

The naked earth

Cabo de Gata lets you get back to nature in its rawest form

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It isn't the lack of vegetation – although you can't see a tree for miles – that strikes you most: it's the colours. After a palette of English greens, the purity of the natural tones take some getting used to. This is the earth in stark nudity, its minerals uncovered: black, orange, ochre, white so pure it hurts your eyes, crimson and, surprisingly, pink. All bathed in the Mediterranean at its bluest.

This is Cabo de Gata, one of the country's most spectacular natural parks. Its nearly 30 miles of coastline around the south-eastern cape of Spain make up one of the last truly unspoilt places on the Mediterranean and offer the chance to enjoy nature in its earthiest state. Man has made little imprint on this corner of Spain – it's hard to believe that the busy city of Almería with over 100,000 inhabitants is only 30 minutes' drive away – and you can count the villages within the park on the fingers of one hand. Fishing and goat herding are the main means of making a living and salt extraction is still important – the Phoenicians were the first to do so hundreds of years ago – although tourism is now the major industry.

If you're looking for tranquility and to really get away from it all, look no further. In Cabo de Gata you can walk the cliffs for miles and not see a soul, relax on a beach with only the waves for company and enjoy a night sky lit up just by stars. Here, all the feasts for the senses are those provided by nature – bird cries and the crash of waves against the cliffs; the scent of salt, rosemary and thyme; the feeling that you're at one with nature; and the colours.

Walking the coastline, where the Earth's layers of minerals are revealed by the relentless erosion of the wind and sea, gives the best view of colours. Sometimes the cliffs are black with spectacular rock formations such as 'The Finger' and 'Mermaids' Reef', pointing jagged black at the sky as the white sea spray crashes at their feet. The aptly named village of Las Negras has a black beach – sand and pebbles. Sometimes, it isn't volcanic lava but chalk that makes up the cliffs – the beaches at Los Escullos are a mass of delicately sculptured white forms bleached whiter still by the relentless sun. Occasionally, the cliffs are crimson and orange – Cala Roja means 'Red Bay' – but if you're looking for a more conventional yellow beach, try the Playa de Mónsul or Playa de los Genoveses, just west of the small village of San José. Here the long sands offer sheltered and shallow sea bathing – and the water's usually warm.

To see pink, there are two possibilities: inland at Rodalquilar is Spain's only gold mine, abandoned in the 60s after years of activity.



Devoid of its thin protection of soil, the surface mines have revealed the earth's skin. And it's very pink. Like the flamingoes at the salt lagoons at San Miguel – their formation flying at dawn and dusk are one of nature's highlights. But although the flamingoes are the stars of the show, the lagoons also offer plenty of other treasures for twitchers – storks, egrets, avocets, herons and plovers. All within easy sight of the hides located around the lagoon.

Within easy reach of most of Almería's resorts, Cabo de Gata makes for an ideal day trip (but to really appreciate its beauty you need several days) and offers the chance to experience nature in its most natural form – naked.

