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THE SUNDAY TIMES

The best of Spain and Portugal 2015

Chris Stewart Published: 1 February 2015



(Altrendo - Getty) Photograph: Getty Images/Altrendo

In this article, we'll showcase the best of Iberia. We'll find you the perfect hotel, villa or beach; we'll head to a culinary outpost that — officially at least — will be outgunning San Sebastian and Barcelona this year; we'll pick out the essential events from a crowded calendar of festivities; and we'll dig out active options from golf to paragliding. First up, the author of the bestselling *Driving Over Lemons* explains the enduring appeal of his adopted homeland

See the special edition in full below, or skip to your preferred section using the following links:

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Everyone said it was the romantic thing to do, but, frankly, it was a bit of a cliché. Come to Spain — Seville, no less — to study flamenco guitar. I was a romantically inclined youth, so, at 21, I packed my bags and did exactly that.

My girlfriend of

the time was horrified. I was going to live in a dictatorship. (It was 1972, and I was to catch the last three years of Franco's rule.) It was a crazy time, and I wish I had noted down some of the things I saw. But I found Seville the most intensely seductive city, and from that first visit to Spain, it was always a dream to relocate permanently.

I finally did it in 1988, and I've been here ever since.

For me, the landscape is the big thing about Spain. It's not gentle and comfortable, like England. It's colossal and awe-inspiring and uncomfortable and hot and thorny and inhospitable. It feels somehow stronger and more extreme. There's a saying that Africa begins at the Pyrenees, and in many ways it's true: wide, sweltering plains; huge ranges of mountains, 12,000ft high. I like nature to make me feel small, and Spain does that.

With its architecture and the underlying Moorish influences, I feel here that I am living deep in history. It seems a foolish thing to say, because I'm from Britain, and we certainly have no shortage. But here the history somehow feels more real and important. It runs like a thread through the language, the customs, the politics. History is living.

I have wonderful friends in Madrid, which is often what makes a city. So too Barcelona. Everyone sees the Catalan capital as this vibrant, dynamic city, the Rio of Europe. But what many don't realise is that, until relatively recently, it was a grim little town — you couldn't even find the sea. In the past 20 years, they've succeeded in somehow bringing the sea into the city. It's the same with Malaga, and Bilbao and Valencia. A real sea change, you could call it.

More widely, Spain has changed for the better, too. It's only a slight exaggeration to say that this was a Third World country 30 years ago, suffering the most awful hangover from the dictatorship. There are still traces of that, but Spanish culture is really strong. The music, the art, the architecture — it hasn't allowed itself to be swamped by North American hegemony. Spanish music is still the main thing they listen to here. You feel you're part of a culture, and we don't always have that in Britain.

There's this incredible noisiness to the people and life here. They're not happy unless there's noise — if you're enjoying a conversation in a bar, they'll put the music on loud to make you feel comfortable.

The Spanish take great pride in their country — they're real chauvinists, in fact. You admire this extreme patriotism in a way, but it has also held

them back. Twenty-five years ago, you rarely saw a Spaniard outside Spain. “Why bother leaving when I have everything I could want here?” was the line they took, and they were right in a sense. But with the economic crisis, young Spaniards are going out into the world.

I’m particularly fond of Andalusia, where we live. It fulfils all the stereotypes: endless beaches, flamenco, white villages, the Moorish legacy. Seville, Granada, Cordoba — even now, after all these years, when I see those names on road signs, I get a frisson of excitement.

This was the worst place in Spain to eat for a long time, but it’s changing in a big way. They are getting more adventurous. We go out to eat around here and we always find new places that blow our minds, extraordinary places.

Jamon Iberico de bellota is a firm favourite. The pigs from which it comes roam around holm-oak forests, and it costs the farmer three times as much to do it this way, but it’s worth it. The Spanish are obsessed with ham. Every house has a jamonera, a clamp on a wooden stand that holds a leg of jamon. I once met a professional ham-cutter: he travelled the country with a guitarist who would accompany him as he cut the ham.

In my long and happy time living in this magnificent country, I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more Spanish than that.

