

TOUCH OF THE TROPICAL



DRAMA: Rugged Nerja coastline and (inset) Frigiliana mill



Life in the laid-back East (of the Costa del Sol) has never seemed more appealing, writes 'West End Boy' Laurence Dollimore

WELCOME to the most beautiful town in Spain,' toothless local Jorge calls out in broken English as I wipe the sweat from my brow. (OK, so I still look like a tourist, despite four years in Spain.)

I had just hiked up to the top of Frigiliana which has indeed been crowned one of the country's most picturesque pueblos, as plaques through the village will tell you at every turn.

A 10-minute drive up from the coast from Nerja, it's the pearl in a string of white-washed villages glistening in the hills of the Axarquia and its nearby Granada neighbour, the Costa Tropical.

Either way, this is the very laid-back eastern end of the Costa del Sol, and boy, take it from me a 'westie' based near Marbella, it really is a breath of fresh air.

"This is our little paradise," beams grandfather Jorge, who has lived here

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ARABIC: Vestiges exist in many villages, including Archez

Unspoilt paradise

From page 17

his entire life. "We have a great local community, amazing food and sunshine, what more do you need?"

Some of the views inland wouldn't look out of place in *Jurassic Park* - minus the dinosaurs - and hidden in that jaw-dropping landscape is a whole world of stunning mountain villages, underground caves and beautiful, unspoilt hidden coves.

Jorge recommends a visit to the outer walls of this old Moorish fortress town, and a break at his friend's tapas bar, but it's 300 metres back down the ancient cobbled street.

I opt for the closer Las Chinas, having just toiled up the Everest-steep slope in searing heat, the car parked a good



PERCHED: Castle in Vélez-Málaga (left) while (above) surfer enjoys shores of the Axarquía coast

kilometre down the road. The food didn't disappoint: a dorada as meaty as chicken, the whole three-course menu del día typically for the region, cheap as chips.

For something sweeter, head to the only sugar cane factory still functioning in Spain.

Still chugging out deliciously sticky molasses (treacle), the El Ingenio miel de caña factory operates from the magnificent 16th century Nuestra Señora del Carmen mansion in the heart of Frigiliana.

Delve deeper into its maze of

whitewashed alleyways - maybe after a restorative caña or two - and you can sense the pride here, with abuelas tending to their prize-winning geranium pots and not a scrap of rubbish blowing down the streets.

It's a recipe that's repeated across the hills of this region - fantastic food, incredible views, charming villages with Arabic ruins and just as friendly people - just ask the expats, who have set up in Sayalonga, Comares, Competa or Salobrena.

If you're not set on staying quite so rural, Vélez-Málaga the Axarquía's capital, which offers a faster pace and its own brand of charm.

On arriving, there's only one direction to go - and that's up!

From the ruined Moorish castle you can map the town with its busy roads, coffee shops and bars and a historic quarter typical of so many white hilltop villages embedded throughout a region that was once a jewel of Islam.

The route to the castle will

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take you to the Jardín de los Remedios, a park that sits parallel to the castle and overlooks a church with a spire that protrudes from the white-washed Lego-stacked houses below. With its streams, miradores and benches, the park is the perfect escape from the bustling centre, offering up fisheye views from the Med to the mountain tops. The statue of Jesus - Velez's answer to Rio de Janeiro's Christ the Redeemer - has the best panorama, watching over the action from his lofty perch next to the Ermita de la Virgen church. Head over to the castle and watchtower for a glimpse into the Moorish past which shaped the Axarquía region. Although parts of the building date back to the 10th century, its heyday came 400 years later, when it was one of a chain defending the mighty Arabic Nasrid Kingdom of Granada. The entire city played a part in subduing a notoriously turbulent zone, hence the old Moorish name for it: *Ballix-Malaca* - or Fortress of Malaga. With 1,500 metres of defensive walls and numerous solid turrets, the castle provided such

strong defence it was used in a military capacity right up to the 19th century. The mountain towns and villages of the Axarquía from Cometa to Comares and Archez to Algarrobo are full of signs of their Moorish past and olden days in general. Each has a wonderful crop of white houses stacked higgledy-piggledy around quaint plazas and along timeless cobbled streets. But no trip to the Axarquía is complete with seeing the charming Nerja. It's famous Balcón de Europa jutting out into the Med offers theatrical views while the popular town has managed to retain its Andalusian credentials and its rocky coves, sandy beaches and pueblo vibe are the envy of its more westerly Costa del Sol rivals. Nerja was left untouched by the massive tourism develop-

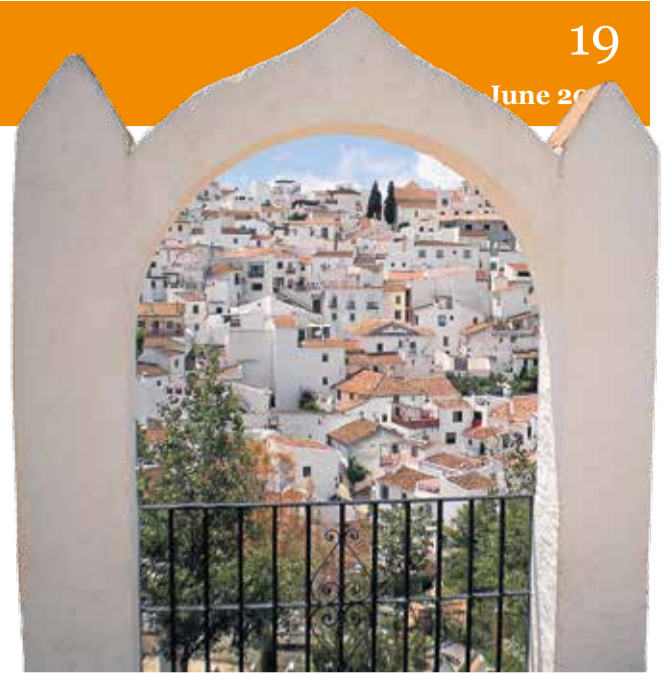
ment boom which hit the likes of Torremolinos and Marbella from the 1950s onwards. But that all changed when five boys on a bat-hunting trip stumbled upon the opening to a cave on a hillside above the tiny fishing village of Maro, a few miles east of Nerja. Vast caverns were revealed, with spectacular rock formations showing evidence of Palaeolithic man. General Franco himself came to view the 'Cueva de Nerja' and coach-loads of visitors subsequently followed suit. And when Nerja was chosen as a location for the 1980s TV series, *Verano Azul*, its future as a tourism destination was set. The series left an indelible mark. Now, wherever you go in Nerja, you'll come across the name, which means blue summer. There is a *Verano Azul* travel agency, bus company, park, block of apartments ... you may even

find a bar serving a *Verano Azul* cocktail.

But if you want to get away from it all - the disco bars, the tourist shops and the bustle - head for one of the small coves just below the town, or nearby in Maro. Nerja's beaches are cut off from the town and roads, backed by sheer cliff-face. You can sit on the sand for hours in solitude, lose track of time, without seeing a sign of civilisation, just coastline colliding with blue sea in both directions. It is just so un-Costa



FORTRESS: Roman aqueduct has survived to this day



UNEVEN: Higgledy piggledy streets are part of the appeal while (below) Salobrena castle is a crown of the Costa Tropical



B { } bou
HOTELS

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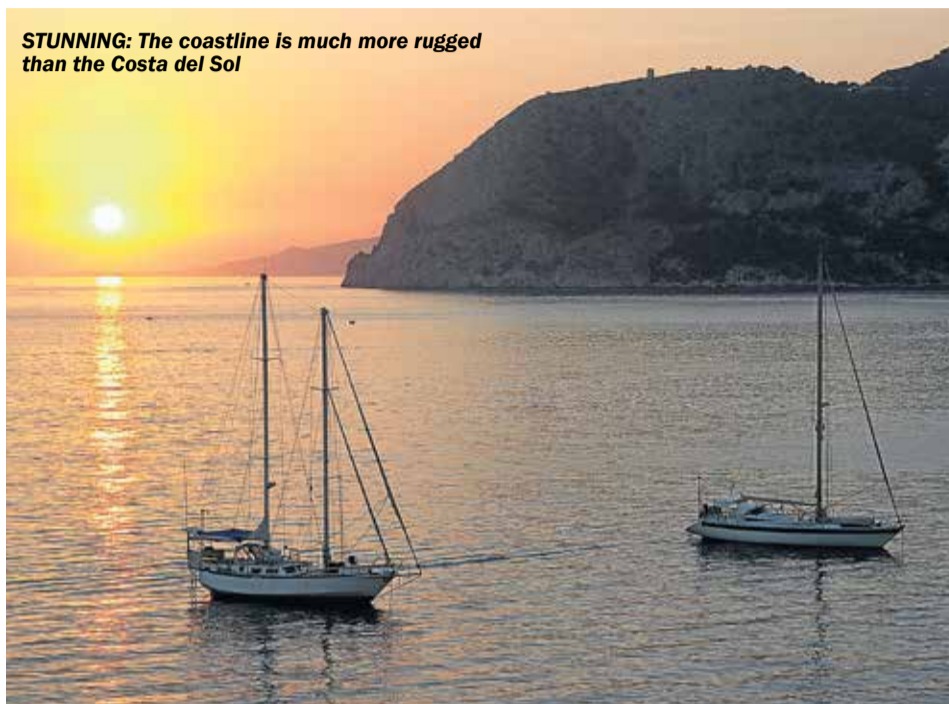
Magic of the Orient

