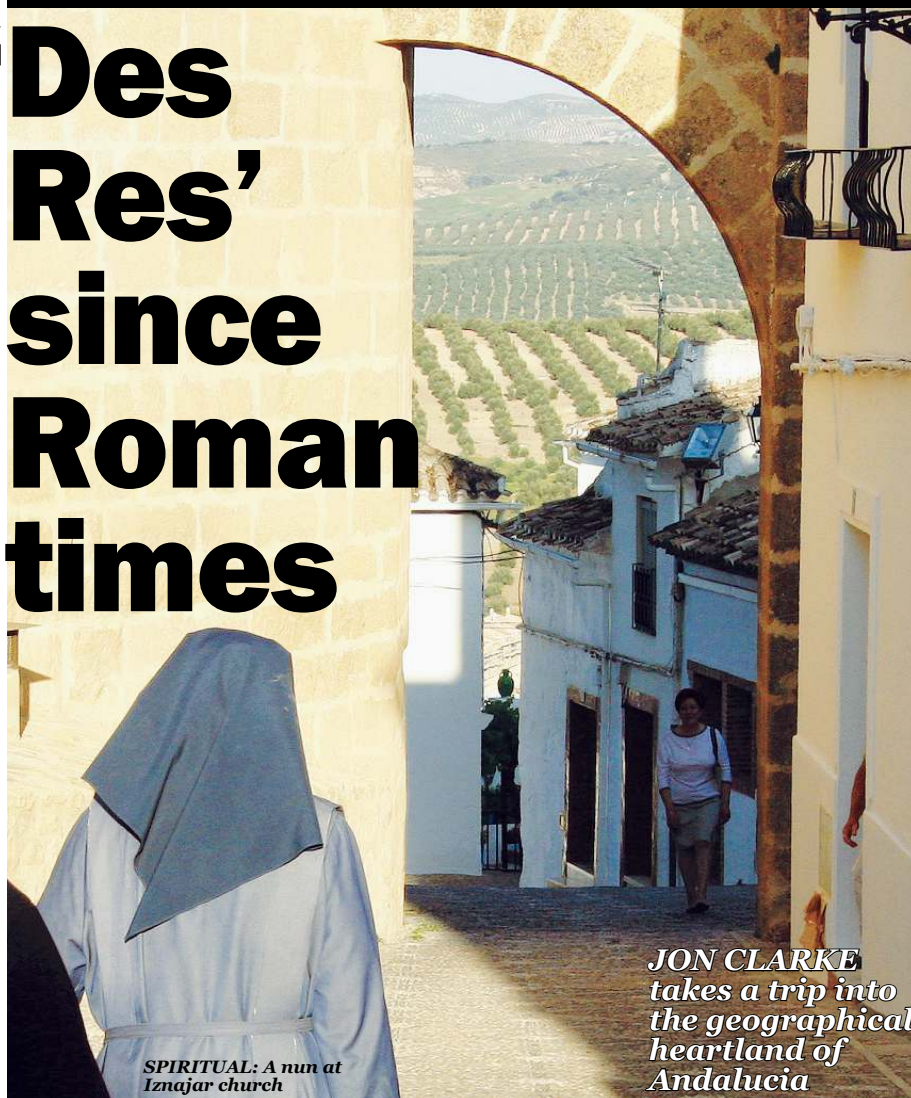


All about The Subbética



'Des Res' since Roman times



SPIRITUAL: A nun at Iznajar church

JON CLARKE
takes a trip into
the geographical
heartland of
Andalucía



Pictures: By Jon Clarke

DEFENSIVE: Moorish Zuheros from castle battlements

It is, without a doubt, one of the best examples of Romanic 'des res'.

Sited high up on an escarpment with views for miles around, the 1000-metre squared Roman villa must have been sumptuous in the extreme.

Aside from its indoor fountains, statues and plunge pools, it had wall to wall mosaics on the floor and beautiful frescoes on the walls. Its main bedroom was designed to maximise the views, while the dining room – or *triclinium* – had a waterfall and channels running through it and a raised podium where guests would recline to eat.

There was even underfloor heating, not to mention large staff quarters, where perhaps up to a dozen slaves would have been housed.

Yes, the Roman leader, or merchant, who lived in the recently discovered villa in Almedinilla certainly had it good.

Yet, were it not for the construction of the new A340 around the small village it would never have been found.

In fact, the road was originally scheduled to go right over it. But fortunately plans were altered at the last minute and over the last two decades archaeologists have managed to uncover what is thought to be the most intact Roman villa in Spain.

Inhabited between the first and fifth centuries, it shows the sheer luxury that the leading merchants of the time were accustomed to.

It also serves as the perfect testament to the wealth of the Subbética area, which has been producing some of the world's best olive oil for nearly 2,000 years.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that today three of Spain's top areas for olive oil production are in the Subbética.

The DO's – or *denominación de orígenes* – of Lucena, and particularly Priego and Baena (under which the village of Almedinilla falls) are famous worldwide for their mixture of rich and complex olive oils.

It is certainly the best product of the Subbética region (although the wines of Montilla-Moriles aren't far behind), which comprises 14 towns, sited in the south of Córdoba province.

Turn to Page 12

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From Page 11

Described as the 'geographic centre of Andalucía' for its close proximity to the Costa del Sol, Córdoba and Granada, the Subbética is full of historic towns, interesting archaeological sites, and wonderful walks.

But, best of all, is the scenery, in particular, in the Subbética Natural park, near Priego, and around the stunning Iznajar reservoir, which is full for the first time in decades.

Fringed by pine plantations and oceans and oceans of olives, distant sierras provide the stunning backdrop, while resident birds such as hoopoes and bee eaters swoop across its surface for sustenance.

A warren full of white-washed houses and interesting nooks and crannies

There is hardly a house, let alone block of flats or golf course, to ruin the view, and taking a walk uphill on numerous dirt tracks is bound to lead you to pretty ruined farmsteads and herds of

goats.

Iznajar itself is one of the true picture postcard towns of southern Spain - easily rivaling Ronda and Olvera for its scenery.

Perched on a rocky outcrop that erupts out of the lake, it is peace personified, overlooking the reservoir, which is some 30kms in length and crosses the three provinces of Córdoba, Málaga and Granada.

