

All about Serrania de Ronda

the olive press - October 16- October 29 2014

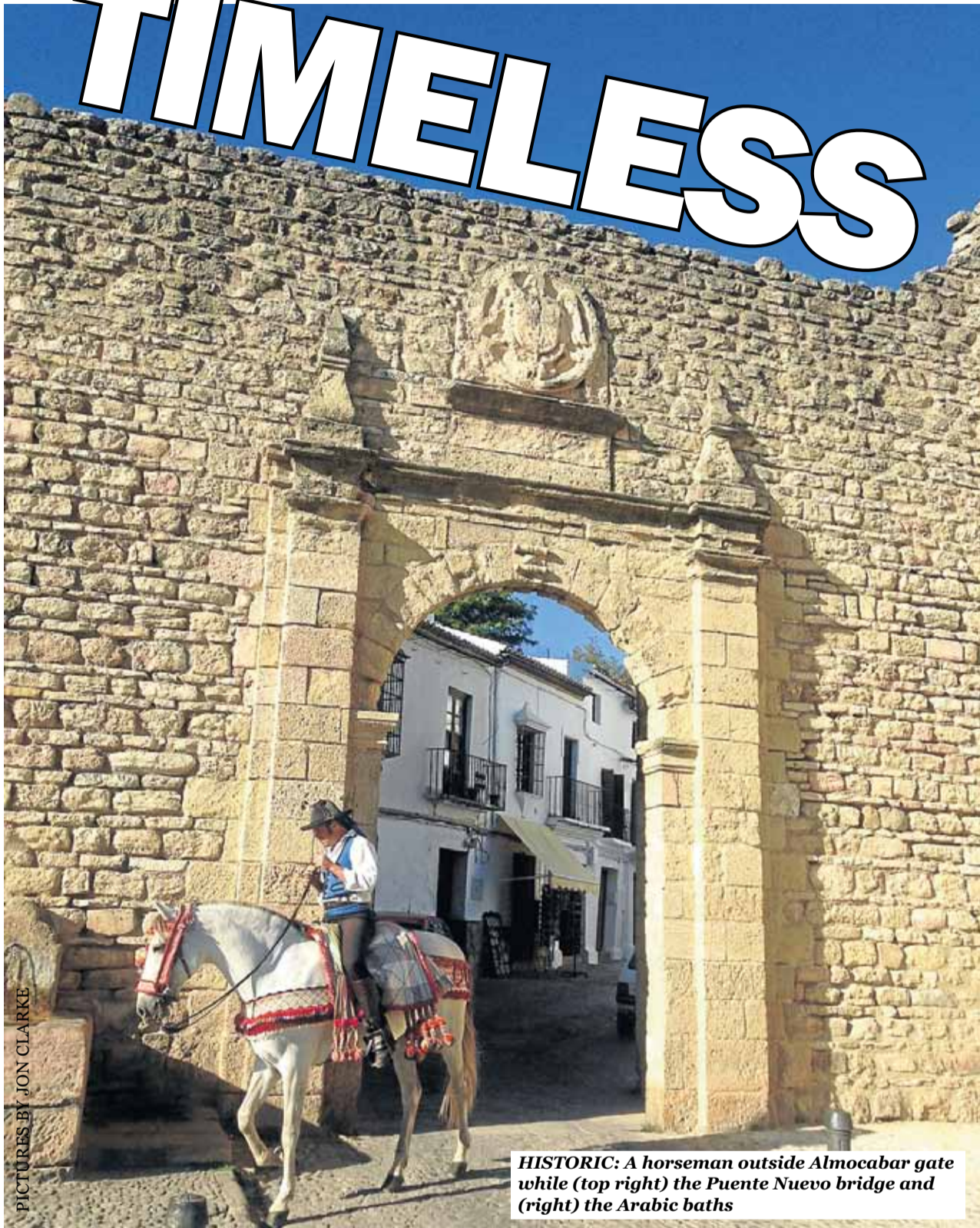


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TIMELESS



PICTURES BY JON CLARKE

HISTORIC: A horseman outside Almocabar gate while (top right) the Puente Nuevo bridge and (right) the Arabic baths



Hidden in soaring mountains and straddling a mighty gorge, Ronda is the stuff of dreams (and video games) but also the adventure of a lifetime, writes Tom Powell

THE giant stone pillars rise up out of the gorge, forming one of the most famous - and photographed - sights in Spain.

But the Puente Nuevo (New Bridge) of Ronda is anything but 'new', as it turns out... It has been the centrepiece of this stunning town for more than 200 years. There is nothing that prepares you for the moment that you first approach it from above and witness the view and 390 foot drop down to the river below.

Chef Jean Christophe Novelli described it as the 'coño moment' (best left untranslated); the second you look down for the first time.

I found myself dazzled by the sheer enormity of the gorge, and its majestic back drop, and I knew it would be difficult to eventually tear my gaze

away from.

But there is nothing about the so-called 'City of Dreams' that fails to impress.

Ronda, located in the heart of the soaring Serrania de Ronda mountain range, is precisely the kind of magical town found in fairy tales.

It is no surprise the latest Gran Turismo video game features a circuit that traverses the mountain roads before crossing this very elegant bridge.

Thousands of tourists tread its streets every day (it is the third most visited town in Spain) discovering the rich history and culture around every corner.

US President's wife Michelle Obama made the trip in 2010, and I knew it would be difficult to eventually tear my gaze



US President's wife Michelle Obama made the trip in 2010, and I knew it would be difficult to eventually tear my gaze

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touring the old town and discovering the Moorish dynasty with her daughter Sacha. UK Prime Minister David Cameron has been on several occasions, as have Jamie Oliver and Bill Gates, along with a host of other famous faces.

And when it comes to writers, they have waxed lyrical about its timeless streets, its breathtaking backdrop and hardy locals for centuries.

German poet Rainer Maria Rilke donated the name 'City of Dreams', Orson Welles took a shine to its bullfighters, while Ernest Hemingway fell in love with, well, just about everything.

"Ronda is the place to go if you are planning to travel to Spain for a honeymoon or for being with a girlfriend," he wrote. "The whole city and its surroundings are a romantic set. Nice promenades, good wine, excellent food and nothing to do."

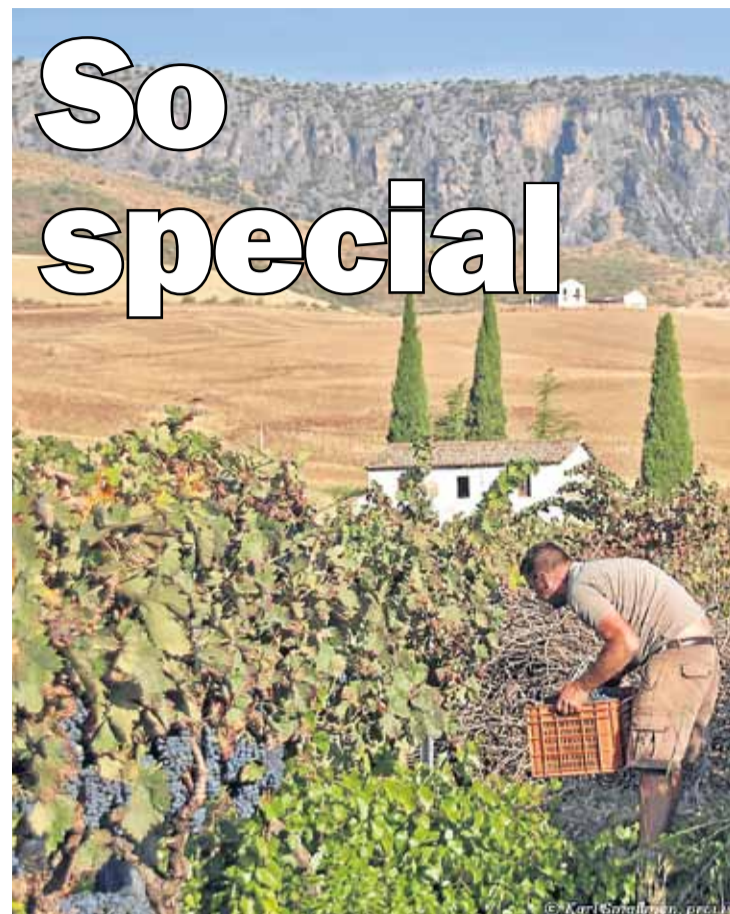
Hemingway, who has a street named after him, would want to revise his last remark if he were alive today.

