

# All about the Alpujarras

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March 25, 2010

## Hump stones to save the economy

**EXCLUSIVE: Granada's most famous expat Chris Stewart on surviving the winter rains, and how he is planning to help out the impoverished Alpujarras region**



**T**HIS past winter has been a winter like no other. The gaggles of old men, the reception committees at the entrance to every village, are still shaking their heads in disbelief. For not even in 1976, when the rivers rose and washed much of the village of La Rabita and two hundred of its inhabitants into the sea, did the rains rain down on Andalucía as they have these last few months. Everyone has some astronomical figure to bandy about... but few can compare with the thirteen hundred (yes 1,300) litres that fell on Capileira, in the High Alpujarras, in just one week this January. The Alpujarras is one of the very driest spots in Spain. It may seem, even in the drought of summer, to be well watered and rushing with streams and springs, but this is a consequence of the high snowfields, and the miraculous aquifers deep in the bowels of the Sierra Nevada, rather than of abundant rainfall. In fact, the rainfall in an average year is scarcely greater than that of the Sahara desert. In spite of what those old folks say about how much greater the rainfall was in the past – and the bitter truth is that these people and their questionable observations are not to be relied upon – it was not. It has always been dry in the Alpujarras. Look at the houses: they have, in common with the architecture of North Africa and the Middle East, flat roofs. The flat roof is a lot less technically demanding than a pitched roof, also cheaper... but it's not a thing you'd want in a rainy climate. The Alpujarras was, quite simply, not designed for rain: all the roofs leaked this last winter. My neighbour, Bernardo – and you won't believe this, but it's true – spent much of the winter sleeping on his back with a bucket clutched to his chest. Every hour or so it would fill up and he would have to get up to empty it. As it happens, we remained perfectly dry on our farm, a few miles outside Orgiva, as we made a "green roof" for our house last year.

Turn to Page 14

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# Alpujarras special

From Page 13

The main reason for the green roof is to insulate the house against the summer heat, which it does very effectively by providing a dense cover of succulent plants to keep the sun off. It looks good, too, especially when the *portulakia* and *mesembrianthemum* are in blossom and hanging in thick colourful tendrils down the outside walls. In winter the extra insulation keeps the warmth in, too.

But the best of it is that the waterproof layer of PVC that you must have to keep the roots from penetrating the concrete of the roof, also keeps the drips out. And so, as we sat inside day after day, watching the rain sheeting across the valley, there was a certain smugness about us... and this despite the fact that the great stone wall of the chicken run had collapsed in the night and the fox had got in and taken all the hens.

We lost our bridge, too, in that first terrible onslaught of rain at Christmas, as well as the road, the *acequia*, our water supply, a whole rake of oranges and olives, and some of the fields down by the river. But it would be wrong to complain; many people were hit a whole lot harder. We have recovered more or less by now. A week after the loss of the bridge we set up the 'Flying Fox', which consists of a steel cable stretched high above the river, and a cunning system of ropes and pulleys for winching whomsoever or whatever is necessary, across the raging flood. It's sort of alarming, but you can get used to anything, and in fact we rather like it: it makes the most banal of expedition something of a

### What remains is the dazzling beauty of the landscape and culture

Boys' Own adventure. (I'm not altogether sure if the Wife concurs with me on this, but she puts on a brave face.)

To date we have winched in and out six *bombonas* of *butano*, two sacks (rather poignant this) of chicken feed, 30 sacks of sheep feed, a sofa, and 89 sheep, who, through no fault of their own, got stranded on the wrong side of the river.

But to return to my theme: it's not just the architecture of the Alpujarras that suffers in the rain; it's the geological weft and warp of the hills and valleys, the very fabric of the mountains.

Apparently the Sierra Nevada is very young

geologically speaking. This means that when it gets wet it all starts falling to bits: rocks break off and roll down the steep hills; land slips away; the very earth turns to porridge and pours into the rivers. And the rivers run turgid, grey and evil smelling... a kilo of sediment dissolved in every four litres of water, so I am told. Standing by the river in the rain, you can watch the process of erosion that ought, in about a hundred million years or so, to turn the Sierra Nevada into something resembling the Pyrenees, where all the extraneous muck has been washed from the tops, leaving beautiful

## My wild, savage landscape



**SURVIVOR:** Chris with his eco water wheel

bare pinnacles of rock.

