

Olive Country Life in Andalusia

Posted on May 5, 2015 by Nellie Huang

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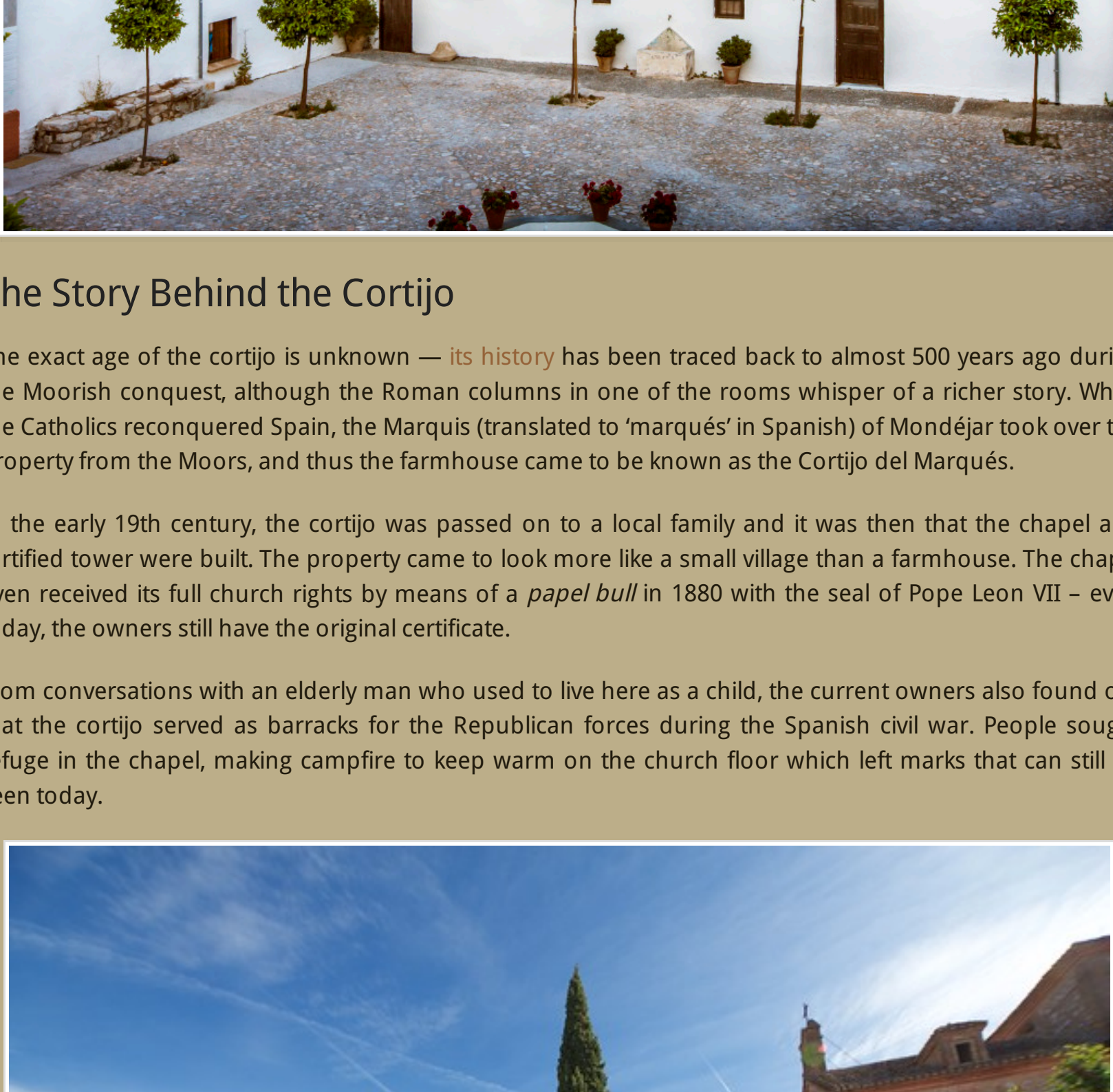
It's a glorious Saturday morning and the sun is beaming through the window. Birds are chirping outside and the air is thick with the scent of pine trees and sunflowers. I look out to see rolling green hills dotted with yellow meadows and red poppies, framed by vast olive groves and imposing grey mountains in the backdrop.

I am in the back country of Andalusia, a region in southern Spain known for its rich traditions and agriculture. Since my first trip to Spain almost 10 years ago, I've wanted to immerse deeply in the back country and experience olive country life. Now I've finally found the chance to do just that. And I didn't even have to go far.

The Cortijo del Marqués is a secret corner of Granada that we didn't know existed until now. The charming retreat is just 18km outside of Granada, yet it gives the sensation that we're somewhere far flung and remote.

The drive there itself was a scenic one as the dirt road took us deep into the olive plantations, past acres upon acres of green fields where colorful woodpeckers flew overhead and little hares skittered around freely. From afar, the rural hotel looked like an entire village, complete with several buildings, a watch tower, farming barns and even a chapel.

