

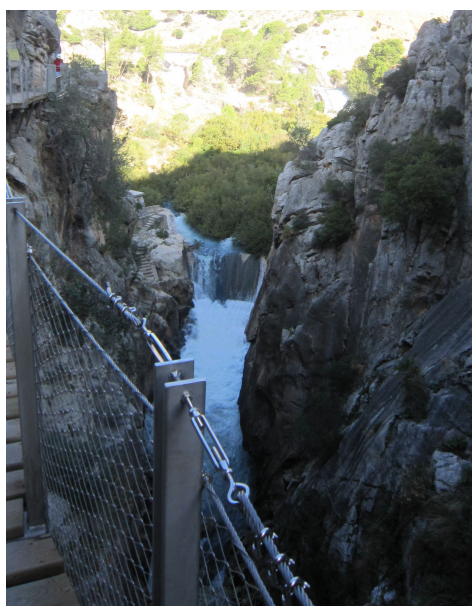
Caminito del Rey

David Landau

Along the Gaitanejo Gorge (Desfiladero de los Gaitanejo), near the northern entrance to the Caminito del Rey, there are two dams. The turbines inside the upper dam, which was built in 1927, produced electricity in the past. Nowadays, the water of the reservoir created by the dam are used for irrigation



The lower dam, built in 1903-1905, diverted the water into tunnels and canals, with a total length of 3 km.



The tunnels and canals were built along the western side of the gorge, the eastern side was already taken by a railroad since 1866, and they carried the water towards the southern cliff, crossed the canyon via an aqueduct to the eastern side, made a horseshoe curve, and from there the water streamed down 100 meters in a pipe and rotated the turbines that produced electricity.



In order to maintain the older dam and the canals, and to control the flow of water with special gates, a trail was constructed along it.



(Source: <http://expertvagabond.com/caminito-del-rey/>)

Part of the trail was dug in earth, another part was hewn in the rocks and the rest hanged and metal beams that were drilled into the cliff. The path composed of concrete plates. The trail was called Balconcillos de los Gaitanes to indicate the resemblance to balconies. In 1921 King Alfonso VIII,

while visiting the area in order to inaugurate a big dam that was constructed further north, walked along part of the trail.



According to one brochure I collected while visiting the area, in 1953, to commemorate the king's visit, the route was renamed Caminito del Rey 'The King's Little Pathway', or Camino del Rey 'the King pathway. It means that in 1953 the canal was still in use.

Sometime later the canal was abandoned. Over the aqueduct that crosses the gorge at the south part there is a huge pipe and the power station down is still producing electricity. Therefore one may assume that a new tunnel that carries the water was constructed. While examining a map of the area it has crossed my mind that instead of a canal that follows the curves of the gorges, they might have just dug a new tunnel in a straight line, more or less, inside the mountain.



In any case, the trail was no longer useful and the local electric company stopped maintaining it. The result was that some of the concrete plates fell and a general decay followed.



The trail became a challenge to climbers and other adventure seekers and in order to assist them, a metal cable was attached to the rocks. The trail received the title: 'The most dangerous walkway in the world.' A more modest title was: 'The most dangerous walkway in Spain.' In the Internet one can find many video clips featuring climbers on the trail. One video clip from 2008 has attracted to this moment more than 12 million viewers. Another video, from 2014, illustrates how people climbed the ruined trail.*

In many places it is written that due to several fatal incidents, climbing on the Caminito del Rey was outlawed in the beginning of the 21st century. Well, this does not seem to be correct. All over the world people can climb on whatever slop they want to. Climbing on Mount Everest is dangerous but it is allowed and it is also a big tourist industry. Apparently what actually was made illegal was walking on the railroad which stretches along the eastern side of the canyon, partly going through tunnels. It seems that there were climbers who left the trail somewhere along it, descended down to the bottom of the gorge, climbed to the other side, and returned to the starting point via the railroad. This was prohibited and those who were caught doing it had to pay a hefty fine.

As for the climbing itself, au contraire. In the village below were guides who took individuals and groups for climbing and walking the trail. There has also been a shop that sold and rented appropriate equipment. Actually we noticed the shop, however, it seems to be out of business. People who have come to practice climbing stay in the hotels, eat in the restaurants in this vicinity, and contribute to its economy.

