

All about **S**errania de Ronda

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Picture by Jed Neill

DETAIL: Ronda's historic doorways and arches are centuries old



TIMELESS: Horse takes a drink at Alcocobar gate and (right) Moorish tower



History comes knocking

Ronda is a cobbled gem where visitors are quickly transported back in time, writes Jed Neill

If you were planning for a tour guide but forgot to book in advance... don't worry, just follow your feet and Ronda will do the rest. Perched on an inland plateau driven out of the earth like an offering to God, it isn't hard to see why the historic gem is the gift that keeps on giving.

Crammed full of historic buildings, churches and museums, despite what Ernest Heming-

way once claimed (that it was a town to merely spend a romantic weekend in bed), there is so much to see and do in Ronda.

However, at 800 metres high, and totally encircled by mountains, it's not for the faint-hearted so get prepared to do some serious walking. My tip is to start at the bottom, where you will

Continues on Page 18

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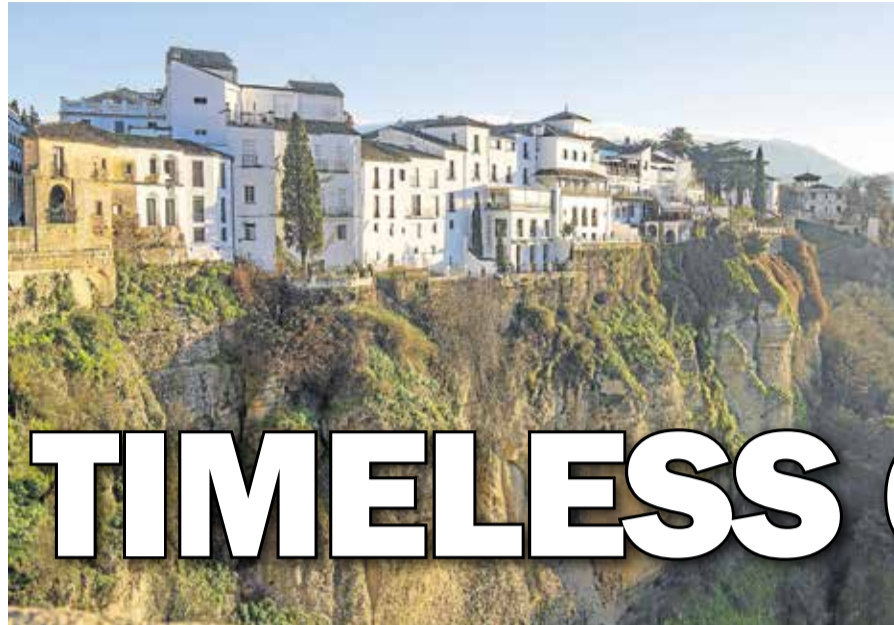
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TIMELESS GEM

BEAUTY: Old mosque, new of the old town, a typical restaurant and famous bridge

From Page 17

find few tourists and where, best of all, you can easily park your car. Down near the Arabic Baths in the Ocho Canos district you will find an old, atmospheric part of town where the ancient weary travellers usually first arrived in Ronda. Built in the 13th and 14th centuries they're the best preserved baths in the whole of the Iberian Peninsula. The steam baths were an obligatory first-port-of-call for all 'outsiders' to freshen up before finding a place to stay. Sadly, the taps have been turned off but the horseshoe arches are a great reminder of the influence and cultural importance the Moors had here.

This was, after all, the most westerly outpost of the Kingdom of Granada the last bastion of the Moorish empire in Spain, holding out against the ever-probing Christian armies until just six years before the final fall of Granada in 1492. "The baths mark the beginning of so much in Ronda," explains Juan Francisco, 31, who has worked at the baths for 14 years.

He is currently training to be a tour guide in the town and claims it is 'not dissimilar' to doing the 'knowledge' for cab drivers in London, taking two years to complete with an enormous amount to learn.

From here, Moorish visitors would have walked up alongside the ancient city walls to the then-heavily guarded Archway of Philip V, known as The Moors Armchair.

It is the main entrance into the old city and was rebuilt in 1742.

It is a must to see before trudging up the renaissance steps to the charming Casa del Rey Moro - and its impressive mine - which was visited by Michelle Obama and her entourage three years ago.

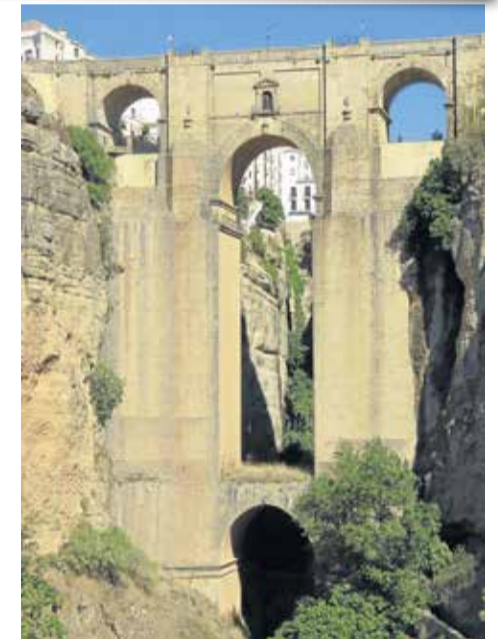
From here, you can easily get lost in the old town of Ronda, which is a maze of cobbled streets and passageways largely cut off to traffic.

Generally keep heading uphill and you will be on track for the main attraction.

The Puente Nuevo is Ronda's most recognisable and spectacular sight, separating both the old and new towns. This is certainly the most famous bridge in Spain and probably among the best known around the world.

Taking 34 years and a shocking 50 deaths (more than the Empire State Building and the Eiffel Tower) to build, this 390-foot feat of engineering really is remarkable. And all the more so with its surrounding countryside and adjacent buildings.

Looking down you certainly feel the full force of what an incredible engineering feat this was as



well as recalling the horrific (most insist invented) incident in Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom The Bell Tolls* where Franco's nationalists are thrown into the ravine to their death during the Civil War.

The bridge adopts human features with drooping eyes and a long face

The best place to see the bridge in all its glory is from the Arco del Cristo, a short, but steep walk down the hillside towards some more ancient historic ramparts of the old town. From here the bridge adopts human characteristics with drooping eyes and a long face,

almost as if it is despairing at the lines of tourists barging against each other along the top. Back on the main thoroughfare and the town's neo-classical architecture unfurls from Plaza Espana up towards its marvellous bullring.