Known as the 'Mirador of the River Genil valley', it is hardly surprising then that Iznajar is fast becoming one of the most desirable inland destinations in Andalucía.

A fashionable place to buy, over the last few years various Spanish politicians and sporting stars have bought in the area, not to mention English businessmen and lawyers. Other interesting residents include the former captain of

Wasps rugby team, who once played for the All Blacks, as well as Peter Reynolds, a former British Defence Attache in Argentina and Venezuela.

"We are mountain people but we like the sea as well, so looking over the lake is a major bonus," explains Reynolds, a former Royal Marine, who has lived with his wife yoga teacher Marilyn near Iznajar for six years.

Next I spoke to two judges, no

less, having a candlelit dinner in the pebbled courtyard of the atmospheric hotel Cortijo La Haza near the town. Recently having bought in the area, they have become firm fans of the lake-side town, which serves as their escape from the rat race back home in England. "We love the countryside and peace," explained one, asking to remain anonymous.

But it certainly does not take

long to fall under the spell of the town. Originally a prehistoric settlement, its fortunes changed in the seventh century when Arab settlers built a castle on the promontory and named it *Hins Ashar*. Iznajar Castle is one of the oldest Moorish fortresses in the region and the ruins are now undergoing full restoration. It is a wonderful place to visit, particularly in the evening, as the hot Andalusian sun starts to drop, its last rays giving an ethereal light to the historic houses around the old castle.

The locals come and go, many dropping into the impressive Church of Santiago, which was built in the 17th Century



VERY MOORISH: Historic Cabra, its poet 'Al-Cabri', the old casino and (top) the Roman villa in Almedinilla



Pictures: By Jon Clarke

Super Subbética



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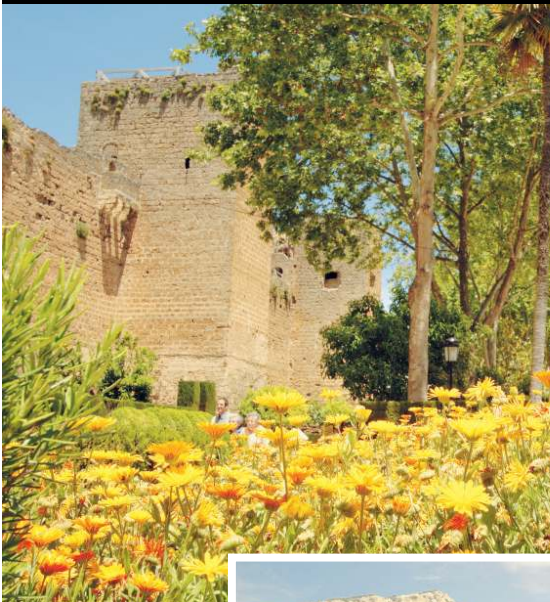
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Subbética special

13



STUNNING: Castle and fountain in Priego, while vista of olive groves



and has a beautiful baroque chapel behind the altar. On leaving the church you stroll past a small square called the Patio de las Comedias which lends credence to the fact that Iznajar once had a theatre culture – even in Arabic days. It is a pretty site, beautifully kept by its proud neighbours, who bedeck its walls with blue flower pots full of geraniums.

It is a similar story in the pretty Barrio de la Villa in the heart of Priego de Cordoba, a lovely 30-minute drive north of Iznajar through rolling olive groves and past romantic ruined farmhouses. Here in the maze of cobbled old streets, dating back to Moorish times, you will find the house of Adoracion Montecille, 74, who moved here from Madrid eight years ago. Her chain of 200 plant pots spreads organically some 50 metres up the side wall of the narrow bumpy street where

she lives. With dozens of different types of geraniums, in a profusion of colours, it has become something of an obsession to the pensioner, who religiously waters and prunes them every evening through the heat of the summer. But that is not all. Since moving back to Priego – known as 'the city of water' – and where she was born in the 1930s, Adoracion has also become as communally minded as the rest of the Barrio. Spic and span, not thanks to the local council, but thanks to the army of old age sweepers, who take out their brooms and sweep their area at sunset in a communal dedication rarely seen these days. This is typical of the Cordoban love of patios and the narrow streets of the charming car-free barrio they inhabit. It is all too obvious strolling around the lovely district, which is a warren full of white-washed houses and interesting nooks and crannies, such as the charming Plazuela de San Antonio, with its palm trees and pretty houses, replete with wrought-iron rejas. Little changed since Moorish

times, it is not dissimilar to the old parts of Cordoba capital, and is fringed by an ancient Balcon de Adarve walkway, which has a lovely view over the local countryside, not to mention a good restaurant of the same name.

Eventually you will wind up at the big prize, the stunning Iglesia de la Asunción, on Plaza de Abad Palomino which is rightly thought to be one of Spain's most important Baroque churches.

The church has an unmissable gilded and multi-layered, blue-pitched roof. Inside though, it is all the more impressive, with an ornate white stucco Baroque interior leading towards a stunningly beautiful carved retablo. The greatest surprise of all, though, lies through a portal to the left, where you enter the breathtaking sagrario, one of the masterpieces of 18th century Spanish architecture.

Quite rightly granted 'National Monument' status, this heavenly side chapel takes the eye up to the skies to a feast of religious imagery, hard to comprehend in such a small town.

Sitting conveniently right next to the church's south door is hotel/restaurant Zahori, well worth a visit whatever time of day.

It is here that English student Adam White, 23, ended up working for his summer holidays thanks to a blossoming

Turn to Page 15



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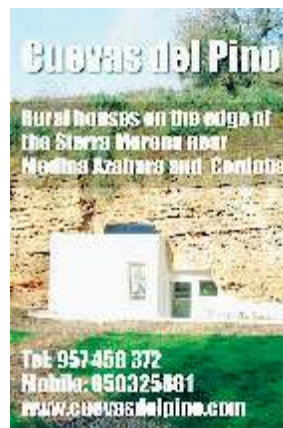
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PROUD: Adoracion cleans her alley





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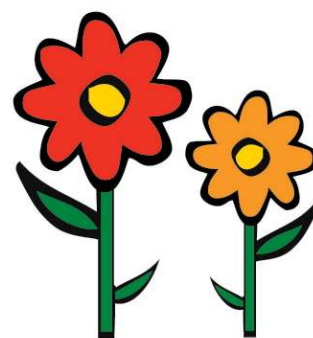
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Pictures: By Jon Clarke

Lovely Lucena

From Page 13

romance with the owners' daughter Gema, who studied with him at Exeter University. "It is the most wonderful town," says Adam, who has been coming to Priego for the last six years. "The people are incredibly friendly and the way of life is very slow and relaxed. Here everyone thinks about the family, and every-one mucks in to help."

