

All about **M**edina Sidonia

Benalup - Casas Viejas & Alcala de los Gazules

January 2011

An 8-page Olive Press insiders guide

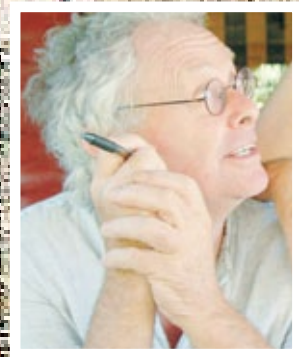
Jon Clarke marvels at the depths of history in evocative Medina Sidonia, where one of the best sights is down in the sewers

THE anonymous metal door swings open and you are led up a narrow corridor to what must easily be one of the most interesting Roman finds in Spain. Only discovered when a local man decided to build a basement garage to his home in 1997, the section of Roman road still features its guttering, sewers, pavement and giant stone flagstones. In peak condition and showing clearly what an ingenious race the Romans were, you will even find the remains of a children's game etched into one of the giant paving stones. The section of road is all part of the incredible collection of Roman remains that makes Medina Sidonia a fabulous place to explore. Just around the corner is the latest offering; a wonderful museum allowing visitors to take a walk around part of the advanced sewerage network that the ancient race installed in the town. It is particularly poignant to think that over 2,000 years ago the Romans understood the importance of sewage, when today a large percentage of Andalusia's towns still dump raw sewage into rivers. The 'Cloacas Romanas' site dates from the first century AD and shows a clear understanding of municipal planning. The extraordinary system of two-metre high barrel-vaulted tunnels are solid and extensive and are said to run throughout the *Gaditano* town.

Turn to Page 2

ANCIENT: Arco de la Pastora

A bridge to the past



PLUS Chris Stewart on getting lost in the Alcornocales park

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2 Medina Sidonia

A bridge to the past

From Page 1

First discovered in 1963, they show clearly how the sewage was carried off via a main channel with smaller rills running off it. Children will love running up and down the tunnels, and the adjacent museum features a series of games and exhibits for them too.

But Medina Sidonia – like its nearby neighbours of Benalup and Alcala de los Gazules – is completely awash with history. As well as a hilltop fortress, a beautiful church, that once served as a cathedral, the town is full of historic buildings with pretty old wooden doorways and classic metal *rejas* (or window bars). Looking like a white wedding cake from a distance, the fortified town became one of Spain's most important dual seats after it was seized from the Moors in 1264.



MEDIEVAL: The old route to Vejer de la Frontera from Medina has little changed in centuries

The title of 'Duque de Medina Sidonia' was bestowed upon the family of Guzman el Bue-

no, the knight who valiently fought to take back various Cadiz towns from the Moors, including Tarifa.

It is also the same family, who later, less valiently provided the admiral that would oversee the loss of the Spanish Armada to the British.

The title is still in the same family and there is a very distinct aristocratic air about the place.

Its tidy cobbled streets are ordered and clean and there is a true sense of grandeur about its buildings. Take the wonderful Plaza de Espana at the top of the town. It is one of the most lovely plazas in Cadiz province and is well planned with fine 17th and 18th century townhouses flanking it.

Always a hive of activity, the Renaissance fronted facade of the town hall is of particular interest, while two or three of the cafes and a cake shop are worth a look into if looking for refreshment.

From here, take a walk up a narrow alley to the Plaza Iglesia Mayor where you will find one of Andalusia's true religious gems.

Santa Maria la Coronada is truly a church, but it has true pretensions of being a cathedral. So it is fitting to discover that it was here that the Archbishop and his staff from Cadiz frequently fled to avoid the frequent attacks of the British and Portuguese.

Similar to the beautiful churches in Ronda or Priego de Cordoba, the place of worship, built on top of an earlier

Stone age treat



FUN: New prehistoric museum

BENALUP-Casas Viejas is best known for a massacre of Anarchists in the 1930s. However these days it is a buzzing town of nearly 10,000 people with a large percentage of youngsters, best highlighted by its young councillor for Tourism Ana Garcia, 26, (pictured).

Best of all, the town now boasts a fascinating new visitor centre showing how man evolved in Spain. The Cadiz Prehistoric Interpretation Centre gives eager young historians a chance to embark on a journey through time. It's a fun museum for children to visit with plenty to see, touch and play with.