It happens on a smaller scale down in the valleys, too, where every morning the villagers wake to find yet another stone wall collapsed, yet more terraces fallen away, and the paths and bridges that lead to their lands, impassable. This is what I find more difficult to take: I can accept the mountains sliding little by little down to the sea; it's a natural organic process; it's what's meant to happen, and we're not going to be here to see the end of it anyway. But I hate to see the damage to the man-made landscape, the walls and terraces and ancient roads that are the result of centuries of human ingenuity and back-breaking labour.

For me the beauty of the Alpujarras is in the juxtaposition of wild savage landscape with the intricate webs of terraces and fields, the lovely green skirts of a hundred textures and colours that surround the villages.

And to walk along the an-

cient ways, the Caminos Reales, among the villages in the valleys, with the majestic backdrop of the high peaks, is just the very best way to enjoy that beauty.

Unfortunately, even without the winter rains, this part of the infrastructure has fallen on hard times. Unless real efforts are made to restore the small scale agriculture that has always nourished these villages, then much of the area's unique beauty will disappear, and people will no longer come to walk in it and wonder at it.

With this in mind, we have set up 'Campos y Caminos de la Alpujarra' ([www.camposycaminosdelalpujarra.com](http://www.camposycaminosdelalpujarra.com)).

The thing is still in its infancy, but we aim to motivate that dying breed of older Alpujarreños who have the ancient skills to teach, and those younger folks who may be out of a job, or just fancy the idea of learning a new skill, to get out there and hump stones about. The idea is that if we can start reopening the ancient ways, rebuilding the ancient walled terraces, and repairing the fallen bridges, then we can give a shot in the arm to the poor battered old Alpujarras and its enfeebled economy. For the mines have been closed, and there's not a lot of money in mountain agriculture; but what remains is the dazzling beauty of the landscape, the history and the unique cultural heritage. Try as they might, the rains will never wash those away.

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Chris Stewart's new book, *Three Ways To Capsize A Boat*, is published by *Sort Of Books* at £10.99. You can find out more about his movements at: [www.drivingoverlemons.com](http://www.drivingoverlemons.com)



# arras special

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**IN LOVE:** El Valero is 'worth less today' despite the investments made in the garden and green roof (top)



**HAPPY:** Chris with wife Ana and two rescue dogs

## I want to be buried at my farmhouse

CHRIS Stewart has lived in his Alpujarran farmhouse, El Valero, for 20 years. For the first ten years he lived in 'pleasant and agreeable penury' and then his debut book *Driving Over Lemons* was published and he became famous overnight, with tourists from as far as Japan arriving for his autograph. "But then every paradise has its flaws," he explains. "We liked what we saw 20 years ago and we like it even more today. As I write this, I can look out of my windows and see the breeze curling through a field of corn; the sheep high on the hill, half hidden by waist-high genista and rosemary. "I mentioned the farm turning into a garden, and I heard on the radio the other week that gardening is one of the two things that happens to you in mid-life, the other being a peculiar tendency towards home improvements. "I was taken aback by this as I realised that I spend an inordinate amount of time with this ques-

tionable 'improvement' activity. "But being human, we set about spending time, energy and money improving it. We seem to be driven by some irrepressible instinct - and for me it's a drive to make our home greener, literally and metaphorically. We have a bank of solar panels sufficient to power a deep-freeze; a water-wheel to sustain the eco-folly we call a natural swimming-pool; and, rather spectacularly, we have green roofs. "So all in all, the answer to that question, about whether we have managed to climb the property scale a notch and move into a mansion in Marbella, is not a bit of it. "We still love El Valero and the only way we're leaving here is in a box - perhaps not even then, as it happens, for both Ana and I plan to lay our bones beneath an orange tree on what is known as the Mandarin Terrace, and there for all eternity enjoy the view of the Cadiar river mingling with the waters of the Trevez, below

the great blue snow-capped Sierra de Lujar. "And in any case, El Valero is not a buying and selling property. It's where we live and it has become as much a part of us as we are a part of it. It's the property equivalent of an abandoned mutt found shivering beside the road - like Big, one of our dogs. "Nobody else wanted the place and, thanks to my own questionable efforts as a builder, it's probably the only property in Spain that is worth less today than it was 20 years ago, when we bought it. This is a matter of complete indifference to me because the place is our home, not an investment. "And it's not finished yet, either. The Turks have a saying: 'When the angel of death comes a-knocking on the door' (it sounds better in Turkish). So, all being well, it never will be complete."

