

Almería Province



Almería's big draw is sun, sand and ehm, sun again – over 3000 hours of it a year. Stretches of green golf courses in this dry part of Europe bring in sun-seekers and settlers on low-cost flights from Europe. The region is a bit of a contradiction: on the one hand, it's overdeveloped in places and vastly populated by postretirement Brits, Germans and Scandinavians looking for a cheap place to live and enjoy the sun; on the other hand, it is one of the least explored coastal areas in Andalucía, with excellent beaches hiding in the Parque Natural Cabo de Gata-Níjar. Up-and-coming coastal pueblos along Cabo de Gata, such as the village of Agua Amarga, are something like the Hamptons for Madrid's trendy, young professionals.

Inland, the wooded Alpujarras give way to a succession of mountain ranges. Vast parts of the province are mountainous semidesert, with beautiful landscapes and Spaghetti Western film sets. Paradoxically, this arid region is the 'garden of Europe', ie a top area for greenhouse fruit and vegetables, which are then sold all over the EU.

Things change still in Almería city, the coastal capital, a place that many say is an 'extension' of Morocco, with signposting in Spanish and Arabic and ferry-loads of immigrant labourers filling the streets down by the seafront and along Calle Real. Despite its lack of major sights, save for the Alcazaba, the city has an unpolished, promising vibe, a couple of good restaurants and tapas bars, and is refreshingly untouristy.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Experience silence and solitude on the rugged, sandy beaches along the **Parque Natural Cabo de Gata-Níjar** (p410)
- Get into shabby chic with the trendy *madrileños* at **Agua Amarga** (p415)
- See the sea of mountainous desert and Wild West film sets amid the arid mountains of the **Tabernas** (p407)
- Explore Almería's biggest Islamic monument, the **Alcazaba** (p401)
- Go underground at the **Cuevas de Sorbas** (p408) for one of the best caving excursions in Andalucía
- Check out the magnificent views from **Mojácar Pueblo** (p416)



■ POPULATION: 546,000

■ ALMERÍA AV DAILY HIGH:
JAN/AUG 13°C/25°C

■ ALTITUDE RANGE:
0M–2609M

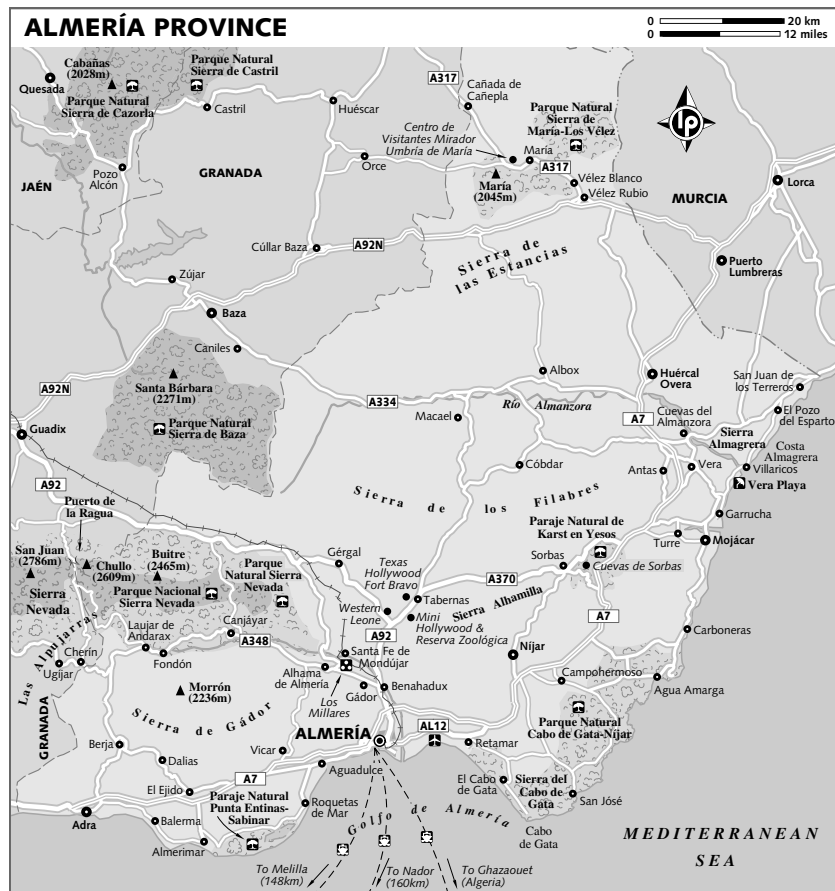
ALMERÍA

pop 177,000

This is Andalucía in its up-and-coming guise. Almería, a town known mainly for the sunny province that surrounds it, has much too tough a competition to deal with: with Granada and Seville lordling over the region, poor Almería is not given the time of day by many. But if you want to get off the beaten track, this is the place to visit. Almería is something like the Marseilles of Spain, or how Valencia was a decade ago. It has been described as a 'rough diamond' and 'rough around the edges', but with the efforts of Almería's proud citizens, and the

agri-dollars that come in from the plastic agriculture, Almería is now experiencing something of a cultural and architectural resurrection.

There's already plenty in Almería for a couple of days' stay: the enormous Alcazaba (citadel) is a major historical site; the old quarter is dotted with charming marble squares, churches and a cathedral, shaded by tall palms; the wide boulevard is forever full of people, and there are old-style tapas bars and innovative, modern-cuisine restaurants. Chic bars and clubs are packed and stay rocking till dawn. This city is definitely a great place to get a touch of Andalucía with an edge that is getting smoother by the year.



HISTORY

Almería's watchtower, the grand Alcazaba, is the only remaining Islamic monument in town and a reminder of the city's former historical importance. The name 'Almería' comes from the Arabic *al-mariyya* (the watchtower), in reference to the Alcazaba, but it has also been suggested that it may come from *al-miraya* (the mirror) – reflecting North Africa back to itself.

This monument harks back to the time when merchants from Egypt, Syria, France and Italy thronged the city's streets. Initially a port for the Cordoban caliphate, it soon became the most important outlet of Al-Andalus, being both the headquarters of the Omayyad fleet and its admiral. Almería once raked in revenues that far surpassed any other Andalusian seaport. Following the Reconquista (Christian reconquest), the city began a long, slow decline, exacerbated by the shifting of naval interests to the Atlantic ports and the Americas. Following a devastating earthquake, a census revealed that in 1658 the city had only 500 inhabitants. Things never really picked up for Almería, but it seems that finally the fortunes are turning and the flush of agri-dollars coming in from the controversial, yet booming, *plasticultura* industry is being streamed towards a concerted drive to market the region as an alternative to the Costa del Sol.

ORIENTATION

Old and new Almería lie either side of the Rambla de Belén, a *paseo* (walk) that runs down the centre of Avenida de Federico García Lorca. A broad, airy boulevard, Rambla de Belén descends gently towards the sea. East of the Rambla lies Almería's architecturally bland commercial district; to its west is the city centre, the cathedral, the Alcazaba and the oldest and most interesting streets and plazas. The old city's main artery, Paseo de Almería, leads diagonally north from Rambla de Belén to a busy intersection called Puerta de Purchena. The bus and train stations sit side by side on the Carretera de Ronda, a few hundred metres east of the seaward end of Rambla de Belén.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

El Libro Picasso ☎ 950 23 56 00; Calle de los Reyes Católicos 17 & 18) An excellent bookshop with two

branches across the street from each other. General interest books and maps of all kinds.

Emergency

Policia Local (Local Police; ☎ 950 21 00 19; Calle Santos Zárate 11) Just off Rambla de Belén.

Policia Nacional (National Police; ☎ 950 22 37 04; Avenida Mediterráneo 201) At the northern end of Avenida Federico García Lorca.

Red Cross (Cruz Roja; ☎ 950 22 22 22) Call this number to request an ambulance.

Internet Access

Internet (Avenida de Pablo Iglesias ☎ 8am-2am; per hr €2) A small shop-cum-internet café, with plenty of terminals and good connections. Very central.

Voz y Datos (bus terminal, Carretera de Ronda; per hr €2 ☎ 9am-2pm & 4.30-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-2pm Sat) Two handy computers in the main bus terminal.

Internet Resources

Andalucia.com (www.andalucia.com) A generic regional site with several pages dedicated to information about Almería.

Medical Services

Hospital Torrecárdenas ☎ 950 01 61 00; Pasaje Torrecárdenas) The main public hospital, located 4km northeast of the city centre.

Money

There are numerous banks on Paseo de Almería. There is also a Banco de Andalucía with an ATM in the bus terminal.

Post

Post office (Plaza de Juan Cassinello 1; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri & 9am-1.30pm Sat) Just off Paseo de Almería.

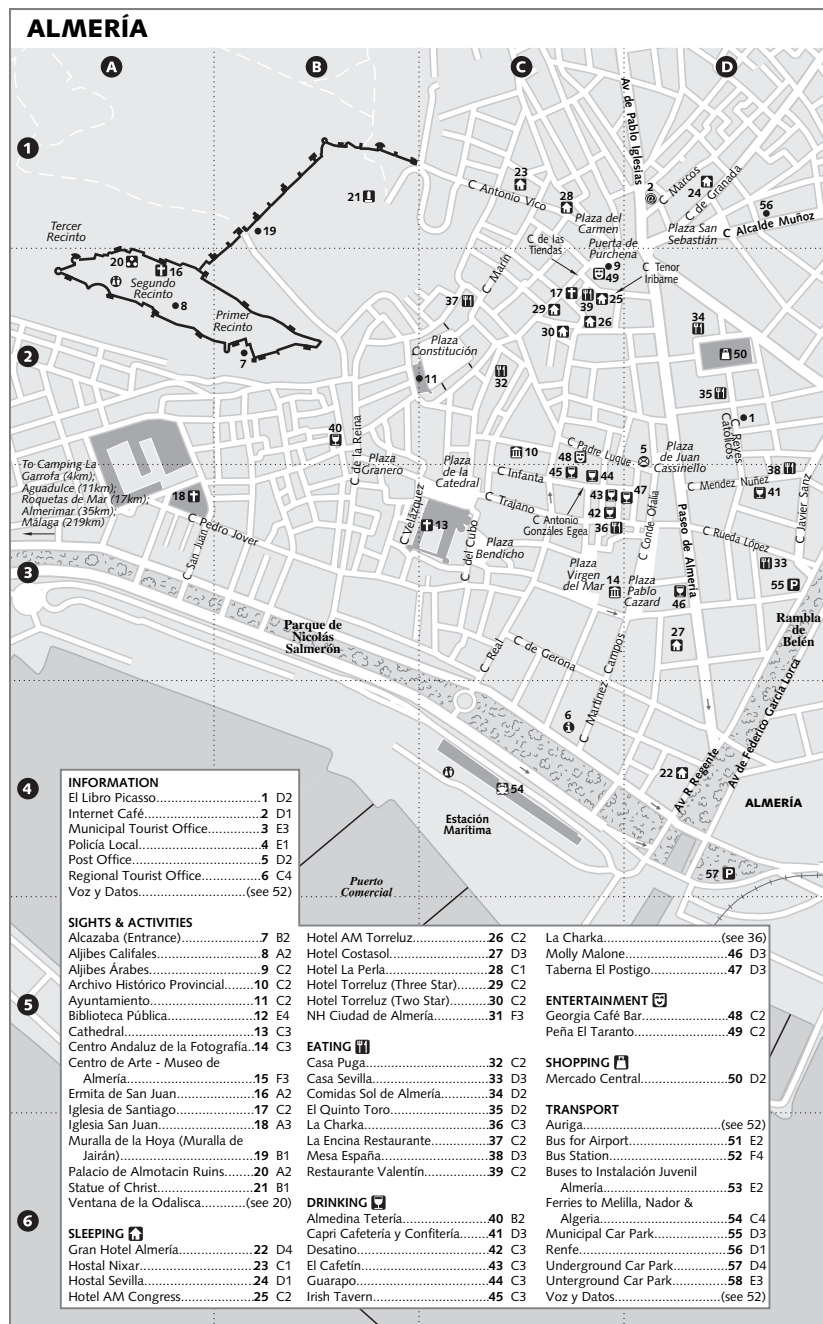
Tourist Information

Municipal tourist office ☎ 950 28 07 48; Rambla de Belén, Avenida de Federico García Lorca s/n; ☎ 10am-1pm & 5.30-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat) Found below ground level, but not very well signposted. It has a very useful range of information and helpful staff.

