

osta Tropica and Lecrin Valley

Eastern Promise

While the Costa del Sol may grab all the headlines, the Costa Tropical has a refreshingly discreet style, discovers Giles Brown



CARY-ON: Giles comes over all Grant, without Grace



ing a vintage convertible a la Cary Grant as I ploughed eastwards out of Nerja. Like a scene from *To Catch a Thief*, in which he starred with Grace Kelly, the road curves through sleepy coves and enjoys stunning views of the Mediterranean and Sierra Nevada moun-

tains as a backdrop. There's a real hint of Italy's dramatic Amalfi coast as you drive, enjoying yet another vista as you come out of one of the classic old tunnels, eventually arriving in what is these days dubbed The Costa Tropical.

This is where the Sierra Nevada literally plung-es straight into the sea and best of all the Costa Tropical - which runs from Nerja to Motril - enjoys a fantastic microclimate and has a bounty of beautiful beaches and atmospheric towns.

As, like much of southern Spain, it has also been a historical stopping off point for centuries with the Romans leaving roads, aqueducts and a variety of other ruins.

The biggest influence, however, was from the Arabs: Almunecar served as the entry point to the Iberian Peninsula and was the power base for Abd ar-Rahman, who founded an independent Muslim dynasty that ruled most of Spain for nearly three

Strolling through the Old Town... experience the sights, sounds and, if you are nearing lunchtime, smells of Andalucia

hundred years.

Your first port of call will probably be the village

of La Herradura, which has a wonderful beach. There is a low key vibe, and if you like the feel-ing of sand between your toes, this is the place. 'The Horseshoe', as the bay is known, also enjoys some of the best diving in Spain.

Flamenco fans should also check out the an-nual festival, held in the atmospheric castle.

If you fancy indulging in a little boating, nearby Marina del Este is a charming, low key marina that has a decent selection of restaurants and bars, reached by driving down through a pine lined urbanisation.

Keep on going and you get to Almunecar, a real living, breathing location unlike many of the old towns of the Costa del Sol, which tend to be nothing more than 'beautified' collections of boutiques, souvenir shops and overpriced restaurants. Strolling through the Old Town confirms this as

you experience the sights, sounds and, if it's near-ing lunchtime, smells of Andalucia. Television programmes play out from front rooms with their doors open, while coloured birds

tweet from their cages and children are called in for lunch.

If you pop into one of the many bars in Almunecar for something to drink, more often than not you'll be asked if you want a tapa as well. It's good to know that this custom is still alive and well in this part of the world.

As you would expect from a town that has been strategically important for centuries, there is more than enough to keep the history buff busy.

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Costa Tropical and Lecrin Valley Special

MY PICKS OF THE COSTA TROPICAL

Local writer David Baird on his Top Ten on the Costa Tropical Sugar Barons

Sugar brought great wealth to the Costa Tropical. As many as 29 sugar mills once oper-ated along the coast, from Malaga to Adra in Almeria province. The industry made fortunes for a few and provided work for thousands. The last azucarera (cane refinery) on the coast closed at Salobrena in 2006. bringing an end to 1,000 years of that industry.

For a vivid insight into an-cient methods of sugar pro-duction visit the Museo Preindustrial del Azucar in Motril, housed in El Ingenio de la Palma, the site of a sugar mill dating back to the 13th century.

Guerrilla Dreams

As you drive along the coast east of Nerja and enter the Costa Tropical, you pass a series of secluded bays, accessible only on foot...La Caleta,

Cantarrijan, Cerro Gordo, shingle and sand beaches guarded by steep cliffs. Today they're the haunt of nudists and summer visitors fleeing mass tourism.

But once these bays were the focus of a rebel movement seeking to overturn General Franco's regime. On moonless nights in 1943 and 1944 small craft edged stealthily into

La Herradura's Boutique Hotel

& Restaurant

these coves and armed men leaped ashore.

Secretly trained in North Africa with British and American aid, they were the spearhead of a guerrilla moveme aimed at undermining Franco's dictatorship. Once Hitler and Mussolini were crushed, they hoped, the Allies would sweep south across the Pyrenees

Cascades of Río Verde This may be one of the most

spectacular roads in Spain. Drive inland from Almunecar and you encounter the Sierra del Chaparral, a wilderness of cliffs and chasms.