The sugar-canes rattled like bones on the wind, and the dark-blue mountains stood close around, sharp and jagged, like a cordon of police'



SO wrote Laurie Lee of his first visit to the Costa Tropical, just before Spain was engulfed in its murderous civil war. Drive along the coast today and you can still appreciate his dramatic imagery. Once upon a time this stretch of the Mediterranean was dubbed the Costa del Sol Oriental. Then, believing that they were being sidelined by the rival resorts up the road in Malaga province, the folk in Granada province woke up. They decided to call their coast the Costa Tropical. And with good reason... not only does it play host to one of the best climates in Europe, it is also one of the most scenic stretches of coastline on the Med. To be exact, the Costa Tropical extends from the eastern edge of

STUNNING: The coastline is much more rugged than the Costa del Sol



Malaga province close to Nerja, to the frontier with Almería and La Rabita; some 80 kilometres of stunningly varied scenery. Development has yet to make heavy inroads because of the rugged terrain, so forget the miles of ribbon developments you see around Benalmadena and Fuen-

girola. It's unspoilt here. Soaring headlands and cliffs are interspersed with small coves, except where the Guadalfeo river flows across a flat, fertile delta near Motril. Here and there, on prominent headlands, ancient watchtowers guard the coast. These *torres vi-*

giá or *atalayas* are a reminder of the time when the cry "¡Hay moros en la costa!" warned of invaders from Africa and sent whole communities rushing for the hills. These days they are great to have a poke around and get a photo with the stunning backdrop of the mountains dropping into the sea.


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HISTORIC: The Costa Tropical is steeped in history, with centuries old buildings at every turn

The first village encountered heading east out of Nerja is La Herradura, on a beautiful horseshoe bay. Until tourism arrived it was one of the poorest villages on the coast. These days it's a charming spot, sitting on a pretty stretch of coastline and with an attractive low rise feel to it. Plenty of expensive homes dot the Punta de la Mona area, and include that of Spain's celebrated guitarist Andrés Segovia, who had a house here. Make sure to head into town to see the seafront monument that recalls Spain's biggest naval disaster. It occurred in 1562 when 28 ships carrying provisions and the families of soldiers from Málaga

laga to Orán on the African coast took refuge here from a storm. The wind turned, with extreme violence, trapping the fleet between two headlands, Cerro Gordo and Punta de la Mona. Altogether, an incredible 25 vessels sank leading to 5,000 people losing their lives. Moving along, we come to the other key resort of the Costa Tropical, Almuñécar. When Laurie Lee trekked across Spain in 1935 — vividly recorded in his book *As I Walked Out One*

Midsummer Morning — he came to a halt in 'Castillo', a village, 'backed by a bandsaw of mountains and fronted by a strip of grey sand which some hoped would be an attraction for tourists'. Castillo was in fact Almuñécar. Lee changed the name to protect his friends. Today modern apartment blocks line the coast here, but fortunately the old town, crowned by castle ramparts, has been preserved. It is an attractive labyrinth of narrow streets. While large

It attracts mainly Spanish visitors and retains its Spanish character

numbers of north Europeans visit in winter, it attracts mainly Spanish visitors and retains its Spanish character. Behind the town thousands of tropical fruit trees flourish in the sheltered Río Verde and Río Seco valleys. The unique micro-climate allows the growth of mangos, custard apples and avocados. Sadly though, 1000 years of sugar production on the southern coast of Spain came to an end in 2006 when the last *azucarera* (cane refinery) closed at nearby Salobreña. Few towns are as impressive on first sight as Salobreña. Its da-

Continues on Page 26

SMART MOVE



WHEN Mathilde Haalstra decided her team needed a new, higher profile office to service the Costa Tropical area, she thought big. Very big. Rather than look for something in the heart of town, or on an industrial estate, the boss of Villas Colores Spain decided to buy an entire building. The fact that it was a hotel - perhaps the best in Salobreña - was an added bonus. Now Hotel Miba on the main road above the stunning resort doubles up as her company's new base, as well as a totally new business opportunity for the ambitious Dutch businesswoman. "I realised it was a win-win straight away," she explains. "Our last office had no window space for our properties to rent or sell and it was also out of the way." She has spent the last six months improving the menu, decor and quality of the rooms at the hotel, but still has plenty more ideas for the summer ahead.

It also serves as the perfect reception area for clients of the two dozen holiday villas her team rent out on the Costa Tropical, as well as house-hunters visiting the area. "And looking after hotel clients is the same as with the villas," she adds. "It's all about attention to detail and good service." Haalstra moved to Spain from Holland, where she ran a busy town hall, three years ago. Since then she has turned Villas Colores into one of the leading rental companies on the Costa Tropical. All the villas are carefully managed by the office and cleaning team of 20. "We don't just rent them, we make sure they are carefully managed and run to perfection," explains the mother-of-three from Utrecht. "In summer they get fully booked but in the winter and spring they are perfect for holidaymakers looking to be near the beach, golf courses as well as the ski slopes. Granada and Malaga are both less than an hour away."

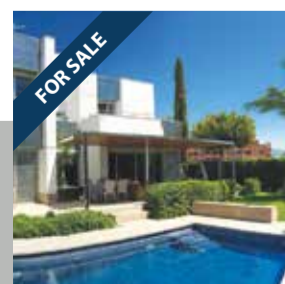
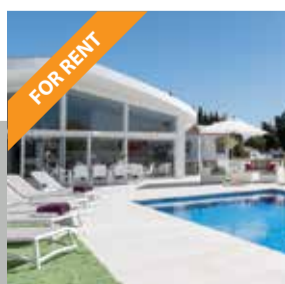
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Going to the Tropics

From Page 25

zzling white houses, topped by ancient ramparts, clothe a huge rock rising steeply from flat farmland. A long sandy beach, split by a large rock (reminiscent of a basking whale), juts into the sea. Nearby is Motril, the bustling administrative centre of the Costa Tropical. It was known in the 18th and 19th centuries as 'Little Cuba' because of the importance of its sugar production. Rum is still being produced in the area on a small scale. You can buy Ron Pálido in local shops. It comes from the surviving distillery, run by Paco Montero.

Since the decline of that industry last century, Motril has opted for tourism. It's worth paying a visit to the Parque de los Pueblos de América, which claims to be the most important tropical botanic garden in Europe, with 36 botanic species imported from the Americas, including coconut palms, jacarandas, magnolias. Meanwhile, learn all about sugar cane production at the Centro de Interpretación at this park. And you can gain a



fascinating insight into the rise and fall of Motril's sugar industry at the Museo Pre Industrial del Azúcar, in the El Ingenio de la Palma.

Inland from here you will find the motorway to Granada city and a short drive inland you will come to some spectacular mountain scenery, dotted with sleepy villages including charming Velez de Benaudalla (right)

You must visit Lecrín valley, or the Valley of Happiness as it was known to the Moors. This is a pleasant, slow-paced corner of Granada province where comedian Alexei Sayle has a home. Seismic movements and erosion have gouged deep ravines and soaring cliffs out of these foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Towering over the valley is the Cerro del Caballo, 3,013 metres high. In winter it is often capped with snow while in the sheltered valley be-

low oranges and lemons flourish. If you head east of Motril on the Almería road the coast loses some of its charm. The beaches, backed by steep rocky slopes, tend to be grey and gritty. New farming methods have enhanced local incomes but not the scenery. Terraces have been hacked out of the hillsides and shrouded in plastic to allow intensive crop production. Guaranteed sunshine and sophisticated irrigation methods produce crops from once-barren terrain. Hemmed in by greenhouses, Castell de Ferro has grown into a minor tourist resort, with mainly Spanish visitors. Breakwaters protect the beaches here and at tiny La Mamola, which has acqui-

red a promenade. It attracts summer vacationers and apartment blocks have sprung up. If you are seeking a tranquil hideaway, this could be the ideal spot.

Backed by arid, bleak mountains, La Rábida (population around 1,500) has spruced up its seafront and boasts a handsome promenade bordered by palm trees. The name comes from rábitas, fortifications built by the Moors as military-religious sanctuaries. Instead of continuing east into Almería province, turn left and head up into the mountains.

