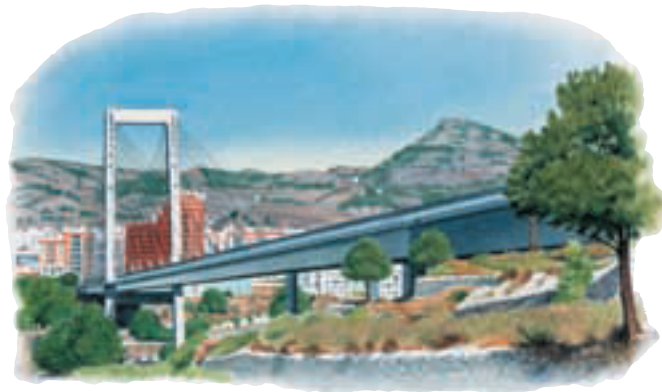




LAND OF VALENCIA



Getting Acquainted with the Serra Mariola

The Serra Mariola and the mountains of L'Alcoià-Comtat offer a harmonious combination of rough terrain, special climatic conditions and a skilful use of the land since time immemorial. This results in a mosaic of landscape and scenery which ecologically-minded visitors are sure to enjoy. To discover this area at its best, you might like to park your car and discover the scenes on foot, horseback or by bicycle.

Please remember that Mediterranean forests and shrub lands are fragile and call for maximum precautions. Do not leave rubbish behind or light fires. Respect animal and plant life. In protected areas, such as the Natural Park of Font Roja, follow park management regulations. Your reward is knowing that you have been kind to the environment.



Hiking routes in the Serra Mariola and l'Alcoià-Comtat

The magnificent opportunities provided by this area for nature excursions are fully covered by a long-distance hiker's route (in Spanish, "Sendero de Gran Recorrido" or "GR"). The GR-7 follows traditional mountain trails marked in red and white paint to keep hikers on the track. A publication called the Topo-guía del sector Venta Boquilla-Alcoi(FTVM-CEV, Valencia 1989) is available, covering the section of the GR-7 running through the Serra Mariola.

The GR-7 approaches Bocairent and runs through the entire Serra Mariola, providing a complete tour of the area. The section between the mountain shelter known as the Refugio S. Reig del Moral (overnight stays and food) and Alcoi is highly recommended. This crosses the Montcabrer peak, which at 1,390m is the highest point in the sierra, and also runs through the impressive scenery of the gorge known as the Barranc del Sinc. Approximate hiking time: 3'30". There are also numerous Short-Distance (PR) routes and Local Footpaths (SL)

In the Natural Park of Font Roja there are signposted walking routes providing a good view of the numerous botanical, scenic and ethnographic attractions of the park. Brochures are available at the park itself.

It is always recommendable to use detailed maps and specialized guidebooks when planning an excursion. The following will be of help: J. R. Nebot, "Mariola" (Valencia, 1998); L'Alcoià

i Comtat, guía natural, històrica i cultural, J.R. Nebot et al. (Alcoi, 1993) offering an extensive inventory of nature and cultural routes (in Valencian); R. Cebrián, "Montañas Valencianas V" (Valencia, 1994); A. Calero, Guía excursionista de la Serra Mariola (Alcoi, 1980); The Serra Mariola and the L'Alcoià-Comtat are included in the following 1:50.000 scale maps: Onteniente 28-32 (820), Alcoy 29-32 (821) and Ibi 28-33 (846).



Cycling routes in the Serra Mariola and the l'Alcoià-Comtat

Road cycling enthusiasts can make a complete tour of the Serra Mariola on a 50-km route running from Bocairent to Alcoi, with a stop at the Font Mariola fountain along the way. From Alcoi, short but steep ascents to Cases de Mariola or the Santuari de la Font Roja can be made.

Mountain bike fans have a range of forest trails and pathways to choose from. Information and suggestions can be found in the guidebook in Valencian Bicicleta de Muntanya: serra amunt, serra avall pels voltants d'Alcoi J. Raül & S. Sellés (Graf. Ciudad, Alcoi, 1992).



PRACTICAL TIPS

To reach Bocairent from Alicante, take the A-7 towards Valencia to Alcoi, turn off on the CV-795 and after passing Banyeres, take the CV-81 to Bocairent.

From Valencia, take the A-7 towards Alicante, bear right towards Albacete on the A-7 at kilometre 57, and then take the CV-81 which passes through Ontinyent to reach Bocairent.



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The tall and celebrated mount Mariola, as fertile as the finest in all of Spain, clad in groves and medicinal herbs, is very rich in waters, and sends them down all her slopes... And so it was that within her shadow and under her protection many villages were built in times of old, and her slopes are still handsomely covered even in our day."

