

All about The **Guadalhorce Valley**

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GET LOST IN THE GUADALHORCE

Charlie Smith discovers why so many expats have found their Eldorado in the white towns of the green Guadalhorce



Don't miss Coin's famous Flea market, while (left) a town near Alhaurin



SPEND 15 minutes gawping at the rugged Alhaurin el Grande mountain range from our balcony before I realise I am late for breakfast. We're running on empty but the cloud-covered peak of the Sierra de Mijas looming beyond the palm trees outside the window is more than enough to distract me from hunger pangs.

It feels like we're in the wilds but this is Las Delicias, an urbanisation in Coin just 33 km west of Malaga, and 30 km north of Marbella. After pulling my travelling partner Juan from his comfortable bed, we amble downstairs where our host Hazel Rennalls has cooked up a mean breakfast. 'Spanish toast', complete

with a piping cafetiere of the good stuff, lives up to the Las Delicias name. We aren't the only guests at the Palms and Lights B&B which Hazel runs with her husband Tony, having made the leap to Spain from Wokingham 18 months ago. There are Americans staying which is clear proof. Guadalhorce Valley has international appeal.

Over a second cuppa, Hazel and fellow British expat Ursula Lewis endorse that, regaling me with tales of their adventures through the valley during their 25-year friendship. "Sundays in Coin are unforgettable," says Ursula, who has travelled over 600 km from her home in Valencia for another glimpse of the valley - a reminder of the

green, green grass of her ex-home. "Every Sunday there is a flea market in La Trocha," Hazel continues, referencing the swish commercial centre that has enticed the likes of El Corte Ingles and Dunnes Stores to branch

out into the rural hinterland to cater for the growing expat population.

Continues overleaf

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"The market is brilliant," Ursula cuts in. "And very cheap. You can get anything from a pipe for your toilet to a lovely wardrobe."

Just as you can get pretty much anything in Coin, the valley's cultural centre, a mix of old and new, traditional and expat.

The feel of authentic rural Spain with a European veneer explains why so many expats from the UK and other parts of northern Europe, have chosen to call it home.

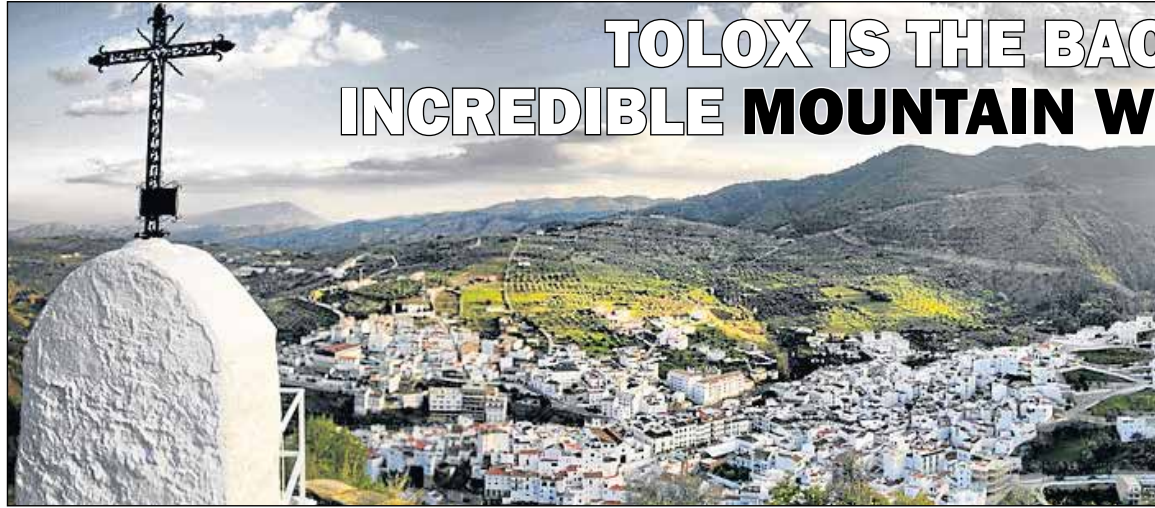
Even one of the tapa we enjoyed at the Nueva Alameda cafeteria was a fried bacon, eggs and mushrooms dish. Does it get more British?

