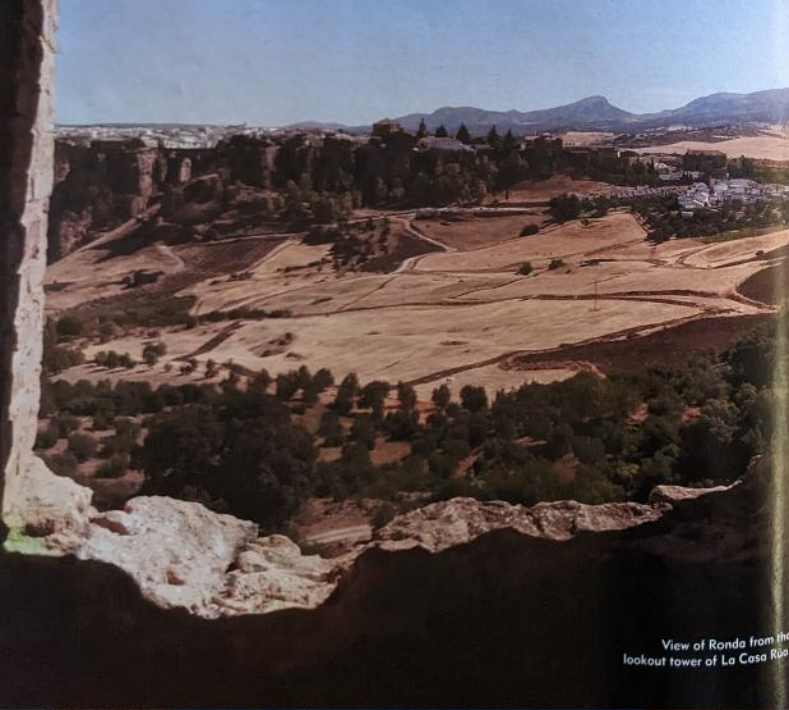


Roaming around RONDA

Easy walking routes from this white village are one of the best ways to appreciate the arresting beauty of the surrounding landscape.

Words and photographs: Shelly Lochish



View of Ronda from the lookout tower of La Casa Rúa

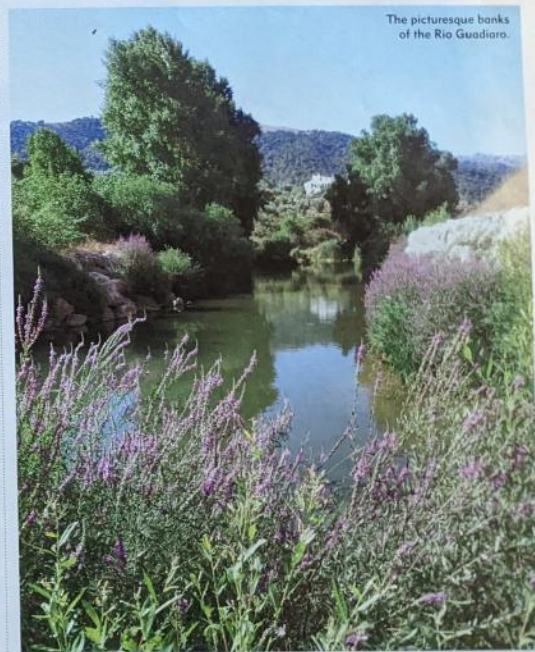


Horses graze in the foothills of Sierra de la Grazalema.

In the heart of southern Andalucía, suspended atop an arresting limestone escarpment with dazzling views of the Sierra de las Nieves and Sierra de la Grazalema, lies the picturesque and enchanting white village of Ronda. Its mix of ancient Islamic and 18th century Spanish architecture and narrow streets lined with colourful flowerpots, numerous open air tabernas, bodegas and tourist shops, is typical of many of the charming *pueblos blancos* in this region of Andalucía. However, its geography and topographic composition are like no other; for Ronda is a city sheared in two by a 100-metre-deep canyon appropriately known as El Tajo ('the chopping-block' or 'severer').

