

The Rough Guide History Tour of San Miguel de Salinas

This short and easy-going walking tour (1 hour max) will take you to seven points of interest and aims to provide a few interesting historical facts about our pueblo.

1. The Old Town Hall – Tourist Information Centre – In the first years of the 1800s Napoleon marched into Spain to exert his European supremacy creating, except in the cities, a short period of freedom for small communities like San Miguel. Provincial land owners, sought independence and town status from distant Dukes, but their aspirations were short-lived and they always found themselves back under the control of Orihuela. It was in 1840 that this first Ayuntamiento or Town Hall, which also housed a jail, was built on the site of the ancient cemetery behind the church. But it would not be until 4 March 1955 that San Miguel de Salinas was finally granted the independent municipality status that continues to the present time. It was used for Council meetings up to 3 January 1988 when the second new Town Hall was inaugurated. This classic building was renovated in 2006 for its current use; you are welcome to view the interior rooms. 2010 will see a third new Town Hall inaugurated.

2. El Paseo – The Church Square. This square has had many names including La Plaza de Ángel Alcaraz, after a local Falangist (a supporter of Franco's Nationalist Party) who was shot dead in Valencia by the Communists during the Spanish Civil War; currently it is called La Plaza de la Libertad or Freedom Square. To Sanmigueleros it is always simply referred to as El Paseo. In 1599 The Bishop of Orihuela granted license for a small chapel or hermitage to be built, where our Parochial Church stands today, to satisfy the needs of the growing local farming community. But in 1689 it had to be demolished due to its poor construction and work started on our existing church. It was not until 1719 that work was completed and on 23 October 1723, at the request of the residents of San Miguel, the council and diocese of the Church of Salvador de Orihuela agreed to separation and allowed it to become an independent parish with its own priest. During most of San Miguel's early history there was always a struggle for independence from Orihuela. In 1829, there was a major earthquake that affected the whole Vega Baja del Segura and, whilst much of the town was ruined, the church remained standing. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-9) it was used as a food warehouse by the anarchists and did suffer fire damage.

3. Cruz de Monte Calvario – It is from this viewpoint, the highest in the town, that we can tell you why our pueblo is so located. The answer is that we have two sources of water. Looking roughly south is the ridge of hills – The Sierra de Escalona from whence natural springs form one source that follow water courses to the town; the second source, closer to the town, is in the area of the ancient finca (down in the dip) – Las Zahurdas. This water is from aquifers or natural underground reservoirs accessed by wells. Bronze Age, Roman and Medieval remains have been discovered at Las Zahurdas, which takes its name from the Arab word for a piggery. The Castillo de Conesa is not really San Miguel's Castle but traces its origin from more recent industrial use as a cement or yeso factory; it is on The Rebate Road and Rebate, around 1600, was a Moorish agricultural settlement – Al Rebat. Lastly from this point, Bargustra, San Miguel's name in ancient times, was on the important Roman route, The Via Augusta or Via Antigua, from the major port at Cartagena to Elche. Around 218 BC Hannibal landed with 32,000 infantry, 8000 cavalry and 37 elephants to march north on Rome along this route, and through San Miguel de Salinas.

4. Molino de Marquesa – We mentioned the Moors, The Northwest Africa Arabs, at the last stop and it could easily be said that their 800 years on The Iberian Peninsular (711-1492 AD) were responsible for, not only the best of Spain's agricultural heritage but also a 'Golden Age' of culture and integration. Our pueblo was within Al-Andalus – Andalucía. From its raised position, it presides over the Vega Baja, which means 'Low Fertile Valley', it is the plain of The Rio Segura. For many hundreds of years it was the most productive farming land in Spain. Back before 1800 San Miguel was referred to as El Campo de Salinas and there were many Huertes – cultivated fields. But, you may be surprised that citriculture, our widespread cultivation of oranges and lemons, is quite a recent development. According to the Christian Gospels it is 'wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart', and these were the traditional crops of San Miguel. Our farmers grew good quality wheat and barley and this windmill is the only survivor of four that were built in the village. Grapes and olives were prolific (many local fincas still have their antique presses) producing highly prized wine and oil; carobs too, the pods shredded to feed

the beasts of burden. Alas, a virus decimated the vineyards in the 1920s ending wine production. Canals were constructed in 1925 and during the 1930s almond groves were established. The Civil War and subsequent Franco Era (1939-75) created unimaginable hardship for the Spanish people and it was a matter of 'what you grew was what you ate'. Peas were a fashionable crop in the 1960s but almost anything grows here and around the pueblo today you'll see fields of melons and artichokes. And when did the oranges and lemons emerge? Not until the mid 1970s.