Regional tourist office ☎ 950 27 43 55; Parque de Nicolás Salmerón s/n; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun) Provides more free leaflets and brochures.

SIGHTS

Almería's enormous Alcazaba is the city's main sight and can be explored thoroughly in a good half day. Almería is not a monumental city, but there are plenty of interesting distractions in its meandering streets.



The old town tumbles down its eastern slope and is the location of most of the city's cafés and bars. Other notable sights are the cathedral to the south, and the archaeological collections in the Biblioteca Pública and Archivo Histórico Provincial to the east.

Almería's beach is a good kilometre out of the centre of town but can be crowded in the summer. A better alternative is a day or two in the Parque Natural Cabo de Gata-Níjar (p410), an easy day trip from Almería.

Alcazaba

The **Alcazaba** (☎ 950 27 16 17; Calle Almanzor s/n; EU/non-EU citizen free/€1.50; 🕒 10am-2pm & 5-8pm May-Sep, 9.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-7pm Oct-Apr, closed 25 Dec & 1 Jan) is Almería's premier attraction: a monstrous fortress that rises austere from impregnable cliffs to dominate the city. Built in the 10th century by Abd ar-Rahman III, the greatest caliph of Al-Andalus, the simple 'watchtower' transformed the seaport into a major metropolis and a flourishing locus for trade. Even though its interior doesn't measure up to the Alhambra (p359), having been shaken by a dramatic earthquake and ravaged by time, it is nonetheless an interesting place.

The huge interior is divided into three separate compounds and originally contained the civic centre in the lowest area, the **Primer Recinto**. Houses, baths, water storage chambers and all the necessities for city life have now been replaced by windswept rose gardens. From the battlements you can see the **Muralla de la Hoya** (also known as the Muralla de Jairán) – a fortified wall built in the 11th century by Jairán, Almería's first *taifa* (small kingdom) ruler – which descends the valley on the northern side of the Alcazaba and climbs the slopes of Cerro de San Cristóbal opposite, a parched and barren hill crowned with a ruined church and a giant **statue of Christ**.

Deeper within the fortified walls is the **Segundo Recinto**. On the northern side of the enclosure you will find the ruins of the Muslim rulers' palace, **Palacio de Almotacín**. It's named after Almotacín (r 1051–91), under whom medieval Almería reached its peak. Inside, the **Ventana de la Odalisca** (Concubine's Window) is romantically named after a slave girl who, legend says, leapt to her death after her Christian lover had been thrown from the same window.

(year-round) An attractive camping ground on the coast, 4km west of town on the Aguadulce road. In addition to the camping ground there are some two-bedroom self-catering bungalows (sleeping up to five people) and you can arrange a host of activities at the site.

Albergue Juvenil Almería (☎ 950 26 97 88; fax 950 27 17 44; Calle Isla de Fuerteventura s/n; under/over 26yr €14/19) Clean and well-kept, the Albergue can accommodate 170 people, nearly all in double rooms. It's 1.5km east of the city centre, beside the stadium and three blocks north of Avenida del Cabo de Gata. Take Bus 1 'Universidad' from the eastern end of Rambla del Obispo Orbera and ask the driver for the *albergue* (hostel) or for the stadium.

Hostal Nixar (☎/fax 950 23 72 55; Calle Antonio Vico 24; s/d €27/45) Time stands still at this gloomy hotel where a grim man welcomes you without a smile. The rooms are adequate, however, for a night's stay and the place is central enough. You have to ring for entrance, even in the middle of the day.

Hostal Sevilla (☎ 950 23 00 09; Calle de Granada 23; s/d €34/54; ☺) This small, friendly place is Almería's best *hostal* (budget hotel), with old-fashioned grey telephones as the peak of its design features. It's clean and efficient and the rooms have TVs with flickering domestic channels.

Hotel La Perla (☎ 950 23 88 77; fax 950 27 58 16; Plaza del Carmen 7; s/d €45/65; ☺ ☹) La Perla's tall, thin block building is on a leafy square, right in the centre. The rooms are uneventful but good value and comfortable. Internet access is free for guests.

Midrange & Top End

Hotel Costasol (☎/fax 950 23 40 11; www.hotelcostasol.com; Paseo de Almería 58; s/d €52/71; ☺) This fairly ordinary midrange hotel has comfortable rooms (we're not sure about the brown carpets) and friendly service. It is also in a very central location. Parking is available in a nearby municipal car park (€7 per day).

Hotel AM Congress (☎ 950 23 49 99; www.amtorreluz.com; Plaza de las Flores 5; s/d €56/60; ☺ ☹) An offshoot of the AM Torreluz, the Congress is a brand-new three-star hotel located in a bustling part of the old town. It provides a good level of service with a rather corporate flavour.

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Hotel Torreluz (☎ 950 23 43 99; www.torreluz.com; Plaza de las Flores 2 & 3; s/d in 2-star €39/57, in 3-star €56/74; ☺ ☹) Burnt-plum walls, spacious comfortable beds, low prices and all the conveniences of a modern hotel make this one of Almería's best-value places to stay. This is especially the case with the two-star accommodation, where you get pretty much all the three-star commodities, at lower prices. An additional bonus is the hotel's location – the bright and pretty Plaza de las Flores. Reception is located in the three-star hotel.

Hotel AM Torreluz (☎ 950 23 49 99; www.amtorreluz.com; Plaza de las Flores 5; s/d €69/92; ☺ ☹) A grand four-star place with lots of brass and marble and a huge sweeping staircase. It's definitely a favourite with business clientele and has all the trimmings. Note that it's under different management to its namesake neighbours (the two- and three-star hotels of Hotel Torreluz). Prices are reduced by up to 40% on weekends.

NH Ciudad de Almería (☎ 950 18 25 00; nhciudad-dealmeria@nh-hotels.com; Calle Jardín de Medina s/n; d €80-131; ☺ ☹) Bordering on the quietly stylish modern look and characterless anonymity, the NH is a well-appointed chain hotel, even if it doesn't quite pull off the style-statement of the year. As it's opposite the bus and train stations it also makes for a good stopover.

Gran Hotel Almería (☎ 950 23 80 11; www.granhotelalmeria.com; Avenida Reina Regente 8; s/d €108/135; ☺ ☹) You can't beat the seafront location and the wide views from the comfortable, modern rooms, but, despite its four stars and a website that declares you will receive 'awesome' service during your time there, you'll probably find the AM Torreluz hotel is better value.

EATING Tapas

Here, as in Granada and Jaén, the pleasurable practice of free tapas with drinks persists.

Casa Puga (Calle Jovellanos 7; drink & tapa €1) The undisputed winner of the best tapas title, in the heavy category. The marble bar is full of barmen's pencil price scribbles, while

fat *jamónes* (hams) hang suspended from wrought-iron hooks in bunches, like meaty chandeliers. Shelves of ancient wine bottles and traditional *azulejo* wall tiles set the tone for a roaring lunch.

El Quinto Toro (☎ 950 26 15 21; Calle de los Reyes Católicos; drink & tapa €1.50) Close to the market, this dark, bullfight-loving, atmospheric bar is always full of faithful tapas devotees.

La Charka (☎ 950 25 60 45; Calle Trajano 8; drink & tapa €1.50) A very popular tapas bar in Almería's busiest evening spot. A big bar, wooden chairs and tables and real 'saucers' of tapas (rather than plates) provide just the right amount of nibbles to keep the clientele guzzling. A great spot to graze before moving on to some late-night bars.

Mesa España (☎ 950 27 49 28; Calle Mendez Nuñez 19; drink & tapa €1.80, fondue €20) This busy bar and restaurant has seating up-front for tapas eaters and red *comedor* (dining room) banquettes at the back for serious dining. A great stop in the evening, especially for a fondue melting session.

Restaurants

Comidas Sol de Almería (Calle Circunvalación, Mercado Central; menú €9; ☺ closed Sun & Mon evenings; ☹) A fun little restaurant opposite the busy covered market. At lunch, hungry shoppers stream in here to tuck into the extensive and hearty daily *menú* (set menu). There is also a large patio out the back, dotted with flowering oleanders.

Restaurante Valentín (☎ 950 26 44 75; Calle Tenor Iribarne 19; mains €10-15; ☺ Tue-Sun Oct-Aug) A secluded little restaurant with stylish service. Dark wood and exposed brickwork create an intimate atmosphere and the food is good. If you really want to splash out and

eat in style, the *langosta* (lobster) will set you back €52.

Casa Sevilla (☎ 950 27 29 12; Calle Rueda López; menú €24; ☺ closed Sun & 1st-15th Aug) A *tour de force* of Andalusian cuisine and wine (the same people own La Vinoteca next door). Specialities include *bacalao a la almeriense* (cod in a spicy tomato sauce) and Argentinian beef, and there are over 8000 bottles of wine from which to choose. The restaurant is inside the Galería Almericentro shopping centre.

DRINKING

Capri Cafetería y Confitería (☎ 950 23 76 85; Calle Méndez Núñez 14) If you need to put up your feet late in the afternoon, prop up the chrome bar at the Capri where you can tuck into a range of delicious pastries or enjoy a cool granita.

Almedina Terería (Calle Paz 2, off Calle Almedina; ☺ 11am-11pm Wed-Sun) Inside the Islamic centre and in a tiny street, the lovely Almedina serves mint tea and good couscous; if you're feeling wild, get a henna tattoo.

Guarapo (☎ 950 268 188; Calle Antonio González Egea; ☺ 4.30pm-late) Shiny, modern and trendy, the youngsters devour the endless cocktail combinations and stay up very, very late.

Desatino (Calle Trajano 14; ☺ 8pm-late) A trendy bar with mirrored windows, playing Cuban rumbas. It doesn't fill up until late.

Molly Malone (Paseo de Almería 56; ☺ 8am-11pm) A massive tree shades the front terrace of this fun bar. Inside it's all spit-and-sawdust décor – lots of dark wood and old London theatre posters – bathing in the fog of cigarette smoke. It is also a great spot for breakfast (€2.50).

La Charka (☎ 950 25 60 45; Calle Trajano 8; ☺ 8pm-2am) This tiny but packed tapas bar is opposite Desatino.

Other popular bars on Calle Antonio González Egea include El Bicho, the Irish Tavern and Taberna El Postigo.

ENTERTAINMENT

A dozen or so music bars are clustered in the streets between the post office and the cathedral. Some of them open from late afternoon.

