

All about the Axarquía

September 2010

A 20-page guide

How the Axarquía awakened from its slumber

Novelist David Baird on why, having lived all around the world, he settled in this quiet corner of Malaga, known as a land of rebellion, resistance and renaissance

WAKING up on the summit of El Lucero is a little like having a rindside seat at the birth of the world.

As the dawn sky shifts from purple to gold, you glimpse the mountains of Africa rising on the horizon above a silver sea. To the north pine forests swim in the mists of Granada province, while below stark crags thrust up from dark valleys to catch the first light of day.

Here and there a column of smoke reaches up from a faraway farmhouse or hamlet. You are high above the Axarquía, the 988-square-kilometre corner of Malaga prov-

ince. And El Lucero, a limestone butress soaring 1,700 metres above sea-level, is as good a place as any to appreciate this region's natural grandeur.

The ruins of an old Civil Guard post provided sparse shelter for the night I spent atop the mountain in order to research a book on the region.

They are the relics of a bitter struggle in the 1940s and early 1950s when guerrillas vainly tried to undermine the Franco regime.

Their leader was a ruthless, charismatic character named El Roberto and legends

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From Page 11

about him and his band still circulate among the villages of the Axarquía.

For quite a while after his rebellion was crushed, not a lot happened in the Axarquía (from the Arabic *sharqīyya*, meaning the eastern zone). While tourists began flocking to Torremolinos and Marbella, it slumbered. Poor communications meant the Costa del Sol Oriental (the coast east of Málaga) was largely bypassed by travellers.

And that's the good news. For this zone largely avoided the worst aberrations of the development boom. Mass tourism has not swamped it and the jets set has focussed on other parts, thank goodness. One hopes the mayor of Frigiliana, one of the least-spoilt villages, took to heart the words of King Juan Carlos when he visited in 1998. Highly impressed, he commented: "You have a very pretty *pueblo*. Do everything to conserve it."

When I first came here, stepping off the bus in Nerja one December when fewer than a dozen foreigners were wintering in the town, land was selling at two pesetas a square metre and wine was 10 pesetas a litre.

Great, for the visitor. But not for the locals. A medieval life style prevailed. The nearest hospital was in Málaga over a potholed road and ambulances and dentists were unknown.

No longer. These days the Axarquía is truly part of the 21st century, with all the amenities you could expect — and all the pros and the cons.

Ancient vines and olive groves have been uprooted to make way for urbanisations and villas. Hundreds of old farmhouses and village dwellings have been renovated and thousands of north Europeans have either bought second homes or arrived to live permanently under the sun. Along the coast apartment blocks have sprouted where once the main crop was sugar cane. Cane was king

At last it awoke



COMMANDER: Roberto

for 1,000 years, but the last refinery on the coast closed in 2006. Fortunately, although concrete has scarred parts of the coast, inland the Axarquía is still an escapist's paradise of sleepy villages and dramatic sierras.

A beautiful city with a fine mosque and an abundance of fruit trees

By far the largest town is Vélez-Málaga, praised by Ibn Battutah, greatest of medieval Arab travellers, as "a beautiful city with a fine mosque and an abundance of fruit trees". Although now surrounded by modern development, the old town is well worth visiting — Cervantes passed this way as a tax collector and mentions Vélez in his epic *Don Quixote*.

Nearby is Torre del Mar, once a huddle of poor fishermen's dwellings. According to one story, things took off when a local builder built apartments



SWEET: Raisins are an Axarquía speciality

to house a string of Málaga businessmen's mistresses. Soon after, the Germans started buying and scores of apartment blocks now line the seafloor. Decent amenities were a long time in coming, but the town has spruced itself up, with an excellent promenade and decent eating possibilities. And now Spanish visitors flock in too.

Just along the coast, the first language at bars and restaurants along the Torrox-Costa seafloor would appear to be German. Torrox insists it has the best climate in Europe, although its neighbours, such as Nerja, are inclined to argue the point. One thing it can legitimately claim: it stages one of the coast's biggest annual beanos. On a Sunday in mid-December tens of thousands scoff vast quantities of *migas*, a belly-filling dish served with torrents of Moscatel wine.