Capital of the Subbética region, Priego is a great place to spend a weekend. Sitting in the heart of a rolling area of hills - much of it, some 32,000 hectares, now designated as the Parque Natural Sierras Subbética - it has a contented self-contained air about it.

Much to do with its decent selection of shops and markets, it is still extremely Spanish in feel; few British have yet to move to the area and tourists are not as common as they ought to be.

In terms of history, this month is a great time to visit Priego due to the so-called *Domingos de Mayo*, which since 1999, have been declared of national interest for tourism. The ancient processions, which take place each Sunday, are stunning and first began in 1642.

Priego itself first became known in Roman times as the cattle town of *Rueda*, which came under the jurisdiction of nearby Carcabuey.

While nowadays few cows wander the area, it has become extremely well known for its goats, and in particular, olive oil.

The town competes fiercely with the other notable olive oil town of Baena, which sits on the other side of the national park, and counts award-winning Nunez del Prado. It is said to be one of Spain's best.

One olive oil producer Benito Serrano, from Priego, explains: "The olive oil here is the best in Spain. It is clean and fruity and great with bread and salads."

If it is cheese you are after you need to head to Zuheros. Taking the charming CP-072, you will wind up into the Sub-

bética natural park, heading past the highest peak of La Tinosa, which sits at 1570 metres, until after around half an hour you reach Zuheros.

A stunning town, sitting high on a promontory and backed by a backdrop of cliffs and a gorge, Zuheros is one of the true gems of Andalucía.

Little-known and little visited, the attractive village has a sleepy relaxed feel akin to somewhere in Extremadura or Teruel.

A cluster of whitewashed houses tumble down to an old Moorish castle built on and into a steep rock face. Later it was used as one of the bases of Fernando III, after the town was seized from the Moorish Kingdom of Granada in 1240.

The town, which still has a distinct frontier feel to it, is perhaps best known for its cheeses and there are around 10,000 goats living in the park.

Many olive groves and vineyards have been pulled down to make way for new factories

But there is one local product of the Subbética that is perhaps even more highly sought after: the furniture of Lucena. On first glance an ugly town, Lucena is extremely underrated as a place to visit. Its success story is also the reason for its ugliness, for the town is now ringed with hundreds of furniture factories and emporiums.

The growth of the furniture industry has turned it into Córdoba's second biggest town, not to mention one of Andalucía's most prosperous.

It is a remarkable turnaround for this now booming place, which was once described by the writer, Gerald Brenan, as one of the poorest Spanish towns he had come across.

Many of its olive groves and vineyards have been pulled down to make way for new factories, not to mention sub-

urbs, and it counts the largest discoteque in Andalucía, so claim its locals, not to mention the world's largest chair, which at 26 metres tall sits outside the Hermanos Huertas factory on the ring road.

Once you get inside the town, formerly known as *Eliossana* or *Perla de Sefarad* in Arabic times, it is actually a wonderful place to spend a morning. It has plenty to offer in terms of sites, and is a nice place for a wander, with its shady squares full of children playing. In particular make sure to visit the baroque church of San Mateo, with its Sagrario chapel, which has exquisite plasterwork and a magnificent encrusted marble entrance.

During the middle ages, the Jewish community in Lucena was one of the most prosperous in Spain and parts of it are still around to visit.

Other monuments include the 17th century church of San Agustín with a unique oval layout and domed tower, and the Church and Hospital of San Juan de Dios, with a marble entrance and baroque altarpiece. You might also take a peek inside the headquarters of the local TV station, one of the oldest in Andalucía, which is installed inside a former merchant's house with stunning 100-year-old frescoes.

Most interesting is the restored Castillo del Moral, where the last Arabic leader of Spain Boabdil, was held in

1483 after being captured by Isabella.

Another pleasant surprise, a short ten minute drive east is Cabra, which must go down as one of the friendliest towns in Andalucía.

Much bigger than one might expect, the town of 22,000 people, has an important and illustrious history going back many centuries.

It is a great place for a wander - in large part due to its clever pedestrianisation - and it has two distinct areas worth spending time in, one up by the castle (which is now a school) and the other in the heart of the old town.

Here, you will find pleasant, winding streets, full of baroque buildings, with *rejas* bedecked in geraniums.

In particular, look for the Iglesia de la Asunción, which is built over a mosque, and the church of San Juan Bautista, which is Visigothic in origin and said to be one of the oldest churches in Spain.

Cabra was also the home of Arabic poet Al Cabri who became renowned for his 'erotic' love songs in the 11th century. Known as 'the blind man of Cabra', there is a statue of him up by the castle.

While in town also make sure to visit the riding stables La Garrocha on the outskirts, where you can hire horses for the day, and head for lunch in Trama y Azahara, a restaurant installed in a recently converted olive mill.



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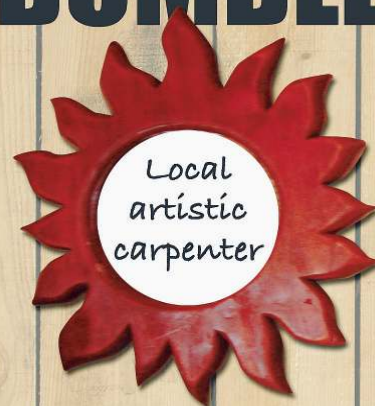
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Subbética special



INTACT: Only ten per cent of Medina Azahara has been excavated

What lies beneath

WHILE not exactly in the Subbética region, the archaeological site of Medina Azahara is well worth a visit, if you are heading up into Córdoba.

The huge 100-hectare Moorish complex was partly built using marble and stone hewn out of quarries in the Subbética, around Cabra and Puente Genil.

The palace-city, ten minutes from Córdoba, is said to be "the most important medieval archaeological site in the whole of Europe".

While only ten per cent of the site has been excavated, there is a fabulous new visitor centre, which fully explains its history. As well as numerous treasures from the time, you will find the perfectly intact Andalusian giraffe, bought for the region's patrimony for 250,000 euros last year.

