



HAPPY: Diners at Gigi's and beach view from Sotogrande

One-stop paradise

Laurence Dollimore finds a down-to-earth welcome in the high society paradise



Photos by Jon Clarke

IT'S an absolute privilege to live here," enthuses 29-year-old Georgina Taylor, welcoming me to her eponymous chiringuito Gigi's. "It's such a beautiful, elegant paradise."

This is Sotogrande, Andalucía's largest privately-owned residential super-estate. And super it most certainly is.

Sometimes described as Spain's 'millionaire's playground', the enclave was purpose-built for a wealthy cosmopolitan crowd with the added bonuses of 24-hour security, designer boutiques and quality restaurants. My first introduction to this LA-like location came via a lifelong Soto resident who strug-

gled to end a sentence in anything other than 'dahling', 'sweetie' or 'fabulous'.

You could have mistaken her for being too posh to pass the time of day. But within 30 seconds of meeting her, preconceptions melt away. And it's the same with Sotogrande, an uber chic urbanisation in the municipality of San Roque.

The bluer-than-blue marina, stacked with gin palace yachts and sailing boats galore, is the backdrop to a multi-coloured enclave of luxury apartments, villas and mansions.

"There's a lot of wealth here but it's not vulgar or ostentatious," says Georgina a.k.a.

'Gigi', who grew up here, attending school in nearby Marbella. "My clients may be millionaires but they are happy to walk around in flip flops and eat chiringuito-style."

Gigi's has been Soto's happening chiringuito since it set up awnings three years ago, but you won't catch Gigi or her business partner Cristobal

boasting about their long list of regular royal visitors, sports stars or celebrity clients.

Scratch beneath the tranquil opulence and find a community that welcomes visitors

"Sotogrande is where the wealthy come to relax in peace, they're not here to show off or be seen, it's very low key," continues Gigi, whose father is from London. "That's why Soto is so special. We have been able to stay under the radar and attract the right sort of money through targeted marketing." Perhaps this helps explain why the resort's economy has consistently outperformed its Costa neighbours. Throughout the last crisis, while areas like Nerja saw property prices plummet by as much as 11%, in Sotogrande they remained stable and even increased, some well into the double figures.

And while the grapevine may have you believe the area is full of snooty money-makers, scratch beneath the tranquil opulence and you will find a down-to-earth, sporty community ready to welcome visitors with open arms.

"There's such a community spirit here," confirms new resident Sue Davies, 51, who relocated with husband Wayne last August.

"There's a great mix of nationalities and everyone is so supportive of each other, it makes it a wonderful place to live."

"There's just so much to do here too - golf, tennis, padel tennis, sailing or the beach," she adds. "You



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Boats and the beach



From Page 17 **BOATS: Marina and beach (far right)**

have everything in one place and that is ultimately why we love it. It's a one-stop paradise." While sailing has long been an obvious pastime for residents, the sports scene has always been ahead of the curve. Padel tennis, Europe's fastest-growing sport, has been a Soto favourite for years. It is also polo's most southerly European home. The big summer tournament at Santa Maria Polo Club in August is almost as famous for its pop-up shopping village and Grey Goose vodka after-parties as the gladiatorial sport itself. That's largely thanks to the scores of royals and Spanish celebrities who come for the month to spectate and join in when they fancy it. The resort has been tagged with the brand of exclusivity ever since it was first developed by multi millionaire Joseph McMicking

in 1962, after he fell in love with the location on a chance trip to Spain with his wife. A Who's Who of kings, princes, sultans and aristos followed in their footsteps, buying or renting villas here, including former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, Glenn Hoddle, Eddie Jordan and the current and former Chief Ministers of Gibraltar. Princes William, Harry and Andrew, Fergie, Duchess of York and her daughters, the princesses Eugenie and Beatrice are all familiar faces at Sotogrande polo. Then there are A-list visitors like Rod Stewart, Mariah Carey, BBC's Nick Knowles and



SOTO FANS: The Davies (far left) and the Astles (left)

