

All about the Lake District

May 2009

Oh I do like to be beside the lakeside

It's just 45 minutes from the heaving Costa del Sol and packed with stunning scenery and great food. Here, taking a fun circular route – and including the fabulous El Torcal mountains near Antequera - Jon Clarke explains why the Malaga Lake District is miles better than the coast

FANCY somewhere different to lay down your towel this weekend? Is the Costa del Sol just too busy and the Costa de la Luz too windy? Fed up looking for a place to park and a beach with more than a postage stamp of space to lie on? Well, here is an alternative . . . in the mountains about half way between Ronda and Antequera. It's called the Malaga Lake District and while there has been no William

Wordsworth eulogising its beauty - nor have there been many mentions in guide-books - take it from me it is the hot tip for cooling off this summer.

It's not only a brilliant alternative to the overdeveloped beaches of Fuengirola and Marbella – and a break from

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Walk on the wild side

From Page 1

the relentless winds of Tarifa or Vejer - it is also almost completely unspoilt. Quieter - and a good deal cheaper - than the coastal towns, the turquoise lakes were created when a dam was built in the 1920s across the dramatically-high Guadalhorce river gorge, known as the Garganta del Chorro.

You can pitch your tent along the shore at various campsites and there are a number of lovely lakeside beaches to lie on, not to mention swim off, so don't forget your bucket and spade.

And this year, after one of the best winters for rain in recent memory, the lakes are reaching capacity again, having been as low as 30 per cent after four years of drought last year.

Little known to holiday-makers, the upland area, much of which has been designated a natural park, has a breathtaking mix of historic sites, villages and scenery.

Sitting amid craggy mountain surroundings, the lakes are a magnet for wildlife, with eagles, vultures and bee-eaters swooping around. It's ideal for a day trip from the coast or any of the inland towns... and it will appeal to the Indiana Joneses among your children. As well as the lakes, they can look forward to ruined cities, swamps and tunnels through vertiginous rock. Alternatively, there are enough good hotels to make it a destination in its own right.

The perfect way to explore the Lake District is



OUT THERE: El Chorro is full of breathtaking scenery and amazing walks such as the death-defying Caminito del Rey

in a circular route starting at Ardales, and taking in perhaps Teba, Campillos, Fuente de Piedra and finally the delightful town of Antequera.

But Ardales best sets the scene for what is to come: a village tumbling down a hillside, bustling since Roman times, an amazing little church complete with ancient Muslim minaret, a cave complex with 60 Palaeolithic paintings from 18,000BC - and all just five minutes from the lakes.

A busy town with plenty of atmosphere, there are a series of good places to stop for breakfast or lunch, including restaurant Juan

Vera, which has some excellent old photos around its walls and Casa Paco, which is your spot for tapas, and in particular, breakfast.

Great tapas and you can buy a bag of oranges or lemons for just one euro

The road out of Ardales eventually meanders to the Garganta del Chorro gorge. You will want to stop every 100 metres to take a photo and the children will love

the theme-park drama of the descent into the increasingly narrow ravine. It's certainly a humbling experience, as the sky darkens and you're met with nearly sheer walls, sometimes 400 metres high. Make sure to stop at the Swedish-run tapas bar and *chiringuito* Bikers Heaven to refresh yourself in their natural sulphur-spring fed pool.

A protected oasis next to the chapel Finca la Ermita, where the annual *romeria* comes from Ardales, there is some great tapas and you can buy a bag of oranges or lemons for just a euro. Later, through blinding

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DIVE IN: There are plenty of places to have a dip and pedalos and canoes can be rented

sunshine reflecting off the lake's surface below, we had to blink and suspend disbelief as we watched a group of thrill-seekers clambering gingerly along a path pinned to the gorge's side 100 metres up. Known as the King's Pathway (or *Caminito del Rey*), it has become a rite of passage for teenagers and extreme sports enthusiasts. With large sections missing and the handrail all but collapsed, the rickety wooden track requires a series of long, suicidal leaps - or in fact nowadays abseiling skills - and nerves of steel to attempt.

