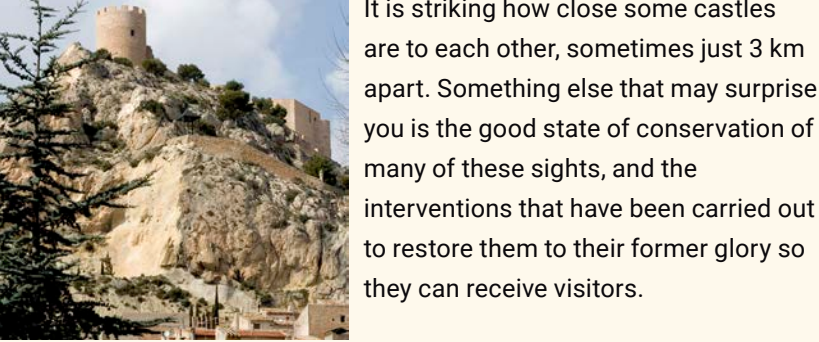


A walk between reality and legend through the history of the Vinalopó Castles

In the heart of Alicante province, among vineyards that grow all over the Vinalopó river basin, dozens of fortresses rise up that have witnessed battles, legends, conflicts, and also reconciliations. The Vinalopó Castles Route covers just over 100 kilometres, and extends through the Alicante towns of Santa Pola, Elx, Aspe, Novelda, Monóvar, Elda, Petrel, Sax, Villena, Biar, Camp de Mirra, Beneixema, Banyeres and Castalla.

If you stop to explore the main fortresses along the way, you will discover the history of the Almohads, who built them as a refuge from the advance of the Christian kingdoms. These fertile lands, where top quality grapes are still produced today, were fought over for centuries. And it was here where the constant conflicts led to the signing of the Treaty of Almirza, a peace accord signed in 1244 between the Crown of Aragón and the Kingdom of Castilla that set the limits of the Kingdom of València. It was agreed by James I of Aragón and the infante Alfonso the Innocent, who would later be James' son-in-law and the future king Alfonso X the Wise. In the treaty it was stipulated that the lands to the south of the Biar-Busot line would be reserved for Castilla, although the complete delimitation of borders was not definitively resolved until the 19th century.



Let yourself be carried away by the other charms of the Vinalopó

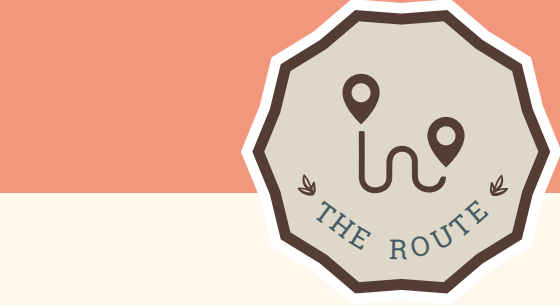
The Vinalopó area in Alicante province offers many other delights that you won't want to miss. Starting with L'Alt Vinalopó. Its condition as a natural border between the Castilian plateau and the Levantine coast, together with the Mediterranean climate and fertile soils, has historically been the engine behind the area's rich cultural diversity.

In the surroundings of its main population centres, among which Villena stands out as the capital of the comarca, archaeological remains of different civilisations can still be visited: prehistoric villages such as Cabezo Redondo, Iberian sites including El Puntal, fortresses of Arab origin, for example, La Atalaya Castle, and 19th-century agro-industrial communities including Santa Eulalia.

On the other hand, Vinalopó Mitjà and Baix Vinalopó extend along the two slopes of the Vinalopó valley, a long depression formed by its namesake river that supplies many towns along its 92-kilometre route: Biar, Beneixama, Campo de Mirra, Cañada, Villena, Sax and Salinas, among others. This landscape is home to the Sierra de Mariola Natural Park, with colourful fields and extensive vineyards. It is no accident that the Vinalopó comarcas, and specifically the city of Villena, are considered must-sees on the famous "Alicante Wine



Likewise, the archaeological sites bequeathed by the numerous settlers that this area has received also serve as milestones to be followed during the journey. Thus, while Coves dels Calderons in La Romana take visitors back to Alicante province's Palaeolithic period, the remains at El Monastil in Elda will transport you to Iberian times. Another highly recommended activity is to attend the Moros y Cristianos fiestas in one of the towns mentioned above. The smell of gunpowder, the music and the troupes are three elements that will captivate you if you decide to see one of the parades. And finally, you can enjoy magnificent cuisine, with excellent rice, fish and shellfish dishes, as well as ice cream and turrón.