Sweet, high-alcohol wine and raisins are Axarquía specialties. In autumn you will see grapes laid out to dry on *paseros*, earthen beds facing south. No wonder the wine is compared to bottled sunshine, which you can verify by attending Cómputa's celebrated wine festival in August.

Be sure too to try the raisins, a luscious, mouth-watering experience. For an idea of the work involved in producing them visit the Museo de la Pasa in Almáchar.

On the coast the biggest single reason for the Axarquía becoming an internationally known tourism venue lies underground: la Cueva de Nerja.

On January 12, 1959, five local boys discovered these vast caverns with amazing rock formations and traces of Paleolithic man. General Franco himself came to view this phenomenon. Today in Andalucía only the Alhambra in Granada draws more visitors.

The rest of Spain finally woke up to Nerja's attractions when *Verano Azul*, a popular TV series, was filmed there. Talk about a reality show — when *Chanquete* (an old fisherman in the series) died, Nerja *ayuntamiento* flew its flag at half-mast. And today an oil painting of Antonio Ferrándiz, who played the part, hangs in the town hall.

Often you will hear more English than Spanish in Nerja. Back in the Napoleonic Wars the British bombarded Ner-

Axarquía special

ja's fortifications into rubble, but the locals don't hold it against them. Brits run many local businesses and are the mainstay of tourism.

Without doubt the most spectacular scenery along the Costa del Sol lies beyond Nerja. From the town's Balcony of Europe you gaze at mountains which tumble sheer into the azure Mediterranean. Lofty headlands conceal secluded beaches and the area is now protected as a marine sanctuary, great for snorkelling.

I finally discovered the ideal place to unpack our bags and take up residence

But, for me, the best part of the Axarquía is to be found inland. Here lies the Spain where my wife and I, after working around the world, finally discovered the ideal place to unpack our bags and take up residence.

As we'd dug our way out of dust traps on the tracks of the Outback, as we'd struggled through the crowded streets of Hong Kong, we'd dreamed of an easy-going place in the sun where we could unwind. Like many other expatriates, we found the ideal spot. What matter if the toilet was only a hole in the ground, the roof



COASTAL HIDEOUT: Rural Sayalonga with developed coastal resort Torre del Mar behind. (Inset) Church in Sedella

beams were near to collapse and the house could only be reached up 40 or so cobbled steps.

It was autumn and there is no sight more attractive than the cubist dwellings of the Axarquía bathed in that golden light. The one we found looked down on a mosaic of carefully tended fields, irrigated by channels first built by the Moors. To the rear rose the precipitous slopes of the Sierra Almijara.

Each of the region's 31 com-

munities has its charm and a history often more eventful than you may imagine.

Take El Borge, population 1,000, famed for its raisins and as the birthplace of El Bizco, a blood-thirsty, one-eyed bandit (his old home is now a hotel and restaurant). Unusual street names reflect the fact that today's mayor is a little to the left of Mao Tse-tung.

Tiny Macharaviaya has interesting street names too...Penacola, Mobile, New Orleans.

They recall the days when it was known as Little Madrid, thanks to the Gálvez family who achieved power and wealth and aided the USA's fight for independence.

Riogordo is the place to be on Good Friday and Easter Saturday. You are likely to meet Roman centurions strolling down the main street and Galician shepherds refreshing themselves in a bar. Hundreds of villagers take part in the annual Passion Play. Meanwhile in Puente don

Manuel you can find just about every British luxury and necessity in its hive of expat businesses.

Beyond the villages and cultivated valleys rise the heights of the Tejada and Almijara sierras, forming part of a 40,000-hectare nature park. Once mule trains, charcoal-burners, smugglers and wood-cutters trod the paths through the mountains. Now they are largely deserted, except for hikers, bikers and bird-watchers.

The last wolf disappeared a century ago, but you can catch glimpses of mountain goats, wild boar, foxes and other wildlife amid these tortuous ranges.

Maroma, the highest peak in Málaga province at 2,068 metres, is often wreathed in cloud, in winter sheathed in snow. In the past *neveros* (snowmen) would pack the snow in *esparto* baskets in summer and bring it by mule to the coast to use for refrigeration.

