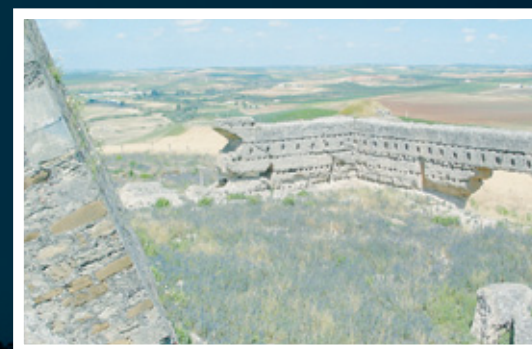


Treasure hunt along the Via Augusta

Jon Clarke is blown away by the stunning, little-visited gems of the Campiña, once one of Europe's most important regions



I was knocking on for three in the afternoon and we still hadn't thought about lunch. Scrabbling around on the side of a hill, overgrown with long rye grass and raggedy unkempt olives, I felt like a kid in a sweet shop for the first time in years.

Hot? Yes, but it was just as the local archaeologist had described it: Topped with a medieval castle, now in ruins (see picture above), and with a river running beside it, the hillside was literally one big burial ground full of Roman artefacts and pottery.

Not a sign in sight - nor a fence to stop you wandering in - we were soon crunching over ancient fragments of porcelain mugs, bowls and olive vats, known locally as *anforas*, some still adorned with the burgundy red paintwork typical of the times.

Incredibly, this is one of hundreds of practically undisturbed archaeological sites in the area known as La Campiña, basically a huge rolling plain that sits between the celebrated cities of Sevilla and Cordoba.

This should not come as a surprise though, for the key towns of the Campiña sit near the Via Augusta, that in Roman times was one of the busiest highways in the world.

For nearly 2,000 years the shifting grains of civilisation - from the Romans to the Moors and from the Vandals to the Visigoths - shunted armies and plied their trades along what is now more commonly known as the A-4 national highway.

Largely an area of rolling agricultural land, loosely following the course of Spain's Guadalquivir river, few people stop to even ponder the importance of this route as

STRATEGIC: Ancient Carmona was once a key Roman town, while (inset) ruined castles line the nearby countryside

Turn to Page 2

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2 La Campiña *special*

From Page 1



From the frying pan into the breadbasket

they bomb along at 110 k/ph between the two principle Andalucian cities. Moors the pity. For, as logic prevails, this 60-mile expanse of prime farmland bequeaths one of the richest tapestries of historical remains and settlements anywhere in the world.

Practically unknown even here in Spain, the towns of Ecija and Carmona, as well as nearby Osuna, Marchena, La Roda and Palma del Rio are delights, which for their size are all the more remarkable.

Full of grand townhouses, expansive archaeological sites and, best of all, a staggering large number of charming boutique hotels, they are in many ways more impressive than their famous big sisters either side.

Even better, you won't find yourself shoulder to shoulder with tour groups, or barked at by tourist-weary waiters, as is often the case in Sevilla and Cordoba. Ecija is particularly fascinating by virtue of its geography. For the city of 42,000 people is often described as the 'hottest in Europe' - frequently the hottest in the world - due to its location in a dip in Spain's steamiest region in summertime.

Termed the 'frying pan of Europe', the mercury occasionally hits 52 degrees (126f) in summer, when it is said you can fry an egg on its pavements.

The truth is, apart from a very few days when the Terral wind comes from the Sahara to the south, the place is actually quite bearable . . . , and indeed designed to deal with the heat.

It's narrow streets keeping out the midday sun as best as possible and its buildings mostly designed around leafy courtyards with fountains and other water features, cooling the air down.

The heat however, is a red herring, for Ecija should really be best known for its palaces and a series of Roman finds - mosaics, plaques and statues - which are said to be the envy of Italy.

On one celebrated dig, a statue, known as the *Amazona*, emerged two Millennia later without even a scratch.

