

8 PAGES!

SOUTHERN SPAIN TRAVEL GUIDE

On narrow roads from Alicante to Málaga

FROM ALICANTE TO MÁLAGA. The journey starts with a heavy walk. I am in *Alicante*, the south Spanish city along the Mediterranean, which has an old fortress looming on a hilltop, which I have attempted to climb. The fortress is called *Castillo Santa Barbara*. And the air is hot.

Being May, summer is already well under way in this part of Europe. But the wind is blowing nicely and the view up here on the hill over sea, city and the mountains beyond is incredible. Down below, narrow streets and alleys are winding around old, worn and beautiful buildings that were once proud mansions in another era, long gone. Later in the evening, down by the seafront along the harbor, couples are strolling slowly under the palm trees, looking at the yachts, taking in the views and smells of the city. With a beer at one of the seafront cafés, as the sun sets, I find myself thinking that I could learn to like, maybe even love, this city.

Welcome to the mountainous regions of *Andalusia*, *Murcia* and *Valencia*, southern Spain, a part of Europe that often seems very far from the rest of Europe; the

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SHARP CURVES *Stunning views meet those who venture into the South of Spain. Photo: Traveling Reporter*

hectic life of *Berlin*, the broad avenues of *Paris* and, for that matter, the Spanish capital of *Madrid*. Here, many people remember the days not long ago when dictator Franco ruled a Spain in fear. Before that, a cruel civil war was fought up in the mountains of *Sierra Nevada* and on the countryside, inspiring Ernest Hemingway to sit down and write "*For Whom the Bell Tolls*". And it wasn't too long ago that Spain was still considered a developing country.

These days, modern freeways cross the valleys and run through the mountain range.

But Spain is again burdened with debt, rising un-

employment, falling real estate prices and an overall struggling economy.

In *Alicante*, though, to a visitor all that seem to pass right by, or at least not disturb the quietness of the city. But I am not staying for long – I have arrived to *Alicante* to embark on a ten day drive to *Málaga*. The journey will take me via squiggly roads along the Mediterranean, via even narrower paths up in the mountains, through the great Moorish city of *Granada*, and down to the Andalusian hometown of Salvador Dalí, *Málaga*, to where he swore not to return as long as Franco was in power. Dalí never returned.





ALICANTE View from Castillo Santa Barbara, Alicante. Below: Alicante details. Photo: Traveling Reporter



Part 1

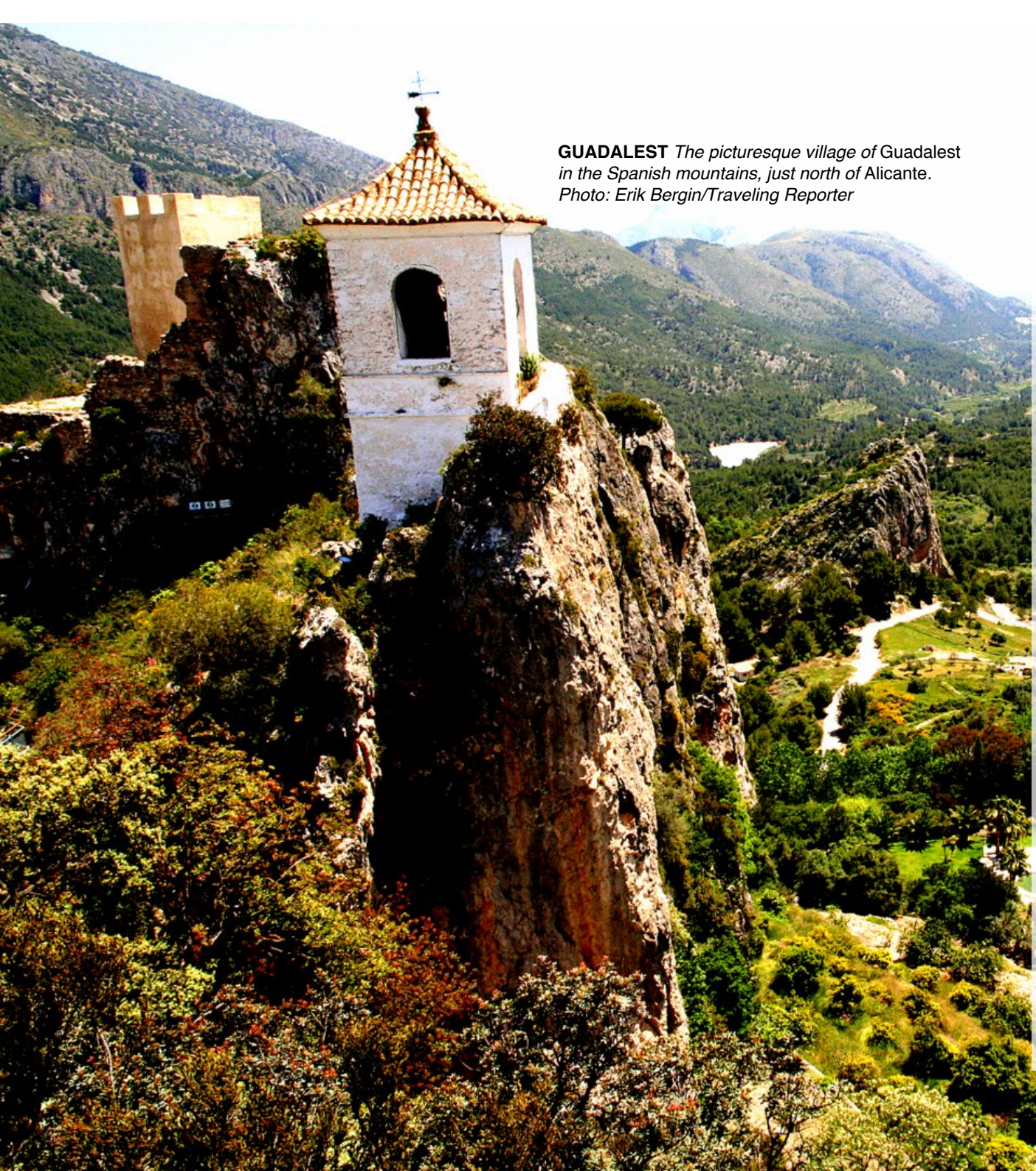
I get in my rental and drive north of *Alicante* on highway E18. My first stop is brief – *Benidorm* is not my kind of place, but I still want to check it out. The place consists mainly of a long beach behind which a quite ugly row of hotel complexes and apartment buildings has been put up. I sincerely cannot figure out why someone would want to go to *Benidorm*, but the city seems filled with holiday makers from northern Europe, so there must be something attractive about the place not visible to the naked eye.