Chris Stewart’s books about Spain include Driving Over Lemons: An Optimist in Andalusia, and A Parrot in the Pepper Tree. His latest, Last Days of the Bus Club, is out now (Sort of Books £9). He leads guided walks in the Alpujarras, in Andalusia, in spring and autumn, for guests staying at Casa Ana, in Ferreirola (casa-ana.com), and Las Chimeneas, in Mairena (laschimeneas.com)

Spain and Portugal's hottest hotels and villas

Cool urban bolthole? Cottage for two in the mountains? Beachfront retreat? We know all the best spots

Hotels

1 For food: Hotel Villa Soro, San Sebastian

The marble-floored villa that houses 15 of the hotel’s 25 bedrooms was built in 1898 and is a peaceful retreat, decorated in soothing tones of cream and milky brown. It’s a restrained contrast to the fireworks going on further down the tree-lined Alcalde J Elosegi Hiribidea. For here lies Arzak, a temple to Basque fusion cuisine that has held three Michelin stars since the late 1980s. Run by Juan Mari Arzak and his daughter Elena, the restaurant serves up an array of dizzying molecular creations, including seaweed and kokotxas de merluza — delicate tufts of meat from a hake’s throat (arzak.es).

Doubles from £103, B&B, 00 34 943 297970, villasoro.es



Abadia Retuerta Le Domaine, Castile and Leon (5)

vegetation, it’s more home-counties garden than urban hang-out. You could take one of the hotel’s foldaway Brompton bikes as you head out into the sultry night, but the Raval district, on the other side of Las Ramblas, is an easy walk away — and bursting with cool nocturnal haunts.

Doubles from £120, B&B, 00 34 934 816767, hotelpulitzer.es

4 For relaxation: Six Senses Douro Valley, Viseu

Set on the fringes of the Douro Valley, this is Six Senses resorts’ first foray into the European market. The 57 villas, rooms and suites are built around a renovated 19th-century manor house, with views across vine-coated slopes to the lazy River Douro. The spa is as superb as you’d expect from these masters of pampered loafing, and there are local winemakers on hand to showcase the best varietals of this rich wine- and port-making region.

Doubles from £192, B&B, 00 351 254 660600, sixsenses.com

5 For indulgence: Abadia Retuerta le Domaine, Castile and Leon

The medieval meets the postmodern at this 12th-century former abbey. Last year, the Abadia became the first hotel in Europe to offer Google Glass free to visitors, and its cutting-edge credentials extend to the new El Santuario spa. Opening in the former stables in July, it will offer vinotherapy sessions, with a “spa sommelier” deducing your palate and prescribing the most effective treatment. You’ll get to drink some of the stuff when you head to dinner at Pablo Montero’s Michelin-starred in-house restaurant.

Doubles from £280, B&B, 00 34 983 680368, ledomaine.es

6 For culture: Urso Hotel, Madrid

This is the big new hitter in the Spanish capital, and its neoclassical frontage leads to 78 rooms decorated in muted grey tones, with marble bathrooms and huge windows that suck in the Iberian sun. Its restaurant, The Table By, features a rotating cast of Michelin-starred chefs; manning the stoves right now is Fernando Canales, of the Bilbao restaurant Etxanobe. Within walking distance are the baroque Museo de Historia building and Spain’s finest art museum, the Prado, which until September is hosting an exhibition of monumental views of Spanish cities by Genaro Perez Villaamil.

Doubles from £150, B&B, 00 34 914 444458, hotelurso.com/es

7 For wine: Estalagem de Monsaraz, Alentejo

2 For isolation: La Rectoria de Sant Miquel de Pineda, Garrotxa

With dormant volcanoes, cave complexes that drip with stalactites, medieval villages and ruined castles, the little-known Catalan region of La Garrotxa is a mountainous frontier nudging the French border. This former rectory, dating from the 12th century, has been restored by the chef Roy Lawson, formerly of the Balmoral hotel, in Edinburgh, and his wife, Goretti, a Catalan whisky expert he met in the Scottish capital. The refurb exudes a roughly hewn feel, with exposed oak beams, monastic white decor and a menu that reflects Roy’s Scottish roots, blending Catalan with the Clyde in dishes such as squid stuffed with black pudding.

Doubles from £67, B&B, 00 34 691 353111,

laretoriadesantmiquel.com

3 For nightlife: Hotel Pulitzer, Barcelona

Among the boisterous throngs of Las Ramblas and Placa de Catalunya, this sleek urban bolthole treads the fine line between stylish and informal with aplomb. Leather and wood abound, the lobby morphs into a bar and library area with blinding white sofas, and the 91 rooms are as snug as they are soundless. Begin your night with a cocktail or two at the rooftop bar; with thick wooden furniture, trellises and exuberant



Casa Dali, Cadaques, Catalonia (12)



Urso Hotel, Madrid (6)



