

# King of the Castle



## IN FRANCE AND SPAIN

History and geography make Les Baux-de-Provence and Ronda two of the most spectacular fortified towns to be found anywhere **BY ROB & WENDY LINDSAY**

Remember the childhood rhyme “I’m the king of the castle, and you’re the dirty rascal”? Over the centuries, being at the top of the hill has helped ensure victory and longevity. Think back to the historic places you’ve seen or read about — hilltop castles, stone forts, or in this case, fortified towns. We discovered two of our favourite fortified towns spectacularly perched on impenetrable crags — one in France, the other in Spain.

Our starting point, in Provence, southern France, was the fascinating town of Arles. Nestled along the banks of the Rhone River, it has many impressive Roman ruins, among them a coliseum and a theatre, both still in seasonal use for bullfights, opera and concerts. With its bright blue window shutters, sunbathed walls, vibrant flower-filled window boxes, and inviting sidewalk cafés

(one of which inspired van Gogh’s famous painting *Le Café de nuit*), it’s easy to understand why the town has long been an inspiration to artists.

Leaving Arles behind, we drove approximately 20 kilometres into the country, passing olive groves and orchards en route to Les Baux-de-Provence. It’s often called “the most dramatic fortified village in France” — and indeed it is impressive. From a distance, there’s no sign of the castle or the walled village. It appears to be just one massive grey limestone mountain towering 245 metres over the green valley. However, a red-and-white flag snapping in the breeze does hint there could be inhabitants up there. Finally, as we drew much nearer, battlements and castle walls became distinct. An entry sign informed us that this stronghold was once the feudal home of the Grimaldi family (now Princes of Monaco)

Photography, Lindsay Editorial

Spectacular Ronda where the “new” bridge (circa 1793) links the town across the 100-metre chasm of the Tajo de Ronda ravine. Les Baux: (above left to right) Castle ruins; approaching Les Baux; sign presenting 1,000 years of history; the chapel.

and had controlled a vast area.

When you pass into the walled village, the castle battlements loom over everything below and you feel and see why it was such an impenetrable position over the centuries. Apparently, when the Lords of Baux built their stronghold here in the 10th century, they claimed King Balthazar, one of the three wise men of Bible fame, as an ancestor and took the Star of Bethlehem as their emblem. It was this banner of the white star on a sea of crimson that we could see from so far away.

True to its premedieval heritage, the village is a maze of narrow, steep, winding passages. One wishes the

ancient stone walls could speak of the centuries of history and passing culture they have seen. Two museums give a glimpse of a tumultuous past when over 4,000 people lived in the village. Today, there are only two dozen residents, all involved in the tourist trade, with cafés and a myriad of craft and souvenir shops selling the local lavender, wine and olive oil for which Provence is famous.

The view from Les Baux is spectacular, featuring the Alpilles Mountains, the Camargue plains famous for their white horses, the Vaccarès marshes, and the immense Rhone delta with the blue Mediterranean in the distance.

As we departed the town, our guide pointed out an





Ronda: Church of El Espíritu Santo (Holy Spirit) visible beyond the stout city walls.



Ronda: (left to right) statue honouring Romero, father of modern bullfighting; poster for a bull fight in White Village of Mijas; view from Ronda out across the farmland of Southern Spain.

old quarry across the valley where in 1822 mineralogist Pierre Berthier discovered the principal source of aluminum and named it bauxite after the ancient fortified village.

Next, in Spain's southernmost region of Andalucía, we took Route C-339 through San Pedro de Alcántara and into the mountains, following the signs for Ronda. It's a wide, paved highway, and the numerous trucks, buses and cars travelling the twisting mountain route daily suggest the timeless lure of Ronda.

A few Pueblos Blancos (white towns) glittered seductively across the mountain valleys along our route. The day before, we had explored a couple of them, following meandering mountain roads that from a distance looked like mere goat paths. Their steep, winding streets, interesting little shops, tiny sidewalk cafés and, of course, the views made for a memorable day. During the Moorish period, the tradition of whitewashing house walls to reflect the hot summer sun was introduced, and modern-day householders in designated towns are still obliged by law to whitewash

their houses at least once a year... thus ensuring the continuing fame of Andalucía's Pueblos Blancos.

Finally, we reached the mountaintop with spectacular Ronda perched on a plateau. The current site was founded as a fortified post by the Romans, although neolithic artifacts have been excavated. This stronghold received the title of city at the time of Julius Caesar, and the old town (La Ciudad) contains some of the oldest original buildings in all of Spain.

The setting is impressive, as the plateau is split in two by the vast Tajo de Ronda, a gorge carved from the rock by the Guadalquivir River. Several houses and gardens in Ronda overhang the 100-metre chasm, making you wonder about the lengths folks will go to for a view. The old town is a picturesque labyrinth of streets, and anyone interested in architecture or history will find it a fascinating spot.

Across the gorge, in El Mercadillo (the "newer" part of the town), the most significant monument is the

Plaza de Toros de la Real Maestranza, a bullring famous throughout the world and one of the oldest in Spain. Its fame is linked to three generations of locally born bullfighters, Francisco, Juan and Pedro Romero, the latter considered the father of modern bullfighting. The mystique of the matador, his glittering suit, and the grace and spectacle of cape and sword are said to have begun with him. Apparently, the museum is worth a visit — if you can catch it open.

There's a literary link here, too. In Chapter 10 of Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, there's a scene describing the execution of Fascist sympathizers, who are thrown off a cliff in a fictional village. However, Hemingway spent some time living in Ronda, and locals say he modelled the scene on actual events that are part of the town's history.

Ronda's steep gorge is crossed by three bridges, of which the Puente Nuevo (new bridge), completed in 1793, is by far the most famous. Its graceful aqueduct-like arches have become the symbol of Ronda. It links the historic district with the flourishing shops and restaurants of El Mercadillo and as a result is the most heavily used. Still, it remains solid, strong and graceful — a fitting tribute to its designer, José Martín de Aldehuela, and the men of Ronda who laboured for 42 years to build it.

One can best appreciate Ronda's phenomenal cliffside setting and the scale of the Puente Nuevo by strolling the beautiful garden walk (Paseo de los Ingleses) that runs along the very edge of the precipice to the Parador (a state-run hotel in a historic building). You can see for miles out over the undulating farmland below, and the coffee shop is a great spot for lunch at cliffside tables.

But upstairs, we can only imagine, the rooms must surely have the most spectacular views in all of Spain. ■

*Trip Planner* | France: [int.rendezvousenfrance.com/en](http://int.rendezvousenfrance.com/en)  
Spain: [spain.info/en\\_CA](http://spain.info/en_CA) | 416.961.3131/[mycompass.ca](http://mycompass.ca)