Only the name Coin, perhaps, when spoken of by newbie Brits. It's pronounced 'Co-eeen' but they call it like the money.

Historically, Coin is very much on the money with a cosmopolitan past stretching from the Roman Empire to pop culture. 'Eldorado',



**Los Barcos,
the setting for
"Eldorado"**



TOLOX IS THE BACK DOOR TO INCREDIBLE MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS



**Charming
Tolox**

the BBC's famously flopped soap, was filmed on a purpose-built set outside town.

The Romans set the place up as the market town of *Lacibis*, mining the terrain for minerals and laying the foundations for the area's latterly burgeoning 'Green Coin' ceramics trade.

Marble from the quarries of Sierra Blanca, five kilometres south, was used to construct the amazing Roman town of *Italica*, near Sevilla, the birthplace of the mighty Emperor Hadrian in 76AD.

Then, like many parts of Spain, Coin fell to the Moors in the 900s before being reconquered by the Christians in the late 15th century. The town buckled under a siege in which, legend has it, the great New World explorer Christopher Columbus took part.

The fascinating 9th century Moza-

rabe Monastery will take you back to those swashbuckling times.

But the draw of the mountains is too strong and we set off to explore them.

We went to see the Sierra de las Nieves, Spain's newly-declared National Park to the west of the Guadalupe Valley.

Largely untouched by tourists yet ridiculously close to the coast, it's a weekend getaway begging to be booked. Pinsapo fir trees, Spanish ibex and thriving otter populations are some of the gems that won't it National Park protection.

Tolox is the back door to this incredible mountain wilderness.

As someone once described it, 'If Coin sits at the foot of the Sierra

de las Nieves, then Tolox is the toenail'.

Once part of the Kingdom of So-leimán, this whitewashed Moorish village also draws visitors to explore the healing properties of its Fuente Amarga Spa.

Stress and muscle fatigue are washed away with a variety of therapies ranging from natural gas inhalation to mud spray treatments. Former Spanish Prime Minister Miguel Primo de Rivera is among the more famous faces to have indulged.

Conveniently close to the spa on the fringes of the Sierra de las Nieves sits one of the Guadalupe Valley's finest hotels.

Offering eagle-eye views as far as

**Take water for
the steep climb
and a camera
for the awesome
scenery**

Mala-ga, the Cerro de Hajar hotel is one of Andalucia's more remote places to rest your head. If rigorous adventure is more your backpack, you should try the winding walk from Marbella, which takes in the towns of Ojen, Monda, Guaro, Coin and - if you have the energy - eventually Alhaurin. Take water for the steep climb and a camera for the awesome scenery and views.

Every hairpin bend round the steep cliffs offers up a fresh angle on the Guadalupe Valley. Looking up at the imposing ceiling of white cloud, and down to waterfalls trickling below, it's

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HEADY HEIGHTS: The Caminito del Rey and (right) the Barranco Blanco waterfall

easy to forget that the Costa del Sol metropolis is just over the mountain. Arriving in Alhaurin is like deja vu as a 'castle' looms into view. It's the famous brick water tower that starred in the opening credits of the Eldorado series, built to look old. More striking is how Alhaurin has grown. Where Coin may have a few amazing tapas places or cake shop, Alhaurin has more. The route south west out of Alhaurin brings you to the serene Barranco Blanco

(White Ravine). A photographer's favourite, buried in the countryside where wild boar feel safe to roam, its aquamarine waters end in a magical waterfall. Everyone mentions the Nazis, who allegedly used the area as training camp during WW2, due to the alliance between Franco and Hitler. You can still see a white building that was used as a sentry point as you arrive. And on the other side of the valley let's not forget the Caminito del Rey, a huge hit with thrill seekers.

Once dubbed 'the world's deadliest walkway, and with 1,000 visitors a day, this high-adrenalin hike above the El Chorro gorge, is in high demand.

It was recently praised as a 'shining example' of a sustainable tourist attraction. Director of tourism for the Costa, Arturo Bernal, said thousands have visited the site this year, while 'last winter saw visitors of 84 different nationalities flock from five different continents'.