Sometimes called the City of Towers, Ecija (pronounced *Ess-i-ha*) has the feel of a mini-Sevilla, its cobbled streets full of atmosphere and equally attractive buildings.

It has its fair share of palaces, more than two dozen, one the Palacio de los Granados, which is now a hotel. To sit in its pretty patio is to be transported back 200 years.

Best in the spring or summer, in the heat, with the ever present sound of water trickling from fountains and into the stylish alberca-style pool. Its rambling roses, bougainvillea and jasmine running riot, the smell of orange blossom almost overpowering.

Our tour along the so-called *Roman Route of Betica* was an incredibly easy drive; the roads are good, the terrain gently rolling, and the six towns on our journey were no more than half an hour apart.

But don't expect to be blinded by breath-taking scenery. The Campiña is actually rather flat and treeless, basically full of wheat, making this the breadbasket of Southern Spain.

But under a cobalt blue Spanish sky, our spirits were up, as we approached Carmona.

Built on an easy-to-fortify escarpment, Carmona is best approached from the Eastern Cordoba exit. Taking you up past the Puerta de Cordoba, a mish mash of Roman, Moorish and Renaissance styles, you are immediately in the beautifully preserved old town.

Look for the signs for the Casa de Carmona hotel, a 16th century nobleman's house, which is a great place to have a poke around and the best spot to leave your car.

Already a favourite among the English-in-the-know the chips on the paintwork give it that genuine feel of a cash-poor aristocrat. But it is very charming nonetheless.

From here step out into the Middle Ages, the windy streets leading to leafy squares and some of the best restaurants in the region.

It was no surprise to discover that Carmona is one of the oldest towns in Spain, being the site of human habitation for over half a million years.

It certainly feels old at the ancient Roman necropolis and amphitheatre, where a guardian ushered us to a parking space shouting in hilarious English: 'Roman remains, stop here!'

A vast site of thousands of tombs, many you can climb down into,

La Campiña

3

and including one which has a small elephant statue, it kept us occupied for much of the morning.

From here we were off towards Palma del Rio, another ancient town, right by the Guadalquivir river.

I'd done my reading, in particular a recent book by American historian Mary Lee Settle, which really put the river and route in perspective.

It had been right back in 152BC when Cordoba was the biggest city in Europe. It ruled over *Betica*, the richest province in the Roman Empire, providing Rome with most of its olive oil, as well as wool, wheat and copper.

A little further downstream, Santiponce, near Sevilla, is even older having been established after the Romans sent the Carthaginians packing at Italica in 206BC. Its broad paved streets once boasted an amphitheatre for 25,000 spectators - still an incredible place to visit today - and it was the birthplace of two emperors Trajan and Hadrian.

Both later became important Moorish cities, with Cordoba in the 10th century becoming the heart of the Islamic Empire, said to boast 3,000 mosques, 80,000 shops and 900 public baths.

By the 16th century Sevilla had finally taken over in size and importance, thanks to its monopoly on trade with Spain's colonies in the Americas.

But it is perhaps in the interim - between the 11th and 15th centuries when the Arabic Moors ruled much of Spain - that the area became so revered.

A time of chaos and Christian fervour, it became almost as sacred as the Holy Land when the Pope announced a crusade 'to fight the infidels' in Spain.

Heralding enormous bloodshed, bands of Knights Templar rode to Spain to try and clinch back the Muslim country for the Christians.

By the mid-13th century both Sevilla and Cordoba were in their hands.

Most of what fell in between became a shifting line of anguish, with the Kingdom of Granada and its outposts of Ronda and Antequera somehow staying intact for a further two centuries.

and scattered around are numerous white-walled *cortijo* farmhouses, many in ruins, with lines of proud palm trees hinting at happier times.

You are here though for the towns, with Marchena, Posadas and Almodovar del Rio all springing surprises, while Osuna is a gem of significant proportions.

During Roman times, *Urso*, as it was known, was well connected and there was great wealth made here from olive oil in particular.

But it had been a key strategic place since Iberian times, a fact easily proven by its huge (and sadly rather neglected) necropolis burial site that can be found a five minute walk above the town.

