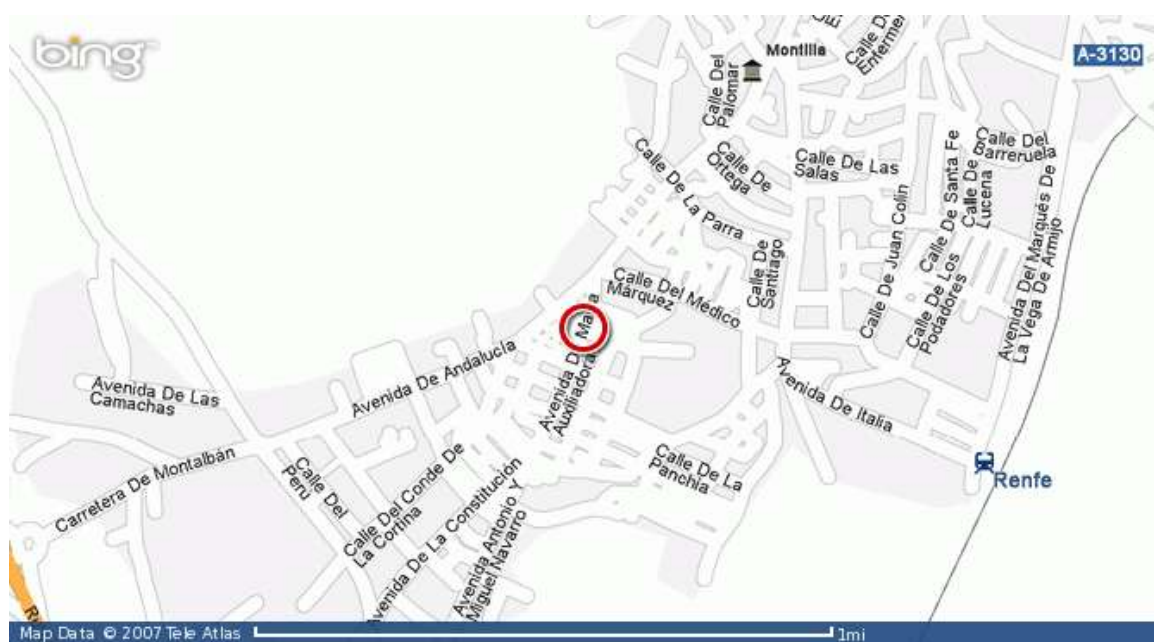


Recently, some Montilla vineyards have been developing a young, comparatively low alcohol, white wine similar in style to the Vinho Verde found in northern Portugal.

Although in these modern times wooden barrels have somewhat gone out of fashion, that is not necessarily the case here in Montilla where there are still plenty of Barrel Makers *Tonelerías* and one, at least, is well worth a visit.

Wineries

The one of choice is Montilla's oldest, **Bodegas Alvear**, Calle María Auxiliadora, 1; tel: 957 652 939; www.alvear.es; which was founded in 1729 and is located right in the centre of town. The tour is both fun and informative, and the tastings at the end give you a fine opportunity to decide which of these wonderful wines you want to leave with. But don't leave without a bottle or two of Pedro Ximénez! Guided tour and wine tastings Mon-Sat 12:30, Sat, Sun & must book in advance and a minimum of 7 people accepted. Ticket Office is at the Alvear Shop, Avenida Boucau, 6 - close to the Ford dealership. Adm: Mon-Fri €2.95 & Sat, Sun & hols €3.95.



Places to Shop

Tonelería J. L. Rodríguez, Ctra. N-331 Córdoba-Málaga, Km 43.3; tel: 957 650 563; www.toneleriajlrodriguez.com; found just to the west of town on the old Córdoba road, is well worth a visit. Besides catching a quick peep at how wooden barrels are produced, it also has a shop with the most interesting array of barrels of all sizes, artisan and other wooden decorative pieces - that make for excellent souvenirs, and a good selection of local wines for sale, particularly the new style, young, *Vino Verde*.

