

Mr Henderson's RAILWAY

Gourmet restaurants and spectacular scenery can be found on an historic English railway in Andalucía.

Words and photographs: Fiona Flores Watson

The British have a long-standing history in Andalucía; a close and (mostly) cordial connection – apart from the obvious, Gibraltar, there are the sherry companies in Jerez and the Rio Tinto mines in Huelva province, both of which thrived in the 19th century with their own railway lines. But I bet you didn't know that in that same era of industrial boom, the Brits built a 110-mile railway connecting the Rock with inland Andalucía.

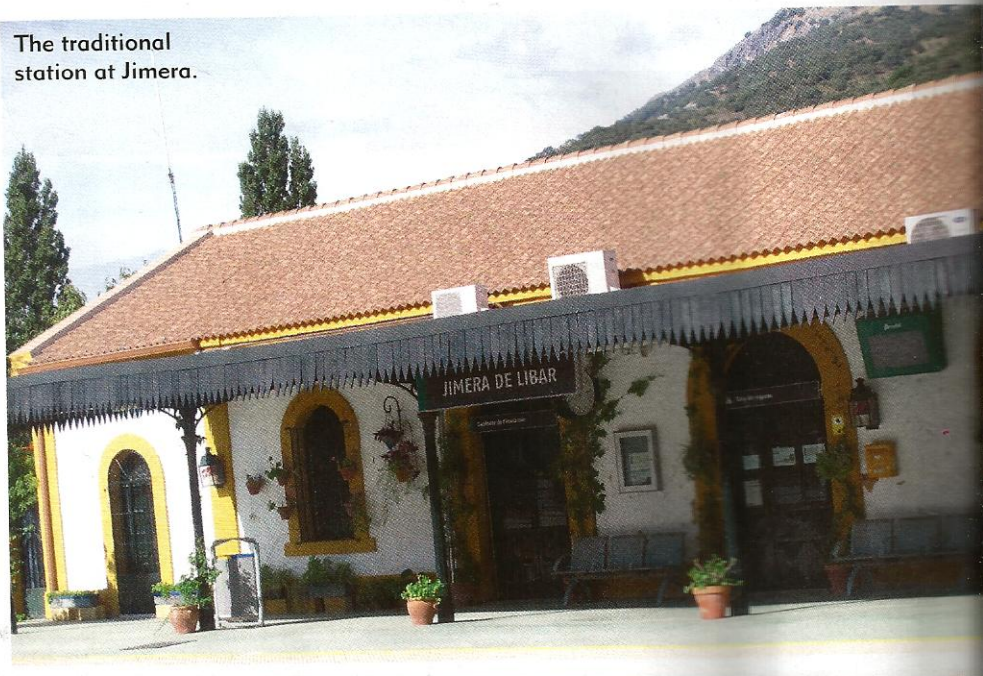
Back in the 1880s, travelling from Gibraltar to the hilltop town of Ronda, where British officers from the garrison went on leave with their families to enjoy the clean mountain air, meant a long, uncomfortable journey by coach and horses – poor roads, danger from bandits and subject to the weather. So the British decided to build a railway to make the journey faster, safer and more comfortable, as well as providing a crucial connection to the main Madrid train line at Bobadilla junction, north of Málaga.

The line was financed by aristocratic entrepreneur Sir Alexander Henderson (later Lord Farrington) who had built railways in South America and India. The last and most difficult stage of the project was the 65 miles of track through the Sierra de Ronda between Jimena and Ronda. Completed in three years and opened in 1892, Mr Henderson's Railway had 20 bridges and 16 tunnels.

In addition, 10 new stations were built in rural towns. Many of these, in traditional Andalusian *albero* yellow and white, were located several hundred metres below the hilltop towns they served and satellite communities sprung up around them.

