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**LE PHINISI, L'ART DE LA  
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TOURISTICA  
INTERNATIONAL



# LANDSCAPES AS THE LEADING HEART OF L

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# ECOTOURISM

# WITH WATER G ACTOR IN THE A MANCHA

TEXT

ENRIQUE SANCHO

PHOTOS

CARMEN CESPEDOSA  
& ARCHIVE

ALCALÁ DEL JUCAR

# DESTINATION



WATERFALL IN THE SIERRA DEL AGUA PATERNA DEL MADERA

The province of Albacete boasts beautiful waterfalls, lagoons, rivers and gorges

**W**ater in La Mancha? All descriptions of La Mancha agree that it is a flat land, almost desert-like, dry, even sad, as was its most famous inhabitant “of the sad figure” as Unamuno defined him. Curiously, Cervantes does not describe it like this... or in any other way, perhaps because it was a place “whose name I do not want to remember” or because he leaves it to the reader’s imagination and, in any case, he does so in a very different way when Don Quixote and Sancho enter a forest where they find “a meadow full of fresh grass, next to which ran a calm and cool stream.” But others have done so, “the reddish, monotonous, flat plain” that Azorín described, or more recently Julio Llamazares: “this yellow plain, smooth as an ironing board, desperate and boring at the same time (...) in the middle of these barren fields or covered with cereal, one feels outside of the world, abandoned to one’s fate by one’s fellow men.”

Water in La Mancha? It doesn’t seem like it. The Arabs had it clear when they baptized it as Manxa or Al-Mansha, which translates as “land without water”, or also “dry land”. And it is true that a good part of the landscape of La Mancha gives that impression, and perhaps that is one of its charms, but it is also true that in La Mancha, especially in the part that covers a good part of the province of Albacete, you can discover pools of water, mighty rivers and short springs, waterfalls, gorges, small lagoons, wetlands, even one of the most beautiful and impressive large aquatic spaces that also left its mark on Cervantes himself when he compared it to the Mediterranean in Barcelona: “Don Quixote and Sancho looked everywhere: they saw the sea, until then unseen by them; it seemed very spacious and long, much more than the lagoons of Ruidera, which they had seen in La Mancha...”



ENTERING THE CAVE

The truth is that the Lagunas de Ruidera (shared between Albacete and Ciudad Real), which suddenly appear in the middle of a dry and flat land, seem like something magical, like the one Don Quixote found when he entered the nearby cave of Montesi-

nos when he wanted to check for himself “if the wonders and enchantments that were said about it in all those areas were true.” There Montesinos reveals to him the legend of the enchantment of Ruidera, explaining that, together with his squire, Guadiana, and the lady Ruidera and her daughters, they find themselves there enchanted by the work of the magician Merlin. And Don Quixote performed the most famous enchantment in the history of literature, turning various literary characters - the lady Ruidera and her daughters - into rivers and lagoons. And it also seems to be Merlin’s work that, in the middle of La Mancha with its dry and flat appearance, there is the unusual landscape full of harmony, dense vegetation and diversity of aquatic and terrestrial fauna that form the 16 terraced lagoons of Ruidera (15 lagoons plus the Peñarroya reservoir) that, even in times of maximum drought, always have water.



