

# Huelva Province



Out on a limb at Andalucía's far western extremity, Huelva draws few travellers who are not en route to or from Portugal, except for those drawn to the famous Doñana national park with its vast wetlands and celebrated wildlife. But turn off the Algarve-bound motorway and you will find a land of many and surprising pleasures.

Huelva's coast – the western end of the Costa de la Luz (Coast of Light) – is an almost unbroken 110km stretch of broad, Atlantic sand, interrupted here and there by estuaries and coastal wetlands, Doñana's pre-eminent among them, that provide endless fascination for nature lovers. The coast's human settlements range from appealing ports-cum-local-resorts such as Isla Cristina and Punta Umbría to unabashedly industrial Huelva itself – interspersed with, it has to be said, an amount of uninspired, throw-it-up-quick touristic development.

North of the coastal strip, you move into a thinly populated rural zone of sleepy villages and occasionally bustling market towns. The millennia-old, moonlike mining zone around Minas de Riotinto boasts a set of excellent visitor attractions that really bring its past to life, from Phoenician times to the enormous British-run enterprise of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Far northern Huelva is beautiful, verdant, rolling Sierra Morena country and is the province's most glittering secret. Dozens of timeless stone villages are connected by ancient paths winding along river valleys and through emerald woodlands – a walker's and rider's dreamland that's only beginning to be discovered.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Wind your way along the woodland paths among the ageless villages of the **Sierra de Aracena** (p167), west of Aracena
- Discover the wildlife and vast wetlands of the **Parque Nacional de Doñana** (p154)
- Walk in Columbus' footsteps at the **Lugares Colombineos** (p149)
- Expose yourself to the elements and down plates of fresh seafood along the great Atlantic beaches of the **Costa de la Luz** (p152 and p158)
- Live millennia of unique mining history at **Minas de Riotinto** (p162)



■ POPULATION: 484, 000

■ HUELVA AV DAILY HIGH:  
JAN/AUG 12°C/24°C

■ ALTITUDE RANGE: 0M–960M

## HUELVA

pop 145,000

The capital of Huelva is a modern, unsentimental, industrial port city set between the Odiel and Tinto estuaries. Despite its unpromising approaches, central Huelva is a likable, lively place and the city's people are noted for their warmth. Though there's little evidence of it today, Huelva's history dates back an impressive 3000 years to the Phoenician town of Onuba, whose river-mouth location made it a natural base for the export of inland minerals to the Mediterranean. Onuba is one of several locations postulated for the legendary Tartessos (see p24), and was later developed by the Romans. Huelva was devastated by the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, but later grew rapidly as a port and commercial and administrative centre after the British Rio Tinto Company developed the mines in the province's interior in the 1870s. Today Huelva has a sizable fishing fleet, and a heavy dose of petrochemical industry, unignorable on the southeastern approaches.

## ORIENTATION

Huelva's central area is about 1km square, with the main bus station on Calle Doctor Rubio at its western edge, and the train station on Avenida de Italia at its southern edge. The main street is Avenida Martín Alonso Pinzón (also called Gran Vía). Parallel to Avenida Pinzón, one block south, is a long, narrow, pedestrianised shopping street that runs through several names, from Calle Concepción to Calle Berdigón.

## INFORMATION

There are banks and ATMs all over the town centre. The bus and train stations have ATMs, too.

**Ciber@lameda** (Calle Luis Braille s/n; Internet per hr €1.30; ☎ 10am–2pm & 5–9pm Mon–Sat, 5–9pm Sun)

**English Bookshop** (☎ 959 28 10 94; Calle San Cristóbal 11; ☎ 10am–1.30pm & 5.15–8.15pm Mon–Fri, 10am–1.30pm Sat) Sells bestselling fiction, guides and children's books.

**Hospital Juan Ramón Jiménez** (☎ 959 01 60 00; Ronda Exterior Norte) The main general hospital, 4km north of the centre.

**Medical emergency** (☎ 959 49 40 09)

**Municipal Tourist Information Kiosk** (☎ 959 25 12 18; Plaza de las Monjas; ☎ 10am–2.30pm & 3.30–8.30pm Mon–Fri, 10am–2pm & 4.30–6.30pm Sat)

**Policia Local** (Local Police; ☎ 959 21 02 21; Plaza de la Constitución 1) In the *ayuntamiento* (city hall).

**Post office** (Avenida Tomás Domínguez 1; ☎ 8.30am–8.30pm Mon–Fri, 9.30am–2pm Sat)

**Regional Tourist Office** (☎ 959 65 02 00/02; othuelva@andalucia.org; Plaza Alcalde Coto Mora 2; ☎ 9am–7.30pm Mon–Fri, 10am–2pm Sat & Sun) Well informed and helpful.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Like most port cities Huelva can seem rough and ready at times, but most people are open and very friendly. There are a few dodgy characters around, however, so take care of belongings wherever you go and leave nothing in parked cars.

## SIGHTS

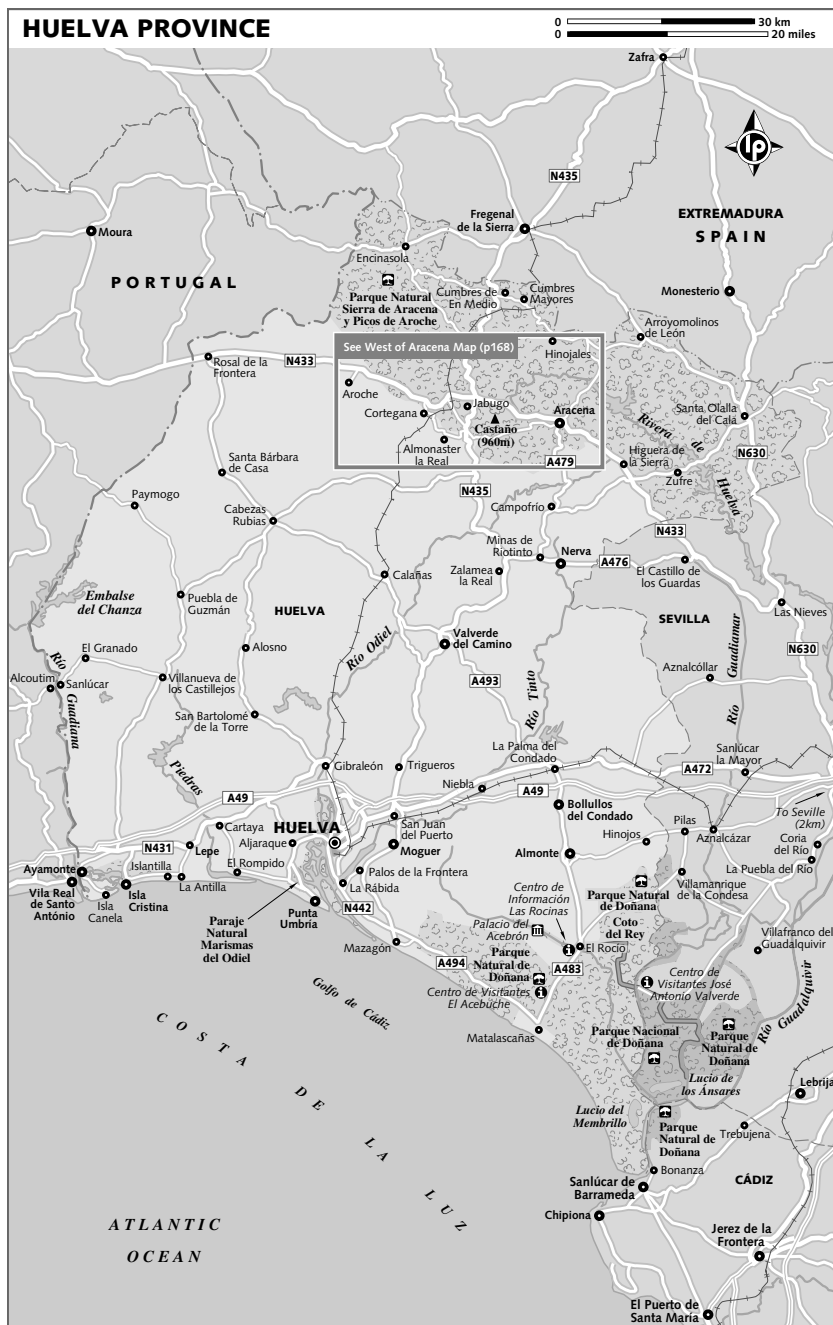
Despite its historical importance, Huelva's sights today are few. The well-displayed main museum, the **Museo Provincial** (☎ 959 25 93 00; Alameda Sundheim 13; admission free; ☎ 2.30–8.30pm Tue, 9am–8.30pm Wed–Sat, 9am–2.30pm Sun), concentrates on the province's archaeological pedigree, especially its mining history (see p162). Pride of place goes to a huge Roman water wheel that was used to extract water from mines near Minas de Riotinto. You'll also see a reconstructed gold-and-wood Phoenician funeral cart. Labelling is in Spanish.

An odd legacy of the area's mining history is the **Muelle Rio Tinto**, an impressive iron pier curving out into the Odiel estuary about 500m south of the port. It was built for the Rio Tinto Company in the 1870s by George Barclay Bruce, a British disciple of tower specialist Gustave Eiffel.

Two kilometres north of the city centre, off Avenida de Manuel Siurot, is the **Santuario de Nuestra Señora de la Cinta** (☎ 959 15 51 22; admission free; ☎ 9am–1pm & 4–7pm), a chapel where Columbus is believed to have prayed after returning from his momentous 1492 voyage. The event is portrayed in tiles by artist Daniel Zuloaga and the chapel's hilltop position affords good views over the Odiel estuary and the wetlands to the west. City bus 6 (€0.80) goes there from outside the main bus station.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

From 29 July to 3 August each year, Huelva celebrates Columbus' departure for the Americas (3 August 1492) with its **Fiestas Colombineas**, six days of music, dancing, fun-fairs, cultural events and bullfighting.



## SLEEPING

Huelva has a limited range of accommodation and a lot of it caters for the business crowd.

**Instalación Juvenil de Huelva** (☎ 959 65 00 10; www.inturjuven.com; Avenida Marchena Colombo 14; per person incl breakfast under 26yr €13-15, over 26yr €17-19; 🚻) A modern youth hostel with a good standard of accommodation: rooms hold two to four and all have a bathroom. It's 2km north of the bus station: city bus 6 (€0.80) from outside the main bus station stops just around the corner, on Calle JS Elcano.

**Hotel Costa de la Luz** (☎ /fax 959 25 64 22; Calle José María Amo 8; s/d €28/50; 🚻) Despite its proximity to the fish market, the Costa de la Luz is reasonable and comfortable. Obviously decorated in a furnishings time warp.

**Hotel Los Condes** (☎ 959 28 24 00; www.hotelloscondes.com in Spanish; Alameda Sundheim 14; s/d incl breakfast €40/59; 🚻) Almost next door to the luxury NH Luz Huelva, Los Condes has 54 air-conditioned rooms at about half the price. They're large, bright and modern, with big gleaming bathrooms. Together with the friendly reception, free internet and a reasonable restaurant, this makes the best value in town.

**NH Luz Huelva** (☎ 959 25 00 11; www.nh-hotels.com; Alameda Sundheim 26; s/d €100/105; 🚻) This is the best hotel Huelva has to offer, with attractive, very comfy rooms in an ugly building with concrete, scallop-shaped balconies. Breakfast (only) is available. It's worth checking the website for discount offers, and ring ahead to book a parking spot.

**Hotel Tartessos** (☎ 959 28 27 11; www.hotel-tartessos.com in Spanish; Avenida Martín Alonso Pinzón 13; s/d €106/116; 🚻) This large, modern hotel has 100 rooms with all the comforts a business traveller expects, plus two restaurants and a piano bar. Rates drop to €63/74 from October to June.

## EATING

Restaurants and tapas bars cluster along and near Avenida Martín Alonso Pinzón, Avenida Pablo Rada and the streets south of the cathedral.

**Taberna El Condado** (☎ 959 26 11 23; Calle Sor Ángela de la Cruz 3; tapas €1.50, raciones €10-15; 🚻 closed Sun) An atmospheric tapas bar of just two

small rooms dominated by a ham-heavy bar, specialising in tasty local meats. Directors' chairs and tables out on the pedestrianised street are great for a quiet evening beer watching the world go by.

**Diez Barriles** (Calle Jesús de la Pasión s/n; tapas €2; 🚻 1pm-11pm or midnight) This popular uptown tapas bar is large, shiny and modernistically minimalist in design, but traditional meats and seafood remain the stocks in trade.

**Pastelería Dioni** (☎ 959 24 06 32; Calle Palacios 3; drink & snack €2-3; 🚻 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-9pm Sun) A glittering bakery with an English-style tearoom upstairs, Dioni is great to drop into for tea or coffee and a mouthwatering array of cakes, pastries and sandwiches from its laden counters.

**Trattoria Fuentevieja** (Avenida Martín Alonso Pinzón s/n; mains €6-11; 🚻 closed Sun evening) This slightly refined and very popular Italian spot serves a good range of salads as well as pizza, pasta and meat dishes, with touches of vaguely classical art amid the tasteful sky-blue-and-lemon decor.

**Las Candelas** (☎ 959 31 84 33; Avenida Huelva s/n, Aljaraque; mains €10-15; 🚻 closed Sun) Huelva's most renowned restaurant is 7km west of the city in Aljaraque. It specialises in delicious fresh fish and *carnes a la brasa* (char-grilled meats), in a traditional inn setting. Turn off the A497 Punta Umbría road at the Aljaraque sign and you'll see the restaurant as you enter the town.

Also recommended:

**La Casa de la Patata** (☎ 959 28 25 75; Calle Ginés Martín s/n; baked potatoes €1.30-3.50; 🚻 closed Sun) Neat uptown diner serving up steaming and satisfying baked potatoes.

**Don Camillo e Peppone Aragón** (☎ 959 28 01 59; Calle Aragón 43; pasta & pizza €5-7; 🚻 closed Tue); **Peral** (☎ 959 28 18 06; Calle Isaac Peral 3; pasta & pizza €5-7; 🚻 closed Wed) Prepares authentic and tasty pizzas and pasta. Both branches get very busy at weekends.

**Restaurante La Caña** (☎ 959 54 16 75; Calle Garcí Fernández 5; mains €10-18; 🚻 closed Sun evening & Mon) A classy place that's particularly good on fish, but there's plenty of meat choice too.

