



COME UP AND SEE: Exquisite hilltop village of Comares and (inset) historic sugar mill in Frigiliana

History tour

Mountain peaks, olive groves, vineyards and Moorish villages take Rob Horgan's breath away on a journey up hills and back in time through the Axarquia

TIGHT clusters of brilliant-white cubes huddle into folds on the mountain-side. As I round the corners, the sight of each Moorish village is even more impressive than the last. It's becoming increasingly difficult to stop gazing out of the window and keep my eyes on the road. It's a different world and yet,



unbelievably, the jaw-dropping landscapes are just a stone's throw from the tourist hotspots of Nerja and Torre del Mar. Glancing in the rearview mirror, I can still see the glistening Mediterranean sea I'd left behind just 20 minutes earlier. While Nerja's beaches attract thousands of tourists, and the region's capital, Veze-Malaga, draws business to the area, there is nothing quite as breathtaking as a climb up to the emblematic village of Comares or into the sierras of Alhama, Tejada and Almjara. As retired British expat, Stephen Pager tells me when I stop off in Sayalonga: "These mountains are full of character. "Nerja is great for tourists, ice cream and beaches, but the real beauty of the Axarquia, the reason I moved here to retire, is the hills."

Quaint

Some of Andalusia's loveliest towns and villages – Sedella, Competa and Frigiliana – are hidden away in this region's hills.

In fact there are so many beautiful places to see that you need a good few days to explore them all. But my first port of call isn't quite so rural. In fact, Veze-Malaga, as I soon discover, is a fast-paced hive of activity, although it has its charms too. On arriving, there's only one direction to go – and that's up! From the ruined Arab castle that stands proudly overlooking the town you can see the busy roads, lined with coffee shops

Turn to page 20



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Don't be warded off by the 'phantom'

It is easily the most popular tourist attraction in the Axarquia and it is little surprise that Nerja's cave pulls in thousands by the day.

While some describe them as over-commercialised and not worth the money, the caves are in fact some of Europe's finest.

Despite enormous crowds at peak times, within seconds of descending the stairs you are in an extraordinary place, worlds away from Nerja and the sunny coast.

A marvelous glistening underworld of stalactites and stalagmites, sprouting and dripping into weird and wonderful formations, with each flight of stone steps the eerie caverns get more impressive.

The 'phantom hall' in particular – so called because of the ghoul-like appearance of its structures – is astounding.

The vast caves also boast the world's largest stalagmite; a 32 metre high column verified by the Guinness book of world records no less. And there is a campaign currently underway to get the caves officially recognised by UNESCO as a world heritage site.

The site was allegedly discovered by five local lads in 1959, when they went hunting for bats. After dislodging a couple of stalactites they were able to descend into a huge cavern where they found skeletons and ceramic pottery. The caves were officially opened to the public in the summer of 1960.

Long and winding

From page 19

and bars, and above them, the old town, with its quaint winding streets, more like those of the mountain towns and villages throughout the region.

My route to the castle takes me into the Jardin de los Remedios, a park that sits parallel to the castle and overlooking a church with a spire that protrudes from the white-washed Lego-stacked houses below. With its streams, miradors and benches, and the mountain tops in one direction and the Mediterranean in the other, the park is the perfect escape from the bustling centre.

The statue of Jesus has the best views; Velez's answer to Rio de Janeiro's Christ the Redeemer watches over the action from his tranquil lofty perch, located next to the Ermita de la Virgen church.

I head over to the castle and, at the watchtower, get my first glimpse into the Moorish past which shaped the Axarquia region. Although parts of the building date back to the 10th century, its heyday came some 400 years later, when it was one of a chain defending the mighty Arabic Nasrid Kingdom of Granada.

The entire city played a part in subduing a notoriously turbulent zone, hence the old Moorish name for it: Ballix-Malaca



TOWERING: Velez-Malaga church, while (above) the town from outside

– or Fortress of Malaga. The castle, with 1,500 metres of defensive walls and numerous solid turrets, provided such strong defence it was used in a military capacity right up to the 19th century.

The mountain towns and villages from Competa to Comares and Archez to Algarrobo, with their white houses stacked higgledy-piggledy, quaint plazas and cobbled streets, are also full of signs of their Moorish past.

As Irish expat Liam Kelly explains to me: "The Axarquia is as culturally and historically rich as anywhere. Wandering around any of the hilltop towns is like stepping into the past." And he's not wrong. The road up to Competa is a journey back in time, starting with Algarrobo which boasts 8th-century Phoenician tombs (signposted just past the entrance



to the town). A little further up the winding road, the old olive groves and moscatel vineyards start to appear, interrupted by the towns of Sayalonga, where you will find the fabulous Bodegas Bentomiz, and then Competa.

Not far off the road to Comares there is Vinuela with its crystal lake. While the town of Vinuela is perhaps not as appealing as some, the lake, quiet against a backdrop of mountains and blue skies, is well worth the drive (and dive!).

But of all the Axarquia mountain communities, Frigiliana is renowned as the most beautiful.

Regularly winning awards as the top pueblo blanco in Spain, Frigiliana is a day trip hotspot for tourists down the road in Nerja. And it is literally a sweet place to visit – home to the only sugar cane factory still functioning in Spain. Chugging out deliciously



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ROCKY: Coastline near Nerja from the Balcon de Europa

road...

sticky molasses (treacle), the El Ingenio miel de cana factory operates from the magnificent 16th century mansion, Nuestra Señora del Carmen, at the heart of the town.

However the region has undergone somewhat of a transformation in the last decade, as retired British carpenter and budding author Tony Byford, 63, explains to me.

"I moved here for the slow pace and the simple life in the 1980s," he tells me. "The people are still as friendly as ever but the slow pace is starting to get quicker."

"Dirt tracks have been replaced by proper roads, so there is far more traffic - and it travels considerably faster too."

He adds: "For the upcoming generations the life is of a far higher standard and I do not begrudge them any aspect of it. I still love the quiet of the countryside and the enduring traditions of its people."

Before the day was out, I headed back down from the hills and scooted along the coast to the charming resort of Nerja to watch the sunset from the impressive Balcon de Europa (offering, arguably, the best possible view of the Mediterranean). Flanked by the dramatic Sierra Almijara, Nerja has retained an authentic air with its narrow winding old town streets, rocky coves, powdery sand beaches



PIT STOP: In Frigiliana



that its western rivals have lost. It was still well off the map in the late 1950s when tourism started taking off to the west of Malaga in spots such as Torremolinos and Marbella.

Then five boys on a bat-hunting trip stumbled upon the opening to a cave on a hillside above the tiny fishing village of Maro, a few miles east of Nerja. Vast caverns were revealed, with spectacular rock formations showing evidence of Paleolithic man. (See Page 20.)

General Franco himself came to view 'Cueva de Nerja' and coachloads of visitors followed suit.

When Nerja was chosen as a location for the 1980s TV series Verano Azul its future as a tourism destination was set. The series left an indelible mark. Now, wherever you go in Nerja, you'll come across the name Verano Azul (blue summer).

There is a Verano Azul travel agency, bus company, park and block of apartments. You may even find a bar serving a Verano Azul cocktail.

The real joy is found in the small coves just below the town, or nearby in Maro.

Nerja's beaches are cut off from the town, backed not by a road, but a cliff-face. You can sit on the sand and not see any sign of civilisation; just coastline colliding with blue sea in both directions. When you sit against a rock, feet dangling, fresh from a dip in the late afternoon sun, it's so peaceful you lose track of time.

Dipping my toes into the sharp November sea, with a pistachio ice cream in one hand as the sun set, over Malaga, the laid-back sleepy life on offer in the Axarquía - up in the mountains and down on the coast - had never seemed so appealing.

Dead interesting

SAID to have been designed so the dead would not turn their backs on each other, it is claimed to be the only round cemetery in Spain. Now locals in Sayalonga hope that their unusual graveyard, built in 1840, is to be promoted better as a tourist attraction. A visitor centre is now open and a local historian is urging the authorities to designate it a BIC, or site of specific cultural interest.



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STANDING TALL: Competa's 15th century church

Home for life

STROLLING through an olive grove surrounded by rolling hills and the November sun beating down on my back, I was in a state of undeniable bliss as I took in the jaw-dropping landscapes.

David from the Competa tourist office had pointed me in the direction of the olive groves, a simple five-minute walk from the centre of the pueblo, saying 'that is where you will find the real Axarquia'.