For the city is actually brimming with things to do and opportunities for adventure.

The most famous attractions are undoubtedly the old town and its three bridges, spanning the gorge and connecting the city's Roman and Arabic roots with its modern town.

Look out for the 14th century San Miguel bridge, the 17th century Puente Viejo and of course the 18th century Puente Nuevo. Hemingway used it as a setting in his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, in which he described prisoners being thrown from it to their deaths below during the Spanish Civil War.

A great starting point is at the bottom of the Arabic quarter, today known as the San Miguel



So special

HARVEST: Picking season at one of Ronda's 30 bodega and (bottom) nobleman Don Bosco's home

district, where you will find the Iberian Peninsula's best preserved Arabic baths.

The baths, currently undergoing a restoration, were originally built in the 13th century and operated by a water wheel, bringing water up from the River Guadalevin below.

A stroll around the immaculate chambers, arches and columns conjures up images of the lifestyle enjoyed by travellers around the then Kingdom of Granada. A fantastic recon-

struction film really brings it to life.

Leaving the baths and walking up the charming cobbled paths takes you into the buzzing old town, which is ripe with key historic buildings and charm personified.

The typical Ronda furniture is abundant, along with pottery and handicrafts, all rich in Moroccan influences.

This quarter, La Ciudad, is the city's oldest and was a favourite haunt of filmmaker Welles, due to its beautiful Moorish structures interspersed with fine renaissance mansions.

Built in 9BC, Ronda is one of Spain's oldest towns and was a key military bastion in the Roman Empire, as well as boasting its own thriving wine industry.

But it was later completely transformed by the Moors, who were responsible for many of the special sights that make it so popular today.

It is possible to walk along the Moorish city walls, past the crumbling Alcazar, and look



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out into the Serrania, where the view has barely changed in centuries.

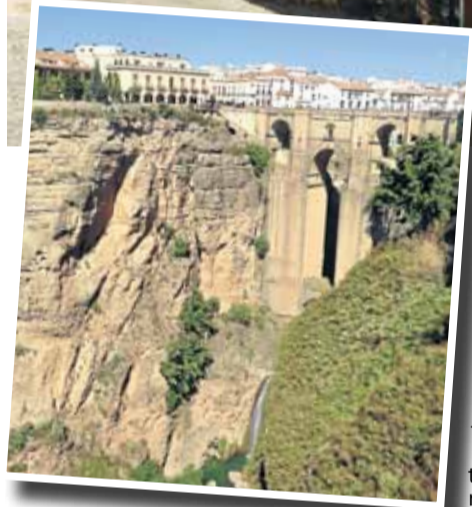
Another highlight is the soon-to-be luxury hotel Casa del Rey Moro, where Michelle Obama surprised onlookers in 2010 by descending the 300 difficult steps down the water mine - 'La Mina' - an experience many tourists pass on.

But America's First Lady wanted to witness at first-hand how the Arabic defenders used to collect water from the river below during violent sieges in the 14th and 15th centuries.

The Obamas also visited the delightful Mondragon palace, which houses the municipal museum as well as beautifully kept water gardens from which the sweeping Serrania can be gazed upon.

Exhibitions vary from Stone Age history to local geology, but the charm of the wonky floor and low ceilings remains throughout.

Nearby is the Santa Maria la Mayor church, which dominates the Plaza Duquesa de Parcent, a large shady square perfect for cooling off in.



CHARMING:
A classic Arabic building and view of bridge

Originally built in the 14th century as a mosque, these days the ornate church is open to tourists and is well worth the visit.

Nuns can still be spotted crossing the square, reminding you that this part of Ronda's history is still very much alive.

Across from the church is the landmark neo-classical town hall, with its bold stone arches which are so typical of Ronda. The Bandoleros Museum is an-

other great option for anyone with so much as a passing interest in swashbuckling bandits, battle and treasure.

And for those with an adventurous side, before crossing the bridge to the new town, there is the opportunity to delve down into the gorge and discover what lies below.

As of this year, a cliff-hugging footpath reminiscent of El Chorro's Caminito del Rey has been opened, giving a new view of Ronda for those hardy enough to brave it.

And take it from me, gazing up at the beautiful old buildings teetering perilously on the edge of the cliff is just as spectacular as looking down.

There is just as much to do in the new town as the old, with the bullring - one of Spain's oldest - taking pride of place.



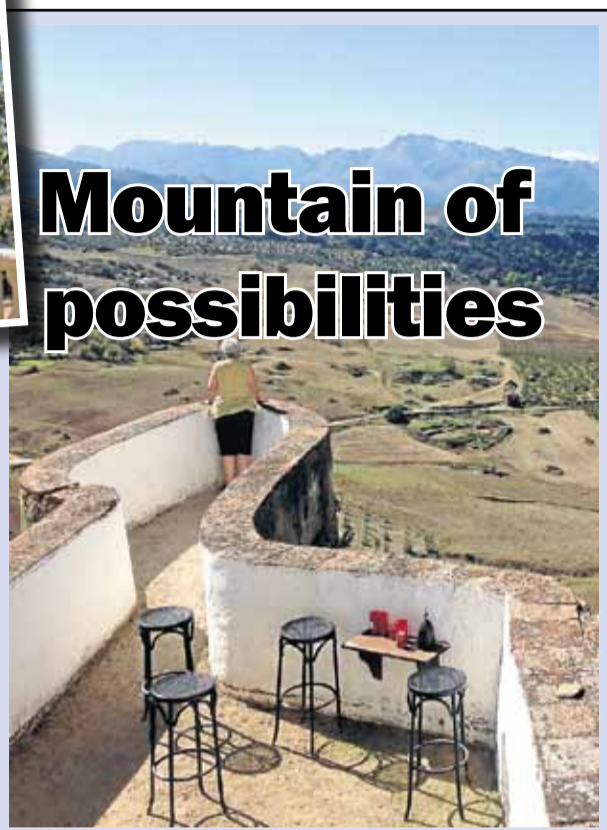
VISTAS: From the old town and (right) Maruja Limon

RONDA is as much about its local mountain landscape, walks and villages as its main town. There is enough to keep you occupied in the surrounding Serrania de Ronda for days, if not a week.

You can easily spend a day or two walking or driving around the luscious Genal valley, book-ended by stunning Gaucin.