An explorers' paradise - including a fantastic railway walk

It's little wonder that the track, which has been officially closed since 1992, is on the verge of restoration. The nearby village of El Chorro is small but a number of hotels and restaurants have sprung up to cater for climbers. Its main allure is its position by Lake Gaitanejo and the spectacular soaring limestone crags that envelop it. An explorer's paradise - including a fantastic railway walk which climbs up the side of the gorge.

Watch out, though - while this is just a branch line, trains do occasionally rumble past. Fancy doing it the safe way, you can try a number of lo-



cal adventure specialists including Casa del Lago Holidays, where Jacci and Rob Sheehy organise all range of fun and interesting activities, including quad biking, climbing and canoeing.

Another great excursion, by foot or car, heads up towards the ancient ruined city of Bobastro, with a turn off on the El Chorro to Ardales road. Also in El Chorro is German-run El Chorro Rock Climbing Shop.

An incredibly atmospheric place (see Page 19), continuing beyond it for another mile or so, you will reach a dead end and Bar La Mesa, surely one of the best sited restaurants in the world.

Not always open but if you are lucky, the owner will attempt to attract the local vultures by swinging a leg of ham in the air until they are circling *en masse*. From here, head towards

the main Guadaleba-Guadalhorce reservoir, where a winding road took us towards Campillos and Teba, going across dams and to more great lunch stops, including El Mirador, an earthy, organic affair, serving dishes with a spicy North African flavour and, in particular, great stuffed cabbage.

Nearby is the charming La Cantina, which is the oldest in the area and run by a charming local family. For lunch or supper, by far the best place in terms of food is Yerbaguena in Campillos. En route to Ronda, you'll find Meson del Diego.

Heading north, a few miles away from the cluster of lakes near El Chorro, but certainly worth the visit is Andalucía's biggest natural lake, the Laguna de Fuente de Piedra.

It is the second most important breeding ground for flamingos in Europe

(after the Camargue in France). Though in danger from drought over the last few years and encroaching farms, each year up to 20,000 pairs come to breed.

You can drive around the lake, and a visitors' centre near the village of Fuente de Piedra gives advice, maps and tours. While here, why not take a visit to the nearby Donkey Sanctuary, which is well signposted.

The journey back is on the windy road to Almogía, via the national park of El Torcal. Here, you can climb limestone formations, watching out for 30 types of orchid, until you're high enough to see the coast of Africa.

One thing for sure, next time you are sweating in the car to take the kids to the beach for the weekend, give the Lake District a thought. And then dive in, all guns blazing.

Buying and renting in the Lake District



BARGAIN: This village house in Ardales, with fantastic views and ready to reform, is selling through Inmobiliaria Ardales for just 18,950 euros

WHILE the real estate market is incredibly quiet at the moment, there are still buyers looking to invest money in inland Andalucía.

The Lake District with its incredible scenery and communications with the coast and airport at Málaga is an extremely good investment.

According to Karen Holmby of Inmobiliaria Ardales, there are some excellent deals out there.

"The fincas are hard to come by and are rare, but there are some great village houses in Ardales, which have dropped a lot in price."

New village houses, for example, have dropped from 180,000 to 150,000 euros. "A three-bedroom village house to reform that was 80,000 last year is now down to 59,000 euros. "Plenty of people will take offers unlike last year. They know they have to."

One thing she is keen to warn people about is not to be tempted to buy a plot of land around the lakes as it is unlikely to get planning permission.

"We don't sell them because all you can get - if you are lucky - is a licence for a warehouse, which you won't be able to live in."

Finally, if you are looking for somewhere nice to rent for a month or two while you are looking around to buy, you could do worse than contact Roland and Eryl, from Ardalesvillage.com. The couple have the largest selection of good quality rental property in the area, ranging from B&Bs, apartments and village townhouses to rural retreats in extensive grounds as well as luxury villas with private pools all within 20 mins of the lakes.

