

When in the land of the conquistadors, live like a conquistador. It's a useful motto in Extremadura. No slaughter or rapine, obviously. But a certain hauteur and luxury should be considered. Fortunately, both are built into Villa Martires, at the top of Trujillo. It takes some getting to. There's a 2½-hour drive from Madrid or Seville airports, and the final ascent recalls an age when both donkeys and Spaniards were thinner. But, when you arrive... well, when we arrived, I had a look around the grounds and cried: "Just call me Don Antonio!" My wife opted for "Donald", arguing that the place required full-name formality.

Created from military outbuildings of the Moorish castle just along the ramparts, Martires is Downtown meets the Escorial. It combines elements of Spanish and English nobility, reflecting the owners' backgrounds, and there are breakable treasures everywhere: antiques, bone china, wall-filling pictures, chandeliers, fresh flowers, crystal. "Careful, Donald!" she shouted endlessly — though in truth we barely met up for the first couple of days.

If I were in the dining hall (you'd host a G8 lunch in there), she was in one wood-panelled salon. Or another. Or a kitchen fit for preparing jubilee banquets. Or by the pool, or the tennis court. Even if we were simultaneously in the main salon, we didn't necessarily spot each other.

Eventually, we coincided on the terrace, with a bottle of champagne. I expected paparazzi. Terrific tiered

**THERE'S
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**Villa Martires,
Trujillo, Spain**



Mediterranean gardens stepped down the steep hillside. The sky was vast. Below, the roasted land rolled away, interrupted finally by the Gredos Mountains, then Portugal. I don't believe I've ever felt so illicitly privileged.

"We'd better go to see how the other classes are getting on," I said one day. So we did. Landlocked in Spain's far west, Extremadura has struggled since the Stone Age. That's why it's pristine today. Why, also, Extremaduran boys were so quick to the boats for new-world glory. The Peru-conquering Francisco Pizarro,

Cortes, de Orellana and Nuñez de Balboa were all locals. Money flowed back for a while. Trujillo's magnificent Plaza Mayor is trimmed with arcades and conquistadors' palaces.

All around, though, is *dehesa* tableland, studded with holm oaks, cattle and acorn-eating pigs, and yielding little unless you own a lot of it. Hence historic poverty, but also huge landscapes to stir your inner cowpoke. They lead variously to Roman Merida, to the rocks and gorges of Monfrague National Park, where imperial eagles and griffon vultures

perform nature's best choreographed food search, and to Guadalupe, whose Virgin statue is patron of all Hispanic peoples. Monks in the mountain-topping monastery clearly took vows of wealth, the better to protect her.

Then you're back to Trujillo, Martires and seigneurial life way above the salt. You may dine in, but you're better on the main square, among Spaniards — at the Corral del Rey (00 34-927 323071, corraldelreytrujillo.com; menus from £17) or the Bizcocho Plaza (927 322017, restaurantbizcochotrujillo.com; menus



from £13). Outside, storks land clumsily on their nests. Pizarro oversees from his plinth. A final glass or two on a terrace. Everyone is out there, tots through to grandparents. The other classes, it seems, are getting on fine. This will hearten you as you head back up the hill to hauteur.

Travel details: Villa Martires sleeps four and starts at £4,500 a week with Trujillo Villas (020 7385 5345, trujillovillasespana.com). In the same grounds, the Garden Cottage sleeps six and starts at £1,950. Fly to Madrid or Seville with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com), easyJet (0843 104 5000, easyjet.com) or Vueling (vueling.com).

Anthony Peregrine

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Watch Jose Pizarro's hunt for the best jamon in Extremadura: thesundaytimes.co.uk/travel