

How to follow the route



Upright signs: located every few metres and at crossroads there are posts with green coloured flags indicating the direction to follow and the number of metres left from the total length of the route.



Ground signs: the route is also marked out with round signs on the ground indicating the right direction to follow.

Museu del Palmerar (Palm Groves Museum) at Sant Plàcid orchard

The route starts off and ends at one of the historic orchards called "Sant Plàcid". Here you can see one of the most unique traditional homes, built in the 19th century, and comprising two wings joined by a covered wooden bridge.



"Sant Plàcid" orchard house, the "Museu del Palmerar" (Palm Groves Museum)

Inside you'll find the Museu del Palmerar (Palm Forest Museum), a museum space, which offers the visitor a wide vision regarding the characteristics of this highly valuable cultural landscape. The museum is structured in four different exhibition spaces. After a visual prologue, the first room tells us the history of the Elx Palm Groves from its origins to the present time. In the second room, dedicated to the palm groves, three

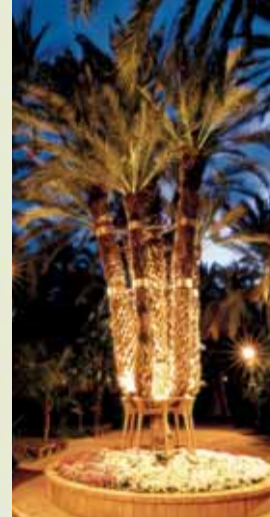


different subjects are discussed: the biology of the palm tree, life in the palm grove and the palm tree's uses and handicraft. The next space aims to explain what the declaration of the Elx Palm Groves as a World Heritage means. The visit to the museum ends in the workshop where, in real time, you can see how the Palm Sunday White Palm is manufactured and other palm derived objects. You can, of course, acquire souvenirs or information materials.

Once outside, a signalled route invites us to visit the Sant Plàcid orchard to know palm tree cultivation and maintenance techniques and to observe a recreation of the traditional irrigation system with a system of ditches and distributors. The grove, of approximately 15,000 sq.m, has a thousand palm trees and a sample of the most characteristic associated crops and trees such as olive trees, carob trees, lemon trees or pomegranates, and endemic species such as the Elx Poplar.

Once the visit is over, we'll advance along the street called Porta de la Morera, under which the Elx Historic Reservoir main irrigation ditch flows, you come to the "Huerto del Cura Hotel", a fine example of integrating a building in with the landscape, before you cross the street to visit the famous "Huerto del Cura" (Garden of the Priest).

Huerto del Cura



Listed as an Artistic Garden since 1943, this orchard has an area of 13,000 sq.m. It is a private garden where a fine collection of Mediterranean and tropical plants can be seen, although the majority of the specimens are palms and cacti.

The most outstanding feature of the garden, due to its rarity, is the Imperial Palm Tree, a unique example of a palm tree with seven branches splaying out from the same trunk. Also of interest is the garden house, with a picturesque arcade set on palm tree trunks.

Imperial, or 7-branched Palm

Sol, Rogeta, Sempere and Almàsseres orchards



Continuing along the route, your path now takes you to an educational facility, called the Salesianos Catholic School, set in the midst of well-aligned palm trees in the "Pesetero" orchard and the palm orchard known as "Hort que no té Portes" (Without Doors).

Just before you turn right is the "Sol" orchard, an area that has been taken over by the township for rehabilitation, with young palm specimens having been planted. After this you take the path called "Cami de les Baies" where you can see on your left another example of the integration of public services in the palm plantation, the El Palmerar Public Primary School.

Here you come to a new crossroads. In front of you is the "Dins" orchard, and you should take the right-hand road called the "Cami de les Almàsseres", between the "Rogeta" orchard on the right, and the "Sempere" orchard on the left. In both of these orchards lots of work has been done on rejuvenating the plantation.

Along this stretch you can see walls dating from the Moorish period that mark the boundaries of each orchard. In archaeological surveys, both the "Almàsseres" orchard (whose name refers to the erstwhile oil mills - "almasseres" - found here) and the Orchard of "Felip" contained fragments from the original construction period in the 19th century.

The "Pontos" and "Malla" orchards

The gate to the "Pontos" orchard provides access to a pathway bordering a series of tall palm trees that leads to one of the last buildings still preserving its traditional structure. This building has an annex where the process of bleaching palm leaves was once carried out.



"Malla" orchard house

A few more metres along the path is the orchard called "Malla". This is a private property that still maintains a noteworthy agricultural production, and there is a house that preserves its traditional style, but has also been updated.

Landscape and architecture

There are two unique architectural features associated with the palm plantation landscape: traditional houses and stonewalls. The houses are located on terraces, close to the road. They once had extensive porches, often built with palm tree trunk beams, a kitchen and sleeping quarter areas, and an area for animals in the back.

The orchards were separated from one another by walls demarcating different properties and preventing animals from escaping. These walls were built in rough stone and mortar, and were then rendered with brown plaster. Sometimes fences were also made using dried intertwined palm leaves.