Soon you reach La Contraviesa, a bleak, largely uninhabited range of beautiful mountains.

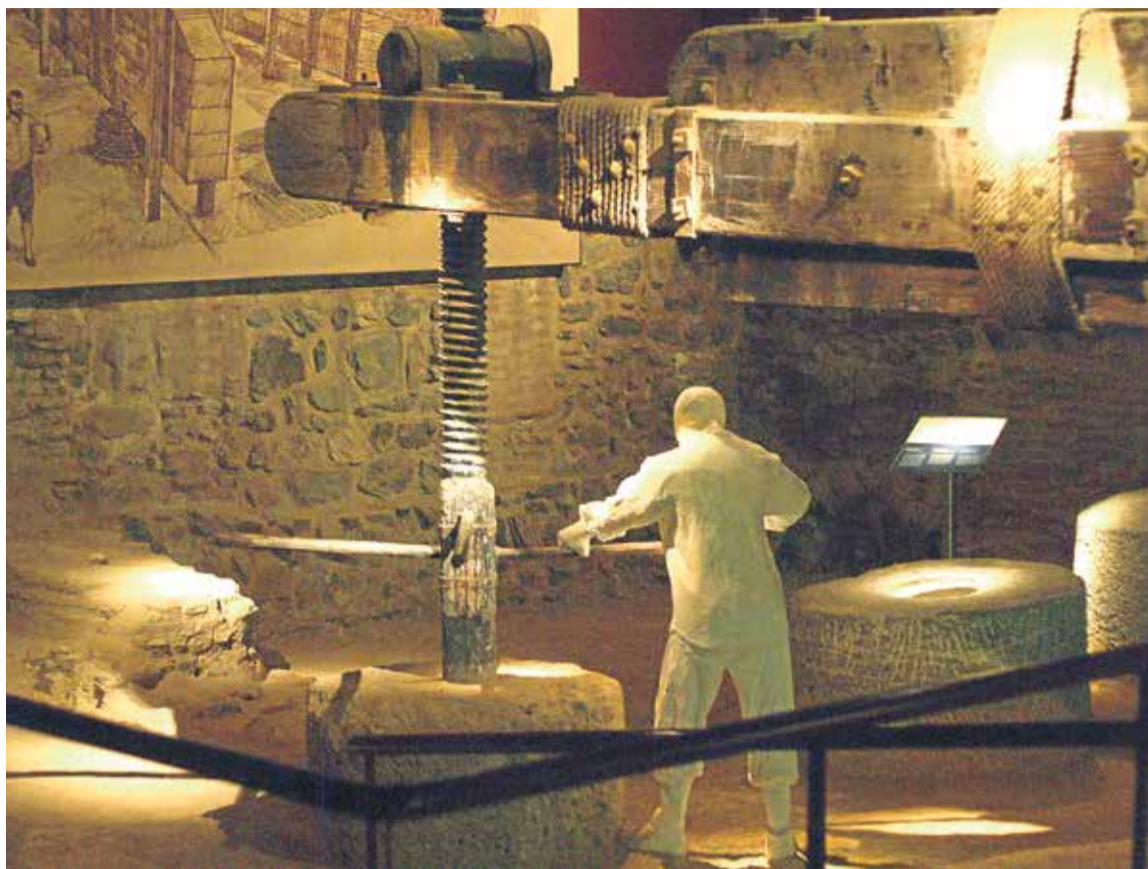
From its upper reaches, rising as high as 1,800 metres, you look across the deep Guadalfeo valley to the villages dotting the Alpujarras, as the area on the southern slopes of the Sierra Nevada is known.

The panorama is particularly spectacular in spring when the almond blossom contrasts with the distant snow-capped mountains.

A traditional part of meals along the coast and in the Alpujarras is the VINO de la Contraviesa, a hearty rosado. Until recently the region's wines never rated much attention from connoisseurs. Today, however, half a dozen bodegas are making serious attempts to produce quality vintages by introducing new grape varieties and modernising their methods and making some fine reds and whites.

Conditions are unique, as the Tempranillo, Garnacha, Cabernet Sauvignon and native vines are wafted by breezes from both the Sierra Nevada and the Mediterranean. Definitely worth a little exploration.

David Baird is the author of the best-selling East of Malaga - Your guide to the Axarquia and Costa Tropical. He has lived in the area for decades and also written about the infamous rebels who fought on against Franco after the civil war in his book Between Two Fires - Guerrilla war in the Spanish sierras, much of it based in the Costa Tropical.



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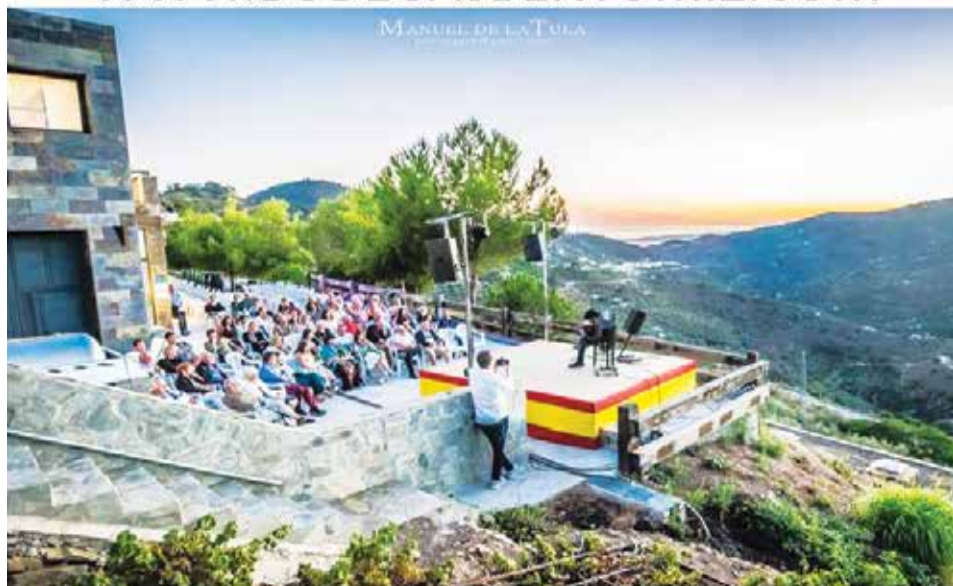
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Q: What has Nerja got to do with TRIVIAL PURSUIT ?

A: It invented it

It is possibly the most successful board game of all time, with over 100 million units sold in 26 countries and in at least 20 languages... and it was born in the Axarquia.

It happened after two young Canadian journalists stayed in Nerja in the winter of 1980, having quit their jobs to work on the game and persuade investors to part with their money. Chris Haney, a high-school dropout, had been working as a picture editor in Montreal while his friend David Abbott was a sportswriter.

The pair lived at El Capistrano, a villa resort where Haney's parents had a house, and they allegedly worked 16 hours a day thinking up questions for their game - fuelled by San Miguel. And lots of it.

But while they enjoyed the paella, the beer and strolls along the Balcon de Europa, they struggled to find investors for 'Six Thousand Questions', as it was originally called.

Just one Nerja resident decided to invest, a Canadian barman. He is now a millionaire.

The game went unnoticed for two years. They lost money on every copy they sold and it looked to be a disaster. But then once the first cheques started rolling in they never stopped.

Within months it was selling by the million and in 1984, Time magazine called it 'the biggest phenomenon in game history'.

And it is still incredibly popular, with Nerja's first Trivial Pursuit tournament currently being planned for this year.



To the Moors' last stand!

One of Andalucia's most rewarding mountain adventures lies in wait among the olive trees, inland from Nerja, writes Guy Hunter Watts

TOWERING to almost 1000m the rugged massif of El Fuerte provides a stunning backdrop to the pretty village of Frigiliana, just inland from Nerja. The mountain played a dramatic role in the region's history at the time of the last Morisco uprisings.

The Moslems who stayed on after the Reconquest knew they were living on borrowed time yet were loathe to abandon this exquisite swathe of Al Andalus.

Taking refuge atop the rocky pinnacle of El Fuerte their last stand against de Zuarzo's Christian troops is one of the most evocative incidents of the Morisco rebellion.

When you get to the top of this dramatic pinnacle of rock you'll appreciate why they chose the mountain as a last refuge.

The Route

The walk begins in Frigiliana in the square at the entrance of the village, La Plaza del Ingenio next to a round hut containing a puppet

theatre. From here head up the cobbled road beneath El Ingenio passing a row of ceramic plaques. Continue along Calle Real then opposite house no.9A cut right up a cobbled staircase at a sign Barrio Morisco-Mudéjar. At house no.13 pass beneath an arch then bear right at a sign Panoramicas. Reaching the fabulous Garden Restaurant the

path divides. Carry straight ahead passing above the restaurant. After 100m the path narrows then loops steeply upwards. Reaching a tiled bench head straight on following a sign El Castillo. You pass several sculptures, the work of a resident expat.