Peña El Taranto (☎ 950 23 50 57; Calle Tenor Iribarne 20) Almería's top flamenco club hides in the renovated Aljibes Árabes (Arab Water Cisterns). Live performances (€20), open to the

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

La Encina Restaurante (☎ 950 27 34 29; Calle Marín 3; mains €11-21; ☺ closed Sun & Mon evening) Almería's most exciting restaurant for inventive cuisine. Get yourself some deer cutlets with caramel treacle (€21), see-through thin *carpaccio* (€12) or pork medallions with mushrooms, pine nuts and sweet *moscatel* wine. If there's space, finish with a fondue of fresh fruit and chocolate. Alternatively, have some tapas and relax al fresco on the terrace.

public, often happen on weekends. Ring for details or check at the tourist office.

Georgia Café Bar (☎ 950 25 25 70; Calle Padre Luque 17; 🕒 8pm-late) The Georgia Café Bar has a terrific ambience. It has been open for more than 20 years and stages the occasional live-jazz gig, although even the piped music is great.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Almería's **airport** (☎ 950 21 37 00; www.aena.es) receives charter flights from several European countries. You can get cheap flights from several British and European cities (see p441). Scheduled services go to/from Düsseldorf with **LTU** (☎ 950 21 37 80; www.ltu.de), to London Gatwick with **GB Airways** (☎ 950 21 38 98; www.gbairways.com) and to Barcelona, Madrid and Melilla with **Iberia** (☎ 950 21 37 90; www.iberia.com). You can pick up inexpensive outbound international fares from agencies such as **Viajes Cemo** (airport ☎ 950 21 38 47; Roquetas de Mar ☎ 950 33 35 02) or **Tarleton Direct** (airport ☎ 950 21 37 70; Mojácar ☎ 950 47 22 48; Roquetas de Mar ☎ 950 33 37 34).

Boat

From Almería's Estación Marítima (passenger port), **Trasmediterránea** (☎ 950 23 61 55, 902 45 46 45; www.trasmediterranea.es) sails to/from Melilla three times daily Tuesday to Friday and twice daily Saturday to Monday, from June to September, with daily sailings from October to May. The trip takes up to eight hours. The cheapest passenger accommodation, a *butaca* (seat), costs €29 one way; the fare for a car starts at €123 for a small vehicle.

The Moroccan lines **Ferrimaroc** (☎ 950 27 48 00; www.ferrimaroc.com), **Comarit** (☎ 950 23 61 55; www.comarit.com in Spanish) and **Limadet** (☎ 950 27 07 71) sail to/from Nador, the Moroccan town neighbouring Melilla, with similar frequency to Trasmediterránea. Prices vary between €28 to €33 for a one-way adult fare and €128 to €139 for a car.

You can buy tickets for all sailings at the Estación Marítima. See the Transport chapter for more information regarding services to Morocco (p448).

Bus

Daily departures from the **bus station** (☎ 950 26 20 98) include buses to the following destinations:

Córdoba (€22, 5 hours) One daily.
Guadix (€7.50, 1¼ hours) Nine daily.
Granada (€10-12.20, 2¼ hours) Up to 10 daily.
Jaén (€19, 5 hours) One or two daily.
Madrid (€23, 7 hours) Five daily.
Málaga (€15, 3¼ hours) Up to 10 daily.
Murcia (€5, 2½ hours) Ten or more daily.
Seville (€28-29, 5 hours) Two daily.
Valencia (€31-38, 8½ hours) Five daily.

For buses to places within Almería province, see left for information on individual destinations.

The bus station is extremely efficient and clean. There are clean toilets, an ATM, internet access (p399) and automatic left-luggage lockers (per day €5). Renfe has a travel centre in the terminal, where you can book onward tickets, and there is a helpful **information desk** (🕒 6.45am-10.45pm) that will direct you to the right ticket booth for your destination.

Train

You can buy tickets at the town centre **Renfe** (☎ 950 23 18 22; www.renfe.es; Calle Alcalde Muñoz 7; 🕒 9.30am-1.30pm Mon-Fri & 9.30am-1pm Sat) office, as well as at the **train station** (☎ 902 24 02 02). Direct trains run to/from Granada (€14 2¼ hours, four daily), Seville (€32, 5½ hours, four daily) and Madrid (€33 to €38, 6¾ to 10 hours, twice daily).

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The airport is 8km east of the city, off the AL12; bus 20 (the 'Alquíán' bus; €1) runs between the city (from the western end of Calle del Doctor Gregorio Marañón) and the airport every 30 to 45 minutes from 7am to 10.30pm, but less frequently on Saturday and Sunday. It runs from the airport to the city every 30 to 45 minutes from 7am to 10.08pm Monday to Friday, and from 7am to 11.03pm on Saturday and Sunday.

Car & Motorcycle

There are several car-rental agencies in the city. Avis, Europcar and Hertz have desks at the airport. A good-value local company, **Auriga** (☎ 902 20 64 00; www.aurigacar.com), has an office in the bus terminal.

Almería has the same difficult streetside parking as most Andalucian cities. Parking for 30 minutes will cost you €0.20 and an

hour is €1.05. There are, however, large underground car parks beneath the Rambla de Belén and on the eastern side of the Rambla at its seaward end. Fees at these car parks are €1 for one hour and €10 for 24 hours.

Taxis

There are **taxi stands** (☎ 950 22 61 61; night taxis ☎ 950 42 5757) on Puerta de Purchena and Paseo de Almería and at the bus and train stations.

NORTH OF ALMERÍA

LOS MILLARES

You need to be an archaeology enthusiast to consider a visit to **Los Millares** (☎ 608 903404; admission free; 🕒 9.30am-4pm Tue-Sat Apr-Sep, 10am-2pm Wed-Sat Oct-Mar), 20km northwest of Almería between the villages of Gádor and Santa Fé de Mondújar. Your own transport is necessary as there is no viable public transport and the site is a 1.5km trek from the main road.

The site covers 190,000 sq metres and stands on a 1km-long spur between the Río Andarax and Rambla de Huéchar. It

was a town that was possibly occupied from around 2700 BC to 1800 BC, during a period when the Río Andarax was navigable from the sea. The town's metal-working people may have numbered up to 2000 during optimum periods of occupation. They hunted, bred domestic animals and grew crops; their skills included pottery and jewellery-making, and certain finds indicate trading links with other parts of the Mediterranean.

The site is enclosed within four lines of defensive walls reflecting successive enlargements of the settlement. Inside lie the ruins of the stone houses typical of the period. Outside the living area are the ruins – and some reconstructions – of typical passage graves (domed chambers entered by a low passageway) of the Neolithic and pre-Bronze Age period.

Do not be discouraged by a notice on the roadside wall of the gatehouse stating that you should contact the Delegación de Cultura de Almería for permission to enter the site. It is essential, however, that before you leave for the site you check that someone will be on duty at Los Millares **gatehouse** (☎ 608 95 70 65) to let you in. To get here, take the A92 north from Almería to Benahadux,

THE WILD WEST

When you go north of Benahadux, into Almería's savage semidesert landscape, you'd never think you were on ground that was once walked on by Clint Eastwood, Raquel Welch and Charles Bronson – the squinting, the putting and the moustachioed stars of Spaghetti Westerns. But what the area may lack in water, it certainly doesn't lack in a history of film stars. In the 1960s and '70s, makers of Western movies spotted the resemblance between this area and the 'badlands' of the American West, and shot dozens of films here, including *A Fistful of Dollars*, *The Magnificent Seven* and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Locals played Indians, outlaws and cavalry, while Eastwood, Welch and Bronson took centre stage. Movie-makers come here less often now, but the surviving shells of three Wild West sets remain as bizarre and excellent tourist attractions.

Mini Hollywood (☎ 950 36 52 36; adult/child €17/9, ticket includes Reserva Zoológica; 🕒 10am-9pm Apr-Oct, 10am-7pm Tue-Sun Nov-Mar; shows at 5pm year-round, & 8pm from mid-Jun to mid-September), the best-known and most expensive of these sets, is 25km from Almería on the Tabernas road and has bank hold-ups, shoot-outs and hangings, plus men saying: 'This town ain't big enough for both of us, hombre' (in Spanish, of course). Rather bizarrely, adjoining the Wild West town is a wildlife town, the **Reserva Zoológica**, with lions, elephants, buffalo and other species.

Three kilometres further towards Tabernas, then a few minutes along a track to the north, **Texas Hollywood Fort Bravo** (☎ 950 16 54 58; www.texashollywood.com; adult/child €10.50/6.50; 🕒 10am-10pm) is another Western town, with a stockaded fort, a Mexican village and Indian teepees. There's also **Western Leone** (☎ 950 16 54 05; admission €9; 🕒 9.30am-sunset Apr-Sep, 9.30am-sunset Sat & Sun year-round) on the A92, about 1km north of the A370 turning. Both of these sights played a part in some of the same films as Mini Hollywood and have a more authentic if slightly worn-out air (which extends itself to their approach tracks, so it's best to drive slowly).

SOMETIMES IT'S HARD TO BE A COWBOY

'We just want to entertain, we want the audience to have a good time, you know?' A cowboy called Domingo speaks to me in a hoarse voice, while a dreamy film score plays in the background and shy kids ask for autographs. We're in Texas Hollywood Fort Bravo. He'd just done an array of somersaults, acrobatics, free falls and displayed a mastery of weapons, all on horseback. 'You have to be brave to do this job' says he. You certainly do – especially if your job involves mounting a horse at breakneck speed, and sometimes even jumping off balconies, straight into your saddle. 'I was once filming with a top star here on the set, and I was riding a horse so fast I fell off – seven stitches above one eye, five on the cheek.' But his injuries are not a hardship. In fact Domingo has worked hard to earn his right to be a cowboy: 'I came to see the show back in '86, and I loved it so much I asked to take part. They told me I could, but that I'd have to pay and bring my own horse. So I turned up with my horse and took part in the shows over the years, until I learned the trade and they started to pay me.' And the rest is history, so to speak. 'I've done loads of films and TV series, from WWII films to action films, doing stunts. But I love working here the most. I'm with the horses, the people like it, and we have fun. The Wild West is where I love to be.' He gets on his horse, shouts 'Yeeehaaa!' and rides off into a dusty Spanish sunset.

then head northwest on the A348. Signs indicate the Los Millares turning, shortly before Alhama de Almería.

NÍJAR

The small mountain town whose real-life story of forbidden love and revenge gave Federico García Lorca (p48) the inspiration for his poetic drama, *Blood Wedding*, is a beautiful though touristy town with narrow, uphill streets, and gleaming white houses whose flat roofs stand unforgettingly against the blue sky. Níjar's other claim to fame is the production of some of Andalucía's most attractive and original glazed pottery, and colourful striped rag rugs known as *jarapas*.

From the top end of Calle García Lorca, the narrow Calle Carretera leads into the heart of old Níjar and to **Plaza la Glorieta** and the church of **Santa María de la Anunciación**. Beyond Plaza la Glorieta, up Calle Colón, is the delightful **Plaza del Mercado**, with a huge central plane tree and a superb blue-tiled fountain with large fish-head taps.

Accommodation is limited, but **Hostal Asensio** (☎ 950 36 10 56; Calle Parque 2; s/d €20/38) has bright, pleasant rooms. Cheap eats can be had in the popular **Café Bar La Curva** (Calle Parque; platos combinados €6), which is diagonally opposite Hostal Asensio. For a more picturesque spot, though not great food, head for **Café Bar Glorieta** (Plaza la Glorieta; platos combinados €5) or across the plaza to **Bar Restaurante El Pipa** (Plaza la Glorieta; bocadillos €2.50).

Shops and workshops selling pottery and rugs line the main street, Calle García Lorca, and are dotted along the adjoining **Barrio Alfarero** (Potters' Quarter) along Calle Las Eras, off Calle García Lorca. Most notably, **La Tienda de los Milagros** (Calle Lavadero 2) is the workshop of British ceramicist Matthew Weir and his wife, who produces quality *jarapa* rugs.

