A_{ll about} S errania de Ronda

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Picture perfect



NICE promenades, good wine, excellent food and nothing to do...'
Thus Ernest Hemingway wrote off the town where he spent numerous holidays drinking the local wine and carousing at corridas, no doubt disappointing many of Ronda's proud residents with his puzzlingly

lacklustre review.

Most of today's travellers - including Britain's last two prime ministers and an American First Lady - would certainly disagree with him. Ronda has been crowned Andalucia's third most-visited town and it's not hard to see why.

The so-called 'City of Dreams' is a true wanderlust gem and somewhat of a celebrity hangout

lebrity hang-out.
This year alone, Theresa May, Anne Hathaway, Ricky Gervais, Jodie Whittaker, Gordon Ramsay, Kristin Scott Thomas and Spain's ex-premier Mariano Rajoy have all allegedly visited the stunning mountain town... so say locals in the know.

Obama

Michelle Obama also made headlines when she visited in 2010, touring the old town and discovering the Moorish dynasty with her daughter Sasha. Celebrity chef Jean Christophe Novelli

Celebrity chef Jean Christophe Novelli went house hunting in the town after falling in love with it in 2009.

With its spectacular high sierra setting, leafy parks, cobbled lanes and atmospheric ventas it's no wonder Ronda has stolen the hearts of so many travellers.

Over the centuries a slew of writers have waxed lyrical about its timeless character, stunning views and charmng locals.

The German poet Rilke baptised it the 'City of Dreams', Orson Welles took a shine to its bullfighting scene and

Continues on Page 18





Picture by Jon Clarke

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$S_{\it errania}$ de Ronda

From front page

City of dreams

Hemingway himself capitalised on its culture of bullfighting for two of his own works.

Ronda's legendary torero Pedro Romero who slew more than 5,600 bulls was the muse for his noble matador in *The Sun Also Rises*; while the fierce rivalry between Luis Miguel Dominguin and Antonio Ordonez, the city's other most famous bullfighter, is chronicled in *The Dangerous Summer*.

But it seems the good people of Ronda overlooked the Nobel Prize-winning author's slight on their hood. Instead, they paid homage to him with the Paseo de Ernest Hemingway, a pathway that teeters along the top of Ronda's crown jewel – El Tajo gorge – which offers up gorge-ous views across the Sierra de las Nieves Natural Park.

This 120-metre-deep chasm slicing the city in two is bridged by Ronda's most photographed structure.
The magnificent Puente Nuevo is any-

The magnificent Puente Nuevo is anything but new, having been completed in 1793. As you cross the cloud-touching bridge, it's like stepping into a medieval fairytale. The backdrop of soaring mountains crowned with traditional Andalucian white villages is equally dramatic.

Taller than London's Centre Point tower, the structure took a staggering 40 years to complete, claiming the lives of some 50 builders who died bridging the gap. They left behind an awe-inspiring fusion of nature and architecture connecting the new town of Mercadillo with the old quarter, La Ciudad.





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

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."

A chamber above the bridge's central arch was used as a prison during the Spanish Civil War. Legend has it that

Republican and Nationalist prisoners were tortured and thrown from the windows to the deadly rocks below. Later

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"

DE R

REGULAR VISITOR: Orson Welles

and its skyscraper jail.

American author Orson Welles (1915-1985)
"A man is not from where he is

born, but where he chooses to die.

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 dreams."

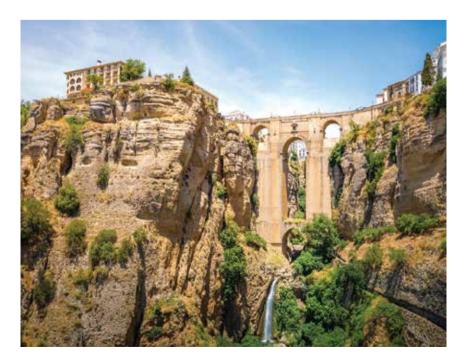
For a picture-perfect view of the bridge, hike down to the bottom of El Tajo. You can access the scenic walking routes



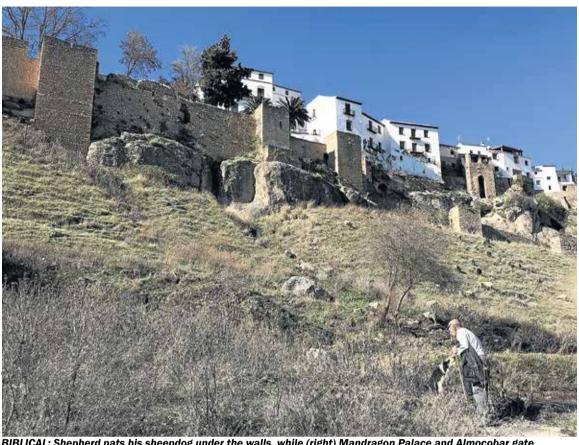
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it housed a bar, today it's a museum dedicated to the history of the bridge







BIBLICAL: Shepherd pats his sheepdog under the walls, while (right) Mandragon Palace and Almocobar gate

from either side of the bridge. Take the old town side for a more challenging hike or the new town side for the easier

Picture by Jon Clarke

Ronda's bullring, poised between new town and old, also gets huge amounts of attention for being the oldest and most beautiful in Spain. There's a museum inside and you can take a tour. Despite bullfighting's alleged waning popularity, this famous arena is mobbed in September for the annual Goyesca bullfights, a homage to Ron-da's two most famous matadors and the Spanish artist Goya.
Ronda is a tale of two cities. Its old and

new towns each have their own distinctive styles with Roman and Moorish influences

Built in 9 BC, it's one of Spain's most historic settlements and was a key military bastion in the Roman Empire.