Sauntering along Virgen de la Paz the buildings sag onto the road with a big bellyful of windows and latticed shutters while neighbouring shops lean into one another as if they were commenting on what ever stray traveller happens to be walking past.

Families, friends and tourists form huddles in the alleys and streets nearby browsing the shops or filling up in a huge range of largely average restaurants - see our best professional picks later in this supplement.

The town's main hub is Calle La Bola (or Espinel depending on its mood) a long pedestrianised street full of shops and with its bustling Plaza del Socorro square a little way up.

Here you will find a stunning church and the ancient 'casino' where the father of Andalusian independence Blas Infante demanded the region be self autonomous in 1918. There is a statue of Blas outside.

At the tourist information centre, multi-lingual Alicia Lopez says tourists simply do not spend enough time in Ronda. Although that is changing as more and more tourists do stay for at least one night.

"Give Ronda more time," she pleads, "at least two or three days because if you're here for



VISTA: Across the amazing tajo landscape

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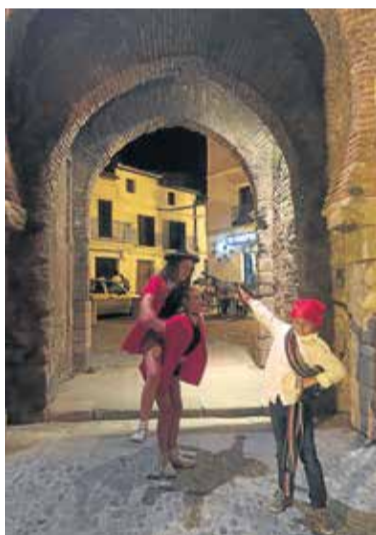
Picture by Geoff Scott Simpson



SITES: Bullring during the annual Goyesca fight, Palacio Mondragon, Almocobar gate and local witches



Picture by Jed Neill



Syrian prince Abu'l-Fida (1273-1331)

"Elegant and lofty city in which the clouds serve as a turban and its towers as a sword belt"

Irish novelist and poet James Joyce (1882-1941)

"Ronda with the old windows of the houses, the eyes which spy out hidden behind the latticework so that their lover might kiss the iron bars."

Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986)

"It is here, in Ronda, in the delicate penumbra of blindness, a concave silence of patios, leisure of the jasmine and the light sound of water, which summoned up memories of deserts."



Trailblazers

The word on the street from some of Ronda's famous visitors...

German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926)

"The spectacle of this city, sitting on the bulk of two rocks rent asunder by a pickaxe and separated by the narrow, deep gorge of the river, corresponds very well to the image of that city revealed in

American author Orson Welles (1915-1985)

"A man is not from where he is born, but where he chooses to die."

one day you'll struggle to see everything." At the tourist office you can buy a special €8 ticket giving you access to the Palacio de Mondragon, the Museo del Bandolero, the Arab Baths and the Puente Nuevo museum, which is excellent value.

The first three though are an absolute must and will keep you occupied for hours. Let's also not forget the largest and oldest bullring in Spain - the beating heart of Ronda. A stunning structure, beautifully maintained with some fabulous Goya etchings in a side building, it is yet another must-visit spot. Legend has it that when a nobleman fell from his horse and risked being gored to death,

without hesitation local hero Francisco Romero (b 1698) leapt into the ring and distracted the bull by waving his hat, and then killing it.

Half a century later, Romero's grandson Pedro (who has a statue outside the bullring) invented the modern bullfight using the *muleta* - a red cape used to attract the bull's attention.

September's annual Goyesca bullfight in 18th century costume pays tribute to Ronda's rich matador history and is famous the world

over.

The bullring is encircled by roads named after two of the 20th century's most famous icons - Ernest Hemingway and Orson Welles, who both spent considerable time in the town, with the latter being buried here, his ashes scattered in a well at a bullfighter's estate near the town.

Further up Virgen de la Paz you reach the Alameda del Tajo, a beautiful tree-lined promenade, which is the perfect place to see out west over the Tajo gorge to-

Orson Welles spent considerable time in town and is buried here

wards the Sierra de Grazalema in the distance. If time is no issue I would recommend the Museum of Ronda in the old town, which is a firm reminder of the clash between the towns Moorish roots and it's Catholic architects. And there is, quite simply, so much more to see if you have the time.

And nearby are a dozen amazing towns and villages to keep you occupied for easily a week. 'The whole city and its surroundings are a romantic set,' Hemingway once wrote and it is true that Ronda is a place in which nature and culture unite to exhibit the best of both worlds.

Picture by Jon Clarke



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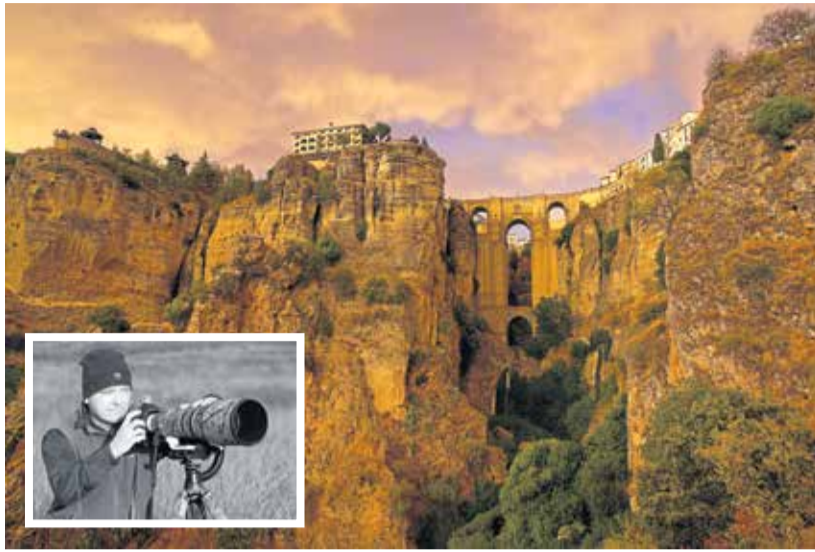


Battle stations

It's the moment Napoleon's unpopular army is finally sent into retreat by a legion of local townsfolk. Pitchforks, muskets and all... And Ronda Romantica in spring is a must-visit event



Picture by Jon Clarke



SNAPPER: Geoff Simpson



AN EYE FOR THE ARTS

HE has the quintessential photographers eye, whether it is capturing Ronda's tajo or getting up close and personal with Spain's rarest wild animal the lynx. Now visual artist Geoff Scott-Simpson has opened an eponymous gallery in Ronda showing off all his fabulous works. Simpson, who worked as a gem valuer for the likes of Cartier, De Beers and Sotheby's, has very much returned to his first love - nature. His skill behind the camera has led to some phenomenal encounters from stag fights to thunderstorms. The career change led Simpson to collaborate with wild life hero Sir David Attenborough to find some of Britain's most beautiful

landscapes. His photos truly make you believe you were there yourself, maximising the effect of light to reveal the landscape's ethereal qualities. The artwork is available in glass acrylic or metallic mediums as well as museum-quality paper. For those who would like to improve their photography, Simpson also offers individual and group workshops including a private tour to capture the Iberian lynx in Andújar. The workshops cater for all sorts of levels from beginners looking for tips to international photographers looking for an edge.