Níjar is served by two buses a day (one only on Saturday), but the scheduled times make a return day trip from Almería impossible. By car, Níjar is 4km north of the A7, 31km northeast of Almería. There are parking bays all the way up Calle García Lorca, but check for parking restriction signs.

SORBAS

Another pottery town, Sorbas lies about 34km by road from Níjar and can be reached from here by a pleasant drive through the compact mountains of the Sierra de Alhamilla. More excitingly, Sorbas stands along the edge of a dramatic limestone gorge in the Paraje Natural de Karst en Yesos, where water erosion over millions of years has resulted in the stunning **Cuevas de Sorbas** (☎ 950 36 47 04; www.cuevasdesorbas.com; adult/child €10.50/6.50; ☞ guided tours 10am-8pm Apr-Oct). The excellent guided tours, complete with pit helmets and lights, can be organised through the town's **tourist office** (☎ 950 36 44 76; Calle Terraplén 9; ☞ 10.30am-2.30pm Wed-Sun) or through the **Centro de Visitantes Los Yesares** (☎ 950 36 44 81; Calle Terraplén s/n; ☞ 11am-2pm & 5-8pm). Both of these are located on the road

into town. Tours are only run on request and at least a day's notice is required.

The only accommodation option is the bland, motel-style **Hostal Sorbas** (☎ 950 36 41 60; s/d €25/40; (P)) on the main road right at the entrance to the village. For food, the best options are **Cafetería Caymar** (Plaza de la Constitución; tapas €1.80) or the good-quality **Restaurante el Rincón** (☎ 950 36 41 52; Plaza de la Constitución; mains €8-14) next door. Both are on the charming central plaza.

There are buses from Almería to Sorbas and back (€4, 1¼ hours, four daily Monday to Friday).

LAS ALPUJARRAS

West of the small spa town of Alhama de Almería, the A348 winds up the Andarax Valley into the Almería section of Las Alpujarras (for more details on the Alpujarras, see p386).

The landscape is at first relentlessly barren, with arid, serrated ridges stretching to infinity. However, it gradually becomes more vegetated as you approach Fondón, where the small **Camping Puente Colgante** (☎ 950 51 42 90; camping per person/tent/car €2/2/2; ☞ year-round) is located.

For information on walking routes and refuges in the Sierra Nevada mountains, which rise from the north side of Las Alpujarras, visit the **Centro de Visitantes Laujar de Andarax** (☎ 950 51 35 48; ☞ 10.30am-2.30pm Thu & Fri, 10.30am-2.30pm & 6-8pm Sat & Sun), on the A348, just west of Laujar de Andarax.

Laujar de Andarax

pop 1800 / elevation 920m

This pleasant 'capital' of the Almería Alpujarras is where Boabdil, the last emir of Granada, settled briefly after losing Granada. It was also the headquarters of Aben Humeya, the first leader of the 1568-70 Morisco uprising, until he was assassinated by his cousin Aben Aboo. Today the town produces Almería's best wine.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

To sample some of the local *vino* (wine), pop into the shop at **Cooperativo Valle de Laujar** (☞ 8.30am-noon & 3.30-7.30pm Mon-Sat) where you can sample the cooperative's own wines and *digestifs* and buy good local produce. You'll find it 2km west of town on the A348.

Laujar de Andarax itself is not remarkable but there is a handsome **Casa Consistorial** (town hall) on the central Plaza Mayor de la Alpujarra, with three tiers of arches crowned by a distinctive belfry. Otherwise, the large 17th-century brick **Iglesia de la Encarnación** is the only other building of note, with its minaretlike tower and a lavish golden interior.

A signposted road leads 1km north to **El Nacimiento**, a series of waterfalls in a deep valley, with a couple of restaurants nearby. On weekends the falls are full of weekendening Spaniards who rock up to use the purpose-built barbecues under the trees. It's possible to buy meat and wood at the falls although most people usually bring their own.

The falls are the starting point for some walking trails that the Centro de Visitantes can tell you about.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hostal Fernández (☎ 950 51 31 28; Calle General Mola 2; s/d €16/31) Just off the main square, Plaza Mayor de la Alpujarra, this is a friendly place overlooking the square and the valley. It also has an excellent restaurant (mains €9) that serves local wines.

Hotel Almiraz (☎ 950 51 35 14; almihost@larural.es; s/d €32/42) About 1km west of town on the A348, the Almiraz is a nicely situated modern hotel with comfortable rooms. It has a bar and a large restaurant that offers a reasonable *menú* for €9.

A popular bar-restaurant is the **Fonda Nuevo Andarax** (☎ 950 51 31 28; Calle General Mola 4; d €33; raciones €3.50), which also has rooms above the restaurant.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A bus to Laujar (€5, 1¼ hours, one daily) leaves Almería bus station at 9am Sunday to Friday, starting back from Laujar at 3.45pm. To get from Laujar to the Granada Alpujarras, take a bus to Berja, then another to Ugíjar or beyond.

COSTA DE ALMERÍA

AROUND ALMERÍA

Here is where Almería's coast becomes divided between noisy package-tourist resorts, such as **Aguadulce**, 11km from Almería, and, 6km further down the road,

THE PLASTIC SEA

The sea of plastic-fantastic greenhouses along Spain's most arid soil shows that with a bit of imagination, effort and no scruples, anything is possible. What was once a land where even olives struggled to grow has now become Europe's fruit 'n' veg garden. Beneath the steaming polythene swell tomatoes, lettuce and peppers, all irrigated by underground aquifers. Their production and sale has brought untold wealth to parts of Almería province since the 1970s. The prime example of this growth is the town of El Ejido, west of Almería: it has Spain's highest ratio of bank branches to population.

But these riches are starkly contrasted by terrible racism, particularly in El Ejido where in 2000, race-riots broke out against the African workers who labour at the greenhouses. Many of them are illegal immigrants who arrive on the infamous *pateras* (small, wooden boats) and hope to find work in Almería's greenhouses. Despite the fact that the industry wouldn't be what it is without their work, they get less than €20 a day and live and work in appalling conditions. Since 2004, many Eastern European workers have been brought to Almería's greenhouses to replace the African labour force, which has worsened both living and working conditions and decreased wages. The opening chapter of the travelogue *Andalus: Unlocking the Secrets of Moorish Spain*, by Jason Webster, describes the situation vividly.

The environmental price is also high: there are 20,000 tons of nonbiodegradable rubbish produced annually here, and the aquifers are diminishing. The real state of Almería's precious water resources became evident when the Partido Popular (PP) national government (1996–2004) planned to divert water from the Río Ebro in northern Spain to keep the show on the road. This was strongly opposed by Ebro area inhabitants and by ecologists concerned about the large Ebro delta. The plan has since been shelved under the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) government. Instead, the world's second-largest desalination plant is being built at Carboneras on Almería's east coast, to ensure that Europe's driest desert continues to produce.

To see for yourself you can take the bizarre 'Plastic-fantastic' tour offered by **Hola-Almería** (☎ 627 46 03 01; sergitocv@yahoo.es; tours in English & Spanish €15), which takes you to a good old veg auction in El Ejido before commencing a tour of greenhouses in the locality and ending with tapas on the beach at Balerna.

Roquetas de Mar, and the quiet, isolated beaches to be sought out within the **Parque Natural Cabo de Gata-Níjar**, where there is a refreshing lack of big hotels and mass tourism. Then there are old seaside towns with stylish small hotels and gourmet restaurants by the beach, where trendy *madriileños* (residents of Madrid) come to spend their holidays, such as **Agua Amarga**. For those of you seeking some water sports fun, try **Almerimar**, a town popular with Spanish holidaymakers. It has the best windsurfing conditions on Andalucía's Mediterranean coast.

The extensive wetlands of the **Paraje Natural Punta Entinas-Sabinar**, located between Roquetas and Almerimar, are a good place for bird-watchers to spot greater flamingos and other water birds – around 150 species have been recorded there. A vast area to the west of Almería and a lesser one to its east are covered in plastic-sheeted greenhouses.

PARQUE NATURAL CABO DE GATA-NIJAR

The wild rugged landscape of volcanic hills tumbling down into a sparkling turquoise sea around the Cabo de Gata peninsula is a delight to lovers of nature, silence and solitude. Some of Spain's most preserved and least crowded beaches are strung beautifully between the stark cliffs and capes of the dramatic Parque Natural Cabo de Gata-Níjar. With just 100mm of rain in an average year, Cabo de Gata is the driest place in Europe, yet the area supports over 1000 varieties of animal and plant wildlife that thrive in the arid, salty environment. The scattered settlements of whitewashed, flat-roofed houses add to its haunting character. This is one of the highlights of not only Andalucía, but the whole of Spain.

You can walk along the coast for 61km all the way from Retamar (east of Almería city) around the southern tip of Cabo de

Gata and then northeast to Agua Amarga, but in summer there's very little shade. This place gives you the feeling of being in real wilderness – nature here is still largely untouched and you are likely to be walking in splendid isolation amid some extraordinary scenery.

It's recommended to call ahead for accommodation anywhere on Cabo de Gata during Easter and July and August. Camping is only allowed in official camping grounds.

The Editorial Alpina 1:50,000 map *Cabo de Gata-Níjar Parque Natural* is the best for the area. See right for information on getting to the various villages on the peninsula.

Information

About 2.5km before Ruescas on the road from Almería is **Centro de Interpretación Las Amoladeras** (☎ 950 16 04 35; Carretera Cabo de Gata-Almería, Km 7; ☎ 10am–2pm & 5.30–9pm mid-Jul–mid-Sep, 10am–3pm Tue–Sun mid-Sep–mid-Jul), the main information centre for the Parque Natural Cabo de Gata-Níjar, which covers Cabo de Gata's 60km coast plus a thick strip of

hinterland. The centre has displays on the area's fauna, flora and human activities, as well as tourist information and maps.

Getting There & Away

Bus routes run from Almería to El Cabo de Gata (€2, 30 minutes, 10 daily), San José (€2.50, 1¼ hours, four daily Monday to Saturday), Las Negras (€3.50, 1¼ hours, one daily Monday to Saturday) and Agua Amarga (€4, 1¼ hours, one daily Monday to Friday). Bus schedules can be obtained from Almería city tourist offices or from Almería bus station.

To reach Faro de Gata you will need your own car. Alternatively you can hire bicycles in El Cabo de Gata at the **Oficina de Información** (☎ 950 38 00 04; Avenida Miramar 88; ☎ 10am–2.30pm & 5.30–9pm) for an easy ride. If you are touring the park by car, the only petrol station is halfway along the Ruescas–San José road. San José has a couple of car-rental agencies.

El Cabo de Gata

When people dreamily talk of Cabo de Gata, they are usually referring to the natural park,



rather than the village itself. A summer holiday resort for Almería's day-trippers who prostrate themselves on the coarse, sandy beach, out of season, the place is wind-swept, shuttered and deserted.

South of the town are the **Salinas de Cabo de Gata**, an area of soupy salt-extraction lagoons. In spring, many greater flamingos and other water birds call in at the salt pans while migrating from Africa to breeding grounds further north. With more arrivals in August there can be as many as 1000 flamingos on the pans. Autumn brings the largest numbers of birds as they pause on their return south. A good place to watch the birds is in the hide that's found in a wood-fenced area just off the road 3km south of the village.

Another flamingo-viewing spot, where you'll probably get closer to the birds, is the small lagoon where the stream **Rambla de Morales** reaches the beach, 2km northwest of El Cabo de Gata village.

