

Plaza de la Encarnación, Seville



DISCOVERING *Andalucía*

Proud, passionate and mysterious, Spain's beautiful Andalucía has given the world the thrill of the flamenco dance, the swirl of the matador's cape, the finest sherries and a legion of World Unesco Heritage sites. *Norah Casey* follows the trail of Christopher Columbus and peeks beneath the skirts of *Life on Marbs*.



Irish people have a habit of gravitating towards their own when away from home. Even when I have been in the furthest reaches of civilisation I get excited when I hear an Irish accent and I babble on about how we might be connected. Sometimes this can take some time as I go through second cousins twice removed, where he or she went to school, grew up, worked and finally a tiny thread will emerge. Something like his sister knew my sister's best friend. "Ahh, now I have you"; I declare with relief. But here's the oddest thing: While I am gleeful over finding one fellow countryman, I am allergic to going anywhere that hordes of Irish holidaymakers populate in the summer months. When I came back to Ireland in 2002 I was approached by a well-known and sadly since-departed columnist,



"We lost hours strolling around the cobbled streets, stopping for tapas"

Angela Phelan, with a view to combining forces on a magazine aimed at the Irish in Marbella. I was sceptical. It's hard enough to sustain magazines for the 4.5 million people who live in Ireland, let alone a small town in the south of Spain. She soon put me right. Marbs, as she called it, was a home from home for Ireland's wealthiest families and was awash with the famous and infamous from our tiny island. Her magazine, *iStyle*, aimed exclusively at the Irish elite in Marbs did really well back in the boomier times.

This tendency among us Irish to swarm a sunny outpost holds no attraction for me. So we gave Marbella a miss and headed to more obscure destinations. Over the past few months I have planned and cancelled many travel review trips because of various security concerns across Europe and with only a week to go to the Easter holidays I reluctantly settled on Marbella as a base for exploring Andalucía. It's only a few hours away by plane with Ryanair and Aer Lingus options, I found a great hotel and it was an easy drive to places like Seville, Granada and Cádiz. And anyway, how bad could it be?



MARBELLA OLD TOWN

So, let me be upfront. I went with zero expectations of liking Marbella, my plan was to put up with it as a convenient location for travelling around the region and writing about the beauty of Seville and the stunning scenery in the mountains around Ronda and Granada. But I fell in love with it. The locals say it's not a shadow of its glitzy, glamorous heyday; the parties are less brash and it's no longer a magnet for the A-list. But I liked it all the more because of that.

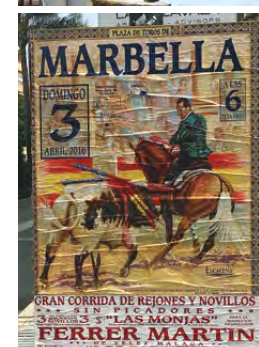
Easter was unusually quiet, it was sunny and pleasant in the Old Town and we lost hours strolling around the cobbled streets and stopping for tapas and the odd glass of wine during long lazy days. Plaza de los Naranjos (Orange Square) is the heart of the Old Town, its buzzy and touristy and the food in the many restaurants is over priced but we still went there for sundown every evening to sip a glass of wine and soak up the atmosphere. Off the beaten track we found some gems, Cortes Café on Calle Peral does a great tapas selection for €10, a brilliant Italian, Stuzzikini, where we waited for the kitchen to cope with the demand of the small space, the vitello tonnato made it well worth the wait. On our first night we stumbled upon Arco Tapas Bar where the staff took matters into their own hands and sent out scrumptious fried aubergine with sugarcane honey, fine jamón Ibérico and artisan sheep's cheese. Fellow foodies kept up a constant stream of recommendations on Twitter and we gamefully tried out most of them. What I loved about Marbella was



how easy it was to walk everywhere. We walked miles every day, exploring the laneways of the old town and venturing through the cool leafy subtropical Parque de la Alameda to linger on the ornately tiled benches on the way to the seafront. The surreal Salvador Dalí sculptures of the Avenida del Mar look like they have been honed by the wind and sea itself as you ramble onwards towards the Paseo Marítimo where the seafront restaurants spill on to the promenade. Some afternoons, my son Dara and I lost an hour or so sipping coffee at The Boardwalk (wonderful place for breakfast, lunch or dinner with stunning sea views) making up stories about the strollers (Maevie Binchy told me once it was good practice for creative writing!).