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# 16 Alpujarras special

## More goatees than



**ORGIVA: Full of alternative folk**

It is four years since I first stumbled across the New Age capital of Spain.

With more goatee beards than Glastonbury, Orgiva is unlike anywhere else I have visited in the Iberian Peninsula.

Aside from the spectacular scenery, light and landscape, there must be lay lines running through the middle of the town, the amount of alternative types who have settled here over the years.

Mystics, holistic therapists, shamans, this green backwater of the Granada province has a disproportionate concentration of them. A magnet for New Age travellers, who spend much of the year at three distinct camps just outside the town, there is always something (or someone) colourful passing through.

This has left an indelible stamp on the spiritual capital of the Alpujarras, while completely dividing the somewhat staid and conservative town establishment.

This can be best summed up by the

**But there is a lot more going on in Orgiva than meets the eye, as Olive Press publisher Jon Clarke di**

annual Dragon Festival, a free-form and entirely free get together of up to 20,000 party goers from all around Europe.

Taking place each Spring, it has become something of a game of cat and mouse between the (unofficial) organisers and the local town hall and police.

Doing their best to stop the event from taking place - putting up warning signs, and digging trenches to stop vehicles from entering various sites - the authorities show a distinct disdain for the now well-established shindig.

This is all rather sad. For traditionally Orgiva is one of the most deprived towns of the region and particularly hard hit by the closure of various mines a few decades back. The influx of northern Europeans - many who spend the year here - has certainly brought some commerce, while also providing the town

with an edge, a sense of personality and, above all, a liveliness, which has often been lost from many other inland towns of Andalucia.

It has also created an - in part - modern-thinking community keen to embrace the outside world.

Take the municipal market in the centre of town. It is abuzz with new energy, with all number of businesses offering different trades and services. I sat at the terrace cafe within - where travellers crank up their laptops (using the free wifi) - and, most crucially, talked to the traders, many of them Spanish from the local area, who have worked around the country before coming home to Orgiva to set up stall. This doesn't happen in most provincial Spanish towns, where there is, quite simply, a mass exodus of anyone with good ideas or drive.

This all means that the town can support a good restaurant like Limonero, where Canadian chef Wes Somerville whips up a creative storm six nights of the week, a bespoke jewellery shop like 925, or a brilliant ceramicist Al-

bayde, w on walls But, best modern ge of the i and the e This mea such as a converte olive mil putty rem cement a It also m architect Dry, and cialists li and Mal Conect 1 area.

And of a thoughtf Stewart, been set tryside ju Last, bu it was a Spain's f per, the e It was he first spot ited publ a dingy s La Caixa Set up b and a ca had an in on the p politics, tures.

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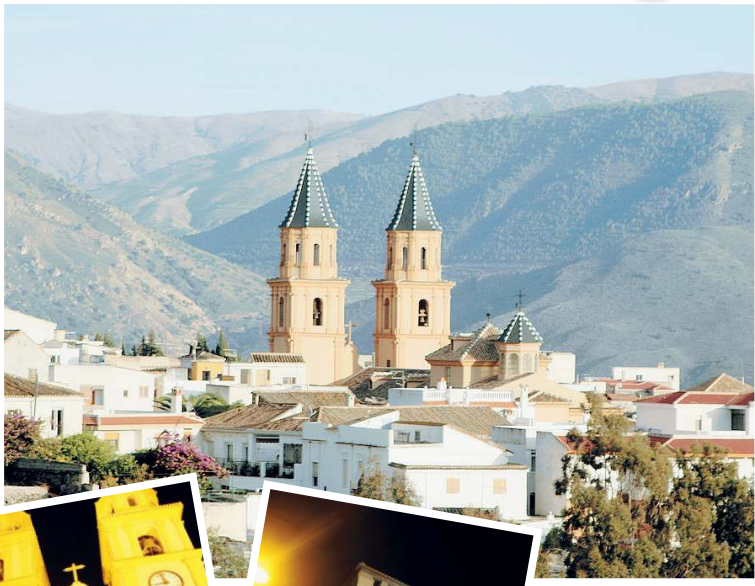
# an Glastonbury