Zigzagging higher you will love the views across the village and east towards the

Higuerón valley. Climbing through a swathe of young pines you pass a dilapidated mirador. Passing a second mirador you reach a bluff from where you'll see a large water tank down to the left.

Cut left on a narrow path which zigzags down to a track (15mins) where, angling right, head past the water tank then cut right up a cobbled staircase that passes a mill then zigzags up to a pylon. Here bear left. After climbing steeply the path angles left into a group of pines, descends for a few metres, then resumes its ascent. The trees thin out as views open out towards the Mediterranean. The path runs on towards the northwest, parallel to a ridge which is now to your right. Bearing right it climbs more steeply as views briefly open out to the north. Soon the path adopts its former course to the left of the ridge before passing an old calera (glossary) (55mins) then runs on towards the towering massif of El Fuerte. Passing through a breach in the rocks angle left then continue to the summit of El Fuerte (976m) where you reach a trig point and a sign Fin de Sendero (1hr 40 mins). Return by the same route back to the start point of the walk (3hrs).

OVERVIEW

This is a relatively easy and emblematic walk, taking up to three hours. The path that leads up from Frigiliana is well marked and easy to follow even if you have some 650m of fairly steep climbing to negotiate. But the extraordinary panorama that awaits at the top more than justifies the effort. Returning by the same route is just as much of a treat: the vast views along the way make this itinerary an absolute must-walk.

SITTING PRETTY:
Guy Hunter Watts at the top



AT THE TOP YOU APPRECIATE WHY THEY CHOSE THE MOUNTAIN AS A LAST REFUGE

Reaching the fabulous Garden Restaurant the path divides

The Nitty Gritty

Starting point: La Plaza del Ingenio at the entrance to Frigiliana
Grade: Medium
Distance: 8.5kms
Time: 3hrs
Total Ascent/Descent: 730m



BIRDS EYE VIEW: Of Frigiliana

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Don't be warded off by the 'phantom'

It is easily the most popular tourist attraction in the Axarquia and it is little surprise that Nerja's cave pulls in thousands by the day.

While some describe them as over-commercialised and not worth the money, the caves are in fact some of Europe's finest.

Despite enormous crowds at peak times, within seconds of descending the stairs you are in an extraordinary place, worlds away from Nerja and the sunny coast.

A marvelous glistening underworld of stalactites and stalagmites, sprouting and dripping into weird and wonderful formations, with each flight of stone steps the eerie caverns get more impressive.

The 'phantom hall' in particular – so called because of the ghoul-like appearance of its structures – is astounding.

The vast caves also boast the world's largest stalagmite; a 32 metre high column verified by the Guinness book of world records no less. And there is a campaign currently underway to get the caves officially recognised by UNESCO as a world heritage site.

The site was allegedly discovered by five local lads in 1959, when they went hunting for bats. After dislodging a couple of stalactites they were able to descend into a huge cavern where they found skeletons and ceramic pottery. The caves were officially opened to the public in the summer of 1960.

No tropical downpour can dampen the delights of Motril and Almuñecar, towns with different pasts whose Costa Tropical location makes them siblings under the skin, writes Laurence Dollimore

COSTA 'Tropical' it certainly was. Searing summer temperatures seemed to arrive early for the one day I chose to visit Almuñecar, one of the most important tourist towns in the province of Granada. But no time for complain-

ing, I headed to lively seafront eatery Mar de Plata, where four glasses of wine, two soft drinks and an oversized tapas of hearty Irish stew came in at just €12.

It's one of many food bargains you'll find in this ancient town, where tapas is often provided free of charge with every drink - not something you would see in the likes of Marbella,

where one drink alone can cost the equivalent of my entire lunch bill.

After a short sprint back to the hotel, it wasn't long before tums were rumbling again.

It was off to Da Nicola's pizzeria, owned by friendly British expat Nigel, who moved to the seaside village 12 years ago after more than 20 years in Lanzarote.

"Life is just so much more tranquil here," he told me, "there's a great international community too, mostly British, Swedish and German."

The businessman set up his restaurant just over two years ago.

"People move here for a relaxed way of life and they definitely get that, it's not as chaotic as the Costa del Sol but there's still a nice buzz about the place, especially in summer."

An hour's drive from Benalmadena, Almuñecar is more famously known as an important setting in British author Laurie Lee's account of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. His book - *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning* - referred to the town as 'Cas-

Sister



PICTURESQUE: One of the many beautiful historic buildings in Motril

tillo', in an attempt to disguise people's identities.

But Almuñecar's history goes much deeper than the Civil War.

It was originally called Sexi when it was founded as a colony by the Phoenicians around 800 BC - a fact not lost on some residents today, who still refer to themselves as *Sexitanos*.

Over the next 600 years it would become an important port and town with a large fish salting and curing industry that was a major supplier to Greece and Rome. The Romans took over the town during war with the Phoenicians in 218 BC.

Almuñecar thrived and was recognised for its loyalty to Rome in 49 BC thanks to its fishy forte.

Evidence of this was uncovered during excavations in the Majuelo Botanical Gardens in the 1980s, a large section of which is still on display. As they needed huge

amounts of fish and sea salt and a constant supply of fresh running water, the Romans built more than 8 km of water conduits in the valleys of the Rio Seco and the Rio Verde in 1 AD, including five significant aqueducts.

They are all still standing and amazingly, after 2,000 years, four of them are still in use. The Roman water supply also served the town and recent excavations in the centre uncovered the fifth aqueduct and a Roman baths.

You can see the most impressive aqueduct (top) just a three-minute drive from the centre of town.

The Romans are believed to have been the first to fortify the Castle of Saint Miguel, although frequent rebuilding has destroyed most of its very extensive fortifications.

Just below the castle on the landward side is the Cueva de Siete Palacios, although it is less a cave and more the largest remnant of a Roman palace yet found in Almuñecar.

It survived for hundreds of years as 'social housing' until the 'cave dwellers' were



STRONG FOUNDATIONS: Roman water system in Almuñecar still stands today



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WHAT A VIEW: You can see from the coastline to the snowy mountains from the Castillo de San Miguel

act



the time on the very few rainy days here.

In summer, you can head to one of over a dozen beaches that play host to thousands of tourists every year.

And if you're looking for more of a city vibe, drive 20 minutes east to Motril, Granada's second biggest town and the capital of its coast.

Here you'll find great food at great prices, and of course, the legendary free tapa per drink.

Once the sugar refinery capital of Andalusia and, arguably, Spain there are still eight old sugar refineries standing tall today.

They were once seen as the future of the city, now they are legacies.

The Nuestra Señora de la Cabeza is another vestige of the town's commercial heritage. Both a refinery and a distillery, it sits next to the public swimming pool and the Parque de las Américas.

It was founded by the Larios gin family in 1885 but due to the low salaries paid, the workers tried to burn it down.

The town hall also wanted rid of it but the Junta disagreed and has declared it a property of historical heritage to protect its distillery, chimney, store and terrrain.

