. The starting point is Barrancos a Portuguese small town located in the Alentejo region which is a main landscaping feature of this section of the Iberian border.

At the beginning of this stage, the path will soon cross the border between Spain and Portugal to go into the Múrtigas River valley. The landscape comprises gallery forests, Rockroses patches and scattering Olive groves. This natural scenery makes more enjoyable this hiking route through diverse panoramic natural sites.

Smuggling all along the border was a very important activity in the past. Sites such the *Virgen de las Flores* Hermitage used to be a very popular pass for smugglers who used to smuggle both dairy and first need products from Portugal into Spain during the Spanish post-war period.

The track is in good and acceptable surface and the walk is easy and has no difficulty other than the wading across the Múrtigas River, especially in the raining season. In general, this is a very comfortable hiking along a pretty acceptable track.

Start: Barrancos (Portugal)

Finish: Encinasola (Spain)

Distance: 13,100 km

Time: 4 hours

Suitability:



MIDE evaluation:



Environment: Severity of the natural environment.

1



Orientation: Guidance on the route directions.

1



Track Features: Difficulty in following the track.

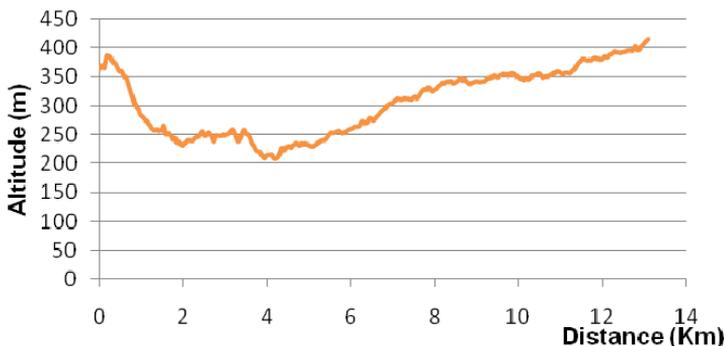
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Struggle: Struggle required for accomplishing the route.

3

Barrancos-Encinasola



ROUTE GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Barrancos is a Portuguese municipality located in the Beja District in the Alentejo region. This is a typical border town and people speaks “barranqueño” a Portuguese dialect which is also very much affected by the language spoken in the bordering areas of both Extremadura and Andalucía regions. In addition, this region comprising of large pastures used to shelter fugitives and exiles as it was considered ‘nobody’s land’ for almost five hundred years.

This stage of the route starts at the highest point in Barrancos town. There some telecommunication aerials will make a good landmark reference. Hikers’ sensible feelings will wake up with the astonishing panoramic view of the Hispanic border from the natural viewing-point located opposite to the cemetery. On having taken to the right flank of the site, we will follow up the tarmac road which will become a dirt path that starts descending towards east at the junction.

Some two hundred metres ahead, the path comes to a wide esplanade where there are three different paths. An intuitive insight will help us to



Rockrose flower

make the right choice which is the path on the right. This is a far more used path which soon will descend towards a dry and arid valley that appears to be the ideal kingdom for Rockroses and Broom bushes.

On coming to the bottom off the valley, the path will meet a junction of multiple paths and tracks. We will ignore all paths to the right to take the one that makes a 90° turn to the left and heads towards a pine forest bordering the last plots of Olive grove in Barrancos municipality.



Border between Spain and Portugal

••• Km 0.66. Border between Spain and Portugal

A path with dry stone walls on both sides will take us to a natural site where the E386 border milestone stands up. The path will come to a Pine grove area where the first signing posts to the Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche Natural Park can be spotted. This Pine grove is also a site where European Turtle Doves purring songs are frequently heard together with the barking from the hounds kept in a nearby kennel.

After wading across the Pedro Miguel Brook, the path will follow the natural course of this small brook through Pine and Eucalyptus groves while looking for the HU-9101 road which connects Barrancos and Encinasola towns. This is an area with high levels of humidity and dampness even in the dry season which sustains good samples of riparian vegetation such as Oleanders, Brambles and Rosemary bushes.

On following the road direction, we will meet a fountain on the side of the road. The fountain is from 1959 and has two water-tubes coming out from a showy front to pour water into a central basin (*pilar*). Nearby there is also a picnic area with some picnic tables. As the path goes through this natural gorge carved by the brook, we will leave behind the Portuguese territory to come into Spain through Huelva province. The road will come to a junction with the road to Aroche town yet we will continue walking straight ahead. The road wades across a small brook and we will take onto a dirt path that branches off to the left and that is blocked by a country gate.