Archaeologists at the site also recently uncovered an entire mosque dating from the seventh century, making it the oldest in the world. Built between 936 and 940AD by Abd ar-Rahman III, the first caliph of Córdoba, the complex was modelled on the



OASIS: Hotel Cuevas del Pino, while (inset) precious giraffe find

Grand Mosque of Damascus.

The sentimental version of history tells us that it was built for the caliph's favourite concubine; but most believe it was simply constructed to be an imposing display of political might.

Tragically it was destroyed during a devastating civil war in the 11th century when Berber soldiers from Morocco sacked it less than a century into its life.

If you are looking to head up to Medina Azahara you might opt to stay in the charming guesthouse Cuevas del Pino, just outside the complex.

The amazing retreat combines a series of cottages set in a tranquil oasis of calm, on the edge of the Sierra Morena hills.

Spend a night in its stunning, recently converted 120,000-euro cave house, and you will sleep like a baby, listening to nightingales.

Best of all, the owner, artist Pilar del Pino Lopez, is extremely knowledgeable about the site and can point you in the best direction as to walking or cycling there.

Visit www.cuevasdelpino.com

On your bike

ONE of the best ways to see the Subbética is to walk or cycle along the Via Verde (or the green route), which takes you right into the heart of the park.

The 58km route follows the old line of the Tren de Aceite (olive oil train) which has now been transformed into a rambling and biking track.

The route links the villages of Puente Genil, Lucena, Cabra, Doña Mencía, Zuheros and Luque, all of which make delightful stopping points.

Along the way you'll see plenty of well-preserved railway architecture, such as bridges, tunnels and stations.

But, best of all, you will see some of the most beautiful countryside with views in all

Take a trip into the heart of the Subbética on the Via Verde cycle track, writes Tessa Norman



MAPPED OUT: Route



directions.

Some of the stations have even been transformed into bars, restaurants and infor-

mation centres.

The best stop though is the stunning hotel/restaurant Hacienda Minerva, which is a beautifully conserved and renovated olive mill, just outside Zuheros.

In Zuheros itself you will find the most charming restaurant Mesón Atalaya, which has a great menu del día.

At its eastern end you will find the Laguna del Conde, the largest lagoon in the Subbética with a wealth of wildlife.

It is close to the pretty village of Luque, which is spread out below a rocky outcrop topped by the ruins of a Moorish castle, which is well worth a visit.

At the other end of the track lies the large town of Lucena, known for its historical churches and a great place to refuel in one of its many tapas bars and restaurants.

Even further east is Puente Genil, which is one of the oldest towns in Córdoba and has plenty of sites worth visiting.

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Subbética special

THE first time I saw Zuheros, the beauty of the place took my breath away.

"I want to live here!" I announced to my husband, after just one morning in the village.

We were on a tour of the Subbética, looking for possible places to live, when we spotted the little village nestled against the mountainside, looking out over a sea of olive trees. Immediately impressed us.

Over the following months, we toured the length and breadth of Andalucía seeking the ideal place to settle down, but we always kept returning here.

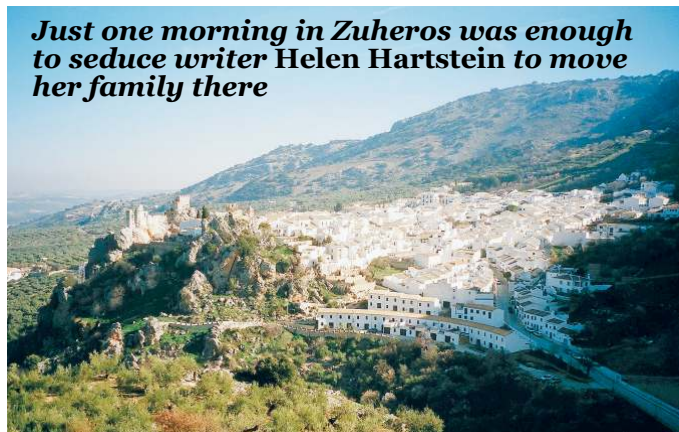
The area had certainly cast its spell on us, as it does on thousands of tourists every year.

Zuheros is the archetypal *pueblo blanco*, its white-washed houses and narrow winding streets nestling in the shadow of the Sierra Subbética.

Its impressive castle, originally built in the tenth century and extensively re-fortified in the Renaissance, clings improbably to a rocky outcrop, from which the village gets its name (Suhayra means "rock" in Arabic).

Love at first sight

Just one morning in Zuheros was enough to seduce writer Helen Hartstein to move her family there



INSTANT ATTRACTION: The town of Zuheros is mesmerising

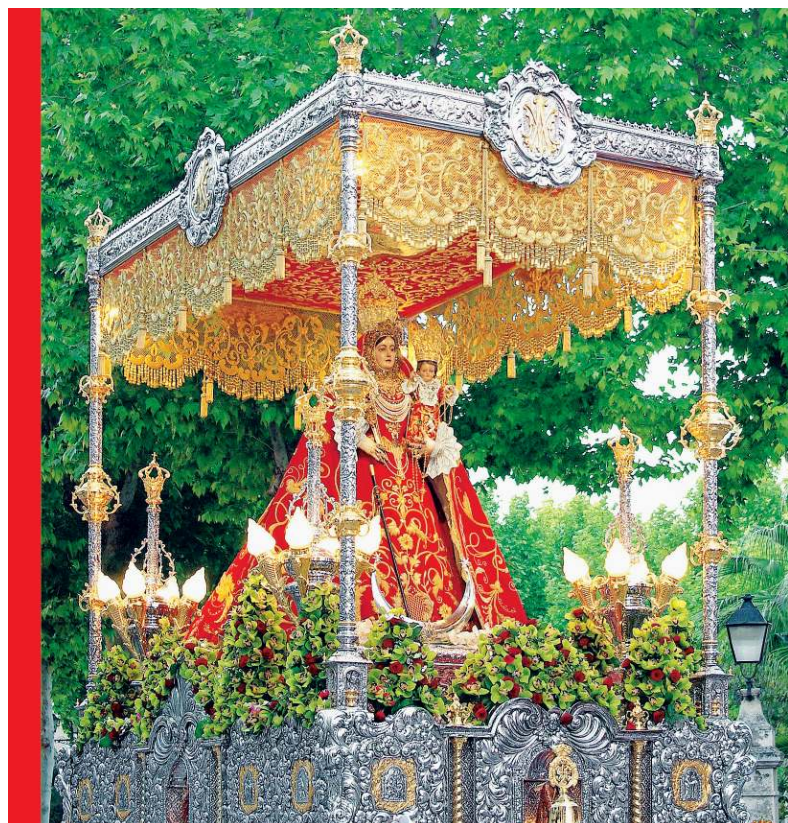
The village's Moorish past is evident, but archaeologists have unearthed evidence of people living in this area since Palaeolithic times.

