

# **THE MOUNTAINS OF RONDA AND GRAZALEMA**



### About the Author

Guy Hunter-Watts has lived and worked in Andalucía since the 1980s. After studying at the universities of Santiago and Salamanca he taught English in South America before moving to the Ronda mountains where he's been leading guided walks for almost 25 years. His work as a walking guide and freelance journalist has taken him to many corners of the planet including India, Namibia, Tanzania, Latin America and Mongolia.

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# THE MOUNTAINS OF RONDA AND GRAZALEMA

by Guy Hunter-Watts

**CICERONE**

JUNIPER HOUSE, MURLEY MOSS,  
OXENHOLME ROAD, KENDAL, CUMBRIA LA9 7RL  
[www.cicerone.co.uk](http://www.cicerone.co.uk)

© Guy Hunter-Watts 2018  
First edition 2018  
ISBN: 978 1 85284 892 7

Printed by KHL Printing, Singapore  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.  
All photographs are by the author unless otherwise stated.



Route mapping by Lovell Johns [www.lovelljohns.com](http://www.lovelljohns.com)  
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The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although naturally we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

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*Front cover: Looking south to the Embalse de Zahara and the Sierra del Pinar from the summit of Lagarín (Walk 27)*



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## **Acknowledgements**

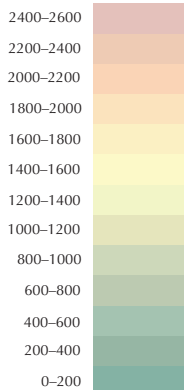
Having the help of volunteers at my home in Montecorto during the time I was compiling this guide was a huge help. Many thanks to Sarah Fox, Rafa Lopes, Aurélie Vesco, Daria Filmonova and Katarina Kostorova.

And an extra special thank you to Ola Leszczyńska for your help and company when I was researching routes in the Valle del Genal and the Sierra de las Nieves.

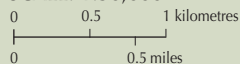
## Symbols used on route maps

	route
	alternative route
	start point
	finish point
	start/finish point
	woodland
	urban areas
	regional border
	international border
	station/railway
	peak
	campsite
	building
	church/chapel
	cemetery
	pass or col
	water feature/spring
	mirador
	bridge
	picnic area
	other feature
	cave

### Relief in metres



SCALE: 1:50,000



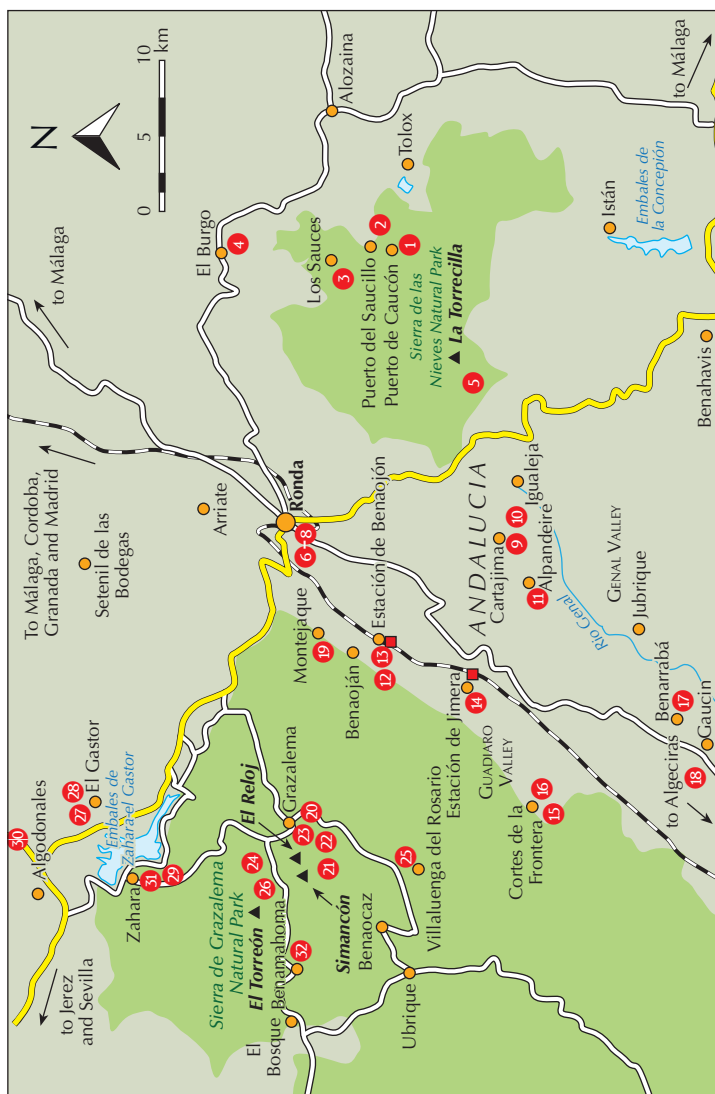
Contour lines are drawn at 25m intervals and highlighted at 100m intervals.

