

All about the Guadiaro Valley

Yes, Prime Minister

Despite being discovered by British leader David Cameron, few people have unearthed the true secrets of the Guadiaro Valley



TOP VISITOR: British PM David Cameron in Jimera de Libar in 2008

By Wendy Williams

It is, without a doubt, one of Andalucía's most evocative valleys.

So it is no surprise, that British Prime Minister David Cameron recently told his Spanish counterpart Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero that taking holidays in the area was going to be one of the things he would most miss about leading his country.

Despite being a little damp, the UK leader had spent a wonderful week around the Guadiaro valley - dubbed the 'secret valley' - in 2008.

He had particular enjoyed the stunning Walk of Mr Henderson's Railway, which traces the 19th century railway line as it winds up the valley between Jimera de Libar and Benaolan.

Having recently taken my first so-

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From Page 1

jour around the Guadiaro valley, it is easy to see why Cameron had fallen for the area.

Hidden away in the heart of Andalucía, just south of Ronda, the stunning valley is full of charming villages and some of the country's best scenery.

Whether you enjoy walking, swimming, bird watching, cycling, hiking, horse riding or just plain relaxing, there is something for everyone. But what really sets the area apart is the breathtaking scenery that surrounds it, thanks in part to the high rainfall it receives.

While the well known adage may claim that the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain, actually, the rain in Spain falls mainly in the Grazalema natural park, in which much of the Guadiaro valley sits.

The sleepy villages, though painted white on the outside, are full of colour inside

The high levels of rain - up to 3000 litres a year - account for the lush greenery of the valley that is a stark contrast to the more arid landscape often associated with the sun-drenched South of Spain.

One of the highlights of any trip here is the spectacular drive along the winding roads that often sit hundreds of yards above the river.

At every turn the view seems to get better, particularly as the classic white-washed villages of Cortes, Jimena, Benaojan, Montejaque and Jimera come into sight. Once inside these sleepy villages it is clear that while

ON YER BIKE: Cycling is popular in the valley - as well as driving



Down in the valley

they may be painted white on the outside, they are full of colour inside with an amazing historical legacy and local culture.

But, do take note; they have tiny streets built a time long before the advent of cars, so driving can be tricky.

It is best to explore on foot or you could find yourself stuck between two white walls on a one-way street. Montejaque is one such tiny village, with just 1000 inhabitants it lies in the shadow of the El Hacho mountain peak, on the edge the Grazalema Natural Park.

The name Montejaque comes from the Arabic 'Monte-Xaquez' meaning 'lost mountain' and the remains of a medieval fortress here point to the town's once key role in protecting the borders of the Nazari kingdom of Granada.

The neighbouring town of Benaojan, like the majority of these villages, is also of Moorish origins with its narrow streets centred



HIGHLIGHT: Driving along the winding passes

around the main square and church. Now famed for its chorizo, Benaojan was originally built on the mountainside but has now also grown up around the railway station in nearby Estacion de Benaojan.

This area is also renowned for the caves that are situated just a stones throw away; La Cueva de la Pileta (see page 19), being the most

famous.

According to Andy Chapell, owner of the well-established hotel 'Molino del Santo' in Estacion de Benaojan, they were not just the first Britons to open a business in the area in 1986... his wife was the first woman to drive.

"What first attracted us here was that it was all so unspoilt," he explains. "The landscape is amazing with the gentleness of the valley bottom and the dramatic scenery above. "There are so many varied

things to do here with the railway line, the Roman sites and caves. But, in particular we love the people just getting on with their lives," he adds.

Further down the valley, across from the Libar mountain range, you will find Jimera de Libar.

When the Arabs settled here the town was called Inz Almaraz meaning "woman's castle" but this was changed to Ximera de Libar after the Christian conquest.

Nowadays this village is home to a vibrant annual music festival held at the beginning of September (see centrespread). Continuing your journey down the valley you reach the slightly bigger Cortes de la Frontera, with a population of around 4,500.

It is home to one of the largest bullrings in the Serrania de Ronda, built in 1894. And with both the Graza-

lema and the Alcornocales Natural Parks surrounding it, Cortes is truly spoilt for nature.

