

All about Gaucin & the Genal Valley

August 2011

An 8-page Olive Press insiders guide


A view from the top

Wendy Williams admires the views from the Balcony of the Serrania de Ronda and discovers what gives Gaucin its 'zing'...


"IT has a special 'zing' that the other villages just haven't got," explains Caroline Grant from Hampshire, who is currently looking to buy a home in one of Andalusia's most scenic towns. "It is not spoilt, there aren't coach loads of tourists, and we just love it," she added. Gaucin does have a certain *je ne sais quoi* about it that sets it apart from the many other white villages that litter the mountains across Andalusia. Known as the Balcony of the Serrania de Ronda, Gaucin perches on a rocky outcrop at the end of the Genal Valley. The town is in fact just 30 minutes from the Costa del Sol but this piece of unspoilt countryside offers a raw beauty that is a million miles away in spirit. Small enough to remain

Turn to Page 2

LOOK OUT: Gaucin castle has incredible views across the Serrania de Ronda and the Strait of Gibraltar to Africa



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² Gaucin & Genal Valley *special*

From Page 1

untroubled by supermarket chains, this jumble of white-washed houses, lorded over by the historic Arabic castle Castillo del Aguila, is the biggest of the valleys pueblos blancos with around 2,000 residents.

But it has none of the razzle-dazzle that has taken over the concrete ribbon of the Costa del Sol.

And, while it is difficult to put your finger on exactly what it is that makes it such a magical place, it is clearly something that has been felt by many.

Despite initial appearances, hidden in this mountainous enclave behind the white washed walls are literally hundreds of expats.

In particular, Gaucin attracts a bohemian and artistic crowd that lends it a distinctly creative and prosperous air. It is rapidly carving a name as an artist's escape while also being a select holiday spot for the likes of the Sainsbury family, Fatboy Slim and allegedly once Princess Diana.

But its key selling point is the spectacular views.

The furthest point inland where you can still see the sea, on a clear morning you can make out both Gibraltar and Morocco's Rif mountains beyond.

Into the hills



INSPIRATIONAL: Paddy Robinson captures the view of Gaucin (left) in her work

they informed me.

"Gaucin has beautiful views of the countryside and Gibraltar.

"We will never leave, we have grown up here, and it is our town." Of course, as might have been expected the trio also launched into a spiel about the good old days.

"The town has changed a lot over the years and not all for the better, there are less people now than there used to be although a lot more foreigners live here." And it is certainly true that the town has changed a lot over the years, but the presence of foreign-

ing a few minutes out from watching the world go by - the old boys all agreed it is the scenery that draws the foreign crowds.

"They come because it is so pretty and because it is only 25 minutes to the beach,"

Even the locals still admire the views.

Alfonso Corbacha Moncado, 88, Francisco Garcia Moreno, 66, and Sebastian Marijan Ruiz, 54, have lived here all their lives.

But as we got chatting - tak-

from Barcelona with a friend looking for somewhere and I didn't like the scenery until I got here," explains Robinson who exhibits her work in Fructosa.

"It is just beautiful," she added.

In fact artist Paddy Robinson, 66, who has lived in Gaucin for eight years, believes it is some of the best scenery in Spain.

"I decided to come and live in Spain but I had never been here before I drove down

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³ Gaucin & Genal

ers at least is nothing new.

Throughout the town's somewhat turbulent history - which according to archaeological remains dates back to pre-historic times - Gaucin has been invaded by everyone from the Phoenicians to the Moors to the French.

And key to Gaucins early popularity with the British is of course Gibraltar.

From the late 18th century Britons commissioned on the rock would spend summer breaks here.

And it became so popular that British engineers were actually commissioned to build a railway from Algeciras to Ronda in the late 19th century.

Sadly, on the opposite side of the coin, as Gaucin has seen more and more foreigners arriving, it has seen local Spaniards leaving.

"Around 100 years ago, Gaucin was as large as Ronda," explained David Rodriguez Delahueriga, 33, who



BUENA VISTA: The views stretch as far as Gibraltar

owns hotel La Herriza, on the road down to Gaucin station.

"But one has been on the up and one has been on the down ever since.