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Engineering project fit for king

THE PROJECT to dam the Turon river was planned at the beginning of the 20th century. A key river providing much of Malaga city's drinking water, the river originates in the heart of the Sierra de las Nieves near El Burgo. Before entering the Gaitanes Gorge, the river joins both the Guadalteba and Guadalhorce rivers.

The building of the Conde de Guadalhorce dam started in 1914 under the direction of engineer Rafael Benjumea. Concrete was used to build the dam and the sides were covered in blocks of stone cut by stonemasons.

It is 75 metres high and more than 50 metres at its base. Its arch spans some 130 metres and the reservoir's current water capacity is 86hm3. It accounts for some 12 kilometres of the Rio Turon.

A hydroelectric plant was built at the base of the dam and King Alfonso XIII was so impressed with its installation he awarded Benjumea the title, the Count of Guadalhorce and named the dam after him.

It was officially opened in 1921 by the king and on this occasion he took a walk along the specially constructed catwalk, called *El Caminito del Rey* (The King's Path), pinned to the face of

the gorge some 100 metres above the river. Incredibly, much of it is still left standing today.



AWESOME: Caminito del Rey is a true feat of engineering



LANDSCAPE OVERDOSE: Countryside around the Lake District is some of the best in Spain and includes flamingos, hidden chapels and ancient cities

Amazing lakes & karma*

* (apologies to Emerson, Lake & Palmer)

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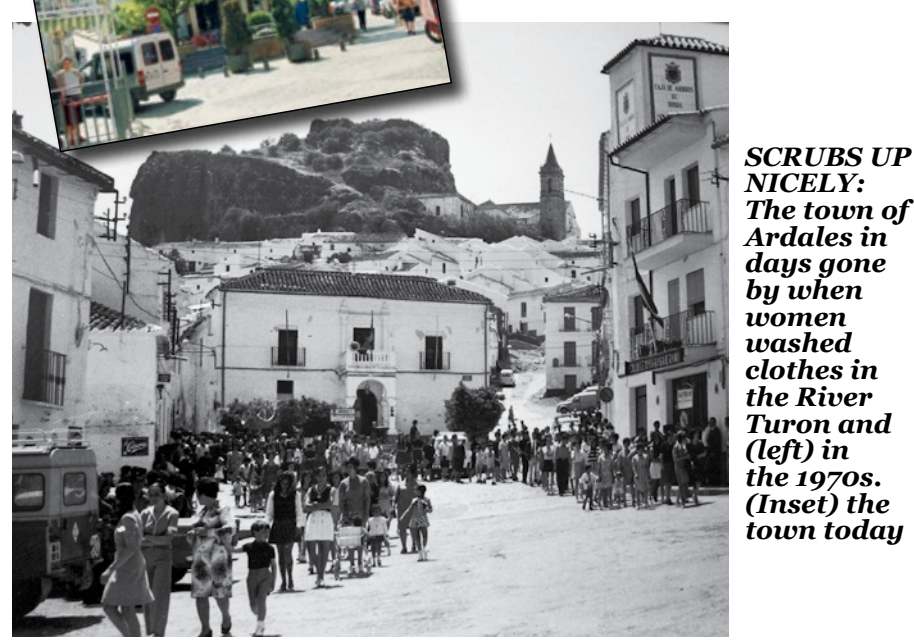
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Awash with memories




SCRUBS UP NICELY:
 The town of Ardales in days gone by when women washed clothes in the River Turon and (left) in the 1970s. (Inset) the town today