Even better, as the village is situated in the national park, some of the excesses of modern development

have been avoided and the people here take great pride in their village.

The women are continually whitewashing, cleaning and generally maintaining their houses, and every now and again I feel I have to get outside and spruce the

place up, if only to avoid comments from the neighbours. Visitors are particularly impressed by the thin black line that people paint at the bottom of their walls to differentiate their houses from the pavement. This border gives the houses



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Subbética special

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an impeccable smartness, but I have not yet managed to get onto my hands and knees and paint one around our house.

With only around 800 inhabitants, Zuheros is the smallest municipality in Cordoba province, and, for such a small village, we are surprisingly well-provided with services: a village school, an open-air swimming pool for the summer months, several bars and restaurants, a couple of museums and two hotels.

Rural tourism based on the production of olive oil is becoming more popular

But what really attracted us to Zuheros was the scenery, which is truly magnificent. Zuheros is a magnet for walkers, mountain-bikers and climbers. For those a little daunted by the rigours of mountain-biking, there is the relatively sedate Via Verde, the route of a disused olive-oil railway, which snakes its way through the countryside, providing a

safe and less mountainous route for walkers and cyclists alike. We have spent many a happy hour with our children cycling on the Via Verde.

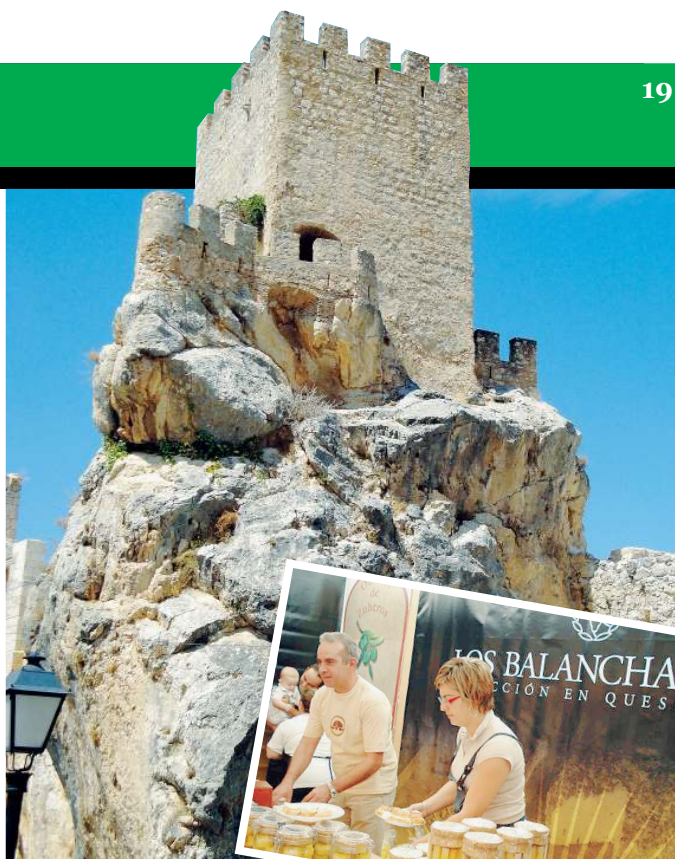
And then there are the olives: Zuheros falls within the remit of the D.O. de Baena and the majority of the families in the village make their living through olive farming. During the olive-picking "campaign" (roughly the end of October to March) the village is a hive of activity as everyone pitches in to harvest the valuable crop.

Rural tourism based on the production of olive oil is becoming more popular in the area and there are several places to visit if you are interested in this area. Antonio Zafra has a *finca* just outside of the village and produces organic olives and olive oil. His enthusiasm for his product is contagious, as he explains how the olives are grown, harvested and made into olive oil. Visitors to his *finca* take a little of this passion away with them when they leave, as well as hopefully a bottle of his excellent olive oil! Zuheros even has its own bat cave, although, disap-

pointingly for my sons, Batman does not live there. This cave, about four kilometres out of the village, is incredible for its natural features, (impressive stalactites and stalagmites) but is even more notable for its history. It is one of the most important Neolithic sites in Andalucía, and contains fascinating Palaeolithic cave paintings – as well as bats!

Zuheros is also home to Los Balanchares, a factory that produces marvellous goat's and sheep's cheese, made from the milk of the local flocks that roam across the Sierra. If you come to the village in September, you can visit the Feria Nacional del Queso Artesano, where you can enjoy a taste of some of the finest cheeses in the country, along with a glass of *fino* or local *tinto*.

We've been living here for nearly two years now and every morning I wake up and look out of the window, amazed that we can be living in such a beautiful location. It's a great place to bring up children and, as I watch our sons playing with their friends in the village square, I feel that we have truly been welcomed into village life.