For me, what makes these remote villages even more spectacular is that they seem a million miles from anywhere; but in reality they are less than an hour's drive from the hustle and bustle of the Mediterranean coast.

Suzanna Odell, owner of the charming Hostal el Anon, has lived in Jimena since 1977, and is quick to praise the ideal location of the area and the beauty of the surroundings.

When talking about her arrival in the area she says: "I had had a sort of revelation of being where I belonged one night in the rain. I wanted to live here forever."

"They place a lot of importance on children and the family, which is one of the reasons I like it here, for the humanity. Even the poorest of people, the labourers, know how to behave and are considerate."

With so much on offer, this hidden gem is a must see for anyone wanting a taste of the real Andalucía. Rising near Ronda and winding its way down through the mountains to the Mediterranean, the 183km long Rio Guadiaro is quite a short river, but it is home to incredible scenery, not to mention half a dozen of the best white villages that Andalucía is renowned for.

So why will Cameron miss it so much? It's obvious... it's just beautiful.



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CHALLENGING: Guadiaro Valley cycle race

Guadiaro Valley special

ON first arrival in Jimena de la Frontera, you would be forgiven for thinking that it was a sleepy white village with not much to offer. But, you would be wrong. White village it may be, but sleepy it is not.

Turning up, unintentionally, at the culmination of their summer festival, the streets were filled with townsfolk and the subtle tones of Spanish classical guitar could be heard amid a carnival of world music.

Amongst the crowds of families and mothers and daughters dressed in matching Flamenco dresses which filled the square, were old couples dancing the paso doble. Even if there had been a donkey idling by, it couldn't have been much more Spanish.

Overlooked by the 13th century Moorish castle which sits on top of the hill, the small town is the epitome of picture postcard Spain with its white-washed houses built on some of the narrowest streets in the region.

The most stunning views are from the castle look-out to the surrounding Alcornocales Park

Trying to manoeuvre a station wagon around such roads was a challenge, but then these streets were made for walking, and most of the 9,000 residents do just that.

Lined with unique and traditional guest houses, local shops and lively bars, the steep streets all snake up to the castle which boasts excellent views of the town and



LOOKOUT: Wonderful views from the castle

These streets were made for walking

Nicola Cowell takes to the narrow lanes of Jimena to discover why the town is such an enchanted retreat for tourists and expats



SPLASH OF WHITE: Typical Jimena street

as far out as Algeciras and Gibraltar, on a clear day.

The castle, which was used as a vantage point by many groups including the Romans, Iberians, Moors and Phoenicians at various points

er - and it's also not too far away from the beach," he explains.

But, perhaps the most stunning of views to be taken in from the castle look-out is of the surrounding Alcornocales

throughout history, was seen as a great location for keeping a watchful eye on the area.

And it's not just for military purposes that Jimena is well-situated.

Local butcher Domingo Caliente says the best thing about the town is its location. "It is really well situated with so much around - the countryside and the river just that."

Natural Park, with many hiking and horse-riding options for the more active and the Hozgarganta River for swimming.

If a walk up the near-vertical streets to the castle and back is about as much as you can muster, there are plenty of bars in the town where you are guaranteed a refreshing drink and some friendly chit-chat.

As well as the annual music carnival, Jimena is host to several other festivals throughout the year, the most popular of which is the

mushroom collecting in mid-November. Melissa Gonzalez owns the newly-opened Hospederia Casa Henrietta and says people flock to collect the local Chantarella mushrooms.

"November is a busy time of year, when guests come to pick and try all the different types of mushrooms grown here," she explains.

"We will be hosting a mushroom tasting week here at the restaurant this year. "I grew up nearby, but moved to Jimena because it is so

typically Spanish and has beautiful scenery, plus the people are so friendly."

From the more traditional Hostal Anon, with its dining terraces overlooking the Natural Park, to the quirky Bar Marilyn - a shrine to Monroe - the town has a vibrant social scene that is enjoyed by the many ex-patriates who make up about ten per cent of the population.

And if those ex-pats were looking for traditional Spain with a twist, they came to the right place.

