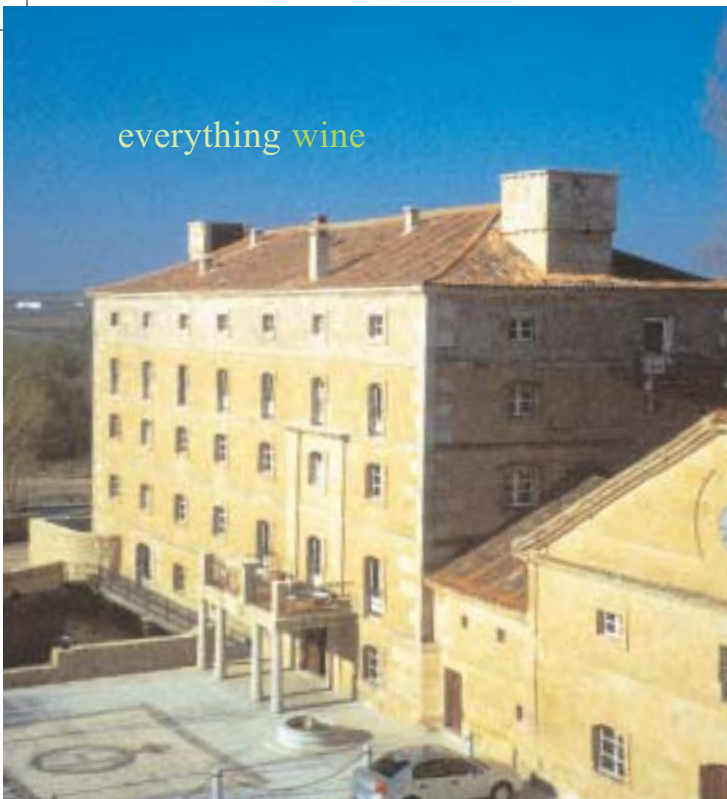


everything wine



A river runs through it

Words by Sarah Monaghan, pictures by Sarah Monaghan and Bill Rolfe

Sarah Monaghan sees another side to Spain when she visits a luxury rural hotel that sits right astride a river in one of the country's most up-and-coming wine regions

They say that the proximity of running water is good for the soul. It certainly aids relaxation. As I slept soundly in my bedroom at Hacienda Zorita, it was with the knowledge that a fast-flowing river ran directly beneath the 600-year-old building in which I dreamed. The river is the Tormes, a tributary of the mighty Duero that spills from Spain into Portugal, finally opening out into the sea at Oporto. Gazing out of my window at the mist rising in the early morning sunlight over the river, I saw fish coming up to feed and the native Black Stork swooping from tree to tree.

Hacienda Zorita, a former Dominican monastery dating back to 1345 and now a stunning boutique wine-hotel, stands right astride the river. Were you in the market for a championship round of pooh sticks, this would be just the place. Play, though, would require dashes from the hotel entrance through to the dining room's wrought iron terrace (over which you could peer to watch your sticks appear, provided they were not pulled out of play by any of the fish with which the river teems).

More likely though, like me, you would prefer to do something far less energetic... and to sit beside the river, drowsily watching the cool water gush by, sipping a glass of wine, the tune to *Summertime*: "...livin' is easy, fish are jumpin'..." rolling through your mind.

