

travel

LAND OF GOLD

Mary Lussiana loses herself in the beautiful countryside of Andalusia

Let the name Andalusia roll slowly off your tongue and you should be able to taste the refreshing tang of gazpacho, or the juice of a plump Manzanilla olive as you bite into it; you should feel the torpor of a summer afternoon when all that moves are the swallows, and the only sound to break the sacred silence of the siesta is the occasional lazy 'clack' from a nesting stork. Andalusia is as much a state of being as a part of Spain. The region is renowned - and rightly so - for

its jewels of Cordoba, Seville and Granada, with their 'Oriental sparkle below a clear sky' (??who??), but it is the tapestry that hangs between these cities which pulls me back time and time again.

Here, you can lose yourself in the rich, unblemished gold of the countryside in early summer. Watch the combine harvesters creating patchwork squares as they murmur in the distance; drive alongside fields of sunflowers, their heads raised obediently

and uniformly as they run, regimented, along the roadsides; pass whitewashed haciendas seemingly undisturbed by the modern world, and catch a glimpse of the bulls reared for fighting, and the famous Andalusian horses - so fleet of foot because, legend has it, they are made pregnant by the wind. Endless horizons turn to towering limestone pillars the nearer you are to Granada; some 6,000 years ago, prehistoric man lived in the caves in these

dramatic formations and, unusually for western Europe, the march of time is almost invisible.

The region is so large that it is best to base yourself in two or three different places; you could do it all from Malaga, or you could fly into Seville and out of Granada. The distances between the recommendations that follow are not huge, however the roads are winding and progress can be slow - but then, this is all about feasting your eyes on the landscape.

HACIENDA DE SAN RAFAEL



Midway between Seville and Jerez, the 300-year-old Hacienda de San Rafael is a charming, low-lying farmhouse. Privately owned and run like a home, rather than a hotel, by the son of an Anglo-Spanish couple - whose brother runs the equally acclaimed Corral del Rey in Seville - 11 duplex bedrooms radiate off a Bougainvillea-clad courtyard. All are different; pleasingly simple and yet with every comfort, from dressing gowns to a fresh sprig of lavender placed on your pillow at night. The verandas outside each bedroom door serve as a breakfast and lunch area - and a chance to commune with the many nesting swallows that swoop tirelessly in and out to feed their young. Dinner is set amid candlelit splendour, either in the courtyard or in the gardens. Those in search of a bit more space should book one of the three casitas, which are generously proportioned, and set within a private garden, with their own shared infinity pool.

EL JUNCAL

Just outside Ronda - with its superb eighteenth-century bull ring and dramatic gorge that cuts the town in two (right) - is the bodega and hotel El Juncal. There are 11 rooms in the farmhouse (far right), and a beautiful terrace with views over a lush lawn, a swimming pool and fields. The wine, especially the rosé, is delicious. While you are here, take the opportunity to eat at Michelin-starred Tragabuches in Ronda, which is owned by the same family and specialises in modern, creative Andalusian cuisine.



BARCELÓ LA BOBADILLA



Built in the style of an old Andalusian palace - complete with a Mudejar chapel that is popular for weddings - La Bobadilla (above left) is surrounded by olive groves and forest, with a stable of white Andalusian horses to ride (above right), a huge swimming pool and beautifully kept gardens. It is a family-friendly resort in the best possible taste. Children are cared for and entertained, while parents can enjoy delicious dinners of crispy, black pork, or chilled gazpacho garnished with quail eggs and ham, as the sun sets on the bell tower and the cool, soft evening breeze gets up. The beautifully designed rooms are lavish in space and comfort, most with their own private garden or courtyard, and the huge bathrooms have walk-in showers and baths large enough for two. The spa, with indoor pool, has a selection of treatments for when the sun sends you indoors ☐

Ways & means Mary Lussiana travelled as a guest at **Hacienda de San Rafael** (00-34-954 227 116; www.haciendadesanrafael.com), where a double room costs from €257, B&B; at **El Juncal** (00-34-952 161 170; www.eljuncal.com), where a double room costs from €133, room only; and at **Barceló La Bobadilla** (00-34-958 321 861; www.barcelolabobadilla.com), where a double room costs from ?€319, B&B.

Barceló La Bobadilla, built in the style of an old Andalusian palace, is surrounded by a vast landscape of forest and olive groves