On the southern side of the gorge, the old city of Ronda (La Ciudad) descends to the valley below in a tangle of cobblestone lanes that enclose the remains of its Moorish past. On the northern side the new Ronda (El Mercado) spreads out into the surrounding *campes* (countryside) in a profusion of shady plazas, hotels, restaurants and shops. The two cities meet at the magnificent Puente Nuevo. This not-to-be-missed 18th century quadruple-arched stone bridge straddles the chasm of El Tajo and the Río Guadalevin below and is undeniably the nucleus of Ronda's aesthetic charm and its major tourist drawcard.

An hour north of the Spain's busy Costa del Sol, Ronda is, for the most part, a relaxing retreat from these hectic coastlines: a tranquil place where life moves at a leisurely pace. But come mid-morning all that changes as the tourist coaches from the southern beaches unload their day-tripping passengers into Ronda's main plaza. Thankfully though, the object of their desires, those unparalleled sweeping views of indigo mountains, golden valleys and the plunging verdant gorge itself, provides a multitude of perfect getaway destinations to avoid these temporary crowds.



The picturesque banks of the Río Guadalevin.

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With its mountainous setting at the confluence of two national parks, Ronda offers a host of hiking options for the spirited traveller, from short rambling country strolls, to longer full-day walks that pass through local villages and even epic mountain ascents. The most easily accessible trails leave straight from the city centre and provide the perfect opportunity to explore this exquisite landscape of La Serranía de Ronda.

La ruta de la Ermita Virgen de la Cabeza
I visited Ronda in August, under a blazing Spanish sun. With the thermometer already in the high 20s in the early morning, I decided against any peak-bagging adventures in favour of some less strenuous hiking. On the first morning I set off on a popular six-kilometre circular walk to a 10th century cave church known as the Ermita de la Virgen de la Cabeza.

Leaving the old city through its historic defensive walls at the Almorcobar gate, I continued out of town through the local *harris* of San

Francisco. Very quickly, the road changed from paved to gravel, as the modern houses gave way to orchards and olive groves, laden with small green fruit ripe for harvesting.

After a while, the trees subsided altogether into a clearing that contained the remains of a large abandoned house. This neglected stone edifice was once part of a palatial mansion, known locally as La Casa Rúa. At the height of its splendour, this stately residence contained not only the grand homestead, but also a tennis court, swimming pool, fountains, and expansive, beautiful gardens. Today the mansion lies in ruins, overgrown with weeds, strewn with rubbish and defaced by graffiti.

Standing in front of this shabby grandeur, I couldn't help but wonder what possessed these landed Spanish gentry to abandon such a tremendous home. What horrible fate befell them that they deserted their mighty abode with such haste and disregard? I later learned that the original, illustrious inhabitants of the mansion had an eight-year-old daughter who was mysteriously and

brutally murdered on the premises. Locals believe that the young girl's ghost haunted the owners and eventually drove them away, and there was certainly an aura of tragedy surrounding the forsaken ruins.

As I continued to explore the site, I came across an old path leading out to the cliff face. To my surprise, perched at the very tip of the limestone cliff, stood a dilapidated lookout tower. Like the decaying mansion, this 20-metre-high stone tower appeared to be in a state of imminent collapse. With only minimal hesitation, I braved the precarious but irresistibly crumbling staircase inside it. Once at the top, I was rewarded with an exhilarating panorama of the ivory-white Ronda skyline illuminated against the lilac mountains of Las Sierras in the distance.

Accompanied now by views of Ronda and the Sierra de la Grazalema, I continued to descend until, after a kilometre, a steep narrow ramp on my right led me down to the Ermita de la Virgen de la Cabeza. During the ninth century, Ronda was a Muslim city where Christians were forbidden from worshipping. Undeterred, these Christian zealots marched out

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With its mountainous setting at the confluence of two national parks, Ronda offers a host of hiking options for the spirited traveller, through local villages and epic mountain ascents.

across the valley and carved themselves a church into the rock face. Every Sunday in June, festive religious processions march here from Ronda, commemorating that original pilgrimage with singing and dancing.