And off I'd trotted, along a

Laid back Competa is home to many long-term expats, including Spain's very own Lonely Planet editor, writes Rob Horgan

gravel path lined with never-ending rows of olive trees – until that is, I rounded a corner to find myself confronted by a horse. Not being very 'country', my path through this rural paradise was blocked.

As I approached (warily), the

horse, loosely tied to a tree with a flimsy-looking rope, reared up on its back legs and neighed at me, sending a large amount of saliva in my direction.

Wracking my brain for what to do next, I reverted to what I been taught as a kid growing

up in London: if you don't like the look of someone, cross the road.

And so, after scrambling down a relatively easy slope, I found myself on another path and again heading through a jungle of olive trees.

But to my utter dismay, just five minutes further on, my path was once again blocked by a solid-hoofed mammal determined not to budge.

This time I did not even try to pass. I set my bag down, took out my book and just enjoyed the balmy autumnal day in the great outdoors. It was, as David had promised, a real insight into the laid-back way of life amid the fertile lands of the Axarquia.

Celebrate

And it is this way of life that attracts so many expats to the area, including, no less, than John Noble, the editor of Spain's celebrated *Lonely Planet* guide.

A former journalist at the *Observer* and *FT*, he fell in love with the place over two decades ago and uses it as his base when not carousing the rest of the country for his job. On a night out at the town's stand out hive for fun, restaurant El Pilon, he is quick to

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business started to grow we increased not only our range of furniture but also giftware. We're always on the look-out for something a bit different and try to keep the ranges constantly changing." And while the furniture side of the business takes precedent, the food side has also continued to grow.

"Our customers have helped us develop our range of baking products and also kept us in touch with what's hot on the biscuits and cakes front.

"And one thing we've learnt is that people like variety so we also have plenty of spices and ingredients from around the world."

And to help their customers, they even have a selection of recipes on their website.

Another branch to the company is the ladies boutique, provide style at affordable prices with individually picked items and plenty of choice.

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WHEN British couple Andy and Debbie Wilkes moved to Competa just over a decade ago they decided to open a shop serving the surrounding Axarquia area.

Falling in love with the town, the former IT consultants, hoped that selling a mix of British foods, plus local arts and crafts would prove to be profitable.

And so it came to pass, with the shop Sugar and Spice thriving to become one of the true success stories of the town.

Now ten years on, they have a second shop across the road specialising in bespoke furniture, mostly imported from Morocco.

Their love for Moroccan furniture began after an Easter trip, where they fell in love with the arabesque furniture.

As well as the furniture they also stock many other Moroccan crafts produced in the souks by artisans, all at excellent prices.

As Debbie explains: "As the furniture side of the

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BUZZING: The main square hosts an annual wine festival every August

sing the town's praises. And he is not alone. Danish expat vet Jens Klausen, 79, moved here 25 years ago, and insists he will never move.

"The climate, the extremely friendly people and the beautiful landscape are as good as anywhere in the world. I have no plans to move," he says.

Nor does Tom Sobel, who owns the emblematic Pilon restaurant. The genial American, who divides his time between running the popular spot and working as a therapist along the coast, fell in love with the local art and culture scene. "It is quite different to any other places I have visited and there is usually something going on," he says.

Friendly

Back in the white-washed village centre I quickly get a firsthand encounter with the 'extremely friendly people'.

While perched on a bench in Rincon de los Abuelos (grandparents' corner), studying my map and planning my route around the village, I was joined by Maria and Carlos, a retired Spanish couple who have lived in Competa for over 40 years.

After exchanging pleasantries and revealing the fact I'm a journalist, the couple were determined to show me all Competa has to offer.

Taking hold of my map they plotted 'the best route' for me to take, placing an 'X' at every



LEGO LAND: White houses clustered together

'tourist attraction' they could think of.

But, as Carlos says: "Competa is not really for tourists; you can come for a day but it is better to stay for a lifetime." The first port of call, hand-picked by my grandparents-for-a-day, was the Museo del Vino close to the charming main square, Plaza de la Almirante, with its 15th century church and Moorish clock tower.

Even more than for its olives, the Axarquia countryside is renowned for moscatel grapes - and the wine isn't too bad either. The two local bodegas, Bodega Almirante and Bodega Luis Picante, ex-

port their wines throughout Europe, and tours of both places are well worthwhile. Each August, revellers gather beneath the lofty bell tower in the plaza for the Noche del Vino.

'For this one night,' says my tour guide, 'wine is free by the barrel'.

Arty

"People come out in the thousands, drinking as much as they can take," he adds. (Needless to say, I'm now planning a return trip to Competa in the summer.) Next up is a trip to the art museum. Competa's growing reputation as an arty destination attracts expats from far and wide, many coming for the annual sculpture walk showcasing local artists' work every Easter.

My final trek of the day takes me a little way up La Maroma. At 2,068 metres, La Maroma is the highest mountain peak in the province, forming a natural barrier between Granada and Malaga. Even at 636 metres above sea level the views are impressive.

In one direction I watch the first snow of the season fall on the Sierra Nevada, while in the other, I could see brilliant-white cube houses tumble down the hillside with the Mediterranean glistening far off in the distance - a spectacular end to my day in this rural retreat hidden up in the hills.

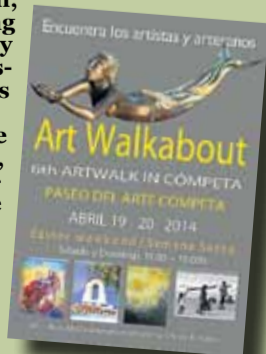
Walk the walk

ART lovers will be able to enjoy all styles of arts and crafts at the eighth Art Walkabout in Competa.

Taking place in March, the event aims to bring together the community in an animated and artistic atmosphere at various venues in the town.

Works on show include paintings, photographs, graphics, drawings, ceramic bowls and bronze sculptures.

For more details on the event visit www.art-competa.com



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To the Moors' last stand!

One of Andalucia's most rewarding mountain adventures lies in wait among the olive trees, inland from Nerja, writes Guy Hunter Watts

TOWERING to almost 1000m the rugged massif of El Fuerte provides a stunning backdrop to the pretty village of Frigiliana, just inland from Nerja.

The mountain played a dramatic role in the region's history at the time of the last Morisco uprisings. The Moslems who stayed on after the Reconquest knew they were living on borrowed time yet were loathe to abandon this exquisite swathe of Al Andalus. Taking refuge atop the rocky pinnacle of El Fuerte their last stand against de Zuarzo's Christian troops is one of the most evocative incidents of the Morisco rebellion. When you get to the top of this dramatic pinnacle of rock you'll appreciate why they chose the mountain as a last refuge.

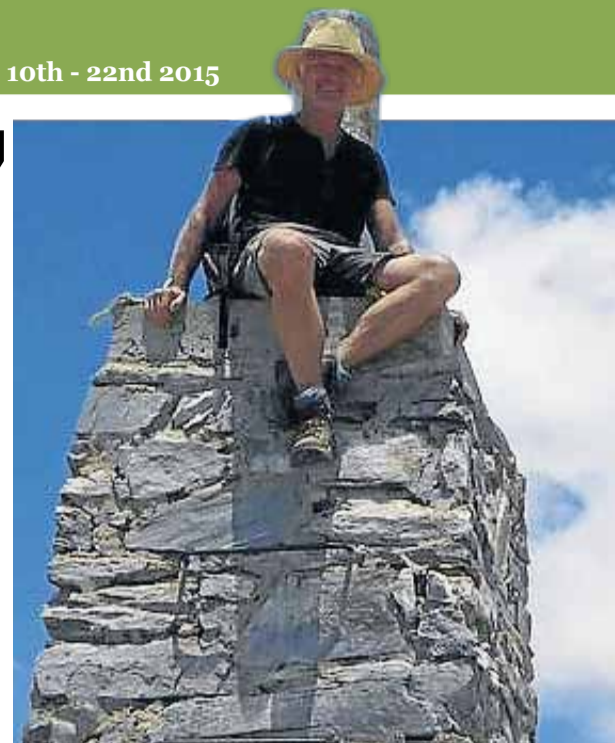
The Route

The walk begins in Frigiliana in the square at the entrance of the village, La Plaza del Ingenio next to a round hut containing a puppet theatre. From here head up the cobbled road beneath El Ingenio passing a row of ceramic plaques. Continue along Calle Real then oppo-

site house no.9A cut right up a cobbled staircase at a sign Barrio Morisco-Mudéjar. At house no.13 pass beneath an arch then bear right at a sign Panoramicas. Reaching the fabulous Garden Restaurant the path divides. Carry straight ahead passing above the restaurant. After 100m the path narrows then loops steeply upwards. Reaching a tiled bench head straight on following a sign El Castillo. You pass several sculptures, the work of a resident ex-pat. Zigzagging higher you will love the views across the village and east towards the Higuéron valley. Climbing through a swathe of young pines you pass a dilapidated mirador. Passing a second mirador you reach a bluff

OVERVIEW

This is a relatively easy and emblematic walk, taking up to three hours. The path that leads up from Frigiliana is well marked and easy to follow even if you have some 650m of fairly steep climbing to negotiate. But the extraordinary panorama that awaits at the top more than justifies the effort. Returning by the same route is just as much of a treat: the vast views along the way make this itinerary an absolute must-walk.