Casa Dali, Cadaques, Catalonia (12)

than surreal, with views over a sleepy bay and a pleasingly laid-back air. The warren-like interior is all sloping beams, wrought-iron chandeliers and rustic farmhouse tables. Patio doors lead out into a garden awash with bougainvillea. Don't expect any original masterpieces in the small Museo de Cadaques nearby — but regular exhibitions explore Dali's life and work. Sleeps 9; from £3,700 a week; 020 7351 6384, sjvillas.co.uk

13 For views: Trujillo villas, Extremadura

Three hours from Madrid, but centuries behind in terms of development, Trujillo is a 16th-century time trap of crumbling castle walls and squat churches. These seven granite villas and studios, built into the old town's walls are stylish and individual, with the Artists Studio the most bijoux. Prints by local talents should help bring out your inner Miró, while the views towards the Gredos Mountains from Villa Moritos may ignite a

The popping of corks will drown out the ploughing of crops in Reguengos de Monsaraz, European Wine City 2015. Its focal point is the village of Monsaraz, a fortified settlement of just a few hundred people. Amid a garden filled with lemon trees, the whitewashed, two-storey Estalagem is built partly into the town's walls, and its rooms are stocked with charmingly creaky dressers and inviting beds. A short drive from the village is the property's vineyard, Herdade do Esporão, where tasting sessions are curated by the Aussie expat David Baverstock; don't miss the sweet red Garrafeira and the oaky Reserva Branco.

Doubles from £39, B&B, 00 351 266 557112, estalagemdemonzaraz.com

8 For great outdoors, La Escondida Hotel & Restaurant, Alicante

Swapping the raucous roar of Wembley for the gentle rustle of olive groves, the former England and Barcelona boss Terry Venables is the gaffer at this former hunting lodge. Always one with an eye for a new signing, El Tel snapped up the property when it came onto the market and has turned it into a 10-room retreat with exposed beams and original masonry. Don't get too comfy: the Font Roja nature reserve is a playground for the active, with hiking, mountain-biking and riding among the extras on offer. Or, if retired-footballer activities are your bag, there's a great golf course nearby.

Doubles from £134, B&B, 00 34 965 513046, hotelescondida.com

9 For family: La Manga Club, Murcia

This long-standing resort favourite now has extra appeal for any budding young Rory McIlroys, with the opening last November of its Golf Academy, which offers specialised tuition packages for children. This is all alongside a wealth of other junior academies in tennis, cricket, rugby and football. Don't worry about the young ones hogging the facilities: you'll have 28 tennis courts and three 18-hole golf courses to choose from.

Doubles from £77, B&B, 00 34 968 175577, lamangaclub.com

10 For beach: Fuerte Conil Costa Luz, Conil de la Frontera

The Costa de la Luz is the better-looking, more refined brother of the Costa del Sol. La Fontanilla, a vanilla-coloured ribbon of sand below amber cliffs in Conil, is one of the best beaches along here, and is presided over by the Fuerte Conil. It's large (more than 400 rooms), but not without character — witness the donkey employed to "mow" the grass. Got youngsters in tow? Release them into one of a string of kids' clubs and kick back on the flower-bedecked terraces or soft sands down the hill.

Doubles from £46, B&B, 00 34 956 443344, fuertehoteles.com

Villas

11 For design: Lovers Dezanove House, Galicia

With more than a hint of Scandi sauna about it, this contemporary beach house near the Cies archipelago, 35 miles from Santiago de Compostela, has won architectural awards for innovative design. Its sustainability credentials are certainly hefty — much of the house is made from recycled bateas, seaborne wooden platforms on which mussels grow. Inside, touches include a "float therapy" bathtub, a teppanyaki table and underfloor heating.

Sleeps 6; from £2,206 a week; 07460 815443, dezanove-house.com

12 For art lovers: Casa Dali, Cadaques, Catalonia

In the home village of Salvador Dali, up near the French border, this colonial-style villa is more sybaritic



Trujillo Villas, Extremadura (13)



Hotel Pulitzer, Barcelona (3)



Fuerte Conil Costa Luz, Conil de la Frontera (10)

Alboran should fit the bill. Twenty minutes' drive from Estepona, nestling in one of the most exclusive corners of Malaga province, it's an eye-catching affair in white, with cavernous sofas, floor-to-ceiling windows, plasma TVs and spectacular views to the fringes of the Med. You're in a gated golf community, so the only thing likely to disturb you is the odd shout of "Fore!".

