

# All about Costa de la Luz



Issue 164 June 27 2013

## Let in the light

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



**FRONT ROW:** Watching kitesurfers at Valdevaqueros beach and (below) authentic Venta el Toro

It was in a sleepy backwater, up a dead end road close to Vejer de la Frontera that I found one of the last redoubts of quintessential Andalucía.

Tricky to find and easy to miss even when right outside, there are few places left in the region that are quite so unpretentious.

Authentic in the extreme and little changed for decades, Venta el Toro, in Santa Lucia, near Vejer, is where those locals in the know go for a dose of nostalgia and a darn good tapas lunch.

It is here that you will find local hoteliers es-

caping their clients and lovers heading for a secret rendezvous.

For me it is typical of the entire Costa de la Luz (or Coast of Light), a wonderful stretch of coastline that signifies the very essence of escape.

The concept is perhaps best summed up by the sense of space and views you get when taking lunch at restaurants like Tesoro, high above Tarifa or, sitting, for example, on the stunning roof terrace at boutique V Hotel in Vejer. For spreading out in front of you are uninterrupted ten-mile vistas of rolling fields all

the way down to white sandy beaches, with very little built on them.

An incredible sight, this patchwork quilt of greenery and long, unspoilt beaches is sadly almost unique to Spain these days, and what the majority of Andalucía'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

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# In the eye of the Hurricane

**It is a quarter of a century since film producer James Whaley joined his brother to create the first hip hotel on the Costa de la Luz**

It was around 25 years ago that my elder brother stopped in Tarifa en route to a windsurfing holiday in Portugal.

By chance finding the windiest spot in Europe, he decided to ask around if there were any small houses for sale and was shown a 12 room abandoned hotel, owned by an incredible 19 siblings, involved in a big family dispute.

He bought it for an incredible price but I had soon convinced him that he would never make any money out of 12 rooms, so we obtained permission from the town hall to build an extra 23 and an architect from Ibiza was drafted in.

A year and a half later the Hurricane opened and we quickly converted the bricklayers into our staff, some becoming cooks, others waiters, others receptionists or gardeners. I explained to the builders that

making a cake was as easy as making cement. All you had to do was throw the right ingredients into a mixer and stick it in the oven at the right temperature for the appropriate amount of time. The food back then in Andalucía was not very good, apart from gazpacho of course. The salads consisted of tinned everything: maize, asparagus, grated carrots, tuna in nasty oil.

So my first task was to set up a herb and vegetable garden. It seemed that none of our builders had heard of basil, coriander, sage, parsley and thyme - never having listened to Simon and Garfunkel. As I had lived in Italy I got an Italian friend to send me rucola, or rocket seeds, which the builder/cooks thought was disgusting. It took a month to get our first client, a German, who ordered



**VANGUARD: Whaley**

a bottle of Marques de Riscal rose, which he claimed was corked. The plasterer/waiter Jose served him another bottle which was again not to his taste. Nor was the third. Not to be outdone Jose instead found an old bottle of cheap white wine and added half a glass of red to it. 'Fantastico' the German client exclaimed and the next day brought his friends. From our friend Hans the hotel had lift off... it has never looked back.



**HIDDEN CHARM: Conil square, boats in Barbate and partygoers in Canos**

# Coast with most

From page 25

Spain in them."

The coastline is only matched in beauty by Cabo de Gata in Almería and there is something incredibly haunting about the stunning windswept beaches, particularly around El Palmar and Tarifa. The Costa de la Luz is certainly intrinsically different. 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 probably the highest concentration of top restaurants per capita of anywhere else in Andalucía. This is a true food capital and over the last few years, I have found at least 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 back streets are heaving with lively bars well into the early hours.

But 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 and it is one of the few places - thanks in the main to its breezes - that still has enough going on through the winter.

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 peaceful when they used the town as their bridgehead into southern Spain.

This is quickly obvious wondering around Tarifa, its historic ramparts littered with statues and references to stirring catholic heroes such

as Sancho El Bravo and Guzman el Bueno. The Costa de la Luz 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 you are in for a surprise.

There are literally miles and miles of mesmerizing 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. 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 Andalucía 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.