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Andalucia's best kept secret

Picture by: KARL SMALLMAN www.secretandalucia.com



A birdseye view of Estacion de Cortes

When artist James Nitchen and his partner Louise wanted to live in Spain they looked at many different areas but fell in love with Estacion de Cortes, writes Elizabeth Gould

ALTHOUGH not the prettiest in Andalucia, the village has lots of character and as a talented artist, James finds the area around the village an inspiration for his paintings. As a keen bird watcher he can sit on his terrace and see a wide variety of birds including booted eagles and owls. Living close to the river, where there are great walks, he can watch kingfishers, cormorants and the occasional otter. There is also an abundance of wild flowers in the area, including orchids.



BREATHTAKING: Rio Guadiaro as seen by James

James and Louise love the area as it is so quiet and peaceful - the only sound you can hear when you wake in the morning is the gentle clanging of sheep and goat bells. There are only ten British people who live permanently in the village but they have totally integrated with the friendly Spanish residents, with regular games of England v Spain pool in a local bar.

Six years ago, James found a 100 year old finca to restore and his first experience with the locals was when the previous Spanish owners paid his electricity bill. There is a small post office in the town, and collecting your mail is like stepping into a neighbour's living room. Living close to the railway, James prefers to take the train rather than his car and frequently visits Ronda, Jimera de Libar and Algeciras.

He says that Estacion de Cortes is a great place to live for an artist with the mix of beautiful scenery, wildlife and friendly locals.

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Ex-UK press photographer Karl Smallman - now editor of website www.secretandalucia.com that covers the area - displays a few of his evocative shots of the Guadiaro valley, from cave visits to flamenco displays

From Bilund with backpack

By Paul Darwent of Bar Allioli in Jimera de Libar

BACK in 1998, when our daughter was a toddler of 18 months, we decided we needed a break from the long drawn out winter of Denmark to rejuvenate our souls with some southern winter sunshine.

Ryanair wasn't quite so prolific then, but we managed a flight from Billund to Madrid and, using public transport and backpacks, leisurely made our way south to the Costa del Sol for a holiday. Back home in Denmark, it was a cold January and we were coming home one night when we realised that not being able to go into a bar or restaurant with our daughter wasn't quite the lifestyle we wanted.

First, we moved to La Cala, which was the perfect starting point for a new life in Spain, but it wasn't España.

During weekends and holidays spent camping

in the Guadiaro Valley we often stopped for a drink in the bar opposite the railway station. Shortly after that, we closed down the bar we had in La Cala and promised ourselves a few years away from the bar trade.

That was until that very bar in Jimera became available!

A points system helped the decision and against our expectations we got the place. We'd run a bar before but this was different as 90 per cent of the clientele was Spanish. By experimenting we became a rural Spanish Cafeteria with a few quirks.

Living in this valley is different from all other experiences, being half an hour away from supermarkets, with banks that

close early and always having to check how much fuel there is in the car.

But then you see the place!

The ice cold Cueva Del Gato pool is a favourite picnic and swimming spot

Both sides of the valley are defined by mountain ranges that are simply stunning. While you can't walk just anywhere, there are plenty of paths and tracks to explore and, when you ascend to the peak of one of the mountains, the views are amazing. Crisp, clear days allow you to appreciate the closeness of Africa and views north towards Olvera are breathtaking. We have mainly been exploring on foot but there are plenty of other ways around. Riders of the lost trail in Cortes will get you motorized. We are looking



PARTNERS: Paul and his wife Synnove outside Bar Allioli and below, some of their forthcoming events

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to get on our bikes this autumn and enjoy the sparse traffic that we have. One of the other simple pleasures we have is free swimming. Being the part of Spain with the highest amount of rainfall, there is running water all year round and many places to swim for free. The ice cold Cueva Del Gato pool is a favourite picnic spot and all the way down the river there are places to enjoy the refreshing water. The nature in this valley is a joy to behold and if you are armed with GPS, www.wikiloc.com or www.groundspeak.com will supply you with routes to follow and coordinates to go geo-caching. Outdoor pursuits play a big part in our life here, to the extent that we started guided walks and organized trips.