## DRINKING

After 9pm tapas bars such as Taberna El Condado and Diez Barriles (see left) get quite lively. Later, crowds flock to the bars and terraces lining Avenida Pablo Rada and the student bars south of Plaza de la

Merced, which get going around 11pm or midnight and include **Moe's** (Calle Aragón), a shrine to the Simpsons, the publike **Donington Bar** (Calle Aragón), **Pub Tumi** (Calle Jacobo del Barco 4), good for a game of pool, the spookily decorated **Templo** (Calle Jacobo del Barco) and the bare, white-tile-clad **Bar Prokope** (Calle Vázquez Limón 8).

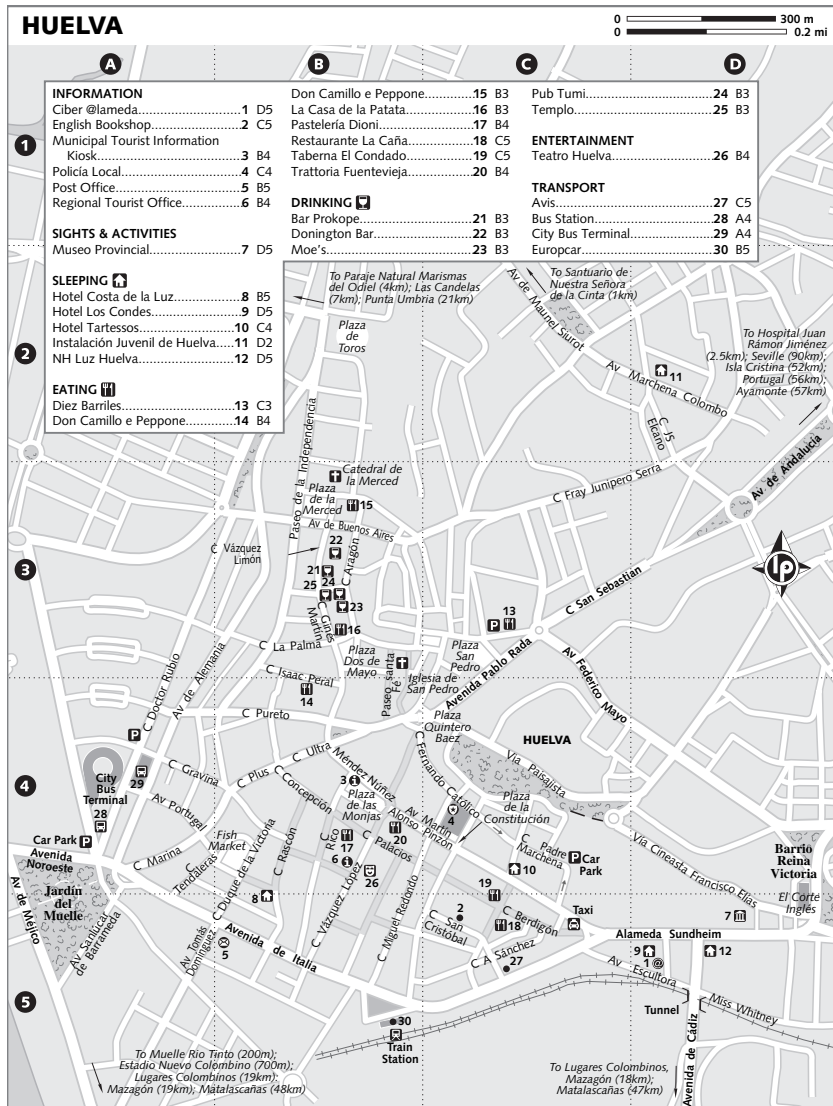
## ENTERTAINMENT

The **Teatro Huelva** (☎ 959 21 02 57; www.huelva.cultura.com in Spanish; Calle Vázquez López 13; 🎫 ticket office 11am-1pm & 7-9pm) stages a broad programme of theatre and music. **Recreativo de Huelva** (☎ 959 27 02 08; www.recreativohuelva.com; Estadio Nuevo Colombino, Avenida del Decano) is Spain's oldest officially recognised football club,

founded in 1889 by British employees of the Rio Tinto Company (a similar club at Minas de Riotinto predated the Huelva club but was never officially registered). 'Recre' are currently enjoying their best years ever, with an appearance in the Spanish cup final in 2003 and promotion to the national First Division in 2006. Match tickets usually cost between €20 and €50.

## Train

From the **train station** (☎ 959 24 56 14, 902 24 02 02; www.renfe.com; Avenida de Italia) four daily services run to Seville (€7 to €17, 1½ hours), an afternoon Alitaria train goes to Córdoba (€31, 2½ hours) and Madrid (€59, five hours), and two daily trains run north to Almonaster-Cortegana (€5.50, 2½ hours) and Jabugo-Galazara (€6, 2¾ hours) en route to Extremadura.



## GETTING THERE & AROUND

### Bus

Most buses from the **bus station** (Calle Doctor Rubio s/n) are operated by **Damas** (☎ 959 25 69 00; www.damas-sa.es), which runs all over Huelva province as well as to Seville and along the Algarve to Faro and Lagos in Portugal. Frequency to most destinations in Huelva province is reduced on Saturday, Sunday and holidays. Damas destinations include the following:

**Aracena** (€6, 2¼ hours) One or two daily.

**Ayamonte** (€4.50, one hour) Up to 10 daily.

**Isla Cristina** (€3.80, one hour) Fourteen daily Monday to Friday, five daily Saturday and Sunday.

**Lagos** (€13, four hours) Two daily except Saturday, Sunday and holidays from October to May.

**Matalascañas** (€3.90, 50 minutes) Two daily Monday to Friday.

**Mazagón** (€1.80, 35 minutes) Thirteen daily Monday to Friday, three daily Saturday and Sunday.

**Minas de Riotinto** (€5.50, 1¼ hours) Up to six daily.

**Niebla** (€2.40, 30 minutes) Up to nine daily.

**Punta Umbría** (€1.90, 30 minutes) Fourteen daily.

**Seville** (€7, 1¼ hours) Eighteen or more daily.

**Socibus** (☎ 902 22 92 92) runs to Madrid (€21, seven hours, four daily). For more information on buses to Portugal see p445.

### Car & Motorcycle

Poor signage and a user-unfriendly one-way system can make driving in Huelva a frustrating experience. There's streetside parking around the bus station and on Avenida Escultora Miss Whitney (parallel to Alameda Sundheim), and multistorey or underground car parks on Calle Doctor Rubio near the bus station, Calle Padre Marchena off Avenida Martín Alonso Pinzón, and Calle Jesús de la Pasión.

For car hire there's **Avis** (☎ 959 28 38 36; Avenida de Italia 107) or **National/Atesa** (☎ 959 28 17 12) or **Europcar** (☎ 959 28 53 35), both in the train station concourse.

## AROUND HUELVA

### PARAJE NATURAL MARISMAS DEL ODIEL

This 72-sq-km wetland reserve, across the Odiel estuary from Huelva, harbours a large, varied bird population, including up to 1000 greater flamingos in winter. There are also about 4000 pairs of spoonbills, plus ospreys, grey and purple herons and many other waterfowl. Some of these birds are easily viewed from a 20km road that runs the length of the marshes.

The marshes can be reached by car along the A497 Punta Umbría road west from Huelva. Cross either of the parallel bridges over Rio Odiel, then follow 'PN Marismas del Odiel' signs to reach the **Centro de Visitantes Anastasio Senra** (☎ 959 50 90 11; 🕒 10am-2pm & 6-8pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-2pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar). South of here, several paths to good bird-watching spots strike off the road through the reserve, but some are only opened to guided groups: check at the visitors centre.

### LUGARES COLOMBINOS

The Lugares Colomberos (Columbus Sites) are the three townships of La Rábida, Palos de la Frontera and Moguer, along the eastern bank of the Tinto estuary. All three played key roles in the discovery of the Americas and can be visited in an enjoyable 40km return trip from Huelva. The nearest and most important of the sites is the monastery at La Rábida, where Columbus retreated after his grand plans had been rejected by Portugal's King João II. Here Columbus met Abbot Juan Pérez (former confessor to Queen Isabel la Católica), who took up his cause and helped him find support for his far-fetched plans not only from the Spanish royal court but also from the sailors of Palos and Moguer.

## Getting There & Around

Monday to Friday, 28 buses a day leave Huelva for La Rábida (€1, 20 minutes), with half of them continuing to Palos de la Frontera (€1, 25 minutes) and Moguer (€1.10, 30 minutes). The others go on to Mazagón. On Saturdays, Sundays and holidays, service is reduced by more than half.

## La Rábida

pop 400

Critical to Columbus' success was the role of the Franciscan monks in the **Monasterio de la Rábida** (☎ 959 35 04 11; admission incl English, French, German, Portuguese or Spanish audioguide €3; ☎ 10am-1pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat Apr-Jul & Sep, 10am-1pm & 4-6.15pm Tue-Sat Oct-Mar, 10am-1pm & 4.45-8pm Tue-Sat Aug, 10.45am-1pm Sun year-round). Here Columbus found support for his far-fetched ideas, and much of the planning of his voyage was discussed and agreed upon inside these walls.

Set amid pine trees, this 14th-century Mudejar monastery is a haven of tranquillity and is now devoted to the Columbus myth. Highlights include a series of 1930s murals on the Columbus theme by Huelvan artist Daniel Vázquez Díaz; the church, where Martín Alonso Pinzón, captain of the *Pinta*, is buried; a chapel with a 13th-century alabaster Virgin before which Columbus prayed; and the peaceful 15th-century cloister. Upstairs, the **Sala Capitular** (Chapter House) is where the final plans for the voyage were drawn up by Columbus, Fray Pérez (the abbot of La Rábida) and Columbus' two fellow captains, the Pinzón brothers from Palos de la Frontera.

No Columbus tour would be complete without a walk down to the waterfront to the **Muelle de las Carabelas** (Wharf of the Caravels; ☎ 959 53 05 97; admission €3.20; ☎ 10am-2pm & 5-9pm Tue-Fri, 11am-9pm Sat, Sun & holidays Jun-Sep, 10am-7pm Tue-Sun Oct-May), with life-size replicas of Columbus' faithful three-vessel fleet set against a pseudo-15th-century quayside. The *Niña*, *Pinta* and *Santa María* can all be boarded. Their size (none is more than 30m long) and the evidently ghastly living conditions give you some idea of the huge achievement of the voyage. But the comical mannequins, including some sorry naked natives, are impossible to take seriously.

A couple of cafés around the monastery/Muelle de las Carabelas area serve drinks and snacks.

## Palos de la Frontera

pop 7000

The small town of Palos de la Frontera, 4km northeast of La Rábida, was the port from which Columbus set sail, and which provided two of his ships and their captains (the Pinzón brothers: Martín Alonso Pinzón and Vicente Yañez Pinzón) and more than half his crew. Palos is justifiably proud of its role in the European discovery of the Americas but its access to the Tinto estuary is now silted up and today it's chiefly significant as a centre of Huelva province's big-time strawberry industry. All over the surrounding countryside in winter and spring you'll see huge expanses of plastic sheeting with the red fruit ripening beneath, especially along the road to Mazagón, and you'll notice some of the thousands of temporary strawberry-pickers from eastern Europe and Africa.

Moving northeast up Calle Cristóbal Colón from the central square, you soon reach the **Casa Museo Martín Alonso Pinzón** (☎ 618 570983; Calle Cristóbal Colón 24; admission free; ☎ 10am-2pm & 5-7pm Tue-Sun), the home of the captain of the *Pinta* and leader of the Palos maritime community who organised the local men and ships that sailed with Columbus. Inside are changing exhibitions on Palos-and-Columbus themes.

Further along and downhill is the 15th-century **Iglesia de San Jorge** (Calle Cristóbal Colón; ☎ 10am-noon & 7-8pm Tue-Sun). Before setting sail on 3 August 1492, Columbus and his men took communion in this church and left by the Mudejar portal facing the small square. A monument in the square lists 35 Palos men who sailed with Columbus.

A little further down the street, within a small park, is **La Fontanilla**, a brick well where Columbus' crews drew water for their voyage. A viewing platform above has a plaque marking the site of the jetty from which the three ships sailed.

A short distance down the main street from the main square, **Hotel La Pinta** (☎ 959 35 05 11; www.hotellapinta.com in Spanish; Calle Rábida 79; s/d €42/68; 🍷) has neat, well-kept, marble-floored rooms (a touch overpriced), and a good, traditional-style restaurant serving plenty of local fish, seafood and meat (mains €14 to €22). **El Bodegón** (☎ 959 53 11 05; Calle Rábida 46; mains €8-20; ☎ closed Tue), a busy, atmospheric, noisy cavern of a restaurant, cooks up fish and meat on wood-fire grills and does out

## THE FOUR VOYAGES OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

In April 1492 Christopher Columbus (Cristóbal Colón to Spaniards) finally won Spanish royal support for his proposed westward voyage of exploration to the spice-rich Orient; a proposal that was to result in no fewer than four voyages by the great navigator and a fabulous golden age for Spain.

On 3 August 1492, Columbus embarked from Palos de la Frontera with 100 men and three ships. The flagship, the *Santa María*, was piloted by its owner, Juan de la Cosa from El Puerto de Santa María (Cádiz province), while the *Niña* and *Pinta* were captained by the Pinzón brothers from Palos de la Frontera. After a near mutiny as the crew despaired of finding land, they finally made landfall on the Bahamian island of Guanahani on 12 October, naming it San Salvador. The expedition went on to discover Cuba and Hispaniola, where the *Santa María* sank. Its timbers were used to build a fort, Fuerte Navidad, which 33 Spaniards were left to hold. The *Niña* and the *Pinta* got back to Palos on 15 March. Columbus, with animals, plants, gold ornaments and six Caribbean Indians (so ludicrously represented at the Muelle de las Carabelas, opposite), received a hero's welcome, as all were convinced that he had reached the fabled East Indies (in fact, his calculations were some 16,000km out).

Columbus made further voyages in 1493 and 1498, discovering Jamaica, Trinidad and the mouth of the Orinoco River. But he proved a disastrous colonial administrator, enslaving the indigenous people and alienating the Spanish settlers. Eventually his mishandling led to a revolt by settlers on Hispaniola and before he could suppress the uprising he was arrested by a royal emissary from Spain and sent home in chains. In a final attempt to redeem himself and find a strait to Asia, Columbus embarked on his fourth and final voyage in April 1502. This time he reached Honduras and Panama, but then became stranded for a year in Jamaica, having lost his ships to sea worms.