It is certainly a town rich in archaeological gems, and nearby, in particular, you should look for the cave paintings of Cueva Del Tajo de las Figuras.



mosque, is a fine example of late 15th century Gothic architecture.

You enter the church through a rather nondescript patio, partly Mudejar in influence, and have a superb Baroque tower, which can be climbed for some remarkable views across the nearby fields.

The original bells are still at the top and the view, in particular, over towards the Costa de la Luz and Cadiz city 20 minutes away is fascinating.

Look out for the benches used in the Spanish Inquisition

Inside the main church take a particularly look out for two benches that were used during the Spanish Inquisition, as well as the fine Plateresque retablo carved out of polychromed wood. Head out of here for a general stroll, looking out in particular for the lovely Medieval archways that still exist.

The most evocative is without a doubt the Arco de la Pastora, which was built under the Arabs in the 10th century and is of the classic horseshoe arch shape, its marble pillars probably Phoenician in origin.

With so much history it is fitting that the town has a series of sweets that have been produced here since Arabic times. "The best known of these is the alfajor," says Jose Manuel Gomez, of local company Distintivos de Calidad, that supplies the area's specialities to over 50 restaurants around Andalusia.

3 Medina Sidonia special



DRIFTING: Santa Maria church interior while (top left) what could be Spain's oldest chapel

"It is a type of macaroon made with almonds, eggs and honey and it is known around Spain," he adds.

"But there is so much of quality around here, much of it

due to the incredible nearby grazing land."

To help market the local products, he and a number of other producers have recently launched a new brand

The very heart of Cadiz



POPULAR since the Romans first arrived in the second century BC, the quaint town of Alcala de los Gazules sits at the dead centre of Cadiz and offers commanding views of the surrounding countryside.

The sleepy white town, known as Lascuta during the Roman period, is famous for its plethora of baroque and neoclassic architecture on offer. Taking pride of place in the Plaza Alta is the Gothic church of San Jorge (pictured), with its imposing tower, built in the mid-16th century on top of the ruins of the old mosque.

The town is also situated on the Ruta del Toro. But somewhat controversially given the bull-fighting heritage of the surrounding area, the Plaza de Toros has actually been transformed into a nightclub.

'Aromas de Medina'. "It is slowly getting the name around and so people understand the idea of quality," he explains at his shop, which also sells foie gras, high quality ham and cheese from around the province.

The town of 12,000 people is a great place to live, as Dutchman Joost Van der Laan confirms. The former Dutch television boss moved to the town from Malaga eight years ago. "The people are so friendly, and I love the beautiful countryside and stunning views. And best of all the unspoilt beaches of the Costa de la Luz are just 30 minutes away."

Now well integrated into the town, he has made friends with a number of older Spanish residents, including a 72-year-old who walks from Puerto Real every Saturday to join him for lunch. The trip is 33km and takes him seven hours.

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THE rain lashed down and the streets ran like rivers. We ducked into a bar that, for one reason or another, was heaving with morose Teutons. There were so many of them that there was no room to open our map, so we went outside onto the terrace that was protected by a canvas awning.

The air itself was so full of water though, that within minutes the map was utterly sodden, and wherever Manolo so much as touched it with his pencil, the point made a grubby wet hole. Manolo really knew the park well: he had grown up here and worked as a warden before becoming a professor of ecology at the University of Sevilla. He explained to us in minute detail the route we should take...

"Now at the first bifurcation of the path, by a big rock, you don't take it, but keep on until the main path turns left and starts to climb. The important thing is at all times to keep the peak of Aljibe

on your left - and the radar dome of Pico de las Yeguas on your right - that way you can't possibly go wrong." And he made a couple of big wet holes with his pencil in the remains of our map. "I must be getting home to my family now. Any problems, just give me a ring." And he sloshed off into the wet black night. Uncertainly we checked into the hostel above the bar. The staff seemed half crazed, and the clientele were those same Teutons who were infesting the bar downstairs. We inspected our room; water was dripping through the ceiling and a sporadic fizzing came as the electricity that powered the dim bare bulb. The bathroom was soft and green with mould; the floor was awash, and there was an interesting design feature consisting of a window that opened directly onto a concrete wall. The door to the next room was open to reveal a crowd of men in string vests sitting around, coughing and watching television.

