



# Sistema Central

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Looking over the Circo de Gredos, the savage cliffs of Los Tres Hermanitos and Almanzor from the El Morezón ridge, on the **Alta Ruta de Gredos** walk (p44)
- Stumbling across the ridge of Covacha to pick a blissful spot to camp on the **Lakes & Peaks** walk (p49)
- Wandering through Hoyo Moros, a beautiful glacial corrie below Calvitero, on the **Sierra de Candelario** walk (p53)
- Exploring the eroded rock formations, fallen boulders, tall spires and narrow gullies of La Pedriza on the **Cuerda Larga** walk (p57)

Area: 94,224 sq km

Average summer high: 31°C

Population: 2.5 million

There's more to central Spain than Don Quixote, windmills and vast wheat fields. A spine of 2200m-plus mountains called Sistema Central rises rather unexpectedly from the *meseta* (high tableland) of Castilla y León and Castilla-La Mancha, providing an oasis of delightful alpine wilderness among the sometimes bleak expanse of Spain's heartland. A short drive from Madrid the well-watered valleys and rugged peaks are extremely popular with *madrileños* (people living in Madrid), but these attractions are little known by foreign tourists.

Sierra de Gredos forms the western and most dramatic section of Sistema Central and is the target for mountaineers and climbers as well as walkers in search of dramatic ridge traverses. Sierra de Guadarrama, while less grand than its western neighbour, is a very popular weekend getaway and winter ski destination. Its La Pedriza and the GR10 offer some rewarding challenges for walkers.

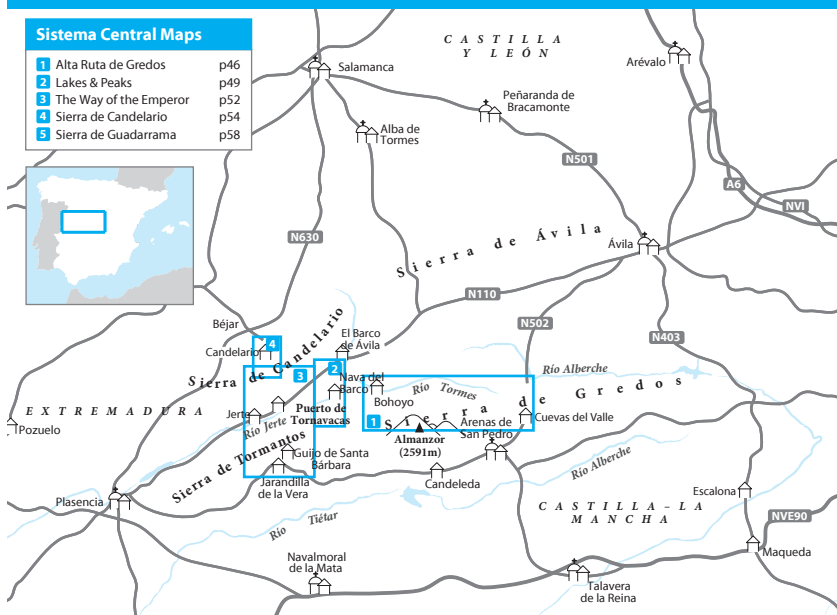
This chapter describes many of the most spectacular walks in Sistema Central. Some walks include popular tourist routes, but rest assured there's fantastic scope for getting well off the beaten track.



## SISTEMA CENTRAL

## Sistema Central Maps

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3	The Way of the Emperor	p52
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## HISTORY

Evidence of Neolithic and Celtic peoples has been found on the southern slopes of the range. Generally speaking, the history of the Sistema Central reflects events unfolding in the *meseta* and rest of Spain, with the region resisting and succumbing to numerous invasions over the centuries, and repeatedly changing hands. The mountain terrain made an ideal base for guerrilla activity against the forces of Napoleon and Franco.

In 1978 Spain became a constitutional monarchy and a process of decentralisation began. Now the Sistema Central is governed by four regions: Castilla-La Mancha, Castilla y León (which has authority over most of the Sierra de Gredos), Extremadura and the Comunidad de Madrid (which governs the Sierra de Guadarrama). Recently these new authorities began promoting rural tourism in an effort to bring money and employment into the mountains.

## ENVIRONMENT

Formed more than 300 million years ago in the late Palaeozoic period, then resculpted

275 million years later, the Sistema Central is divided by the Río Alberche into the western Sierra de Gredos and eastern Sierra de Guadarrama. The geology of the range (predominantly granite plus some gneiss and the odd seam of quartz) means springs well up close to the summits. These water sources as well as snowmelt from the highest peaks keep the valleys well watered year-round.

Massive glaciers carved many of the valleys in the range during the last Ice Age 10,000 years ago (glaciation is obvious in the central Gredos, far less so in the Guadarrama). The landscape then remained unchanged until the Middle Ages when humans began to make a significant impact on the environment. Until then the Sistema Central had a thick cover of deciduous trees such as holm, Pyrenean and cork oaks, with indigenous Scots pine appearing on the higher slopes. Only remnants of these forests survive today, mostly in river valleys and inaccessible areas. In places, ancient forests have been replaced with black or Corsican pine plantations, but a wide range of animals and plants is still found.