

Spanish views to thrill in heady Gaucín

Artists from near and far have been drawn to the hill village of Gaucín, but a flourishing gastronomy and some stylish places to stay make it a seductive destination for all

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Outlook sunny... the view from Molino del Carmen Photograph: Charlotte Tolhurst

Even today, the Andalucian hilltop village of Gaucín is a place for those in search of romantic thrills. In the past, those thrills had a very real element of danger. The village, clinging to a forested mountain ridge between Gibraltar and the once impossibly remote inland town of Ronda, was a notorious lair for bandits and smugglers. Access was by a steep and narrow path, compared to a ladder by at least one traveller. French writer Prosper Mérimée braved the route in 1830 and was rewarded by views he believed only painters could properly convey. He was so excited by the whole experience that he later made Gaucín the native village of his most famous literary creation, Carmen.

The road linking Gaucín with the coast is still gloriously vertiginous, and the village itself – despite the replacement of bandits with foreigners – has not become an oppressive tourist den. It has also now acquired, in the shape of the Molino del Carmen, some of the most seductive holiday homes in all [Andalucía](#). A former olive mill, some of its old machinery intact, the Molino extends down the side of the village that faces the distant Mediterranean. Divided into five holiday apartments, each with its own panoramic terrace, this rambling white building is cheerful, spotlessly clean, and decorated in a way that makes you feel welcomed into a tasteful and homely private domain. The sheltered pool terrace has loungers and a rain shower, and courses in fitness training, cooking and painting are in the pipeline.

You can also do as I did, and spend much of your time at the Molino staring at views that seem to have been conceived as illustrations of the picturesque and sublime. A ruined Moorish castle, rising above sheer cliffs, guards a panorama that sweeps over a landscape of oaks, cork trees and craggy peaks to the faraway sea. Gibraltar is usually visible in the background, as are the Rif mountains of Morocco. And after dark you can glimpse the lights of the port of Tangier.

Understandably, and as Mérimée predicted, Gaucín has become a haven for artists. The Molino's owner, a delightful and enterprising young Englishwoman named Pip Jenkins, was keen to introduce me to some members of this diverse but close-knit community, whose influence seems to have ensured the village's remarkably well-kept, little-spoilt look. Going from one artist's dwelling and studio to the next helped me to understand even better why the artistically inclined should want to settle in Gaucín. Even those with relatively modest means have been able to create for themselves miniature paradises, enhancing simple white interiors with a mass of eclectic objects, laying out patios and gardens, and ensuring that windows and terraces make the most of the village's endlessly astonishing vistas.

Colour, joy and whimsy were the inevitable characteristics of most of the art I saw at Gaucín, so it was refreshing that the work of the one major Spanish artist of the colony, the ceramicist Juan Antonio Sangil, should have a monumental and powerful austerity. Surprising, too, were the figurative works of the octogenarian American sculptor Bayard Osborn, whose art and life were a reminder of the darker elements to be found in any Eden.

The tall and handsome Osborn, one of the village's first foreign settlers, has lived here for more than a quarter of a century. Now recovering from a stroke, he struggles to articulate tales of a life that appears to have embraced much of the 20th century. He was with the US troops who liberated the concentration camp at Mauthausen, and is also one of the last direct links to the New York avant garde of the 50s, and to the Bloomsbury Set, specifically Hispanicist Gerald Brenan, the first writer to promote an interest in Andalucía's rural traditions.

During my time at Gaucín, I was able to enjoy an aspect of rural Andalucía barely appreciated by Brenan, and not at all by Mérimée, whose idyllic impressions of the village were balanced by the experience of dining on tough, half-plucked chicken in a flea-ridden inn. Gaucín and its surroundings now have a gastronomy to match the beauty of the area. I was particularly taken by the remote Caserio Ananda restaurant, which can be spotted from the spectacular British-built railway that connects Ronda with the coastal city of Algeciras. It serves a combination of imaginative tapas and the most delicious barbecued meats you'll find outside the Basque country.

More unexpected still was a mountain-top vineyard run by a retired Swedish media mogul, Richard Enkvist, a long-bearded man with the look of a 19th-century explorer. Passionate about viticulture, he has developed one of Andalucía's most outstanding red wines at his baronial-style estate, Finca Buena Vista, outside Gaucín. The wine, appropriately, goes under the label *Sueños* (dreams).

Tasting these wines in the luxuriant garden setting of Enkvist's estate, was a perfect preparation for Gaucín's summer *feria* (to run from 4-7 August this year). I watched the opening of the festivities from the comfort of my terrace at the Molino. The village band marched by, followed by riders in sombreros, and horse-driven carriages bearing this year's beauty queens. I thought again about Mérimée, and how his sighting of one of these young women's predecessors had reputedly led to his invention of Carmen, the person who came to epitomise Spain's sensuous exoticism. For a few moments the stereotypes of romantic Andalucía did not seem too far-fetched.