LA MANCHA © LUIS VIZCAINO

## Underground secret

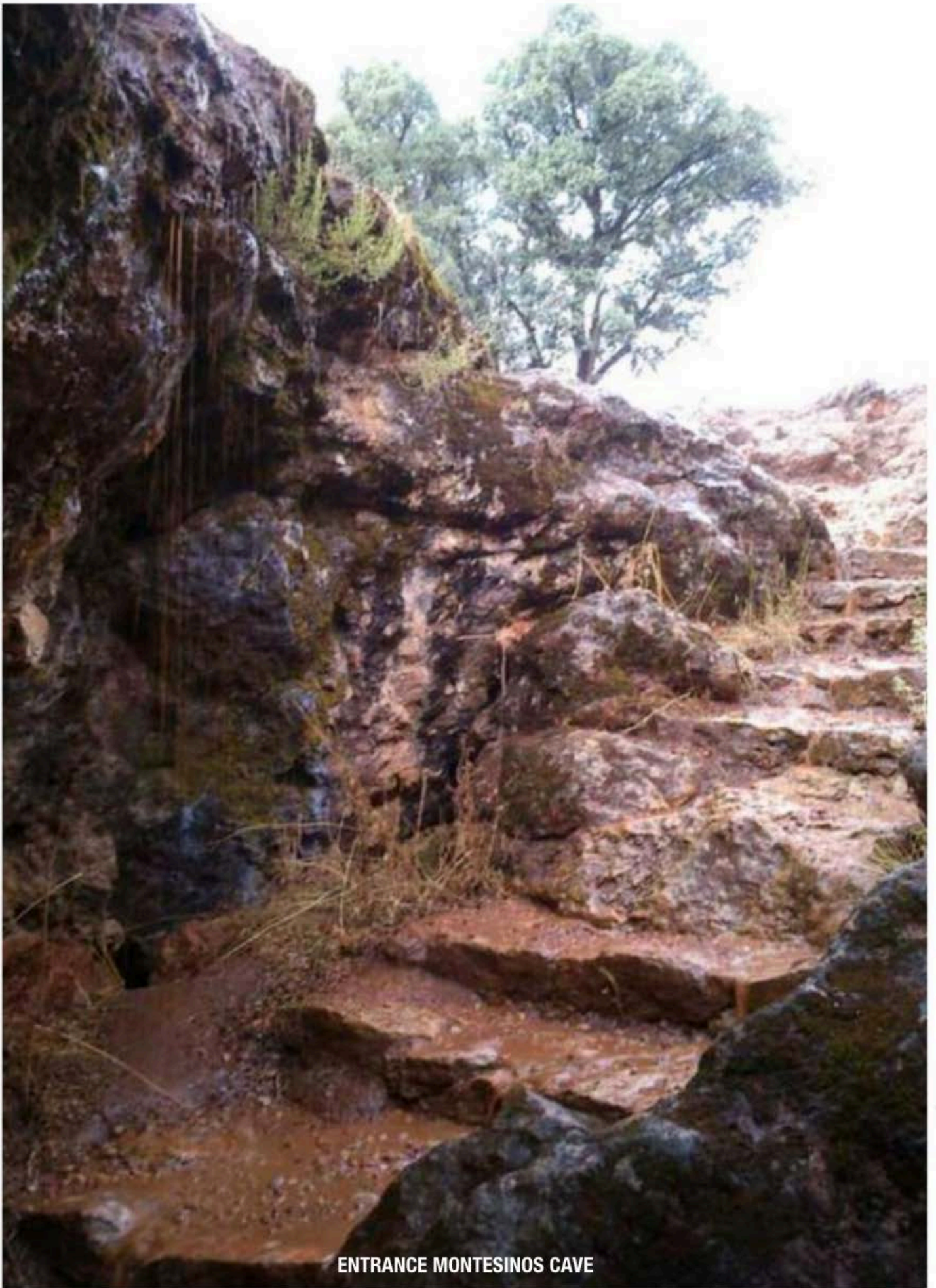
Its fifteen terraced lagoons, which flow successively into one another, overcoming the 140-metre difference in height between the first and the last, forming waterfalls and falls, are separated from each other by barriers of tuff or travertine marble – another act of magic that turns moss into rock as the water deposits lime and more lime, although it does take time, as this type of porous rock began to form in the Quaternary, 18,500 years ago, and is still constantly growing today – and they have no equal in Spain. The water in the lagoons comes from lateral springs located on the slopes; surface contributions from the Pinilla River and more than 70% from underground conduits. The secret is aquifer 24, admits Ignacio Mosqueda, director of the Natural Park of the Lagunas de Ruidera, which occupies almost 3,800 hectares. This aquifer has its natural overflow in the area, giving rise to the Upper Guadiana or Pinilla River. Curiously, even when there is heavy rain, the lakes barely change their level until a few weeks later, when the water infiltrated into the ground reaches the aquifer. There is only something similar in the Plitvice lakes in Croatia, which are also 16 and which, surprisingly, bear the names of the drowned people that legends tell of under their waters: the Gypsy, the Grandmother, the Shepherd Mile, the Goat Lake...



IN THE CAVE OF MONTESINOS



RUIDERA LAGOONS



**ENTRANCE MONTESINOS CAVE**







VIEWPOINT





WALKING THROUGH A CAVE



RIVER WORLD © E.GÓMEZ

This natural wonder is full of all kinds of species, including grass, reeds, rushes and different types of algae, along the waters, and further inland there is a whole botanical garden: elms, black and white poplars, fig trees, ash trees and willows, and near the lagoons there are predominantly oaks, pines, cypresses, junipers, kermes oaks, thyme bushes, rosemary bushes, hawthorns and brooms. The animal fauna is not far behind, underwater there are barbels, carp and pike, above all, and on land there are some wild cats, foxes, wild boars, mountain goats, deer, shrews, hares, hedgehogs and otters. And so that nothing is missing, and as the place is very suitable for the nesting of birds and their stop during migrations, you can see grebes, little grebes, red-crested pochard, mallards, tufted ducks, great reed warblers, purple herons, Bonelli's eagles, short-toed eagles, eagle owls and great bustards...

