

# All about Alcalá la Real

## and the SIERRA SUR de JAÉN



SEE OUR AD ON PAGE 2

**Once a heavily contested frontier between Muslim and Christian Spain, today Alcala and the Sierra Sur is synonymous with the concept of 'happy Jaen'. By Jon Clarke**

**H**AVING spent over two years trawling southern Spain for his dream home Patrick Crosby, 49, finally gave his wife Julie, 52, an ultimatum. It had cost a lot of money bringing his three children over from the West Coast of Ireland on a house hunt every holiday and he wanted a decision. "I put the screws on her and told her to pick somewhere. Anywhere," he explains. "We had seen hundreds of places and it had cost me a fortune paying for all the flights and hotels, etc. "Luckily she chose here, the south of Jaen, which is similar to Galway back home, except with a lot more sun."

The builder is typical of the sort of person to relocate to the area known as the Sierra Sur of Jaen. Looking for a change of lifestyle and a new challenge, he and his family Jade, 9, Kieran, 11 and Patrick, 13, have immersed themselves in village life, and quickly picked up the language. "My boys are now getting top marks in Spanish at school and - because they learnt proper Castilian in private classes when we first arrived - their teacher says they speak better than the locals." It was a similar story for writer Diane Dennett who hunted around Galicia and the plains of Extremadura before finally arriving in Jaen.

Looking for the place to settle, she and her husband Barry, a marine engineer, straight away knew that the town of Alcala was ideal for them. "The minute we arrived in Jaen we knew it was right," explained the editor of local magazine *Olive Country Life*. "The mountains were more my size and it felt like the Lake District where we come from back home." While not exactly full of lakes like, say the El Chorro area near Antequera, there are certainly plenty of rugged peaks.

Continued Page 2

# Castles and Caliphs



**TYPICAL:** The Crosbys have quickly learnt Spanish and become part of the melting pot in Alcala, seen above

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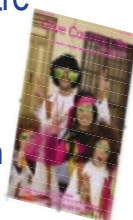
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# Castles atop every hill

From Page 1

In fact, there is almost nowhere in the area lacking in scenery. Views invariably go on for miles and there is little urban blight to ruin the picture. Look in any direction and a rolling blanket of olive trees stretches towards the horizon, interspersed occasionally with clouds of cherry and almond blossom in early Spring. And to cap it all, the three main towns of Alcalá la Real, Alcaudete and Castillo de Locubín are full of fascinating history and all topped with castles.

**Views invariably go on for miles and there is little urban blight to ruin the picture**



**MAJESTIC:** Intricate doorway of the church of Alcaudete, a town where immigrants are well looked after, says Diane Heston (centre) with husband Andy (rgt) and electrician Kevin Thompson



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On the so-called 'Route of the Caliphs', the trio were once part of a well fortified northern frontier of the Kingdom of Granada, which held out against the Christian Crusaders for a couple of centuries. Strategically located between Granada and Cordoba - from where the key Moorish kings (known as Caliphs) ruled - it became an important market town. A chain of towers are scattered throughout the nearby hills and, according to legend, the border was frequently shifting. Few places were more fortified than Alcalá, which became synonymous with fierce battles between the two adversaries. This was reflected in its Arabic name of *Qalat* (meaning a fortified settlement) and it managed to hold off the Christians until 1341. The town is still entirely dominated by the castle, known as the Mota, which sits at 1000 metres above sea level. It is a fascinating place to poke around with its fabulous views across the town and, in particular its gateway Puerta de la Imagen, which is similar to one in the Alhambra. It also preserves a few parts of its former mosque, which has now become the Iglesia de Santo Domingo and there is an archaeological museum if you still have time. It was from here, coincidentally, that the Catholic