It was completely transformed by the Moors, who were responsible for many

of its tourist-magnets today. The banos Arabes is one, originally built in the 13th century and operated by a water wheel, bringing water up from the River Guadalevin below.

A stroll around the immaculate chambers, arches and columns - assuming tit is open again following the recent floods - conjures up images of the lavish lifestyle enjoyed by travellers in what was then the Kingdom of Granada. A fantastic reconstruction film brings it all to life.

Another Moorish highlight is the Casa del Rey Moro, the palace where Michelle Obama surprised onlookers in 2010 when she descended the 300 perilous steps down to La Mina - the

water mine – an experience many tourists choose to pass on.

Built in the 18th century during the Moorish occupation, it was on these vertiginous steps that chain gangs of Christian slaves formed a human con-

veyor belt to pass up containers of wa ter from the river Guadalevin.

The heart of the new town is the bustling main shopping street, Calle Espinel - known as 'La Bola' by locals. It's bursting with handicraft shops, local produce and infinite places to stop off for churros and chocolate or Ronda cheeses and

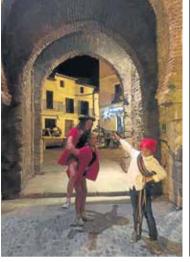
Another way to explore Ronda is via its exquisite wine tours. Since Phoenician and an-Grecian times, wine has been produced here and probably transport-ed to the great cities of the Roman Empire.

Take a visit to any of the 20 or more bodegas and you'll be filled in well. If you're spending more than a couple of days in Ronda, the cave art at the Cueva de la Pileta is another must-see.

Nestled the village of Benaojan some 20 kilometres southwest of the city, the belly of the cave reveals Stone Age paintings of horses, of horses, goats and fish which can be marvelled at by torchlight with a guide.

A trip to Ron-da, whether it be for a day, a week or even a month has the uncanny ability to transport any visitor to another time and era. If you're reading this up there, Mr Hemingway, we think you should eat your words.





Get carried away!



HE is currently on a world tour, having starred at the London Gui-tar Festival.

So it is no surprise that Paco Seco's Ronda Guitar House is fast becoming one of the most prestigious cultural venues in Anda-

He and his team offer an exceptional and emotive concert in a very intimate setting.

Recognized by Lonely Planet, Rick Steves and Le Routard, this is one

evening's entertainment not to be missed on a visit to Ronda. Run by his English wife Lucy, the team offer a fabulous cultural journey with local Ronda wines served up alongside some of the best strains of Spanish guitar. The concerts take place at 19:00 each evening, and cost just 15€.



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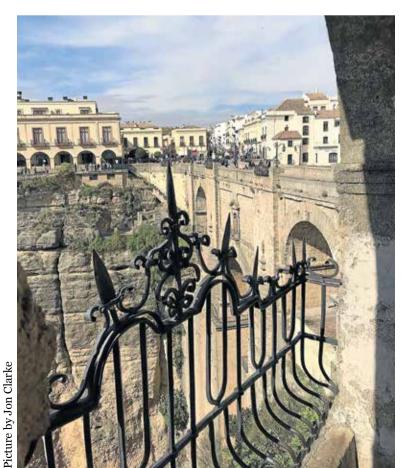
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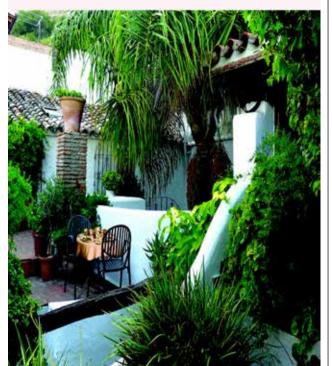


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The Road to Ronda

Author and guide Guy Hunter-Watts reflects on 30 years of living and walking in the Ronda mountains

HEN I first came to Andalucía in the '80s Alastair Boyd's travelogues The Road from Ronda and In The Sierrania of the South were essential reading for any expat with a desire to get beneath the skin of life in La Sierra.

Like Alastair, who later became a friend, I'd set out in search of my own vision of Shangri-La after deciding to set up a language school in Ronda. I eventually set up home in one of the least known of the pueblos blancos - Montecorto, at the edge of Grazalema Natural Park.

At that time there was just one phone in the village, the women still washed in the acequía which runs down through it, and the only wine on sale in shops and bars was vino de Montilla, a type of sherry, dispensed from a five litre flagon. In those days wine bottled with a cork was for the señoritos.

This part of Spain has been on the traveller's map since the time when it became an offshoot of The Grand

Tour. Ronda and

ing post between the Moorish delights of Sevilla and the narcotic charms of Granada. The rugged mountains that surround the town dovetailed perfectly with the Romantic movement's idyll of beauty: a landscape of plunging gorges and hilltop villages and castles, of Carmen-like andaluzas and one in which even highway brigands - known as bandoleros - were given a heroic role by the likes of Mérimée

its sierras were a perfect stag-

and David Roberts.

Driving the long and winding road to Ronda up from San Pedro, then heading west

past towering cliffs through forests of holm and cork oak, it's easy to see why so many writers and arrists have been attracted to the area. And why, more recently, a large expat community should have put down roots. Nearly every small village within 20 kilometres of Ronda has at least a dozen expat families search-

ing out their own vision of The Good Life.

Many of my foreign neighbours and friends have integrated into their host communities by setting up businesses which have helped rural tourism to push down deeper roots. It might be by running a bar or hotel, becoming forerunners within our local organic food movement, writing a restaurant guide, setting up a paragliding school or cycling business or by being amongst the pioneers - such as German Federico Schalt - who have helped bring great wines back to our local sierras.

All these activities have helped bring prosperity and jobs to an area that was, in large part, a rural backwater just 40 years ago.

