

All about Jimena

and San Pablo de Buceite

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A need for stamina in town with big heart

A white town with a buzzing social scene, Andrew Pearce gets in shape and explores the vibrant streets of Jimena de la Frontera and neighbouring San Pablo de Buceite

RURAL: View from Jimena towards Jimena Estacion



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A logo for Taberna de Javi featuring a red bull silhouette.

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A background image for Venta las Acacias showing a textured, light-colored surface.



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Jimena special

Healthy surrounds

A LIFETIME living in Jimena de la Frontera would do wonders for your health.

For most jaunts across the historic town are likely to involve a challenging ascent. You are likely to climb one of the area's beautiful, but stamina building narrow avenues.

All roads lead to Rome but, in the case of Jimena, these sloping streets wind up to the 13th Century Moorish castle that continues to watch over the cobbled lanes and lovingly maintained whitewashed homes. The castle – a constant reminder of Jimena's intriguing past – rises up above the town, keeping a wary eye on the hillsides and looming mountain peaks of the surrounding Serrania de Ronda.

And the short, but challenging, walk to the all-seeing medieval stronghold is well worth the effort as panoramic vistas greet the eye once the steep hillside is conquered.

Once an important vantage point for the Moorish armies, the castle witnessed many battles as Christian armies laid siege in numerous blood-thirsty attempts to claim the towering site as their own.

Even before such struggles the town has been home sporadically to the Iberians, Phoenicians and Carthaginians, as well as the Romans. These days, however, such combat and instability is fortunately consigned to the history books as Spaniards and expatriates of varied nationalities contribute in equal measure to the vibrant social scene of what, at first glance, appears to be a sleepy Andalusian outpost.

And it is this healthy relationship that immediately



FUN AND GAMES: Children playing football in front of the town's belltower

becomes apparent from just a few hours strolling the streets of Jimena.

A visit to just one of the many inviting bars and authentic restaurants – which serve as the perfect refueling stations once a winding road has been negotiated – will reveal the special bond that the townsfolk have successfully nurtured over

recent years. "I have been here for the past seven years and I quite honestly love living here," explains Caroline Bickerstaff, owner of the buzzing Bar Oba in town.

"I am the only English bar owner in the town and I have been completely accepted by everyone.

"This is a town with a lot of heart. "After moving here it soon became very apparent that it had a really positive vibe." This vibe is fuelled by the thriving social scene that has been gradually harnessed with the help of hip events such as the annual week-long international music festival.

Held in the second half of July, it attracts a range of jazz, rock, flamenco, folk and classical performers

and draws visitors from all over Andalusia.

This mix of old and new, working together in perfect tandem, is one of Jimena's great hallmarks, the vast majority of its buildings – in many cases dating back centuries – still ooze their original charm after carefully-managed restoration projects.

Luckily the many visitors to the town are now fortunate enough to choose from a number of guest-houses that make it possible to enjoy their authentic nature, without being too far away from their usual home comforts.

Owner of popular guest house, El Chirimoyo, Briony Fletcher, explains: "I tried my best to ensure that the soul of this place wasn't lost as we worked on the renovations.

"I contracted a highly-talented craftsman to replicate the original floor tiles of this house for the bedrooms and the kitchen.

"They were so beautiful in the first place, why would you ever want to start afresh?"

This carefully-induced change has fortunately become the hallmark of the 9,000-strong town, which now consists of approximately 1000 expatriates.

Despite having changed in size and amenities considerably, Jimena remains worlds apart from the built-up coastal resorts that lie just 25 minutes away by car.

The development of the town has been witnessed by resident of 20 years Alberto Bullrich, who first visited Jimena a mere 40 years ago.

"Jimena used to be an extremely quiet but amazingly beautiful mountain town," explains Bullrich, who also writes an internet blog called *JimenaPulse*.

"I came back 20 years later and I suddenly saw the first signs of change. For instance, a medical centre had appeared.

"What is so special is that it is still a small town with a rural feel to it, but it has significantly opened up over the years and welcomed its ever-growing expatriate population without losing its original identity."