But, of course, there are also humans who, especially when the heat arrives, come to this privileged water. Some are content with admiring the landscape, walking along well-marked paths or walking to discover unique places such as the very wide crevasse of the Quebrada del Toro, the aforementioned Montesinos cave, taking a trip to the Rochafrida castle, the hermitage of San Pedro or the Venta del Celemin, places where, by the way, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza left their mark. Other humans prefer to sunbathe and take a dip in the cold waters of the lagoons or practice some sport in them.

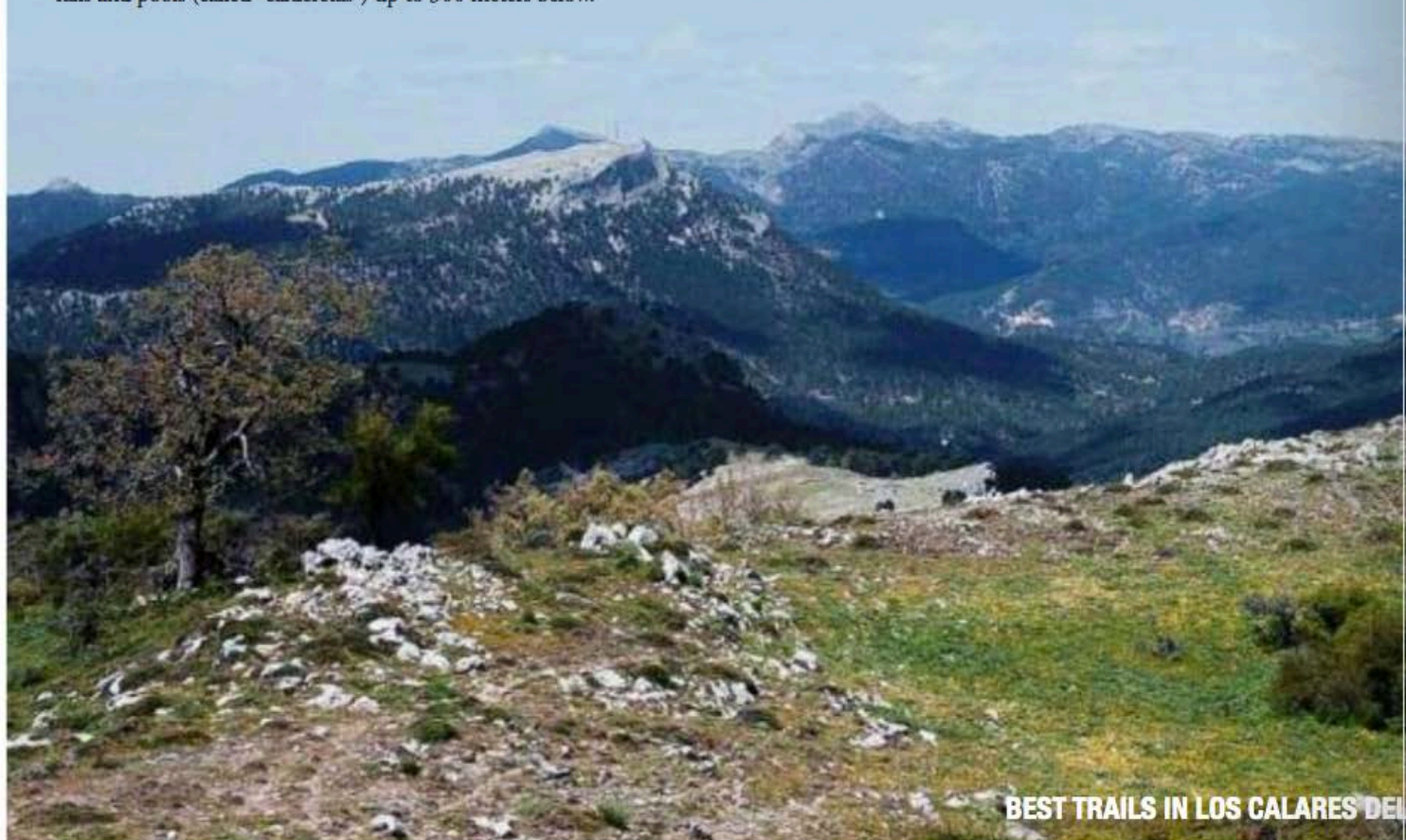
Swimming is permitted in all the lagoons, but perhaps the most popular is the Laguna del Rey, with its crystal-clear waters and serene surroundings, perfect for a day of relaxation and water fun, ideal for families and groups of friends, offering a safe and pleasant space to swim and enjoy the scenery. Also the Laguna Colgada, known for its clear waters, stunning natural surroundings and spectacular views, is a great place to swim, have picnics and enjoy the sun. It is also perfect for kayaking and paddle surfing, more common sports. However, in the Lagunas de Ruidera you can also practice sailing and even diving and there are also certain spots available for sport fishing.