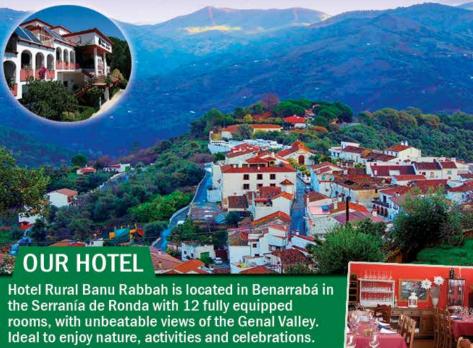
I had the rare luck, as a writer of hiking guides, that my arrival in Andalucía coincided with the advent of walking-for-pleasure in the mountains. When I first brought hiking groups to Grazalema – the trailhead for several amazing on-foot ad-





Hostal









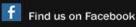


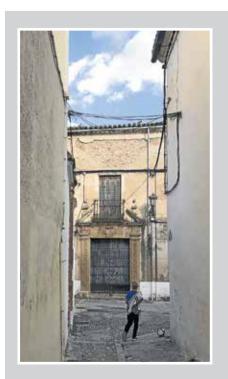
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Gateway to history

It's been a key Andalucian nerve centre since the time of the Romans and back in the days of Al Andaluz, Ronda was a key stopping off place for travellers. It's no wonder then that you feel like you have stepped back in time in the cobbled streets of Ronda old town. Around every corner you will find historic palaces and townhouses, each with their very own original entrances. Many hide grand townhouses inside (left), while others lead to emblematic squares.



ventures - there was just one basic fonda in the village and a couple of simple tapas bars. Grazalema since that time has mirrored what's been happening in many more pueblos blancos: there are now four hotels, several casas rurales, half a dozen new bars and restaurants, waymarked trails and, along with all of this, a new awareness that you don't need sand and sea to attract foreign visitors to your village. I was able to ride a part of this new wave by running a B&B for walkers that ran almost full for 10 years. When I closed for 10 years. When I closed the business down – I wanted more time to write and travel – it felt like killing that goose that laid the golden egg. But the joys of walking our local network of mountain paths would never have been papuigh to keep me in the Ronaudh to keep me in t

enough to keep me in the Ron-da mountains were it not for that other essential life ingre-



dient: good neighbours. Life here would make little sense without experiencing the extraordinary bonhomie and natural

gregarious-ness of our An-dalucían hosts. The southern Spanish are team players - think Feria, Semana Santa or any fiesta hosted by a vil-lage – and are nearly always delighted to welcome a new member to the club, including a foreign one. Whether it's reenacting the events of the Guerra de la Independen-cia, rehearsing satirical songs for Carnival, playing in the village brass band or or-ganising the ganising the annual 101km race around Ronda, people

are happy to

work together in order to make things happen. And they are easy and generous with their invitations following that old sierra adage 'donde come uno, comen dos'.

At a time in Europe when pop-ulist, inward-looking move-ments are threatening to break up one of the most successful community adventures in modern history, I rejoice in any initiative or process that looks to unite and integrate rather than divide. I feel a sense of privilege to have lived half of my sixty years in this exquisitely beautiful corner of Europe and am happy that, in the 1980s, I took that magic Road to Ronda. Even if I'll never become an andaluz de pura cepa I'll remain a happily ensconced European.

Guy Hunter-Watts lives in Montecorto, 20km west of Ronda and is the author of Cicerone's 'Walking in An-dalucía', 'Coastal Walks in Andalucía', 'The Mountains of Ronda & Grazalema' and 'The Andalucían Coast to Coast Walk'.

His B&B is now let on a self-catering basis from April through to October. www.guyhunterwatts. com&www.rondatejar.com



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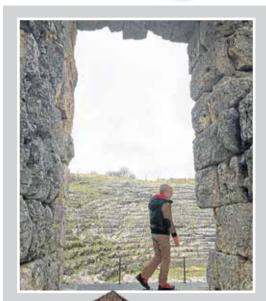
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errania de Ronda



ROMAN RONDA

A 15-minute drive from Ronda takes you to the ancient city of Acinipo, where the Romans built another ancient settlement. 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.



PREACHING THE BLUES

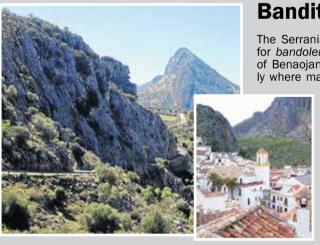
While it's about as stunning as any of the pretty villages around Ronda, there is one big difference with Juzcar... it's blue. This is thanks to the Smurf movie that in 2011 decided to use the tiny village as the mythical base of the tiny creatures. It has been used a handful of times since and voted 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.

Secret Serrania

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

ONDA 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

wonderful 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.



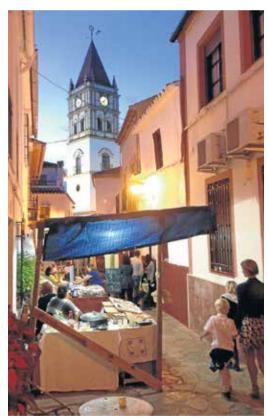
Bandit territory

The Serrania was once a major stronghold for bandoleros (bandits) and the tiny towns of Benaojan and Montejaque were famously where many holed up. But there is much more, such as the Cueva de la

more, such as the Cueva de la Pileta, near Montejaque (left), which has the oldest cave paintings in Spain, while Benaojan is the centre of the ham and sausage industry. There is also a fabulous walk from Benaojan 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.