SOARING: Zuheros castle and cheese from local factory Balanchares

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RICH: Few regions can match the wealth of the Subbética. From left (clockwise) Patio de las Comedias in Iznajar, a frieze and fountain in Priego, olives in the natural park, goats above Lake Iznajar, pew in Priego church, horses and riding stables in Cabra, the Roman villa in Almedinilla, Priego's stunning Baroque cathedral

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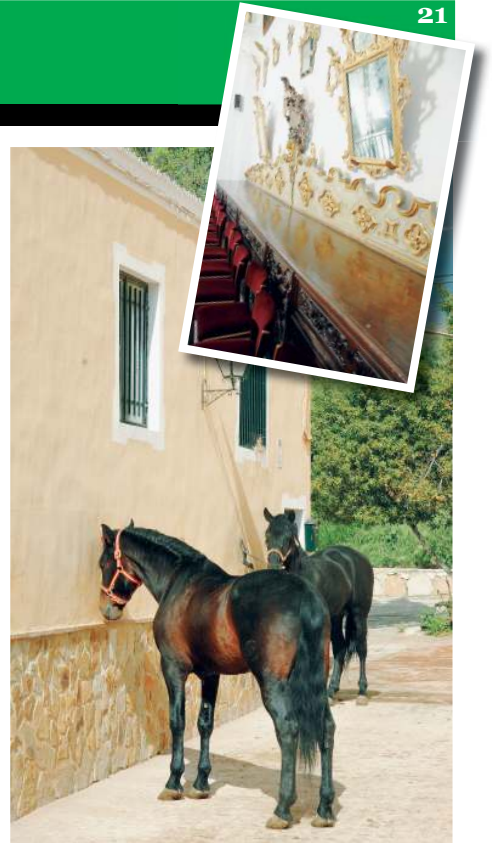
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Subbética special

DRIVING around the back roads of the Subbética it is impossible to miss the huge behemoths that are dotted around the rolling countryside.

At a glimpse it is not hard to imagine these country estates - or *lagares* - as castles visited by Cervantes' creation *Don Quijote*.

Indeed the *Lagar de la Inglesa*, in Montilla, is enormous and has apartments that look perfectly suited for royalty.

These grand buildings, many of which are listed in Cordoba's huge coffee table book *Cortijos, Haciendas y Lagares*, seem to be palaces fit for the super-rich. And there are more of them in the Cordoba province than anywhere else in Andalucía.

But in essence these buildings are nothing more than agricultural factories, which hark back to the days when Spain had an extremely uneven society.

Built at the heart of huge country estates, they were known for bringing misery on the huge mass of landless labourers, who often struggled to even feed themselves.

Their constituent parts may vary slightly dependent on produce: wine, olive oil, cereal or livestock.

The behemoths of betrayal

The Subbética has an endless supply of enormous, but near derelict, country estates. This could be poetic justice for the unfair latifundia system that they once stood to symbolise, explains architect Liam Kelleher

But for the most part they are planned around open or closed courtyards.

The various wings provide living accommodation for the owners, a *señorio* (for honoured guests) and perhaps also a *vivienda de labradores* (farmhands). There will be a large building for the mill (or press) and *cuadras* and *pajar* for the care of the donkey power that was necessary before mechanisation.

My tutor at university always used to say that architecture

is an expression of the society that builds it.

He believed that there was no better way to study the culture of a period than through its buildings.

It is no exception here.

Many were constructed in a simple peasant manner from materials close to hand, such as mud and rocks. They were then protected from the elements by lime wash and large over-hanging roofs of tiles or thatch.

Window openings were few



and far between with a timber lintel wrapped in twine to help the clay to stick to it. These had metal bars for security and sometimes timber shutters to keep the weather out.

Glass was only for the *señoritos*, or upper classes. And it was not until the middle of the 19th century that many of these buildings became

permanent constructions. For the most part they were utilitarian, where form followed function, long before Le Corbusier thought of that catchy little ditty.

Indeed, they were only decorated by crude classical motives at the entrance to the owner's accommodation.

Generally, building roof spans were narrow due to

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Subbética²³ special



MAJESTIC: Yet many of the 'lagares' have a troubling history

the poor quality of the local wood. Heavy stone walls were enough to restrain the horizontal forces from simple, un-braced, lightweight pitched roofs.

Where agrarian production required a larger unobstructed floor area, both timber and carpentry skills had to be imported from other areas to build roof trusses.

The eucalyptus trunks from the local streams were unsuitable and the peasants could only build lean-to or un-trussed couple roofs.

The expense of trusses could only be afforded by the bodegas, working in high-end markets. The space between the roof beams was often in-filled with split bamboo canes from nearby rivers, specially designed clay bricks or timber boarding.

With almost 800 examples in varying states of disrepair, Córdoba Province is the most abundantly supplied region of Andalucía.

It took an amazing 16 years to compile them in the aforementioned Junta-sponsored book, of which there are actually two volumes, one more

than every other province. I can even see two examples from the top terrace of my own house. The Molino del Poleo, built early in 20th century has a charming overgrown garden to the front and somewhat disconcertingly sports a roof of green tiles and brown ceramic tile-clad walls.

I have often imagined that it could have a future as a boutique hotel

All of which give it the appearance of a house built on the proceeds of a night at the Monaco gaming tables.

The much larger and much more sober Cortijo La Solana used to rely on its now demolished industrial almazara for oil production from the surrounding olives.

It still has palms in its central courtyard, but elsewhere is sadly decayed and will eventually slide into the nearby barranco.

I have often imagined that it could have a future as a boutique hotel and health spa, with olive oil-themed cuisine and beauty treatments aimed at the rich northern Europeans or Madrileños.

Of course the restaurant would have to be Michelin-starred, with a basic menu supplemented by locally gathered wild hare, asparagus and quail, when in season.

So sure of its success was I that I tried to persuade a friend to buy it, but Fermín is both urbane and a good businessman and politely pointed out that now was not the time to expand his range of olive-based beauty care products.

As an architect it is heart-wrenching to watch these iconic buildings of the Andalusian landscape fall apart, taking with them the last evidence of an agrarian past.

But they were also witness to the harsh life of the region. They were built by *latifundistas* (absentee landlords) and controlled by *caciques*, who terrorised the local peasantry.

When the landowners disagreed with liberal government laws, they refused to farm their land and the people starved.

According to Gerald Brenan, it was this system of agriculture that was in part responsible for the bitterness of the Spanish Civil War.

Perhaps the dereliction of these *cortijos*, *haciendas* and *lagares* is noted in the small print of the Spanish "pact of forgetting" about the Civil War.

If I am going to understand these buildings better I will have to follow my tutor's advice and get back to my sketching.

You can contact Liam Kellehar BA (Hons) Arch., RIBA, COACo no 570, at liam@arquitectos.eu.com



Rute's royal refuge

What do Bill Clinton, Fidel Castrol and a donkey have in common?

NOT many businesses in Andalucía can claim to have Bill Clinton, Fidel Castro and King Juan Carlos as customers. But the Association for the Defence of the Donkey (ADEBO), in Rute, has received sponsorship for three of its donkeys from the trio. The sanctuary, set up by Pasqual and Quika Rovira in 1989, has had visits from the Spanish royal family, with Queen Sofia dropping in two years ago. It was set up to help Spain's donkey population, which has shrunk over the last 50 years, from over one million to just 100,000.