Then there is a fascinating side trip to the haunting remains of the Roman town of Acinipo and nearby Setenil de las Bodegas, where the Romans kept their wines.

Don't forget to pop into the charming authentic town of Arriate, to visit its ham factories



Mountain of possibilities

PICTURES BY JON CLARKE AND KARL SMALLMAN

and enjoy its great local restaurants.

And finally if it is nature and wilderness, head for the great

outdoors of Grazalema natural park with its scenic villages of Montajaque, Benaojan and Jimera de Libar.

Once a year the country's most famous bullfight, the Goyesca, takes place here, with thousands descending on Ronda for the event.

The rest of the time, apart from the odd bullfight in the Spring, the ring is popular for its museum dedicated to the sport. In 1994, it also served as the set-

The journey once took four hours on barely passable roads but is now less than an hour

ting for Madonna's hit song *Take a Bow*. From outside the bullring and the tourist information office you can catch a traditional

horse and carriage for a more authentic tour of the town. It is surprisingly good value. The large, shady Alameda del Tajo botanical gardens are absolutely vital to experience on a hot summer's day, providing welcome respite from the city buzz as well as shade and water fountains.

A stone footpath from there, Paseo de los Ingleses, skirts round the edge of the cliff

taking full advantage of the sweeping panoramic views on offer.

The heart of the new town is certainly the bustling main shopping street, Carrera Espinel, (known as 'La Bola' by locals) which is bursting with handicraft shops, local produce and infinite places to stop off for a *cafe con leche*.

In fact it is one of the most alive and buzzing in Andalusia, while the square Plaza Socorro is

where Blas Infante declared Andalusian independence 200 years ago from its charming Casino.

The journey to Ronda, which once took four hours to undertake on barely passable roads, is now less than an hour from the coast.

That first sighting as you wind down through the mountain is still just as spellbinding, as the 'City of Dreams' comes to life.



PRAYER: Santa Maria la Mayor church

Alegria, alegria, alegria



GYPSY STYLE: An impromptu show and (right) the owners

It was a random Tuesday lunchtime but the *alegria* (happiness) could be felt from the bullring next door.

As the third cork popped from a cava bottle the group of gypsies started to sing with real passion and the guitars came out in force.

I could quickly tell this was not part of the excellent show that new flamenco bar El Quinque is putting on four times a day. If not quite *duende* (the occasional spirit that flamenco performers talk about) it was certainly a spontaneous outpouring of happiness.

Cigars and tapas were the order of the day and a quick 30-minute lunch turned into a two-hour hand-clap session, replete with splendid food and wine. Opened by two flamenco aficionados, Angel, a guitarist, and Pablo, a singer, the new addition to Ronda's entertainment scene should do well.

Both have lived and worked among the celebrated gypsies of the Sacromonte area of Granada and both have obvious passion. "We are trying to do something authentic and of true quality," explains Angel, whose wife Noelia is a talented artist to boot. Shows take place throughout the day with a longer show at 8pm in the evening. The food, including delicious oxtail croquettes, was NOT an afterthought.



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BLUE-TIFUL: Giant Smurf welcomes tourists

WHILE Griffon vultures and crag martins dominate the skyline in the Genal valley south of Ronda, there is another rather different species enticing tourists in - Smurfs.

I began my foray into the verdant valley on 9 km of twisty, turny concrete, descending from the San Pedro-Ronda road to Igualeja.

Chestnut tree-covered slopes eventually give way to this picturesque pueblo, nestling at the foot of the valley.

It is the region's largest village with a population of around 1,000, and boasts the source of the Genal river nearby.

Said to be Europe's cleanest river, crystal clear water trickles from a cave before becoming a steady stream.

Venturing deeper into this fertile, green valley I arrived at Pujerra, a hidden gem of a pueblo that wears its individuality proudly on its sleeve.

For the few tourists who make

Green and blue



STUNNING: Cartajima and (below) the source of the Genal river

Heading off the beaten track, Tom Powell takes a diversion to explore the luscious Genal valley and investigate its tiny blue celebrities



the journey, there is a well sign-posted woodland trail with picnic tables, a beautiful central plaza and the remains of a deserted medieval community. Every November the village holds its chestnut fiesta, with

the delicious, nutty smell of roasting chestnuts wafting all the way down the valley. Next up was the village I was most excited to see for myself, Juzcar, which seems to firmly divide opinion between visitors.

Spain's New England

The Alto Genal valley is truly a valley for 'all seasons', writes Di Beach (right)



YOU don't need to fly to New England for the fall... just take a drive up the Ronda road to the Genal Valley.

Here in the Alto Genal, the sweet chestnut trees (castaños) that carpets the mountainsides put on a magnificent display of autumn colours - red, yellow, gold and orange.

The seven villages of my area dot the Serranía de Ronda like a string of magical pearls.

Unique villages, with their own cultures still intact, they have plenty to offer for the traveler looking for a dream escape and some stunning, classic nature.

It is this time of year to look out for the valley's wine festivals, as well as the chestnut festival in Pujerra and even a mushroom festival in Juzcar.

Meanwhile Parauta is famous for its rabbit and Cartajima celebrates its delicious 'mosto' wine.

My favourite autumn/winter treats are the setas or edible fungi.

Some nestle under the chestnuts and other species hide in the crevices in the

Riscos, the formidable crags above the village of Cartajima.

Either way, the villagers winkle them out and serve them up raw with scarlet pomegranate seeds, drizzled with olive oil, sprinkled with salt.

Now is the perfect time for the discerning culturally-minded traveller to come up and explore.

Or pop up in the spring when you will find a glorious abandon of wild flowers, migrating birds back from Africa, the bright flash of bee-eaters and swallows.

A season of rich abundance it is also a great time for a walk between villages.

Finally, the hedonism that is summer. Each village has a swimming pool, open to all and a superb place for observing local life. All night fiestas in every village celebrate ostensibly the patron saint but actually are worshipping Terpsichore and Dionysus!

Come visit us at any time of the year. We won't disappoint you.

Di runs the charming Los Castanos hotel... see www.loscastanos.com



GREAT OUTDOORS: Fortress in Benadalid, blue Juzcar and adventurers eye up the Genal Valley

Juzcar is in many ways the same as other beautiful pueblos in the region with its quaint smattering of houses perched on the side of a mountain, surrounded by lush forest. Except for one major difference - it isn't white - it's bright blue. In 2011 the town was painted 'Smurf blue' by Sony Pictures to publicise the release of the new Smurfs movie. Although initially intended as a temporary change, Juzcar's transformation into a blue village and tourism hotspot began to seriously boost the area's economy. And when Sony offered to repaint the village white, the residents voted in a referendum to keep it blue, and retain

their status as the world's first and only Smurf village. And when this blue vision first came into view I couldn't help but smile - it is genuinely unique and surprisingly attractive. Wandering its streets feels rather special, and while there is not a whole lot else for tourists to do when the initial smiles subside, I wholeheartedly agree with the decision to keep Juzcar blue. The residents certainly seem to have embraced it too, with miniature Smurfs clambering on roofs and windows, hiding in doorways or behind chimneys. But don't be put off - the serene atmo-



sphere and gentle, laid-back village way of life still prevails here. The road out of Juzcar climbs back up out of the valley towards the small hamlet of Cartajima, which is undoubtedly blessed with the most glorious backdrop in the region. The view from the main street takes in vast layers of craggy limestone ridge tumbling down into a sea of rich greenery, speckled with pueblos. An earthy smell permeates the vil-

lage's steep, narrow streets, while the church, Nuestra Senora del Rosario, stands boldly at its highest point. From these high-up vantage points you can spot a multitude of birds, including swifts and blue rock thrushes, as well as choughs, rock doves and blackcaps. But after a quick bird-spotting session my dip into the valley came full circle and I was soon back out on the main road to Ronda, ready to swap the sleepy valley, Smurfs and birds for the bustling market town.