In fact, the cortijo (farmhouse' in Spanish) did serve as a home for more than thirty peasant families at one point in its long string of history, which explains why it has an authentic, old world charm.

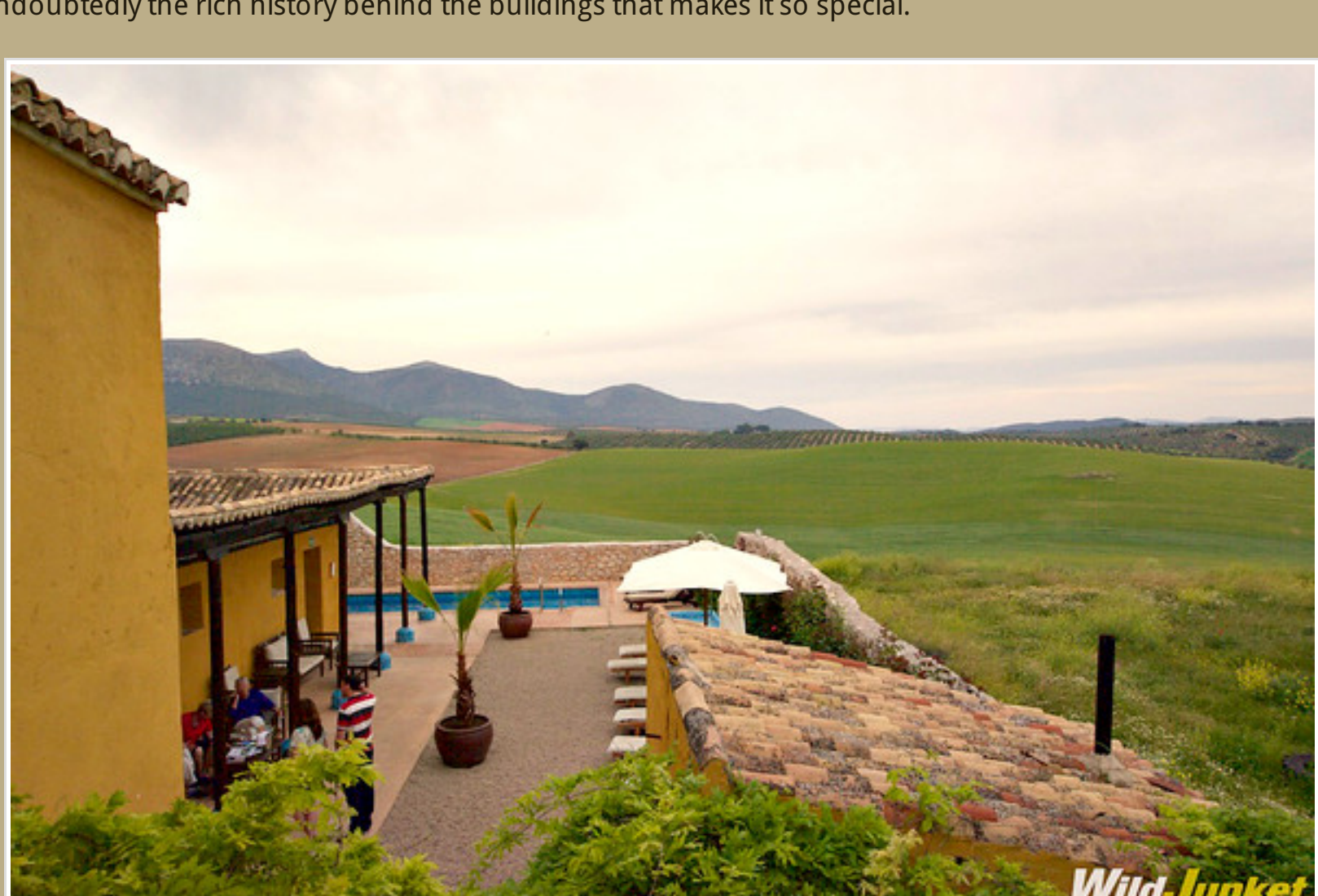


The Story Behind the Cortijo

The exact age of the cortijo is unknown — its history has been traced back to almost 500 years ago during the Moorish conquest, although the Roman columns in one of the rooms whisper of a richer story. When the Catholics reconquered Spain, the Marquis (translated to 'marqués' in Spanish) of Mondéjar took over the property from the Moors, and thus the farmhouse came to be known as the Cortijo del Marqués.