Instead, I leave the main road and head up in the mountains to the small village *Guadalest*. The old, original part of the village has a dramatic position on top of a steep and narrow mountain. You enter the village by a narrow tunnel straight through the rock. Tourists are swarming the place, but the setting and the views, with the village overlooking a long, green valley stretching towards the sea to the east and with a artificial lake below, makes *Guadalest* well worth a day trip from Alicante or, for that matter, from Benidorm.

From *Guadalest*, I continue west on the road CV-70, heading for the city of *Alcoy*.



Map by Google



GUADALEST *The picturesque village of Guadalest in the Spanish mountains, just north of Alicante.*
Photo: Erik Bergin/Traveling Reporter

Alcoy up in the mountains is an industrial center these days, with focus on textiles, food and metals. But with a history stretching back several thousand years, and with muslims as well as christians having constructed forts and buildings there as the area was thrown back and forth between rulers, *Alcoy* is an unusually culture rich and beautiful industrial town. As I drive into the city, I find it almost empty – it is siesta time and most stores and cafés are closed.

As it turns out, I stay in *Alcoy* only a few hours and instead continues south again towards to coast. My next stop is *Elche*, about 15 kilometers from the Mediterranean south of *Alicante*.

If you are into palm trees, *Elche* is the place to be. For some reason that is not immediately clear, the city of *Elche* has specialized in the cultivation of palms, featuring Europe's largest collection of palm trees. The city also has many shoe factories, but it is the palms that really make the difference. Palm cultivation farms are everywhere. You can virtually look anywhere in the city, and you are sure to see a palm tree.



ELCHE — THE MOTHER OF PALM PLANTAGES A surreal sight awaits in *Elche*, holding Europe's, if not the world's, largest palm plantages. *Photo: Traveling Reporter*

After a few hours among the palms, I head towards the coast again and the small city of *Torre Vieja*. This seems one of the main spots for especially British holiday makers. Many cars have UK licence plates and to rent or buy a summer home here has attracted tens of thousands from northern Europe. It is, in a way, easy to see why – the place is calm, close to sea and reasonably cheap as the Spanish real estate market has plummeted the last few years in the world's ongoing financial crisis.

In the harbor of Torre Vieja, an old submarine had been anchored up at my visit. Beyond yachts lay in rows, and there is also a long pier. A tourist's train runs around down at the seafront, carrying old people around the city. But the city has a feeling to it of being there just for the sake of these northern Europeans, it is like a colony where few things seem to be really genuine. Is this really Spain?, you wonder.

Higher up from the sea, long rows of rather depressing summer homes are lined up, with a huge hospital complex sitting between the villas and the Mediterranean, blocking access to the water. Big signs in English advertise the place, called *Los Altos*, as having "schools, supermarkets, city buses" and "wide green areas".