SITTING PRETTY: Guy Hunter Watts at the top

AT THE TOP YOU APPRECIATE WHY THEY CHOSE THE MOUNTAIN AS A LAST REFUGE



MAJESTIC: Views into the hills

The Nitty Gritty

Starting point: La Plaza del Ingenio at the entrance to Frigiliana
Grade: Medium
Distance: 8.5kms
Time: 3hrs
Total Ascent/Descent: 730m



BIRDS EYE VIEW: Of Frigiliana

from where you'll see a large water tank down to the left. Cut left on a narrow path which zigzags down to a track (15mins) where, angling right, head past the water tank then cut right up a cobbled staircase that passes a mill then zigzags up to a pylon. Here bear left. After climbing steeply the path angles left into a group of pines, descends for a few metres, then resumes its ascent. The trees thin out as views open out towards the Mediterranean. The path runs on towards the northwest, parallel to a ridge which is now to your right. Bearing right it climbs more steeply as views briefly open out to the north. Soon the path adopts its former course to the left of the ridge before passing an old calera (glossary) (55mins) then runs on towards the towering massif of El Fuerte. Passing through a breach in the rocks angle left then continue to the summit of El Fuerte (976m) where you reach a trig point and a sign Fin de Sendero (1hr 40 mins). Return by the same route back to the start point of the walk (3hrs). *This walk is among 36 others described in Guy Hunter-Watts' Walking in Andalucia. Olive Press readers are entitled to a 25% discount on Guy's celebrated book from January 15, via: <http://www.cicerone.co.uk/product/detail.cfm/book/802/title/refer/olivepress>*

Sweet deal



STUNNING: Cortijo with mango farm

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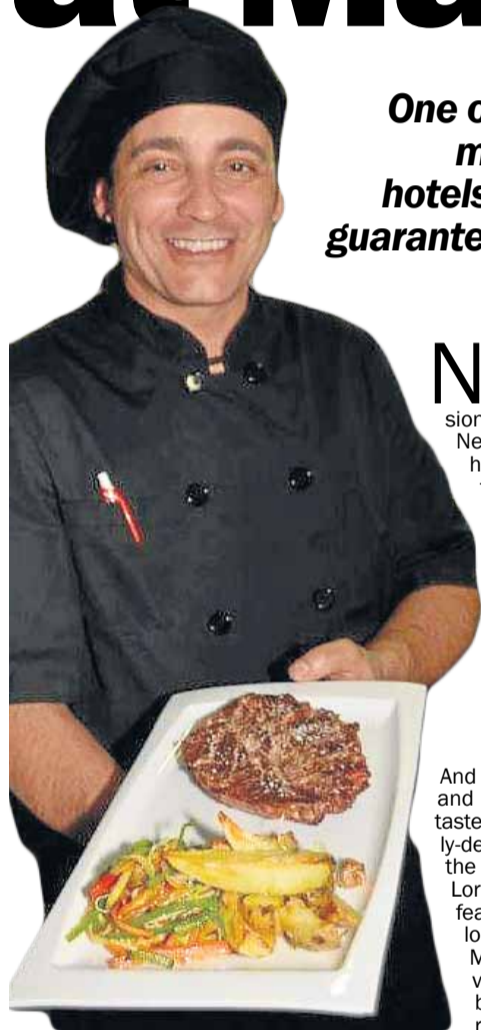
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Cabellos's stylish take on traditional dishes include 'bacalao gratin', delicious Almadraba tuna, crispy duck magret and suckling lamb shoulder.

Freshest

And guests visiting over Christmas and New Year are sure to get their tastebuds tantalised, with specially-designed menus to celebrate the festive season.

Lorenzo's New Years' Eve feast features the best in traditional local produce.

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DINERS' DELIGHT: Las Mayoralas

sert are sure to make 2015's last meal your best one. The restaurant, which is open all-year round, presents the full range

of Malaga's rich variety of food, from the freshest fish to the most succulent cuts of meat.

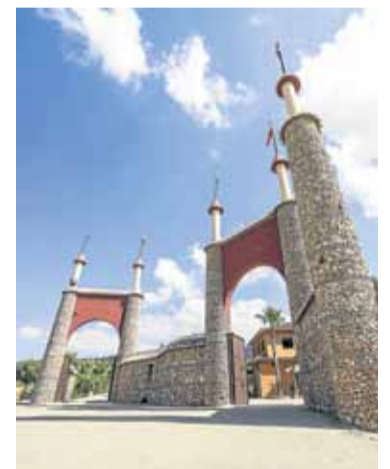
And the sumptuous menu can be enjoyed in the lush surroundings of one of the Axarquía's most emblematic hotels. Sitting near the celebrated Vinuela lake, the views from the hotel's detached cottages could not be better. Each is well equipped with a fitted kitchen and at least two bedrooms, plus a private pool and garden. Guests relax in total privacy, gazing across the faraway peaks, including Maroma at over 2000 metres, and have just a short stroll to the restaurant which is open all year.

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NEW CHEF: Lorenzo



VIEWS: Cottages overlook lake Vinuela



GATEWAY: Hotel turrets

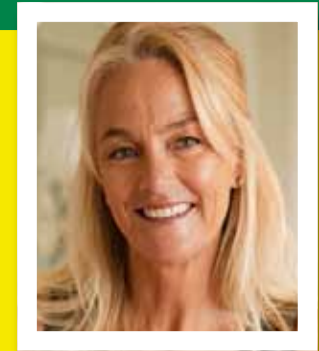
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AS3030 Churriana 850,000€

357m2 4 bed, 3 bath detached villa in urbanization with 24 hour security, close to the shops, airport and beach.



AS3029 Periana 125,000€

55m2, 1 bed, 1 bath rustic townhouse with garden and 5 terraces, views of the mountain, lake and distant sea



AS3025 Benajarafe 265,000€

67m2 2 bed ground floor apartment with large shared terrace, garden and pool area with a door to the beach.



AS3024 Alora 349,000€

201m2 3 bed, 3 bath Villa with car port and above ground pool in the countryside close to town on 98,692m plot



AS3031 Almachar 107,500€

Bright and airy 100m2 Newly renovated 3 bedroom village house situated on 2 floors with 2 entrances.



AS2356 Zalea, Casarabonela 550,000€

Large 4 bed, 3 bath, family home with two 2 bed guest apartments in the courtyard, purpose built for rural tourism with pool



AS2995 Cútar 80,000€

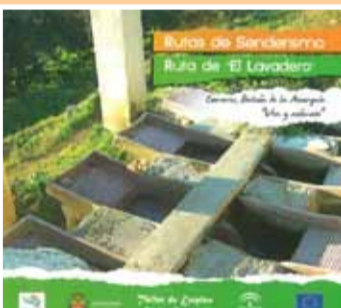
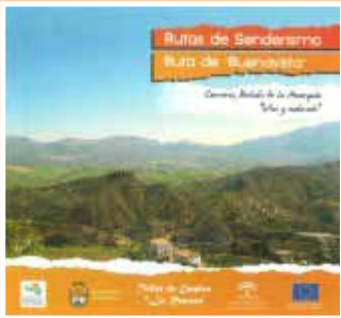
138m2 Fully renovated 5 bedroom family house with terrace and views over this Moorish village to the mountains beyond