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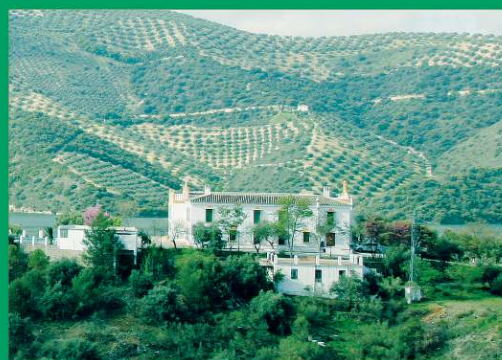


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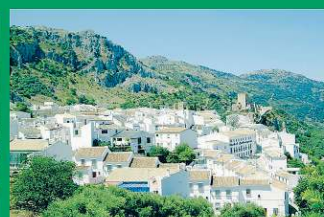
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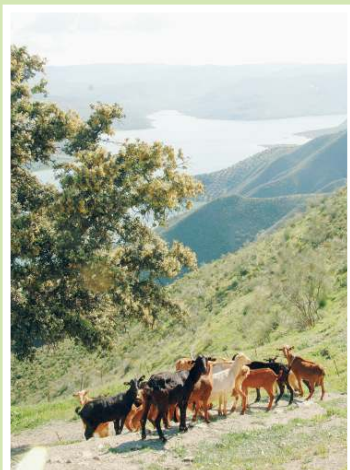
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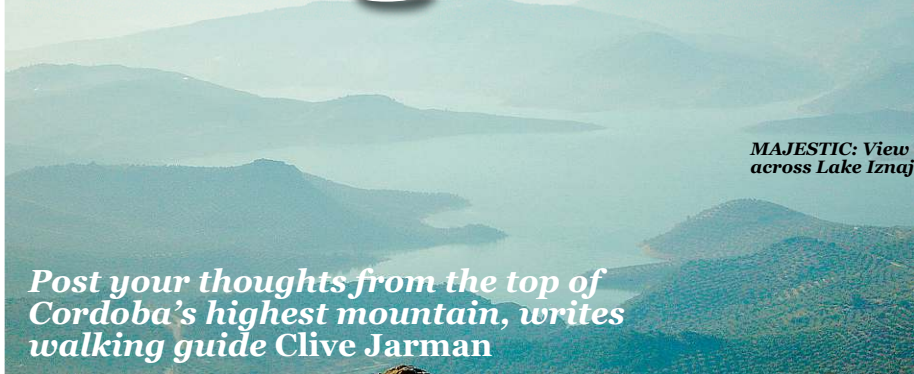
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Subbética special

A letter from on high



MAJESTIC: View across Lake Iznajar

Post your thoughts from the top of Cordoba's highest mountain, writes walking guide Clive Jarman

Pictures: By Monolo Vega

PERFECTLY sited between Granada, Cordoba and Malaga, it is no surprise that many people choose to come to the Subbética for a walking holiday.

The stunning Subbética Natural Park is in the physical centre of Andalucía and is literally brimming with great walks and scenery.

The park comprises nearly 32,000 hectares rising from 500m to the peak of La Tinosa, which sits at 1568m in the sierra de la Horconera.

The Sierra Subbética is part of the ragged rambling spur of the Cordillera Bética, the youngest of the Iberian mountains.

Over the last 230 million years, the high mountains have slowly collapsed due to erosion of the limestone by water and weather.

This erosive action has also been responsible for the volcanic like depressions

known as *hoyones* or *dolinas* that can be seen in and around the park.

White limestone houses stand out in sharp contrast against the Mediterranean blue skies, and black-trunked almond trees parade down terraced slopes cultivated by man since time immemorial.

While there are some wonderful walks from Cabra, Luque and Almedinilla, the best walking terrain is found around Priego de Cordoba and Zuheros.

Sitting in a commanding position high up on a limestone slope, Zuheros is the northern gateway to the Natural Park.

It is perfectly situated for exploring numerous walking routes that take us into the hills and away from the ubiquitous olive groves.

There are numerous circular walks around the village so there is no need to fuss with transport. Just park in

the village and get away for the day!

One of the most important consequences of the massive limestone erosion in the area has been the formation of the cave above Zuheros. Known as La Cueva de los Murciélagos, it is home to Neolithic man, and houses some important cave paintings.

There are at least six excellent routes, varying from very easy to difficult

The excavation of the cave has provided valuable information about the changing lifestyle of these hunter gatherers.

Another of the outstanding effects of the dissolution of the limestone is the forma-

tion of the Bailón Gorge. This river was for the most part subterranean at the beginning of the Pleistocene era (1.6 million years ago), but over thousands of years the roof collapsed and the massive boulders that can be seen in the river bed are evidence of this force of nature.

There are a total of seven walking routes around Zuheros varying from short half-day excursions to full-day's outings of up to 20kms for experienced walkers.

The classic walk of about 14kms starts at the bottom of the village, heads south up the gorge, crossing the river five times and circles the Cerro de Bramadero to return back to the square for a well-earned drink.

A gruesome find Circuit of Bramadero - Zuheros

This circular route of about 13 kms heads through a gorge, which is a haven of bird life including blue rock thrush, Dartford warblers, black wheatear and Sardinian warblers. There is also a big colony of Griffin vultures.

It leaves Zuheros heading in a zig-zag into the gorge, passing caves which once were the home to Neolithic man and then the Fuente de la Mora; local tradition has it that the water is good for those suffering ailments of the stomach.

After nearly 3kms you come to the junction of the Arroyo de Morena y Zarzilla at about 800m above sea level.

The valley now becomes much more intimate with evidence of man's presence with quince, walnut, pear and a ruined cortijo. Leaving the valley, the route crosses the Polje de la Nava, a very large and once fertile plane to return via the abandoned Cortijo de Fuenfria, (the scene of a very gruesome crime) behind el Cerro de Bramadero to arrive once more in the gorge.

