

Добро пожаловать в Марбелье or Welcome to Marbella

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Roger Wheeler visits the Costa del Sol to sample the wine, the food and check out those burly Russian men.



Marbella Beach

I have been visiting the **Costa del Sol** for many years and over that time nothing much has changed apart from the language spoken by a large number of new residents. Today most of Europe is slowly recovering from recession so there isn't much money around. Of course, the Brits and Germans still visit in their hoards on their cheap package deals, stay two weeks, eat only their national food, get sunburnt, occasionally drunk and then fly home.

However, you would be blind not to notice the very large number of quite heavy set men with their, usually young female companions sitting in the best bars and restaurants. These are the Russians who along with their neighbours from Bulgaria now represent a substantial number of local residents.

Of course they are all over the Mediterranean and have been for some years but it is on the Costa del Sol that they have become very visible. They are apparently buying all the decent real estate, leaving the many thousands of empty houses and flats in the safe hands of the banks that financed over the years but now can't sell them.

We were strongly advised by a British ex-pat that it would be wise not to engage with any of these gentlemen or "*you could be sent home in a box*", I don't think that he was joking. So, we spent just one night in Marbella, still a very pretty seaside resort and surprisingly very Spanish despite their new neighbours.

Our new friend also advised us to avoid Puerto Banus, once the playground of the Hollywood A listers with their large floating gin palaces and designer boutiques, as, we were told that it had become quite tacky. How, exactly, he didn't expand on but we moved on anyway. Suffice it to say that the local police in Marbella have opened a special department to deal with the crimes that the Russian and eastern Europeans are held responsible for.



Gaucin

We drove west to our favourite Pueblo Blanco, Gaucin, (or Gaycin as it has become known). We have visited many times and never tire of its peaceful charm. Just 24km up from the coast near Estepona it has some of the most atmospheric charisma you will find in any of the many similar pueblos scattered like snowflakes over the Serrania de Ronda, it is an area of stunning natural beauty, with a striking range of mountains, the views are simply beautiful.



La Fructuosa: Roof Terrace

Gaucin has at least one gay owned and run hotel – La Fructuosa – with about seven lovely rooms and a great restaurant. There are several excellent tapas bars and a couple of quite expensive restaurants. While we were there none other than Gordon Ramsay and film crew were in residence filming one of his *famous* programmes on a new restaurant, La Granada Divino. Pricy but very good we were told although how they will manage during the long winter months when the tourists leave will be interesting, as the locals rarely visit.

We drove on to Cadiz, just 120 miles along one of the finest stretches of coastline in Spain which has become the windsurfing capital of the country. There are miles of unbroken sandy beaches with spectacular Atlantic rollers; there are many surfing resorts which are extremely popular.



Cadiz at sunset

Cadiz, the oldest city in Western Europe, is one of the most beautiful places we have ever visited. Its tiny narrow streets with five storey buildings almost seeming to touch at the top, hundreds of tapas bars and restaurants with lovely little squares around every corner.

Of course there is a stunning cathedral, worth a visit even if, like us, you have no religious persuasion. Cadiz has a character and atmosphere that is hard to define; you just have to be there. We stayed at the brand new Parador – Hotel Atlantico. Just two years old this hotel is a fantastic building, with very comfortable rooms with balconies with sea views.. We were just unlucky to arrive when they seemed to be training new staff and we had to wait two hours for our room to be ready, unacceptable in one of the four star Paradors. Then dinner that night was just awful, service slow and quite unfriendly and the food, after it had been sent back once, arrived burnt. You may imagine our conversation with the hapless duty manager the next day.



Roger & Mike in Cadiz



Gibraltar

From there, home via **Gibraltar**, which contrary to popular belief, is not an island but a British Overseas Territory, part of the Iberian Peninsula. Gib is a fascinating place; it really is Britain in the sun, with fish and chip shops, M&S and a large Morrison's.



Caleta Hotel

As usual we stayed at the Caleta Hotel, this is one place that the Parador could learn something from, they have got customer service to a fine art. On arrival you are made to feel like a long lost friend, the rooms are excellent and the restaurant very good indeed. The prices are very reasonable; there are always deals to be had. The hotel is being redeveloped this year into Gibraltar's first five star and that will certainly be worth a visit.

The Spanish Government is continuing to harass the Gibraltarians by insisting on full searches of every car wanting to arrive or leave the Rock, this can result in three or four hour queues, extremely annoying and frustrating. We were very lucky as we picked up our hire car just across the frontier and were able to simply walk through. On our return we left the car in the same place and walked back through the border without any problem. It all depends on the time of day and the mood of the frontier guards.

The Costa del Sol is still a great place to visit, the beaches, the weather, the food, it is one of the best value for money holidays you can have.