It is recommended to start the trip in the Alto Vinalopó comarca in Santa Pola, where there is much to explore, above all its Castle-Fortress, but also its three watchtowers, built in 1552 under the reign of Philip II. Then, about 16 km away, head straight for the land of palm trees, Elx. A beautiful setting, close to the banks of the Vinalopó, where you will find Altamira Palace. Next stop is the town of Aspe, which has three fortifications. Later, around four kilometres away in Novelda, you will see La Mola Castle.

The route continues in Monóvar, 11 km further on, with the Baroque hermitage of Santa Bárbara, one of the town's most outstanding buildings. Afterwards, you will discover the heart of the Vinalopó valley, specifically, the cities of Elda and Petrer. They are practically glued together, and are the cradle of the Alicante footwear industry. Elda Castle was erected in 1172 by the Almohads, who held it until the Christian conquest in the mid-13th century. Petrer Castle dates from the same period; highlights include the crenellated walls and the great keep. The next stop is Sax, about 12 km away, with a castle that dominates the city from its position. Next, go directly to the city of Villena, crowned by the old castle of Arab origin.

Just 10 kilometres along the way there is another must-see: Biar; its castle is considered one of the best preserved in the comarca and is located in an area of outstanding natural beauty. The next stop is 16 km away in Camp de Mirra, lying on the slopes of Los Cabezos de la Fantasmata and San Bartolomé. 4 km further on is Beneixama, surrounded by olive groves and vineyards, from which they obtain excellent wines. After this stop, you will have delved into Banyeres de Mariola, with a castle that rises to a height of 830 metres. The route reaches its end at Castalla, where you can visit the castle and also explore the countryside.



Other must-sees

Alicante province isn't only the sea. It is one of the most mountainous provinces in Spain and has 9 of the 22 parks in the Region of Valencia, as well as 6 protected spaces.



Another highly recommended option is to explore the Alicante Wine Route, a unique journey through the Vinalopó comarcas to the south and La Marina to the north. You will visit wineries to try exquisite wines and find out more about how they are produced.



You can also savour traditional cuisine with innovative pairings to awaken the senses. The Vinalopó comarcas are known for their rich gastronomy as there are a wide variety of dishes and pastries typical of the area. The best known are the dumplings known as "pelotas" or balls, gazpacho and gachamiga.

Santa Pola is home to some of the best beaches in the area. A good example is Tamarit, with views of Tabarca islet.

The beaches of Elx also stand out. Some of the best known are El Carabassí, Pinet and L'Allet. Are you going to miss out?



Vinalopó Castles Route Guide



Places to visit castles and fortified towers on the banks of the Vinalopó river.

How to get there

Alicante province is very well connected with the main towns in the Region of Valencia and other cities in Spain.

Alicante-Elche Miguel Hernández airport (around 9 kilometres from Alicante city centre)

The high-speed train, which reaches Alicante-Terminal station and Villena, has extensive high-speed connections through the AVE trains that link it with Madrid, Alicante and Castilla-La Mancha. In addition, the Alvia trains connect with Castilla y León, Asturias, Cantabria and Galicia.

The AP-7 motorway, which runs along the entire Mediterranean coast, is very close by, as is the A-31 dual carriageway, which runs inland. There are also several bus services connecting Alicante with cities such as Valencia, Albacete, Murcia and Madrid, as well as many other towns in the province.

The castle-to-castle route

This is the Vinalopó castles route with information on each of these fortresses. You will see options for visiting some inside, including guided tours, and also other castles that can only be admired from the outside, as well as other tourist attractions in each town. Without a doubt, a trip full of experiences and adventures.

