

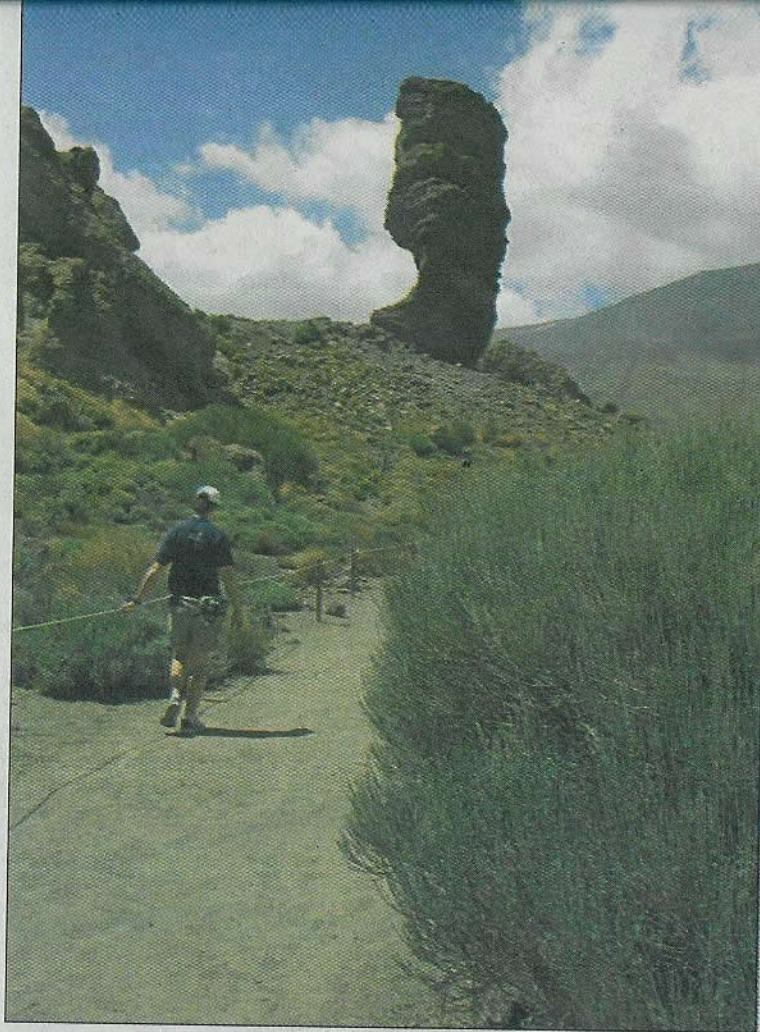
PHOTOS BY
SARAH ANDREWS,
Special to
Stars and Stripes

Hikers head out
on a forest
walk in Parque
Nacional de
Garajonay on
La Gomera in the
Canary Islands.
The forest is
almost spooky
in its cool
dampness.



Wild Spain

A walk through the best of the country's national parks



The Parque Nacional del Tiede includes some odd rock formations, known as Roques del Garcia, as well as Spain's highest mountain.

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Spain may be best known for its sun, sandy beaches and sangria, but beyond its seaside resorts and lively cities there is a natural paradise many travelers never discover.

Many of the country's most remote corners have been set aside as pristine national parks where nature thrives.

A full 8 percent of Spain's total territory is marked as either a park or a reserve. Thirteen of them are classified as national parks, protected areas known for their flora, fauna or geological elements. They range from towering mountain peaks to marshy lowlands to desertlike volcanic landscapes. No matter what form of natural beauty calls you, there's bound to be a national park to suit.

Here are our picks of Spain's top national parks:

Parque Nacional de Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici, Catalonia

In this park, water is everywhere. It has more than 200 lakes and ponds and is crisscrossed by the countless streams, creeks and mountain torrents that give the park its name (*aigüestortes* means "twist-



PETER JAEGER/Stars and Stripes

ed waters"). The mountainous park also is one of Spain's most rugged: cast over 141 square miles in northeastern Spain, the park encompasses the best the Pyrenees have to offer and is a paradise for walkers, trekkers and climbers.

It celebrated its 50th birthday this year and has long been known as a prime place for climbing and hiking. In recent years, Aigüestortes has earned a new claim to fame as the home of a 37-mile trekking circuit around peaks that average some 7,800 feet in height. Many people take the route slowly, sleeping in mountain refuges each night, but some, called "sky runners," try to do it in 24 hours or less. The fastest time to date is 10 hours and 35 minutes. To really soak up the scenery of snow-capped peaks, meadows of wildflowers,

gurgling streams, peaceful rivers and the occasional stone church, take a slower pace.

