



FASTER IN ANDALUSIA

Roger Wheeler experiences two different sides of Spain

Easter or Semana Santa (Holy Week) is bigger than Christmas in southern Spain, with all the villages, towns and cities going crazy with major fiestas, processions and loads of religious services. The costumes worn in the processions are famous for the large, colourful and elaborate high-pointed headdresses which completely cover the face. These processions can comprise of up to 3,000 people, mainly men, but usually just a few hundred take part. The history of this celebration dates from the 15th Century and whilst not losing its intense religious significance, in many ways it's an excuse for the entire region to have a huge party. The main event takes place in Seville, everyone's favourite Spanish city, but we decided to see what the 'real' small towns of the area were like.



SEMANA SANTA

Carmona, an ancient, prehistoric even, town just 33km north east of Seville was developed by the Romans around the year 100BC and it hasn't changed much. It's a small place of just 28,000 inhabitants with an enormous number of churches, palaces and museums all quite astonishing in their construction and decoration. In fact it seemed to us that the entire old town was one big museum.

Situated on a ridge high above the central plain of Andalusia, Carmona is dominated by a 13th Century castle which is now one of the

government-owned four star **Paradores**. Staying at a Parador is usually a great experience and it is here, although Paradores are not what they were, in fact there is now talk of some being closed completely and others only opening during the summer. I had stayed at this one some 25 years ago and had always wanted to return. The state of the



VIEW FROM OUR ROOM @ PARADOR

Spanish economy has meant that many of the little touches, such as dressing gowns and slippers are gone. But of course the buildings are still fabulous. Our room on the top floor was perfectly fine, but when we walked in the window shutters were closed. Once open, the view that greeted us was staggering. There was a small balcony situated on a hill, at about 300 feet high, from which the huge red plain of Andalusia was spread out before us; such was the view that we almost didn't notice the room itself. The only problem was that after dark the floodlights which lit this historic building were blinding, which meant that we couldn't sit on the balcony after dinner, pity. Paradores are always offering good deals; we paid €110 per night, not bad. Dinner was very good value at €33 for three courses and the wine was surprisingly reasonable at €14. The hotel has a really beautiful bar and high vaulted ceiling dining room, which was once the chapel. There is an excellent, large swimming pool, which you have to walk some way to get down to, in the grounds and there's quite a few steps to get there, but it's worth it.

The old town of Carmona itself is very small with a maze of narrow winding streets, which aren't pedestrianised and the locals seem to enjoy thinking that they are on the Monte Carlo Rally, it makes for interesting strolling. There are many beautiful Spanish palaces, museums and, of course, plenty of churches. The Roman **Puerto de Sevilla** and **Puerto de Cordoba** mark the main entrances to the town; they and most of the other Roman and medieval remains are well preserved and certainly worth seeing. The Cordoba Gate houses the local tourist office, where the staff were very helpful with maps and guides. All roads lead to the main square, **Plaza de San Fernando**, which has not changed much since Roman times. It is fascinating place, with about eight tapas bars, but strangely no actual restaurants. In the evening the square is full of locals with their children, just chatting and strolling. The atmosphere is lovely and the display of what must be thousands of finches roosting for the night in the trees that surround the square, gives it an almost fairytale feel. We sat there for an hour or so, sipping the local sherry and just watching the world go by.

Looking for somewhere to eat dinner was a challenge as nowhere was open before 10pm, (this is southern Spain after all) and there didn't seem to be many restaurants. We had almost given up and were heading back when we found **La Yedra** (The Ivy), which was literally a hundred yards from our hotel, and a perfect and quite romantic little place serving traditional Spanish food with a slight twist. The locals are obviously fans of the place as there didn't seem to be many tourists. We sat in the candlelit courtyard area and had a lovely dinner; the bill with wine was €70, highly recommended.

Next day we headed back to the heat and buzz of Seville, and the contrast couldn't be greater. A perfect four or five day break would be three in Seville and two in Carmona; you get to see two sides of this beautiful part of Spain. easyJet fly to Seville from Gatwick four times a week and every day to Gibraltar which is an easy 120 mile drive. Holy Week in Andalusia is one of those things you have to experience before you die.



PUERTO DE SEVILLA

www.paradores-spain.com/spain/pcarmona.html
www.paradoresofspain.com
spainguides.com/carmona.html
www.semana-santa.org