Emerging at the other end of the Caminito in Ardales, you'll be hard-pressed to get in your car and leave. Often called Andalucia's Lake District, with turquoise waters surrounding tree-lined islands, it's easy to see why.

The scenery is more akin to the cantons of Switzerland than anything found on the Costa del Sol. So many white villages, so much still to discover about the Guadalhorce Valley. In the towns our catchphrase of the day became 'We're not lost' when people saw us consulting our tourist office maps and offered help.

But really that is the only way to experience the Guadalhorce Valley. Just lose yourself.



HOTEL: In hills near Alhaurin

ANDALUCIA'S OWN 'BREAD BASKET'

THE Guadalhorce Valley is 804km² in size, and home to around 150,000 permanent residents, while many more own second homes there.

It has always been known for its citrus production, with orange and lemon plantations stretching out in every direction from the valley's towns. Of the eight municipalities, Coin is the biggest. But towns such as Alhaurin El Grande, Alora and Cartama are also immensely popular with expats.

While first colonised by the Romans, it was the Moors who have had the largest influence on the area.

Everywhere there is evidence of their work, which tamed the tumbling streams into irrigation systems and brought fertility to the whole of the valley.



But while the region has been termed one of the bread-baskets of Andalucia since Roman times, the locals have long struggled with fluctuating rainfall, which can still bring devastating floods to the whole of the valley or leave the land parched for months on end.

DON'T GET LEFT BEHIND

Property Overseas Group

More and more buyers are looking inland, says agent Richard Woodland, from Property Overseas



Indeed, the majority of homes his agency Property Overseas Group have on their books are less than 30 minutes from the coast... and no more to Malaga airport.

The demand for inland property, especially country fincas, has continued to grow this year, as buyers are looking for affordable properties with a different, more Spanish lifestyle away from the coast. There is also growing rural tourism industry in the area which is stimulating the market.

Although there is some indecision from Brit buyers over the uncertainty of Brexit and the fluctuating exchange rate, there is still a rush from buyers in the Netherlands, Bel-

gium and Scandinavia as well as Spanish buyers also coming back into the market.

"We haven't seen a noticeable rise in prices but the difference in the asking and selling price has shown a decrease," explains Woodland. Selling property on rustic land can prove more complicated when fincas are not registered correctly or have difficulty in achieving the AFO. The AFO was introduced in 2012 to help regularise the legal status of buildings in rural areas but this has only hindered the buying process. Every town hall has different regulations, fees and timescales for obtaining the certificate and the administrative bureaucracy can delay purchases and potential sales can suffer.

"Scenically, the area is very attractive and, due to the lower prices than the coast, the demand still continues," he adds.

"I expect the market to continue a steady and gradual growth in 2019, and more competitive with less properties becoming available for sale. "Buyers need to make sure they don't get left behind as many properties are getting picked off the shelf."

Richard's office in Coin is opposite La Trocha or visit the website www.propertyoverseasgroup.com

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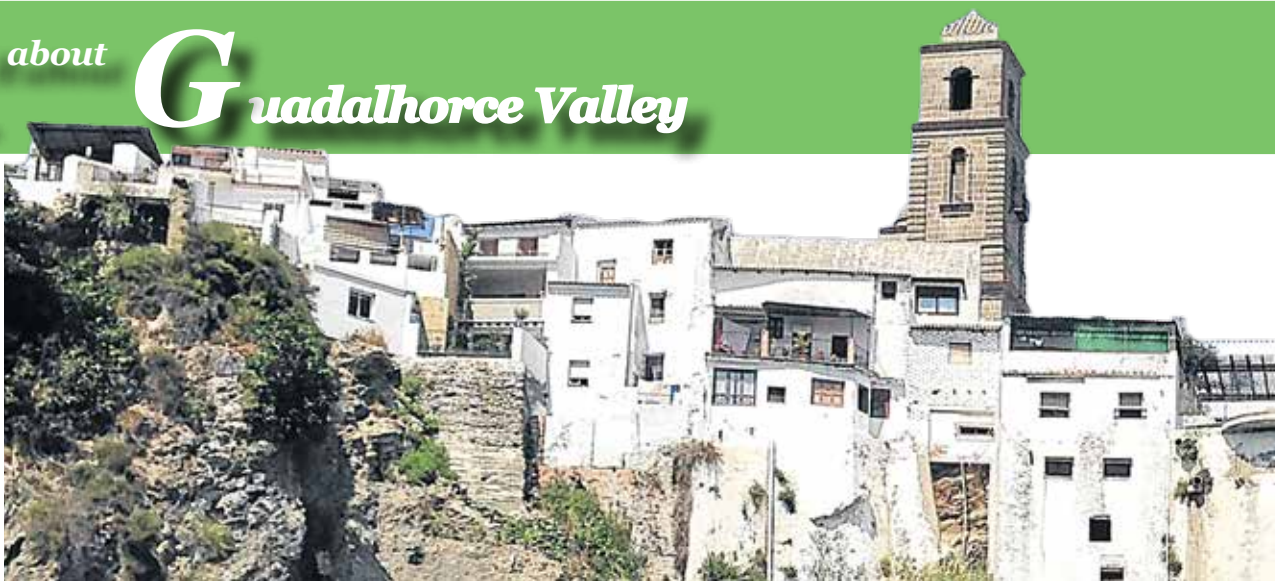


