



TAKEN FOR A RIDE: An egret hops on a bull in a field en route to Zahara de los Atunes

Riding the wind

JON CLARKE takes a trip along the Costa de la Luz, Andalucía's most unspoilt, if sometimes rather breezy, coastline



OVERLOOKING rows of vines and a sea of undulating umbrella pines the restaurant high up in the hills above Tarifa is extremely hard to beat. With no signs, apart from a warning that you are entering a 'military zone' - it is a military mission in itself to locate the place. But that is all part of the fun. Called appropriately 'Tesoro' - or Treasure - this is one pot of gold that really is worth seeking out. Aside from the fabulous food - including fresh langoustines and a classic 'retinto' steak typical of the region - the views over Tarifa and across the Gibraltar Straits to Africa are impossible to improve. To a backdrop of cow bells and a light, lilting breeze, we watched an enormous container ship slowly making its journey impeturbably westwards. Peace personified, in the far distance a wispy line of silvery clouds sat atop the huge Moroccan landmass, one of the mythical Pillars of Hercules. The Moors would never have had it so good on arriving in Tarifa in 710AD. While later dubbing Andalucía 'paradise', it was certainly anything but

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Let there be light

From page 1

town as their bridgehead into southern Spain. This is quickly obvious wandering around Tarifa, its historic ramparts littered with statues and references to

stirring catholic heroes such as Sancho El Bravo and Guzman el Bueno. It is a similar story along the celebrated coastline known as the Costa de la Luz, or Coast of Light, that stretches all the way from Tarifa to Cadiz.

This is Europe's true deep south; a windswept flood plain, fringed by long dune beaches and crowned by a series of austere 'cubist' towns, which were built by the Moors who ruled this land for nearly 800 years.

If you have never taken a ride to these shores, just the other side of the Rock of Gibraltar and Algeciras, you are in for a surprise.

There are literally miles and miles of mesmerising and largely unspoilt white, soft and sandy beaches, ideal for a bucket-and-spade-break away from the over-built towns the other side of the Rock.

Sightseers will be spoilt by the numerous sites from the famous Trafalgar lighthouse - off which the crucial naval battle once took place - to the historic fishing village of Sancti Petri and from the Roman ruins at Bolonia to the twisting, white-washed streets of Conil.

The two main towns are Tarifa - a Mecca for kitesurfers - and Vejer, a hip and alluring escape, where cabinet ministers and celebrities occasionally rub shoulders.

And then there are the hidden gems, like exclusive Roche, where Madrid's captains of industry take their holidays, and Zahara de los Atunes, the sleepy fishing village, which is fast garnering a reputation for its food and wonderful beach.

And still there is more, with El Palmar claiming to have the best surfing waves in Andalusia and Europe's largest sand

dune, at over 30-metres in height in Bolonia. And don't forget Caños de Meca - the fun capital of the region - or gritty Barbate, whose fish restaurant El Campero is among the best in Spain.

But what best sums up this long stretch of coastline for me is the view you get while taking lunch at Tesoro above Tarifa or, in particular, at evocative Gadir in a converted windmill on the ridge behind Vejer.

For spreading out in front of you from here is an entirely uninterrupted ten-mile vista of rolling fields all the way down to the white sandy beaches of El Palmar and Conil.

An incredible sight, this patchwork quilt of greenery and long, unspoilt beaches in the distance is sadly practically unique to Spain these days, but what the majority of Andalusia's coastline would have looked like 50 years ago.

"This incredible expanse is like nowhere else around," explains lawyer Carmen Atkins, who has been based in Vejer for two decades. "The

great mix of coast and hills and these lovely towns luckily still hold a lot of the old Spain in them."

The coastline is certainly only matched in beauty by Cabo de Gata in Almeria and there is something incredibly haunting about the stunning windswept beaches, particularly around El Palmar.

While not an aficionado of its famous watersports - or to be fair its winds - there is something intrinsically different about the Costa de la Luz. Laid back and unshowy, its friendly, unfussy locals compliment the breathtaking scenery and distinctive vibe.

The coastline is, without a doubt, for the more discerning tourist and, in particular, for lovers of fine food. Vejer in particular has an incredible mix of stylish boutique hotels and perhaps one of the highest concentrations of top restaurants per capita anywhere in Andalusia.

This is a true food capital and over the last few years, I have found perhaps a dozen great places to eat within a ten mile radius of the town. Tarifa has an altogether different feel. This is a party town, particularly in summer, when the backstreets are heaving with lively bars well into the early hours.

Its stylish mix of shops and restaurants added to its melting pot of worldly Spaniards and interesting expats make for a distinct Tarifa scene, not dissimilar to the one you find in Ibiza. Even better, it is one of the few places - thanks in the main to its breezes - that still has enough going on

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FIERCE TO SERENE: Warrior Guzman el Bueno, a farm near Facinas, retinto cows in the hills above Tarifa and a street scene in Vejer

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abouts, golf courses and luxury condos give a flavour of the nearby Costa del Sol. But there are all sorts of other daft plans on the horizon, including a crazy idea to build a huge apart-hotel development on virgin land, right by the beach alongside the stunning Trafalgar lighthouse.

While not yet confirmed, there have been whispers of a nine-hole golf course and, before you know it, of course, there will be the obligatory villas, then commercial centres, etc, etc.

"It would be crazy to allow all this to happen," says Tarifa fashion designer Maria Malo of Mala Mujer. "This is one of the very last unspoilt coastlines left in Spain."

through the winter. But alas, all is not well on the Costa de la Luz. Just as is the danger in the Cabo de Gata natural park in Almeria, the economic pressures on cashing in from tourism are making inroads here.

It has already happened in the sprawling, ugly development of Novo Sancti Petri, whose endless round-

abouts, golf courses and luxury condos give a flavour

of the nearby Costa del Sol. But there are all sorts of other daft plans on the horizon, including a crazy idea to build a huge apart-hotel development on virgin land, right by the beach alongside the stunning Trafalgar lighthouse.

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Atkins agrees. "The politicians here just don't have any foresight. All they think about is jobs, but they haven't figured out yet the quality of tourism that comes here already and can continue to grow. "The good news is that young people at least seem to be against the projects so we will have to hope they can make themselves heard."

There has at least been some good news recently, with the cancelling of a project that would have seen the size of Tarifa harbour grow by up to ten times.