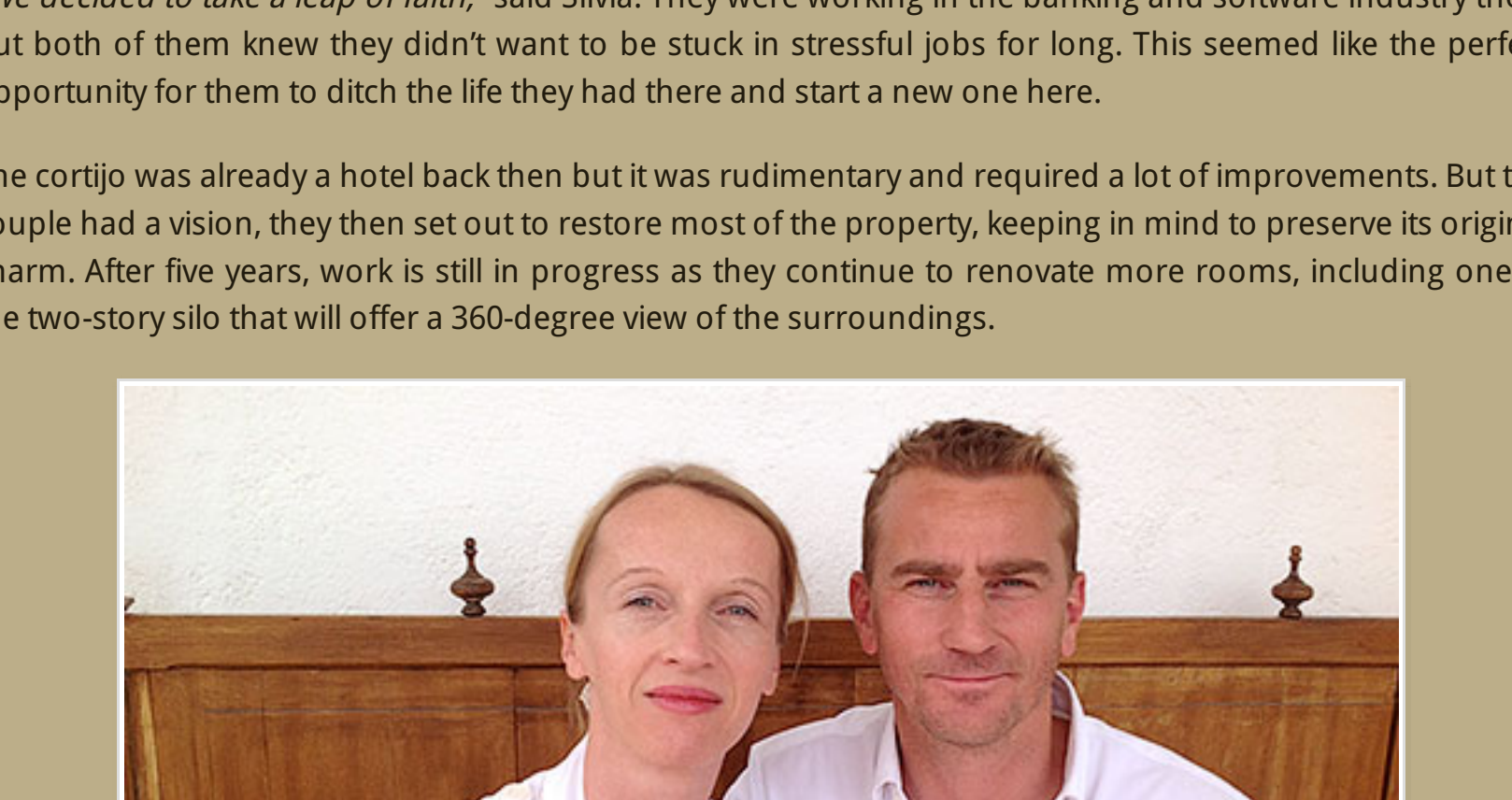
In the early 19th century, the cortijo was passed on to a local family and it was then that the chapel and fortified tower were built. The property came to look more like a small village than a farmhouse. The chapel even received its full church rights by means of a *papel bull* in 1880 with the seal of Pope Leon VII – even today, the owners still have the original certificate.

From conversations with an elderly man who used to live here as a child, the current owners also found out that the cortijo served as barracks for the Republican forces during the Spanish civil war. People sought refuge in the chapel, making campfire to keep warm on the church floor which left marks that can still be seen today.



After the war, all the inhabitants started to move away from the cortijo to nearby villages and to Granada, leaving the buildings to slowly crumble and collapse. Despite its glorious past, nobody except the locals were aware of its existence until it was restored in the 2002 by the previous owner. During the restoration process, emphasis was made on preserving its original features.

After centuries of existence and decades of decay, the Cortijo del Marqués was reopened as a boutique rural hotel in 2010. Today, it has the air of a historical Andalusian manor house and the modern comforts of an exclusive country retreat. While the tranquility and beautiful setting are what draws people here, it's undoubtedly the rich history behind the buildings that makes it so special.



A Leap of Faith

So how did an old farmhouse in the middle of the countryside become what it is today?

The story is a serendipitous one. Five years ago, Dutch-Austrian couple Silvia and Alco, who were living in Madrid then, decided to look for a bigger property outside the city to bring up their children. Their real estate agent knew this property wasn't what they were looking for, but thought it would be perfect for them. And she was right.

When they first saw this property, they fell in love with it. It was nothing like what they had in mind, but they were enamored.

