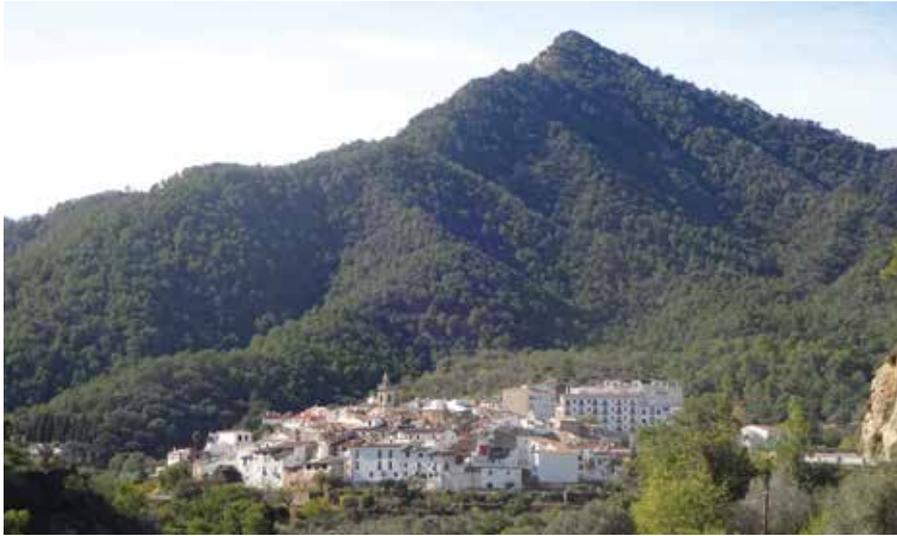


The Sierras of the Orange Blossom Coast

8 days from £719 May, September & October



Spain is blessed with a rich variety of great walking country – from the mountains of Andalucia to the sand-dune cliffs of the Donana, from the rocky peaks of the Costa Blanca to hilly vineyards of Catalonia. Much less well-known, though of at least equal merit, are the Sierras of the Orange Blossom Coast just to the north of Valencia. The coastal area, known as ‘La Huerta’, the ‘orchard’, is ancient, irrigated farmland which has provided nearby cities with fruit, vegetables and rice for centuries. Not far inland are the dramatic landscapes of the Desert of the Palms, the Sierra de Espadan, and the Sierra de Irta. The resort of Benicassim is the ideal base from which to explore these lands of white villages, watchtowers and Carmelite monastic ruins.

• 7 nights hb in Benicassim • Walks in the Sierra de Irta, near Peniscola, in the ‘Desert of the Palms’, and in the mountainous Sierra de Espadan

PROGRAMME

DAY ONE: Flight to Valencia or Castellon. Transfer to your hotel in Benicassim (an hour from Valencia, 30 minutes from Castellon), for seven nights’ half-board accommodation.

Benicassim has a pleasant town centre a mile inland from the beach, but its pride and joy are the splendid Modernista villas towards the northern end of the seaside avenue. It also has a 3 ½ -mile Via Verde Greenway linking the resort with Oropesa del Mar – this is a disused coastal railway line suitable for walking or cycling and featuring spectacular sea views. Take a torch for the tunnel! You will learn about the influence of the Carmelite order in the area during your walk in the Desert of the Palms. In town, you might fall under their influence yourself at the Carmelitano distillery where aromatic liqueurs and sweet Moscatel are produced from old recipes! There are train and bus services from Benicassim to surrounding areas, and neighbouring Castellon has both a main line station and frequent suburban services to Valencia.

DAYS TWO TO SEVEN: In resort with three included walking excursions.

Walk 1: The Desert of the Palms and its Hermitages. You drive the short distance inland and up into the Palms Desert Natural Park, just behind Benicassim. Rising up to over 2000ft, the park begins just three miles from the coast as the crow flies – rather further by the rather twisty road! It is a land of rich Mediterranean vegetation and wildlife, scattered with castles and hermitages, and offering fantastic views both of the coast and the precipitous mountains inland. The circular walk starts at the monastery where there is a short visit with entrance fee included. 5 miles, 350m of ascent/descent.

Walk 2: The Sierra de Espadan, Ain – the water route. Just under an hour’s drive inland is the impressive Sierra where you walk today, near the white-painted village of Ain, set scenically on its hillside. The village’s name means a spring in Arabic, so it is appropriate that your route has

water as a theme. You walk from the village up to the castle and then continue along a path on the hillside above. Along the way, there are pines, cork oaks, and – of course – several springs, used for irrigation. 7.5 miles, 465m of ascent/descent.

Walk 3: The Coastal Sierra de Irta. Coach transfer (45 minutes) to Santa Magdalena de Pulpis, from where you walk through the Sierra to the coast. Starting through a wooded area, you reach a Templar castle, which was built on an older Moorish fortification. Shortly afterwards you reach the high point of the walk; it’s all downhill to the coast from here! There are carob and ancient olive trees as you descend towards the medieval Badum watchtower on the coast, near the resort of Peniscola. 6 miles, 330m ascent, 450m descent.

You have a little time to explore Peniscola. The town’s name is a corruption of ‘Peninsula’ and the castle is, indeed, almost an island. It was built by the Knights Templar in the late 13th century, but in the 15th became the home of Papa Luna, Pope Benedict XIII, the last of the Avignon Popes of the Great Schism, who took refuge here after being deposed.

DAY EIGHT: Depart to the airport for your flight home.



YOUR HOTEL

HOTEL INTUR BONAIRE ★★★★★, Benicassim (seven nights)

The hotel is located just 200 yards from the beach and 1 ½ miles from the town centre of Benicassim. Set in pleasant gardens, the hotel has a large outdoor swimming pool and a small indoor one. There is a bar and restaurant serving buffet meals. The comfortable bedrooms have bath/shower, wc, tv, air-conditioning, safe, hairdryer, and small fridge, as well as free wifi. Rooms with pool-view and terrace come at a supplement. Wellness facilities (charges apply) are available in a neighbouring sister hotel. (www.intur.com/hotel-bonaire-benicassim).

If you have friends who are not walkers interested in this itinerary, it is featured in our Escorted Holidays brochure with a touring programme.