Columbus died in 1506 in Valladolid, northern Spain – impoverished and apparently still believing he had reached Asia. His remains were eventually returned to the Caribbean, as he had wished, before being brought back to Seville cathedral in 1899. Or were they? The story of Columbus' posthumous voyages has recently become quite a saga itself – see p98.

plates of good cheese and *jamón serrano* (mountain-cured ham).

## Moguer

pop 13,000

Like Palos, Moguer is an attractive, small, whitewashed town. The *Niña* was built here and up to one-third of Columbus' crew came from Moguer, including Juan Niño, owner of the *Niña*. Moguer also has its own charming flavour of Andalusian baroque and its sunny beauty was fulsomely expressed by local poet laureate, Juan Ramón Jiménez (1881–1958), who won the Nobel prize for literature in 1956. The streets are dotted with plaques bearing quotes from Jiménez' *Platero y Yo* (Platero and I), which tells of his childhood wanderings around Moguer with his donkey and confidant, Platero, and his old home is now a museum.

## ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Driving into town, 'Centro' and 'Oficina de Turismo' signs will lead you to a car

park outside the castle on Calle Castillo, from which the central Plaza del Cabildo is 1½ blocks away. The helpful **tourist office** (☎ 959 37 18 98; www.aytomoguer.es in Spanish; Calle Castillo s/n; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun & holidays) is inside the castle.

## SIGHTS

The **Castillo** (Castle; admission free; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun & holidays) is a bare walled enclosure of Almohad origin, expanded in the 14th century. The tourist office, which occupies an old storage building inside the castle, has exhibits on local wine and Moguer's connections with the Americas.

Simply taking a stroll round Moguer's busy morning streets is a pleasure. There are fine buildings everywhere, one of the best being the 18th-century Italianate **ayuntamiento** (town hall; Plaza del Cabildo; ☎ 10am-2pm Mon-Fri), with its arcaded, two-storey, neo-classical façade. Pop your head inside to see the beautiful patio.

Close by is the 14th-century **Monasterio de Santa Clara** (☎ 959 37 01 07; Plaza de las Monjas; guided tour €2; ☎ 11am-1pm & 5-7pm Tue-Sat), where Columbus spent a night of vigil and prayer the night after returning from his first voyage. He had vowed to do so if he survived a terrible storm off the Azores. You'll see a lovely Mudejar cloister, some of the nuns' old quarters and dormitories, and an impressive collection of Renaissance religious art.

Five minutes' walk from Plaza del Cabildo is the **Casa Museo Zenobia y Juan Ramón Jiménez** (☎ 959 37 21 48; www.fundacion-jrj.es in Spanish; Calle Juan Ramón Jiménez 10; admission €2.50; ☎ 10.15am-1.15pm & 5.15-7.15pm Tue-Sat, 10.15am-1.15pm Sun), the old home of Juan Ramón Jiménez and his wife, Zenobia Camprubí, normally decked with memorabilia and open for one-hour guided visits. At the time of writing the house was under restoration and the exhibits had been temporarily moved to Jiménez' birthplace at Calle Ribera 2, with the same visiting arrangements.

The 18th-century, baroque **Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Granada**, two blocks southeast of Plaza del Cabildo, has a tower that Jiménez immortalised as resembling Seville's Giralda tower from the hazy distance.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Hostal Pedro Alonso Niño** (☎ 959 37 23 92; Calle Pedro Alonso Niño 13; s/d €15/25; ☎) Close to the Convento de Santa Clara at the end of Calle Monjas, this friendly *hostal* (small, low-budget, hotel-like accommodation) has a pretty patio with paintings, pottery and plants, and comfortable rooms with small baths.

**Hostal Platero** (☎ 959 37 21 59; Calle Aceña 4; s/d €18/30; ☎) Just around the corner from Hostal Pedro Alonso Niño is another small *hostal* – plain, old-fashioned, simple and very clean.

**Mesón El Lobito** (☎ 959 37 06 60; Calle Rábida 31; raciones €7-10; ☎ closed Wed) This fun restaurant occupies an old winery a couple of blocks west of Plaza del Cabildo and is an experience even without the food. Stacks of wine barrels and curious artefacts adorn the walls and locals occasionally sell fruit and vegetables. The fish and meat *a la brasa* are good and the house wine is cheap.

**Mesón La Parrala** (☎ 959 37 04 52; Plaza de las Monjas 22; raciones €6.50-9; mains €10-16; ☎ 10am-11pm Tue-Sun) Family-run La Parrala, opposite

the Santa Clara convent, serves good grills and fresh fish in two rooms – one in wine-cellar style, the other a bit more formal with classical art.

**Bodegaito Los Raposo** (☎ 959 37 12 81; Calle Fuente 60; tapas €1-3) Another cracking place, where you order by plate size from a choice of more than 40 fish, meat and salad dishes. There's lots of local wine, too. Try the 'Licor de Viagra', prepared from local sweet wine; it works wonders, according to the ever-smiling host.

## SOUTHEASTERN HUELVA

A wide, sandy beach runs along the Costa de la Luz 60km southeast from the outskirts of Huelva to the mouth of the Río Guadalquivir. The beach enjoys good weather for much of the year (although it can be windy) and shares many of the characteristics of the better known beaches of Cádiz province: fine white sand, windswept dunes and a thick, protective barrier of pines. Frequenting mainly by Spanish holidaymakers, the resort towns of Mazagón and Matalascañas are unpretentious if unremarkable places to stay. East of Mazagón the beach comes within the territory of Doñana national park, which is the major reason to come to this region – a huge wetland and vital refuge for millions of birds and many mammals, which will fascinate any nature lover.

### MAZAGÓN

The low-rise development at Mazagón, just 18km out of Huelva, is inoffensive and in summer the town develops a holiday buzz of its own. Avenida Conquistadores runs 1km down from the A494 to the beach then continues 3km east as the beachfront road of residential Mazagón. There's a **tourist office** (☎ 959 37 63 00; Edificio Mancomunidad, Avenida Conquistadores; ☎ 10am-2pm Mon-Fri) halfway down to the beach: look for the flags. This is in the centre of town as far as services are concerned. A large marina spreads out from the west end of the beach and on summer evenings the seafront bristles with life.

The glorious broad, sandy **beach** is backed by low sandstone cliffs for some distance east from Mazagón. You can reach it easily beside the Parador de Mazagón, 3km from town. At **Cuesta de Maneli**, 9km beyond, a 1.2km boardwalk leads across 100m-high dunes from a car park to the beach through glorious pines and junipers. The Cuesta de Maneli beach has a nudist section.

### Sleeping

**Camping Mazagón** (☎ 959 37 62 08; Cuesta de la Barca s/n; adult/tent/car €5.50/5.50/5.50; ☎) A huge year-round camping ground a couple of minutes' walk from the east end of the beach. The site is well wooded, though much space is taken up by permanent caravans and tents.

**Hostal Hilaria** (☎/fax 959 37 62 06; Calle Hilaria 20; r €60; ☎ closed mid-Dec-early Jan; ☎) This bright and cheerful *hostal* is just north of the tourist office. All rooms have a terrace or balcony but some are set above a bar, which can be a little noisy in summer. Rates fall 25% to 50% outside July and August.

**Hotel Albaida** (☎ 959 37 60 29; www.hotelalbaida.com; Carretera Huelva-Matalascañas; s €44-65, d €67-102; ☎) The elegant Albaida is housed in a classic-looking villa and offers comfortable, airy rooms tastefully kitted out in primary tones with a touch of colourful art. All room prices include breakfast. Staff are welcoming and helpful. It's 600m east of the town centre, amid pine trees just off the highway.

**Parador de Mazagón** (☎ 959 53 63 00; www.paradores.es; Playa de Mazagón; s/d €120/150; ☎) Three kilometres east of Mazagón, the creeper-clad Parador is a low-lying '70s classic – a cross between a ranch-house and a Californian beach bungalow, with broad verandas, marble-floored bathrooms, tasteful modern art and neatly manicured hedges and lawns. The luxurious rooms all have sea views and there's easy access to the beach below the cliff-top gardens.

### Eating

**Las Dunas** (☎ 959 37 62 59; Avenida Conquistadores 178; mains €8-15) Right up at the western end of the seafront, big, bright Las Dunas cooks up lovely fresh fish, and the view of the ocean and marina puts you right in the mood.

**El Remo** (☎ 959 53 61 38; Avenida Conquistadores 123; mains €10-20; ☎ 1-6pm & 8-11pm, closed Sun

evening) This well-run seafood restaurant has a wide terrace overlooking the sands. The simply grilled or fried fish, such as *merluza* (hake) or succulent *dorada* (bream), are always a good choice but the *carnes a la brasa* are fine too.

For tapas and seafood *raciones* (meal-sized servings of tapas) take your pick from four or five bars along Avenida Fuentepiña, running off the inland stretch of Avenida Conquistadores.

### Getting There & Away

Buses run from Huelva to Mazagón (€1.80, 35 minutes, 13 daily Monday to Friday, three daily Saturday and Sunday) via La Rábida and Palos de la Frontera.

### MATALASCAÑAS

pop 1100

This custom-built resort of uninspired villas, plain ugly apartment blocks and several large hotels, mostly in shades of muddy brown, is a sad contrast to the wilderness of the adjoining Doñana national and natural parks. But despite its aesthetic and environmental negatives, Matalascañas is a favourite of holidaying families from Seville, for its very proximity to Doñana, its terrific beach and plenty of summertime facilities.

### Orientation & Information

Matalascañas stretches 4km southeast, parallel to the beach, from the junction of the A494 from Mazagón with the A483 from El Rocío. From here Avenida de las Adelfas heads south straight to the beach, passing the **tourist office** (☎ 959 43 00 86; Edificio Parque Dunar, Avenida de las Adelfas s/n; ☎ 10am-2pm). Buses stop just past the tourist office. The east side of Avenida de las Adelfas is a wall of shops, restaurants and bars a couple of blocks deep.

### Sights & Activities

Apart from the attractions of golf, the beach and water-based activities, Matalascañas boasts the **Parque Dunar** (☎ 959 44 80 86; www.parquedunar.com; Avenida de las Adelfas; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm), a 1.3-sq-km expanse of high, pine-covered dunes at the west end of town laced with cycling routes and a maze of sandy pathways. Within this dune park is the very interesting **Museo del Mundo Marítimo** (Museum of the Maritime World; ☎ 959 43 00 19; adult/under 15yr €5/3;

☞ 11am-2.30pm & 6-9.30pm Tue-Sat, 11am-2.30pm Sun mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 10am-2pm & 3.30-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun mid-Sep-mid-Jun) with five themed rooms devoted to the coasts and seas of the Doñana area, the whales and other cetaceans of the Strait of Gibraltar (including skeletons and full-size replicas up to 20m long), and the fishing and boat-building industries.

The best section of beach is at the eastern end of town, where there's also a 1.5km-round-trip **walking trail** through the dunes of Doñana National Park.

### Sleeping

**Hotel Doñana Blues** (☎ 959 44 98 17; www.donana.blues.com; Sector I, Parcela 129; r €102-134; ☞ ☑ ☒ ☓) The only place in town with real character, Doñana Blues is a small hotel in comfortable yet appealingly rustic style. Each room sports different art and furnishings but all have terrace or balcony. It also has a pool, a café serving breakfast, and bicycles to rent for €6 a day. Outside the high seasons, rates come down about 30%. Book ahead.

**Hotel Tierra Mar Golf** (☎ 959 44 03 00; www.vimehoteles.com; s €81-117, d €102-146; ☞ ☑ ☒ ☓) Well-equipped, modern, seafront hotel with an inviting pool just above the beach. There's a 25% supplement for stays of less than seven days from 10 July to 10 September, but rates can fall as much as 50% from October to Easter. All room prices include breakfast.

Other acceptable options:

**Casa Miguel** (☎ 959 44 84 72; Avenida Las Adelfas; r €50) Small, pleasant *hostal* with restaurant, conveniently placed just north of the tourist office.

**Hotel Flamero** (☎ 902 50 52 00, 959 02 64 00; Ronda Maestro Alonso; www.hotelflamero.es; d €56-92; ☞ ☑ ☒ ☓) Large beachfront hotel; half-board (€115 for two) obligatory from mid-July to mid-September.

### Eating & Drinking

**Restaurante Bajo Guía** (☎ 959 44 00 37; Paseo Marítimo, Sector N; mains €9-15) This specialist in seafood and rice dishes, with picture windows overlooking the ocean, sits on the seafront east of Hotel Tierra Mar Golf.

**Taberna Tío Paco** (☎ 959 44 81 94; Plaza de las Begonias; tapas/raciones €2/8.50, mains €10-20; ☞ closed Wed) 'Uncle Paco's' is an excellent spot for tapas, *raciones* and grilled meats, in the precinct off the east side of Avenida de las Adelfas. Its *terrace* (terrace) has large *sherry barrels* for tables.

### Getting There & Away

Buses from Huelva (€3.90, 50 minutes, two daily), via Mazagón, generally run Monday to Friday only. Extra services may run in summer. Buses also link Matalascañas with El Rocío and Seville (see p158).

### PARQUE NACIONAL DE DOÑANA

Spain's most celebrated and in many ways most important wildlife refuge, the Parque Nacional de Doñana (Doñana National Park) is one of Europe's last remaining great wetlands and a place of haunting natural beauty and romantic myth. It was owned by the dukes of Medina Sidonia in the 16th century, and is named after the wife of the seventh duke, Dona Ana, who retreated from life at court to a specially built mansion here. Dona Ana's spirit, legend has it, still wanders these marshes and forests of the Guadalquivir Delta. There are even claims that the area was the site of the fabled Tartessos (see p24). Today the park is intimately associated with a fervently adored incarnation of the Virgin Mary, Nuestra Señora del Rocío (see p157), who every year draws hundreds of thousands of celebratory pilgrims to the village of El Rocío on the park's northwestern fringe.

The 542-sq-km national park extends 32km along or close to the Atlantic coast and up to 25km inland, bounded by the Río Guadalquivir and various tributaries in the southeast and by the A483 Matalascañas-El Rocío road in the west. El Rocío (p156) and the town of Matalascañas (p153) are the most convenient bases for visiting the park. Much of the national park's perimeter is bordered by the separate Parque Natural de Doñana (Doñana Natural Park), under less strict protection, which comprises four distinct zones totalling 540 sq km and forming a buffer for the national park. The two parks together provide a refuge for endangered species such as the Iberian lynx (with a population estimated at between 30 and 50) and Spanish imperial eagle (about eight breeding pairs), and a crucial habitat for millions of migrating birds. About six million birds spend at least part of each year in the national park and some 350 species have been recorded here.