Miniature smurfs clamber on roofs and windows, hiding in doorways or behind chimneys

A new Dawn

THE recession might be as deep in Ronda as anywhere else in Andalucia, but some are doing well. While plenty of expats have been forced to relocate to the UK as *la crisis* worsened Dawn Hutchinson has thrived. Since rolling the dice to relocate to Ronda in 2007 she has set up and created an online marketing business ArayoWeb, that now employs four people - three of them Spanish. Originally from Brighton, Dawn, 33, left her marketing job in the UK to set up the business. "I worked from home for the first five years but now I have an office in Ronda's main street. "If we continue to do well we hope to open another office in America, but we will always have an office here as I love the area so much." Her company also sponsors the local rugby team Los Bandoleros as she feels 'a real connection' to the Spanish community (see story on page 28).



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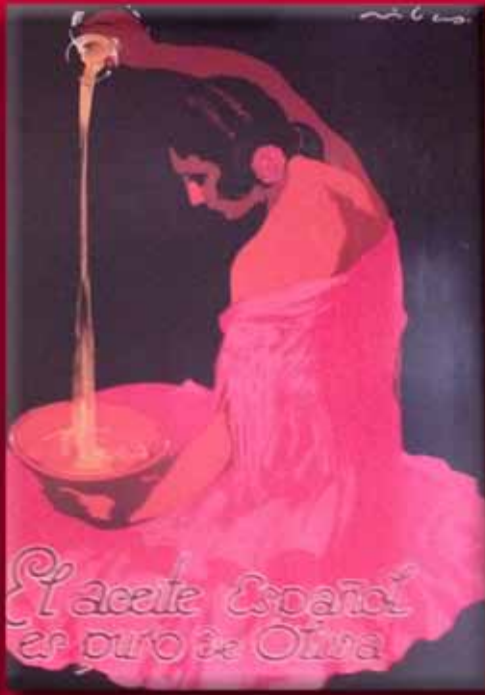
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THE People's Republic of Arriate is an 'island' in the Ronda Mountains. Not an island in the classical sense of the word, but an eight-and-a-half square kilometers island entirely surrounded by Ronda, from whom it wrestled control some 400 years ago.

Fiercely independent of its *pico*, or snobbish, neighbours, the district - the smallest in Malaga province - has been staunchly left wing since the death of dictator Franco in 1975.

Ruled by either the PSOE or the IU (formerly the Communist party) for nearly four decades, fortunately this is what one might call 'Communist Light', and has more to do with a shared sense of fun than of the teachings of Chairman Mao.

This might perhaps explain, why - despite its apparent hard left leanings - the town has some of the best known Easter parades in the whole of Andalusia.

Highly competitive and reaching fever pitch around Good Friday, practically every family has a member in one parade or another.

Indeed, such is the clamour to be involved, the brotherhoods even hold lotteries for the right to carry the floats (or *tronos*) of Jesus and Mary.

"It has always seemed a real contradiction to me," says Jose Antonio Coca, a fitness instructor, who grew up in the town. "The processions are taken very seriously and they are very moving, but it is a simple fact that most of those involved

HOME-GROWN



The left-leaning independent town of Arriate has a very different feel from its 'snobby' Ronda neighbour, writes Jon Clarke

ISLAND HOME: Arriate nestles in a wide valley and (inset) its river view

hardly ever go to church and so it is really just down to the tradition."

Either way, Arriate has a distinctly warm and friendly feel to it and, on the whole, its people look after each other in a sort of anarchic, commune-type way.

It is no surprise to learn then, that in the run up to the civil war in 1936, the town's defence committee was run by anarchists, who with the CNT had the strongest trade union in the area.

Arriate also has the curious distinction of being, aside from Ronda, the only town of the Serrania de Ronda to have grown substantially over the last decade.

While most of the dozens of towns and villages have generally shrunk in size, hemorrhaging people to the larger cities, Arriate has actually increased to its current figure of over 4,000.

Much to do with its near proximity to Ronda - coupled with more reasonable prices - the

The Arriatenos are worldly people, who have travelled all around the world to work

town has grown well. "It is no surprise with the town being easily one of the most friendly in Malaga province," explains Carmeli Gamarro, whose family firm Melgar have been curing and salting meat for many centuries.

"The Arriatenos are worldly people, who have travelled all around the world to work," she continues. "It makes them open and friendly."

This was certainly the case as many of them had to emigrate to Switzerland, France and Germany to work in the tough impoverished years of the 1960s and 1970s.

These days, while a new tranche of youngsters is being forced to go abroad to hunt again for work, many of the original emigrants are back and you can't help but notice the number of happy-looking pensioners hanging around watching the day go by.

One place, Bar La Albarra is so famous for these old boys that a Dutch photographer put together an exhibition based entirely around its clientele. Sitting down to play cards over an 80-centime brandy, the old boys certainly look contented with the world.

Another perfect snapshot of the town is at Pedro Montesino's greengrocer, which is the heart of local life and where a queue frequently snakes around the shop.

It is here that his faithful customers patiently wait their turn, catching up on gossip and barking Pedro, who is never short of a bit of banter himself.

A hard-working man, he is up with the lark to source his great selection of produce and spends much of his afternoon delivering it around the nearby area.

"And as long as the locals keep supporting our local shops and demanding good quality goods then I will continue finding them," he says.

Luckily the town has managed to keep its local shops. There are only two small supermarkets and attempts to open a Dia in the town were recently shelved.

Almost every house on the

main street has a shop on its ground floor. Many of them have no signs, but just a main door. Some are like caves, stretching back almost 50 metres, and shopping around, you can find some of the best quality meat and vegetables in Malaga province.

Tucked away in the town's fabric are a number of other interesting sites. Best are some of the 'secret' meat factories that are dotted around.

One of these in the charming pedestrianised Calle Callejuela has been open as a shop since 1900, a fact proven by the number carved into its pretty wrought iron doorway. The factory is at the back for anyone interested in visiting.

Greengrocer Pedro is typical of the Arriate stock. A staunch supporter of old fashioned village life, he spends most weekends enjoying the local countryside.

A keen hiker, he is forever in training for this or that, the highlight of his year being the annual 101km walk organised by nearby Ronda's famous Foreign Legion.

"It is the best thing about living in a country village like this," he explains.

Indeed, the countryside surrounding Arriate - meaning 'vegetable garden' from the Arabic word *Arriadh* - is full of lovely walks.