The main road, the Carretera de la Cabra, corkscrews up 13 kilometres from Otivar (passing a favourite launch spot for paragliders) to the Mirador de la Cabra Montes. Further up the highway (A4050), near the km33 mark, a track weaves down to the Río Verde gorge.

Practitioners of barranquis mo (canyoning) love this area of sheer cliffs and cascading water – and so do hikers.

Wines of the Contraviesa

You want spectacular views? Climb the Contraviesa, a whale of a mountain that lies east of Motril between the Sierra Nevada and the sea. It rises as high as 1,800 metres. You look across the deep Guadalfeo valley

to the villages dot-ting the Alpujarras and the snow-clad peaks of the Sierra levada.

almond Vines. and fig trees struggle to survive on the high, unwatered plateau. The Contraviesa has always been known for its hearty rosadowine, but now several bodegas, having upgraded their vines and modernised their methods, are producng first-rate vino tin

had been proclaimed - Yusuf.





drop of the Sierra Nevada mountain

Dutch couple Femke Spiering and Erik Stekelenburg have turned the 1.5 hectare plot, near Restabel, into a thriving business producing ential oils and othe essential products. In total 22.000 plants

are maintained and harvested by hand, while it has become something of an experiment, being the only such farm in An dalucia.

"Lavender is a great skin toner, improves quality of sleep, relieves headaches eases muscle pain and contains many other health benefits," explains Erik. Find out for yourself at Casa Lavanda from May till October on Tuesday, Friday, Saturday and Sun-day from 10 am till sunset. For more info visit www. casalavanda.es or call 692 534 949/ 634 849 633

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The Tragic Bay

Sheltered by two greater ers and sun wo But that beautifu

an also be a death tra nt records Spain's big

ran on the African co 25 out of 28 ships w ople lost their lives

One Midsummer Morning

Laurie Lee's seductive descriptions of Spain have helped attract thousands of tourists. When he trekked along the Mediterranean coast in 1935 – vividly recorded in his book As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning – he came to a halt in Castillo, 'a tumbling little village, backed by a band-saw of mountains and fronted by a strip of grey sand'. Castillo was the name he gave to Almunecar to protect his Republican friends from right wing revenge. Almune-car remembers him with a plaque at Puerta del Mar on the seafront.



Lovely lavender

A ambitious pair of expats have bought a taste of Provence to southern Andalucia. Their stunning ecological lavender farm, in the Lecrin Valley, is a riot of colour with a back







Goats on high

One of the most su prising sights along the Costa Tropical is that of wild goats grazing on the steep slopes above the cliffs of the Cerro Gordo headland

The cabra montes - close to being wiped out about 30 years ago - have made a come back and a number of goats now forage amid the crags and bushes there. You can't miss them

- a male goat, fully grown, weighs around 75 kilos with horns up to a metre long.

to spot one in the early morning or evening.

David Baird is the auth of East of Malaga - I sential Guide to the A arquía and Costa Tre *cal.* His other boo published by Maro Press (http://maroi ress (nttp://maroin press.wordpress.com, include Between Tv Fires - Guerrilla war the Spanish sierra about a forgotten co flict, and Sunny Side (- The 21st century hits Snanish village denii Spanish village, depic ing a community's col with modern way

Vintage delight

If you are looking

for the brash beach

clubs... then the

Costa Tropical is

not for you

From Page 21

In particular take a poke around the Castillo de San Miguel, which overlooks the old town and was a stronghold for the Phoenicians. Romans, Nasrid Arabs and Christians.

Also worth checking out are the beautiful Palacete de la Najarra and the Claves de Almunecar museum that tells the fascinating story of 3000 years of Almunecar.

Continue along the coast road that nugs the Mediterranean and a few kilometres east vou'll come across Salobrena. With an ancient Arabic fort

overlooking the town this place that has a tangible atmosphere of the old AlAndalus

two things. One that the maze of twisting narrow streets be neath me had hardly

changed in centuries. I half expect an Arab merchant to come bustling out of a side street at any moment.

The second thought was that I re-ally should have brought more water with me. Climbing Salobrena's steep streets to the fortress in the searing heat of the August afternoon wasn't perhaps the wisest of ideas. When I reached the top however,

he climb was more than worth t. The view is spectacular, across sugar cane fields and small farm nouses down to a few low rise apartment blocks and chiringuitos on the

Claiming to have been inhabited for 6,000 years, you can see why, with a commanding view of the sur-rounding area, Salobreña was an important strategic location.

