



OLÉ JEREZ

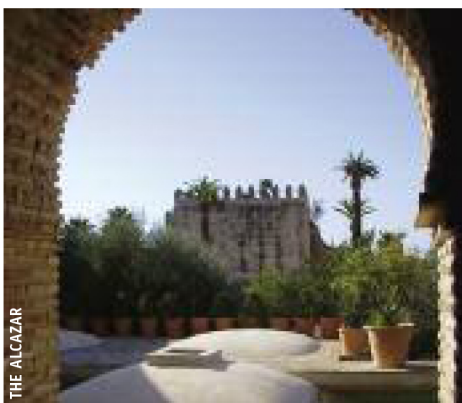
Roger Wheeler discovers the delights of Jerez

Over the past ten years we have visited most of the cities in southern Spain: Malaga, Granada, Cordoba, Cadiz and Seville and have invariably loved them all; the climate, the food, the people and the atmosphere. We thought that we had seen all that there was until we discovered **Jerez**, which at just an hour from Seville and Gibraltar is one of the nicest Spanish cities that we've ever visited.



Although it has 208,000 inhabitants it has the feel of a small intimate place, full of lovely little squares, beautiful architecture and literally stuffed with bars and restaurants. It's all very walkable as the centre is mainly pedestrianised. Of course to the Brits its biggest claim to fame is the fact that it's the home of your mother's favourite drink – sherry. Wine in this part of the world is basically sherry wine; it's what they serve everywhere and at one time it was more popular than rioja.

Jerez, or **Jerez de la Frontera** to give it its full name, has all the usual attractions of a



THE ALCAZAR

major Spanish city: a magnificent cathedral, museums, a Moorish castle (the **Alcazar**), dozens of beautiful churches and they are all very close to each other making the old city centre very easy to walk round. There are 16 bodegas, where they make and store the wine, that are open to the public. We only went to two, **Sandeman**, which was a great experience as was the sherry and **Tio Pepe** which was a little like Disneyland with drinks.

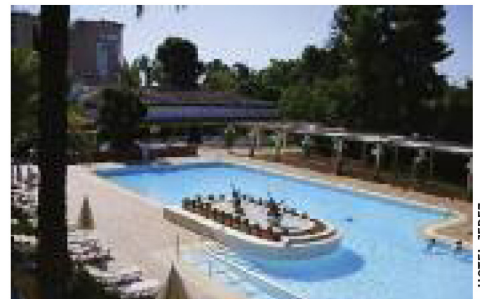
This is wine growing, cattle ranch and horse rearing country with the world famous **Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art** at its heart. This is internationally recognised as the world's leading school for horsemanship and makes for one of the highlights of a visit to the city. They put on an amazing show four days a week in an arena that seats 1,500 and it's always full. The dancing stallions and displays of carriage driving are simply spectacular. Of course it's designed for tourists and the riders are mainly professionals but nonetheless it demonstrates what all the fuss is about and it's the pure bred Spanish **Carthusian horses** that are the



SCHOOL OF EQUESTRIAN ART

stars of the show. We had a very charming guide, Xavier, who confessed to a secret – he didn't like horses but he loved his job!

Although the city was founded before the Romans it's a very young place with the streets and squares thronging with people out enjoying themselves in the evening. There must be hundreds of tapas bars, all serving great little snacks and, of course, a glass of fino or amontillado. We visited one of the



HOTEL JEREZ

many late bars tucked away on one of the plazas; it was full of small fountains, fascinating art and little courtyards, like nothing we had ever seen before.

We chose to stay in the **Hotel Jerez**, a little way out of the centre. The buses were on strike but the taxis were very cheap, just 4€ (about £3) to take us right into the city centre. The Hotel Jerez is a large 1960s building with big bedrooms and most have balconies overlooking a huge pool. It seems to cater for the business community but with an enormous bar and very good restaurant we didn't mind the men in suits. We ate on the hotel's terrace restaurant, almost on our own, with terrific food and a wine list that was basically sherry and so that's what we had. I had never thought of ordering a bottle of fino sherry with dinner, but we were assured it was the right thing to do and they were right.

We were lucky enough to be given a full guide of the city by Pedro, the chief of the local tourist office. We always use the tourist information centres wherever we are but didn't expect this service, what a guy he was too. He was a walking encyclopaedia of the city, its history and its many attractions. There was no way we were going to miss anything.



FLAMENCO

Jerez is the birthplace and home of flamenco and Pedro insisted that we see the very best. He took us to an out of the way bar and at around midnight (things don't happen very early in Spain) we were treated to a demonstration of the genuine article. It was completely amazing, just three singers/dancers and two guitars made a sound that would fill the Albert Hall. It was explained that flamenco is a gypsy tradition and this troupe were gypsies whose art had been handed down through many generations. Flamenco may not be to everyone's taste, but if you're in Jerez, it's something you have to see.

Jerez is a real find, we thought that we knew all the main sites of Andalusia, we couldn't have been more wrong. Whilst the major cities all have a lot to offer, Jerez stands out above them all as a small, compact and simply stunning place, we can't wait to go back.