Genesis' Mike Rutherford, who have all sought a low-key break in this exclusive enclave. On any good day you might also spot 73-year-old Robin Byers cruising around the puerto in his 1978 blue Volkswagen Beetle convertible. "I have travelled around the world and I can say with confidence that there's not a development in the whole of Europe that rivals Sotogrande," he tells me. "When you think of Monaco or St Tropez, they don't have all the sports that we do and they don't have Gibraltar and Andalusia on their doorstep. "We have fantastic views and food and we don't attract the tattoo brigade, dare I say it

attracts well behaved people." Indeed you can't help but feel at peace when strolling around the marina, although make that Segwaying around the marina. Personal transporters are the in thing here, whether it's workers zooming to the office, coffee in hand, or hipster teens taking turns on motorised skateboards. After dodging the two-wheeled-speedsters, check out the port's bustling Mercado de Levante flea market. From ceramics to vintage fashions, everyone is welcome under the candy-striped awnings that pop up along the quayside. And following on from last year's success, the convoy of food trucks representing Soto's finest eateries offer even more choice this summer, with permits to set up alongside the market's pop-up stalls as well as down at the polo club. Unfortunately, in search of respite from



Established in 1980, Blue Sky is the largest property management organisation in Sotogrande and offers its clients a wide range of services.



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STUNNING: Fountain (left), Marina (above), market and walkway (far right)



the Soto sun, I found the gelato truck was closed so I had to settle for a cerveza. But I was spoilt for choice, with high quality café's, bars and restaurants on every corner of the port.

At The Hairy Lemon, a favourite expat haunt, I got chatting to James Eden, 38, from Kent.

"Soto has a great ambience, and we love coming here to get away from the bustling coast," he explains. "It's obviously a bit pricier but it's worth it, and my wife likes the shopping."

"We have a place nearby in Casares but if I could afford somewhere here I would snap it up in a heartbeat."

Despite its upmarket nature, this enigmatic resort 25km east of Gibraltar is full of mostly down-to-earth and warm-hearted people.

"You don't have to be a snob to get on in Sotogrande, people aren't like that here," Sarah Smith, 51, tells me as she watches her son at padel tennis training. "To be honest it's nowhere near as flashy as Marbella where people like to show off their wealth. "People in Soto are a lot more genuine, they mind their own business, meet up with friends and have a good time. We're all just trying to live the good life."

Her words resonated as I drove through

Sotogrande's leafy avenues to Galerias Paniagua, the bijou commercial centre where the residents buy their foreign newspapers and paperbacks and can eat out when they don't want to cook in.

Graham and Jane Astle from Cheshire were enjoying a late lunch at cool new eatery, Petit Bistro.

"There's a huge mix of nationalities, it's not a British bubble which is what we love about it," explains Graham, 71. "On top of that it is easy to make friends as everyone is so approachable."

Of that I certainly concur. Maybe it's the tranquility lacking in Marbs or Banus, or perhaps the beautiful views of Gibraltar from all around.

Aside from its sports and family-friendly beach bars,

Soto also has nice beaches to relax on. And had work not beckoned the following morning, it's more than likely a cabana and cocktail session would have been calling my name. Perhaps next time.

I left Soto reluctantly, sad that I couldn't stay longer, jealous that I wasn't part of this close-knit community.

But I'll be back and, having met a whole cast of hospitable residents, I know that I will be welcomed as if I were one of their own.

There's a huge mix of nationalities in Sotogrande, it's not just a British bubble

STACKED UP: Motor boats in Marina



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MOVING IN: Charlie and Bimba

One in one out

SOTOGRADE residents will have to fix their own shelves as they have said goodbye to BBC Television presenter Nick Knowles.

The DIY SOS host had only moved to the exclusive resort in May 2015, switching Eton for the Costa with wife Jessica, 27, and their now 23-month old son Eddie.

But less than a year after moving into the luxurious five-bedroom villa, the couple announced their separation in January of this year, forcing the pair to end their Spanish dream early.

Moving in, however, are Spanish model Bimba Bose and her English DJ-cum-model boyfriend Charlie Centa.

The couple, who have featured in Vogue Spain and high street campaigns including Pull & Bear, are staying in the area while Bimba takes a break from recent cancer treatment. The cool couple were also seen hanging out at San Pedro's skatepark near Marbella.

