

All about Antequera

Mollina and Fuente de Piedra

November 2010

A 12-page Olive Press insiders guide

The sleeping giant awakes

A city of palaces and churches, of history and tradition, Antequera counts for 70 per cent of the key buildings and monuments of Malaga province, writes Jon Clarke

THERE is something remarkably solid about Antequera, in both its people and its buildings. Solid in the sense of bulk and solid in the sense of temperament, the city is a kind of sleeping giant, rather like the silhouette of the nearby rock, the Pena de los Enamorados, that dominates its outskirts (see pictures above). Described as 'the Prehistoric museum of Andalusia', its narrow streets feel almost choked by the weight of history; its enormous, solidly-built palaces and churches towering over them. It is not for nothing that an incredible 70 per cent of all the key listed buildings and monuments (or *patrimonio*) of Malaga province are found in the city. "Malaga city doesn't come close," insists Silvia Jurado, president of the local tourism initiative CIT. "There are so many gems here. You would be hard pressed to see them all in a weekend." The 19th century traveller Washington Irving, a former US ambassador to Spain, was particularly taken by the place, when he wrote: "Everything in this venerable city has a decidedly Spanish seal." But Antequera has been stepped in a rich and glori-

Turn to Page 2

DELIGHTFUL PROPORTIONS: Plaza Santiago at night, while (top) the evocative Pena de los Enamorados

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JOY: Church of Santa Maria and (right) typical square



From Page 1

ous history since the stone age, when ancient tribes roamed the area and built their famous burial sites - or dolmens - which are still a joy to visit. Then there was the Roman period, the Moorish invasion and finally - some 600 years ago exactly - the reconquest by the Christians, who retook the city in 1410. The wealth of history is quickly apparent on wandering around the easily manageable city with its orange-tree-lined streets and wide marble pavements. Head in any direction and you will find a Baroque or Arabic gem. I particularly like Plaza de las Descalzas and a short walk away Plaza Santiago for its delightful proportions. While there are more churches per head of capita than anywhere else in Spain, the city is topped with a magical jewel in the crown, its stunning Alcazaba, or ancient fortress, which is now open again after a long refurbishment. Take a walk up the hill from the tourist office, through the imposing Arco de los Gigantes, and you soon come across the impressively fortified fortress. Marvel at the views and the leafy gardens, which are a delight to walk around, and then take a particular look at the 13th century Torre del Homenaje, which is a great example of Islamic architecture. Coincidentally Antequera, then known as Madinet Antaqira, was the first of the

major Arabic towns to fall when the Christians under El Infante Don Fernando of Aragon made his final push south into the Kingdom of Granada in 1410. In the Plaza Alta square below the Alcazaba, not only will you find a great terrace restaurant El Escribano to while away an hour, but the stunning church of Santa Maria is a joy to visit. Light and airy with a superb Mudéjar-style, double hammer ceiling, thankfully the church has been unseparated and now holds a series of art exhibitions and even rock concerts.

Antequera's conservative nature may have something to do with its huge wealth

This is all rather odd for a city that is about as conservative as any you will find around Andalucia. Alongside Sevilla, and say Ronda, there is a distinctly traditional feel to the place, both in sights and values. This may have much to do with the amount of wealth that has been generated here for many centuries. It is no coincidence that the rich, fertile plain (or vega) of Antequera is dotted with enormous estates, each with their impressive white-washed cortijos. Many of these have been wonderfully conserved,