For *malagueños*, hiking to Maroma's summit is something of a pilgrimage. Quite a number trek up at the summer solstice to enjoy the dawn (best to be fit and well-equipped). Just to confirm that you have made the right choice in coming to the Axarquía, a plaque at the top records: "This mountain is the centre of the world./This mountain like any mountain is a sacred place./That's why you are here..."

David Baird is the author of several books relating to the Axarquía, including *East of Málaga — Essential Guide* (Santana Books), *Sunny Side Up — The 21st century hits a Spanish village* (Santana), and *Between Two Fires — Guerrilla war in the Spanish sierras* (Maroma Press). More information at: <http://maromapress.wordpress.com/>



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FOR avid map readers, the double loop in the A-7000 above Malaga must hold some allure. This is the old road out of Malaga north and should win awards for scenery, with your ears literally popping as it ascends into the Montes de Malaga national park. It was up this road that my wife and I came when we first settled in Spain seven years ago.

En-route to our first rental home in Andalucia (me planning to write a book, my wife concentrating on painting) we couldn't have found a better way to arrive in the Axarquía. Stopping for lunch at 400-year-old Venta Galway - which takes its name from an Irishman, who moved there when the British market couldn't get enough of the area's sweet muscatel wines - you have a birds eye view of the Axarquía.

Not only spectacular in landscape, the Axarquía, a ham-shaped wedge that cuts inland from the beach resorts of Torre Del Mar and Nerja, has much to offer in culture and increasingly in food and wine. It has not always been so visitor-friendly though and dauntingly, as one guidebook points out, the little-known region has only been physically safe for tourists to visit in the last few decades.

Indeed the Axarquía (pronounced Ass-Ikea) has long been fabled as one of Spain's most inhospitable zones. A former haunt for *bandoleros*, or bandits, who preyed on traders carrying goods to Granada, it was also a popular route for smugglers bringing contraband into Spain from Africa. Such was its volatile nature (the coast was regularly attacked by Barbary pirates) that the area's inhabitants built fortified villages, with watchtowers in the hills inland.

After spending a year living in the region, the Olive Press editor Jon Clarke explains why he identified with the Axarquía

A land of rebellion, resistance and renaissance

The region is completely steeped in a dramatic history of rebellion, resistance and renaissance. The evidence is all around: churches built after revolutionaries, inns dedicated to highwaymen. Battlefields meanwhile litter the area and it was here - in Comares and Frigiliana, in particular, at 'El Fuerte' - that some of the last few battles were fought between the Christians and Moors during the Christian reconquest of Spain.

From here they launched frequent guerilla attacks against Franco's victorious army

Later, it became a hotbed of republicanism and after the Spanish civil war in the late 1930s, became one of the key escape routes and hide-outs for left wing soldiers.

From here they launched frequent guerilla attacks against dictator Franco's victorious army, and weren't officially beaten until the mid 1950s. Dissected by deep ravines and criss-crossed with streams, it is easy to see why it was such a hard area to pacify. The confusing pattern of rutted hills mean that journeys that look tiny on the map can, and usually do, take quite some time. But that is very much part of the Axarquía's charm, a bucolic landscape of whitewashed vil-

lages and due to a fabulous microclimate, plantations that include - unlike anywhere else in Europe - mangoes, avocados and bananas.

"It has a wonderful microclimate stretching all the way up to Periana," says landscape gardener Lee Talbot, who has lived here for five years. "You don't get extremes of weather and almost any plants will grow given water."

Its mountainous borders - that include Maroma at over 2000 metres - serve a double purpose, protecting the region from extremes of temperature and also drawing in moisture to aid its agricultural sector, which is still reasonably strong.

First inhabited by the Phoenicians, who planted acres of vines, and later the Romans, it wasn't until Moorish times however, that the region began to truly thrive. Part of the cultured kingdom of Granada, great fortified towns and palaces went up and it was here - as mentioned - that the Moors made some of their last collective sighs, before being vanished, via the Reconquest, back to Morocco.