### GPX files

GPX files for all routes can be downloaded free at [www.cicerone.co.uk/892/GPX](http://www.cicerone.co.uk/892/GPX).

*Breach in the rocks on the way to the Lígár plateau (Walk 30)*







*Bennarabá in the lower Genal valley (Walk 17)*

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

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I first visited Ronda in the mid-80s. Arriving when the Semana Santa processions were in full swing I soon fell under the spell of the town and its extraordinary physical surroundings.

In those days there were few waymarked trails in the area but the paths I was able to discover were of great beauty, and they inspired me to search out more. Some years later I returned, this time to buy an abandoned village house in one of the quietest of *los Pueblos Blancos* (the White Villages). It was there I struck up a friendship with Andrés Duarte, a kindly shepherd, who would later show me many of the old drovers' paths he'd known since his childhood. With Andrés as my guide I came to know the surrounding mountains far better and with each new trail discovered, my attachment for the region grew.

My time in the Ronda mountains has coincided with a new interest among both Spaniards and foreigners for rural tourism and, along with it, walking. Trails are now waymarked: three GR routes cross the area while many PR trails have been created linking the villages of both the Sierra de Grazalema and the Sierra de las Nieves, along with those of the Guadiaro and Genal valleys. Even though many companies now offer group and self-guided walking holidays in the area, you can rest assured that you'll meet with few other walkers and may even have the trail all to yourself.

Guy Hunter-Watts

2017



*The path up towards Puerto de Cuco (Walk 2)*





## INTRODUCTION

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*Ronda seen from the ridge leading to the chapel of La Virgen de la Cabeza (Walk 7)*

People's first associations of southern Spain are often of sun, sand and sea, of beachside resorts and tourism of the packaged variety. Yet this coastal belt, cradled to the east by the Mediterranean and to the west by the Atlantic, constitutes a tiny part of Andalucía, Spain's southernmost and most diverse autonomous region. Just a few kilometres inland from the sea the mighty Penibetic mountains rise steeply upwards, stretching like a vast sabre across southern Spain. From the high peaks of the Sierra Nevada – they rise to almost 3500m and are snow clad for several months of the

year – this majestic chain gradually decreases in height before merging with the more northern Subbetic chain as they run west towards the Atlantic. These grandiose mountain ranges are home to some of the finest walking trails in Europe.

The market town of Ronda, the largest of *los Pueblos Blancos* (the White Villages), is cradled between two of the region's most beautiful Natural Parks: the Sierra de las Nieves to the east and the Sierra de Grazalema to the west. Both areas boast UNESCO biosphere status thanks not only to their great natural

beauty but also to the diversity of their wildlife and plants.

The spectacular mountain passes and peaks surrounding Ronda, and the villages nearby, have attracted travellers to the region since the advent during the mid-19th century of what we now call tourism. The Romantic movement ensured that Ronda, along with Sevilla and Granada, became an essential part of the Grand Tour, nurturing a vision of Andalucía and its mountains as a land of bullfighters, bandoleros, flamenco and gypsies. Engravings, watercolours and paintings from the early Victorian era, typified by the work of David Roberts, helped spread the fame of the town whose stunning physical setting inspired many artists and writers and later attracted a flow of illustrious visitors. Mérimée's *Carmen* (set in Seville), later set to music in Bizet's opera, gilded a much romanticised Andalusian lily.

Today the town remains very much on the traveller's trail even though most visitors are daytrippers who arrive on organised coach excursions from the Costa del Sol. By mid-afternoon the crowds have departed and Ronda regains its dignity; this is the time to explore its labyrinthine old town centre, one of Europe's most beautiful historic quarters with views that are second to none.

Ronda was always the main market town for the villages of the surrounding mountains and until the advent of motorised transport

an intricate network of footpaths saw the constant passage of villagers with their mules and donkeys, bringing goods to and from the town as well as buying and selling their animals at regular livestock markets. The footpaths were maintained by royal decree, from which the name *cañada real* or royal way is derived. Later, when these same goods began to be transported by lorry, passage along these ancient byways rapidly declined and local councils ceased to maintain the paths. The advent of walking tourism has changed all that and there is now a growing awareness that these same footpaths can bring welcome income to the villages that they connect.