Study the his-

tory of gin

or drink it

and get

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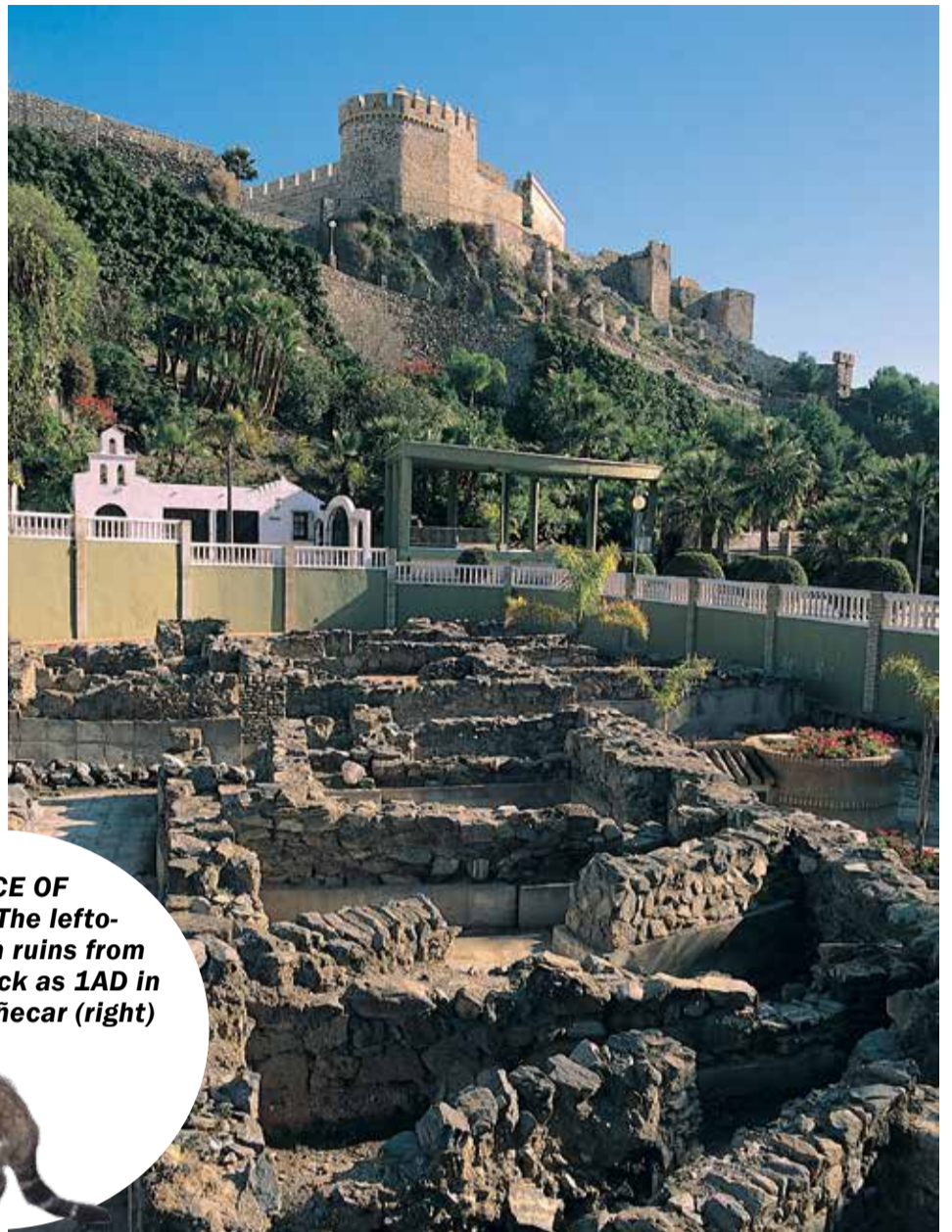
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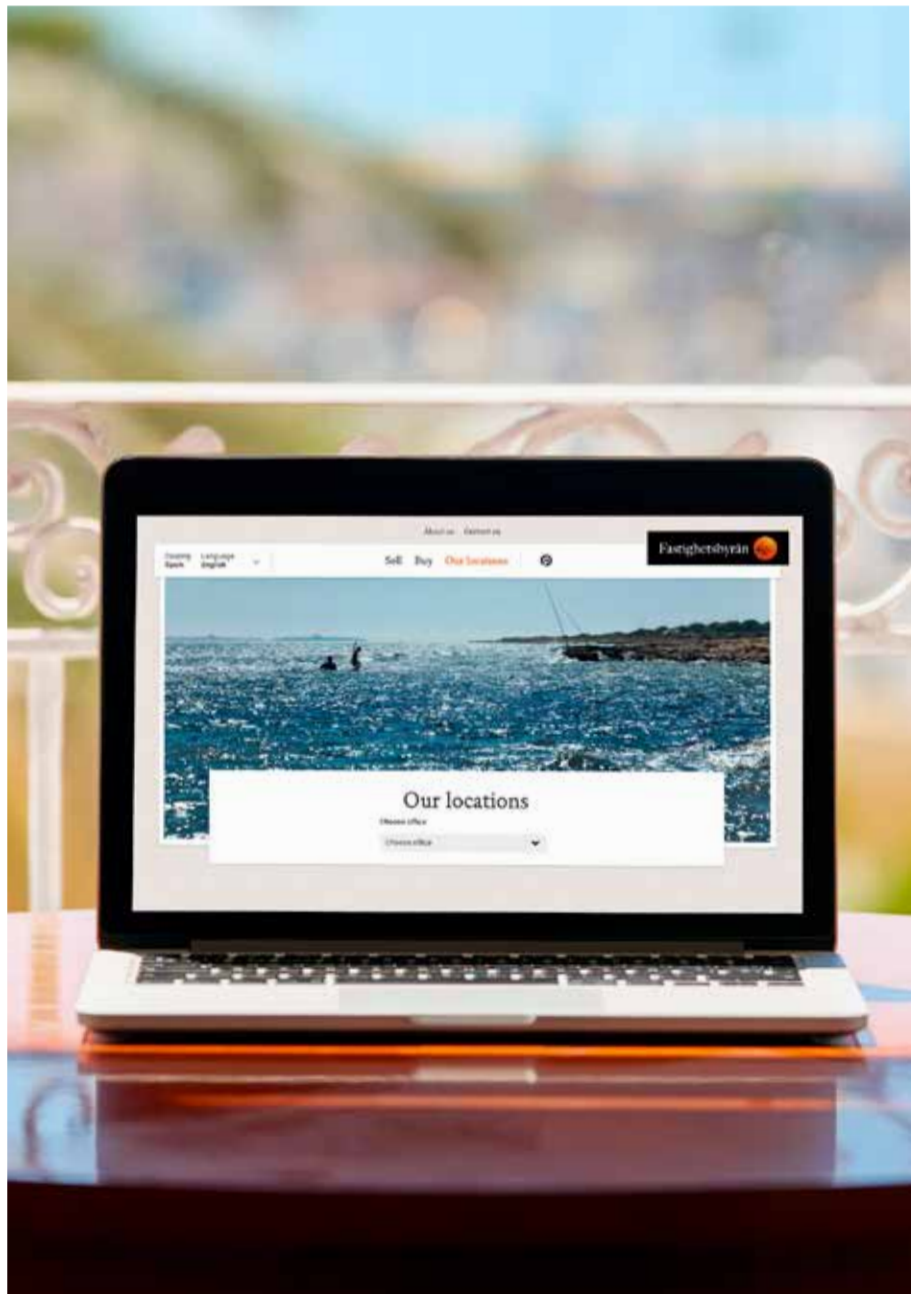
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A SLICE OF HISTORY: The left-
over Roman ruins from
as far back as 1AD in
Almuñecar (right)



re-housed in the 1970s. Only then did its true origins become apparent and it now houses the town museum. It means there is lots to do and see if you need to pass



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One-eyed bandit!

David Baird follows in the footsteps of the bandoleros, who made the Axarquia infamous

ABOUT the biggest hazard you will meet on the back roads of the Axarquia is a herd of goats, a lorry overloaded with farm produce or a hostelry inviting you to dally for a lazy hour or so. But it was not always so. *Bandoleros* – or bandits – were once a major feature of life in this area. Colourful types though they were, it did not make the experience of having your valuables purloined at the point of a blunderbuss any pleasanter. In the years following the Napoleonic Wars, so lawless were the roads that the English writer Richard Ford advised travellers to bring along 'a decent bag of dollars' to appease any highwaymen you might meet. He also suggested carrying an impressive-looking watch, noting: "The absence of a watch can only be accounted for by a premeditated intention of not being robbed of it, which the *ladron* considers as a most unjustifiable attempt to defraud him of his right." One of the most notorious



19th-century bandits was *El Bizco* (the one-eyed bandit). They remember him in his birthplace, El Borge. Take a ride up there and witness how the landscape becomes steeply undulating, clothed in olive groves and vineyards.

Several streets are named after revolutionary heroes such as Che Guevara, the legacy of a leftwing, anti-monarchy mayor who often made headlines with his controversial decisions. The Mudejar-Renaissance Rosario church is impressive, with immense pillars supporting its three naves. Look for two holes in the weather-vane atop the church. They were allegedly made by *El Bizco's* shotgun. The vane had never worked but – after he blasted away – it functioned perfectly. Otherwise *El Bizco's* record is pretty gruesome. With his comrades in crime, Frasco Antonio and Manuel Melgares, he terrorised the whole area. At times, these cut-throats were used by unscrupulous 'caciques', powerful land-owners, to sway local election results. Wander down a maze of narrow streets and at the bottom end of the village you find the olive mill where *El Bizco* was born. It has been converted into the Posada del Bandolero, combining an attractive hotel, restaurant and museum. At the side of the bar you can see the original mill-stones and a deep well. *El Bizco's* chum, Melgares, meanwhile is said to have committed one of his most daring crimes in Frigiliana (six kilometres inland from Nerja). Disguised as a priest, he entered the *Ingenio*, the mansion owned by the Counts of Frigiliana, pointed a pistol at the manager and made off with around 100,000 pesetas. Today the *Ingenio* houses the last

factory in Europe producing *miel de caña* (molasses), on sale in local shops.