## From miracle to miracle

And if the terraced landscape of Ruidera and the balance of its waters surprise you, you have to prepare yourself for another miracle of nature just over two hours away. In the heart of the Sierra del Segura, among leafy pine forests, in the Calares del Mundo y de la Sima Natural Park, the Mundo River is born, which will become a tributary of the Segura. Although its route is interesting, especially when it runs between the so-called Roman Bridges of Isso, what undoubtedly draws the most attention is its surprising birth through the opening of the Chorros cave, about 15 metres wide and 25 metres high, hanging in the middle of a stone circus. The water comes out with force, rushes into the void and 82 metres below crashes against the rocks, forming a set of waterfalls and pools of extraordinary beauty enveloped in the water vapour that keeps the walls covered with moss and lichens green. The route continues in the form of small waterfalls and pools (called "calderetas") up to 300 meters below.

The cave from which the river is born is one of the longest in Spain, a delight for speleologists. More than 30 kilometres of a network of galleries, some 85 cavities, siphons and lakes that form part of a complex that, according to experts, could be seven or eight times larger, still unexplored. The waters of the cave come from the filtration of rain and snow from the Calar del Mundo just above it and after a long journey underground, they come out again through the mouth of the Chorros, converted into the brand new Mundo River.

In autumn or winter, the so-called "burst" can occur. This is the moment when the jets of the Mundo River burst with their characteristic roar and the waterfall has more flow. This phenomenon usually occurs after the rainy season or when the snow melts.



Although just contemplating the birth of the world justifies a visit, there is much to see and enjoy in the Park. The landscape is of enormous diversity and chromatic richness, with the presence of geological formations typical of limestone mountains such as escarpments, river canyons and all those forms of limestone dissolution that characterise the karst landscape: calares, chasms, uvalas, sinkholes and numerous caves. The flora of the Natural Park offers more than 1,300 species, with abundant forests of pine, oak and gall oak, as well as maples, yews, holly, ash trees, etc. It is worth walking through the so-called “Hell’s Strait”, a narrow canyon 4 kilometres long and escarpments with a difference in height of 300 metres. The crystal-clear waters of the river separate the two mountain ranges that make up the Calar del Mundo and the Calar de la Sima.

And after so much water, there is nothing like relaxing... surrounded by water, thermal water, of course. Within the natural park itself is the century-old Balneario de Tus, which offers hotel, restaurant and spa services in a spectacular natural space. But, above all, what makes this spa unique is the spring of mineral-medicinal water, used since Roman times for its therapeutic properties and now offered in numerous hydrothermal and beauty treatments. A good place from which to plan excursions and regain strength while enjoying the rich gastronomy of Albacete and La Mancha: migas with brave broth, rice with rabbit and snails, gazpacho manchego with game, pumpkin fritorio, andrajos with cod, potaje bochero...



MUNDO AND SIMA NATURE PARK



## On the edge of the rivers

Despite its reputation as a dry place, La Mancha in Albacete is home to several rivers that form beautiful landscapes in their courses and surround small towns and cities that give it a special character. The two most notable are the Júcar and the Segura. The first borders what is considered one of the most beautiful towns in the world, according to the latest National Geographic ranking that values its small size and its cultural and scenic wealth: Alcalá del Júcar.

