

New sections for the Via Verde del Noroeste

I. Description and background

The Murcia Region's 2014-2020 European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Operating Programme includes among its initiatives the “Upgrading of Via Verdes”, which aims to increase the number of visitors to these places, with the Tourism Institute being charged with running the operations needed to extend and consolidate a network of Via Verdes in the region.

Via Verdes (literally “Green Ways”, sometimes known in English as “Rail Trails”) are former railway lines that have fallen into disuse and are repurposed as ecotourism tracks for the benefit of walkers and cyclists. Courtesy of their accessibility, ease of use and safety, with barely any gradients and free from motorised traffic, they are especially attractive to anyone wishing to discover the natural environment and the cultural heritage of the settlements and areas they pass through.

The first to be repurposed in the region was the **Via Verde del Noroeste** (Northwest Green Way), which made use of the old railway line between Murcia and Caravaca de la Cruz. Work on the original railway lasted from 1925 to 1931, with a notable emphasis on the construction of viaducts, tunnels and stations. It was closed down for good in 1971.

The first section of the Via Verde, between Los Baños de Mula and Caravaca de la Cruz, was opened in 1998, while the remodelling of the remaining section between Baños de Mula and Murcia (Campus de Espinardo) was carried out in 2011, both initiatives taking place within the Spanish government's “Caminos Naturales” programme, at which point the Vía Verde del Noroeste had a total length of approximately 78 km.

At that time however it was not possible to remodel certain sections of the line that had been affected by other infrastructure projects or had been developed; such discontinuities were resolved by resorting to alternative routes, at the expense of creating what were sometimes quite lengthy detours.

Once the circumstances that had prevented operating in certain sections had been resolved, it became possible, in conjunction with the ERDF, to undertake the task of remodelling the new sections of the **Vía Verde del Noroeste** in the municipalities of Alguazas and Campos del Río, significantly increasing the linearity, continuity and safety of the track by avoiding the detours.

The work that has been carried out is as follows:

- **Alguazas:** Restoration of the original S-shaped route of the railway line as it passes the town (2.5 km), in the centre of which is the tourist inn (built some years ago using the former storage building next to the train station); the raised crossing over the RM-531 road has also been restored with a pedestrian walkway supported by the brackets of the dismantled railway bridge.



The next section of the track has also been upgraded as far as the former water treatment plant (5.2 km), having removed the pipework, which lay at a very shallow depth and had been hampering efforts to repair the former railway platform.



- **Campos del Río:** Work has been done on two sections in this municipality. In the area around La Casilla, to the north east of the town, a long (900 metre) section of the original railway line has been incorporated, reducing the detour that previously been signposted by more than 850 metres.

The other newly-adapted section measures 800 metres and starts at the former railway station (nowadays rehabilitated as a tourist inn), utilising the course of the railway at the beginning and subsequently creating a track parallel to the RM-531 road to Albudeite. One of the benefits of this intervention was that it enabled the alternative route along rural roads to the north west of the town, involving a detour of 2.2 kilometres, to be eradicated.



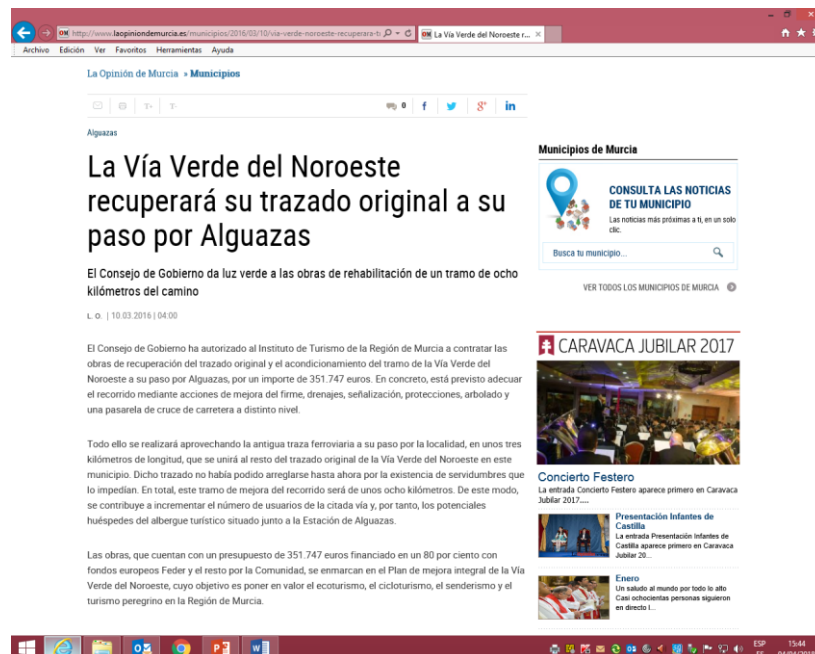
The eligible cost of the operation amounted to €338,143.66. Funding from the ERDF amounted to €270,514.93. 4.2 km of the Vía Verde del Noroeste was remodelled.