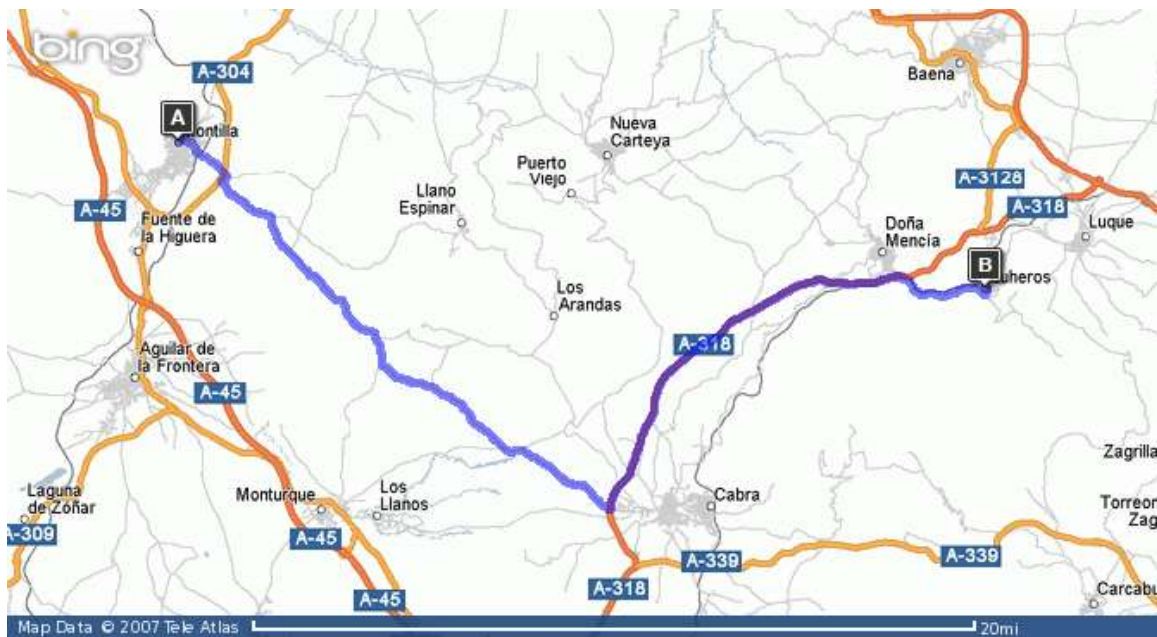


Place to Eat and Drink

The **Las Camachas**, Avda. Europa 3; tel: 957 650 004; whose name refers to a trio of cooks known as *Camachas* and featured in Cervantes' novels, is owned by the Hotel Don Gonzalo and located just a short drive from it. It has a pleasing Andalusian hacienda style, and is the best known restaurant in this area. In any of the six dining rooms you can enjoy delicious regional specialties such as Country-Style Partridge (*perdiz campaña*) and Artichokes cooked in Montilla wine (*alcachofas al Montilla*).

The next stop, **Zuheros**, is a quite charming village and not very far away.

Just take the A-45 south, direction Málaga, to the junction with the A-318, direction Doña Mencía, and the signpost for Zuheros is at the exit for Doña Mencía.



In the south-eastern corner of the province of Córdoba a large, nearly 400,000 acre, area is known as the Subbética. Within this, a beautiful 78,000 acre semi-mountainous region of steep slopes and beautiful valleys, home to attractive towns and villages and an eclectic array of flora and fauna, has been designated as the Nature Park of the Sierra Subbética (*Parque Natural de la Sierra Subbética*).

Of all the places here one little village stands out for its geographical location, natural beauty, cultural connections and even for a spectacular restaurant renown for its local mountain specialties.

The **Archaeological Museum & Castle** *Museo Arqueológico y Castillo* Plaza de la Paz, 2; tel: 957 694 545; has exhibits found locally and in nearby caves that date back 35,000 years to the Palaeolithic age. It also allows visits to the castle that was built between 13th and 14th centuries but whose highlight is the 16th century-Renaissance palace, which is just across the street. Open: Apr-Sep Mon-Fri 10-14 & 17-19, Sat, Sun & hols 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18 & 19; Oct-Mar Mon-Fri 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17 & 18, Sat-Sun 10-14 & 16-18; small admission fee.

The **Museum of Arts and Local Customs "Juan Fernández Cruz"** *Museo de Costumbres y Artes Populares "Juan Fernández Cruz"* Calle Santo, s/n; tel: 957 694 690; has exhibits that illustrate the traditions, way of life and local customs, and is found at the edge of the village in a beautiful mansion dating from 1912. Open: May-Sep Tues-Fri 12-14 & 17:30-20:30, Sat, Sun & hols 10:30-14:30 & 17:30-20:30; small admission fee.