AS2978 Comares 105,000€

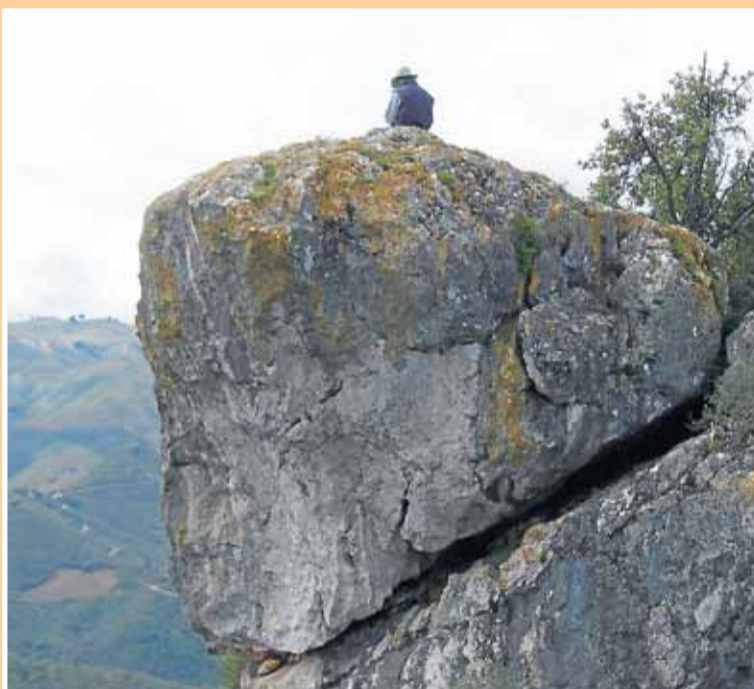
Charming 2 bedroom country property with courtyard and roof terrace situated in a small Hamlet just below Comares

www.axarquiaproperties.com



MAPPING THE WAY: Comares hikers and (left) a series of hiking trails

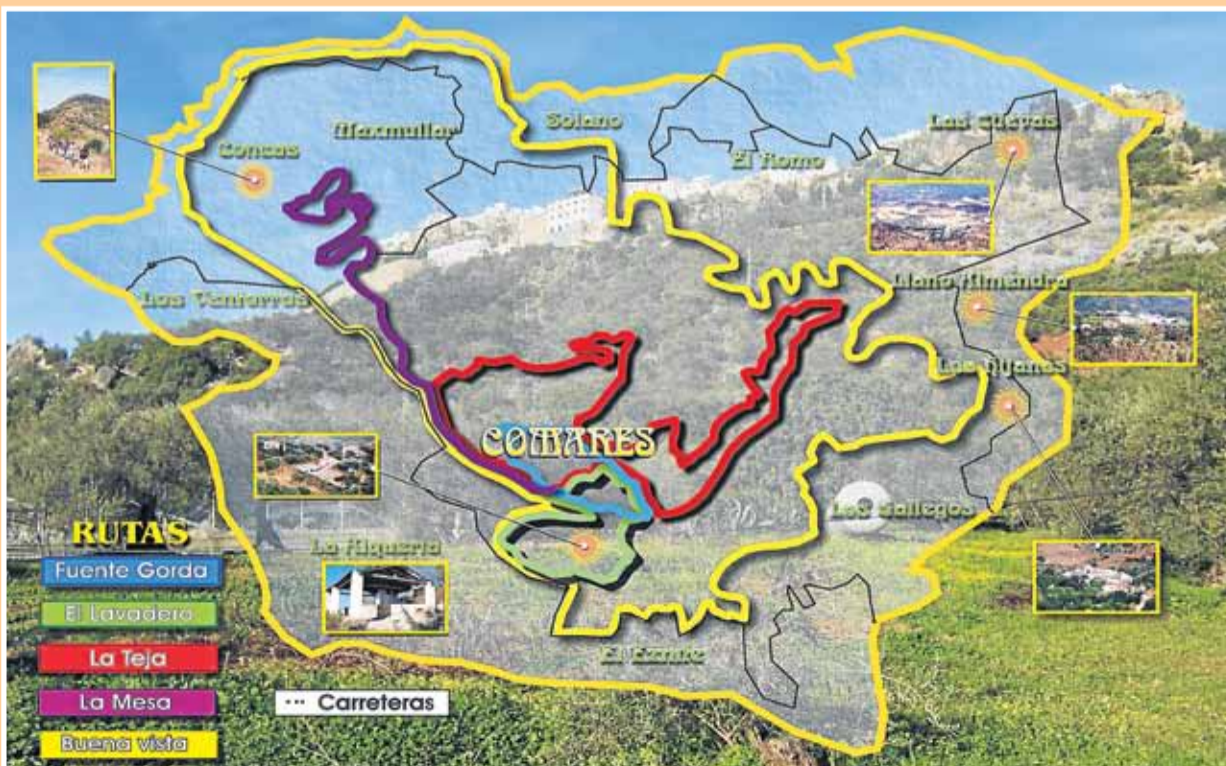
A THIRSTY MESS



ROCK ON: Hike halt

There's no better start to a day than a dawn hike from Comares

ROSE early from my bed on the outskirts of Comares, eager to stretch my legs on one of the many walking routes around the hillside town. I opted for the Ruta Lavadero, described as 'medium difficulty'. The gentle dawn stroll through Comares was set to the tune of bird-song and a cow mooing down the mountain somewhere. I said 'hola' to a donkey in a garden and set off into the rising sun, which was splashing fuzzy pinks and oranges over the sierras. The route was well signposted... That is unless, like me, you tend to go running up every rocky path to see how the view differs. Needless to say, within an hour I was pretty lost and tales of people going walking up in the Axarquía



(in particular around Frigiliana) and never returning were present in the back of my mind. I passed just two other people on my hike and they seemed to be equally struggling with the combination of heat and mountain. The beauty of Comares being atop a mountain though is that you will always know roughly how to get back there. And so I continued to tread a path over the rocks, through the pine forests and past the farms and luxurious houses, while always keeping one eye on the white-topped mountain. A few hours of glorious hiking later I found myself back on the road into the *pueblo*; a sweaty, thirsty mess.