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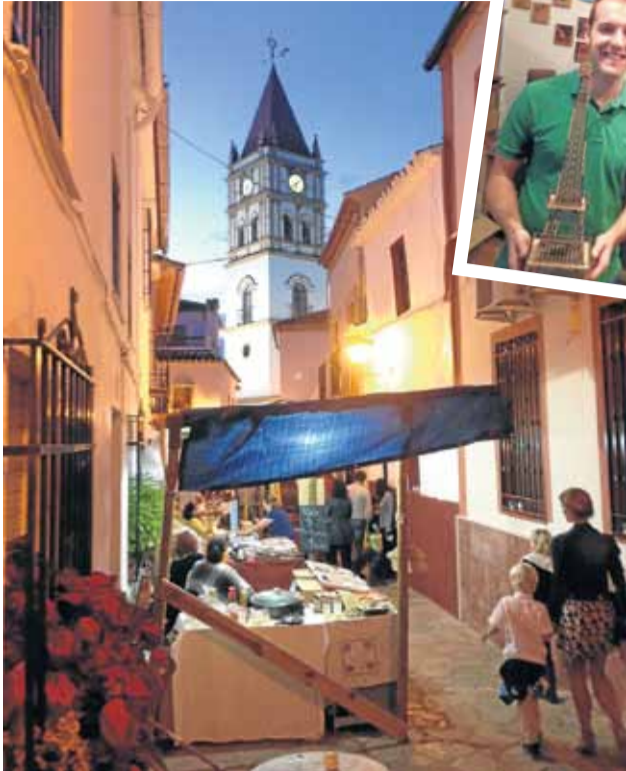
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AUTHENTIC: Fiesta en el Aire and (inset) stallholder and (bottom) greengrocer Pedro



The best goes up what is known as the valley of the Molino Canto to the source of Arriate's river Guadalcobacin. A shady stroll through a pristine valley, the path continues up into the Sierra de las Nieves. And yet there is more. For Arriate can also call itself something of a musical town, one of the best in Andalucia, with two town bands and plenty of local groups. It is a tradition that can be traced back even before the origins of the town, when a mythical group of country musicians roamed the area playing music in the dead of night. Known as La Aurora de Arriate,

the group still keeps up the tradition playing every Sunday morning between the hours of 4am and 6am. With origins from Arabic times in the 13th century, the coplas, or local songs, have been passed down from generation to generation and became famous when in 1973 the British National Geographic Society recorded them for an album on Spanish cultural music. A capacity for music is all too obvious with a visit to the incredible Los Caireles bar on the high street. There are few surprises in the Serrania as pleasant as walk-

From Arabic times, the songs have been passed down through the generations

ing through the anonymous frosted glass doors on a concert night in winter, when it will be full of hundreds of music fans of all ages, colours and styles. Much to do with the brothers Roberto and Monolo Rivera, the surprise is more the better, if you can persuade them to take you out back. If so, you will realise that the bar you are standing in is just one small corner of what was once - since the 1940s - Arriate's Cine Ideal. And what a gem it is. Still standing today, with its main screen and stage - not to mention 350 original wood and leather seats bought from Cine Paris in Malaga in the 1950s - best of all are the stunning brightly-coloured hydraulic tiles that line the entrance. "Our father was a real film fanatic," says Monolo. "This was one of the most popular cinemas in the Serrania. "People came for miles around despite the movies being heavily censored by the local priest and mayor, who would watch the film first demanding cuts all over the place." Running until 1988, when due to dwindling audiences part of it had to be converted into a flamenco venue, the brothers have kept it intact despite numerous offers from developers to turn it into flats. "This is our legacy and part of our town's key history," says Roberto. "I grew up watching Cinema Paradiso and always dreamt of one day opening the cinema up again. One day we hope to be able to find the funding to do that." It is one of those projects, which hopefully a planned new tourist association will help to get off the ground. With a new tranche of talented, hard-working expats moving in, opening hotels and restaurants (one, El Muelle, run by a Dutchman, number one on *TripAdvisor* for all of Andalucia, no less), it could well be Arriate's decade. The emphasis is on sustainability, organic agriculture and home-grown produce. Its recently set up Fiesta en el Aire epitomizes this mix, a three day festival of the best of Andalucia's natural produce and music. Thinking small, planning local, growing your own...It could be a microcosm of what Andalucia should really be aiming for in years to come.



On top of the world!

Arriadh Hotel is situated in beautiful surroundings just a 10 minute drive from Ronda. The village of Arriate, undiscovered by mass tourism, is within walking distance and offers a wide variety of restaurants and tapas bars.

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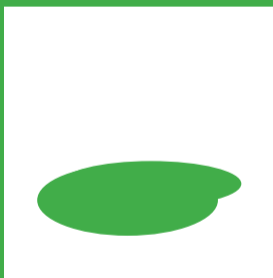
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On tour in the Serrania

RONDA is surrounded by two national parks, the Sierra de las Nieves to the East and the Sierra de Grazalema to

the West. Both are full of wonderful walks and pretty towns. Here are a few suggestions for excursions out of Ronda.

1 GRAZALEMA AND ZAHARA Grazalema and Zahara (pictured right) are two of the most evocative towns around Ronda. Both set in spectacular scenery and with some lovely sites, Zahara has a towering castle above it and a great restaurant Al Lago, while Grazalema (a beautifully conserved gem) was once the centre of the wool industry and you can still buy delightful rugs and bedspreads.



TOUGH GUYS: Ronda's own rugby team

When ru

HAVE a look at these men. Rugged and tall, it is a known fact but Ronda has a rugby team. While initially formed half a decade ago, the team has been renovated and rebranded under a new name, Los Bandoleros. Sponsored by fast-growing web design and online marketing business Arayoweb, they have new shirts, new kits, and



MOUNTAIN PASS: The windy road to Montajaque



2 BENAJOAN AND MONTAJAQUE

If it is wonderful mountain scenery you are after and villages famous for their bandits then this pair are worth a visit. Montajaque has a cave with the oldest cave paintings in Spain, while Benaolan is the centre of the ham and sausage

industry. There is a fabulous walk from Benaolan Estacion down the river to Jimera de Libar, from where you can get the train back. At each end is a great lunch spot, with Quercus and Molino del Santo.



3 RONDA LA VIEJA (ACINIPO) A 15-minute drive from Ronda at the top of one of the highest hills in the area the Roman's built their ancient city. It still has much evidence of their skills with a large part of its amphitheatre intact and a lot more to look at, not to mention the views. The visitor centre is only open for the morning, but one can always climb up to the amphitheatre out of hours.



HIDDEN: Kevin Speak and (below) the Monasterio

Secret surprise

IT is one of the most exciting projects a builder could hope for. And during the renovating of the listed 18th century building Monasterio del Carmen in Ronda, Kevin Speak has unearthed some interesting findings.

The beautiful building in the heart of Ronda's old town has so far given up hidden arches, lost floors and even a secret doorway that, he believes, was used by Republican soldiers to hide during the Spanish Civil War.

"It is a wonderful job and I am really enjoying it," explains British expat Speak, who has lived in Ronda for more than a decade. Bought by a UK developer John Small and wife Carol, from Sheffield, the building is being converted into a high-end quality guesthouse.

It took seven years to get planning permission for the building, which once, allegedly, put up the king. "I have seen photos of the old king inside," says Speak. "So we have a pretty good idea of the building's significance."



4 SETENIL DE LAS BODEGAS

Only 20 minutes drive away, the historic Roman town of Setenil is a real eye opener and amazing for photography. Nestled in the rolling landscape north of Ronda, it was built on a series of caves, which served to keep the wines of the Romans cool in summer, hence its name. It is best to leave your car outside the town, wander up to the old fortress before heading down to the famous overhanging cave for a fine tapas lunch.

gged is exactly the right word

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importantly a new ground. "We have just been given access to use the military sports ground," explains club president Dawn Hutchinson, of Arayoweb.