For these late Victorian-era travellers, their journey started by steamer from the Rock to Algeciras. Poor Algeciras, the industrial city across the bay from Gibraltar, inevitably gets a bad rap when it's up against the glories of Granada, Córdoba and Seville. While the port city cannot compare with the Alhambra's exquisite magnificence or Córdoba's Mezquita, it does have

The traditional station at Jimera.



a gritty charm with a colourful market, Moorish remains and a landmark hotel, the Reina Cristina, overlooking the bay.

The hotel, the oldest on the Costa del Sol, was designed by a British architect as the Henderson family's luxurious summer residence, later being expanded into a hotel. In those days it had a sweeping view, now marred by industrial machinery, over the bay to Gibraltar and across the Straits to Morocco. The architectural style is a slightly incongruous mix of colonial Victorian and Spanish with turrets and balustraded terraces shaded by palm trees. Many famous figures have stayed here over the decades including King Alfonso XIII, Orson Welles, Ava Gardner, Federico Garcia Lorca, and a young journalist called Winston Churchill.

Starting in Algeciras, Mr Henderson's Railway winds its way up through the Sierra de Ronda to the town itself and on to Bobadilla. But you'll find yourself wanting to get off the train to see the stations and cargo sheds converted into restaurants along the way. A hassle-free way to do this is to go with an expert. Manni Coe of boutique travel company Toma Tours knows all the people along the railway and was involved with its restoration. A passionate and knowledgeable hispanophile, Manni runs a Mr Henderson's Railway gourmet hiking tour from Algeciras to Ronda with daily hikes, staying in hotels along the railway – all that exactly provides the perfect excuse for feasting on some delicious Andalusian food. Manni is an excellent and entertaining guide, whose enthusiasm brings

EXPLORE *Mr Henderson's Railway*

FROM TOP: The Hotel Reina Cristina in Algeciras; the white village of Castellar de la Frontera; tuna fillet at Cepas restaurant, and the special Blue Fin cava.

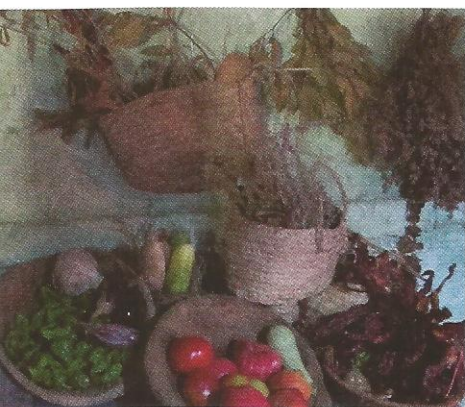
the region's history to life. He acted as the guide for Michael Portillo when the ex-MP-turned-presenter filmed an episode of the BBC's Great Continental Railway Journeys on Mr Henderson's Railway.

If you're this near the coast of Cádiz province and you're a foodie, you must try the highly-prized *atun de almadraba* (almadraba tuna) when it's in season (April to June). Blue-fin tuna (*atun rojo*, confusingly) is caught off the Cádiz coast using the skilled Phoenician method – a series of nets which the fish swim through until they're caught in a central area; the largest specimens are then lifted out and killed by fishermen. Many tonnes are flown straight to Japan to be used in sushi. In Getares, a quiet seaside town around the headland from Algeciras, you can feast on this melt-in-the-mouth tender *atun de almadraba* (almadraba tuna), caught just up the coast, at Cepas restaurant; they offer entire menus based around it. For the ultimate *maridaje* (pairing), choose Blue Fin cava, specially made to accompany the wild fish.

Following the railway up from Algeciras, passing through holm and cork oak forests, you find many *pueblos blancos*, the white towns perched atop mountains. One of these is Castellar de la Frontera, so called due to its location on the often-changing frontier between the Moorish lands and the Catholic Kings' territory in the days of Al-Andalus. This fortified town was abandoned in the 1970s due to problems with water and electricity supplies, and the population moved to a new town, Nuevo Castellar, built at the bottom of the hill. Then German hippies came to live here and now the town's Arabic brick arches, cobbled streets and white houses, drenched with dazzlingly bright bougainvillea in brilliant pinks and purples, are lent a creative touch by house signs made of cork, an important local industry.

