

Postcards from Andalucía End of September 2012



We found a trail to walk beneath the cliffs of Ronda.

Last week we enjoyed one of the best meals we've ever had. And it came as a total surprise. Via Málaga and Ronda, we arrived by bus in the country town of Olvera, the start of the Via Verde, a 36 kilometer stretch of abandoned railway that declines gently down to Puerto Serrano. The former railway stations at each end are now rustic hotels, and there's another one approximately midway at Coripe.

We were the only guests in the Olvera station and the proprietor was the only staff. He cooked and served us a wholesome country meal. First, a Red Salad composed of slices of tomatoes, roasted peppers and mild onion, plus shredded carrots and beetroot, cheese of the *feta* type but not salty, topped with roasted almonds and a light dressing. This was followed by a thick cut of grilled pink *ternera* (veal) studded with peppercorns and juniper, served with roast potatoes and peppers (Our host packed the generous remains of the chop into a plastic box and they sustained us for lunch the next day as well). With some warm bread and robust local wine this made a great homely meal, but it's not the one we really want to tell you about.

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Clouds building up over the Andalusian hinterland, seen from the station hotel at Olvera.

The weather had been sensational, but with the inevitable luck of Harvey Tours, the four month drought came to an end the next day, within minutes of our starting our walk with full day-packs. An intermittent spatter of rain seeped from the clouds, and it was warm, so we kept taking our an-oraks on and off. The hills and gorges were wild and empty, apart from the regiments of olive trees and the occasional remote *finca*. The vultures we had come to see sensibly kept to their perches on the pinnacles.



The sixteen tunnels we passed through provided occasional shelter.

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After trudging 21 kilometers we arrived at the Coripe station hotel damp and exhausted. It was totally isolated. The town of Coripe is a couple of kilometers away at the top of steep hill. Again we were the only guests and the proprietor, Juan, a handsome, chatty young man wearing a red bandana around his head, was the only staff. When we arrived he was grinding something in a pestle. He offered us a sniff – vanilla and cardamom. Later that evening, in between cooking in the kitchen and serving at table, he perched on a bar stool and explained each dish – where the ingredients came from (usually his own garden), and how they were prepared.

The first course was consommé of chicken served very hot in an ample sort of dessert glass, together with a small shot glass containing an egg, Oloroso sherry and *hierba buena* (mint), which you tipped into the soup. Delicious and restorative. This was followed by a salad of sliced tomatoes from Juan's garden, mixed with goat's cheese and fresh herbs.

The main course was a slice of tuna fish, flash-grilled so that it was still pink inside, on a bed of caramelised sweet onions, soft and slightly charred, with a splash of manzanilla sherry. This came with jasmine rice fried with chopped spring onions stirred in at the last moment.

Pudding was an elegant crêpe soaked in the vanilla and cardamom mixture Juan was grinding when we arrived, topped with whipped cream and caramel. We're not sure what this meal cost, but the total bill for two, including a night's lodging and breakfast was €95.

Juan had some of the jasmine rice at the bar for his own supper, while telling us how his mother had passed on to him her traditional cooking skills. In the high season in spring fifteen hundred diners can troop through his restaurant during a weekend. He calls in ex-

Juan's is the only car by the station hotel at Coripe.



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tra staff then. And that's how he lost his girlfriend, who ran off with a cook. How any woman could reject this good-looking, charming, talented, enterprising young man we can't imagine. Although the station hotel at Coripe is a very isolated gig.

The next day we awoke under a lid of low cloud and steady rain pressing down on a sodden landscape. We had not brought foul weather gear, so when Juan offered to drive us 30 kilometers to his home town, which had a bus connection to Seville, we aborted our trek.

Seville and the rest of southern Spain received half of its annual rainfall over that day and the next, as we dodged between art galleries and some of the best tapas bars in all of Spain.



Rainswept Seville.

We are now in Cádiz. The sun blazes when we emerge from our tiny flat by the central market. We go to the main plaza for breakfast because the cafe has *churros* (extruded donuts, delicious when freshly made, greasy and appalling at any other time) and then we walk fifteen minutes to the magnificent beach which extends from here to the straits of Gibraltar. For lunch we have fried *calamares* or *tortillitas camarones* (shrimp fritters) at a beach shack. In the evenings we saunter around town sampling manzanilla and trying out new tapas combinations in the dozens of cosy tapas bars which inhabit this charming city.