"Basically over time there was less and less demand for the local produce, which is predominately goats and sheep, and so a lot of people left, they went to big cities like

Barcelona and Madrid to find work.

"Interesting now however there are a lot of people around Spain who originated from Gaucin.

"And although Gaucin is bigger than some of the other towns in the area, a lot of the houses are empty, owned by people who have their roots here but only come back for holidays." He continued: "Now however the foreigners are bringing money with them which is great for the town.

"But it still doesn't feel like a touristy place.

"It is still a typical *pueblo blanco* in a beautiful natural park, (Los Alcornocales), and has everything people look for in an original Andaluz village. It also has that little bit more."

By following the geckos you get a wonderful flavour of this exciting and pretty village

Instantly setting it aside from a typical village, for example, are dozens of brightly-coloured geckos which stand out against the whitewashed walls as part of a local artists initiative.

The brainchild of Jesus Balsa, the 2008 project - which saw 400 geckos decorated - aimed to involve locals and foreigners, young and old, in promoting the village.

By following the geckos around you get a wonderful flavour of this exciting and pretty white village.

You are also reminded of the strong artistic presence that comes to the fore in the annual art trail.

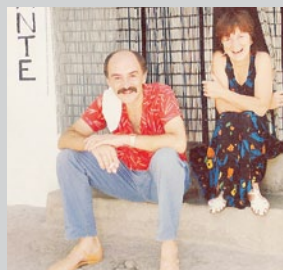
Transforming the town into a living gallery the Art Gaucin Open Studios event each Spring lead visitors on an art route throughout the many workshops.

Now in its seventh year, the event lets visitors wander from studio to studio, mingle with the artists and soak up the creativity.

And creativity is certainly part of the fabric of life in Gaucin, and is, quite possibly, the secret to the town's 'zing'.

My Gaucin

One of the first expats to live in the area, estate agent Mary Beker remembers what Gaucin was like when she moved...



TRAILBLAZER: Mary arrived in 1975

IT all started with an advert in *The Observer*.

Mary Beker, 67, originally from Warrington, moved to the town on a permanent basis in 1975 when Franco was still in charge.

Here she tells *the Olive Press* about her early years there. "I saw an advert offering a free weekend in Jimena where they would show you properties around the area. I hadn't really thought about moving here, I just fancied the free weekend.

But I just fell in love with the place. It was a bit of an adventure as it was a long way from everywhere.

At the time there was no road to the coast so you had to really want to come here, it wasn't convenient. There are a lot of English there now but the foreigners that were there before were very special.

Some had money, some didn't, but it wasn't all dinner parties and the like, we were just a bunch of nutters in the middle of the mountains.

We were very involved with the Spanish, and they kind of adopted us. I was always 'their foreigner' and because I had a car I would get invitations to weddings and Matanzas because I could take people.

Now, when I go back, they call me a traitor as I have gone to the next village, which to them is a big deal.

They used to call people who had been as far as Ronda *munditos* because they had seen the wide world. Most of them had never been to the coast, had never seen the sea.

Of course, back then there were only three cars in the village. Because there wasn't much space to park I used to leave the keys in the car and someone would move it if they needed to.

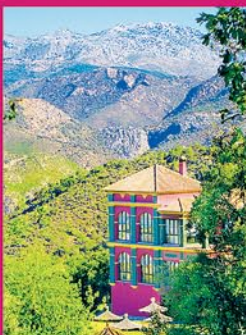
There was no concern about anybody stealing it.

Women didn't go in bars in those days and I had to change the way I dressed. All the other women still wore black. Now some of the teenagers seem half naked. It really has changed tremendously.



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A collage of two images. The top image shows a chestnut in its spiky husk, with the red nut visible. The bottom image shows two Amanita muscaria mushrooms with bright orange-red caps and white stems, growing on a forest floor covered in leaves and twigs.

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6 Genal Valley *special*

On the scenic route

AS I dipped my toe into the water and admired the stunning mountainous scenery around me, the charms of the Genal Valley were all too apparent.

From my vantage point in the municipal swimming pool in Parauta, I was surrounded by a vast landscape of oak and chestnut forests and craggy peaks.

This expansive valley - spread over 42,000 hectares between the coast and Ronda - is a paradise for walkers, wild-life lovers and those who just want to get away from it all. It even boasts one of Europe's cleanest rivers.