Frigiliana was a flash point in the 1940s when anti-Franco guerrillas based in the adjacent sierras sought to provoke a general revolt. In a bid to discredit them, Franco's tightly controlled media labelled them '*bandoleros*'. If you hike into the mountains with their abrupt inclines and deep gorges riddled with caves, you can see how difficult it was for the Civil Guards to track the guerrillas. High up, near a pass called the Puerto de Frigiliana, lie the ruins of the Venta Panaderos. Once this inn was a welcome rest stop for muleteers en route to Granada and a meeting place of footpads, smugglers, guerrillas – and Civil Guards. Locals tell anecdotes about how the guards would suddenly arrive,

El Tempranillo's claim was: "In Spain the king rules, but in the sierra I do"

tale to tell about smugglers or bandits. Such as Benamargosa, up a well-watered valley northwest of Vélez-Málaga. A couple of centuries back it was dubbed *Gibraltar Chico* (Little Gibraltar) because the inhabitants were renowned as smugglers, particularly of tobacco.

These days Benamargosa likes to think of itself as the Oasis of the Axarquia. The sheltered environment and benign climate allow tropical fruits such as mangoes and avocados to flourish on the fertile lands bordering its river. Perhaps most famous for its association with the lawless past is a lonely inn standing on a crossroads at one of the highest points of the Axarquia.

To reach it, you take the old road from Málaga to Granada, the A6103. It weaves its way through the forested Montes de Málaga then past limestone crags to the Venta de Alfarnate.

First opened in 1691, this inn, standing beneath the rocky but-tress of the Tajo de Gomer, claims to be the oldest in Andalucía. At weekends it is crowded as '*domingueros*' (trippers) tuck into roast kid, partridge and pork.

In the past all manner of travellers stopped here. A plaque notes: "In this Venta on April 21 1850 the Mail on the way to Málaga was stolen by a group of 12 armed men. The bandits took particular care to seize a packet of Government prosecutions and criminal lawsuits coming from the Granada chancery." On one occasion in the 19th century, a horseman rode up as the customers were tucking into gazpacho from a common bowl. Told there were no spoons left, he used the crust of a loaf to scoop up the cold soup – then produced a pistol. "Now," he commanded, "do the same as I do. Eat your spoons!"



CAPTURED: Infamous bandit El Tempranillo was finally captured and kept at Venta de Alfarnate (below)



They recognised him as El Tempranillo, Andalucía's most notorious bandolero, whose claim was: "In Spain the king rules, but in the sierra I do." They were forced to chew their wooden spoons.

On other occasions, El Tempranillo was more gallant. Always courteous, if he stripped a lady of her best jewellery, he would kiss her hand and assure her: "Such a pretty hand needs no adornment."

Truth to tell, those bandits were hardly a bunch of Robin Hoods. Most would have robbed their own grandmothers given the chance. But time has cast a romantic aura over them, popular mythology has embroidered their characters and their memories have been enshrined in everything from museums to the names of gourmet dishes.

Ford maintained that travellers often exaggerated the bandit peril. When he inquired about thieves, "according to all sensible Spaniards, it was not on the road that they were most likely to be found, but in the confessional boxes, the lawyers' offices, and still more in the bureaux of government."

Bless my soul – some things don't change. **Learn more about the outlaws in Francisco Montoro Fernández's book *Bandoleros de la Axarquia* (Acento Andaluz). David Baird is the author of *East of Malaga* (Santana Books), the definitive guide to the Axarquia, as well as *Sunny Side Up – The 21st century hits a Spanish village* and *Typhoon Season*. These are distributed by Maroma Press (<http://maromapress.wordpress.com/>).**



RUINED: An old mill in the Rio de la Miel valley once used by smugglers



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THEY say it's easy to sell something you love. And for the team at Edwards Estates, the only established property agents in Frigiliana, it's never been easier.

The small and friendly team of four all live in the charming village, which sits just 10 minutes in the hills above Nerja and the Costa del Sol.

"It's an absolutely lovely place to live with great bars, restaurants and a busy events calendar," enthuses boss Scott Edwards, who set up shop in the town six years ago.

"We're proud to live here and love it which makes it easy to sell."

And the proof is in the pud-

EASY, PEASY!

Why the friendly team at Edwards Estates find selling in Frigiliana a breeze

ding, with the company leading the sales in the area, which include Frigiliana pueblo and all the surrounding countryside.

"We sell to such a wide range of clients...the British, Dutch and Danish and from as far away as Canada," reveals Scott, who created the com-

pany with his father some 11 years ago.

"We are genuine specialists in the area and have more than 30 years of real estate experience between us, while our agents speak Spanish, English and Dutch."

The company has properties to suit every need, from modern apartments to countryside properties and more recently new developments.

Scott, who's father Robert worked in property in Nerja from the 1980s, adds: "We're small in number, but large when it comes to friendliness."

"We're proud of our success rate at matching people with properties and we see daily many of our past happy customers, whose lives have changed for the better since they first made contact with us and moved to this special area of Spain."

If you're wary about buying in Spain, Edward's Estates will be



FRIENDLY: The A-Team at Edwards Estates

on hand to guide you through the often tricky and daunting processes.

That includes introducing you to trusted local lawyers and notaries and offering advice on opening a Spanish bank

account.

The team will also help you obtain the necessary legal documentation to purchase your home.



JAW-DROPPING: Aerial shot of Frigiliana

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- Panoramic Sea & Countryside Views
- Build Size 120m2, Plot 10,500m2



Property Reference: FR528
Price: 485,000€

It really is all about the location, at the stunning award-winning holiday property complex overlooking lake Viñuela

BELIEVE THE HYPE

It is certainly corny to use 'location, location, location' in a property description, but one exception must surely be this unusual complex in the Axarquia, which has just come up for sale. There are ten cottages and a restaurant complex, overlooking the reservoir of Lake Viñuela, with its turquoise waters and stunning views. Cantueso is a holiday destination that has over the last 12 years developed a reputation for its cosy cottages and family friendly facilities. The *Guardian* newspaper has listed it in its top ten European self-catering family holiday destinations. And for those days when mum doesn't want to

cook, there is an on-site restaurant which has been number one on Tripadvisor for many years. The landscaped gardens surrounding the cottages are admired for their colourful diversity throughout the year, and visitors love to pick figs, oranges, or a lemon to go in their gin and tonic. There are also interesting plants and shrubs such as the Coral Tree, Pineapple Guava, Kumquats and of course the ubiquitous olive. The site has been developed very much with children in mind and all the cottages have individual terraces and the large pool is securely fenced with self-closing gates. The swing park, football field, mini golf course and trampoline provide lots for active youngsters, and babies and younger children are not forgotten with a host of items available to make travelling families' lives easier. Not least, having large items such as buggies available can save costly excess baggage fees, and the Cantueso policy of allowing arrival and departure to be on any day, can lead to cheaper air fares. Make sure to visit our website www.cantueso.net, as it not only describes the cottages and restaurant in great detail, but also has masses of tourist



information, excellent photographs and videos of the complex and surrounding area.

There is an associated blog which regularly adds items of current interest, and a live webcam overlooking the lake which attracts thousands of hits each week. Nearby Periana village, which sits at 450m above sea level, is surrounded on three sides by mountains and has lake views to the south. Just under an hour from Málaga airport it attracts nature lovers, photographers, cyclists and

walkers who enjoy the subtropical climate and marvel at the myriad of springtime wildflowers. In summer there is often a welcome breeze with thermal currents over the lake attracting eagles and other birds of prey. Although the village only has 3,500 inhabitants they certainly know how to enjoy life, and throughout the year there are many fiestas and events, some which last several days! Only for sale due to personal reasons, in total the site covers about 18,000 sq m and has ample scope for further development.



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- Beautiful holiday location
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Cost of the freehold and business: 2,500,000€

Holiday Complex FOR SALE

An unusual commercial opportunity to buy the freehold and business of a well established family friendly holiday complex (in Andalucía, comprising ten self catering cottages, a restaurant (rated number one in area) with 50 covers inside and 50 outside, and owner's apartment.

The whole site is tastefully landscaped with an area of over 18,000 m² and is surrounded by olive groves. There are wonderful views to the south over Lake Viñuela and mountain ranges on other aspects.



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WHERE TO EAT



Creative cuisine has finally started to revolutionise the Axarquía and Costa Tropical's dining scene, writes Jon Clarke



POLE POSITION: Restaurant el Penon overlooks Salobrena

MOUNTAINS OF CHOICE

THE Axarquía and the Costa Tropical are slowly developing a varied dining culture after decades of meatballs and goat stew.

Led by a string of outsiders, many of them expats, a drive towards experimentation has seen a growth of creative cuisine.

In Nerja there is a great melting pot of places to eat, with one of the best being **Carabeo**, whose setting could not be improved sitting on desirable Calle Carabeo overlooking the sea.