• **To visit:** You can get to the park from the towns of Espot in the east and Boi in the west. Both have visitor's centers — telephone (+34) 973-624-036 and (+34) 973-696-189, respectively — where you can get maps and information. No private vehicles are allowed in the park,

but many trails begin at its boundaries and park-owned jeeps are available to taxi you into and out of the park.

• **When to go:** The best time to walk the park's Alpine-like peaks is summer. In early summer, there may still be patches of snow. The easiest walking conditions are in late August.

Parque Nacional de Doñana, Andalusia

The seasonal change in this park is dramatic. In late autumn, the low-lying marshes that dried up over the hot summer fill with water, attracting millions of birds from across Europe. The resulting spectacle is unforgettable and well worth protecting.

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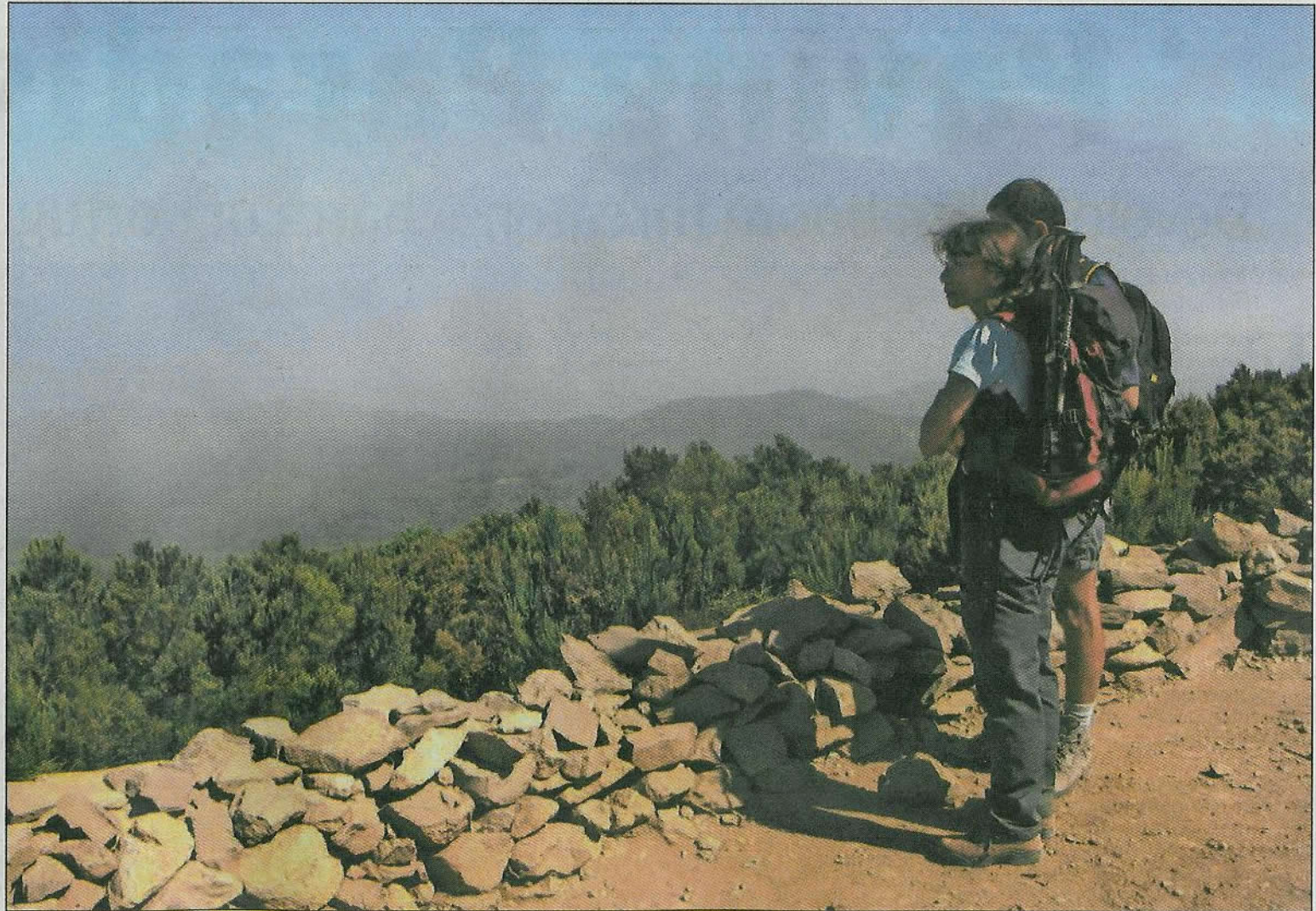
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One of the top bird-watching sites in Europe, Doñana is a fragile wetland that's home to some 6 million birds, including northern European birds that winter here, African birds that nest here and local species, such as the endangered Spanish imperial eagle. This marshy strip on the coast of southern Spain is best-known as a habitat for water birds. Storks, flamingos, wild ducks, spoonbills and countless other species all spend time here.