SEMANA SANTA (HOLY WEEK)

The Easter processions reminded me of my childhood when we donned our communion dresses and walked like angels through the streets behind the statue of the Virgin Mary held aloft on a makeshift platform. But only vaguely, as our ramshackle homemade Legion of Mary procession is nothing like the full-on Spanish extravaganza. We arrived on Holy Thursday so caught daily processions until Easter Monday – each featuring different colours and music and iconography from the soulful trumpets and purple hues of the hooded penitents on Holy Thursday to the black cassocks and mantillas of the dark days of Good Friday through to the joyous white, red and gold spectacle of Easter Sunday. We even got to go backstage to see the enormous bejewelled statues being cleaned and repaired for their annual outing carried along on tronos (elaborate thrones). We lined the streets along with the locals to catch a glimpse of the marching bands and the cute children. It was magnificent.



PICS WERE TAKEN ON THE CANON POWERSHOT SX60 HS AND THE CANON POWERSHOT SX70 HS



Costa de la Luz

PUERTO BANÚS

So you might wonder why this lovely historic idyll has earned a reputation for brassiness and brashness. Fortunately, or unfortunately, it shares spaces on this coastline with what regulars call the Port of Abuse. Puerto Banús is unashamedly a playground for the uber wealthy and those who want to gawk at them. That said, we really enjoyed strolling around taking in the Lamborghinis, Ferraris and Rolls-Royces as well as the mega yachts and their occupants. The architect who built Beverly Hills, Noldi Schreck, was the brainchild for the marina and tourism complexes. When it opened in May 1970, *Playboy's* Hugh Hefner rubbed shoulders with the Aga Khan, Prince Rainier and Princess Grace of Monaco and heart transplant pioneer Dr Christiaan Barnard. It's that kind of place! You are as likely to see the cast of *TOWIE* and *Life on Marbs* as Michelle Obama, the King of Saudi Arabia and Eva Longoria. It's definitely lost a lot of the glitz and glamour since Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant holidayed back in the day. Now, instead of presidents, princes and acting royalty, the wealthy residents and super-yacht owners are more likely to be new money from indeterminate sources. And there are a few of our own in situ along with British, Russian and Middle Eastern residents of the more opulent villas.

Locals will regularly and wistfully recall meeting George Clooney who was on the hunt for a house, or the excitement of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt paying a visit, not to mention Posh and Becks, Lady Gaga and Hugh Grant.

Puerto Banús is an odd milieu of opulent villas, mega-yachts, designer shops, sex clubs and lots and lots of plastic surgery clinics. It's also a favourite haunt of Irish leaving cert students who descend in their droves come the end of June. These is nothing elegant or sophisticated about Puerto Banús, it's full on bling. But it's fun all the same and the shopping is amazing.

The beaches of Cádiz's **Costa de la Luz**, are wild and beautiful. We stopped off at a camping spot right on the beach at Torre de la Peña on the way to Tarifa where caravans and tents are welcome or you can book one of the bungalows. It's a stunning beach and very chilled.



EXCURSIONS AND DAY TRIPS

Snowy Peaks and Stunning Vistas

I was a regular visitor to Nerja for a few years (north of Málaga) and did some rambling day trips to wonderful historic landmarks and pretty *pueblos blancos*, Berber whitewashed villages dotted around the hillsides of La Alpujarra. In Andalucía you can spend the morning skiing on the snowy peaks of the Sierra Nevada and the afternoon on the sunny beaches of the Costa del Sol. On this trip there was only time to do the more spectacular gems of the region. We started early from Marbella and revisited the best of the best on a memorable day trip that included some incredible UNESCO World Heritage sites. The unmissable palace of Alhambra at Granada, the Islamic temple of Mezquita at Córdoba and the Moorish fortress of Alcazaba which stands guard over the port of Almería. If you have the time it's really worth driving on to Ronda, a city layered with history from the Romans (Julius Caesar first declared it a city) to the Moors. Marvel at the view over the Serranía de Ronda mountains from the 18th century Puente Nuevo. Regardless of how you feel about bullfighting (I'm not a fan) the old bullring at Ronda is worth a visit. This is the birthplace of Spanish bullfighting and every September it is host to the Corrida Goyesca where the fighters pay homage to Goya's work.

The Sherry Triangle

The best advice I can give you is to book a driver for a day and take in some of the great bodegas (wine cellars) north of Cádiz for a tasting tour with some

El Niño de las Pinturas mural, Tarifa



of the regions best sherry and brandy producers. Jerez de la Frontera (the origin of the English word sherry) is not only home to great sherry producers but is the birthplace of Flamenco dance and the magnificent dancing Andalusian horses. It forms one of the three points of the Sherry Triangle, the other two being Sanlúcar de Barrameda and El Puerto de Santa María to the south. The sherry from each area has its own distinctive flavours and characteristics and a good guide will help with the tastings. While you may not be a connoisseur at the end of the day you will have enjoyed lots of this magical golden elixir from the very dry to the succulently sweet. Try to book tickets to an equestrian performance at the Real Escuela Andaluza del Arte Ecuestre, usually on a Thursday but you can visit the stables outside of the performance time.