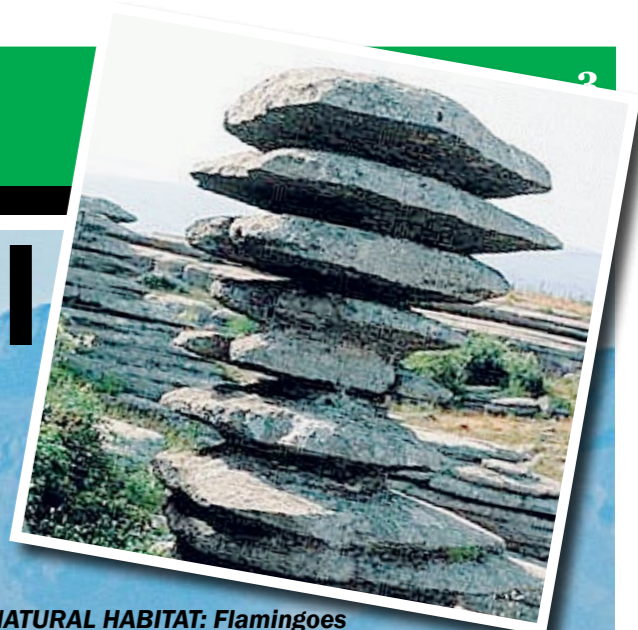
although few are lived in. Some have been converted into venues for weddings, while others are garden centres. The rest are simply aching for conversion from anyone wealthy enough, or stupid enough, to take on board such a large project. This is the gateway to Europe's finest olive groves. Stretching north from here are the famous appellations of Priego de Cordoba, Jaen, and of course the local olive oil producers in Fuente de Piedra, Alameda, Sierra de Yeguas. While a controversial - and perhaps misguided - plan currently exists to convert a large part of the vega into a huge international airport and commercial centre, it is currently still relatively intact. Take a ride out towards three key areas of natural beauty nearby, up towards the lake district, with its famous Caminito del Rey, or Fuente de Piedra with its lake filled with flamingoes for much of the year. Then there is the formidable barrier of the Sierra de las Cabras and more famously El Torcal, one of Spain's fin-

Antequera special

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est rocky outcrops, with a new visitor centre, to boot. Not quite connected to the same chain of mountains, but just as impressive is the nearby Pena de los Enamorados, or Lovers' Rock, where local legend insists that a Christian warrior and a Muslim girl leapt to their deaths rather than be forced to live separate lives. As one local expatriate Euan Woodward, a training and development consultant, who lives in nearby Mollina, described it. "My priorities were having an airport nearby so that I could return to the UK for work without driving long distances,

and I have two - Granada and Malaga. I also wanted to be based in a traditional Spanish town. "I saw Mollina and liked it very much. Then I went just down the road to Antequera and thought that was the icing on the cake. I sat outside cafes and watched the world go by and was really taken by the feel of the place. "Antequera has lovely restaurants, plenty of shops and the mountain range El Torcal. The best thing about Antequera is that I feel at peace here. The place just feels right for me." Now, Washington Irving could not have summed it up so well.



NATURAL HABITAT: Flamingoes at Fuente de Piedra and (inset) rocks at El Torcal



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Aladdin's cave

Antequera is one of the region's best places to find old doors and antiques

MOST people assume the ancient church and posada date back to the 16th or 17th centuries. But, in fact, atmospheric restaurant Caserio de San Benito is just over a decade old. It was built from scratch entirely from ancient building materials collected over decades by owner Antonio. Sitting some 10 miles north of Antequera, it is testament to the eye of the man. An Aladdin's cave for collectors, it is literally full to the brim with thousands of ancient artefacts, such as doors, milling equipment and troughs. But, as it happens, the Caserio is anything but unique for the area. Antequera has long been known as one of the best places to find antiques and old building materials in Andalucía.



COLLECTORS: Jose Antonio Romero (right) and Antonio (inset) and his restaurant Caserio de San Benito

"It has been a crossroads for traders and travellers for centuries and there are so many important old buildings and farms here," explains Jose Antonio Romero, who has two antiques shops in the town. The first El Rincon de Antiquedades sits in the heart of La Veronica shopping centre, while the second El Rincon de la Ceramica is a huge reclamation yard in the Complejo Luante industrial estate, near Hotel Los Dolmenes.

Full of antique furniture from all over the world, in particular you can pick up reconditioned doors for just over 350 euros, including door frame and lock.

"I have been collecting for four years and have antiques from all over the world, including Morocco and India," continues Romero, who is an electrician by trade.

"I have always been interested in old things and Antequera definitely has an antiques culture thriving here." There are around half a dozen other antiques dealers and reclamation yards in the area, including Juan Dorado's spot in the El Faro area beside the A92 motorway.

Here, you can also find any number of interesting items from carriages to elegant statues.



