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## Vall d'Ebo: moving mountains and going underground

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Dizzy heights, dramatic views, deep valleys and prehistoric caves, the Vall d'Ebo is where nature is seen at its most extreme. A million-year-old cave sits almost on the side of the ravine from hell, whose waters crash relentlessly and furiously against the rocky crags whilst far below, mountain-top houses seem to be tiny white specks the size of pebbles.



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A trip to the Vall d'Ebo starts from Pego, in the south of the Alicante province and winds its way inland and uphill via hairpin bends and panoramas of orange groves, rice fields across which the visitor can see at least three towns and, far away on the horizon, a thin, almost imperceptible blue strip that is the Mediterranean. The road takes you past the ruins of the Castell d'Ambra, which became a Moorish settlement with entire houses built into its walls until it was finally abandoned when the first foundations of Pego were laid in the mid-thirteenth century.

Onwards and upwards, the marjal begins to resemble a patchwork quilt whilst Monte Pego, already some four hundred metres above sea-level, appears to be a toy-town whose houses you could pick up with your fingers.

Long before visitors reach the village that is named after the valley, the formidable chasm of the Barranc de l'Infern looms into view. Literally translated as 'Hell's Ravine', it is a phenomenon of nature that commands – and deserves – a healthy dose of respect. The best view of this is on the return journey, where a conveniently-placed lay-by allows you to park your car and take in the full extent of this awesome spectacle at leisure.

A couple of kilometres further on, visitors will reach the impressive Cova del Rull, a guided tour of which is fascinating and highly recommended.



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### A prehistoric rabbit hole

El Valle de Ebo's star attraction, the Cova del Rull, managed to escape unnoticed for more than a million years until local resident José V. Mengual - known to friends as el tío Rull - was out hunting one fine day in 1919. The rabbit he was on the trail of disappeared down a hole in the mountainside, so José set a weasel on it. However, the weasel also disappeared. On further investigation, pulling aside the rocks that appeared to hide the rabbit hole, Sr Mengual had discovered a prehistoric cave. Naturally, he put his own name to it and began to reform it for visitors. Forty years later he abandoned the project, but local

authorities reopened the cave a decade ago and now tourists come 363 days a year to see the result of el tío Rull's day out hunting (the cave is only closed on Christmas day and New Year's day).

Once inside, the cave resembles a cross between a fairy tale and a scene from Jurassic Park with its amazing rock formations and artificial lighting to give it an eerie edge. The stalactites grow at a rate of one to 25 centimetres a century and are formed entirely from dripping water, although there are a number that remain where they fell after the last earthquake in the region. Visitors will be relieved to know, though, that this was over three hundred years ago, so there is no danger of the structure caving whilst you are underground. During your trip, it is advisable to wrap up warm as the

cave is kept at a constant, year-round temperature of 15°C, and humidity is 100 per cent.

The largest stalagmite is known locally as 'the diamond cathedral', given that it is covered in tiny calcium crystals that reflect the light and give it a magical air. Above it are tiny, thin stalactites known as 'macarones' because of their tube-like shape that allows water to drip through them.

One of the most unusual features of the Cova del Rull is the 'flower' on the ceiling - said to be the only rock formation of its kind in Europe, it does in fact resemble the spread of petals and in the centre is a 'chimney' that extends upwards for thirteen metres.

From the highest point of the cave, the panorama is spectacular, allowing visitors to take in the entire thing in all its colourful glory. The rocks are predominantly orange, due to their high iron oxide content, bluey-grey, which are mostly manganese and white, which is limestone. Many of the stalactite and stalagmite formations are covered in fine, glittering calcium crystals.

Here, at the highest point, there are just five metres of mountain rock separating the visitor from the outside world, whilst at the lowest point, there are some 18 metres. However, a tunnel exists that goes down even further, around 37 metres, and speculation is rife as to what is at the bottom. Some say that there is an underground lake, and others believe that there are more galleries like the main one that tourists are taken round, but the studies have yet to be carried out.

Before leaving the cave, you will find a number of rather fascinating 'rock faces' - with a little imagination it is possible to see a prehistoric animal complete with long teeth, a virgin and a devil, an elderly man in a flat cap, a damsel in distress sitting on a rocky outcrop clasping her hands and three men who appear to be absorbed in the view of the cave's floor.

Guided tours of the Cova del Rull are possible from 11.00hrs to 17.00hrs from November to February for a price of 3.70 euros (2.50 euros for children, young persons' cardholders and retired persons with documentary evidence). In October and March, the cave is open until 18.30hrs and from April to September, from 10.30hrs to 20.30hrs.

### **Descent into Hell**

Stretching all the way from the municipal boundaries of Pego to the Vall de Laguar, the Barranc de l'Infern ('Barranco del Infierno', or 'Hell's Ravine') slices through the mountains and appears, from the road, to be a tiny silver snail's trail. Close up, it is a river that is only accessible via a steep incline that zigzags down from Fleix in the Vall de Laguar. An area of great botanical and geological importance, flanked with pine forests and caves, the Barranc de l'Infern is awesome to behold but a visit there is not for the faint-hearted. Walking boots are essential and it is best to travel as part of an organised excursion - this way, you will get the best out of your trip to this magnificent part of the Alicante countryside. Otherwise, contact the tourist information office for details of rambling routes in the area.



Avoid walking in the Barranc after heavy rain, as the waters can become tempestuous - last year, a group of experienced hikers became stranded, literally, in the river overnight and survived by clinging onto debris floating in the river. Fortunately they were unhurt, but it is best to make the journey on a clear day when you can enjoy the silence, the complete isolation broken only by the rustle of the wind in the pine trees and the song of the birds that inhabit the area. Golfinch, sandpiper and Eurasian kestrel all make their homes in the Barranc de l'Infern, and you may even see owls and wild cats on your travels. At the right time of year, the Barranc is closer to paradise than to hell.

For more information, contact the tourist information office in Pego, which covers the Vall d'Ebo, Vall de Gallinera, Vall de Laguar, Forna and l'Atzúvia. Tel: 966 400 843.

Where to stay: Casa Rural Ca Masanet, also a café and restaurant, on C/ San Antonio in the village of the Vall d'Ebo on the way to the Cova del Rull. Popular with walkers and fans of rural tourism.

Tel: 96 640 67 00 for bookings or information.

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