## The 200km coastline

**THE Costa de la Luz officially stretches for around 200kms all the way up into Huelva and to the border with Portugal. Split in two by the stunning Donana national park, the coastline also includes the so-called sherry towns of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Rota, Chipiona and El Puerto de Santa María. It also includes the cities of Cadiz and Huelva.**

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**UNSPOILT PARADISE: View across undeveloped Valdevaqueros beach to Tarifa**

# Please save our beaches!

**S**ADLY all is not well on the Costa de la Luz. As is the case with the Cabo de Gata natural park in Almería, 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 roundabouts, 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 ludicrous 1400 hotel room development on virgin land alongside Tarifa's celebrated Valdevaqueros beach, for which the town has recently been given two 'black flags' by Spain's leading environment group Ecologistas en Accion.

Another scheme would see a huge apart-hotel development again on virgin land, right by the beach alongside the stunning Trafalgar lighthouse, in El Palmar, and Vejer currently has two or three other scheme bubbling under.

A protest group PELP has been fighting the developers for years and has the 40,000 signatures it needs to force the development to go to a public enquiry.

"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."

The Vejer petition can be signed at [www.salvarelpalmar.es](http://www.salvarelpalmar.es)

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# Dance to a Different Tuna

**Gin Tonics, tuna lollipops and tuna yachts... despite Belinda Beckett not eating fish, Zahara's V Ruta de Atún festival had her hooked!**

“JUST try it,” said Dave. “It doesn’t taste that fishy.” The last person to try that was my mother, when as a babe in a high chair I refused to eat my fish fingers, dashing each spoonful to the floor. To my dysfunctional palate, all fish smells of ammonia and tastes worse. But, despite being a pescaphobe I found myself at the annual Tuna Festival in Zahara de los Atunes and agreed to try some, all in the line of duty, of course. The dish set before me didn’t look like fish: orange and round with a tiny leaf, it could have fallen from a neighbouring tree. That was the whole idea! *Paripé de Mandarin* (Mandarin Deception), was created for this year’s tapas competition – one of 36 imaginatively-prepared dishes, each representing the chef of a different restaurant.

Huge thought goes into the presentation to give a humorous twist, or to perhaps outwit my own picky taste buds. I was determined to find out... There was so much choice! Tuna burgers, tuna lollipops, bars of tuna wrapped in gold leaf, tuna with ice cream, tuna shaped like yachts... even fashioned into miniature pizzas with their own printed boxes. There was even liquid tuna, wittily named ‘Gin Tonic’. Every tapa came with a glass of chilled manzanilla and, at €3.50 a throw, it was a no-brainer for fish aficionados. “All the same Dave, I think I’ll wait to try the tuna toffees,” I reasoned, discovering that the Mandarin Deception contained raw tuna tartare! Which was a bit of a nuisance for Dave as the tuna toffees were being served down the

road in Atlanterra (Zahara’s posh sister resort) and we’d been lucky to find a parking spot in town. Fish lovers travel from far and wide to the Costa de la Luz in Springtime to taste the first succulent almadraba tuna – caught by an ancient method dating back to Phoenician times, just as these Leviathans leave the cold Atlantic for their warmer Mediterranean spawning grounds. During festival week there

are as many fish fanciers on land as there are tuna in the sea, when the population of this pretty maritime pueblo of 1,300 residents fills up with another 15,000 hungry souls. Last year they munched their way through 65,000 tapas made from 200 tuna weighing some 200 kilos apiece, netting restaurateurs an impressive €400,000 over one weekend – not bad in an economic crisis! And tuna isn’t the only temptation. There are some enticing prizes for eating it too, which only steeled my resolve. Eat 12 tapas for the chance to win a smart LGD TV, a Samsung tablet or a Nintendo Wii. Eat all 36 and a weekend for two at the posh Hotel Atlanterra could be yours. It was all so well organised (something of a surprise, in Spain). Everyone gets a menu

map detailing the location of each restaurant and its speciality tapa, divided into six colour-coded zones, plus a sheet of paper drawn up with boxes that you have to get stamped as you eat. The man responsible for this shining example of entrepreneurialism is local restaurateur Gaspar Castro, President of local traders association ACOZA. “For most towns May is the month for communions and weddings but we don’t cater for those events in a big way as we’re only a small fishing village,” he says. “At the same time, it’s one of the best months to eat fresh red tuna, caught in our unique way. We’ve been making a party of it since 2009 and it’s really paying off.” If high drama is your bag, there’s plenty of it with music,