Visit www.geoffscottsimpson.com



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PLUCKING AMAZING!

TALENT: Ronda guitarist gives fascinating nightly shows explaining the different Spanish instruments

YOU can certainly hear the influence of Spanish guitar just wandering the streets of atmospheric Ronda.

The air is frequently thick with the pleading sound of authentic Spanish guitar and it is no surprise to learn that a few famous flamenco rhythms come from the city, while one local musician Vicente Espinel apparently invented the first five-string guitar. "There's no institution that validates the quality of music played on the street. It's just a feeling of freedom," explains guitarist Paco Seco, who moved to the town with his English wife Lucy a few years ago.

Originally from Sevilla, the internationally-acclaimed musician has toured the world with his unique fusion of classical and flamenco guitar.

The father-of-three has his own band and with his wife launched the successful Ronda Guitar Festival in 2016, bringing in musicians from as far and wide as Italy and now Costa Rica.

The pair are doing a great job for the town, showing off an amazing collection of instruments, mostly guitars of course, plus a nice mix of CDs and other excellent wares at their centre on Calle Padre Mariano Soubiron.

They also have a nightly live session from 7pm, which is anything but your cliché touristic flamenco event. During the hour-long show Paco cleverly explains the history of Spanish guitar, playing up to



half a dozen different instruments and in numerous styles.

His own compositions - a kind of flamenco fusion - are inspired and he could easily sit alongside the likes of Andres Segovia or Paco de Lucia when it comes to fast-moving fret work.

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Ref. Z171 – Finca Magdalena is situated 15 mins from Ronda, on the best side of the valley. The property, set on a 40.000 m² plot, has 4 bedrooms, 3 luxurious bathrooms, 2 swimming pools one with solar heating. Highly recommended!

GORGEROUS RONDA COTTAGE FOR SALE

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Ref. Z406 - This beautiful two bedroomed cottage with pool is located within the Grazalema Natural Park close to the village of Montecorto in the Province of Malaga. Private swimming pool enclosed with attractive ironwork, with terrace around providing plenty of room for outside living.

OLVERA APARTMENT FOR SALE. MODERN DUPLEX IN HEAVEN

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66 m²



Ref. Z421 - This is a gorgeous property throughout and would make an excellent home or holiday home it feels high up and really is heaven.

OLVERA TOWNHOUSE FOR SALE. PERFECT PAD

38.000 €

40 m²



Ref. am160 - A perfectly presented home on a quiet pedestrian street in the lower part of the village, with a very pretty facade this house has everything you could be looking.

OLVERA TOWNHOUSE FOR SALE. GLORIOUS RAINBOWS DREAM

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Ref. z388 – Olvera is known for its amazing views, and this property makes the very best of them! Beautifully decorated and furnished, it's light and airy, and has plenty of space with three bedrooms and two bathroom. Outside there's a terrace with a picture-perfect panorama.

OLVERA TOWNHOUSE FOR SALE. UNIQUE ARTISTS RETREAT

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Ref. Z429 - This wonderful home is delightful and inviting from the moment you enter the door! Beautifully decorated in traditional Olvero style, this substantial property boasts 4 bedrooms, patio and terrace and is a complete one-off at an amazing price. You're bound to fall in love with it!

OLVERA TOWNHOUSE FOR SALE. FLYING VIEWS

47.000 €

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Ref. Z417 - A Perfect holiday cottage. This home has been lovingly cared for, and looked after beautifully. The property has amazing views towards the castle church and mountains as well as pretty roof top village views.

OLVERA TOWNHOUSE FOR SALE. HIDDEN GEM

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Ref. Z282 - A perfect little one bedroom holiday home, or a home for one! This renovated house is set within the old streets of Olvera, with stunning views from the terrace.

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LEFT TURN TO SUCCESS

THE People's Republic of Arriate is an 'island' in the Ronda Mountains. Not an island in the classical sense of the word, but an eight-and-a-half square kilometers island entirely surrounded by Ronda, from whom it wrestled control some 400 years ago. Fiercely independent of its *pico*, or snobbish, neighbours, the district – the smallest in Malaga province – has been staunchly left wing since the death of dictator Franco in 1975.

Ruled by either the PSOE or the IU (formerly the Communist party) for nearly four decades, fortunately this is what one might call 'Communist Light', and has more to do with a shared sense of fun than of the teachings of Chairman Mao.

This might perhaps explain, why – despite its apparent hard left leanings – the town has some of the best known Easter parades in the whole of Andalucia. Highly competitive and reaching fever pitch around Good Friday, practically every family has a member in one parade or another. Indeed, such is the clamour to be involved, the brotherhoods even hold lotteries for the right to carry the floats (or *tronos*) of Jesus and Mary.

"It has always seemed a real contradiction to me," says Jose Antonio Coca, a fitness instructor, who grew up in the town. "The processions are taken very seriously and

Earthy, forward-thinking and fiercely left wing, Arriate is the perfect foil to the grandeur of Ronda, writes Jon Clarke

they are very moving, but it is a simple fact that most of those involved hardly ever go to church and so it is really just down to the tradition."

Either way, Arriate has a distinctly warm and friendly feel to it and, on the whole, its people look after each other in a sort of anarchic, commune-type way.

In 1936, the town's defence committee was run by anarchists

It is no surprise to learn then, that in the run up to the civil war in 1936, the town's defence committee was run by anarchists, who with the CNT had the strongest trade union in the area.

Arriate also has the curious distinction of

being, aside from Ronda, the only town of the Serrania de Ronda to have grown substantially over the last decade.