ROUTES: Ruta Lavadero

Balco the

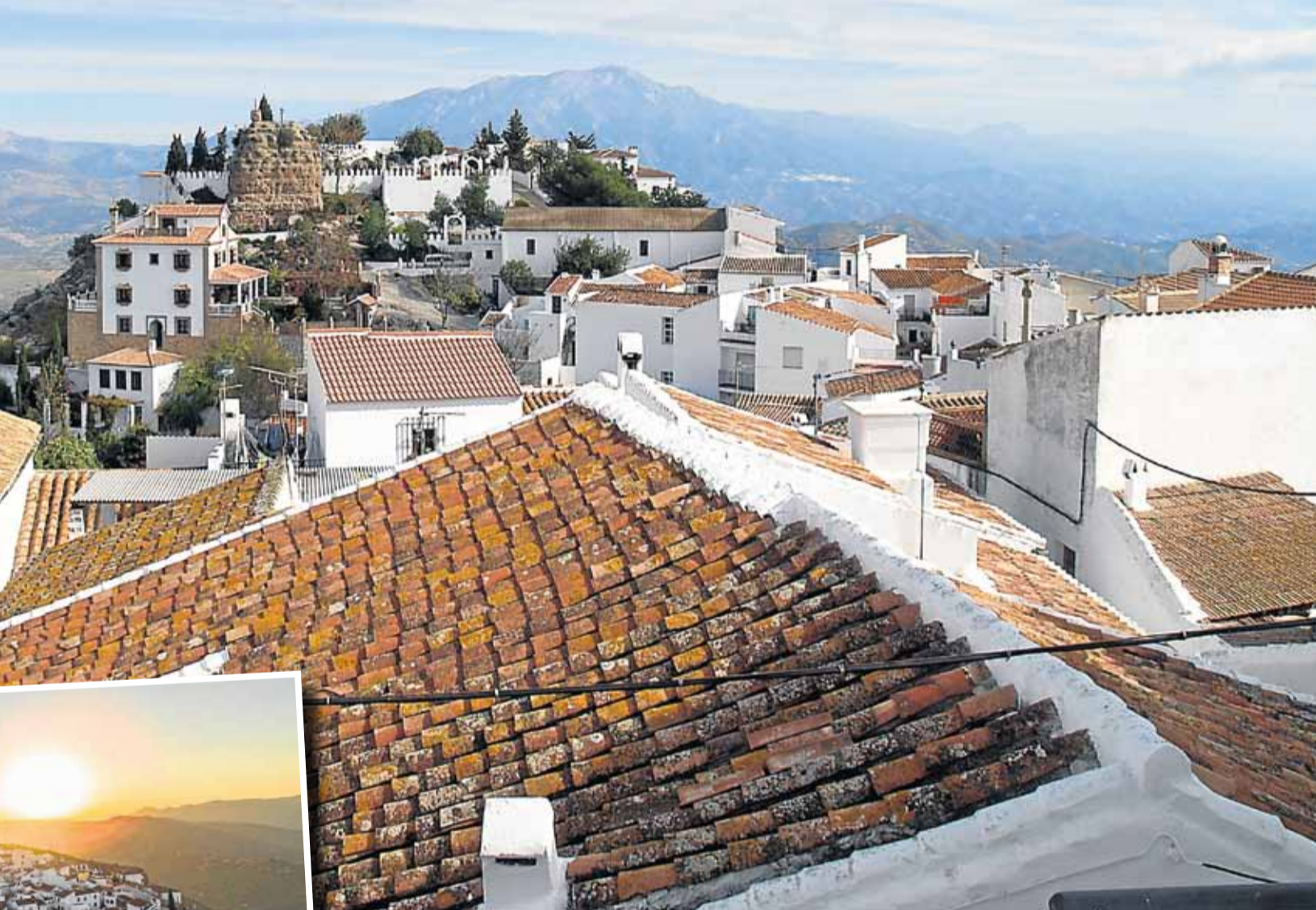
Comares is a stunning mo



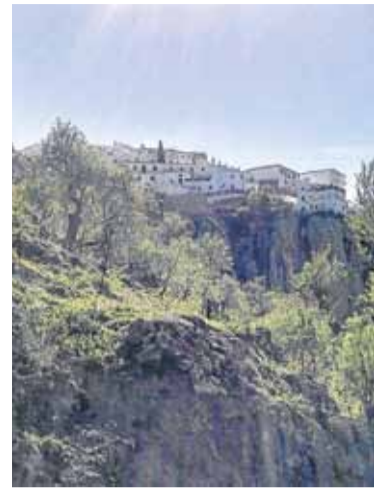
SIERRAS dressed in a patchwork of pueblos, plantations and isolated homesteads spill down towards the sparkling coast where illuminated resorts hug the shore. It's easy to see why the hilltop pueblo of Comares is called the balcony of the Axarquía. This spectacular place sits atop its regal perch where the views are simply stunning. But there is much more to this pueblo than 360-degree views. Hiking, cycling and rock climbing are all popular activities in the area. Begin with a walking tour of the village centre. The route is dictated by pretty ceramic footprints, and takes in numerous miradors, the Castillo, the peaceful cemetery before ending back in the central square. It is the perfect introduction to Comares, with regular optional pit-stops in the shape

cony of Axarquia

Mountain-top pueblo and an adventurer's dream, writes Tom Powell



ROOFTOP WONDERLAND: Comares lords over the rest of the region



VALLEY: In Comares

Flying free

FLYING through the air with the rugged valley opening up below you, a trip on Comares' zipwire is an experience you'll never forget.

A breathtaking 110 metres above the ground, and 436 metres long, the 'tirolina' is the most extreme in Spain. This is one challenge not for the faint-hearted, or, crucially, those scared of heights.



WIRE WALK: Tirolina



PATRON'S PARADISE: St. Hilario

New year party

COMARES kick-starts every year with a celebration of its patron saint, Hilario, on January 16. A procession leads through the streets before music and dancing later in the day.



of tapas bars and ornate benches. Of the historical remains, the Moorish fort stands highest of all. It was the stronghold of ninth-century Moorish rebel leader Ibn Hafsun, and there are plenty of information boards explaining more about this turbulent time. Heading out of the village centre, there are clearly-marked hiking routes which make exploring the varied countryside surrounding Comares a doddle (see panel, left). And for the more adventurous hikers, there are plenty more potential routes that aren't publicised in leaflets. The Axarquia is undoubtedly a hiker's paradise. Cycling is also immensely popular in the area, while the steep slopes flanking the village are often speckled with rock climbers. But for such a seemingly remote location,

Turn to page 30

Hotel Restaurante ATALAYA



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www.hotelcomares.com

HOTEL Restaurante Atalaya

RESTAURANTE *El Molino*



Barriada Los Ventorros, 9 . Comares
Tel. 618 952 645
CERRADO LOS LUNES

30

All about the **A**xarquía

December 10th - 22nd 2015

Hilltop haven



HILL VIEW: Comares' white-washed houses

From page 29

Comares still knows how to party with the best of them. July's Feria de Verdiales, the annual August village feria, as well as events celebrating Patron Saint Hilario offer ample opportunity to let your hair down and dance.

Visitors can extend their stay by sleeping in Comares too, with the Hotel Atalaya a popular option. With capacity for 120 people, it also boasts an excellent restaurant serving up local produce and stunning views from its south-facing balconies.

There are plenty of other smaller B&B style places to stay in the centre of the town.



Flamenco fiesta

THE fiestas de Verdiales are legendary in Comares, with the whole village coming together to enjoy music, dancing and drinking.

The verdiales are traditional folk dances and songs.

They are common in Malaga's mountain villages, and supported by colourful musicians and cheering crowds. In Comares, the festival takes place every July.

Table Mountain

comares.com



TableMountainComares



TableMtComares



Los Ventorros 13/15 (Comares, Malaga) 29195,

Los Ventorros is a little village 5 min. west of Comares. At the top of the hill go LEFT (not right to Comares)

A lovely and FREE EXCURSION combined with lovely food?

This is your *MUST DO* day trip: A FREE outing from the Costa del Sol to get to know the Axarquía area, the beautiful countryside just inland of MALAGA. Enjoy breathtaking vistas to the Mediterranean, admire natural beauty, amazing landscapes with olive and almond groves. A hilly, lush and unique environment. And great food too!

Appealing? Just take your (rental) car and come to the adorable whitewashed village of COMARES. On its proud hilltop, Comares is the jewel in the crown. With its Moorish architecture, it majestically overlooks most of the Axarquía and has unbeatable panoramas towards the sea. Unspoilt, still undiscovered and not to be missed!

A few minutes west (in the hamlet of los Ventorros) find Comares' hidden treasure "la Mesa de Masmullar", a small flat-topped table mountain. Climb to its plateau to enjoy Andalusian nature, rocks, views, clean air and hidden archaeological Moorish remains.

But before or after your visit, don't forget to spoil yourself by just another MUST DO: Have lunch or dinner at Comares' number 1 restaurant: "Table Mountain". Situated at the foot of la Mesa de Masmullar. Comfortable, affordable and welcoming, a place with delicious and fresh foods for all tastes! The nice food and atmosphere alone is worth the trip inland, as many say...

Our varied menu also offers delicious Asian choices:
Try our Indian curry or Indonesian Saté and Beef Rendang.
New: NASI GORENG (a fried rice dish from Indonesia). WELCOME!!!

Be WELCOME and enjoy the magic of Comares and its Table Mountain!!!

T: +34 952 957 057 • M: +34 630 131 300

Visit the website for clear route descriptions and more info



www.TableMountainComares.com



Opening hours:
1pm - midnight • Kitchen: 1pm - 11pm
Monday closed

Wine time

PHOTO BY JON CLARKE



Axarquia's top vineyard has opened its own restaurant, discovers Jon Clarke

It was perhaps inevitable that having got their wines into dozens of Michelin-starred joints around the world, they would open a restaurant of their own.

Now talented Clara Verheij and Andre Both (above), from Bodegas Bentomiz have inaugurat-

ed a stylish new spot for diners in the Axarquia. With the help of Nerja chef Juan Quintanilla, of Sollun, they have created an alluring three and five-course tasting menu, which can be paired with the vineyards six different wines.

Sitting on the top floor of their stylish bodega, you eat in an airy dining room with amazing views of classic Axarquia scenery.

The dishes, which are as handsome as they are creative, use mostly seasonal and almost all local ingredients... and cleverly pair the couple's wines.

Hence, the vineyard's intriguing red - made from Petit Verdot, Tempranillo, Cabernet Franc and the local grape Rome - is used to slow-cook Iberian pigs cheeks, with shiitake mushrooms and sweet potato and then served up alongside.

Meanwhile, a foam of parmesan, popcorn of rice, cooked with seaweed is paired with one of their fabulously flinty Moscatel Ariyanas whites.

It is a decade since they first rescued this abandoned vineyard, in Sayalonga, above which they built their home.

Quickly recognising the enormous potential of the local Moscatel de Alejandro vines, they have had rave reviews from wine journalists and sommeliers. It is little surprise you can find it in the world's leading restaurants, including Celler de Can Roca, in Girona, and Gordon Ramsay's restaurants in London. It also sells in Waitrose.