The **Bat's Cave** *Cueva de los Murciélagos* is an extensive system of which only part are open to the public, and it has been ascertained that it was inhabited some 35,000 years ago. There are wall-paintings that originate from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic ages, 6,000-3,000 BC and 3,000-2,000 BC respectively, and relics from the Copper and Bronze ages through the Roman period to the Middle Ages have been excavated here. Be advised, this is reached by way of a winding, steep road that runs some 2.5 miles from Zuheros. Information and Reservations, Calle Nueva, 1; tel/fax: 957 694 545; e-mail informacion@cuevasdelosmurcielagos.com; open summer Mon-Fri 10-14 & 17-19 and winter 10-14 & 16-18. The caves are open Mon-Fri (but not holidays) Apr-Sep 12:30-17:30 and Oct-Mar 12:30-16:30, but only by previous appointment; Sat, Sun & hols Apr-Sep 11-12:30, 14, 17 & 18:30, Oct-Mar 11, 12:30, 14, 17 & 17:30; small admission

Places to Eat/Drink

The **Los Palancos**, Calle Llana 43; tel: 957 694 538, found just across from the castle, has a most dramatic location literally on the edge of the cliff and its large, open, picture windows offer the most beautiful views of the sun setting over the valley and mountains. The cuisine, featuring all kinds of mountain and game specialties is particularly alluring too. It also has local produce for sale and a pleasant terrace.

Local Products

Quesería de la Sierra, Ctra. Zuheros-Baena, s/n; tel/fax: 957 640 233; is located just outside Zuheros on the way towards the tourist office, specializes in producing artisan goat's cheese made from ecologically produced non-pasteurized milk of the highest quality, matured with vegetable-based rennet, salt and olive oil. The resulting cheese has its own particular aroma and flavour, making it an ideal aperitif with strong red wine. The small shop also offers an enticing array of other local products

Activities

The terrain around here offers itself to all kinds of rural activities and **Alúa**, Calle Hondo del Río, 26-A; tel: 957 694 692; www.alua.es; offers a wide variety of experiences including hiking, canoeing, potholing, climbing, paintball and archery.

The penultimate stop on this daytrip, **Alcalá la Real**, has a dramatic location and is steeped in history.

Getting There

Take the A-318 north to the junction with the N-432, and then follow that, direction Granada, to Alcalá la Real.



Although this place had been known in Prehistoric and Roman times, it was the invading Moors who recognized its strategic importance.



In 727 they originated a fortified settlement, known in their language as Alcalá, at an elevation of 3,389ft that totally dominates the surrounding region. From here, too, there are sparkling views of the wide expanse of the Sierra Nevada mountain range to the south.

During the 12th century the Fortaleza, and the city that had grown up below it, was the scene of frequent battles between the Moors and Christians. Finally, after ruling for more than 600 years, the Moors succumbed to the forces of Alfonso X1 in 1341, who added the word Real - meaning Royal - to its name. He also founded an abbey with his royal patronage, which lasted until the 19th century and coincided with the city's greatest era.

However, during the Wars of Independence the French forces ransacked the city during their retreat. Although, gradually, the city was rebuilt the La Mota fortress and the Mayor Abacial Church (*Iglesia Mayor Abacial*) - built between the 16th and 17th centuries, were more or less ignored.

Up until just a few years ago it was possible to just drive up and wander around this fascinating example of an abandoned walled city - **Fortaleza de la Mota**, and human skeletons were just left exposed in the tombs under the floor of the church.

These days, however, things are more organized, and the car park is under the walls next to the combined tourist information office/ticket office tel: 639 647796, with the Fortaleza open 10:30-13:30 & 17-20, with an audiovisual show between 11:30-12:30 & 18-19; small admission fee.

From here it is quite a steep walk up and, once there, you will be intrigued by the church with its marvelous new wooden roof and the glassed-off skeletons under its floor; informed by the exhibits in the archaeology museum, and fascinated by the scope of this ancient settlement.