While most of the dozens of towns and villages have generally shrunk in size, hemorrhaging people to the larger cities, Arriate has actually increased to its current figure of nearly 5,000.

Much to do with its near proximity to Ronda – coupled with more reasonable prices – the town has grown well.

"It is no surprise with the town being easily one of the most friendly in Malaga province," explains Carmeli Gamarro, whose family firm Melgar have been curing and salting meat for over three generations. Her son currently runs the show.

"The Arriatenos are worldly people, who have travelled all around the world to work," she continues. "It makes them open and friendly."

This was certainly the case as many of them had to emigrate to Switzerland, France and Germany to work in the tough impoverished years of the 1960s and 1970s.

These days, while a new tranche of young-

Pictures by Jon Clarke



OUTDOOR VIBES: Visitors to the *Fiesta en el Aire* festival



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GRAFTER: Pedro Montesino

sters is being forced to go abroad to hunt again for work, many of the original emigrants are back and you can't help but notice the number of happy-looking pensioners hanging around watching the day go by.

One place, Bar La Albarra is so famous for these old boys that a Dutch photographer put together an exhibition based entirely around its clientele. Sitting down to play cards over an 80-centime brandy, the old boys certainly look contented with the world. Another perfect snapshot of the town is at Pedro Montesino's greengrocer, which is the heart of local life and where a queue frequently snakes around the shop.

It is here that his faithful customers patiently wait their turn, catching up on gossip and barracking Pedro, who is never short of a bit of banter himself. A hard-working man, he is up with the lark to source his great selection of produce and spends much of his afternoon delivering it around the nearby area.

"And as long as the locals keep supporting our local shops and demanding good quality goods then I will continue finding them," he says.

Luckily the town has managed to keep its local shops. There are only two small supermarkets and attempts to open a Dia in the town were thankfully shelved. For now.

Almost every house on the main street has a shop on its ground floor. Many of them have no signs, but just a main door. Some are like caves, stretching back almost 50 metres, and shopping around, you can find some of the best quality meat and vegetables in Malaga province.

Tucked away in the town's fabric are a number of other interesting sites. Best are some of the 'secret' meat factories that are dotted around. One of these in the charming pedestrianised Calle Callejuela has been open as a shop since 1900, a fact proven by the number carved into its pretty wrought iron doorway. The factory is at the back for anyone interested in visiting.

Greengrocer Pedro is typical of the Arriate stock. A staunch supporter of old fashioned village life, he spends most weekends enjoying the local countryside.

A keen hiker, he is forever in training for this or that, the highlight of his year being the annual 101km walk organised by nearby Ronda's famous Foreign Legion.

"It is the best thing about living in a country village like this," he explains.

Indeed, the countryside surrounding Arriate - meaning 'vegetable garden' from the Arabic word *Arriadh* - is full of lovely walks.

The best goes up what is known as the valley of the Molino Canto to the source of Arriate's river Guadal-cobacin.

A shady well-signposted circular stroll through a pristine valley, full of ancient cave houses, ruined mills and an abundance of nature, you can even swim in the cooling river in summer.

And yet there is more. For Arriate can also call itself something of a musical town, one of the best in Andalusia, with two town bands and plenty of local groups.

It is a tradition that can be traced back even before the origins of the town, when a mythical group of country musicians roamed the area playing music in the dead of night.

Known as La Aurora de Arriate, the group still keeps up the tradition playing every Sunday morning between the hours of 4am and 6am.

With origins from Arabic times in the 13th century, the coplas, or local songs, have been passed down from generation to generation and became famous when in 1973 the British National Geographic Society recorded them for an album on Spanish cultural music.

A capacity for music is all too obvious with a visit to the incredible Los Caireles bar on the high street.

There are few surprises in the Serrania as pleasant as walking through the anonymous frosted glass doors on a concert night in winter, when it will be full of hundreds of music fans of all ages, colours and styles.

Much to do with the brothers Roberto and Monolo Rivera, the surprise is more the better, if you can persuade them to take you out back. If so, you will realise that the bar you are standing in is just one small corner of what was once - since the 1940s - Arriate's Cine Ideal. And what a gem it is.

Still standing today, with its main screen and stage - not to mention 350 original wood and leather seats bought from Cine Paris in Malaga in the 1950s - best of all are the stunning brightly-coloured hydraulic tiles that line the entrance.

"Our father was a real film fanatic," says Monolo. "This was one of the most popular cinemas in the Serrania.

"People came for miles around despite the movies being heavily censored by the local priest, who would demand cuts all over the place."

Running until 1988, when due to dwindling audiences part of it had to be converted into a flamenco venue, the brothers have kept it intact.

"This is our legacy and part of our town's key history," says Roberto. "I grew up watching Cinema Paradiso and always dreamt of one day opening the cinema up again. One day we hope to be able to find the funding."

With a new tranche of talented, hard-working expats moving in, opening hotels and restaurants, it could well be Arriate's decade. The emphasis is on sustainability, organic agriculture and home-grown produce.

Its annual Fiesta en el Aire every October epitomizes this mix.

A three day festival which launched nearly a decade ago, it promotes the best of Andalusia's natural produce and music and already gets nearly 20,000 visitors over the weekend.

Thinking small, planning local, growing your own...It could be a microcosm of what Andalusia should really be aiming for in years to come.



SECRET WALK:
One of the best walks is along Molino Canto valley



HISTORIC: Arriate has been independent since the 1600s

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Secret Serrania

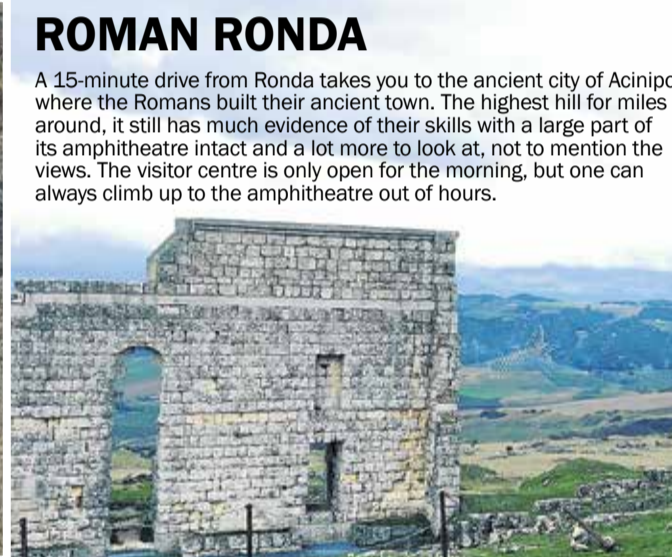
From bandit hideouts to Roman wine cellars, there is so much to see and do close to Ronda, writes Jon Clarke

RONDA is surrounded by two natural parks, the Sierra de las Nieves and the Sierra de Grazalema, not to mention its very own breathtaking Serrania. These surrounding hills are creaking with won-

derful walks and pretty towns and villages to visit, all easy to reach in the car and most with their own excellent places to stay and eat. Here are a few top picks for a trip out of Ronda.