In the swing of it

Golf fanatic James Stewart has been teeing up top properties in Sotogrande for three decades

HE'S swung the irons with Spanish golf legend Seve Ballesteros, shared Valderrama's greens with US President George Bush Snr and teed off with Prince Andrew... few people have enjoyed better job perks than James Stewart whose business is associated with the UK's biggest estate agents, Savills. But he has certainly earned it.

Despite decorating his office with photographs of famous golf partners and retelling stories of how he helped bring the Ryder Cup to Spain for the very first time, it is clear that James' first and most important love is his business.

And after 34 years in Spain and 17 years in Pueblo Nuevo there is not much James doesn't know about the property market.

"I am really excited about the direction Sotogrande is going in," he says. "Last year the property market showed some real promise."

"The uncertainty around Brexit has obviously taken its toll but we are still busy and will probably see another good year."

He adds: "We had expected to push on from 2015 but with a vote to Leave the likelihood is that the market will remain



JAMES: With Ballesteros

the same as last year - which is still a positive, just not the boom we were hoping for just yet."

Outside of the property world, James' passion is on the golf course... in particular in Sotogrande's esteemed Valderrama.

A member for 30 years, his love-affair with the club dates back to the early 90s when club owner Jaime Ortiz-Patiño brought him in to help bring the Ryder Cup to Spain.

"It was a great honour for me and I got to meet some top players," he says. "Seve was by far my favourite, a true gentleman and ambassador to the sport."

He adds: "I'll never forget playing in the Volvo Masters Pro Am in 1997 with Seve and Zimbabwean pro Mark McNulty."

"On the 18th I had the putt to win the tournament and Seve and Mark both took turns at lining me up. I felt huge relief when the ball fell in the hole."

With a separate office in Puerto Sotogrande, James Stewart in association with Savills has established itself as a top agent for Sotogrande and surrounding areas.

For more information visit www.js-sotogrande.com or call 956 795 300

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Serving up ace facilities, Ian McDougall is nurturing the latest generation of tennis and padel stars in Sotogrande

For the love of tennis

He played with Bjorn Borg during the Swede's golden years, represented Great Britain at youth level and even named his dogs Tennis and Padel... it is fair to say that boss at Octogono Club Ian McDougall is crazy for the court.

Moving to Spain as a 21-year-old tennis coach in 1982, Ian landed himself a job at the prestigious Puente Romano centre.

The 11-time Grand Slam champion Borg had put his name to the club and for six days a year he made an appearance at the up-market Marbella resort.

Luckily for Ian, that meant he had the chance to play alongside the Swede as they partnered up for doubles exhibition games against the likes of Spanish legend Manuel Santana.

"It was great to play alongside Bjorn," he says. "He was a really nice guy, quiet, kept himself to himself."

"On the court he was at his best, although I had to encourage him to get forward a bit more as he tried winning every point from the baseline as he did so well throughout his career."

In 1987, Ian was crowned the first Padel World Champion in Marbella with partner Marcus Ludlow.

From there Ian moved to Argentina where he played at the highest level for a year.

Nowadays, father-of-four Ian spends his time running the Octogono club. With five padel courts, three hard tennis courts and three red clay courts,



NEXT GENERATION: Ian with son Johnny

the 55-year-old Yorkshireman has transformed the centre into a hub for up-and-coming stars.

And while the likes of former England boss Glenn Hoddle, and British royals Eugenie and Beatrice have enjoyed a

knock about on Octogono's courts, Ian is just as interested in getting kids on to the court.

As well as running its own summer camps, Octogono also hosts the Soto Academy which nurtures rising stars in Andalucia.

Junior competitions are scheduled throughout August for both tennis and padel and local players are encouraged to sign up.

And while Ian's 10-year-old son Johnny hasn't beaten his dad yet, he says he 'will soon!'

Meanwhile, Ian's 29-year-old son Oliver is following in his father's footsteps and works as a coach at the club. But it is not just a club for kids, tennis mix-ins for seniors take place every Wednesday and Sunday morning while padel mix-ins are run throughout the week. And with a no-membership policy everyone is welcome.