"It is great news," explains Swiss Beat Steffan, whose company Dwarf 8 is a new clothing company based in Tarifa. "The new port would have completely ruined Tarifa if it went ahead. Thank god common sense has prevailed."

Take a ride down to the Costa de la Luz to see why it is so important to prevent any further development. Enjoy the breath of fresh air from its near neighbour the Costa del Sol and understand why this unique area must be saved from further development.

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the view from Tesoro

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I COULD hear it long before I could see it. What started as a distant, unidentifiable murmur became a sudden burst of noise as I rounded a corner, like the transition from muffled music heard underwater to the clarity that comes as you break the surface. The scene that greeted me resembled the culinary equivalent of a trading floor as stallholders responded to gestures and requests from customers who in turn jostled for position at the counters. The variety of produce on offer was astounding. Colourful mountains of fruit and vegetables, of all shapes and sizes, contrasted with the more muted tones of the cheeses, meats and breads. And then there was the seafood. Shrimp, crab and shellfish lay invitingly on their icy displays as a fishmonger expertly carved fillets from a large tuna. There was so much fantastic fresh produce to choose from that my only regret was the effect my hearty breakfast had had on my appetite.



Chiclana de la Frontera's covered market, situated in the central plaza, is the heartbeat of the town - a focal point for locals looking to stock up on grocery supplies and gossip in equal measure. The town, divided by the River Iro, is dotted with pleasant squares and charming

churches all linked together by a modest network of shopping streets. Located about 40km south of Cadiz, Chiclana also boasts up to 20 bodegas, offering sherry tastings to tourists and the opportunity to treat yourself to a nice bottle of moscatel. Instead, I dropped into a

In the footsteps of the gods

James Bryce took a trip to Chiclana and Sancti Petri, where it is said that the Temple of Hercules once stood and Roman leaders Hannibal and Caesar took their hols

tapas bar for a hard-earned beer and was given an instant reminder of the town's links to the high seas. The walls were adorned with black and white photographs dating back to the 1920s. In one, a crowd of locals watched on as fishermen hauled the carcass of a huge whale onto the quayside, while other images showed fishermen chatting as they tended their nets. Separated from the coast by six kilometres of tidal salt flats, Chiclana has close ties with the ocean. The almadraba fishing technique used to catch tuna is famous along this stretch of the Spanish coast and at one time fishermen using this method would head out into the Atlantic from the thriving nearby village of Sancti Petri. Sadly the village is now abandoned, sitting largely in ruins, with long-forgotten fishing boats serving as a poignant reminder of its seafaring past.

It is claimed that Franco commandeered the village as a holiday retreat for his family while he was in power, forcing the villagers out. It then fell into disrepair following the dictator's death, although there is talk of some villagers moving back to Sancti Petri to renovate properties in the settlement. As I wandered around the nearby modern marina beyond the village, I was reassured to see that the area still has a strong maritime theme running through it. A large number of boats were moored, accompanied by the occasional clanking sound of metal clasps knocking against the masts in the breeze, while a handful of anglers sat patiently by their lines.

Sancti Petri was once home to one of the world's most important buildings

A small selection of restaurants and sailing clubs attended to the lunch crowd, alongside companies operating out of portacabins offering a variety of water sports. The levante winds, which are a regular fixture on this stretch of coast, make it the ideal spot for sailing sports, and a cursory glance out to sea indicated there were no shortages of people taking full advantage. For the slightly less energetic, boat trips run twice daily to the Castle of Sancti Petri, located on an island just off shore.

The island is situated at the mouth of the Sancti Petri channel between San Fernando and Chiclana and is steeped in history. Legend has it that the island was once home to the Temple of Hercules, widely regarded as one of the most important religious buildings in the Ancient World. Roman historians claimed that the remains of the mythical God were buried beneath the temple and Hercules' legacy is acknowledged today in the form of a street name and an imposing statue located at the entrance to the marina. Classical sources claim the famed Carthaginian military commander, Hannibal, came to the island to offer sacrifices to Hercules before embarking upon his conquest of Roman Italy. Meanwhile Julius Caesar is said to have had a dream which foretold his domination of the world while staying at the castle.

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Costa de la Luz *special*

My immediate plans were slightly less ambitious, involving a stroll along the two-kilometre stretch of beach that looks out across the channel towards the island. I was staying at Casa la Dehesa, an 'off-grid' eco-retreat about 15 kilometres inland from Chiclana. Owners Rob Kite, 44 and Flavia Aravena, 46, who rely on solar power for their electricity supply and grow their own vegetables, have lived near Chiclana since 2006.

La Barrosa beach was voted as being in Spain's top five best beaches in the Sunday Times

"The most attractive thing about the area is that it is not over developed and is quite Spanish," Flavia told me as we enjoyed the late evening sunshine at the retreat, bordered on one side by a cork forest. "It allows us to enjoy a great quality of life and the atmosphere is very relaxed," Rob added. In the evenings, the emphasis shifts from the centre of Chiclana to the nearby beach front promenade of La Barrosa.

HISTORIC: Sancti Petri island (while right) the town's main church and below its fruit market



The beach attracts plenty of worshippers during the day and was recently voted by the Sunday Times as one of the top five best beaches in Spain last year. But as day becomes night the bars

and restaurants come alive with families and couples alike, drawn in by the promise of fantastic sunsets and seafood. As I tucked into a variety of dishes, including octopus and tuna,

against a backdrop of excitable chatter, it was easy to see why the area is so popular with Spaniards. And as I sat there listening to the waves despite not being able to see them, I was reminded of my

earlier discovery of the market. Chiclana may be a town that is slow to reveal itself, but those who take the time to explore it will find a diverse and enjoyable stop off along the Costa de la Luz.



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Cookery teacher Annie Manson on why Vejer de la Frontera has become the definitive dining room of the Costa de la Luz

Frntera of food

ONE of the most unexpected thrills of Vejer de la Frontera for a first time visitor is the huge number of places to eat. The even bigger surprise is that

the vast majority are excellent. Indeed, it is almost impossible to eat badly in this gastronomic paradise, which doesn't just rely on summer tourists for its survival. Both in the heart of town and

in the nearby villages of Patria, Santa Lucia and Canos de Meca there are perhaps a dozen eateries that would survive anywhere in Andalu-

cia. And the bottom line is; if the food's not good enough, the restaurant won't survive.