I began my return journey via a rocky path that descended steeply into an easy, hazy forest. It was quiet here, and at the sound of my footsteps, lizards scampered off the trail ahead of me and took refuge in the dark crevices of the rock wall. A kilometre ahead, the forest came to an abrupt end at a large field of dry golden wheat. I had reached the valley floor. Only the sun-drenched patchwork of fields and paddocks now lay between me and the towering cliffs of Ronda. Applying another layer of sunscreen to my sweaty skin, I fixed the brim of my hat low on my head and started out into the scorched valley, following the wide dirt track.

The undulating valley floor was hot and dry. As I passed one field, a small herd of horses that had been enjoying a roll in the dusty earth clambered up towards me and poked their heads over the fence, hopeful for a rewarding feed. But the grass was just as dry on my side of the fence, and they soon tired of my lacklustre offerings. Eventually, I reached the base of the cliffs and began the final slog home up

the snaking zigzag path to the city on top. I was hungry and sweaty, but the beautiful views and the knowledge that an icy cold jug of sangría awaited me made the final uphill assault a relative breeze.

On a quest for a cave

Much of the mountainous landscape surrounding Ronda is composed of ancient karst terrain punctuated by natural caves and chasms. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, these complex systems of hidden caverns provided the perfect refuge for the infamous *bandoleros* (bandits): the Andalusian Robin Hoods whose thieving ways put them at odds with the law. Paleolithic remains found within some of these caves attest to a considerably longer history of human use.

One of the most picturesque and famous caves in the region is the Cueva del Gato, a cave near the small village of Benaocín, which lies 11 kilometres west of Ronda. The cave is named for its resemblance to a cat's head (I failed to see it) and forms the exit point for the subterranean river, Río Guadiaro, as it cascades into a natural water hole, and is the perfect spot for a cooling dip.

Starting at the Puente Nuevo, I followed the Tajo cliffs northwards, leaving Ronda through

the new suburbs of La Mercedillo. The cliff-top boulevard narrowed to a small dirt trail that hugged the cliffs. Here, I stopped briefly to admire the view back to Ronda - the white city sitting regally on her buttressed limestone crag - before continuing along the path as it descended gradually to the valley floor through a sweet-smelling forest of pine and oak.

All too soon, the shady forest ended, thrusting me once more into the hot Spanish sun. I had been dreading the next section on the map. Ahead of me lay two miles of totally exposed, roasting hot gravel road, directly parallel to the train tracks. Although it was not quite midday, it was hot - really hot. Each minute in the baking heat felt like 10. I should have set out earlier.