For more information visit www.tennissotogrande.com or call 659 453 444/ 677 589 895



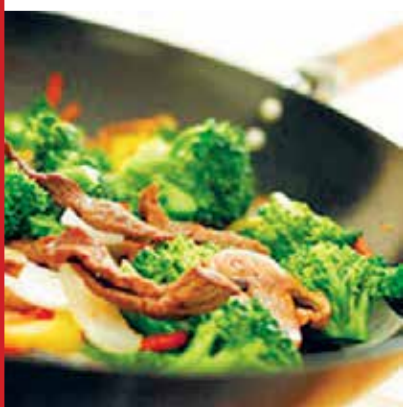
DREAM TEAM: Ian with Bjorn Borg (left), Ian and Davis cup team (above) and his club courts (below)



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STUNNING LINKS: The view from Alcaidesa golf is one of Spain's very best

Sotogrande is home to more top-notch golf courses than you can shake a nine-iron at

It would not be unfair to call Sotogrande the home of Spanish golf. After all, it has some of the oldest courses in the country and has even hosted the Ryder Cup. Indeed, anyone with half an interest in sport will remember the fantastic last few holes of the 1997 Ryder Cup, when Colin Montgomery played the best round of his life. That was at Valderrama, now viewed as one of the must-play golf courses in Europe, beautifully maintained, pricey and, some say, a touch too challenging. Golfers up for a change should try Alcaidesa, claimed to be the only Links golf course in southern Europe. Seaside courses require a different style of play from your standard 18 and if the ball lands in the water, forget it! As an added touch, Alcaidesa may be the most scenic of all the Sotogrande courses, with breathtaking coastal views to Gibraltar and North Africa. It might explain why the course entices a serious number of high-quality events to its doors each year, from parties to society weddings. There are, of course, half a dozen more courses on the Sotogrande circuit. Real Club de Golf de Sotogrande, a.k.a. the 'Old Course', was the first to be built in the area and said to be a dream to play after tricky sister course, Valderrama. It was here that so-called Bermuda grass was first introduced into Spain. Meanwhile Almenara Golf, designed by Ryder Cup champi-

Golf glorious golf

on turned respected course architect David Thomas, is up in the hills where footballers Glenn Hoddle, Glen Johnson and Brendan Rogers have homes. La Canada, La Reserve and San Roque complete the 'famous five'. "There are few places with such a high concentration of great golf courses," says Ian Bateman, of Holmes estate agents. "When you add the fabulous tennis facilities and polo club, with its 11 full size courses, the facilities in Sotogrande are second to none."

Kids are us



FAMILY Fun Park Jugarnia has landed at Sotogrande Marina and parents will be just as delighted as children. Following a successful test run last year, the activities-packed park is here to stay and is the perfect place for those aged two and above to run riot. Parents can simply arrange to drop them off for a full action-packed day, then go off to enjoy some quality adult time of their own. "We have everything here - bungee trampolines, laser quest, ball pits, arcade games and more," MD Carlos Calvo told *the Olive Press*.

"We provide the children with drinks and snacks, so you can leave them in safe hands all day if you want to enjoy some alone time." The company offers catered birthday parties and has also expanded into mobile birthday bashes, meaning they can bring the party to your doorstep, providing all the equipment and games your young ones could want, from bouncy castles to animal rides. They can even cater to food specifics. "If for example the kids want a popcorn machine or candy floss or smoothies, we will source that for the client," said Carlos. The entertainment company has been in operation in Madrid since 1993. "We have 20 years of experience in keeping kids entertained," says Carlos. "During El Dia del Nino this May we catered for more than 200,000 children. "Our goal is simple - to give the kids a great time."