Part 2

Having seen enough, I leave and continue my journey south to spend the night in a much nicer town, *Santiago de la Ribera*, at the large natural lagoon *Mar Menor*. The area around the lagoon *Mar Menor* is worth a few days of your time. This is much more Spain than *Torre Vieja* just north, and the lagoon makes for both beautiful views and nice swimming. There are loads of small towns, villages and parks to choose from. Finding a hotel is rarely a problem.

I stay one night in Santiago de la Ribera, that features great views over the bay with small boats, seafront tapas restaurants and promenades – and almost no



SANTIAGO DE LA RIBERA BY NIGHT *Right by the sea-like lake Mar Menor is Santiago de la Ribera, a nice place to stop by at one or two days. Photo: Traveling Reporter*

other people in sight. It is as if the place was abandoned after an outbreak of a horrific disease or something.

Immediately south of Mar Menor, where the big city *Cartagena* is situated, the coast makes a turn to the southwest. I skip the industrial city *Cartagena* altogether and drives on. Continuing westward, you can opt for the modern highway AP-7, running all the way down to the city of *Almeria*, in the district of Andalusia, and then on all the way to *Gibraltar*.




The country between the big cities in southern Spain are true countryside. Many small country roads are really scenic routes, passing desolated villages, dramatic passes and twisting and bending to follow the shape of the coastline. Hopping back and forth between the AP-7 and small coastal roads, it is possible to make the way to *Almeria*, a nice city worth a day or two before taking in the mighty mountains of *Sierra Nevada* just north of *Almeria*.

Back in the 70's, this harsh environment was supposed to lure viewers to desert areas west of the Mississippi. The movie sets are still standing, featuring fake building fronts of banks, saloons, liquor stores and hotels. The gallows is also there, and one collection of fake buildings take visitors "across the border" to Mexico, with its typical white walls.

Part 3

From Almeria, the mountains of *Sierra Nevada* are easy accessible by car, with several roads leading inland from the coast. The area features a wide range of activities – trekking, skiing in winter, and camping are some of the options available.



But nevertheless, it is highly recommended that you make the effort to really head into the mountains, as the views here are quite amazing. You will find 



ROAD HAZARDS *Fallen rocks on the road or partly collapsed roadways due to rains are common in the Sierra Nevadas. Photo: Traveling Reporter*



FOR A FEW DOLLARS MORE Close to Sorbas, old movie sets stand desolated in the desert. Photo: Traveling Reporter



small villages hanging on mountainsides, roads making breathtaking curves around steep hills, and everything covered in bright colors of green vegetation, blue skies, and the brown and grey of the mighty mountains themselves.

From Almeria, you might choose to navigate your way across the *Sierras* to the city of *Granada*, which should not be missed. One of the finest relics from the days of the Moors, the castle of *Alhambra*, is an absolut necessity for a visitor in this part of Spain. Also, if you are arriving during winter, ski slopes are just 30 minutes away from *Granada*. Even if you come during spring or summer, the ski resort is open for visits, providing fantastic views and noce walks.

One of the Europe's most scenic driveways has to be the A-44/E-902 running between *Granada* up in the mountains and *Motril* down at the coast. I chose that way, and spend a night in a nice seaside village with the inspiring name *Calahonda*. There is not much to do there but to walk the beach, enjoy a cold ➡



SNOW IN MAY The *Sierras*, close to *Granada*, are great for skiing in the winter. Arriving in May, a snowball fight fits better.



beer at a seafront café, and check out the large tomato plantages that surround the place.

From *Granada* up in the mountains and *Calahonda* down at the sea, it is just a few kilometers along the Mediterranean coast to my goal, *Málaga*, where I go and check out the Leonardo da Vinci museum, and then hit the beach.

If you go for this drive, it is not a bad idea to save a day of two for *Málaga*, with its marvelous buildings, parks and seaside postcards settings. An old, blue crane has been left in the harbor area and is illuminated during nighttime. Also, head for the city's restaurant area for a drink and tapas, surrounded by the sounds and images of southern Spain, a part of Europe that is very different from the north.

Story & photos by **Erik Bergin**
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CALAHONDA *The small town of Calahonda sits right on the beach, surrounded by tomato plantages, below a majestic cliff. Photo: Traveling Reporter*



THE MIGHTY ALHAMBRA *High up on a cliff in the city of Granada stands the Moorish temple Alhambra, one of Europe's best architectural wonders. Photo: Traveling Reporter*

Logistics

Renting a car

Many car rentals will let you pick up the car in one place and return it in another city. It is best to book online prior to your trip, although you might be able to secure a bargain on location.

Getting a flight

British Airways, among others, offers cheap flights that are easily converted into a multi-destination ticket. Try using search engines like **momondo.com** that offer multi-city searches.

Finding hotels

Finding lodging is rarely a problem in southern Spain. Rather than booking ahead and be stuck with a schedule, use your car, or your legs, to look around as you arrive at a new village or city.