

Spain: The Sierra Nevada & Alhambra Palace

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Malaga and drive to Mairena
- Day 2/6** Explore wildlife along many trails from and near Mairena and day visit to coast.
- Day 7** Full day visit to Granada and Alhambra Palace.
- Day 8** Fly London.

Departs

June

Focus

Natural History and authentic Spanish cuisine & culture

Grading

Grade A/B. Day walks at leisurely pace.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ESP21)

Highlights:

- Wide altitude range (1,000 to 2,900m) offers a host of butterflies, other invertebrates & flora
- Spanish Marbled White, Apollo, blues, skippers & fritillaries, dragonflies, oil beetles
- Padded Brushwood, Spanish Barberry & Small-flowered Gorse in oak forests
- 150 endemic plants, including Sierra Nevada Violet & Woolly Lavender
- Blue Rock Thrush, Golden Oriole, Scops Owl, Nightingale, Flamingoes, a host of raptors
- Time in Granada & Alhambra Palace
- Home-cooked Spanish food and demonstration.



The Alhambra Palace, Flower-rich Sierra Nevada Mountains, Greater Flamingo



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Introduction

The Alpujarra are the southern foothills of the Sierra Nevada, a dramatic and imposing mountain range that lies east of the famous old Moorish city of Granada. The Sierra Nevada range (the second highest in Europe after the Alps) boasts the two highest mountains in Spain, Mulhacén and Pico Veleta, which tower to over 3,350 metres (11,000 feet). Snow-capped for much of the year, this is serious mountain country, and these great peaks are visible from North Africa on a clear day, shimmering in the deep blue, cloudless Andalusian skies. Their southern flanks are less imposing, and offer the keen walker a network of manageable trails of outstanding beauty. On arriving in the Alpujarra it is hard to believe the Spanish *costas* are just an hour or two's drive to the south – this is a different world, and one which Gerald Brennan first brought the attention of the British and wider public when he wrote his now classic book, 'South from Granada', describing his experiences of Alpujarran village life and traditions in the 1930s. More recently, Chris Stewart's book 'Driving Over Lemons', based around Orgiva, has captured the modern imagination. Yet despite this new-found fame, the Alpujarra retains its remote and rustic charm – the characteristic white-washed Berber villages perched on hillsides, mules carrying loads across ancient pathways, terraces of fruits and vegetables, and ubiquitous irrigation channels built by the Moors all serve as lasting reminders of the area's long and colourful history.

Isolated by the natural barrier created by its network of steep mountainsides and deep valleys, the Alpujarra has much to offer both trekking and wildlife enthusiasts. As well as great natural beauty in its landscape there is wildlife in abundance here,



Traditional white-washed Berber buildings

and the continued use of traditional agricultural practices ensures a rich diversity of plant-life, such as colourful spring blossoms and orchids and their attendant populations of butterflies across the range of different altitudes found here. Our tour is in mid-June and walks will be at a gentle pace, focusing on butterflies, flowers, birds and other wildlife. The main daily itinerary below outlines some of the walks and sites we will visit and as always the itinerary will be kept flexible to react to weather conditions and to make the very most out of our time here.

The tour will include the opportunity to visit Granada and to explore one of Spain's most splendid architectural gems, the Alhambra Palace. A drive to the coast offers the chance to see spectacular birds such as Greater Flamingo and much more.

Due to the warm temperatures in June we will avoid demanding climbs in the mountains and will walk at a slow pace as we search for the numerous butterflies and other wildlife. Our focus will be on the butterflies and flowers found in abundance on the hillsides and mountain slopes and in the meadows, a profusion due largely to old-fashioned farming methods practised on these slopes. Some 2,100 plant species (30% of the representative species of the Iberian Peninsula) are found here, of which about 150 are endemic to the Sierra Nevada. We'll access sites by a mixture of walking and minibus; indeed some of the most rewarding butterfly sites are in easily reached meadows and even lay-bys – many of the latter offer superb 'butterflying' opportunities and a morning can be very pleasantly spent in these densely vegetated areas, eagerly adding find after find to our day's list of species. We will not forget to pause to admire the ubiquitous stunning views back across the Alpujarran valleys of white-washed villages, deep gorges, Moorish waterways (*acequias*) and glittering mica schist jutting out of the hillsides. Along with looking for butterflies and flowers our tour will also enjoy listening to such summer songsters as Nightingales and warblers.

