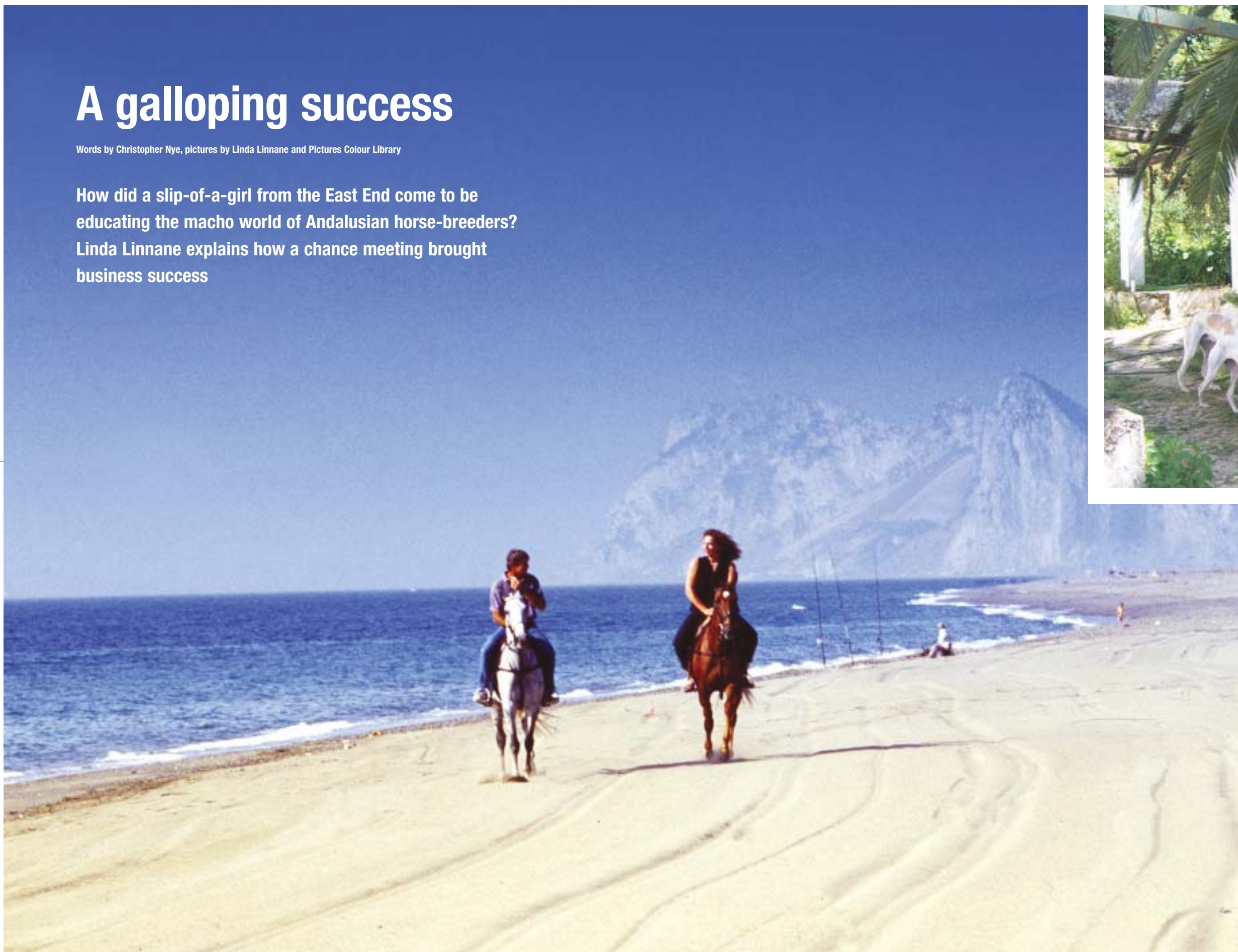


A galloping success

Words by Christopher Nye, pictures by Linda Linnane and Pictures Colour Library

How did a slip-of-a-girl from the East End come to be educating the macho world of Andalusian horse-breeders? Linda Linnane explains how a chance meeting brought business success



Linda Linnane's story reads like a schoolgirl novel. She left school at 16 without a single 'O' level, having skipped most of her classes hanging around stables and dreaming that some day she might own her own pony.

