



HIGH TASTE

Southern comfort: the rustic-chic private country estate of Cortijo El Carligto is set high up in the hills on a sharp ridge, an hour from Málaga, with stunning views across the Mediterranean to Morocco

AS MY wife and I climbed the hill, a rainbow appeared over the shoulder of the Sierra Tejeda towering above us. Walking off a hearty mountain village lunch during a warm shower, we seemed much further than 30 minutes from the Costa del Sol, twinkling in the distance. Yet such contradictions are part of the charm of Axarquía, the Andalusian hinterland east of Málaga, and of the stunning Cortijo El Carligto, a luxury villa perched on the tip of one of these sharp ridges overlooking the sea almost 2,000 feet below.

In fact, this was one of the region's first days of rain in six months: summers here are blisteringly hot and winters warm. El Carligto is an oasis in any season, a small farmstead lovingly restored by owners Alan Hazel and Marc Wils in simple but elegant style.

It is strikingly secluded: on three sides the ridge falls away through olive trees, cactus and vines, with an immense vista of the Velez valley below, the Mediterranean beyond and the Moroccan coast on the horizon. Not for nothing is the nearby village of Canillas de Aceituno known as "el balcón de la Axarquía".

Whitewashed farms and villas dot the ridges around but at night the silence is total. I loved the stillness of a sunny morning with only the sound of the wind. This is a retreat – and an extremely comfortable one.

El Carligto is also exclusive. This four-double-bedroom property has to be hired in its entirety; you can cook for yourself or hire a chef. Indeed, if you choose to pay for the concierge service and add-ons such

An exclusive rural retreat perched in the mountains of Andalucía offering tailor-made food and wine tours of the region makes for the perfect indulgent holiday, says **Andrew Neather**

as spa treatments you could happily stay on the terrace, by the swimming pool or lounging in its drawing room and library for days on end, luxuriating in interiors decked out with French and Spanish antiques and hand-stitched tapestries.

Tempting though that might be, you'd miss much of the region and especially its food and wine – a major new focus for El Carligto's owners, who organise tailor-made trips to local producers.

This is an important olive-growing region: the harvest starts in mid-November, conducted using the age-old method of hanging nets beneath the trees and whacking the branches with sticks. At the

Benaoliva olive mill in Benagalbón, Nacho Perez was awaiting the harvest when we visited: the mill is unusual in still using a 1920s-vintage grinder.

Its stone wheels grind the olives to a paste that is put between mats, in an eight-foot-high, multi-layered sandwich, and squeezed in a 1950s press. We tasted the resulting oil against eight others from the region – a remarkable range of flavours.

This is also an area famed for its grapes, both dried and in wine. Most of the wine is sweet, drunk here as an aperitif: producers such as Jorge Ordoñez are giving artisanal production of these wines some modern panache. But I preferred the dry whites made from the same

grape – moscatel – as well as the heady local reds made variously from syrah, garnacha, tempranillo and Bordeaux varieties, such as the Aryinas red from Bodegas Bentomiz.

The dried fruits – raisins and figs – are more surprising, not least for the implausible quantities in which they are consumed. As we staggered out of a particularly massive lunch of morcilla (black pudding) and roast kid at the friendly La Sociedad restaurant in Canillas, I was surprised to see many locals buying two-kilo boxes of huge, sweet raisins from the owner on their way out. The one-kilo box I bought on their recommendation lasted some time.

This is a rustic cuisine unlike that

offered in the wave of Spanish restaurants that have opened in London over the past few years. I love tapas at Marcos Fernández's Ibérica or José Pizarro's eateries in the capital but they're a far cry, for instance, from the hunks of spit-grilled pork leg that were served up as a tapa with beer at Lo Pepe Molina bar in Almayate, where we stopped by for a pre-lunch sharpener.

Next to such hearty fare, the food of principal El Carligto chef David Palacios is elegant and sophisticated, such as a duo of Ibérico pork cheeks and steak with asparagus and padrón peppers.

But Palacios's food is simple and local too: on the evening of the goat blowout, we wanted nothing more than a bowl of his chilled ajo blanco (almond and garlic soup) in front of an olive-wood fire.

The next day, the grey murk of Stansted made our breakfast – fresh mango, bread and local cheese in brilliant sunshine, under a palm tree – seem all the more improbable. Had it all been a dream? I do hope not.

DETAILS: SPAIN

easyJet has return fares from Stansted and Gatwick to Málaga from £85.98, easyjet.com

Cortijo El Carligto has four doubles (must be rented together) from €800 a night (minimum three-night stay) with welcome hamper and tapas (€100pp for a guided culinary tour of the olive mill and a bodega with tastings of local olive oils and wines, plus lunch). A new week-long Iberian pig butchering course available from October costs from €1,600pp all-inclusive, based on group of eight, carligto.com



Gastro villa: above left, El Carligto offers an in-house chef service from David Palacios, centre, using local produce, right