Certainly there are few regions as evocative and unspoilt as the Genal Valley, which is made up of a collection of 16 villages within the Serranía de Ronda, some of which are literally off the map.

Moreover, while Gaucin, by far the biggest town in the valley, may have attracted an influx of expats in recent years, few have ventured further into the valley. It remains quintessentially Spanish and for every few cars, there seems to be a donkey. In fact taking a trip through the valley is almost like taking a step back in time.

"Life here goes on the same," smiled Ana Martínez who runs El Quejigo in Algotocin,

selling local hams and cheeses in addition to typical artisanal crafts from the area.

"There are less people these days, it is quieter but it hasn't really changed much over the years." Certainly tourism is not generally developed in the Genal Valley giving those that venture into each authentic village the sense of getting to know the 'real Spain' or at least, how it used to be when people lived simpler and slower paced lives. Going hand in hand with this, the Genal Valley is one of few areas where you can still

Wendy Williams takes a step back in time in the unspoilt Genal Valley



glimpse artisanal trades that are slowly dying out. In particular you will find bas-

kets and blinds woven out of esparto grass that is found on the high peaks.

Indeed esparto was once the main source of income for many families in the Sierra de las Nieves.

Dividing the manual task between men and women - the men would collect the grass and the women would weave it - the locals were able to make countless everyday items. In Iguala there is now a woman's cooperative that has been formed to keep this tradition alive.

But the sad truth is that it is dying out.

"A few decades ago esparto was a good living, but nowadays young people are not interested in learning the trade," explained Martínez, who sells the products. "It is a lot of work and takes a long time and people just don't have the patience." In fact the main staple business here is actually chestnuts.

Indeed, as I ventured into a bar just outside Gaucin I was immediately struck by two posters - one in English, one in Spanish - hanging pride of place between the hams and wooden beams informing me all about chestnuts.

Apparently they can be eaten as a dessert, in syrup or as butter.

The area boasts four different varieties of chestnut trees up to 500 years old

But what is more interesting is what it says about the area, which incidentally boasts four different varieties of chestnut trees, some up to 500 years old.

Each local village picks them and sells them to a local co-operative that markets them around the rest of Spain. If you visit in late Autumn - well worthwhile just to see the valley taking on the red hues of the leaves of the valley's chestnut trees - you are sure to find many families in the different villages out picking chestnuts, just as their parents and grandparents did. They could also be gathering wild the mushrooms which are



TRADITION: Juzcar has changed but esparto grass weaving (below) continues

found in abundance in the shade of the trees. There is a certain charm to the rural way of life here, with people living off the land.

And a great way to get a feel for the area as a whole is to take a drive along the incredible A369 between Gaucin and Ronda. The stunning road weaves its way through the valley, offering breathtaking mountain views along the way. But while the drive itself is stunning, it is the villages along the way that bring it to life.

Often outwardly similar, every village has a unique character. This is most apparent in the tiny village of Juzcar, which decided to break the mould by painting its white walls blue.

The village certainly stood out from the crowd after being transformed to promote new film The Smurfs 3D. Despite competition from 200 other villages, it was chosen for its close resemblance to the fictional village where the Smurfs live. Now where else could you say that?





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Music in the valley

A QUIET life in the Genal Valley may not be what most of us think of as rock'n'roll.

But former Alisha's Attic guitarist Marcus Myers (below) has quite happily made his home in Cortes de la Frontera after moving to the village 10 years ago. Playing regular gigs at El Gecko in Cortes de la



Frontera and Bar Alioli in Jímera de Libar, Myers is popular in the Guadiaro and Genal valleys.

More recently he has been touring all over Europe with American singer Lissie. And he is excited to be playing gigs in Madrid and Barcelona next month. He also recently headlined the Delta Sound Festival which well and truly positioned him back in the spotlight.