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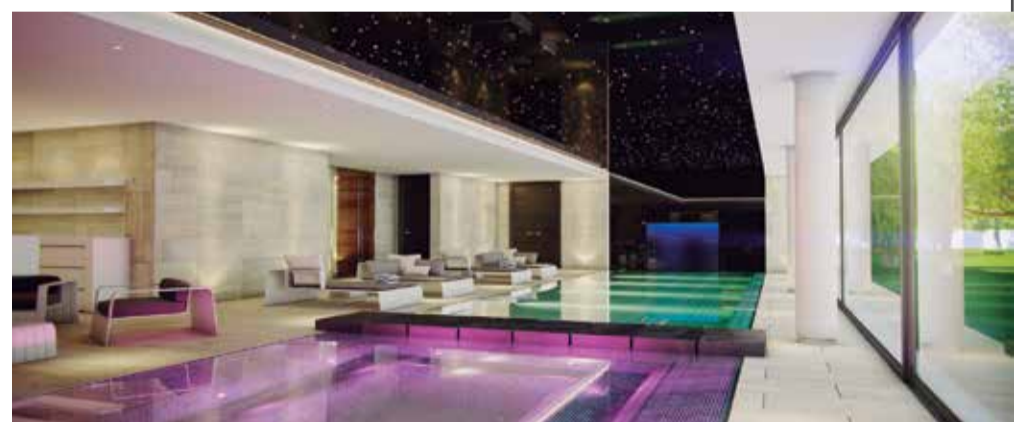
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Journeys end

THE beach is calling and I must go' reads a chapter of the menu at magical Gigi Beach.

And there are few places on the Andalusian coastline that I would rather be at lunchtime in summer. A place where the well-heeled cap-



tains of industry take their lunch, the chiringuito screams class and quality.

Set up by the well travelled Georgina 'Gigi' Taylor, 29, three years ago, everything from the plates to the chandeliers spells creativity with a capital C.

But you are here for the food, which is inspired by Gigi's many travels around the globe.

A clue is the pole at the entrance,



which points to everywhere including New Delhi, Rio and Dublin. "London bizarrely fell off the day after Brexit," laughs Gigi.

The half-Argentinian, half-Londoner, who went to school in Marbella, continues: "I like to offer Ottolenghi-style food, very fresh, with Asiatic twists, and everything created with lots of love."

Certainly, the tuna tartare matches this description, sitting on a bed of avocado, while the 'espeto' grilled sardines were amazing.

Her loyal clientele includes such luminaries as former racing driver

Eddie Jordan, wine merchant Robin Byers and Tim Reid, the former

Mandarin Oriental bigwig, who couldn't speak more highly of the place and insisted on being photographed with a sign at the door.

"The food is fabulous, fresh and well worth the journey from Jerez today," he says.



BEAUTIFUL: Dishes at Gigi's are like works of art

Grand cru Andaluz

Hotel Milla de Plata deserves much more than silver... it's gold all the way, particularly for its food, writes Jon Clarke



IDYLLIC: View from Milla de Plata's terrace and (below) a delicious tuna tartare



PERCHED on a rocky outcrop, looking down on an idyllic beach, few places feel as privileged as Hotel Milla de Plata. The domain of Cristobal Rodriguez, the hotel cascades down various levels to the rocky cove below, with billowing-curtain day beds placed at strategic spots.

This is classic Grand Cru Andaluz and even better, the hotel counts on a fabulous restaurant Mar Sana with views to die for and food that easily matches. The charming terrace is one of **THE** places to dine on hot sum-

mer evenings. With its varied menu and decent wine list, it attracts the key movers and shakers from Sotogrande and further afield.

They are drawn to its fresh fish and special tuna menu, that has half a dozen ways of eating the celebrated blue fin tuna, well known in the province of Cadiz.

The tuna tartare was in particular delicious, and a very generous serving, coming in with three portions on a bed of lettuce.

The pulpo a la gallega was also a sure-fire hit.



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Learning a new language is fun at the Blah Blah Blah Academy

WHETHER you're declining verbs on the beach or vamping up your vocab in a Spanish cookery class, there's never a dull moment at Sotogrande's leading language school.

The Pueblo Nuevo-based Blah Blah Blah Language Academy, with outposts in Gibraltar, Tarifa and Marbella, has a team of 12 highly-qualified teachers tutoring small classes in seven languages: Spanish, English, French, German, Russian, Arabic and Chinese.

Established four years ago by Barbara Moral, the school promises a fun, flexible, communicative approach with exotic extras including weekend get-aways to San Sebastian and wine-tasting tours.

