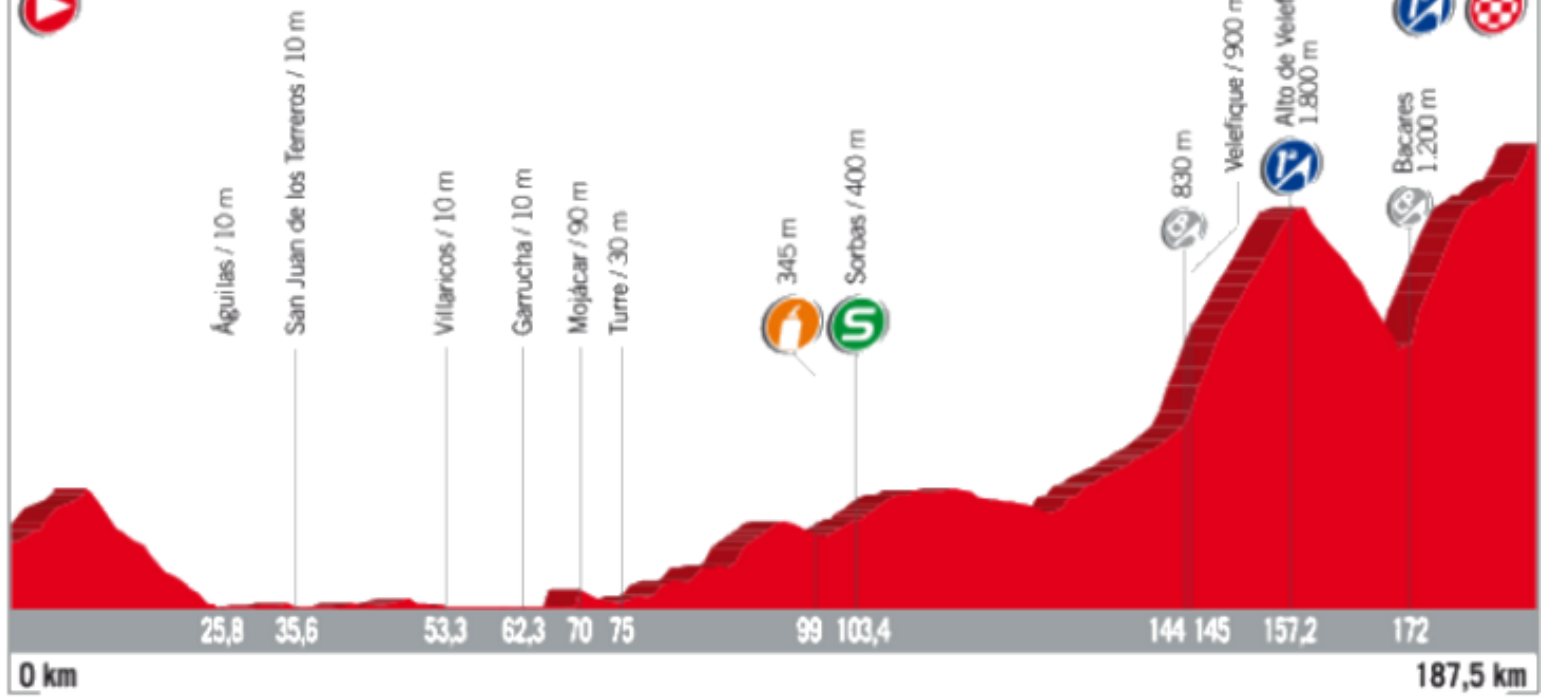


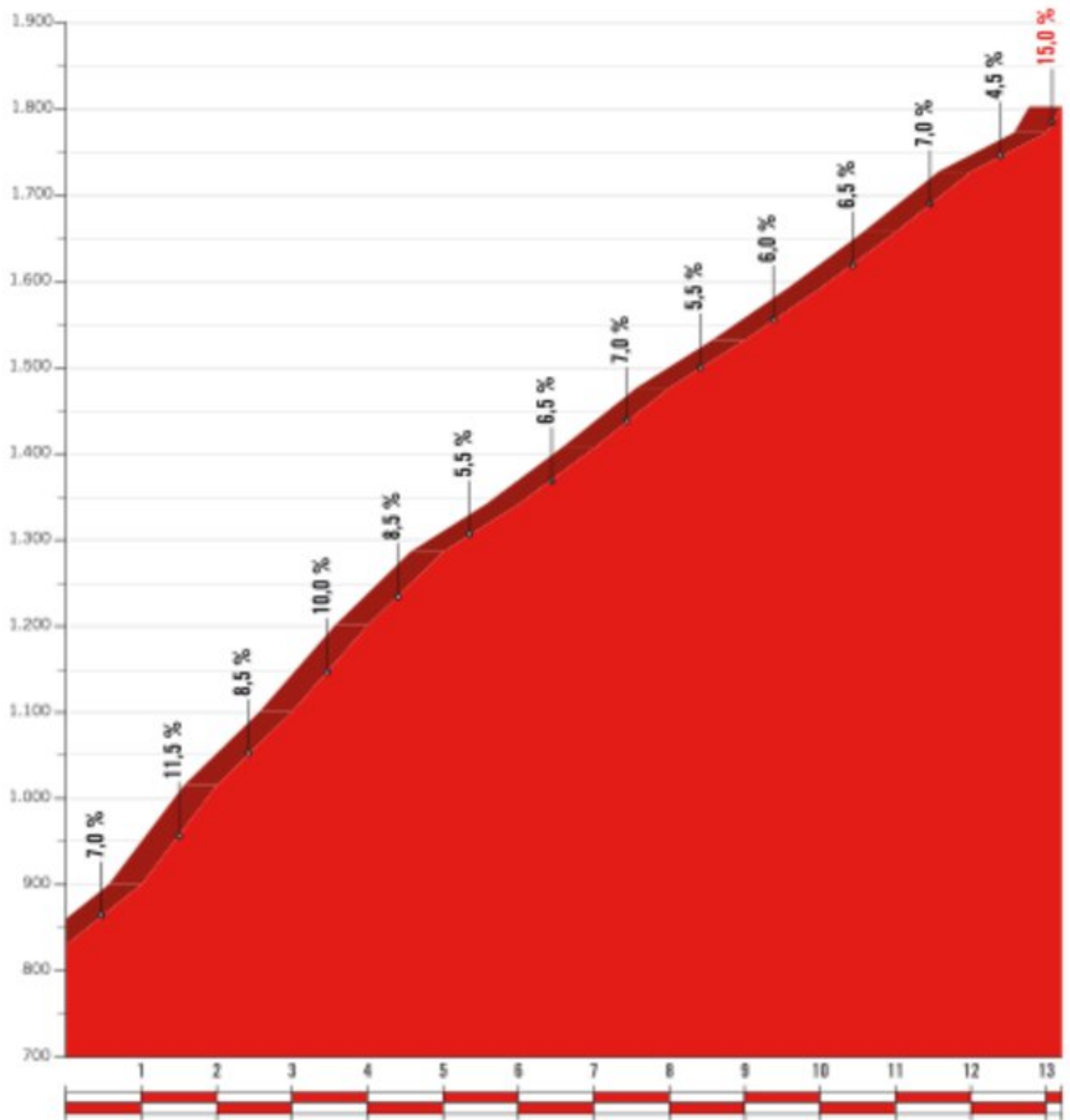


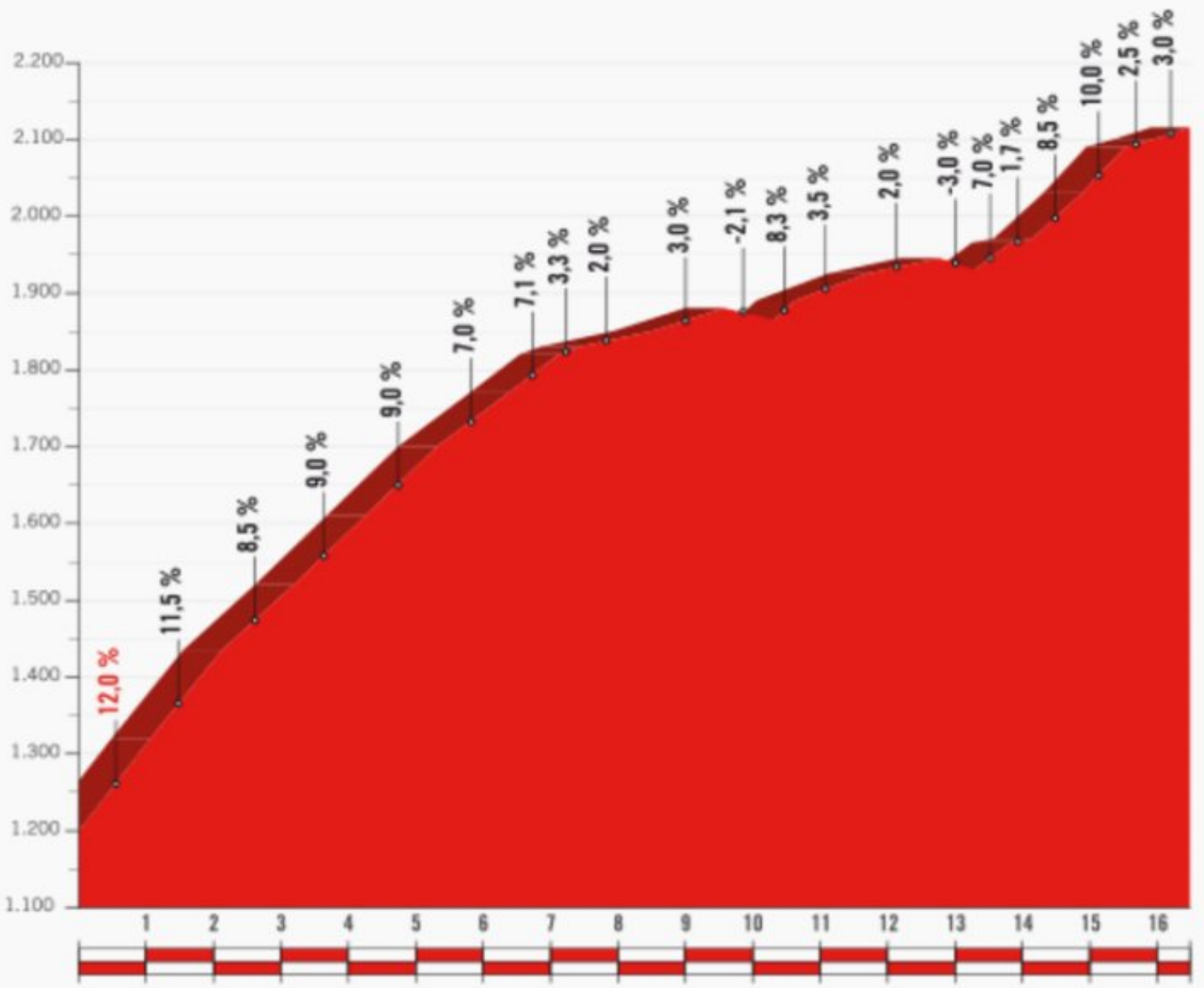
LORCA
300 m



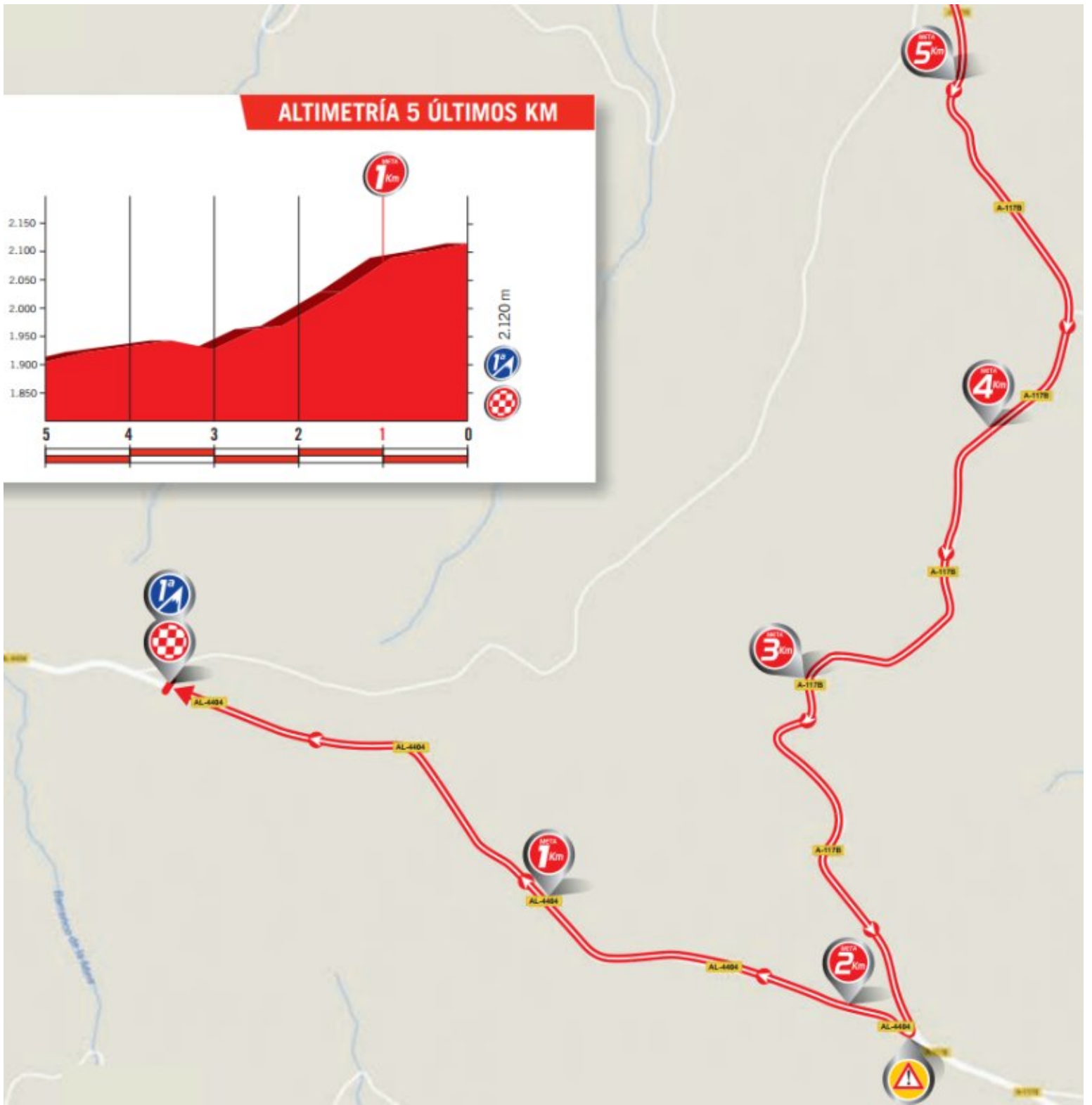
OBSERVATORIO ASTRONÓMICO DE CALAR ALTO
2.120 m







ALTIMETRÍA 5 ÚLTIMOS KM



It is not often that words cannot describe the beauty of the varied land and seascapes through which a cycling stage passes. This is not an infrequent occurrence, though, in the Vuelta a España. Many people from outside of Spain, perhaps, have never heard of the two provinces through which our brave cyclists pass today, Murcia and Almería. Indeed, the Vuelta website, normally replete with information about starting and finishing villages, and tourist sites along the way, is notably laconic on today's stage. Nonetheless, pass through beauty they will.