Ever since its inception in 1969 the national park has been under pressure from tourism, agriculture, hunters, developers

and constructors. Many locals believe the park's interests take unfair priority over their own concerns about much-needed jobs. Ecologists argue that Doñana is increasingly hemmed in by tourism and agricultural schemes, roads and other infrastructure that threaten to deplete its water supplies and cut it off from other undeveloped areas. Some 30 lynxes have been run over on roads around the national park's fringes in the past decade. In 1998 the uneasy balance between industry and conservation collapsed when a dam broke at Los Frailes heavy-metals mine at Aznalcázar, 50km north of the national park. Hastily erected dikes prevented the poisonous tide from entering all but a small corner of the national park, but up to 100 sq km of wetlands to the park's northeast were contaminated. Today, the latest threats to Doñana range from the activities of deer poachers and landings of drug smugglers on the beaches to a barmy proposal for a road along the beach from Matalascañas to Sanlúcar de Barrameda.

### Information

The national park's main visitors centre is the **Centro de Visitantes El Acebuche** (☎ 959 44 87 11; Carretera A483 Km 26; ☞ 8am-9pm May-Sep, 8am-7pm Oct-Apr), off the A483 Matalascañas-El Rocío road. To find it, head 4km north from Matalascañas, or 12km south from El Rocío, then go 1.6km west along an ap-

proach road. The centre has an interactive exhibit on the park, a café, and a shop with a large screen showing film (live or recorded) of Iberian lynxes in the El Acebuche captive-breeding programme. (The programme itself – see p64 – is not open to visitors). Also here are paths (1.5km and 3.5km round-trip) leading to bird-watching hides overlooking nearby lagoons.

The national park has two other visitors centres on its western fringes, both also with paths to nearby lagoons: the **Centro de Información Las Rocinas** (☎ 959 44 23 40; ☞ 9am-3pm & 4-7pm, to 8 or 9pm Apr-Aug), with an exhibition on the history of the El Rocío pilgrimage, beside the A483 1km south of El Rocío; and the **Palacio del Acebrón** (☞ 9am-3pm & 4-7pm, to 8 or 9pm Apr-Aug), 6km along a paved road west from Las Rocinas, housing an ethnographic exhibition of the park.

The Junta de Andalucía's *Doñana* map (1:75,000), published in 2004, covers both the national and natural parks. It's sold at the Acebuche centre for €8.

### Activities

Keen bird-watchers should find something to keep them happy along the trails near the three western visitors centres, though you won't generally find the numbers or variety of birds seen on tours into the park. The **Charco de la Boca path** at the Las Rocinas centre, a 3.5km round-trip with four hides, is usually best, especially in the evening.

### DOÑANA LIFE CYCLES

The many interwoven ecosystems that make up Doñana National Park give rise to fantastic diversity. Nearly half the park is occupied by marshes. These are almost dry from July to October but in autumn they start to fill with water, eventually leaving only a few islets of dry land. Hundreds of thousands of water birds arrive from the north to winter here, including an estimated 80% of Western Europe's wild ducks. As the waters sink in spring, greater flamingoes, spoonbills, storks, herons, avocets, hoopoes, bee-eaters, stilts and other birds arrive for the summer, many of them to nest. Fledglings flock around the ponds known as *lucios* and as these dry up in July, herons, storks and kites move in to feast on trapped perch.

Between the marshlands and the park's 28km-long beach is a band of sand dunes, pushed inland by the wind at a rate of up to 6m per year. The shallow valleys between the dunes, called *corrales*, host pines and other trees favoured as nesting sites by raptors. When dune sand eventually reaches the marshlands, rivers carry it back down to the sea, which washes it up on the beach – and the cycle begins all over again.

Elsewhere in the park, stable sands support 144 sq km of *coto*, the name given here to areas of woodland and scrub. *Coto* is the favoured habitat of many nesting birds and the park's abundant mammal population – 33 species including red and fallow deer, wild boar, mongoose and genets.



The more remote **Centro de Visitantes José Antonio Valverde** (☎ 10am–7pm, to 8pm or 9pm Apr–Aug), on the northern edge of the park, is generally an excellent bird-watching spot as it overlooks a year-round *lucio* (pond). The Caño de Rosalimán waterway just west of here is also a fine site. The easiest way to reach the Valverde centre is an authorised tour from El Rocío (see opposite); the alternative is to drive yourself on rough roads from Villamanrique de la Condesa or La Puebla del Río to the northeast.

The March–May and September–November migration seasons are overall the most exciting for birders.

## Tours

Access to the interior of the national park is restricted. Anyone may walk along the 28km Atlantic beach between Matalascañas and the mouth of the Río Guadalquivir (which can be crossed by boats from Sanlúcar de Barrameda in Cádiz province), as long they do not stray inland. But to visit the interior of the national park, you must book a guided tour leaving either from El Acebuche visitors centre or from Sanlúcar de Barrameda (see p190). The tours from El Acebuche, in all-terrain vehicles holding 20 people each, are run by **Cooperativa Marismas del Rocío** (☎ 959 43 04 32/51; per person €23; ☎ 8.30am Tue–Sun year-round, 3pm Oct–Apr, 5pm May–Sep). You need to book ahead by telephone – the tours can be full more than a month before spring, summer and all holiday times. Bring binoculars, if you can, plus mosquito repellent (except in winter) and drinking water (in summer). The tour lasts four hours and most guides speak Spanish only. The route of 70km to 80km normally begins with a drive along the beach to the mouth of the Río Guadalquivir, then loops back through the south of the park, taking in moving dunes, marshlands and woods, where you can be pretty certain of seeing a good number of deer and boar and huge numbers of birds, though ornithologists may be disappointed with the limited opportunities for serious bird-watching.

Keen birders, beginner or expert, will, however, almost certainly be happy with tours along the northern fringe of the national park from El Rocío to the Centro de Visitantes José Antonio Valverde. These trips normally spend part of their time in

the national park and part in the natural park, and range through pine and oak forests and across marshlands, with a great diversity of birds and high chances of seeing deer and boar. The following operators use smallish vehicles carrying a maximum of eight or nine people:

**Discovering Doñana** (☎ 959 44 24 66, 620 964369; www.discoveringdonana.com; Calle Águila Imperial 150, El Rocío; 6hr trip 1–3 people €110, each extra person €28, 12hr trip 1–3 people €160, each extra person €45) Expert English-speaking guides; most trips are of broad interest but personalised tours also available; binoculars, telescopes, reference books available at no extra cost.

**Doñana Bird Tours** (☎ 95 575 5460, 637 922688; www.donanabirdtours.com; 9hr trip 1–3 people €110, each extra person €30) Top-class bird tours led by resident British bird expert and author John Butler; also offers longer birding holidays.

**Doñana Nature** (☎ 959 44 21 60, 630 978216; www.donana-nature.com; Calle Las Carretas 10, El Rocío; 3½hr trip per person €23) Half-day trips, at 8am and 3.30pm daily, are general interest and may not go as far as the Valverde centre, but specialised ornithological and photographic trips are also offered; English- and French-speaking guides available.

## Getting There & Away

Buses between El Rocío and Matalascañas (see p158) will stop at the El Acebuche turn-off on the A483. The first bus south from El Rocío, at 7am (7.45am Saturday and Sunday), should get you to El Acebuche (€1, 15 minutes) in time for the 8.30am national park tour. From Matalascañas the northward 7.45am bus Monday to Friday should enable you to make the tour. Check current schedules before you start out.

## EL ROCÍO

### pop 1200

Overlooking picturesque *marismas* (wetlands) at the northwest corner of the Parque Nacional de Doñana stands the extraordinary village of El Rocío. As you drive into town the tarmac road gives way to wide sandy avenues, cutting between eerily quiet ranch-style houses. Hoof-prints, hitching posts and hat-clad honchos do nothing to dissipate the bizarre guns-at-noon atmosphere that pervades. But despite appearances the town is not a film set, but a bona fide piece of Andalucía's own 'Wild West'. The quiet houses, with their sweeping ve-

randas, are no show homes but are the well-tended properties of over 90 *hermandades* (brotherhoods) whose pilgrims converge on the town every Pentecost (Whitsuntide) for the Romería del Rocío (see below).

## Information

The **tourist office** (☎ 959 44 38 08; www.turismode donana.com; Avenida de la Canaleja s/n; ☎ 9.30am–1.30pm & 3–5pm Mon–Fri) is beside the main road (A483) at the western end of the village. It supplies local information and can make reservations for tours in the Doñana national and natural parks. Several ATMs are dotted around town.

## Sights & Activities

In the heart of the village, dominating a wide sandy square, stands the **Ermita del Rocío** (☎ 959 44 24 25; admission free; ☎ 8am–9pm), built in its present form in 1964. This is the home of the celebrated **Nuestra Señora del Rocío** (Our Lady of El Rocío), a small wooden image of the Virgin dressed in long, jewelled robes, which normally stands above the main altar. People arrive to see the Virgin every day of the year and especially on weekends, when El Rocío brotherhoods often gather here for colourful celebrations.

## THE ROMERÍA DEL ROCÍO

The Romería del Rocío, Spain's biggest religious pilgrimage, draws hundreds of thousands of festive pilgrims to El Rocío every Pentecost to commemorate the miracle story of the sacred effigy of Nuestra Señora del Rocío (Our Lady of El Rocío).

Like most of Spain's holiest images, this one – known as La Blanca Paloma (The White Dove) – has legendary origins. Back in the 13th century, a hunter from Almonte village found the effigy in a marshland tree and started to carry her home. But when he stopped for a rest, the Virgin magically returned to the tree. Before long, a chapel was built on the site of the tree (El Rocío) and it became a place of pilgrimage. By the 17th century, *hermandades* (brotherhoods) were forming in nearby towns to make pilgrimages to El Rocío at Pentecost, the seventh weekend after Easter. Today, the **Romería del Rocío** (Pilgrimage of El Rocío) is a vast festive cult that draws people from all over Spain. There are over 90 *hermandades*, some with several thousand members, both men and women, who still travel to El Rocío on foot, on horseback and in gaily decorated covered wagons.

Solemn is the last word you'd apply to this quintessentially Andalusian event. In an atmosphere similar to Seville's Feria de Abril (p114), participants dress in fine Andalusian costume and sing, dance, drink, laugh and romance their way to El Rocío. The total number of people in the village on this special weekend can reach about a million.

The weekend reaches an ecstatic climax in the very early hours of Monday. Members of the Almonte *hermandad*, which claims the Virgin as its own, barge into the church and bear her out on a float. Violent struggles ensue as others battle for the honour of carrying La Blanca Paloma. The crush and chaos are immense, but somehow the Virgin is carried round to each of the *hermandad* buildings before finally being returned to the church in the afternoon.

The **marshlands** in front of El Rocío have water all year, thanks to the Río Madre de las Marismas which flows through here, so this is nearly always a good place to spot birds and animals. Deer and horses graze in the shallows and you may be lucky enough to see a flock of flamingos wheeling through the sky in a big pink cloud. The bridge over the river 1km south of the village on the A483 is another good viewing spot, and just past the bridge is the Centro de Información Las Rocinas (see p155), with paths to bird-watching hides.

For a longer walk from El Rocío, cross the Puente del Ajolí, at the northeastern edge of the village, and follow the track into the woodland. This is the **Raya Real**, one of the most important routes used by Romería pilgrims on their journeys to and from El Rocío. The track crosses the **Coto del Rey**, a large woodland zone where you may spot deer or boar in early morning or late evening.

Since El Rocío is such a horsey place, it would be a pity not to have a ride yourself. **Doñana Ecuestre** (☎ 959 44 24 74; Avenida de la Canaleja s/n; per 1hr/2hr/half-day €17/23/41; ☎ office 8am–8pm), on the west side of the A483, offers enjoyable guided rides through the woodlands west of El Rocío.

## Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation during the Romería is often booked at least a year in advance, at sky-high prices.

**Camping La Aldea** (☎ 959 44 26 77; www.campinglaaldea.com; Carretera El Rocío Km 25; adult/tent/car €5.50/5.50/5.50, cabin or bungalow for 2/4-5 €62/100-134; ☹ closed 25 Dec-5 Jan; 📞 📺 📺 📺) A well-equipped, modern camping ground at the north end of the village, La Aldea has a range of cosy wood or brick-and-thatch cabins and bungalows, with air-con, private bathrooms and TV, as well as over 250 camping spaces. Rates fall by up to one-third outside August.

**Pensión Cristina** (☎ 959 44 24 13; Calle El Real 58; s/d €30/36) Just east of the Ermita, the Cristina is one of El Rocío's few budget *hostales*. Rooms are reasonably comfortable and there's a decent and popular restaurant serving paella, venison, seafood and more (mains €6 to €9).

**Pensión Isidro** (☎ 959 44 22 42; Avenida de los Ánsares 59; s/d €24/48; 📞) This slightly more comfortable *hostal*, with air-con, heating and bathtubs, is 400m north of the Ermita. External rooms have little balconies and it's generally a more tranquil locale than the Cristina.

**Hotel & Restaurante Toruño** (☎ 959 44 23 23; fax 959 44 23 38; Plaza Acebuchal 22; s/d incl breakfast €57/81; 📞 📺) An attractive villa overlooking the *marismas*, only 200m from the church, the Toruño has 30 well-appointed rooms. Odd-numbered rooms from 101 to 115 and 207 to 225 have views over the marshland. The restaurant, across the sandy plaza outside, is one of the better options in town, serving up sizeable portions of well-prepared country and coastal fare – lamb, venison and beef from the national park, fish, seafood, cheeses, wild spinach. Mains are €12 to €22.

**El Cortijo de los Mimbrales** (☎ 959 42 22 37; www.cortijomimbrales.com; Carretera A483 Km 30; r €134-156, 2/4-person cottage €311/364; 📞 📺 📺) Four kilometres south of El Rocío on the road towards Matalascañas you'll find this delightful hacienda-style property. Accommodation is in double rooms or cottages (all room prices include breakfast) with bold, vibrant colour washes and curious antiques combined in a uniquely contemporary fashion. The excellent restaurant is worth the trip even if you aren't a guest –

mains are from €9 to €18. There's a beautiful Arabic-style pool, and horse-riding and mountain biking are available on the 10-sq-km estate. Only snag: the seven-night minimum stay from 1 July to 15 September and during major festivals. From March to June and 15 September to 31 October (for which the above prices apply) the minimum is three nights.