/Santa Pola

With a long seafaring tradition, it is set in a landscape of great ecological diversity, on the shores of the Mediterranean. Santa Pola's centre has a fortress, the castle ordered to be built by Philip II to repel attacks by pirates and corsairs. This 16th-century defensive system continues with three other watchtowers that rise in Las Salinas (Tamarit Tower), in the south-eastern area of the sierra (Escaletes Tower) and Atalayola Tower, on which the current lighthouse was built.

Castle-Fortress

Visitable

In Santa Pola's old quarter, in Plaza de la Glorieta, you will find one of the Mediterranean's most prized treasures, Santa Pola Castle-Fortress, built in the 16th century and declared an Asset of Cultural Interest. This Castle is very different from most of the fortresses in the other towns in Alicante province as it doesn't have a keep or two walls. The wall of the fortress, which is currently a cultural centre, houses the different rooms in which are found the Museum of the Sea, the Chapel of La Virgen de Loreto, the Assembly Hall and the Municipal Exhibition Hall. Inside the grounds you will find the Patio de Armas, which you can visit at any time as it is always open.

Escaletes Tower

Exterior

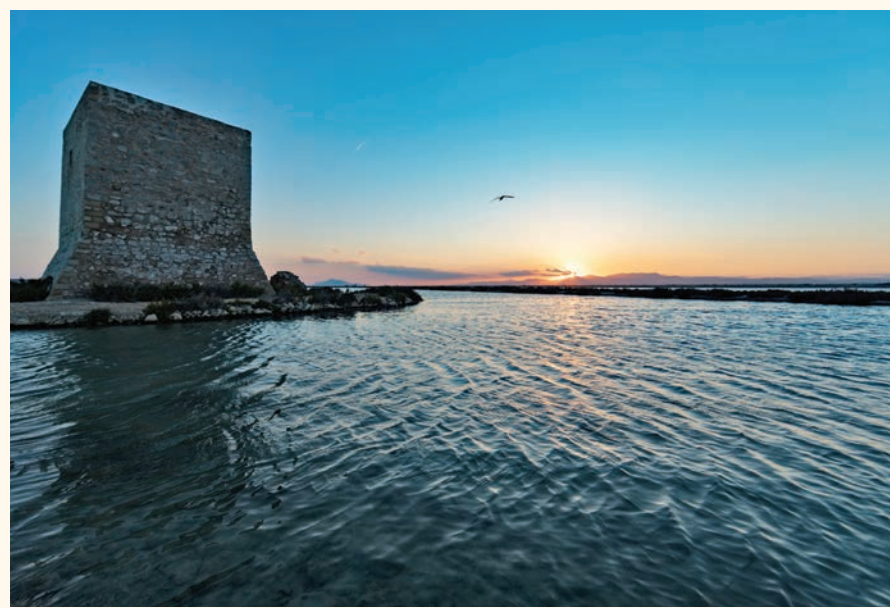
To the north of Santa Pola at the foothills of the sierra lies this tower, also known as Torre Pep. To get there, you will need to take the coastal road that leads to El Carabassí beaches. Of the three towers in the municipality, this is the one in the best state of conservation and at the highest altitude. Although you can only see its exterior, it merits a visit as it is located in an iconic part of the city.



Tamarit Tower

Exterior

Also known as the Albufera tower, this fortification is a must-see for photography fans. It was built in the 16th century as part of the system of coastal watchtowers established by Philip II for the defence of the Levantine coast. Today, the tower is completely surrounded by water since it is located in one of the lagoons in Las Salinas de Santa Pola. Very close to the tower there is a lay-by to leave your car, where you will find a series of information panels that explain the salt flats, how they work and the birds that you can see in the area.



Atalayola Tower

Exterior

Much more than the perfect photo for social media profiles, its walls hold the secrets of five centuries of history, which fortunately, has managed to maintain the three heights of the tower. If you walk around it and go up the nearby stairs, you will be able to see Tabarca islet in the distance. You should also be aware that it is currently used as a maritime signal lighthouse.

/Elx

The city of the Lady has many charms to reveal that are reason enough for you to decide to visit. Its old town preserves important examples of its Muslim past and Baroque splendour. Proof of this are the ruins that still remain of its walls, which surrounded the town for years throughout its history.

