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Above

Spring comes early to Albuñuelas despite the snow-topped presence of the Sierra Nevada. Long warm days with good clear light produce a profusion of new floral growth and the valleys fill with the heady scent of orange blossom.

visit for Hugh, his wife and his 20-something daughter since they enjoyed the course so much last year that they've returned and say they'll be back again too next year. They're not the only ones: the Visitors' Book speaks for itself: "We are here for the second time and we like it even better than the first" is one comment; "Thank you! We've enjoyed a delightful painting holiday with glorious scenery, marvellous meals, stimulating company and exceptionally kind and attentive hosts" is another.

It's early morning and the painters are absorbed. Open tubes of oils, daubed palettes and canvasses are dotted around the patio and the ambience is one of tranquillity, creativity and well-being. The sounds of birdsong and chiming village church bells fill the air across the valley. The non-painters of the group are quietly reading or sunbathing around the private swimming pool with its breathtaking views across to the other side of the valley and verdant mountainside of La Giralda, the highest peak at 1,400 metres high.

The green valley has peace and quiet in abundance and the rugged ridges surrounding it are perfect for strolling. More active guests can enjoy guided walks or horseriding around the surrounding countryside and the *Deining* over

Lewis scenery of Las Alpujarras is just over the hills in the next valley. The Sierra Nevada mountain range, a 15-minute drive away, offers hiking and skiing. All this, plus the beaches of the Costa Tropical 30 minutes' drive in one direction and the stunning sights of Granada 30 minutes' in the other are great for stimulating the creative juices.

Proof of this is a close friend of Jimmy's: the writer and biographer Ian Gibson who is an authority on Spanish poets and artists including Federico García Lorca and Salvador Dalí. He lives in the next village of Restabal and enjoys it, he says, particularly because it is untouched and not "an English enclave".

Jimmy has worked as an artist and teacher throughout his life in the UK, Spain and Kenya. Antonia is originally from Salamanca and the couple met in Glasgow in 1960 when Antonia was visiting as a trainee teacher and the couple have three grown-up children. They bought the house in 1996, opting to retire to southern Spain for its light and colour: "We knew that we wanted an independent house with character and history and around five guest rooms. When we saw the Cortijo, although it was in a dreadful state of dilapidation, we knew straight away that this was for us," says Jimmy.



This page, clockwise

Jimmy and Antonia; the attractive facade of the farmhouse;
a painter at work on the cobbled terrace





Clockwise

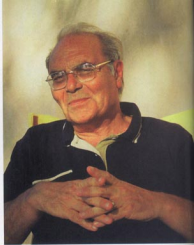
Tools are downed over lunch; Jimmy has worked as an artist in Spain and the UK, the farmhouse prior to its restoration

The house had enjoyed a lively history. It had been the most important house in the area, where villagers would celebrate weddings, local fiestas, parties and gatherings. Then in the 19th Century, gambling debts forced the owner to sell off half of it, and the house was split in two. With the renovation, the house became the focus of local attention once again as it was the first big restoration project in the local area. But as Antonia is Spanish and Jimmy speaks the language fluently, they soon made contact with the right people. "The *aparejador* was our main man," explains Jimmy, referring to the technical (or quantity) surveyor, without whom they would have been lost. "He was a local man from Granada and we were delighted with the high standard and efficiency of his work". (Jimmy recommends anyone considering doing renovations on an old Andalusian building to check out previous work of more than one local *aparejador*.)

It took 18 months of work to restore the house into a home and back to its original grandeur. Thanks to Antonia's good taste and Jimmy's artistic sensibility, it is now furnished with family antiques, hand-embroidered curtains and wall lamps with chandeliers. Each of the bedrooms is different and wonderfully comfortable, with large beds and individual décor bursting with character. The decoration has been completed with many of Jimmy's valuable paintings.

Once the finishing touches were complete, the couple opened their house to friends and family for a big Christmas gathering in 1997. For Antonia and Jimmy, this was something of a trial run for them in running a rural guesthouse, they say. "The group paid towards the general costs of food, drink, laundry etc, and everyone enjoyed a memorable festive season while we experimented and found out what was expected of us!" says Jimmy.

For most of the year Jimmy and Antonia run the property as a B&B, with double rooms for around €80 a night. Alternatively, groups of up to nine people can rent out the whole house independently for around €1,600 – and there has even been a return to its earlier history, with wedding couples holding both the ceremony and



reception in this enchanting, romantic location.

The couple advertise the painting holidays in specialist art magazines such as *The Artist* and *Leisure Painter* and run them several times a year at a cost of around €700 per person (including accommodation with ensuite bathroom, meals, tuition and excursions). El Cortijo del Pino is also now listed in many guides including *Alistair Sawday's Special Places to Stay in Spain* and *Guy Hunter-Watts' Small Hotels and Inns of Andalusia*. It has also been awarded the prestigious Golden Hospitality Award from the Spanish *Radio Turismo* two years running.

Although the market value of the house has increased considerably since 1996, neither Antonia nor Jimmy say they are really interested in knowing what it could be worth today – they are just delighted with life as it is, running their beautiful farmhouse, meeting new guests including artists, writers and musicians and welcoming them back. Says Antonia: "We have made some wonderful friends and look forward to them returning for many years to come."

For more details on courses or B&B at El Cortijo del Pino, Albuñuelo, Granada, call: 00 34 958 776 257; mobile: 00 34 607 523 767 or e-mail: cortijodelpino@eresmas.com