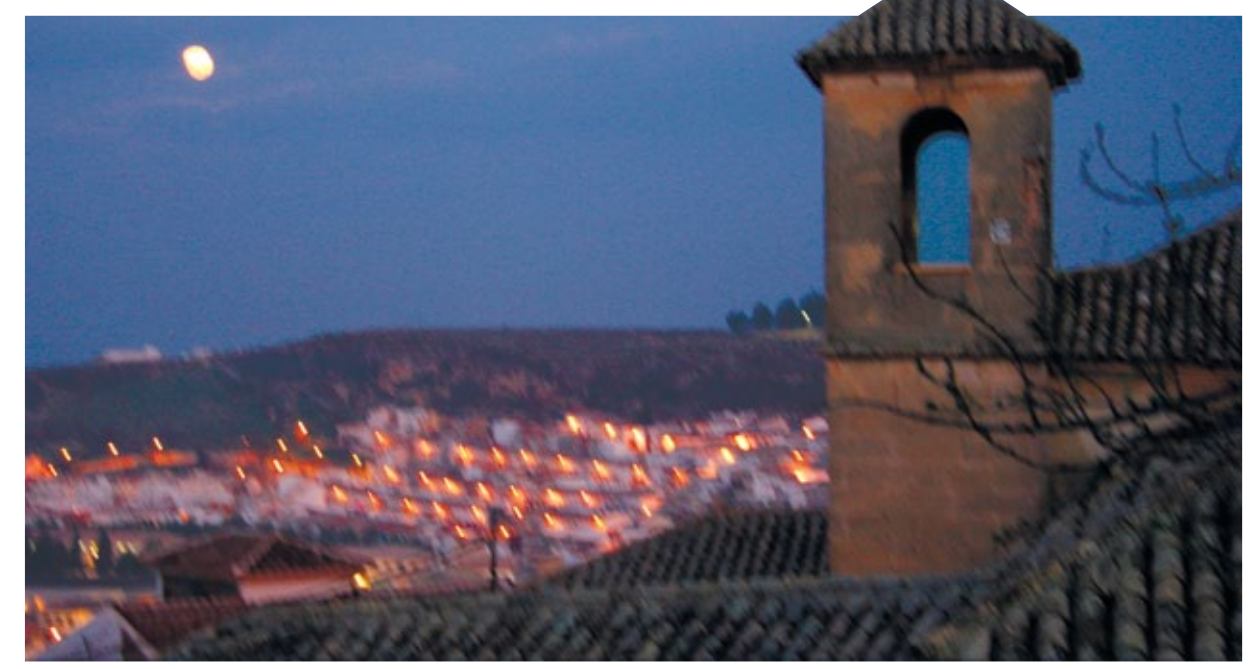
Monarchs - Ferdinand and Isabella - rode out to receive the keys upon the surrender of Granada in 1492. Not long after, the town had become famous for its nobility, and by 1502 around a quarter of its 600 or so inhabitants had been awarded titles for their bravery in fighting the Moors. Take a wander around its narrow atmospheric streets, admiring some of the old churches and squares. At the bottom you will find a lovely open square Paseo de los Alamos, where in the evenings or on sunny lunch-times there are plenty of nice tapas bars to take a drink. There are some half decent shops, but mostly people visit the area around Alcalá for the countryside. It is easy to see why, taking a circular drive towards Frailes, via Ribera Alta on a meandering back road that gently climbs into the Sierra Sur itself. It is here that British actor Ayub Khan Din has settled with his family after making his name in films *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. It is also the home of celebrated writer Michael Jacobs, who based his book *Factory of Light* on the town. "It is such a magical place," Jacobs explains over a beer in his local restaurant El Choto. "I still love the place and the wonderful people who live here, which is why I am not sure I want to translate the book into Spanish." He is very much the local

celebrity in a town known mostly for its olives. Having written a number of books on Spain and regularly for the *Telegraph* newspaper, he concentrated on the magical world of Jaen in the *Factory of Light*. Centred around the reopening of the town's local cinema, it became a deserved bestseller and is one of the best books written about Spain for a decade. Currently working 16-hour days on his next book on a journey through the Andes (in part with his close friend *Driving Over Lemons* writer Chris Stewart), he describes the Sierra Sur area as "largely forgotten" by travel books. In the *Factory of Light*, he wrote: "Beyond Alcalá with its eloquent vestiges of a once indomitable citadel and abbey, the area known as the Sierra Sur de Jaen appeared to have been largely forgotten by travel books and history itself."