We were the only customers in the bar apart from an old man with a hat and a stick

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Dominguito's was the place to eat in Alcalá de los Gazules, according to the barman at the hostel, so, taking advantage of a momentary slackening in the rain, we repaired thither. Dominguito was a lugubrious sort of a man with protuberant ears and thick glasses. We had a tapa at the bar, while Michael filled Dominguito in on the details of our proposed journey. Then we sat down at a table, the only customers in the bar, apart from an old man with a hat and a stick. "The seafood'll be g-good here," said Michael, "so we ought to try the p-prawns.. also you get h-hellish good h-ham; the woods are full of p-pigs, so a ración of jamón ibérico would be n-nice. Cádiz produces nice white wines too, so we'll have a b-bottle or two of the San Diego..."

I was happy to leave the choice to Michael, who knows a lot more than I do about the regional gastronomy of Spain. As we drained a second bottle, Michael said a u n t e r e d across to the old man with the hat and stick. "We're walking to Saucedá through the park tomorrow," he said... "going out to Patrite first thing and then heading on north from there." The old man looked up at him in bafflement. "Apparently we have to find the canuto and keep the peak of Aljibe on our right. It's going to be a long day's walk."

The old man continued looking up at him in silence. "They say the rain's going to lift... what d'you reckon?... think we'll make Saucedá before nightfall?" Michael scratched his head and looked down in an interrogatory fashion at the little old man, who still said nothing. "He's deaf," said Dominguito, wringing out a filthy cloth. "He can't hear you."

That night in our room, the electricity kept on fizzing, even when the light was off. The water dripped irregularly through the hole in the ceiling. The men in the next room had turned the television up so they could hear it above the sound of their coughing. Also a certain guttural muttering in the corridor attested to the restlessness and dissatisfaction of the Teutons. Michael was fast asleep within thirty seconds of hitting the bed - and he snored like a bastard.

