

Cazorla Diary

by

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We've planned our trip meticulously: booked the hotel well in advance, trawled the Internet for info about our destination, the Natural Park of Cazorla, Segura and Las Villas in Jaén, and of course, checked the car's innards before setting off. We arrive at our hotel late evening after a 4.5 hour-drive from Malaga. It's warm and cosy, and the food's comforting and wholesome. Outside it's wet and windy and the mountainside's cloaked in fog. But we're optimistic: tomorrow the sun will surely shine.

Day 1

9.00am - False start

Only it doesn't. It rains. The mist drifts and shifts but refuses to lift. We jump in our trusty Fiat Doblo – and it refuses to start. Eventually the engine fires into a laboured chug-chug. We crawl up mist-swirling bends, gathering an impatient convoy behind us.

The park covers an area of 850 square miles, roughly the same size as Tenerife, and in parts reaches a height of over 7000 feet. Famed for its wildlife (deer, wild boar, mountain goats, griffon vultures, otters and golden eagles), ancient forests, rivers and brooks, and rugged rock formations, the area is criss-crossed by scores of hiker's trails, as well as rough tracks suitable for sturdy vehicles. The chances of actually seeing any of its treasure seem remote this first morning.

Something is seriously wrong. We pull over to the side of the road and pass a valiant pair zipped up in all-weather hiking gear. There's a signposted route nearby of around five-six hours, they tell us. We consider ditching the Doblo. But we're hardly kitted out. My partner's wearing a sheepskin coat that weighs more than the original sheep and neither of us have waterproof anythings. We decide to roll back to the hotel and figure out what to do.



Early morning mist



Goat family

10.30am - Pit stop

A miracle. It's December 6, a public holiday, and there's a garage open! We leave the van in the mechanic's hands and take comfort in a cup of thick hot chocolate with churros (long, deep-fried doughnutty things) at a nearby café.

11.30am - Cazorla town

The car is now working. The petrol tank has been given a drink (some kind of cleaning fluid) and the engine prodded and listened to. An electrical fault, says the mechanic. Needs sorting out properly, but should hold out. Too late now to embark on a soggy all-day hike, so we opt for plan B: explore the town of Cazorla, and sign up for an organised jeep trip in the afternoon.

Even on an overcast morning, Cazorla's a charming place, crammed with narrow streets and whitewashed houses, and presided over by a ninth century Moorish castle. At the foot of the castle, on the plaza *vieja*, sit the striking ruins of the church of Santa Maria, a Renaissance gem destroyed in 1694 during a storm. We stroll along the river that winds out of the town, admiring the stone bridges and mini-waterfalls, the ducks, and the weeping willows with their Autumn-burnished tresses.

1pm – Tapa treats

We see a sign for a museum, but instead, step into La Cueva de Juan Pedro. The ceiling is strung with ropes of garlic and chillies, greasy hams, and pots and pans and cooking utensils-cum-instruments of torture. There's a roaring fire behind the bar and the counter displays a tantalising array of tapas - even for vegetarians. We sample a very rich *patatas a la pobre* (poor person's potatoes), leek and mushroom *revuelto* (Spanish scrambled eggs) and fried *acelgas* (chards) with garlic.



Roasting meat



Cazorla town in the rain

2pm – Jeeping in the rain

We meet our fellow jeepmates, two elderly couples from Madrid, and Andrés, our guide. Andrés does his best to keep our minds off the worsening weather. He points out the different species of conifers, elms, ash trees, alders and thousand-year old oaks, and tells us how the Spanish Armada was largely built from the forests of Cazorla in the 18th century. In 1983 UNESCO declared the park a biosphere, and today although forestry is still allowed, along with hunting, fishing, agriculture and livestock, all industry is strictly regulated.

The drizzle turns into a steady downpour. The Madrileños stay put. We hop out and scramble over slippery rocks to the birthplace of the river Gualquivir – an insignificant trickle that later swells and surges into Andalusia's longest, most-written about river. We peer through the windows at baby pine trees that sprout miraculously out of chunks of limestone, and I brave the rain to snap a giant fossil embedded in a rock. At last we arrive at what should be the highlight of the trip: the chance to observe griffon vultures at close range. We take it in turns under an umbrella to peer through Andrés's telescope. Despite the rain it's still exciting to see the great birds stuffed in their hole-in-

the-cliff nests.