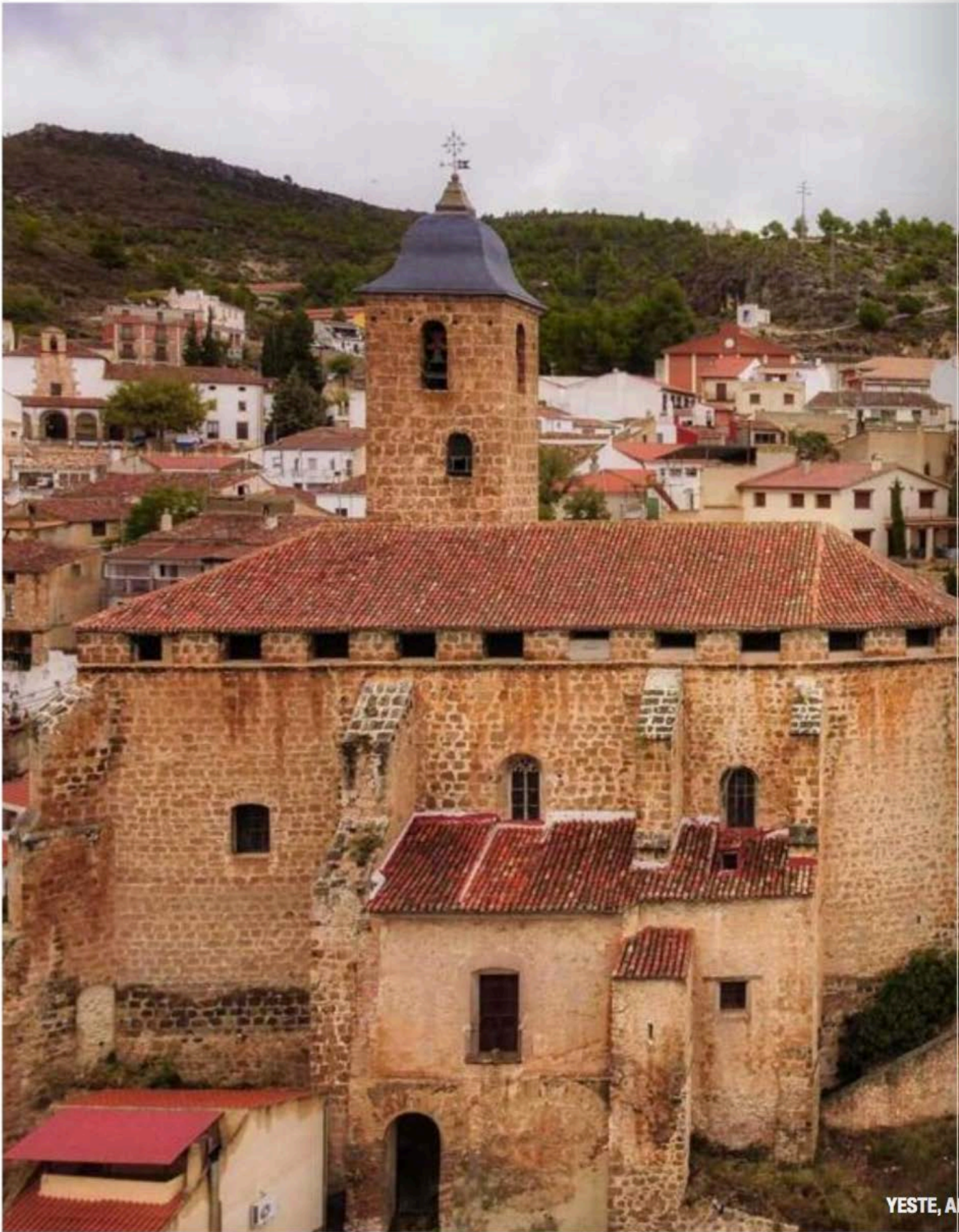
Crossed by the rivers that form the Hoz del Júcar and the Valle del Cabriel, it shows a different aspect with a landscape shaped by the rivers that creates a game of contrasts that mixes the

plain of the area with the unevenness of the valleys that surround it, and above the architecture of the handful of houses crowned by orange roofs perched on the rock on which the Almohads built a castle in the 12th century. In the opinion of the publication, one of the most beautiful images of this town is reflected in the waters of the Júcar River, crossed by a Roman bridge that connects the old town, where the slender tower of the church of San Andrés stands out, whose Gothic elements shine with a special light at nightfall, with the modern part of the municipality.

Alcalá del Júcar is the first step to discover the region of La Manchuela, full of contrasts that seduce the traveller with its rich landscape and culture. Its identifying features come from a remote past that has left its mark on civilizations and centuries. But La Manchuela is not only the history of its twenty-five villages. Often the plain becomes a valley, and nature is hidden and full of surprises.



