

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-



A pebbles paved street in Encinasola

pressive masses of quartzite rocks which are also home to rocky birds of prey such Griffon Vultures, Bonelli's Eagles and the Eagle-Owl.

Start: Encinasola
Finish: Cumbres de San Bartolomé
Distance: 17 km
Time: 4 hours and 30 minutes

Suitability:



Difficulty: MIDE evaluation

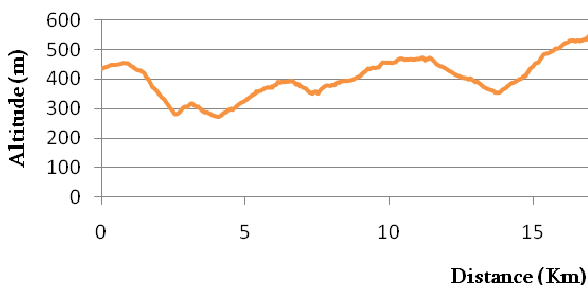
Enviroment: Severity of the natural environment. **1**

Track Features: Difficulty in following the track. **1**

Orientation: Guidance on the route directions. **1**

Struggle: Struggle required for accomplishing the route. **3**

Encinasola - Cumbres



ROUTE GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Encinasola is located at the *Sierra de Aracena and Picos de Aroche* mountain range. The origins of this highland town go back to the Bronze Age yet Romans and Arabs left a distinctive mark on this land. The remains of the *Castillo Árabe*, an Arabic castle from the 10th century, are a good example of this. Nevertheless, the symbol of this small town are the two bastion-towers from the 16th century known as *San Felipe and San Juan* which were built to defend the place against the Portuguese attacks during the Reconquista period.



Partial view of Encinasola town at the beginning of the stage

This stage of the route starts at *Arrabal Menor Street* which is outside of the town. From there, we will come to a level open stretch of grassy ground with three paths. The right choice is the path in the middle which is a waymarked track known as *Sendero de la Peña de San Calixto*. The area comprises an Olive grove and some dry stone walls. Small birds like Goldfinches and Greenfinches are quite common in the area as they are quite at use of human proximity.

The path, well limited by dry stone walls on both sides, continues straight ahead and towards *El Cerro de la Cruz Hill* while leaving behind Encinasola town. As the walk progresses, we will bump into an iron countryside gate which is blocking the path. After crossing the gate, the path splits in two and we will go onto the path to the left which will soon wind through vegetable gardens and fruit tree groves.

••• km 1.2. The Cuesta del Caño Slope

The track begins to descend and becomes wavier. Fantastic views open out across two valleys known as *Valle del Caño* and *Valle del Sillo*. The Olive grove will progressively turn into a richly nourished woodland comprising Holm Oaks and Mediterranean undergrowth of Rockroses, Spanish Lavender and Brooms. Any curve of this descending path is a good place to stop and look at the landscape and to the peculiar geomorphology of these valleys. The showy shapes of the rocks worked on the mountains relief are the result of centuries of erosion.

The path continues descending until it reaches the bottom of the valley. The *Huerta del Caño* country house remains to right of the path which now goes across the *Caño Brook* by a footbridge made of concrete. The riverbanks support some vegetation of Tamujos (*Flueggea tinctoria*) and Oleanders as well as some Eucalyptus trees by the ford.

On having crossed the brook, the trail continues straight ahead having the *El Berrón* Country Estate on a side. After crossing a countryside gate



Ford at the *Caño Brook*

which is blocking the track, the path starts a gentle climbing and soon we will spot a massive quartzite rock to the right. This is the *Peña de San Sixto* (San Sixto Rock). Using the binoculars and from the path, we will watch some Vultures and perhaps other rocky birds standing on the rocks. Permanent communities of Griffon Vultures locate on the top of the rock which is also home to other rocky birds. Despite of currently being a paradise for rocky birds, the *Peña de San Calixto* used to shelter diverse

groups of people. Evidences of this are the settlements from ancient times which have been discovered at the rock foothills and, from a most recent period, the remains of the huts known as 'chozos'.



San Sixto Rock

After having enjoyed the majesty of the flight of Griffon Vultures, the trail heads towards the *Arroyo del Sillo* Brook while winding through a Cork Oak pasture and some Olive groves that in spring time appear fully covered with annual plants of pleasing natural colours.

••• Km 4. Ford at the Arroyo del Sillo Brook

The *Sillo* Brook is faster-flowing and wider than the *Caño* Brook. Since there is no bridge over the brook, wading across this stream might be a pretty arduous task especially in the raining season.

However, this is an especially interesting riverbed because of the many animal species related to it. The pristine water of the *Sillo* Brook is home to many rare and endemic fish species. Among others, they are the jarabugo (*Anaecypris hispanica*), the pardilla (*Rutilus lemmingii*), the boga (*Chondostroma polylepis*), the Barbel and the Eel; all they Iberian endemic species. In addition, excrements of Otters are easily spotted along the stony river bed while Vultures' guano whitens the rocks and stones on the river shores. Together with this interesting animal world is scarce vegetation comprising thorny Tamujos on the brook shores and, floating on the backwaters, the Water Buttercups of white flowers.

After wading across the brook, the trail comes into Cumbres de San Bartolomé municipality while winding through a Holm Oaks pasture known as *Dehesa de la Gallega* which is fully devoted to cattle breeding. The trail starts climbing until it reaches the top where it splits into two tracks. In here, we will take onto the track that bears right making a 90° turn to continue straight ahead. On the opposite slope locates the *Cortijo De la Gallega* farmhouse while views of the *Barranco del Lobo* Ravine and the *Sillo* Brook open at the front. The trail continues straight ahead while passing by some artificial water troughs for the cattle.