A good way to explore the wide, flat area is on a bike, which can be hired in El Cabo de Gata at the **Oficina de Información** (☎ 950 38 00 04; Avenida Miramar 88; 2hr/1 day €4/13; ☹ 10am-2.30pm & 5.30-9pm).

An extremely well run camp site, **Camping Cabo de Gata** (☎/fax 950 16 04 43; camping per person/site €4/8, bungalow €6; ☹ year-round; (P) 🚰) is close to the beach, and probably the best place to stay in El Cabo de Gata. It has all the necessary amenities, including a restaurant and 250 sites. You will find it 2km down a signposted side road southwest of Ruescas.

Hostal Las Dunas (☎ 950 37 00 72; www.lasdunas.net; Calle Barrio Nuevo 58; s/d €36/51; (P)) is a friendly family house with well-kept, modern rooms and crazy balustraded balconies in carved marble.

Right at the entrance to the village, **Blanca Brisa** (☎/fax 950 37 00 01; www.blancabrisa.com; Las Joricas 49; s/d €39/65; (P)), a big peach-coloured hotel, has clean and comfortable rooms with no décor to speak of. It has a large, decent restaurant (one of the few restaurants in town) with *platos combinados* (mixed plates) for about €5.

At the southern end of town, **La Goleta** (☎ 950 37 02 15; mains €5-20; ☹ closed Mon Oct-Jun & Nov) has good seafood and great sunset views from the beach tables.

El Naranjero (☎ 950 37 01 11; Calle Iglesia 1; mains €10-25; ☹ closed Sun) is one of the closest things you'll find to a proper restaurant in El Cabo de Gata, right at the entrance to the village. The Naranjero specialises in fish and seafood and gets busy at lunch time.

Faro de Cabo de Gata & Around

Salt collected from the *salinas* (salt lagoons) is piled up in great heaps at La Almadra de Monteleva. This desolate-looking village has an equally desolate-looking church, the **Iglesia de las Salinas**, whose extremely tall tower dominates the area for miles around.

South of La Almadra the coast becomes abruptly more rugged and the perilously narrow road winds airily around the sharp cliffs. It soon reaches the lonely lighthouse of the **Faro de Cabo de Gata** on the southern tip of the peninsula. From here a *mirador* (lookout) has a view over the jagged reefs of the **Arrecife de las Sirenas** (Reef of the Mermaids).

There is an **information cabin** (☹ 10am-2pm & 4.30-8.30pm May-Sep, 10am-3pm Oct-Apr) that has some information on the park, but it is randomly closed in the off-season. You can pick up information here about the boat trips around the peninsula that are run by

El Cabo a Fondo (reservations ☎ 637 44 91 70). The trips are a wonderful way to view the dramatic coastline.

San José

Almería's attempts at creating a new Costa del Sol along its own coastline have resulted in places like San José or Mojácar Playa (p416), where, as in other resort towns, life happens mostly in the summer. San José does have a more tastefully executed appearance, with low-rise developments, a neat little marina, and a couple of good places to stay. Situated on the edge of the Parque Natural Cabo de Gata-Níjar, there are a host of healthy outdoor activities available, which is one of the reasons Spaniards flock here for the holidays and long weekends. The resort centres around a small sandy bay with a harbour at its eastern end, representing the village's origins as a fishing cove.

Drivers from El Cabo de Gata will have to head inland and turn off in an easterly direction towards Ruescas. After about 61km you will hit the San José-Níjar road. Turn right and after a further 7km you will reach San José.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The road that enters the town eventually becomes San José's main street, Avenida de San José, with the beach, Playa de San José, a couple of blocks down to the left. On Avenida de San José, in the main block of shops and cafés, just before the central Plaza Génova, you'll find a **natural park information office and visitors centre** (☎ 950 38 02 99; ☹ 10am-2pm & 5-9.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun). It sells maps and a range of books, souvenirs and craft work.

Also on Avenida de San José, in the village centre, are a Caja Rural bank, an ATM and a Spar supermarket.

ACTIVITIES

The information office can tell you about bicycle rental, boat trips, 4WD tours and diving. For horse riding, book a 45-minute lesson (€21.05) at the **Hotel Cortijo el Sotillo** (right), or take a cross-country ride to Playa de los Genoveses (€45, 2½ hours) or further into the *parque natural* (€64, 3½ hours). Almería's **Eolo** (☎ 950 26 17 35, 670-391480; www.eolo-wind.com; Avenida del Cabo de Gata 185, Almería)

also organises activity trips to the *parque natural*.

SLEEPING

Camping Tau (☎/fax 950 38 01 66; e@parquenatural.com; camping per adult/child/tent/caravan €4/3.50/5/5.50; ☹ Apr-Sep) A cool, wooded camping ground, set 250m back from the beach, Tau has room for 185 people and is very popular with families. Follow the 'Tau' sign pointing left along Camino de Cala Higuera as you approach central San José from the north.

Instalación Juvenil de San José (☎ 950 38 03 53; fax 950 38 02 13; Calle Montemar s/n; bunks €8; ☹ Apr-Sep) A friendly, non-Inturjovent youth hostel run by the local municipality, which stays open over the Christmas and New Year period and long weekends. To find it, head towards Camping Tau but turn right after crossing a dry river bed, then take the first left up the hill.

Hostal Sol Bahía (☎ 950 38 03 07; fax 950 38 03 06; Avenida de San José; d €70; 🚰) and its sister establishment **Hostal Bahía Plaza** (Avenida de San José) across the street, are bright, modern buildings in the centre of San José with 34 simple but decent and clean rooms with TV.

Hotel Cortijo el Sotillo (☎ 950 61 11 00; Carretera Entrada a San José s/n; s/d €120/141; (P) 🚰 🚰) Depending on the season, this ranch-style complex can be a romantic getaway for couples, or a family spot to release shouting children. The house is an authentic 19th-century *cortijo* (country property) with rural-style rooms and on-site riding. It has an excellent restaurant serving regional cuisine.

Hotel Doña Pakyta (☎ 950 61 11 75; fax 950 61 10 62; Calle del Correo; d with sea view €151; (P) 🚰) This place has an unparalleled sense of space, with huge picture windows framing magnificent sea views that greet you as you enter the cool, white lobby. Rooms are large and spacious, in sea blues and whites and there's a beach right below the hotel. A room with a terrace is a must (those without are only €10 cheaper) to enjoy the wonderful views.

Plenty of apartments are available for rent (ask at the tourist office or look for signs); two people can pay as little as €18 a day for a few days' stay in the off-season, though it costs more like €60 during July and August.

EATING

Restaurante El Emigrante (☎ 950 38 03 07; Avenida de San José; fish & meat mains €6-12) Under the same

TOP BEACHES ALONG EL CABO DE GATA

- Cala Carbón – Fine sand, gorgeous sea
- Cala de la Media Luna – More fabulous swimming and sunbathing
- Playa Mónsul – As featured in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*
- Playa del Barronal – Get in your birthday suit
- Calas del Barronal – The four seductive Calas are a dream
- Playa de los Genoveses – 1km of fine sand
- Playa San Pedro – A ruined hamlet beach now housing New Age hippies

ownership as the *Bahía hostales* (p413), Emigrante is a somewhat ordinary but dependable option in the centre of town. A breakfast of orange juice, toast and coffee costs €3.

Hotel Cortijo el Sotillo (☎ 950 61 11 00; Carretera Entrada a San José s/n; mains €8-14) Almost always full thanks to its honest and hearty regional food, the huge, echoing dining room of the *cortijo* has satisfied diners eating lunch up to 5pm in the afternoon. Reservations are recommended.

La Gallineta (☎ 950 38 05 01; Pozo de los Frailes; mains €8-18; ☎ 8pm-late Tue-Sun, closed mid-Jan-end-Feb) A small, elegant restaurant 4km north of San José where urbanites on weekend escapes come for the inventive food with an international twist. Try the prawns in mango purée (€7.50) or the fillet of beef in a thick Pedro Ximénez gravy (€18).

Mesón El Tempranillo (☎ 950 38 00 59; Puerto de San José 6-7; mains €9-15) One of a number of good fish restaurants found beneath a string of colourful awnings near the harbour. Eat out on the shaded veranda that overlooks the beach.

Also try **La Cueva** (☎ 950 38 01 54; Puerto Deportivo 3, 4 & 5; mains €8-14), another good fish eatery, next door to Mesón El Tempranillo.

GETTING AROUND

There is a reasonable amount of parking on Avenida de San José, on the north side of the main beach, and at the harbour. Taxis can be contacted on ☎ 950 38 97 37 or 608 056255.

San José to Las Negras

The rugged coast northeast of San José has only two small settlements, the odd fort and a few beaches before the village of Las Negras (17km northeast from San José, as the crow flies). The road can be confusing as it spends most of its time diverting inland.

The hamlet of **Los Escullos** has a short, mainly sandy beach and a restored old fort, the Castillo de San Felipe. You can walk here from San José along a track from Cala Higuera. **La Isleta del Moro**, 1km further northeast, is a gorgeous, tiny fishing village on the western arm of a wide bay, with the **Playa del Peñón Blanco** stretching to its east. The beach is small but relatively quiet.

From here, the road climbs to a good viewpoint, the **Mirador de la Amatista**, before heading inland past the former gold-mining village of Rodalquilar. About 1km past Rodalquilar is the turning for **Playa del Playazo**, 2km away along a level track. This attractive, sandy beach stretches between two headlands, one topped by the Bateria de San Ramón fortification (now a private home). From here you can walk along the coast to Camping La Caleta and the village of Las Negras.

The tiny village of **Las Negras** stands above a pebbly beach that runs north towards Punta del Cerro Negro, an imposing headland of volcanic rock, and has a small population of young hippies giving it some oomph.

SLEEPING & EATING

Los Escullos

Camping Los Escullos (☎ 950 38 98 11; camping per 2 people, tent, car & electrical hook-up €19; ☎ year-round; (P) (S)) This large, moderately shaded place is 900m back from the Los Escullos beach. It has a pool, restaurant, grocery store and ATM, and bikes for hire.

Hotel Los Escullos (☎ 950 38 97 33; d incl breakfast €85; ☎) A small hotel near the beach with reasonable rooms (all with TV). It also has a restaurant serving limited fare for between €8 and €15.

La Isleta del Moro

Hostal Isleta del Moro (☎ 950 38 97 13; fax 950 38 97 64; s/d €21/43) This *hostal* is in a superb

DETOUR: LAS NEGRAS TO AGUA AMARGA

There's no road along this cliff-lined and secluded stretch of the Cabo de Gata coast, but walkers can take an up-and-down path of 11km (four to five hours). **Playa San Pedro**, one hour's walk from Las Negras, is the site of a ruined hamlet whose buildings (including a castle) once housed an international colony of two or three dozen hippies and the occasional wandering tourist. It's 1½ hours' walk on from San Pedro to **Cala del Plomo**, a beach with another tiny settlement. You could stop at the little **Cala de Enmedio** beach, half an hour after Cala del Plomo, before heading on for about one hour to reach Agua Amarga.

location overlooking La Isleta del Moro's harbour. It also has a good restaurant that serves fresh seafood.

Las Negras

The largest settlement along this stretch of coast is the hamlet of Las Negras, which has good *hostal* accommodation, camping facilities and one or two eateries.

Camping La Caleta (☎ 950 52 52 37; camping per adult/child/tent/car €5/5/4.50/5; ☎ year-round; (P) (S)) This place lies in a valley 1km south of Las Negras, in a separate cove. It can be fiercely hot in summer, but there is a good pool.

