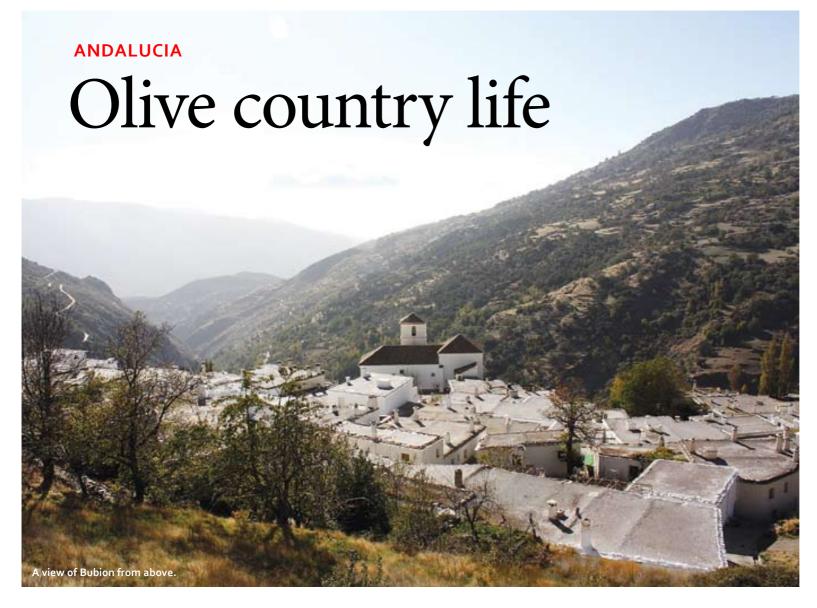
# traveller







Hippies as well as villagers live as one in Spain's deep south

#### **NELLIE HUANG**

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A KIND of Shangri-La lies tucked in the Sierra Nevada mountain range, deep in the heart of Andalucia.

The Alpujarra region is one of the most fertile areas in Spain. Water from the mountains and Mediterranean sunshine feed fruit orchards while the dry air

Nothing thrills me more than reaping the fruits of my labour. Every season, I go out into the fields to collect the olives when they're ripe. That is the best part of my job.

Roberto, an olive cultivator in the Alpujarras

helps cure that Spanish staple, serrano ham.

The scenery, too, is pretty. White-washed villages, remnants of Muslim communities, cling onto the slopes.

While the Alpujarras is off the tourist trail in the way that cities such as Madrid and Barcelona are its stars, the region's bucolic way of life tends to attract travellers who want to stay.

My partner and I took a tour into the mountains to see this bohemian enclave for ourselves.



Traditional white-washed houses are used as holiday homes.

#### **OLIVE GROVES**

As we drove to the peaks, we watched brown, rugged landscapes give way to silvery olive groves, as the smell of pine and citrus permeated the air.

Our tour guide, Roberto, an olive cultivator in his 50s, told us what he loved about life in the Alpujarras: "Nothing thrills me more than reaping the fruits of my labour. Every season, I go out into the fields to collect the olives when they're ripe. That is the best part of my job."

#### NATURAL SPRINGS AND HOLISTIC CENTRES

The pastoral life he described is an enticing one. In his 1957 book *South of Granada*, British writer Gerald Brenan detailed his seven-year stay in this area in the 1920s. Since then, it has become a veritable destination for hippies, and now, New Age practitioners.

The gateway to the Alpujarras, the town of Lanjaron, is home to a Buddhist meditation centre, yoga halls and holistic stores. It reverberates with spiritual energy, drawing artists and writers from all over the world.

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PHOTOS NELLIE HUANG

## Olive country life

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We drove on to Cortijo Amapolis, a retreat in the shape of a Mongolian yurt hidden in the valleys. The retreat programme combines meditation, yoga and massages.

One of the guests, Ruben, a Brazilian dancer, said: "Waking up to the mountain air, meditating in the tranquillity and being surrounded by fellow artists — that's what makes me feel alive. I've been here for only a month, but I know this is now my home."

#### **ORGANIC LIVING**

We left the hippie trail behind us, with the slopes carpeted by meadows of wildflowers. Mushrooms and herbs found in the wild are used in local cuisine and what people can't pick, they grow in their backyard — one reason why Alpujarran cuisine is gaining fame for its organic origins.

