

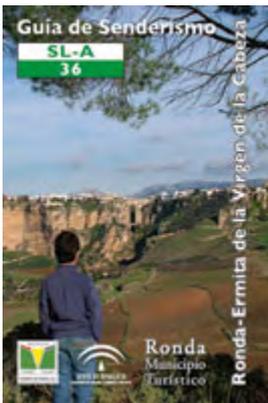
## SL-A 36 RONDA - HERMITAGE OF THE VIRGIN 'DE LA CABEZA'

Distance: 2.5 km

Level of Difficulty: low

Type of route: Linear

Mode: On foot or mountain bike



This route starts in the attractive neighbourhood of San Francisco, next to the medieval defensive city walls and the gates of Carlos V and the 'Almocabar'. Fresh drinking water can be found in the fountain beside the old entrance to the city. We leave the spacious plaza of the Ruedo Alameda to our left, and make our way up the street (or calle) Torrejones, which passes the 'Torre del Predicadorio' [Preacher's Tower] at its highest point. This is where people once gathered to hear the sermons of the beatified friar Diego José de Cadiz, whose remains are now to be found in an urn at the foot of the statue of the Virgin de la Paz, patroness of Ronda, in the sanctuary de la Paz. The remains of the tower that one can see here nowadays once formed part of the Roman aqueduct that brought water from the spring of La Arena to Arunda (as Ronda was then known). It is worth stopping to take a closer look at the remains of the water channels and to admire the magnificent view of Ronda that one gets from this spot.

We continue on past this spot, soon finding ourselves at the very edge of the built up area. At the second roundabout that we meet we find a signpost indicating that the 'iglesia rupestre de la Virgen de la Cabeza' is to be found on our right. Of the two tracks that we can now see before us, we take the first, right-hand, one.

Our path is very clearly defined by the stone walls of the bordering fields and estates, where we see mostly olive trees and cereals growing. On our right we are soon greeted with a marvellous frontal view of the old 'Ciudad', the name used to refer to the old Muslim town of Ronda, where some of the most important monumental buildings are to be found, such as the church of Santa Maria la Mayor. To the right of this latter is the site of the old Castillo, or castle, which was demolished in 1808 by French troops during the Napoleonic wars. Further to the right is the church of the 'Espíritu Santo' [Holy Spirit], which was built over the remains of an Arabic defensive tower destroyed during the conquest of Ronda by the Catholic kings, Isabel and Fernando, in 1485. It is said that when this church was finished in 1505, Isabel left the hoof print of her horse stamped in the porch way. Not so long ago photographs were published in the international press of Madonna, the famous singer, saying her prayers inside this church. On the extreme right is the neighbourhood of San Francisco where our walk started out from.

We soon pass the house of 'Arrúa' on our right. From what remains of it we can see that this was once a stately mansion, with wine cellars, swimming pool, tennis courts and a look out tower. In its hey day it was the envy of all who passed by.

From here the track starts a gradual descent, passing foliage of sumach, turpentine (*Pistacia terebinthus*) and holm oaks growing by the wayside. Between the vegetation we can make out the Ronda Tajo, the name given to the cliffs and gorge that ages of erosion has cut into the sedimentary rock known as 'molasa', an agglomeration of sand and limestone that was deposited between ten to twenty million years ago when this zone was under the sea, as is indicated by the presence of abundant maritime fossils. To the left of the cliff face we can see the 'Asa de la Caldera' or 'Cauldron's Handle', whose name refers to the shape formed in the rock by the same processes of erosion.

A little further on we can enjoy further views of the Tajo and the famous New Bridge, which joins the old 'Ciudad' side of Ronda with the newer 'Mercadillo' or 'Little Market' side. The Guadalquivir river flows through the gorge and out across the basin known as 'la Hoya del Tajo'. In the surroundings of the gorge are terraced orchards and vegetable gardens watered by a labyrinth of irrigation channels that have their origin in the Arabic epoch. Amongst the fruits that are grown is the famous 'pero' of Ronda, a small variety of apple that is much appreciated in the Serranía. The fields are mostly dedicated to wheat growing although several vineyards are starting to make an appearance, returning to these terrains after a century of absence caused by the devastations of the phylloxera plague. Grape growing was once a major economic activity here and it looks like it will soon regain its previous importance. There are now around twenty wine producing vineyards in the Serranía producing high quality wines under the auspices of the regulating body of the 'Vinos Sierras de Malaga' and receiving the denomination 'Serranía de Ronda'.

A few metres further on we reach a fork in the track. We take the right hand track, descending towards the zone where, every second Sunday of June, the 'romería' [pilgrimage] of the Virgin 'de la Cabeza' takes place, and where we can see a drinking water fountain and two stone troughs. If we walk between the enormous pine trees on our right we can contemplate a magnificent panoramic view of Ronda spread out along the top of the majestic Tajo.

Looking in the other direction we see ranges of mountains cut by valleys. To the west is the massive hill of Mures, on whose flat summit, silhouetted against the sky, we can see the 'Lentisco del Mures' [Mures Mastic Tree] a specimen that is noted in the catalogue of remarkable woods and trees of Andalucía. Looking eastwards from there we see the following peaks: Torreón (1,654 metres above sea level, and the highest in the province of Cadiz) in the Sierra del Pinar, followed by that of San Cristobal (the first to be seen from the Atlantic) and the range of Libar, at the foot of which runs the Guadiaro river. All these mountains are within the boundaries of the Sierra de Grazalema Natural Park. The Guadiaro is formed where the Guadalquivir comes down the valley from the north and joins the Guadalquivir. To the east is the Sierra Hidalga and behind it the Sierra de la Nieve, where the pinsapo, or Spanish fir tree grows, native to the Serranía de Ronda. The presence of this rare species was a decisive factor in the creation of the Sierra de las Nieves Natural Park. To the south we can see the Sierra del Oreganal, with the hills of Armola and Jarastepar, standing between us and the Genal Valley.

The final stage of our journey takes us down the ramp that leads to the hermitage of the Virgin de la Cabeza. This Mozarabic church was carved out of the sandstone rock during the ninth and tenth centuries and is also known as the Caves of San Anton. In front of the entrance is a baroque chapel where the statue of the 'Virgen de la Cabeza' is housed throughout the summer months. The whole complex is well worth visiting. A 'bono turístico' or tourist pass can be bought in the Municipal Tourist Information Office which gives us access to this and other monuments that are maintained by Ronda Town Council, such as the New Bridge, the Arab Baths, Mondragon Palace, and the Nasrid House of the Giant.