**'It is such a magical place and some truly wonderful people live here'**

"A former no man's land between Moorish and Christian Spain, it had been heavily depleted in later centuries by massive emigration." Unsure of what to find on his arrival, he went on to describe his excitement of finding Frailes, and labelled it as

"paradise". He wrote: "Excitement at the vastness of the panorama was matched by a profound sense of peacefulness. Beauty was not tinged by terror but by a feeling of enormous relief on attaining some long-awaited goal. The whole composition appeared to radiate a divinely ordered harmony." With these words I headed up into the hills past Frailes enjoying the most incredible landscape I have found anywhere in Spain. The road leading up towards Valdepenas de Jaen is spectacular and really feels like a true wilderness. It eventually arrives at a turn off for a hamlet called Hoya de Charilla, where one of my favourite hotels the Quinta de Charilla is found. Peace personified, the only sounds you hear are the owls and goats and the scenery from the nearby hills is incomparable. Over three days I drove around the region, merely scratching the surface of the fascinating towns of Alcaudete and Castillo de Locubín, a very attractive laid back place, known for its cherry festival. Both towns have their own fascinating histories, with Alcaudete, in particular, a stand-alone market town like Alcalá. Full of interesting nooks and crannies, it has a clever, reformist mayor, who has gone out of his way to welcome immigrants from around the world.



**ATMOSPHERIC:** The moon rises over Alcalá, which held out the Christians for 600 years

This is immediately apparent on arriving in the pretty main square beside the town hall where a big group of gypsies sit holding a meeting, while Africans and Chinese mill around nearby. There is no sense of danger, and everyone smiled when I began taking pictures.

This apparent harmony is reflected in this year's official town hall calendar in which there are dozens of photographs of all the immigrants - including English and other northern Europeans - who have made their home in the town. "A lot of young people have

stayed and settled here recently," says Andy Heston, who runs his building business Campo Construction here. "The town hall has worked really hard to make people feel welcome whatever the colour of their skin and that is excellent." This attitude sums up the

region as a whole, an area too long thought of as a transition province, with the Moors for example calling it 'Jeen' or the 'caravan route'. Make sure to come for a visit to 'Happy Jaen', and like thousands of others over recent years, you might just end up staying.

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## Stone Age builders to Rock Bottom prices

**They have been building here since Neolithic times and today Alcalá property is still standing up well... and proving a fabulous bargain, says Jon Clarke**

**T**HEY have been building homes in the Sierra Sur since Jesus was in nappies. And the foundations were laid well before the Romans wandered into the area 2000 years ago. In fact, it is thought that the ancient Iberian tribes made the area one of their key settlement zones. As well as various dolmen burial sites, in nearby Almedinilla archaeologists have traced settlement back to 100,000 years before Christ. In particular, they have discovered a well-preserved grid layout of an ancient Iberian village - known as an 'oppida' - which was some eight hectares in size. Sitting atop a high hill with unbeatable views, the El Cerro de la Cruz site has so far yielded numerous earthenware pots, tools and weapons, including an ornate 'falcatá' sword. Nearby on the edge of town is one of Spain's best preserved examples of a Roman villa El Ruedo.

"It is a very interesting area and there is a lot of history here," says builder Patrick Walter, who worked for 30 years in the building trade in Bath, before moving to the area. "The whole place is full of charming old properties and there are plenty of country homes, because unlike, say in Cordoba or Sevilla, a lot of people owned a bit of land here," he says. As local Alcalá estate agent Jerome Marguier, of Andalucía Rural, explains: "Most people still have a few hectares of olive trees with a small property on them. The middle class is quite wealthy and few people ever starved around here." The Frenchman, who moved to Spain having worked as an

electrical engineer in Cambridge, reckons that not only is property here the cheapest in Andalucía, but it could get even cheaper. "I think the prices have come down about 20 per cent over the last year and will come down perhaps ten per cent more," he says. Where else, he contends, can you find decent country homes for less than 20,000 euros, highlighting it with a short five-minute drive to see one bargain five minutes from Alcalá. While a ruin and in need of complete renovation, the semi-detached property measures in at 18metres squared and sits on nearly a hectare of land. The

price; just 17,000 euros. "It even has its own electricity and water," he continues. But, as local architect Liam Kelleher warns it is getting much harder to get planning permission for such rustic properties. "You have to be careful with the escritura and be very careful with plans," says the architect, who previously worked for leading London firm CZWG. "And it is vital to do things 100 per cent correct, particularly if you are foreign." To save yourself any potential hassle buyers might instead be advised to buy a village or town house instead.