Up in the nearby village of Frigiliana you would be mad to miss the amazing **Garden** restaurant, which consistently produces some of the freshest, most varied (read spicy and original) food in the Axarquía (see next page).

A varied menu with plenty of original dishes it sits in a lovely back street with the best views in the entire region.

Possibly the best food in inland Axarquía is to be found at **Hotel Vinuela**, which has got better and better since opening 20 years ago.

Combining a great mix of local ingredients and creative Mediterranean cuisine, you will not be disappointed.

The menu is detailed and includes such joys as *rabo de toro* spring rolls with lettuce hearts, as well as an excellent cress



salad with cured beef and foie shavings.

There is even a Moroccan tagine as a main course, while fresh fish is always on offer.

In good weather you dine outdoors overlooking the lake reminiscent of the Days of the Raj, and it is no surprise that the King is said to have eaten here.

Also close to the Vinuela lake you will find the unusual boutique hotel/restaurant **Las Orquideas**, with one of the best backdrops in Spain, overlooking Vinuela Lake and Maroma mountain.

Not far away in the charming village of Archez, you will find one of the most alluring new restaurants in the region.

Called **Meson Mudéjar**, it was recently taken over by a Polish couple, who have turned it into a Vegan restaurant with rooms. A charming spot in the extreme, you sit and take an early evening drink in one of the sleepest town squares imaginable, alongside one of the Axarquía's most evocative church towers, which was built in Arabic times.

The meson itself sits around a charming cobbled patio and counts on its original beams, old doors and windows and numerous other features.

The menu is varied and interesting, particularly for a carnivore like me.

Continues on Page 30



VARIETY: On the terrace at Hotel Vinuela and (above) stunning La Sardina in La Herradura

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WHERE TO EAT



ORIGINAL: New vegan joint Meson Mudejar



Spicy mix

From Page 29

I wasn't sure what to go for but was steered to the delicious spicy onion fritters, as well as the cauliflower wings, and raw sushi rolls, which had carrots, nori seaweed, leeks and cashew nuts all rolled in courgette slices.

A light vegetable curry was splendid, while a 'Beyond meat' burger from California was a surprise indeed, having zero meat but plenty of flavour.

In Competa, try the highly rated **El Pilon**, which is very much the stand-out restaurant in the town. A popular social hive, the bar area is great for tapas, while the restaurant itself is a must try.

Close by is the wonderful **Bentomiz** restaurant, sitting in the same name vineyard, in Sayalonga, which has won international awards for its wines for a decade.

Mixing its wines in a fabulous food pairings, this is one hell of a place for lunch, with incredible views and stylish flourishes to boot.

Up in Comares there is a



STUNNING: Both the winemaking skills of Clava and cooking of Andre impresses at Bodega Bentomiz

good variety of places to eat, including **Atalaya**, where you can also stay the night. Finally, another excellent inland place is **Cantueso**, which has been serving the Periana area for over a decade.

A holiday complex, rated by the Guardian as within the Top Ten best in Europe, the restaurant is normally full at lunch and frequently busy at night.

Costa Tropical restaurants

There is a big mix of good places to eat on the Costa Tropical as well.

By far the most emblematic must be legendary **Restaurante el Penon**, which sits in pole position literally built on the famous rock below Salobrena town.

I've eaten here on various occasions over the last two decades and rarely been disappointed, not just with the excellent ambience and views, but also by the service.

Professionally run, by two local friends, it focuses on top quality fish and seafood, including lobsters, and has an excellent wine list to boot.

Next door is **Restaurante**

La Bahia, which is anything but your usual fried fish affair, and apart from the cool jazz music, there were a number of interesting dishes.

These included the so-called 'queda bien', a clam and langoustine stew, which was delicious, as well as an excellent value rich and creamy fish soup at just €6.

Another place worth checking out here is **Hotel Miba** above the town, where the menu keeps getting better and better, since it was taken over by the new owners from **Villas Colores**.

Another place in Salobrena is **Arais** which is the creation of Francisco 'Paco' Izquierdo, an ambitious chap, who has not only cooked since his teens, but also makes his own rum, from a factory in the town.

Dubbing his food as 'an adventure' his place is certainly well out of the ordinary. Beautifully decorated, it is split into two parts, a bustling bar area, full of creative furniture and lighting, and a stylish dining room next door. Up in La Herradura look out wonderful beach restaurant **La Sardina**, which has a splendid setting and excellent staff.

The fish was incredibly fresh as was the seafood and the

owner, now well into his 70s, is regularly about bossing the team.

Also look out for English chef Mark Parris at **No.20**, who along with business partner Laurent Hue is doing a great job.

Mark, from Kent, has considerable pedigree in the kitchen, having trained under Albert Roux at Le Gavroche in London, before doing stints at the Oxo Tower, Harvey Nichols and Souffle.

I was very impressed with the attention to detail and the lovely mix of flavours in original starters, which came (sort of) in combos.

Just up the road a great bar to hang out in and grab some tapas and a decent range of beers is **Hideaway**.

Finally for a charming inland spot look out for **el Nacimiento**, in Velez de Benaudalla.

This is one trip well worth the journey, particularly to take in the Museum of Olive Oil, en route.

Hidden up a tiny track on the edge of the village, you will find this charming spot beside a roaring stream and waterfall.

Once an olive mill, it is a great place for lunch or dinner and the menu is a good range of dishes typical from the Granada region.

A comp dream



WITH stunning views across emblematic Vinuela lake and up towards the formidable peak of Mount Maroma, **Hotel Vinuela** is one of the most scenic places to stay in Andalucia.

With stylish bedrooms, an amazing restaurant and peaceful grounds, it is hardly surprising that it is already the stand out place to stay in the Axarquia.

Now 20 years old, this four-star spot has the region's most exclusive spa and massage centre.

Set in the hotel's grounds with views across the lake, the Mei Wellness & Spa is a new concept in exclusive well-being therapy.

Perfect for individuals or for couples, the spa - which counts on a jacuzzi, sauna and hammam - is rented out privately by the hour.

"You will experience feelings of complete serenity and harmony: a unique and unparalleled experience that you will never forget," promises hotel manager Maria Herrero, of the B Bou chain.

The company has also recently taken over another amazing hotel **Cortijo Bravo** nearer the coast near Velez-Malaga.

This wonderful place was once one of the homes of the Larios family, who grew sugar cane for their rum factories along the coast.

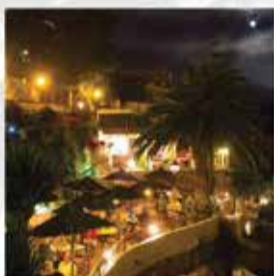
The converted mansion is style personified and each room offers lovely views inland towards the mountains or along the coast. Now a boutique hotel, many of its 21 rooms count on four poster beds and balconies.

In Nerja you are spoilt for choice for good places to stay. In pole position is **Hotel Toboso**, which couldn't be in a better location in the heart of town by the emblematic Balcon de Europa.

The rooms are fantastic in size and you are right next to the excellent Cochrane's Irish restaurant and bar, which is good for a local meal and has the best terrace in Nerja. You might also check out **Hotel Carabeo**



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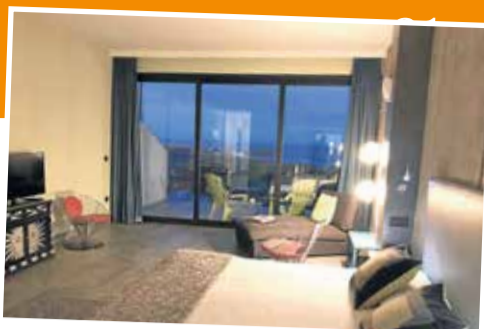
WITH views and food to match, the Garden restaurant in Frigiliana is hard to beat. Run by capable expat Rob Grimmond, who trained at Leiths in London, you will be hard pressed to find anywhere with such fresh and exciting ingredients.

A distinct Arabic crossover of flavours, dishes are heavily geared towards vegetables, while spices come from around the world.

