



GR-48.

SIERRA MORENA TRAIL: PROVINCE OF JAÉN

STAGE 1:

MARMOLEJO/ VIRGEN DE LA CABEZA



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This first stage of the GR-48 trail through the province of Jaén starts off at Marmolejo town and finished at the Virgen de la Cabeza Sanctuary. The trail matches the traditional path which is used throughout the year by the pilgrims and especially the last Sunday of April when is the celebration at the Cabezo Hill where the sanctuary locates.

The trail starts climbing up the hills from the very first section of the stage. The reward for such climbing is the astonishing view of the foothills and the Yeguas River valley which is the natural border between Córdoba and Jaén provinces.

Remember that at this very beginning of the route we will be entering the Sierra de Andújar Natural Park which is a natural region of

great ecological value and home to many endangered animal species. We must be very respectful with this delicate natural site.

We will have an excellent view of the landscape and natural features in this section of Sierra Morena mountain range from both Las Majadillas natural viewpoint and from Navalasno farmhouse. We will see many deep valleys with hills covered by Holm Oaks and Rockroses patches resulting from the strong action of the water streams and brooks on the granite bedrock.

This will be a most beautiful and rewarding stage of the GR-48 route although it is one of the most challenging because of the distance (over 30 kilometres) and the difference between positive and negative accumulative slope (over 300

metres). Nevertheless, hikers will not forget this beautiful climbing up towards because of the natural beauty in the area.



Start: Marmolejo Town
Finish: Virgen de la Cabeza Sanctuary (Andújar)
Distance: 32 Km
Time: 12 horas

Suitability:



*

MIDE evaluation:



Environment:
Severity of the natural environment

2



Track Features:
Difficulty in following the track

2



Orientation:
Guidance on the route directions

3



Struggle:
Struggle required for accomplishing the route

5

*Suitability: Walking, horse riding and mountain biking

This ascending section of the route is really hard and only suitable for very fit bikers.

The Autovía de Andalucía (E-05) Motorway connects to the J-5001 Primary-A road which passes through many natural sites of the mountain range by means of using any of the forest tracks that crosses through the natural park. Between the 16.5 kilometre (natural border of the park) and the 32.2 kilometre vehicles are not allowed and must be left at any of those mentioned kilometre marks.

Marmolejo - Virgen de la Cabeza



ROUTE GENERAL DESCRIPTION

This stage of the route starts at the Plaza del Ayuntamiento Square in Marmolejo. From here, go into Francisco Calero Herrero Street and towards Iglesia de Jesús. Bend to the left at the cross with Jesús Street and towards the Balneario de Marmolejo Spa. We will leave the town at Calvario Street to connect to the A-420 road that leads to the Guadalquivir River. Marmolejo's impressive Spa will remain to the right before crossing over the Renaissance Bridge.

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Stone made water trough at the beginning of the stage.

••• 2.75 km Renaissance Bridge at Marmolejo

Following the A-420 road and after crossing the Renaissance Bridge, the trail matches the forest track to the right which continues parallel to the river while climbing up towards La Aliseda and La Centenera country

estates (J-5001 country road). Some water sources and springs flow out from the limy slopes where there are many ferns such the Maidenhair Fern, very common by water springs.

The trail splits into two near the electricity power plant. Ignore the track that runs by the Guadalquivir River and that is known as Sendero de la Ribera del Guadalquivir Path and continue walking onto the country road and towards La Aliseda Country Estate. From this point onwards, the trail skirts through the foothills while climbing up towards the highest slopes at La Centenera Country Estate.

As the trail starts ascending, slate rocks will replace the red sandstone and the scattering Olive groves and garden plots which can be seen on both sides of the trail will be replaced by pastures of young Holm Oaks. The countryside road will become a path by the shepherds' house of El Baldío Country Estate to the right and Valdeleches Country Estate to the left.

••• **Km 9.6 Mirador de las Mijadillas Viewpoint**

At this point, we have already hiked some 9.5 kilometres from Marmolejo town although almost 23 kilometres remain before coming to the Sanctuary. This natural viewpoint locates half way before reaching the top of the hill. From here, we will have an astonishing panoramic view of the southern region where Rockrose bushes and Holm Oak trees stretch



Panoramic view from the Mirador de las Mijadillas natural viewpoint.

across and to the Guadalquivir River valley. Some whitewashed villages and towns such Arjona, Arjonilla and Porcuna locate far away together with some irrigated fields near Marmolejo and Andújar towns. Finally, the horizon line is shaped by the silhouette of the Béticas mountain range,

the Peñón de Martos Rock, Jabalcuz and Sierra Mágina foothills.

The Mirador de las Mijadillas viewpoint locates in an area of granite bedrock. The natural erosion on the slope causes the bedrock being broken into large granite boulders.

