

HUELVA
LA LUZ
Andalucía

Doñana y Marismas del Odiel



World Heritage Site

In 1994, Doñana National Park was declared a World Heritage Site – the highest distinction bestowed by the UNESCO upon a natural or cultural space. This status reflects the extraordinary uniqueness of this group of ecosystems in Huelva and the importance of preserving them for future generations.

Considered one of the world's most important natural locations, the territory of Doñana encompasses over 100,000 hectares of protected land, almost all of which is located within the province of Huelva, although a small segment is shared with the neighbouring provinces of Cadiz and Seville. The specially protected National Park lies within this territory, occupying 50,720 hectares on the right-hand bank of the Guadalquivir River and its estuary on the Atlantic Ocean. Famed around the world for the diversity of its ecosystems, Doñana is an organic mosaic that includes lagoons, beaches, shifting and fixed sand dunes, reserves and salt marshes, as well as many transition areas. These different wild spaces are home to an incredibly rich variety of fauna and serve as the wintering sites of more than 300,000 waterfowl every year.



Some of those bird species are seriously threatened, such as the white-headed duck, the marbled duck, the purple swamphen and the slender-billed gull. Doñana also harbours two of the European animal species currently facing the highest risk of extinction – the Spanish imperial eagle and the Iberian lynx, both endemic to the Iberian Peninsula.

Almost entirely surrounding the National Park – with which it shares close ties and ecosystems – Doñana Natural Park extends over a vast area of 53,835 hectares. Within the province of Huelva, the park boasts many natural treasures such as the spectacular Asperillo sand dunes, the pine forests and lagoons of Hinojos (which attract thousands of waterfowl when they become inundated) and the Abalario lagoons. Apart from the areas of both parks, an additional 2,040 hectares of land in this region also enjoy varying degrees of protection.



If this region only possessed a few of the environmental characteristics and riches mentioned above, they would still be more than enough to make a large part of the Doñana territory worthy of the protected status and national and international distinctions it has already been granted. Doñana has been declared a National Park, a Ramsar Convention site "of exceptional importance for fowl" and a ZEPA site "for the special protection of fowl." Moreover, UNESCO has also granted the National Park two notable designations – Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site.

The latter, granted in 1994, is undoubtedly the most important, given that its basic objective is to include Doñana among the world's most important and exceptional cultural and natural sites and preserve it as part of the world's common heritage. This distinction officially recognises Doñana National Park unique characteristics, as well as its extraordinary value as a legacy to be shared with the world.



Visiting Doñana National Park

Doñana is a vast extension of protected land that holds biological treasures of internationally recognised importance. A National Park, Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site, this territory is comprised of various different ecosystems, including the region of the Guadalquivir River salt marshes. Predominantly located in the province of Huelva, the natural enclave of Doñana is part of a region of immense cultural significance, whose principal claim to fame is the annual religious pilgrimage to the village of El Rocío.

The seasonal cycle is vitally important to the complex and diverse ecological network of Doñana, whose characteristics vary according to the time of year. Although there is never a bad time to visit either the National or the Natural Park, spring and autumn are particularly suitable for optimum enjoyment of its beauty, given the greater probabilities of higher water levels in the salt marshes, greater population density of fowl and the excellent weather conditions. If you plan to visit the National Park, there are five visitor centres located in the provinces of Seville, Cadiz and Huelva that remain open year-round, except during the week of the pilgrimage to El Rocío and the Christmas holiday season.



Of the five centres, three are in the province of Huelva, in the western part of the park. Access to these centres is completely free of charge, and reservations are not required. At said centres, you will be provided with all the information you will need to interpret and understand the richness of Doñana's amazing natural and cultural heritage, as well as to discover the various ways of enjoying it firsthand – exhibitions, clearly marked trails and guided tours of the different ecosystems.

The "El Acebuche" Visitor Centre was the first, and it continues to be the foremost point of reference and information for the National Park, as well as the starting point for all guided tours of the park. The centre is about three kilometres away from the coastal town of Matalascañas along the A-483 road towards El Rocío, which you will eventually exit and turn onto a driveway that is approximately two kilometres long.

Located in an area of scrubland and pine forests beside a series of interconnected lagoons, this centre offers a permanent exhibition about the National Park complete with an audiovisual presentation. Two easy hiking trails begin just outside the centre; no prior authorisation is required to use them. The first trail, called "Laguna del Acebuche", runs 1.5 kilometres along the shore of the Acebuche Lagoon that was restored in the 1980s and is now home to certain waterfowl species that live in Doñana when the salt marsh's water level is low.



The "Lagunas del Huerto y las Pajas" path, which is 3.5 kilometres long, allows visitors to view another recently restored lagoon network, in addition to reserve areas and pine forests where species such as the red kite, the booted eagle and the common kestrel make their nests.