The school is now organising summer camps for kids in Tarifa, where they get to try a range of activities, including kite surfing, cycling and kayaking.

"The students are the reason why we are here," says Barbara, the school's charming director/teacher who speaks impeccable English.

"Our slogan is 'We are committed to make them speak' and that's exactly what we do, by adapting to their learning style and making sure they integrate with the local community," Barbara explains.



CHATting AWAY: At Blah Blah Blah

Spanish without tears



In a recent collaboration between Blah Blah Blah and Ion Kitesurfing school in Tarifa, Spanish on the Beach was introduced to the delight of students, with classes from May to October.

Welcoming adults as well as kids, and offering learning bolstered with cultural activities such as wine tasting, orange picking and Spanish cookery lessons, Barbara is creative, inspiring and truly passionate.

With an amazing back-to-school party planned for this autumn, she clearly thinks that having fun goes hand-in-hand with learning.

"Learning a language is all about communication and our flexibility is key to getting the best out of every student," she says.

Everyone is welcome so get in touch and add a new language to their communications skills, the fun way.

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ROW YOUR BOAT: Life afloat Jon Clarke taking a trip down the Rio Guardio (above)



Up Soto creek with a paddle

Arriving in style, Jon Clarke takes a trip down the Rio Guadiaro

It is by far the most exciting way to arrive in Sotogrande. But you are likely to get wet so don't bring your gladrags. One of the best family adventures on the Costa del Sol, you can rent a kayak and paddle the whole way down the Guadiaro river from El Secadero, which is actually in Casares, to the mouth of the river at Soto-

grande port. Taking a couple of hours, you will see a huge range of birds and feel like you are in total wilderness for much of it. There are even a few rapids to get the heart racing. Organised by Andalucia Activities, kayaks come in three sizes and can comfortably take three people in the larger ones.



I joined a group descent, with around 100 people in dozens of canoes, arriving early and getting kitted out properly, with a full safety drill before heading off. But you can also get a special day out for groups or individuals organised by Andalucia Activities. And as well as kayaking, the company also offers walking expeditions as well as paddle board lessons and wakeboarding. **For more information visit www.andaluciaactivities.com**

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Trample under foot

THE 45th INDI International Polo Tournament has begun at the Santa Maria Polo Club in Sotogrande, running from July 27 to August 28. A total of 24 teams representing 18 nationalities, more than 830 horses and 98 players participating in this year's tourney. Four of the tournament's championship cups are classified as World Tour cups, signifying the event's prestige. Equally prestigious is the host club. The club's PR manager Pilar de la Puente told the Olive Press: "Sotogrande is known as 'the cathedral of European polo.' It's the best club in Europe and ranked third in the world." Though the tournament is unsurprisingly glitzy, with such high-end sponsors as Maserati and Cartier, it does have one bit of democratic flare. For every match except the final, attendance is open and free to the public, with crowds usually growing above 50,000. And the finals are only a tenner.



CHUKKA TIME: In Sotogrande and James Beim (left)

SURROUNDED by 35 years worth of paperwork, boss at Holmes Sotogrande Ben Bateman stands a proud man.

Knocking on the door of 1,500 home sales, the back room of the office gives an insight into the world of Sotogrande property like no other.

With around 3,000 properties on record, the file room at Holmes is a labyrinth of information.

And to most of us the files mean very little.

But to Ben and the team at Holmes they hold the key to their expertise and success.

"We pride ourselves on our market knowledge," Ben says. "There isn't another agent who has as much data on Sotogrande's property market as we do."

Abundance

"It is very rare to find a house in Sotogrande that we don't already know about and have a file on."

The data includes everything about the history of a property, from redevelopment plans to previous sale prices.

And the abundance of data is not just for show, it allows the team at Holmes to understand the market in Sotogrande better than anyone else.

"Knowing the market and the history of Sotogrande is integral to providing the best service for a buyer or seller," Ben says. "With 35 years of market history we can effectively identify and understand why certain properties and certain areas are worth more

With files stacked from the floor to the ceiling, Ben Bateman shares the secrets behind Sotogrande's property market

Top rank and file



KNOWLEDGEABLE: Ben Bateman of Holmes Sotogrande

than others."