REPUBLIC OF FUN

Friendly Arriate sits just five minutes outside Ronda, but is a completely different world. This charming village of nearly 5000 souls is a bustling place and fiercely independent of big sister Ronda, from whom it officially broke free some 400 years ago. It has a warm, homely feel about it and a great mix of local shops, restaurants and places to stay. Pick of the bunch to eat is El Muelle, a converted train station, while you must spend the weekend at either Hotel Arriadh or finca Alcantarilla. Its Fiesta en el Aire festival in early Autumn is now legendary and attracts nearly 20,000 punters over a long weekend.



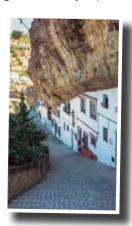
OUTDOOR VIBES: Visitors to Fiesta en el Aire festival

Prehistory kept alive

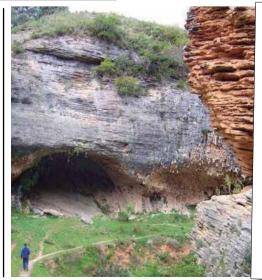
For anyone wanting an idea of what life was like in Ronda 5,000 years ago, head to Algaba, a short drive out of Ronda. This wonderful estate has recreated a prehistoric village showing clearly how the area's forefathers lived, how they ground their bread, decorated their homes and what they did with 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**

Cavemen colony

The historic Roman town of Setenil de las Bodegas is a real eye opener and amazing for pho-



tography. Nestled in the rolling land-scape, 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.



Fanning its fortune

An hour walk from Ronda will take you to one of the most stunning natural sites, the Cueva de Abanico (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, perfect for a picnic.



is an incredible choice of places to lay down your head in the 'City of Dreams', as Dutch poet Rilke once described Ron-

One of the best is the Reina Victoria (cataloniahotels.com), which was built over 100 years ago by British builders when the train line first arrived here from



RURAL DREAM: Breakfast by Alcantarilla's swimming pool

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 Christen-

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.
Check **Hotel Ar-**

riadh (www.ar-riadhhotel.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 talents of Dutch couple John and Wilbert.

Excellent value, it has an amazingly peaceful garden and a splendid infinity pool.

For complete authenticity and to sample a taste of the idyllic mountain life, consider spending a few days at Finca Alcantarilla (www.alcantarilla.co.uk) a wonderful B&B, just ten minutes out of Ronda.

Recently described by Bryony Gordon in the *Telegraph* as one of the 'most beautiful places' she has ever stayed, and Sath-nam Sanghera in the *Times*, as the 'perfect villa holiday', you will be amazed at the well-appointed grounds and historic features of the home.

Another fabulous place to stay at the western end of the Serrania in Jimena is **Hostal Anon** (www.



IDYLLIC: Arriadh and El Anon

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

Owner Suzanne has lived in Andalucia for over 40 years and the place often comes alive on weekend nights with a very liber-

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

In the heart of the stunning Genal Valley, this is an ancient Arabic village, built by the Son of Rabbah, prominent in the vil have been prominent in the village's early days.
A large castle stood in the area

and can be found nearby at Monte Poron, where a legend seems to cloud its history. The hotel itself is comfortable and very good value.



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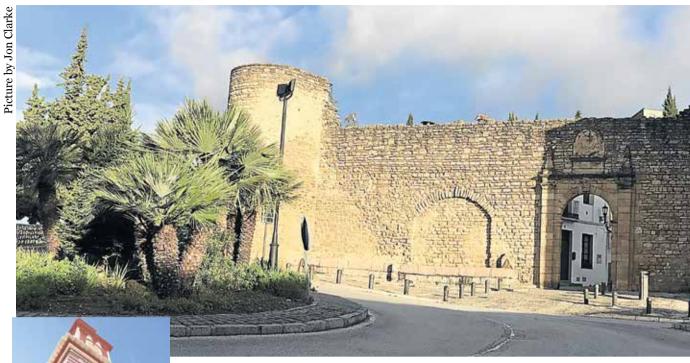
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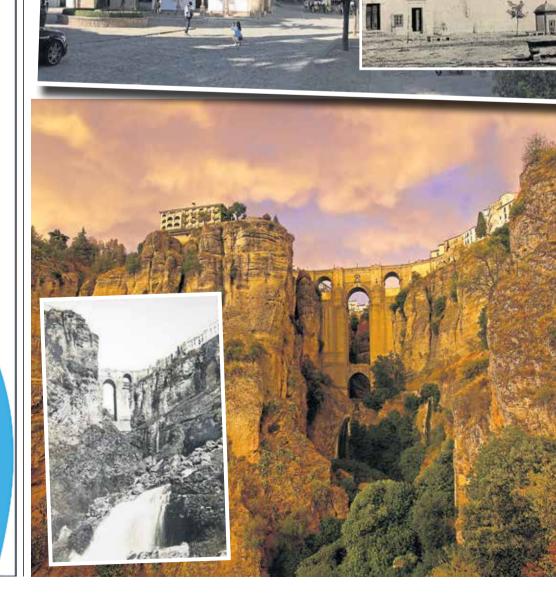
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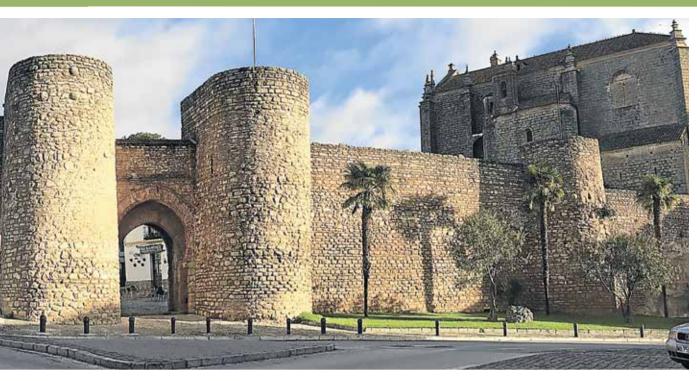
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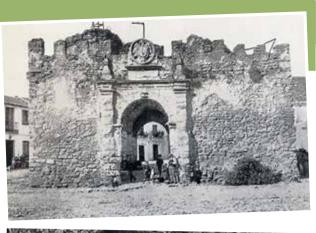
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HOW TIMES HAVEN'T CHANGED