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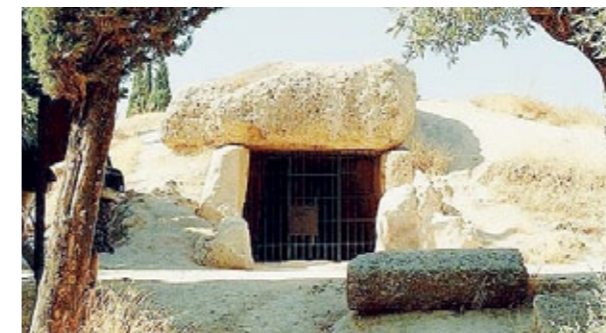
5 Antequera special

The Prehistoric museum of Andalucía

SINCE the ancient Egyptians were erecting the pyramids in Giza there have been ancient tribes shuffling around the fertile Antequera vega. It is for this reason that the town - which sits at the dead centre of southern Spain - is often called the 'Prehistoric museum of Andalucía'. Indeed, just about every time a major construction job is undertaken in the area, archaeological remains are dug up. Only in 1998, builders found an incredible set of mosaics at an ancient Roman villa unearthed on the outskirts of the town, near the train station.

Among the remains - said to be some of the best preserved in the world - they found statues, including the

priceless Venus of Antequera and the Nero Germanica. A few years earlier archaeologists



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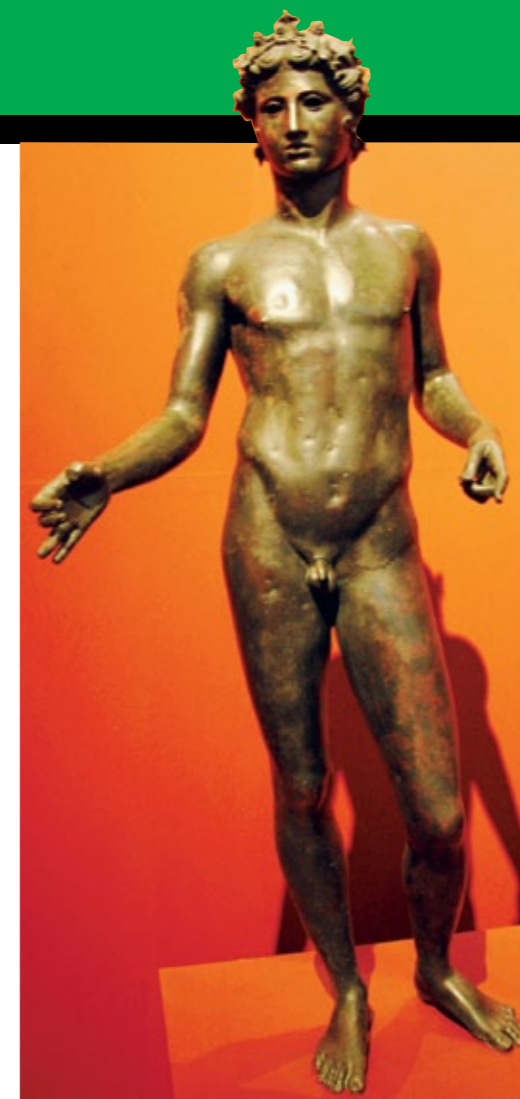
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6



Where history comes alive



WITH 70 per cent of all the protected monuments and buildings in Malaga province, there is plenty of sightseeing to be done in Antequera. But, almost inevitably, you need to go inside - to the Church of Santa Maria - to see the very best of what is on offer, in particular, with this fabulous Roman statue, known as the Efebo (above) and far left a wooden monk. Left, the gate to the Plaza de los Escribanos and (inset above) two of its details. Main picture is a view from the Alcazaba, while (inset) is a church at night in Calle Diego Ponce, and Plaza San Francisco.

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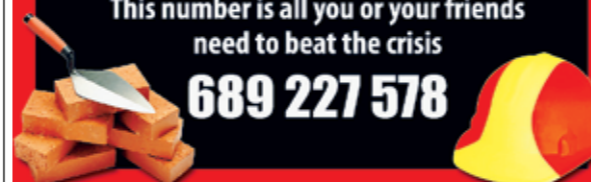
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8 Antequera special

My council house solution

If you thought you only found a glut of empty and overpriced developments on the coast you would be wrong.