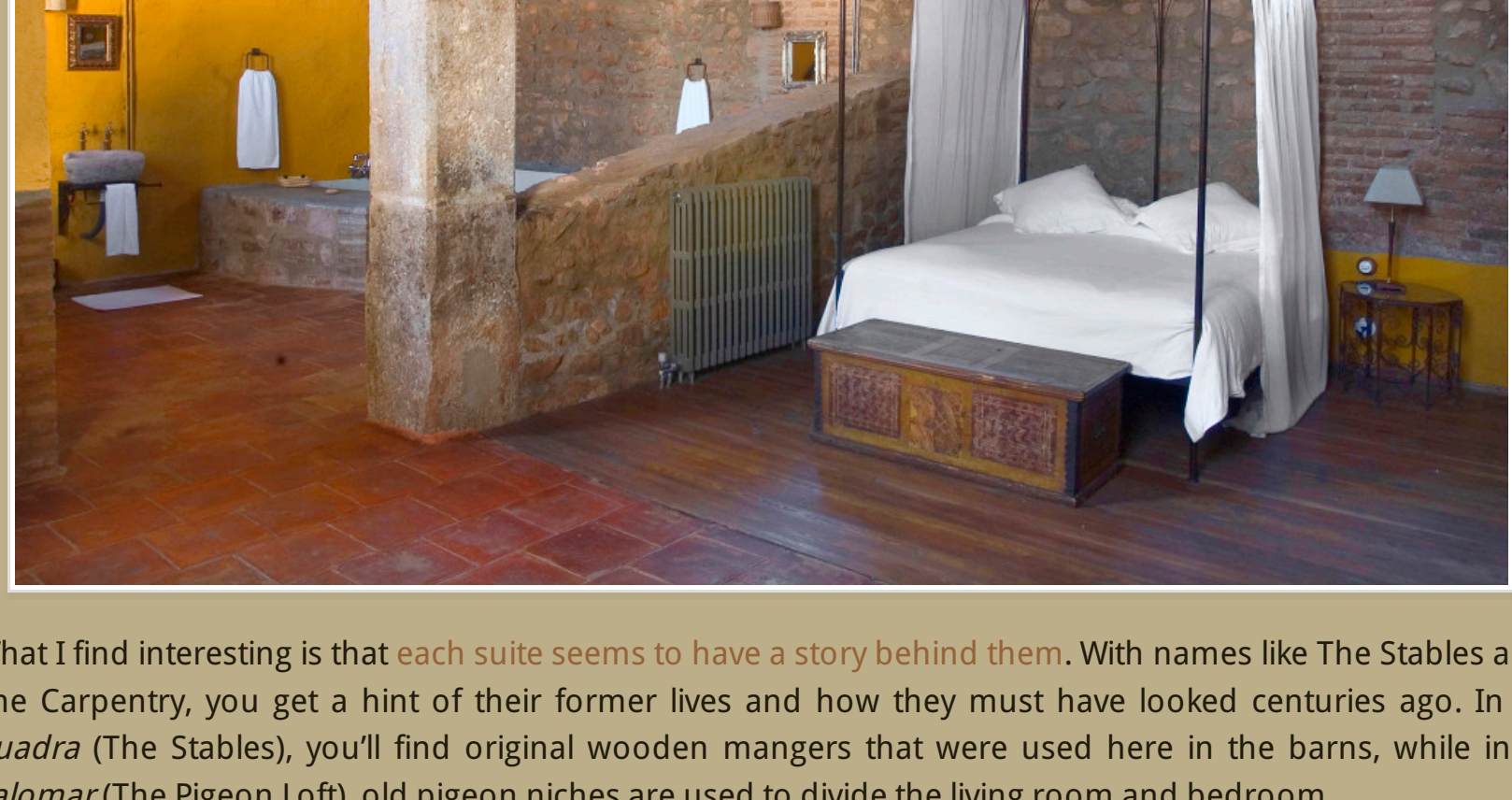
"We decided to take a leap of faith," said Silvia. They were working in the banking and software industry then, but both of them knew they didn't want to be stuck in stressful jobs for long. This seemed like the perfect opportunity for them to ditch the life they had there and start a new one here.

The cortijo was already a hotel back then but it was rudimentary and required a lot of improvements. But the couple had a vision, they then set out to restore most of the property, keeping in mind to preserve its original charm. After five years, work is still in progress as they continue to renovate more rooms, including one in the two-story silo that will offer a 360-degree view of the surroundings.



"This place changed me," Silvia shared with me with a twinkle in her eyes. "I was very different five years ago. I had a busy life then, always rushing around and stressing up about work. But now, I have the Spanish *mañana* attitude. It's important to enjoy life and treasure the little things around us."

These days, she loves living in the countryside with her family and managing the hotel at the same time. Their two sons have grown up here and this is where their family will continue to live for generations. During our time there, we got to know Silvia and Elko a bit and it was obvious their love affair with the cortijo is a lifelong one.



Modern Comforts in an Old World Setting

For hotel guests seeking a peace of mind, the cortijo provides an intimate and romantic atmosphere. With just 11 suites (soon to become 15 suites) spread across a big property, the cortijo gives lots of space and privacy. There are lots of outdoor lounging space, including a beautiful pool area overlooking the green meadows and a colorful garden outside the manor house. At the same time, owners Silvia and Elko provide very personal service, greeting guests by their first names and always checking in to make you feel right at home.