Some stand out dishes include an amazing Iberian tartare (pictured), as well as

salmon in ajoblanco with tahini and pomegranate molasses, while his pluma pork melts in the mouth, with a chickpea lentil dhal and curried banana sauce. 'No tricks, just good fresh local produce,' insists Rob. Who could disagree?

plete



SLEEP WELL: At Hotel Miba (above)



RETREAT: At Vinuela Spa and (left) Cortijo Bravo

WHERE TO STAY

The Axarquía and Costa Tropical have a great selection of places to stay, discovers Jon Clarke

In one of the best parts of the town. Looking to stay in a charming inland village, look no further than **Meson Mudejar**, in Archez. Recently taken over by a charming Polish couple, it is a sleepy spot with simple, clean rooms, that sit above the vegan restaurant downstairs. It's good value and you can head out for a range of walks from the door as well as enjoy experiencing the typical Axarquía life. Along the Costa Tropical perhaps the best place to stay is the recently renovated **Hotel Miba**, in Salobrena. This wonderful eight-room hotel, recently taken over by the team at **Villas Colores**, perches on an escarpment overlooking Salobrena town. Every inch of this modern hotel maximises on the incredible views, be it across to the breathtaking

nearby town, which soars up like a wedding cake from stage left, or stage right to the snow-capped Sierra Nevada mountains. The rooms are spacious and each have their own private terrace. It also has an excellent restaurant and rooftop bar and swimming pool with stunning views up the coast. This is a great place for an evening cocktail. Up in Motril look out for **Casa de los Bates**, which is an amazing 19th century Italianate mansion, with sumptuous bedrooms and well appointed dining and sitting rooms. The places oozes history and the family home, now owned by two charming brothers Borja and Inaki, is full of antiques and photos of its illustrious guests, which have included Nelson Mandela and the King of Spain.

B { } bou
HOTELS

LA VIÑUELA & SPA



B { } bou Hotel La Viñuela & Spa is one of the most special boutique hotels on the Costa del Sol, located in a natural environment of the most beautiful in Andalusia, on the shores of Lake La Viñuela and at the foot of the Sierra de Tejada and Almijara, a few minutes from the beach, a unique location.

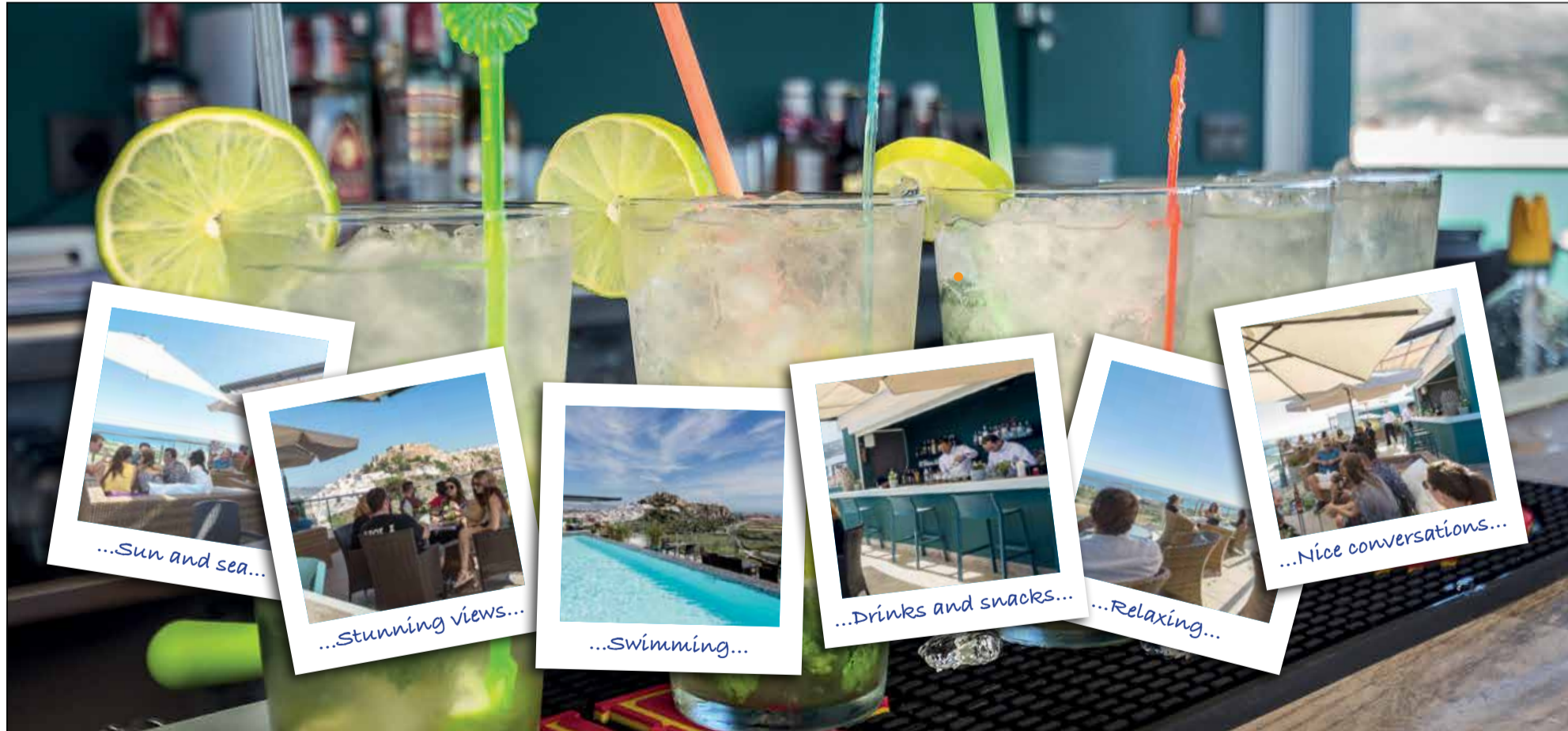
Everything adds up so that your stay at B { } bou Hotel La Viñuela & Spa is a mixture of emotions and sensations to be enjoyed, surrounded by 15,000 m2 of beautiful gardens, in 37 exclusive rooms, with two swimming pools and a private spa, among many others services. Savoring the best traditional cuisine in the area, in its rooms or terraces, is an incomparable experience.

B { } bou Hotel La Viñuela & Spa draws a gastronomic route through Andalusia, which starts with the fresh fish and seafood from Málaga, continues with the important tropical mango and avocado from the Axarquía, as well as the incomparable goat from Canillas. A unique Mediterranean traditional cuisine, a delight for the palate and the senses.

It will be a pleasure to receive you.

B { } bou Hotel La Viñuela & Spa, a place to lose yourself and meet again ...

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**129.950€
TH4076**

Corcoya,
Sevilla

4 bed, 2 bath
Build: 175m2

This fantastic townhouse is located in Corcoya, a tranquil town, with all the local amenities close by and surrounded by stunning Andalusian countryside whilst only being a short 5 minute drive to the large busy town of Alameda. Benefits from amazing patios, pool and stunning views.



**65.000€
TH4007**

Fuente de
Piedra, Malaga

3 bed, 2 bath
Build: 113m2

This townhouse is close to all the local amenities shops, bars and restaurants and within walking distance to the beautiful flamingo lake and nature reserve. The property is accessed by a private gated entrance to the front patio and the main entrance.



**120.000€
CH143**

Aguilar de la
Frontera, Cordoba

4 bed, 1 bath
Build: 139m2

This lovely property is set just a short drive from Aguilar de la Frontera and has a private gated entrance leading to a front courtyard garden and onto a walkway that runs down the side of the property giving easy access to the rear garden. It has a private swimming pool a spacious patio area with summer kitchen.



**26.000€
TH4026**

Castil de
Campos, Cordoba

3 bed, 1 bath
Build: 90m2

Situated on a quiet level street in the village of Castil de Campos and only 10 minutes from the popular town of Priego de Cordoba in Andalusia this 3 to 4 bedroom Townhouse is on the market for only 26,000,00 euros. Needing only updating this property represents great value.



**135.000€
CH157**

Castillo de
Locubin, Jaen

3 bed, 2 bath
Build: 155m2

This rural chalet is situated near to popular Castillo de Locubin in the Jaen region of Andalusia, with a generous level 2,866m2 plot. It includes a magnificent swimming pool and large private terraces all with panoramic views over your land, olive groves, the countryside and to mountains beyond.



**52.000€
CJ498**

Priego de
Cordoba, Cordoba

3 bed, 1 bath
Build: 158m2

This rural detached 3 double bedroom Spanish cortijo boasts spectacular mountain views. The countryside home comes with a generous 805m2 plot and has mains electricity and town water connections, in need of updating. priced to sell giving you the opportunity to create a large family home.



**175.000€
VL902**

Vinuela,
Malaga

3 bed, 2 bath
Build: 119m2

This detached 3 double bedroom Villa property is located on the popular urbanisation of Lomas de Sabato in the Malaga region of Andalusia, with outstanding mountain views and parts of the lake, plus only being a 4 minute drive to all shops, restaurants and amenities.



**169.950€
TH4088**

Periana,
Malaga

3 bed, 2 bath
Build: 123m2

Located in the tranquil town of Mondron, 5 minutes from Periana. Although on the outskirts, it's only a 25 minute drive to the coast town of Torre del Mar, where the beach and chill out chiringuitos are. It has 2 floors, a patio and an underground garage, which can be accessed by the rear end of the house.

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