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FOR a hotel retreat in the traditional white village of Jimena de la Frontera, stay at the Hospedería Casa Henrietta Bed and Breakfast. Owned by artist Melissa Gonzalez, who hails from nearby but is half-British, the hotel is always lively and hosts several festivals throughout the year. Visit the hotel and take an art course in October or stay in November to sample the local mushrooms.

Sleep and dine in style

Alternatively, La Vina de Linan is a beautiful place and a real hidden secret in Jimena de la Frontera. It is unique with fabulous views, quality accommodation, large pool and hot tub with plenty of areas to chill out and there's a very warm welcome to all guests from owners Val and Pat Jubb. You could also try Pension El Chirimoyo, a relaxed and friendly Bed and Breakfast in Jimena de la Frontera.



SHADY NOOKS: Escape to the tree-covered terraces in the afternoon heat - Vina de Linan (above) and Hotel Molino del Santo (top right)



RUSTIC CHARM: The old railway building that houses Restaurante Quercus

This beautiful and spacious guest house set in a converted 600-year-old house offers visitors private use of the garden in peaceful and tranquil surroundings. For a stunning hotel, book yourself in at the rural Molino del Santo, situated in the countryside at Estacion de Benaolán. This 18 bedroom hotel with heated pool is surrounded by beautiful gardens and a mountain stream. The restaurant and bar offer excellent food and a great atmosphere, and are open seven days a week for visitors as well as guests. Or for the meat-lover, look no further than restaurant Asador el Muelle in Benaolán. The restaurant boasts the only wood-fired Arab oven in the area, allowing owner and chef Cristobal to cook some of the finest steaks and meat dishes around.

Another option might be Hotel Molino Cuatro Parad, a charmingly restored flour mill located just outside the popular village of Benaolán on the banks of the river Guadiaro near Ronda. Converted into a comfortable country hotel with a variety of accommodation options, the rural hotel is in the perfect location to explore the natural parks of Sierra de Grazalema and Sierra de las Nieves. If you prefer a more rustic experience, you may opt for the Cabanas campsite in nearby Jimera de Libar, situated on the Guadiaro River. Here you

can stay in cabins or tents and take part in various adventure sports like horse-riding and kayaking from your base at the campsite. This converted railway shed right at the side of the railway line serves local and seasonal natural produce. Hotel Inz Almaraz in Jimera de Libar is a smaller rural hotel with five double rooms and a rustic-style house. The hotel also boasts a very good restaurant with a variety of typical as well as contemporary Spanish foods and a good selection of wines from the area. If you like to relax, but

also want to be well situated for walking, trekking and bird watching, this is for you.

Paul always gives a warm welcome and offers a great selection of tapas

And if you do decide to take the famous walk from Benaolán to Jimera de Libar, the perfect place to finish your trek is at Bar Alloli in Estacion Jimera de Libar. Here owner Paul, originally from Yorkshire, always gives a warm welcome and offers a great selection of tapas at very affordable prices. The bar is always bustling with locals and tourists alike, and Paul has his finger firmly on the pulse of the local social scene, ready to point you in the right direction for a good time.

Another rustic restaurant worth a visit is the Restaurante Quercus in Estacion Jimera de Libar. This converted railway shed right at the side of the railway line serves local and seasonal natural produce. Finding yourself in Cortes de la Frontera, you cannot miss Hotel El Gecko, which is among the best boutique hotels in the region. The tastefully converted Andalusian Inn is family-run and is the perfect place to unwind, with a delightful terrace, patio and pool plus the locally renowned Riverside Bistro. This informal and friendly restaurant is well-known for its good quality, fresh food.



