

THE VÉLEZ RIVER BASIN

The Vélez is the river par excellence of La Axarquía region. Almost 69 km in length, it crosses the changing landscape from north to south on the eastern side of the province of Málaga. The entire river basin, also known as the Hoya de Vélez, covers 610 km² and has an estimated average flow of 629 mm. The catchment area consists of the following rivers: Benamargosa, Almárchar, Sábar, Rubite, Bermuza, Alcaucín, Almanchares, de las Cuevas and Guaro, another name for the upper and middle course of the Vélez. The main waterside structure is found at the Embalse de la Viñuela reservoir, built in 1989 to supply the Costa del Sol and to irrigate the crops in the surrounding areas. Following the norm, the upper courses of these rivers enjoy a good degree of environmental conservation, although a significant part of the flow is channelled away, from the outset, through irrigation streams that distribute this precious liquid among the orchards, vegetable gardens and terraces. The middle and lower part of the valley is the most important from an economic point of view, since the fertile floodplains have basically been used for intensive crop farming, which contaminates the aquifers to some degree due to the use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers. In years gone by, the mouth of the Vélez formed an estuary which has disappeared due to a large accumulation of silt washed down from the formerly wooded hillsides of the surrounding mountains. The current delta formation, listed in the Inventory of Wetlands of Andalusia, is of great ornithological interest as it is a crossing point for numerous migratory birds, especially waders.

The Vélez river basin supports different ecosystems as a result of the variety of rock formations and biomes. The dolomite rocks of the Tejeda sector host unique plant species and numerous species endemic to Málaga and Almería, as well as baetic system, baetic-rif and Iberian-North African endemic species. The riparian vegetation is not particularly profuse and varied. Rows of ash trees still remain in certain stretches of the Sábar River whilst along the entire course of the river, to a greater or lesser extent, there are oleanders and willows (*Salix pedicellata*). In the lower reaches, near the mouth of

the river, the gallery forest has been replaced by thickets of Spanish cane and groups of white poplars. Shallow pools are inhabited by very interesting species of fish, like the barbo gitano (gipsy barbel) and the eel.

Near the mouth of the river, there are numerous archaeological remains of the Phoenician and Roman periods, during which time the river was navigable to these settlements. The Necrópolis del Jardín and the archaeological sites of Los Cerros del Peñón, Alarcón, del Mar and de Toscanos stand out because of their historical value and have been declared Cultural Heritage Sites.

Freshwater pools in the Vélez river basin: *Poza del río Sabar.*

Other bathing areas in the Vélez river basin:

Pozas del Arroyo del Alcázar. Río Alcaucín (Sierras de Tejeda, Almijara y Alhama Natural Park): Access is from Alcaucín along the signposted dirt track (6 km) leading to the recreational area of El Alcázar. The two weatherproofed pools are nestled between three beautiful artificial waterfalls, next to the recreational area of El Río.

Poza del Molino Alto. Río Bermuza (Sierras de Tejeda, Almijara y Alhama Natural Park): You will reach this pool by following the signposted path to the Cueva de la Fájara, walking down the irrigation stream for a few metres, or down the Molino Alto road. Both options depart from the road joining Canillas de Aceituno and Alcaucín. The pool is a short distance above a small bridge.



Pozas de la Rahíge. Río Almanchares (Sierras de Tejeda, Almijara y Alhama Natural Park): There are three natural pools at the exit of the Barranco de Almanchares ravine, upstream from the bridge on the MA-4105 road (Canillas de Aceituno to Sedella). Access is from the old recreational area of La Rahíge, along a narrow irrigation stream in poor condition.