Picture credit: David Cussen



**PESCAPHOBE:** Belinda gets a stamp

dancing, street parades and a demonstration of tuna filleting that’s pure theatre, complete with buckets of blood! It’s called a ‘ronqueo’ after the ‘grunting’ noise the knife makes when separating flesh from bone. It takes experts with cleavers and sharp knives under ten minutes to reduce one silvery 200-kilo tuna to 17 choice cuts the colour and texture of prime beef (which is why bluefin tuna is confusingly called *atún rojo* in Spain) “Hardly



**HOOKED:** Locals enjoy the parade while (top) the Mandarin Deception

any goes to waste which is why we call the tuna ‘el cerdo del mar’,” Gaspar told me. (That explains the float I saw go by, bearing a bunch of cheering children dressed as Peppa Pigs.) A 200-kilo almadraba tuna will fetch €3,800 on the open market in Spain and the *ventresca* (stomach, best for tuna steaks) sells for €40 per kilo but some cuts are particularly delicacies: the *morillo* (a kind of muscle in the head) costs circa €55 per kilo and the female eggs, €80 per kilo. *Huevos de leche* are also relished, though aren’t for the faint-hearted (being tuna sperm) but Gaspar swears they’re ‘very tasty’. Although, as his restaurant was responsible for the Mandarin Deception, I’m not so sure I believe him!

The most fascinating aspect of the local tuna industry is the almadraba – the large structure you can glimpse one kilometre out to sea. It’s a complex labyrinth of nets several kilometres long and more than 30 meters deep, designed to guide the tuna into a central trap (*el copo*) from which there’s no escape. Ecologically sound, immature tuna can wriggle out through the mesh and live to spawn

another day. The thrilling part is the *Levantá*. Several will be held between April and June, dependent on wind, tides and sea conditions and decided by the almadraba’s ‘captain’. Then, the fishermen encircle this seething cauldron of captive tuna in their boats and hoist the nets out of the water. They will have no more than six hours to raise thousands of kilos of frenzied fish. ‘Almadraba’ is Arabic for ‘place of fighting’ and the name’s well-justified. Zahara boasts one of the ‘big four’ Atlantic almadrabas in

**The current record for a bluefin sold at auction in Tokyo is 155.4 million yen - a cool 1.1 million euros**

Spain, along with those of Tarifa, Conil and Barbate which also hold their own *rutas de atún* during May and June. In 2010, Barbate welcomed 50 celebrity chefs to its festival including Ferrán Adriá, Juan María Arzak and Dani García. Quotas are strictly controlled to preserve declining stocks

### Ten facts about the bluefin tuna

1. Bluefin tuna can swim up to 80 km/hour
2. They can live to be up to 30 years old
3. They can grow to be more than two metres long and weigh up to 200 kilos - to give you an idea, that’s roughly the same size (if a bit bigger) as basketball player Shaquille O’Neal
4. The largest tuna on record was 3.3 metres in length and weighed 726 kilograms!
5. They can plunge down to depths of 1000 metres
6. It is thought to be the fish that best regulates its own body temperature, allowing it to travel through the chilly waters of the northern Atlantic
7. The population from the East Atlantic usually swims counterclockwise and penetrates the Mediterranean to spawn in its warm waters. They cross the Gulf of Cadiz in late April or early May, and the fishing seasons starts then and lasts for only about two months. After spawning, they return to the Atlantic in search of food
8. Japan consumes 270,000 tons of raw tuna each year, five times the consumption of the second country on the list (the USA)
9. In 2011, Spain sold 1,970 tons of bluefin tuna to Japan for 36.4 million euros. Just one kilo of the desired ‘sashimi grade’ good stuff can sell for €18.50
10. Due to excessive—and often illegal—farming of bluefin tuna in the eighties and nineties, the species is now nearly endangered. Thanks to recently established quotas by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna, the bluefin tuna may be on the road to recovery



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## 30 Costa de la Luz special

# WHALE OF A TIME

**F**LOCKS of tourists are not the only arrivals to southern Spain each year, with pods of killer whales a common sight in the Straits of Gibraltar.

The 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.