HISTORIC: Alora castle

AWAY from the hustle and bustle of vibrant Coin and Alhaurin, a sleepy, white-washed Andalusian pueblo sits waiting to be explored.

Despite keeping its fascinating history to itself with unwarranted modesty, Alora has blossomed into a hive of cultural activity.

Marked out by its stunning Arabic castle atop Cerro de las Torres hill, the sprawling streets are brought to life through Moroccan and Roman influences before them. However, the castle is even older and was originally built by



Phoenicians, before being expanded under Roman rule. And later destroyed by Visigoths in the fifth century before the Moors finally came and rebuilt it. The Muslim minaret is still clearly visible today, protruding defiantly from the elegant and immaculately preserved castle.

Built in 1462, from local history expert and museum worker, Maria Jose says.

"You can see evidence of all the different ages of the castle, it is so interesting and such a shame that so few people come and see it."

It is a wonderful place to visit, but

unfortunately the castle is not often open to the public.

A short walk down narrow traditional streets leads to the town's lowest-lying square. Here stands the impressive 17th century Catholic church of La Encarnacion, which somehow appears to be even larger on the inside.

Adjoining the church is the municipal museum, complete with ancient pottery, historical displays and intense mustiness.

It is a Mudéjar construction dating from the 16th century and supported by stone pillars and columns.

"Alora is such a wonderful town, there is so much culture to see in the artists, history and of course, the best food in the region is here," explains local tour operator Kora Buggel.

Hidden right in the heart of the town is an old molino, where olive oil was traditionally produced but it is now used for the occasional concert.

Various small museums and bars

have sprung up in the centre since the turn of the century, as this town continues its legacy as one of the most important settlements in the Guadalhorce Valley. It is certainly a fairly bustling place, much busier than most of the valley's pueblos.

One of the highlights is the small bodega belonging to José Miguel Pérez Hidalgo, which produces a range of wines from the Guadalhorce Valley's vineyards, and offers tasting sessions to organised groups.

Killing

At the foot of the hill on which Alora rests is a railway station, and it was here, just five years ago, where the houses were struck by a terrible flood, killing livestock and destroying homes. From the castle it is easy to see where the river ripped apart a bridge, separating Barriada Estacion from neighbouring Barriada del Puente.

Castle in the sky

CARTAMA castle at night is a magical juxtaposition of ancient and modern. The crumbling hilltop remains are bathed in floodlights at night, recently installed by the Town Hall. Even in daylight, no other vantage point in the vicinity offers such far-reaching views of the Guadalhorce Valley.

Cartama spreads out below,

at the head of the Guadalhorce river, where a restored iron bridge connects the town with its train station.

A rocky path zig-zags up from the main square to the castle, meandering beneath shady pine trees, with benches placed at intervals for much-needed breathers.

At the top stands a pretty shrine to the town's patron saint - the Ermita de Nuestra Señora de los



CASTLE: Cartama

Remedios.

Built in the 17th century on top of the original 15th century building, the sanctuary was restored as recently as 2007.

Inside you can still see the ornate ceiling with its crystal chandelier, the elaborate decoration contrasting with the spartan wooden benches that seat the congregation.