**FROM ANCIENT TO MODERN (SORT OF):** The Iberian settlement in Almedinilla is well preserved and once covered eight hectares. Right, agent Jerome Marguier in front of this bargain 17,000 euro property with four bedrooms and five minutes from Alcalá

around so make sure to get proper references and be careful before you start renovating," says Diane, who travelled around

amps, which leads to a lot of fires if properties are not converted properly. "The old systems will take up to 25 amps for a while... until it gets too hot and there is a fire. Nine times out of ten it is caused by a kitchen appliance."

**The houses have so much character and it is a crime the way some people destroy them**

But wiring aside, the buildings of the area are generally well built using a variety of local materials, as builder Patrick Crosby, based in Castillo de Locubín, discovered. "I found everything and anything while converting them. Some are earth-built, with cow dung, straw and hay," says the boss of PKC construction.

"Others have three foot thick walls with wine bottles, beer bottles, bullets, lead weights, and everything else dumped inside them. It is certainly never a dull job. "Half the time they use branches rather than beams, but most of the homes are surprisingly solid," says the builder, who has worked in construction for most of his life, in part as a civil engineer in New York.

"I always try and make sure people work with the old buildings as much as possible. They have so much character and it is a crime the way some people destroy them. "One expatriate who moved here didn't like the wonky old frame and said she wanted to have straight walls like she had back home in England. I said why don't you buy in England instead?"

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## The bargains on offer

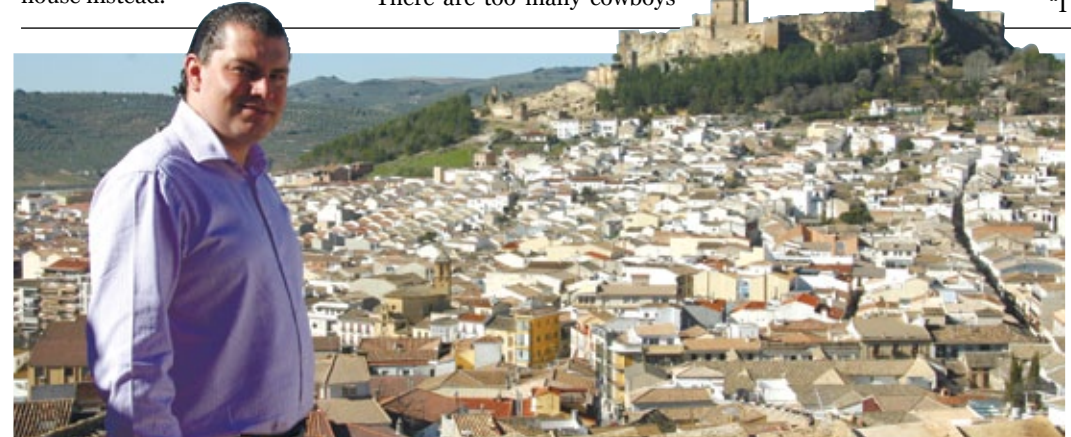
Beautifully restored three bedroomed town house in the historic area of Alcaudete. There are two sun terraces with pretty views and the house is situated in a quiet street in the heart of the town. 74,000 euros through Campo Construction, in Alcaudete on 953 708 983



This interesting 140m house in the heart of Alcalá old town has three bedrooms and could easily be lived in with few alterations. Small outside space at the back could be converted into a terrace with views towards the Sierra Nevada. Cost just 49,500 euros through Andalucía Rural Net on 953582416



This stunning, fully renovated four bedroom, three bathroom house, with its own pool and a hectare of land, sits in the charming hamlet of Fuente de Espino, ten minutes from Castillo de Locubín. For sale through Grupo Une Inmobiliaria, in Alcalá (953582548)



## Buy one home, get one free

JAEN is already one of the cheapest places to buy property in Spain, according to the BBC's *Place in the Sun*. But now, one ingenious local seller has come up with surely one of the bargains of the year so far. Keen to entice a buyer for his fabulously located four-bedroom townhouse in central Alcalá, the seller is throwing in a pretty country property as part of the deal. For just 210,000 the purchaser will get the large townhouse, with its own central patio, two large roof terraces (one pictured above), a parking space and amazing views of Alcalá's castle, plus the pretty country home in the hamlet of Fuente de Espino, a 20

minute drive away. But the cottage itself is great in its own right. It has 400 metres squared of fruit trees and is 135 metres in size, with three bedrooms, and some of the best views in Spain. As agent Diego Escobar La Torre (pictured) of Une Estates explains: "This is perfect for a family or couple who want to relocate here and have the best of both worlds. "They have the amazing townhouse for the week and the lovely rural project to work on at the weekends. It is an amazing deal."