**Hotel La Malvasía** (☎ 959 44 38 70; www.lamalvasiahotel.com; Calle Sanlúcar 38; s/d incl breakfast €129/204; 📞 📺) This new 18-room hotel is the most luxurious option in town with individually and beautifully designed rooms, a distinguished air and a fine '*nuevo andaluz*' restaurant (open from Tuesday through to Sunday afternoon, mains €15 to €20) with a 160-strong wine list. It's almost on the waterfront, though most rooms don't actually overlook the *marismas*.

**Aires de Doñana** (☎ 959 44 27 19; Avenida de la Canaleja 1; mains €15-19; ☹ Sat-Sun) Most El Rocío eateries focus more on feeding the hungry punters than on culinary niceties. Aires de Doñana, despite its rustic barnlike exterior, makes a great alternative with its picture windows overlooking the *marismas*, polished service and successfully imaginative menu.

## Getting There & Away

Damas buses run from Seville to El Rocío (€5.50, 1½ hours, three to five daily) and on to Matalascañas (€6, 1¾ hours). One or two further services along the A483 just between Almonte and Matalascañas also stop at El Rocío. All these buses will stop outside El Acebuche visitors centre (you may have to request this).

From Huelva to El Rocío, take a Damas bus to Almonte (€3.90, 45 minutes, six daily Monday to Friday, fewer services on weekends), then another from Almonte to El Rocío (€1.20, 20 minutes, four to seven daily). You need to leave Huelva by 6pm to make the connection.

## WEST OF HUELVA

The Costa de la Luz between Huelva and the Portuguese border, 53km to the west, is lined all the way (apart from a couple of breaks for estuaries and wetlands) by a broad, sandy beach backed for long

## DETOUR: NIEBLA

Twenty-five kilometres east of Huelva on the old A472 from Seville, and 4km north of the modern A49, stands the ancient town of Niebla (population: 4000), encircled by 2km-long, red-ochre, Muslim-era walls. Complete with 50 towers and five gates, it has some of the most perfectly preserved medieval remains in Andalucía. Entering Niebla from the east you cross the Rio Tinto on a beautiful Roman bridge that was destroyed in the Civil War but has since been carefully restored.

Inside the walls the warren of streets is a pleasure to explore. The major monument is the enormous, 15th-century **Castillo de los Guzmán** (☎ 959 36 22 70; www.castillodeniebla.com; admission €4; ☹ 10am-6pm, to 10pm 1 Jul–mid-Sep, to 8pm Sat & Sun mid-Mar–30 Jun), built around two large patios. You'll need a strong stomach for the gruesome display of torture instruments in the dungeon. Niebla's **tourist office** (☎ 959 36 22 70; ☹ 10am-6pm, to 10pm 1 Jul–mid-Sep, to 8pm Sat & Sun mid-Mar–30 Jun) is in the castle entrance. For a romantic evening take in one of the dance or drama productions staged here on Saturday nights in July and August.

In the heart of the old town the quaint **Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Granada** (Plaza Santa María) combines the features of a 9th-century mosque with those of the Gothic-Mudejar church into which it was transformed in the 15th century. Ask at the Casa de la Cultura on the same square for Señor Juan de Dios who will open the church for you. Don't miss the Islamic horseshoe and multi-lobed arches in the entrance patio, the original mihrab (prayer niche) in the south wall, the church tower which was originally a minaret, the Gothic tracery on the east-end roof, and the Visigothic stone bishop's throne behind the altar.

stretches by dunes and trees. The coastal settlements emphasise tourism but also retain river- or sea-port character, especially Isla Cristina with its large fishing fleet. The beach is certainly superb – especially outside the main July–August season, when the crowds disappear and prices fall.

## PUNTA UMBRÍA

pop 13,000

Established as a holiday resort in 1880 by the Rio Tinto Company (whose holidaying engineers used to travel from Huelva in a paddle steamer), Punta Umbría is now a favourite summer destination for people from Huelva and becomes very busy in July and August.

Despite the uninspiring development, Punta Umbría has a friendly atmosphere and an attractive location between the Atlantic coast and the peninsular wetlands of the Paraje Natural Marismas del Odiel (see p149). The town has a helpful **tourist office** (☎ 959 49 51 60; www.puntaumbria.es; Avenida Ciudad de Huelva; 8am-3pm & 4.30-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat & Sun Jun-Sep, 8am-3pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat Oct-May).

Thirteen kilometres of sandy **beaches** stretch all along the ocean side of town and off to the west. Windsurfing and kitesurfing are popular, especially off the town beach near the estuary mouth.

## Sleeping & Eating

Punta Umbría has a big range of accommodation, although even this gets booked up in July and August.

**Camping Playa La Bota** (☎ 959 31 45 37; www.playalabota.com; Carretera Huelva-Punta Umbría Km 11; adult/tent/car €5.50/5.45/0; 📞 📺) Set between the roads to Huelva and El Rompido, 6km out of town, this well-kept camping ground is convenient for the beaches and also has pine bungalows sleeping four.

**Hotel Real** (☎ 959 31 04 56; hotelrealpuntaumbria@hotmail.com; Calle Falucho 2; s €36-60, d €50-85; 📞) The best of several budget places near the east end of Calle Ancha, the pedestrianised main street on the estuary side of town. All rooms are sizeable and comfy but the renovated ones are positively stylish, in cool blues and greens with flat-screen TVs set flush to the wall. Rates dip by 25% to 50% outside July and August.

**Hotel Barceló Punta Umbría** (☎ 959 49 54 00; www.barcelo.com; Avenida Océano s/n; s/d incl breakfast €132/165; 📞 📺 📺 📺) This large modern complex in Alhambra-influenced style sits right on the Atlantic seaboard overlooking the beach. It offers all the expected top-end facilities including a large kidney-shaped pool.

**Chiringuito Camarón** (☎ 959 65 90 38; Avenida Océano; mains €9-15; ☹ Mon-Sun afternoon) By far



the best places to eat in Punta Umbria are the restaurants and *chiringuitos* (open-air eateries) dotted along the ocean beach. The Camarón, almost in front of the Hotel Barceló, serves up terrific fish from the Huelva coasts a la *plancha* (hotplate-grilled) or fried, plus good paella. Efficient waiters, big ocean-view windows and an ample *terrazza* make dining here a pleasure – and it's open all year.

Also recommended:

**Hotel Ayamontino** (☎ 959 31 14 50; hotelayamontino@hotmail.com; Avenida Andalucía 35; s/d €52/81;

☺) Solid midrange place with restaurant and café, centrally placed opposite the tourist office.

**Restaurant Miramar** (☎ 959 31 12 43; Calle Miramar 1; mains €8-16; ☹ closed Mon) Another top year-round beach restaurant.

### Getting There & Away

From Huelva, buses run to Punta Umbria (€1.90, 30 minutes) every hour from 7.15am to 8.15pm and at 9pm. In summer, hourly ferries (€2) sail from the Muelle de Levante at Huelva's port.

### ISLA CRISTINA

pop 19,000

Thirty kilometres west of Punta Umbria along the same fabulous beach (broken only by the estuary of the Río Piedras at El Rompido), Isla Cristina is not only a developing beach resort, packed in August (when prices skyrocket), but also a bustling fishing port with a 250-strong fleet. East along the beach, which is backed by attractive dunes and pine woods outside the town, are the custom-built resorts of Islantilla and La Antilla, low-rise and tasteful enough but near-deserted out of season.

### Orientation & Information

Isla Cristina stands at the west end of a low promontory between the Carreras estuary along its north side and the Atlantic beach on the south. The town centre, bus station and fishing port are all in the north-west corner of the promontory. From the centre, Gran Vía Román Pérez heads 1km south to the western end of Isla Cristina's blue-flagged beach, while hotels are dotted around the beach side of town, up to 2km east of the centre. The helpful, modern **tourist office** (☎ 959 33 26 94; Calle San Francisco 12; ☹ 10am-2pm daily, plus 5.30-7.30pm Mon-Fri Mar-Oct)

is among the narrow older streets behind the fishing port.

### Sights & Activities

Upstairs in the tourist office building is the **Museo de Carnaval** (Carnival Museum; ☎ 959 33 26 94; admission free; ☹ 10am-2pm daily, plus 5.30-7.30pm Mon-Fri Mar-Oct) with a gorgeously colourful display of costumes, crowns and posters from Isla Cristina's annual carnival, which is among the biggest in Andalucía.

The **Puerto Pesquero** (Fishing Port; Muelle Martínez Catena; ☹ auctions about 11am & 4pm Mon-Fri) is a lively scene in the morning and evening as boats sail in with their catches and the fish are auctioned off before being whisked away to the markets of Seville, Córdoba and Madrid.

As you can imagine Isla Cristina and Islantilla enjoy excellent conditions for watersports. The **Estación Náutica Isla Cristina** (☎ 902 07 64 77; www.en-islacristina.com) is a unified information source for local windsurfing, canoeing, sailing, waterskiing and diving operators.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Camping Giralda** (☎ 959 34 33 18; www.campinggiralda.com; Carretera Isla Cristina-La Antilla Km 1.5; adult/tent/car €5.50/5/4.50, bungalow for 4 €49-91; ☐ ☹) Set among pines at the eastern edge of town, the Giralda has room for over 2000 people. The dune-backed Playa Central is close and you can arrange a host of water-based and other activities at the site.

**Hotel El Paraíso Playa** (☎ 959 33 02 35; www.hotelparaisoplaya.com; Avenida de la Playa; s/d €65/129; ☐ ☺ ☹) A friendly and attractively remodelled two-storey hotel, with restaurant and bar, just a stone's throw from Playa Central, this is the best deal in town – especially outside peak season: prices drop to €49/97 in June and September and €33/59 from October to May.

**Hotel Oasis Isla Cristina** (☎ 959 48 64 22; www.hotelesoasis.com; Avenida Parque 62; r incl breakfast €161-225; ☐ ☺ ☹) If you fancy the comforts of a large, top-end, Spanish holiday hotel, Isla Cristina has three virtually brand-new ones, though you may not find any open in the depths of winter. The luxurious Oasis is set among pine woods a stone's throw from the beach and has a lovely large pool and a kids' club with its own smaller pool. Room rates dip sharply outside July and August.

**Casa Rufino** (☎ 959 33 08 10; Avenida de la Playa; mains €13-26; ☹ lunch & dinner 15 Jul-31 Oct, lunch 16 Feb-14 Jul & 1 Nov-21 Dec, closed 22 Dec-15 Feb) You can't miss the gaudy yellow-and-green tilework of Isla Cristina's most celebrated restaurant, just off Playa Central. Its speciality is the *tonto*, an eight-fish, eight-sauce sampler of local favourites (€24 per person; minimum two people).

Also excellent for fresh seafood are the restaurants on the plaza outside the fishing port. The unassuming upstairs dining room at **Restaurante Hermanos Moreno** (☎ 959 34 35 71; Avenida Padre Mirabent 39; mains & raciones €8-20; ☹ lunch) and the larger **Restaurante El Pescador** (☎ 959 34 36 35; Avenida Padre Mirabent 19; mains & raciones €7-13; ☹ 6.30am-9pm or later) both serve up tasty fried and *plancha* fare.

### Drinking

Some bars in the older streets near the central Plaza Flores stay open late and get lively with a youngish crowd. **Pipirigaña** (Calle Pérez Pascual 12) is an inviting one, with an open courtyard where live music is sometimes staged.

### Getting There & Away

**Damas** (☎ 959 33 16 52; Calle Manuel Siurot) runs buses to Huelva (€3.80, one hour, 14 daily Monday to Friday, five daily Saturday and Sunday), Ayamonte (€1.40, 25 minutes, three to five daily) and Seville (€10, two hours, one to three daily).

### AYAMONTE

pop 17,000

Ayamonte has a cheerful borderland buzz about it, although you can now speed straight past it into Portugal on the splendid Puente del Guadiana over the wide Río Guadiana north of town. Romantics can still enjoy the pace of times past, however, by taking the ferry across the Guadiana between Ayamonte and Vila Real de Santo António.

### Orientation & Information

Ayamonte's hub is Plaza de la Coronación and its seamless neighbour Paseo de la Ribera, fronting Avenida Vila Real de Santo Antonio, opposite the marina. The *muelle transbordador* (ferry dock) is 300m west of here, on Avenida Muelle de Portugal, beside the Guadiana. The bus station is 700m east of Plaza de la Coronación.

Ayamonte's **tourist office** (☎ 959 32 07 37; Calle Huelva 27; ☹ 10am-2pm & 5-7pm Mon-Fri Oct-Jun, 10am-2pm & 6-9pm Mon-Fri Jul-Sep, 11am-1.30pm Sat), a couple of blocks behind Plaza de la Coronación, is very keen to help you make the most of your time here.

### Sights & Activities

The old town between Paseo de la Ribera and the ferry dock, with its narrow, mainly pedestrianised streets, is dotted with attractive plazas and old churches and riddled with bars, cafés, shops and restaurants, making for a pleasant wander. The **Casa Grande** (Calle Huelva 37; admission free; ☹ 10am-1pm & 5-8.30pm Mon-Fri), a fine 18th-century mansion with a carved pink-stone façade and columned interior patio, is now Ayamonte's Casa de la Cultura, staging art exhibitions and other events.

If you'd like to get to know more of the Río Guadiana, one of Spain's longest and biggest rivers, **Cruceros del Guadiana** (☎ 959 64 10 02; www.crucerosdelguadiana.com) runs daily cruises around the estuary (€8, 70 minutes) and some 35km upstream to the Portuguese village of Alcoutim (€42 including lunch, 7½ hours). Check departure times and get tickets at their kiosk on the ferry dock.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Marqués de Ayamonte** (☎ 959 32 01 26; Calle Trajano 14; s/d €28/45) The Marqués provides plain but good-sized rooms with TV, phone and winter heating. The best thing is its central location just off Paseo de la Ribera.

**Hotel Luz del Guadiana** (☎ 959 32 20 02; Avenida de Andalucía 119; s/d incl breakfast €45/70; ☺ ☹) In a bland modern block just west of the bus station, this hotel has pleasant enough rooms with TV and air-con. Ask at neighbouring Bar Los Robles if no-one answers the door.