YOU can almost imagine a donkey or horse walking out the old Almocobar gate into Ronda old town, as they used to do back in the 19th century (right). It is the same up at Ronda's stunning cathedral (left), once a mosque, and still with its minaret, which sits in a square, hardly changed in centuries. And as for one of Spain's most famous views - that of the Tajo from below - it has been a magnet for tourists since the 18th century, when the first Romantic travellers first arrived from northern Europe - and recently appearing in the cartoon movie Ferdinand







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Traditional dishes of Ronda

Traditional aisnes of Ronad



WHERE TO EAT

HIGH TABLE

Ronda has mountains of top restaurants packed with great ingredients and talented chefs, writes Dining Secrets of Andalucia editor Jon Clarke

FEW places in Andalucia have it all when it comes to food. The Serrania de Ronda is the

The Serrania de Ronda is the exception, whether you are after tasty tapas, simple local ingredients or Michelin-starred mastery. There are hundreds of exciting places to choose from, now including the excellent Michelin-starred Bardel, where Benito Gomez goes from strength to strength.

Other long-standing winners include historic Pedro Romero, soulful Almocabar, and the rural delights of Molino del Santo and El Muelle, while exciting new arrivals include El Almacen and Sarmiento, in Casares.

Up in the heart of Ronda authentic **Porton** – an institution run by Javier for the last 40 years - has wonderful old photos on the wall and a guaranteed feel good fac-



FRIENDLY: Siempre Igual and (right) Azahar tor. Here, you will find my favourite

tor. Here, you will find my favourite Ronda tapa, the wonderful quails egg with ham on toast.

Just around the corner, the town's grandest restaurant **Pedro Romero** sits slap bang opposite the bullring, with wonderful bullfighting photos and posters, as you might expect.

you might expect.
Run by brothers Carlos and Tomas, a top sommelier, you should try the fantastic *rabo de toro* (oxtail) and let him select the wine.

A total contrast is **El Almacen**, run by talented Javier Pimentel, a local Ronda lad, who went around the world and back before opening his restaurant last year.

ing his restaurant last year. It's a stylish spot, with a great selection of music, including a huge pile of records... but you are here for the food and Javier doesn't



and two years in London.
For wine lovers check out **Entre Vinos**, which has over 100 wines from Ronda, and always has a dozen wines available by

the glass. There are some excellent tapas and it is a charming place to while away a few hours.

Just up the hill a little is **Siempre Igual**, which is exactly that 'Always the same', and a bloody excellent place to enjoy tapas and some excellent wine with friends.

Run by a friendly fam-

Run by a friendly family team, they always have some experimental new dishes, worth a try and you are in a great location, just up from the bullring. Across the bridge in

Across the bridge in the heart of the old town look out for **Meson El Sacristan** run

It has Roman ruins in the basement and easily the best steaks in the town.

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. Few places have the splendour of **Restaurante Azahar** in the historic hotel Reina Victoria. Its dining terrace offers up the

best views in Ronda, even Andalucia, 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 roast

suckling pig and kid.
But plaudits 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. Yet in Ronda, there is even more with the long time most respected restaurant **Almocabar** going from strength to strength as Manolo continues to improve his offering and experiment with the best local ingredients, such as



HIP: Restaurante Sarmiento in Casares

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RONDA ALL STARS: Javier at El Almacen, Benito at Bandal, Javier at Porton and Tomas and Carlos at Pedro Romero





TALENTS: Manolo at Almocabar cooks mushrooms while (right) El Muelle

This place is as authentic as it gets and you always get treat-ed well. Venturing out of Ronda there are so many amazing country escapes for lunch or supper The two best are easily **Molino**

del Santo, in charming Benao-jan, now shut for the winter, as well as El Muelle, in Arriate, which boasts hundreds of regulars who drive all the way from the coast - and even Sevilla - for

It's no surprise, this old railway

being atmospheric storeroom to the n'th degree and boasting excellent local authentic fare to boot.

Run by friendly Dutchman Frank Rottgering, alongside talented local chef lsa, there are plenty of new dishes each month and the menu is full of their colourful cre-

The wine list is simple but inspired and the food is always amazing fresh and beautifully served... Even better are the prices.

Another amazing new country addition is **Sarmiento** at the extreme western end of the Serrania de Ronda in Casares.

This is the creation of three well-travelled, creative friends, who have all lived and worked abroad during the heart of

Spain's worst ever recession. Coming back to Casares full circle are Miguel and Juan Sarmiento, whose father set up this very restaurant in the classic Andalucian town three decades ago,

before leasing it out to another

local family.
The pair have both worked in many restaurants abroad and more recently landed plum jobs working at the Hotel Don Pepe in Marbella and at Sotogrande SA. Their head chef is Victor Carrace-

do, who has also worked around the world for leading chains, in-cluding Ritz-Carlton and Hilton, and is currently head chef at Mar-bella's five-star Don Pepe hotel.

Their new restaurant is 'based on the essential pillars of the Andalucian lifestyle: authenticity, spontaneity and the enjoyment of friends and family'.

And up at this wonderful space, with the best views in Christen-

dom, it is hard to disagree.
It would be unfair not to mention chef lan Love at **La Cascada**, at hotel Molino del Puente.