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<p>Ref 5597 - Price: 17K Euros, Built: 160m2, Land: 800m2. Large countryside property just 5 mins from Alcalá La Real. Water, electricity, connection to the sewage. Fantastic views to the mountains</p>	<p>Ref: 5665 - Price 69K Euros - 210m2 - Terrace - 2 town houses for the price of one! 210m2, first 3 bedrooms house fully reformed. Nice terrace, view to the Arabic castle</p>
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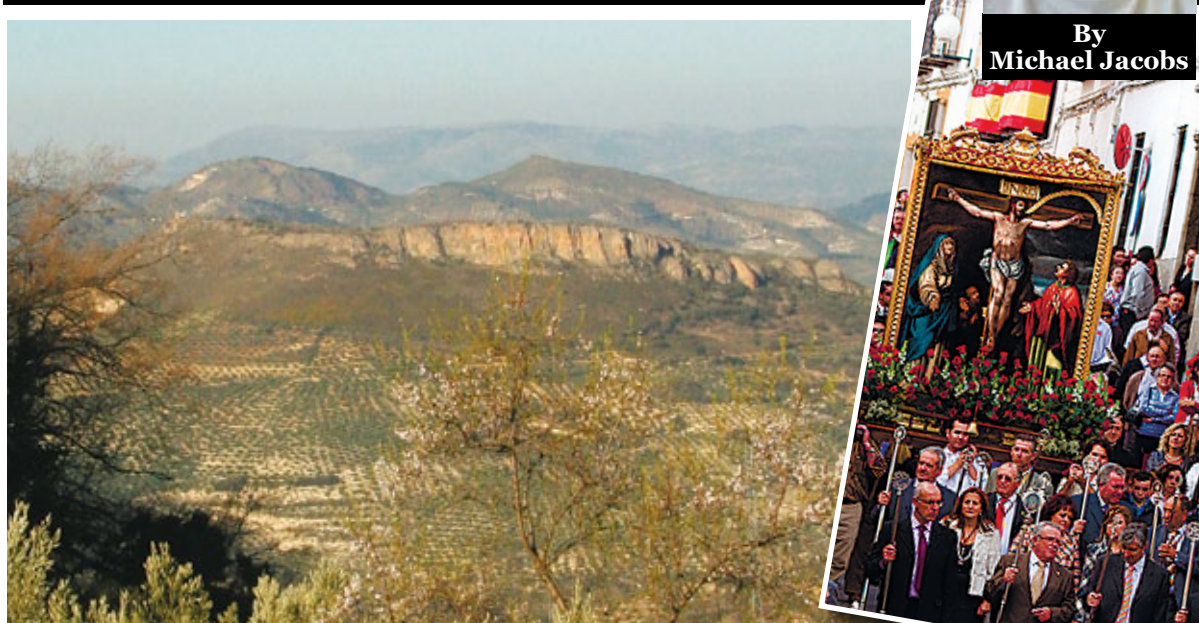
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# Secrets of Sierra Sur



By Michael Jacobs



MAJESTIC: The views on a drive from Alcalá to La Hoya de Charilla are unbeatable, while the Romeria, with 16th century painting of Christ, at Valdepenas de Jaen is unmissable



**H**AVING written widely about Andalucía and specifically about Jaen in his book *Factory of Light*, Michael Jacobs is well qualified to give his Top Ten Tips on what not to miss in the area.