So what has made this small *pueblo blanco* into such a foodie Mecca?

Much of it is due to its nearby surroundings, which produce some of the best ingredients in the world. The obvious examples are sherry, fish and salt and the Vejer restaurant scene is totally in tune with these ingredients.

In addition, just about every bar and restaurant offers wonderful jamón ibérico, sliced in front of you and there is some wonderful seafood, including anchovies



NEW BROOM: Hip new tapas and wine bar *Vina y Mar*

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and cuttlefish. Of course in season the amazing blue fin tuna is hard to beat and the prized retinto cattle that line the nearby hills are perfect for succulent steaks.

The vegetable gardens of Conil nearby, offer the very best lettuces and tomatoes you could possibly wish for. These ingredients all make their way into the hands of skilled chefs around the town, many of whom have absorbed their skills in their family kitchen, while equal numbers have come from Madrid, northern Spain and even France.

The future for Vejer as a gourmet destination looks exceedingly good

But, above all, nearly all restaurants and bars in Vejer are family run. They have chefs who believe that less is more and the perfection of such wonderful local ingredients

FRESH: Vejer has some of the best local ingredients

should be allowed to speak for themselves.

The best restaurants include the charming trio of Califa, Asador Braso de Sancho and Vera Cruz (see *where to eat* on page 26), the stalwart Trafalgar and breathtakingly beautiful Gadir, and outside of town El Toro and Castellaria in Santa Lucia. You might also want to venture up to Ho-

tel Sindhura, Patria and the stunning La Brena in Canos de Meca.

But if you want something a bit different, then dining in Vejer can be one long tapas crawl and with my job bringing groups of people to Spain for cookery courses I frequently have dinner in half a dozen of my favourite places around town.

The future for Vejer as a gourmet destination can only get better. As the demand for top quality food continues - in part due to the town's offering of wonderful upmarket boutique hotels - the competition will inevitably get stiffer. This will drive up the standards even more.

Ultimately the town hall could get involved and we should think of becoming twinned with the culinary town of Ludlow in Shropshire. Both are out of the way places, off the normal gourmet map, while both have an amazing selection of good places to eat.

Now that is certainly some real food for thought. Call Annie B on 620560649

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Annie's top tapa tips



TASTY: Fresh fish dishes on tapas trail

THE newly opened Garimba on Plaza d'Espana has already become a hit. The decor is striking - stunning wooden fixtures and brightly painted old Andalus tiles. It's even offering Vermouth (a typical drink of Madrid).

Along the orange tree-lined Corredera the trendy Cuatro Gatos is into its second month. Solfee offers dishes of the most wonderfully combined flavours - for example Jasmine Tea Cheesecake - not typical of the area at all but will leave you wanting more.

Make sure to pop into Ramon's Vina y Mar, Vejer's hot new wine bar with scrummy tapas (the tiny jars of anchovies from Cantabria are a must) and a good selection of interesting wines by the glass. La Oficina on calle Juan Bueno meanwhile offers only local wines by the bottle and glass. Nearby check out Bar Navarro, which is the best place for fried fish or *pescados fritos*.

Then there is El Altillo on Altozano, which turns tiny squids into stars. Finally for meat lovers Meson de la Perdices in the new town can pot roast a partridge into a plate of heaven.

Gustav at Casa Leonor whips up the best stuffed red peppers with salt cod and you will always find great music. Finally, keep some room for the fabulous tapas created by Kiko (his father Antonio cures the best olives in town) at El Claustro, newly opened with the most spectacular garden setting (must be the only garden in Vejer!). It is run by the Nicolas family - the top fishermen in Vejer so it is naturally top quality fish.

At Pepe Julian look out for its fabulous anchovies in vinegar, as well as puntillitas (tiny deep-fried squid).

Opposite there you will find El Aljibe, fantastic croquetas of *Mojama* (or air-dried tuna) and *erizos* (sea urchins). The best *Paella* in town can be found at Meson el Palenque. Finally in Bar Central - a huge family affair - ignore the awful Rod Stewart records and indulge in the wonderful *tostas con anchoas y boquerones*, a marriage of the salted and pickled anchovies with allioli and tomato salsa. With a glass of Manzanilla - this is my desert island dish.



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CARVE UP: Teacher Hector Garcia demonstrates the kitesurf technique

On the crest of a wave

TAKE a walk out to the famous Trafalgar lighthouse in Canos de Meca and, on a windy day, you will be in for a real treat. Like a day out in rural China, you will see dozens – sometimes hundreds – of large colourful kites bobbing up and down and weaving around in the prevailing winds. Zoom in and you will soon realise that practically the whole of this stunning dune-backed beach is being dominated by the high adrenalin sport of kitesurfing. It is the same picture up the coast on the 10km stretch of coastline that heads west out of Tarifa. It has literally taken the area by storm and over the last decade the traditional sport of

The Costa de la Luz is one of Spain's top spots for activities and in particular wind and waves

By Jon Clarke

windsurfing has been almost completely blown out by this fashionable new sport. "These days about 99 per cent of our clients are renting kitesurfing equipment," says Miri Vanickova, 36, of Dragon shop and kite school, based in the town. "It has become so incredibly popular over the last few years." Both Dragon and other shops like Gisela Pulido Pro Center and Wave Bandits rent out the kit including wetsuits, helmets and supervision from just 50 euros a day.

"It has certainly become one of the key economic dynamos of the town and brings in a lot of money," says Hector Garcia, 36, who works from Surf Centre Tarifa, based at the hip Arte Vida hotel just outside Tarifa. "It brings in a lot of income and helps to make the town an all-year round holiday destination." Best of all compared to other action sports it is quite easy to learn, explains German teacher Maike Vollmer, 28, from Wave Bandits. "The progression is really fast, but it is important to take lessons and get the right introduction into safety systems. Otherwise it can be dangerous."