The "La Rocina" Visitor Centre can also be reached by turning off the A-483 road at a later point, located near the outskirts of the village of El Rocío. This centre offers informative options that include an exhibition dedicated to the religious pilgrimage to El Rocío, set up inside a house decorated in the traditional "Rocío" style. The centre also offers a film projection about La Rocina, an important inlet stream that feeds the Doñana salt marshes. The "Charco de la Boca" trail, which begins at this centre, is 3.5 kilometres long and follows the left bank of the La Rocina stream, offering five bird-watching observatories along the way.

Six kilometres from the La Rocina Centre, along a paved road leading from the centre's parking lot and running parallel to the stream, is the third of these visitor centres – "Palacio del Acebrón." In this former residence and hunting lodge, you can visit an ethnographic exhibition about Doñana that explains the historical and cultural evolution of the area. Another trail, called "Charco del Acebrón" begins here and covers a distance of 1.5 kilometres.



This 1.5-kilometer boardwalk begins where the National Park meets the eastern limit of the town of Matalascañas. Walking along this path, one can observe the formation of the primary shifting sand dunes and the dune frontage, the beach and the forests of stone pines.

Spanish legislation currently allows free access on foot to the country's entire coastal perimeter, and the park's beaches are no exception. Beginning in Matalascañas, you can walk along an exceptionally beautiful stretch of coastline over thirty kilometres long, flanked by the Atlantic Ocean and the imposing wall of sand dunes.

Walking southeast, this route eventually comes out on the right-hand bank of the mouth of the Guadalquivir River, opposite the town of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, in the province of Cádiz.

The National Park also offers visitors the possibility of exploring inside Doñana along different routes travelled in SUVs.



Reservations are required and a fee is charged for this tour. Although control and supervision of these activities fall to the park administrators, the tours are given by different private companies that have been awarded public concessions to this end. The Huelva routes, handled by the "Marismas del Rocio" cooperative, leave from the El Acebuche Visitor Centre. These tours spend four hours inside the National Park, making stops at different points along the way to observe the most interesting and representative ecosystems. The drivers are also expert guides who provide their passengers with additional information and point out unusual occurrences and animal sightings during the trip.

It is important to remember that the Natural Park, which surrounds the National Park and is of a similar size, imposes fewer restrictions and is easier to visit. The fact that the two parks share certain landscape features and ecosystems means that numerous species (such as the elusive Iberian lynx) can also be seen in the Natural Park, whether they live there or are just passing through. The park contains a variety of singular spots such as the salt marshes of Hinojos, the swamp system of Ribetehilos or the Abalario lagoons. Another recommended sight for visiting is the spectacular Asperillo sand dunes, which can be crossed using a 1.2-kilometer long wooden boardwalk called "Cuesta de Maneli." This is a delightful stroll alongside pine forests and dense bush vegetation. The boardwalk will take you directly through the only fossilised dunes still left in Doñana and finally comes out onto a cliff top, where you will be regaled with a truly breathtaking view of the Atlantic Ocean



The Guadalquivir Salt Marshes

The Guadalquivir salt marshes are the biological jewel of Doñana National Park, and are also one of the most important wintering and nesting places for waterfowl on the continent. These vast wetlands provide an ideal habitat for threatened species such as the white-headed duck, the purple swamphen and the marbled duck.

Forests, reserves, living and fossilised dunes, lagoons, riverbanks and shores constitute enormously important ecosystems in Doñana, but the salt marshes are the key to the National Park's relevance. It is also the largest ecosystem, since practically the entire area of the Guadalquivir River salt marshes in the province of Huelva are located within its borders. Their strategic location at the southern tip of Europe and close to the African continent has made the salt marshes home to numerous bird species.



Although visitors may see the marshes as a flat surface, there are small variations of elevation that, with changes in the soil and humidity, create diverse habitats for flora and fauna. The high salinity in certain areas keeps vegetation scarce, while giant reeds, nut grass and bulrushes grow in others, turning them into vast green areas in spring until they become dry in summer and fill with water again in autumn and winter.

Over three hundred different bird species populate the salt marshes at different times of year. Some use them as their winter headquarters, such as the greylag goose – Doñana is the most important wintering spot for this species in Europe. Others such as the spoonbill, An Iberian lynx the purple heron, the red-knobbed coot or the avocet arrive in spring for mating season. This extraordinary wetland also welcomes a variety of birds of prey such as kites, marsh harriers, black-winged kites, ospreys and the rare yet impressive Spanish imperial eagle.



The Odiel Salt Marshes

The importance of Doñana is enhanced by other wetlands in the province, such as the salt marshes of the Odiel River. These marshes are protected by virtue of their ecological value and are located a short distance from the city of Huelva.

The Natural Site of the Odiel Salt Marshes, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, is located on the banks of Huelva's tidal inlet, divided between the townships of Gibraleón, Aljaraque, Punta Umbría and Huelva. It is the second largest wetland in Huelva – second only in size, for its beauty and environmental value are incomparable.

The protected area occupies 7,185 hectares of land and also includes the Natural Reserves of the El Burro Salt Marshes and En Medio Island. The Odiel Salt Marshes are the result of the interaction between the dynamics of the Odiel River current and the tides of the Atlantic Ocean, which has generated an intertidal ecosystem that attracts large numbers of broadbilled sandpipers and makes these marshes an important wintering site for various species of waterfowl.