Today, now 44, she lives in a beautiful farmhouse on the Costa de la Luz with her husband Peter, 46, and baby son, Noah, owns two beautiful stallions and runs a business advising professional horse-breeders on care and nutrition. So how did she get so lucky?

By her early twenties Linda was an estate agent working near Marbella and engaged to Peter, who like her, was from London. "Peter was running a beachside restaurant when we met at a feria, and I was working in the property business, although my real passion was horses," says Linda.

Driving home from work one day she saw a sign for a restaurant with a picadero (riding school) attached, and popped in for a glass of vino and to eye up the horses. And there he was, the most beautiful colt Linda had ever seen; big, cinnamon-coloured, and with a brand in the shape of a crown on his hindquarters. Campeon (meaning Champion) was tethered to a wall in a dark stable. "He turned to look at me and took my breath away," says Linda.

The riding school owner saw her looking and shook his head: "Going to the knacker's yard. Bad leg," he said. Linda persuaded the owner to give her

Horse and hounds

Linda with husband Peter, son Noah and their three dogs (above); empty beaches provide the ideal riding ground during the winter months

everything business



Campeon sniffed the air, then rolled in the dust and rolled and rolled... Taking the horse back home to his birth place, at almost 20 years old, was full circle for him and his journey's end. It was a really emotional moment

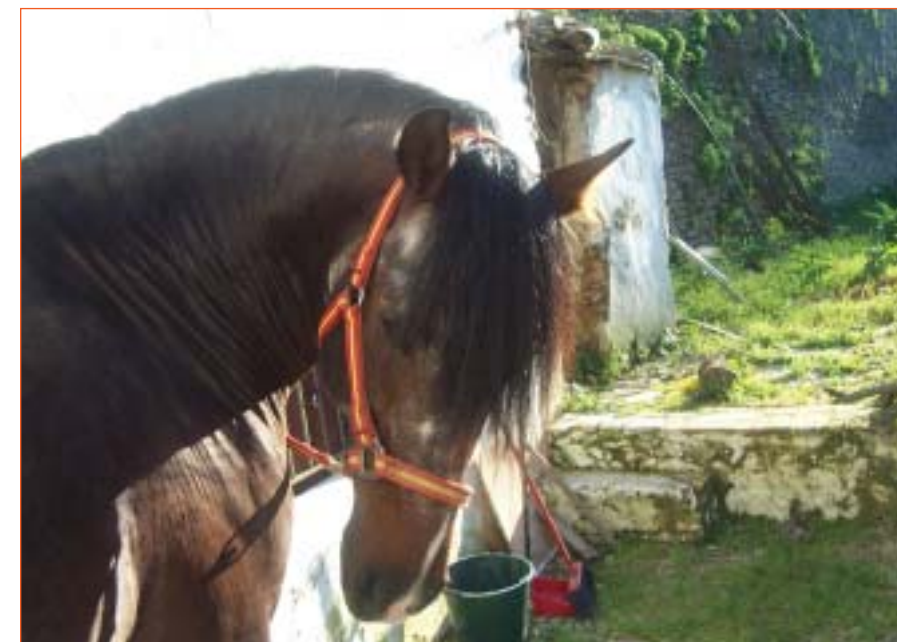
Hot property

The sweltering ranches of Andalusia are famous for their horses, but as Linda discovered, many of the animals still suffer from diet deficiencies



Horsing around

Clockwise from above right: Noah shows off his Spanish to dad; Campeon's mate, Cómico; Linda, Peter and colleague Veronica at a Spanish horse show; Linda with Campeon on the farm in Medina; ...and riding him back in the UK



a chance. Over the next few weeks, she worked and trained with the horse and was so impressed by his character and performance that she agreed to buy him. Says Linda: "The slight deformity on his foreleg made him unsuitable for bull work. To me, though, he was perfect." She and Campeon started to take part in the Spanish horse world, riding in festivals and galloping across the beaches in winter.

In 1992, Linda and Peter decided to return to the UK so that Linda could take up a BSc (Hons) in Equine Science at Hartbury College in Gloucestershire. Campeon went with them. In the fourth year of her course, Linda returned to Spain to take part in a final-year project in Córdoba studying the care of Andalusian horses. She explains: "In

Spain the horse world is a macho world; big horses bred for mounted bullfighting." She quickly observed that knowledge of horse nutrition was poor, cases of colic were common, and the Spanish style of stabling horses permanently and only feeding oats was causing deficiencies. Her research project earned her a first-class honours degree.