The style of the hotel leans towards simple but rustic and elegant, featuring four poster beds, freestanding bathtubs, vaulted ceilings and antique furnishing. The furniture have been handpicked by the owners from flea markets and local antique stores, creating a tasteful and authentic decor. Each of the suites is unique in design and layout — no other room is the same.



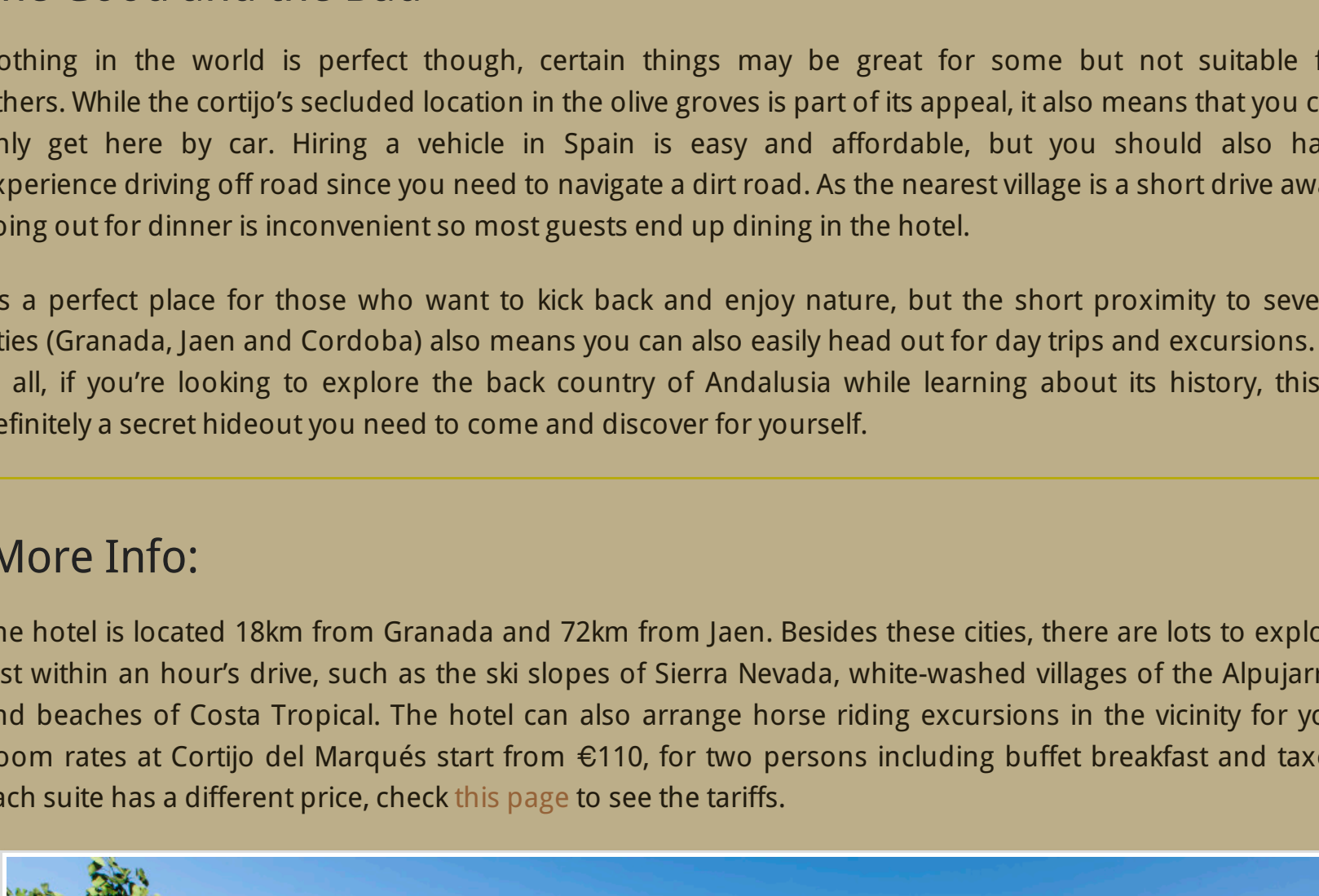
What I find interesting is that each suite seems to have a story behind them. With names like The Stables and The Carpenter, you get a hint of their former lives and how they must have looked centuries ago. In *La Cuadra* (The Stables), you'll find original wooden mangers that were used here in the barns, while in *El Palomar* (The Pigeon Loft), old pigeon niches are used to divide the living room and bedroom.

As its name implies, *El Mirador* (The Lookout) is located right on top of the fortified tower, with windows that open up to a 360-degree view of the countryside. One of the coolest rooms is *El Granero*, the former granary of the cortijo with beautiful stone walls, a five meter high original wooden ceiling, a four-poster bed, and an enormous open-concept tiled bathtub.