Taking advantage of the European Community's CEDER programme for rural development, time and money have been invested in waymarking



*Summer landscape south of Ronda  
(Walk 1)*

local footpaths, some of which date back to Roman and Arab times. This initiative, hand in hand with the creation of the Natural Parks of the Sierra de las Nieves to the east and the Sierra de Grazalema to the west, means that the Ronda mountains now offer some of the finest hiking trails in Andalucía with a corresponding infrastructure of both hotels and restaurants.

The section that follows gives a brief overview of the three regions covered in this guide while a more detailed description is given at the beginning of each regional section.

### THE THREE REGIONS

From east to west, the three regions covered by this guide are:

#### Ronda and the Sierra de las Nieves

Of the three areas described within this guide the Natural Park of the Sierra de las Nieves is the least well known yet it is home to one of the most grandiose expanses of mountains in southern Spain. Several of the park's peaks are more than 1500m while La Torrecilla at 1919m is the highest point in western Andalucía.

As the name implies, the mountains are often snowcapped in winter when they make a breathtaking backdrop to Ronda when seen from the west.

Wooded valleys and mountainsides, with the world's largest stands of Spanish fir (*Abies pinsapo*), contrast with craggy outcrops of limestone

above the tree line, and there's a well-maintained network of hiking trails which cut into the heart of the Sierra from both its eastern and western sides.

Although you first need to drive along forestry tracks to reach most trailheads, this extra effort is richly rewarded and the drive to and from the walks can be an adventure in its own right.

In recognition of the unique beauty of the park, already a UNESCO biosphere reserve, within the coming year the area is due to be upgraded from 'Natural' to 'National' Park. The added kudos is bound to attract more visitors and more investment to the area.

This section also includes two delightful walks straight out from Ronda as well as one historical walk through the town's enchanting Moorish quarter which will lead you past all of its most emblematic monuments.

#### The Guadiaro and Genal valleys

Stretching south from Ronda the valleys of the Genal and Guadiaro rivers are home to some of Spain's most beautiful small villages.

The upper part of the Genal valley feels more remote and can only be accessed by one narrow, snaking road. Most walks here lead you through the valley's chestnut forests while those further to the south, in the area close to Gaucín, lead you through ancient stands of gall and holm oak.

## WALK 1

### *Puerto de Caucón circuit via El Tajo de la Caina*

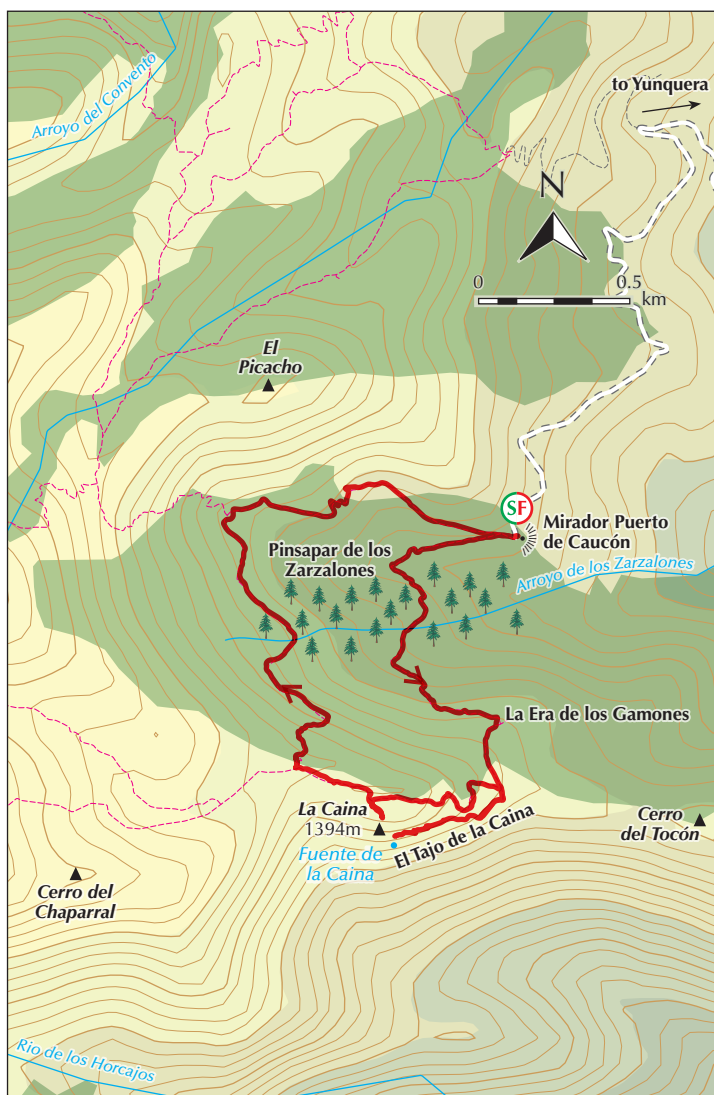
<b>Start/Finish</b>	Mirador Puerto de Caucón (also called Mirador de Luis Ceballos), near Yunquera
<b>Distance</b>	7km
<b>Ascent/Descent</b>	475m
<b>Grade</b>	Medium
<b>Time</b>	2hr 20min
<b>Refreshments</b>	None en route
<b>Access</b>	From Ronda take the A-366 via El Burgo to Yunquera. Arriving at a roundabout at the entrance to the village turn right then follow signs for 6.7km to the Mirador Puerto de Caucón (or Mirador de Luis Ceballos)

