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Up, Down and Around Ronda

By AMANDA HESSER

WE were running late the morning a friend and I drove to Ronda, a small town in Andalusia, and we had made a few wrong turns — an inevitable occurrence in southern Spain, where one finds accurate road signs about as often as one finds a green vegetable on one's dinner plate.

We were going to Ronda for a wedding. For months all we'd heard were gushing raves about the place. "It's stunning!" people would say, or they would just gasp, presumably at the thought of returning. In my experience, when that happens it's much like when someone begins a joke by saying, "Now here's something funny." It's not, and the place isn't so great.

Call me a pessimist, but our first few hours in Ronda confirmed my fears. We ran into a bunch of tour buses as we took the long, and wrong, way into town. Then it began raining, and as my friend dashed off to a bachelors' lunch, I missed the women's lunch and found myself at La Giralda, a dingy little tapas bar run by a stout female dictator who took the orders, cooked the food and served it.

I asked her if she had setas, a wild mushroom that is more expensive than ordinary button mushrooms. "Yes," she said, looking away, then added impatiently, "but the regular ones taste better." I took her word for it — I wasn't going to cross her — and immersed myself in a newspaper.

When she placed the mushrooms before me, I could see that things were looking up. Grilled on a plancha (or flat griddle) and sprinkled with herbs, the mushrooms were perfectly cooked: seared a nut brown on the bottom and left undisturbed so that the juices had pooled in the caps. I washed them down with a sherry and relished the scene: the dictator fluidly working the dining room and the stove, the men peeking in from the street at the soccer game on the television, and the French couple next to me, ordering the most French thing on the menu — a tortilla, or omelet.

I had one up on them. I had listened to the dictator and had tried something new, which, after all, is the whole point of traveling. And why, perhaps, I had resisted friends' comments about Ronda. When on the road, you want to feel the sense of discovery, not that you are following an overtrodden path. It is difficult to get that these days, especially in Europe, but as my lunch reminded me, each new place can be absorbed in one's own way.

So rather than head directly for Ronda's centerpiece — the gorge dividing the town in two — I went in the direction that would likely set the local tourist board reeling. I walked up the pedestrian shopping street, Calle Espinel, a main artery cutting through the town. Many medium-sized towns in Europe have such a street, and if you want to get a feel for how the

regular citizens live, this is the place. It is like a museum of curiosities. You can see what kind of clothing there is to buy (checked fabrics, brightly colored dress shirts), the kitchen equipment a Spanish cook regards as necessary (not a copper paella pan, but a lot of stylish utensils), or the type of bread in the bakery. Ronda, small as it may be, has an Internet cafe and, oddly enough, seems to specialize in wedding attire. Perhaps it is the Las Vegas of Spain.

Then I turned toward a residential neighborhood, where the streets wend down narrow, steep alleys. Ronda is one of southern Spain's white towns, and most of the tightly packed houses are painted a bright white, with small courtyards you can sometimes catch a glimpse of. Mostly what I caught was the noise of everyday life: a couple arguing, keys jangling, a man talking to his electrician.

Ronda was proving to be an interesting place even without its heralded sights. I shed my funk.

Then I dutifully walked to the Puente Nuevo, the 18th-century stone bridge that patches together the two sides of town. It has, as a resident told me, both a romantic and a dark side, and is the subject of many legends, including that it once contained cells for prisoners with windows letting out — and down — to the gorge. Certainly prisoners have made fatal or failed escapes, and a number of people, including priests during the Spanish Civil War, have met their forced deaths by way of gravity. I leaned over to take a look at what everyone had bragged about, and I nearly passed out.

The Tajo de Ronda, or Ronda Gorge, plummets some 360 feet down to the Río Guadalevín, a thin, shallow river that looks from the height of town to be a trickle of water streaming over a pale, blurred bed of rocks. From here you also have a panoramic view of the rolling hills and farmhouses surrounding the town. And you see what a geological oddity Ronda is. It is not simply a town set on a bluff, but a fantastic aberration, bursting forth from the serene sea of farmland.

The reason our friends were getting married in Ronda had much to do with this beauty. The groom had come to the town many times. During one of his visits, he was introduced to Antonio Ordóñez, one of Spain's great bullfighters and Ronda's pride, often referred to as El Maestro. Before Mr. Ordóñez died in 1999, he told our friend, if you come to Ronda with a woman, and if after three days the woman is more captivating than the town, then she is the woman for your life.

Many people who come to the area want to stay, including the first primitive dwellers, then the Romans, then the Moors, who perched themselves on the cliff and built a palace, a mosque and an entire village. When the Crusaders came through in the 15th century and caught sight of it, they, too, thought they deserved such turf and conquered the town by clever, if cruel, means. They took control of the water supply at the base of the gorge and essentially did nothing until the Moors were thoroughly parched.

With much of the structural town firmly in place, the Christians did a little face lift, but left much of it the same. And so, like many places in Andalusia, it has a lively patchwork of architectural styles and touches.

One very good example of this is Santa María de la Encarnación, a Catholic church installed in what was a mosque. The minaret has been transformed into a belfry, and an altar with the

geometric Arabic designs remains. But it also has the haphazard charm of an important civil centerpiece that has been preserved and redecorated over the centuries. As it changed from mosque to abbey, to a collegiate church and now a parish church, it picked up many influences — some Gothic, some Renaissance, even a little Baroque.