Of course, now the trail is no longer a challenge to climbers, but the practice of climbing with ropes and one's own fingers has not disappeared from this area. While walking on the trail we noticed two people climbing on a wall of the eastern side of the gorge.

Eventually the local authorities have realized the potential of this site as a tourist attraction and decide to renovate it. In the end of March 2015 the new trail was inaugurated with a huge international acclaim: 'The most dangerous path has reopened.' Through the Internet one could have order tickets till the end of September and very soon they all were gone.

Apparently not all those who obtained tickets, which were still free, arrived at their appointed time. As a result several local tourist institutes have announced in their Internet sites that they can secure tickets to those who purchase their services. So, we have contacted a local hotel, reserved two nights, and they secured for us two tickets. And so it was; in the middle of October we walked the trail from start to end, around 8 km, and indeed it was a spectacular experience.

The trail has two entrances, southern and northern. When the trail was reopened the idea was to let people enter from both gates. However, a change of policy has occurred and from the beginning of October till the end of March one can enter only through the northern entrance. This change is an advantage since going from north to south is walking down. Let me say that during the summer the temperature in this part of the world can reach 40 degrees and in this kind of weather the difference between walking down or climbing up may be significant. I suggest that starting at the northern gate is always preferable.

The path to the northern entrance starts in a short tunnel just in the side of a restaurant (el Kiosko).





We were told that a bit further along the paved road from the restaurant there is a tunnel that shortens the distance.



However, we preferred to walk through the forest. The length of this trail is 2.7 km and through the tunnel 1.6 km.



We reached the entrance and joined the line. When it was our turn, our tickets were scanned, and the warden ascertained that the names on the tickets were the same as those in our passports, which we brought along following the instructions. The time assigned to us was 11 o'clock and we arrived there few minutes earlier. A German couple that waited with us in the line has 12 o'clock marked on their tickets, but they were allowed in. Each of us also received a sheet of plastic to cover our head and a helmet to use, just as a precaution against falling stones.



Along the trail there are no toilets, near the entrance there are. In the published general instructions it is written that there are no water faucets on the trail, and one should bring drinking bottles along. The wardens give us all several instructions, not to smoke, not to use walking sticks, etc., and allow us to enter the trail.

In the first part, which is several hundred meters long, the trail first hangs on the cliff.



In the beginning of the 21st century, after several fatal accidents, local authorities demolished the beginning of the trail in order to prevent people from walking there



<http://www.cazatormentas.net/foro/reportajes-de-senderismo-montaismo-trekking-y-mtb/embalse-del-gaitanejo/>

The water streamed through a tunnel below and then into a canal. The trail descends down and follows the canal.



Then and now, the trail continues over the outer wall of the canal.



After that the water entered another tunnel and the trail again is hanging on the cliff. The next photo was taken from the train that cruises along the eastern slop of the gorge.



At the end of this part the valley widens.





In one place the trail continues inside the canal.

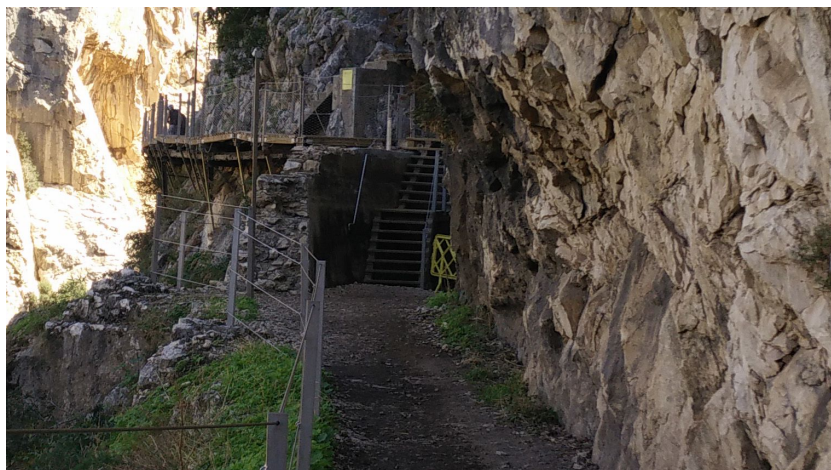


In several places there are tables and benches. In one of them we paused and ate the food we brought along.