WELCOMING: Owner Suzanna Odell

HOTEL FOCUS - HOSTAL EL ANON

A little piece of Spain

AFTER navigating your way through the maze of narrow streets you arrive at the charming Hostal el Anon located on the steep Calle Consuelo, in Jimena de la Frontera. With a welcoming, relaxed atmosphere you will feel at home straight away here and will be immediately struck by the friendliness of the staff. The hotel has only 13 rooms, each one unique, which adds to the homely nature of the place. And there is an intimate bar, decorated with railway memorabilia. The piece-de-resistance, however, is the Restaurant el Anon, which offers delicious home-cooked food. And it is a clear testament to the quality of the restaurant that many of the locals also choose to eat here so that on any given night it is wise to book in advance. According to hotel owner, American-born Suzanna Odell, who has lived here for 33 years, the hotel attracts a mix of guests from all over, but the feel of the place remains rooted here in the heart of Andalucía. She says: "For me it was important to keep the hotel as Spanish as possible, so all of the staff are from around the village." And it is easy to see why this is the case. With picturesque Andalusian courtyards, vine-shaded terraces, and a roof-top swimming pool overlooking the whole town, you cannot fail to be impressed by the setting. So, whether you are the more adventurous type hoping to explore the surrounding area or you just want a romantic getaway, Hostal el Anon is an ideal location.



7 Guadiaro Valley special



Largest collection of cave art in Europe

“DO not allow anything to damage the cave. These paintings are a priceless treasure.” Those were the words of Jose

Bullon Lobato when he discovered the Cueva de la Pileta in 1905, a cave which can be found 25km out of Ronda, near the village of Benaolán. The 'Cave of the Pool', was found at the side of one of

the Sierra de Libar hills when farmer Lobato noticed bats flying in and out of the area and went to investigate, soon finding himself in an impressive 2000 metre cave. But what was most interesting

By Nicola Cowell

about his find was the discovery of several cave paintings, now known to be the largest collection of Paleolithic cave art in Europe and between 25 and 32 thousand years old. The paintings, depicting animals like cows, horses and fish, are painted with charcoal and ochre, and are still preserved by the Lobato family more than 100 years on.



ANCIENT: Cave paintings are at least 32,000 years old

No socks for me!

Paul Whitelock on why he loves Montejaque

IFIRST discovered Montejaque ten years ago this week, while on a tour of Andalucía with my then wife. As we drove from Ronda through the stunning scenery of the Guadiaro valley, calling at the Cueva del Gato on our way, we crossed the river, turned up the hill and suddenly we saw our first ever pueblo blanco, Benaolán, clinging precariously to the mountainside above us. After squeezing our hire car through its narrow but pretty streets, we drove on up the hill towards our second white village, Montejaque. This was even more impressive. The square, with the pretty town hall, the church and the old hotel and, at that time three thriving bars, left an indelible mark upon us. Despite visiting countless other enchanting white villages during that fortnight, such as Grazalema, Zahara de la Sierra, Arcos de la Frontera and Olvera, we liked Montejaque the best. We decided to look for a property there and made several return visits to the area

over the next few months. In the end we bought a place in Ronda in 2001, but my thoughts kept returning to the tiny village tucked in beneath el Hacho mountain. Seven years later, at the very end of 2008, I came to live in the village. By this time divorced, I'd met a new lady, now my second wife, and I joined her there. My Montejaque is waking each morning beside the woman I love and watching the sun rise through our window, listening to the early morning chattering of the birds in the olive tree next door, nattering with our Spanish neighbours about the weather and the cost of living, being treated with kindness, respect and trust by the locals, being known as the guiri that speaks good Spanish, going foraging for firewood up the mountain, not having to wear socks from April to October, going for a paseo in the early evening and then for tapas with friends before going home to dinner. We're shortly moving house, but only down the road. We're staying put in the village we love - Montejaque. My Montejaque.