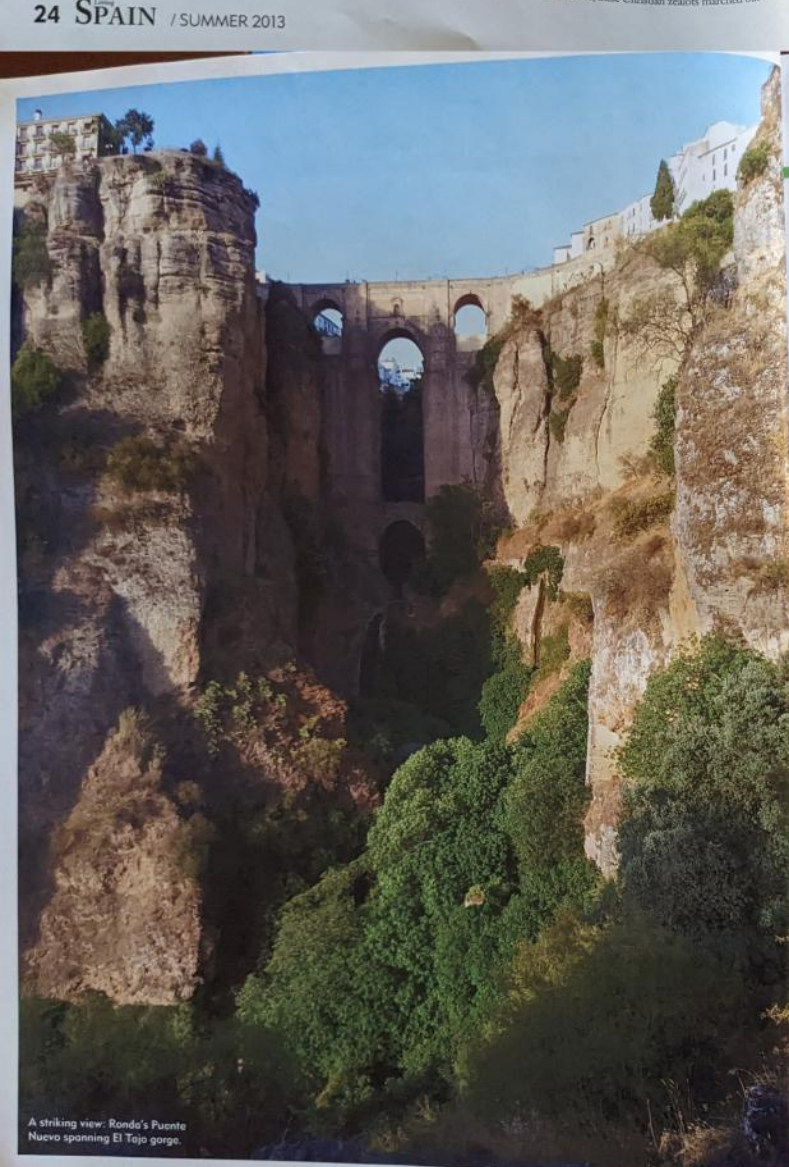
On my left, the train tracks tapered into the distant horizon. On my right, field after field of dry wheat and wilting sunflowers. The sunflowers drooped their brown heads towards the ground dejectedly; even they had tired of the sun's ferocious, endless heat. I crossed the train tracks and found myself striding onto a large wheat field. Creating a small hillock, I surprised a pair of eagles resting on the posts of an old wooden gate. They took flight, and rapidly ascended on invisible



OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Ronda city centre; the Ermita de la Virgen de la Cabeza; the Cueva del Gato. ABOVE: The ruins of La Casa Rúa. RIGHT: A patchwork mosaic of fields radiates from the base of the Ronda's escarpment.



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A striking view: Ronda's Puente Nuevo spanning El Tajo gorge.

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thermals to soar high above in wide sweeping arcs.

From this vantage point, I could now see the entrance to the cave, and with renewed vigour I made haste for the swim that awaited me. The large deep blue pool at the mouth of La Cueva del Gato was cool and shady. And it was all mine; empty and perfectly peaceful. After five minutes of blissful bathing, however, my solitude was rudely interrupted by a boisterous group of German boys' scouts. Lamenting the shattered serenity, but eager now for a hearty feed, I continued on my way to the village of Benaocín.

Surrounded by the lush riparian vegetation of the Río Guadiaro, the walk was picturesque and pleasant. I ambled along at a leisurely pace through this pretty, riverside landscape, dotted with small country houses, their vegetable gardens and variety of fruit trees giving out their sweet, pungent aroma. I arrived at Benaocín just in time for a late, large and lengthy Spanish lunch. As I slowly and reluctantly prepared for the return hike home, the infrequent local bus unexpectedly pulled up outside the restaurant. With the mercury soaring way above 40°C, the prospect of another perspiring trudge in the sweltering heat seemed truly unbearable. So, with only the slightest pang of guilt, I boarded the bus back to Ronda.

A scamper down the El Tajo gorge
Starting out from the top of El Tajo, it seems that all of Spain's mountains and valleys lie before you in a vast mosaic of gold, brown and green. This romantic panorama has wooed many a famous writer and artist, including Hemingway, who famously set a scene in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* on killings that took place at these cliffs. Most visitors to Ronda are content to admire the gorge from afar. If you are willing to exert a modicum of effort, however, the descent into the fertile canyon offers equally stunning views, some ancient ruins, and a leafy retreat from the tourists above.