This exhilarating half-day walk leads through one of La Sierra de la Nieves' largest stands of Spanish firs (*Abies pinsapo*) to the towering cliff face, then the summit, of El Tajo de la Caina. This vertical face numbers among the park's most impressive feats of Nature, rising sheer above the spring of the same name for almost 200m. A bluff just beyond the spring provides a stunning promontory to rest before climbing to La Caina's summit (1394m) before you return to the walk's start point by way of the upper reaches of the Pinsapar de los Zarzalones.

The walk can be shortened by returning via a shorter, marked trail that loops back to Puerto de Caucón from La Era de los Gamones. Set time aside to gulp in the views from La Caina as well from the Mirador Puerto de Caucón from where a vast panorama opens out to the south and east which, on clear days, encompasses the distant peaks of the Sierra Nevada.

The walk begins at the parking area at the Mirador Puerto de Caucón. Exit the parking area at its western end past a commemorative plaque to Luis Ceballos following a sign for 'Senderos 30m'.

## WALK 1 – PUERTO DE CAUCÓN CIRCUIT VIA EL TAJO DE LA CAINA





*The view east  
from the Mirador  
Puerto de Caucón*

**Luis Ceballos** (1896–1967) was a botanist who in the 1920s and 1930s documented the flora of the Ronda and Grazalema mountains. He was active in protecting the remaining stands of pinsapos in the Sierra as well as initiating projects for their reafforestation.

Reaching a fork after 30m angle left at a sign, ‘Sendero Caucón-Tajo de la Caina’. The path loops steeply down through juniper to enter a stand of pinsapos where reafforestation is taking place. After crossing the stream bed of the **Arroyo de los Zarzales** the path climbs, passing a signboard about the trees of the Pinsapar de los Zarzales before crossing a low rise. After descending it climbs once again in a series of tight loops. As the trees thin out the Mirador Puerto de Caucón comes into sight down beneath you.

Reaching a ridge top and an old threshing platform, **La Era de los Gamones**, cut right following a sign for ‘Tajo de la Caina/Vistas Panorámicas 750m’. The path climbs





*El Tajo de la Caina's southern face*

through enormous pinsapos before reaching an open tract of ground where, heading straight ahead, you reach the *mirador* (viewing point) and a sign, 'Fin de Sendero' (55min).

From here cut right past a sign warning of steep drops to one side of the path. Follow a narrow path beneath the southern face of a cliff over a series of knolls, all with soaring views to the south. Sticking close to the cliff face you reach the **Fuente de la Caina**, which emerges from a cleft in the cliff face. ►

From here retrace your footsteps back to the sign, 'Fin de Sendero', then head back towards the Era de los Gamones for 75m to a sign marking 'Vistas Panorámicas'. Here bear left up through the pinsapos. The path, initially indistinct, adopts a westerly course before angling back

Some 50m beyond the spring is a perfect place for a break.

round to the east and passing through a breach in the rocks. Cairns mark your way. The path winds back to the west before reaching flatter ground.

### Optional ascent of La Caina

Here, cutting hard to the left, you could make your way up to the highest point of **La Caina** (1394m) (1hr 20min). Be aware that there are sheer, unprotected drops just a few metres to the south. Once you have visited the summit, retrace your steps back to the main path.

Maintaining your course west across La Caina, parallel to the top of the cliff face, you pass just to the right of another old *era* (threshing floor). Continuing on the same course you pass a sign which reads 'Era 120m'. Some 5m beyond the sign you reach a three-way junction. Ignoring waymarking to the left, branch right past a wooden post with a large cairn at its base. A clear footpath leads back down in a series of loops into the **Pinsapar de los Zarzalones**.

After a steep descent the path bears left, levels then adopts a northwesterly course as the Mirador Puerto de Caucón comes into view once again, still running on through the pinsapos. After passing in front of a steep outcrop of limestone the path loops round to the right as it contours round the upper reaches of the valley of the **Arroyo de los Zarzalones**. After crossing three of the stream's tributaries it runs east along the northern side of the valley where reafforestation is taking place. Some 30m after passing the fork where you earlier forked left you return to the parking area of the **Mirador Puerto de Caucón** (2hr 20min).