MILL IN THE PAYMENT OF LA JARABA







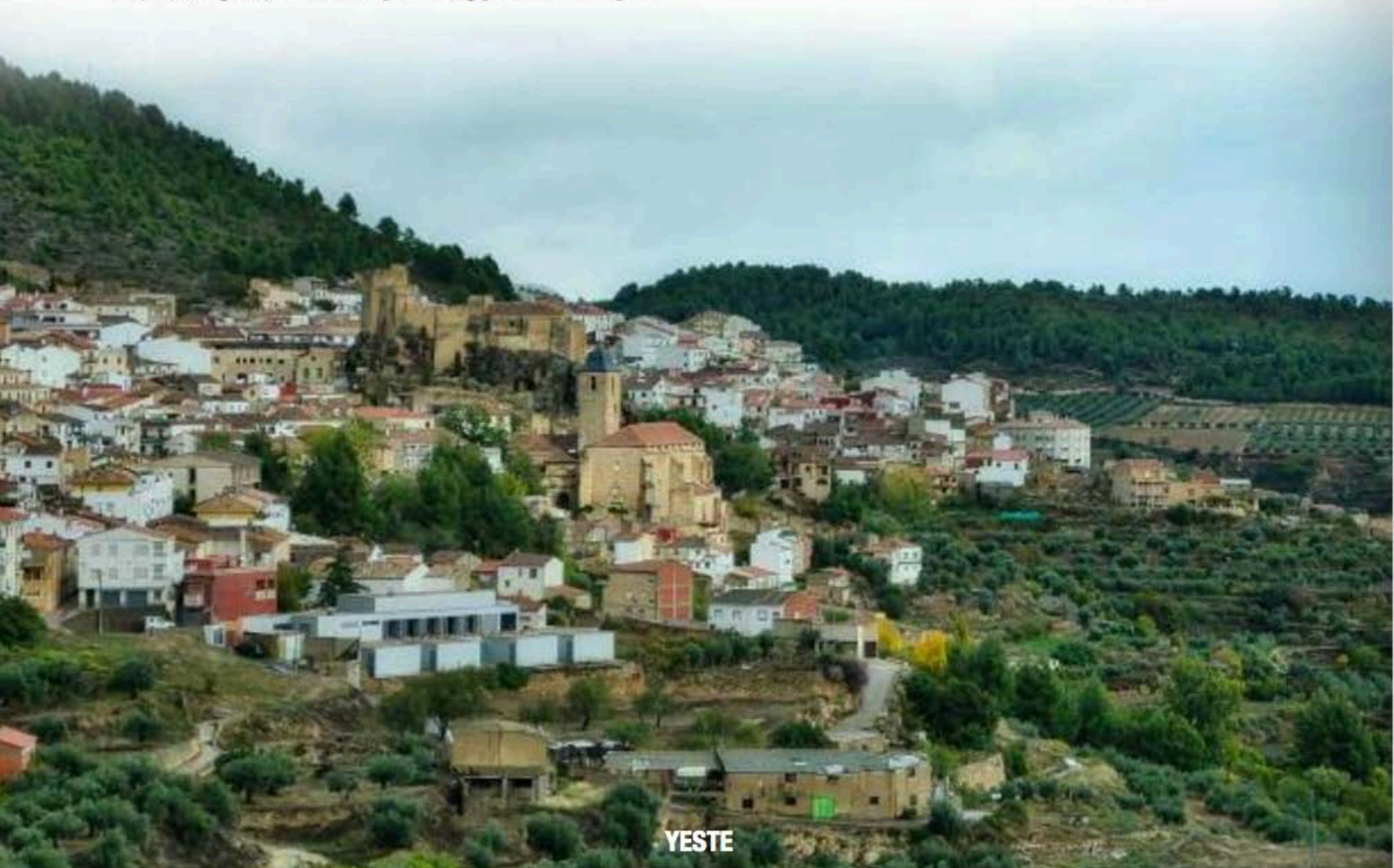
LBACETE

And the other great river of Albacete marks its splendour in the Sierra del Segura that breaks with the landscape of La Mancha, here the mountains, the rivers, the mountain villages each with its own character predominate and an endless landscape of holm oaks, pines, olive trees and almond trees extends and, once again, with water as the protagonist and the places where you can enjoy it. The Mirador de Híjar in Férez, which allows you to see the picturesque meander that forms the Segura river just before reaching the Cenajo reservoir in Socovos, the largest in the Segura basin.