In the next section, which is several hundred meters long, the water went through a tunnel and the trail, again, hang on the cliff. In one of the video clips the climbers reach this point over the broken trail and then enter the tunnel and return through it to the aqueduct. From there they descend to the train bridge with rings and ropes the same way they climbed up. Presently it is not allowed to walk through the tunnels.



<http://blog.thecheaproute.com/guide-to-el-camino-del-rey-el-chorro-spain/>



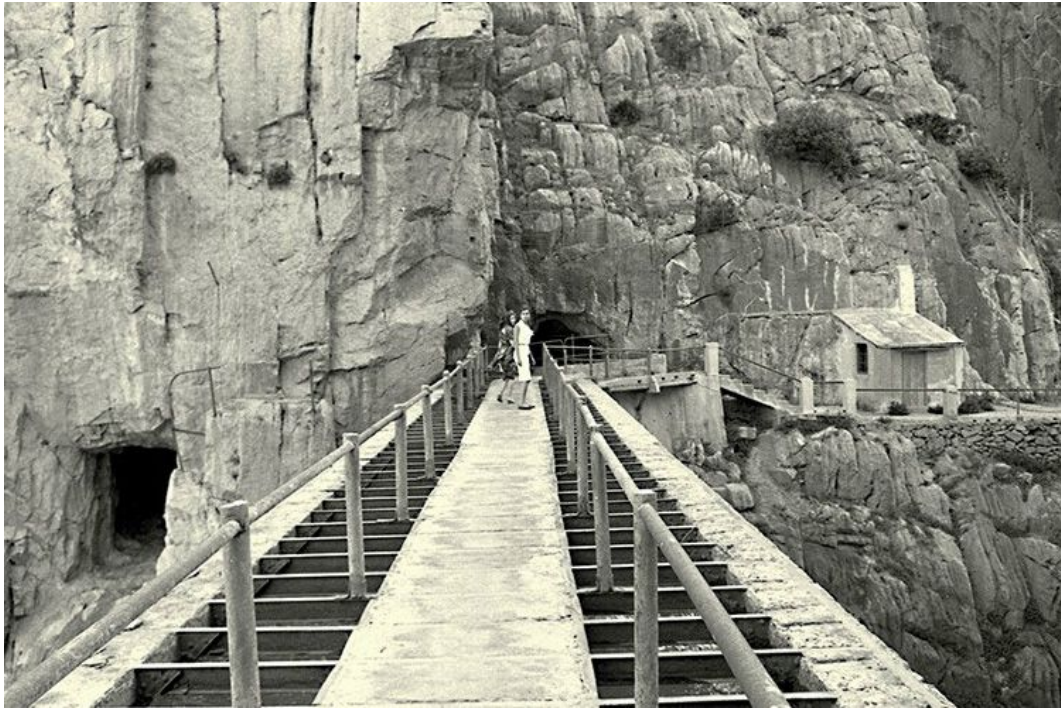
I read that there is a plan to clear the tunnels so people will be able to walk through them when otherwise the trail has to be closed because of stormy weather. I would imagine that the tunnels might be open always to enable those with fear of heights to walk along the trail. After all, of the total length of 3 kilometers between the control points, actually less than a half is hanging trails.



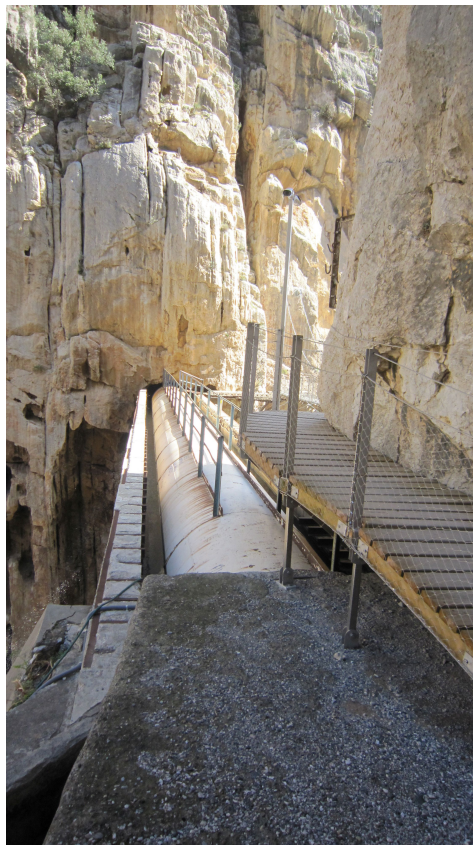
At a certain point the aqueduct, which is much familiar from the various photos, is revealed.