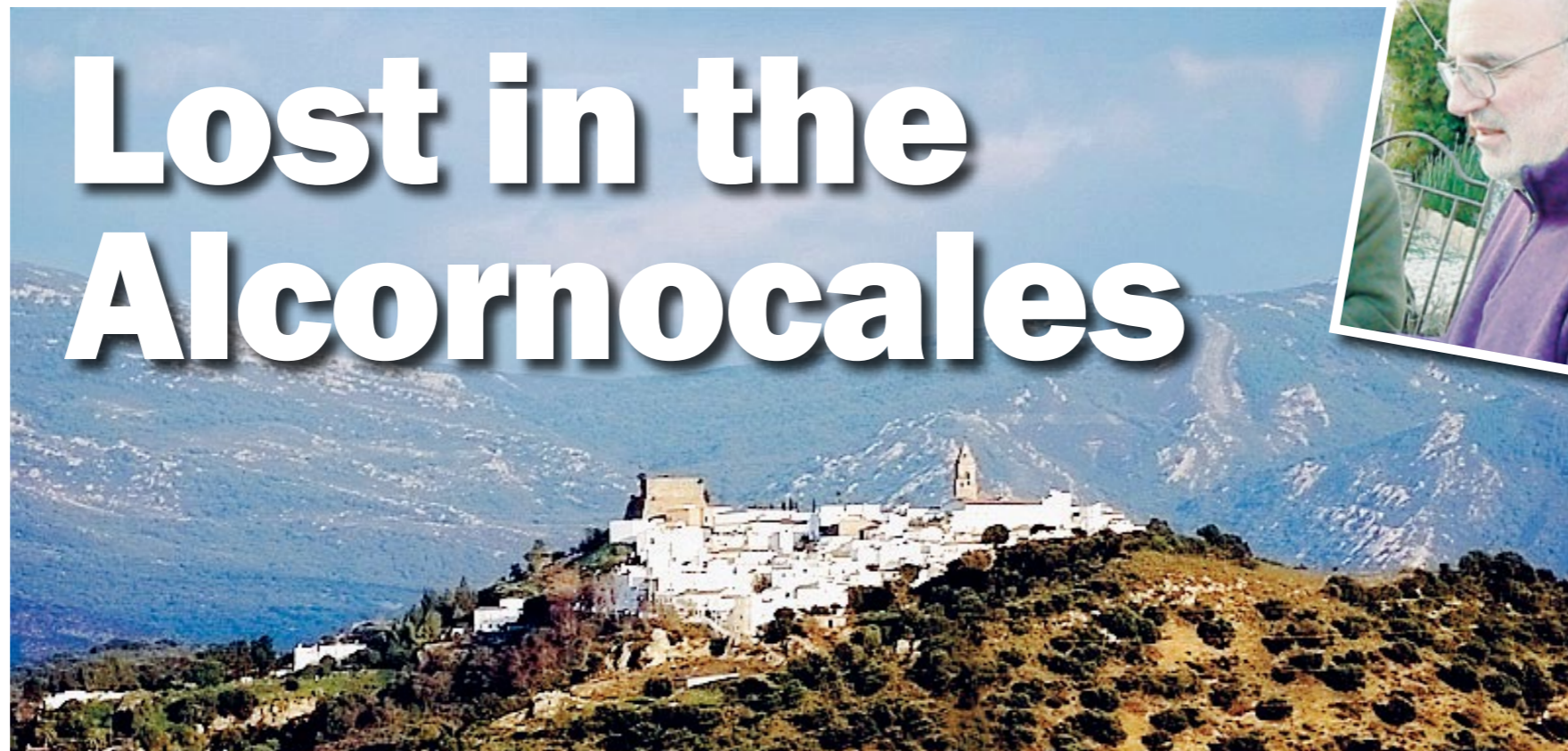
Pigfat butter

The morning found us back at Dominguito's, which had been recommended to us as the best bar in town for breakfast - again by the barman at the hostel, whose ears also stuck out a lot. I suspected him of being Dominguito's brother. "What they h-have for b-breakfast in this part of the country," said Michael. "is manteca; it'd wonderful; you should try it on your toast." Manteca is the orange pig-fat butter that you see the more Spanish type of Spaniard smearing thick on his tostada in the morning. He'll be washing it down with a coñac or two to get himself bounced into the day. I had always viewed the stuff with suspicion - it is pretty suspicious looking stuff, coming as it does, in white, off-grey

A ROLL IN THE HAY: Stewart takes a nap, while (main picture) Alcalá de los Gazules

or orange - and in sixteen years or so of living in Spain. I had never even tried it. But Michael's features were suffused with a sort of manic pleasure as he stuffed the ghastly looking mush into his face. "G-go on, try it," he burbled with his mouth full. "It'll set us up nicely for the day's walk." Gingerly I smeared a smidgen upon my toast and delicately savoured it. In a sort of gross and atavistic way it was absolutely delicious. At the same time as a certain biliousness, I could feel the energy of the dead pig cours-

Lost in the Alcornocales



Driving over Lemons writer Chris Stewart on his mammoth journey walking through the Alcornocales natural park



Flying ants

We checked out of the hostel and into the day. It had stopped raining, but the sky looked unpromising. We went to a supermarket to buy victuals - a whole cheese, half of olives, another of dates and some rotten oranges. Michael explained the need for all this provisioning to the salesgirls, with a detailed account of our proposed itinerary. And then finally we could put the awful moment off no longer; we shouldered our packs and trudged off along the road, heavily laden with food. Or, if the truth be told, I was laden with food because I had, instead of the more appropriate plastic sports-bag, a huge backpack, whereas Michael had a horrible old thing he had bor-

Phonecall

Within an hour we had lost all trace of a path, and were blundering about up to our chests in the exuberant vegetation of the cork-oak forest. It was not a matter of keeping peaks on our right or left; we couldn't see out of the woods. Our boots were caked with heavy mud; we were scratched and bleeding, confused and a little irritated by the turn events were taking. We came to the top of a rise where we could see above the trees. "B-bloody hell," said Michael, "looks like the middle of the Tasmanian rainforest..."