"A standard kite course is about three to four days, after that you will be able to practise on your own." Famed as 'the Wind Capital' of Europe, it is unsurprising that Tarifa's Valdevaqueros Beach is a Mecca for windsurfing and kiteboarding, even occasionally playing host to the World Championships. Alongside Diamond Head in Hawaii and Fuerteventura in the Canaries, there are no other places that rival it for constant winds, either the Poniente from the west or Levante from the east. The best wind for kitesurfing is the Poniente, which comes in from Portugal. It measures between two and five on the Beaufort scale and brings

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Costa de la Luz special

IN the world of extreme watersports, Gisela Pulido is churning some serious wake. At the age of just 17 she has already won the world kite-surf freestyle championships a record seven times. Competing since the age of eight, it is perhaps no surprise that she is so good... nor that she should choose Tarifa – Europe's wind capital – as her home. "We have wind every day and almost all the year," Gisela tells the Olive Press. "And it doesn't matter from what direction. You can ride with different conditions, choppy or flat." Pulido, who needs to train on the water for hours every day, continues her schooling through an online school program. "I have my laptop and all I need is an internet connection in order to study. I can train and study at the same time," says Gisela, who has her own surf centre in town. She is currently ranked number one in the world in freestyle and won her first world championship at age 10 in 2004. Originally from Barcelona, last year she crossed the straits competing against a ferry. "I think Tarifa is the best place for learning because there is a big beach and lots of waves and, of course, it is my hometown. "I love kitesurfing; I love to be in the water and, ultimately, I love to introduce people to the sport and meet the students," said Pulido. "My favourite part of the sport is that you can jump super high, you can do tricks and you can surf some waves." The perfect envoy for Tarifa, she spends her days testing new equipment, promoting the sport as well as the town. And, above all, she likes to emphasise the sport's accessibility. "It is easy to learn and everyone has the ability to compete if they put the effort in and train everyday...nothing is impossible." If you are interested in learning to kitesurf contact Gisela at her school on 608 57 77 11 or visit www.giselapulidoprocenter.com

Girl power

Elizabeth Byrum talks to Tarifa's very own world champion Gisela Pulido, 17

in a cooler breeze from the sea. It also happens to be the dominating wind in Tarifa. The best wind for windsurfers is the Poniente, which comes from the south east from Africa or from across Spain. It normally builds up for a few days and at its peak – when everyone gets sent mad – it can reach up to eight or nine on the Beaufort scale. "Either way the winds here in Tarifa are extremely constant and it is rare to get a week with no winds," adds Hector Garcia. Even better the sport has become much safer with the introduction of a private company that provides emergency boats for rentals. Called Sea Angels they currently have three boats plying the straits on windy days. "It is a fabulous service that

Tarifa is truly magic because of the contact we have here with nature

What also makes Tarifa special, is its unique geography, making it an ideal spot for all things outdoors. Winters are exceptionally mild and dry, even by Medi-

terranean standards, and it nestles near the borders of two national parks, with terrific walking terrain. "Tarifa is truly magic because of the contact here with nature," says Bruno Muchada Suarez from activities company Art Of Surfing, which offers everything from mountain bikes to climbing equipment. In terms of hiking, one short, yet adventurous trek takes you up into the Paraje Betiuelo mountains west of Tarifa. From here, you have views across stunning landscape in all directions, in particular inland towards the Los Alcornocales Natural Park. The walk starts from Punto Paloma, which is well signposted around four kilometres on the road out of Tarifa westwards. From here the signs are easy to follow. It is a stunning walk and those that take it are rewarded with one of the most beautiful 'secret' beaches in Andalusia (see left). Last but not least, don't underestimate the ornithological importance of Tarifa as the migratory gateway between Europe and Africa. Throughout the year over 200 species use the tip of Tarifa as a reference point in their journeys north and south.