Casimira, Pastoret, Mareta, Borreguet and Monjo orchards

You now cross the street called "carrer Curtidors" to contemplate one of the best-preserved groups of orchards in town: the Casimira, Pastoret, Mareta, Borreguet and Monjo orchards.

All together they form a complex now called "Parque de Palmeras Filet de Fora", with a total surface area of over 150,000 sq. m. In this area the traditional orchard structure has been recovered thanks to the planting of over 200 fruit trees of 19 different species, plus some 140 palm trees of 7 different species, combined with sport facilities, a pool, children's playgrounds and diverse public services.

The route now follows this new stretch next to one of the entrances to the "Monjo" orchard, after which, a little lo-



"Filet de Fora" Palm Groves Park.



"Tia Casimira" orchard house

wer down, comes the "Tia Casimira" orchard, with an entranceway that has an old house next to it, with a set of columns that once must have formed part of an elegant porch.

When you reach the bend, you take the "Cami de Felip", named after the orchard you can see on your left, in which you can appreciate the traditional irrigation system still preserved here. This is one of the quietest stretches along the way, so you may be lucky enough to see some of the local birds thriving here.

On the last stretch of the route, the palm orchards are set side by side with the urban layout of the town. The "La Mareta" orchard is a good example of contrast and the kind of symbiosis that has been achieved with the older quarters of Elx. This integration is fully evident in the "Borreguet" and the "Monjo" orchards, which are right next to the centre of town.



Porta de la Morera orchard

Just a little further along, you cross the street to the orchard called "Porta de la Morera", the result of a municipal undertaking to recover an ancient abandoned palm plantation. On the western end of this area, the town's modern Congress Centre has been built, integrated within a large plaza, with the palm trees being replanted in a garden with a geometric design, and including pools, a playground and a large pergola.

At the far end of the park, next to the car park entrance, is the last sign on the route, indicating that your journey through the beautiful palm plantation is soon coming to an end. The orchards along the way preserve quite a lot of the original Moorish infrastructure and irrigation systems set within a modern town that has carefully preserved this natural treasure, now listed as UNESCO World Heritage.

The Elx Palm Forest



Palm tree orchards are the most characteristic feature of the urban landscape of Elx. They surround the city like a huge green belt, 2 km long and 1 km wide. The sheer quantity of palm trees here, numbering around 200,000, make the city look more like a forest when seen from the distance.

Yet the Palm Groves is not a natural forest, but rather a cultural area which is as rational in its design as the gardens of the Renaissance, originally created for agricultural production, and owing much to the complex system of irrigation used to water the whole area.

A cultural landscape inherited from Al-Andalus

Although it is probable that palm trees grew in this area in remote times, it was the Moors who came to Spain and called it Al-Andalus who originally planted and nourished them; using techniques derived from the oasis cultures of northern Africa and the Middle East. Moorish farmers, of course, were experts in taking advantage of minimum amounts of water in their desert lands.

The orchards are actually trapezoidal or square terraced plots, on whose borders the palm trees would be planted in single or double files, always coinciding with the layout of the irrigation channels.

These layouts acted as screens that preserved crops from the sun and wind. As a result, intensive farming was carried out on various levels (crops under the date palms, fruit trees and herb gardens).



The ancient "Ressemblanch" mill, located in the "Diego Escorina" orchard, powered by waters from the Main Irrigation Canal.

World Heritage



UNESCO approved the Historic Palm Forest of Elx as a World Heritage on 30 November 2000, in recognition of its universal value as an example of the transfer of landscape characteristic of one continental culture to another, in this case north African landscape transported to Europe. UNESCO also underlined the particular interest of the ancient irrigation system, which is still in operation today.

The age of the enlightened traveller

European travellers visiting the town of Elx in the Modern Period have left records of the impressions caused by the Palm Groves in their chronicles.

Hieronymus Münzer (1494), stated that "...it is a place exceptionally endowed with olive oil, and nowhere else have I seen so many palm trees as here."

A. Jouvin (1672) wrote that he could see "nothing else but palm trees, loaded down with fruit..."

J. Peyron (1772) noted that "...the plain is covered with palm trees as far as the eye can see. It is claimed there are over fifty thousand, two thirds of which are over one hundred and twenty feet high, forming a superb forest." J. Townsend (1786) described the town as follows: "Elx, or Illice in Roman times, can truly be called the city of dates, because it is surrounded by palm trees..."



A View of Elx, in an illustration by Alexandre de Laborde (1805).

An exotic place



The largest Palm Groves in Europe, the northernmost oasis in the Mediterranean, has attracted many famous people throughout history. Among all the orchards, the most famous is undoubtedly the "Huerto del Cura". This artistic garden has had a long list of illustrious visitors – politicians, writers, scientists – who have all succumbed to its beauty.

This must have happened to the Empress Elisabeth of Austria, the celebrated Sissy, who visited the "Huerto del Cura" in 1894, and was so impressed by the seven-branched palm tree that she commented to the proprietor that this date palm had the power and strength of an empire. The chaplain at the time, by the name of Castaño, decided to call this tree the "Imperial Palm Tree" following her visit.



The beauty of the Palm Groves also attracted both Romantic and Impressionist painters due to its undeniably oriental look. This was the case of the great Spanish painter Joaquín Sorolla.