Sleeps 6; from £2,325 a week; 00 34 915 237451, villas.spain-select.com

20 For escape: La Casilla, Las Alpujarras

Spain is enduringly popular with Brits, but you're unlikely to bump into anyone you know in the village of Bubion. In fact, there's a good chance you won't bump into anyone at all. This tiny Moorish settlement sits 4,400ft up in Las Alpujarras, on the slopes of the Poqueira gorge. At the foot of the village, between the church and the pulsating village square (a couple of snoozing old boys — if you're lucky), this snug one-bedroom cottage is

hitherto undiscovered passion for painting. Villas and studios sleep 2-10; from £330 for three nights; 020 7385 5345, trujillovillas.espana.com

14 For city vibe: Casa de Pulpo, Valencia

You'll feel like a local if you stay in this three-storey townhouse in the fishermen's neighbourhood of El Cabanyal. Some of the best restaurants in town are on your doorstep — Ernest Hemingway and Orson Welles used to frequent nearby La Pepica — and the local food markets and tapas bars teem with discerning foodies. Yet the quiet backstreet on which the recently refurbished "Octopus House" sits counts the number of tourists it sees in a year on one hand. Dust off your Spanish and the chances are no one will rumble you. The traditional facade belies surprisingly sleek decor, and there's a secluded terrace for a vino or two before you head to dinner.

Sleeps 6; from £337 a week; 020 3384 7066, spain-holiday.com

15 For a coastal base: Villa Felipe, Costa Blanca

It's almost impossible to escape the sea views during a stay at Villa Felipe, a modern three-level property on a hillside between the resort of El Campello and the harbour town of Villajoyosa. They come at you from all angles, whether you're lazing on the expansive terrace, drifting around the pool, strolling in the garden or pulling the drapes after a long day of beach-hopping on this popular stretch of the Costa Blanca. The villa has a barbecue, and there's tennis and golf within easy reach. Benidorm is 20 minutes away — either close enough or far enough away, depending on your viewpoint.

Sleeps 8; from £1,430 a week; ownersdirect.co.uk

16 For city proximity: Casa Bali Meco, near Lisbon

With ancient ramparts, a sparkling bay and famed restaurants, the town of Sesimbra has been a popular day trip from Lisbon since the 18th century, when it was popularised by holidaying Portuguese monarchs. The hustle and bustle of the capital is just 25 miles away, but you'll require plenty of persuasion to leave the cube-like confines of Casa Bali Meco, which has Balinese furniture and a lawn cabana. There's a great swimming beach, Praia des Bicas, five minutes' walk away.

Sleeps 7; from £1,393 a week; 01273 747811, thevillaagency.co.uk

17 For families: Villa Monte Canelas, Algarve

Fed up with being battered by floats and armbands in the pool? Among the eye-catching features of the four-bedroom Villa Monte Canelas is a children's pool, separated from the placid waters of your own adults-only cool-off by a wooden lounging area. But the segregation won't last: there's an enormous dining table that seats 10, an eight-seat outdoor sofa and an oversized LCD TV, around which you can all gather for movie nights. Other perks include a Wii console, a DVD player, a hammock and a spacious enclosed lawn with a spice garden. What's nearby? Does it matter?

Sleeps 8; from £345 a week; homeaway.co.uk

18 For country charm: Villa Apolonia, Algarve

Offering the perfect retreat from the frenzied fiesta of the Algarve summer, this three-bedroom country villa is set in landscaped grounds, with a herb and vegetable garden. There's a 33ft pool for languid lengths and a pétanque area for some gentle competition, but you'll likely be too busy with your feet up somewhere on the wraparound veranda or one of the secluded terraces. For supplies, head to the Moorish indoor market in nearby Loule.

Sleeps 6; from £3,757 a week; 0845 618 2205, akvillas.com

19 For sun worshippers: Villa Alboran, Malaga

If you like to holiday in the sort of flashy pad that looks as if it probably once starred in a Wham! video, Villa



Urso Hotel, Madrid (6)

west of Llanes, on the Asturian coast. If your kids haven't giggled themselves into immobility by the time you arrive you'll find Poo to be one of the prettiest, most family-friendly beaches in Europe. A clear stream — the River of Poo — runs through a gently widening valley to the sea, providing low-tide paddling and, at high tide, a vast, perfectly safe natural swimming pool.

La Concha, San Sebastian

One of the world's greatest urban beaches, La Concha is an elegant curve of spotless sand with a fiesta-like feel that kicks off in late May and lasts the whole summer. The swimming is safe, there's usually plenty of space, and if you get peckish, you're in San Sebastian, for goodness' sake.