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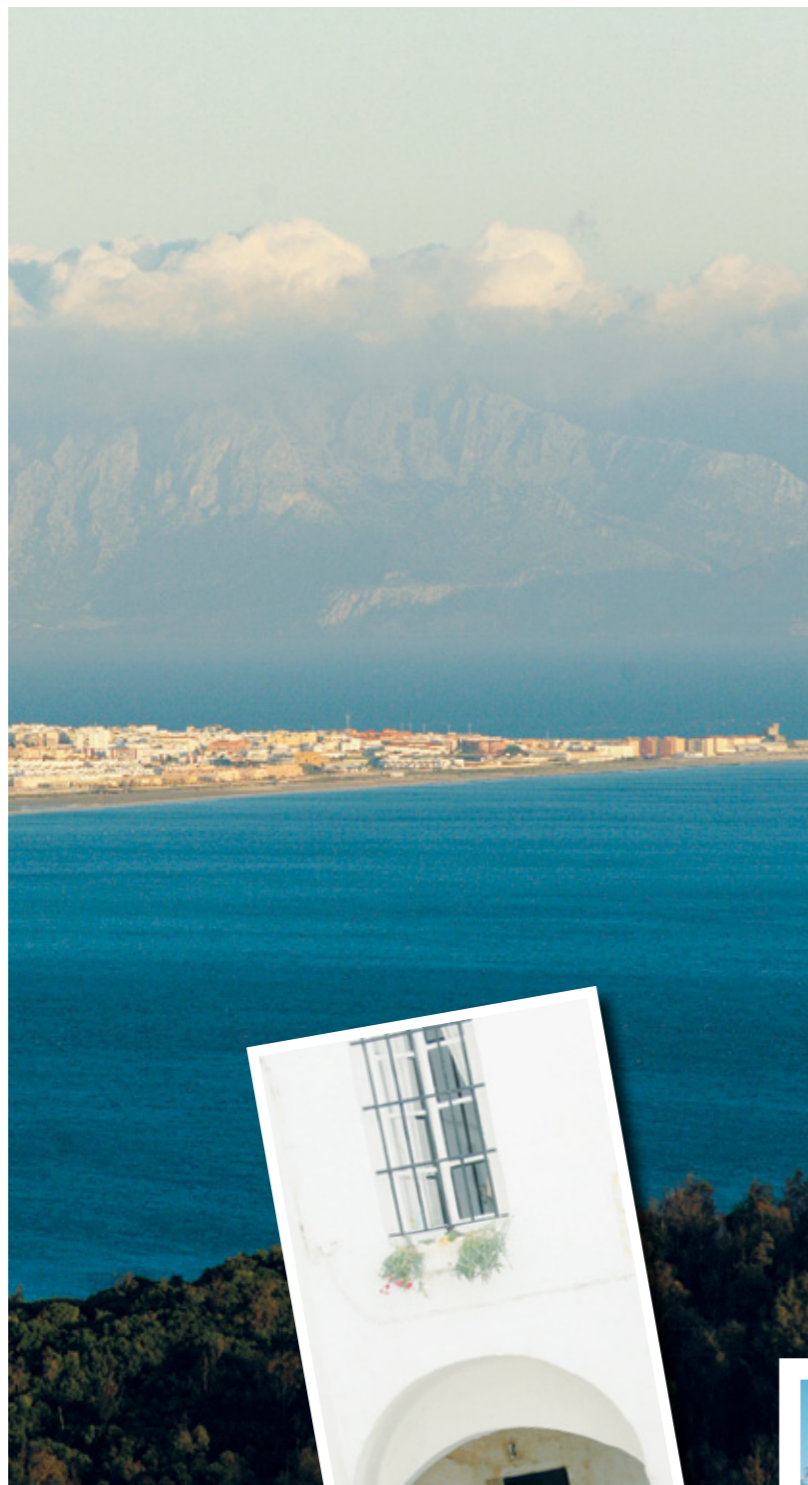
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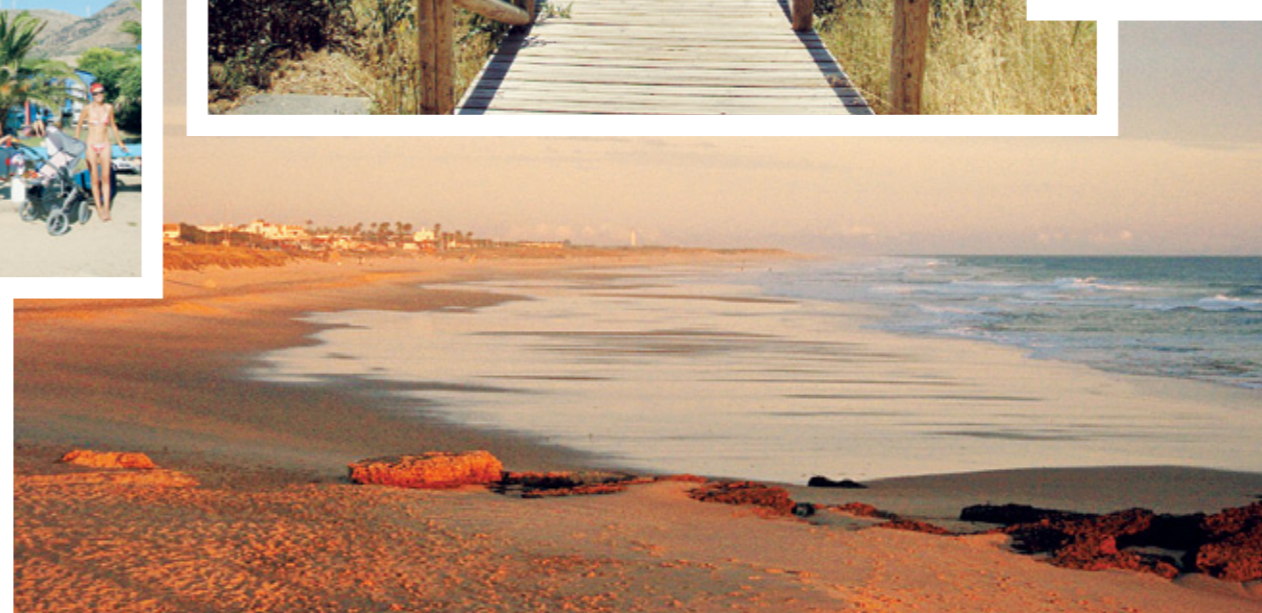
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10 Costa de la Luz special



Famed for its sharp light and unspoilt coastline - almost unique to Andalucía - the Costa de la Luz is a photographers dream. Here, clockwise, from (above) we have the beach at El Palmar, the famous dune at Bolonia, a watchtower at Conil, a walkway onto the beach at La Barrosa, a view towards the Trafalgar lighthouse at dusk, the party crowd on a Tarifa beach, Tarifa beach from Arte Vida hotel, an archway in Vejer and finally a view of Tarifa and the distant Pillar of Hercules in Morocco, from Betijuelo

Viva la luz



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12 Costa de la Luz special

Costa de la Luz has some of Andalucía's best restaurants

A feast for foodies

By Jon Clarke

TUCKED into the ancient walls of the city of Tarifa on the Paseo Alameda are a string of the Costa de la Luz's best restaurants.

Perfectly summing up the melting pot of the town - often called the crossroads of Africa and Europe - here you will find a superb mix of styles.

Two of the best - La Trattoria and La Pescadería - are curiously run by former architects, who were drawn away from native countries by the allure (and winds) of Tarifa.

"There was something very special to be near the mythical pillars of Hercules," explains Paolo, whose Real McCoy Trattoria serves up an Italian feast including Osso Buco, sauteed provolone cheese with honey and a mean carbonara.

A well-travelled foodie and lover of the arts, his restaurant has a great mix of wines, including appropriately a Rosso di Montalcino.

Next door, La Pescadería - the town's best fish restaurant - is a more modern affair, run by amiable Argentinian Victor, who moved here 12 years ago.

Known for its amazingly succulent blue fin tuna, its trademark dish is a degustation of four different styles. "It has been a major battle acquiring it this year due to the incredibly strict quotas and



OFFERING: The bluefin tuna at La Pescadería, while (inset right) the team at La Trattoria

the massive demand from Japan after the earthquake," explains Victor, who went into cooking after an architecture degree.

At the other end of the paseo, next to the stunning new theatre you should look out for the excellent duo of Entre dos Aguas and Lola Mora, run by a friendly father and son team.

Both have a Mediterranean flavour, while Entre dos Aguas now has its own charcoal grill and a great range of pizzas. Nearby you will also enjoy Bamboo if you are looking for fresh salads, snacks and fruit juices. Meanwhile, if you are looking for something a little different then you should definitely head to the coolest hangout in town, La Cueva, which sits in a tiny backstreet, buzzing with music and nightclubs until the early hours.

Here engaging Irishman Scott

and his business partner Merv give diners the chance to make up their own menu, largely based around the 100 per cent beef burgers, which are simply superb. But there is a lot more to recommend it, with the chicken wraps incredible, not to mention the music and the friendly barmaids.