He and his wife have been pleasing the punters with their tasty creations for well over a decade now and its amazing riverside terrace cannot be beaten in good

www.diningsecretsofandalu-

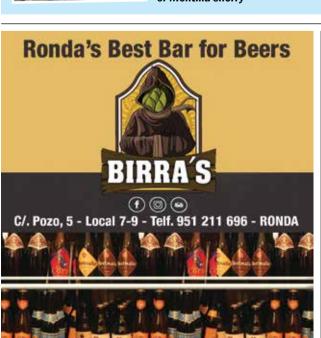




It's a midday lunchtime in Ronda and things feel like the 1970s, none more so than at Jamoneria Granadino where owner Juan serves up local farmers and expats huge vats of Montilla sherry





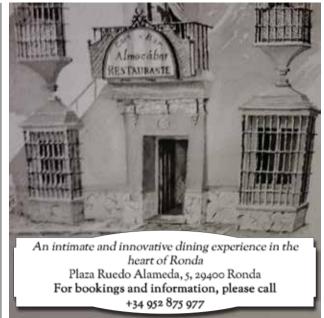


el almacén

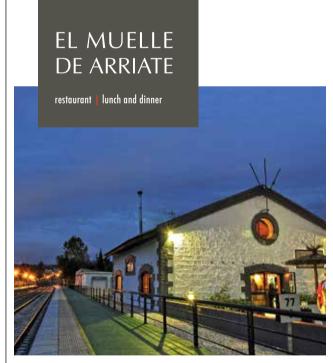


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ON YOUR BIK

Joe Duggan takes a ride into the mountains to meet a Tour de France legend

PEDAL TO THE METAL: Joe on way to Parauta, and (below) Tour de France hero Jesus Rosado with pic of himself on the tour



must if you're planning to cycle to Ronda from base camp San Pedro de Alcantara.

The 48 km ascent to this mountain eyrie is a tour de force on a Tour de France scale but 'vale

la pena', as they say here in

Spain.
And with my cyclist's antennae and with my cyclists a antennae twitching over tales of Roman amphitheatres, gorge dwe-llings and underground cave systems hidden around Ronda, I wasn't going to sit and spin the wheels on my 18-gear Rocinante.

cinante.
Those embarking on the climb are offered spectacular views.
Pedal past Los Arqueros Golf Club's gilded gates and Zagaleta, home to the rich and famous. To your right, La Concha's awe-inspiring peak points the way

points the way.

The A374 twists past thick green canopies of fir trees carpeting the landscape.

A 'Welcome to the Serrania de

Ronda' sign greets me 22km up, as do warning signs for snow. I push on through and take a detour to Parauta, one of Andalucia's famed white villages, guarding the gateway to the majestic Sierra de las

Nieves.

A thin ribbon of leads to tiny viroad tiny vi in the this llage in the valley, built around the 16th century Iglesia de la Inmaculada Concep-cion, cob cobstreets bled steaming chestnut braziers adding to its char-

It's a sharp climb back to the main road, but this is the home straight. The fading sunlight deepens the landscape's burnt ochres and vivid emeralds as I power on to Ronda, serenaded by the gentle toll of cow bells. Ronda's old town bustles with Friday evening revellers, but I

can't linger for too long over El Tajo's swooping splendour. I'm

meeting a man who knows a thing or two about cycling.
Jesus Rosado is a born-andbred Ronda cycling legend who battled his way to Paris in the 1990 Tour de France after honing his skills in his hilly homeland. He opened his bike shop land. He opened his bike shop

ago but he loves to recall the

glory days. "It was like a dream. I was 23 years old; a year before I was cycling in competitions, and suddenly I was cycling in the Tour de France with my idols; Miguel Indurain, Greg LeMond. It was an incredible experien-

ce," he says.
"This region's unique climate certainly helped me become a good cyclist."

Not even the angels are stirring as I leave heavenly Ronda next day at first light. I cycle towards Arriate, the countryside's gold and green parading its Saturday morning best.

Meanders

Arriate's emigrant monument recalls leaner times, but the town, which has grown in recent years to 4,000 residents, is now home to quality shops. Its train station, built on one of

Europe's steepest track gradients, is part of Mr Henderson's Railway, the 1890 brain-child of British engineer John Morrison and fi-nancier Sir Alexander Henderson. It's a punchy climb from here to Setenil de las Bodegas, burrowed into a

gorge carved out by the River Trejo, its houses embe-dded into the rock like Hobbit

After refuelling with café con leche and a thick slab of pan con tomate on Calle de las Cuevas, the sinuous climb out of Setenil gives way to a flat road lined with olive trees leading to the Roman ruins of

Acinipo.
The 2,000-capacity Roman amphitheatre, completed circa 200 AD, crowns the escarpment, offering stunning views. From here, black asphalt, untroubled by the rumble of cars, cuts through golden sunflower fields as craggy mountain

peaks serrate the horizon. It's peaks seriate the horizon. It's a stunning section of the ride. Disaster strikes as my lower gears malfunction. But help is close to hand and the three bells of the Iglesia de la Virgen del Carmen ring me into Montecorto, where the 450 inhabitants are also gearing up for their first Independence Day celebrations.
Bougainvillea climbs whitewas-

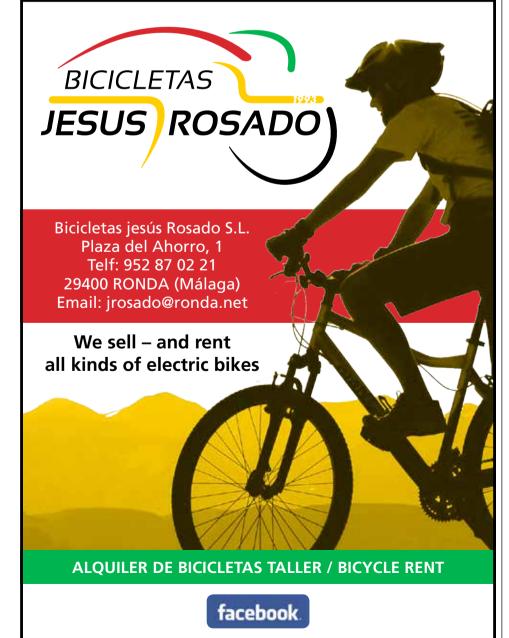
hed walls and a fresh mountain spring meanders through the village. A khaki-fatigued hunter, rife slung over shoulder, strides past.

