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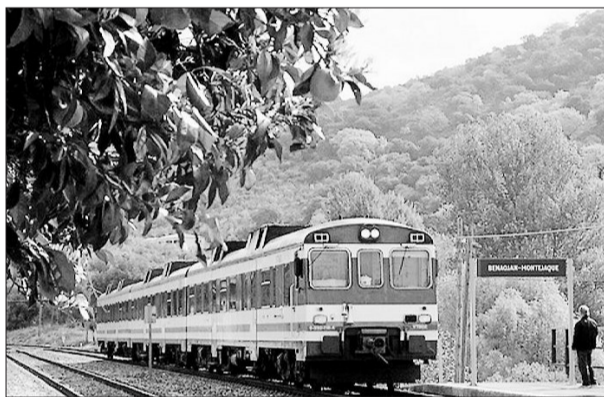
WITH ANDY CHAPPELL



The station at Benaosan – a little piece of Victorian Britain in the Andalusian countryside.

Station *masters*

wanes. It's hard to remember in those winter months how much the heat saps energy and just getting by with the minimum done is a great achievement. More on this next month – if I'm not too hot and exhausted to put fingers to keyboard.



Oranges on the line? Makes a nice change from lemons...

Mr Henderson's very fine railway...

BACK in the late 1800s, garrison officers stationed at Gibraltar wanted to be able to enjoy the fine countryside inland from their billet.

A century ago, the 12-league journey from Gibraltar to the hilltop town of Ronda was a day's journey on horseback, so a railway was built from the Mediterranean port of Algeciras to Ronda and beyond.

The line, which is still used today, passes stunning scenery and historic sites. British engineer John Morrison was the mastermind behind the railway and he was backed by his friend, wealthy financier Alexander Henderson – later the first Lord Faringdon.

The two men knew what they were doing. They had already collaborated on ambitious railway projects in South America, so for them the 178km (110 mile) line was a doddle.

It ran from Algeciras to Bobadilla, where it met the main line to Madrid, the gateway for the rest of Europe, and the first section was opened in October 1890.

long-forgotten bargain prices. If you can find a more attractive railway station for a sundowner you'll be doing very well. It beats Clapham Junction every time for me, although the gentleman in the anorak won't get nearly as many train numbers here. Over the years the line has been famous for being used by bandits and smugglers – mostly trading goods brought across the frontier from Gibraltar. Cigarettes, alcohol, silks and sugar were the main items that were sold from the train windows at each station by "Matuteros" – a specific name for the folks who profited on the line. The Guardia Civil have tightened up on most of these activities now, although it is still not uncommon to see local people smoking cigarettes in packets with health warnings in English – a near-certain indication that the smuggling is still thriving. When we first arrived here in 1986, it was known for Gibraltarian passports

to allow 'Smuggler' as a profession!

Much of the countryside through which the trains pass – gorges and forests of cork oak trees – is not visible from any road. It is a stunning journey. The trains are cheap and reliable – public transport as it should be, although greater frequency would be a big help.

The issue now though is that it's claimed that the stopping trains are not viable, even though many of the services run at two-thirds occupancy or more. This is where there is a great difference between my experience of Guernsey and the UK compared with the Spanish system. There is very little transparency when changes are being made. There is no chance to make a case for preservation because no one knows what is really going on.

How many people travel on the line? No one knows, or if they do, they're not telling.

What is planned and when? Bit of a grey area, that.

Who can help you with real reliable information? The authority who might know is not available just now, or actually not at any other time either. He is protected by bureaucrats and secretaries to ensure that direct questions are not possible.

On my visits to Guernsey, as I notice every issue debated and dissected in print and on radio and television, I am more than a little envious. Decisions may not always be to your liking but at least you know what is going on and have a chance to vent your spleen if necessary.

I am all set to get out there and do what I can to defend our local railway – at least, I think I am. I mean, I think it's necessary but I really don't know what or when. And nor does anyone else. This is surely a result of 40 years of dictatorship when people did not expect to be part of any decision-making process – and it lingers in the mindset of many locals who look at me very strangely when I suggest action is needed and that mere mortals like them or me can make a difference.

Or maybe it's this climate. As spring gives way to summer, this is the time when the heat wins and the resistance of everyone

One of the delights of living in a sparsely populated rural area is the range of flora and fauna, which never ceases to surprise in its quantity and variety.

The birds and the flowers in this area are always apparent, exciting and dramatic whether it is a meadow of wild orchids or griffon vultures, with their nearly three-metre wingspans, soaring on the thermals. Alpine swifts nest nearby and red-rumped swallows were picked off insects over our river recently, both delightful summer visitors.

Mammals are less common and less often seen and after 26 years of living in this area, surprises still abound.

Last week a mid-evening journey was enlivened by the sight of a small mammal in the middle of the road. The car headlights showed it to be cat-size but with very distinctive black spots on its back and a long tail.

Lots of locals have told me about genets being in the area but this was the first one I had been able to view well – albeit not for long, as it quickly climbed an almost vertical bank and disappeared into the undergrowth.

Wikipedia tells me that they adapt well to human activity and this one was no more than 300 metres from Montejaque, a neighbouring village. I also learned that they spend a lot of their time living in trees and are pretty much solitary outside of the breeding season.

The young weigh 'approximately' 2.74 ounces at birth. Why can't they be more precise about these things?

Anyway I didn't see any kittens, of 2.74 ounces or any other weight, but it was a moment I will never forget.



When officers at a Gibraltar garrison decided they wanted to see the countryside, typically, the British didn't hesitate. In the late 1800s they built a railway line through some of the most beautiful countryside in Andalusia – and it's still in use today, often taking visitors to our expat **Andy Chappell's** village...

WE ARE lucky to live in a valley where a railway line was laid down over a century ago and which still functions today. Known locally as 'Mr Henderson's Railway', it was financed by Sir Alexander Henderson, 1st Baron Faringdon of Oxfordshire, a mere mister when it opened over a century ago.

Some of his descendants have recently been in the area to celebrate his achievement – the line is a vital communication link between remote villages and the capital of our area, the mountain town of Ronda.

Services are not exactly frequent – three stopping trains a day in each direction, to be precise – but they are a great asset to our area. Some Guerns – and you know who you are – have travelled to see us using the train all the way from St Malo.

The local station is only a short walk from our small hotel in the hamlet of Estacion de Benaosan and literally thousands of people visit us each year using the service, many coming from the Costa del Sol for lunch or combining the train with a valley walk. Two hours of trekking is covered in seven minutes by the train.

Our local station is an absolute delight – like a toytown station with pretty flower pots and a cantina, a bar designed for the railway staff and passengers. The bar still opens six days a week, with tables and chairs on the platform – overlooking mountains and with lemons rather than leaves on the line – and selling tapas and drinks at

FOR 26 years Guernseyman Andy Chappell and his partner Pauline have run a small hotel in Andalusia's Grazalema Natural Park. Molino del Santo won the TripAdvisor Traveller's Choice Award 2013.
● www.molinosdelosanto.com.