Glowing praise is no stranger to Jimena. In fact, it was so



MOTHER AND DAUGHTER: Bar Oba duo

Jimena special

in heady heights



HEALTH AND WEALTH: But communism and card playing too, at the IU community centre, while (above) Bullrich and (right) a typical street scene



highly regarded by Spanish King Alfonso XII that he declared in 1879 that it should be officially recognised as a town, rather than a village. Such sentiments are certainly still shared by the lucky 1000 expatriates who now inhabit the town. "This is definitely real Spain, I have lived here for nine years now and Jimena certainly does have something very special about it," says Fletcher. Blessed with a plethora of hearty restaurants and tapas bars, there really is something very special about the food that is on offer in most places. Be it Mesilla de los Angeles in Estacion de Jimena, or El Ventorrillero just off the Plaza de Constitucion in Jimena, many of the dishes use natural ingredients

found in the surrounding forest, or from locally grown produce. Added to that, a trip to any of these popular spots will often include bumping into a friendly face, be it Spanish or expatriate. For, judging by the welcomes granted on stepping foot into these places, the ethos of the area is unmistakably that a stranger is simply a friend not yet made. Nevertheless, if a break from the bustling bars and friendly residents is needed then the town is perfectly located, surrounded by vast expanses of

sprawling countryside. Would-be walkers and intrepid explorers are blessed with the Parque Natural de los Alcornocales, which stretches away from both the north and southern ends of town. Bristling with cork oaks, called *alcornocales*, this natural park is home to an incredible array of birds and insects. And hidden away at Jimena's southern gateway to the park lies the enchanting Rancho los Lobos - a traditional Andalusian farmhouse, impeccably restored, providing cosy accommodation as well as

horse rides and challenging woodland treks. Run by Susan Hemme, hailing from Switzerland, the ranch is a tribute to sustainability and green energy with all the hot water generated by the site's solar panels. The adventurous will certainly not be short of ideas, with experienced horse riders even being able to take trips at night. "You really can make the most of the beautiful woodland scenery that this park has to offer with the range of activities you can enjoy here," explained Hemme. "Even if you're not a horse rider, you can venture out from the base and enjoy some breathtaking walks or exciting bike rides." So good are the potential treks around Jimena de la

A plethora of hearty restaurants and tapas bars provide much food for thought

Frontera, author and seasoned hiker Guy Hunter-Watts has even written about two possible trails the town has to offer in his guide *Walking in Andalusia*. Called the *Walk of the Old Mill* and the *Walk of the Wolf and the Pigs*, both begin in Jimena but soon take their followers on challenging circuits that are brimming with incredible views. And that is before even mentioning the sights that

can found in neighbouring village San Pablo de Buceite with its fertile valleys and healthy orange groves. Not only is Jimena town home to some challenging daily treks as people negotiate the picturesque cobbled streets as part of their daily routine, but the surrounding countryside offers even more testing excursions. The town really does work wonders for your health!

