

# All about Benalmadena



## It's not all about lying on the beach

**Liam Kirkaldy scales the heights to find the real Benalmadena, which is full of many layers and some genuine surprises**



**SIGHTS: Colomares Castle, and (left), the Pueblo**

It is not every day you meet a man who owns his own castle – yet Carlos Martin, owner of Castillo de Colomares, is just one of the many surprises awaiting visitors to Benalmadena.

The castle, sitting on the side of a windy road on the way up to Benalmadena Pueblo from the coast, came as something of a shock.

Built in 1994 by Martin's dad - a gynecologist named Dr Esteban Martin - it was constructed using four different architectural styles and is meant as a slightly bizarre tribute to Christopher Columbus' discovery of America.

This quirky stop off aside, continuing the walk uphill into Benalmadena's old town - or Pueblo - gave me my first glimpse of the Costa del Sol town's chaotic beauty.

Built on the side of a steep hill, and at points actually on cliffs, Benalmadena's pueblo cascades down from the jutting Sierra de Mijas towards the sea. The traditional Andaluz-style white-washed buildings which compose the pueblo are dazzling – literally so when they meet the November sun – and it is easy to spend a morning getting lost in the intersecting courtyards and alleyways.

Its cobbled streets and plazas seem to jostle for space, while competing to outdo each other in terms of grandeur and charm.

It is a surprisingly historic place (and well looked after to boot) and apart from the sudden appearance of a scooter or motorcycle, the pueblo doesn't look like it has changed in hundreds of years.

Though it was occupied by multiple civilizations, including the Phoenicians, Byzantines and Romans, Benalmadena's development was kick-started by the arrival of the Moors from North Africa, leading to the architecture that is seen today.

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**VISTA:**  
Down below  
towards the  
sea from  
the pueblo  
church



**FOCUS:** A fountain in the  
Pueblo

## Where history

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At points the place can seem more like a botanic garden than a real town, with the floral decorations outnumbering the people. Flower baskets line the route up the Calle Real to its spectacularly located church of Santa Domingo de Guzman. Constructed in 1621, the church is thought to have been built on top of the foundations of an old Moorish temple, and originally would have formed the centre of Benalmadena. The quaint old building - complete with play park for those less interested in architectural history - occupies a spot overlooking the modern

part of town and the marina beyond. In-keeping with the way the town adapts to the scenery, there is even a lift travelling straight up a cliff face, to transport visitors who cannot face the climb. In many respects Benalmadena is a case study in the story of the Costa Del Sol. Like much of Andalusia, the place was originally shaped by its Moorish rulers, but has massively grown into a modern - and some might say - sprawling town. Looking down over the new town below - visible from the viewing point at the church - the Moorish architecture and old-style Spanish streets fade as the town moves downwards,

revealing a more typically modern textbook definition of the Costa del Sol. In short, it is down below in Arroyo de la Miel and Benalmadena Costa that you will find all the usual holiday trappings and fleshpots one would expect from a Spanish resort. But that said, once you start sniffing around there is a lot more to be found, in particular in the quality of its local entertainment and for a family you are really spoilt for choice. "Obviously there is the marina, which was a huge change, and we built the

**At times the place can seem more like a botanic garden that a real town**

## Join the club



**O**pened in 1976 and having hosted the Spanish Open in 1979, Torrequebrada Golf Club is billed as one of the best golf courses in Europe. It is certainly a wonderful place to escape - a true green lung of the Costa del Sol - and golfers can enjoy stunning views of the surrounding scenery while testing themselves against the 18 holes. Designed by Jose Gancedo - and using the same grass of Sotogrande's famous course - it is spread across various valleys, gentle slopes and around woods and lakes. One

hole even goes right down to beach. Due to its position on the edge of the coast, players are likely to experience some wind - providing an extra element to the course's already challenging lay-out. Another option is the Benalmadena Golf Club, part of the Baboo Bar and Restaurant, which along with nine holes also offers golf lessons for all abilities, pitch and putt, and regularly holds competitions. The adjacent restaurant serves stylish food at reasonable prices. You might also consider Bil Bil golf.