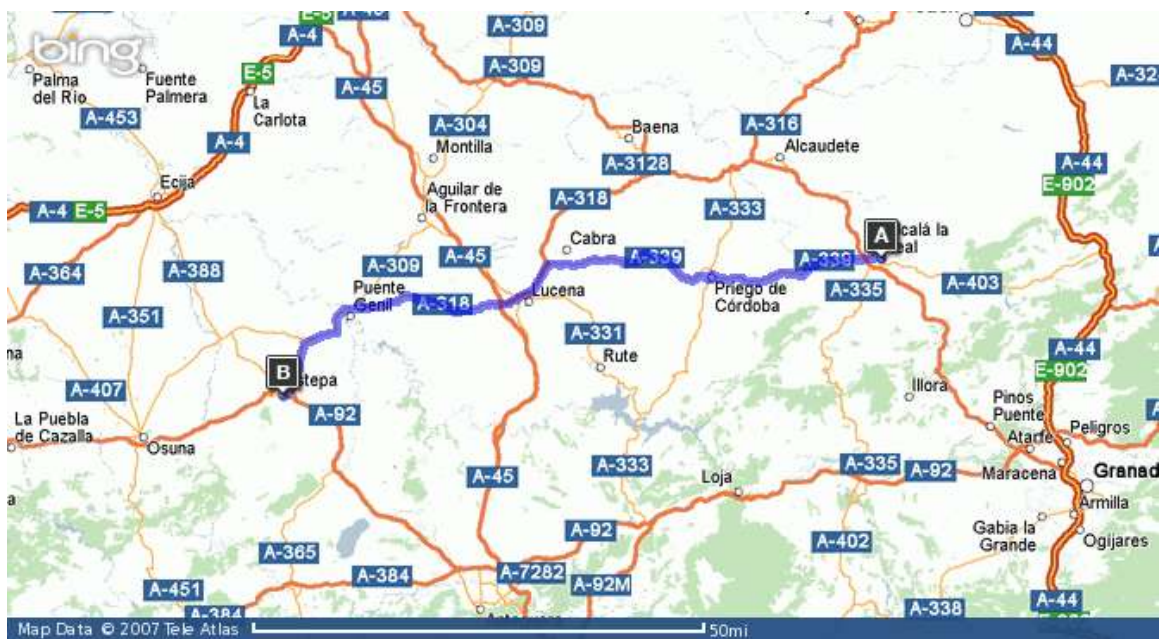


Not least, though, the panorama of the surrounding hills all covered with olive trees, and the mountains as back-drop - snow covered during the

winter, make it clear how strategic this spot must really have been in bygone centuries.

Anfibios y Reptiles, tel: 953 582 217; open: summer daily 11-13:30 & 18:30-20:30, and by previous arrangement in the winter; adm: free; may be small but is certainly interesting. It rescues amphibians and reptiles and, of the exhibits, the open-air turtle tank where you can watch these creatures sunning themselves or diving into the murky green water, is perhaps the most fascinating.

The last stop on this tour, **Estepa**, is directly west straight across the Subbética on the A-339 and A-318. Along the way, it's worth a quick stop to take a look at the impressive Fuente del Rey in Priego de Córdoba.



Along the way it's worth a quick stop in Priego de Córdoba to take a look at the elaborately impressive Fuente del Rey.



Estepa, close by the junction of the A-318 and A-92, has an interesting history and some impressive monuments, but it's an unusual quirk of history

that makes it famous all over Spain for what is a necessary tradition in every Spanish house over the Christmas season.

In fact, the combination of cereals and pig's lard, the ingredients for a delicious shortcake biscuit called *Mantecado* had been known in this part of Andalucía, mainly Antequera and Estepa since the 16th century

For centuries, the area around Estepa was heavily forested and proved to be a successful hiding place for guerrillas and bandits fighting the French forces during the Wars of Independence in the early 18th century. Tired of trying to ferret them out, the French took another approach completely and cleared the woodlands. After the war, this area was replanted with cereals, thus setting the scene for a new industry in Estepa that began in 1870.

To drive through Estepa in the months leading up to the Christmas period is far more than just a visual experience. Bakery after bakery, all over town will be producing not only **Mantecados** in all its various guises - Mantecado with Almonds, Mantecado with Cinnamon and sesame, Mantecado with chocolate or Lemon and Puff-pastry Mantecado, but **Polvorónes** - a variant of Mantecados and **Turrón** - similar to nougat and made with almonds and honey or sugar. As a result, Estepa is also an aromatic delight.

Naturally, all the companies are more than willing to entice you in with the attraction of free tastings, and one of these is E. Moreno, Avda. De Andalucía 63-65, † 95 591 2696. Here, not only can you taste traditional goodies like Mantecados, Polvorónes and Turrónes, but also new products they are introducing onto the market.



One thing is for sure, you won't leave here without a box or two to take home. What's more, when you see the extensive displays of these Christmas delicacies at every hypermarket and behind every bar, you will now know where they all come from.

The last leg of the trip, back to the Casa de Carmona in time for dinner, is straightforward. Just take the A-92, direction Sevilla to its junction with the A-364 then follow that to Marchena and then the A-456 for the last 27 kms to Carmona.