It was an odd parallel to draw, as neither of us had ever been anywhere near Tasmania, and what we were looking at was cork-oaks. But on all sides of us there stretched an unbroken forest of trees, seemingly trackless, without clearings or breaks. A small flock of vultures circled aimlessly above a distant rise. A little disenchanted we plunged back into the trees, heading, insofar as possible, northeast, where we figured our best hope lay. We clambered carefully through



TEUTONS: Old boys playing dominoes in a local bar and (left) Michael

On all sides there stretched an unbroken forest of trees, seemingly trackless

The lout looked at us without interest. While he was getting a head of steam up in the coffee machine, Michael got the map out, and the notepad upon which Manolo had sketched the route. In the cold light of day and at the head of the trail it looked more baffling than ever. There was what looked like a schematic plan of some railway sidings, then a pine tree, beside which Manolo had written 'pino', then there was a rock that said 'tajo', and finally a long, wiggly dotted line that passed neatly through the spiral binding to our destination on the next page. Michael got the compass out and placed it on the table in a knowledgeable way; then came the remains of the sodden map. We looked at the notebook, turned it this way and that... "Hmm," we said. "O G-god, it's B-bob," he spluttered. "Trouble with B-bob is he never stops t-talking. B-Bob!... Hallo... yes, yes, yes. No... no. We're stuck in the m-middle of the Parque de los Alcornocales... yes, y-yes... hopelessly Host... Hallo Bob... can you hear me? Damn! L-lost coverage. G-good thing really; h-he'd have talked all day." We bashed on through the woods, Michael filling me in the while on the extraordinary fecklessness of Bob. I burst through a clump of oleander to find Michael rooted to the spot, petrified. "What's the matter?" Without speaking he indi-

cated a sign nailed to a tree: "Toros Bravos", it said - fighting bulls. "Oh my G-God!", he said. "We c-can't p-possibly go on through here... I'm terrified of toros bravos." "Don't you worry about it Michael," I said putting my arm on his shoulder. "That sign is just there to frighten us..." "N-no it's not; it's there so that if we're killed by bulls we can't hold them responsible." Michael was speaking in a sort of strangled croak now. "Look," I said, reassuringly. "There's no bulls here, and besides, there are lots of trees... if anything should happen, all we have to do is find a tree and skin up it. That's what you do with bulls." But Michael was rooted to the spot. The phone rang again... "O hello B-Bob. This may be the last time you hear from me; we're about to be g-gored to d-death by b-bulls." I looked at him, quivering now as he said his farewell

to the distant and feckless Bob. His rucksack was a livid red. I thought it best not to mention that. "Come on Michael. If there's bulls we'll see them before they see us. The sooner we get out of this horrible wood the better."

Read the next instalment of Chris and Michael's adventures in our next issue. Extract taken from the Almond Blossom Appreciation Society. Visit www.dive.govierlemons.com for more antics.

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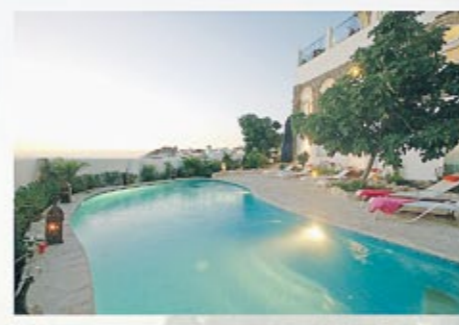
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STUNNING: La Vista entrance and (inset) the Bistons



Medina Sidonia special

View from the top

IT is lucky that Gary and Kirsty Biston live practically next door to their hotel and restaurant business in Medina Sidonia. Because hardly a minute goes past when there isn't something pressing that has to be attended to.

Dealing with over 20 staff, planning the menus, and handling the booking of over a dozen rooms, it is always fairly frenetic at the Biston residence.

And then there is the matter of three children, including a six-month-old baby, born almost the same month they opened their second hotel in the town.

It is little surprise then, that the staff and friends - not to mention the odd visiting writer - are frequently left, literally, holding the baby, while the hard-working duo go about their business.

"We are pretty used to it now," explains Gary, 44, who until recently had another job working as a director for Simpson's Travel in the UK.

"Before we moved to Spain we lived in London working from 9am to 9pm," he continues. "We earned a lot of money, but didn't have a lot of quality time together. We'd get home, have dinner, watch TV and fall into bed."

"To be honest, since we opened the new hotel things are not a great deal different in terms of hours."

But life is certainly more enjoyable for the Bistons who regularly take

Gary and Kirsty Biston of La Vista prove that you can juggle children and a successful business

their children Lily, 6, Oliver, 4, and baby Sophia - not to mention their staff - on trips to Morocco and the Sierra Nevada to ski.