Hostal Arcefe (☎ 950 38 81 40; Calle Bahía 6; s/d €26/38) A very well maintained small *hostal* on the main street in Las Negras. The rooms are cool and quiet and some of them have sea views from their balconies.

Other accommodation in Las Negras consists of holiday apartments and houses to let, but you may find a few signs offering rooms by the night. For food, try **Restaurante La Palma** (☎ 950 38 80 42; mains €5-10), a relaxed shack overlooking the beach, for good music and excellent fish at medium prices.

Another option is **Pizza y Pasta** (☎ 950 38 80 97; Calle San Pedro; mains €5-6; ☎ Mar-Nov), a friendly Italian restaurant with checked tablecloths and a small patio. Pop across the road to the perpetually busy **Cerro Negro** (Calle San Pedro), whose outside tables are invariably occupied by hippies or bright young things chilling out with a cold beer.

Agua Amarga

Agua Amarga is to trendy Madrid professionals what the Hamptons is to New York's darlings. Well, almost. The style is suitably understated here. The unassuming village has a low-key, relaxed feeling, with the emphasis on quality, chic and expensive accommodation and inventive-cuisine restaurants. House prices have soared in the past few years with everyone wanting their own authentic village house. Sandy streets, surfer shops and boho-chic make this just about the most fashionable fishing village on the coast.

There are boats for hire on the long sandy beach and 3km east (up the Carboneras road) is a turning to a cliff-top lighthouse, the **Faro de la Mesa Roldán** (1.25km away), from where there are spectacular views. From the car park by the turning you can walk down to the naturist **Playa de los Muertos**.

Drivers from Las Negras to Agua Amarga must head inland through Hortichuelas. From the bus shelter on the eastern side of the road in Fernán Pérez, you head northeast for 10km on a new tarmac road until you meet the N341. Turn right here for Agua Amarga.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hostal Restaurante La Palmera (☎ 950 13 82 08; Calle Aguada s/n; d €90; ☎) With a breezy, beachfront location in the middle of the action, La Palmera has 10 bright rooms with rocking chairs and half-moon balconies. The restaurant (mains €7 to €15) has a nice beach terrace and is the locals' favourite for lunch.

Hostal Familia (☎ 950 13 80 14; fax 950 13 80 70; Calle La Lomilla; d with breakfast with/without sea views €120/80; ☎) A relaxed place, set amid trees, with prices that don't quite match the effort: the rooms are big and comfortable, but their décor is patchy at times and the baths are quite run-down. The *hostal* is renowned for its excellent three-course North African-influenced *menú* (€18).

Hotel El Tio Kiko (☎ 950 13 80 80; www.eltiokiko.com; Calle Embarque; d €150; (P) (S) (S)) El Tio Kiko is a top-of-the-range large hotel where all rooms enjoy lovely views over the bay. The style is something akin to Mexican adobe with lots of wood and white.

MiKasa (☎ 950 13 80 73; www.mikasasuites.com; Carretera Carboneras s/n; s €85, d incl breakfast €105-190, ste €219-235 (P) (S) (S)) The slick and chic MiKasa

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Casa Café de la Loma (☎ 950 38 98 31; www.degata.com/laloma; La Isleta del Moro; s/d €30/45 Sep-Jul, s/d €35/52 Aug) This is true Mediterranean heaven in an old *cortijo* (farm house) that has been kept simple and beautiful, with a large, wild garden, terrific views of the sea and the village beach, and friendly owners. The 6 airy rooms have rustic and North African mementos and mosquito nets hang over each bed. In the summer months, a restaurant opens with vegetarian and meaty dishes, and there are jazz and flamenco concerts once a week in the garden, under candle light. The Casa is not far from La Isleta del Moro along the road to Las Negras.

has understated, elegant décor with super-comfortable rooms, some with fresh floral patterns and others in Oriental-style opulence, coir matting, colonial recliners and discreet balconies. A savvy crowd of professionals rush down here from Madrid for long weekends. Cold and heated swimming pools, Jacuzzi baths and a small health spa make this Almería's most romantic hideaway.

Café Bar La Plaza (☎ 950 13 82 14; Calle Ferracarril Minero; platos combinados €6) Located in the village square, this is a cheerful, down-to-earth favourite of the locals. Try the delicious fish soup.

La Villa (☎ 950 13 80 90; Carretera Carboneras s/n; mains €18-20; ☎ 8.30am-late, closed Wed) Right next door to MiKasa and run by the same family, La Villa offers the same stylish environment and a quality international *menú* influenced by the family's extensive travels. Meals can be taken outside around the atmospheric pool.

MOJÁCAR

pop 6000

There are two Mojácars: old Mojácar Pueblo, a village that looks like a multilevel wedding

cake melting down the cliff, with its jumble of white, cube houses on top of a steep hill 2km inland. Then there is Mojácar Playa, a soulless modern coastal resort 7km long but only a few blocks wide. Mojácar Pueblo is dominated by tourism, but retains its picturesque charms and can still captivate with its maze-like streets, and balconies swathed in bougainvilleas. Mojácar Playa is a relentless strip of hotels, apartments, shops, bars and restaurants, and is home to northern European retirees and year-round caravan-dwellers seeking sunshine. There is a good, long beach and a lively summer scene, but life slows down from October to Easter.

From the 13th to the 15th century, Mojácar Pueblo stood on the Granada emirate's eastern frontier and suffered several Christian attacks, including a notorious massacre in 1435, before finally succumbing to the Catholic Monarchs in 1488. Tucked away in an isolated corner of one of Spain's most backward regions, it was decaying and almost abandoned by the mid-20th century before its mayor lured artists and others with giveaway property offers.

Orientation

Mojácar is divided into two distinct areas: the *playa*, the developed beachfront, running for several kilometres, and the pueblo, the old village located on a hilltop 2km inland. To reach the pueblo from the *playa* turn inland at the roundabout by the huge shopping centre, Parque Comercial. Regular buses run from the pueblo to the *playa* and vice versa.

Information

In Mojácar Pueblo, both Banesto and Unicaja (across the square) have ATMs, as does Banco de Andalucía, which is located in the Parque Comercial.

Centro Médico (medical centre; ☎ 950 47 51 05; Parque Comercial, Mojácar Playa; ☎ 10am-1pm & 5.30-8pm) General medical help. English and French are spoken.

Information booth (☎ 950 47 87 26; Paseo del Mediterráneo, Mojácar Playa; ☎ 10am-2pm & 5-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-1.30pm Sat Apr-Sep) Opposite the Parque Comercial.

Policia Local (☎ 950 47 20 00; Calle Glorieta, Mojácar Pueblo) In the same building as the tourist office.

Post office (Calle Glorieta, Mojácar Pueblo; ☎ 12.30-2.30pm Mon-Fri & 10am-noon Sat) In the same building as the tourist office.

Tinta y Papel (☎ 950 47 27 92; Centro Comercial, Plaza Nueva, Mojácar Pueblo) Located on the 1st floor of the shopping centre; there are maps of the region and some tourist books.

Tito's (☎ 950 61 50 30; Playa de las Ventánicas, Mojácar Playa; per hr €3; ☎ 10am-8.30pm, closed when raining) Internet access; a lively outdoor bar overlooking one of the beaches along Mojácar Playa.

Tourist office (☎ 950 47 51 62; info@mojacar.es; Calle Glorieta, Mojácar Pueblo; ☎ 10am-2pm & 5-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-1.30pm Sat) Just north of Plaza Nueva; a very helpful office.

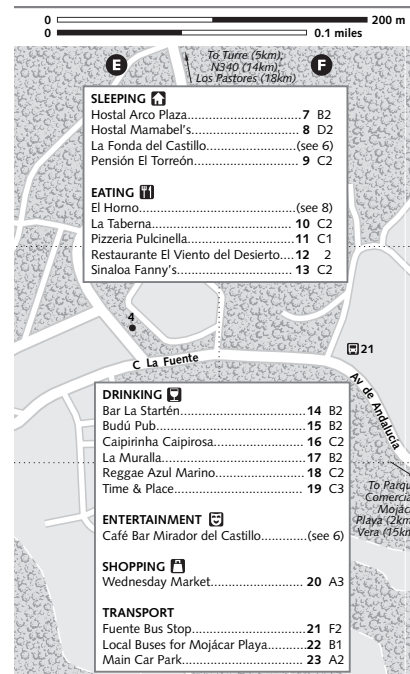
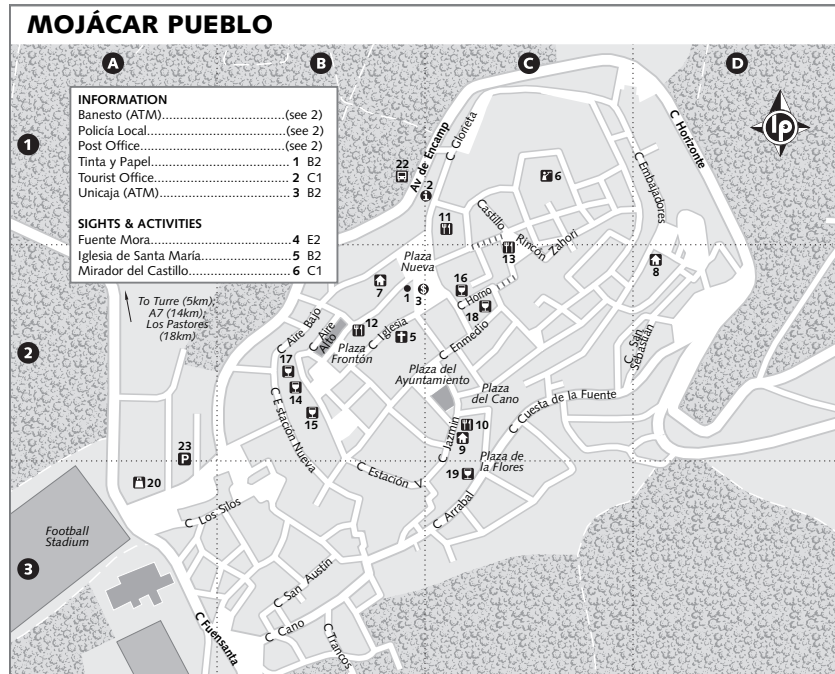
Sights & Activities

The best way to see the pueblo is to wander around the quaint streets with their flower-decked balconies, and browse through the boutiques. There are great views from the public terraces of **Mirador del Castillo**, located at the top of the village. The fortress-style **Iglesia de Santa María** (Calle Iglesia) is just south of Plaza Nueva and dates from 1560. On Calle La Fuente is the remodelled, though still expressive **Fuente Mora** (Moorish Fountain), a fine example of the Spanish-Islamic tradition of enhancing function with artistry. An inscription records the last Muslim governor's noble plea for Mojácar Muslims to be allowed to remain in their home. The plea was made to the Catholic Monarchs, who usurped the governor in 1488.

Apart from Mojácar Playa's long, sandy main beach, a number of more secluded beaches are strung out to the south of the town. Some of those beyond the **Torre de Macenas**, an 18th-century fortification, are naturist beaches. For good windsurfing equipment (per hour €12), canoeing, sailing and water-skiing (per session €20), check out **Samoa Club** (☎ 666 442263, 950 47 84 90; Playa de las Ventánicas, Mojácar Playa), on one of the beaches on Mojácar Playa. For some exciting quad biking (one hour €35) in the Cabrera mountains contact **Mojácar Quad Treks** (☎ 600 258385, 637 925505; Paseo del Mediterráneo).