During her course, she decided to investigate the origins of Campeon's crown-shaped brand. Asking among horse dealers, she was directed to a bull stud farm in Medina-Sidonia near Jerez. The estate had been owned by Portuguese royalty; hence the crown. She showed a photograph of Campeon to an elderly gaucho and he remembered the beautiful but imperfect horse he had sold to a gypsy for its meat-value so many years

ago, and was astonished to hear how well he was doing, winning competitions and living in the UK.

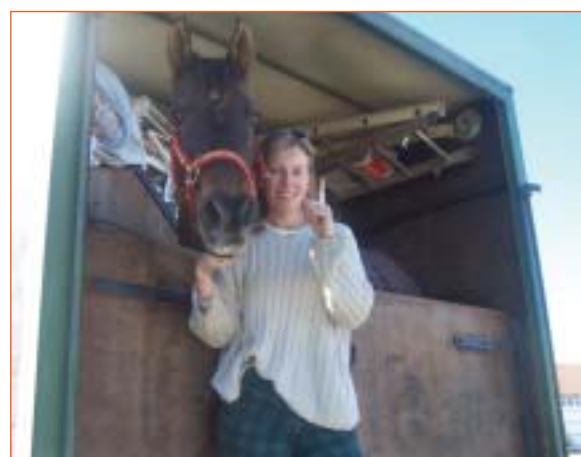
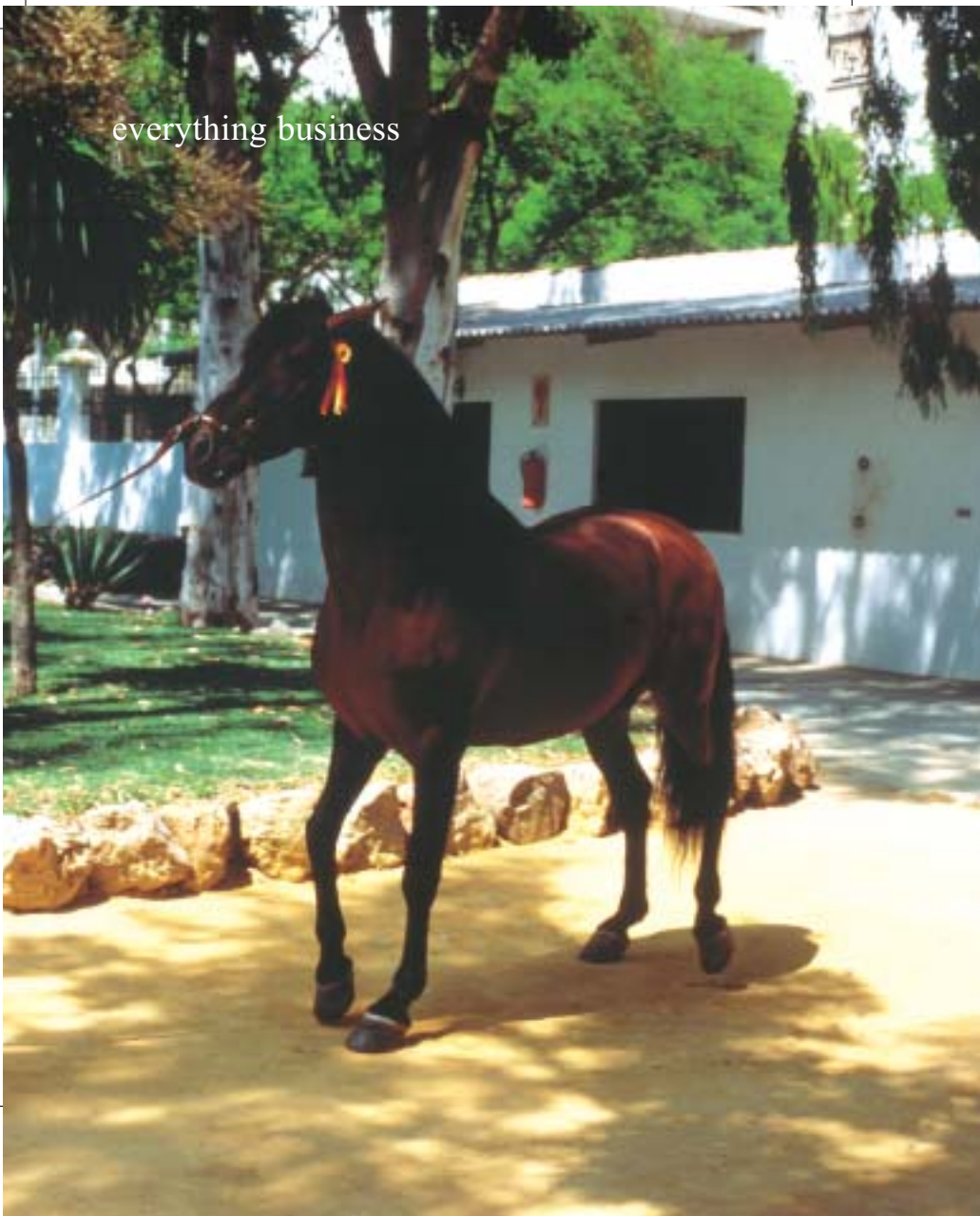
Spending time in Andalusia, however, made Linda realise that she wanted to return to the old Spain that she had missed so much. Peter agreed. They started looking for somewhere to live in the Jerez area.