On leaving behind the viewpoint, the trail winds through some reforested groves of Stone Pine trees and Eucalyptus trees which have replaced the mass of Mediterranean undergrowth and forest. At one twist of the trail, we will go across a bridge over a small brook. This is a good site where to stop and contemplate the slate rocks on the borders. Those are known as 'mosqueadas' because of the dark inlays on the rock surface resulting from contact (thermal) metamorphism which means that we are walking on the strip between the contact area (slates) and the unmetamorphosed country rock (granite rock).

The trail continues climbing up to the top of the hill. The reward for such steep climbing will be the view from one of the highest areas which is near the main access to Los Valles County Estate. From here we will enjoy the breathtaking view to the west of the Yeguas River valley. This natural site is at the time a natural border between Córdoba and Jaén provinces and where the river is tamed into the Yeguas Reservoir.

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The reward after such steep climbing is an impressive panoramic view.

Espinola Country Estate where we will turn left and towards La Aliseda Country Estate. The trail will continue ahead and through reforested Pine groves which appear to eclipse a pasture where we may find the precious Saffron Mil Cap mushroom in autumn.

••• Km. 16,5. Cancela de entrada al Parque Natural



Gate to Sierra de Andújar Natural Park

One kilometre after passing the junction at La Centenera the trail will come at the gate to the Natural Park. Only Authorized vehicles are allowed from this point onwards. We will enter the park through the access to the left of the gate to get back to the path which makes a sharp turn to the right just opposite to the rangers' station while starts climbing down through a steep gully known as La Fuente de la Perdíz.

As the trail climbs down, typical Mediterranean shady vegetation as Heath Trees, Tupertine Trees and Portuguese Oaks start covering the slopes while having to the right the Espinarejo ravine and La Parra hill. We will see to the north the steep foothills of Valquemado gorge which locates at the Yeguas River valley and even, in clear sunny day, we will spot in the far away distance the Sierra Madrona mountain range which is the border with Ciudad Real province in Castilla-La Mancha region.



Jándula River valley and Cerro del Cabezo Hill in the background

The path continues climbing down and through Holm Oaks and Cork Oaks pastures with some impressive Iberian Wild Pear trees which grow by the streams' fords. To the right, the steep and abrupt valley carved by the Arroyo Valdepeñoso Brook which waters into the Jándula River –at the very far away background- and the exceptionally well preserved Mediterranean forest covering the steep and beautiful hillslopes. At the very far away background are both the Cerro del Cabezo Hill and the Virgen de la Cabeza Sanctuary atop the hill.

••• Km 19.8 Cancela Cable del Espinarejo Gate

At the end of the steep climbing down, the trail comes into a natural site shaped by reforested Pine groves. Ignore any other paths and tracks and continue ahead and until a gate with two granite pillars and a thick wire which is blocking the path. On having crossed the gate, the path splits into two. Ignore the path to the right which is used by pilgrims' authorized vehicles and carts and continue walking onto the path to the left which is the one for hikers and pilgrims who walk up to the Sanctuary.

Pine groves bring a taste of forest to the site where we may spot some Deer and perhaps birds such the Eurasian Jay and the Great Spotted Woodpecker which may be singing on the treetops.

On having come to the junction at the path, we will need to pay attention

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Waymarking signs at the vía pecuaria junction

to the waymarking signs in there. Ignore the path that climbs down and continue walking onto the path that heads up. Some two hundred meters after, we will eventually leave the path to continue walking onto another path which is a former cattle route (vía pecuaria) that leads to the Sanctuary. This waymarked path is suitable for walking, horse riding and biking although bikers may struggle when negotiating some steep slopes.

Soon after, we will come to a green country gate which is blocking the path and that must remain closed behind us. The path becomes rocky while fitting in a small yet hard ditch running down. Pine groves have been fully replaced by Rockrose bushes and scrub.

On having come to the top of the hill, the path connects to another path and the path's surface becomes smoother. The path climbs up slightly and towards a natural viewpoint from where we will enjoy the panoramic view of the Valle de la Cabrera valley and the Navasno Nuevo County Estate, both located to the west. The silhouette of the Sanctuary atop the Cerro del Cabezo hill which locates to east appears to be closer to us.

••• Km 24.2 Navasno Nuevo County Estate

On reaching the top of the hill, the path flattens and winds through an area where noble Mediterranean undergrowth thickens with many samples of Strawberry Trees, Junipers and Laurustinus shrub. Tracks of Deer and other mammals such as Foxes and Egyptian Mongooses may be spotted on the path. On both sides we will see small ponds 'bañas' resulting from the depression in the red sands and clay which are used by Wild Boars to remove parasites from inside the fur.



'Bañas' along the path produced by Wild Boars' action

As the walk progresses, the trail will come through a young pasture of Holm Oaks while passing by a small water trough to the right and a short-cut path used by pilgrims. Ignore this path and continue ahead on the path which now flattens. We will see some rose granite outcroppings resulting from water erosion of former stream beds. These rocky sites are ideal habitat for Juniper trees though.