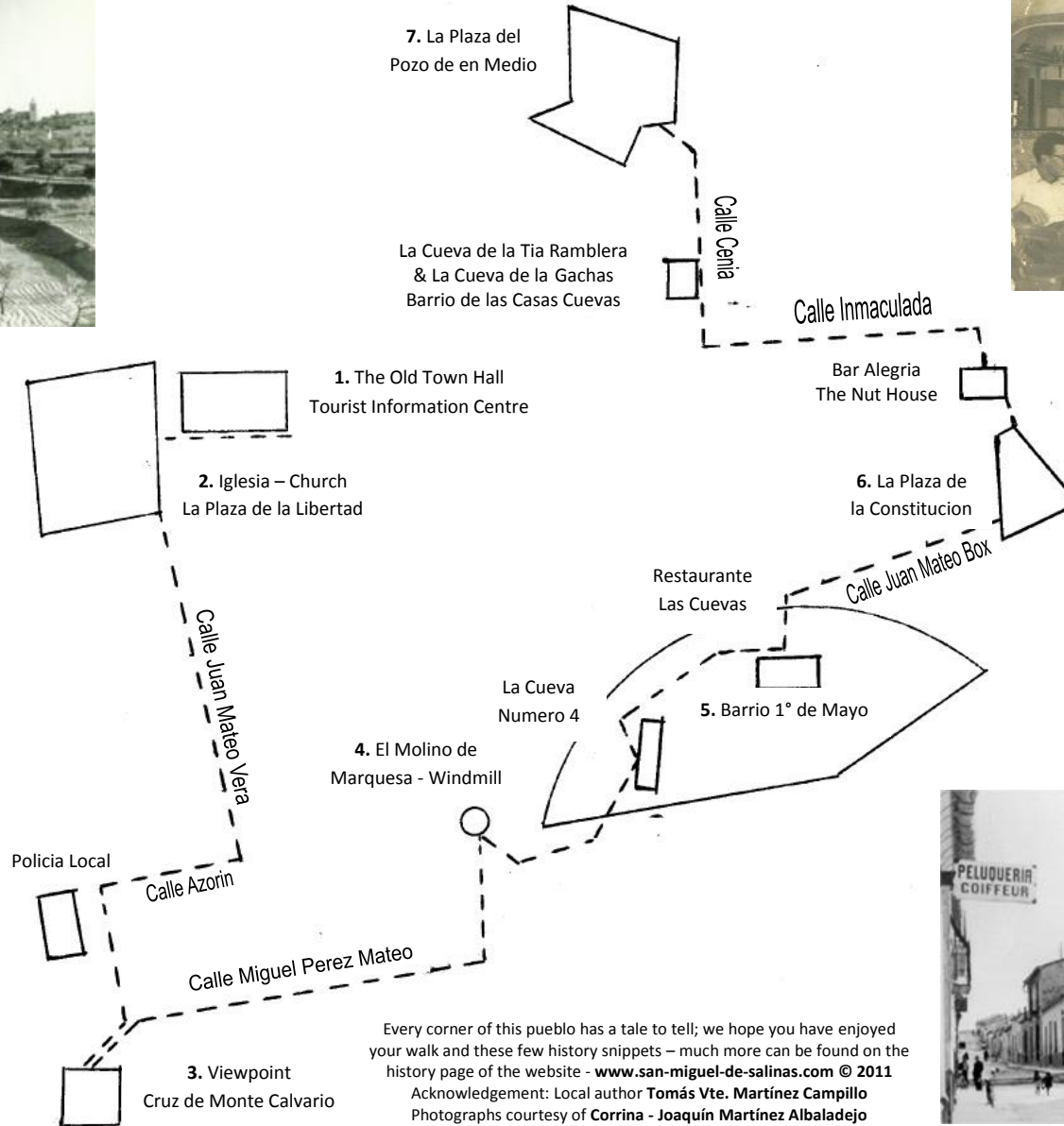
5. Barrio 1° de Mayo – The Cave Area - In 1848, Dom Pascual Madoz, in his renowned Geographical Dictionary, described the town of San Miguel de Salinas as having "22 huts of bamboo and wood and 77 caves in the rock, 8 lanes and 2 squares, a town hall and two schools, with a population of 205 residents with 994 souls". Our Cave Area was occupied by the lowest paid workers. The geology, layers of hard rock and sandstone, lends itself to natural caves and many impoverished transient farm workers found cave-dwelling an option. It is a relatively simple but very manual task to develop a cave. Most have a constructed frontage to create security across the wider cave entrance, hiding the depth of excavation. And, the deeper you dig the bigger the cave... until, of course, you hit a neighbour's diggings. In this area feel free to wander over the paths where you will see cave chimneys, vents and Aljibes. To fully appreciate cave-dwelling you could visit La Cueva Numero 4, which is open, at times, as the gallery of local artist, the charming Maire Kalkowski, and Las Cuevas Restaurante, once two separate cave homes occupied by the Felicianas and Campanilleras Families. You need to know what an 'Aljibe' is. It's a water cistern and important for storing rainwater. There are many Aljibes, which are dug down into the rock and lined with plaster cement; even today there are Sanmigueleros that rely on their 'Aljibes' for water. One old villager we know got a water bill recently and he went straight down to the Town Hall and told officials that he has never paid for water and never will because he has an 'Aljibe'. Unfortunately, water quality from 'Aljibes' is not good enough for consumption but try and tell that to an old Sanmiguelero!