ROMAN RONDA

A 15-minute drive from Ronda takes you to the ancient city of Acinipo where the Romans built their ancient town. The highest hill for miles around, it still has much evidence of their skills with a large part of its amphitheatre intact and a lot more to look at, not to mention the views. The visitor centre is only open for the morning, but one can always climb up to the amphitheatre out of hours.




Cavemen colony

The historic Roman town of Setenil de las Bodegas is a real eye opener and amazing for photography. Nestled in the rolling landscape, 20 minutes out of Ronda, it was built around a series of caves, which served to keep the wines of the Romans cool in summer, hence its name. It is best to leave your car outside the town, wander up to the old fortress before heading down to the famous overhanging cave for a fine tapas lunch.



Prehistory kept alive


For anyone wanting an idea of what life was like in Ronda 5,000 years ago, head to Algaba, a short drive out of Ronda. This wonderful estate has recreated a prehistoric village showing clearly how the area's forefathers lived, how they ground their bread, decorated their homes and what they did with their dead. There are also lots of rare breeds of cows and goats and you can even stay in the nearby finca if you fancy it. **Visit www.algabaronda.com**

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PREACHING THE BLUES

While it's about as stunning as any of the pretty villages around Ronda, there is one big difference with Juzcar... it's blue. This is thanks to the Smurf movie that in 2011 decided to use the tiny village as the mythical base of the tiny creatures. It has been used a handful of times since and voted to stay blue some years back. But apart from the many attractions for kids, based around the movie, it is also the perfect place for a walk and to see Griffon vultures and crag martins.



Bandit territory

Serrania was once a major stronghold of banderos (bandits) and the tiny towns of Benaoljan and Montejaque were famous for being many holed up. But there is much more, such as the Cueva de la Pileta, near Montejaque (right), which has the oldest cave paintings in Spain, while Benaoljan is the centre of the ham and sausage industry. There is also a fabulous walk from Benaoljan Estacion down the river to Jimera de Libar, from where you can get the train back. At each end is a great lunch spot, with hotel Molino del Santo, when open in season, the obvious pick.

Fanning its fortune

An hour walk out of Ronda will take you to one of the most stunning natural sites, the Cueva de Abanico (or the Fan Cave). Near here celebrated flamenco star Estrella Morente, and husband bullfighter Javier Conde were planning to build a hotel and it is no surprise why. This is one of the most beautiful walks imaginable, with bits of Roman road to discover, ruined towers and then the amazing cave and river at the end.



THRILLING: River cycle and (right) the Experience team

THE RIDE OF YOUR LIFE

The Serrania de Ronda is the definitive place to head off on a cycling tour, writes Jon Clarke

THE Serrania de Ronda is the definitive cyclists paradise.

With hundreds of miles of winding roads and dirt tracks, the area is perfect for both road and mountain bikers.

There are numerous circular routes to be taken, from short one-hour bimbles to whole-day, ten hour marathons.

Get off road and you could find yourself on an ancient Roman road to Grazalema or a sharp descent towards a ruined Moorish bath.

Various cyclists do the off road track all the way down to Marbella, while there is a spectacular all-day ride over the Sierra de las Nieves mountains to Tolox, where you can stay overnight in



a stunning mountain retreat Cerro de Hajar and come back the next day.

One of my favourite mountain bike rides heads

up out of Ronda through the gently sloping Arriate valley towards the Puerto del Monte pass near La Cimada.

Here you enter Cadiz province heading down off-road at a rate of knots for two or three kilometres into historic Setenil de las Bodegas, where after lunch or morning coffee, you head along an ancient bandits' track, called Contrabandistas, into the charming Ronda la Vieja valley and then round back to Ronda.

You could try doing tracks like this on your own, but better use one of the various professional cycling companies that organize trips around the Serrania and further afield.

One of the best established cycling companies, Andalucian Cycling Experience have been guiding riders through Ronda's stunning scenery for 12 years. Husband and wife team Ashley and Claire Higgins cater for all ranges of ability from their base in the picturesque village of Montecorto. And they sort everything out from the bikes to accommodation to food.

Kids

From novices and families to budding Chris Froomes, the British expats' expert tours will take cyclists into the heart of one of Spain's most stunning settings.

"We have a range of road bikes for hire and we even have children's chariots and kids' seats so the whole family can come along," says Ashley.

"If there are people on the coast, they can come up and join us for a day's riding, or they can come up and spend three days to a week."

Ashley and Claire set up the business after swapping the UK 'rat race' for the hills of Andalusia.

They fell in love with Montecorto after two years scouring Malaga and Ronda for the perfect base.

Mountain biking along trails or road cycling with will take riders through hidden gems like Zahara, Setenil and the Roman ruins of Acinipo.

Accommodation ranges from fully-furnished villas with swimming pools that sleep 4 to 6 people to comfy townhouses - perfect to relax in after a day's riding.

A fully qualified mechanic is on hand - with a van to scoop up anyone finding the going tough and 40% of bookings are from recommendations or satisfied customers returning for another holiday.

Visit www.andalucian-cyclingexperience.com or call 952 184 042



Time. 2 hrs 30 mins

The walk starts from the car park just past KM12 on the Zahara to Grazalema road.

Leaving the car park, the path is largely flat and gentle and remains that way until you reach the griffon vulture colony. From here choughs, blue rock thrush, Sardinian warblers, crag martins and the occasional short-toed eagle can be spotted.

Winding down a steep but well-defined path, steps have been put in place with hand-railings in a few particularly steep areas. Once you reach the bottom, the floor is made up of huge boulders gradually diminishing in size as you walk northwards towards the impressive cave system.

After taking in the cave it is back the way you came. This can be particularly gruelling on weary legs and it is advisable not to do so in midday summer heat.