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# All about Benalmadena


## WHO'S THE KING OF THE CASTLE?

**T**AKEN aback by the existence of the very eccentric 20-year-old Castillo de Colomares I sought an explanation from a Spanish couple from Alicante, who were in Benalmadena for a holiday. When I admitted that I had only learned of the castle's somewhat limited history that day, a sly grin spread across the face of the husband, who began to laugh openly, shaking his head at my ignorance. That is, until his wife interjected, "don't listen to him," she said, "he only found out yesterday."

At this point I began to fear that my trip, to what I had originally believed to be a Moorish castle, was quickly turning into a marital counseling session. I decided to approach a member of staff, Carlos, who introduced himself as the castle's owner. He explained that his father, Dr Martin, had lived in the US for many years and had developed a passion for the country's history and culture. Upon coming back to Spain for his retirement, he had set about building a tribute to Columbus, the man who had discovered the

land he had so much affection for. As such, the castillo is more monument than castle, with the design deliberately spanning four different architectural styles to tell the story of the New World's discovery. The work - carried out by Dr Martin himself with the help of two local bricklayers - was started in 1987 and took seven years to complete. It is well worth a visit, if only to see what a castle would look like if it was built to represent four different historical eras at once.

**FAUX GOTHIC:** The Colomares castillo is actually 20 years old



## unravels itself slowly

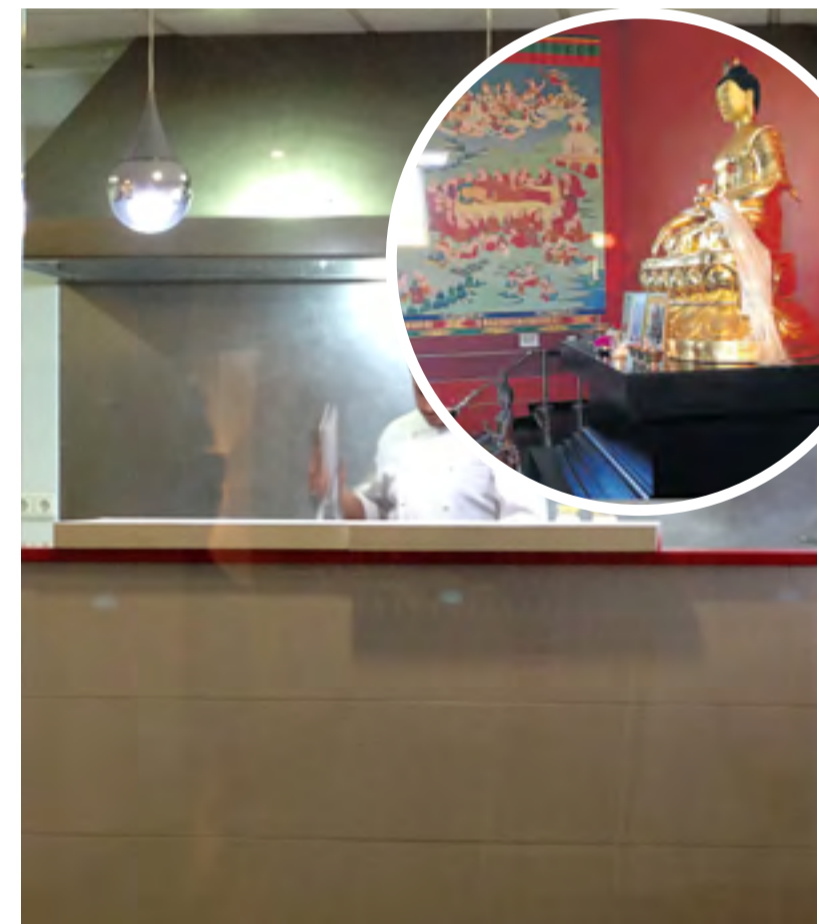
golf courses and the cable car to the top," explains Rosa Gonzales, Benalmadena's President of Business Associations. The manager of local estate agent Airos Investments has

watched as the town's infrastructure has been transformed over the last three decades. And, according to her, it hasn't just been classic bucket and spade tourism that has helped to boost the

town's economy. "There has also been a huge growth in the number of language schools, with the Town Hall giving out a lot more licenses."