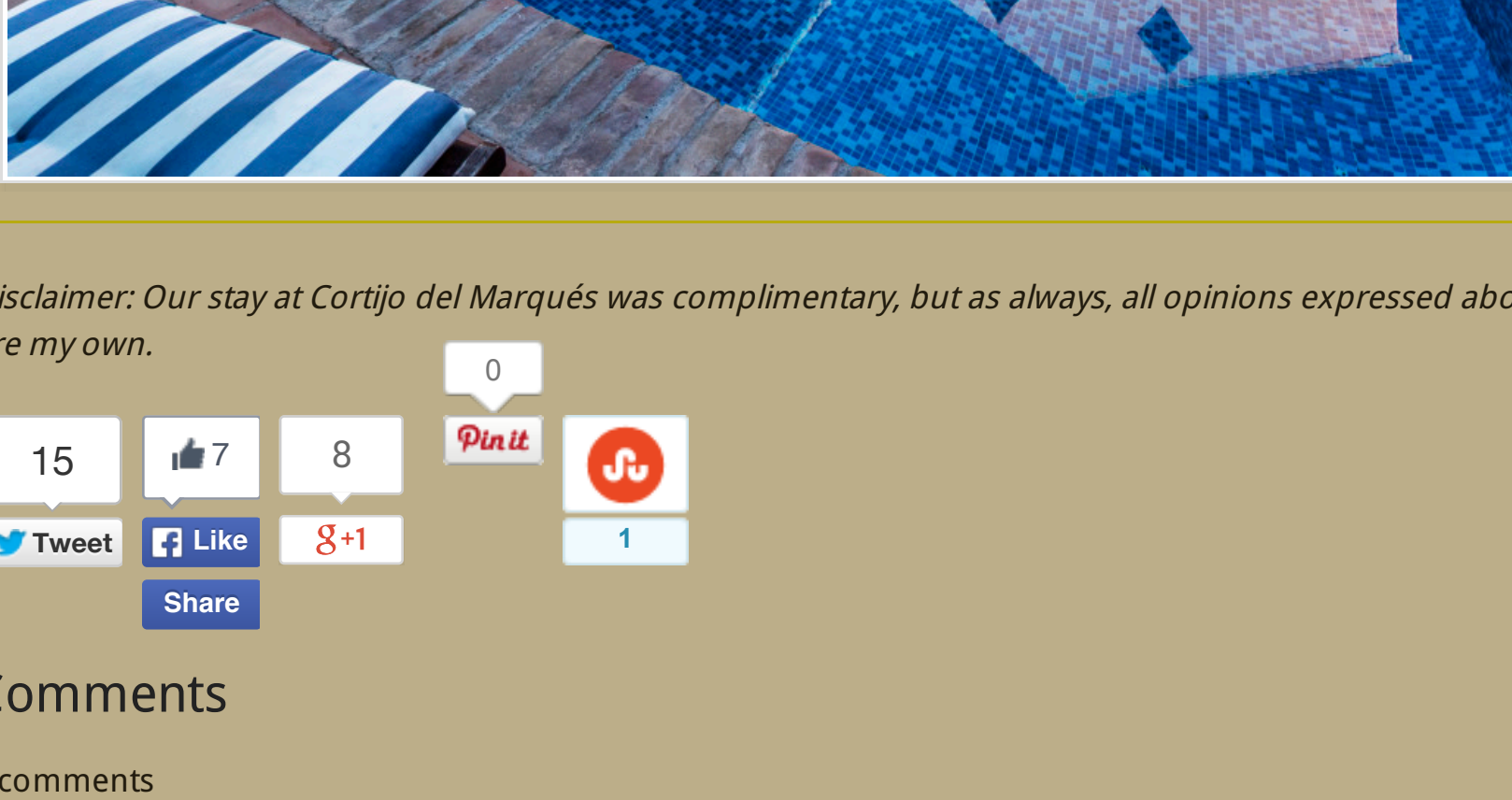
Our suite, *La Iglesia* meaning 'church' in Spanish, is actually built within the chapel. The spacious 80 m² suite is made up of a vaulted sunlit bedroom with views of the swimming pool and surrounding greenery, a living area with a beautiful ceiling and a restored XIX century bathroom with a freestanding bathtub. My favorite thing about this suite is definitely the view — I love waking up to the sunshine and that gorgeous panorama of landscapes that completely epitomize Andalusia. They even provided us with a baby cot for Kaleya, which definitely made our lives easier.

Another feature I love about the hotel is the warm and cozy dining and lounge area, characterized by large arched glass doors, high ceiling, a huge fireplace, and sophisticated Chesterfield sofas. We loved sitting in the comfortable lounge area feeding Baby Kaleya, while chilling out with a glass of wine or two and listening to flamenco music playing in the background. In summer, the balcony doors also open up to create an open space perfect for outdoor lounging.



Even if you don't stay at cortijo, it's worthwhile coming here just for dinner. The in-house restaurant serves up Mediterranean cuisine with a focus on local recipes and produce, in a slight modern touch. Every night, the restaurant serves a fixed menu three-course menu for €28, which is great value for money considering how amazing the food is.