A guidebook called the "Guía del forastero de Alcoy" published in 1864 started with this passage when describing the well-known Mariola sierra, famous for the beauty of its mountains, the purity of its springs and the richness of its vegetation. Lying between the provinces of Alicante and Valencia, the Mariola is the meeting point for three districts known as La Vall d'Albaida, El Comtat and L'Alcoià.

A meeting with the Mariola is magical. At each step, on any well-worn or well-hidden forest track, on any wind-ing pathway, many surprises await the wanderer: hills, valleys and ravines are clothed in every hue of green, hermitages and mountain springs beckon to weary travel-lers, and the scenery comes alive with the song of a bird, the leap of a hare or the soft rustle and sudden flight of a partridge. The air tingles with the aroma of rosemary, sage, lavender, thyme, a herb known as "Aragonese tea", and an extensive vade mecum of aromatic and medicinal plants. Nature rewards visitors with some of her finest work—work we can enjoy and appreciate, as long as we heed her fragile balance and take pains to leave no indelible sign of our passage.

The sierra offers a wide range of opportunities for lovers of the outdoor life. Climbing the peaks of Montcabrer, Sant Jaume and El Portín, through pine forests, holm oaks and even yew trees, we are met with splendid views and panoramic vistas. A visit to the ancient cave-like depots for storing snow, called "cavas", or to some of the old farmhouses in the area provides us with an



overview of the area's popular architecture. The old railway track connecting a number of villages, together with the Long Distance Hiker's Route GR 7, plus numerous foot-paths crossing the sierra, give us plenty of choice for excursions on foot, bicycle or horseback. The sources of the Vinalopó and Clariano rivers provide pictur-escape spots for rest and relax-ation amidst the thriving greenery.

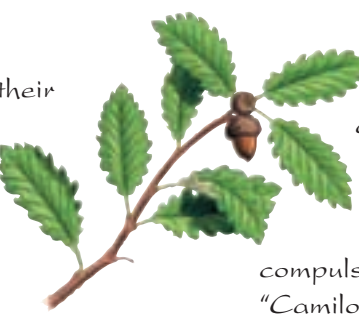
Human settlements under the shelter of the sierra have come, gone and been replaced by new settlements since prehistoric times. This is no wonder, in view of the area's natural wealth: abun-dant water, natural shelters, game, fish, and on the skirts of the mountain, fine soil for growing grain, olives and fruit trees. Numerous remains, from the Paleolithic, Neolithic, Iberian and Roman cultures, can still be seen, not to mention the abundance of vestiges in the area dating from Moorish times. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, artisan textile traditions began incorporating new tech-nologies to give rise to a strong industry dedicat-ed to making sheets, eiderdowns, bed-spreads, and above all, blankets. Today, textiles, papermaking and food preserves still form the basis of the local economy. Wrought iron, ancient firearms (used in local festivities), em-broidered table and bed linen, masks and disguises are some of the articles still handcrafted in the area and sold in special-ist shops.

Traditional local cuisine makes much use of home-grown produce, which is often flavoured with aromatic herbs from the Mariola mountains, giving Mariola dishes their characteristic taste. "Gazpacho" (usually a game stew with wafer-thin pasta), "olla" (a hunter's pot), "bajoques farcides" (stuffed broad bean pods) and "pericana" (spicy dried cod), all using fine olive oil from the region, are emblematic dishes here, sharing the honours with rice platters and, of course, the ubiquitous paella. Moorish influences are again evident at dessert time, when "peladillas" (sugar-coated almonds), "turrones" (a nougat-like sweet), sugared nuts and the "pastissos de monjes" (nun's pastries) are brought



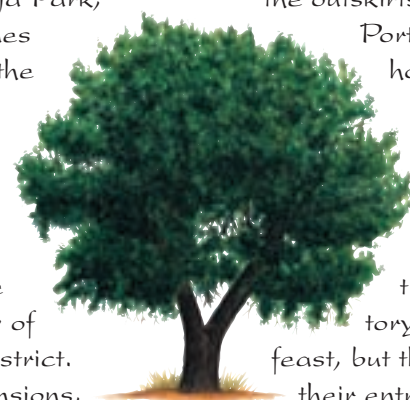
out. And as a digestive, there are two liqueurs bearing their own denomination of origin: "herbero", distilled from mountain herbs, and "café-licor", present at many tradi-tional celebrations. Access to the mountains is through **Bocairent**, which lies in mountainous terrain, with a cluster of tall-looking buildings running round a hilltop crowned by a bell tower to form a harmonious ensemble. The ancient town centre, listed as a national historic-artistic monument, still preserves its Medieval structure and its steep, winding streets. Of note is the Baroque campanile of the Church of the Virgin of the Assumption and its excellent museum con-taining works by Juan de Juanes, Ribalta and Sorolla. Close by, the Archeological Museum shows a valuable collection of discoveries from the surrounding area. A visit should also be made to the "Covetes del Moros", or Moorish caves, whose cavities were carved out of the rock face flanking a ravine opposite the town. Also worth visiting is the bullring sculpted from sheer rock using pickaxes in 1843. Both in the town itself and its outlying areas are a number of hermitages, and a choice of crys-tal-clear springs from which to drink.

