

Picnicking in a hidden valley in Andalusia

When the Andalusian sun is too hot for hiking up in the mountains, the locals enjoy walking in the valleys. We recently learned of a hike up the arid bed of the Rio Chillar—pronounced chee-yar—that runs from the hills above the white village of Frigiliana to the beach in our town of Nerja.

As we set off up the dry riverbed, the only evidence of a waterway was the snaking sugarcane which marked the course of the river making its way to the Mediterranean. The trail was filled with Spanish families heading for a day of shady picnicking by a waterfall and swimming hole. Many of the children were in bathing suits and sandals.



After about an hour of hiking, the ground got a little muddy as we rounded a curve, and then we were forced to tip-toe from stone to stone across a stream about 12 feet wide and six inches deep. We walked on the other side of the deepening water for a few more minutes, until we were faced with a choice: follow the locals with their picnic baskets and walk into the water, or turn back and call it a day.

Giving in to the call of lunch by the waterfall, we stepped right into the rocky-bottomed river with our newfound friends, and kept walking up, in the shade of trees. The water soon grew knee deep, and every now and then it came up even higher.

Passing through worn-granite chasms 20 feet high, we marveled that the rivulet running down to the beach could ever have carved these walls of stone. After wading upriver for about two and a half hours, we came to a natural dam and pool of chest-high water and found ourselves among 30 or so Spanish families. As the children swam and played in the pool, the adults laid out elaborate picnics and opened bottles of chilled white wine and sparkling water. We sat on dry rocks to enjoy sandwiches of local cheese and Serrano ham before making our way back downriver.

Non-hikers may be under the impression that the trip down is easier, but it can actually be treacherous. One misplaced step onto a slippery rock sent me spilling backward. Once out of the river and back on dry land, our boots rapidly turned from muddy to dusty as the sun we had trekked upriver to avoid beat down mercilessly.

Fortunately, a small tapas bar, El Bar de Cochinos de Caballos, the local horsemen's watering hole of choice, is right there in the riverbed. A tapa such as chickpea stew or potato and tuna salad comes free with a one-euro beer, and that is worth a five-hour walk in the river any day.

Mike DeSimone