Set up by his father in 1979, Ben began working at Holmes 15 years ago. Taking the reins in 2013, Ben's passion for Sotogrande drives his enthusiasm towards running his business.

"I grew up in Sotogrande, and now I am bringing my family up here," he says. "There really is nowhere quite like Sotogrande."

"When describing it to someone who has never been before it is hard to portray the magical atmosphere that Sotogrande has."

He adds: "I get so much pleasure from helping people find their homes and then watching them and their families enjoying Sotogrande for five, 10 or 15 years," he adds, with a smile.

"It is always sad when families leave, but on the bright side they have loved this place and are now entrusting us to help open the door for a new family to move here."

To contact Ben and the team, visit www.holmesotogrande.com or call 956 795 340

Second chance

IN May of 2010, San Roque lost its flagship casino which had offered a host of first-class entertainment and became a tourist attraction for the Sotogrande area.

Now, six years later, the city has recovered its facilities for leisure and gambling due to Austrian group Novomatic.

Last December, the first stone for the reconstruction of the property was placed symbolically and the Casino Admiral San Roque opened its doors on July 27.

More than €5 million were invested and over 300 jobs were created in the renovation and opening of the casino. Customers will find rejuvenated facilities with two bingo halls, 125 roulette games, eight tables of games, a multipurpose party room for all kinds of events and an international buffet.

Also, during the first 45 days there will be a special programme with performances, animation and surprises.

Finalists of the first stage of a competition started on Facebook for local music groups, with the final winner pocketing a prize of €5,000.

Three hundred workers participated in the renovation of the facility, which was developed in record time so that the opening coincides with the summer season.

Local mayor Juan Carlos Ruiz Boix stressed that the complex, which is intended to be permanent, is an attractive generator of wealth, economy, and employment.

Wild and free



THE hidden gem of the Sotogrande estate is a 27-hectare area of marshland housing an abundance of wildlife.

Boardwalks criss-cross the thick foliage and a lagoon with extensive reed beds attracts many winged visitors.

The Junta spent €198,000 on the boardwalk in 1999, along with fences, gates and a bird hide.

After several acts of vandalism, however, the hide is now rarely open to the public. But bird-watching is still easy enough for those with the will and the

rewards include purple gallinules (swamp hens) penduline tits, cormorants and gulls.

The location of the estuary, where the river Guadiaro enters the Mediterranean, is perfect for birds moving along the coast and migrating to Africa. It also provides the best place for views of the estuary and the coast, and, after a morning spent wildlife spotting there is the glorious Guadalquiron beach to unwind on in the afternoon.



CHIRP: A purple gallinule (left), a penduline tit (far left) and the rickety board-walk (above)

Where to eat

Hidden gems

Sotogrande and its nearby coastline has a wealth of places to eat, writes Dining Secrets of Andalucia editor Jon Clarke

GIVEN the demands for quality in Sotogrande, it is perhaps not surprising that to survive, its restaurants have had to follow suit. And there is no doubt, that the quality - and range - of food on offer has improved dramatically over the last few years.

As well as great tapas restaurants and some exciting new eateries, including a sushi bar, the more established joints, such as the Hairy Lemon, go from strength to strength. But to really appreciate what this exclusive enclave has to offer diners also need to venture a few miles outside towards San Roque and Manilva. Perhaps the most emblematic

of these hidden gems is atmospheric La Finca (www.lafincafusion.com), which sits next to La Casita campsite in San Roque. Thai fusion in style, you don't just discover it by accident, but once discovered you will keep returning.

In summer you sit around a leafy courtyard, a riot of colours and candles, while in winter you dine inside the authentic farmhouse with stone floors and fireplaces. The place is run by New Yorker Chris Cousins and former partner Syrie Blanco Walsh, whose family has owned the estate since the 1800s.

Much of its success is down to the chef Benny, an amiable Thai/American, whose Thai fusion menu is a adventurous with plenty of specials to add to the mix.