The Axarquia's unique terroir of steep slopes and the closeness of the sea, all provide an ideal microclimate for the grapes.

The vines - some over 100 years old - are grown in hollows, to collect water, and are cut back to bushes, so that the leaves protect the maturing grapes from that scorching summer sun.

The wines produced are naturally sweet and unfortified and produced in temperature-controlled stainless steel tanks.

They named their aromatic wines Ariyanas, after a nearby Moorish hamlet, which comes from the Arabic word for aromatic.

The pair got their wine known by taking mini European tours to wine fairs and celebrated restaurants, getting an 85 per cent success rate. "If the sommelier tried our wine, the restaurant purchased it!" says Clara.

Why not come up for yourself, as Clara explains: "Visitors enjoy seeing the vineyard and get an understanding of how the wines are developed - before enjoying the wines with a guided tasting, alongside lunch."

www.bodegasbentomiz.com



STYLISH: Light open-plan dining

Q: What has Nerja got to do with TRIVIAL PURSUIT?

A: It invented it

It is possibly the most successful board game of all time, with over 100 million units sold in 26 countries and in at least 20 languages... and it was born in the Axarquia.

It happened after two young Canadian journalists stayed in Nerja in the winter of 1980, having quit their jobs to work on the game and persuade investors to part with their money.

Chris Haney, a high-school dropout, had been working as a picture editor in Montreal while his friend David Abbott was a sportswriter.

The pair lived at El Capistrano, a villa resort where Haney's parents had a house, and they allegedly worked 16 hours a day thinking up questions for their game - fuelled by San Miguel. And lots of it.

But while they enjoyed the paella, the beer and strolls along the Balcon de Europa, they struggled to find investors for 'Six Thousand Questions', as it was originally called.

Just one Nerja resident decided to invest, a Canadian barman. He is now a millionaire.

The game went unnoticed for two years. They lost money on every copy they sold and it looked to be a disaster. But then once the first cheques starting rolling in they never stopped.

Within months it was selling by the million and in 1984, *Time* magazine called it 'the biggest phenomenon in game history'.

And it is still incredibly popular, with Nerja's first Trivial Pursuit tournament currently being planned for this year.



Bodegas Bentomiz

The Complete Wine Experience



Visitor's review, 25.11.2015

"Best lunch & wine of 2015. The tasting was entertaining, delicious. The lunch - presentation, flavours, perfectly sized portions, delightful service - was truly wonderful."

Tour & Tasting: see & learn about the vineyard & bodega then taste 4 Ariyanas wines. Starts 12:30, €9,00.

Complete Wine Experience: enjoy a tour & tasting before a delicious lunch paired with our wines. 3 or 5 course menu, €28,50 or €39,00 plus drinks. Starts 12:30.

Just Lunch: been before? Join us for a delicious lunch, each dish designed to pair with Ariyanas wines. Choose 3 or 5 courses (€23,50 or €34,00) plus your drinks. Served at 2.00.

Book today: www.bodegasbentomiz.com

or call +34 658 845 285



25th December to 1st January only
Bodegas Bentomiz's

Wine-Lovers' Christmas Menu

You are cordially invited to enjoy this sumptuous 5 course menu with a glass of champagne and 3 glasses of Ariyanas wine.

Price per person: €59,50

Reservation essential!

Call

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Or email

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Also serving alcohol
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WATER WAY: View over Vinuela lake is one of Andalusia's best

Lakeside living

A crossing point for travellers for centuries, Puente Don Manuel is now the main inland hub of the Axarquia

It has been a crossing point for travellers criss-crossing the Axarquia for centuries. So, it is entirely appropriate

that Puente Don Manuel is now the number one commercial hive for inland Axarquia.

Here, at the so called 'cruz de Periana' - overlooking beautiful Vinuela lake - you will find a bustling commercial centre with plenty of businesses and restaurants, including curry houses and fish and chip shops.

This fast-growing settlement, which is administered by larger Alcaucin, is where thousands of local expats stock up on all their essentials. There is a hairdresser, dentist and various British estate agents, not to mention the well established Arkwrights food shop, run by Linda and Geoff, which has been the glue of the community for years.

There are a number of good places to get a coffee, none less than the excellent Terrace cafe, a great butcher and probably the best fish and chips in the Axarquia with the Town Frier, now in new hands.

Make sure to take a ride up to



BUILDING BRIDGES: Puente Don Manuel

the village of Alcaucin, which has a rich historical legacy and is full of narrow, winding streets and whitewashed houses. Alcaucin derives its name from the Arabic 'Al Cautin', meaning the 'arches' a possible reference to the town's aqueduct.

Prehistoric

Way before the Moors - and Romans before them - it is known that prehistoric man lived here, after the remains of a Neanderthal man were

found in 1983 in a cave near to El Boquete de Zafarraya. Certainly though, it is scenery that is the biggest draw around here.

The lake of Vinuela, just a stone's throw away is a great place for a walk and a picnic, or if you are after a bit of luxury a stay at the region's top hotel Vinuela.

As well as boasting wonderful grounds with tennis courts and two huge swimming pools, there is a spa and an excellent restaurant, which is one of the best in the whole region.



PICTURESQUE: Landscape from Alcaucin statue



The Town Frier

Take Away Menu

Opening Times
Tues-Saturday
12-10pm
Sun/Monday
CLOSED

ALL
Pie and
Chips
6.00€

FISH

- Small Cod & Chips.....7.50
- Large Cod & Chips.....8.50
- Large Haddock & Chips.....9.50
- Fish Cake & Chips.....5.00
- Scampi & Chips.....7.50

CHICKEN

- Southern Fried Chicken & Chips....8.00
- Chicken Nuggets & Chips.....5.50
- Popcorn Chicken & Chips.....6.50

SAUSAGES

- Jumbo Sausage & Chips.....5.00
- Jumbo Sausage Battered & Chips....5.00
- Vegetarian Sausage & Chips.....6.00

SPECIALS

- Doner Kebab.....5.00
Served with Fresh Salad or Coleslaw
- Onion Rings.....2.50

PIES

- Steak Pie
- Steak & Kidney Pie
- Chicken and Mushroom Pie
- Mince Beef and Onion Pie

BURGER'S

All Burgers are made with 100% Steak and are Garnished with Salad

- Cheeseburger & Chips.....6.00
- Hamburger & Chips.....5.50
- Zinger Burger & Chip.....6.50
- Vegetarian Burger & Chips..6.00

CHILDREN'S MENU

- Small Cod & Chips
- Chicken Nuggets & Chips
- Sausage & Chips

Childrens
Menu is
Priced at
4.00€

PHONE ORDERS
608 531 601

Mushy Pea's, Curry Sauce, Coleslaw
Pickled Eggs, Onion and Gherkins
Priced at 50c each

AXARQUIA PROPERTIES SPECIAL CHRISTMAS



AS2989 Country House, Solano
265,000€
140m2 Delightful 3 bed, 3 bath reformed house on 700m2 plot with Baño Arabe



AS3028 Detached Villa, Viñuela
295,000€ 95m2 3 bed, 2 bath villa with pool on 7,500m2 almost flat land



THROUGH THE MILL

THE Axarquia has changed a lot over the last 15 years and, with it, the housing market.

At Axarquia Properties we have been successfully selling property in the region since 2001, and the changes we have seen in the market have been extraordinary. In 2001 we sold mainly ruins that needed complete renovation, something that in 2015 you cannot do at all. This is mainly because the law has changed and it is difficult to get a renovation licence nowadays if the ruin has no roof.

But back in the day when the hills were full of ruins and the countryside looked a wreck, foreigners came in their droves to buy, buy, buy. Prices were cheap, and you could turn a ruin into a three-bed, two-bath country property with pool for as little as €80,000.

Suddenly the lacklustre hillsides were turned into sparkling white oases, and prices went up, up, up.

Prices soared, people were buying. Paperwork somehow didn't seem to matter, everyone got licences and the town halls were happy.

Brains were left at the airport and many people ran happily to their banks. Stories were told about people handing over cash to Spaniards selling property in bars. It was a bit like the Gold Rush must have been. Then came The Crunch.

The property market has seen a lot of turmoil in 15 years, writes Axarquia Properties boss Sally Harrison



AS2314 Town House, Riogordo
89,000€ 94m2 2 bed fully renovated village house with large roof terrace

Mayors went to prison, and vendors couldn't sell their properties because the paperwork wasn't right. Prices dropped and dropped and dropped.