Some meters ahead we should to pay close attention to the direction marks. We will see a GR-48 waymarking sign together with another green and white sign that reads 'A la Virgen'. We will continue walking onto another path that branches off left while climbing down in the same direction as the stream bed to come to a former basin area -in the shape of a funnel- which locates between two wire mesh fences.

After fording a small brook with Reed and Round-leaved Mint bushes, we will continue onto another path that branches off right. Some five hundred meters after, the path will make a sharp curve where we will return to the original path to get to a green countryside gate which is the main access to La Navarra County Estate. From here, we will spot some Eucalyptus trees at the farmhouse's access which locates atop the hill.

The trail winds through the County Estate where a water well and two water troughs locate in a meadow. This site is used by pilgrims on their way up to the Sanctuary as animals may water and refresh in the troughs. Navalasno Viejo Farmhouse locates atop the hill, well guarded by large Eucalyptus trees.



Navalasnó Farmhouse

••• Km 27.4 Navallasno Viejo Farmhouse

This is a good site for breaking. In front of the farmhouse still can be seen the remains of both a former threshing area and a kiln and some scattering semi-ruined structures such former stables and animal pens around the farmhouse.

On having left behind and to the left the farmhouse and to the right a livestock building, we will continue walking along the firebreak track and to the east. After some six hundred metres, we will come at Fuencubierta Country Estate main access. After crossing the gate which should remain shut behind us, we will return to Lugar Nuevo Country Estate.

The trail winds through young pastures and meets another path that is perpendicular to the direction we are travelling. Ignore that path and continue ahead. Step by step the path will start descending towards another valley. Granite boulders will be a common natural feature as the path climbs down while many White Foxgloves give colour to the wild meadow, especially in spring.



White Foxglove, very common by granite boulders

The end of the slope may be harder for bikers since the path's surface becomes rocky and the slope steepens and even fits into the ground. The beauty of the site is a good reward though and especially at the Arroyo de los Santos Brook. The brook supports a beautiful lineal forest along the riverbanks with big samples of hundreds years old Ash-Trees whose thick trunks will be a surprise for hikers.

••• Km 29.7 Wooden Bridge

On having come to the brook, we will walk upstream and to go across a wooden bridge. Horse riders should use another bridge which is downstream though. After crossing the bridge, the trail continues ahead and winds through a Pine grove where we should pay attention to the way-marking signs. The path which now matches a 'vía pecuaria' slightly bends to the right while climbing up a steep slope with dry stone walls at some sections. The path will eventually meet the firebreak track where we will cross a gate which is blocking the track. This gate is shut although there is a sort of kissing gate on a side for hikers, bikers and riders.

The site we are walking through now is home to some wild animals. Hikers may even spot some big samples of Deer and perhaps any Fallow Game grazing between the Pine trees.



The wooden bridge over the Arroyo de los Santos Brook



Granite rocks take whimsical forms on this section of the stage

••• **Km 30.7 Track towards the Sanctuary**

Another path approaches from the right on this last section of the stage. This path which is known as either Camino Viejo or Cordel de los Molinos is a traditional path used by pilgrims when travelling from Andújar town to the Virgen de la Cabeza Sanctuary. The path is also classified as Tourism Interest in Andalucía. We may choose to come to the Mirador del Camino Viejo Viewpoint which locates some metres down this path and that is one of the most popular sites used by pilgrims when breaking. Then we should return to the trail to continue ahead with the GR-48 route.

The track climbs up and comes into a small ravine to the left where hikers will enjoy the whimsical forms of some big and fragmented granite rocks and boulders in the site. Pines groves have been replaced by Mediterranean undergrowth which appears to struggle when colonizing the cracks on the granite rocks and boulders.

The first brotherhood buildings (cofradías) will start showing at the top of the hill. Those are the houses for the pilgrims that located nearby the Sanctuary. The trail will eventually come near Marmolejo Brotherhood's Headquarter which is also the end of this stage of the route.

Marmolejo. Renaissance Bridge

••• The first historical review of the Renaissance Bridge is recorded in Benito del Castillo's last Will which is dated on May the 21th, 1600. The manuscript reads that this master stonemason was employed as a wage earner to build the bridge although the bill was still unpaid.

Even first works were done in the second half of the 16th century; the bridge was almost completely rebuilt in the 19th century. In the first decade of the 21st century, the Ministry of Public Works of the Government of Andalusia commissioned some restoring works which gave cultural value to the bridge.

The bridge has seven semicircle arches with a span of 125 meters and a rise of 25 meters at the cen-

tral arch. The three first arches from the right bank are from the 16th century while the other four were built in the 19th century.

The bridge is strategically located as for connecting the plain fields of the Guadalquivir Valley to the highlands up in the mountain range. This was especially important in the 16th century as many cattle routes passed through the region and livestock moving became a most important activity. For many centuries, the bridge was the pass for accessing to sites located up in the mountains such La Centenera or La Virgen de la Cabeza as well as the path which currently is the A-420 Road towards the Yeguas River and the Campana Bridge from where it follows up to the Pedroches Valley.