## first meets discovers

whose creations can be seen in Paris and London. Of all, its culture of free and thinking has led to the emergence of cultural centres like Cortijo as well as an understanding of the importance of sustainability in the environment. It is a series of green builders, like Sebastian Blakeley, who has built his enormous 400-year old Molino Benizalte using lime plaster and cob walls in place of brick and breeze blocks. It means top quality sustainable buildings like Boris Henne or David Asker from Tecnicas Maro and the colm de la Croix from Solar have all descended on the

course, it means green and talented writers, such as Chris whose trilogy of books have been in the beautiful countryside outside the town. It is not least though, also the birthplace of the finest English newspaper, the Olive Press. It is four years ago that I visited the brave and spirited architect, produced out of his second floor office above a bank. It is a former energy trader campaigning Evertonian, it is an interesting range of stories about environment, corruption, plus good in-depth fea-

Perhaps only here, with the level of interest in the environment, could such a publication could be the potential to take it around the region and, so far, the plan is to be good though, to be the motherland.




**MAJESTIC:** Orgiva's striking twin-tower church and historic town hall really stand out at night

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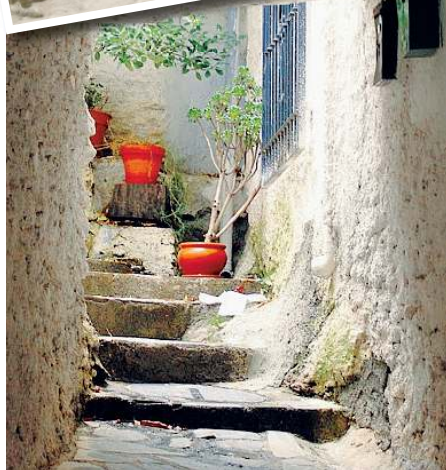
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## Alpujarras special



**CHARMING:** Typical village view. while (top) Federico Garcia Lorca in Orgiva

**T**HE 70km long jumble of valleys, known as the Alpujarras has, without a doubt, some of Spain's best walks and scenery. It is little wonder that 19th-century traveller Richard Ford described the area as the 'Switzerland of Spain', with its dramatic valleys and soaring peaks.

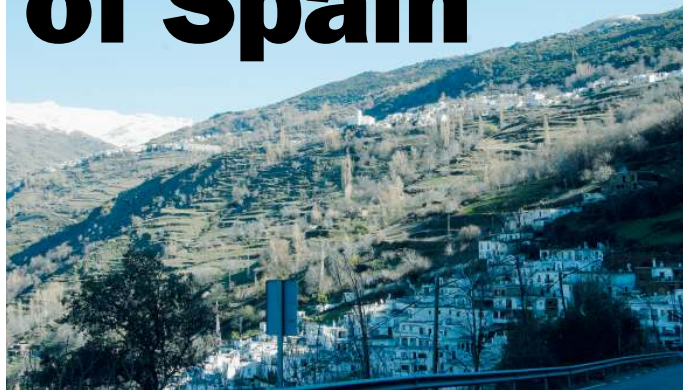
**Take a ride uphill from Orgiva into the Poquiera Gorge, with its trio of breathtaking villages**

Later, poet Federico Garcia Lorca and English writer Gerald Brenan, who spent a long time in the area writing his book *South from Granada*, waxed lyrical about its people and landscapes.

Indeed, you are rarely out of sight of the snowline in winter and in summer the area takes on a distinct *Little House on the Prairie*-style feel when up in the high meadows.