Outside Tarifa en route to Vejer you have a couple of excellent options for lunch, the first being Pacha Mama, the hippest chill out spot on the coast, run by friendly Italian Guido Archetti, with a nice mix of dishes and light snacks, plus a great vibe.

Another great spot is Tesoro, a secret hideout in the hills, in Betijuelo, near Bolonia. This is almost the most beautiful place to eat lunch, with the views across the Straits being second-to-none and the amazing *retinto* steaks or *almadraba* tuna delicious.

Over in Vejer is an equally good range of options. The most recent opening (actually re-opening) is Vera Cruz, owned by a talented couple from Madrid, who have recently moved to the area. Cleverly employing the services of one of the coast's best known chefs Jose Manuel Perez, from Asturias, they have injected a new, exciting buzz to the town.



You pretty much eat what the owner's aunt is cooking that day

Also recently opened is the great new wine bar Vina y Mar, which has a good range of wines by the glass and tapas.

Nearby, is the amazing El Jardin de Califa, which sits in an atmospheric candlelit patio in one of the town's oldest, most evocative buildings, which is now a hotel.

Full most nights in summer, it also does well in the winter and has a good mix of international dishes, with a middle eastern theme.

With talented local entrepreneur James Stuart at the helm, it is a fluid, well run operation and well worth a visit. Another brilliant spot in the centre Asador la brasa de Sancho is run by French chef Daniel, who trained with Michel Roux, no less.

Here, you will be excited by the charming terrace and the stunning old townhouse where diners will happily lose themselves for a couple of hours.

Near Vejer there are plenty of other exciting places to eat, best of these being in the delightful hamlet of Santa Lucia where you must be sure to visit the domain of Juan Valdes, whose terrace is one of the most romantic in Spain, and whose grilled meats from around the country are raved about.

Practically next door is the most authentic restaurant in Andalucía, the Venta el



PALS: Father and son at Lola Mora and Entre Dos Aguas and (top) Venta el Toro

Toro, where you pretty much eat what the owner's aunt is cooking that day, plus some fabulous local goat's cheese. Just up the coast in Canos de Meca you would be hard-pressed to find a restaurant better than at Hotel La Brena. This romantic spot overlooking the sea is bustling for most of the summer, unsurprising with its talented and engaging chef Felipe Retortillo, from Cantabria. Self-taught his repertoire is exciting, but above all, he uses a good set of top ingredients, served alongside an exciting wine list.

The duck salad with four different cuts of duck and, above all, his medley of fresh blue fin tuna was a delight. The Jack Daniels with red fruit and cherry coolie finished things off perfectly.

You should also look out for Gadir, which sits on its own above the town with some of

the best views around, as well as Trafalgar, the first proper restaurant to open in the town, thanks to the vision of Madrid-based book publisher Pedro Pardo.

Finally, near Vejer be sure to visit the fabulous Restaurant Patria, where Thomas and wife Ase are fast garnering a reputation as having some of the best food in the area.

The Danes have a good eye for detail and Thomas's combination of flavours using the best of everything sourced locally makes dining there a complete pleasure.

Another much improved place to eat near Vejer is the attractive Sindhura hotel, which has a fabulous dining room looking down to the coast near Conil.

Recently signing up a new chef from Caracas, who has spent the last eight years honing his trade in Madrid and Valencia, the menu is varied and tasty.

Over in Chiclana there is a surprisingly good range of restaurants to pick. One of the best is Domingos, formerly The Lemon Tree, now run by Mick and Doreen. It has a fabulous beer garden for the kids and a good international menu. There are also regular events, which can be found on www.mycadiz.biz.

Another top spot is Sicilian-owned Trattoria Gusto in La Barrosa, which has great authentic Italian food, with great pesto, antipasti and fresh pasta every day.

On an Italian tip you might also try Don Pomodoro, which offers a wide variety of homemade pasta and pizzas, as well as Nuovo Sassari, which has been going for more than 20 years and offers traditional Italian dishes using fresh and high quality food.

Finally for something a little different why not try Wok Ji-ang Nan, an Asian restaurant which offers an inclusive all-you-can-eat buffet. There is a wide variety of meat and fish dishes to choose from which are freshly cooked for each customer.



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14 Costa de la Luz special

IT is always difficult to decide where to stay in Vejer de la Frontera, as there is such an amazing range of places to stay, both in the town and nearby on the beach. In the heart of town it is difficult to beat the stalwart Hotel La Casa del Califa, which is easily one of Cadiz's most striking buildings, its main doorway adorned with a shell. The Moorish core has now been added to with 10 new buildings all based around a charming central patio, where guests dine under candlelight each evening. Equally stylish is the nearby Triperia, which has the true feeling of being a boutique hotel. Just outside the town on the coast there are an equal number of great places to stay, but few beat authentic Casas Karen, in Canos de

Zen and the art of finding a great hotel

Costa de la Luz has a wealth of stunning places to stay



CHARM: One of the suites at La Casa del Califa in Vejer

Meca, which is one of Andalusia's most sustainable green hotels.

Nearby, you might also want to consider Madreselva, which is set around a central courtyard and has a nice pool for the kids to splash in.

Over in Tarifa there has also been a huge explosion of good places to stay over the last few years. In the centre of the town there are a couple of superb options including the super cool Posada la Sacristia, which is full of stylish touches and has a great open-plan dining area with a shop selling clothes and jewelry.

15 Costa de la Luz

Another fantastic option nearby is the restaurant with rooms Hotel La Brena, which is in a very quiet spot next the town's best sheltered beach.

Inland from here in the heart of the stunning La Brena natural park you will find the most exciting hotel, La Palomar de la Brena, which is a beauty hidden away in the most charming spot.

In particular it is worth coming along just to see the fabulous dovecote - or Palomar - which is said to be one of the biggest in Spain. Up the road in Zahara de los Atunes there is also a wealth of hotels, the majority albeit rather lacking in charm. This certainly cannot be said however, for Hotel Antonio, now well established for decades, which sits right on one of the best beaches in Andalusia.

It has a wonderful restaurant, which has served the great and the good and a huge pool to keep the kids happy if the waves are too big.

In Chiclana there are also plenty of big brass options, but few beat the earthy Casa la Dehesa, hidden in a charming hamlet 15km inland.

