

# VIVA LA ESPAÑA

Andalucia has history, heat... and bears, Roger Wheeler finds



Southern Spain is still one of the most popular destinations for summer sun. The number of budget airlines serving its many airports makes it affordable – just. You can fly into one and leave from another, as today most short-haul airlines don't operate return fares, just singles.

For our tour of the region of Andalucia, we started in **Seville** – in June. First big mistake; it was 44C-plus in the shade, too hot for sightseeing. But it is a really beautiful and very gay city. Spring is the time for Seville, and the **Feria de Abril** and Easter are when the whole city, gay and not-so-gay, puts its party frocks on and goes slightly wild.

Seville was founded in 206BC and for more than 2,000 years it has prospered and grown into the fabulous city we see today. Of course there is a cathedral – huge – with the **Giralda tower**, which gives great views over the city. The **Moorish Alcázar** is the royal palace,



GUADALQUIVIR RIVER

which is still in use and can be visited. It's a shopper's paradise. Even I bought a sexy white T-shirt, only €6. The gay zone is based around the **Alameda de Hercules**, where there are plenty of bars, restaurants and clubs. There are two famous bear bars – **Men to Men** and **El Hombre y El Oso** (Man and Bear). **Itaca** is the biggest gay venue but, this being southern Spain, it doesn't get really going until 3am. Itaca holds Roman parties, which are, apparently, legendary. The international bear convention, **GuadalkiBear**, takes place every October. It's a very professionally organised event spread over four days and if bears are your bag, it's the place to be.

We stayed in the **Alcoba del Rey de Sevilla**, a fab little hotel in the **Macarena** district. This really is a find – a stunning little place housed in a 200-year-old building with just 15 rooms. An oasis in the middle of the frenetic bustle of this vibrant city, Alcoba del Rey is a must.

And the owner, **Rafael Amate**, who must be one of the best-looking hoteliers in Spain, couldn't be friendlier. All the rooms have beautiful four-poster beds draped in lovely Moroccan silks and linens. No room numbers – they have names; ours was Beatriz de Suabia, once a queen of Seville. They must have known we were coming.



From Seville we drove south to the hilltop town of **Arcos de la Frontera**, which, they say, is the most beautiful of the many *pueblos blancos* (white villages). Indeed it is lovely – on the southern side of the main square there are some stomach-churning views, where the *mirador* (viewpoint) ends in a steep 150m-high cliff. To be honest I've been to lots of these white villages and they do tend to merge into one after a while. Arcos does have a **Parador hotel**, a lovely place in a fantastic position.

After the heat of Seville we needed to chill – literally – and checked into the **Hacienda El Santiscal**. Another ancient building dating from the 15th century, it's only 4km from Arcos but once you arrive all you will want to do is lie by the pool and listen to the silence. This hotel is completely Spanish in style, set beside a river, a lake and a huge country park – a wonderful location.



HACIENDA EL SANTISCAL

The large bedrooms are very comfortable and the restaurant is also lovely. My dinner wasn't the best but maybe I chose badly; the rest of our little party thoroughly enjoyed themselves. So if you're travelling through southern Spain and want a truly peaceful stopover, Hacienda El Santiscal is well worth the detour.

Our trip concluded in **Torremolinos**. The 100km-plus from **Sotogrande** (near Gibraltar) to **Malaga** is the perfect example of Spanish developers' greed. I first went to the **Costa del Sol** about 40 years ago and thought then that it was a bit overdeveloped. They haven't stopped; now the whole coast is quite hideous. **Marbella** is quite simply horrid –

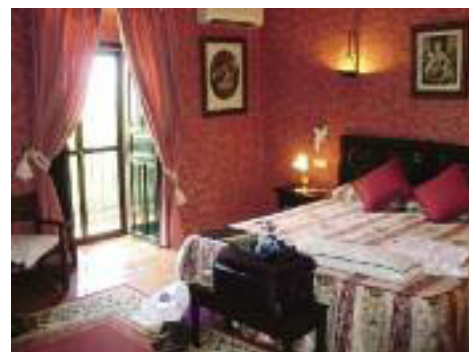


HOTEL COSTA LAGO

don't stop there. **Puerto Banús** – awful, and so it goes on. Torremolinos has been developed out of all recognition, however, all the old gay bars, clubs and saunas are still going strong and the beach is as cruisey as ever. We were booked into the **Hotel Costa Lago** on an all-inclusive deal. We had a little suite in this awful '60s concrete building, but which inside was quite nice. One problem: we were the only same-sex couple there. All the other 500 guests were family groups, mainly from Germany, need I say more? The food was actually quite good. I have never had to get wine from a tap before, but it was drinkable. Everything was included, even the booze, so good value for money.

## useful links

- [www.guadalkibear.com](http://www.guadalkibear.com)
- [www.santiscal.com](http://www.santiscal.com)
- [www.alcobadelrey.com](http://www.alcobadelrey.com)
- [www.andalucia.org](http://www.andalucia.org)



HACIENDA EL SANTISCAL