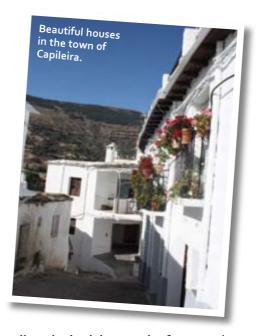
Farmhouses, or cortijos, abound, serving food in its purest form. We stopped at Cortijo Garin to sample a typical item, the Plato Alpujarreno — a mixture of jamon (cured ham), morcilla (congealed cow's blood) and patatas a lo pobre (pan-fried potato), tossed in locally produced olive oil and condiments. Naturally, the ingredients came from the restaurant's own farm.

#### CASA RURAL

Twelve kilometres away lies the Poquiera



The village of Pampaneira lines the valley slope.



valley, the backdrop to the famous trio: Pampaneira, Capileira and Bubion. The three are reportedly the most stunning of the Alpujarras' white-washed villages. Each is a phalanx of twisting mule tracks, steep cobbled paths and wooden balconies draped with bright red peppers that invites hours of exploration.

We pushed further to the other end of the highlands, 20km away, to get to Pitres. The town has a bundle of rustic holiday homes, or casas rurales. Poised on the slopes, these guesthouses have an unobstructed view of the gorge and outdoor terraces to while away the time.

As the sun set, we settled into La Oveja Verde, a traditional country-style guesthouse, to enjoy a glass of wine.

The beauty of the place inspired a fellow guest, a middle-aged British writer, to use Pitres as the setting for his next novel. "I want to use the romance of the Alpujarras in my novel," he said. "A place like this is rare these days."

#### **TRIP NOTES**

Go: The nearest airports are in Malaga and Granada. Lufthansa and British Airways fly to both airports for about \$1,500. For optimum mobility, rent a car at the airport. The rate is about €50 (\$94) a day. Road signs are in Spanish but it is easy to find your way with a map. Most locals speak only Spanish, so learn some words before you go. The other option to book a tour. Olive Oil Tours (www.oliveoiltour. com) depart from Granada. A six-hour excursion including lunch costs €55.

When to go: The best time to visit is in spring (April to June) when the climate is pleasant and flowers are in bloom. Temperatures can drop drastically at night, even in summer. Winter is best avoided as roads might be closed due to snow.

#### Eat and stay:

- Cortijo Garin (www.cortijogarin.com). The average price of a meal is €10.
- Alpujarras Holidays (www.alpujarraholidays.com) has homes furnished with a kitchen and swimming pool.
  Rates from €40 per person.
- Cortijo Los Iberos (www.casaibero. com) is an excellent farmhouse for travellers to experience rural living. Rates from €22.5 per person.
- La Oveja Verde (www.laovejaverde. es) has panoramic views. Rates start from €30 person per night.
- Cortijo Amapolis (www.armonia. tantrika.net). Retreats that include accommodation in a yurt, meditation sessions and three meals daily cost €150 a day.







### The Extraordinary Taxi Ride of their lives

SINGAPOREANS Ong Jing Yi, 33, and her brother Jason, 35, won themselves a taxi ride of a lifetime on Tuesday. The prize was part of Tourism Western Australia's Extraordinary Taxi Ride contest launched in February.

The pair will embark on a seven-day tour of the Australian state with Doug Slater, a taxi driver chosen in an online voting contest. He will receive A\$25,000 (\$32,041) for driving the Ongs and 10 other pairs of passengers across Western Australia and telling them all about his home state.

His charges hail from Australia and around the world. The journey will take nine weeks starting from April 9.

The Ongs will embark on the fifth leg of the journey, visiting areas such as Monkey Mia, a popular destination to hand-feed dolphins and Shell Beach, which as it name suggests, is made entirely of shells



WA's Tourism Minister, Dr Elizabeth Constable, presents Extraordinary Taxi Ride winners Ong Jing Yi and Jason Ong with the prize certificate.

The siblings were selected by a panel of judges based on their passion for travel and their ability to present themselves. They will be blogging about their experiences while on the trip.

For more information on the contest, log on to www.extraordinarytaxiride.com.au.

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