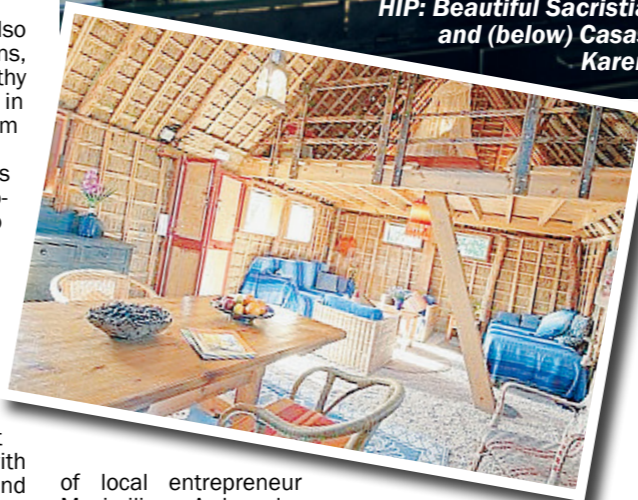
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In the centre of the town there are a couple of superb options including the super cool Posada la Sacristia, which is full of stylish touches and has a great open-plan dining area with a shop selling clothes and jewelry.

Also fantastic places to stay are the Hotel La Estrella, which is a charming townhouse with a distinct Moroccan flavour and superb prices, as well as Silos, which is two amazing suites tucked away in the stunning home



HIP: Beautiful Sacristia and (below) Casas Karen



of local entrepreneur Maximilian. A brand new option meanwhile is the Hotel Convento, an amazing building which was formerly a monastery just outside the main Puerta de Jerez gate.

Set around a central atrium, these comfortable rooms are complimented by its quiet relaxing gardens at the back, which

still counts on its ancient walls.

And last but not least if you are looking for somewhere good to stay en route to or from the Costa de la Luz, you shouldn't miss Meson Sancho on the main road to Algeciras.

Literally right on the main road you will find the hotel surprisingly calm and there are a great selection of bungalow suites, not to mention stunning views towards Africa. And then, of course, you have the great restaurant.



HISTORIC: The dovecote at Palomar and (right) a room at La Estrella

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CONTRASTS: From Puerta de Jerez to the new theatre (right)

It was fast approaching midnight on a Monday night in June and I was still eating my supper in a square in the heart of the Tarifa old town.

The place was decidedly buzzing and there was a distinct sense of collective fun. Music poured from around a dozen doorways and the bars were doing a roaring trade.

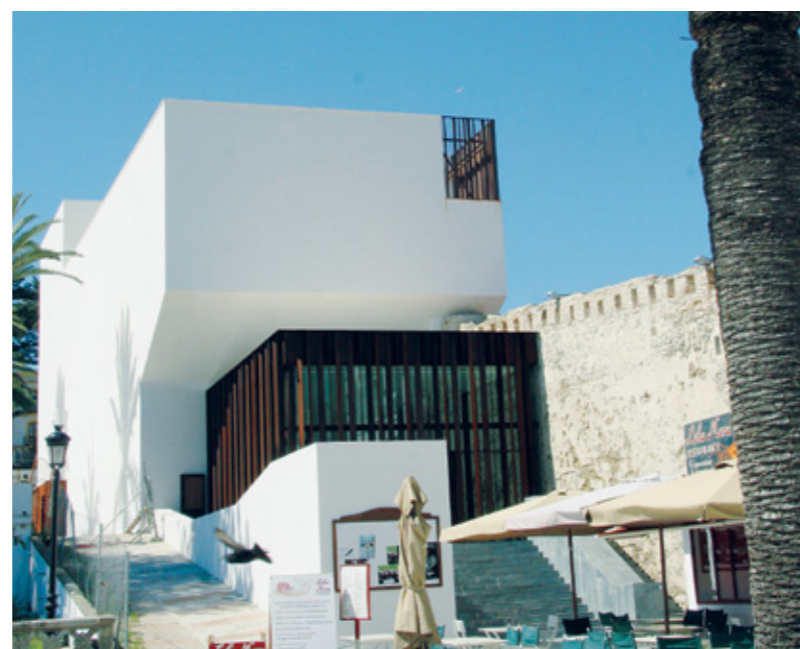
"It's fantastic to see it so busy so early in the week," explains kitesurf instructor Janet Vanickova, who was having dinner with her Czech friends at the next door table. Having moved here from Germany, via Nerja, three years ago, she insists that few places in the world have such a unique vibe. "You meet everyone here. It is a real international melting pot and never predictable," she insists.

It is the same for nearby bar owner Merv, a builder by trade from Dublin, who moved to the town with his wife, a doctor, three years ago.

The boss of La Cueva restaurant/bar/club (with partner Scott), he has seen the town develop well, despite the recession. "We certainly can't complain and have been busy right through the winter," he says.

Little by little the historic town, that was the bridgehead for the marauding Moors in the eighth century, is becoming a haunt for style and fashion lovers. Trendy shops and bars are opening every month and the range of hip places to stay is comparable only to Vejer, a short hop up the coast. But this new side is still very much

A turbine



matched by its ancient, historic feel. And once through the evocative Arabic gateway Puerta de Jerez, you are quickly in a different world. While there are few stand out build-

ings, aside from the odd church, the narrow streets of white-washed houses, replete with *rejas* and old wooden doors, feel very lived in. It is a feeling that novelist Paulo

of energy

Tarifa is one of Andalusia's true party towns thanks to its all year tourism, discovers Jon Clarke

Coelho catches well in his book *The Alchemist*, about a shepherd boy who stops in Tarifa on his way to Morocco. When writer Rose Macaulay travelled here in 1949, she found Tarifa overwhelmingly Moorish, while curiously London wine merchant Tommy Layton was pestered by 'grotesques' (beggars) and *inalfabeticos* (illiterates) when he visited in 1959.

These days, while it certainly still has an edge, largely due to its port, which ferries passengers to and from Morocco, it is much more a Mecca for watersport enthusiasts, in particular kite surfers these days. There can certainly be little debate over its frequent and steady winds. Both the Levante coming from the east and the Poniente coming from the west blow for much of the year.

It is said to be a contributing factor behind the town's allegedly high suicide rate, and has led to the hills above the town becoming a prime spot for some of Europe's most productive wind turbines.