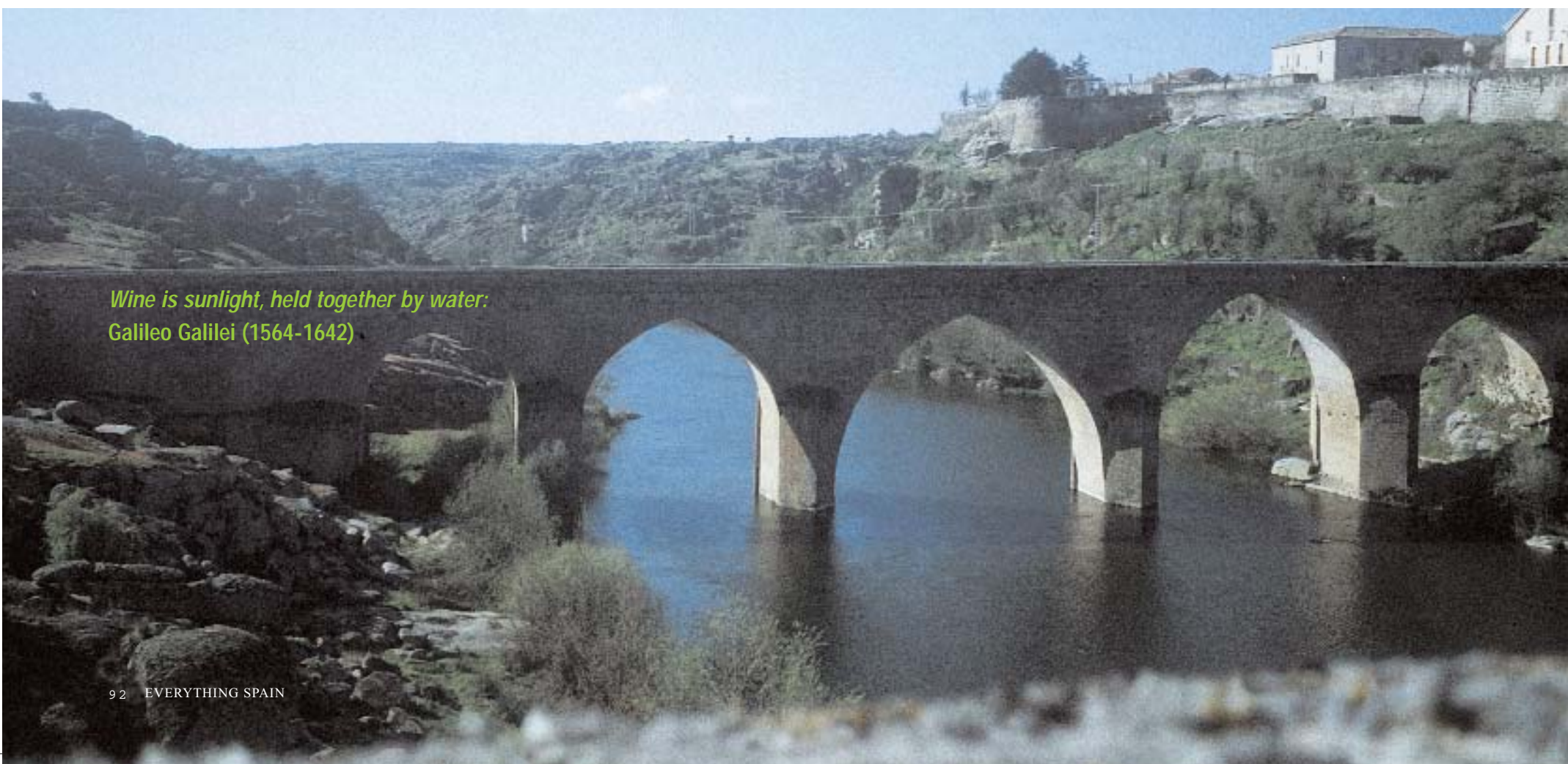
Here is a side to Spain that is as far from the clamour of the costas and from the clichés of sea, sand and

sangría than you could ever hope to go. For Spain, too, this is something entirely new. Go to Tuscany, the Napa Valley or Cape Town and wine tourism is a familiar concept. But Spain? The average tourist knows little else other than Rioja. But here, in the wild and beautiful wine-producing area of the Alto Duero, part of Spain's vast tableland of Castilla y León that abuts Portugal, a quiet revolution is taking place.

The company behind this innovation is Haciendas de España. Haciendas translates as wine estates, and, true to its name, the company has a clutch of wineries across Spain's classic regions in Rioja, the Duero Valley, Ebro and Andalusia. It is doing something else novel in Spain by growing experimental grape varieties and producing premium single estate wines.

One of the wines to come out of its wine production in the Duero area is the Durius brand, now selling extremely well in the UK. In fact, so well that wine expert Matthew Jukes, author of *The Top 250 Wines of the Year*, recently described Durius Tempranillo (£6.99, widely available) as: "one of the most impressive new reds to come out of Spain in a long time ... a true trail-blazer, and one you will want to taste again and again".

But a wine hotel in this little-known corner of Spain? The area is certainly remote. As we drove out from Hacienda Zorita towards Portugal on a visit to the Hacienda Unamuno Winery that produces the popular Durius brand, Bill Rolfe, the company's international marketing director, challenged us to



Wine is sunlight, held together by water:
Galileo Galilei (1564-1642)

Hacienda hospitality

Hacienda Zorita, a beautifully restored former 14th-Century monastery, straddles the River Tormes (above, left); Roman bridge across the river Tormes (below, left); sunlight streams into the comfortable lounge at Hacienda Zorita (above, right); grapes ripening at Hacienda Unamuno (right); the honey-coloured sandstone university town of Salamanca (far right)





budget airlines, Hacienda Zorita is easily accessible and offers the opportunity to explore one of the most spectacular and untouched parts of Spain, as well as the surrounding wine regions. Ryanair flies from Stansted to Valladolid, an hour's drive from the hotel, and a host of airlines go to Madrid, just over a couple of hours away, and it's easy to book a hire car ready for collection from each airport.

If it's city life you are after, it's also close at hand. The hacienda is just eight miles from Salamanca, Europe's City of Culture 2002, described by Mark Ellingham, author of the *Rough Guide to Spain* as, "the most graceful city in Spain", with its stunning ensemble of Renaissance architecture and what has to be the country's most beautiful main square. It's a compact place that you can wander on foot and, as Spain's most famous university city, it buzzes with life and offers great shopping, bars and restaurants.