The stage starts at Lorca, an inland city not named for the famous poet of Spain, but nonetheless notable as a city of around 90,000. While many Spanish cities are bounded by mountains and rivers, Lorca is spread out. After Cáceres on the plains of Extremadura, Lorca is second when rankings of Spanish cities are made according to how much surface area they cover. Through much of the Moorish occupation, Lorca was on the frontier, the boundary, between the areas controlled by the Moors and those controlled by Spaniards. The very name Lorca comes from the Arabic word meaning battle, bespeaking its contested past. Lorca Castle is one of the largest castles in Spain, at around ½ mile long.

The city contains many remnants of a varied past, begun with its inhabitation during the Neolithic period, around 5,500 B.C. The Argaric people, early adopters of bronze and thus dominant over their neighbors who were still stuck in the copper age, flourished here between 2200 and 1550 B.C.. Although concentrated in Murcia, the Argars held dominance possibly all the way to the Algarve region of Portugal, famous to us as a springtime tour location.

At one time the Jewish quarter of Lorca spread over 5 square kilometers, and the 14th century synagogue is still preserved today, almost intact. It seems that after the conclusion of the Reconquista, the city lost most of its importance, and was greatly depopulated, leaving behind mostly intact artifacts of earlier times. In the early 19th century, many of those structures, which had fallen into ruin, were restored, and the city again began to grow. Holy Week processions and pageantry in Lorca, today, cause it to be judged amongst the best in Spain.

Lorca has the only major Church in all of Spain dedicated to St. Patrick, and Murcia is the only city with him as their patron saint in all of Spain. This is because the definitive victory over the Moors in Murcia came during the great battle of Alporchones, which took place on St. Patrick's Day, March 17th, 1452. The Moorish army had been on a pillaging expedition into Castilian lands, and had to pass through the plains of Alporchones to reach home. (When we see "al-" in Spanish, it generally is the Arabic article meaning "the" but I was unable to track down the derivation of "porchones") The Spaniards, under the leadership of the Alcalde of Lorca Castle ("al" calde now is used for mayor but then, perhaps, for commander), whose name was Alonso Fajardo "el Bravo" (a perfect, if somewhat comical name too good not to mention) laid in wait, with knights and infantry from Lorca, Caravaca and Murcia. The raiding army, returning with prisoners and thousands of heads of cattle, were surprised, and after their captain, Malik ibn al-Abbas, who was known in Spanish as Alabez de Vera, was captured, they lost morale and were defeated, never again proving a real threat to this part of Spain.

Our brave cyclists will pass through and near many interesting topographical features today, including a giant Geode called Pulpi. A geode is a sealed rock with a cavity inside which has trapped minerals inside, which through the ages have crystallized. Probably many of us, rock hounds or boy or girl scouts as kids, have seen a small geode, or even broken one open. The Pulpi Geode, though, is 8 metres, almost 30 feet, tall and houses transparent gypsum crystals measuring up to 2 metres, almost 8 feet. It maintains its own microclimate, so it is possible to pass within this geode, and admire the crystals. The riders will pass through the karst landscape of Sorbas. Karst is a form of relief that is created when water dissolves and erodes soluble rocks, forming sinkholes, canyons, caves and subterranean streams. The karst of

Sorbas features over 1000 interconnected caves, filled with beautiful formations. The riders will pass along some coastline along today's stage, and also pass through, or near, a small desert, the Tabernas Desert, formed by surrounding mountain ranges which hardly ever allow rain to fall there. The rain which has fallen, over the millennia, has created dramatic and picturesque landscapes, which hopefully we will see on our Vuelta video feeds.

An arrival at a weather station always portends exciting action, and with two category 1 climbs in the last several miles, today should be exciting, from a cultural viewpoint, of course, but also for pure racing. Should be a beautiful day!

Enjoy the Vuelta. Enjoy the day!