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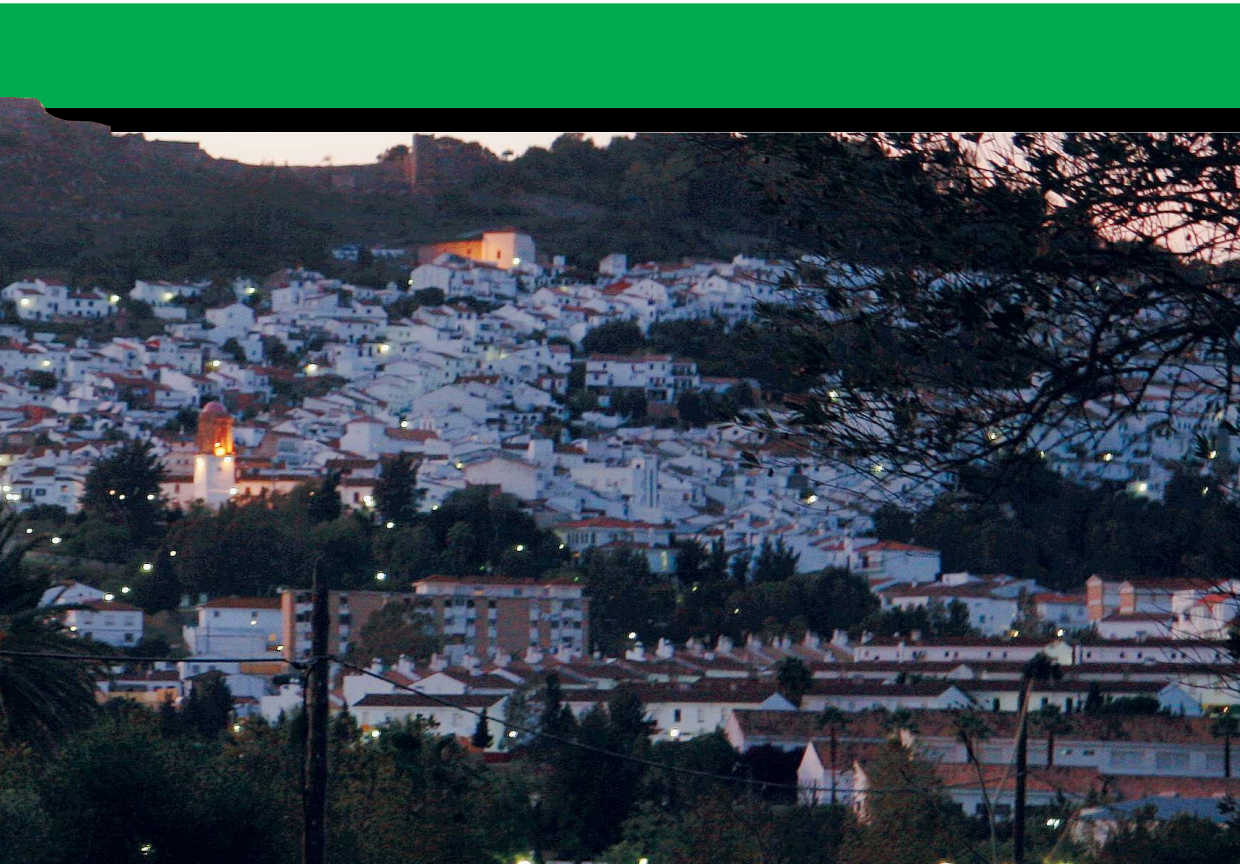


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SCENIC: The silhouette of the mountain town of Jimena as night falls, with (above and right) the view from San Pablo Estacion over the town and into the Serrania de Ronda and the entrance to San Pablo. Meanwhile, (left), two images of the old monastery and chapel in Jimena Estacion



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ON LINE: Estacion de Jimena as it was in the 1940s (above) and as rail users view it on their travels today



SKY HIGH: Castle atop the steep climb through the narrow streets of Jimena decades ago (above) and as seen today



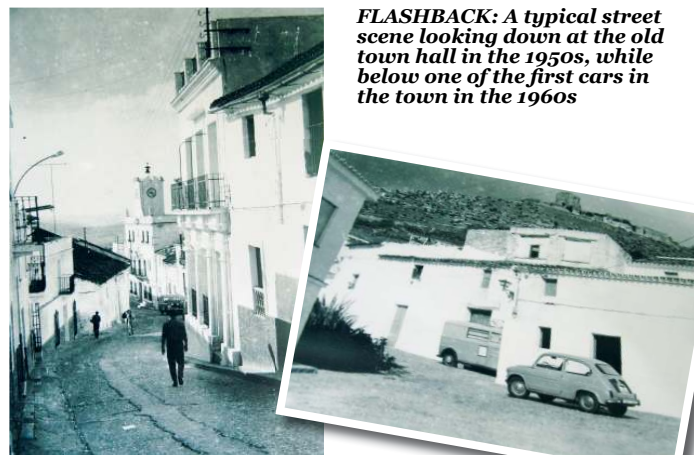
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FLASHBACK: A typical street scene looking down at the old town hall in the 1950s, while below one of the first cars in the town in the 1960s

Jimena special

WHERE TO STAY

HOMELY accommodation with a twist is the best way to describe what's on offer in Jimena.