The Thai soups, summer rolls and 'sticky rice' are legendary, while the duck salad starter and the Massaman curry are surefire winners. Heading the other direction you will find firstly hotel Milla de Plata (www.hotelmilladeplata.com), just outside Torreguadiaro, which sits on a headland overlooking a rocky cove and with views to die for.

Its restaurant Mar Sana is a charming spot for an evening meal and heavy on fresh fish,



AUTHENTIC: (top) Courtyard at La Finca, (above) a creation at Terraza de Teo and (left) an amazing outdoor table at Molino del Conde

with its own special tuna menu (see Grand Cru Andaluz, page 26).

This is a place to come and chill out, take in the waters below, before a sherry, supper and then cocktails. Your best bet is to book a room for the night.

Next up is il Sono (www.ilsosono.es), on Cala Sardina, which has been voted Spain's greenest restaurant and has a genuine focus on the environment. Run by Andrea and Tamara, its food is also excellent, with a real twist being its pasta with truffle. Continuing along you come to the hidden cove of Punto la Chulera, where the amazing joint of Saly Sol sits.

Totally hidden from the road, this charming wooden restaurant has been picked out by El Pais

as one of the Costa del Sol's genuine 'hidden spots'.

No surprise, it has stunning views and counts on some of the freshest fish imaginable thanks to a ready supply of octopus from the nearby rocks, and a daily supply from the owner's son. Carry on another mile towards Manilva, and you get to emblematic Floria, where Dutchman Peter has been attracting the key movers and shakers from Sotogrande and Gibraltar for a decade.

Open all year, it is like nothing else around and has the best Prawn 'pil pil' on the coast, not to mention amazing clams. If you are looking for a chiringuito a little closer to the resort, then head for wonderful Gigi's Beach (www.gigisbeach.com), sitting just outside the marina (See Journeys end, page 26) by the sailing club.

The creation of Georgina 'Gigi' Taylor, her youthful hard-working approach to style and taste, makes this a surefire winner, not just for local foodies, but international businessman alike.

Inside the marina, the real standout place to eat is the Hairy Lemon, which has got better and better since chef Lorenc and number-crunching wife Liz took the helm a couple of years ago. This is the genuine hive for expats and has a sister The Lemon, next door, which is a bit more formal in style.

A great place for families, kids can happily run (or bike or scoot) around the square by the fountains and the children's menu is popular and healthy.

There is an excellent all day menu, but its real strength is the excellent range of tapas, which are freshly-prepared each day. There are over a dozen, including amazing prawns in mint salad and a fantastic teriyaki duck breast, which has a complex meaty flavour enhanced by a delicious Asian glaze and a zingy wasabi coleslaw.

If you are looking for a place to sit out to enjoy the boats, then there are two perfect spots in the marina, next to the Ribera del Marlin.

The first is the well established



The Hairy Lemon


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What a steal

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Well established in Sotogrande for five years and offers clients free parking and wifi, and there are both alcoholic and soft drinks.

Visit www.janstaels.com for more information



August 3rd - August 16th 2018



TALENT: Chef at Sal y Sol and (left) a dish



Molino del Conde (www.grupomolindelconde.es), which has just opened its doors, and has the nicest terrace and 30 different types of rice made by world champion paella maker Giuseppe Langastro. Finally, you must try to track down two other interesting spots, firstly La cabaña (www.grupomolindelconde.es) that sits in the old Cortijo Valderrama, which was the house of Sotogrande's founder Joseph McMicking. It sits in lovely gardens, with a pool

and chimneys for cold nights and is great for celebrating events. Last but not least, if you are looking for something genuinely authentic and amazing value, visit La Terraza de Teo (www.laterrazadeteo.com) in Guadiaro. Just on the edge of town this spot owned by Teodoro Sanz and his chef wife Manoli has some of the best quality tapas I have eaten in Andalucía and at amazing prices to match. Best were the warm octopus with sea urchin sauce and salm-

on blini with cream cheese and chives, not to mention the scallop in a potato with hollandaise sauce. As he is from Puerto de Santa Maria, it was no surprise that he also has a great range of blue fin tuna dishes including the tuna tartare extraordinaire.



CREATIVE: Dishes by Lorenc (right) at the Hairy Lemon



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