Three different types of dolphins inhabit the recently established Natural Park of the

Straits of Gibraltar: common, striped and bottlenose. 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

**Seeing a sperm whale wave hello with its giant tail is always fun**

certainly also see dolphins, and most of the companies try their best to be as respectful to the mammals as pos-

*Tarifa is a fantastic place to go whale and dolphin watching*



**SPOTTED:** The crew sees a whale



sible. Turmares Tarifa is a company dedicated to the art of whale watching and the mission of conservation. It offers tours that unveil the intimate lives of the inhabitants of the sea.

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## Costa de la Luz special 31



**Riding the wind**  
The Costa de la Luz is a great spot for activities and in particular wind and waves

**T**AKE a walk out to the famous Trafalgar lighthouse in Canos de Meca or along Tarifa's stunning Valdevaqueros beach 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 has literally taken the area

by storm and over the last decade the traditional sport of windsurfing has been massively blown out by this fashionable new sport. "These days about 99% of our clients are renting kitesurfing equipment," says Guido, of Kite Concept "It has become so incredibly popular over the last few years." Both Kite Concept and other shops like Surf Centre Tarifa rent from just €50 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, 38, who works

out of 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." While appearing complicated it is apparently quite an easy sport to learn. Tarifa's leading beach hotel the Hurricane is offering three day courses for adults and week long courses for kids. Its owner James Whalley is adamant that is enough time to learn. "It is amazing how quickly people pick it up," he says. Famed as 'the Wind Capital'

**There are no other places that rival it for the constant winds**

measures between two and five on the Beaufort scale and brings in a cooler breeze from the sea. It also happens to be the dominating wind in Tarifa. The best wind for windsurfers is the Levante, which comes from the south east from Africa. 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.

### SADDLE UP

IF you are looking for something different why not go horse riding in the stunning Alcornocales park just north of the coast. Rancho Los Lobos is in a fabulous spot surrounded by rolling green hills with cork forests, cattle and horse pastures. This lovely old farmhouse is a paradise for nature lovers and hikers, the perfect place to spend a relaxing holiday.

## On the crest of a wave

WHILE Tarifa is known for its kitesurfing, El Palmar, near Vejer, is known for its surfing. This stunning (mostly) undeveloped beach is a great place to learn how to surf. One of the best surf breaks in southern Europe, in summer there are up to a dozen surf schools lining the beach, with a handful operating all year around. Friendly English-speaking teacher Kike (left with pupils) teaches anyone from "six to 96" through his company 9 Pies surf. Classes start from 20 euros and he also organises surf camps and rents boards.

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## Swap shop

IT has come to be something of a regular fixture on Sundays. A clever idea, the Mercadillo de los Domingos in Tarifa is the perfect way for locals to find something new and to clear out things no longer needed. The second hand market is a great place to pick up clothes, toys and numerous other items. Set up by the owners Eva and Macu from nearby restaurant Delicatessen, the only proviso is that items cannot be new. "People have a lot in their houses that they don't need," explains Eva, originally from Sevilla. "We have given them an opportunity to raise some much needed money recycling their stuff."



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**How Vejer de la Frontera reinvented itself as a food Mecca, writes Dining Secrets of Andalusia editor Jon Clarke**

WITH its high arched ceiling and uber-stylish entrance, it feels like the high temple of dining. And with a chef who trained at Europe's (recently voted) number one restaurant El Celler de Can Roca it certainly has the correct pedigree too.

What, however, is most remarkable about the opening of the new restaurant Delicias is its location... NOT in Madrid or Sevilla, but in a tiny town half way along the Costa de la Luz. This is all part of the incredible success story of Vejer de la Frontera, which has reinvented itself as one Andalusia's main culinary points of reference over the last decade.

Like a slow-cooked pork belly, the beautiful white town has gently fused the ingredients together to rival anywhere else in the region. It is little short of amazing how many good places there are to eat in this stunning white town and the nearby villages of Patria, La Muela, Santa Lucia and Canos de Meca. This is a true gastronomic paradise with a melting pot of chefs from all around Spain and Europe.

"We set the bar high," explains James Stuart, boss of celebrated hotel and restaurant La Califa, which now has its own diffusion tapas restaurant, as well as its own twist on a kebab joint.