Alcázar de la Señoría or Altamira Palace

Visitable

This building dates back to the 11th and 13th centuries in the Muslim era, although it also has different construction elements dating from the 11th and 13th centuries. It was a residence of the lords of Elx between the 15th and 16th centuries, and is now one of the city's symbols and home to MAHE (Elx Archaeological and History Museum), created by Alejandro Ramos Folqués. It preserves archaeological remains found at the La Alcudia site and Parque de Elx, as well as different items with other origins.

You can visit Altamira Palace for free on Sundays, together with Elx Archaeological and History Museum. Around the Palace, you will also find a multitude of places and historic buildings of great interest, such as the Basilica of Santa María, La Calahorra Tower, the aforementioned Parque Municipal, as well as the Palm Grove of Elx and the Vinalopó riverbed. Without a doubt, this is one of the unique, special places in Elx. You'll love it!



La Calahorra Tower

Exterior

La Calahorra Tower will not disappoint. There are many curiosities to be discovered in this fifteen-metre high tower, which is quadrangular in shape and formed part of the old wall of Elx. Inside you will be surprised to see some Masonic symbols both on the ceiling and on the walls, since it housed the old Elx lodge. Don't leave the city without seeing it because this Muslim fortification is one of this period's symbols in the city. You will take a piece of its oldest history with you.



Ressemblanc Tower

Exterior

You can go to Huerto de la Torreta, outside the historic centre, to visit this 15th-century construction, which served as a watchtower against possible maritime threats. Its interior is divided into four floors connected by a spiral staircase. If you decide to walk around its exterior, don't forget to have a good look at all its façades as on one of them you will discover the coat of arms of the Santacilla family, the former lords of this place.

Los Vaillo Tower

Exterior

Surrounded by palm trees, it offers one of the most beautiful views of Elx from its heights. Built between the 15th and 16th centuries, it was originally conceived as a watchtower. Palm trees are the main focus of the landscape that has always adorned the building. Another highlight is its close connection with the local Municipal Conservatory of Music. On the other hand, its name comes from the 'Vaillo', an old family from Elx who were members of the nobility and who received the title of Counts and Countesses of Torrellano.

El Pinet Tower

Exterior

This tower is located on the same beach to the north of La Marina in Elx, specifically El Pinet, which you can only access on foot as it is unspoilt. A place that amazes with its incredible views of the Bay of Santa Pola. Like the other towers on the Elx coast, its function was to guard the coast to prevent smugglers from crossing the coastal lagoons. Currently, only its very deteriorated masonry base remains, and only its exterior can be visited, but it is without a doubt worth it as from this viewpoint you have beautiful views of Las Salinas de Santa Pola Natural Park, where with some luck you can observe flamingos.

/Aspe

Tourism in Aspe is based on four pillars: culture, nature, fiestas and gastronomy. El Río Castle, the Aljau archaeological site, the remains of the Aljau and Fauqui canals and the irregular layout of its old quarter are witnesses of the evolution that this town has undergone over the centuries.

El Río Castle

Exterior

The cubes of the El Río Castle towers are barely standing, but they demand the attention of anyone who loves history. If you look at its grounds, which don't have a keep, you will be struck by the twelve fortified towers joined by stretches of wall. Although it is currently inaccessible inside, there are notable remains of the walls and the bases of its towers.

Aljau Castle

Visitable

If you feel like visiting an open-air archaeological museum, Aljau Castle is a must-see. The archaeological intervention, carried out in 2010 next to the Tarafa river and El Baño bridge, confirmed the existence of a possible fortified construction from the late middle ages. Among its archaeological treasures, several household rooms structured parallel to the river and connected to each other stand out.

Next to this fortification are the remains of a house with several rooms in which a hearth and an earthenware vessel have been found. Despite its deteriorated state of conservation, you can still distinguish the structures that separate the rooms and the entrance to it. Recently, in 2019, works were carried out to stabilise, consolidate and musemise this castle's architectural remains.

/Novelda

Novelda is home to attractive modernist architecture, which you will find in the city centre. If you visit it, you will see that its culture revolves around the Sanctuary of Santa María Magdalena, a curious modernist church that has earned it the name Alicante's La Sagrada Familia.