**Hotel Don Diego** (☎ 959 47 02 50; www.hotelondoniegoayamonte.com; Avenida Ramón y Cajal 2; r incl breakfast without/with air-con €76/89; ☹ closed mid-Oct-Semana Santa; ☐ ☺ ☹) The seasonally open pink confection of the Don Diego is south-east of the marina. Rooms come with TV and bright red bathrooms.

**Parador de Ayamonte** (☎ 959 32 07 00; www.parador.es; Avenida de la Constitución; s/d €103/129; ☐ ☺ ☹) The modern Parador looks out over the broad Guadiana from a spectacular hilltop perch 1.5km north of the town centre. Decked out in chichi peaches and mint greens, it's well appointed if a bit soulless.

**Casa Luciano** (Calle Palma del Condado 1; mains €10-17; ☎ closed/Sun) Great fish and a great atmosphere make the unassuming Luciano the place for a slap-up meal. Everything on your plate is freshly cooked and only minutes out of the water – and there's lamb or wild asparagus *revuelto* (scrambled-egg dish) if you fancy something more land-based.

**Casa Barberi** (☎ 959 47 01 37; Paseo de la Ribera 12; mains €7-16) and **Mesón La Casona** (☎ 959 32 10 25; Calle Lusitania 2; mains & raciones €6-15) are both popular and busy, serving a range of seafood and meat.

### Getting There & Around

There are no customs or immigration checks heading in either direction by road or ferry.

### BOAT

The ferries of **Transportes Fluvial del Guadiana** (☎ 959 47 06 17) cross the Guadiana to/from Vila Real de Santo António every 40 minutes from 9.40am to 8pm, Monday to Saturday, and hourly from 10.30am to 6.30pm on Sundays and holidays shared by Spain and Portugal. From July to September they go every half-hour, 9.30am to 9pm. One-way fares are €4 for a car and driver and €1.30 for adult passengers. Fairly frequent buses and trains run along the Algarve from Vila Real de Santo António.

### BUS

**Damas** (☎ 959 32 11 71; Avenida de Andalucía) runs to Huelva (€4.50, one hour, six to 10 daily), Seville (€10.50, two hours, four or five daily) and Isla Cristina (€1.40, 25 minutes, three to five daily). Damas also has a twice daily service (except Saturday, Sunday and holidays from October to May) along Portugal's Algarve to Faro (€5.50, 1¼ hours) and Lagos (€10, 3½ hours). Buses to Isla Canela (€0.90, 15 minutes) run every half-hour, 9am to 8pm, from June to September, but just four times a day, Monday to Friday only, the rest of the year.

## THE NORTH

As you travel north from Huelva's southern plains, straight highways are replaced by winding byways and you enter a more temperate zone, up to 960m higher than

the coast, with a benevolent climate that's relatively rainy by Andalusian standards and a little cooler than most of the region in summer. The rolling hills of Huelva's portion of the Sierra Morena are covered with a thick pelt of cork oaks, chestnuts and pines and punctuated by winding river valleys, dramatic cliffs, age-old, enchanting villages of stone and tile, and bustling market towns such as the area's 'capital', Aracena. This is a wonderful and still little-discovered rural world, threaded with beautiful walking and riding trails and blessed with a rich hill-country cuisine that abounds in game, local cheeses and fresh vegetables but is famous above all for the best *jamón serrano* in Spain. Most of the hill country lies within the 1840-sq-km **Parque Natural Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche**, Andalucía's second-largest protected area.

### MINAS DE RIOTINTO

pop 4500 / elevation 420m

Tucked away on the southern fringe of the sierra is one of the world's oldest mining districts – no longer producing the metals it's famed for but still fascinating for its unearthly, sculpted and scarred landscape, its absorbing history, its A1 museum and the opportunity to visit old mines and ride the mine railway. The area's hub is the town of Minas de Riotinto. The Rio Tinto itself rises a few kilometres northeast of the town, its name ('Coloured River') coming from the deep red-brown hue produced by the reaction of its acidic waters with the abundant iron and copper ores.

Legend tells us the mines here were the mines of King Solomon. Archaeology has yielded evidence of copper mining as early as the 3rd millennium BC. By the 4th century AD the Romans were going at it hammer and tongs, mining what was described as a veritable mountain of silver by Avienus, who saw the 'slopes glint and shine in the light'. The lodes were then largely neglected until a group of mainly British investors founded the Rio Tinto Company to buy the mines from the Spanish government in 1873. The company turned the area into one of the world's great copper-mining centres, diverting rivers, digging away an entire metal-rich hill (Cerro Colorado), founding Minas de

Riotinto town to replace a village it had demolished, and setting up an enclave of British colonial society which among other things formed Spain's first football club. By 1913 the Rio Tinto Company employed over 14,000 workers, but in the mid-20th century it sold the mines to Spanish interests. The company has since become one of the planet's biggest mining companies, with operations worldwide, but mining in its birthplace went into a steady decline and finally ceased in 2001.

### Orientation

Minas de Riotinto is 6km east along the A461 off the N435 Huelva-Jabugo road. Entering the town, turn right at the first roundabout to reach the Museo Minero, about 400m uphill. Buses stop on Plaza de El Minero, a little beyond the same roundabout.

### Sights

The attractions are administered by the **Parque Minero de Riotinto** (☎ 959 59 00 25; <http://parquemineroderiotinto.sigadel.com>; Plaza Ernest Lluch; ☎ 10.30am-3pm & 4-7pm), headquartered at the well-signposted Museo Minero. Here you can buy tickets for the museum, the Victorian house, the Peña de Hierro and the Ferrocarril Turístico-Minero, with small discounts if you opt for combined tickets. It's worth ringing ahead to confirm timetables, especially for the train and the Peña de Hierro.

The fascinating **Museo Minero** (Plaza Ernest Lluch; adult/child under 13yr €4/3; ☎ 10.30am-3pm & 4-7pm) is a figurative gold mine for devotees of industrial archaeology, taking you right through the Riotinto area's unique history from the megalithic tombs of the 3rd millennium BC to the Roman and British colonial eras and finally the closure of the mines in 2001, with some information in English as well as Spanish. One of the best features is the 200m-long re-creation of a Roman mine which includes a reconstruction of one of the Roman water wheels built to drain water out of the mines. The tunnels might feel claustrophobic to some, but the displays along the way tell a vivid story of a nightmarish world where slaves worked in galleries only 1m wide by the light of tiny oil lamps, many of them dying within weeks from the wretched conditions. The

museum also features a big display on the railways that served the mines. At one time, 143 steam engines, mostly British-built, were puffing up and down these tracks. Pride of place goes to the **Vagón del Maharajah**, a luxurious carriage built in 1892 for a tour of India by Britain's Queen Victoria and later used by Spain's Alfonso XIII for a visit to the mines.

The museum ticket also gives entry to a **Victorian house** in the **Barrio de Bella Vista**, a 19th-century suburb where British staff of the Rio Tinto Company were housed, complete with Protestant church and colonial-style 'English Club'. The house (Bella Vista 21) is accurately kitted out with British colonial furniture and trappings. The suburb, now inhabited by Spaniards, is beside the A461 opposite the turn-off into the town centre, and anyone can wander round even if not visiting No 21. The English Club is still in existence and remains exclusive though now with a largely Spanish membership, to which women were finally admitted in 2001.

An easy and fun way to see the mining area (especially with children) is to ride the **Ferrocarril Turístico-Minero** (adult/child €10/9; ☎ 1.30pm 1 Jun-15 Jul, 1.30 & 5pm 16 Jul-30 Sep, 4pm Sat, Sun & holidays Oct-Feb, 1pm Mon-Fri, 4pm Sat, Sun & holidays Mar-May), taking visitors 22km (round-trip) through the surreal landscape in restored early-20th-century railway carriages. Trips start at Talleres Minas, the old railway repair workshops 2.5km east of Minas de Riotinto, off the road to the nearby town of Nerva. The train is pulled by a diesel locomotive except when a steam engine takes over a few Sundays a year. It's essential to book ahead for the train, and schedules may change, especially in winter. You have to make your own way to the station: ask at the museum about taxis.

The other trip organised by the Parque Minero is to the old copper and sulphur mines of **Peña de Hierro** (adult/child €8/7), in an impressive hilly and forested landscape 4km north of Nerva and 9km from Minas de Riotinto. Here you see the source of the Rio Tinto, an 85m-deep open-cast mine, and are taken into a 200m-long underground mine gallery and to the site of the fascinating Marte project (see the boxed text, p164). These trips are available daily but times vary and it's essential to book.

The Parque Minero is currently not running trips to the **Corta Atalaya**, one of the world's biggest opencast mines, 1km west of the town. But you can still get a peep at this awesome hole in the ground, 1.2km long and 335m deep and reminiscent of a vast amphitheatre, if you follow the 'Corta Atalaya' sign to the left as you enter Minas de Riotinto from the southwest.

The most recent mining activity took place about 1km north of Minas de Riotinto at another opencast mine, the **Corta Cerro Colorado**. There's a viewing platform on the road towards Aracena, the Mirador Cerro Colorado, where you can ponder the fact that as recently as 1968 Cerro Colorado was a hill.

### Sleeping & Eating

Minas de Riotinto itself only has one place to stay, but there are good options in Nerva, another ex-mining town 5km east.

**La Estación** (☎ 959 58 00 34; [www.cmlaestacion.com](http://www.cmlaestacion.com); Carretera Nerva-Riotinto s/n, Nerva; dm incl breakfast under/over 26yr €12/15; **P**) Offers friendly and sparkling clean hostel-type accommodation in Nerva's renovated 19th-century railway station. It has lots of local information.

**Hostal Galán** (☎ 959 59 08 40; [www.hostalrestaurantegalan.com](http://www.hostalrestaurantegalan.com); Avenida La Esquila 10; s/d €27/39; **☎**) Just round the corner from the Museo Minero, the Galán has plain but acceptable rooms and a handy restaurant with a lunch or dinner *menú* (set menu) for €8.50.

### THE MARTE PROJECT

On trips to Peña de Hierro you'll be shown the area where, since 2003, scientists from NASA of the US and Spain's Centro de Astrobiología in Madrid have been conducting a research programme known as Marte (Mars Analog Research & Technology Experiment) in preparation for seeking life on Mars. It's thought that the high acid levels that give the Río Tinto its colour (by the action of acid on iron) are a product of underground micro-organisms comparable with those that scientists believe may exist below the surface of Mars. Experiments in locating these microbes up to 150m below ground level are being used to help develop techniques and instruments for looking for similar subterranean life on the red planet.

**Hotel Vázquez Díaz** (☎/fax 959 58 09 27; [per.sonal.telefonica.terra.es/web/hotelvazquezdiaz](http://per.sonal.telefonica.terra.es/web/hotelvazquezdiaz); Calle Cañadilla 51, Nerva; s/d €26/43; **☎**) A welcoming, well-run hotel in Nerva, which offers decent rooms and has its own good restaurant (*menú* €10).

**Cafetería Época** (☎ 959 59 20 76; Paseo de los Caracoles 6; mains €7/20; ☎ 8am-11pm) On the way into Minas de Riotinto from the A461, this bright, modern establishment has a handy café section with a good selection of tapas and *raciones*, and a rear restaurant walled with historical photos.

### Getting There & Away

Damas buses run daily from Huelva to Minas de Riotinto (€5.50, 1½ hours, up to six daily) and on to Nerva (€6, 1¾ hours, up to five daily), and vice-versa. **Casal** (☎ 954 99 92 62 in Seville) has three daily buses from Seville (Plaza de Armas) to Nerva (€4, 1½ hours) and Minas de Riotinto (€4.50, 1¾ hours).

Damas departs Minas de Riotinto for Aracena (€2.30, one hour) at 4.35pm (11.05am on Sunday) and at 3.05pm Monday to Friday. This last goes via Nerva. A Casal bus leaves Nerva for Aracena via Minas de Riotinto at 5.45am Monday to Saturday. Returning, the Casal bus leaves Aracena at 5.15pm, while Damas buses depart Aracena for Minas de Riotinto (but not Nerva) at 7.45am (6pm Sunday) and 7am Monday to Friday.

### ARACENA

pop 7000 / elevation 730m

In the heart of the sierra lies the old and thriving market town of Aracena, an appealingly lively place spreading around the skirts of a hill crowned by a medieval church and ruined castle. It makes an ideal base from which to explore this lovely area.

### Orientation

The town lies between the castle hill, Cerro del Castillo, in the south, and the N433 Seville-Portugal road skirting it to the north and east. The main square is Plaza del Marqués de Aracena, from which the main street, Avenida de los Infantes Don Carlos y Doña Luisa (more simply known as Gran Vía), runs west. The bus station is towards the southeast edge of town, on Avenida de Sevilla.

### Information

**Centro de Salud** (☎ 959 12 62 56; Calle Zulema s/n) Health centre almost opposite the bus station.

**Centro de Visitantes Cabildo Viejo** (☎ 959 12 88 25; Plaza Alta 5; ☎ 10am-2pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jun, 10am-2pm & 6-8pm Tue-Sun Jul-Aug) The main information centre of the Parque Natural Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche.

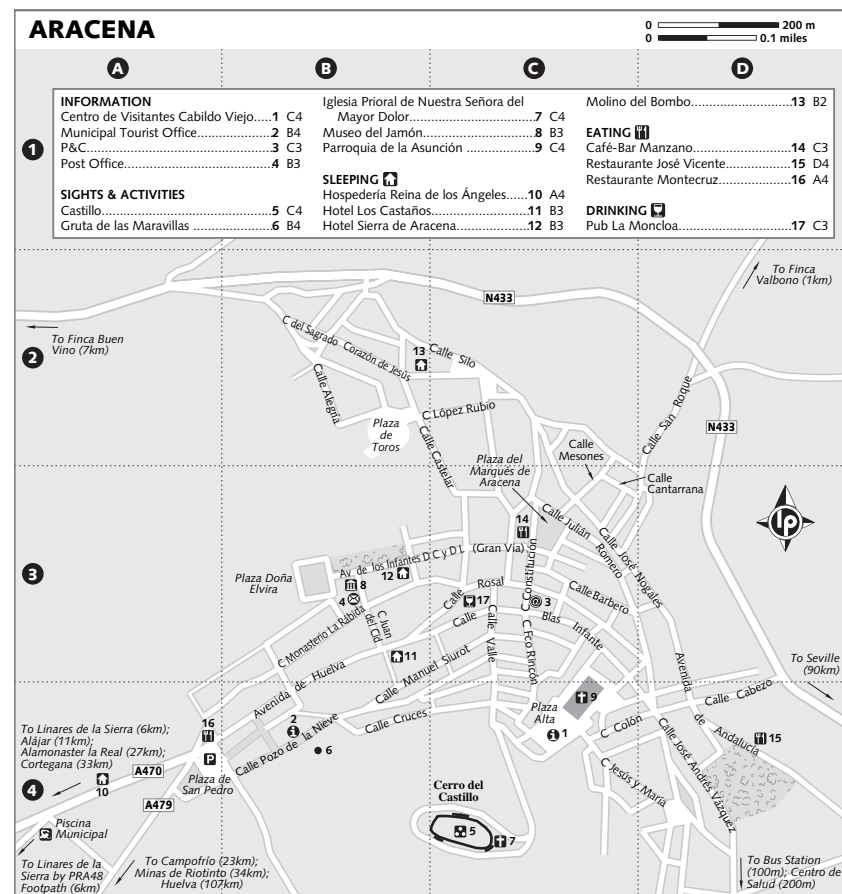
**Municipal Tourist Office** (☎ 959 12 82 06; Calle Pozo de la Nieve; ☎ 10am-2pm & 4-6.30pm) Facing the entrance to the Gruta de las Maravillas; sells some maps of the area.