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# Switzerland of Spain



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# Alpujarras special

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mountain road east towards Trevelez, stopping in Pitres and, in particular, the five nearby villages that make up the Taha region. Paths wind between the villages, past numerous streams, through orchards and, at Fondales, there is the lovely Arabic bridge over the River Trevelez. Trevelez itself is well worth a visit. Sitting at nearly 1500 metres, it claims to be the highest town in Spain and has become famous for its curing of hams and is literally full of ham shops and factories. East of Trevelez you will find Juviles, an important silk centre in Moorish times, Berchules, a high village of grassy streams and chestnut woods, and Cadiar, which Brenan described as the 'navel'. Beyond here there are more rolling, arid landscapes as you head towards Almeria and the charming towns of Ugijar and Yegen, where Brenan lived for a decade.



**HIDDEN GEM:** Bubion, while (right) local onions and ham, and (below) typical Alpujarran carpets



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**WHERE TO STAY AND EAT**

**Rooms with views and food to die for**

By Dale Nottingham

IF a room-with-a-view is what you're looking for, the assortment of pocket-sized villages that cling to the vertiginous slopes of the Alpujarras play host to some of the finest accommodation in Andalucía.

The main attraction at tranquil Casa Rural las Chinenas in Mairena, however, is neither the airy simplicity of the furnishings, nor the warm hospitality of host David Illsley. It is, somewhat surprisingly, to be found in its modest kitchen, where resident chef Soledad conjures up creations with a flair typically associated with Michelin-starred restaurants. Indeed, celebrity chefs Samuel and Samantha Clark, of London's Moro cookbook, are said to count Soledad among their favourite chefs.

On the subject of flair and creativity, nowhere are these qualities more in evidence than in Limonero, a true gem of an eatery, tucked away off a small street in Orgiva.

Head chef Wes serves up an epicurean orgy the like of which I haven't enjoyed for many a moon.

The restaurant is beautifully lit and elegantly furnished, while the food – from the bread baked in little terracotta bowls through to the purgatorially indulgent chocolate mouse – is crafted with the care and attention to detail of a chef at the height of his powers.

Another place I would heartily recommend you stay is Casa la Sevillana in Bubiòn. At 1,350 metres above sea level, Bubiòn offers spectacular views, while in the Casa La Sevillana, Eve Love and husband Julio have created a cosy hideaway from which to enjoy them.

Practically next door is Restaurant Teide, a spacious family-run restaurant, with roaring log fire and an eclectic menu that includes traditional Andalucian cuisine.

Less lofty but equally enchanting is Sierra y Mar, run by

charming hosts Inger and Giuseppe, in the picturesque village of Ferreñeira. If walking is your thing, this is for you. Back in Orgiva, a couple of places worth checking out include Baraka, where you can sit out on the sun-kissed terrace and sample the delicious Arabic food. The falafel served in a pitta is fabulous as is the homemade ice cream. Nearby you will also find Casa Santiago, which has a scenic terrace by the church and you'll find a *menu del dia* for just 8.50 euros. Two other options are the cafeteria in the municipal market, which has free wifi, as well as Bar La Macia, which has just reopened and has some great home cooked meals and, in particular, pizzas


**Cocktails**

Another great place to stay in Orgiva is Pension Rural Alma Alpujarra, whose former clients include King Alfonso XIII, as well as celebrated British writer Gerald Brenan. Little changed for decades, it still has a lot of character, not to mention a great price at just 20 euros per person.

Up the road in Lanjaròn, there are also some great places to eat, including El Volante, which is offering a 'credit crunch' lunch for just 6.50 euros.

As for nightlife, if it is sport you are looking for then head to El Gecko in Lanjaròn, which also has good tapas and a great selection of beers and cider. Last, but not least, the hippest place to hang out, by far, is D Tragos pub and cafe, which is run by the great grandson of famous British writer Robert Graves. Well appointed with table football and other games, it has an imaginative mix of music, including ska, drum and bass and flamenco and serves up a mean range of cocktails. Best of all, it boasts some extremely rare and valuable creations by English anarcho-sculptors the Mutoid Waste Company. Now those are worth a look.

a bilingual business centre serving the whole Alpujarra region



# Alpujarra Conect

[www.alpujarraconect.com](http://www.alpujarraconect.com)

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