Tamariu, Catalonia

Two and a half miles east of Palafrugell lies the perfect little cove of Tamariu, a rocky inlet with a scoop of soft sand and a handful of beach restaurants — the calamari at El Palangui is fabulous. For privacy, head to the far right of the beach, where there's a hidden section, or follow the coast path round to the left, past the stone jetty, where you'll find another secret spot.

Bolonia, Andalusia

There are Roman ruins on Bolonia's beach, from where you can see Africa looming to the south. There are also vast dunes, backed by pine forests, warm tidal pools, for paddling, and herds of cows, adding a slightly Goan feel. It's popular with Spanish families, surfers and nudists, and the northern end is best for shelter from the wind that rises mid-afternoon.

Spain and Portugal's culture calendar

Carnaval

Cadiz, February 12–22

The biggest carnival on mainland Spain is a riot of music, colour, fireworks and, above all, the rapier-sharp wit of the Gaditanos, who traditionally use their 11-day festival as an excuse to poke fun at the government. Whether or not you speak Spanish, this is the biggest laugh you'll have all year. Free; cadizturismo.com

believed to be six centuries old. Light the fire, pad around the terracotta flagstones beneath chestnut beams and take in the south-facing views through shuttered windows to the Med — and, on a good day, Morocco beyond. Should you find all the peace a little disconcerting, Granada is an hour's drive away. Sleeps 2; from £410 a week; 00 34 958 763381, rusticblue.com

Spanish beaches: our top five

Praia das Rodas, Galicia

Locals call this island beach El Caribe Gallego — the Galician Caribbean — which says it all. Open from Easter to September, and accessible only via an hour-long ferry trip from Vigo, Baiona or Cangas (£14.50 return; mardeons.com), it lies in the Islas Atlánticas de Galicia national park and is considered by many to be the most beautiful beach in Spain. There's a decent restaurant, and if you bring a tent, you can stay the night (from £8pp, based on two sharing; open June to September; campingislascies.com).

Playa de Poo, Asturias

The Playa de Poo lies opposite the Island of Poo, just

Fiesta de Jerez

Jerez, February 20–March 7

The biggest and most important flamenco showcase in Spain takes place in the Andalusian town that thinks it owns the art. About 40 official concerts by the genre's elite — including Patricia Guerrero, Tomas de Perrate and Pastora Galvan — are backed up with hundreds of impromptu gigs by less famous musicians. Some events free; jerez.es

Las Fallas

Valencia, March 15–19

The Spanish event with the greatest potential for disaster — and all the better for it — Las Fallas is the festival of fire, a bucket-list must-see where deafening daily explosions signify “Down tools, start drinking, light fireworks”. It all culminates in the immolation of about 750 sculptures made by neighbourhood associations on the final day. Free; visitvalencia.com

Pop-Up Pompidou

Malaga, from April



(Eliza Snow/Getty)

France opens this month in the fancy port district, reinforcing Malaga's reputation as Spain's city of art. Exactly when this huge glass cube opens — and what art it will contain — is a strictly guarded secret, but we've heard that works by Frida Kahlo, René Magritte, Francis Bacon and Malaga's most famous son, Picasso, will be on show. Admission fee to be confirmed; centrepompidou.es

Cruces de Mayo

Cordoba, April 29–May 3

The first branch of the Pompidou Centre outside



(Alfredo Maiquez/Lonely Planet)



(Alamy)



(Sergio Nogueira/Alamy)

Ah, Cordoba in early May: the temperatures are delightful and the streets, callejones and patios are awash with cascades of flowers. The city's 70-odd hermandades — Roman Catholic brotherhoods — use the blooms to decorate huge crosses, then decide whose is best, based largely on who can throw the best party. Food, wine and flamenco all feature in this joyous week-long celebration.

Free; turismodecordoba.org

Festas de Lisboa

Lisbon, June 1–30

The celebration of St Anthony's Day (June 13) is an excuse for a month-long party in the Portuguese capital. Everyone knows that only the fish cared for St Anthony's sermons, so the consumption of grilled sardines is compulsory — and beware if you're single, as he is the patron saint of lonely hearts. Many of the people you'll meet will be looking for love.

Free; festasdelisboa.com

Mares Vivas festival

Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal, July 16–18

Lenny Kravitz and the fado superstar Ana Moura are the first acts to be announced for this year's event, held on the south bank of the Douro, outside Porto. If last year's line-up — Kaiser Chiefs, James, Portishead and the Prodigy — is anything to go by, you'll be in for a rocking good time.