About 50km from Algeciras is San Pablo de Buceite, a tiny village whose station has been converted into a restaurant. Nieves, the owner, lived in the restaurant for a time so it has a homely feel with quirky, artistic decoration; railway sleepers are used as beams and mementoes such as uniforms hang on the wall and there is a delightful shaded terrace and garden where concerts are held in summer. Traditional seasonal dishes on the menu include artichokes with ham and garlic, and Iberian pork fillet with foie and *patatas a lo pobre*. Several trains





thunder past every day, but none stop here any more.

Not far from San Pablo is Gaucín, the pretty mountain-top town famous for its artists, where you can stay at the heavenly El Nobo. The owner, Sally, is English and has been living here for over 20 years. Her sprawling Andalucían house, on the hillside below the town, has several studios and cottages with pools and a tennis court. This is one of those places which is homely and comfortable, where you can lounge around in the garden.

Peaceful and idyllic with a private paradise of lawns, agapanthus and palms, it will lull you into a new, slower rhythm. El Nobo's centrepiece is the infinity pool: one of the most spectacular in Spain with incredible views down across the valley towards the sea; it has a natural feel, thanks to the rocks and grasses which border its edge.

Down in El Colmenar, nominally the station for Gaucín although it's a good half an hour's drive away, is Caserio Ananda, which specialises in grilled meat. Angeles, the ebullient and charming chef and co-owner, has a wood-fired grill and oven, and cooks everything on them: bread, peppers, garlic, and suckling pig. Angeles and her husband grow their own organic fruit and vegetables, and source as many of their ingredients locally as possible; she also serves organic and natural (additive-free) Spanish wines. Around the rustic interior of the restaurant you can see bowls and baths made of cork; this material is harvested traditionally from the cork-oak forests of the Parque de los Alcornocales which cover this area.

The route which Toma Tours offers features daily hikes over five days; on the version I did, which was a three-day taster, we did two hikes. The first was from Castellar down to the railway line (the hardcore version finishes further up the track at Jimena de la Frontera); my favourite was the second, from Jimera de Libar to Benoajan (GR141). The route follows the train track, which in turn traces the course of the river Guadiaro. The path is good,



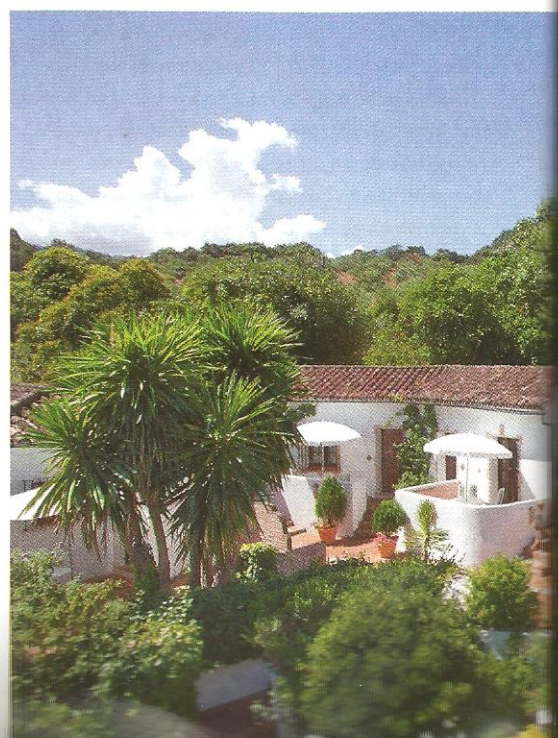
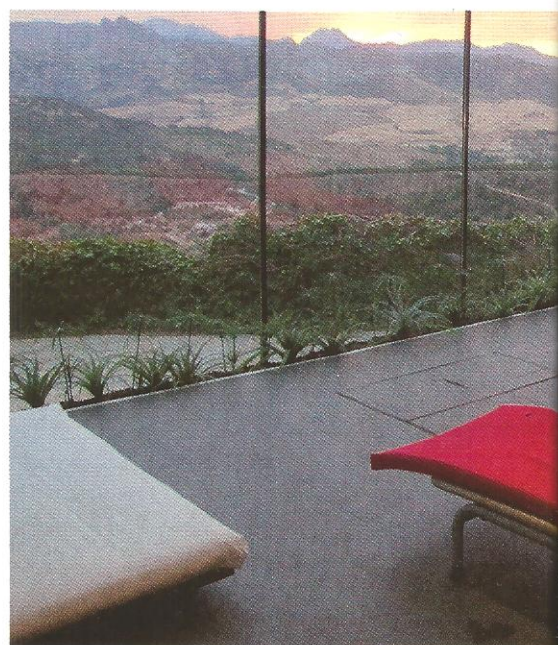
FROM LEFT: Home-grown produce at Caserio Ananda at El Colmenar; the homely hotel El Nobo in Gaucín, famous for so many artists living there; El Nobo's infinity pool enjoys spectacular views to the sea.