The fauna of the salt marshes includes the largest colony of spoonbill chicks on the continent, accounting for approximately one-third of the entire European population. They are also home to grey and purple herons, black storks, cranes and flamingos, as well as birds of prey often found in wetland environments such as the osprey and the marsh harrier.

This Natural Site contains the Calatilla Information Centre, which offers visitors various resources to help acquaint them with the location. In addition to the network of open-access hiking trails, which include several lookout points, and the information areas, guided tours organised by the company Onubaland are also available. These visits can be made on foot, in train or by boat, and they take visitors through different restricted areas in the company of an expert guide who provides information about the unique features of the setting and the different bird species.

The routes that come close to the salt water areas grant such close-up views of birds – flamingos, for example – that visitors cannot help but feel privileged to have experienced this amazing corner of Huelva's natural landscape



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VISITS TO DOÑANA:

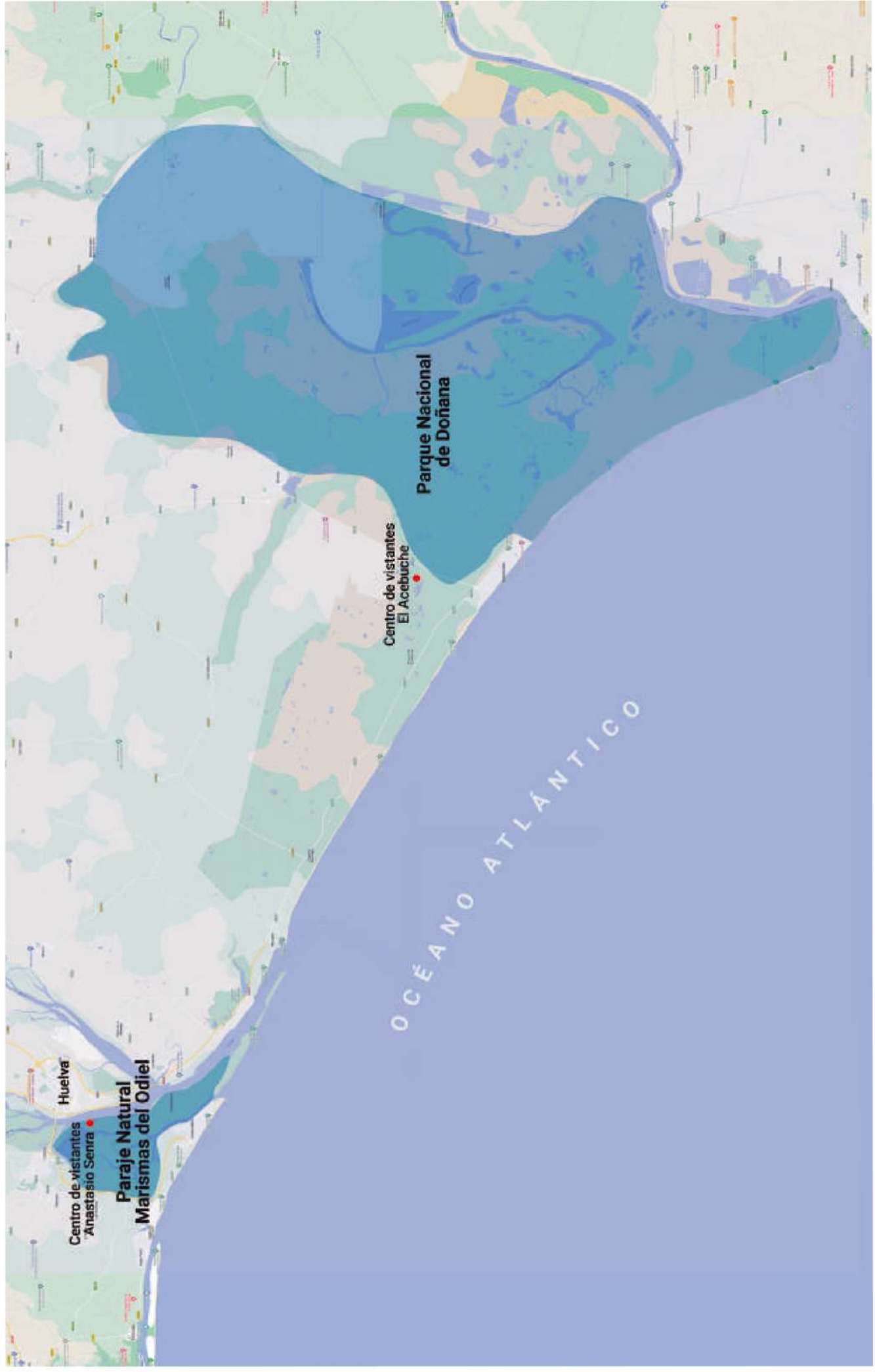
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