While important in Roman times it was in the 16th to 18th centuries that it truly thrived. Then sitting at the heart of the richest agricultural region in Spain, many of its farmers had been enticed in from abroad, from Germany and France, with the promise of land and livelihoods.

The Bourbon revival under Carlos III brought investment to the deserted countryside. Trade was booming with the *Americas*, via Sevilla.

Its aristocratic families, in particular the Dukes of Osuna, were among the richest in Spain and profligate builders, endowing the town with a dozen convents, renaissance palaces and, the crowning achievements, the Collegiate and University.

Osuna is said to have a higher concentration of palaces than even Venice or Vienna, and walking down the grand Calle Sevilla, it is hard to argue; its facades are some of the most intricate I have ever seen, one the Palacio del Marques de la Gomera, conveniently now a hotel.

From here, on the advice of the local archaeologist, we were up early on a fascinating tour of the rustic hinterland.

Taking the road to the village of El Rubio (meaning The Blond, and testament to the Northern European farmers who once settled here), we had soon found our own private dig.

As we sat in the remains of the medieval fortress - our pockets full of fragments - we imagined how this hill may have once been a Roman settlement with thousands of homes.

Looking across the huge empty plain in the blazing heat, listening to the wind and the screech of a kite, we agreed this was the sort of secret spot that makes Andalucia such a wonderful region.

And yes we did make lunch. This is Andalucia, after all, and at 4pm, we were not even the last to arrive.



BALCONY ON THE WORLD: View towards Osuna from Carmona and (left) convent in Marchena





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4 La Campiña

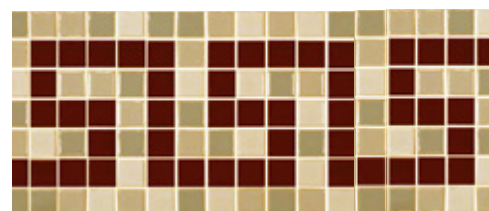
THE La Campiña area south of the Guadalquivir River is rich in countryside and natural splendour but it is also home to a deep historical and cultural legacy, littered with beautiful churches, fortresses and archaeological sites. Undoubtedly one of the best ways to discover these sites is to follow Andalucía's Roman route, known as the *Ruta Baetica Romana*. *Baetica* was the name used by the Romans to refer to the southern part of Spain taken from the word *Baetis*, the ancient name for the Guadalquivir River.

Today the route, awarded the Andalusian Tourism Prize in 1999, passes through thirteen towns and cities including Sevilla, Cadiz and Córdoba. Much of the route, from Santiponce to Córdoba takes you through the Campiña revealing a wealth of history along the way. In Santiponce, a town of just under 7,000 inhabitants near Sevilla, you will find the remains of the ancient city of *Italica*.

One of the most important sites of Andalucía's archaeological heritage, *Italica* was the first settlement founded by the Romans outside the Italian Peninsula.

Marcus Ulpius Traianus, the first Roman emperor to be born outside Italy, was born here in 53 AD and his successor, Hadrian, lived in this city during his youth. Excavations on the site began between 1781 and 1788 and have continued ever since.

To date, archaeologists have uncovered



Wendy Williams follows the Roman Baetica route around La Campiña taking a trip back in time...

traces of six large public buildings, around 50 houses, a theatre dating from the Augustan era, and a 25,000 capacity amphitheatre, one of the largest in the empire.

One of the most important sights is the Exedra House, which boasts its own baths and gymnasium while the nearby San Isidoro del Campo monastery is where the first Spanish translation of the Bible was written. Once hailed by Julius Caesar as the strongest city of the *Baetica*, Carmona has evidence of human settlements dating back more than half a million years. The city first flourished under Roman rule, with two of the four main gateways still remaining.

Archaeologically, the most fascinating thing to be found in Carmona is the necropolis which was in use in the first and second centuries AD.