Tarifa

Where the Mediterranean and the Atlantic meets lies the town of Tarifa in Cádiz famous for tuna fishing, kite surfing and all manner of wind sports. It's also the most southern point of mainland Europe with a strong Arabic influence, the African continent is just 14 kilometres away with a regular ferry service to Tangier, Morocco. We stopped off for a few hours to see the remains of its ancient medieval walls and Guzman castle. The beaches of Los Lances, Valdevaqueros or Punta Paloma are spectacular. There's a bit of a hipster vibe about Tarifa, pretty low key on the tourist spectrum with nice well priced hotels and hostels. It's charming and real – a rare combination. Don't expect fancy, high-end restaurants, the cafes are full of locals and serve great seafood (especially the bluefin tuna).

As we drove into Tarifa I spotted these stunning murals shining like beacons in an otherwise grey landscape of apartments. The famous Granada-based street artist **Raúl Ruiz**, who goes by the name of El Niño de las Pinturas painted the vivid blue composition of bird and man for a project called Neighbours and Street in Tarifa. Artist Axel Void painted the other gable end of the woman dissected with blue.



a UNESCO site and the world's third largest churches. The royal palace complex of Alcázar combines Mudéjar and Gothic architecture. For something completely different, head to the Plaza de la Encarnación to wonder at the "mushrooms of the incarnation" the world's largest wooden structure. You can take an elevator to the top of the Metropol Parasol to look out over the city. If you have time then take in the Museo del Baile Flamenco where daily flamenco shows take place at the centre of the museum which houses flamboyant costumes and an education in the history of the music and dance that travelled the world.

We stopped for lunch at the bustling bodega, Dos de Mayo, where we jostled to get a table and to be heard above the chatter at the bar. This is traditional Andalusian tapas where you shout your order at the bar and be ready to pick up when the waiter calls it out, flavours were divine and I loved the hustle and bustle with the locals. Order aubergine with honey sauce, cod on spinach (very different), grilled goats' cheese and octopus – all wonderful.

Christopher Columbus

We headed west from Seville towards the Gulf of Cádiz to visit Huelva where nearby Christopher Columbus set sail for the new world. There are three main sites on the Columbus trail, La Rabida, Palos de la Frontera and Moguer. We made it to Palos de la Frontera where a museum featuring replicas of the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María from his first voyage of the Americas was a hit with the teenager.

Shopping for a day!

Puerto Banús is home to all the high end brands including Gucci, Jimmy Choo, Dior, Cartier and Versace. It also boasts one of the biggest El Corte Inglés department stores in Spain and, of course, a suitably large Zara. A stroll down Avenida Ricardo Soriano in Marbella will also take you past many high end and high street stores. The Old Town has lots of craft, jewellery and gift shops including some lovely cashmere scarfs and capes.

The Rock of Gibraltar

Missable, especially the queues. You still need a passport to enter the British Overseas Territory of Gibraltar which is in the EU but outwith the Customs Union so you can still buy duty free there – hence the long custom check queues to get back into Spain. The Rock is pretty dramatic but otherwise head on once you've taken the pics and marvelled at this colonial outcrop. We got delayed for an hour as I tried to recount the details of the documentary *Death on the Rock* to Dara and the aftermath of the SAS shooting dead three members of the IRA, 10 years before he was born.

Cádiz

If you plan on visiting Cádiz set aside a half day, it's a bit off the beaten track. Cádiz is the oldest city in Spain and pretty ancient by western European standards. But that said it hides its treasures well. Unlike the more spectacular vistas of Seville, Córdoba and Granada, Cádiz is quieter and less grand. But if you take the time you will love the less commercial aspect of its ancient streets and laid-back locals.

Seville

According to myth, the Greek god Hercules founded this glorious place some 3,000 years ago. Seville is a beautiful city steeped in character and full of architectural wonders where Baroque, Islamic and Gothic facades blend magnificently. The Plaza de Toros (bullfighting ring) is one of the oldest in Spain and even outside of the bullfighting season is open to visitors. It took over 100 years to build the enormous gothic Cathedral of Saint Mary of the See,

THE PLACE TO STAY

The *grande dame* of hotels on the Costa del Sol is Los Monteros, whose genteel charm has stood the test of time.



It was one of the first grand luxury hotels back in the 1960s and has hosted all the greats over the years including Queen Ingrid of Denmark, Michael Jackson, Julio Iglesias, Sean Connery, Antonio Banderas and Melanie Griffith.