with plenty of shade, and you can see bridges and tunnels built by the good Mr Henderson and his trusty engineers. At one point the path dips down so you're alongside the river, where the oleanders grow on the banks providing a burst of colour against the green. Hillsides are thick with trees, broken by harsh limestone escarpments. You don't see many other people; in fact, there's little sign of civilization. Perfect for getting in tune with your natural surroundings and leaving behind everyday cares and worries.

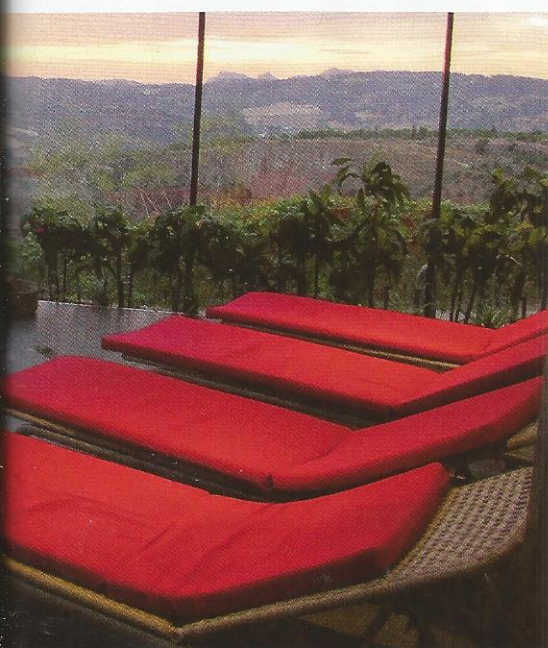
Arriving at the next village, Benoajan, you can walk straight to the Molino del Santo, an old wheat mill converted into a hotel and restaurant, also English-owned. You eat outside on a beautiful terrace alongside the mill stream, entwined in late summer with vines heavy with grapes and sweet-smelling fig trees, soothed by the sound of gently rushing water. Fresh, crisp flavours on the menu here include marinated prawns with avocado and baby salad leaves, and fig salad with *queso fresco* and *jamón*. An excellent wine list features the must-try new dry muscatel wines from Málaga, such as El Lagar de Cabrera by Bodegas Muñoz Cabrera.

The next stage of our journey was to take the train to Ronda. Benoajan station is a short stagger downhill from El Molino; be sure to ask which is the correct platform, so you're on the right side when the train pulls in. It's just a 20-minute journey, and the line winds around through Arriate, beyond Ronda, and then back again before arriving at the city's station.