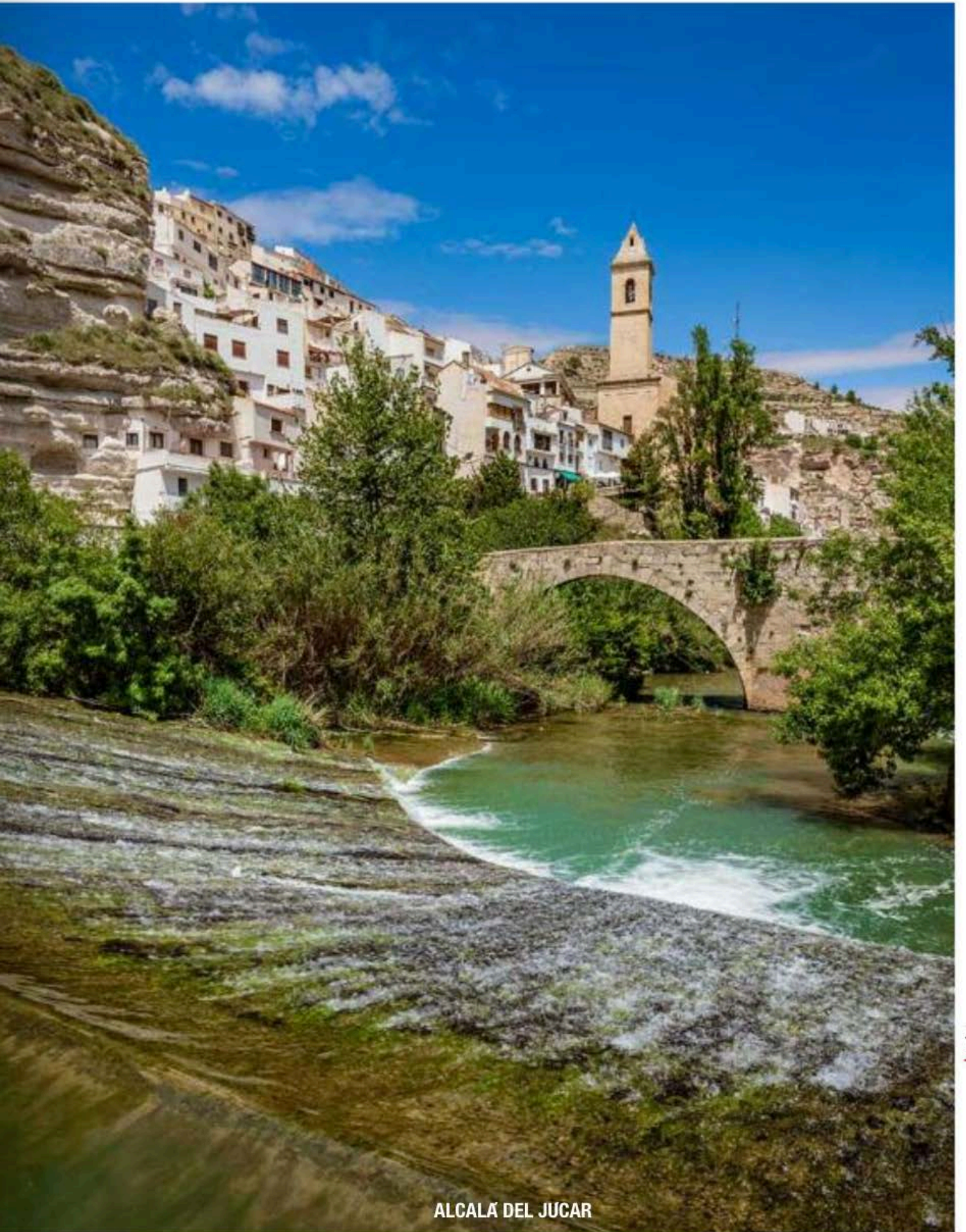
Water, or rather ice, because it is often frozen, is also the protagonist of the El Chorraero waterfall in Paterna del Madera, surrounded by abundant and varied vegetation that freezes in some winters and forms a spectacular horsetail of ice. The Madera River, called Los Endrinales upstream, runs through the parallel valley, creating fairy-tale landscapes among pines, oaks, maples,

ash trees and holm oaks that once belonged to the Duke of Alba. From here, the Carretera del Agua starts on a slow circular route, stopping at viewpoints, streams and waterfalls, which invite you to venture from time to time along the paths that cross exceptionally well-preserved forests. Along the way, you will discover the peculiar town of Sierra del Agua, with its charming waterfall, the beautiful corners of the Arroyo de Los Endrinales River Nature Reserve, the incredible views of the mountains and La Mancha from the Cuerda de La Almenara...