"We are so lucky to live in such a great part of the world and we really try and give our children the best possible opportunities in life," explains Kirsty, 37.

Their experience of travel and knowledge of the industry is all too apparent at the stunning La Vista de Medina, their new venture, which they bought for 600,000 euros last year. The rooms have just the right level of comfort and the menu just the right amount of creativity to keep everyone happy. With fabulous views and landscaped grounds that feature not one, but two swimming pools, they understandably score well on *TripAdvisor*.

But what they are most proud of is the way they have integrated into their adopted town.

"We have employed a lot of people over the last six years and brought in a lot of investment," says Kirsty, who is frequently helping other expatriates with paperwork issues. "Most of our friends are Spanish and we both speak the language."

As if to emphasise this, when they had their official opening last summer, with a big flamenco concert opposite the hotel, they were presented with an award, by their own staff as a gesture of thanks.

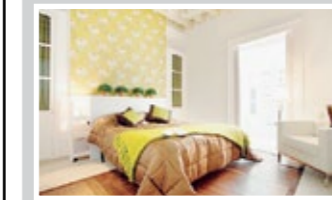
"We were completely blown away by it," says Kirsty. "That meant more than anything."

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8 Medina Sidonia special

WHERE TO EAT



BOSS: Andres at Duquesa

FORMAL, well established and professional, it is little wonder that Medina's La Duquesa is packed every day, apart from Tuesday when it is closed. Specialising in traditional and seasonal cuisine the a la carte menu is extensive and includes partridge, venison and rabbit. I had an exceptionally good menu del dia which started with a chick pea and lamb soup, followed by a

tuna casserole which was excellent. Another great option is the recently opened Mataero on the other side of town. Set up by an enthusiastic family from Chiclana – its friendly owner Vivien speaks English, while her father knows a bit about quality, having worked for seven years at the London's Savoy hotel. For a great local venta is Machin, which has been around for years, and serves up a great rabo de toro and asparagus. El Duque is another ex-

tremely popular option, just a short walk from the centre and with typical Spanish food. It is always busy and it gets good reviews on the web. Another good local spot is Bar Restaurante Ortega, which has good home cooking. There is a more formal restaurant and you can eat outside on the terrace overlooking the square. It is the best spot for a sunny day. Last, but not least, the food at La Vista is incredibly good, with experienced chef Gary at the helm.

WHERE TO STAY

WITH over three million euros worth of art within its walls, the Fairplay Golf Hotel and Spa is anything but your usual golf resort. It is certainly nothing short of amazing how many fabulous originals line the corridors and open spaces of this exciting escape on the edge of Benalup. There is art everywhere – even in the underground car park and even works from the Belgian owner's wife Slawa Devos and daughter. The all-inclusive hotel has wonderful views of the nearby Janda area and is a comfortable place to stay, with an amazing state-of-the-art spa, three restaurants and, naturally, a top 18 hole golf course. Nearby you might also want to consider the unique Utopia hotel, which is one of those very original places that you come across every so often. Completely different to Fairplay, you are transported back to the 1930s with everything from the decor to the art and

furniture coming from that era. The brainchild of former journalist Miguel Angel Fernandez, there is a heavy influence on cabaret, and shows take place most weekends. Guests dress up for the weekend and the food is so good there have been visits from chefs including Ferran Adria and Juan Mari Arzak. In Medina Sidonia you really are spoilt for choice for where to stay. The finest spot must be at the top of the town at La Vista de Medina run by English couple, the Bistons (see page 19). It is a wonderful old place with comfortable rooms and, best of all, a terrace restaurant, which has views for miles. Another great place to stay is La Posada, situated nearby. There are eight charming apartments that have been renovated to a high standard, but still retain the original architecture. All the terraces have great views and the hotel has its own



WINDOW ON THE WORLD: View from Fairplay hotel

shop selling fine arts and antiques at exceptionally good prices. Over in Alcala, a great place to stay is Antigua Fonda, a bed and breakfast and self catering guesthouse in the centre of town. Alcala is also a good place to have a painting holiday and anyone interested should get in touch with the team at Painting in Spain on 956 420 487. Finally, Los Balcones is situated on the most picturesque road in Medina Sidonia, Calle La Loba. The house is typical Andalusian 18th century, with a lovely patio, and has been restored into seven apartments which are very comfortable and well equipped.

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