Carmona has evidence of human settlement dating back more than half a million years

5 La Campiña *special*

On the old Roman road

ROMAN SPLENDOUR: Córdoba's Templo Romano



Also worth a visit is the City museum and Interpretive Centre, located in the 16th century Marques de las Torres Palace, which traces the city through the ages.

In nearby La Luisiana the must see spot is the roman baths, located in the south-western part of the town, which boast the largest Roman pool in the Iberian Peninsula. Near the baths you will also find the Los Borricos (donkeys) fountain, an artesian well with a drinking trough for animals that dates from 1769.

The parish church of la Purísima Concepción is also worth a visit for the beautiful elliptic dome above the altar and the main altarpiece with a 17th century wooden carving of the Immaculate Conception. Further down the road is the town of Ecija which was declared a site of historic-artistic interest in 1966.

Soak up the impressive array of palaces, narrow streets and plazas, not to mention the eye-catching sight of the eleven towers. Ecija rose to prominence under Roman rule, becoming one of the four government capitals of the Baetica province. Over the years objects of great artistic value have been found during various excavations including a sculpture of the muse of Calliope and several impressive mosaics.

Any visit here should include a trip to the municipal history museum located in the Benameji palace which explores the town's evolution right up to the present day, including displays of the principle archaeological finds. Other highlights include the Roman forum and the town hall, which boasts a mosaic uncovered during the excavations of a roman house.

If you decide to follow the whole route in sequence, your next destination is Osuna, after first travelling through Almedinilla, Montoro and Córdoba.

There are many Roman city remains in Osuna, the last community to resist Caesar, including the theatre, water reservoirs and above all the underground necropolis.

The so-called *La Quinta* burials reveal a number of oval graves carved out of rock that date from between the 1st century BC and 1st century AD.

Other highlights include the Santa Maria de la Asuncion collegiate church built by Pope Paul the 3rd in 1534, which boasts works including five Jose Ribera *El Espanoleto* paintings.

The Torre del Agua archaeological museum features bronze reproductions of the *Lex Ursonensis*, one of the most important Roman law documents conserved in Spain - now housed in the national archaeological museum of Madrid.

Finally, the last stop on the Roman route that falls within La Campiña is Marchena, located between two hills.

The remains of Marchena's city walls, which surround the old medieval area of San Juan with a perimeter of 2400 meters, should definitely be visited.

Of the four main gateways built by the Romans three still stand: the Arco de la Rosa, the Moron gateway and the Carmona Gateway.

Other worthwhile stops include the Gothic-Mudejar style Santa Maria de la Mota Church and the mid-17th century San Agustin Church.

The whole surrounding area of La Campiña is archaeologically of great interest, not just for the Roman ruins but for a history that dates back half a million



SIGNIFICANT: Italica was the first Roman city built outside of Italy

Digging up the past



AN intact Roman family tomb dating from the first century AD has been unearthed in Carmona following emergency excavations at the famous Conjunto Arqueológico de Carmona site.

The burial chamber also revealed many funerary objects including ceramic vessels and animal remains that would have been part of an offering to the dead.

years. The Roman *Baetica* route is a great opportunity to enjoy the regions stunning natural beauty while learning about the history of the place.

Most of the towns come alive in the month of May with local fairs, festivals including the popular *Cruces de Mayo* and at the end of the month there is a pilgrimage to the shrine of El Rocío.

For more information visit www.beticaromana.org

WEALTH: Lines of Roman pots sit in a back room at Ecija's archaeological museum



If you would like to discover an amazing historical Roman trail across Andalucía, then the Roman Route will not fail to disappoint. The *Ruta Baetica Romana* as it is known in Spanish, starts at Cadiz in the south the route winds its way across the northern parts of Andalucía to the north of Córdoba where in Roman times it established a point of connection between the Roman Empire's European and African territories.