By far your best option is to stay in the stunning rural retreat up in the hills above San Pablo called La Almuna.

Here, Diana Paget has been catering for lovers of countryside and stunning views for the last few decades and it is only ten minutes drive from Jimena.

A rambling old farmhouse with stunning gardens, guests get served a great breakfast, and must ensure to be around at the end of November (Nov 27 to 29) when Diana runs her annual Christmas fair, now in its 15th year.

If you want to be in the heart of Jimena itself El Chirimoyo, is a guest house, owned and run by Briony Fletcher. A garden apartment for two costs just 50 euros a night. All rooms have been expertly restored, keeping their authentic Spanish feel in the meantime.

The garden is a real treat surrounded by lush vegetation, the perfect place to enjoy a lazy Sunday morning breakfast.

The Casa Grande, recently taken over by Carmen and Alfonso Delgado is a classic hotel full of surprises. The rooms



are extremely comfortable, while the top floor contains a mini library and extensive views across the townscape.

Nearby in Estacion de Jimena are a couple of good options. Hostel Los Arcos is a fabulously cheap bet from just 25 euros a night, while owner Jose also runs the clean, modern

For the more adventurous, look no further than the Rancho los Lobos, the active person's dream retreat, located five minutes down a gravel track by the gateway to the Los Alcomocales Natural Park Run by Susan Hemme, this hidden delight offers beautiful wood cabin rooms, as well as horse rides, treks and mountain bike routes.

However, if complete comfort is what you're really after, look no further than the sumptuous Hostel Anon – a beautifully romantic getaway that always comes highly recommended by those that know a thing or two about great places to stay.

WHERE TO EAT

IF wholesome, hearty meals are what tantalises your taste buds then Jimena and San Pablo de Buçeite are definitely worth a visit.

Specialising in home-grown produce and cooked in the right way, you will be spoilt for choice.

Most exciting find of all was the converted train station at San Pablo where the appropriately named Restaurant La Estacion is a great addition to the Andalucia dining scene.

It has been beautifully converted by Nieves, a true stationmaster, who picked up her cooking skills living in the sophisticated region of Tarragona, near Barcelona.



FIRST CLASS: Nieves at La Estacion, and below Juan at Los Arcos, while (left) La Almuna

Along with her charming son, she serves up a great range of dishes, including mouth-watering partridge pate, tasty foie gras and a 'crujiente de setas' with rocket, parmesan and smoked beef, which was one of the best dishes the Olive Press has tried in Spain.

If you are looking for something a little more economical in San Pablo, then why not try the Venta Acacias, which is a classic local spot, with some great game when in season.

In Jimena itself, one should try the atmospheric Bar Oba run by Caroline Bickerstaff, aided by her ever-willing daughter Brogan.

It is regularly buzzing with a healthy blend of expatriates and Spaniards with Thursday nights being particularly popular due to the its quiz night.

There is always a good range of tapas including albondigas and boquerones as well as fresh Manchego cheese. Also, the home-made beef burgers are definitely worth sampling.

Just a bit further down the street is La Bodeguita, a traditional Spanish eatery, where you can't go far wrong with a plate packed with fried fish and mouth-watering pork.

Just next door lies the equally enticing El Ventorrillero, another authentic restaurant, in which the Menu of the Day is charismatically recited to you by popular local waiter Jose Gomez.

The meat in sauce is a particular favourite – with the meat literally melting in the mouth.

Why not also try Taberna de Javi,



which specialises in wholesome homemade tapas, while nearby in Estacion de Jimena is homely Meson Aragon managed by the ever-friendly Narciso. Nearby is the restaurant Los Arcos, where Juan Miguel Perez has introduced a policy of using as much home-grown organic produce as possible.

