

About the Sierra de Gredos

Central Spain's highest mountains, with several peaks over 2500m (8200 ft), the Sierra de Gredos is a small but impressive range approximately 150 km. long and 25 km. wide, forming the western section of the important chain of mountains known as the *sistema central*, which run approximately East-West across central Iberia and divide the higher plains of northern Castile from the lower plains of southern Castile and Extremadura. **The resulting difference in elevation between the northern and southern valleys is roughly 1,000 m / 3281 ft., and in turn, creates great diversity of climate and ecosystems.** The region includes portions of the provinces of Madrid, Avila, Salamanca, Toledo and Cáceres.

The National Hunting Reserve and Regional Park

In 1905, the main part of the central massif of Gredos was declared a Royal Hunting Reserve by King Alfonso XIII and hunting was banned. This pioneering act prevented the extinction of the *Capra Pyreneaica Victoriae* - the Spanish Ibex - which had almost been hunted to extinction, largely by Spain's nobles and royalty. With the parallel extermination of the wolf-the ibex's only natural predator, the the Ibex made a strong comeback and hunting soon resumed on a very limited basis. During most of the Franco era, the reserve was almost exclusively used by Franco and his guests. In 1972, control of the reserve was passed to the ministry of environment (ICONA) and was declared a National Hunting Reserve. In 1987, its status was changed to Regional Park – 2nd highest level of protection after National Park—, as part of the network of 'protected natural areas' of *Castilla y Leon*. Since 1975, various groups have been campaigning for the entire sierra to be declared a National Park, but there are many economic interests that are in conflict with such a designation that would severely limit or restrict agricultural and forestry activity within the limits of the park.

Geology & Climate

Formed around 40 million years ago, along with the rest of the *sistema central* - achieving their current aspect only 10,000 years ago, at the time of the retreat of the last glaciers. Metamorphic and igneous rocks predominate, with the most important being granite. (Granite is composed of feldspar, mica and quartz). Heavy glaciation resulted in an impressive modern-day landscape of glacial cirques and moraine, rushing rivers, meandering streams and crystalline pools, surrounded by towering, lichen-covered granite in fantastic formations.

For details on the climate in this area, see our [specific page on weather in the Sierra de Gredos](#)

Fauna and flora

The area is well-known for the diversity and abundance of its fauna. Estimates vary: **between 50% and 64% of the peninsula's terrestrial vertebrates are found in Gredos.** **These include: 14 species of amphibians, 23 species of reptiles, 130 species of birds, 30 species of mammals, including the peninsula's largest population of Spanish Ibex,** a nimble and majestic animal that has become the nationally recognised symbol of the Sierra, and one that you are almost sure to spot during your stay in Gredos. In addition, **this is one of Europe's premier bird-watching areas, where you'll see soaring birds of prey—**depending on the season, species possibly observed include various kinds of eagles, vultures, kites, hawks, accentors, etc. as well as a host of other smaller birds of great interest to birdwatchers, including spotted and green woodpecker, azure-winged magpie, hoopoe, roller, bee-eater, kingfisher, crane, black stork, night heron, purple heron, and many other kinds of wading birds.

As for flora, there are approximately 1400 species, of which 14 are unique to Gredos. Thanks to the geography and climate, the range of plant types include examples of all 5 main categories of Mediterranean vegetation: 3 in the northern valleys, and all 5 in the south. Depending on the time of your visit, at higher elevations throughout the range, you will enjoy landscapes of high meadows carpeted with wild flowers, hillsides coloured and scented by broom and heather. Dense forests of Scots pine and some stands of native Pyrenean oak are found in the northern valleys, while much of the fertile southern valleys are terraced with orchards of olives, cherries and figs, and their forests are populated by black pine, chestnut, walnut, ash, poplar and birch, as well as Pyrenean, cork and holm oak.