Black Storks are very common at the Múrtigas Riverbanks

••• Km 2.56. Camino la Carvajera Path and the Múrtigas Riverbanks

On having left the road, the path continues on a former countryside road for a few metres. As the road goes through a Cork Oak grove, the terraces made in the past to level off the ground still can be seen. The electrical laying over our heads is a good landmark acting as a direction sign that eventually will head towards the country house known as *Casa de la Ribera Alta* located atop a small hill and under the shadow of a massive Eucalyptus tree.

The path continues ascending and on the former and dismantled road. On having reached the top of the small hill, a new path meets the former road. At the junction, we will take the path that goes straight ahead to start a deep descending towards the bed of a seasonal brook. At this point, a dry stone wall on the left side of the path will guide us while ascending a new steep slope. On having reached the top of this new hill, we need to pay attention to a new junction. Here, we will see a country gate blocking a path to the right, another path leading to the left and another track that goes ahead and parallel to the dry stone wall. We will take this path, known as the *Cañada de la Carcaveja*, which starts descending through young pastures of Holm Oaks until it comes to the Múrtigas Riverbanks. Despite being a short distance, this may be a difficult and challenging section of the route for bikers.

At the riverbank, the path turns to the right and goes across a countryside gate. The path continues upstream and parallel to the river for the next 250 metres or so. At a point, the dry stone wall on the left side of the path opens to give access to the river ford. As the path curves, we will leave



Múrtigas Riverbanks

the path and wade across the river. All necessary precautions must be taken before wading across the river even it is not very large and does not carry much water.

The sinuous tracing of the *Múrtigas* River facilitates numerous meanders along. Riparian vegetation and gallery forest comprise Reeds, Bulrush and Oleanders together with tree formations of Ash-trees, Black Poplars and patches of Eucalyptus groves.

After wading across the river, the path is blocked by a country gate that will be shut behind us after passing. The path continues climbing through a scanty Olive grove while following the watercourse direction. On having reached the top of the hill, we will turn left at the point where the path joins another footpath that goes perpendicular to our direction and by the end of the countryside fencing. The reward for such a climb is the exceptional view of both the *Múrtigas* Riverbanks fitting into the meander and Barrancos town in a distant background.

The path continues ahead and, after crossing a country gate, it will take us into a different environment where Brooms and scattering woodland give shape to a pasture for cattle breeding. Two Wild Olive trees appear to be guarding the path that now runs parallel to a dry stone wall and from where the *Virgen de las Flores* Hermitage is already spotted.

Just after passing by a dairy, another gate is blocking the path that makes a turn to the left to save the watercourse to finally arrive to the *Virgen de las Flores* Hermitage.



Virgen de las Flores Hermitage

••• Km 5.03. Virgen de las Flores Hermitage

The *Virgen de las Flores* Hermitage surrounding area is a natural site where every year pilgrims gather in a traditional celebration. News about this hermitage and the natural site can be found in some manuscripts about the way the area was populated after the Spanish Reconquista (reconquest) in the late 13th century. The main pilgrimage takes place eight days after Easter Sunday, on a Monday and on August 15th is held the popular celebration known as the '*Romería de los Emigrantes*' (the pilgrimage of the emigrants). The hermitage surrounding area resembles a picnic area well equipped with some picnic tables and benches, water taps and some metal structures to shelter pilgrims from the rain and sun. Nevertheless, what call our attention the most are two old massive Olive trees and the astonishing size of their trunks. Certainly, those hundred years old trees appear to be silent witnesses of the past history.



A hundred year old Olive tree near *Virgen de las Flores* Hermitage

From the hermitage, the path heads towards Encinasola town. This is easy climbing walk that requires no much effort as the path surface is in good conditions. The path winds through a quite arid hill covered with a pasture with some Rockroses, Brooms and Gorse bushes. To the right is the isolate *Barranco de las Flores* Ravine and at the end of the steep slope the contrasting white walls of the *Cortijo de la Gama* farmhouse can be already seen.

The path bends left at the junction with the *Picorroto* path. In the past, this path was very popular among smugglers when goods were trafficked from Portugal, especially in post-Civil War times. On reaching the top of the hill and to the left of the path is the main gate to access to the *Cortijo de la Gama* farmhouse. On the opposite side there is a large artificial pond where the cattle waters. This natural site

is popularly known as *La Cruz de la Moza*.

Eventually, dry stone walls will become the borders of the path. As the walk progresses the number of Holm oaks increases together with some patches of lush woodland resulting from the active reforestation in the area.