On the original aqueduct plates were laid in order to facilitate crossing of people.



Later people crossed the canyon over the pipe that carries the water to the other side and to the turbines.



Recently when the trail was rebuilt a suspension bridge was constructed. No more than 10 people are allowed to be on the bridge at the same time, and a warden is standing there to see to it that the instructions are observed.





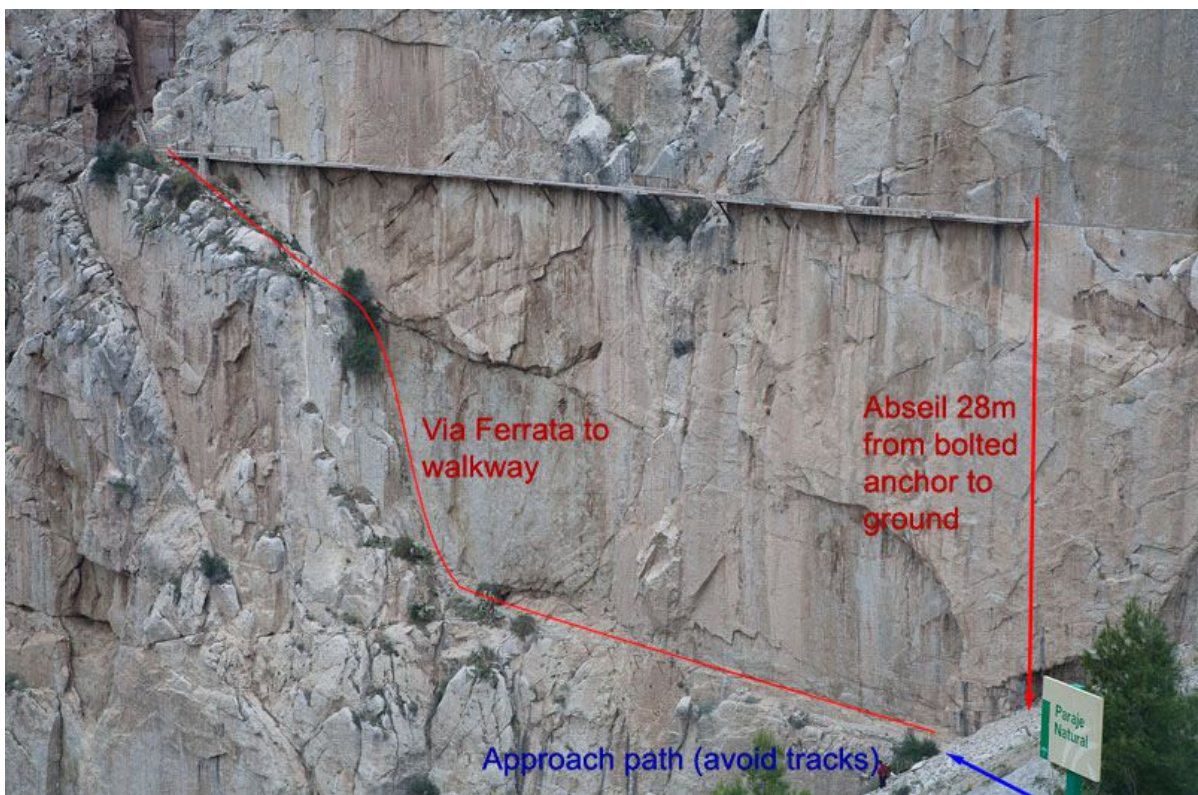
Now comes the part of walking on the southern cliff.