Language skills are essential to Benalmadena's growth, with money from foreign tourists and investors thought to account for over 50% of the local economy.

And further more the Castillo is not the only surprise in Benalmadena. Perched on the edge of a cliff and looking down on the coast, you will find the biggest Buddhist Stupa in Europe. A must see, particularly at sunset, when the fading light plays brilliantly off its golden top, it is a great place to make a wish (making sure you walk around it the right way) according to one of its guardians, a Czech who exuded inner peace.



**MAKE A WISH:** Going clockwise around the Stupa can bring you good luck

As well as hosting luxury yachts (naturally), the marina - which, with 1,000 moorings, the largest in Andalusia - is also the base for leisure and wildlife activities, with dolphin and diving trips available from the port and at the nearby Sunset Beach resort hotel. The marina hosts concerts and food tasting events and its bars and restaurants are lit up at night, reflecting off the water to stunning effect. So despite the attraction of the Pueblo, Benalmadena is certainly not a town just living in the past.

is no coincidence. The story goes that a Buddhist teacher visited from his Spanish headquarters in nearby Velez-Málaga, and bumped into the then-mayor of Benalmadena, Enrique Bolin, while having lunch in the port. The two fell into conversation and the mayor suggested that the town build a temple. The teacher was keen on the idea, so long as the positioning was right. In the end he insisted he would do it, as long as 'all the people could see it in Fuengirola', explained the guardian. In the end they built the biggest Stupa in Europe - and apparently on a clear day it is visible from Africa. Visitors are encouraged to walk around the structure clockwise and make a wish, which Buddhists believe could be granted. The interior contains a space for meditation, as well as prayer objects and a sign offering a 'Teaching of the Week'.



During my visit, the sign warned: "Stay away from things that are none of your business, and don't make them your business." Perhaps good advice, but probably not applicable to this trip - visiting Benalmadena should be everyone's business.

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# All about Benalmadena

## A journey to the top of the world

It is a journey that will never be forgotten...and on a clear day you can see Africa from the top of the Teleferico in Benalmadena. The 800 metre ride from Arroyo de la Miel lasts 15 minutes, taking visitors up to the top of Mount Calamorro in the Sierra de Mijas – the highest part of Benalmadena - to a spot offering spectacular views of the town, the coast and beyond. Opened in 2000, the Teleferico has become one of

the main attractions in the town. There are three kilometres of well signposted hiking trails, leaving from the top, which arrive at various viewpoints over the landscape below. It is also possible to spot hawks, eagles and vultures from the peak. The cable car runs from 11am to 5pm throughout November and December, though it is closed in high winds. It is open for longer in the spring and summer.



## Dynamic new fitness centre is proving that fitness can be fun. BODY BEAUTIFUL IN BENALMADENA

Set up by David Smithson and Angel Lesta Candal – a former European bodybuilding champion - Positive Fitness Benalmadena has quickly become one of the

most popular gyms in town. "We offer a service so that we can look after everyone, so that everyone gets individual treatment," explains fitness trainer David, a former

carpenter. The centre currently has free weights and weight machine rooms, as well as a boxing studio, that offers boxing, kick boxing and

Muay Thai classes. There are also Zumba classes – including Zumba for seniors and there are plans to install

a spinning studio as well. "We only opened in May, so we are a little bit of a work in progress," says David, who has lived in Spain for four years. "We have great plans for the studio, and are currently on the lookout for

investment. "What is really encouraging has been the great reaction from people in Benalmadena." Open every day, including Sundays and Fiestas. Memberships start at €25 per month.