£45; maresvivas.meo.pt

Santander International Festival

Santander, August 1–31

Established in 1948, this is the biggest cultural event in the Iberian calendar: a month-long programme of classical music, opera, ballet, theatre and performance art, staged in venues across Cantabria. This year's highlights have not yet been confirmed, but past acts have included heavyweights from Daniel Barenboim to Plácido Domingo.

Some events free; festivalsantander.com

La Tomatina

Bunol, Valencia, August 26

We don't need to go into the sticky detail of Spain's biggest food fight, except to say that the tomato-pelting mayhem has become so popular, you need a reservation to participate. You can buy tickets direct from the organisers.

£7.50; latomatina.info

Fiesta de San Mateo

Logrono, La Rioja, September 19–26

As well as having one of the finest collections of taperias in Spain, Logroño also hosts the country's biggest wine celebrations: a week-long harvest festival. It's a torrid affair involving parades, dancing and wild outbursts of spontaneous affection, all fed from a fountain of red wine.

Free; logrono.es

Culinary outpost Caceres savours its year in the sun

We head to the little-known city of Caceres, Spain's new gastronomic capital

It's probably fair to say that, before he opened the Madruelo restaurant in Caceres, Extremadura, Francisco Dominguez didn't spend much time talking to his diners about pig fat. He used to be the chef at Pikes Hotel, in Ibiza, home from home on the White Island for the Spice Girls and Kylie, among others.

Late on a Saturday night, though, the hipster-bearded chef is in his element, telling me how they make patatera, a speciality sausage. It's far better, apparently, than sobrasada, the superficially similar sausage they have in the Balearics. "The difference," he says, "is that only the fat goes into the patatera." And that makes it taste better than the Balearic sausage, which has actual meat in it? "Yes!"

Mmm. You have to applaud the Caceres-born chef's decision to bring his culinary skills and enthusiasm home to this often-forgotten hinterland of western Spain. I'm here because Caceres is Spain's Capital of Gastronomy for 2015. Is this really because the local cuisine deserves to be celebrated, or just because this isolated pocket of Extremadura — the nearest airport is Seville, two and a half hours' drive away — could do with the publicity? After all, if this city-hopping accolade was entirely meritocratic, then surely the multi-Michelin-starred San Sebastian would win every year?



(Zhang Li Yun/REX)



(Esteban Cobo)



(David Ramos/Getty)



(CEPHAS - Neil Phillips)

Chef Jose Pizarro shows how to identify the best quality jamon Iberico in Extremadura

The city could certainly absorb a few more visitors. Arriving earlier that day, I had headed straight for the 12th-century Moorish wall, where — shielding my eyes against the low winter sun, with the misty Gredos Mountains in the distance — I found I had the entire, gloriously anachronistic city to myself. The only other visitors were cartoonishly large storks, sitting on a nest at the top of the Toledo-Moctezuma palace.

Caceres has a wonderfully preserved old town — described by Unesco as one of the three most complete “ensembles of monuments” in Europe. (Prague and Tallinn were the others.) It’s spectacularly unspoilt, all gothic mansions and turreted walls.

Perhaps the most impressive building is the modernised restaurant-hotel Atrio. Outside, it’s a fortified chocolate box of sharp corners and neat caramel masonry. Inside, it’s a testament to the taste of its owners, Toño Perez and his long-term partner, Jose Polo, with wooden beams and elegant lighting that makes everybody look like an actor in a 1960s Italian movie.

Toño, a twinkly-eyed Ben Kingsley lookalike, met Jose at high school, and they’ve been together 34 years. (“He was a Young Communist,” he reminisces. “And I was Opus Dei. An explosive combination!”) Since then, their partnership has earned them two Michelin stars and offers to sell up and move to Barcelona.

If they did ever move, it might be tricky to take the hotel’s wine cellar with them. The list is an inch and a half thick and includes an 1806 Château d’Yquem, which would set me back £232,000. I pass on that, but dive into the grand tasting menu: dish after dish of proudly local, technically adventurous food.

There’s retinto, a soft, acorn-fed beef, finely minced and with an almost nutty flavour; sea bass glazed with orange, lemon and curry; black truffles with asparagus; and an ice cream made with the local sheep’s cheese, Torta del Casar, which ends the meal with an unexpected burst of savoury freshness.

“We may not be San Sebastian,” Jose says afterwards, “but there’s an authenticity to the food here. The Iberico ham. The cheese. The retinto beef. The smoked paprika. Being the Capital of Gastronomy is a great opportunity. The whole city thinks, ‘We have to be at our best.’”