Next came the Financial Crisis. Building stopped, and no new building licences were granted. The merry-go-round stopped spinning. The goose that had laid the golden eggs was dead.

But not to despair!

In 2015, with the market nearly bottomed out, many northern Europeans began coming back again to buy

up what they could. Everyone had heard you could buy property for a song in Spain. Vendors let go of property for less than they had paid, and the new owners, while not able to build, were at least able to put in new windows, doors, kitchens and bathrooms.

Country properties remain the all time favourite, the larger the better so they can be used for B&Bs. But the new trend is moving towards apartments in the old historic town of Malaga – so if anyone has anything there to sell please get in touch with us.

I predict that 2016 will see a continuation of buyers coming to grab what is left of the bargains, and vendors will still have to bite their lips and take a loss. But, as always, things will get better again, prices will rise, and buyers will continue coming to what is quite possibly the very best place on earth to live.

Spain, we know why we are here. Now it is time for new buyers to discover this for themselves.

This Christmas, at least six geese are laying!

teamstar holiday rentals

Team Star's five-star rentals

NERJA'S delights are best enjoyed in luxury Team Star Holiday Rentals property.

Based in the region since 2000, this division of the Team Group boasts the widest selection of beachside apartments and country villas in Nerja and Frigiliana.

Founded by Anke Werner, Team Star's multi-lingual team takes care of a portfolio of around 200 properties.

The company has agents from the UK, Canada, Germany and Scandinavia who insist on the highest standard of care for their guests.

Properties are cherry-picked for access, gardens, pools and location and owners are encouraged to ensure their properties' facilities are constantly updated and refurbished.

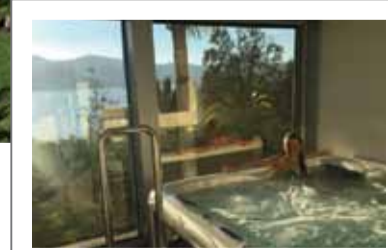
It is no surprise the company's attention to detail and first-rate customer service has seen extraordinary year-on-year growth of 30% over the past five years.

And now it is set to expand into the historical centre of Malaga, where holidaymakers can stroll to the museums or the cathedral straight from their rental home.

Contact info@teamstarholidayrentals.com or 0034 952 527 300

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ADVERTORIAL

Marvellous Mei

Hotel Vinuela is taking the concept of relaxing to a whole new level with its brand new spa, writes Jon Clarke

WITH stunning views across emblematic Vinuela lake and up towards the formidable peak of Mount Maroma, it is one of the most scenic places to stay in Andalucia.

With stylish bedrooms, an amazing restaurant and peaceful grounds, it is hardly surprising that Hotel Vinuela is already the stand-out place to stay in the Axarquia.

But now the four-star spot has yet another reason to lay down your head for a perfect weekend break: the region's first exclusive spa and massage centre.

Set in the hotel's grounds with views across the lake, the Mei Wellness & Spa is a new concept in exclusive well-being therapy.

Perfect for individuals or for couples, the spa - which counts on a jacuzzi, sauna and hammam - is rented out privately by the hour.

The perfect place to be pampered and de-stress, you will quickly find your inner peace.



INNER PEACE: The jacuzzi and hammam help to release muscle tension

Start your journey by toning your body with the 'aromatherapy and contrast showers', before plunging into the hammam to help release muscle tension, and breath deeply and calmly. Next visit the sauna or hot tub, then give free reign to your imagination and all your senses by having a delicious tea in the rest area.

"You will experience feelings of complete serenity and harmony: a unique and unparalleled

experience that you will never forget," promises hotel manager Maria Herrero.

The private spa (for 60 minutes) costs just 56€ for two people. It is 15€ for each additional person (5 maximum) and IVA is included.

Open from Monday to Sunday, non-stop from 8.00 to 22.00. Please note opening hours can vary depending on the season.



STUNNING: Panoramic view from a bedroom



Validity: 31/01/2016



10€

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WHERE TO STAY

The Axarquia has a great selection of places to stay, writes Jon Clarke

FROM rural, rustic retreats to charming beachside hotels, the Axarquia has got the lot.

But few places beat the amazing **Las Orquideas**, high in the hills above Lake Vinuela.

Run by a British/German couple, who have a fabulous eye for interior design, this is perhaps the most stylish boutique hotel in the Axarquia. Maximising on space and views, the hotel centres on its fabulous restaurant and outdoor terrace, which looks out towards the high peak of Maroma. A swimming pool sits just below.

Peace personified you can spend an hour just sitting and enjoying the changing sky towards sunset, before eating in the excellent restaurant. Rooms are incredibly spacious and feature four poster beds and romantic roll top baths, while decor is subtle and matched by its minimalist choice of antique pieces.

Another fantastic place to stay near the lake is **Hotel Vinuela**, which has similar views across the lake and inland to Maroma as well. A much bigger hotel, it counts on an excellent spa, swimming pool and highly-rated restaurant, while its comfortable rooms have superb terraces to enjoy the views.

Nearby **Las Mayorales** is of a distinctly different style, offering a dozen or so, private chalets, each sitting in their own private grounds and with lovely views of the surrounding area. Each chalet has a fireplace, two to

A complete dream



LAKESIDE VIEWS: From Las Orquideas

three bedrooms and its own kitchenette making it an excellent place to hole up for a long weekend.

In Nerja you are spoilt for choice for good places to stay.

In pole position is **Hotel Toboso**, which couldn't be in a better location in the heart of town by the emblematic Balcon de Europa.

The rooms are fantastic in size and you are right next to the excellent Cochrane's Irish restaurant and bar, which is good for a local meal and has the best terrace in Nerja. Next door **Marissal** has been running for decades and also has excellent value and good size rooms. There is a good discount for Olive Press readers and the restaurant downstairs is great all day from breakfast to cocktails at night.

Another small, family-run place **Tres Soles**, sits in emblematic Calle Carabeo, a fantastic central location near to all the main sites and restaurants.

Decent-sized rooms are clean and

the reception is friendly offering a hive of local information.

Looking for a good place to stay in Competa, **Chili B&B** is an excellent option, sitting above the town with amazing views (see sidebar).

Another wonderful place to lay down your hat is hotel **Palacio Blanco** in Velez Malaga, run by capable Dutch couple Jan and Christa.

This historic building right in the heart of this gem of a town is stylish and oozes comfort.

If you are looking for something more rural, then few places come as luxurious as Cortijo Piltraque, near Colmenar.

Sitting in the most wonderful location, with some of the best views in Christendom, this wonderful gem has been set up by Belgium couple Hubert Deckers and Annemie Tielens.

He was a well-known chef back in Belgium, while she was a psychologist.

Not just for chilling!

Chili Bed and Breakfast in Competa is a sportsman's dream, discovers Jon Clarke

IT looks like something from a James Bond movie and the giant fan in Karen and Sean Baker's pool cost an arm and a leg to boot.

Installed as a tool to improve swimming speed, it is most famously used by the Brownlee brothers, who secured triathlon gold and bronze at the Olympics in 2012. Known as an 'Endless Pool', this high-tech bit of kit - a swimming treadmill - is just one of many health and fitness features, that make Chili B&B in Competa not just unique for the Axarquia, but for the whole of Andalucia.

"We can offer swim stroke video analysis and advise swimmers on how to improve their swimming technique and swim more efficiently," explains Karen, a qualified triathlon coach.

On top of this, guests at their stunning B&B high above Competa, can check out their 'gait analysis' on the world's first Running Power Meter, use numerous sporting gizmos to improve performance, not to mention borrow one of the couple's many bikes.

And after a hard day's exercise, you can come home to a range of different massages in the specially set up massage room. They also offer Kinesiology taping, which aids blood flow and healing.

Setting up their business earlier this year, the pair (left), who are both engineers by training, take all types of sport incredibly seriously.

"Runners are always seeking to run faster for longer and we offer full video gait analysis and corrective program of drills, techniques and advice on how to improve your running style," continues Karen.

"We also offer a first for Spain the Stryd running power meter, in which we can measure your running power, cadence and heart rate.

"We capture this data and video your running technique and then write a bespoke program to enable you to run more comfortably and efficiently and ultimately faster and further without using extra energy!" All that said, the charming B&B is not just about sport. The bedrooms are comfortable, have great facilities and excellent wifi.

The spot has amazing views of the Axarquia mountains and for those not bothered about sport, you can just relax on their roof terrace with a beer or a glass of wine.