And so it goes . . .



Reader, you won't believe this, but we went back to Coripe. Yes! Judith was determined to complete the march that the foul weather had forced us to abandon two weeks ago. She discovered there was a bus which would take us in two-and-one-half-hours from Cádiz to Puerto Serrano, the terminus of the Via Verde. From there we could walk the 15 kilometers back to the mid-station of Coripe, stay overnight at Juan's hotel, and retrace our steps the next day. Judith rang Juan and he agreed to open the hotel for us last Wednesday.

To try to repeat an original experience is usually disappointing, so we did worry that a second visit would be anticlimactic. We left Cádiz in a thick fog, unable to see beyond the side of the road. Very Harvey Tours. Somewhere after Jerez a hazy sun appeared and by the time we reached Puerto Serrano the sky was blue. It turned out that the bus station



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lies a couple of kilometers from the Estación de Puerto Serrano where the walk starts, so the trek was increased to 17 kilometers each way.

We started out at noon, and it was hot. Curiously, the track started out with a descent which seemed too steep and which curved too sharply for a railway line. And we were puzzled when the first tunnel was labelled number two. We welcomed the cool darkness of the eight tunnels we passed through. As the afternoon wore on, we sought the lengthening shade of the scrub oaks and olive trees along the route.

We carried just a few nuts and some fruit, and the water in our flask seemed to have been filled from a hot water tap. Almost six hours lat-



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er, when we emerged from the last tunnel – one kilometer long – and walked across the viaduct and the station hotel of Coripe loomed into view, we were thoroughly wrung out.

Juan greeted us with an embrace and a couple of cold beers. Did we want further refreshment? Our shriveled stomachs might manage a few olives, we said. Juan didn't have any olives. Instead he produced a chilled glass cup of fresh *ceviche* in the Peruvian style – shreds of raw fish, chopped onions, bits of sweet corn and red peppers, freshened with lime juice. There followed a second chilled glass cup of *porrita antequerana* – a sophisticated version of *salmorejo* – the cold tomato soup that Judith makes so well - but flavoured and decorated with orange and grapes and flakes of tuna fish. We devoured these – a perfect restorative after a long, hot walk.

Juan had brought his mother along, and she busied herself in the small kitchen while he took us for a jaunt. He drove up into the sierras north of Coripe to a high perch where we could watch the sun set over the mountains and valleys and a dramatic hilltop castle. In the dusk Juan gathered herbs for tonight's meal – pungent varieties of thyme and sage, and other powerful scents we could not identify.

We sat down to glasses of red wine from the Duero and a first course of wafer-thin slices of very pink *ternera* (veal), barely singed, arranged beneath a pile of salad: rocket, grated parmesan, pine nuts, chopped walnuts, splashed with balsamic vinegar, and surrounded by a dainty ring of transparent slices of cucumber. Delicious!



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The second course was a *revuelto de calabacín* – scrambled eggs with tiny chips of courgettes and serrano ham. Marvellous! The main course was grilled cutlets of *cordero* (lamb) and rice, both delicately flavoured with the herbs collected an hour ago. Superb! For pudding, once again we had the crepes topped with a honeyed mixture of vanilla and cardamom, served with whipped cream trimmed with chocolate. Fantastic!



After dinner, Juan set couple of chairs outside and we sat to listen to the hoots of the owls from all points of the compass and watch the silent stars overhead. That night Chuck awoke in the small hours with a sharp pain in the big toe of his left foot. Had the rich diet provoked an attack of gout? We just couldn't drop out of the walk a second time, and so, after begging a couple of paracetamol from Juan, he soldiered on and gradually walked through the pain.

It being a Harvey Tour, of course it rained, but this time, as well as our anoraks, we possessed a four-euro umbrella bought from a street hawker in Seville, and after a little while the sun came out again. We ate our *bocadillos* filled with some wonderfully tasty *pâte* reserved from breakfast and listened to the bells of goats invisible higher up the mountain.

The journey seemed much easier than the previous day's journey. It was cooler, but also, subtly, downhill. As we neared Puerto Serrano the initial mystery was solved. The track took a detour round the mouth of the former first tunnel, now overgrown, its approach eroded away.

Coming and going, we walked 34 kilometers to reach a destination restaurant – which must be some sort of record.