Also here to greet me is Claire Higgins, who has run Andalucian Cycling Experience with her husband Ashley for 10 years. The company organises cycling holidays and accommodation around Ronda. Not only has Ashley mapped my route but Claire attends to my bike's gear issues (finding a mechanic is like divining water in a

desert to the stranded cyclist).
"We fell in love with Ronda,"
says Claire. "It's got good
mountain-biking, there are flat
rides for families and some really big climbs for those who want to test themselves."

As I say goodbye, the clouds burst (October and November are Ronda's wettest months). I seek sanctuary in a nearby restaurant before braving the elements and the steep climb towards southern Europe's oldest subterranean cave system, the spectacular Cueva del Gato. Its waterfall and natural pool make a refreshing stop for the summer cyclist.

And it's not all downhill from here. If you're feeling a little saddle sore, head to Benao-jan-Montejaque station where a train will speed you and your bike back to Ronda for a we-II-earned beer.



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

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 in-

This is the perfect alternative route to Ronda, taking in the celebrated town of Gaucin, the stunning Genal Valley and 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.

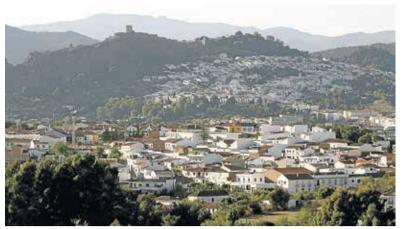
It's a charming spot, popular with upmarket tourists and walkers and has a fabulous castle, the Castillo del Águila, which sits at 688 metres above sea level and offers a classic eagle's perch of the surrounding area.

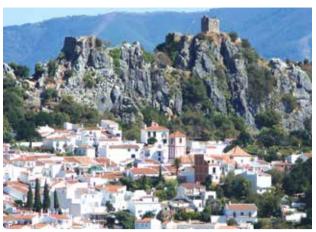
Another half an hour on and you come to Jimena de la Frontera, a whitewashed town officially declared of Historical and Artistic Importance in 1983.

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, even at the historic 38-year open





FORTIFICATIONS: The western end of the Serrania de Ronda includes Jimena de la Frontera and Gaucin (right)

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 Jimena'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 pain-

tings 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 enti-cing 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'

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 Guadarrangue 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.

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The house is all on one level, disposed around a central courtyard and surrounded by beautiful landscaped gardens. The stunning views are to the back of the property and lead down the valley towards the old roman ruins of Acinipo. It is finished to the highest standard and with gorgeous details, such as the old marble sinks in the bathrooms and old roman gravestones set into the dry stone walls that surround the property.



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Ronda, Andalucia - €398,000 Bedrooms: 4 Bathrooms: 3





Country House & Cortijo Ronda, Andalucia - €299,000 Bedrooms: 4 Bathrooms: 2

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Ronda, Andalucia – €500,000

Bedrooms: 5 Bathrooms: 2

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Ronda, Andalucia - €250,000 Bedrooms: 3 Bathrooms: 2 Ref: 0014-024613



ON THE UP AGAIN

But there are still some amazing deals around Ronda, according to **Olvera Properties**

HE Serrania de Ronda proper-ty market is finally starting to go up again. After years of flatlining prices

and a shortage of clients, the number of buyers is rising, alongside the

average price of properties. "Thing's have really picked up in the last couple of years," explains local agent Zoe Males, of Olvera Proper-

"Last year was really healthy and the first half of 2018 was great, apart from the summer, which has been a

But the prices are going up well and the prices are going up well all clients who had budgets of €40,000 to €50,000 two years ago are now looking from €70,000 to €80,000, and we're definitely seeing a lot more interest.

Surprise

"There are also a lot more country property buyers in the €250,000 bracket these days," she adds.

And this is no surprise given how stunning the countryside is around the area, with the landscape and views not dissimilar to the Highlands of Scotland or Snowdonia, but with

The Welsh mother-of-four certain-



GOD'S OWN COUNTRY: Views of Zahara lake and Algodonales and (top right) Zoe and Anne Marie

ly knows better than most having worked in the area since moving there in 2004.

Today, she and her business partner Anne Marie handle just over 300 properties, stretching from Ronda to Zahara de la Sierra and from Olvera to Campillos.

"It's a big area, but we know every listing inside out and are good at matching buyers with homes," ex-

Most of our buyers are British and

thankfully while Brexit paused a lot of people it didn't put them off buying in the long term and many of

them are now back looking again. "While they may have been petrified at first of the consequences, they are certainly not now.

The company, based out of the mar-ket town of Olvera, some 30 minutes north of Ronda, finds its buyers from comprehensive marketing online and from attending shows like Place in the Sun in the UK.

"We also did a show recently in Belgium and have picked up at least one client so far," Zoe adds. She adds that there are some in-credible good deals to be had there,

particularly in the sleepy towns of Algodonales and Zahara. It has definitely been a rollercoaster ten years for Zoe Males, who first moved to Mojacar in Almeria in

While today she is getting at least half a dozen enquiries from clients



a week, this went down to less than that a month in the depth of the re-

"We had been run off our feet in 2005 and 2006, with so many buyers, sometimes four to five a day to look after," she explains. "In one week we actually sold six properties.
"But by 2008 the crash started to happen and by 2009 we were happy we sold one property a month.