Enthusiast

"When I first came across Ronda's local rugby team, a lot of the committee had moved away and the team was therefore left with little or no financial back-

ing and was therefore dwindling in numbers. "Being a keen rugby enthusiast I therefore saw a great opportunity to become involved with the team and help promote it and push it forward." The club now has a new coach who travels all the way from Gibraltar each week and the club is looking for new players, as well as sponsors. For more information visit www.losbandoleros.es

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HISTORIC: Castle above Jimena and (right) Jimena's square



Castle-hopping

A GORGEOUS vista unfolded as we drove past Casares and looped around the valley towards Gaucin, known as the 'balcony of the Serrania' because of its wonderful views. One of Europe's loveliest drives, I was heading off towards the market town of Jimena de la Frontera, which sits alongside the amazing Alcornocales natural park.

The highlight of a stop off in Gaucin is the stunning Castillo del Aguila, which sits at 688 metres above sea level and offers a classic eagle eye view of the surrounding area.

From here head along a long windy road to Jimena de la Frontera, a whitewashed town officially declared of Historical and Artistic Importance in 1983.

A great weekend getaway, it has been inhabited by Iberians and Phoenicians, as well as the Romans, while its 13th century Moorish castle has looked out over many a bloody battle.

Today things are rather more

Jacqueline Fanchini takes a road trip around the castle towns of the Western edge of the Serrania de Ronda



GLISTENING: Views over Castellar lake

tranquil and you will see plenty of children running around, as well as men on horseback and remarkably few tourists.

So friendly is the place that one mother-of-two led us by car to our hostel for the night.

It may be a quiet town but that doesn't mean that the locals don't know how to party and we had a fun time on Satur-

day night at Hostal Anon, with live music and a decent young crowd.

In the daytime though it's all about putting your walking shoes on and heading around the steep cobbled streets... and, in particular to the castle that rises above.

The eighth century castle became a National Monument in

1931 and has recently been renovated, but it was once part of a Moorish defence system that stretched from Olvera to Tarifa.

It remains as a constant reminder of Jimena's intriguing past as a *frontera* - or frontier - when it guarded the western flanks of the Arabic Al-Andalus with Christian Spain.

The castle witnessed many battles as Christian armies laid frequent siege to the fortifications protecting the Moorish stronghold of Algeciras.

The view of the surrounding countryside below is amazing, in particular the sprawling forests and undulating hills of Los Alcornocales natural park.

One of Europe's largest protected spaces, it is the ideal spot for putting on your walking boots and exploring.

When the Hozgarganta River swells there are dreamy waterfalls and pools to be found but, as ever, ask the locals to point you to the best spots.

The park is also home to the prehistoric paintings at Laja Alta which incredibly date back as far as the Bronze Age.

After a day spent exploring the wild and stunning terrain, Jimena offers a range of enticing dining options with a mix of Spanish and Moorish cuisine.

The area is known for mushroom picking and game hunting, but the one thing you can't leave without trying is the sweet *piñonate* cake.

For those on a budget, here's a free tip - since the castle doesn't get locked up at night, it's ideal for a candlelit (romantic) picnic and some good old-fashioned stargazing.

On our way back from Jimena the next day we headed to visit the castle at nearby Castellar de la Frontera.

The drive up to the village passes through forests of cork trees and past the beautiful turquoise reservoir formed by the Guadarranque River.

When you get there, the small village within the old castle walls has a traditional Hispanic feel but is sprinkled with quirky shops selling a mix of Moroccan jewellery and trinkets.

The Aljibe restaurant is well worth a visit, if only for the friendly Spaniard who'll let you hold and pat his hawk while you take pictures with it for €3. When you finally head home after a weekend of castle-hopping, rejoice in the knowledge that hidden just behind the Costa del Sol's shining bright lights lie some of Spain's most precious mountain gems.



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Algaba's work also includes research and teachings on the area's geology and ornithology, as well as acting as a centre for endangered cows. These include the Spanish Pajuna - of which there are just 500 left - as well as the Andalusian Cardena, which in the early 90s had been reduced to just seven individuals.

Guests and groups can now come and stay at the centre's restored 250-year-old finca. www.algabaderonda.com

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You are spoilt for choice with romantic and hip places to stay around Ronda

DUBBED the 'City of Dreams', appropriately, by German poet Rilke there are plenty of excellent places to stay in the Ronda area.

In the heart of the city there are many emblematic choices, but if it is peace and quiet you are after then simple **Hotel Boabdil** is a good bet.

Set up by a friendly expat couple it sits in one of the most charming streets of the old town, just yards from ancient Almocobar gate and its excellent same name restaurant.

The rooms are clean and airy and some boast good views. Also in the old town look out for **Aire de Ronda**, which is both stylish and traditional in equal measures.

In the countryside nearby are some of Andalucia's hippest hotels.

Easily one of the best choices is **Molino del Puente**, run by friendly English couple Ian and Elaine Love, who also have one of the area's best restaurants **La Cascada**.

A bit further away in Benaolan you must certainly consider incredible **Molino del Santo**, a classic rural retreat, which has been serving the



STYLISH AND TRADITIONAL: Molino del Puente and Aire de Ronda (right)

Dream City

area for nearly three decades. Run by English couple Pauline and Andy, the hotel has the knack of keeping guests happy with just the right mix of comfort, good food and character.

Best of all, it counts on one of the best restaurants in Andalucia, and has many, many returning guests.

Closer to Ronda, in the charming village of Arriate, you will find a number of great places to stay.

The first, **Hotel Arriadh**, has been providing weary travellers with lodgings for over a decade in the hills above the town with the most amazing views imaginable.

Recently completely renovated by a Dutch couple John and Wilfred, it completely capitalizes on the amazing views and light and the gardens are incredibly peaceful.

Best of all your hosts are incredibly helpful and friendly and go out of their way to ensure you have a fantastic stay. Over in the Genal Valley you will find **Los Castanos**, Andalucia's top rated hotel on *TripAdvisor*.

Sitting in the sleepy, authentic village of Cartajima, it is the retreat of cultured expats

Diana and John Beach, who go out of their way to ensure you have a superb break.

A lovely townhouse, you can walk right from the door of

and there are some excellent local restaurants. Best of all there are loads of books and you can also eat in if you fancy it.

Last, but not least, why not try out **Hostal Anon** over in Jimena, which is a great place for a romantic break.

It's been a classic stopover for travelers for decades and the rooms have a Spanish rustic feel, while the outside intertwining terraces have a Moorish decor.



TALENT: Wilfred at Hotel Arriadh

Providing weary travellers with lodgings for over a decade in the hills above the town

What to buy: esparto bag

ONE thing to look out for in the Ronda area are baskets woven out of *esparto* grass that grows in the area. Once the main source of income for many families in the Sierra de las Nieves, sadly *esparto* products are now a dying trade.

In Igualeja however you can visit a womens' cooperative that aims to keep the tradition alive as well as forming jobs for locals.



"An oasis of style and comfort... a couple of days of pure mountain air, birds of prey circling overhead & you begin to appreciate the harmony of an older, slower and infinitely more peaceful way of life."