Our base is the delightful Las Chimeneas Hotel in the small village of Mairena run for over twenty years by English owners David and Emma Illsley. Authentic Spanish cuisine, of the highest quality, is cooked by local chefs with local foodstuffs using recipes published in David and Emma's book 'Las Chimeneas; recipes and stories from an Alpujarran village'. Their inspiring story featured recently in the BBC documentary 'Write around the World with Richard E Grant' (Series 1: Episode 3). We hope to enjoy a cooking demonstration and to learn much of the fascinating history of the Alpujarran villages and people.

With a hugely impressive flora, a rich diversity of butterflies across a range of altitudes, interesting birdlife, access to a wide range of different habitats and scenery, rich Spanish culture and the added bonus of the coast and the magnificent Alhambra Palace on the doorstep, this tour has all the ingredients to make a very memorable holiday.



Alpujarra

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some reordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Sierra Nevada

Our holiday begins with a flight to Andalusia and a drive to our base in Mairena, Las Chimeneas. The drive from Malaga will take us along the southern coast of Spain towards Motril, tracing the footsteps of Laurie Lee, author of 'Cider with Rosie' and 'As I walked out one midsummer morning'. Later we will stop for a short break to admire the rugged landscape that overlooks the village of Órgiva and the home of the more recent English author Chris Stewart.

The road narrows and twists as we climb towards the foot of Sierra Nevada and offers spectacular views of a wild, yet partially cultivated, landscape. We will be ready for a drink on the Hotel terrace and first of many choice meals when we arrive at Las Chimeneas. David and Emma will welcome us and introduce us to their fascinating story.

We shall be based here for the holiday. Mairena is situated in the eastern Alpujarra at an altitude of about 1,000 metres. Las Chimeneas is a special place – it enjoys wonderful views across the Sierra Nevada with a Booted Eagle or flock of Bee-eaters often gracing the skies above us. Guest rooms are spacious, with en suite facilities and their own small terrace area.



Las Chimeneas Hotel

A small pool is a relaxing way to cool down at the end of each day. David and Emma also run a 5-hectare *finca* with mixed fruit trees such as persimmons, pears, olives and figs, and they grow organic vegetables which are used in the guesthouse's restaurant. This is where shooting of the BBC documentary took place. Every night there is a choice of three courses for dinner, all cooked by a gifted local lady, Soledad, whose style and quality of cooking has been likened to and admired by the owner of the well-known London restaurant, 'Moro!' Bread is baked daily and is 'moorish' (in two ways)!

Days 2-6

Wildlife Walks

Mairena is a traditional Alpujarran village with white-washed houses and views as far ranging as the Riff Mountains in North Africa. It lies on the GR7 – a long-distance ancient European pathway built by the Romans, and one can easily walk straight on to this route from the village which we will do, but only for a short stretch. The land here is more fertile than in the western Alpujarra – these are well-washed alluvial soils, and terraces with crops are a major feature of the landscape here, along with *acequias*.

We'll make daily wildlife excursions and walks each day from our base in Mairena. Our tour leader will decide on the exact itinerary each day according to weather and other factors, but the description below gives an idea of the sort of wildlife excursions that we will undertake during our week-long stay.

Walks in & around Mairena

There are plenty of day walks setting off on foot from Las Chimeneas passing alongside and through fertile terraces and meadows at altitudes of around 1,000 metres. Though these will not be particularly demanding trails, we will be walking along stony mule pathways and irrigation channels, and over some rough ground. Our pace during the first couple of days will probably be that of a 'gentle perambulation' with some steeper climbs, stopping to look at particular flowers, birds and butterflies along the way. On one day we may head for Jubar Temple, a 900-year-old mosque with frescoes, and on another we may follow the thousand-year-old Chestnut Walk (Camino de los Castanos Millenanos) – a 5-hour walk through the Laroles Valley passing olive and almond terraces and following the path of a stream to its head. *Adenocarpus decorticans* (a broom), Small-flowered Gorse (*Ulex parviflorus*) and Spanish Barberry (*Berberis hispanicus*), among many other species, all grow in and around the oak forests and we will also be on the look-out for species such as the endemic Woolly Lavender (*Lavandula lanata*), *Ranunculus acetosellifolius* (a buttercup) and Sierra Nevada Violet (*Viola nevadensis*), as well as a diverse range of orchids.