Deep throating

Picture by Jon Clarke

BEWARE - you are about to enter Andalusia's 'Green throat' and it's not a walk for beginners.

If the name doesn't put you off, the sign at the start of the Garganta Verde trek is ominous warning enough.

It tells me only 10 people are allowed to walk the path daily and you need a permit from the park office in El Bosque, in advance.

I already have my permit. Now I'm going to find out what lies beyond the mouth of this spectacular limestone canyon, concealed in the rock face 2.3km beyond the mountain village of Zahara de la Sierra. And within just minutes of setting off it is hard to believe that you are anywhere near civilisation.

Not another soul is in sight, the silence broken only by the buzz of bees and insects.

The views across the cliff face, where clusters of gravity-defying

If you thought Malaga's Caminito del Rey was exciting, try the Garganta Verde!

trees cling on to either side of the plunging gorge, must rate among the wonders of the world.

And the deeper you go into the canyon the better it gets.

The scent of rosemary and other wild herbs intensifies in the shade as the rocky walls close in and an earthy dampness fills the air.

Griffon vultures with a wingspan of up to three metres circle above while a series of steps lead the 400-metre way down to the depths of the ravine.

It is here on the canyon floor, filled knee-high with ice-cold running water in the winter that the true spectacle awaits.

A brief scramble over the boulder-laden floor leads to La Ermita, a

collapsed system of caves tinted pink and orange, ornamented with eroded stalactites and stalagmites. For a moment, it feels like I've stumbled onto the set of a Hollywood blockbuster themed on the planet Mars.

The roof of the cave plays host to rock doves, and bats disturbed from their daytime snooze can be seen making short tentative flights throughout the day.

It is possible to continue on through the gorge and exit via Zahara but that's for experts and requires climbing gear.

Most people are content to head back the way they came - but not before soaking up the beauty of the Garganta Verde.



Take the back route into the Serrania de Ronda and visit the many castles of its western edge

A GORGEOUS vista unfolded as we drove past Casares and looped around the valley towards Gaucin, known as the 'balcony of the Serrania de Ronda' because of its wonderful views. This is the back way into the Serrania and one of Europe's loveliest drives, particularly now they have finally finished the A-377 inland.

This is the perfect alternative route to Ronda, taking in the celebrated town of Gaucin, the stunning Genal Valley and - with a small detour - the charming market town of Jimena de la Frontera, which sits at the extreme western edge of the Serrania alongside the amazing Alcornocales natural park.

Gaucin can be seen for miles around, like a white ribbon on the peak of a hill.

It's a charming spot, popular with upmarket tourists and walkers and has a fabulous castle, the Castillo del Águila, which sits at 688 metres above sea level and offers a classic eagle's perch of the surrounding area.

Another half an hour on and you come to Jimena de la Frontera, a whitewashed town officially declared of Historical and Artistic Importance in 1983.

A wonderful weekend getaway, it has been inhabited by Iberians and Phoenicians, as well as the Romans, while its 13th century Moorish castle has looked out over many a bloody battle.

Today things are rather more tranquil and you will see plenty of children running around, as well as men on horseback and remarkably few tourists.

It may be a mostly quiet town but that doesn't mean that the locals don't know how to party and on many Saturday nights it comes alive,



FORTIFIED: Jimena

CASTLE-HOPPING

even at the historic 38-year open Hostal Anon, with live music and a decent young crowd.

In the daytime though it's all about putting your walking shoes on and heading around the steep cobbled streets... and, in particular to the castle that rises above it.

The eighth century castle became a National Monument in 1931 and has recently been renovated, but it was once part of a Moorish defence system that stretched from Olvera to Tarifa and protected the western edge of the Kingdom of Granada.

It remains as a constant reminder of Jime-

na's intriguing past as a 'frontera' - or frontier - when it guarded the western flanks of the Arabic Al Andalus with Christian Spain.

The castle witnessed many battles as Christian armies laid frequent siege to the fortifications protecting the important Moorish stronghold of Algeciras.

The view of the surrounding countryside below is amazing, in particular the sprawling forests and undulating hills of Los Alcornocales natural park behind.

One of Europe's largest protected spaces, it is the ideal spot for putting on your walking boots and exploring.

When the Hozgarganta River swells there are dreamy waterfalls and pools to be found but, as ever, ask the locals to point you to the best spots.

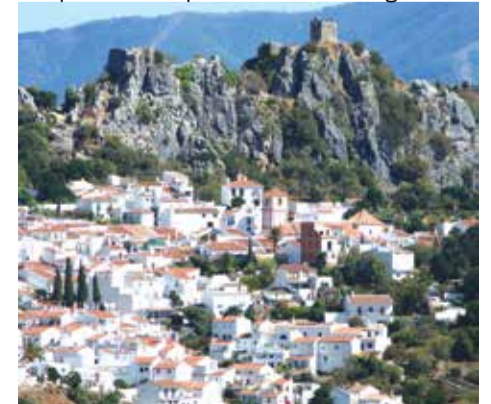
The park is also home to the prehistoric paintings at Laja Alta which incredibly date back as far as the Bronze Age.

After a day spent exploring the wild and stunning terrain, Jimena offers a range of enticing dining options with a mix of Spanish and Moorish cuisine.

The area is known for mushroom picking and game hunting, but the one thing you can't leave without trying is the sweet 'piñonate' cake.

For history lovers another great castle worth visiting is at nearby Castellar de la Frontera.

The drive up to the village passes through forests of cork trees and past the beautiful turquoise reservoir formed by the Guadarraque River. When you get there, the small village within the old castle walls has a traditional Hispanic feel but is sprinkled with quirky shops selling a mix of Moroccan jewellery and trinkets. When you finally head home after a weekend of castle-hopping, rejoice in the knowledge that hidden just behind the Costa del Sol's shining bright lights lie some of Spain's most precious mountain gems.



SOARING: Castle-topped Gaucin

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Looking for a 'jobby'?

"RONDA is for people who value country life. They love the authenticity of the town and don't mind that it is a little colder in winter," explains Villas & Fincas boss Anita Ernsten.

She is one of a number of key agents who specialise in selling stunning country properties and amazing historic townhouses to wealthier, more refined expats. She and husband Oscar have a number of amazing properties around the area, including vineyards, mills and olive estates to sell.

Co-founder Anita says these types of businesses are perfect for buyers looking for - what she calls - a 'jobby', something a little more serious and something with a challenge.

She explains that the local market is certainly on the up as more and more people are seeking out Andalusia's relaxed lifestyle.