**P&C** (☎ 959 12 63 96; Calle Constitución 9; internet per hr €2; ☎ 10am-2pm & 5-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 11am-2pm Sat)

**Post office** (☎ 959 12 81 52; Calle Juan del Cid 6; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1pm Sat)

### Sights

Dramatically dominating the town are the tumbling, hilltop ruins of the **castillo**, an atmospheric fort built by the Portuguese in the 13th century and rebuilt, probably by the Knights of Santiago, around 1300. Next door is the **Iglesia Prioral de Nuestra Señora del Mayor Dolor** (admission free; ☎ 10.30m-6pm), also built around 1300 – a Gothic-Mudejar hybrid that combines an interior of ribbed vaults with attractive brick tracery on the tower. The castle is reached up a steep road from Plaza Alta, a handsome, cobbled square that was originally the centre of the town that initially grew up on the slopes below the castle. The 15th-century **Cabildo Viejo** (Old Town Hall) here houses



the natural park's visitor centre (see p165). Opposite is a huge, unfinished Renaissance church, the **Parroquia de la Asunción** (☎ 7.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, noon-1pm Sun).

Beneath the castle hill lies a maze of caves and tunnels full of stalagmites and stalactites. Attracting some 150,000 visitors a year, these form Aracena's premier tourist site, the **Gruta de las Maravillas** (Cave of Marvels; ☎ 959 12 83 55; Calle Pozo de la Nieve; tour adult/under 19yr €8/5.50; ☎ 10.30am-1.30pm & 3-6pm tours every hr Mon-Fri, every half-hr Sat, Sun & holidays). The 1km route features 12 chambers and six lakes, with all sorts of weird and wonderful rock formations that provided the backdrop for the filming of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. Coloured lighting and piped music make you feel that this is still a lurid film set but the cave nevertheless manages to impress. The tour (in Spanish only) culminates at the aptly named **Sala de los Culos** (Chamber of the Bottoms), usually met with roars of laughter from elderly Spanish ladies and bashful silence from their husbands. A maximum of 35 people is allowed on each tour and tickets can sell out in the afternoons and on weekends when busloads of visitors arrive.

The *jamón ibérico* (Iberian ham) for which the Sierra de Aracena is famed gets due recognition in the new **Museo del Jamón** (Museum of Ham; ☎ 959 12 79 95; Gran Vía; tour adult/under 19yr €3/2; ☎ tour every 40 min 11.10am-5.10pm; ♿). Visits are by guided tour so unless your Spanish is good enough, ask first whether they have started tours in other languages. You'll learn why the acorn-fed Iberian pig gives such succulent meat, about the importance of the *dehesas* (native oak pastures) in which they are reared, and about traditional and modern methods of slaughter and curing. The museum also has a room devoted to *setas* (wild mushrooms), another local delicacy.

## Activities

### HORSE RIDING

For a ride on horseback through some of the lovely local countryside, head to the stables at **Finca Valbono** (☎ 959 12 77 11; www.fincavalbono.com; Carretera Carboneras Km 1; guided ride per hr €10), 1km northeast of town.

### WALKING

Many good **walking routes** start from Aracena. A beautiful round trip of about 12km

can be made by leaving Aracena between the Piscina Municipal (municipal swimming pool) and the A470 road at the western end of town. This path (see Map p168), the PRA48, rollercoasters down a verdant valley to Linares de la Sierra (p169). To return by a different (and less steep) route, the PRA39, find a small stone bridge over the river below Linares, beyond which the path goes round Cerro de la Molinilla, passing old iron mines for a stony ascent to Aracena, coming out on the A479 in the southwest of town.

You could extend the walk 4km west from Linares to Alájar on the PRA38, via the hamlet of Los Madroñeros. There are great views on this stretch. From Alájar you can catch the afternoon bus, daily except Sunday, back to Aracena (see p168).

## Festivals & Events

Ham lovers can celebrate the whole piggy scene at the **Feria del Jamón y del Cerdo Ibérico** (Iberian Ham & Pig Fair), held on a site south of the Cerro del Castillo for four days around 20 October.

## Sleeping

**Hospedería Reina de los Ángeles** (☎ 959 12 83 67; www.hospederiareinadelosangeles; Avenida Reina de los Ángeles s/n; s/d €23/38; ♿) This former residence for out-of-town school students, opened as a hotel in 2005, provides 90 good, clean, bright rooms with phone, bathroom and TV – a good budget deal. There's a café too.

**Molino del Bombo** (☎ 959 12 84 78; www.molino delbombo.com in Spanish; Calle Ancha 4; s/d €23/45; ♿ ♿) A welcoming new *hostal*, purpose-built in tastefully rustic yet very comfortable style, the Molino stands near the top of the town. With attractive indoor and outdoor sitting areas and good bright rooms making use of little frescoes and exposed stone and brick work as design features, it's a great find. Breakfast is available.

**Hotel Los Castaños** (☎ 959 12 63 00; www.loscastanoshotel.com; Avenida de Huelva 5; s/d €39/58; ♿) This 33-room hotel is not very exciting to look at but the rooms are good-sized, comfy and clean, with TV and bathtub. It's solid value and breakfast is available.

**Hotel Sierra de Aracena** (☎ 959 12 61 75; www.hsierraaracena.es; Gran Vía 21; s/d €43/59; ♿) A reliable hotel that has recently had the overhaul

it was due for. The style is chintz, classic art and floral prints. Rooms are good-sized: eight enjoy good castle views and the newer, wood-roofed attic rooms, costing €10 to €15 extra, are particularly cosy.

**Finca Valbono** (☎ 959 12 77 11; www.fincavalbono.com; Carretera Carboneras Km 1; s/d €73/89, 4-person apt €150; ♿ ♿ ♿ ♿ ♿) A converted farmhouse 1km northeast of town, this is Aracena's most charming accommodation, all in tasteful rustic style including fireplaces in the apartments. Facilities include a bar, a pool, riding stables and a good, medium-priced restaurant (mains €8 to €15) with local mushroom and meat specialities as well as vegetarian and pasta dishes.

## Eating

**Café-Bar Manzano** (☎ 959 12 63 37; Plaza del Marqués de Aracena; tapas €1.80-3.50, raciones €9-18; ☎ 8am-8pm or later Wed-Sat & Mon, 10am-8pm Sun) This terrace café on the plaza is a fine spot to watch the world go by and enjoy varied tapas and *raciones*, including many types of wild mushroom, some of which seem to be in season almost year-round here.

**Restaurante José Vicente** (☎ 959 12 84 55; Avenida de Andalucía 53; 3-course menú €18; ☎ 1-4pm & 9-11pm, closed Sun evening, last week Jun & 1st week Jul) Aracena's best restaurant and a good place to enjoy the area's famous specialities – *jamón ibérico*, mushrooms and even snails. The proprietor is an expert on sierra cuisine and even the fixed-price *menú* (which includes a drink) is excellent. It's a small place so it's advisable to book.

**Restaurante Montecruz** (☎ 959 12 60 13; Plaza de San Pedro; raciones €9-15, menú €15) Several tourist-oriented restaurants and bars line Plaza de San Pedro and Calle Pozo de la Nieve near the Gruta de las Maravillas. The Montecruz, adorned with assorted stags' heads and bunches of garlic, takes pride in its Aracena cuisine but don't let the waiters steer you too rapidly to the most expensive dishes.

For further tapas bars, take a wander along Gran Vía or Avenida de Andalucía.

## Drinking

A small cluster of late bars starts to unlock their doors around 10.30pm along Calle Rosal, a dark side street between Gran Vía and Avenida de Huelva. For cool company try Pub La Moncloa, with a deep 16th-century well preserved in one corner. Most

nights in summer it stays open till around 4am but off-season it may close at 1am or not even open at all.

## Getting There & Away

**Casal** (☎ 954 99 92 62 in Seville) runs two daily buses to/from Seville's Plaza de Armas bus station (€6, 1¼ hours). **Damas** (☎ 959 25 69 00 in Huelva) travels to/from Huelva (€6, 2¼ hours, one or two daily). There are also buses from Aracena to Minas de Riotinto (see p164), to villages around northern Huelva province (p168) and a daily Casal bus at 10.30am to the Portuguese border just beyond Rosal de la Frontera, where you can change to onward Portuguese buses (Aracena-Lisbon takes nearly nine hours for €16).

## WEST OF ARACENA

Stretching west of Aracena is one of Andalucía's most unexpectedly beautiful landscapes, a sometimes lush, sometimes severe hill-country region dotted with old stone villages where time seems to have stood still for a good long while. Many of the valleys are full of woodlands, while elsewhere are expanses of *dehesa* – evergreen oak pastures where the region's famed black pigs forage for acorns. The area is threaded by an extensive network of well maintained walking trails, with ever-changing vistas and mostly gentle ascents and descents, making for some of the most delightful rambling in Andalucía. Most of the villages are served by buses and many of them have accommodation and decent restaurants, so you can make day hikes or string together a route of several days. It's advisable to book ahead for rooms.

Good walking routes extend over all parts of the **Parque Natural Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche**, but they're particularly thick in the area between Aracena and Cortegana, making attractive villages such as Alájar, Castaño del Robledo, Galaroza and Almonaster la Real good bases.

## Maps & Guides

Trail marking is erratic so you need the best possible map and preferably a good walking guide. The best of both in any language are Discovery Walking Guides' *Sierra de Aracena* and accompanying *Sierra de Aracena Tour & Trail Map*. These are

sold locally at La Posada in Alájar and the Posada del Castaño in Castaño del Robledo, but it makes sense to buy them before you come if possible. Other reasonable maps are *Parque Natural Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche* (1:75,000), published by the Junta de Andalucía, and the IGN 1:25,000 sheets 917-I *Galaroza*, 917-II *Cortelazor*, 917-III *Cortegana* and 917-IV *Aracena*. Also worth having is the Spanish-language *Mapa Guía Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche*.

## Getting There & Around

### BUS

**Casal** (☎ 954 99 92 62 in Seville) runs buses from Seville (Plaza de Armas), via Aracena, to many of the villages. Two a day follow the N433 to Galaroza (€1.40, 25 minutes from Aracena), Jabugo (€2, 35 minutes), Cortegana (€2.60, 50 minutes) and Aroche (€3.50, 1¼ hours), and one (Monday to Saturday only) takes the southerly A470 route to Cortegana through Linares de la Sierra (€0.90, 15 minutes), Alájar (€1, 30 minutes) and Almonaster la Real (€1.90, 50 minutes). In addition, two buses a day (one on Sunday) run just from Aracena to Cortegana by the N433 (one continuing to Aroche except on Saturday), and one (Monday to Saturday only) from Aracena to Cortegana and Aroche by the southern route. All these services run in the reverse direction too, making it possible to travel west and east morning and late afternoon every day on the northern route. On the southern route

you can go westbound at lunchtime and late afternoon, and eastbound early morning and mid-afternoon (except Sunday in all cases).

**Damas** (☎ 959 25 69 00 in Huelva) runs one bus each way Monday to Friday between Huelva and Aroche (€7.50, three hours) via Almonaster la Real (€6.50, 2½ hours) and Cortegana (€7, 2¾ hours), and another between Huelva and Jabugo (€7, 2¾ hours) and Galaroza (€7, 2¾ hours). The latter service also runs north (but not south) on Sunday.

### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The N433 from Aracena to Portugal passes through Galaroza and Cortegana and near Jabugo. A more scenic and slower route is the narrower, more winding A470 through Santa Ana la Real and Almonaster la Real (passing close to Linares de la Sierra and Alájar). Several roads and paths cut across the hills to link these two roads.

### TRAIN

There are two daily trains running each way between Huelva and the stations of Almonaster-Cortegana (€5.50, 2½ hours) and Jabugo-Galaroza (€6, 2¾ hours). Both trains terminate further north in Extremadura. Almonaster-Cortegana station is 1km off the Almonaster-Cortegana road, about halfway between the two villages. Jabugo-Galaroza station is in El Replido, on the N433, 4km west of Jabugo.

## Linares de la Sierra

pop 300 / elevation 500m

Sunk in a river valley 7km west of Aracena on the A470, Linares appears to exist in another era. Cobble streets, a minute unpaved bullring plaza, black-clad villagers, blind corners and thick silence pervade the tiny streets that are surrounded on all sides by a verdant river valley. There's no accommodation here but there is the famously good **Restaurant Los Arrieros** (☎ 959 46 37 17; Calle Arrieros 2; mains €9-15; ☎ lunch, closed Mon & mid-Jun-mid-Jul), with its summer terrace overlooking the valley, enticing fire in winter and innovative approach to the area's pork products and wild mushrooms, such as the latter caramelised in sweet sherry. It's a great place to break the walk from Aracena to Alájar (see p166), but be sure to reserve a table.

## Alájar

pop 750 / elevation 570m

Five kilometres west of Linares de la Sierra is the region's most picturesque village, Alájar. Bigger than Linares, it still retains its tiny cobble streets and cubist stone houses as well as a fine baroque church. Above the village a rocky spur, the **Peña de Arias Montano**, provides magical views over the village and is reached 1km up the road towards Fuenteheridos. The *peña's* 16th-century chapel, the **Ermita de Nuestra Señora Reina de los Ángeles** (☎ 11am-sunset), contains a small 13th-century carving of the Virgin that is considered the patron of the whole Sierra de Aracena. The chapel is the focus of the area's biggest annual religious event, the **Romería de la Reina de los Ángeles** (8 September), when people from all around the sierra and beyond converge here to honour their Virgin.