## Two centuries of care

Undertaker Francisco Camero serves the entire Costa del Sol with care and dignity

BETWEEN them they have well over 100 years of undertaking experience. But the five brothers and sisters of Benalmadena's Camero family are also the fourth generation of undertakers working for a firm that was set up in the 1800s. Based out of an office in Benalmadena pueblo, they have dealt with a good many dead bodies over the decades, many of them British. "My first job 39 years ago was dealing with two dead Britons," explains Paco Camero. "I was just 15 and we found one of them at the

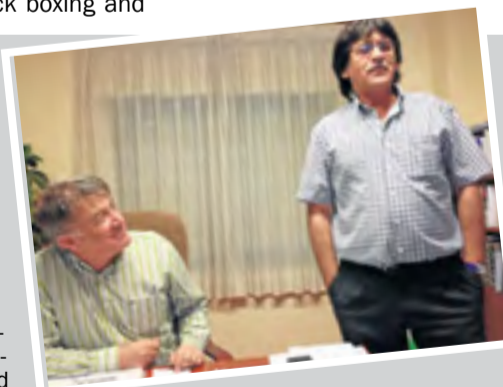
bottom of a swimming pool and one of them lying next to it. "They had both died of alcohol poisoning. One we buried here, the other we sent back to the UK." He and his brother Salvador now run the operation that has four other offices in Fuen-girolas, Mijas, Torremolinos and Malaga. It also has a crematorium, chapel and cemetery in Benalmadena. "But we have agents and people working for us all the way from Nerja to Sotogrande so we can cover the whole Costa del Sol," explains Salvador. Since the 1970's the com-

pany has been dealing with many foreign residents and Camero's reputation has gone beyond the borders of Spain to the many international funeral arrangements in each and every continent. The company offers funeral plans and the well known 'dignity charter' promise. Special arrangements can be included should you return to live in England. "We can offer peace of mind and all funds are secure and

**BROTHERLY LOVE: Salvador and Paco Camero at Pueblo HQ**

at a fixed price," adds Salvador.

Francisco Camero SL is a member of the Málaga Funeral Directors Association For more information call Francisco Camero on 902 200 625 or email at camero@camero.es.



TEAMWORK: Angel and David outside Positive Fitness

## From fish and chips to physics

BUSINESSMAN and teacher Keith Ellis (left) and his wife Belinda decided to move over to Spain to open a British fish and chip restaurant in the 1980's. Their summers consisted of running their business in Spain and in the winter Keith taught in schools in York. After a decade of travelling back and forth, Keith decided to teach in international schools here on the coast and from there founded the Benalmadena International College in 1997.

The success of the school has grown over the years and is now well established here on the Costa del Sol.

With over 30 qualified English teachers, the school has an excellent reputation with students from 3 to 18 years of age, giving them the chance to apply to the top universities around the world.

In the new year, a sports centre and swimming pool will be constructed.

The college is also setting up a language school to teach adults and children English, Spanish, French, German, Russian and Chinese.

Finally, the college would like to mention to all its ex-students that Shandy, the school dog for 14 years, has just passed away. Visit [www.bic-benal.com](http://www.bic-benal.com)



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# All about Benalmadena

Not just the biggest hotel on the Costa del Sol, Sunset Beach Club has something for everyone, writes Jon Clarke

**M**OST hotels would be struggling to hold a dozen weddings in a year.

At Sunset Beach Club in Benalmadena they just had TWO DOZEN in September alone.

"We get over 80 a year and at €3,500 an event we think that is terrific value," explains manager Mark Wardell.

It doesn't seem much. But, of course, by the time you have factored in the guests rooms, their meals and mini-bar tabs (the majority are Irish, after all), it becomes a profitable business for the hotel.