Another local agent Zoe Males, boss of Olvera Properties says that there is an increasing number of young professionals who are looking to buy stunning homes in the area.

With new technologies they only need a good internet connection to stay on top of work and it is this portability that has allowed Ronda's property market to keep flourishing.

"We get a lot of young people that can literally work from anywhere and just want a base," explains Males, who herself commutes between the area and Wales.

Her agency has a huge range of properties from grand Ronda townhouses to fabulous cheap properties in towns such as Olvera from as little as 40,000 euros.

Another experienced local agent who knows the area well is Thorwald Bodensiek, from Serrania Services. The agent, who also runs Ronda Properties with his wife Irene, knows the town like the back of his hand having lived in the historic Barrio de San Francisco for a decade.

He has sold many properties this year so far to expats and has dozens of buyers actively looking for properties on his books.

"We have a huge mix from the multimillionaire buyers looking for huge estates to the retired couple looking for a simple holiday home," he says.

www.olveraproperties.com
www.rondaproperties.com
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410 Ha, Bull Ring,
Stables, Ruin**

Ref:100558

3,280,000 €



Country Estate, 410 hectares, (1013 acres approx), 2 Cortijos, guest house, private bull ring, stables and large ruin for renovation. Principal accommodation: Colonial style Hacienda, 750m², with beautifully designed accommodation and magnificent views across the valley. Comprises entrance hallway with fireplace, 4 double, en-suite bedrooms, fitted wardrobes, including spacious master suite with dressing area, attractive staircase down to kitchen-diner, dining-room, library/office, grand doors into sitting-room with fireplace and double aspect windows out to terrace. Wooden beamed ceilings and splendid floors throughout. Guest house: 1 double bedroom with seating area and en-suite bathroom. Cortijo two, 700m²: Traditional tower and interior, cobbled patio Andaluz with gate keepers living accommodation comprising 2 bedrooms, sitting-room, kitchen and bathroom. Across the patio is an additional accommodation of 2 bedrooms, bathroom and sitting-room with chimney. Private bull-ring, stables, feed, machinery and tack rooms. Malaga International Airport approx. 1 hour.



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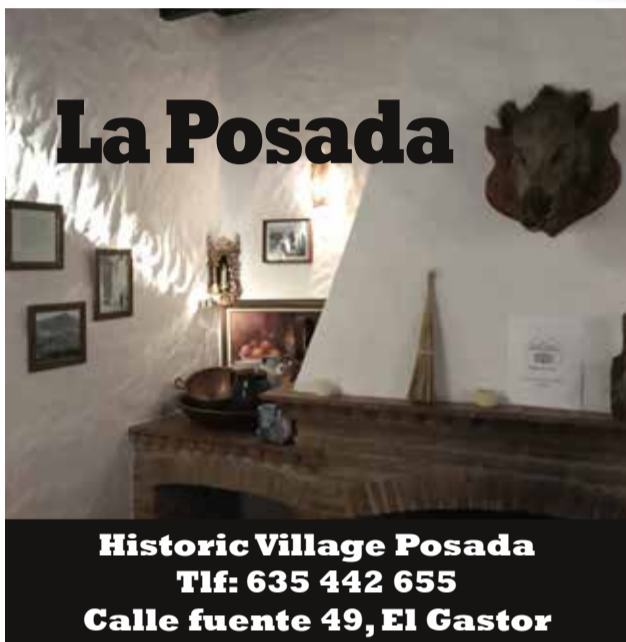


LA POSADA: Authentic Spanish cuisine

WHERE TO EAT

MOUNTAIN OF CHOICE

Ronda has it all from great ingredients to talented chefs, writes Dining Secrets of Andalucia editor Jon Clarke



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AFTER a mountain hike or a full day's sight-seeing around Andalucía's most charming town there is nothing better than a top eaterie or tapas tour.

The Serranía de Ronda has the lot, from tasty tapas joints to creative restaurants, using the best ingredients Andalucía can muster, from local goats cheeses to wild mushrooms and nuts. My favourite places to eat are in the villages stretched out around the Serranía.

Exciting

For years, **Molino del Santo**, in charming Benaolan, has been leading the charge, while **El Muelle**, in Arriate, finds its punters driving up from the coast and even Sevilla an hour and a half away for lunch. Set up by charming Dutchman Frank Rottgering, this old railway storeroom is atmospheric to the n'th degree and well worth tracking down.

He and his talented local chef Isa spend hours planning new and exciting dishes every month... and his menu is full of their colourful creations. The wine list is simple but inspired and the food is always amazingly fresh and beautifully served... Even better are the prices.

At **Molino del Santo** owners Pauline and Andy are constantly improving its offering and never scrimp on quality menu. Their quiet but capable chef Alberto keeps getting better, the menu changes by the week and there are always plenty of twists and flourishes.

For rural fare, you must also



ATMOSPHERE: El Muelle and (inset) its dishes

hunt down chef Ian Love at **La Cascada**, at hotel **Molino del Puente**.

This unsung hero of the Serranía has been pleasing the punters with his tasty creations for well over a decade now.

It's amazing riverside terrace cannot be beaten in good weather, while it is atmospheric inside for cold winter nights.

Also in the countryside near Ronda you will find **Venta Pelistre**, which has been serving

the countryside around Arriate for decades.

A true family run restaurant they breed their own Iberian pigs and grow many of their own vegetables, plus the wine list is getting better by the year.

The least touristy restaurant around, if you are lucky you might bump into famous local bullfighter Cayetano, who is a regular.

Another incredibly authentic place to eat is **Venta Molino**,



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Partido Morena y Vicente, Ronda



TEAM: At Siempre Igual

which sits in a rural spot with amazing views.

This stunning old cortijo, still has many of its original features, pre-restoration, but charm personified. What it does brilliantly is meat... and you will rarely eat such good succulent pork.

Piste

Slightly further away in the village of El Gastor, on the edge of the Cadiz province looking out across an amazing lake look out for **La Posada**.

This is another charming, authentic place that has been serving the region for decades and has been beautifully restored.

It has a great menu del dia, simple and good value, while you can go off piste on the menu if you fancy it.

Up in Ronda centre, there are a few really authentic places, including **Porton** - an institution - run by two friends Javier and Pepe for the last 40 years. Here, you will find my favourite Ronda tapa, the wonderful quails egg with ham on toast.

Around the corner up the hill is one of the best tapas bars **Siempre Igual**, a friendly, family-run place and always busy.