Cooling off in the peaceful garden beneath the castle walls, drinking in the stunning views and listening to a guitarist practicing on a nearby bench, it was hard to imagine the spot being the scene of bloodshed throughout the centuries.

Continue along the road from Sa-lobreña and you'll find the road lined with sugar cane fields as well as a scattering of plastic greenhouses for more intensive agr

culture as you head towards Motril The town, with its

small port, marks the eastern edge of the Costa Tropi cal. Although there is evidence of the Phoenicians set tling nearby, Motril doesn't have the

charismatic old towns of its neighbours. Most of the recent history of the town revolves around its status as a centre for sugarcane production in the 18th and 19th centuries, meaning that i unfortunately suffers from a lack of atmosphere. To conclude if you are looking for

the brash beach clubs of the Costa del Sol, its soap stars and Premiership footballers then the Costa Tropi I is not for you. You won't find a Marbella Belle here for all the Botox in Basildon. The Costa Tropical is about the

laid back family friendly vibe, and is the perfect remedy to the Marbs summer madness!



Looking down from the castle walls, I reflected on

You are most likely

Decorative furniture, lighting, textiles, paintings vintage clothing, jewellery & quirky objets d'art

Mint tea on the terrace







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T is 35 degrees but we are still southern Spain.

Around the Arabian wood ta-ble at The Camel Stop – a true cornucopia of collectibles - sit no less than five nationalities and a Scouser, the man from Liverpool being no less than left wing comedian Alexei Sayle him-

With the conversation drift-ing from the topic of over-building to fine art degrees, this can only be inland Andalucia.

And for those not fancying a massive hike on windy roads deep into the interior, the Lecrin Valley could be just about your perfect spot.

Just 25 minutes to the coast and 25 minutes to the city of Granada, this dramatic area, literally translated as the 'Happy Valley', is a wonderful place for a break, or even to live.

"It's certainly very convenient for us," explains Sayle, who has just returned after a three year absence to the home he and his wife bought over a decade ago. On a buying trip for a few or-

Stunning Lecrin Valley has an eclectic mix of locals including Nexei Sayle (left) and eletubbies creator Andrew Davenport, writes Jon Clarke

naments (including a bargain taking afternoon tea in one of the most unusual shops in nesh), he waxes lyrical about the area's ancient water courses that bring cold water from the Sierra Nevada, as well as his spacious home, which counts a swimming pool, 12 orange trees, cactus and bougainvillea "The history of the area and its stunning countryside are a

major draw," "The area athe savs. "It really is an exciting and tracts some rather strange, but interesting people."

vivid place." There is cer tainly some-thing special about the enclave, which sits between Granada city and the coast at Motril.

Comprising a wealth of pretty villages and charming countryside, it is little surprise to learn that other notables have properties here, including Teletub bies creator Andrew Davenport, music producer Youth, formerly of Killing Joke, and George Mi-chael's publisher Dick Leahy.

"The area attracts some rather strange, but interesting people," explains painter James Connell, who has worked from a studio near Albuñelas for the last decade



STUNNING: Niguelas and Murchas (right) are great places to walk around

"They are certainly infinitely more interesting than the cock-tail party set on the Costa del Sol with all those nationalistic enclaves. It is easy to see why.

Scattered with lemon, orange and almond trees, this beautiful area has been little affected by

tourism. If you are looking for a cultural hub with bright lights, concerts and Michelin-starred restau-

ants then look again. The Lecrin valley is what you

from the pressures of modern liv-



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Costa Tropical and Lecrin Valley Special ²⁵

Of course, this time warp is made all the more fascinating by the fact that the vallev really is only 25 minutes from the centre of Granada Where this be-

with the aroma of

oranges and lem-

ons

comes apparent is in the history of the valley, which is dotted with ruined Arabic castles and look-out towers. Travelling south from Grana-

da in the 7th Century the Moors chanced upon this fertile land and named it El Valle de Lec-Peaceful, and filled

rin - the Vallev of Happiness. But its history was not always happy.

It was ac-ually here tually

the Nazrids, moved after being forced out of the city of Granada after signing the Declaration of Surrender, handing his beloved city over to the Catholic Monćhs.

Appropriately, the last view of the city before descending into the Valle de Lecrin is from the Puerto del Suspiro del Moro (The Pass of the Moor's Sigh).