According to the owner Elko, having a fixed menu means that the food is fresh and always of the highest quality. For big eaters, the portions are quite small though. During our stay, we tried the traditional Spanish appetizer, *ajo blanco* (cold garlic soup), and an outrageously good dish of pan fried sea bass topped with white chocolate cream. My favorite dish was the Iberian pork cheek stew simmered in red wine sauce, so soft and tender yet full of flavor.



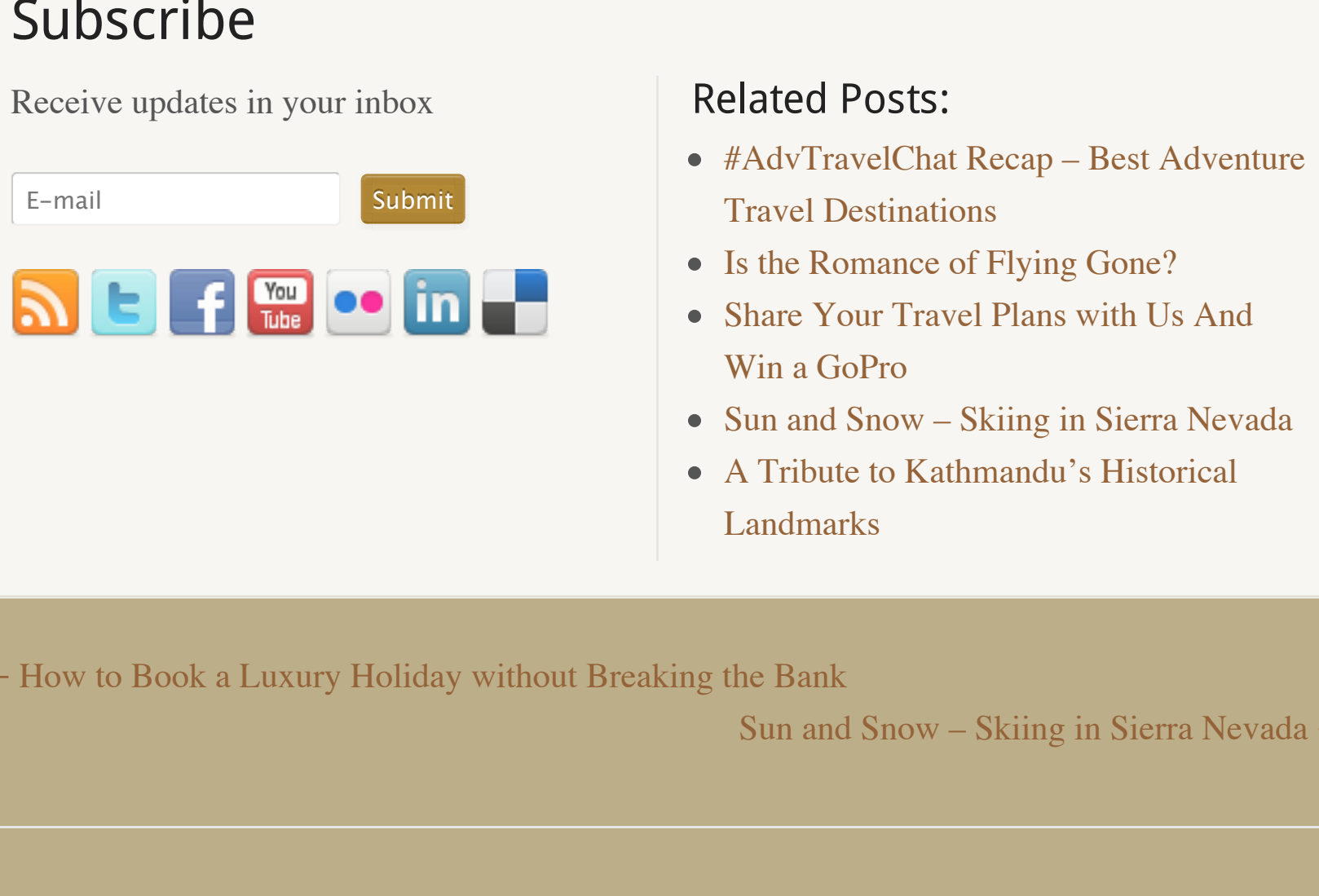
The Good and the Bad

Nothing in the world is perfect though, certain things may be great for some but not suitable for others. While the cortijo's secluded location in the olive groves is part of its appeal, it also means that you can only get here by car. Hiring a vehicle in Spain is easy and affordable, but you should also have experience driving off road since you need to navigate a dirt road. As the nearest village is a short drive away, going out for dinner is inconvenient so most guests end up dining in the hotel.

It's a perfect place for those who want to kick back and enjoy nature, but the short proximity to several cities (Granada, Jaen and Cordoba) also means you can also easily head out for day trips and excursions. All in all, if you're looking to explore the back country of Andalusia while learning about its history, this is definitely a secret hideout you need to come and discover for yourself.