Birds that we may see include an array of tits and finches, Stonechat, Crested Lark, Serin, Black Redstart, Sardinian Warbler and Blackcap. Black Wheatears are found here year-round too and we may be lucky enough to see this handsome bird alight on a path in front of us, or on a rocky outcrop. It is also a delightful walk from Mairena to Yegen, the village where Gerald Brennan stayed, and in spring and early summer the fields and trees burst with almond blossom, and later with poppies and lavender. Butterflies we'll



Moroccan Orange-tip

look for in the fields and along pathways in Broom bushes include Small White, Moroccan Orange, Speckled Wood, Pearly Heath, skippers and fritillaries. It is not uncommon to find up to 20 species within a couple of hours in spring. There are mammals here too – along with regular visitors such as Badger and Fox which come into the village regularly, it's worth keeping an eye out for a more elusive local mammal, the Genet!

El Joplon & Laujar Cave

Other walks just a short drive from Las Chimeneas may include the 'Picena circuit' – a 3-hour circular walk into a deep canyon to enjoy the wildlife inhabiting the protected microhabitat here; it's perfect for early butterflies and we'll look out for Queen of Spain and other fritillaries here in particular. The abandoned village of Joplon makes an interesting stop on our way home. The Laujar Cave walk is a dramatic 4-hour walk either side of a river following the line of an *acequia* and passing through the town of Laujar, final capital of the Moors in Europe and home also to some fine vineyards! This is stunning scenery and the views along mountain streams and overlooking Alpujarran valleys and gorges are spectacular. Interesting plants such as Wild Peony (*Paeonia coriacea*), *Polygala boissieri* (a milkwort), *Orchis olbiensis* (an early purple orchid) and *Astragalus sempervirens* subsp. *nivadensis* (a milkvetch) should be among our botanical finds in this habitat, while Crag Martin, Blue Rock Thrush and Grey Wagtails, as well as Kestrels



Hoopoe

and circling Golden Eagles or perhaps a Griffon Vulture overhead are among the birds we may find along this route. We'll be listening for the bright loud song of Cetti's Warbler as well as hoping to catch sight of the characteristic bobbing of a Dipper in a secluded mountain stream or pool.

In June some of the butterflies we'll be looking for include Spanish Gatekeeper, Red-underwing Skipper, Cleopatra, Spanish Marbled White, Queen of Spain, Mazarine Blue and Brown Argus. If the weather has been good, we'll hope to see the first of the fritillaries such as Heath, Meadow and Glanville. It will be peak egg-laying time for some species and it is exciting to watch as species such as Long-tailed Blues lay thousands of eggs on the legumes here! We'll also look for Swallowtails laying eggs on *Umbellifers* – these beautiful butterflies make an excellent subject for keen photographers as they lay. Hoopoes, Golden Orioles, Bee-eaters and a variety of flycatchers and warblers such as Whitethroats should be among the many bird species we'll see, and we'll also listen out in the evenings for the

distinctive single-note calls of Scops Owls, or perhaps even calls of Eagle Owls which are found in some parts of the Alpujarra.

La Ragua Pass & Sierra Nevada National Park

For higher altitude walks and wildlife we will drive up to La Ragua – the only natural pass through the high Sierra Nevada range, situated at an altitude of about 2,000 metres. The Sierra Nevada has the highest number of endemic plant species in Europe and Sierra Nevada Daffodil (*Narcissus nevadensis*), Sierra Nevada Sandwort (*Arenaria nevadensis*) and *Artemisia granatensis* (a wormwood) are among the interesting plant species here. We'll look for the stunning plumage of the Rock Thrush, together with Europe's southernmost population of Citril Finch and, after a sumptuous picnic lunch, we may be treated to the acrobatic displays of resident Choughs. and admire the wonderful setting of La Calahorra castle. This strategically placed fort was built by the Catholics after the Moors had fallen between 1515 and 1523.

In the Sierra Nevada, one of the joys for the naturalist is a chance to examine the different vegetation zones as the altitude changes, enjoying the flora and butterflies associated with each zone, and in rich alpine meadows. The views here are breathtaking, extending half way to Madrid to the north-west and to the Riff Mountains to the south on a clear day. We'll scan the mountainsides for herds of Spanish Ibex, a specialty whose stronghold is here in the Sierra Nevada – indeed, signs of their presence are easily spotted, along with Wild Boar. Spanish Imperial, Booted and Golden Eagle soar over these mountain peaks and we'll be looking for some higher-altitude butterflies such as Apollo, as well as



Spanish Ibex

ringlets, Scarce Coppers and Scarce

Swallowtail and endemic flowers in the alpine meadows, where several springs and bogs support a rich flora. On some of the higher rocky slopes and in the sheltered corries, the most highly prized endemics can be found, among them Glacier Toadflax (*Linaria glacialis*) the pink-coloured *Viola crassiuscula*, *Ranunculus acetosellifolius* (a buttercup), Sierra Nevada Saxifrage (*Saxifraga nevadensis*) as well as Alpine Rock-cress (*Arabis caucasica* subsp. *alpina*).

