

## Following old Blue Eyes

Contributed by Derek Workman

Area: Mountains west of Denia in northern Alicante province

Route: Pego &ndash; Vall de Ebo &ndash; Vall d&rsquo;Alcalà &ndash; Castell de Castells &ndash; Pego

Distance: 97 kilometres

Take to aromatic hills in search of The Blue-Eyed One, a legendary Moorish leader, delve into enchanting chasms and marvel at Neolithic man's artistic endeavours.

Like many small villages, Vall de Ebo has suffered badly due to depopulation as the young people move to the coast in search of work. Those who have stayed work mainly in agriculture, but the beauty of the surrounding countryside is attracting an increasing number of visitors to sample the peace and tranquillity and excellent mountain cuisine. Lamb &mdash; roasted, grilled or in rich stews &mdash; is popular on local restaurant menus, as are minjos, small pancakes stuffed with meat or wild mountain vegetables, blat picat, a pork stew with vegetables and barley, and of course, being so near the ricefields of Pego, a wide range of rice dishes.

A couple of minutes' drive up the hill from Vall de Ebo, following the signs for Vall d&rsquo;Alcalà, is the Cova de Rull. Discovered in 1919 by one José Vicente Mengal when trying to rescue his dog after it had disappeared down a rabbit hole, the Cova de Rull (Curly Cave) is estimated to be between five and seven million years old. Visitors take a 20-minute wander through caves with splendid formations of stalactites and stalagmites with such endearing names as Catedral de Diamantes, where the rock sparkles in the light of the guide's lamp, and La Flor, an opening in the cavern roof which has petal-like stone layers overlaying each other resembling a beautiful flower in full bloom.

Back in daylight, continue to Vall d&rsquo;Alcalà, a small valley with only two villages, Alcalà de la Jovada and Beniaya. The land appears uncultivated apart from the occasional olive and almond groves, with spiky gorse and palmetto interspersed with the odd copse of pine trees. But don't be deceived. Since medieval times this area has been known as the medicine chest of Europe, and herbalists would travel hundreds of kilometres to pick the provender of these apparently sparse lands. The intense heat of this high, rolling terrain produces some of the finest-quality rosemary, thyme, camomile and lavender, and even today local people can be seen roaming the hills gathering medicinal and culinary herbs. A number of restaurants in the area offer wild vegetables picked from the mountains as well as using the herbs found on their doorstep.

Just before Alcalà de la Jovada, at the K7 marker, beside a car park and picnic area on your left-hand side, is a nevera. This is a snow well, one of the man-made shafts that proliferate in this region. They were used to store the mountaintop snow, brought down from high ground in panniers carried by mules, that would later chill the summer-time drinks of the coastal elite, as well as preserve the abundant fruits for which the local valleys are still renowned.

Park and walk up the rough track to the right for a few moments. To your left you will see a gray dome, reached by another small path. This nevera is one of the best preserved in the area. Two short footpaths, one to the top of the nevera and another, which allowed access half way down, give a good idea of the structure of these pre-industrial freezers.

As you look into the deep, dark reaches below through openings at the top, you can imagine the pulley suspended through the metal ring at the pitch of the dome, via which chilled workers would be lowered to stamp down the snow. When the compacted snow reached the level of the arched openings a layer of rice would be spread over it to conserve the temperature. When the snow became ice, it would be packed into straw-lined wooden boxes to be carried by mule down mountain tracks to the clients on the coast.

Return to the road and continue to the yellow-and-white km6 marker. Take the concrete road to the right and you will almost immediately see the ruin of Adzubieta. Far from the opulent centres of art and science that were Córdoba and Granada, Adzubieta is Valencia&rsquo;s most perfectly preserved Moorish village, albeit a ruin. As you step gingerly over the stones that now clutter what were formerly the alleyways of the village, it is easy to imagine yourself back in the aljame, the Moorish barrio, listening to the call to prayer from the minaret of the mezquita (mosque) in nearby Alcalà de la Jovada.

Return to the main road, turn right and within a couple of minutes you will arrive at Alcalà de la Jovada, which overlooks Adzubieta. From this village, Alshahir Ibn Al-Azraq (known as the blue-eyed one long before Frank Sinatra&rsquo;s time) ruled his domain. Born in the village around 1218, he was a thorn in the side of Jaime I in his conquest of the Kingdom of Valencia, until in 1254 he was defeated by the Christian king and banished to North Africa.

Longing for his home, the Moorish leader returned 22 years later to lead an uprising to reclaim his lands. He failed in the attempt and was killed in 1276 while laying siege to the walls of Alcoi. In the village square, remnants of the mosque that Al-Azraq built as part of his palace now form part of the parish church, La Purísima Concepción. A bust of Old Blue Eyes in the street behind the Town Hall commemorates his rule, and another, in the shape of a brass fountain in the main square, pours forth fresh mountain water.

Two kilometres after leaving the village, heading in the direction of Planes, a turn left leads to a twisting road that mounts the hill to Beniaya. With Alcalà de la Jovada, this village makes up the Vall d&rsquo;Alcalà. Follow the sign through the village towards Tollos, a winding country road with stunning views as you pass over the top of the tail end of the Sierra d'Almudaina.

As you begin the descent just before the km5 mark, the valley to your left is the Barranco Malafi, the route by which, in 1609, thousands of Moriscos (Moors who had converted to the Christian faith when the country finally came under Christian rule), who had been given only three days&rsquo; notice of their forced departure, were herded down the

twisting track through high cliffs to the port of Denia. Rumours of hidden treasure are still bandied about. Turn left as you enter Tollos and left again at the T-junction and follow the road for Castell de Castells (13 kilometres). As the road descends into Castell, it crosses a small bridge and immediately begins to rise again. Fifty metres further on an ornate lamp standard stands at a junction that points right to the village or left for Benichembla. Take the left fork. Just after the marker km28, a sign indicates the Pla de Petracos to your left, 1.5km, and some of the most important rock paintings in the Comunitat Valenciana.

#### WHAT TO SEE

Vall de Ebo:

Cova de Rull, underground caves with spectacular stalactite and stalagmite formations.

Adzubieta:

Remains of Moorish village at Km6 on the CV712.

Pla de Petracos:

Neolithic rock paintings at Km28 on the Castell de Castells&ndash;Benichembla road. Accessible to public, no charge.

#### WHERE TO STAY

Beniaya, El Chato Chico, Plaza de la Iglesia, 6. Tel. 96 551 44 51.

Parcent, Casa Carrascal, Carrer D'Alt, 14. Tel. 679 043 130.

#### WHERE TO EAT

Tollos:

L'Antiga Escola, Calle Salamanca 9.

Parcent:

Casa Carrascal, Carrer D'Alt, 14. Tel. 679 043 130.

#### MORE INFORMATION

Vall de Ebo:

Ayuntamiento, Plaza Mayor, 2. Tel 96 557 14 13. Open 9.30am-2pm.

Alcalà de la Jovada:

Ayuntamiento, Plaza Bis Villaplana. Tel. 96 551 41 07. Open 9.30am-3pm.

Castell de Castells

Ayuntamiento, C/San Roque, 1. Tel 96 551 80 67. Open 9.30am-2pm.

The extended version of Following old Blue eyes, including full details of where to stay and eat, and what to do, including opening times and prices can be found in Inland Trips From the Costa Blanca by Derek Workman, twenty-two excursions in the Valencian Community . His accompanying book Small Hotels and Inns in Eastern Spain gives details of eighty charming hotels in the region. Both are published by Santana Books. Tel. (+34 952 485 838) Web page [www.santanabooks.com](http://www.santanabooks.com)