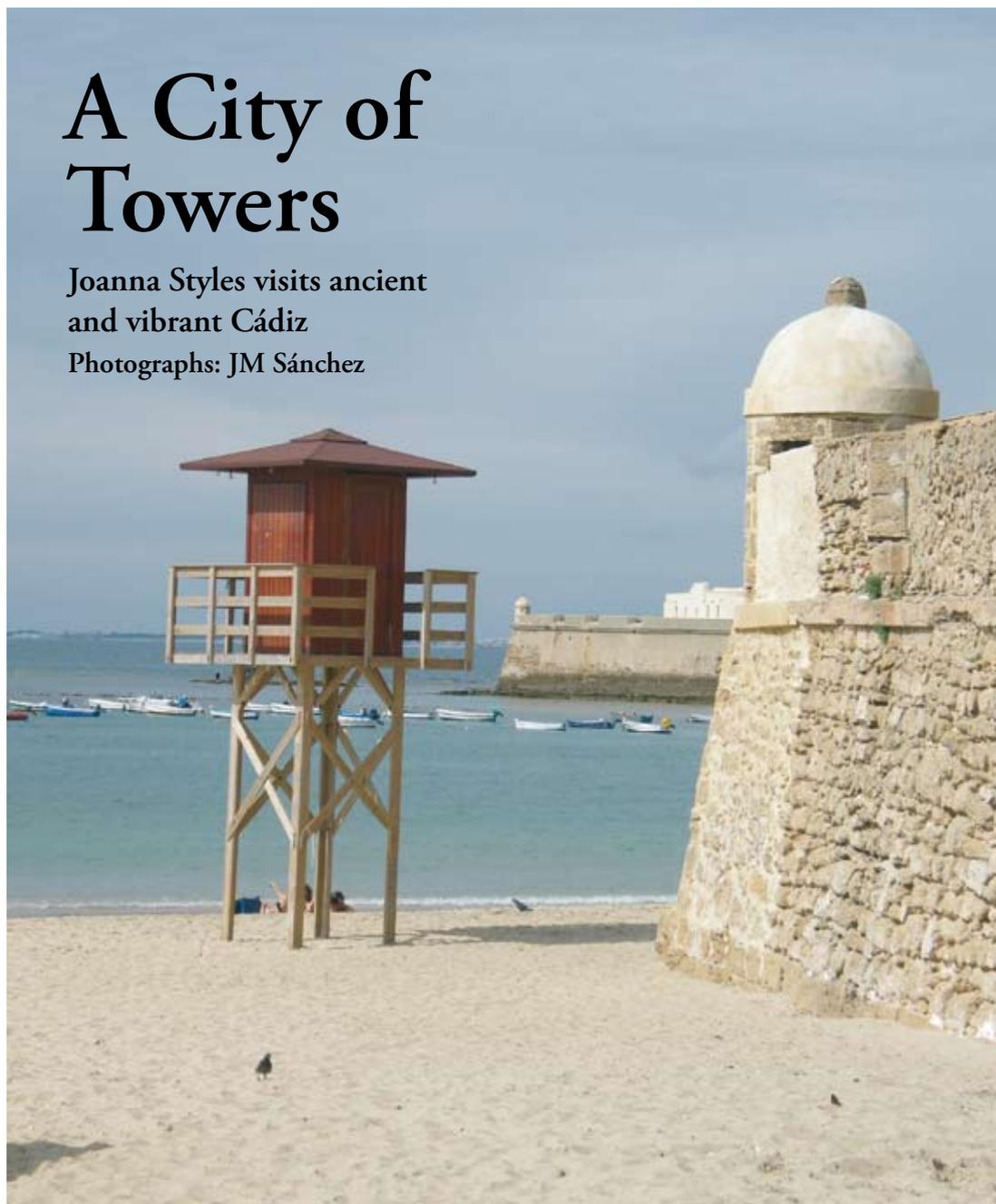


A City of Towers

Joanna Styles visits ancient and vibrant Cádiz

Photographs: JM Sánchez



As you survey Cádiz from the top of the newly-opened West Tower in the cathedral, the city stretches below your feet in a tumble of flat roofs and towers. According to historians, at the height of Cádiz's prosperity in the 18th century there were no less than 160 watchtowers. From these, merchants would scan the Atlantic to see if their ships were on their way home laden with riches from the New World. The towers take all shapes and forms – from regal such as the golden cathedral dome and Tavira Tower, the tallest and official watchtower for Cádiz port, to more lowly whitewashed turrets.