"There is plenty of competition between restaurants and all of us keep taking the level higher in order to get ahead." This is the serious goal that has to be taken by new restaurants like Las Delicias, as well as its equally charming new neighbour Italian La Tarantella, which sits in a beautifully renovated townhouse garden overlooking one of the best views in Christendom.

It is no surprise that this second new joint to open this spring - in the heart of the worst recession Spain has ever seen - is owned by a former purveyor of fine fish, who sold his profitable business in Sevilla to settle in the town.

And the entrepreneur Paco Pacheco knows more than anything else that he has to get the offering right... and above all, deliver quality.

"There is so much competition now I had to work out carefully what would be my niche. I certainly know about fresh fish, but still didn't have was a good Italian res-

taurant," he explains. It is this level of thought that has helped to make this small Cadiz town into such a foodie Mecca.

Much of the ingredients of Vejer's success are down to the local surroundings, which produce some of the best quality ingredients in the world. The obvious examples are sherry, fish and the wonderful pork and beef from the classic brown 'retinto' cows, which you often see wandering around the nearby hills.

Of course the amazing blue fin tuna, caught nearby is spectacularly good and the vegetables available are also of a high quality.

Another reason is the type of tourists who visit the town, which sees a distinctly better heeled crowd than its nearby rivals on the Costa del Sol.

"We don't just rely on beaches," explains restaurateur Ramon at Vina y Mar, which has its own wine shop with over 200 references. "And many of



**AMBITIOUS: Owners and (top) chef at Delicias, while (top left) Damian at La Brasa**

the people who visit are keen food lovers, who come here specifically to eat."

This is certainly the case and the huge mix of restaurateurs, who herald from France, Denmark, Britain and the north

of Spain have helped to put together a rich and varied offering for them. Frenchman Damian Giroud at long-running La Brasa de Sancho typifies the mix. Having cooked since his teens - and even had a stint under the Roux brothers at La Gavroche in London - he knows plenty about cooking. Constantly evolving over the last decade, his restaurant is set in his elegant historic home in the heart of the town, with some fabulous outdoor

**A stylish spot overlooking fields down to the sea near Cadiz, the ambience is incredible**

tables. "We hope we know what it is that makes people's holidays great, good service and, above all, good food," he explains.

His near neighbour Javier Duenas, at Garimba Sur, on emblematic Plaza de Espana is also doing well, with a fine mix of ingredients and style. "It all began in the late 1990s when Javier and his partner Pedro opened their famous restaurant Trafalgar," explains Stuart, whose hip hotel Califa conveniently put up the new influx of foodies across the square.

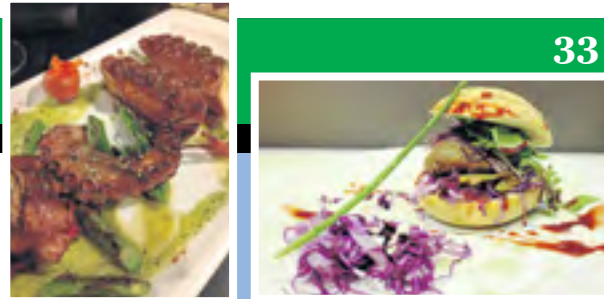
"It was the start of the food culture and we opened our restaurant in 2002 to give them some competition," he continues, citing Trafalgar, Califa and Castille-

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## My top dishes

**Jon Clarke gives some of his top tapa tips and more in Vejer**

HERE is a huge variety of dishes and tapas to offer in Vejer.

One of my favourites has to be the mini retinto beef hamburger at Vina y Mar (above), which comes in a coconut milk and bamboo sauce.

Recently selling 400 in one day, best of all is the fact that it can be washed down by over a dozen wines by the glass, including two or three local Cadiz producers.

Nearby Las Delicias, recently opened by four friends in an 1840s theatre, has some real chestnuts, including a wonderful carpaccio of thinly sliced pork belly.

Former Madrid Ritz chef Hector Sanz also offers an excellent choice of salads and a separate menu of 'mini burgers' and 'molletes de la Janda'.

At Brasa de Sancho look for the delicious salmon mini quiche (crujiente) with broccoli, as well as chef Damien's Blanco, before launching into one of the town's best steaks, including a fabulous seven-year-old retinto beef chop.