6. La Plaza de la Constitucion – as you pass through this square on our route, please pause to consider the importance of its name. It commemorates 6 December 1978 when Spain adopted its modern constitution. Across from the small, yet significant, statue you'll see the notorious Bar La Alegria, otherwise known as The Nut House, where, it was said, clients are loco and they pay for the peanuts but not the liquor because it had no license. Enter if you dare to see a barroom that hasn't changed since 1948. Also at this location on the site occupied by today's Taberna Bar was the Ideal Cinema, built in 1927 and regularly in use until the 1960s. On our historic route, if you can drag yourselves away from The Nut House, is now heading to our final stop via an adjoining Cave Area – Los Barrios de las Casas Cuevas & Paz, and en route you will pass La Cueva de la Tia Ramblera, another great little bar restaurant owned by Katherine and Rafael: they own a number of caves and please ask them, they may have time to show you La Cueva de las Gachas. It was once occupied by a little old lady who ran a sort of grocery store, probably bartering with local produce. La Gacha is an 'apoya' or nickname derived from the daily stew she made to feed the local waifs and strays – the poor kids. These are both in Calle La Cenia, the street of the waterwheel; here a donkey or mule would have walked around and around incessantly pumping water from a well to irrigate the gardens where the produce was grown.

7. La Plaza del Pozo de en medio – this is the Square of the Wells, of which there were four. It was the poorest of areas in San Miguel... but of history, it is said that here the Roman cohorts satisfied their thirst and bathed their battle wounds - injuries they had sustained from the spears of The Carthaginians. Whilst we have recently renovated this square, look at the little old houses... they are like most of the dwellings of early San Miguel. We have a last anecdote for you. The poorer kids from El Barrio del Pozo were at war with the posh kids 'up the hill' at Monte Calvario. There were regular battles between the two 'bloods'; believe us when we tell you it was bows and arrows and spears at dawn. The school master decided enough was enough and told both groups to come to school for a final battle. And so they did, carrying all their weapons, where the teacher ordered them to throw them in a pile, stop fighting and make friends. This sort of rivalry also occurred in an older very rough local tradition – The 'Sartenazo', arranged on certain Sundays, battles between youths from San Miguel and those from Torremendo. The 'Sartenazo', very roughly, "hitting someone over the head with a frying pan" was finally banned by our respective Town Halls before the end of the 1800s.

Every corner of this pueblo has a tale to tell; we hope you have enjoyed your walk and these few history snippets – much more can be found on the History Page of the website.

WALKING HISTORY TOUR OF SAN MIGUEL DE SALINAS



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Acknowledgement: Local author **Tomás Vte. Martínez Campillo**
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