From the Plaza del Campillo on the southern side of the bridge I began my descent via the steep zigzag path that twists down the shrub-covered cliff. A few hundred metres down, a vantage point jutting out over the ravine below provided impressive views of the Puente Nuevo in all its glory. From here, the path rapidly narrowed and became quite precarious as it traversed the cliff towards the bridge. In fact, it was little more than an overgrown goat track with buckled rocks and fissures in the cliff face. After 15 minutes of this sidelong scampering, I found what I was looking for - the remains of a centuries-old *malinas*, or flour

mill. Mills like this one operated here for hundreds of years until a giant torrent of water and rockslide destroyed them in 1917. I followed the stone channel that transported the mill's water supply along the cliff. To my surprise, it led to a lush, green crevice of moss-covered rocks, over which cascaded a misty white waterfall.

Turning back on the trail, I noticed a large rope anchored to the base of a tree at the cliff edge. El Tajo gorge is a renowned climbing spot and over the years many rope-assisted climbs and *via ferratas* have been established here. With the rope's help, the descent to the lower rocky ledge was a relatively safe undertaking. A little more rock hopping led me straight to the Río Guadalevin itself, little more than a trickle at this time of year.

That evening, my last in Ronda, I indulged in dinner at one of the city's superb cliff-side restaurants. In the rosy glow of the languidly setting sun, I sipped my wine and watched the purple silhouettes of the mountains fade into the deepening sky. The hotel lights twinkled like a jewelled necklace along the cliff-edge. As I sat back in utter peace and contentment, I marvelled at Ronda's magic and the spell she had cast on me. You see there are some places that dazzle you with their spectacle and grandeur, while others work their way into your heart more slowly, as you discover their hidden secrets and delights. Ronda does both.

Four other trails to roam around Ronda

■ **Ronda to Tajo del Abanico** (7.6 kilometres return): a magnificent walk through a variety of landscapes, includingholm oak forest, that leads into the spectacular cliffs of the Abanico gorge and cave. The walk is relatively flat and easy but the paths are loose and rough in parts.

■ **Ronda to Puente de la Ventilla** (11.6 kilometres return): an easy, flat walk to an 18th century bridge. The rural walk follows two streams and passes by several wine cellars but necessitates two highway crossings which must be done with care.

■ **Ronda to Pilar de Cartajina** (8 kilometres return): a circular walk on lush, vegetated, flat walking trails through pretty rural countryside. The trail takes in the Pilar de Cartajina, a natural fountain that was once a traditional rest stop on the road to Ronda, and the remains of a Roman aqueduct.

■ **Ronda to Parque Periurbano** (3.3 kilometres return): an easy, circular, rural walk that offers great vistas over to the river Guadalevin and a great example of the Andalusian woodland pasture landscape, known as *dehesa*.

Getting there

Ronda is a two-hour drive from Marbella and a two-hour drive from Seville. Ronda is well connected by public transport with frequent buses and trains running to all of Andalucía's main cities and further afield to Madrid (see www.rnfte.com/EN/aviadores for train schedules, and www.locomarillos.es for buses).

Staying there

Ronda offers accommodation for those on all budgets from luxury hotels to camping. Hotels with a view of the gorge and the valley are at the pricier end of that scale.

At the budget end Hotel Morales (Sevilla, 51, 29400 Ronda), from €30 a night for a double) is a clean, quiet and comfortable stay. Those wishing to splurge on a decadent view can opt instead for the Parador de Ronda (Plaza de Espana s/n, 29400 Ronda, from €200 a night for a double).

Where to eat

The streets within the heart of Ronda's old city are lined with tapas bars and a variety of restaurants, from Spanish to Italian, and even Japanese. Criso Santa Pola offers delicious top-end tapas with a view to match (www.rontapola.com). Casa Mateo (www.bodegascasamateo.com, blogspot.co.uk) is a more traditional tapas restaurant with a huge menu. The area near the bus stop is the locals' favourite for tapas.

Walking guide sites and tour companies

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