Festivals & Events

On the weekend nearest 10 June, see Mamebel's (p418) costumes in action for the re-enactment of the Christian conquest of Mojácar, **Moros y Cristianos**. There's dancing, processions and other festivities.



THE MOORS' LAST SIGH

Driven from the heady heights of Granada in 1492, the remaining Andalusian Muslims retreated east to Almería's and Granada's Alpujarras valleys, Mojácar, Murcia and Valencia. However, over the next century they were inexorably pressured to convert to Christianity or emigrate to North Africa.

During Inquisition times, members of the Muslim community were banned from reading or writing Arabic and were forced into mass conversions in the 1490s. Many did convert (becoming known as Moriscos), but this conversion was superficial and revolts ensued over the years. In 1609 the Inquisition finally sought the official expulsion of the Moriscos and over the next few years some 300,000 (some say three million) Muslim Spaniards were expelled from Al-Andalus. The refugees were only permitted to take belongings that they could carry, and they arrived at the ports, 'tired, in pain, lost, exhausted, sad, confused, ashamed, angry, crestfallen, irritated, bored, thirsty and hungry' as Father Áznar Cardona observed. Children under seven were not allowed to travel directly to Islamic lands, forcing many families to give them up to Christian orphanages. The arrival of the refugees in the ancestral homeland was far from comfortable – dressed as Europeans, with many of them having forgotten their Arabic mother-tongue, they were quickly labelled the 'Christians of Castile'.

Interestingly, when photographer Kurt Hielscher arrived in Mojácar in the early 20th century he found the local women dressed in black, wearing veils over their faces. At the entrance to the village there was a sign stating 'Mojácar, Kingdom of Granada' as though the last 400 years had never happened.

Sleeping

MOJÁCAR PUEBLO

Hostal Arco Plaza (☎ 950 47 27 77; fax 950 47 27 17; Calle Aire Bajo 1; s/d €36/52; 🚻) Bang in the centre of the village, this *hostal* has spacious bathrooms, sky-blue rooms with wrought-iron beds, crisp white linen, and great views of the Plaza Nueva and the valley below. Bedrooms also have TVs, and the management is incredibly friendly and efficient.

La Fonda del Castillo (☎ 950 47 30 22; www.elcastillomojacar.com; Mirador del Castillo; d €48-54; 🚻) This laid-back *hostal* manages to stay just the right side of characterful. Peeling paint and a bit of damp do nothing to eclipse the bohemian atmosphere. Bedrooms and bathrooms are neat and all have fantastic views. There is a bar, **Café Bar Mirador del Castillo** (opposite), in front of the house, with some rooms above it. More rooms are around a courtyard (with a pool in the middle) at the back.

Pensión El Torreón (☎ 950 47 52 59; Calle Jazmín 4; d with shared bathroom €60) A breathtakingly beautiful little *hostal* with a bougainvillea-clad terrace overlooking the village. The five rooms are almost English-countryside quaint, with lace-work linen and antique bits and bobs. The new, English owners are promising en-suite rooms. The house is allegedly the birthplace of Walt Disney, who

was, according to the locals, the love-child of a village girl and a wealthy landowner.

Hostal Mamabel's (☎/fax 950 47 24 48; www.mamabels.com; Calle Embajadores 5; d/st€ 65/87) Mamabel is quite a character and her *hostal* almost serves like a showcase for her handmade dolls and exquisitely decorated rooms, individually styled with antiques. She also makes costume dresses for the Moros y Cristianos festival, if you're in town. Some rooms have fantastically precipitous views from their windows and terraces.

MOJÁCAR PLAYA

Almost everything here is on Paseo del Mediterráneo, the main road running along the beach.

Hotel Río Abajo (☎ 950 47 89 28; www.mojacar.info /rio-abajo in Spanish; Calle Río Abajo; d €57; 🚻) Nestling amid trees in a residential cul-de-sac on the edge of the Lagunas del Río Aguas, this has to be the most tranquil hotel on the *playa*. Nineteen blue and white pueblo-style chalets are dotted among lush gardens, with direct access to the broad, sandy beach. It's a fantastic place for kids and there are even swings in the gardens.

Hotel Felipe San Bernabé (☎ 950 47 82 02; fax 950 47 27 35; Playa Las Ventanicas; d €66; 🚻) Completely different from the Río Abajo, this is a swish (and good-value) hotel with well-

appointed rooms. Set back from one of the better beaches, the hotel's main feature is its excellent restaurant (right).

Hotel El Puntazo (☎ 950 47 82 65; Paseo del Mediterráneo 257; 1-star d €57, 3-star d €116; 🚻 🚻) The sprawling Puntazo comprises separate but adjacent hotels of one and three stars, under the same management. It has comfortable (if soulless) modern rooms and arranges plenty of activities, making it popular with families.

Parador de Mojácar (☎ 950 47 82 50; www.parador.es; Paseo Mediterráneo; s/d €79/99; 🚻 🚻 🚻) A few hundred metres south of the Parque Comercial, Mojácar's *parador* (one of the Paradores de Turismo, a chain of luxurious hotels, often in historic buildings) is a modern building with lavish gardens and is well located for the golf course.

Eating

MOJÁCAR PUEBLO

La Taberna (☎ 647 72 43 67; Plaza del Cano 1; tapas & platos combinados from €4) Good tapas and tasty vegetarian bites get everyone cramming into this thriving little restaurant inside a warren of intimate rooms, full of chatter and belly-full diners. There's also an enormous house kebab that arrives on its own scaffolding!

Restaurante El Viento del Desierto (Plaza Frontón; mains €5-6) A good-value Moroccan restaurant just by the church. It is well regarded by the locals and makes a nice change from tapas, although it also does standard Spanish dishes such as pork fillet with mushrooms or rabbit in mustard.

Pizzeria Pulcinella (Cuesta del Castillo; pizzas €6, pasta from €7) For cheap eats you should check out this cheerful place which has good views over the *playa*.

Sinaloa Fanny's (☎ 950 47 22 73; Rincón Zahori; meat & fish mains €8; 🚻 closed Wed Oct-May) This laid-back Mexican joint is run by the affable Steve, who has lived in Mojácar for 20 years. Reputed to have the largest selection of tequilas in Spain, the restaurant also has slow internet access, a pool table and vertiginous terraces.

El Horno (☎ 950 47 24 48; Calle Embajadores 5; menú €13, mains €11-16) The stylish restaurant of Hostal Mamabel's (opposite) is the best place for home-cooked food in Mojácar, including a tasty couscous dish. The location also has excellent views. Definitely not to be missed.

MOJÁCAR PLAYA

Maskó (☎ 950 47 22 47; Parque Comercial; pastries €1.50-2 🚻 8am-late) A real Italian-run café with strong espresso and foamy cappuccinos, plus a huge selection of pastries, cakes, ice creams, sandwiches and snacks. Open almost all the time, this place is the main rendezvous in town and is perpetually busy.

Hotel Restaurante Felipe San Bernabé (☎ 950 47 82 02; Playa Las Ventanicas; mains €11-16) A plush conservatory-style restaurant decked out in cool whites and greens, with big wine glasses and pristine white tablecloths getting dirty with some excellent Spanish cooking. There's a good selection of fish dishes and good-value tapas.

Los Pastores (☎ 950 46 80 02; Cortijo Cabrera, Turre; mains €9-16; 🚻 Tue-Sun) It's an epic journey to reach this modest eatery, but it is worth it, especially on the weekends (when it is advisable to book two days in advance). The cosy public interior belies the excellent cooking – home-made pastas, grilled sea breams, giant king prawns – and a commendable wine list. From Mojácar head towards the A7 *autovía* (toll-free dual carriageway). Turn left (through a large stone gateway) after about 10km, at the sign for Cortijo Grande. Drive a further 8km past the golf course and up to Cabrera at the top of the hill. There are occasional signs for the restaurant en route.

Drinking & Entertainment

Classical music, live comedy acts and jazz concerts are staged at the lively **Café Bar Mirador del Castillo** (☎ 950 47 30 22; Mirador del Castillo, Mojácar Pueblo; 🚻 11am-11pm or later). There's a throng of busy summer bars in Mojácar Pueblo but some of the better ones include the following:

Bar La Sartén (Calle Estación Nueva) Keeps going even longer than Time & Place, with a terrific stir of conversation and character.

Budú Pub (Calle Estación Nueva) Has a great roof-terrace.

Caipirinha Caipirosa (Calle Horno) Mexican style.

La Muralla (Calle Estación Nueva) Has the most romantic views from its *mirador* terrace.

Reggae Azul Marino (Calle Enmedio)

Time & Place (Plaza de la Flores) For good conversation and late-night drinking; a stylish place that keeps going to the early hours.

Unless indicated, all the bars are open evenings only from 8pm until late. Bars on Mojácar Playa include the following:

La Mar Salada (Paseo del Mediterráneo 62, Mojácar Playa; ☎ 10am-late Mon-Fri, 11am-late Sat) The beach-front bar of the moment.

Tito's (☎ 950 61 50 30, Playa de las Ventánicas; 📅 Apr-Oct) Lively and long-established. On one of the beaches on Mojácar Playa, Tito's features live music, including jazz.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Long-distance buses stop at the Parque Comercial and at the Fuente bus stop at the foot of Mojácar Pueblo. The tourist office has bus timetables.

Alsa Enatcar (☎ 902 42 22 42; www.alsa.es) runs daily buses to/from Murcia (€9, 2½ hours, four daily), Almería (€5.50, 1¾ hours, two daily), Granada (€15, four hours, two daily) and Madrid (€29, eight hours, two daily). There's a bus to Málaga daily except Sunday and holidays. For Almería, Granada and Murcia you buy tickets on the bus; for Málaga and Madrid you must book at a travel agency such as **Viajes Cemo** (☎ 950 47 28 35; Paseo del Mediterráneo, Mojácar Playa), 2km south of the Parque Comercial (Pueblo Indalo bus stop). Buses to Alicante, Valencia and Barcelona go from Vera, 16km north, which is served by several daily buses from Mojácar (€1.20, 50 minutes, nine daily).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Mojácar is 14km east of the A7. A winding, scenic coastal road approaches Mojácar from Agua Amarga and Carboneras to the south.

Getting Around

A local bus service (€1) runs a circuit from the southern to the northern end of Mojácar Playa, then back to the Parque Comercial, up to the pueblo (stopping near the tourist office), then back down to the *playa*. It runs every half-hour from 9am to 11.30pm, April to September, and every hour from 9.30am to 7.30pm, October to March, reaching the pueblo in 15 minutes.

Parking in Mojácar Playa is along the seaward side of the main road. In Mojácar Pueblo you should follow the one-way system along Avenida de Paris to reach the main car park, at Plaza Rey Alabes. Mojácar's Wednesday market takes over the car park. It is not advisable to leave your car in this car park overnight on Tuesday night, when parking is transferred to the

nearby football stadium for the duration of the market. **Taxis** (☎ 950 47 81 84) hang about in Plaza Nueva. There are several car-rental offices strung out along Mojácar Playa.

VERA & AROUND

Vera pop 6500 / elevation 102m

Almería's once neglected stretch of coast from Mojácar to the provincial border with Murcia is now attracting many holiday-makers, some wearing nothing but their birthday suits. They are especially drawn to the big sandy beaches either side of the Río Almanzora. Here, one of the largest naturist resorts in Europe is still developing within a vast complex of apartments, villas and hotels. Further north is the darkly dramatic Costa Almagrera, backed by the brooding hills of the Sierra Almagrera, where few locals and visitors set foot.