Ronda is the kind of place you could zip through in a day or spend several, using it as a starting point for day trips. It has fine hotels and a number of good restaurants. Over a few days, between the rehearsal dinner, the wedding and a cookout at a local ranch with a bullring, we took in Ronda bit by bit.

We stayed at the Parador de Ronda, which is in the heart of the north side of town, right next to the bridge on a site that was the town hall and food market, with great views of the gorge. It is a modern hotel that is quite American in feel. But the rooms are large, nicely furnished and pleasant with welcome touches like hair dryers, a sofa, velvety soft sheets and room service.

On our second day we had lunch at the Taberna de Santo Domingo near the bridge, once the headquarters of the Tribunal of the Inquisition. It was, from a visitor's point of view, the perfect kind of restaurant, conveying a warm, rustic charm without overdoing it. Simple photographs are hung on stone walls. The ceiling is beamed, and wood farm tables are scattered around the room.

The food is the same, delicious but discreet, well-prepared country food. I began with *sopa de ajo*, a garlic soup with a broth so rich and wonderful I wanted to drink it from the bowl. The soup is thickened with large pieces of bread that soak and soften in the broth. Next I had scrambled eggs with shrimp and garlic chives; the eggs merely held the shrimp and chives together. We were with friends, so I let my fork wander, to a plate of Iberian ham, sliced so thin it was translucent. To tender fava beans with ham. And to a dish of braised oxtail that melted in my mouth.

Another day, the first and only sunny, warm day we would see (though most travel guides will never say this, because of its location Ronda is often either rainy or blazing hot), we had a few hours to explore.

We started with the bullring. It looms in the center of town like a ship at dock. A few vendors are gathered around its edges, but it feels less like a sports arena than a palace, with tidy grounds, a museumlike gift shop and visiting hours. Inside is perhaps as stunning as a peek down into the gorge. The ring, a neat flat circle of sand, is rimmed with a red and yellow wall. The spectator rows are shaded under two layers of stone columns and a tile roof. It is one of Spain's oldest bullrings, and gained such prominence in the sport, as home to bullfighters like Pedro Romero and Ordóñez, that a Ronda school of bullfighting evolved. Now, Ronda plays host to just a couple of bullfights a year, the most important one being *La Corrida Goyesca*, in September.

We walked on to the Convento de Carmelitas Descalzas, on the Plaza Merced. In many parts of Spain, nuns bake and sell sweets to the public by way of a revolving tray, usually at the side of the church. Here in a cool, tiled vestibule was a small display of their wares: macaroons, *membrillo* (quince paste), cookies and cakes. We rang a little buzzer on the wall and, a few seconds later, heard the scuffle of shoes on a stone floor. "¡Hola!" said a nun from behind the wall. "Can we have one *membrillo* and one *bizcocho*?" asked my friend. "Yes — 1,000 pesetas,"

the nun said. We placed our \$6 in the revolving lazy Susan next to the display. With that, it began spinning and, without slowing at all, made a full circle. Out came the membrillo and cookies on the top shelf, and our change on the shelf below. Not even a New York City bodega cashier could beat that speed.

Our next stop was La Casa del Rey Moro, the House of the Moorish King. Its great feature is a set of stone steps, called La Mina, that lead down to the base of the gorge. At one time, Arab and Christian slaves labored on these steps carrying jugs of water from the river to the town. As we began our descent, a middle-aged couple passed us on their way up. The woman was sweating and panting; her husband was mumbling under his breath.

It was not an easy climb (though the way down was tougher on the legs than the way up). The brochure promises 365 steps (not that I'm complaining, but I only counted 236). By the time we reached the bottom — having passed the room of whispers (a room designed so that from the middle you cannot hear people talking by the walls) and the room from which hot oil was poured on invaders — we forgot our aching knees for a moment. The river was serene, a pale green ribbon of water, framed by cliffs dotted with cactuses and olive trees, determinedly fighting gravity. Later, panting and gasping for air, we arrived back on top, where there is a pretty herb garden and terrific views of the town across the gorge.

Looking for a cool place to recover, we slipped into the Museo de Caza, or hunting museum, and got one of the more bizarre and amusing treats of our time in Ronda. Giddy Spanish music accompanied us as we roamed through room after room of stuffed game, most of it from the nearby Sierra Nevada national park, but some of it was also from around the world. Ronda was apparently home to its own Teddy Roosevelt, named F. J. Loustau, or so the placards indicated. It's not something you would fly to Spain for, but it was actually quite interesting, with well-preserved examples of everything from moose and Dall sheep to a gleeful-looking wart hog and a tiny, freakish Siamese ibex.

For our last dinner, we returned to the Taberna de Santo Domingo. This time I indulged in a plate of marinated anchovies and langoustines grilled on a skewer and served with alioli, a garlic mayonnaise. A vegetarian friend at our table asked for a plate of vegetables. It was the only time the waiter seemed reluctant to please. He went to the kitchen to ask if this was possible. It was. But when another person asked if we could have a second plate for the table, he immediately declined. "We don't have any more vegetables in the kitchen," he said firmly. We would eat well, but on their terms.

And all that time, I had enjoyed Ronda thinking it was wonderful because I had discovered its beauty. It was simply my delusion, like any traveler's, that it had anything to do with me.