In 1985, following several fatal accidents, the authorities closed the gates of the trail. However, that was no big obstacle and people continued to walk there. At the beginning of the 21st century, after several more fatal accidents, the authorities also dismantled the first 30 meters of the trail near the railway bridge, as they did near in the northern gate.



Removing those first 30 meters had not stopped the tenacious climbers and instead they created an alternative route which is seen in the various video clips one can find in the Internet.

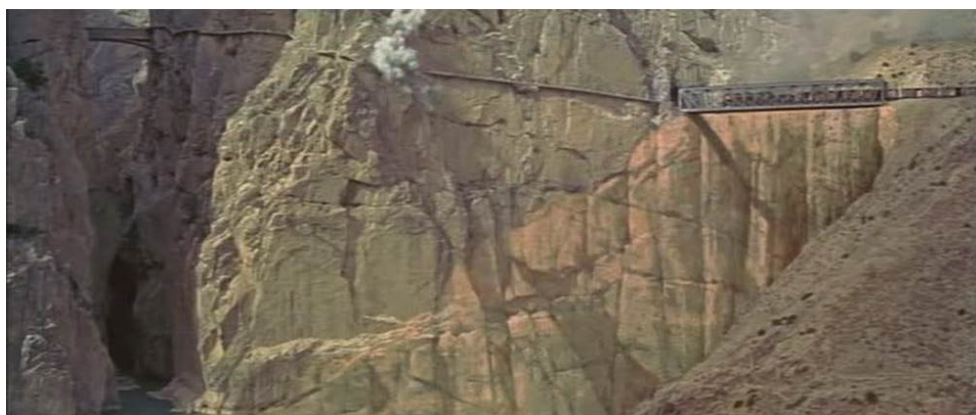


Source: <http://nipunscorp.com/2012/06/18/most-scary-road-el-caminito-del-rey/>

The renovated trail was built above the train tracks.



The movie “Von Ryan’s Express,” released in 1965, is a story about Allied prisoners of war in Italy towards the end of World War II. Under the leadership of Colonel Joseph Ryan (Frank Sinatra) they escape and eventually are on a train racing toward the Swiss border, being pursued by a train full of German soldiers. As the Alps appear they reach a bridge where heavy stones block the track. One Italian man who is with them draws their attention to a trail that starts at the end of the bridge, and informs them that through this trail they can cross the mountains. They rush to the trail and start running along it. However a German aircraft comes and blows part of the trail.





So they have to go back to the bridge.



This part of the movie was filmed right where the Caminito del Rey meets the train bridge. Examining the film, it seems that in the middle of the sixties of the last century the pathway was still in a good condition.

Eventually the POWs replace the damaged track as the *SS* race up from behind. Ryan, Fincham, Sgt. Bostick and others hold off the German soldiers, but many are killed in the process. The prisoner train moves out, with the defenders running to jump onboard. Fincham makes it and desperately reaches back for Ryan, with the Germans in pursuit. Ryan is shot and killed by Gortz here on the bridge just as the train crosses into Switzerland.



The rest of the route is descending along the gravel road and walking 2.1 km to the southern entrance.



Passing through the southern gate, continuing along the road, going over the lower dam, and walking along the other side of the lake, all at all around 1 km, the full view of the southern cliff is revealed.



Leisurely walking and stopping to observe and enjoy the landscape, to take photos, and to eat snack, it takes around 3 to 4 hours to complete journey from el Kiosko to el Chorro. From the southern entrance every hour on the hour a bus, for one euro and a 55 cents, takes passengers back to the parking place near the restaurant at the beginning of the walk. In the summer time, the last group is allowed in through the northern gate at 17:00. The last bus leaves the southern gate at 20:00, or by another account 20:30.

One last word: the route is magnificent and the experience unique.

*

El Camino del Rey [High Quality] 21.12.2008

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmDhRvvs5Xw>

El Camino del Rey - World's Most Dangerous Hike, Thrillseekers Anonymous, 17.4.2014

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcczjFRcVcU>

More information:

<http://www.andalucia.com/province/malaga/el-chorro/caminito-del-rey-history.htm>

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David Landau's homepage:

<https://www.modeemi.fi/~david/index.html>