There is certainly much evidence of their civilisation, particularly in the main market town of Velez Malaga and the heart of Comares, where in the claustrophobic Calle del Pardon, 30 families of Moors, were spared their



RUGGED LANDSCAPE: Looking across Lake Vinuela, while (right) a modern church in Torre del Mar

Lemon Tree in the heart of the town. Driving back towards the coast, you should certainly take a poke around Periana, perhaps stopping at Cantueso for lunch. You should also certainly head for a bit of shopping in the curious, fast-growing settlement of Puente Don Manuel, where hundreds of expatriate Britons, who live in the area, stock up on all their essentials.



Like Malaga it also has a Moorish fortress rising above it with battlements, but unlike Malaga it also has a fascinating old medina, crammed full of interesting nooks to explore. Its old town has recently been given a special protection status and no less than 47 historic buildings have been specifically listed.

Even better, it is soon to have a paradior, with the celebrated national chain having identified the town - and more importantly the key building, an ancient convent - where it is to expand. Next up it's the coast and if that's your thing, well take your pick from the celebrated Nerja, the down to earth Torre del Mar or Torrox and its excellent beaches. But be aware, while there may be no more *bandoleros*, there are a good many more tourists clogging up the hotel rooms, not to mention sunbeds.

While there may be no more bandoleros, there are a good many more elderly tourists

Keep going and the road eventually leads through well cultivated, but interesting land, to the historic commercial town of Velez Malaga, a much underrated and little visited place, which thrives on its market and excellent shops.



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6 Axarquía special

The good-value Axarquía is a fabulous place to make a home, writes estate agent Sally Harrison

Buying in the home of bananas and mangoes

IT'S official, the property market is booming in the Axarquía. More than any other place on the Costa del Sol people are discovering that this is the nicest area to live in. Having the best climate in Europe - Torrox officially takes the title - means that tropical fruit grows in abundance with mango and avocado plantations as well as even bananas. Palm trees line many roads and you really do find yourself driving over lemons! Its not unusual to have to wait for a herd of goats or sheep to cross the road or to see huge oxen pulling carts and men going to work on their donkeys or mules. Life here is far from the madding crowd yet if you want to play tourist there are 25 kilometres of beaches just waiting for you to put down your towel.

People know your name and watch out for you, watering your plants if you are away

When its raining on the coast you quite often find that up in the mountains you are above the clouds and enjoying brilliant sunshine. More and more people are discovering the joys of living in the typical *pueblos blancos* where the local traditions and tranquil way of life continue. Foreigners are welcomed and most become part of the local community, learning the language and joining in with the festivities. People know your name and



ROOMS WITH A VIEW: A charming villa for sale from Axarquía Properties overlooking Lake Vinuela

watch out for you, watering your plants if you are away for a few days and taking in your mail until your return. If you are ill they are the first to come to the hospital or your house to offer support and food. The simple ways of life that are lost living in big cities remain in these villages like a time warp. Waking up in the morning to the sun rising over the mountains, which in winter have sprinklings of snow on top, is just one of the many little daily occurrences that make life in the Axarquía special. You can breakfast in a t-shirt on your terrace while the snow melts as the sun heats the day. On the subject of property, which I have worked in here in Spain for decades, prices are lower here than in other parts of the Costa del Sol. You can still pick up small renovated three bedroom homes for decent prices and a ruined cortijo to renovate from as little as 120,000 euros. On top of that, restaurants and bars give better value for money with a three-course menu del dia costing from just seven euros. While time has stood still in the Axarquía progress is evident with a new tram service linking the capital Vélez-Málaga to the sea side resort of Torre del Mar.



GO BANANAS: tropical fruit, like these mangoes and bananas grows in abundance

There is a fantastic hospital, 24 hour health clinics in the larger villages and most have municipal swimming pools. There are good local schools, with buses ferrying children to and from school, as well as free internet and Spanish lessons available in most villages. If a new, relaxed way of life is what you are looking for, then the Axarquía has it all.