We begin the long, slow drive back to Cazorla. As dusk falls, the rain eases off. Slithers of weak sunlight split open the sky and we pause to take in the splendid views out across the olive-tree plains of Jaén.

7.30pm – Reward time

Coffee and cognac at the hotel, a warming soak in the bath, dinner and so to bed.

Day 2

9.00am - A sunny start

Not only has the sun got his hat on, but the Doblo also fires on all cylinders. We anticipate a perfect day of hiking and driving. And almost get it.

Retracing the route of yesterday's aborted drive we run into a family of shaggy white mountain goats: the first of the day's various animal sightings. Our planned walk along the river Borosa and up to two lagoons starts just past the strangely-named Torre de Vinagre, where there is a visitor's centre stuffed with heads of wild boar, deer and ibex.

11.30am - River Borosa walk

The river rushes by, swollen from the rains; its banks crowded with a green-orange-red blend of pines, fig trees, maples, hawthorns and poplars. After a while, the river narrows and we navigate a series of narrow man-made walkways and wooden bridges. The water pounds onto boulders coated in thick green moss. Everywhere is shiny and lush. Cat Stevens pops into my head and I start praising the singing and springing of the wet garden. We emerge from the walkways into a wide, rugged valley, surrounded by dramatic limestone rock reliefs. We spot a pair of – we think - golden eagles circling above.

Suddenly it's all too much like hard work. The path becomes steep and rocky. A couple we meet coming down tell us that the first lagoon is empty. We cop out and collapse for a picnic lunch in a grassy meadow, then make our way back..



Fast-flowing river



Cazorla canyon

5.30pm - Deer, oh deer

Our next stop, the deer park by the Tranco reservoir. En route we nearly hit two wild boar. They belong to a hotel and are about as wild as a couple of chickens, but we get excited all the same. Dusk may be the best time for deer-spotting, but not with crowds of whooping kids and parents

who let them. Still, we glimpse two different species of deer before thoughts of hot baths and hot toddies pull us away.

The perfect day is about to go pear-shaped. We stop for a coffee. I don't have my purse. It must have fallen out of my pocket at the deer park. Tired, worried and miserable, we drive back to Cazorla, brush up at the hotel, and report the loss at the police station.

8.30pm - Drowning sorrows

We bump into Andrés in town and tell him what's happened.. “Lo hecho, hecho está (what's done is done),” he says, giving us practical advice about the best tapas in town. He sends us to the fabulous Las Vegas bar, where we order a plate of assorted delicacies piled on a kind of deep-fried bread. They have names like *gloria bendita* (heavenly glory), scrambled egg with prawns and onions; *largartijón* (big lizard), anchovies with garlic mayonnaise; and *ojo de pato* (duck's eye), slice of fried potato, slice of egg, dollop of mayo and spicy red sauce. The house wine is excellent. We forget about the purse, the hassle and the cholesterol, and savour the moment.

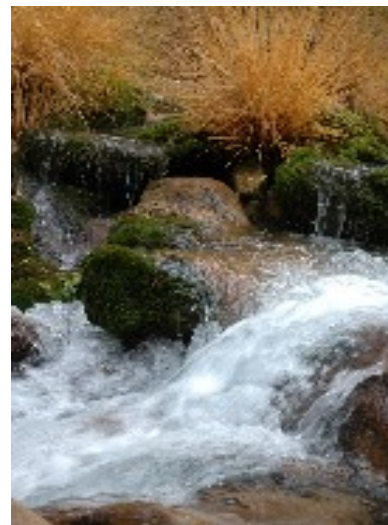
Day 3

It's raining. The car starts. We return to the deer park, retrace our steps and root through every bin in sight. We don't find my purse. We do, however, see hundreds of deer chilling out in the drizzle. And there's not a screaming kid in sight.

Back in Cazorla, we drop into La Cueva and Las Vegas for a final round of tapas and good cheer. *A mal tiempo, buena cara*: when things go wrong, put on a happy face. Despite the dodgy car, dismal weather and lost dosh, we just about manage it.



Illustration 1: Twilight over plains of Jaén



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