The Peña de Arias Montano takes its name from Benito Arias Montano, a remarkable 16th-century polymath and humanist who produced one of the first maps of the world, learned 11 languages and was confessor, adviser and librarian to the powerful Spanish king Felipe II. Late in life Montano became parish priest of nearby Castaño del Robledo and made many visits to this spot for retreat and meditation, inspired no doubt by the magnificent views. Felipe II is said to have visited him here and prayed in the cave just below the car park.

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Casa Padrino** (☎ 959 12 56 01; Plaza Miguel Moya 2; mains €8-12; ☎ lunch Sat & Sun, dinner Fri & Sat) Formerly a farmhouse belonging to Arias Montano, Casa Padrino, just behind Alájar's church, serves superb fare loosely based on old village recipes in what used to be the building's chapel. Try the *revuelto de hiervas del campo* (scrambled eggs with wild herbs) or the *solomillo al romero* (pork sirloin with rosemary) – and don't miss out on the fabulous list of Spanish wines. You can also enjoy tapas in the front bar.

Outside the chapel are stalls selling local cheeses, and also the 6th- or 7th-century **Arco de los Novios**: by legend any couple who walk together through this 'Arch of the Financés' will marry.

There's a very cosy inn, **La Posada** (☎ 959 12 57 12; laposadadealajar.com; Calle Médico Emilio González 2; s/d incl breakfast €45/55), a couple of doors off the central Plaza de España, which has just eight rooms, a good little travellers' library and a small restaurant for guests. The friendly Spanish-British couple who run it are keen walkers and full of information on the area, and can arrange guided walks and horse rides.

Down in a beautiful valley about 1.5km west from the village, the excellent, Dutch-run **Molino Río Alájar** (☎ 959 13 13 08; www.molino rioalajar.com; Finca Cabeza del Molino; cottage for 2/4 from €88/118; ☎ ) comprises a set of comfy, warm-feeling, stone, brick and tile holiday cottages, with a spacious communal room, pool, donkeys for hire and plenty of walking information. Minimum stay is two nights, rising to seven at peak seasons.

Alájar's former cinema has been converted into **Mesón El Corcho** (☎ 959 12 57 79; Plaza de España 3; mains €12-15), an authentic temple to the products of the sierra, especially local cheeses and roast leg of lamb. The design is utterly unique, from the stone floor mosaics to the amazing cork sculptures on the bar ceiling.

## Castaño del Robledo

pop 200 / elevation 740m

North of Alájar on a minor road between Fuenteheridos and Jabugo, the small village of Castaño del Robledo is enjoying a late



### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Off the N433 just west of the small village of Los Marines and 7km from Aracena, **Finca Buen Vino** (☎ 959 12 40 34; www.fincabuenvino.com; Carretera N433 Km 95; per person incl breakfast Oct-Apr €60, May-Sep €70, cottage per week low/high season €500/1000; 📍 📞 📺) is a cross between a working farm and a delightfully comfortable, convivial English country house. It's a great base for walking trips and for enjoying first-class food and wine, and would-be gourmets will be particularly interested in the week-long cookery courses run by cordon bleu-trained owner Jeannie Chesterton, who will take you through a repertoire of Andalusian, Mediterranean and Moroccan dishes. Cooking days are interspersed with trips to local cheese and ham factories, food shops, sherry bodegas and restaurants. Courses run between October and April and cost €1,200 for six nights, all inclusive.

renaissance these days thanks mainly to weekenders from Seville who have bought up houses here. But it still retains an almost medieval charm, with a jigsaw of tiled roofs overlooked by two large churches either of which could easily accommodate the entire village population. The name of the iron-domed **Iglesia Inacabada** (Unfinished Church) speaks for itself (funds ran out in 1793), while the towered **Iglesia de Santiago El Mayor**, favoured by the local storks, was founded by Arias Montano (see p169) back in the 16th century, then rebuilt with baroque additions after the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake.

Castaño is perfectly situated amid some of the Sierra de Aracena's best walking country (see the detour boxed text, opposite), so it's great to find the **Posada del Castaño** (☎ 959 46 55 02; www.posadadelcastano.com; Calle José Sánchez Calvo 33; s/d incl breakfast €35/49) here. This characterful converted old village house has walkers foremost in mind and the young British owners (highly experienced international travellers) are full of information and tips. They offer self-guided walking holidays and horse-riding holidays (bookable through their website).

You'll find a couple of bars serving food on shady Plaza del Álamo, behind the Iglesia de Santiago El Mayor.

### Galaroza

pop 1600 / elevation 550m

On the N433, just over 1km cross-country northeast of Jabugo, Galaroza is a pretty village gathered around its 17th-century church, the **Iglesia de la Purísima Concepción**. It's known for its many springs, fountains and water channels, and villagers celebrate their abundance of H<sub>2</sub>O by chucking buckets of it at each other and all comers on 6 September, in the **Fiesta del Jarrito**.

**Hostal Restaurante Toribio** (☎ 959 12 30 73; www.hostaloribio.com; Calle Iglesia 1; r €42; 📍 📞 📺), just behind the church, is recently renovated with bright, welcoming rooms sporting pretty little floral murals – and its own cosy restaurant (mains €6 to €15). **Finca La Suerte** (☎ 959 12 30 10; www.fincalasuerte.com; Carril Cuesta Palero) will take you riding on fine Arab horses with British Horse Society-accredited guides along the beautiful trails around here for anything from one hour to several days.

### Jabugo

pop 2500 / elevation 650m

Jabugo's mouthwateringly tender *jamón ibérico* is considered the best of the best, even in a ham wonderland like the Sierra de Aracena. Jabugo even has its own system of classification, grading hams from one to five *jotas* (Js), with five Js representing hams from pigs that have only ever gorged themselves on the sierra's acorns. The village itself is not much to look at and has some ugly ham-producing factories around the outskirts, but then you come here for the taste-bud trail, not for the sightseeing.

A line of bars and restaurants along Carretera San Juan del Puerto on the eastern side of the village wait for you to sample Spain's best *jamón*. At **Mesón Cinco Jotas** (☎ 959 12 10 71; Carretera San Juan del Puerto; 📍 9am–9pm Tue–Sat, 9am–4pm Sun & Mon), run by the biggest producer, Sánchez Romero Carvajal, a tapa of *cinco jotas* (five Js), will set you back €2.50, while a *ración* is €16, or you could 'pig out' on *cinco jotas* and fried eggs for €10. At shops such as **de Jabugo la Cañada** (☎ 959 12 12 07; Carretera San Juan del Puerto 2) you can purchase almost every part of the pig in some form or other. Slices of high-quality *jamón* cost about €5 per 100g, and for a whole 7kg ham you would pay between €150 and €250.

### DETOUR: ALÁJAR–CASTAÑO DEL ROBLEDO–GALAROZA FIGURE OF EIGHT

This beautiful day-hike is a superb introduction to walking in the Sierra de Aracena and connects three of the area's most attractive villages in a figure of eight, allowing you to vary the route by starting from any of the three or walking only part of it. Most of the way is through varied woodlands but you'll also enjoy long-distance panoramas, wonderful wildflowers in spring, and the spectacular Peña de Arias Montano. The whole route takes about 5½ hours at an average walking pace, not counting stops. The steeper bits are done downhill and there's nothing any modestly fit walker couldn't cope with.

Leave Alájar (p169) by the track to El Calabacino, signposted from the A470 at the western end of the village. El Calabacino is an international artist/hippy colony and a few creative signs from its inhabitants help you along your way. Your route crosses a stream on a wooden bridge, and a small, square, stone-and-brick church on your right, then ascends through a cork-oak forest, where you'll probably hear the grunts of Iberian pigs rooting around for some acorns. Ten minutes past the small church, fork directly right at an 'El Castaño' sign. Another 10 minutes and you will cross a small stream bed to follow a path marked by a yellow paint dot. Within a further 10 minutes the path becomes a vehicle track. Fifteen minutes along this, carry straight on at a crossroads, and in three minutes more you crest a rise and Castaño del Robledo comes into view. Some 200m past the crest, take the shadier path diverging to the left, indicated again by dots of yellow paint. After 10 to 15 minutes this track starts to veer down to the left, passing between tall cork oaks and gradually wending into Castaño del Robledo (p169).

After refreshments and whatever exploring you're inclined to do, leave Castaño by the path through the shady Área Recreativa Capilla del Cristo, on the north side of the HV5211 road passing the north side of the village. To the left you'll soon be able to see Cortegana and Jabugo, before you fork right at a tree with yellow and white paint stripes, 15 minutes from the *área recreativa* (recreational area). Your path starts winding downhill. Go straight on at a crossing of tracks after 10 minutes, and right at a fork one minute after that (a ruined stone building is up the left-hand path here). In 10 minutes Galaroza comes into view as you pass between its outlying *fincas* (rural properties). Cross a small river on a footbridge and emerge on the N433 road three minutes later. Walk left to Galaroza (opposite). The path by which you will leave (after any explorations and refreshments) is 700m west along the N433, marked by a 'Sendero Ribera del Jabugo' route sign.

Leaving Galaroza, fork right one minute out from the mentioned sign, then turn left four or five minutes later down to a footbridge that stretches over a small river. The path soon starts winding up the valley of the Río Jabugo, a particularly lovely stretch. Half an hour from the footbridge you will reach a vehicle track marked 'Camino de Jabugo a Galaroza'. Head right, passing a couple of *cortijos* (rural properties), to cross the river on a low bridge. Turn left 50m past the bridge, then left at a fork 30m further on. You re-cross the river, then gradually wind up and away from it. Ten minutes from the river, turn left at a red-tile-roofed house (Monte Blanco) and in 15 minutes (mostly upward) you're re-entering Castaño del Robledo, this time from the west.

To leave again, start retracing the route by which you arrived from Alájar earlier – up Calle Arias Montano from Plaza del Álamo, right along the first cobbled lane, up through the cork oaks to the crest then down to the crossing of tracks (30 minutes out of Castaño del Robledo). From here turn left, across the southwestern flank of Castaño (960m, the highest hill in the Sierra de Aracena). The track curves sharply to the left after 12 to 15 minutes. Some 300m further, turn right along a path beside a stone wall, which is marked by yellow paint. At a fork 10 minutes walk down from here, take the lesser path down to the right, and within another 20 minutes you will reach the Peña de Arias Montano (p169). Leaving here, start along the paved road down the hill, but after 50m diverge right down on to a cobbled track. Within 10 minutes this track re-emerges on the road: follow the road down for 25m then turn right down a track through a gap in the wall. Cross the A470 a minute or two later to carry on down into the middle of Alájar.



## Almonaster la Real

pop 1800 / elevation 610m

Almonaster la Real is a picturesque little place harbouring the most beautiful gem of Islamic architecture. The little **mezquita** (mosque; admission free; ☎ approx 8.30am-7pm) stands on a hilltop five minutes' walk up from the main square. Almost perfectly preserved, it was built in the 10th century and is like a miniature version of the great mosque at Córdoba. Despite being Christianised in the 13th century, the building retains nearly all its original features: the horseshoe arches, the semicircular mihrab, an ablutions fountain and various Arabic inscriptions. The Christians added a Romanesque apse on the northern side, where parts of a broken Visigothic altar carved with a dove and angels' wings, from the church that stood here before the mosque, have been reassembled. Even older are the capitals of the columns nearest the mihrab, which are Roman. The original minaret, a square tower, adjoins the building. You can climb to the upper chamber and look down on the Almonaster's 19th-century **bullring** (where a bullfight is held each August), but take care near the open, unprotected windows.

In the village, the Mudejar **Iglesia de San Martín** (Placeta de San Cristóbal) has a 16th-century portal in the Portuguese Manueline style, unique in the region.

The top of **Cerro de San Cristóbal** (915m), a 4km uphill drive from Almonaster, affords fabulous views in almost all directions. It's a magnificent place to be at sunset.

On the first weekend in May the village hosts the **Cruz de Mayo** festival, an excuse to show off the local fandango dancing and some fabulous traditional costumes.

**Hotel Casa García** (☎ 959 14 31 09; www.hotelcasagarcia.com; Avenida San Martín 2; s/d €37/53; 📞 📺) is a stylish, small hotel with a large, shady *terrace* at the entrance to the village. Rooms have a *Country Living* feel and some have balconies. The restaurant is also highly regarded (mains €8 to €14) and specialises in

local meat dishes (but also has vegetarian options).

**Pensión La Cruz** (☎ 959 14 31 35; Plaza El Llano 8; s/d €20/30), on a pleasant small plaza, has six clean, simple rooms with bathtub, plus an economical bar-restaurant (*raciones* are €5 to €7).

## Other Villages

**Cortegana**, 6km northwest of Almonaster, supplies much of the local *anís* (aniseed liqueur) for Almonaster's fiesta. It's overlooked by a 13th-century **castillo** (admission €1.30; ☎ 11am-2pm & 6-8pm Tue-Sun) with a local museum inside. The best time to visit Cortegana is during the **Jornadas Medievales**, a huge mid-August fiesta where everyone dresses up in medieval costume and indulges in plenty of eating, drinking and merrymaking, a medieval market, tournaments, falconry displays and archery competitions.

**Aroche**, 15km west of Cortegana, is only 30km short of the Portuguese border. It's a cheerful, friendly place of narrow, pebbled streets, with a 12th-century **castillo** (admission free; ☎ 10am-7pm Fri-Sun), remodelled in the 19th century as an unusual bullring. Just below the castle is the large **Iglesia de la Asunción** which, surprisingly, houses some first-class sculpture by La Roldana, the daughter of the famous Pedro Roldán, and Alonso Cano. The town's other main attraction – if you can call it that – is the **Museo del Santo Rosario** (Paseo Ordóñez Valdéz) – a collection of more than 1000 rosaries from around the world, some donated by celebrities such as Mother Teresa, Richard Nixon and General Franco. For visits to the rosary museum and church and to the castle outside its regular opening days, ask at the **Casa Consistorial** (Town Hall; ☎ 959 14 02 01; Plaza Juan Carlos I; ☎ 9.30am-1pm Mon-Fri). Aroche's **Centro Cultural Las Peñas** (Calle Real; tapas €1.20-1.60, *raciones* €8-11), full of men swigging the local *anís*, has a great local atmosphere and serves up tasty tapas and *raciones*.

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