The Scotsman



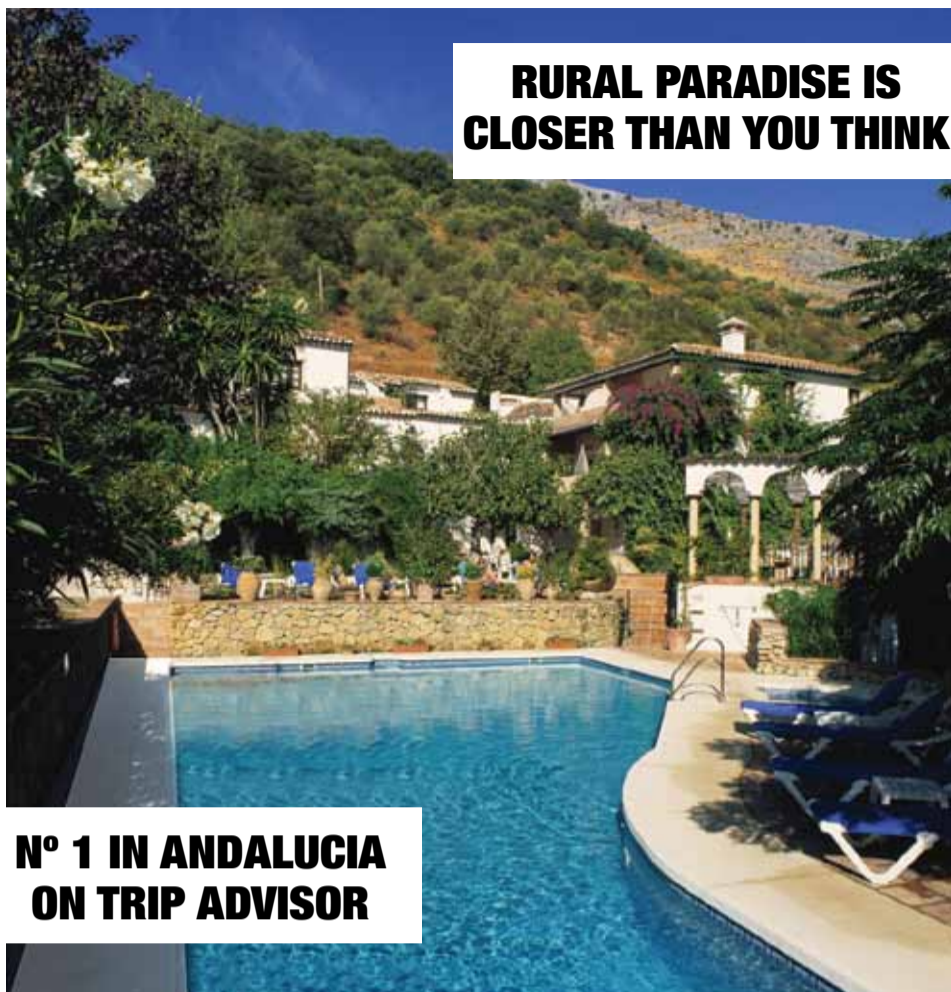
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GREEN ESCAPE: Molino del Santo and (above) peaceful Boabdil



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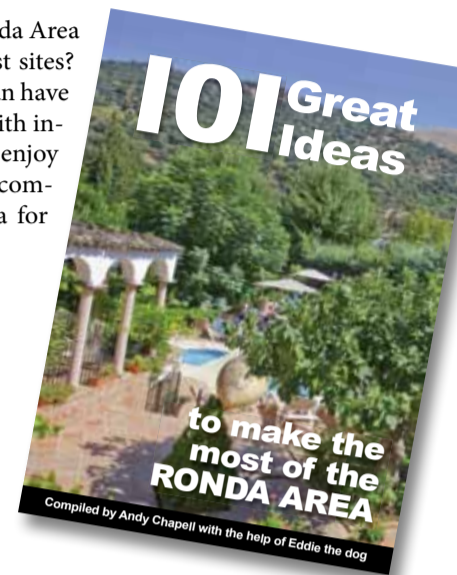
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EDDIE'S THORTS from Molino del Santo

Just had ANOTHER hair cut. What is wrong with this owner guy? Just because he's losing his hair, he seems to want me to lose mine too.

I'm just grateful for customers with hearts. Some folk went to a local restaurant recently – don't let the Old Master know they ate out, he gets very odd – and they brought me back a doggie bag of left-overs.

Restores my faith in human nature. Thank you C and M. You know who you are.



There's also talk of cutting off my tail – just because someone they don't like is coming to stay. They're worried that the person will think they're welcome. Apparently this is funny.

Eddie 

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From our Benaoján Correspondent

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seuse too who offers amazing value in all kinds of unisex treatments.

Some dates are already fully booked but find a gap and you'll be getting a bargain with rooms from just 95 euros with breakfast included.

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**DUO: At Porton and
(right) Juan at Spice
Route**

Where to eat

FEW places in Spain have such a good range of restaurants as the Serrania de Ronda.

Much to do with its ingredients – its olive oils, cheeses, hams, mushrooms, fruits, nuts and vegetables – as long as chefs use local and think big, long will it stay that way.

Thankfully every year new restaurateurs arrive in the region, with fresh ideas and skills, all helping to improve the gene pool.

This year's new additions include the stunning **Maruja Limon**, **Juntera** and **La Cascada**, while the likes of **Casa Santa Pola**, soulful **Almoco-bar** and rural idylls **Molino del Santo** and **Al Lago**, go from strength to strength.

While the excitement award must go to **la Granada Divino** in Gaucin thanks to its TV show with Gordon Ramsay, the real plaudits must – once again – go to **El Muelle**, in Arriate.

Incredibly, this authentic spot is still (a year on) Number One out of 15,000 restaurants in Andalucia, according to *TripAdvisor*.

Thoroughly deserving, this converted railway storeroom is worth a journey alone, as many people do from Estepona and even Gibraltar.

Run by friendly Dutchman Frank Rottgering with chef Isa from nearby Alcala del Valle, it has maintained its attention to detail, its customer service and, above all, its amazing prices.

But tiny Arriate has more, thanks to the recent opening of **Juntera Gin and Tonic** in the heart of the village.

Set up by a local lad Sergio Marin Garcia, he and his brother David, the chef, use organic produce from his family's nearby vegetable gardens, with some excellent twists.

And then there is **Taberna Manolo**, which has also been through something of a revolution over the last year, perhaps in a bid to keep up with its rivals.

Equally authentic, expect to try



**THUMBS UP: Omar at
Buenos Aires**

All about **Serrania de Ronda**

Diners' paradise



The Serrania de Ronda has Andalucia's best collection of restaurants, writes Dining Secrets of Andalucia editor Jon Clarke



MINE'S A LARGE ONE: At Juntera

a tartaki of tuna, secretos or a steak in whiskey.

Up in Ronda meanwhile you will find everything from creative **Tragatapas**, run by former Michelin-starred chef Benito Gomez, to traditional **Pedro Romero** and lots in between.

But easily still pick of the bunch is **Almoco-bar**, which has been producing consistently good quality food for 30 years opposite the old Arabic gate of the same name.

Run by a tight-knit team, presentation is important and a new offer includes a series of interesting four and five course set meals, paired with wines from five of the local vineyards. Nearby, **Meson El Sacristan**, keeps on getting better and better.