La Mola

Visitable

In the Vinalopó valley, this castle is one of the best vantage points in the province's inland comarcas. You can find it on a small hill 360 metres above sea level, surrounded by a walled enclosure with only one floor. It has an unusual triangular tower, built in the 14th century after the Christian conquest. It is only 3 kilometres from the town, so it is very easy to access for visitors. La Mola Castle and the triangular tower can be visited freely. The Novelda History and Art Museum also offers guided tours for both school groups and associations.



/Monóvar

Located in the Medio Vinalopó comarca, its centre sits on a hill where the hermitage of Santa Bárbara is located, which together with the castle and the clock tower create the townscape.

Monóvar Castle

Exterior

Belonging to the Almohad period between the 12th and 13th centuries, a diversity of archaeological findings dated to the Bronze Age have also been discovered in it. Being built on a hill, its floor plan is quite irregular, and part of the wall and a tower can still be seen today. Despite the fact it is lying in ruins, it is possible to go to this small fortress by following a simple route. Undoubtedly, a place of interest to enjoy its landscapes and learn about its history.

/Elda

Just 35 minutes from Alicante, this destination combines charms such as history, fiestas and traditional cuisine. Among the town's cultural heritage, you will be struck by its castle, the church of Santa Ana and the Ibero-Roman site of Monastil.

Elda Castle

Visitable

Next to the Ibero-Roman site of Monastil, this castle is considered one of Elda's two jewels due to its antiquity and importance. You will feel like a true medieval knight if you come to contemplate its immense cylindrical crenellated tower. This is a magical piece of work that has remains of Muslim, medieval and Renaissance art.

/Petrer

Petrer is a benchmark in inland Alicante province's tourism. In addition to its castle, you can also visit the wall's cave-houses, which were restored to show what daily life was like centuries ago.

Petrer Castle

Visitable

To get to this imposing castle, you will have to climb a slope as the fortress is located on top of the hill at the highest point of the city, next to the Vinalopó river. Once there, get your camera ready to capture one of the most spectacular views of the city. But if you want to see the fortress from the best angle, come driving from the Alicante-Madrid motorway, just when it crosses Petrer at the bridge that goes over the Rambla de Pusa. Its most outstanding element is its large square tower with two floors and a basement, which was a cistern in Islamic times and was later used as a prison by the Christians, who built a larger cistern next to the same tower.

Petrer Castle can be visited freely and free of charge on Saturdays, Sundays and bank holidays, from 11:00 am to 2:00 pm. But it is recommended to go on the guided tour, which is also free and runs from Tuesdays to Sundays.

/Sax

Sax is another place worth visiting. This charming town is built around its castle, an imposing fortress that was part of the defensive line established in Alt Vinalopó since Muslim times.

Sax Castle

Visitable

500 metres above sea level on a pinnacle that occupies a large part of the Vinalopó valley, you will find this spectacular fortress. A building classified as Spanish Historic Heritage and characterised by being located at a great height, which gifts visitors with unforgettable views of the valley and the town. The keep, founded on a cavern, and albarana tower have been preserved. One of its many positives is that this castle offers free visits, including guided tours. If you decide to stop here, you will find an unexpected beautiful stairway with pointed arches.



/Camp de Mirra

In this village in Alt Vinalopó, the Almizra Castle ruins and the Church of San Bartolomé are two of its must-sees.

Almizra Castle

Exterior

This castle dominates the entire wide valley of the Vinalopó between the Sierra de Beneixama and the Sierra de Onil. You can get there by following two different paths; Cementerio and Calvario. Both leave the centre and meet at the foot of the hill. Next to the castle is a hermitage consecrated to Saint Bartholomew connected to a Christian defensive tower. As respects the castle, a tower just about remains standing, with a square base concealed with a roof to which the Hermitage of San Bartolomé was connected. Nevertheless, this place continues to be of great historical importance as it was the location of the meeting between the King of Aragón, James I, and the infant Alfonso the Innocent, which gave rise to the Treaty of Almizra.

/Biar



The charm of inland Alicante province can be found in towns like Biar, which in addition to its castle has picturesque streets, historic monuments, an aqueduct on the outskirts and a lot of tradition, with its Moros y Cristianos fiestas.