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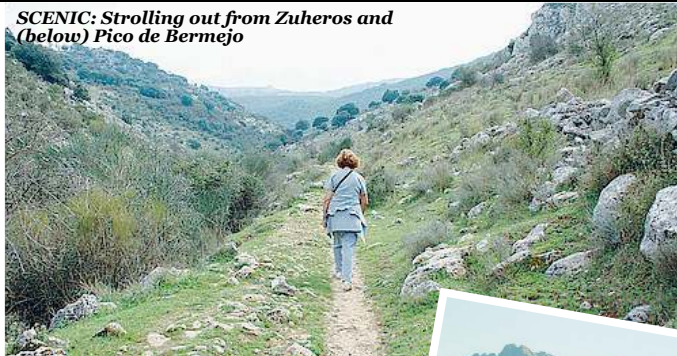
While Priego is more famous for its stunning baroque masterpieces and pretty flower-bedecked lanes, it is also a tremendous place to plan a walking trip.

There are a total of six official routes, varying from very easy to difficult.

The classic route here, of course, is the ascent to the summit of La Tiñosa at 1568m, not very far in terms of distance, but there's a great deal of "up".

It's a must for those who want to 'bag' the highest peak in Córdoba, and conveniently there is a letter-box at the top where you can post a letter to prove it. Well at least post your thoughts on the achievement.

SCENIC: Strolling out from Zuheros and (below) Pico de Bermejo



Exact route maps, available in English and Spanish, are available from Hotel Huerta de las Palomas, just outside Priego and from Hotel Zuhayra in Zuheros, price 2.50 euros each. Clive Jarman, who is available for guided walking, is on 669 700 763 or 957 694 693



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This great circular walk of 14kms passes by the two highest peaks in Cordoba, Pico de Bermejo and La Tiñosa (complete with its 'letter box').

After a steady climb the walker is rewarded with amazing panoramas in all directions. On the peak of Bermejo, you will find the remains of an old Muslim castle, Jardin del Moro, while below the sad looking ruin of Cortijo de Vichira. Keep your eyes peeled for both Bonellis and Booted eagles.

The return to Los Villares is via the GR7, the long distance transcontinental route that links France with Greece.

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SPAIN produces more olive oil than any other country in the world, and what better place to see the process in action than in Baena, Priego or Cabra. Two of Andalucía's most celebrated oil production centres Baena and Priego have their own official *denominación de origen* (DO) which guarantees its standards of production are among the highest in Europe.

It's all on the label

The Subbetica is one of the best areas for olive oil in the world

So good is the oil in the area that a new DO for Lucena was recently inaugurated to take in various towns, including Lucena, Iznajar and Rute. Yet, just a few decades ago,

practically all the oil was shipped as bulk, often to Italy, who passed it off as its own. Nowhere is this more evident than at the Trama y Azahara restaurant in Cabra, which is

hidden away inside a stunning old olive mill. Apart from the great array of old milling equipment to see, there is a wonderful collection of colourful old tins, many of

which purport to be from Italy in English.

"A lot of it was to do with Franco," says restaurant owner Julia Canelles. "Due to the embargoes on Spanish prod-

VISUAL FEAST: The line up of ancient olive oil containers at Trama y Azahara

ucts a lot of producers had to get their products out via Italy or elsewhere." Another good place to visit is the Núñez de Prado mill in Baena.

The 'free run' oil is the best in the business

In the same family for centuries, the olives cultivated on the estate are all harvested by hand before being ground to a paste on ancient granite stone mills.

The "free run" oil which results from this process is regarded as the best in the business, and is only used sparingly to flavour gazpacho or bread.

Be sure to taste a drop of the superior quality oil during your visit, not to mention a stroll through the olive groves.

A bird's eye view

The Subbetica has got plenty to see for the twitcher, writes Doreen Cage

THE hills of the Subbetica are a nature lovers' paradise.

The mountains, gorges and lakes make the area a vast canvas for wild life and especially birds.

Each spring I still marvel at the deafening morning chorus of the Nightingales, who sometimes sing the whole night through. It is an exciting time waiting for the return

of all the migrants, most of them back from Africa.

The Woodchat Shrikes were a little late this year, while the Montague's Harriers are all nesting again. There are normally at least 20 pairs that make their way back from Africa to fields near my home.

From the smallest birds, the Firecrest, to the weird looking Stone Curlews and Little Bus-



Pictures: By John Wainwright

FEATHER FULL: Bird watching

tards, there is so much to see. I particularly like the startling red plumage of the Rock Thrush and the red hollyberry-like knobs on the head of a rare Crested Coot.

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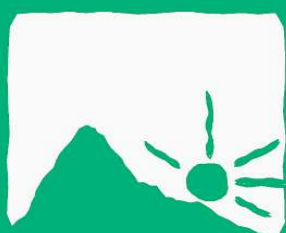
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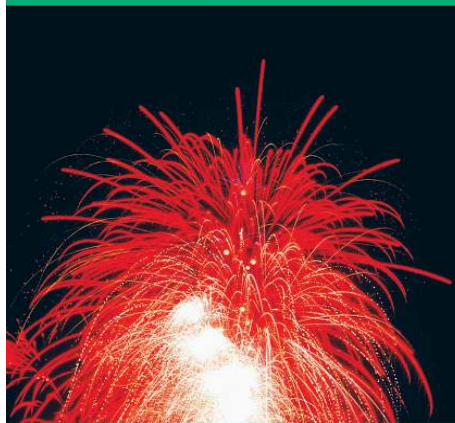


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La Subbética



la Subbética in the geographical heart of Andalucía

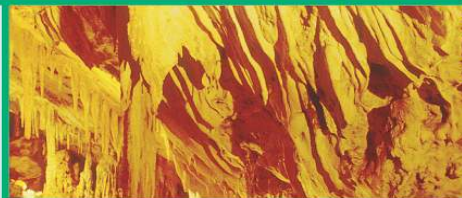
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The Subbética is a district made up of fourteen towns in the south of the province of Córdoba, in the heart of Andalusia. This privileged location means that the Costa del Sol and the cities of Córdoba, Granada and Jaén are no more than an hour away, and Seville can be reached in less than two hours. Visitor to the Subbética find a district full of attractive propositions, where the area's Natural Park and other protected areas, its historical and artistic heritage, its archaeological sites, its green line, its craft work and popular traditions all reflect the richness of a series of charming and welcoming towns, not forgetting their gastronomy.

