



In the Andalusian hills about an hour's drive from Malaga sits the Finca El Cerrillo, a small estate with a restored and extended 200-year-old farmhouse, once used as an olive mill.

Sue and Gordon Kind fell in love with the property in 2001. With Gordon's artistic eye - he trained as a sculptor and was once set designer for the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester - and Sue's administrative abilities, they transformed the farmhouse into a comfortable hotel, now a base for walking holidays offered by the Headwater company.

Inland Andalucia, with its "white villages" - clusters of narrow streets with white-washed houses - is a far cry from bland coastal resorts. Gordon and Sue sought an opportunity to restore and add to the beauty of the finca while "importing" the relaxed style of hotel they had encountered in the Caribbean.

There are now 14 rooms, some of them in the main building and the rest converted from outbuildings or provided by extensions, most with private sitting areas and a few with their own roof terraces.

Taxis sweep guests from the busy crowds of Malaga Airport eastward along the coast as far as Algarrobo and then up a winding, precipitous road to the quiet, picturesque village of Canillas de Albaida.

It is one of many so-called white villages found in the Andalusian hills with buildings dating back to the time of the Moorish invasions from Africa, only 15 kilometres away across the Mediterranean and visible on clear days, especially in the winter when the "heat glare" diminishes.

Indeed, the minarets built by the Moors can often still be seen in these villages, amalgamated into the church towers built by their successors, the Christians.

Greeks, Phoenicians and Romans have all left their marks on this beautiful region, inaccessible to all but mules and horses until relatively recent times.

Our guide is Elaine, who lives in a village a bit further lower in the hills and has been resident in Spain for many years, able to converse fluently with the local Spanish people. She has a wealth of knowledge about the wildflowers and trees we pass by, the history of the villages and their modern-day life.

We are in a designated Natural Park - the equivalent to England's national parks. The pace is easy and there are frequent stops to admire the view, impart knowledge, eat a packed lunch or provide water for Sybil, the finca's resident dog, a gentle beast which often accompanies walkers.

At the end of walks to the villages of Salares and Competa, lunch is taken in local bars.

"Villagers prune the trees and harvest the olives in exchange for supplies of oil to the hotel kitchen"

At Salares, where we enter the village over a bridge built by the Romans, we sip *tinto de verano* (red wine of summer) as rotund bar owner Theo presents a feast of food including prawns, pork slices, aubergines fried in oil and salads. The meal is rounded off with oranges from his own trees.

The walks are not strenuous and, apart from the last day when the route is longer, guests are usually back at the hotel early in the afternoon, with plenty of time left to enjoy the wonderful gardens, laze by the pool or stroll through an olive tree plantation.

Villagers prune the trees and harvest the olives in exchange for supplies of oil to the hotel kitchen.

One of the olive trees, with its twisted trunk and branches, has been transformed by Gordon into a tree house, complete with a help-yourself drinks bar.

Inside the farmhouse, Christine the cook is preparing the three-course evening meal, eaten either in the spacious restaurant or on the terrace overlooking the valley.

The food at the finca is superb, from the fresh fruit platters available at breakfast to the three-course dinners in the evening.

My wife, a vegetarian, was full of praise for the special dishes prepared for her.

Wine with dinner is complimentary while guests can help themselves to other drinks from an "honesty bar", settling their bill at the end of the week.

If they wish, guests can opt not to go on the organised walks, either choosing to stay around the finca or follow their own routes.

We did this on the last full day, following the track and road down the valley into the village of Archez and returning via Canillas and a steep path known as the goat track.

ABOVE:
The village of Canillas de Albaida.

LEFT:
Guide, Elaine Jones (right), with Sybil, resident dog at the Finca de Cerrillo, and walkers.

Pictures:
David Green



What better place to walk?

David Green enjoyed a walking holiday in the Andalucian hills






LEFT:
Wild flowers spreading down the hillside in Andalusia.

BELOW:
The village of Archez.



FACTFILE

-  Headwater Holidays offers a week's walking or painting holiday at Finca El Cerrillo, inclusive of all meals and transport, from £1,049 per person or £1,229 with British Airways flights from and to Gatwick.
-  The firm also offers guided and independent walking and cycling holidays in other parts of Spain and throughout Europe and the Caribbean.

 Contact details: www.headwater.com, telephone 01606 720033.



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