**1** One unmissable place is the town of Valdepenas de Jaen, for its spectacular surroundings, its interesting 16th century mill museum and its great nightlife. The town has Flemish roots and it is steeped in interesting folklore tradition

**2** My favourite tapas bar has got to be La Cueva, in Frailes. It's in my village, but it really does have a great atmosphere and some fabulous tapas

**3** While the wine in the area is slowly improving between November and April you can try a very traditional local type of mosto at La Mira Cielo in Alcalá

**4** A fabulous olive oil is the organic Oro de Genave from the north of Jaen, while a great local one is called Las Parras, from Frailes

**5** My favourite archaeological site has got to be the La Mota at the top of Alcalá hill. While they have

messed around with it no end it is still fascinating

**6** A fabulous hidden escape has got to be Chircales, a sanctuary near Valdepenas. A lovely Romeria goes there and it is breathtakingly beautiful

**7** My favourite local dishes include Alcalá's well known chicken stew called a *Secretaria*, *Choto del Aljillo*, or garlic kid, and a rice dish with rabbit and chorizo called *Arroz Caldoso*

**8** A great drive would take you to Frailes via the pretty village of Ribera Alta.

From there you would carry on climbing up into the Sierra Sur into breathtaking scenery, taking a left into La Hoya de Charilla, where at the weekend you might have lunch at La Quinta de Charilla, before heading back down to Alcalá


**9** A superb walk is the old road from Alcalá to Frailes which goes through some amazing virgin territory

**10** The best bit of art in the area has got to be the 16th century painting of Christ at the sanctuary at Chircales (see above).



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The Reads found their home through BBC programme *Living in the Sun* while a few others tell us about why they settled in the Sierra Sur and what they are doing there

# Homehunting celebs

By Paul Whitelock

**O**NE local couple had their five minutes of fame when they found their home through the BBC's *Living in the Sun*. Ian and Irene Read

moved to Jaen in 2007 after getting in touch with the programme's producers, to help them find their dream escape.



HAPPY: The Reads are doing what they have always wanted to do



"We had long wanted to move to warmer climes, somewhere easy for our six grown-up children to visit and not too far from our aging parents," Ian explains. *Living In The Sun* found a number of homes that met their criteria to open a guest house and run a small removal business. Irene said: "We had no intention of buying without giving it serious consideration, but we ended up becoming the first couple ever to buy on camera". This was how they found their new home three kilometres down a dirt track between Alcalá and Montefrio at the foot of the Sierra Parapanda. As soon as they had tied up loose ends in the UK, they moved out. Ian bought an old LDV van, that was soon to become known as "The Beast of Montefrio", and his company, Man and Van in Spain, was born. The Reads' home and retreat Los Molinos is situated deep in a gorgeous valley at an altitude of 800 metres, facing south with views over the Granada plains and the mountains beyond. "Moving to Spain has given us the opportunity to do the things we always wanted to do at the pace we desire," says Ian, "We still have to work, but we feel in control as opposed to work ruling our lives."

## Alejandro and Claudia, both 25, Argentina

Alejandro and Claudia from Argentina, moved to Mallorca to run newly-opened restaurant Fuegos del Sur in the centre of town. Both 25, Alejandro is the chef and Claudia is



maitre'd, waitress and bartender rolled into one.

"We came to Spain because there is no work in Argentina," says Claudia, "Our mother tongue is Spanish, and although the accent round here is different, we feel completely at home." Alejandro adds: "We like it here very much and we are proud to serve one or two dishes made from real Argentinian beef, which is imported specially. Our customers seem to like it."

## Brian and Sandra Dolan, Alcalá

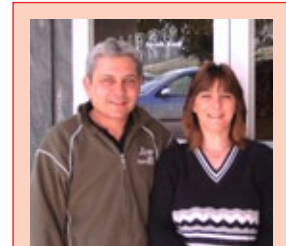
"We live in a six bedroom detached house a few kilometres from Alcalá, and we love it; the magnificent scenery, the fresh air, the way of life, but most of all the people. "All of our Spanish neighbours are so supportive and they have become firm friends. Everyone helps us with our Spanish and they put us right when we pronounce things wrongly. We feel



so much part of this community now, we could not contemplate going back to live in England "The only regret we have is that we didn't come to live here 20 years ago."

## Kevin Thompson, Los Chopos

"We were badgered by some friends to come over here for years. We always used to go on holiday to Greece or Turkey, until our friends bought us flights here. We came over, loved it and within a week had bought a house next door in the same village. We moved out a year ago and have no regrets at all."