Above the shrine are the remains of the 10th century Moorish castle. The crumbling walls are all that's left of the impenetrable fortress that originally boasted ten watchtowers, but the views are still to die for.



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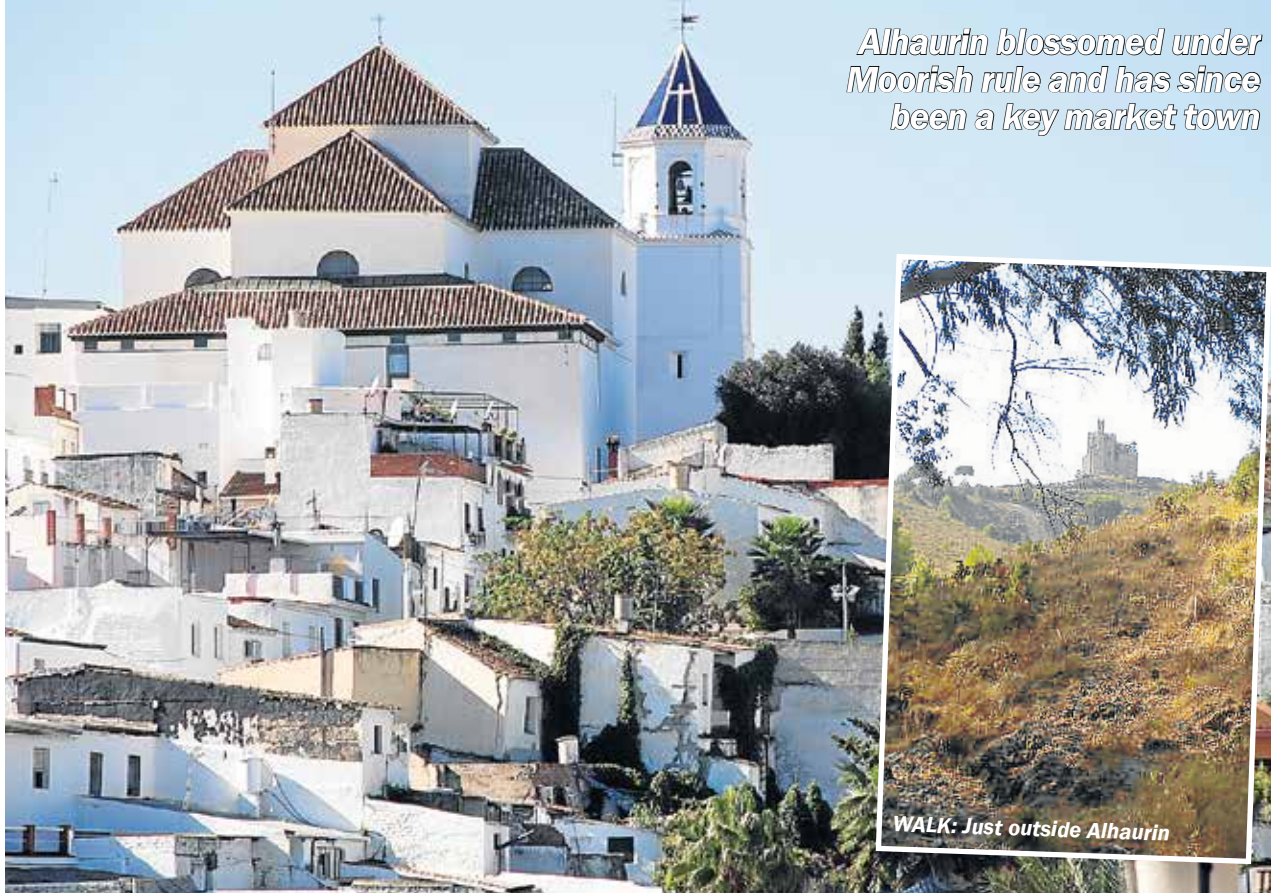
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The Garden of Allah

Alhaurin blossomed under Moorish rule and has since been a key market town



WALK: Just outside Alhaurin

It was in Phoenician times that Alhaurin el Grande first developed its role as an important market town, as the already established Iberian tribes bartered their goods with new arrivals from Lebanon.