It garners its name, legend has it, as being the spot where the king broke down in tears as he took one last glance back at the city. And his mother famously commented: "Weep then like a woman, over that which you could not defend like a man.

Later the valley became a battleground in the bloody Morisco uprising due to its strategically important position as the only idvll.

southerly access route to Grana-da and the only point of entry to the Western Alpujarras.

Yet today the only hint of the devastation that swept through the valley is in the ruins - the most famous being those of Lecrín Castle where the kings and queens of Granada were buried.

. It is believed that the last burial was of Moraima, the wife of Boabdil, who died in Cádiar as they were preparing to leave for exile in Africa.

Now, walking around the many villages the indelible mark of the Moors

> remains names and architecture but the vallev has slipped into a peaceful slum-

Nowhere tually here Nowhere is where Boabdil, the last King of this more apparent than in Niguelas, where it was still quiet at 9.30am when I strolled through the lovely village and up into the mountains above it, where a track leads literally alongside a burbling brook and up to the snowy peaks in the far distance.

Of course like any given day in summer the town's locals had been up late, enjoying the cool of the evenings.

And even when they finally wake up from their slumber by the time I am coming down there is still something peaceful about the place that is filled with the aroma of oranges and lemons.

It has once again become a Valley of Happiness and it is no surprise that so many people have come to create their own

The Camel Stop



of when you conjure up tra-ditional images of the sun-drenched south of Spain; rolling countryside and sleepy villages where sheep and goats are herded through narrow streets. It offers a complete escape





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T is easily one of the most nistorical places to stay in Anlalucia. With its current deeds dat-

ing back to 1492 and written in Arabic, the stunning Palacete de Cazulas counts on 14 bedrooms and even has its own chapel (making weddings a distinct possibility for you roman tics out there).

Sitting high above the Costa Tropical, 25 minutes inland of Almunecar, the palace once administrated 1,300 hectares that spread almost the whole way to Nerja. Today it can be rented for

long weekend breaks, for groups looking for something a little different.

Owned by English surveyor Richard Russell-Cowan for near ly 20 years, you will be in capa

Where to eat



MAJESTIC: Palacete de Cazulas

ble hands and will live like the former Christian nobleman Don Rodrigo De Ulloa, who bought it from Moorish vizir Abu-el Hu sayn on May 20, 1492. Sitting on the celebrated 'ca-

bra route' inland to Granada.

DINERS DELIGHT

The area has a series of wonderful places to stav. writes Jon Clarke

charm

you can see for miles across some of Spain's most fertile land, where everything from avocados to bananas grow.

Another incredibly rural guesthouse is the ecologically built La Finca del Castillo Arabe. near Murchas, in the Lecrin Va

It sits in stunning olive groves with views right across the





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and Lecrin Valley Special

Lecrin valley and towards the famous castle where the last Moorish ruler King Boabdil holed up after the reconquest. Run by the perfect hostess Scarlett Farrow and her hus-band Chris, the estate operates as a centre for permaculture and has been restored with a keen eve for detail.

Comprising four suites, it strikes the perfect balance between sustainable and luxury. Guests are treated to homecooked, organic meals, which are delivered direct to the door of your suite, or upstairs on the main terrace, and Scarlett runs cookery

courses, on a range of themes.

Another wonderful place to stay in the Lecrin Valley is the have also turned this historic mill into a buzzing spot, great for a spot of lunch or supper. lovely hotel run by English hosts Tinca and Roberta in Niguelas. Indeed, its restaurant has Algueria de los Lentos - The come one of the main points inn of the slow people – might well be a rural idyll, ideal for of reference for the whole valley and not just for tourists and ex relaxing, but its dynamic hosts



RURAL CHIC: Alqueria de los Lentos is a top chillout spot pats, but with lots of local Span-

ish to boot.

designed with a clear artist's eve, along with the unusually shaped and painted pool. Best of all, from here it is a short walk into the charming village and then from here up into the foothills of the Sierra

Its rooms are also incred-

ibly comfortable and have been

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evada, with its snow-capped peaks in the distance. If you are looking for some thing on the coast then easily

the most charming place to stay has got to be La Tartana. This wonderful spot, overooking La Herradura's famous bay has a group of well appoint-

ed rooms designed by local de-signer Shane Williams. Sitting around a classic Anda-lucian courtyard the real bonus is the amazing restaurant next door (see where to eat), where you will have the finest meal on the whole Costa Tropical

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