Does Caceres have enough breadth to its cuisine, though, to entice gourmets to make the pilgrimage? That night, after Atrio’s huge lunch, trying Madruelo’s patatera seems more of an obligation than a treat. It’s as good as Francisco claimed, though, made with local smoked paprika and mashed potato, comfort food with the rapid flavour-delivery system you only get from a rich dollop of fat. I try it again the next day in even more decadent piruleta (lollipop) form at La Matilda, a restaurant on the cobbled Plaza de Santiago. It’s crispy on the outside and like sticky chorizo in the middle.

The region’s other trump card is cheese. Finding the best stuff involves a 30-minute drive east to the smaller but, if anything, even more grand town of Trujillo, known as the “home of the conquistadors”. Any number of adventurers, explorers and downright butchers came from this part of the world, and the few who made it back from the Americas weren’t shy about showing off their wealth. Surrounded by a wall that was started by the Romans and finished by the Moors, Trujillo is an old-world fantasy of crumbling alleyways and great mansions.

From the Moorish castle, you can see where the town gets its gentler side. The scenery sloping away to the west is surprisingly green. There are red kites in the distance, and sheep grazing between granite boulders that poke up through the lush turf.

Those sheep are why the cheese is so good. I go home with a round of Serena cheese from a heavily stocked, ramshackle shop called La Despensa. It’s rich and nobly mature, curdled using the flower of an artichoke for a hint of bitterness.



A chocolate dessert at the Parador de Caceres

NEED TO KNOW

Andalusian with sit-back-and-doze autopilot and, at the flick of a heel, hair-raising sport settings. Nick and Hermione Tudor have a stableful at Finca el Moro, and if you're reasonably competent in the saddle, you can join them for a six-night exploration of the Sierra de Aracena, picnicking in the forests and staying in tiny hamlets. The trip ends with two nights at the couple's pied-à-terre in Seville. Prices start at £1,395pp, full-board (00 34 627 479738, fincaelmoro.com). Flights are extra; head to Seville with BA, easyJet or Ryanair.

Europe's best new golf course

After leading Europe to victory against America at Gleneagles, the Ryder Cup captain Paul McGinley arrived in Portugal to open the estuary-side North Course at Quinta do Lago. Completed in just 10 months, it was voted Europe's best at the World Golf Awards last November. Find out if you agree with a stay at the Hotel Quinta do Lago, where top-end service is complemented by superb views of the nearby beach and the surrounding Ria Formosanature reserve. Five-night packages start at £935, B&B, including three rounds of golf (00 351 289 350350, hotelquintadolago.com). Fly to Faro, 20 minutes' drive away, with easyJet.

Camino Portugues

The Camino Frances, which starts in St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, in the Pyrenees, is by far the most trodden route to Santiago de Compostela. Aficionados — and those looking for a quieter, more contemplative pilgrimage — prefer the Camino Portugues, which follows the wild Atlantic coast for 383 miles north from Lisbon. The entire route takes at least 28 days; better to focus on the spectacular final section, running 68 miles from Tui, on the Spanish side of the River Minho. As befits a pilgrimage, you'll stay in simple, family-run guesthouses and hotels. A seven-day itinerary starts at £474pp, half-board, including luggage transfers (020 3468 1516, caminoways.com). Flights are extra; Santiago is served by Vueling, Ryanair and easyJet.



In the saddle in Andalusia

arrange horses, bikes and lifts into town. A week in July starts at £396pp, including five days of surf instruction and equipment hire, but not flights (020 8144 9950, surfholidays.com). Fly to Lisbon with Ryanair.

Cycling the Costa Verde

There is a risk that when you first set eyes on the Costa Verde — the magnificent stretch of rolling green hills, empty beaches and deep-blue seas on Spain's northern seaboard — you will never want to holiday anywhere else again. Yes, it rains a bit, but that's what scares the tourists away. It's driest from June to August — the ideal time to try a new nine-night self-guided cycling trip that starts in the foothills of the Picos de Europa and winds westwards through fishing ports, hill villages and valleys to the fabulous resort of Gijon. Prices start at £1,159, B&B, including flights, bike hire and luggage transfers (0845 322 4672, headwater.com)

Paragliding in Algodonales

At the northern end of the Sierra de Grazalema, in Andalusia, lies one of the best spots in Europe to learn to paraglide. You can launch in almost any

The history and architecture may bring you to a city, but it's the food that gives you the greatest memories (especially here, because your fridge will smell of Serena cheese for weeks to come). As the rest of the world catches on to its culinary genius, not least that wonderful pig fat, Caceres deserves every moment of its year in the sun.

