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 cafes, 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 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 unemployment, 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 Andalucian hometown of Salvador Dali, Málaga, to where he swore not to return as long as Franco was in power. Dali never returned.
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 an 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.
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 the 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 plantage. Photo: Traveling Reporter
After a few hours among the palms, I head towards the coast again and the small city of Torrevieja. 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 Torrevieja, 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 Torrevieja 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 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.
But that would be to skip many interesting places along the coast, as the AP-7 runs inland, so I go for some of the smaller roads instead.

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 Almería, a nice city worth a day or two before taking in the mighty mountains of Sierra Nevada just north of Almería.

But before you hit Almería, it worth taking a detour to the body-double of America’s Wild West, a ghost town close to Sorbas, northeast of Almería. It was here, among desolated desert cliffs and rocks, that many of Hollywood’s early Wild West movies where shot, especially those with a narrow budget such as For A Few Dollars More. (Photos on next page.)

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 gallow is also there, and one collection of fake buildings take visitors “across the border” to Mexico, with its typical white walls.

These badlands of Andalucía is undoubtedly a fine piece of cinematic history, left to slowly drift away into eternity as wind, rain and sun take their toll on the now derelict movie sets. It is fun to imagine Clint Eastwood gearing up for a duel in this desolate part of Spain.

**Part 3**

From Almería, 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.

Driving here takes some effort. Often, the average speed becomes very low, around 30-40 kilometers per hour, because of the many slopes and curves. It is recommended that you rent a vehicle with a sturdy engine, as shifting gears up and down will otherwise become exhausting after a while. Beware that conditions of roads differ widely – the main roads and highways crossing the area are very good, while smaller roads and paths sometimes put driver’s skills on hard tests. Landslides with big rocks covering parts of the road are not uncommon (photo to the right).

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
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 nice 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

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

**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 postcard 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.

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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.