Today, the Roman Route includes 14 cities within the provinces of Seville, Cadiz and Córdoba and includes areas of great natural and geographical importance such as the Córdoba Subbética Natural Park, the Bay of Cadiz, and the Guadalquivir Valley. Tourists can visit the many attractions on the Roman Route in these cities, including Baelo Claudia in Tarifa, the city of Italica at Santiponce, the Roman museum of Ecija and the many Roman sites at Córdoba.

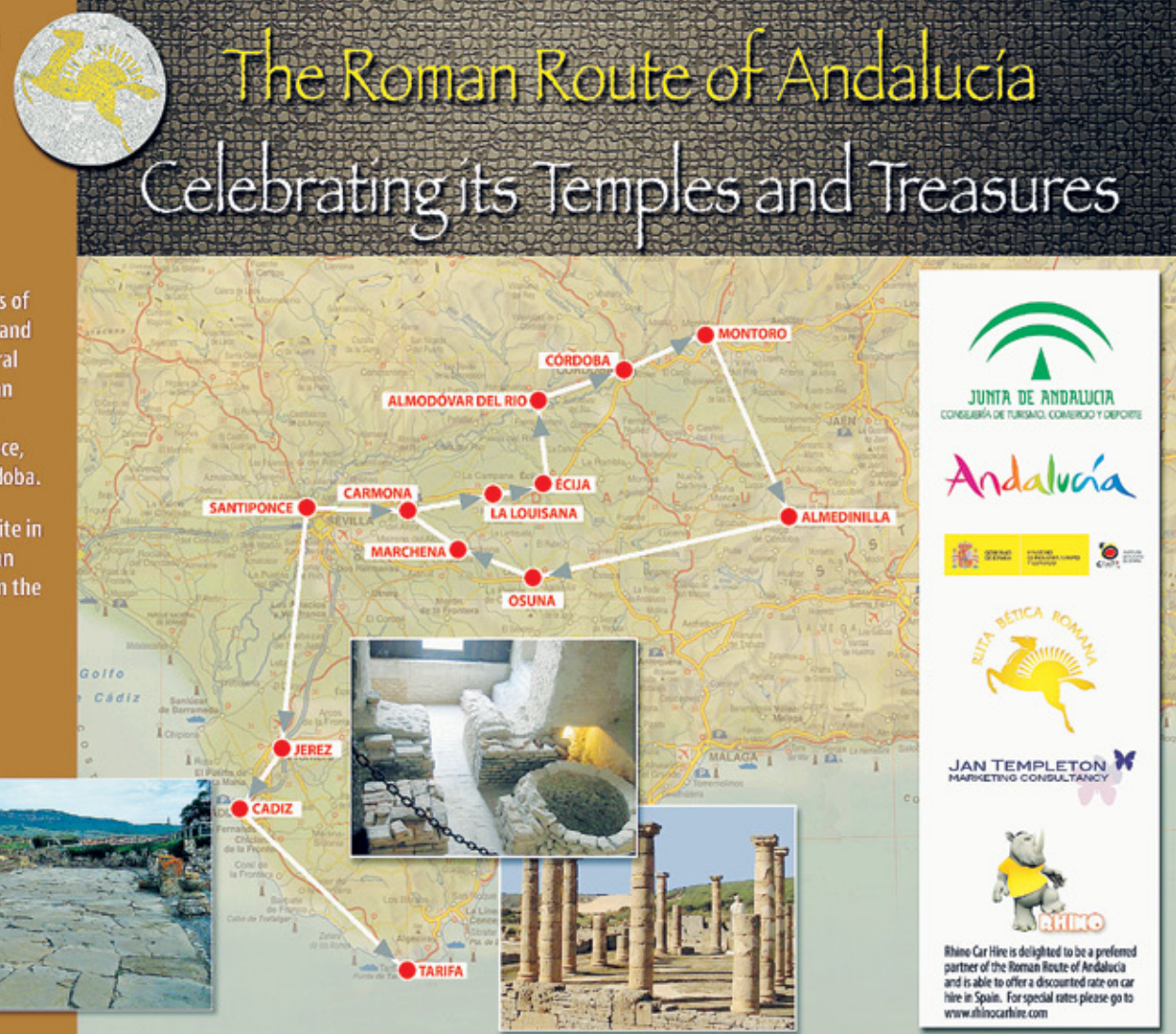
All of the information can be found on the Roman Route website in English at www.beticaromana.org. Copies of the guidebook can now be purchased on-line by following the publications link on the website in English.