Trevor Baker was a guest of the Parador de Caceres (doubles from £71, B&B, 00 34 927 211759, parador.es), Atrio (tasting menus from £18; restaurantatrio.com), Madruelo (mains from £10; madruelo.com) and Renfe (returns from Madrid from £33; renfe.com). [For more information, visit turismoextremadura.com](http://information.visit.turismoextremadura.com)

Take a break from relaxation

There's only so much lounging around you can do on holiday. We pick out the best activity breaks for the year ahead — for all energy levels

Seville and the Sierras by horse

The heart of Andalusia can't be reached by road. It lies somewhere in the mountains, along the ancient tracks and bridle paths that hire cars never reach.

You'll need a horse for the search: a sure-footed

Nick and Hermione Tudor have a stableful at Finca el Moro, and if you're reasonably competent in the saddle, you can join them for a six-night exploration of the Sierra de Aracena, picnicking in the forests and staying in tiny hamlets. The trip ends with two nights at the couple's pied-à-terre in Seville. Prices start at £1,395pp, full-board (00 34 627 479738, fincaelmoro.com). Flights are extra; head to Seville with BA, easyJet or Ryanair.

Rafting the Noguera

Explore's eight-day Pyrenean activity holiday sells out every summer — mainly because of what happens on day two. You wake up in Sort, an outdoorsy town bisected by the lively Noguera Pallaresa, a meltwater-fed tributary of the Segre. The 10-mile middle section of the river comprises Class III and IV rapids, including one named La Lavadora — the washing machine. No further questions. Surviving the river doesn't mean taking the rest of the week off: there's canyoning, kayaking, mountain-biking and abseiling. Kids aged 11 and up will have a blast; adults will struggle to keep up. Prices start at £1,320pp, including flights and some activities (01252 883605, explore.co.uk).

Surfing in Portugal

Apart from sharks, rip currents and coral, the last thing you need when learning to surf is a beach full of guffawing muppets treating your efforts like a clown show. Instead, you want gentle, consistent waves breaking over sand and the complete attention of a patient, professional instructor on an empty beach within walking distance of your accommodation. Helios Beach Houses, just behind Foz do Lizandro beach, in Ericeira, ticks all the boxes, offering two simple bungalows and a cottage, all self-catering, and a gorgeous rooftop loafing area. The owner, Clara, can



Fan zone: hit the surf in Ericeira, Portugal



Learn flamenco near Granada

0 comments



 Ana Guyatt

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direction, and consistent conditions allow novices to achieve in a single week what it could take months to learn in the UK. Fly Spain is a British-run school offering intensive courses that allow you to attain the British Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association's Elementary Pilot qualification. Over five days, the instructors will turn you into a higher being capable of flying figures of eight, solo, up to 400ft above the olive groves and almond orchards of Andalusia. Prices start at £800pp, including accommodation, tuition and transfers, but not flights (00 34 651 736718, flyspain.co.uk). Fly to Malaga with easyJet.

Flamenco summer school

Never get into a discussion with gypsies over the number of flamenco styles. Some say there are five. Others 17. Others insist that those 17 can be subdivided into 93. But if you're determined to learn the basics, definitely go to the experts. With more than 80 years' combined experience under greats such as Manolete and Ana Cali, the dance mistresses Cristina Serrano Paz, Ana Rojas and Chua Alba will put you through 10 hours of intensive tuition at the Centro Flamenco la Fuente school, in Capileira, a village outside Granada. If you're a beginner, that's enough time to nail the tricky zapateado foot-tapping technique; if you're more advanced, you'll learn the alegría and the solea. Prices start at £392pp, self-catering, including transfers, but not flights (00 34 658 307627, flamencolafuente.com). Fly to Granada with Ryanair.

Mountain-biking in Andalusia

New for 2015 is a greatest-hits package from the Geordie cycling specialist Saddle Skedaddle, which asked its guides to combine the most hair-raising Andalusian day rides into a week-long adrenaline rush through the Sierra de Grazalema park and the Guadiaro Valley. The result is a single-track-dominated trip involving challenging descents and some nasty technical trails, with thigh-busting uphill sections, following mule tracks, mountain roads and the odd goat path. It's aimed at riders ranging from keen amateurs to heavily scarred experts: beginners need not apply. Prices start at £965pp, half-board, with bike hire from £140 (01912 651110, skedaddle.co.uk). Flights are extra; head to Malaga with easyJet.