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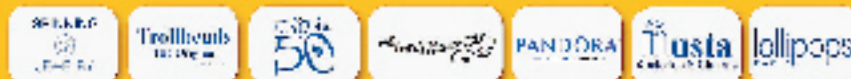


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8 Axarquia special

Take a walk on the wildside

There are some great hikes in the wonderful Axarquia wilderness from Frigiliana, writes guide John Keogh

THE Tejada, Almijara and Alhama Sierras Natural Park – all 40,600 hectares of it – is an impressive mountainous mass which forms a geographical barrier between the provinces of Málaga and Granada. It is a stark reminder of the harshness of life in Andalucía before the arrival of tourism and a fabulous place to escape for a wilderness adventure. Echoing with the sounds of running water, the howling of the wind and, at times, the relentless downpouring of rain, it was always tough to make a living in these moun-

tains. But water is very much the lifeblood of these towering mountains that are filled with deep aquifers. The huge amounts of rainwater are stored in caverns which are best appreciated at the Caves of Nerja. In the summer nothing moves – it's so hot, but from October on until the following May, these mountains become my playground and workplace as a walking guide. Here are a few options available to you should you choose to venture beyond the villages and into the wild. More info at www.hikingwalkingspain.com.

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9 Axarquia special

Up Cerro del Pinto Easy - Three hours

When Capitan Pinto literally crash-landed in Nerja about 200 years ago after surviving a horrendous storm, he made his way up to the hilltop he had seen from the beach to erect a wooden cross on the hilltop as a way of thanking God for saving his men and himself from drowning. There is a monument there to this day and it is still regularly attended by locals when they wish to pray or offer thanks for something or someone in their lives.

I have stretched the route out a little so that it now takes about three and half hours with breaks and stops along the way. It is no more than six kilometres in total with a combined total climb of about 450 meters. From Frigiliana into El Higuero following Ruta Del Imán to Cuesta del Sordo, down



into Corril Del Pinto and then up to the top of Cerro Del Pinto for a look and a prayer and some lunch. Return back to El Higuero by way of the road towards El Molino and then walk back up El Higuero past the waterfalls, we splash through the river until you reach Frigiliana once more. It's a nice way to build an appetite and a thirst. You can eat and drink in Virtudes Restaurant before heading home.

El Fuerte Medium - Four hours

The Stronghold (or *El Fuerte*, as it is known locally), was the site of the Moors Last Stand in Spain. There was once a large fortress atop 'the rock', which overlooks Frigiliana. El Fuerte, was considered a holy place by the Muslim population and it was decided that here they would stand and fight and win or die. From the bus stop in Frigiliana at 330 meters to the top of El Fuerte at 980 meters is a two-and-half-hour climb that is steep at first but the views from the top are incredible. By incorporating the history of the battle as we walk through the old Bar-



rio Mudejar or Barriobarto we can take about four hours in all. Strong legs and sound lungs are a prerequisite.

Fuente del Desparto Hard - Seven to eight hours



There was a time when *esparto* grass was used to make so many different household and farm items that there was a living to be earned by harvesting and transporting it from all over the sierra back to Frigiliana where the grass would be woven into shoes, rope, saddles, window-blinds and much, much more. This route is one of the oldest and best used although it is still little more than a path through the wilderness. From Frigiliana down into El Higuero and up again onto Cuesta Del Sordo, the route then hugs the contours of the Sierra Enmedio or The Middle Mountains. They are so called because they are the mountains in between El Higuero and Rio Chillar. This walk is one of my favourites. At almost 20 kilometres, you need over seven hours including stops, for this walk with plenty of water and food to keep you going.

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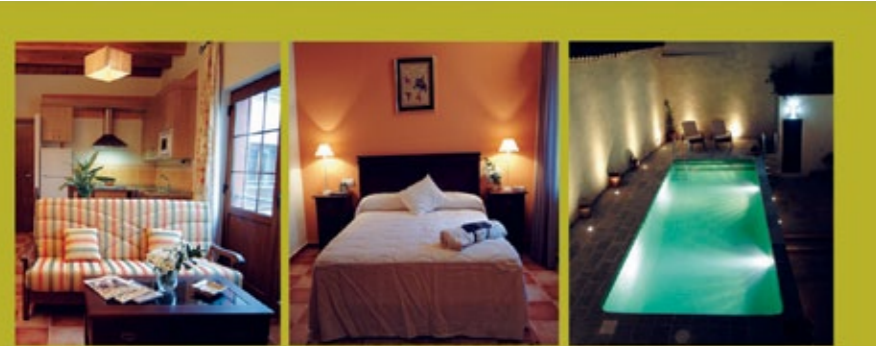
Still clinging to the old ways