The temples and treasures campaign is funded by the Junta de Andalucía in partnership with the *Ruta Baetica Romana* and Andalucía Tourism.



The campaign is managed by Jan Templeton. If you require any further information please contact Jan on 957 703 355 or 689 279 306.



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La Campiña special

THE towns of the Campiña are crammed full of architectural masterpieces. And thankfully not any old builder is allowed to touch the huge catalogue of stunning palaces, churches and castles. From the Torre de Santa Cruz and Convent of the Santísima Trinidad in Ecija to the old university and Monastery of the Encarnación in Osuna, one builder has renovated the lot. In total, Monolo Sanchez Ortiz, 58, has worked on over 60 key buildings around the area, including the historic walls of Sevilla and the landmark Puerta de Sevilla in Carmona.

His company Sanor is one of only 30 companies in Andalucía to hold what is known as 'K7' status, which allows him to pitch for the plum jobs of repairing the region's patrimony.

Since the age of 18 he has had a close interest with historic buildings.

"I have a deep fascination with what makes old buildings tick," he explains. "I love their ancient details and enjoy bringing out the best in them."

This is completely clear when you see the impressive scale drawings that he makes in advance of each job undertaken.

Painstakingly drafted, he in-

Protecting our

Jon Clarke talks to Osuna builder Monolo Sanchez who has spent nearly three decades renovating the Campiña's key buildings



EYE FOR DETAIL: Sanchez at his Calle Carmen scheme

cludes every last detail and insists that his team maintain every single part.

"It is often very hard work, takes considerably longer and costs more," he explains. "But the end result ensures that it is definitely worth it."

You can certainly see this love for detail at a couple of projects in his home town of Osuna.

The best of these is at the stunning hotel, Palacio Marquez de la Gomera, which his company now owns, being run by his brother Jesus. This key 18th century palace is opulence in the extreme and it has been beautifully

restored exentuating its marble patio and baroque staircases.

Full of wonderful details, it is one of the key reasons to visit the town.

Every detail has been conserved from ancient Roman pillars to the fascade

Even more exciting - on an investment front, at least - has to be his latest project, which involves the renovation of another nearby palace.

The enormous project in Calle Carmen, which is over 2,500m in size, is nearing completion and will count on ten beautiful, state-of-the-art apartments, each with their own private garage.

With Sanor's instinctive stamp for preserving its history, every detail has been conserved from ancient Roman pillars to the fascade and the old doorways, roofs and rejas.

9

patrimony



RESTORED: Staircase at Palacio Gomera

"We have overhauled the doors, refitted the window bars and cleaned up an old religious fresco made from

azulejos from Triana," explains Monolo, whose three children and brother also work in the company.

Costing over four million euros, the development is meant to give a flavour of a convent.

"While the homeowners will be sharing the public spaces, each will have their own private outside spaces which are being carefully split up and divided with lattice woodwork," explains Monolo, who has also boned up on the building's history.

The spacious development itself dates back to 1750 and was once owned by a family from the Ruhr area in Ger-



ORNAMENTAL: Calle San Pedro is one of grandest streets in Europe

many.

It was built around the time that the town was centrally planned by Carlos III, the powerful, but austere monarch, famous for his simplistic and oversized palace at El Escorial, near Madrid.

Opposite a glorious church, it is just around the corner from the street, calle San Pedro, which is often credited to have the most ornamental buildings in Europe.

"This is an area rich in history and the development is right in the heart of the best part of town," explains Monolo.