Ford at the *Sillo* Brook

In this section of the route we will see *retinta* and *avileña* cattle as well as some peculiar landmarks which are piles of stones located at the side of the path and that are known as '*majanos*'. Cattle breeding is a main activity in the area and the many cattle exploitations are separated one from each other by dry stone walls and just some cattle grids on the path. The path continues leaving behind *El Pizarro* farmhouse which stands up atop a hill to the left. The Holm Oaks pasture is progressively gaining biodiversity with some Rockroses and Gorse bushes. After reaching the top of a hill, the path continues with gentle ups and downs while fording some seasonal small brooks which support a lush Mediterranean undergrowth of Brambles and Oleanders and that break the monotony of the pasture woodland.

After crossing the last gate to access to the *De la Gallega* Country Estate, the trail connects to the H-2111 road that links Encinasola and Cumbres de San Bartolomé towns. For about three kilometres the trail will match the road border which is wide. This is an easy walking section of the route as there is no much traffic on this highland road. On having come to the three kilometre and at a STOP traffic sign, the trail moves away from the road and bends right to get to a dirt path.

••• km 11.5. Camino del Estrecho del Puerto Path

The track soon heads away from the road that is easy to find as there is a sign for heavy machinery not trespassing on it. The path descends through pastures while Rockroses become more abundant. The Puerto Brook starts showing to the right of the path. As the walk progresses, the Romanitos pasture turns into a narrow rocky ravine where the brook is fitted while carving the rock outcroppings between Wild Olive trees.

This is a natural site known as *El Estrecho*. The brook flows beneath the path and vegetation on the brook banks comprises Brambles patches and some Poplars. The trail continues ahead and soon we will find ourselves walking again through pastures of Broom bushes. The cattle breeding local tradition is clear as there are many stone-made farmyards and sheepfolds near the *Casa de la Gangosa* country house.



Casa de la Gangosa surroundings

The trail continues gently downhill and through an open area while looking for the *Arroyo del Estrecho* Brook. We need to pay attention to the track direction before wading across the brook. Some fifty meters before coming to the concrete made ford, we will bend just to the left to get to a dirt path that goes across a country gate located between dry stone walls. The track continues ahead and shortly after passing the gate comes to a former stone made ford and wades across the *Arroyo del Estrecho* Brook.

••• km 13.69. Ford at the Arroyo del Puerto Brook

Just after fording the brook, the path starts climbing while matching a dirt path which is little used yet is well limited by laboriously made

dry stone walls on both sides aimed to keep the path surface.

The path continues ahead and climbing through a thick Rockroses patch which is also home to mammals such Foxes and Mongoose. It will be difficult to spot any of the mentioned animals since those are primarily active during twilight and night. We will easily spot their tracks and excrements on the path and on some nearby rocks though.



Hikers will climb up between thick Rockroses patches

The path reaches the top of the hill to come to a different area in which Rockroses and Mediterranean bushes are replaced by meadows. As the walk progresses, it is increasingly clear the human action in the area and different uses of the land.

After crossing another country gate, the path continues straight ahead having the protection of dry stone walls on both sides. The path comes to a much more humanized area where locate small country farms and country houses together with vegetable gardens and fruit trees such as Orange trees and Fig trees. In a sudden turn to the right, the dirt path turns into a traditional and beautifully designed stone paved path made of perfectly preserved pebbles and stones. The dry stone walls make a perfect complement to the pavement in which secures firmly a rich Mediterranean undergrowth of Wild Olive trees, Rockroses and Asparagus bushes. No doubt this is one of the most attractive sections of this stage of the route.

The path which is now paved of concrete starts climbing up towards Cumbres de San Bartolomé town while winding through the surrounding areas. This stage comes to finish at a picnic area located outside the town and from where we will have a beautiful view of the town.

Rocky habitats



••• By definition, rocky habitats are areas of steep rugged rocks such as cliffs and crags and where the ecological conditions might be seem as hostile for life. Nevertheless, many are the animal and vegetal species that are adapted themselves to living in this peculiar environment.

In the stage of the GR-48 Trail through Huelva province that connects Encinasola and Cumbres de San Bartolomé towns, there is a rock known as *Peña de San Sixto*.

Common Kestrel, the Rock Bunting and the Blue Rock-Thrush take also shelter at the craggy *San Sixto* Rock. In addition, birds such as the Golden Eagle, the Bonelli's Eagle and the Black Stork build their nests on the most inaccessible areas of the site while other birds better adapted to human settlement such as Common Kestrels, Crag Martins and Common Swifts prefer the wild and natural cliffs of this rock to the walls of the churches and castles located in the nearby towns and villages.



The Common Kestrel is a common bird in open areas yet it prefers rocky sites for nesting

The rock itself is a mass of hard quartzite rocks which have resisted the scourge of erosion creating a projecting peak which is home to many species. The rock is also one of the biggest rocky areas within the *Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche* Natural Park where this natural habitat type is not very common.

The most emblematic animal species in this natural site is the Griffon Vulture. Many Griffon Vultures roost on the rocky crests of the rock and the Eagle-Owl, the Crag Martin, the

This natural site is also home to a range of plants which stick to life in this wild and inhospitable natural environment. Different Ferns and Wild Carnations species grow in the rock crevices and even endemic plants of very limited distribution in the region can be found in this site.

It could be said that every single crag and cliff in *San Sixto* Rock deserve of a special protection as the whole site gives protection and shelter to a singular biodiversity.