Seasonal flowers and harvests

In March and April, the valleys of southern Gredos are a spectacular sea of colour, with the blossoms of the numerous cherry, plum, almond and other fruit trees in the area. Late April and May signal the appearance of the lovely rock rose or cistus flower that line many of your paths. Soon after comes wild lavender, as well as the appearance of delicate wildflowers galore, including crocuses, narcissus, and orchids, many of which last well into the mid-summer months in the high meadows. June is the beginning of the cherry harvest and a good time to start picking oregano, thyme and rosemary. September brings the fig and hazelnut harvest, soon followed by chestnuts in October and November and an explosion of edible wild mushrooms collected with zeal by locals. These Autumn months, the landscape is a riot of reds, oranges, ochres and yellows of the deciduous trees that comprise much of the forest throughout Gredos,

History of human occupation of Gredos

The earliest remains found in Gredos are in the valley of Guadyerbas (carved stones of the early Palaeolithic era and dolmens). Around 2,500 years ago, the Celts (Vetones) were probably the earliest widespread inhabitants of Gredos (remains of settlements in *El Raso*, *Ulaca*, and *Escarabajosa*) and were possibly responsible for the *Toros of Guisando* - live-size stone-carved figures of bulls thought to date from the 2nd and 3rd century BC - site of a famous treaty signed between Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabel, uniting their realms, setting the stage of one of Spain's most productive royal partnerships.

The Romans didn't seem to have been very interested in Gredos, but the region came under their control in the 2nd century BC. The *Calzada Romana* (Roman Road) from *Puerto del Pico* to *Mombeltrán* dates from the 1st and 2nd century BC and was probably constructed to facilitate the movement of troops and transport the ironwork produced in the forges of the region.

Later, the Arabs, mostly Berbers from the Atlas, livestock herders and semi-nomads settled in the region, contributing to improvement of local agricultural practices. Legend has it that the great Moorish general Almanzor climbed the highest peak in the sierra in the year 989, as a symbol of his dominion, and ever since the peak has borne his name. The *Sistema Central* marked the frontier between Christian Spain and Moorish Spain until the fall of Toledo in the year 1085.

The posterior Christian re-colonisation led to the establishment of the first stable settlements in the sunny areas and fertile plains, as well as the network of livestock routes by which people, animals and merchandise have travelled throughout the following centuries. The lands of Gredos gradually came under the influence of the 3 nearest important cities: Avila, Plasencia and Béjar, much as they do today.

By the mid 14th century, the region had become more or less 'inhabited'. There are historical references to exploitation of the forests, existence of forges, mills, looms and textile works, of lands given over to agriculture and hunting.

In the 19th century the network of roads was modernised and terraced agriculture was introduced, which produced a radical change in the landscape, agrarian usage and family incomes.

Finally, in the 19th century, the major reservoirs were constructed and agriculture of some irrigated single crops was introduced, such as tobacco. However, in this century much of the rural population abandoned the countryside for life in the cities, leaving many villages in a state of abandonment and decline. Well-preserved examples of traditional architecture can still be found in many villages in the *Barranco de las Cinco Villas*, la Vera, Plasencia, Béjar, Candelario, etc.

As a result of human development, principally livestock, agriculture and forestry, as well as the constant traffic of travellers crossing the sierra, the landscape of Gredos, except for the high mountain zones, have undergone major changes since the days of the Romans. One result of this is that the entire region is criss-crossed with a network of paths, and dirt roads that enable the traveller to access any point if he needs to.

Modern man in Gredos

Nowadays, the local economy of the region centres on raising of livestock (goats, sheep and cattle) and crops (cherries, figs, tobacco, peppers, chestnuts), and logging (black pine in managed forests). Local production of some of Spain's finest paprika and goat's milk cheeses is another small but important economic sector. Lastly, tourism - of the "active", "rural" or "eco" types is slowly providing significant input into the local economy.

Cuisine

The uncomplicated yet flavourful cuisine of both northern and southern Gredos takes advantage of first-class local ingredients, including fresh trout from the pure waters of mountain rivers, flavourful lamb and kid from the flocks that roam the hillsides and suckling pig, not to mention beef from the local "*Avileña*" cattle - considered among Spain's finest. This is hearty Castilian cooking, famous for roasted meats and tasty "one-pot" stews typically made with locally-grown legumes such as white beans, chick peas or lentils, cooked slowly with leafy green vegetables, chorizo sausage and *jamon serrano* - Spain's famous mountain-cured ham.

The southern valleys of Gredos have the additional influence of Extremadura's noted cuisine, with a myriad of typical "peasant"-style dishes featuring the region's famous sweet paprika - "*Pimentón de La Vera*". In addition, these southern valleys, thanks to their mild microclimates, are known throughout Spain for their production of excellent fruit and nuts, in particular, cherries, figs, chestnuts and walnuts, as well as a wide range of vegetables, which form the basis of numerous local dishes. The region's delicious goat's milk cheeses are considered among the finest in Spain