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La Campiña

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LA Roda de Andalucía lies hidden among a sea of olive groves in the south-eastern corner of Sevilla province. A little market town surrounded by fertile countryside, it is situated right in the heart of Andalucía putting the 4,200 inhabitants within easy reach of Sevilla, Granada, Málaga and even Madrid. Any visit to this sleepy town should include a stop at the Iglesia de Santa Ana, a baroque style church built between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the museums of the three brotherhoods that walk through the streets of La Roda during Semana Santa. But more than anything it is known and loved by travellers as a stop on the Ruta de Washington Irving. Just one of the many routes that you can follow around La Campiña, the

Following Irving



Washington Irving Route retraces the journey taken by the North American ambassador to Spain in 1829 from Sevilla to Granada. Taking in monumental towns, picturesque villages and archaeological sites the route crosses La Campiña and the plain of Antequera before ar-

iving in the rich Vega of Granada. Irving, famous for his 'Tales of the Alhambra', wrote in 1829 of his long and perilous journey through bandit country remarking that in Andalucía "the most miserable inn is as full of adventure as an enchanted castle". Fortunately for today's traveller the conveniently sign-posted route is a little safer and there is more choice for accommodation but it is still a worthwhile adventure. And La Roda makes a good stop off point.



ADVENTURER: Irving

NB. And for those who really want to follow in Irving's footsteps, you can now stay in the local Albergue Municipal (hostal) for just 14 euros a night, including breakfast. "It is becoming very popular understandably at that price," explained a town hall spokesman.

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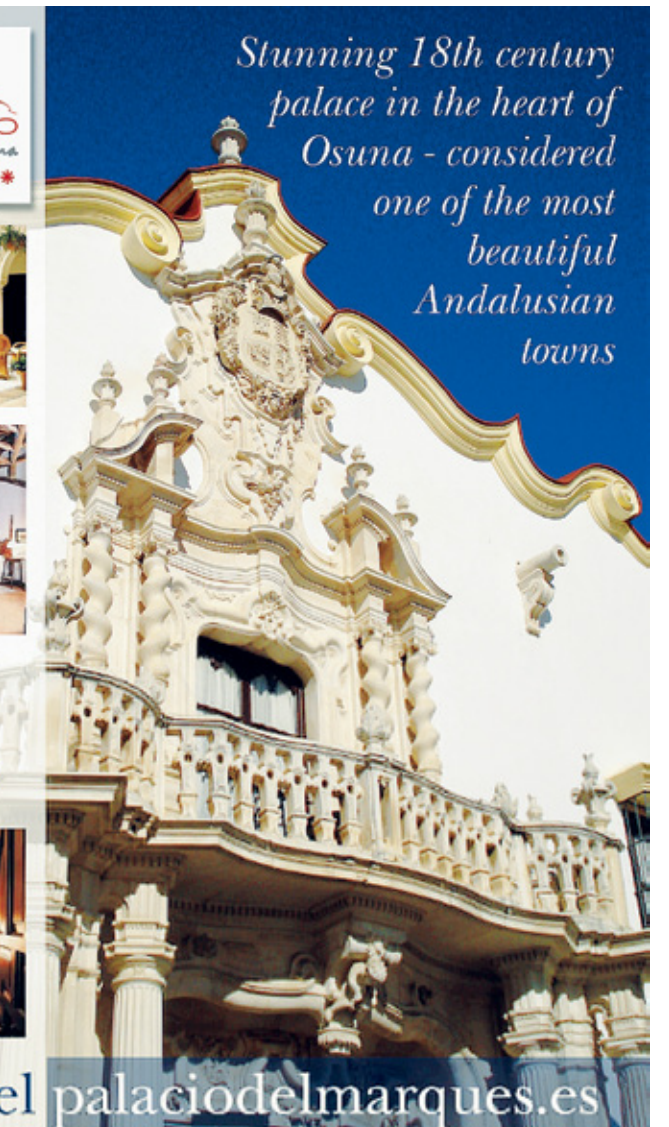
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ONE of the best kept secrets of Andalucía, La Campiña also has some of its finest hotels and restaurants. In Osuna, you should look out for the sumptuously appointed Casona de Calderón, which is one of Andalucía's best hotels according to the Michelin guide. Elena Calderón and her family have spent the past three years

PALACIO DREAMS

Casino and palace dining



DELIGHT: Santaella

For those who like to dine in style look no further than the incredible Palacio de Santaella in Ecija. Built in the eighteenth century, the palace's centre-piece is a beautiful *cúpula* (dome), which towers over the central staircase.