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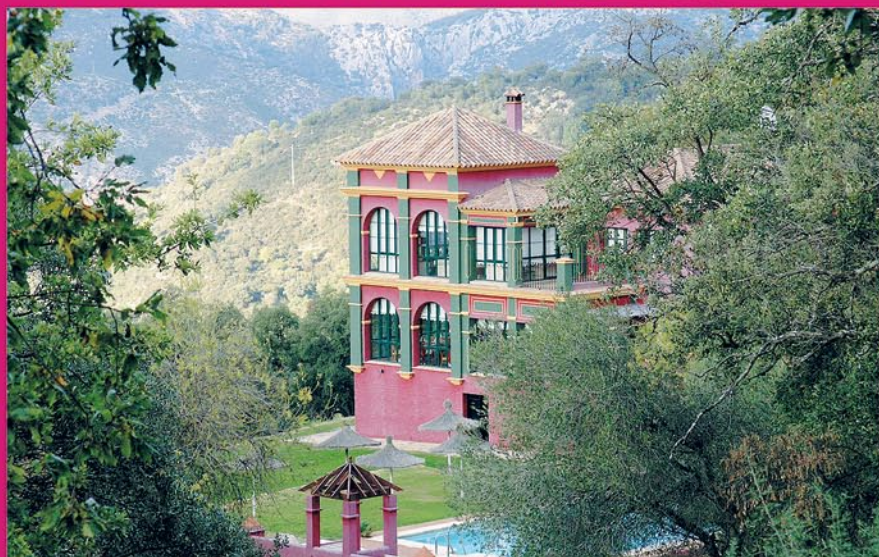
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8

Gaucin & Genal

A room (and a meal) with a view

WHETHER you want a spot of luxury or something small and cosy, the Genal Valley is teeming with fabulous places to stay and eat. Hotel Caballo Andaluz is situated just on the fringes of Gaucin offering spectacular views over the valley, to the coast, Gibraltar and the Rif-Mountains of North Africa.

This rural hotel, which even offers Shiatsu and Thai Massages in the comfort of your own room, also has a great menu *del día*.

Nearby, on the road down to La Colmenar lies the stunning Hacienda La Herriza. With incredible attention to detail, including an old switchboard in the entrance that served the town of Algotocin as recently as 40

years ago, this exclusive family run boutique hotel strikes a balance between luxury and homeliness.

Perfect for nature lovers, the hotel also offers its very own in-house wedding planning services.

And the fantastic restaurant El Hacho is well worth a visit, offering a mix of Mediterranean gourmet cuisine with local and international dishes; plus the chef's own personal creations.

Heading up the Genal Valley you will find the tiny village of Benarrabá with its lovely rural Hotel Banu Rabbah. This charming spot boasts a wonderful fountain in the entrance lending that extra bit of tranquillity into your stay.

Continuing into the countryside you will chance upon Camping



Genal near Algotocin.

With space for campers as well as fully equipped bungalows the stunning site is ideal for nature lovers. It also has a restaurant onsite as well as small supermarket for all your essentials.

Meanwhile, for food lovers, be sure to check out Molienda, in the charming village of Benalauria, which is listed in the Michelin guide. Nestled in a beautifully converted olive mill, the food is entirely organic and mostly comes from the nearby valley.

La Estacion is a newly opened restaurant that provides a jour-

A taste of Gaucin

THEY are responsible for bringing cupcakes to the Genal Valley, and the new owners of Bonlssim in Gaucin haven't looked back since. Karen O'Connor, 52, and Julie Stanton, 51, two friends who own and run the delicatessen together, opened their doors in June but already have a thriving business serving up freshly cooked. "Before we opened we made a simple display of cupcakes spelling the words opening soon and it caused quite a stir," laughs Karen. "It is a lot of hard work but we're very happy," she added. In addition to the delicatessen, which sells a selection of food with Spanish and Moroccan influence, as



SUCCESSFUL TEAM:
Julie and Karen

well as a delicious range of pies and cakes, the pair also caters for dinner parties and villa provisioning. "We offer meals for holidaymakers and locals who don't want to cook," explains Julie who previously ran a deli in England. "The deli concept is huge in the UK," she added. "It was just a matter of time before it caught on here. "We can't believe we are still cooking pies in August but people keep asking for them."

For more information call 661772155.



ney of flavours.

Both a place to retreat and to eat, the fully restored building that houses the hotel, was originally built for the railway station on the Bobadilla-Algeciras line at the end of 19th century. The rustic restaurant has two dining rooms and the old kitchen, as well as a delightful terrace ideal for train spotters.



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