"In 2010 we even had six months when we didn't have a sale. It was a very tough time.

Thankfully the good times are finally starting to roll again and things are looking rosy.

"It's good to see things coming back and I always knew they would," she

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SIERRA VISTA 62,000€ ref: AM254

2 bed 2 bath Build: 67m2

We have known this house from its very beginnings as a romantic craggy ruin set high up at the top of the town, through to total demolition and its loving reincarnation to what is presented today.



FINCA MAGNA 320,000€ ref: Z479

3 bed 2 bath Build: 140m2

A stunning country finca set in a beautiful part of the Andalusian Hinterland with wonderful views of Zahara de la Sierra. Just a 5 minute drive from Algodonales, an hour to Jerez and Sevilla and about 35 minutes to Ronda.



RUSTIC ECO PROPERTY 195,000€ ref: Z481

> 3 bed 1 bath Build: 140m2

We love discovering a treasure, and this property sure is one! Set just 45 mins from Seville in the most gorgeous of locations this finca really is stunning.



FINCA DE LA LUCI, 980,000€ ref: AM263

6 bed 4 bath **Build: 358m2**

Here we have a beautifully presented and perfectly wonderful country home that would and has worked as business accommodating larger groups of holiday makers on guided tours.



GARDEN VIEWS 66,000€ ref: Z482

> 2 bed 1 bath Build: 91m2

We love this one, on one of our favourite streets (with my favourite neighbours) with easy walking to the old town, close to the main street in Olvera.



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CORTIJO, RONDA

Splendid Cortijo in a traditional courtyard setting with stable block, barn and guest accommodation, conveniently located close to the historic town of Ronda. It comprises a main house plus 2 self-contained guest houses, positioned around a beautiful courtyard.

Build: 828m2 Bedrooms: 6 Plot: 38889m2 Bathrooms: 4 €1,150,000 Ref: 89119



Cortijo, Ronda

Magnificent historic Cortijo dating from 16th Century, partially renovated and located in a privileged valley close to Ronda. Enter into a large interior patio and landscaped courtyard with pool and palm trees, the tower with the original bell was used as a lookout.

Bedrooms: 7 Build: 850m2 Bathrooms: 3 Plot: 460000m2 €1,600,000 Ref: 81253



COUNTRY HOUSE, ARRIATE

Lovely country house 164m2 with pool, set in a plot of 506m2, and close to the village for all amenities, views. Comprises 3 bedrooms and 2 bathrooms, entrance hallway leading to spacious sitting-room with dining area, office, 2 double bedrooms and family bathroom.

Bedrooms: 2 Build: 164m2 Bathrooms: 2 Plot: 506m2 Ref: 83663 €250,000



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HISTORIC QUARTER, RONDA

The apartment has wonderful, far reaching views from the balcony and comprises sitting-room diner, kitchen and 3 large double bedrooms. Ideal investment or permanent home. A few minutes on foot from the centre and all amenities. Coast 45 km, Malaga airport 100 km.

Bedrooms: 3

Bathrooms: 2

€95,000 Ref: 101268

Build: 87m2



COUNTRY HOUSE, GENAL

Country house with pool, beautifully presented and located in the lovely Genal Valley amidst stunning countryside. The property is on two floors and comprises 2 double bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, elegant sitting-room with dining area, including a large feature chimney.

Bedrooms: 2 Build: 110m2 Plot: 36200m2 Bathrooms: 2

€275,000 Ref: 101278



CORTIJO, SETENIL

Superb old Cortijo for renovation with a traditional cobbled patio 80m2. Located a 5 minute drive from Setenil de Las Bodegas and only 20 km from Ronda. The property is situated on a slight incline amidst magnificent rolling countryside enjoying amazing views.

Build: 350m2 Bedrooms: 4 Bathrooms: 1 Plot: 44,000m2 €225,000 Ref: 101279



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UNIQUE COUNTRY ESTATE WITH STUNNING MANSION, RONDA

A dream country estate only available for a privileged few. This estate has everything you could wish for; natural beauty, a vineyard, livestock, hunting. It will soon have an olive grove and it counts with over 1300 m2 constructed area, including a four-bedroom mansion, a three-bedroom guest house and a two-bedroom staff house. The current owner of the finca loves it so much that he is constantly investing in improvements for the property!



186-00660P



9 bedrooms



6 bathrooms







1.968 m² 2,510.000 m² private garden oprivate pool



P.O.A€



MAGNIFICENT ESTATE, RONDA

Magnificent country estate in the hills of Ronda overlooking the old Roman amphitheatre and the rolling fields of Ronda la Vieja. The property is set in its own private valley.

6 bedrooms | 6 bathrooms | 800m² build | 268.700m² plot Ref: 186-2773P

3.300.000€



AUTHENTIC CORTIJO, RONDA

Impressive Andalusian Cortijo property has panoramic views towards the Arriate valley and the Ronda mountains. Currently in use as a luxury rural getaway, inc one-bedroom staff house.

8 bedrooms | 8 bathrooms | 809m² build | 15.300m² plot Ref: 186-00756P

1.495.000€



CORTIIO WITH COURTYARD, RONDA

Beautiful Cortijo with courtyard, stables, independent guest houses, a garage and a bodega. This country property is completely fenced and comprises 35.000 m2 of fertile land.

6 bedrooms | 4 bathrooms | 810m² build | 35.000m² plot Ref: 186-00744P

1.150.000€

Contact Us

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