Also in the area is Yeste, one of the best villages in Spain for rural tourism. One of its natural wonders is the “Saltaor” or “Zurriero” waterfall in the Arroyo Madera riverbed in the village of Arguellite, a waterfall that creates a beautiful natural spectacle after a rainy episode. Not far away, and as the end of the route through this area of Albacete, hanging over the gorge of the Mundo river, is Liétor, which impresses with its foundations dug into the rock and the houses overlooking the river. The rock sucks the town into its core and it combs and decorates it like an urban headdress.



YESTE



ALCALÁ DEL JÚCAR

## Look at the sky

Looking at the charms of the waters and lands is all very well, but from time to time you have to raise your eyes and look at the sky and we are in one of the best places to do so. A few days ago, Albacete was declared the first Starlight Tourist Destination province in the world at FITUR. With almost 15,000 square kilometres comprising six regions full of contrasts, nature, water, cultural heritage and clear skies, the province of Albacete and its eighty-six municipalities – all, excluding the capital – are under this seal of quality that the Starlight Foundation grants to places that can be visited, which have very good qualities for contemplating the starry skies and which, being protected from light pollution, are especially suitable for developing tourist activities based on this natural resource. Starlight Tourist Destinations must not only prove the quality of their skies and the means to guarantee their protection, but also the appropriate infrastructure and activities related to the tourist offer and its integration into nocturnal nature.

And for those looking to get more out of their trip through the lands of Albacete, two more recommendations: a visit to the gigantic estate of Pago de la Jaraba, whose name in Arabic curiously means “land abundant in water”. Here history and tradition meet innovation and quality. Its wines, cheeses and oils are a reflection of a commitment to excellence and sustainability. And also related to wine and oil, the Museo de la Tinaja or Centro de Interpretación de la Alfarería Tinajer, an exponent of popular and utilitarian art from the Middle Ages. A unique space, which pays homage to this noble art and to the men and women of Villarrobledo who for almost five centuries have been dedicated to modelling with their hands jars of different sizes and shapes for the production of wine and all kinds of vessels and containers for domestic use and other tasks.



CASTLE



**CASA LORENZO**



**MIGUELITOS FROM LA RODA**



**CALATRAVA FLOWER**



**ATASCABURRAS**



**MANCHEGO LAMB**



**TYPICAL STEW IN LOS MORUNOS**



**BEANS WITH PARTRIDGE LOS MORUNOS**



**LOS MORUNOS LEMON CREAM**

## Sleep and eat

Although the proposed routes are spread out across the geography of Albacete, the distances are not very long and the most practical thing is to have a fixed place from which to set off on the paths. If you choose the capital, without a doubt the best accommodation is the Parador de Turismo de Albacete, located on the extensive plain of La Mancha, the ideal place to unwind, relax and cool off in the pool, as it could not be otherwise when dealing with water, on the hot afternoons of the La Mancha summer. The building is a building with wide corridors, terracotta floors, wooden ceilings and large gardens that will remind you of the inns described by Miguel de Cervantes in his most universal book "The ingenious gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha".

Another option, especially for visiting the Lagunas de Ruidera, is Casa Lorenzo in Villarrobledo, a hotel with 61 rooms, restaurants, and spaces for large events. Restaurants are key at Casa Lorenzo, with a menu based on quality raw materials and Manchegan tradition, offering a varied gastronomic offer.

And speaking of gastronomy, three recommendations in the area: Restaurante Los Morunos, located in La Roda and run by Florentino Tebar Piqueras since 1993, where you can taste the most exquisite and traditional home cooking and a wide variety of recipes that surprise both for their presentation and their flavour. Highly recommended and good value. Restaurante Moreno in Ossa de Montiel, next to the road to the lagoons, just opposite the Laguna La Redondilla. It offers a tasty daily menu for only 13.50 euros and à la carte dishes with reasonable prices and very good quality. Restaurante Mariela Gastro Bar, also in Villarrobledo, is a real discovery with innovative and original cuisine with the best products on the market. Last year it won First Prize in the provincial tapas competition with its "Torrija Vizcaina con 4 elaboraciones". **T**



**MANCHEGO GAZPACHO**