Run by friendly Antonio from Campillos, this busy spot, which counts on Roman ruins in the basement, has easily some of the best steaks in the

Serrania de Ronda's freshest new restaurant



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STARS OF RONDA: Manolo at Almocobar, Antonio at Sacristan, Ignacio at Santa Pola, Neil at Granada Divino and Frank at El Muelle

town, cooked to a tee in the only wood-oven around. It also has a good wine list. Nearby, with the best views in Christendom, look out for **La Maruja Limon**, recently opened by ambitious Barbara Gasull.

Having cut her teeth in restaurants in Santander, she moved south and found this gem of a spot that sits on top of the famous gorge with a charming garden.

The food is organic, homemade and I particularly liked the carrot croquettes in caramelized onions and her tapa of aubergine with *miel de cana*.

Another great new opening in Ronda is **el Quinque**, which aims to combine 'art and gastronomy' and has some excellent flamenco shows to compliment its food.

Chef Francisco Sobrino has cooked in plenty of places on the coast, including the Marbella Club hotel, and his toasted goats cheese with caramelised onions and oxtail croquettes, not to mention the



EVOCATIVE: Dining at Santa Pola

shallot tart with chicken livers, were superb. And still there is more with the excellent **Casa Santa Pola**, which certainly takes some beating for atmosphere.

This is all thanks to Catalan chef Ignacio, who knows Spain's culinary scene like the

back of his hand, and who has worked around the country and likes to experiment as much as possible. Then, let's not forget the charming **El Porton** - an institution - run by the same two friends Javier and Pepe for the last 40 years.

Steeped in bullfighting history, here you will find my favourite Ronda tapa, the wonderful quails egg with ham on toast. Finally for something completely different you must try out the superb vegetarian restaurant **The Spice Route**.

The brainchild of livewire Juan, who grew up in Mallorca, this is not only the Serrania's only such joint, but one of the best in Andalusia.

Using fresh ingredients and a wealth of herbs, he is proving that you can eat quality food without meat. Oat meatballs, soya cannelloni and veggie moussaka, my favourite dish was a sweet gazpacho of red peppers. For international food, Ronda also has a friendly Argentinian, **Buenos Aires**, run by characteristic Omar. It is an excellent spot for tapas, breakfast or just a pint to watch the UK football. It probably also serves up the best coffee in town thanks to its fresh milk.

www.diningsecretsofandalucia.com



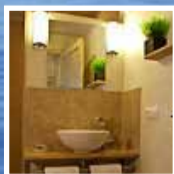
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RURAL TREATS

TAKING a tour into the green hills around Ronda yields a series of excellent country restaurants.

One of the most exciting at present is **La Cascada**, at hotel Molino del Puente, where Ian Love has been winning plaudits for his tasty creations for many years.

Set up with wife Elaine after a number of years on the coast, his food is so highly rated the place has recently entered Andalusia's Top 20 on *TripAdvisor* for the first time.

Over in Zahara de la Sierra you will find **Al Lago**, set up by talented chef Stefan Crites, from America, and his wife Mona, from the UK.

Consistently one of the best places to eat in the Serrania, Stef specialises in local ingredients, including venison, wild boar and mushrooms.

You sit overlooking the stunning Zahara lake and can even lay down your head upstairs should you feel you have overdone it. Slightly nearer Ronda is **Molino del Santo**, where Andy and Pauline have served up the best quality food in the Serrania for three decades.

One of the most evocative terraces in Spain, service is impeccable, and the menu changes regularly and by the season.

Over in San Pablo de Buceite look out for **Restaurante la Estacion**, where Nieves Dominguez has created a great restaurant on a station platform, hence the name. And don't forget fabulous local, the charming **Quercus**, in Jimera de Libar, where you will fall in love with its simplicity and tasty organic food.

Last, but not least, if it is authenticity you are after, you must head for the converted olive mill Molienda in Benalauria. One of Malaga's pretty small villages, this is a true dining secret!



HOST: Mona at Al Lago



RUSTIC: Bright colours at Quercus



MESÓN
EL SACRISTÁN

Open
10:00 - 23:30
Closed
Wednesdays



The only wood oven in Ronda specialising in top quality beef, Iberian pork goat and lamb.
Charming Central Location

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Ref. Nr. 186-00448P

RONDA – 895.000 €

BEAUTIFUL GUESTHOUSE IN
NATURAL SETTING, RONDA

Bedrooms: 7	Bathrooms: 7
m ² Built: 432m ²	m ² Plot: 50.150
Garden: Private	Pool: Private



Ref. Nr. 186-00259P

RONDA – 1.250.000 €

LUXURY MODERN COUNTRY HOUSE,
CORTIJO FOR SALE, RONDA

Bedrooms: 5	Bathrooms: 5
m ² Built: 573m ²	m ² Plot: 25.000
Garden: Private	Pool: Private
Garage: Carport	



Ref. Nr. 186-00405P

RONDA – 1.650.000 €

AMAZING CORTIJO IN PRIVILEGED AREA,
RONDA

Bedrooms: 5	Bathrooms: 5
m ² Built: 520m ²	m ² Plot: 26.300
Garden: Private	Pool: Private
Garage: Private	

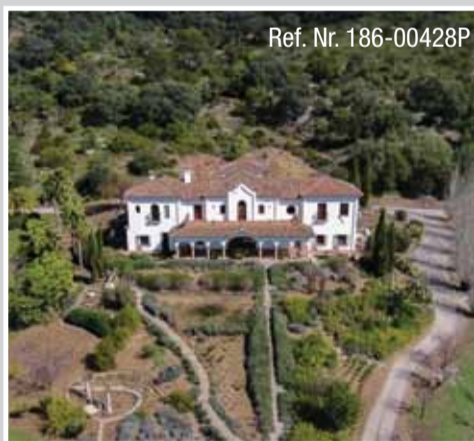


Ref. Nr. 186-2773P

RONDA – 3.900.000 €

MAGNIFICENT COUNTRY ESTATE,
RONDA

Bedrooms: 6	Bathrooms: 6
m ² Built: 800m ²	m ² Plot: 268.700
m ² Terrace: 120	Pool: Private
Garden: Private	

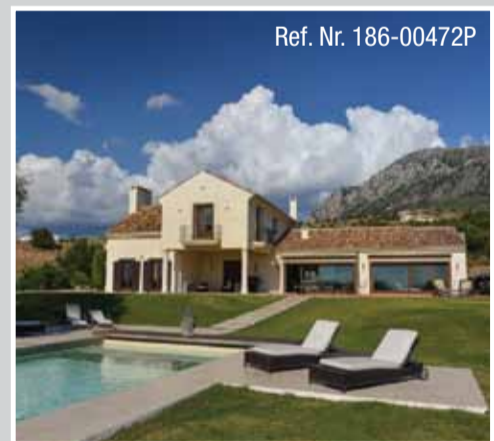


Ref. Nr. 186-00428P

GAUCIN – 6.800.000 €

SPECTACULAR COUNTRY ESTATE IN
ENVIABLE POSITION, GAUCIN

Bedrooms: 7	Bathrooms: 6
m ² Built: 995m ²	m ² Plot: 483.729
m ² Terrace: 272m ²	Garden: Private
Pool: Private	Garage: Private



Ref. Nr. 186-00472P

CASARES – 2.450.000 €

PRIVATE, LUXURY, COUNTRY VILLA
ON LARGE PLOT, CASARES

Bedrooms: 4	Bathrooms: 4
m ² Built: 500m ²	m ² Plot: 26.754
m ² Terrace: 150	Garden: Private
Pool: Private	Garage: Yes