Western Alpujarra

Worthy of exploration are a few of the villages and valleys a little to the west of our base. Trevelez is the highest village in Spain and the centre for Serrano ham production – the mule tracks leading into Natural Park and mountain trails directly out of the village are very scenic and rich in insect-life and flora.

Another village of interest is the perched white-washed Pampaneira – though rather more touristy than the eastern Alpujarra where we will be based, there's a splendid gorge worth exploring in nearby Soportujar. In June, stopping in lay-bys on these mountain roads can be very productive – it's the sheer density of invertebrate-life which really strikes the keen naturalist and which makes a morning's botanising and butterfly-seeking pass in a flash, as one goes from one exciting find to another, before it's time for a

delicious packed lunch watching Crag Martins circle above, and the truly magnificent views out across these rustic and charming foothills.

'Badlands' & Cabo de Gata-Nijar

Another fascinating excursion within reach of Las Chimeneas is an area with peculiar landscape of gorges and steep sandstone slopes eroded into weird and wonderful forms known as the 'Badlands'. Mediterranean *xerophytic* shrubs and interesting small flowering plants survive here, and birds to look out for include Calandra, Short-toed, Crested and Thekla Larks, together with Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Rock Sparrow.

On the coast, the Cabo de Gata comprises coastal lagoons and saltpans holding Greater Flamingo, White-headed Duck, Slender-billed and Audouin's Gull, as well as a range of passage and migrant waders in spring. Black Wheatear is probably more common here than anywhere else in Europe. Of volcanic origin, it is one of the most stunning coastal sceneries in the Spanish Mediterranean. The local flora is rich with indigenous species and provides food for a variety of pollinators. This is a full day excursion with much to see on the drive to and from Mairena.

Day 7

Alhambra Palace, Granada

We'll make a full-day excursion to Granada to visit the Alhambra, a complex of palaces and gardens of the Moorish monarchs of Granada which occupies a hilly terrace on the south-eastern border of the city. At the centre of the Alhambra stands the impressive Palace of Charles V, an outstanding example of Spanish Renaissance architecture. The rest of the Alhambra is an elaborate museum displaying exquisite Islamic artifacts and architecture. We'll visit the exquisite gardens and grounds of the Palace, which will be a fantastic addition to our week in Andalucia and an introduction to a city steeped in history that is well worth revisiting.

This will be a long and stimulating day, with stop-offs on our drive to and from Granada. Close to the city, just off the by-pass, is a highly significant historical site at the Barranco de Viznar. Here in a narrow gorge,



Alhambra Castle

it is thought, lie the remains of one of Europe's most important writers, Federico García Lorca, executed at the start of the Spanish Civil War. Our silent reflection may be broken by the sound of Iberian Magpie and smaller birds such as Sardinian Warbler. We should see plenty of butterflies too, including Spanish Gatekeeper.

Further away we will break our journey at the castle-palace of La Calahorra, in the plains of Marquesado. This imposing stronghold dominates the

landscape and has featured in many a movie. It was built by the Catholics after the Moors had fallen between 1515 and 1523, the last castle built in Spain. We will look for Red-Billed Chough, Rock Sparrow, Black Wheatear and more. It's also a good place to enjoy a relaxing coffee and churros before setting off again on our journey.

Day 7

In Flight

Today we may have time for some further exploration around Las Chimeneas and Mairena before transferring back to the airport for our flight home.

Tour grading

Grade A/B. The walks will be relatively easy, but with some uphill sections on rougher terrain and narrow paths. We will rely on minibus transport as well as spending time merely pottering as we take a closer look at our surroundings.

Weather

We can expect hot weather and clear skies with temperatures of 20- 25°C in Mairena. The Sierra Nevada will see slightly cooler temperatures of around 15-20°C, with a mix of sunny and cloudy days and the possibility of short summer rainstorms.

Food & accommodation

We will be based throughout in the village of Mairena, where we will stay in the beautiful guesthouse, Las Chimeneas, which is owned and run by friendly and knowledgeable British hosts, who also have a 5-hectare *finca*. The guesthouse also has its own restaurant serving excellent Spanish-style dishes prepared by Soledad, a local woman who lives in the village; where possible, vegetables and fruit from the *finca* are used in the restaurant. All rooms have private facilities and a small terrace area, and there are shared living areas with access to reading materials, information about the area, and tea and coffee-making facilities (including British tea!).

All food and accommodation is included in the price of the holiday.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.