••• Km 8.73. The Piedra de los Valientes Monolith



The *Piedra de los Valientes* Monolith

As the level flattens, the path straightens having fewer curves. A monolith known as *La Piedra de los Valientes* (The Braves' Stone) is located at the side of the path. During the peregrination to the *Virgen de las Flores* Hermitage a stop made it obligatory for everyone at this site where there is also a commemorative plaque with the following popular reading:

“En la Piedra los Valientes
Un lunes por la mañana
Se brinda con aguardiente

En la romería serrana De Encinasola y sus gentes"

From this site, Barrancos town is still visible in the distant and to the southwest. As the GR-48 approaches to Encinasola town, the number of vegetable gardens and plots increment and farmhouses such the Valdepegas farmhouse and the Lagunillas one become more numerous. Another interesting feature are the 'aljibes' which are water deposits usually built with bricks together with mortar designed to store either water from the rain or from nearby wells as the one located on the left side of the path.

As the walk progresses the land use changes. Suddenly, the pasture with Oaks and Mediterranean undergrowth at the Virgen de las Flores Hermitage surrounding areas turns into small Olive groves perfectly subjected to the limits of dry stone walls and Prickly Pears bushes.

The path meets the countryside road to Encinasola and goes across the road by a tiny underground path made of concrete. On passing by a 'L' shaped fountain with a water trough, the path connects to Encinasola ring road to go across and continue through an alley with a semi-demolished wall on the side that comes to the town centre where this section of the route finishes.

Carbine soldiers and smugglers at Picorroto

•••The Real Cuerpo de Carabineros de Costas y Fronteras (The Royal Spanish Carbine Corps Police of Coasts and Borders) came into law by Royal Decree on March 9th, 1829. As it comes on the Constitutive Act, this police was established to 'to do the war to smuggling; to prevent smuggling and to vigorously attack its sources; to firmly prosecute any form of smuggling until its total extermination'. Throughout more than hundred years, many were the changes affecting the institution organization, management and even its official name.

In 1833, just a few years after it was established, the army was renamed as 'Carabineros de la Real

Hacienda' (the Royal Treasury Police) depending on the Ministry of Finance. Shortly after, the army entered a state of neglect. Civil people were admitted and they were little accustomed to the ungrateful life style of an army which was bad paid and poorly billeted. Despite being part of the army, civilians were subjected to civil law and sanctions which turned them into lazy

servants always at the mercy of their own interest, dirty manoeuvres and rapacity.

Manuel Márquez Pérez
aka 'Catalino' (1919-2010). One of the last smugglers



The Picoroto Carbine Police Barracks were located in a strategic natural site nearby the Portuguese border and many families were lodging in the building. During the Spanish post-Civil War time this border crossing post was very busy becoming very crucial when prosecuting smuggling. At that time, large groups of smugglers (sometimes they were groups of over one hundred smugglers) used to go across the border bringing from Portugal different products such food, sugar and, most important, coffee from Brazil. The small towns and villages like Encinasola and Fregenal de la Sierra were well supplied with those products. Carbine police had to locate and stop those big groups of smugglers as well as individual smugglers before they reached any town or village in the region. Hereby, many epic encounters happened in the region yet very often agreements between both the police and smugglers were sorted out if the smugglers paid a fee to the police or shared part of the load.

Nevertheless, in the late 60s Picoroto Carbine Police Barracks were dismantled. Since then, these paths and tracks have kept the memories of a recent past time closely related to clandestine trading activity and severe vigilance along the border.

STAGE 2 :**ENCINASOLA/
CUMBRES DE SAN BARTOLOMÉ**

The second stage of the route is a walk through some narrow valleys which are surrounded by rich pastures fully devoted to cattle breeding. Flowing through the region are some rivers, creeks and brooks of pristine water which are home to rare fish specimens. This is a typical Mediterranean landscape where the hardness of rocky masses of quartzite appears to defy erosion and time passing.

This is a quite easy walking section suitable for walking, horse riding and mountain biking. The path heads clearly east and it is in good surface yet it deteriorates somehow when climbing down. Some ravines may be forded and some rivers and streams may be waded across along this section of the route. Apart from a short section where the path matches a countryside road, the path follows the trace of a dirt path which becomes a paved path of pebbles and stones while approaching Cumbres de San Bartolomé town. Certainly, this is a historic and ethnologic value added to the natural features of this stage of the route.

The most attractive features in this section are some natural sites and especially some riverbanks and their surrounding areas. However, it is the landscape what may get our attention the most. After centuries of water erosion, the crests of these ancient mountains show im-