IT is one of the few areas of Andalucia, where some of the old ways are still being conserved. From bottom left (clockwise), Jose Luis Perez, who was born in the same bar, Cafeteria Cavana, in Nerja, that his family have run for decades, a bread seller in Periana, a farmer tends his huerta above Comares, old scales still at work at a Comares greengrocer, a goatherd and his goats, near Riogordo, the local museum in Riogordo and drying grapes in Benamargosa



Pictures by JON CLARKE



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MAP OF THE AXARQUIA



Axarquia special

A cultural hive

On the face of it, Riogordo is just another *pueblo blanco*, not particularly pretty or special. But it does have an active arts scene that would put many other towns in Europe to shame. The season kicks off in March with 'festival sacro-ritual' with performances ranging from a circus to avant-garde theatre to live music.

The expats play their part too having recently started a new Axarquia Art Group

This is followed by the spectacular 'El Paso Riogordo', an enactment of the Passion, Life and Death of Jesus Christ that takes place on Good Friday and is repeated on Holy Saturday. Described as 'one of the best sacred dramas in the world', over

400 villagers dress in period costume to play their part to an audience of thousands. Throughout the year the Ethnographic Museum stages art exhibitions in its splendid gallery. In the museum the displays show the tools, life and customs of the region

with displays and reconstructions. In September 'Rio del Copla' competition is always of the highest standard. Also in September Riogordo celebrates the traditional Candle Night in which youngsters produce magnificent dolls



EVOCATIVE: Paintings of Calle Agua and Plaza de la Iglesia on show at Riogordo Galeria



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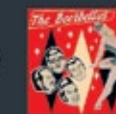
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Axarquía special



PROFITABLE: Clara Verheij

The sweet smell of success

Jon Clarke on the fall and rise of the sweet Moscatel wines from the Axarquía

WITH unemployment running at up to 70 per cent in some Axarquía villages, winemaker Clara Verheij believes she may have found a possible solution. Her profitable vineyard Bodegas Bentomiz, in Sayalonga, is currently producing 30,000 bottles of top quality wine a year from the extraordinary steep slopes of the region. Already exporting to over a dozen countries, many are being sold at the world's top restaurants and hotels, including Raymond Blanc and Gordon Ramsey's Michelin starred joints in the UK. "We have proven that it is possible to make these harsh slopes productive," explains Clara, who comes from Holland. "I just hope this success will encourage more of the youth of the area to take an interest in this top quality product." The recession has already seen the inevitable drift of workers back to the land

to make a living. And while the bodega only has two hectares under vine, it "controls" another 30 hectares cared for by local families. "But the price for grapes is too low and there are currently too many sellers and not enough producers," she explains. This is certainly the case for the grape and raisin producers of the Axarquía, who number around 3000 families. Much of their crop is going to waste because they have no market, due to the low prices of raisins coming from principally South Africa and Greece. "There is no guarantee that after all the hard work they are going to be able to sell," says Jose Gamez, of agricultural trade union UPA Malaga. Currently many of them are having to live off the grants which are little over 1000 euros a hectare. And with the average producer living off half a hectare of vines, they are certain-

Axarquía special¹⁵



TRADITION: Many houses in the Axarquía have the classic 'paseros' used to dry grapes

ly not going to get rich. "We work incredibly hard from sunrise to sunset all through August to get all the grapes in," says farmer Juan Gutierrez, 53, from Almachar. "And all for little financial benefit." Traditionally the sweet Moscatel grape grew extremely well in the Axarquía, largely due to its close proximity of the sea, which brings in breezes to cool the grapes down. It has long produced fabulous high quality sweet wines, which in 1933 led to the Malaga region being the first in Spain to have its own DO - or *denominacion de origen*. But the area can claim to have one of the longest traditions of winemaking in Spain, with vines first being planted by the Phoenicians up to 3000 years ago. They were later heralded by the Roman poet Columella and back in 1502 the Catholic Monarchs took the first known measure to protect a Spanish wine from imported products. A century later Malaga wine producers formed a guild, the forerunner of today's 'consejos reguladores' (or control boards).

