



Move Over for Málaga

Joanna Styles discovers a rejuvenated city oozing confidence

One of the first things the newcomer notices about Málaga is that the city has an air of expectation about it. Against the backdrop of the warm Mediterranean light and the fresh scent of the sea, Málaga seems to have a distinct spring in its step.

This is a city that has had more than its fair share of bad luck. Not only has Málaga suffered years of neglect, it has also endured several decades with the undeserved reputation as the Costa del Sol's ugly sister. But take a walk around the up-and-coming old quarter or a stroll along the port side and Málaga oozes confidence.

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And about time, too. Its airport, the fourth busiest in the country, welcomes over 13.5 million visitors a year, its shiny new cruise terminal is one of Mediterranean's main ports

of call and its long sandy coastline is home to probably the biggest expat population in southern Europe. Yet Málaga, Spain's sixth largest city, is one of the country's most underrated and least-known.

From the outside looking in, there's not much evidence of the new Málaga. The city viewed from the ring road is just another Spanish conurbation with row after row of unattractive tower blocks thrown up in the Sixties and Seventies to house migrant workers. But the avant-garde Congress Palace, sparkling titanium and aluminium from its main entrance, gives the visitor a hint of what's going on. The newly-opened and just as avant-garde City of Justice behind it confirms the idea that Málaga is moving with the times. And proof of this new-found confidence is that Málaga is a candidate for European City of Culture 2016.

A glance at Málaga's history shows more downs than ups. This is a city whose Christian conquest in 1487 was one of the bloodiest and most vengeful in Spain – only 25 families were permitted to stay in the city and all the other inhabitants were sold as slaves or forced into exile. Two centuries later, Málaga suffered a succession of almost Biblical plagues – hunger, disease, floods, earthquakes and pirate attacks which, unsurprisingly, left the city in tatters. After hitting back and becoming Spain's second most important industrial centre with

a large textile sector and a major iron and steel industry, Málaga lost out to a more-competitive Catalunya while phylloxera ruined the local lucrative grapes. And then, when Málaga's marketing men decided it was time to make the most of the sun and Mediterranean, it was Málaga's coastline rather than the city itself that became one of the world's top holiday destinations.

The definitive comeback has taken a new century and pots of public money – having a fairy godmother in the shape of malagueña Magdalena Álvarez, Minister for Public Works, certainly helps – and nowadays Málaga is firmly making its mark as one of Spain's most forward-looking cities. The Andalusian Technological Park (Parque Tecnológico de Andalucía) houses cutting edge global companies, most specialising in high-tech and telecommunications.

Previously an almost total cultural desert, Málaga now boasts an arts calendar and list of cultural attractions that rivals many a larger and better-known city. At Andalusian's most visited museum, the Picasso Museum set in the imposing stone Palacio de Buenavista, the visitor is treated to a total vision of the city's most famous celebrity and the 16th-century palace provides a perfect architectural contrast to Picasso's mastery abstraction. The Centre for Contemporary Art (CAC), housed in a 1942 market and a classic example of rationalist

architecture popular with the Franco regime, offers the very latest in modern art. And the recent offer by Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza to loan the city over 350 works by Spanish and Andalusian artists from her private collection shows that when it comes to art, Málaga means business.

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The city’s packed cultural calendar makes Málaga a Mecca for culture-starved expats on the Costa del Sol, who can at last add real culture to their previous Costa diet of karaoke and amateur dramatics.

The city’s Philharmonic Orchestra offers year-round classical concerts. There’s world-class jazz in November and the Spanish Film Festival in March attracts the very best from the Spanish screen scene. The annual Terral Festival (named after the hot summer wind) offers the very best in music such as Herbie Hancock, Diana Krall and Macy Gray this year.

There’s a price to pay for all this modernity – the cement has only just set on the high-speed AVE line, which brings Málaga within just over two and a half hours of Madrid and in many parts of the city, large-scale building work means that huge areas are currently dug-up or enveloped in a permanent cloud of building dust. The airport is under massive expansion – second terminal and runway; a second ring-road (with better views than the current one) is under construction; and the city metro tunnels are well under way. Add to this the refurbishment of most of the city centre and the construction of a port-side auditorium, and it’s easy to see why Málaga is going places. Most of the work has a finish-by date of 2010 stamped all over it meaning that in around two years time, Málaga will have plenty to be proud of.

Property in Málaga is often overlooked by the buyer, attracted usually to resorts on the neighbouring Costa del Sol. However, homes in the city tend to be cheaper than their Costa equivalents and represent good investment value. If you’re buying to let it’s worth looking at apartments in the centre – from €190,000 for two bedrooms – or in the Teatinos district

near the university where a three-bedroom flat starts at €140,000. For a beachfront apartment in the up-and-coming west end of the city, expect to pay from €350,000 and double this for a property in the high-end Limonar area in the east.

Even if Málaga with its futuristic architecture, the best in culture and large-scale infrastructure does not win the bid for Cultural Capital in 2016, there’s one thing the visitor can be sure to find – a warm welcome. Having offered visitors wide open arms since the first ones arrived in the shape of the Phoenicians in 800BC, the malagueños are justly known for their hospitality. As Hans Christian Anderson said after a stay in the city in 1862, “In no other part of Spain have I felt so happy or so at home as in Málaga.”