Mojácar to Cuevas de Almanzora

Five kilometres north of Mojácar is the fishing port of **Garrucha**, a bustling holiday resort with a fun harbour where there is a clutch of good fish restaurants such as **Restaurante Rincón del Puerto** (☎ 950 13 30 42; Puerto Deportivo s/n; raciones €6-10). There are beaches at the southern entrance to the town. The cosmopolitan **Hotel Tikar** (☎ 950 61 71 31; www.hoteltikar.com; Carretera Garrucha-Vera s/n; d €89/115; 📅 📅), with its excellent restaurant and modern rooms in burnt orange and blue, is the best place to stay, even if it is set back off the beach.

Just beyond Garrucha the main road heads inland for 8km to **Vera**. There is little to interest the visitor in Vera itself other than the handsome **Iglesia de la Encarnación**. In front of the church is a charming, pedestrianised square, a haven amid Vera's otherwise traffic-logged streets. The town has a complicated one-way traffic system and, if you plan to stop off during the busy morning period, it's best to park on the outskirts and walk in.

For some child-friendly fun, head inland to the **Parque Acuático Vera** (☎ 950 46 73 37; www.aquavera.com in Spanish; Carretera Vera-Villaricos; adult/child €13/8; 📅 11am-6pm 18 May-end Jun & 1-17 Sep, 10.30am-7.30pm Jul & Aug). Children will also enjoy poking around in the troglodyte dwellings at **Cuevas de Almanzora**, a busy agricultural town lying 6km north of Vera. The caves, which are known properly as the

Cuevas del Calguerin (☎ 950 45 66 51, 639 101948; admission €5; 📅 guided visits 11am, 2pm, 4pm & 9pm, in Spanish only), pock-mark several layers of cliff-face on the northern outskirts of the town (follow the signs for 'Cuevas Históricas'). The price for the cave tour does not quite match what you get, but it is fascinating nevertheless. There are 8600 caves (some permanently inhabited), and the tour provides an insight into cave life.

The town's other big attraction is the handsome **Castillo Marqués de Los Vélez** at the heart of the town, which houses a **Museo Arqueológico** and the **Museo Antonio Manuel Campoy** (☎ 950 45 80 63; admission free; 📅 10am-1.30pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-1.30pm Sun). The latter exhibits a large and fascinating selection of artworks, from the outstanding private collection of Antonio Manuel Campoy, a native of Cuevas who was one of Spain's greatest 20th-century art critics.

There is not much accommodation in Cuevas itself, but the large **Cuatro Vientos** (☎ 950 45 62 28; Avenida Atrales 21; s/d €20/40; 📅 📅), opposite the bus station, has reasonable rooms.

Vera Playa & the Sierra Almagrera

Back on the coast, Vera Playa comprises the good beaches to either side of the mouth of the Río Almanzora and is exuberantly naturist. The big **Camping Almanzora** (☎ /fax 950 46 74 25; Carretera de Garrucha a Villaricos; camping per adult/child/tent/car €4/3.50/4/4) has a *zona naturista* for naturists and a *zona textiles* for the clothed, although the beach is healthily all-embracing.

There is big money to be made in putting a roof over the unclothed, it seems. Pretty unsightly, large developments are springing up, and complexes such as **Vera Playa Club** (☎ 950 46 74 75; Carretera de Garrucha a Villaricos; d from €180) and a clutch of equally expensive apartments shut off the beaches from the main road, although there are access points for all.

Just to the north is the pleasant village of Villaricos, which heralds a sudden return to traditional buildings after the vast architectural confessions of Vera Playa. It has a pebbly beach and a smart little harbour at its northern end. Close by, **Diving Vivariva** (☎ 950 46 75 72; Puerto de la Esperanza 7) runs diving trips and courses in the crystal-clear waters of the Almagrera coast. Hire of a boat and

equipment costs around €45 while a 'Discover Scuba' course is around €85.

The **Hostal Restaurante Don Tadeo** (☎ /fax 950 46 71 05; Calle Baria 37; s/d €24/36), has decent rooms, although **Hostal Restaurante Playa Azul** (☎ 950 46 70 75; Calle Barea 62; s/d €24/48) is a better offer, with balconied rooms and an excellent restaurant.

You'll need your own transport to explore further north from here. The road winds on for 8km between the coast and the gaunt, wrenched-looking slopes of the Sierra Almagrera. There is a rare sense of isolation along the coast until the road reaches the village of El Pozo del Esparto. Beyond El Pozo, San Juan de los Terreros is the last resort before the border with Murcia.

Getting There & Away

There are plenty of buses between Almería and Vera (€6.50, 2¾ hours, 10 daily) and between Mojácar, Garrucha (€0.80, 30 minutes, nine daily) and Vera (€1.20, 50 minutes, nine daily). Several buses also travel between Mojácar, Vera and Cuevas de Almanzora (€2, 15 minutes) but there are no regular bus connections to Villaricos and north along the Almagrera coast. In July and August there are infrequent connections to Villaricos from Vera. Schedules change each year so it's best to contact **Vera bus station** (☎ /fax 950 39 04 10).

LOS VÉLEZ

VÉLEZ BLANCO & AROUND

Vélez Blanco pop 2300 / elevation 1070m

The beautiful, sparse landscape of Los Vélez district lies 60km inland from Vera. Its main settlements are the three small towns Vélez Rubio, Vélez Blanco and María, which nestle in the shadow of the remote Sierra de María range. Much of the range is protected, in the Parque Natural Sierra de María-Los Vélez. The most attractive and interesting of the towns is Vélez Blanco, with its dramatic castle overlooking a scramble of red-tiled houses.

Information

At Vélez Blanco's **Centro de Visitantes Almacén del Trigo** (☎ 950 41 53 54; Avenida del Marqués de los Vélez; 📅 10am-2pm Tue, Thu & Sun, 10am-2pm & 4-6pm Fri & Sat), information on walking routes,

refuges and general attractions is available. The centre is on the northern edge of town. If arriving by car from the south, reaching it is easier by following the main road that bypasses Vélez Blanco, then entering the town by its northern access road. Another natural park visitor centre, the **Centro de Visitantes Mirador Umbría de María** (☎ 950 52 70 05) is 2km west of María off the A317 and has similar opening times to the Vélez Blanco office.

In Vélez Blanco there is a post office on Calle Clavel and an ATM at the start of Calle Vicente Sánchez, at the eastern end of Calle La Corredera (the main street). The ATM is behind a solid metal grille, so don't get your hand stuck.

Sights

Vélez Blanco's pride and joy is the very imposing **Castillo de los Fajardo** (☎ 607 41 50 55; adult/child €1/0.50; ☎ 11am-2pm & 5-7pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 11am-4pm Sat, Sun & holidays), a castle that seems to spring naturally from its rocky pinnacle. It confronts the great sphinxlike mountain butte of La Muela across the tiled roofs of the village, as if on a bizarre duel. The castle is built over an earlier Islamic fort and dates from the 16th century. The interior is now rather bare, as the impoverished owners sold off the decorations (including the fabulous carved white marble Patio de Honor) in 1904 to American millionaire George Blumenthal. Next time you're in New York, you can see the lovely patio reconstructed in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

A stroll around Vélez Blanco is rewarding, not least for its delightful maze of streets and its many attractive houses. From the far end of the tree-lined main street, Calle La Corredera, you can head up Calle Vicente Sánchez to reach the castle. On the way, Calle Palacio, the first left, is a good example of Vélez Blanco's stylish domestic architecture, all overhanging tiles and handsome wrought-iron balconies.

Just south of Vélez Blanco on the road from Vélez Rubio, signs point to the **Cueva de los Letreros** (road A317; admission free). The district has several groups of 7000-year-old rock paintings, but it's at this ancient rock shelter that you'll find the most outstanding of them. They include the now ubiquitous Indalo figure (used all over the province as a sign of good luck). For a close-up look,

contact the **Centro de Visitantes Almacén del Trigo** (☎ 950 41 53 54; Avenida del Marqués de los Vélez; ☎ 10am-2pm Tue, Thu & Sun, 10am-2pm & 4-6pm Fri & Sat) and arrange a time for them to open the iron fence around the shelter for you. From the A317 you can drive 500m along the signposted dirt track, then it's a 10-minute walk up to the shelter.

The upland town of **María** is a plain little place but has a fine position against the awesome backdrop of the Sierra de María. It's a good base from which to explore the mountains. The town is surrounded by almond groves that are a glorious froth of pink and white blossom in spring.

About 6km west of María, the A317 heads north onto a high plateau towards the lonely village of **Cañada de Cañepla**, from where it continues, by a superbly scenic road, into the Parque Natural Sierras de Cazorla, Segura y las Villas (p347).

Sleeping & Eating

Hostal La Sociedad (☎ 950 41 50 27; Calle Corredera 5, Vélez Blanco; d €30) Right in the centre of Vélez Blanco, this *hostal* has comfortable rooms run by the same management as the popular **Bar Sociedad** (Calle Corredera; tapas €1.50, menú €9) just across the road.

Casa de los Arcos (☎ 950 61 48 05; Calle San Francisco 2, Vélez Blanco; d/ste €45/65) Located close to the information office in Vélez Blanco, this converted mansion has comfortably renovated rooms that overlook a scenic gorge. The hotel also runs tours to the Cueva de los Letreros (these tours are also open to nonguests).

Hotel Velad Al-Abyadh (☎ 950 41 51 09; www.hotelvelad.com; Calle Balsa Parra 28, Vélez Blanco; s/d with view €45/70; 📞 📺) A mock hunting-lodge with almost medieval rooms and incredible views over the valley, the hotel is at the entrance to Vélez Blanco from Vélez Rubio. Rustic artefacts and exposed brickwork give the place an intimate atmosphere. The hotel also has a good restaurant.

Restaurante Los Vélez (Calle Balsa Parra 15, Vélez Blanco; mains €8-10) Along the street from Hotel Velad, this place does satisfying meals.

Mesón el Molino (☎ 950 41 50 70; Calle Curtidores 1, Vélez Blanco; fish & meat mains €12-15; ☎ closed Thu evening) Tucked away up a narrow lane near the centre of Vélez Blanco is this superb restaurant, with big displays of raw beef and hung hams. The patio has a gurgling stream

channelled through it. Choice ranges from partridge and duck to steak and hake.

In Vélez Rubio and María the following two hotels are the best accommodation options, although it would be preferable to stay in Vélez Blanco, if you can.

Hotel Jardín (☎ 950 41 01 06; N342, Vélez Rubio; s/d €18/30) A huge 1960s building on the old main road at the eastern end of Vélez Rubio. Although rather ugly, it's the best hotel in town and has a friendly bar that serves food.

Hotel Sierramaría (☎ 950 41 71 26; www.hotelsierra maria.com; Paraje la Moratilla, María; s/d €36/58) The Sierramaría is a large, modern motel-style place in María, with superb mountain views. It is reached by turning into Paraje la Moratilla, which is just before Hostal Torrente.

Getting There & Away

Alsina Graells (☎ 968 29 16 12) runs buses each way through Vélez Rubio to Granada (€11, 3½ hours, three daily), Guadix (€7.50, 2½ hours, three daily) and Murcia (€7, 2¼ hours, one daily).

Enatcar (☎ 902 42 22 42) has a bus that runs services from Almería to Vélez Rubio (€11, 2¼ hours, one daily), Vélez Blanco (€11, 2½ hours, one daily) and María (€11, 2½ hours, one daily).

Autobuses Giménez García (☎ 968 44 19 61) has a bus from María to Vélez Blanco, Vélez Rubio and Lorca.

The bus stop in Vélez Rubio is on Avenida de Andalucía at the junction by Hostal Zurich.

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