They found their new home, Cortijo Fuente de los Naranjos (The Farmhouse of the Fountain of Oranges), through word of mouth. It was a small ruined property, surrounded by orange groves, in the very valley in which Campeon had been born. Properties in the area were going for around £40,000 and their house came with seven acres of land and three ruined properties that they saw could be converted to casitas for rental in the future. They

returned to Gloucestershire, loaded the horse, three dogs and the furniture into their ancient horse box and set off, chugging through France at 40 miles an hour. "At first Campeon wouldn't go in the box, not least because he had to share it with an ironing board," says Linda. But as the nine-day journey progressed, Campeon became calmer until the time came when they turned him out of the horse box and back into his home valley. "He sniffed the air, then rolled in the dust and rolled and rolled... Taking the horse back home to his birthplace, at almost 20 years old, was full circle for him and his journey's end. It was a really emotional moment," remembers Linda.

The couple were among the first foreigners to settle in the town but were immediately accepted. Linda

everything business

**Living in a box**

Linda comforts Campeon during their journey to their new home in Spain (above right); many Andalusian horses are bred for the bullring (above)

began working with local vets and in 2000 launched her own specialist feed. She sourced ingredients, found a mill, organised packaging, and with the product ready to go, had only to persuade the local horse breeders that this English girl knew more than they did. Her experience at the University of Córdoba opened doors for her and soon the product was selling itself as instances of colic and laminitis fell.

In 2002, Linda and Peter set up an estate agency business called AndaLuz Homes specialising in homes in their corner of south-western Spain. "We're only 30 minutes from the coast, and we've loads of national parks hereabouts, so it's perfect for people seeking a quieter, less developed landscape," says Linda.

With their experience, contacts and enthusiasm, the company has been a phenomenal success. Says Linda: "We only employ local people, which ensures good relations with the community and the Town Hall. Our property portfolio includes rustic fincas along with new-build projects. Having been through the process, we are also happy to help our clients with queries such as importing pets and horses, schooling and tax laws etc." With its population of 11,000, the town of Medona-Sidonia is enjoying the economic benefits of the new arrivals and the effect of increased tourism on the coast. Says Linda: "The

town used to have a faded grandeur about it, but now it's starting to look freshly painted and prosperous." There are four English children enrolled at the primary school, and Noah, Linda and Peter's first son, starts next year.

Noah, two and a half, goes to a local kindergarten every morning. "It costs 50 euros (£33) per month – can you believe it!" says Linda. "The people here make a big fuss of him as he is blond and blue-eyed. He loves being on the farm with the dogs and horses and spends most of his time outside helping me pick oranges and vegetables." She adds that Noah speaks better Spanish than English as he was just a baby when they moved. "We speak English at home but he often uses both languages when speaking to us and waffles away in Spanish when with the locals!"

Says Linda: "I still ride Campeon and he is as athletic as a four-year-old. He doesn't compete anymore – we just hack around the hillside. I have recently commissioned a sculpture of him as I couldn't bear not seeing him everyday. His other job now is companion to my young stallion Cómico, Eventually Campeon will retire and spend his final years with the sun on his back." ●

Visit www.andaluzhomes.com