At recently opened La Tarantella I enjoyed the leg of octopus (top), cooked on a grill, with paprika and balsamic vinegar sauce and a delicious warm provolone cheese.

At Jardin de Califa, which has a distinct Moroccan theme, you might want to try the classic 'pastela' of warka pastry filled with chicken and almonds, cinnamon and turmeric, as well as spinach with prawns and squid in a spicy sauce.

At Califa tapas why not try a skewer of tuna tempura in a mustard sauce or fried and battered Grazelema goats cheese in an apple sauce.



take on Ajo Blanco, before launching into one of the town's best steaks, including a fabulous seven-year-old retinto beef chop.

fields down to the sea near Cadiz, the ambience is second to none. While the menu is compact, the regularly-changing specials are becoming increasingly experimental and always look delightful.

"A lot of our success is the fact that we use so many vegetables," explains Dane Tomas (right with sous chef), who lives next door with his family. A laid back chap, who spends his spare time surfing, he sums it up perfectly: "We know we have to constantly evolve and create new things if we are to keep up with the excellent quality in

town." It certainly seems to be working and, the couple even now have a restaurant book, serialised earlier this year in the Olive Press, with recipes and local dining tips.



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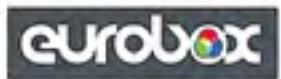
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## 34 Costa de la Luz special

# Hannibal's holiday



James Bryce has a poke around Chiclana and Sancti Petri, where ancient leaders Hannibal and Caesar are said to have taken their time off



**ALLURING: Sancti Petri and (inset) Chiclana**

acy 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.

In the evenings, the emphasis shifts from the centre of Chiclana to the nearby beach front promenade of La Barrosa.

The beach attracts plenty of sun worshippers during the day and was voted by the *Sunday Times* as one of the top five 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 the town's links to the sea.

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.

HAD popped into the salt of the earth fisherman's bar after a morning of sightseeing and was given an instant reminder of Chiclana'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 always had close ties with the ocean. The almadraba fishing technique used to catch tuna is famous along this stretch 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.

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 strong winds, which are a regular fixture on this stretch of coast, make it the ideal spot for sailing, and a cursory glance out to sea indicated there were no shortage 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' leg-

### Business tips

Chiclana counts the largest number of expat businesses on the Costa de la Luz. It has long been popular with the more discerning English, who don't fancy slumming it up on the Costa del Sol. A number of excellent businesses have set up to work with the expat market, including lawyers Temple Cambria, who can undertake numerous types of conveyancing. Meanwhile Monopoly is a popular English supermarket with a wide range of greetings cards and books run by friendly Hazel, her partner Billie and son Jack. Local tradesmen include Steve, a carpenter, and another Steve Harris, who is a whiz when it comes to all TV and satellite issues.

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**Costa de la Luz**

**WHERE TO STAY**

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**STUNNING: View at Hotel V**

THE Costa de la Luz is literally creaking with hip places to stay. In Vejer you are hard pressed to beat the seminal Casa de Califa, in the town's loveliest square, surrounded by its best restaurants. The Moorish building sits around a charming central patio, where guests take breakfast and dine under candlelight each evening. Equally charming - and with one of the best roof terrace views in Spain - is Hotel V run by a Belgian nobleman and with a distinctly upmarket feel. Nearby, right on the beach, in Canos de Meca, is Madreselva, set around a central courtyard and with a decent pool for the kids to splash in. A short drive inland and you will find the charming hotel La Vista in the white town of Medina Sidonia, which is fantastically sited for visits to all the main towns, as well as Jerez, Cadiz and Sanlucar. In Tarifa you have an equally good group of stylish hotels. On the beach, the best established is the Hurricane, which is now 25 years old and run by the coast's long-serving dynamo James Whalley (see article on page 26), who also owns the more luxurious Punta Sur across the road. Dos Mares is another fabulous option, slightly nearer town and also right on the beach. In the heart of the town you

will also find the evocative Dar Cilla, which is normally voted as Number One hostel in Tarifa on Trip Advisor and, quite rightfully, for its lovely well appointed rooms and amazing views across to Africa. If on a budget make sure to check out great value Posada Vagamundos, which sits in a tiny alley, with calm, comfortable rooms (assuming you stay at the back). Finally you might consider Camping Tarifa if you like to camp, but also consider its bungalows, which are great value at just €30 a night for a family of four, including breakfast.



