

Travel

■ SPAIN

Ronda hotel is collection of treasures

Old photographs, other people's castoffs give character to exquisite hotel

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doors, he would take their bookcases, chandeliers and bed frames. And if the mansion itself was torn down he would take the double doors as well.

"He is always looking for old things," says his son, Jose Manuel Arnal Perez, "accepting them from friends or picking them from the street."

Arnal's collection now furnishes the Hotel San Gabriel, a 21-room family operation that ranks as one of the most exquisite mid-range hotels in all of Andalusia.

Every room is unique. Every accoutrement is individual. But the four-storey structure is united by Arnal's innate sense of taste and style, and by a welcoming atmosphere expressed in the motto: "Su casa en Ronda" — "Your home in Ronda."

"A charming, historic hotel," says the Lonely Planet guide to Andalusia, "filled with antiques and photographs that offer an insight into Ronda's history — bullfighting, celebrities and all."

Ronda stands at a dramatic spot in the mountainous interior of Malaga province in southern Spain.

The town's old city, filled with mosques and palaces, dates to Islamic times. The elegant Plaza de Toros, or bullfighting ring, counts as one of the most revered in the country.

The most immediate attraction is the spectacular 120-metre drop of the El Tajo gorge at the town centre, a sight luring thousands of day-trippers annually from Seville, two hours west, and the Costa del Sol, an hour south.

Hotel San Gabriel stands near the gorge. The building dates to 1736, although the family bought it after it had all but burned to the ground in the early 1980s.

At the time, political changes

had rendered many noble families incapable of maintaining their grand, historic residences. In the old town, property values dropped almost as precipitously as El Tajo's cliffs.

Owners downsized to smaller homes and flats, casting off furniture, and old mansions fell in to disrepair or succumbed to fire.

"My father saw an opportunity. Original blueprints were long gone, but Arnal drew plans in the old style and had a professional approve them. He also named the renovated building after the archangel Gabriel, meaning 'God is my strength.'"

"There were so many challenges that my father said he needed God's strength to finish it," Arnal Perez says sharing the family joke. "The first thing we did was remove all the fallen bricks — 100 truckloads of them."

After the family finished the first half of the house, they ran out of money. They moved in but were sad, the son says, to be living beside a black, empty lot.

To finance the completion, they moved into the top rooms and opened the lower floors as a hotel. In late 1998, they completed construction and devoted the new rooms to the hotel as well.

Almost immediately, a film crew booked the place for a month.

"That gave us our start," daughter Anna Arnal Perez says of the expanded 16-room version of the place.

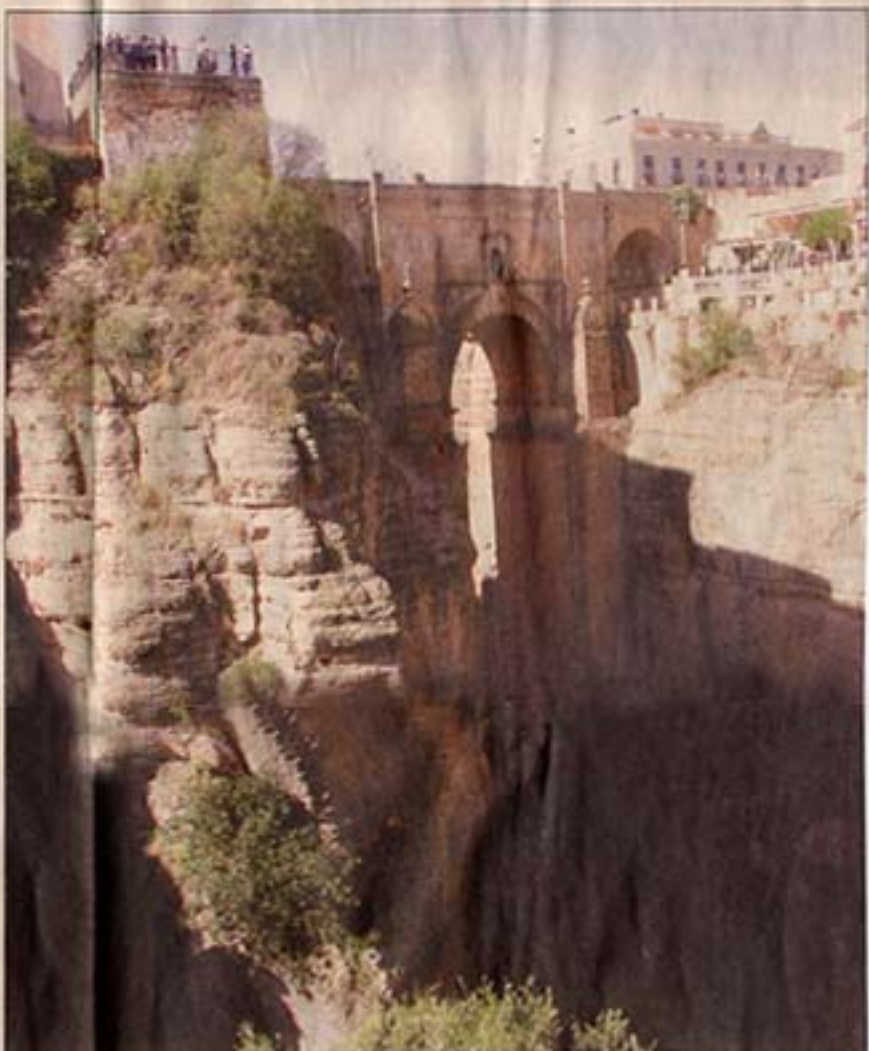
Last year, the family vacated the remaining top rooms, bringing the hotel to its present capacity.

Special touches celebrate Ronda and its environs.

A small room on the ground floor contains 10 velvet-upholstered chairs that Arnal saved when Ronda's historic theatre was torn down.

Guests use it to watch videos, the featured selection being *Don Quixote*, a TV movie filmed by the expanded hotel's first guests — including British director Peter Yates and actors John Lithgow, as Don Quixote, and Isabella Rossellini as the Duchess.

On the antique bookshelves sits a copy of Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*,



Sightseers peer over the edge of the Tajo Gorge from the old part of Ronda, Spain. Still known as the Puente Nuevo, the spectacular stone bridge connecting old and new towns was completed in 1793. Below, a skylight and an elaborate chandelier illuminate the entrance hall of the Hotel San Gabriel.

which in Chapter 10 depicts partisans in the Spanish Civil War throwing 20 fascists, one by one, over the town's cliffs into the gorge.

Almost every element of the breakfast is immediately local as well.

The juice is from freshly squeezed oranges bought at the market, says a card at each breakfast table, in a room decorated by autographed photos of such previous guests as Rossellini and former Led Zeppelin singer Robert Plant.

The croissants come from the baker Alessandro, the honey from beekeeper Faco, the virgin olive oil from Don Felix, and the half-cured cheese from the Angulo family.

"Quality usually remains simple in appearance," the card says. "Trust your senses."

Room rates are itemized at www.hotelcangabriel.com, currently running to 68 euros for a single room, 90 euros for a double.

John Goddard is a feature writer at the Star.