## Rob and Lisa Whelpdale, Route 66 owners, Alcalá

"We came to Spain four years ago for a better life. After spending a month on the Costa Blanca we settled here. "We bought in Alcalá before buying our second house in the village of Castillo de Locubin. We set to work renovating, but, although enjoyable it was hard work and with Robert doing other people's homes too, it was too much. "After a lot of soul searching we decided to invest our money in a bar, and thus Bar Route 66 was born. We opened a few short weeks ago and so far so good. We are still loving every minute of our lives in Spain."



## Geoffrey West, of Butcher West & Sons, Alcalá

"I love the pace of life here in our village Ventas del Carrizal. The kids have so much more freedom here and there is so much less to worry about than back home in Cheltenham. Come the summer months and they are up running around till 1am. "On top of that my butchers shop has taken off with not just the expatriates. The Spanish love the fact that I have 30 varieties of sausages, particularly the spicy ones."

## Phoebe Walters, aged 22, Almedinilla

"In 2005 I took a gap year before university and moved with my family to Spain. Needless to say I'm still here (in my fourth gap year!!) and enjoying every moment. "My first priority was to learn the language. Once I had mastered Spanish I then studied for my TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and opened my own Academia in Almedinilla. I now teach English to the locals and Spanish to English speakers in and around the Alcalá la Real area. "Coming to Spain has been an enjoyable experience."

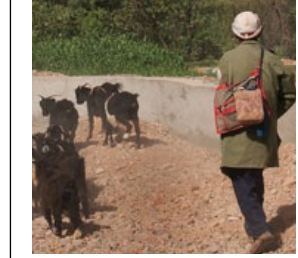
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## Manolo García, goatherd, 74, Hoya de Charilla



Manolo is married and has five children. He still looks after 80 goats in all weathers. "If I gave up, what would I do all day long?" he asks. "I've been a goatherd all my life. Apart from my military service in Mellilla, I've never been away from here. But I'm very happy with my life."

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# 8 Alcalá & Sierra Sur de Jaén special

## WHERE TO STAY

# Hidden gems in hidden province

**W**HILE the Sierra Sur is served with an interesting mix of hotels, Alcalá itself has surprisingly few options. Until a planned parador opens next to the castle in a couple of years, your best bet is the conveniently placed town centre hostelry Hotel Torrepalma. Owned by a Cordobesan businesswoman, staff are friendly and rooms are both clean and tidy. Just a short walk to most of the town's best sites, the hotel conveniently has free Wifi access

for guests and there is a cafeteria/restaurant serving up dishes next door. Another good option further into the town, in the historic quarter is the good value Hotel Zacatin, a family-run affair with a busy bar/cafe. But given that this region is known for its breathtaking countryside one might prefer to stay outside the town. Take a windy road up into the lonely hills above Alcalá until you arrive in the mountain hamlet of Hoya de Charilla. Here, you will find one of Andalucía's most

evocative – and certainly, most remote hotels. A true escape, Hotel La Quinta de Charilla sits in a stunning valley, its pink glory, bathed in the light of the Sierras. Run by Mercedes and her son Rubén who serves up a great mix of dishes in the kitchen, you are in good hands. Dine like a king on fried goat's cheese dressed with strands of honey, or artichokes with ham, and then sleep like a baby with no other sounds than the owls and local goats. You wake up the next morning to a valley overlooked by mountains and a ten minute walk away are some of the best views in Christendom. Costing just 50€ including breakfast, it is excellent value. Explained Mercedes: "The most important things in the hotel and restaurant business are service, customer care, cleanliness and quality and that is what I aim to provide."

Another great country option is a yurt hotel just outside Castillo de Locubin. Run by a former civil servant from Sheffield, Lauren Smith and her husband Sam, a builder (and circus entertainer), Cortijo Vadillo is a delightful spot sitting



**ACCOMMODATING:** Above Cortijo las Salinas and inset Hotel Torrepalma



**REAL CHARM:** Hotel La Quinta de Charilla

## FACTFILE

- Cortijo las Salinas**  
953582416  
www.andalucia-rural.net
- Hotel Zacatin**  
953580568 - www.hospederiazacatin.com
- Cortijo Vadillo**  
639185422  
www.cortijovadillo.com
- Hotel Torrepalma**  
953581800 - www.hotelorrepalma.com
- Hotel La Quinta de Charilla** 636 481 414  
www.fincaloscerezos.com

## WHERE TO EAT

JAEN has long been known as the dark heartland of Spanish cuisine. An area known mostly for its ventas, there has however been a gentle influx of creative cuisine in recent years.