We were looking for a peaceful retreat to return to each night from our long excursions in Andalucía and Los Monteros was perfect. No matter how beautiful a hotel is what it really boils down to is where you sleep at night. I've had my share of uncomfortable holidays with all of us sharing a bedroom. So my priority always is to choose a hotel that has well-priced family rooms. Los Monteros is good value and a great location. We stayed in a split level, two-bedroomed apartment with a sitting room and balcony. It was great to have separate space and bathrooms and somewhere to chat and watch a movie in the evening. The pool was lovely and quiet (the entire Club Brugge football team were training there at the time so we had the place to ourselves!). The first day we arrived in time for lunch and enjoyed the grandeur and traditional service of a leisurely Spanish meal at the El Corzo Restaurant, the first hotel restaurant in Spain to receive a Michelin Star. Thereafter we enjoyed (a little too much) a Champagne buffet at the Flamingo Restaurant every morning. This was our haven after long hot days and we loved the tranquility of the hotel. That said we booked a VIP day at the hotel's exclusive beach La Cabane looking out over the Mediterranean and discovered it was the hottest spot on the Costa del Sol for Sunday lunch. Club La Cabane was the trailblazer for Nikki Beach and other exclusive beach clubs, when it opened in 1965 it was among the first in the world. As a special treat, book a sun lounger (€35), order a bottle of Champagne and enjoy living like royalty for a day at the elegant La Cabane.

Hotel Los Monteros Spa & Golf Resort;
monteros.com; hotel@losmonteros.com



RESTAURANTS

The Best: Beckett's Marbella

On our second night in Marbella we booked dinner at Beckett's without knowing much about its Irish heritage. And although the distinctive Samuel, leathery lines and penetrating gaze, stared over at us as we dined, we were there solely because we heard the food was good. And it was. But there is more to Beckett's than great food. We felt it the moment we stepped inside. Something magical happens when you get all the factors right to make a restaurant great. The lighting, music, art, the muted colour palette, the clatter of cutlery and relaxed conviviality of the guests all make up the elusive ingredients of Beckett's ambience. The food takes centre stage as you settle to dine but all of the theatre of the surroundings create the mood. We enjoyed smoked salmon beautifully presented with parmesan crisps, wonton prawns, delicate fresh tempura of lemon sole and succulent pig cheek. But the secret to a wonderful meal is being well minded which is how we met and got to know Penny Caradas the manager and after dinner her fiancé and the owner, Dubliner Marc Quinlon. They were wonderful hosts that night and on many occasions afterwards during our stay. Marc also owns The Playwright in nearby Elvira and Penny's sisters are involved in restaurants

and clubs including The Boardwalk at the Paseo Marítimo (Theboardwalkmarbella.com). Between them they know the best places and the best people and as well as adopting us during our stay I've sent many visitors their way. Book ahead as it's busy and enjoy a wonderful night with great people and great surroundings (and give them my best!). **Beckett's Bar & Restaurant;** beckettsmarbella.com

AND THE REST...

For the best view head to **Trocadero Playa** at Calle Santa Petronila where this wonderful African-themed beach restaurant and bar serves by far the best Iberian ham we tried (from Jabugo). For a real treat book a table at the restaurant where you'll enjoy great seafood including tuna caught the traditional Almadra way and wonderful pork and beef. You can rent beds and parasols and stay here all day. The décor is wonderful – look out for the wall of hats! trocaderoplaya.es

The Orange Tree owned by Kilkenny woman Irene and her Tunisian husband Frank near Plaza de los Naranjos (Orange Square) in the Casco Antiguo (Old Town). We dined on wonderful seared scallops, Thai style clams, samosas and cod. A nice buzzy spot with great food. Plaza General Chinchilla, 1, 29600, Marbella.

Café bar Ancha in Calle Ancha is great for lunch, really nice local vibe in the heart of the old town – try the bruschetta, jamon and gambas al ajillo and a copa de vin is great value at €2.50.

For cheap and cheerful head to **Cortes Café** in Calle Peral where a mix of five tapas will set you back just €10 with a fruity Valpolicella at €3.50 a glass.

For sundowners at Plaza de los Naranjos head to **Casa del Corregidor** right in the heart of the action where a large glass of chilled rosé costs a cool €3 and a tall glass of beer just €2.75 and the best people watching thrown in for free.

Stuzzikini in Calle Alderete in the old town is a great, authentic Italian but book in advance and persevere on the location – we got lost a few times before we spotted the distinctive purple lanterns – it's a little pricey (Bucatini carbonara €16.50, vitello tonnato €14.50) but really worth it. stuzzikini.com

Find great tapas at laid back **Arco Tapas Bar**, Calle Peral, which serves homemade meatballs and artisan cheeses and the best honeyed aubergine we tried. III