More Info:

The hotel is located 18km from Granada and 72km from Jaen. Besides these cities, there are lots to explore just within an hour's drive, such as the ski slopes of Sierra Nevada, white-washed villages of the Alpujarras and beaches of Costa Tropical. The hotel can also arrange horse riding excursions in the vicinity for you. Room rates at Cortijo del Marqués start from €110, for two persons including buffet breakfast and taxes. Each suite has a different price, check [this page](#) to see the tariffs.



Disclaimer: Our stay at Cortijo del Marqués was complimentary, but as always, all opinions expressed above are my own.

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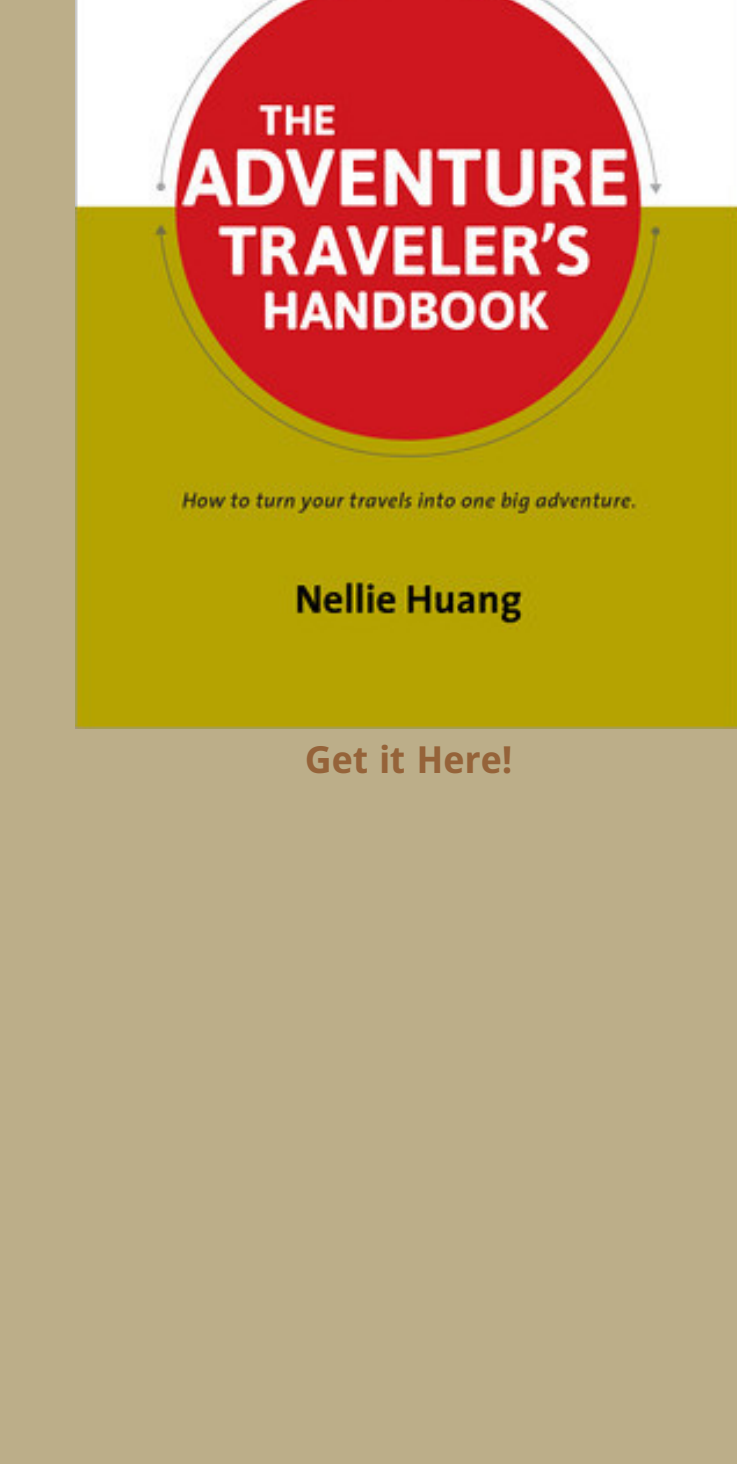
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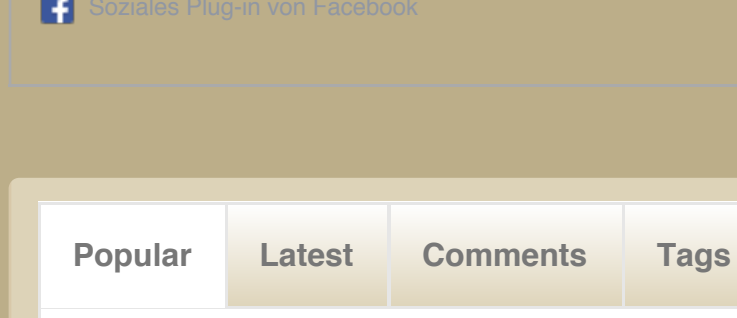
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