Inland towns such as Fuente de Piedra, Humilladero and Mollina - to name just three - have a huge number of ugly and unwanted apartment blocks scarring their outskirts.

It all came about since 2007 when the local authorities - in a bid to milk the development cash cow - allowed the vast majority of these schemes to go up.

They didn't actually think about demand for these 'white elephants'. And the recession has only made them even less desirable.

I continue to ask myself why does greed always seem to outweigh every other human emotion, regardless of civic and moral responsibilities?

In inland Andalucia - just as it happened on the coast - the local authorities, architects and developers colluded with the banks to allow it to happen.

Who would buy one of these cramped and pokey apartments?

But giving planning approval and finance for these developments has proved a grave error. Because who in their right



Graham Govier (left) argues that the glut of empty apartment blocks around inland Andalucia should be turned into council properties

mind would buy one of these cramped and pokey apartments, with their tiny terraces and neighbours sometimes less than two metres away?

And particularly now when you can get a four bedroom home and garden for the same price.

As a member of the PP party in Mollina, I have been campaigning since 2006 against these unnecessary 'ghetto' developments.

In 2001 when I started developing urban land, planning restrictions were logical and took into account their future impact on the environment.

At the time a minimum plot size of 200 square metres was the requirement to build a single or two-storey house, which was plenty.

But nearly every year since then, planning departments have eroded the minimum requirements to the extent that now just 70 square metres is required to build a house.

Even when property prices were rising, there was no justification for it.

From 2002 until 2006 my company built (and sold) 86 three and four bedroom properties. And while profit was of course the driving force, I took on board certain responsibilities regarding the environment, size and style of the homes.

I had a sense of civic responsibility. After all, I lived in the area.

This is why it makes me so angry to see these ridiculous projects.

Most of them are empty and many already starting to degrade.

The owners and the politicians have few clues what to do. In fact, half the time they look like frightened rabbits in the headlights when you ask them.

They know they have made a huge error.

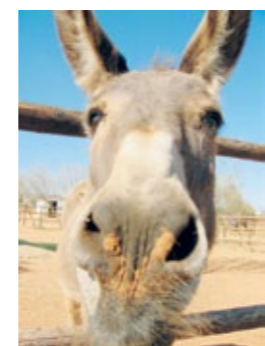
After all, there are up to 1.5

The real Antequera wildlife

ANTEQUERA is surrounded by some of Andalucia's most stunning scenery. From the walkers paradise around El Chorro to the birdwatchers heaven of Fuente de Piedra, there is so much to visit.

Most exciting is the current plan to restore the Caminito del Rey - the incredible Kings Path - at El Chorro, as well as the return en masse of the pink flamingoes at Fuente de Piedra.

After seeing the flamingoes make

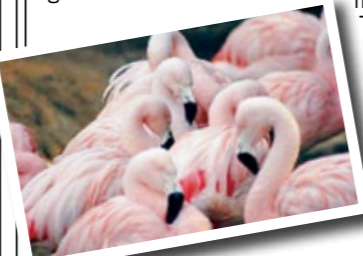


sure to drop into the nearby Donkey Sanctuary, a charity campaigning for improved conditions for donkeys and mules across Europe.

Another great place to visit is the enchanted mountain range of El Torcal with its often haunting rock shapes.

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Close by you will find the 40 hectare Lobo Park, which is home to dozens of different wolf species.



LOVED UP: Flamingoes, while (top) a donkey

Antequera special 9



MISMATCH: Out of town developments cost the same as charming three-bed cottages (inset)

million empty homes in Spain and house prices have fallen by up to 40 per cent over the last year alone.

These pokey apartments, which the banks have often lent money on to the value of up to 120,000 euros, are perhaps today worth just 60,000 euros.

And at that price there are still few takers. Because while there are quite a large number of smart buyers snapping up bargains, it is not these sort of properties they are after.

As one of the few remaining inland estate agencies, I steadfastly refuse to put these developments on my

books. When the local developers or banks ask me why, I tell them straight: 'These homes are not sellable. Sorry.'

My solution would be for the Bank of Spain to negotiate the purchase of these failed projects with the relevant private banks and pass direct ownership to the particular local authorities.