Nowadays, under the auspices of the Societed Tennis Club, the Palacio de Santaella hosts all manner of functions and events, including weddings, baptisms and conferences. But it is hard to beat for romantic dining.

Elegance also abounds in classy Casa Machin. The refined ambience, rendered serene by the high ceiling and subdued lighting, also make this an inspired choice for a romantic dinner. Specialising in fish, seafood and northern meats, Casa Machin is a gourmet paradise.

And then there is more, with the wonderfully named Casino de Artesanos. No sign of a casino these days, nor indeed any *artesanos*; just fabulous coffee, tasty tapas and a wonderful selection of local dishes, including *espinacas labradas* (chopped or 'carved' spinach) and *salmorejo*, a refreshing gazpacho style soup.

Hispania is another good place to eat in the heart of Ecija with a great terrace and a mouthwatering mix of dishes and tapas.

Over in Osuna you would certainly want to dine at the wonderful Hotel Casona de Calderon, where one of the Calderon sisters Aurora has become something of a whiz in the kitchen. You eat in its wonderfully lit dining room, with a range of specialities including beef capaccio and almonds. Nearby you might also want to try Meson del Duque, or the highly-rated Casa Curro.

If looking for somewhere good to dine in Marchena, you would certainly want to try one of the local restaurants including Casa Carillo and Casa Monolo, which are always busy at lunchtime, serving up fantastic tapas.

is often termed one of Europe's grandest streets, full of enormous stunning palaces.

The Palacio is no exception, with a beautiful courtyard, private chapel, sweeping marble stair-

case and appropriately grand rooms to match.

Nearby, also check out the delightful Hotel Esmeralda. For pure value for money - just 32 euros for a single room, including breakfast - it is hard to beat.

If you are looking for something a bit more rural, then get in touch with Turismo Rural Osuna, which has cosy rustic cottages in the area known as Las Vinas.

In Ecija, you are also spoilt for choice, starting with the wonderful Hotel Platería located just a stone's throw from the main square. It has a peaceful and welcoming atmosphere, delicious home cooking and free wifi.

Also excellent value is Hotel Ciudad del Sol - Pirula, which has simple but spotlessly clean rooms and a sunny dining terrace.

Over in the historic town of Carmona, the breathtakingly beautiful Casa de Carmona is a XVI Century renaissance palace, converted into an exquisite 33-bedroom five-star hotel. Here, owner Felipe Guardiola Medina has fashioned a luxurious sanctuary, filled with fine art and exquisite antiques.

Alternatively, check out the stunning Hotel El Rincon de las Descalzas, which has wonderful perfumed gardens full of jasmine and a constant tinkle of water from fountains. It has a fine restaurant Yedra.



CHARM: Casona de Calderon

CALPE SCHOOL

PROVEN HIGH STANDARD OF EDUCATION

Successfully teaching children of all abilities since 1973. Providing a high academic standard in a happy, safe & supportive environment. As an experienced school we are able to cater for the needs of all children and concentrate on their individual strengths, with our team of dedicated staff.

The school offers:

- Education from 2½-11 years old.
- British National Curriculum with fully qualified, experienced staff.
- Official Spanish syllabus with fully qualified Spanish teacher.
- Teaching English as a foreign language, TEAL.
- Special needs programme.
- Small classes.
- After school clubs.
- Home cooked lunch made on site daily.



Special Needs

The only school on the coast to have a qualified, in house, special needs teacher. Assessment and Individual support programmes available.

Summer School

4th - 29th of July
Monday - Friday
10am - 2pm

ALL WELCOME
Visit our website for more details.

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