Stay at the hotel and you can also drive, as we did,

"Thanks to the progress of the budget airlines, Hacienda Zorita is easily accessible and offers the opportunity to explore one of the most spectacular parts of Spain, as well as the surrounding wine regions"

Discreet luxury

Hacienda Zorita has been lovingly restored from a former Dominican monastery (above); wine-tasting in the temperature-controlled cellars of Hacienda Zorita (below, left); vineyards stretch as far as the eye can see (below, centre); Victor Redondo, founder of Haciendas de España (below, right)

guess how many human beings we would spot. Outside a sunlit pastoral landscape was flashing past that cannot have changed for centuries: green fields dotted with cattle, sheep, horses; olive groves; vineyards; and copses of the evergreen Ilex Oak (the acorns of which the Iberian pig feasts on to produce the world-famous Iberian ham). We were all wide of the mark when 45 minutes later we had spotted precisely 14 human beings (I saw 15 actually – an old peasant man wobbling up a dark alley on two sticks – but my sighting was discounted because none of my companions had been looking in the same direction).

But the beauty and remoteness of this place is the essence of its appeal. Thanks to the expansion of the

along the Duero across the border into Portugal in just over an hour – no passports needed these days! We took a boat cruise on the river through the Arribes del Duero National Park. Above us, spectacular cliffs towered, and the Golden Eagle, with its two-metre wingspan, soared. As you cross from one side of the river to the other, you have the added delight of knowing that on your left, the cliffs belong to Spain, and on your right, to Portugal. Between the two, there is an hour's time difference so, if one side of the river it is 10am, on the other it will be 11am.

A stay at Hacienda Zorita is quite unlike a stay at any other hotel. Christopher Columbus stayed here in 1486 while he prepared for his voyage to the New

World and the owner, Victor Redondo, has striven to create old-fashioned hacienda hospitality and to preserve the traditions behind it. "This is a part of old Spain that we are bringing back to life," he says.

The ascetic feel of the former monastery has been skilfully preserved. Think stone walls, oak beams and open fires. Breakfast and dinner is served in the elegant dining room overlooking the Tormes and there are 22 beautifully appointed bedrooms, all with views onto the river and the surrounding wooded grounds. It's 21st-Century comfort meets 14th-Century ambiance and it offers luxury, but discreetly. There's no brash cocktail bar or hovering waiter here, but make any request and it will be quickly met. In fact, it's so relaxed it's more like staying in your own private club.

Alongside the hotel is the original Dominican chapel. Step inside and you are hit by the intoxicating aromas of oak and maturing wine. Here, and in the hacienda's own temperature-controlled cellar, sit 2,000 casks of Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec and Syrah. If the names of the grape varieties are confusing, all becomes entertainingly clear if you take advantage of the wine tour you can do, and the tutored tasting session with 20 different wines. It's not aimed at the connoisseur but is designed to be as accessible as possible.

Victor Redondo has no desire to scare off the wine amateur or make the place elitist: "In the past, a place like this would have been for the privileged few, but we want it to be accessible to everybody – exclusive but accessible." Which is why Hacienda Zorita may be luxurious but rooms start at £63 and the most expensive suite costs just £150 per night.

"There have been two options for wine tourism," Redondo has said, "either the Disney approach or the stuffy approach. I want to offer a third way with beautiful estates and buildings and to appeal to ordinary people. We have to make people feel comfortable." He has done that, and more. I, for one, will be back. ●

At-a-glance



Getting there

Fly to Valladolid from Stansted with Ryanair (www.ryanair.com, 0871 246 0000). The drive to Hacienda Zorita takes just over an hour.

Fly to Madrid from Gatwick or Heathrow with British Airways (www.ba.com, 0870 850 9850); from Gatwick or Luton with easyjet (www.easyJet.com, 0871 750 0100); from Heathrow with BMI (www.flybmi.com, 0870 607 0555) or from Manchester with Monarch Scheduled (www.flymonarch.com). The drive to Hacienda Zorita takes two and a half hours from Madrid and you can stop off about half-way for lunch or tapas at the beautiful historic city of Avila which has the finest preserved medieval walls in Europe.

Staying there

Rooms at Hacienda Zorita cost between £63 and £150 per night (www.haciendas-espana.com, tel: 00 34 923 1129 400, email: zorita@haciendas-espana.com).

Seeing there

Historic Salamanca: spend a day wandering its compact centre, stopping for tapas or shopping. Don't miss the Gothic Cathedral Nueva, the Romanesque Cathedral Vieja or the magnificent Plaza Mayor – simply stunning and a great place to simply sit in a café and watch the world go by.

Drive an hour from the hotel straight into Portugal and take an environmental boat cruise on the Duero through the Natural Park of Arribes del Duero from Miranda do Douro. www.europarque.com

Undiscovered Spain

Watching the world go by at Hacienda Zorita (below); Hacienda Unamuno, an hour from Zorita, produces the now hugely successful Durius brand (centre); the river Tormes close to its confluence with the Duero (right)