Financing could be on an interest-only basis for two years and the properties could then be utilised for social housing.

And this does not mean 'VPO' (or first time buyer subsidised housing) but proper council housing for people who need it and right now there is no

shortage of them. Sure this might appear to be a move in the direction of socialism, but this is not the time to be playing politics.

To leave them unoccupied for much longer will see them dilapidate with even more expense required to make them habitable.

Meanwhile, the queue for social housing gets longer. Perhaps if put under local authority care it might just force councils to review their planning policies and get back the civic responsibility that we demand from them.

And let's not forget that 2011 brings local elections and an opportunity for change. I just find it terribly sad that so far I have seen no political party coming up with any decent solution to the problem.

Surely someone must see sense?

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WHERE TO EAT

ANTEQUERA is certainly best known for its traditional cuisine, such as porra (a thicker, bread-laden gazpacho), mollete bread rolls and a rich goat stew. One of the best places to try it is at El Escribano, which sits in a fabulous position just below the Alcazaba fortress. But while there is plenty of traditional fare, you will also find some interesting modern dishes, such as the green pepper from the nearby vega, stuffed with partridge and covered in a spicy tomato source. Down the hill make sure to drop into the restaurant of the moment, Meson Iberico, which was recently opened by the slick Grupo La Sierra. It is buzzing most nights and no surprise with the quality

of original tapas served up by Cordoba-trained chef Pepillo. From the same group, a sister restaurant La Fabrica in the main industrial estate on the edge of town is a totally different flavour and serves adventurous, modern cooking. Certainly worthy of a mention is Hospederia Coso San Francisco, which has a range of fascinating recipes going back to the 11th century. A charming spot, you sit in a central courtyard, well heated with a roaring fire and even braseros under each table to warm your feet. History lovers will also love the great cake shop Entre Torres in Calle Infante Don Fernando, worth visiting if nothing more for its fantastic old photographs of Antequera. And, if you are looking for wine then you will want to try the excellent new wine shop Sanchez Garrido, while Jamoneria Fuentes has both wine and all the best quality hams and cold meats. If atmospheric charm is what you are after then take a ride up the new motorway towards Cordoba to Caserio de San Benito. This incredible place feels straight out of the 18th century and its restaurant has an interesting and tasty menu. Different, but equally good

in quality is Candida restaurant, in Alameda, which is full most days of the week with businessmen and politicians, rubbing shoulders with farmers and builders. Named after the mother, who cooks in the kitchen, the place has a great value menu del dia and dishes including a fabulous goat stew and one of the finest almond puddings, I have ever tried. A little ride away in Campillos is a brilliant spot Yerbaguena, run by a Spaniard, who spent years living in Brighton. It is stylish and, best of all, serves some of the most inventive food in the region.

Over in Fuente de Piedra you will always get a warm welcome from Mick at Bar Rebutito. Classic English food at excellent prices, you would do well to come here if you fancy watching your favourite footie team on the box. Over in Mollina, look out for Bar Margarita, which is something of an institution, and, if it is English foodstuffs you are looking for, then look no further than the New Village Store, which makes Mollina a veritable home from home for the town's sizeable expatriate community.

Institution

WHERE TO STAY

ANTEQUERA has an interesting range of places to stay dotted around the place and its nearby countryside. While good hotels in the centre are hard to come by you would certainly want a look at Hotel Plaza San Sebastian. In a superb central location, it is a hop and a skip from all the best sights and at 25 euros a night for a single room is unbeatable value. Just a five minute walk from the centre is Hotel Las Villas de Antikaria, which has a terrific 'weekend romance deal' of just 198 euros per couple for two nights... and including a meal at the lovely Escribano restaurant, owned by the same family. A little further away is a parador, while the Hotel Antequera golf is getting increasingly popular. A fabulous countryside option would be on the famous 'bandolero route' in nearby Alameda. The evocative Posada de Jose Maria el Tempranillo - named after one of Spain's most feared bandits - has been built with ancient materials giving the place a genuine 17th century feel. It has a great local restaurant and you really get the impression that the bandolero himself might walk through the door at any moment. Another great country hotel is the recently renovated five-star convent Hotel La Magdalena en route to El Torcal.

Antequera special

11



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