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## Costa de la Luz

# To dine for!

**WHERE TO EAT** The food on the Costa de la Luz just keeps getting better, reckons Jon Clarke

**O**VERLOOKING rows of vines and a sea of undulating umbrella pines the restaurant high up in the hills above Tarifa is extremely hard to beat. 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 the Gibraltar straits to Africa are impossible to improve. Down in the main town there



**RELIABLE:** Head chef Juan at Pescadaria and pizza making at La Trattoria (top)

is a massive melting pot of restaurants on offer, including Argentinian, French and Italian restaurants.

The place to head is Calle Alameda, where you will find the father and son team Javier and Daniel, whose two neighbouring restaurants La Ternera Mimosa and Lola Mora, have been open for ten years.

Both have a Mediterranean flavour, while La Ternera Mimosa now

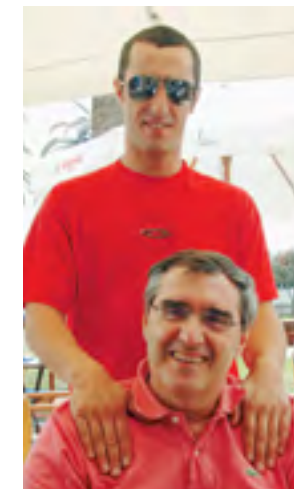
has its own charcoal grill and some amazing artisan pizzas and grilled fish.

Lola Mora is better known for fish and has the prestige of having won the annual best tuna tapa competition (a tuna tartare in puff pastry with a beetroot salmorejo) when it was held in the town for the first time last month.

Interestingly, Javi's brother Rodrigo (and wife Patricia) also own a brilliant Argentinian joint Patagonia, just around the corner. Both atmospheric and charming in equal mea-



**STYLISH:** New Campero in Zahara



asures, it naturally has some of the best steaks in the town, not to mention great empanadas.

Back on Alameda you must look out for the pair of former architects - good friends Victor and Paolo - who run La Trattoria and La Pescaderia. Trattoria serves up classics including Osso Buco and sauteed provolone cheese with honey and such is its renown it is about to open a sister restaurant in Marbella.

Next door, La Pescaderia - now celebrating its tenth anniversary - is certainly able to compete, in particular with his fabulous blue fin tuna menu and excellent wine list. A massive tuna fan, boss Victor, goes out of his way to prize the very best specimens out of the clutches of the Japanese. "It is vital as our clients absolutely love it," explains the friendly Argentinian.

In town one of the coolest spots to head to is La Cueva, where Scott and his chef brother Andrew, who recently arrived from the Mermaid Cafe, in Dublin, serve up an enticing Mediterranean menu on the lines of a classic UK gastro pub. The wings with fresh ginger and lemon in a chilli sauce were hard to beat and Scott, recently a dad for the first time, is a personable, erudite chap.

Also in the heart of the town look out for the excellent Delicatessen, where you can eat an incredibly healthy mix of dishes. Run by two friends from Sevilla, who have a passion for good food, expect specials of the day to include leek and carrot soup and a great tapa of carillada 'bull's cheek'.

The most exciting new restaurant in Tarifa is, without a doubt, Silos 19, set in a stunning 18th century grain silo, which has previously served as a post office, disco and HQ for the Falange.

A massive new investment it has a Moroccan Russian chef installed producing traditional Spanish dishes with modern touches.

The place is literally stunning, with a strong emphasis on art, in particular its off-the-wall 'time machine', made by Juan Sanders, which, among other things can open a wine bottle. If it is beach dining you are harking for then a true chestnut is Bien Estar, right on the

**This is a true tour de force of cooking and one place to miss at your peril**

beach. It is open all year and claims to be the southernmost restaurant in Europe and has been set up by three friends with over 50 years of catering experience between them.

Up the coast a little bit you will find Hotel Dos Mares, a charming place to stay, but also to eat, now that it has its own restaurant Yamani which bills itself as offering an 'experience for the senses'. Nearby you should always drop in to the cool hangout Pacha Mama, which is where the kitesurf crowd go for a series of excellent pizzas and other Italian fare.

On the subject of blue fin tuna, Andalucia's best place to eat it must surely be El Campero in the workaday fishing town of Barbate.

