

Andalusia, Spain: A haven in the hills

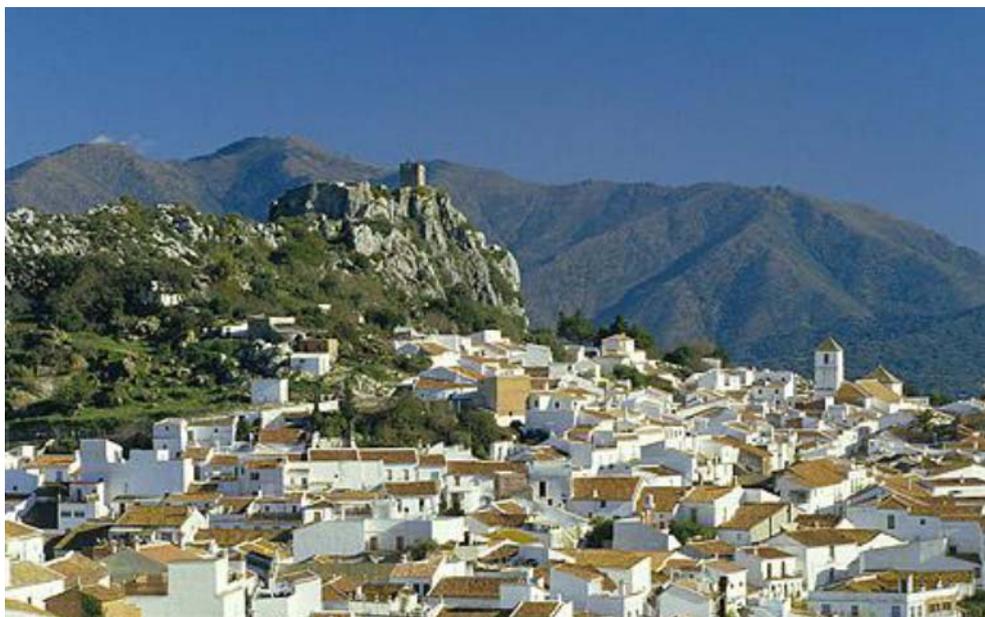
Tim Jepson finds a little piece of perfection in the lofty Andalusian village of Gaucín.

By Tim Jepson

Published: 11:21AM BST 10 Aug 2009

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What a difference a mile makes. After we turn north from the grisly Costa del Sol, the coastal concrete and condominiums give way almost immediately to glorious sweeping views across Don Quixote countryside as we drive the lonely road into the mountains of Andalusia.



The location is astounding, with white houses framed by craggy peaks Photo: GETTY

Over the years I've been preoccupied with Italy, leaving Spain a closed book, and this short break marks the tentative turning of a first page. I've gone for the obvious, as you tend to do when you're ignorant, and the *pueblos blancos*, or white villages, of southwest Spain.

The most obvious and most famous pueblo blanco is Ronda, but I'm heading for Gaucín, which even in my compendious guide to Andalusia receives no more than a couple of paragraphs, promising a lovely setting, sleepy streets, a few bars, a handful of restaurants and some fantastic views. Sounds like my kind of town.

And so it is. Even from afar, the location is astounding, white houses ranged along a lofty ridge, framed by craggy peaks, vultures wheeling overhead and surrounded by miles of sun-drilled hills dotted with carob, cork oak and shimmering fields of wheat.

After an immense climb from the valley, we arrive in pretty narrow streets in the heat-stunned silence of mid-afternoon. A few moments and we find a small bar (the Puente) still serving tapas and ice-cold beer on a terrace with majestic views across the wooded hills and parched plains to Gibraltar and North Africa. Then a phone call to summon Carlos, the charming owner of our hotel rural, La Fructuosa, to open up and show us to some of the most delightful rooms I've seen in a small hotel.

There will prove little to do, in the sightseeing sense, in Gaucín, but who needs things to do when you have somewhere as pretty and pleasant to stay as La Fructuosa? Cool, airy rooms, simply but beautifully decorated, all with those glorious views; a sitting room with tasteful sofas, books, antiques and dark-wood furniture; and – best of all – a sun-dappled, vine-shaded terrace for a humble but perfect breakfast each morning of strong, sweet coffee, oranges, toast and homemade marmalade and wild strawberry jam.

It's all terribly romantic, and no surprise, for La Fructuosa has been an inn for more than 150 years, the lodgings of choice for visiting judges when the court and regional registry were in session. It was also where newly-weds traditionally spent their wedding night. As I said, terribly romantic.

Idle strolls, leisurely drinks, al fresco suppers in jasmine-scented air – Gaucín has all these late-summer pleasures, which you could easily realise in a short break (fly to Gibraltar and it's a 50-minute drive). But there's also more for a longer visit, not least quiet beaches at Barrio del Castillo or Bolonia on the Cádiz coast; the nearby parques naturales of Grazalema, Genal and Sierra de las Nieves; walks to El Hacho (3,320ft), the peak above Gaucín, or to the Genal river for storks, kites and otters; and the pretty white villages of Faraján, Juzcar, Parauta, Alpandeire and Igualeja y Pujerra.

And there's always Ronda, 20 miles away along a wonderfully scenic mountain road (or lovely single-track railway), if you want more sophisticated tourist fare.

I didn't. I'd found somewhere I was happy and saw no reason to move. I may not know much about Spain but I now know about Gaucín. And I like it. I like it a lot.

GETTING THERE

EasyJet (0905 821 0905; www.easyjet.com (<http://www.easyjet.com>)) and **British Airways** (0844 493 0787; www.ba.com (<http://www.ba.com>)) fly daily to Gibraltar. More airlines fly to Malaga, about two hours' drive from Gaucín.

STAYING THERE

La Fructuosa (0034 617 692784 or 952 151072; www.lafructuosa.com (<http://www.lafructuosa.com>)); doubles from €90/£76, including breakfast). An excellent, good-value dinner is served on the terrace Wed-Sun. Other recommended local restaurants are El Molino del Conde at **San Roque** (956 236063; www.elmolinodelconde.es (<http://www.elmolinodelconde.es>)) en route to or from Gibraltar; La Moilienda (952 152548) at Benalauría; Kabilas (952 150144) at Benarrabá; and the charming Estación Férrea (956 642244) in the old railway station at San Pablo de Buceite.