He is also undertaking a popular local experiment of using only his own home reared beef, from cows that are grass-fed on his local estate for three years before slaughter.

"You can really taste the difference from my cows that are completely free range, as opposed to the ones that are bred quickly with loads of meal," he says.

Over the road is the popular Mesilla de los Angeles, which has been run by Carmen Delgado and husband Alfonso for the past 18 years.

The secret behind the couple's success is their dedication to keeping the dishes simple, while ensuring that they are cooked exceptionally well.

The sopa de calabaza for starters is a real treat as are the freshly-made calamarsas as a main course.

However, the coup d'etat is the heavenly crema de Catalunya.

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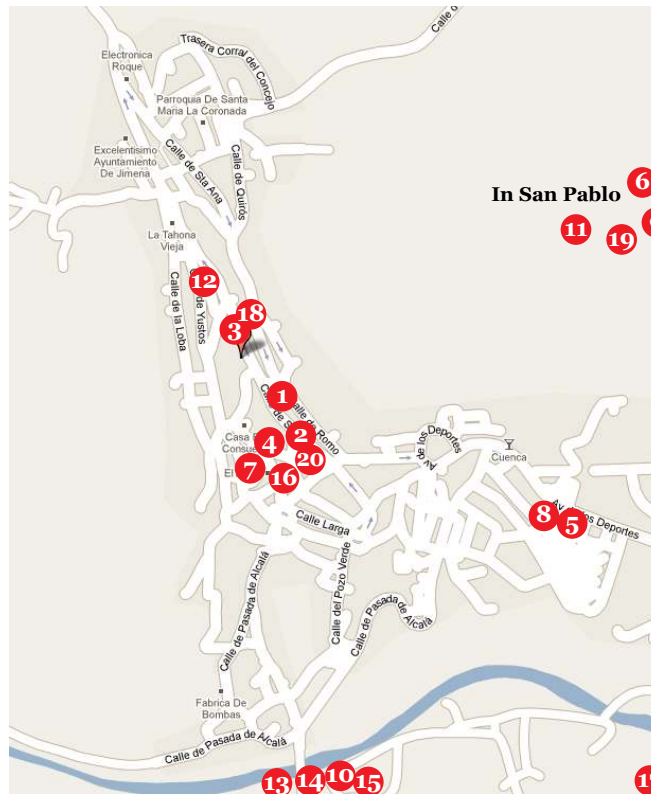
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19. Venta Las Acacias
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What a great place to live

Diana Paget, Hotel la Almuna, half way between Gaucin and Jimena. "Jimena is so different from Gaucin. It is a more cultured town, with classical music concerts and good flamenco. As for San Pablo it is a wonderful

place to do the local shopping. It's not like a cocktail party, where you bump into all the local expats, plus the shops are perfectly good."

Maria Welbury, with son Corey, 12, who live in San Pablo de Buete. "We have lived here for seven years and love the area very much. It is such a great area, but it is vital to speak Spanish."

Yasmina Coronas Marquez, 26, has spent her whole life in San Pablo. She said: "Although San Pablo is a small place, there's plenty to see in the surrounding area."

Ana Maria Espinosa Marquez, also 26, said: "You can go for lots of walks in the countryside here and the people are all very friendly."

Rob Scott, 42, who works in telesales in Gibraltar, has lived in the town with his wife for seven months



GREAT MOVE: Maria and Corey Welbury love the area's countryside

now. He said: "I love it here. People should come here to see the real Spain. The castle ruins are beautiful and you can see all the way out to Gibraltar from there on a clear day."

Kay Fenemore, who is in her early 40s, came from Watford to live in the town. She said: "The town is a good mix of Spanish and English culture and it's a welcoming place. The

main reason to come is to walk around by the river and in the countryside."

Jan Bradley, a pottery teacher, who moved here seven years ago to escape from the hectic lifestyle in London. She said: "It's a very interesting place. You should go and see the castle ruins and look around the town. If you have never seen a white town before, Jimena is a good place to come to visit."



CULTURED: Diana Paget likes the classical music