Created in 1969, the park spreads over 180,000 acres and is one of Spain's most highly protected natural areas, with a limited amount of human traffic.

- **To visit:** Doñana is closed to private traffic, but if you call ahead — telephone (+34) 959-430-432 — you can request a four-wheel-drive jeep tour into the heart of the park. To walk and explore freely, check out a separate but adjoining park that's not as heavily protected. For more information, contact the visitor's center in Acebucheta at (+34) 959-448-711.

- **When to go:** To avoid the crowds and the heat, and to glimpse the most number of waterfowl species, go November through January.



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Hikers at Parque Nacional de Garajonay look at Alto de Garajonay in the distance. According to legend, the Canary Island's versions of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet jumped to their deaths from the mountain, the highest in the park, when their parents refused to let them be together.



Parque Nacional de Garajonay, La Gomera, Canary Islands

Millions of years ago, lush green laurel forests like the one in this park dominated southern Europe. Then along came the Ice Age, and those green paradises were wiped away. Today this kind of prehistoric forest exists in only a handful of places.

The forest is almost spooky in its cool, damp beauty. Moss drips from the thick laurel trees and tinkling streams run alongside the park's many walking paths. In stark contrast to the sun-burned hills of the rest of the arid island, the air here is constantly moist, a phenomenon the locals call "horizontal rain." Cool and warm air currents collide overhead, creating the mist. It's an ideal place for leisurely hiking, mountain biking or simply picnicking.

The park gets its name from star-crossed lovers Gara and Jonay, the Canarian equivalent of Romeo and Juliet. When their families forbade the couple's love, the two committed suicide by leaping off the Alto de Garajonay, the tallest point in the park. These days the hike up to the Alto is one of the most popular ones in the park, though some low guardrails prevent anyone from following the lovers' example.

• **To visit:** The park is free and open to the public, with no restrictions on entry. For more information, contact the visitor's center at (+34) 922-800-993.

• **Best time to go:** Garajonay is beautiful year-round, but for a



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Parque Nacional del Tiede, in Tenerife, Canary Islands, covers more than 32,000 acres of stark volcanic terrain. In the heart of the park is El Teide, at 12,352 feet, the tallest mountain in Spain.

real treat go in December or January, when the mild Canarian climate ensures warm weather and ideal walking conditions.

Parque Nacional de Ordesa y Monte Perdido, Aragon

This is another Pyrenean park, though very different from lush, Alpine-like Aigüestortes. It is a spectacular natural area where with majestic rock formations, waterfalls, rivers, forests and mountains. The park is made of a chain of limestone peaks that runs along the French border, including "Monte Perdido," the third-highest Pyrenean peak. Cliff-lined valleys like the Valle de Ordesa, the Valle de Pineta and the Valle de Anisclo branch

off the central chain, providing fabulous areas for walking, no matter what your skill or endurance level.

Created in 1918, the park now encompasses some 56,000 acres. The most popular areas to visit are the valleys, carved by glaciers millions of years ago. First-time visitors might want to walk down the Valle de Ordesa, the easiest and most-visited valley. The path runs alongside a river and numerous waterfalls in its journey through the green valley. While in the park, watch for the many species of birds and small mammals that call it home. The endangered ibex (a wild goat) lives here, as do more than 170 species of birds and animals like mountain goats, deer, boar and foxes.

• **To visit:** Ordesa has two main



Courtesy of the Spanish Tourist Office

Dramatic seasonal changes affect Parque Nacional del Tiede. It is one of the top bird-watching areas in Europe. In winter, the low-lying areas fill with water and attract millions of birds from across Europe.

entrances, one at the town of Torla to the east, and another at the town of Bielsa to the west. In summer, the park is closed to private vehicles and access is via buses that leave from large parking lots in Torla. The rest of the year, you can park within Ordesa's boundaries. For details, contact the park office at (+34) 974-486-472 or www.ordesa.net.

• **Best time to go:** October, when the rich colors of the changing leaves are at their peak.

Parque Nacional de Picos de Europa, Asturias, Cantabria and Castilla y León

Straddling the Spanish regions

of Asturias, Cantabria and Castilla y León, some of the wettest and greenest regions of Spain, this was Spain's very first national park, and it's still one of its most popular. Originally called Parque Nacional de Montaña de Covadonga, after a pilgrimage site within the park, the name was changed in 1935: its towering rocky peaks (*picos*).

Three main massifs make up Picos de Europa: the Andara Massif, the Urrielles Massif and the Cornión Massif. Urrielles, in the center, is home to the highest peaks, including Naranjo de Bulnes, the tallest in the park at 8,264 feet. More than 200 other mountains reach at least 6,500 feet.

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