II. Compliance with the “Good Practice” criteria

1. Considerable dissemination among the beneficiaries and the general public

The remodelling of the new sections of the Vía Verde del Noroeste in Alguazas and Campos del Río was publicised by the Tourism Institute using various PR initiatives aimed at providing the end-users, who are the main beneficiaries of this type of project, with ample information:

- **Press releases** issued (and in many cases used as the basis for news stories carried by a range of media) during the management and execution of the work, keeping people informed about the start of the project, the approval of the budget, the commencement of work and its completion.

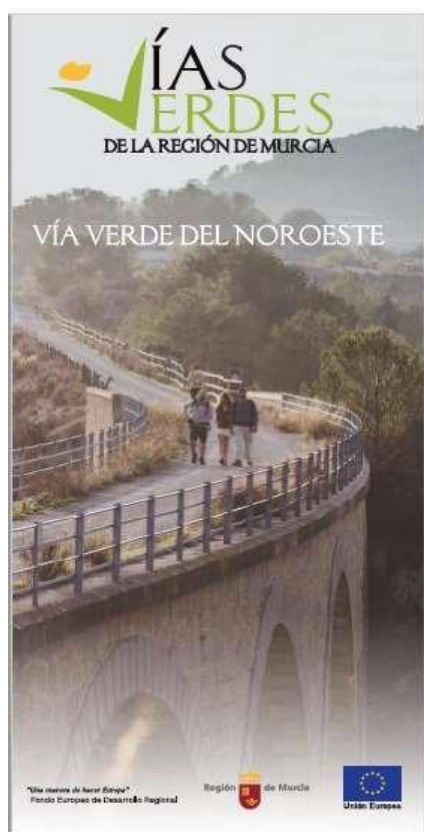


- **Opening ceremonies**, inviting the news media to attend (radio, press, TV).
- **Information on the websites** of the Tourism Institute, both on the regional tourism portal (www.murciaturistica.es) and on the institutional website (www.itrem.es, within the specific ERDF Initiatives section).



- Printing 10,000 folding leaflets presenting the Vía Verde and the newly-adapted sections, remodelled courtesy of the ERDF, distributed in Tourist Offices. The leaflet is also downloadable on the internet from the websites of the Tourism Institute and the Murcia Region Via Verdes Consortium.

(www.viasverdesregiondemurcia.es).



Display of signboards:



2. Incorporation of innovative elements

The Vía Verde del Noroeste was constructed, like many others in Spain, using two surfaces: of the 4-metre total width, 1.5 metres was covered in compacted crushed gravel (for walkers), while the remaining 2.5 metres was covered with a double layer of asphalt (to ensure a smoother ride for cyclists). This mixed solution caused problems along the length of the line of contact between the two materials, because over time with the effect of run-off, sections of the crushed gravel were washed away, causing irregularities and small potholes.

To solve this problem and to obtain a homogeneous finish across the entire width of the track, in the new sections that have just been remodelled an innovative [system of surfacing stabilised with polymers](#) has been used. This system consists of two phases: first a polymer is added and mixed in to the loose crushed gravel (to lend stability to the surface) and then a final finishing wash is added, also using polymer, to make it impermeable. This system is completely harmless to the environment and extremely hard wearing, reducing maintenance needs. Another advantage of this surface is that it does not create dust when people walk on it, and its colour enables it to blend in perfectly with the natural environment.



A second innovation involved the installation of an [electronic counter](#) capable of detecting the number of walkers (using a pyroelectric cell) and the number of bicycles (using a magnetic loop buried under the surface), as well as recording the direction of travel. It works without needing to be connected to the mains electricity system (aiding its placement in natural settings), it can be camouflaged inside a wooden post (to avoid vandalism) and has its own software that enables the data to be processed on a computer, having been downloaded onto Android devices via Bluetooth. With this type of system it is possible to ascertain at any time the number of users who have passed by a given point of the Vía Verde, thereby providing very useful information for evaluating the result obtained from the ERDF investment.