Later the town thrived under Roman occupation when a number of wealthy merchants from nearby Malaga made money from the rich mineral deposits in the nearby hills.

They built sizeable villas, such as Villa de la Mata, and labelled the town *Lauro Nova*. Evidence has been found in the numbers of coins, statues and pillars, a trio of which stand pride of place opposite the town hall today.

But it wasn't until Moorish rule that the town really blossomed, as the Arabs planted new crops in the wide fertile valley that is crossed by two rivers, the Fahlala and Blas Gonzales.

They introduced *acequias* (or water courses) to irrigate the entire valley and built a number of important mills, such as the Molino Morisco de los Corchos.

An area of particular beauty – not to mention an extremely clement climate – it had soon taken on an appropriate new name, that of 'Garden of Allah', or Alhaurin.

Remnants of the eight cen-

turies of Arabic rule can still be found, particularly at the Arco del Cobertizo, which was a gateway to the medina, that had a souk specialising in silk.

One of the last towns to be conquered by the Catholic kings in 1485, it was eventually merged with Alora, Cartama and Coin in 1666 to form a single entity known as the Four Towns.

Though it was anything but plain sailing for the united municipality and there were epidemics of plague and even an earthquake in 1680.

Later, Alhaurin was occupied for four years by the French during the Peninsular War in

the early 19th century, which led to the inevitable destruction and upheaval.

Since then, apart from the turbulent period during the civil war, the biggest threat to civil peace has

been an influx of English hooligans, who thankfully have now all but gone.

There is no doubt that Alhaurin el Grande has been through a dramatic transformation over recent years but there is a now a real swagger about the place.

Businesses are opening and the type of expat now coming to live here is more interested in integration, learning the language and enjoying the town's varied culture.

The type of expat now coming to live here is more interested in integration

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WHERE TO EAT

VALLEY TUCKER

A longtime agricultural hub, it is no surprise you can eat well in the Guadalhorce Valley, writes Jon Clarke

ALL around the Guadalhorce Valley you will find vegetable gardens, orchards and fields of crops.

And with such a fabulous range of local produce it is no surprise you can eat well here. Few places are more authentic than the charming **Bohemia** restaurant in Coin.

Run by creative owner Pedro Trillo, it is full of antique furniture and a range of Pedro's amazing knitted tapestries on the wall, worth a visit alone. But you are here for the food, which is classic soul food with a heavy emphasis on vegetables and, in particular, I loved the aubergines layered with salmon, parmesan, chives, caviar and cherry tomatoes. The courgettes stuffed with goat's cheese were amazing



TALENT: Pedro at Bohemia also knits his own tapestries

too and the portions are of an excellent size.

Also in Coin check out **Casa Paco** which has an amazing range of fresh fish and seafood and has been running since 1985 with current owner Juan starting to work there at the ripe old age of 16.

A livewire, he works extremely hard and this is one of the genuine 'dining secrets' of Andalucía.

The hot conchas finas are incredible, while the razor shells are as fresh as could be.

Also in Coin you might want to check



out **Mumtaz Mahal**, a popular, well established Indian restaurant.

The food is always good and you can sit on the terrace or in the charming interior.

Another great dining spot is **Finca La Mota** on the outskirts of Alhaurin, which sits in its own secret valley.

Also Dutch-owned, you dine on a candle-lit terrace at night surrounded by mature pine, orange and avocado trees.

A classic rural idyll, the diners are spoilt with a great mix of international dishes, with a slant on the oriental, Moroccan and Thai.

Meanwhile you must try herring on brown bread, the chicken satay and a splendid 'zarzuela', which has a top mix of shellfish, rosada and langoustines.

The Thai prawn and chicken curry came in red, green or yellow depending on your preference for spice and was delicious. The apple strudel was a sure fire winner to end the meal.

Another true star of the valley is Jaap Schaafsma, 31, who I first singled out a decade ago, for my book *Dining Secrets of Andalucía*, while working at the then-amazing Santa Fe restaurant in Coin.

After it shut in the recession he headed back to his native Holland for a few years, but is now back at the helm at the excellent **Castillo de Monda**.

It has an inventive menu and there are always specials of the day, plus a great wine list.