IMPRESSIVE: Montejaque nestles into mountain backdrop

Walking tours often end at the family's farmhouse for a glass of sherry

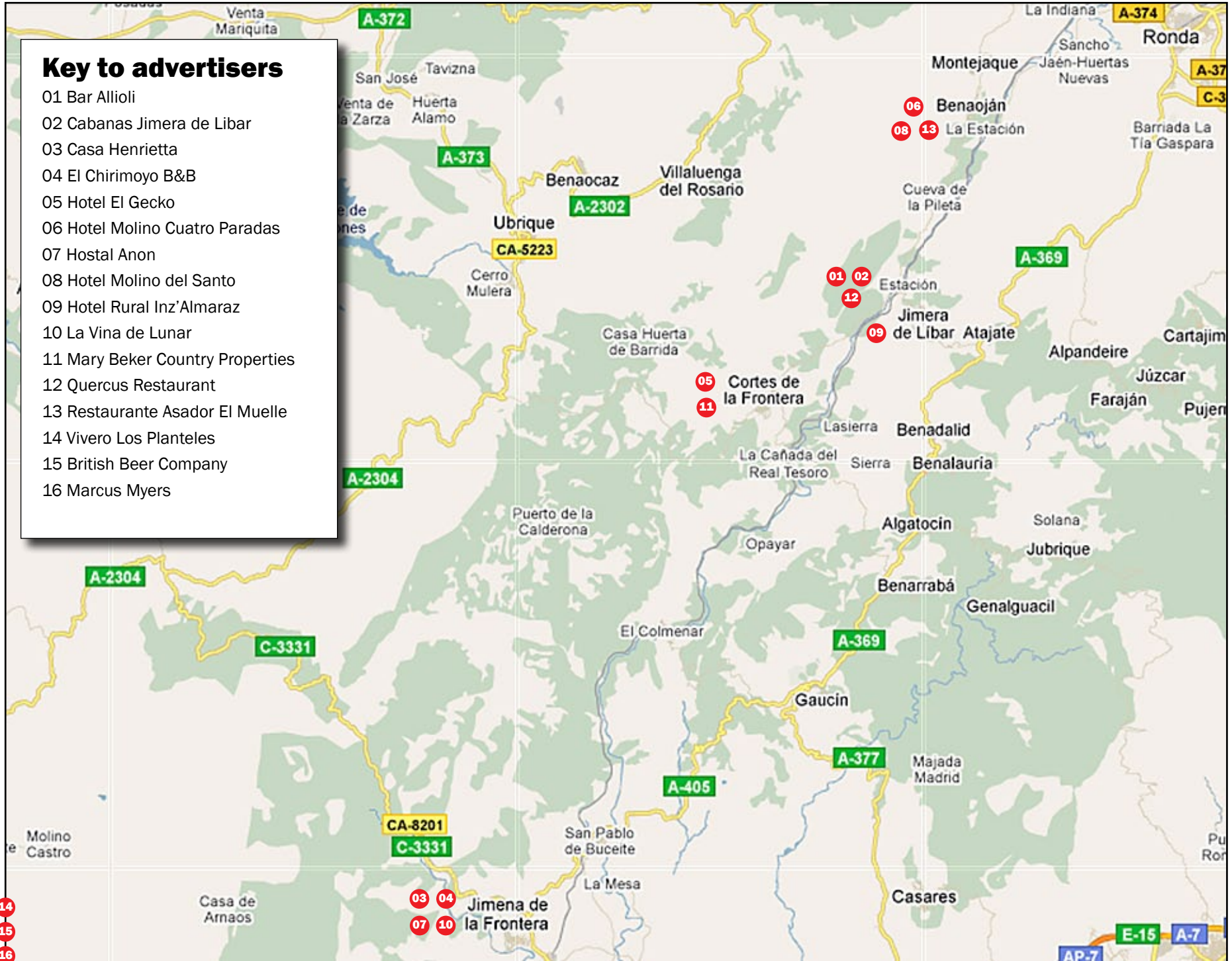
Lobato's grandson, Jose, now owns the cave and runs guided tours, although it has not been largely commercialised. His grandfather and father spent years developing the caves and building steps for walking tours, which often end at the family's farmhouse for a glass of sherry. The tour takes you through the main gallery and new galleries and shows the yellow, red and black illustrations made by the hunter-gatherers. Further on, the gallery of the rocks has an array of pottery, stone tools, flint and bone fragments that have been found in the caves over the years, as well as the skeleton of a young woman. But, perhaps the most spectacular sight is the chamber of the fish, which contains a wall painting of a great black seal-like creature about 3 feet long and, at the innermost heart of the cave, ends in a 250ft vertical drop. Tours at the Cueva de la Pileta run at 10am and 4pm each day.



Molino del Santo

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