In Alcalá a pair of exciting new places have recently opened. The first, La Fortaleza, is stylish in the extreme. Beautifully designed, with slate walls and bright red banquettes, its chef Carlos Sanchez, 24, has learnt his trade in restaurants around Andalucía, including Granada's El Claustro. Only open for four months, he is still finding his feet, but shows real promise with some interesting dishes such as bacalao in a rich hazelnut sauce, with dried fruits. Nearby it is another even more exciting restaurant Fuegos del Sur.

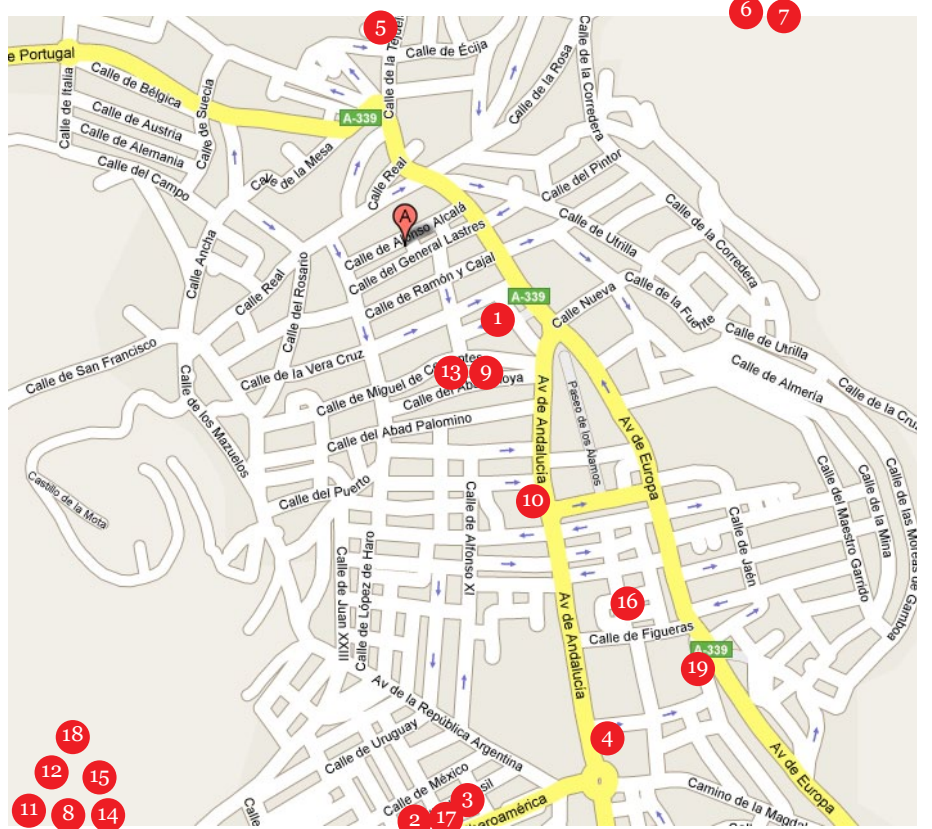
Run by Argentinians Alejandro and Claudia, both 25, they have injected a bit of true talent to the Alcalá food scene. While chef Alejandro looks like a trendy sixth former on



work experience, he cooks food like a grand master, with great panache! His medallions of pink salmon with a mango mayonnaise and his polenta with goats cheese were incredibly good starters, while his main course of Argentinian rib-eye steak was incredible. With his wife Claudia making the perfect, attractive maitre'd, they have a solid future. Finally a 20-minute drive from the town there is one restaurant you miss at your peril. Described in one prestigious guide as Andalucía's "biggest surprise", Casa Pioneras, in Algarinejo, is a pilgrimage that every tourist MUST make this year!

## Key to advertisers

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2. Olive Country Life Magazine
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15. Casa Pioneras
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