Here, Jose 'Pepe' Melero has catered for celebrities, politicians and fellow chefs for two decades and runs the restaurant with military precision,

often serving well over 300 people for lunch alone. This is a true tour de force of cooking and is one place on the Costa de la Luz you miss at your peril, particularly now that Pepe has now opened a new sister Campero in nearby Zahara.

Called Taberner de Campero, it sits in a charming old house with some wonderful modern touches and an amazing set of rope patterns on the ceiling. Over in Vejer you have one of Andalucia's top culinary towns (see page 24), with stunning places to eat, including El Jardin de Califia, which sits in an atmospheric candlelit patio, as well as Brasa de Sancho whose chef Daniel trained with Michel Roux, no less.

Then there is Garimba, with its charming tables out on the same square and nearby Castillera, where dynamo Juan Valdes serves up the best meat dishes in Cadiz province. Practically next door is the most authentic restaurant in Andalucia, the Venta el Toro, where you eat whatever the owner's aunt is cooking that day.

Nearby, in Patria try to visit Restaurant Patria, where Thomas and wife Ase are fast garnering a reputation as having some of the best food in the area.

Finally Oasis bar in Barrosa. Chiclana is a friendly spot for the local English population and always has plenty of special events.

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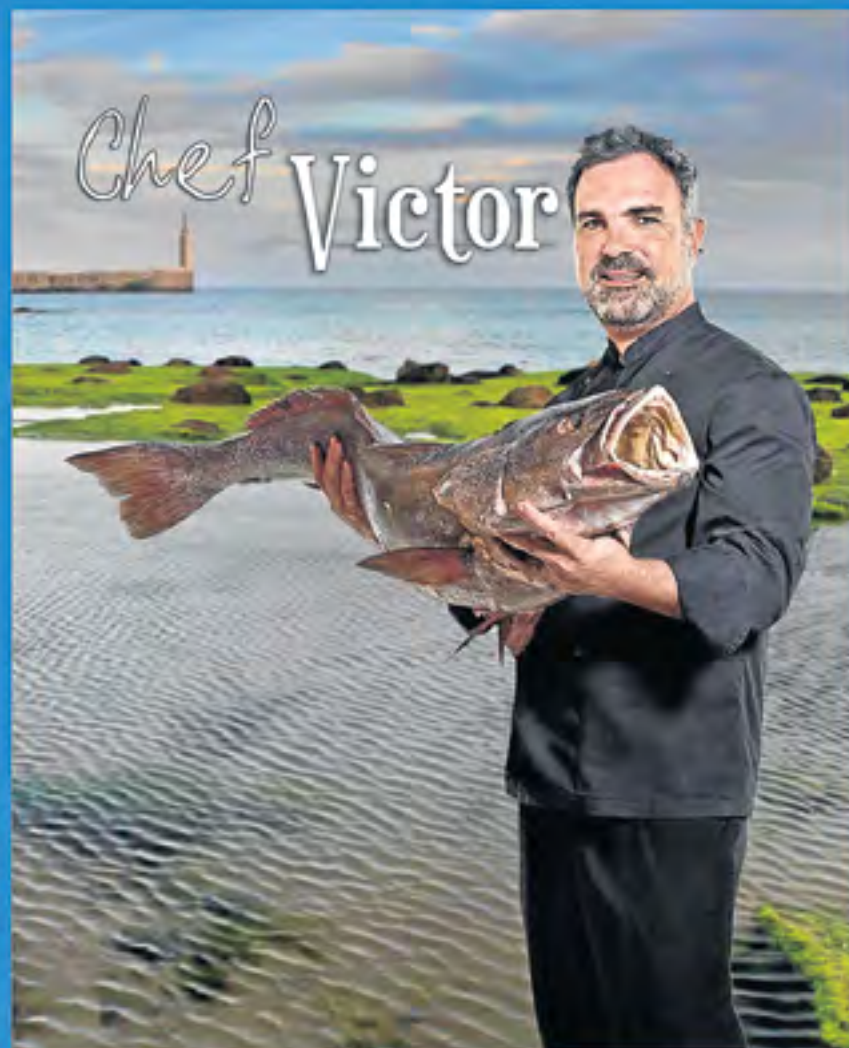


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