Across the bridge in the most emblematic town hall square look out for **Meson El Sacristan** run by friendly Antonio. It has Roman ruins in the basement and easily the best steaks in the town, cooked on a wood-oven.

It also has a fantastic dining terrace where in good weather you can truly watch the world go by in one of Ronda's loveliest squares.

For wine lovers check out **Entre Vinos**, which always has a dozen wines available by the glass and dozens of local wines to open by the bottle.

Even better there are some excellent tapas and it is a charming place to while away a few hours.

Across the street **Cervezas Rondena** is a good spot to drink the local beers of this superb artisan brewery.

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SERVICE WITH A SMILE: At El Pino, Porton and Antonio (right) at Meson el Sacristan



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Live like a king

Review of Azahar restaurant

FEW places have the splendour of Restaurante Azahar in the historic hotel Reina Victoria. Its dining terrace offers up views across the celebrated Ronda tajo and miles beyond. And luckily the food matches up to it, being both creative and with well sourced ingredients. Inspired by its location, it doffs its hat to local dishes, such as roasted kid and roast suckling pig. But the plaudits should go to the creative starters, such as secreto iberico carpaccio with foie, redcurrants and parmesan ice cream, as well as the scallops on yolks of pickled asparagus with sea urchin caviar. I was also taken with the 'prensa de foie' with layers of goats cheese and a range of sauces, including apple compote and fig jam. The degustacion of chocolate pudding, with a fantastic mix of goodies makes up the canvas perfectly.

SWEET END: The chocolate pudding

tables where you can also take a basic tapa, owner Celedonio is happy to explain the process of beer making. For history and tradition head to **Pedro Romero**, opposite the bullring, which is wall to wall in bullfighting photos and posters. Another long-term stalwart is the three decades old **Almoco-bar**, which ticks just about every box for atmosphere, service, food and wines. Meanwhile, ex-Almoco-bar stalwart Antonio has moved to the charming, authentic spot **El Pino** in a nearby side street. A classic hole in the wall local, Antonio is charm personified and his tapas, including an amazing spinach and chicken burger, were fabulous. This is also one of the best value places to eat in Andalucía, and service always comes with a smile.

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30 All about Serrania de Ronda

WHERE TO STAY

Sleep well in the City of Dreams



VARIETY: Hotel Arriadh (above), Hostal A

THERE is an incredible choice of places to lay down your head in the 'City of Dreams', as Dutch poet Rilke once described Ronda. In the heart of the city though few places are as emblematic as the **Reina Victoria** (www.hoteles-catalonia.com), which was built over 100 years ago by British builders when the train line first arrived here from the coast. Standing in an enviable spot overlooking the gorge this upmarket hotel is a place to lie back and luxuriate, relax and enjoy the best views in Christendom. Completely upgraded into a modern four-star hotel by the Catalonia group five years ago, its rooms

are stylish and comfortable and its gardens impressive, counting on a fabulous pool and no less than 70 palm trees. Those looking for a more budget offering should try the central **Hotel Morales** (www.hotelmorales.es), which sits in the heart of the town, perfect for the shops, and the main transport links. However, it is out in the Serrania countryside itself that you will be really spoilt for choice. Close by, check **Hotel Arriadh** (www.arriadhhotel.com), which counts on some of the best views anywhere in Spain. Often described as 'zen-like' the clean lines and maximising of light and views is all thanks to the

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Hamming it up

They are the father-and-son team that offer a one-stop shop of delicious Serrania goodies, including cheeses and hams and a massive range of wines from the area and from across Spain. The son at Jammeria Granadino is a famous ham-cutter who has won many competitions and can be hired for weddings and events around Andalucia.



Ronda has so many romantic and hip places to stay



Anon (below) and (right) Molino del Puente and Hotel Reina Victoria



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talents of Dutch couple John and Wilfred. Excellent value, it has an amazingly peaceful garden and a splendid infinity pool.

In the same village, and equally stunning is www.alcantarilla.co.uk, a beautifully conserved 18th century farmhouse, with its own tower and Arabic watercourse.

The three-bed home can be rented for a minimum of three nights and comes with its own amazing swimming pool and two hectares of grounds.

Also close to Ronda by a meandering river is the charming converted mill **Molino del Puente** (www.hotelmolinodelpuente.com), basically a restaurant with rooms, thanks to chef Ian Love, who has been producing tip top tucker for decades.

Alongside his wife Elaine Love, this historic spot is very popular with visitors from the coast and, best of all, is well connected, while being very peaceful. Spreading out into the Serrania there are loads of amazing places to stay.

One of the finest places is **Hostal Anon** (www.hostalananon.com) over in Jimena, which is a great place for a romantic break.

It's been a classic stopover for travelers for nearly four decades and the rooms have a Spanish rustic feel, while the outside intertwining terraces have a Moorish décor.

Owner Suzanne has lived in Andalusia for over 40 years and the place often comes alive on weekend nights with a very liberal fun feel.

Another amazing spot is **Hotel Banu Rabbah** (www.hbenarraba.com) in Benarraba, one of the most charming, sleepy authentic villages of Andalusia.

In the heart of the stunning Genal Valley, this is an ancient Arabic village, built by the Son of Rabbah, whose family must have been prominent in the village's early days.

A large castle stood in the area and can be found nearby at Monte Poron.

The hotel itself is comfortable and very good value.

Over in Benaolan you should check out **Molino del Santo** (www.molinosanto.com), a classic rural retreat, which has been serving the area for three decades.

Run by Pauline and Andy, the hotel has the knack of keeping guests happy with just the right mix of comfort, good food and character.

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Bedrooms: 9 Bathrooms: 12
m² Built: 2.300m² m² Plot: 12 Ha

A luxury and Historical Hacienda near Ronda, Málaga, Andalusia. A completely restored 16th century hacienda, owned by the local Marqués, converted into an exclusive country house, keeping many of the original details of this historical property. A 9 bedroom, 9 bathroom main house, a 1 bedroom staff house, a gym, spa, cinema, large painting studio with reception area. Build around 3 different traditional courtyards. Beautifully gardened inside the courtyards as well as outside. A chapel is located in the outer garden. The over 120.000 m² plot sits in rolling agricultural landscape of Alcalá del Valle, at an altitude of about 800 metres, looking out toward the peaks of the Grazalema mountains, half an hour north of the city of Ronda. There is an olive grove, a large ecological vegetable garden and grazing land.



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