Whirring away for most of the year, *the Olive Press* recently reported how on one day two years ago, 43 per cent of Spain's total elec-

tricity demand was produced in Cadiz province, much of it from Tarifa. Back in the town, take a walk up the main drag Batalla del Salado, which is full of surf shops, like Dragon, Wave Bandits and Rebel-des.

In the early evening bronzed blonde-haired surf dudes hang outside their respective shops, while willowy northern European girls vie for their attention and walk their dogs.

In the early evening have dinner on the Paseo Alameda before getting lost in the hive of bars or restaurants. "While it may be a small town there are so many good bars, with live music and food," explains local Tarifeno Gaspar Cuesta, from Hisspalense language school.

"The place gets more and more fashionable by the year. It used to be busy here just from March till November."

Partying over, head back to your hotel and sleep until midday, when if you're lucky you might get up to find the wind has abated enough to let you get an afternoon's sunbathing on the beach.

Tarifa just gets more and more fashionable by the year



AS I write, there are workmen laying gigantic wooden blocks on our pedestrianised street Paseo de Alameda.

Each one (see right) is two metres high and adorned with beautiful photographs, each from a different photographer, from a different country in Africa.

They symbolise the start of the eighth Festival of African cinema Tarifa. It is a very well organized festival which includes concerts, talks, and of course the best of African cinema.

It makes for a fine time to be in Tarifa and it is always interesting to witness these groovy, film-festival types discussing international distribution in the Tarifa fish market at nine in the morning. As a bar owner in a tourist-friendly town I am constantly asked "why Tarifa?" Well, one look at my physique will tell you its not for surfing or bodybuilding.

In fact, my answer is always the same: while the size of a village, Tarifa boasts a melting pot of cultures and there has been a large influx of Italians, Germans and South Americans to the town, as well as Britons, Irish and other northern Europeans.

So what is the big attraction to them? The simple answer is wind, sea and proximity to the countryside. The larger answer boils down to one word; balance.

There is, quite simply, a good representation of nationalities here, but not too many of one. From an Irish perspective (I'm from Dublin) Tarifa reminds me of the West of the country. The process of tourism is welcome and encouraged, but if you want to live there you must integrate and do it under 'our' terms. Tarifa has never let itself be overdeveloped, which meant that ghetto-isation was impossible.

Long may it remain that way.



The balance is right

Local bar owner Scott MacNaughton (left) on why multiculturalism truly works in Tarifa

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Seeing the world's biggest mammals at close quarters is vital to protect their future, writes Elizabeth Byrum

A whale of a time



FLOCKS of tourists are not the only arrivals to southern Spain during the summer months, with pods of killer whales a common sight in the Straits of Gibraltar. Orcas are attracted to the area by the large number of Mediterranean blue fin tuna, when in season, and this sometimes brings them into conflict with local fishermen. They also share the same habitat with pilot whales, as well as sperm whales and fin whales who also migrate through the Straits from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. A number of local companies can take you out on a trip to see the whales. And that won't be all as you will almost certainly see dolphins, and most of the companies try

their best to be as respectful to the mammals as possible. Three different types of dol-

phins inhabit the recently established Natural Park of the Strait of Gibraltar: common,

striped and bottlenose. One of the best established companies, the firmm foun-

datation was established in 1998 to study whales and dolphins.

The company, which consists of both scientists and non-scientists, has a 99 per cent success rate at finding whales and runs whale-watching excursions twice a day. From April to July, sperm whales can be sighted in the deeper parts of the Straits, while the more elusive fin whales are also occasionally spotted. The killer whales are thought to come to the fishing areas after being driven out of other parts of the Mediterranean by territorial pilot whales.

We're going underground

TARIFA is fast becoming known as one of the best areas to dive in southern Spain. And to keep up with rising demand a number of companies have set up in the port to provide courses and trips. The best of these, Yellow Sub, organises a range of trips out around the straits every day. There are dives out to numerous wrecks in the area and, as it is now a protected natural park, called the Isla de las Palomas, divers are bound to see numerous fish and some-

times dolphins. Among the best things to spot are moray eels, octopus and scorpion fish. The visibility is always good and the temperatures stay at between 15 and 20 degrees. "We get a lot of people coming up from the Costa del Sol as we have the best diving around," says Italian Enrico Demelas, 38, from Yellow Sub. Based in the port since 2004, he adds: "We can offer short two-hour learner dives and three to five day PADI courses for those who want to go in depth."



firmm aims to protect the rare interaction between the killer and pilot whales

This is despite scientists originally having thought that the scarcity of long-finned pilot whales during the summer months was due to fear of the orcas. The presence of the killer whales in the area creates problems for the fishermen who continue to catch tuna especially after spawning. This is a sensitive area and thanks to companies like firmm, it is being carefully monitored from a conservation standpoint. For the future, firmm aims to protect the rare interaction between the killer and pilot whales, but also avoid continuing conflict between the orcas and fishermen.

Visit www.whalewatchtarifa.net for more information

DIVE SCHOOL



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CAKES AND MORE

Vejer and Tarifa are full of great shops

FOR such a small area it is amazing how many influential shops can be found on the Costa de la Luz. Within the historic heart of both Vejer and Tarifa, in particular, you will find a superb array of interesting places to shop. In Tarifa, there are some excellent clothes and jewellery shops, the best of these by far being She is Nice, which is run by a stylish couple who recently moved from Madrid. As well as a good range of dresses, they even stock the designs - in particular shoes - of the owner. Another good place to check out is Babachic, a bead and



STYLISH: And tasty too, the cakes at Ambigu, while top shoes at She is Nice

from her home in Algeciras, they are not just delicious but look good too.

Heading up the coast to Vejer you will find some excellent local artisans and plenty of small shops selling stylish jewellery, bags and T-shirts. As Carmen Sanchez, who runs the El Telar de Vejer weaving and knitware shop, explains: "There are some excellent quality producers here and prices have not gone up for five years." Her shop opposite the main church sells beautiful silk and cotton scarves that she makes in the shop, as well as merino wool scarves, bedspreads and curtains to order. A short walk away you will find her daughter's shop La Pajara, which prints cotton T-shirts in dozens of different styles, and in any colour you fancy, with hundreds of prints to choose from. The presentation is excellent and they are doing their best to look after the environment.



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