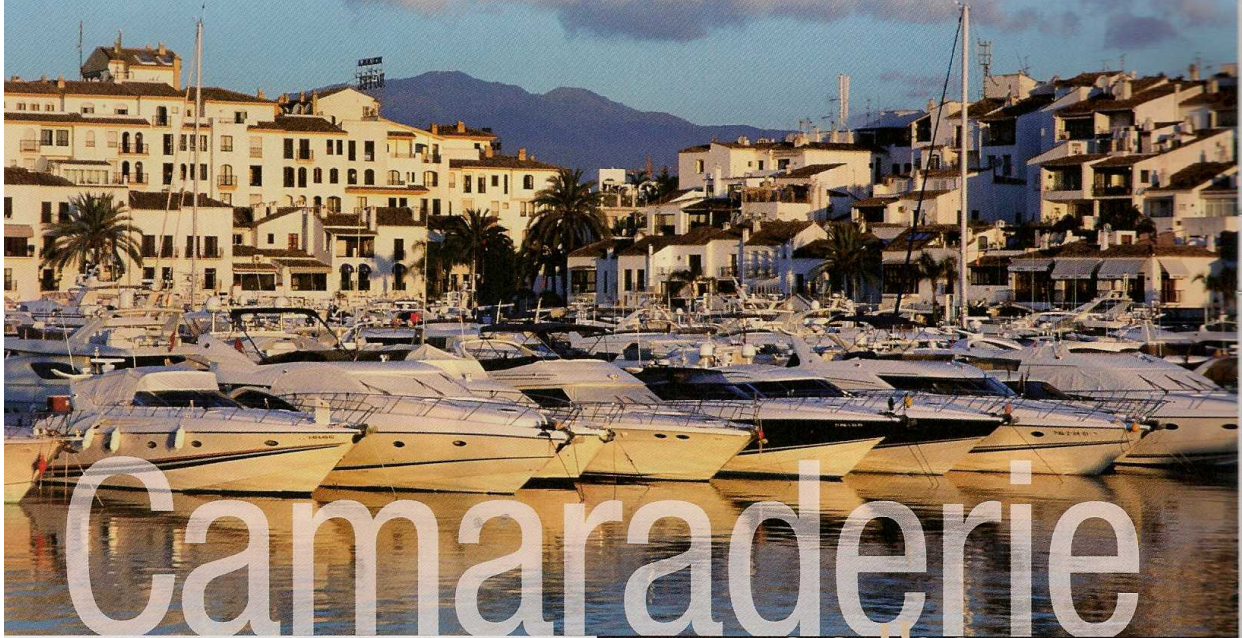


Just west of Málaga, the opulent marina at Puerto Banús is lined with a variety of shops, cafes, and restaurants. BELOW: A stunning view of the Andalusian village of El Borge, as seen through an arched Moorish window.



Camaraderie on the Costa

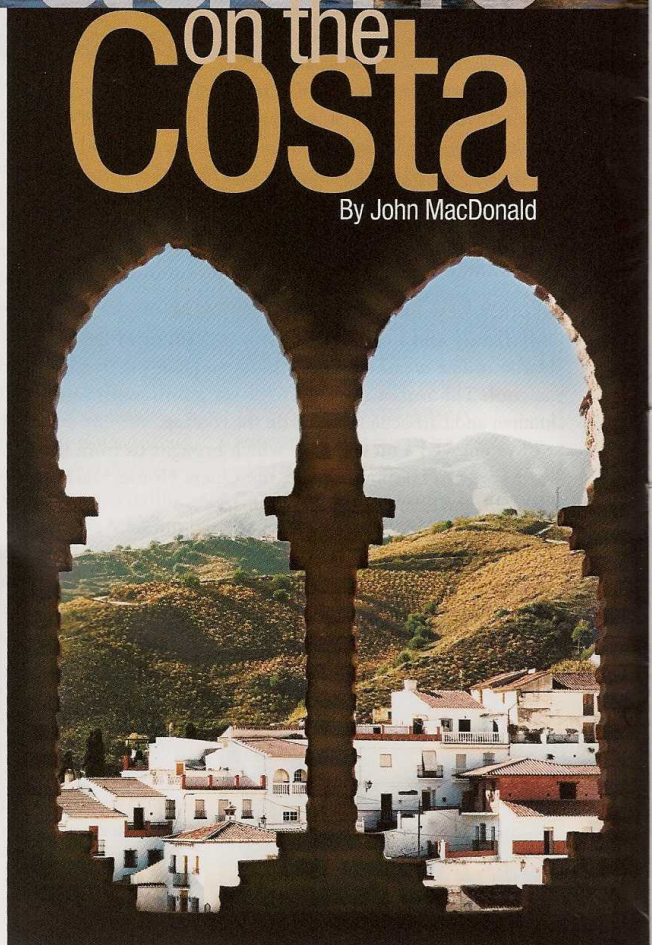
By John MacDonald

As the Duke of Wellington once remarked, "In Spain, two times two does not always equal four". His sentiments are mirrored in the popular opinion that this is a profoundly unique land amongst its European neighbours.

The southern region of Andalucía typifies all things Spanish, and the Costa del Sol is its playground, a stretch of coast contained within the Málaga province, particularly the towns west of Málaga city itself. Once a string of small fishing villages, they have evolved into cosmopolitan centres offering the very best in cuisine, entertainment, and hospitality.