3. Match between the results obtained and the goals that were set

The **goal** of this Project was to upgrade sections of the Vía Verde del Noroeste, extending it by a further 4.2 kilometres and gaining 10,000 new users per year.



The **result** was that **new sections totalling 4.2 km** were indeed constructed, comprising the 2.5 km-section in the municipality of Alguazas and the two sections totalling 1.7 km completed in Campos del Río.

As far as the **number of users** is concerned, it is still too early to obtain consistent data, because the counter installed in Alguazas began measuring on 28 March 2017. Despite this the number of users in the first few months (up until 30 June) was 11,746 (54% of them bicycle users), easily

exceeding the initial forecast, which could be due to the fact that 2017 is a jubilee year in Caravaca de la Cruz and the Vía Verde del Noroeste is proving highly popular as a pilgrimage route.

4. Contribution to resolving a regional problem or weakness

Vía Verdes encourage rural tourism and open-air leisure activities, something that helps to **diversify the regional tourism model** (still highly dependent on the “sun and sand” formula), which is one of the main challenges contained in the “Murcia Region Strategic Plan 2014-2020 (IRIS 2020)”.

Furthermore, by creating new sections of the Vía Verde del Noroeste, this project **consolidates the existing network of vía verdes** in a way that goes hand-in-hand with the “Strategy for the sustainable development of Vía Verdes in the Murcia Region 2014-2020”.

The remodelling of vía verdes addresses a **growing demand on the part of society for so-called “soft” infrastructure** for engaging in open-air activities (hiking, cycle touring and so on) enabling certain areas to be explored and landscapes and settlements to be enjoyed in an unhurried and respectful way (a trend that is starting to be known as “slow tourism”).



5. High degree of impact on the target population

The commissioning of these new sections of the Vía Verde del Noroeste is aimed at **hikers and touring cyclists in the Murcia Region**.

It is also directed towards [users from other regions](#) drawn to the “Vía Verde” product (people who like to explore the various vía verdes on offer in Spain), and those who want to make the pilgrimage to Caravaca de la Cruz, either on foot or by bicycle.



Lastly the [residents of Alguazas and Campos del Río](#) are also beneficiaries of these new sections, which are very often used by the local population for their walks.

[Consideration of the horizontal equal opportunity and environmental sustainability criteria](#)

By their very nature, vía verdes [are non-discriminatory](#). The trajectory that they follow, which is wide with gentle gradients, is both comfortable and safe, meaning that they may be used by men and women alike. Moreover their [public use is free and open to all](#).



The newly remodelled sections of the Vía Verde del Noroeste are also [accessible](#) for people with reduced mobility, with the construction of a pedestrian walkway over the RM-531 road in Alguazas, thereby avoiding steep ramps and a dangerous crossing.

In addition, the upgraded sections comply with [environmental sustainability](#) criteria, being outside protected areas and free of any negative impact for the environment; on the contrary, they harness an infrastructure in disuse, with the advantage of not causing any impact by being fully integrated into their natural setting.



6. Synergies with other policies and public intervention instruments

This project, jointly funded with the ERDF, falls within the regional vía verde development policy, strengthened in 2003 with the creation of an ad hoc consortium comprising the regional administration (led by the tourism department) and the local authorities involved.

This accounts for the fact that the Tourism Institute has handed over the newly remodelled section in Alguazas and Campos del Río to the [Murcia Region Vía Verdes Consortium](#), so that it can oversee their maintenance and management.

The Vía Verde del Noroeste is included in [EuroVelo](#), a project run by the ECF (European Cyclists' Federation) with the aim of creating a network of long-distance touring cycle routes, enabling cyclists to explore the length and breadth of the continent. More precisely it forms part of EuroVelo 8 - the Mediterranean Route, which links Cádiz with Athens by running parallel to the Mediterranean coast, and which has still not been developed or signposted in Spain.



The Vía Verde del Noroeste is also integrated into the ambitious “[Camino de la Cruz de Caravaca](#)” project run by the Institute of Tourism (in collaboration with the local authorities involved) to encourage pilgrimages to the holy town of Caravaca, coming under the umbrella of

developing the region's inland tourism, which encompasses religious, cultural, rural, active and nature tourism.

The remodelled sections in Alguazas and Campos del Río form part of what is known as the “Camino de Levante” (literally “Eastern Trail”), the first of these pilgrimage trails to be signposted, which starts in Orihuela and from Molina de Segura continues by the Vía Verde del Noroeste as far as Caravaca de la Cruz.