Biar Castle

Visitable

From afar you will discover, on a rocky outcrop, this imposing castle with a double walled enclosure and a long history reaching back to Arab times. Biar was always a border area between the kingdoms of Castilla and Aragón, and it has passed from one kingdom to another over the course of its history. Hence the importance of this 12th-century castle. Its 12th-century Almohad vault is unexpected. The rectangular cistern excavated out of the rock remains. In the stronghold, there is an imposing 19-metre-high keep with a ground floor and upper floor, beautifully restored. On your visit you can enjoy a walk around it and the views from the top of the tower.

/Villena

A historic city and capital of the comarca, its old quarter lies around the castle. Descending from it down the old town's narrow streets lined with white houses, you will come across two beautiful Gothic churches: the Archpriest Church of Santiago and the Church of Santa María.

La Atalaya Castle

Visitable

When you approach Villena by car, the first thing you see, crowning the foothills of San Cristóbal, is La Atalaya castle. This is, in fact, the largest of all the castles on the route. It was originally built by the Arabs in the 12th century, and later passed into Christian hands when the Aragonese troops successfully besieged it.

This fortress offers both free-access visits and guided tours to hear about all the castle's stories and anecdotes. Such as, for example, the fact that visitors should look at the two vaults with interlaced arches that are found on the lower floors of the keep. They are a legacy of the time of Arab domination and there are only two other similar examples in Spain: the Royal Chapel of Córdoba, and a house on the Patio de Banderas, part of the Alcázar in Sevilla.



Salvatierra Castle

Exterior

To finish the route through Villena, don't leave without going to the area around Salvatierra Castle. This is a high fortification originally built by the Muslims in the 10th century. Despite its state of conservation (it lies almost in ruins), the fortress still shows its original structure and is an excellent example of an Arab castle built at height and practically impregnable thanks to the hill's natural defences.

/Beneixama

This town is known for being surrounded by olive groves and vineyards, from which excellent wines are obtained.

Beneixama Watchtower

Exterior

The most unique landmark here is the Watchtower, a medieval building that has witnessed the town's origins and history. It is a square tower 10 metres on each side, with a preserved height of 6 metres. And it is curious to know that this tower was built when Beneixama hamlet already existed, in the middle of its network of canals and fields. You can visit its exterior; it is easy to access as it is very close to the town centre.

/Banyeres de Mariola

Banyeres de Mariola is located in l'Alcoià comarca, north of Alicante, in a privileged position in the Sierra de Mariola Natural Park. On arrival, you will be welcomed by the castle, of Arab origin, which crowns the town and gives it a unique medieval beauty.

Banyeres de Mariola Castle

Visitable

Rising 830 metres above sea level, it dominates the land all around it. The castle is in very good condition thanks to the restorations carried out over the past decades. Highlights include the Almohad-period keep, built using the rammed earth technique. Inside, in addition to discovering pieces of history, you can also enjoy a comprehensive museum devoted to the Moros y Cristianos fiestas, so popular in inland Alicante province. You can visit the castle independently or on a guided tour provided by the Banyeres Tourist Office.

Font Bona Tower

Visitable

If you feel like learning about the history of Banyeres de Mariola, don't miss Font Bona Tower, which dates back to the 15th century. When it was built it was separate and had the function of controlling transport links, although it is currently connected to other properties. It has been declared an Asset of Cultural Interest and houses the Municipal Archaeological Museum, where you can discover a collection of archaeological remains from the Palaeolithic period to the Modern Age.

/Castalla

This town, which for centuries was mainly dedicated to agriculture, is nowadays known for its varied and rich gastronomy, renowned for its star dish: *Gaspato*.

Castalla Castle

Visitable

Before or after trying its famous dish, you should visit the castle founded by the Arabs in the 11th century on the remains of Neolithic and Ibero-Roman ruins. Expanded and reinforced by the Christians in the 14th and 15th centuries, the castle dominates all the comarca's natural entries and exits. There are three main parts: The Palau, the Torre Grossa and the Patio de Armas. When you look out over the battlements of its Torre Grossa (Thick Tower), you feel the breeze bringing the smell of the Mediterranean sea. You can enjoy this feeling if you take one of the guided tours organised throughout the year from Tuesdays to Fridays.