Torremolinos

The first of these towns to undergo the metamorphosis was Torremolinos, 7 kilometres from Málaga, and famous for its beaches, the Playamar and El Bajondillo. The El Bajondillo area is the old fishing district, a wonderful place to dine. Try the *gambas pil pil* (hot and spicy prawns) and other superb seafood dishes at Restaurante Los Pescadores Playa. As you stroll El Bajondillo's main pedestrian thoroughfare, the Calle San Miguel, make a point to explore the side streets. I often do, usually because I am hopelessly lost. This is how I stumbled upon the Plaza de la Gamba Alegre (square of the happy prawn). Why this plaza has the name of a particularly joyful crustacean, I have no idea, but it is here that I found the Taberna Flamenca Pépe López, staging authentic and contemporary flamenco. Be prepared for a late night; the show does not start until 10:00 p.m.



Research into the *ferias* (festivals) is essential, and the local tourist office is the key. The Easter processions are a must see. On my last visit, I happily blundered into the foreign residents' festival, and it took some time for my mind to grasp why a human dressed as a Chinese paper dragon was chatting with an Argentinean *vaquero* (cowboy), while waiting for a German bratwurst.

Benalmádena

I am told it is possible to walk from Torremolinos along the promenade to Benalmádena. I have not tried this myself, likely much to the relief of the Spanish ambulance services. But no matter how one arrives, the jewel in Benalmádena's crown is definitely its marina. Not a deep water harbour like that of Puerto Banús, but a port with amazing architecture — Art Nouveau with a Moroccan element. I was reminded of the famed Spanish architect Gaudi's wonderful La Casa Milá and Park Güell in Barcelona. While restaurants are in abundance around the marina, few are typically Spanish. A tip: Walk into the town proper, and indulge in tapas instead.

Fuengirola and Mijas

Typifying Fuengirola is the Calle Moncayo, otherwise known as Fish Alley by English speakers, and La Calle de Ambre (The Street of Hunger) by the Spanish. It contains a multitude of restaurants of every conceivable origin. One of my favourites is The Yorkshire Rose, at the eastern end. It is a quiet starched-tabled establishment serving the very best in British food, and specialises in steaks from North and South America. Another singular establishment is La Cocina Chipriota, operated by Ari the Greek, one of the most charming men I have ever met. The restaurant is almost always full of Spanish women who throng to Ari's place for the cuisine, of course, but also for his fortune telling from the coffee grounds of upturned cups.



A flamenco dancer performs at the Taberna Flamenco Pépe López in the El Bajondillo area of Torremolinos.

Fuengirola and Mijas boast a zoo and aqua park, while Benalmádena hosts the ever-popular Tivoli World theme park, a great place for kids. Take a walk to Fuengirola's Plaza de la Constitución in the evening, dominated by the church of Nuestra Señora del Rosario. This beautiful square is a popular meeting place in the oldest Spanish tradition of renewing friendships and making new ones.

By far, the greatest leisure land usage on the Costa is for golf. With more than 60 courses, the area is a draw for enthusiasts. Mijas Golf Club is one of the best examples: it offers two 18-hole courses with well-manicured greens and elegant fairways, Los Olivos and Los Lagos.

Unfortunately, I have no hand-eye coordination, so the golf courses from Marbella to Estepona are only of academic interest. I take pleasure in other pursuits, a stroll along Marbella's Avenida del Mar being one of them. Lined with Dalí sculptures, the avenida inspires as I head for the shade of Parque Alameda.

To the west is the deep-water harbour of Puerto Banús, where one can see the opulence moored within the breakwater — sleek yachts of kings and billionaires.

Head inland for a day-trip — follow the scent of bougainvillea and wild honeysuckle — to a quiet village such as Benahavis, on the south face of the Serranía de Ronda, renowned for its restaurants and golf courses. Or, visit the cities of Andalucía — the Alhambra at Granada is an easy day excursion, while Córdoba is another must. Walk through the narrow streets of Córdoba's Juderia (Jewish quarter), and enjoy lunch at La Casa Pepe; the *fino en rama* is a treat for all connoisseurs of fine sherry. Finish off the day with a visit to the splendour of the Great Mosque.

Whether you come to the Costa for sea and sun, golf, or all of the above, make sure you experience its true Spanish flavour, which is as rewarding as it is welcoming. The locals like nothing better than for all to join in the fiesta that is life on this sunny coast. ■

John MacDonald is a feature and travel writer based in the United Kingdom, an ardent Hispanophile, and "un amigo de España".

fastFACTS

RESORT DIRECTORY: IntervalWorld.com or pages 377 to 384, and 389

CLIMATE: Temperatures on the coast average 22°C, and there are about 330 days of sunshine per year.

DON'T MISS: The façade and tower of the historic Las Murallas del Castillo, a 10th-century Arabic castle in Marbella's old quarter.

CURRENCY: Euro

TIPPING: Tip 10% in restaurants and a few Euros for taxi rides.

CAR HIRE: Recommended

VISITOR INFORMATION:

Costa del Sol Tourist Board

& Convention Bureau

www.visitcostadelsol.com

+34 952 126 279

www.andalucia.org

www.spain.info

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