It came about just as the wines started to become extremely fashionable abroad, particularly in the UK from the 17th century. There were said to be around 14,000 wine presses in Malaga then and - along with Jerez - many British merchants moved to the area. Evidence of their success can still be found, for example, at Venta Galway, high in the Montes de Malaga hills, named after an Irish merchant who settled there. But, as was the case in many European regions, the industry was destroyed by the phylloxera bug in the late 19th century. It wiped out whole vineyards and the area has

help to collect much needed moisture in winter. They are also left to grow on the ground with the bunches of grapes protected from the blazing sun by foliage. "The real problem is that the yields are low and everything has to be done by hand due to the steepness of the slopes," explains Clara. "It makes it extra hard work to be profitable."

The bodega currently buys grapes from a string of local farmers, as well as a steady supply from the larger, flat vineyards north of Antequera, near Mollina. All in all the vineyard is currently producing over half a dozen wines, under the Ariyanas label, including a spectacular, flinty dry white 'Sobre las Finas', which stays in its lees in vat for four months before bottling. There is also an interesting red wine made partly from the indigenous Rome grape, first introduced by the Romans. So good are the wines that British doyen of wine Jancis Robinson awarded its sweet Moscatel a lofty 18 out of 20.

So good are the wines that Jancis Robinson awarded its sweet Moscatel a lofty 18 out of 20

At the vineyard, high in the hills overlooking the sea in Sayalonga, it is interesting to see how the planting methods vary from other wine regions of Spain. The vines - some of which can be up to 100 years old - are planted in hollows, which



SWEET GOLD: Drying Moscatel grapes

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Bodegas Bentomiz

Bentomiz is a family run bodega founded in 2003 by the Dutch couple André Both and Clara Verheij. As soon as they settled in the south of Spain they knew they wanted to restore the abandoned vineyards they had bought and extend their common hobby of drinking wine, to trying to produce the nectar themselves.

The enormous potential of the autochthonous Moscatel de Alejandria and Romé grapes, in combination with the Axarquía slate terroir and the benign climate, soon led to successful results. The delicate personal wines found their way to an enthusiastic public and many European top restaurants, and Clara and André continue investing their energy, experience and illusions, in their permanent search for excellence in the Ariyanas Wines.

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Located in the easternmost part of Malaga province, the Axarquía is a nature-lover's paradise, where visitors can discover vast natural spaces, from mountain ranges and hilly woodland to breathtaking gorges and pristine beaches.

The beautiful streets, squares and monuments of the local towns and villages display a rich cultural and artistic heritage, which is acted out through the area's many colourful festivals.

The area is also renowned for having the most equable climate in the whole of Europe.

The Axarquía embraces a landscape of incomparable variety, including woodlands, valleys, mountain ranges and endless stretches of unspoilt coastline. The woodlands are a labyrinth of olive trees, almond groves and vineyards. The Axarquía Valley is a flood plain of fruit groves and gardens that hug the banks of the Vélez River. Lemon and orange trees line the Benamargosa and Guaro rivers as far as the small valleys in the foothills of the mountain ranges, beyond which lies the azure coastline of the Mediterranean.

The Axarquía is also a land of many springs, which send streams cascading down the hillsides, irrigating the terraced crops and quenching the thirst of the local labourers.

The coast the Axarquía is characterised by cliffs and coves, headlands dotted with watchtowers, overlooking unspoiled beaches and beautiful gardens.