The Hispanic Society had commissioned a number of Spanish landscapes to Sorolla. Elx was one of the places he chose to visit. On 30 November 1918, the painter wrote to his family, "The man who comes loaded with dates, the light and the whole scene, is something admirable; what's more, the monotony of the date palm tree trunks stands out in delicious colours; it is an ex profeso range that gives the dates a colour which is more beautiful than that of the orange tree... for myself, I wish that I did not feel it so greatly, because after a few hours like today, I feel exhausted, shattered; I cannot bear such pleasure; I cannot resist it as I once did..."



"The Elx Palm Groves", a Sorolla painting, an exhibit at the Hispanic Society of New York.

The importance of irrigation

In the 12th century the geographer Al-Idrisi wrote: "Elx is a settlement built on a plain crossed by an irrigation ditch derived from a river. This irrigation ditch goes under the town walls and the inhabitants make use of it to feed the baths, and it also runs through the markets and streets. The waters of the river I mention are salty. For the inhabitants to drink, they must bring rainwater from other points, which they preserve in cisterns..."



First vignette of the CXXXIII Ballad by Alphonse X the Wise (c. 1279), in which a description is given of the miracle of St Mary of Elx, who brought back to life a girl who had drowned in an irrigation ditch.

The irrigation ditch to which the geographer referred was the "Séquia Major", or main irrigation ditch, an extraordinary work of hydraulic engineering that brought water from 5 km away for irrigation and farming purposes, with a number of different branches or smaller ditches watering the different orchards surrounding the urban centre.

Palm tree farming

Palm trees mainly provide two products: dates and white palm leaves. In addition to the normal operations of fertilising and irrigation, palm tree farming requires a series of yearly tasks that require palm tree farmers to climb to the tops of the trees.

In springtime the palm trees must be pollinated, i.e. pollen from the male palm is collected and carried to flowers of the female palm trees. In summer the dry leaves must be pruned off. At the end of the autumn the mature dates must be collected, which is an operation known here as "munyir". Finally the palm tree tops must be "hooded" or covered so as to obtain white or blanched palm leaves.



A palm tree farmer pruning a tree. Diverse tools.

Elx dates are flavoursome and packed with energy.



White palm craftsmanship

If there is one characteristic feature of the Palm Groves of Elx that make it different from the rest of the palm groves in the world, it is surely the so-called "white palms", which are obtained thanks to an operation known as hooding, or "encaporut-xat", of the tree tops. This process of covering the palm leaves and protecting them from the sun, causes them to turn white instead of their natural green colour.



A craftswoman busy with a curly white palm.

White palm leaves are basically used simply for the celebration of Palm Sunday in Elx, with a procession that has been listed as a Festivity of International Tourist Interest. In the lead-up to this religious holiday the white palm leaves are collected and divided into two types: smooth and curled, with the latter being worked manually to achieve artistic creations of great beauty.

Environmental importance

In addition to its social and cultural values, the Palm Groves of Elx is also important on the environmental level. This huge amount of vegetation has brought about a unique habitat in this area of the country, a special eco-system of its own.

The Palm Groves provides a habitat for local fauna, particularly over 70 species of birds, due to the presence of food in abundance, both from the dates themselves and all the insects associated with palm forest life, which in turn make up a particular fauna group of their own.

Among the birds to be found here all year round are the Wryneck and the Short-toed Tree creeper, the Cattle Egret (in the palm trees near the marshes), the Kestrel, the Little Owl, the Hoopoe, the Great Tit, the Blackbird and

The Populus ilicitanus poplar tree is a local species growing on the banks of the irrigation ditches.

Blackbird.



Hoopoe.



the Great Grey Shrike. Summer bird life includes the Roller, the Swallow and the Woodchat Shrike; and winter brings the Buzzard, the Crag Martin and the Chiffchaff and the Robin.



Goldfinch

Palm Groves Protection Measures

Loss of profitability was often the cause of the destruction of the local orchards. In the 18th century, a number of palm trees were chopped down for the construction of buildings. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the Palm Groves of Elx suffered its greatest losses.



The arrival of the railway in 1884 cut the Historic Palm Groves in two.

Fortunately, in the 1920s a number of voices were raised in protest, and defensive measures were rallied by the municipal archivist of the day, Pere Ibarra i Ruiz. He persevered until both national and international recognition was achieved. The Second Republic promulgated a protection decree in 1933. Currently, the Forest is protected under the Palm Groves Guardianship Act of 1986, the PGOU of 1997 and the UNESCO World Heritage Convention.

Current concerns focus on the integral recovery of the Palm Groves. To achieve this, initiatives such as the acquisition of orchards, re-population activities and research projects are being carried out.



Lab for in vitro cultivation at the Phoenix Station.

The Phoenix Station, located in the "Gat" orchard, investigates techniques for date palm growing and oasis agriculture in general. It has three lines of research: in vitro cultivation of quality date-producing palms; the biological control of plagues and diseases; and date growing and production technology.



Historic palm groves route



ELX DOS PATRIMONIS DE LA HUMANITAT



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