Towards the south, the town of **Banyeres de Mariola** presents another picture-postcard cluster of houses around a hilltop, dominat-ed by the imposing figure of an ancient Moorish castle, which now houses the Archeological and Festivities museums. A stroll round the town centre offers pleasant surpris-es, such as the 16th-century tower of Font Bona, the Baroque church of Santa María and the hermitages of Santa María Magdalena, Sant Jordi and Santo Cristo, accessible along a zigzagging calvary route made in the 18th century. The municipal district, through which the river Vinalopó makes its way, has an abundance of springs and fountains. Pine and oak for-ests cover the mountainous areas, and the valleys are dotted with olive and almond trees and grape vines. From Banyeres de Mariola, the road to Alcoi runs through the Serra Mariola and the Natural Kermes Oak Park of Font Roja. The unique silhouette of **Alcoi**, with its bridges crossing the ravines of the rivers Barxell, Molinar and Serpis, is a wonder to behold. Side by side



with the modern industrial town are the typical squares and streets winding through the ancient centre. The church of Santa María, the parochial churches of San Mauro and San Francisco, with a sacred art museum, the cloister of the Sant Agustín convent or the Ayuntamiento Viejo (old town hall) are compulsory visits, as well as the famous Archeological Museum "Camilo Visedo Moltó" and the Museo Casal de Sant Jordi. As seen from the town, the gorge known as the Barranc del Sinc seems to en-courage us to see wilder, rougher scenery. On the other side of town, the Sanctuary of the Virgin of the Lilies, within the Font Roja Park, marks the start of an attractive nature area clothed in kermes oaks and pines. From the peaks of the Mariola mountains, the valley of Alcoi and Cocentina opens up before the brave climber.

The town of **Cocentina**, seat of the Comtat district, pro-vides visitors with an overview of its history on a walk through the town. The recommended route starts with the magnificent Gothic-style Duke's Palace, continuing with the Renaissance paintings of the Baroque church of Our Lady of the Assumption, and the Moorish alleyways of the Raval district. Popular architecture is combined with ancient Mudejar mansions, and house façades frequently bear 18th-century tiles and noblemen's coats-of-arms. The peaks of the Serra Mariola and the course of the river Serpis run side by side to the north, reaching the town of **Muro de Alcoy**. From here, visitors can make excursions to Peña del Frare and Els Fontanars, see the tiny hermitages located around the district or simply enjoy the peace and quiet on a stroll through the outlying area, with its farmhouses of Morisco—or Christianized Moslem—origin. Leaving Muro de Alcoy behind and bordering the northernmost summits of the Mariola moun-tains, a quiet road takes travel-lers to the vil-lages of Agres and Alfafara. Olive trees, wal-nuts and almond trees invade the mountain slopes around these picturesque hill towns. In **Agres** building traditions have given balconies and wrought iron grilles to the houses that climb the slopes of the mountain following sinuous streets to the summit. At the top is the well-known sanctuary of the Mare de Deu del Castell, from which a beautiful view can



be had of the village and its dis-trict. Further on from the sanctu-ary, along the footpaths leading to the Montcabrer peak, the more adventurous visitor can see the sites of ancient "cavas" and walk through the southernmost yew for-est in Europe. Neighbouring **Alfafara**, with whitewashed houses grouped around the parochial church, offers visitors a number of spots where time seems to have stood still—the village pine forest on the outskirts, the ravine of the Cova de la Font on the path to the

Portín peak, the Late Roman ruins of the Mas del Pou (well house), or even the ancient public washing fountain, where some villagers still do their laundry. Last, but by no means least, a few words on the local festivities, which will serve to highlight the spirit of the inhabitants of the Mariola mountains. The key fiesta by far is the feast of the Moors and Christians, which at-tracts numerous visitors from home and abroad. The his-tory of each individual town contributes variants to each feast, but they all revolve around the same axis: the Moors make their entry in the town and are defeated by the Christian troops. Alcoi, Bocairent, Banyeres, Cocentina, Muro de Alcoy and Alfafara all vie with one another in showiness and colour when the processions of each troop parade through the streets in their best carnival dress to the sound of marching bands, amidst the clamour of the public and the bark of blunderbusses. Other fiestas amongst the Mariolans also stand out for their originality, beauty and antiqui-ty, such as the Parade of the Three Kings in Alcoi, considered to be the oldest in Spain, the "cremà del pi" (burning of the pine tree) and the representation of the appearance of the Mare de Deu (the Virgin) in Agres, or the popular "romeria", or pilgrimage, to the hermitage of San Antonio Abad in Alfafara.