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WHERE TO STAY

THE Lake District is a great place to escape for the weekend, perhaps even to plan a summer holiday. In the heart of El Chorro itself are a couple of excellent places to stay. The **Olive Branch Bed and Breakfast** is a friendly spot with some awesome views. It is currently organising a three-night horse riding weekend, with cheap accommodation and food included. Call Mel or Gary on 686 669 359 for more information. Nearby is the charming **Casa del Lago** apartment run by Jacci and Rob Sheehy, who have an enviable spot at the top of the hamlet. The couple are also specialising in holidays for people with a variety of disabilities and have a fully-fitted apartment ideal for people in wheelchairs and their carers. On the road back to Ardales is the excellent - and good value - hostel **Bikers Heaven**, where you can pick up a good value double room for just 50 euros a night. Sitting in a charming hidden corner behind a chapel, there are orange and lemon trees and an amazing spring-fed pool. Another brilliant place to stay, if you are looking for a more formal-type hotel, is the incredibly sited **Posada del Conde**, sitting beside the main dam for the Guadalhorce reservoir. Run by a local family, this historic hotel is remarkably relaxed and very well appointed with decent size rooms.

WHERE TO EAT

ONE of the best places to eat in the area is **Restaurante La Garganta** in El Chorro. In a great location with spectacular views, its English owners serve up an excellent range of dishes in an attractive dining room. And best of all you can even stay next door. Two other great choices for lunch are **Restaurant El Mirador** and **El Kiosko** which are absolutely packed for Sunday lunch, but open every other day of the week. Nearby is the charming **Cantina venta**, which sits right on the dam and is the oldest restaurant in the area. Also worth a try is **Los Pinos** at Camping El Chorro. In Ardales **Juan Vera Restaurant** is a good spot for lunch or supper, while next door **Casa Paco** is great if you are looking for some tapas or breakfast. More serious diners should head for **Yerbaguena** in Campillos, which is the area's attempt at a Michelin star. Finally don't miss **Meson de Diego**, which is a brilliant stopping off point en route to Ronda.

Lake District special

A secret hideout for centuries

IT was a hideout that few would have found. Hidden amid a pine-covered mountain side, the ancient town of Bobastro is one of Andalusia's most atmospheric archaeological ruins. Dating back to the Moorish era it was here that Umar ibn Hafsun constructed his headquarters from where he led a long running revolt against the all-powerful Caliphate of Cordoba between 879 and 918 AD. Born in 850 in Parauta, near Ronda, he was a wild youth with a violent temper and was involved in a number of disputes and even a murder. He joined a group of brigands, was captured but was able to flee to Africa, where he worked briefly as an apprentice tailor. He soon returned to Andalusia though, albeit as an outlaw, and joined the bandits who were in rebellion against the Caliphate. He soon became their leader and settled at the ancient ruined city of Bobastro. He rebuilt the castle, and also fortified the nearby town of Ardales.

He rallied disaffected arabs to the cause, playing off resentment at the unfair, heavy taxation many were receiving at the hands of Emir Abd ar-Rahman. He acquired castles and lands in a number of areas including parts of Cadiz, Granada, Jaen and Sevilla and in 885, in order to be more centrally located, he moved his headquarters to the town of Poley, which is now known as Aguilar de la Frontera, in Cordoba. After ibn Hafsun's defeat at the battle of Poley in 891, he fled back to Bobastro, where he soon renounced Islam and became a Christian, being christened as Samuel. He built a Mozarabic Church there and hoped to obtain military support from King Alfonso III of Leon. But his conversion proved a major political mistake as it cost him the support of most of his Mullawad followers. Ibn Hafsun died in 917 and was buried at Bobastro. His coalition soon crumbled, with his sons, who took over, falling to Abd-ar-Rahman III's armies in 928.



ATMOSPHERIC: The church carved out of rock by Arab rebel Hafsun at Bobastro

With Bobastro's fall, the mortal remains of ibn Hafsun and his slain sons were exhumed by the emir and posthumously crucified outside Cordoba's famous mosque. The church, which was cut out of the rock, is very much the highlight of a visit today. Its primitive structure can still be seen as three sections separated by horseshoe shaped arches. The church is orientated towards the East and measures 16.5 metres long and 10.3 metres wide.

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