From above, you also appreciate Cádiz's almost island status, flanked on practically all sides by the omnipresent Atlantic whose deep blue vistas surprise the visitor at all corners. Cádiz's only physical attachment to the rest of the

Spanish peninsula is via a narrow strip of land taken up almost entirely by the southern end of the magnificent city beach (some of the finest urban sands in the country), leaving just enough space for the road and railway. This strategic position caught the attention of the Phoenicians over 3,000 years ago when they founded what lays claim to being Europe's oldest city. And the calm waters on the north side of the city in one of Spain's largest natural harbours, the Bay of Cádiz, have provided a safe haven for boats ever since.

Cádiz's maritime connection is evident everywhere you go in the city. Rivaling Sevilla as the principal port for the West Indies route, Cádiz has dominated trade between the Americas and the Canaries for centuries and remains a main port of call for ships crossing the Atlantic. The docks still build ships and Cádiz has one of the most important fishing

industries in Spain – a tradition started by the Romans, whose tuna-preserving factory is open to visitors in a prime spot in the centre of town.

Being small and completely surrounded by sea makes a city vulnerable and Cádiz is, not surprisingly, a fortified city. Fortification on all four sides was completed in 1596 after the second of Francis Drake's attacks plundered the city. Watch turrets and bastions line the walls and the city's western flank is guarded by two castles, Santa Catalina and Sant Sebastián, all reminders of Cádiz's military history. Nowadays, the city has a distinctly civilian air, but gazing out to sea from one of the bastions you can almost hear the cannons blast, protecting the city from yet another pirate attack.

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Widely considered as one of the cities with the best quality of life in Spain, Cádiz is a vibrant city, home to possibly one of the world's happiest populations. Whatever the circumstances, the *gaditanos* have a smile and a wisecrack at the ready. Laughter greets you at every street corner and spontaneous singing (and dancing) breaks out in every square. And you have to admire them – this is one of Spain's poorest cities with chronically high unemployment. Yet even in the current atmosphere of doom and gloom, the *gaditanos* are still having a good time. The maximum expression of this natural *joie de vivre* is, of course, carnival, when for a week in February the whole city dresses up and lives on the wild side.

Cádiz Property

The city's confinement within the limits of an isthmus means that there is virtually no spare building land available in Cádiz. This makes for very expensive property and, surprisingly

for such a small city, Cádiz regularly features in the top six most expensive provincial capitals in Spain, just behind giants such as Barcelona and Madrid. Latest figures point at an average price of over €3,000 per square metre, more



expensive than Marbella (usually the most expensive city in Andalusia) and at a time when property prices throughout Spain are falling.

Expect to pay at least €220,000 for a two-bedroom apartment in the old quarter and make that at least double if you want a property with a roof terrace (and given the wonderful views from up there, you

do want a terrace). The old quarter has plenty of restoration projects and a small apartment needing a good dose of DIY starts at €140,000. Beware of soaring restoration costs, though – being surrounded on all four

sides by moist Atlantic air makes for very damp buildings – so obtain a fixed estimate for work if possible before you commit to the purchase. Restoration grants are available from the Andalusian regional government, but there are strict qualifying conditions plus the usual reams of paperwork. Properties outside the old quarter are also expensive and a two-bedroom apartment in a frontline beach position overlooking the Playa de la Victoria costs from a high €350,000.

Potential for rental yields in the city are good. If you're looking at letting long term, your market possibilities come from locals (unable to buy because of prohibitively high housing prices) and the university population – properties within the vicinity of the Medical and Business Schools are in particularly high demand. Short-term lets also have their potential. Cádiz is an ideal city-break destination and a good base for exploring the nearby beaches and coastline. As yet, this niche market is relatively unexploited and boutique hotels in the city are non-existent. Up-and-coming events include the bicentenary in 2012 of the declaration of the first Spanish Constitution when Cádiz will also be Ibero-American Cultural Capital. Both events are expected to attract thousands of visitors and dignitaries to the city and they will all need somewhere to stay.