If you are looking for Gallic flair then look out for stalwart **El Postillon**, where you eat on a fantastic terrace overlooking a leafy garden and with views into the nearby Sierra de Mijas.

You will be spoilt by the cooking from Xavier Sierra, who after working in his parents' restaurant in France and studying at the best cooking school in Bordeaux, Ecole Hoteliere de Talence, packed up his kitchen utensils and headed to Spain 20 years ago.

Ye Ole' Butchery

Cut above the rest

IF you're still thinking about what meat to cook for that all-important Christmas roast, a Guadalhorce-based butcher may have just the thing.

Now taking orders for the festive season, Ye Ole Butchery in Alhaurin El Grande, offers a piece of home with Irish legs of lamb, Lancashire and Cumberland sausages and a selection of Cheddar cheeses.

The traditional English butcher, headed up by Brit Martin Randall, is a family-run business, which uses old recipes passed down through generations.

Running for almost eight years, the butchers make all their sausages, burgers, pies and savouries on site and even cure their own bacon.

For those run off their feet cooking the roasties or brewing the mulled wine, a home delivery service is available ahead of Christmas.

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WHERE TO STAY

Guadalhorce valley has some great rural retreats, writes Jon Clarke

THERE are some amazing places to stay in the Guadalhorce Valley, where peace and mountain landscapes merge. One of the most reliable is Finca la Mota (www.fincalamota.com), in Alhaurin el Grande, that was once one of the biggest estates in the entire valley.

The 350-year-old farmhouse sits in its own secret valley, surrounded by stunning countryside and with views to match.

Run by Dutchman Kees and his two sons Reuben and Danny, you enter into a classic patio Andaluz with a huge pool and its own terrace restaurant.

Inside it is charming with comfortable rooms and various dining areas, one with two roaring fireplaces. A lovely shady pool and views to match make up the scene.

The rooms are all different and most have a nice atmosphere with good views.

You might also consider staying in the soaring Castillo de Monda, which lords over the Guadalhorce valley with mountain views in all directions.

Taken over by three talented Dutchmen, the place has spacious bedrooms, replete with four poster beds, jacuzzi baths and private ter-



ATMOSPHERIC: One of the rooms at Finca la Mota

Sweet dreams

aces, but it also has a spa. Best of all, one of the trio, Jaap Schaafsma, 32, who is in charge

of the kitchen, has worked among Holland's best restaurants, a few of them with Michelin star status.

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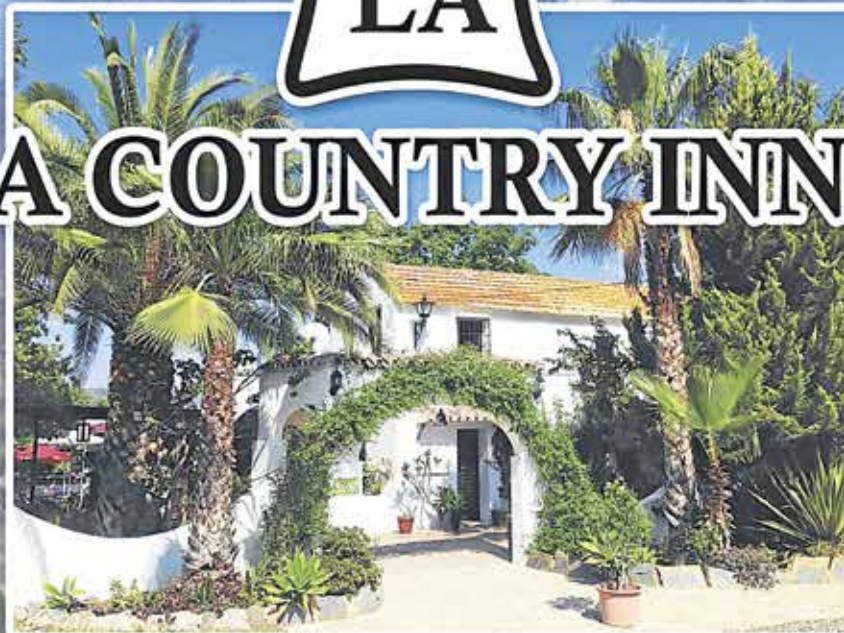
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