Rich in tradition, blessed with stunning natural beauty, the Axarquía is the jewel of Andalucía.

www.axarquiacostadelsol.org

Vintage Velez



WHAT a sleepy place it once was. Here, a series of photos of Velez Malaga back in the 1920s and 1930s show how vehicles were in short supply and the streets were generally pretty quiet. (Top right) An old photo of the Rio de la Miel paper factory, up the coast towards Nerja, that was sometimes used by the so-called Maquis rebels who fought Franco into the 1950s



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18 **Axarquía special**

SOME guidebooks have described the Axarquía as the frying pan of Spain. And that's got nothing to do with the heat. But, fortunately there are at least a dozen great eateries now open to debunk the theory. Two of the best are simple tapas bars based on the coast, with Pata Negra, in Nerja and El Porton, in Torre de Mar, not only serving up delicious and original dishes, but having a great selection of wines. Another superb restaurant is Carabeo 34, in Nerja, where you eat under candlelight in sumptuous surroundings, overlooking the sea. Inland, one of the most successful spots is Cantueso restaurant, in Periana, which offers a fabulously mixed, fresh Mediterranean menu that really deserves plaudits.



GENIUS: Pata Negra

WHERE TO EAT
Out of the frying pan

If you are looking for a grander affair, the romantic dining terrace at Hotel Vinuela, is reminiscent of the Days of the Raj, and it is no surprise that the King is said to have eaten here. A line of palm trees in front of the picturesque lake adds a wonderful backdrop and the food was rich, with modern, exciting touches. In Puente don Manuel you will find Moreno's cafe bar, a sophisticated spot, serving up tapas all day. Nearby, you will find Bar Atila, which has all the live football, plus bingo and quizzes during the week. In an incredible spot above Riogordo, sits the evocative escape Fountainhead, which is known internationally for its fabulous food. Also in Riogordo, and equally exciting is the Lemon Tree, a



ROMANTIC: The elegant dining room at Carabeo 34

bright, cheerful place, known for its Sunday lunch, as well as yoga classes and a quiz night on Thursday. Then there is the charming historic mill El Molino de los Abuelos in Comares. Last, but not least, is the rapidly improving range of places to eat in Velez Malaga. Now a tapas route should include Meson La Tribuna, run by the hard-working Jose Antonio - who claims to work 365 days a year! - and La Tasquita, set up by a former pupil of Andalucía's best cookery school La Consula in Malaga.



VARIETY: Wine cellar at El Porton and team at Cantueso

Axarquía special

WHERE TO STAY
No more paradise lost

WHILE living in the region six years ago, we could never find anywhere to recommend people to stay. Today you are spoilt for choice with a huge range of accommodation from luxury hotels to guest houses to rent. In Velez Malaga, while a paradiser is planned, by far the most sumptuous place to stay is Hotel Cortijo Bravo, sitting in a crowning position overlooking the town. Owned by Malaga's wealthy Larios family, it counts on an amazing pool surrounded by avocado and citrus trees, as well as a stylish restaurant and rooms. In the heart of town look for the recently renovated 19th century townhouse Casa de las Titas. Situated around two patios, it has a dozen



SUMPTUOUS: Central atrium at Hotel Cortijo Bravo

well appointed apartments, most with spectacular views across the town. As historic, but even more stylish, is Palacio Blanco, which was renovated by an English couple, who featured on Channel Five's property programme *Build a New Life*. Up the coast in Nerja, there is a good range of accommodation, the pick of the bunch being Hotel Carabeo and Paraiso del Mar. Carabeo is stunning, installed in a townhouse overlooking the sea, with stylish interiors, a super pool and a top restaurant for the evening. Paraiso del Mar is equally stunning built into the rocks leading down to Burriana Beach, and run by the ever charming Enrique Caro. Inland from here you will find the well sited Hotel Rural Almazara, which sits equi-



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Popular
 Even more rural is the well established Finca el Cerrillo, set up by a Bohemian American artist in the 1970s. Now owned by former set designer Gordon and his wife Sue, it is incredibly popular, particularly for its art, writing and hiking courses, and is without a doubt, one of the most authentic spots to stay in the Axarquía. Nearer Malaga, in an incredible spot perfect for those who might want to get into the city for a slice of sophistication is Cortijo Padre Aviles. Not only nesting in its own valley, it has an enormous pool and no less than two tennis courts. Finally, in the far north, right on the edge of the Axarquía, you will find the sumptuously appointed Casa de los Espejos, in Alhama de Granada. This incredible labour of love is the work of British-based Richard Bigg, who has a great eye for detail. Extremely comfortable, it counts on a huge

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