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WHERE TO EAT

Creative cuisine is coming to the fore in the Axarquia, writes Dining Secrets of Andalusia editor Jon Clarke

THE Axarquia is slowly developing a varied dining culture after decades of meatballs and goat stew.

Led by a string of outsiders, many of them expats, a drive towards experimentation has seen a growth of creative cuisine.

Leading the charge is chef Fredrik Kullberg and his stylish wife Kim at **Fusion**, in Nerja, where the menu has a distinctly international flavour, thanks to the couple's time living abroad, including Vietnam and Thailand.

Despite now counting on five children, they still have time to concentrate on details such as fresh flowers, decor and candles. Formerly the head chef at footballer Tomas Brodin's restaurant Undici, in Stockholm, he has some real chestnuts, such as fresh foie on toast with rocket salad and a blackberry reduction. A recent addition this year is a plate of 100% acorn-fed jamon Iberico from three of Spain's best producers, giving the perfect introduction to the very best of Spanish cuisine.

Keeping Fredrik on his toes is another now well-established Albacete chef Juan Quintanilla, who previously co-ran Michelin-starred Marbella restaurant Skina and recently opened a new joint, alongside the owners of the region's famous **Bentomiz** vineyard (see Page 31).

His Nerja flagship eaterie **Sollun** goes from strength to strength and is now set up in a new location on Calle Pintada, previously known as Calabaza. Named after his two children Sol and Luna, his food is adventurous and light and the main menu changes three times a year.

Expect such delights as beetroot and strawberry 'porra' in



TALENT:
Juan at
Sollun

a vinaigrette with mackerel, a liver parfait with gorgonzola cheese and kumquats and red wine and pigeon with green beans and quince.

Up in the nearby village of Frigiliana you would be mad to miss the amazing **Garden** restaurant, which consistently produces some of the freshest, most varied (read spicy and original) food in the Axarquia (see sidebar).

Another excellent spot in Frigiliana is **Al Fuente** run by friendly Dutchman Jan and his wife Linda, a yoga instructor, and a charming spot to while away the time.

A varied menu with plenty of tapas, it sits in a lovely back street and is worth hunting out. Its excellent value mixed tapas plate is popular with tourists, while it counts on many vegetarian, gluten-free and fish dishes. In Cometa, try the highly rated **El Pilon**, which is very much the stand-out restaurant in the town. A popular social hive, the bar area is great for tapas, while the restaurant itself is a must try. With a regular changing menu, expect to eat lots of seasonal dishes, developed by Tom Sobel and his capable team. Standout dishes included the

super fresh asparagus rolled in Serrano ham and semi cured goat's cheese, while the goat's cheese bruschetta with red peppers is a fabulous starter.

An urbane Canadian, Tom is a psychotherapist by training, and has a love of music (a classically trained tenor, no less), which often sees him DJing come closing time.

"As my parents ran restaurants running Pilon ticks all the boxes," he explains. Close by is the recently opened Bentomiz restaurant, sitting in the same name vineyard, in Sayalonga, which has

Mixing its wines in a fabulous food pairing, this is one hell of a place for lunch

won international awards for its wines for a decade.

Mixing its wines in a fabulous food pairing, this is one hell of a place for lunch, with incredible views and stylish flourishes to boot, thanks to the help of Nerja chef Juan Quintanilla.

Up in Comares there is a good variety of places to eat, including the excellent local joint **El Molino** in the heart of the town, as well as **Atalaya**.

One of the real standout spots though, sits a short drive outside, at the foot of the mythical Masmullah mountain, topped by a former Moorish settlement. The walk to the top is amazing, and lunch or supper afterwards



On the rise!



Restaurante Al Fuente Tapas y Mas

Linda en Jan Hidde Landstra
Calle Real 32, 29788, Frigiliana (Malaga)
(+34) 660 777 744
janhiddelandstra@hotmail.com



Restaurante AL FUENTE tapasyamas





TEAM WORK: Fred and Kim at Fusion

at the excellent **Table Mountain** restaurant is a total must. This emblematic local spot sits in breathtaking scenery and has a menu to match.

There is a great mix of international dishes, including Nasi Goring, a fried rice dish from Indonesia, as well as a spicy Indian curry.

On the road inland, close to the Vinuela lake you will find one of the genuine dining secrets of Andalucia.

Las Orquideas is a boutique hotel/restaurant, with one of the best backdrops in Spain, overlooking Vinuela Lake and Maroma mountain.

Romantic in the extreme, this upmarket place is the brainchild of British accountant John and his talented interior designer German wife Monika. Fresh flowers, candles and amazing chandeliers, all it needed was a talented chef... and hey presto they found one,



CHARM: Jan at Al Fuente

a local lad Jose Carlos Vera Mata, just 24, who has worked around the world, as far and wide as Mallorca and Morocco. Training locally at the Castillo del Marquez cookery school, he has a fantastic understanding of the local Axarquia ingredients, which are some of the best in Spain, thanks to the long growing season. Using plenty of fruit and veg, including mangos and avoca-

Garden of delights



WITH views and food to match, the Garden restaurant in Frigiliana is hard to beat.

Run by capable expat Rob Grimmond, who trained at Leiths in London, you will be hard pressed to find anywhere with such fresh and exciting ingredients.

A distinct Arabic crossover of flavours, dishes are heavily geared towards vegetables, while spices come from around the world.

The definite stand out dish is salmon in ajoblanco (pictured) with tahini and pomegranate molasses, while his pluma pork melts in the mouth, with a chickpea lentil dhal and curried banana sauce. 'No tricks, just good fresh local produce,' insists Rob. Who could disagree?

dos, he also picks mushrooms from his father's finca up in Yunquera.

One to watch for the future, I was inspired by his tacos of bluefin tuna with sweet molasses mustard, parmesan and topped by edible flowers.

His foie with brie, caramelised onion and a 'sponge' of tomato was rich, original and, above all, lip-smacking, while his langoustines in tempura with a 'smile' of pepper mustard did exactly that.

His grilled turbot, risottos and a long list of salads bodes well for the future, while he even manages to serve up crocodile every once in awhile.

There a few other decent places to eat around the Vinuela lake, in particular **Hotel Vinuela**.

Well established chef Jose Manuel Ramos, trained at Andalucia's top cookery school La Consula, and specialises in 'creative Mediterranean cuisine', which means plenty of healthy local fruit and vegetable dishes.

In good weather you dine outdoors overlooking the lake reminiscent of the Days of the Raj, and it is no surprise that the King is said to have eaten here. Another fast improving spot is **Las Mayoralas**, in Periana, which is on a distinct gastronomic mission.

This all thanks to new chef Lorenzo Cabellos, a local lad, who has brought a stylish take on traditional dishes include 'bacaalao gratin', delicious Almadra-ba tuna, crispy duck magret and suckling lamb shoulder.

A great spot to hunt out, the dining room is an impressive affair and the wine list good to match.



WARMING: Fire place at el Pillon

Art of cooking



WITH a sprinkling of Morocco, a pinch of Egypt and a slice of the best of Spain, Paco Fernandez has managed to create one of the must-visit rural restaurants in the Axarquia.

Nestled in the charming mountain village of Colmenar, his eaterie **El Olivo** has been born out of over three decades experience in the kitchen.

But what really catches the eye is his attention to detail and how darn good-looking is his food. It is little surprise to learn then, that Paco trained as an artist for five years in Barcelona, before embarking on a career in cookery.

Some of his canvasses grace the walls of his charming bistro, which sits in a back street of the village, best known for its excellent honey museum.

They help to create an original feel that transcends to the dishes, which change regularly and by the season.

Having made his name in Granada, where he regularly served up 180 covers at a time, he honed his skills on regular culinary trips to Morocco, Italy and Egypt.

"I always tried to stay with locals, watching how they cooked and what they mixed their foods with," he explains.

The end result is a melange of dishes, that all have their own original twist.

His fantastic carpaccio of beef for example comes with slices of fabulously fresh celery, which on first glance appears unsettling, but works incredibly well. Then there is baby chicken with chocolate

and a lasagne of 'three meats', plus a roast aubergine salad, with tomato and mozzarella. For me though, his stand out dishes were the autumn classic of boletus mushrooms, free range egg and foie, which you could smell before it came out of the kitchen, as well as a great tagliatelle with prawns and courgette. "I always try to improvise, change things regularly and experiment," he explains. It should be the key to his success in a region, which is best known for its heavy venta-style dishes.

by Jon Clarke



KITCHEN ARTIST: Paco Fernandez (right)

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