Occupying prime position atop the escarpment is the Hotel Reina Victoria, where the British taking the train up from Gibraltar came to rest



EXPLORE *Mr Henderson's Railway*

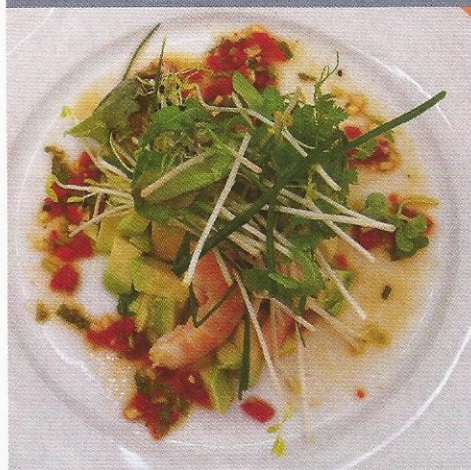


and recuperate, and was the model for the Reina Cristina. With its mountain-top location, pointed gables and pine trees, this one has an almost alpine feel. The hotel was completely refurbished and modernised last year and has contemporary décor in cool, crisp monotonies with wood floors and black rubber lamps; the top-floor rooms have huge terraces with fantastic views. In the small spa, next to the mini-hydrotherapy pool, the relaxation room has floor-to-ceiling glass windows so you can drink in the view while you unwind; at dawn and dusk, the sky and earth glow in glorious technicolour.

A short drive from Ronda is El Muelle de Arriate, a cosy restaurant housed in a former cargo shed by the railway line with a beautiful terrace. Run by a Dutchman called Frank, the menu offers such delights as cherry gazpacho, local cured sheep's cheese and Iberico pork (from native Spanish pigs): *secreto* (belly), *presa* (shoulder), *pluma* (neck) and *charrasco* (ribs), as well as the must-have cooking ingredient chorizo, with potatoes and *pimientos del padrón* (small green peppers). The puddings are fabulous, a chocoholic's dream with cake, mousse and brownies.

Although I'm normally more of an independent traveller, preferring to set (or not) my own route and schedule, allowing someone else to take control – and do the driving – makes for a much more relaxing and stress-free experience. Some of those Andalusian mountain roads are hair-raising, especially at night, so being driven from lunch to hotel, and from dinner to bed, can be an excellent option. Besides, it would be a crime not to do justice to all those wonderful vinos.

FROM TOP: The stone entrance of the Hotel Reina Victoria, and below, its relaxation room from where you can enjoy breathtaking views. **LEFT:** Molino del Santo in Benojan is an old wheat mill converted into a hotel and restaurant, where Fiona ate prawns and avocado.



Tour

Walking Mr Henderson's Railway: Slow Food and Scenic Hikes with Toma Tours is a six-day/five-night guided tour. The price, including all accommodation, meals, transport and accompanying local tour manager, is from €1,429 per person. www.tomatours.com

Getting there

There are three trains a day in each direction between Algeciras and Ronda on Mr Henderson's Railway, taking one hour 45 minutes. For timetables and fares see RENFE (www.Renfe.es).

Staying there

El Molino del Santo in Benojan (www.elmolinodelsanto.com) has doubles from €95; El Nobo in Gaucin (www.elnobo.co.uk) from €130; the Reina Cristina in Algeciras (www.hotelesglobales.com/es/hotel-reina-cristina-algeciras-cadiz.html) from €54; and the Reina Victoria in Ronda (www.hoteles-catalonia.com/es/nuestros_hoteles/europa/espanya/andalucia/ronda/hotel_catalonia_reina_victoria/index.jsp) from €64.

Where to eat

La Estacion de San Pablo (www.laestaciondesanpablo.com) in San Pablo de Buceite, Caserio Ananda in Estacion de Colmenar (www.caserioananda.com) and El Muelle de Arriate in Arriate (www.elmuelle-arriate.com) are all located on the Algeciras to Ronda trainline. These restaurants are family run and offer changing menus with an emphasis on fresh, local ingredients. Cepas in Getares is very close to Algeciras (www.cepasrestaurante.blogspot.com).