Indeed, it is one of the few establishments to have grown over the last five years, much of this thanks to an ambitious €22m upgrade of its facilities since 2002.

An incredibly organised and well-run ship the hotel, said to be the biggest on the Costa del Sol, consistently delivers to holidaymakers from all around the world.

And it definitely does not scrimp and save on food or entertainment.

Having spent three days at the hotel last week, I was surprised at the quality of the restaurant, where breakfasts were lavish and a dinner of prawns *pil pil*



FUN: Loads for the kids to do at Sunset Beach

and a rack of lamb was cooked to a tee.

Locals rave about the live concerts - some of the best on the coast - which are free to expats, as well as the beach restaurant and fantastic pool and playground area for kids.

But there is so much more, when you factor in the supermarket, a hair-dresser, shops and full concierge service, not to mention numerous trips, events and classes.

To use the words of one of the Olive Press sales team, based in the Axarquia: "This is one of the best places to take the kids for a weekend as you will literally not get bored at all. There is so much for them to do."

I was particularly impressed

## A true happy event



with the excellent Boyd's Gym, owned by a local brother and sister team, which has been running for two decades and counts on its own indoor pool and hundreds of local members, the majority expats.

There was even a Padi dive school by the pool, where both myself and the kids (that's my next trip) can learn how to dive in a great value day's beginners course, which ends up looking at fish and octopus swimming around the nearby rocky headland.

Yes, there is a lot going on at Sunset Beach hotel and the statistics speak for themselves. The 554 rooms (mostly one bedroom apartments) at the height of the season hold 1,900 happy souls.

They are looked after by a team of up to 69 cleaners, who process a staggering 450,000 kilos of laundry every year!

The Food and Beverage team meanwhile counts 71 staff who work tirelessly in the various outlets from a la carte dining, poolside snacks, lobby/cocktail bar, beach bar, beach club, show rooms and banqueting.

Then there are 14 'animation' girls and guys whose sole purpose is to make young and old guests alike have a fun-packed visit.

"My ideal guest never leaves the premises and is never in need of anything," explains Dubliner Wardell. "Security and safety would always be our number one priority but on a day to day basis from the moment the cleaning team moves in at 5am to the last bar closing at 4 am our real job is to make people happy."

He continues "Over the past five years while the world around us struggled to cope with all the stresses and pains of recession we have played a very small part in bringing some happiness to many thousands of people from all parts of the globe...as a result we have enjoyed five of the best years in the hotels existence and now look forward to even better times as the coast moves towards more "good times".

### Where to stay and eat

## A little touch of genius!

**L**ITTLE by Little the village of Benalmadena is becoming something of a Mecca for food tourists.

Up in the charming village you will now find a number of excellent places to eat, including a German-run steak house and two English-owned eateries.

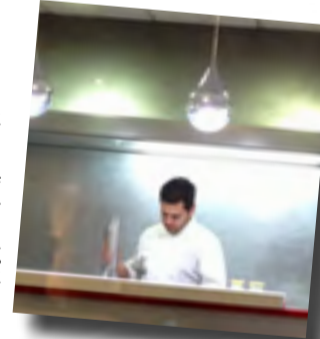
From my point of view the most exciting is the opening of a chic new joint Sollo, which at first glance looks like it might be someone's home.

Well it is now home to the culinary genius Diego Gallegos (pictured right), who I previously knew from a little-known, but hugely rated restaurant Casa Piolas, in Algarinejo, Granada. A well travelled chap, just 29, he trained in two of the best restaurants in the world in

south America, before landing in Granada, where he is also now the resident chef and public face of Riofrio caviar, an organic product raved about by chefs including Gordon Ramsey.

This is one of the real draws of his restaurant with a number of the dishes in the fantastic menu *degustation* featuring caviar, one of the very best products of Andalusia.

His new adventure is an ambitious undertaking with his girlfriend Suzanna, who is also just 29. With a bit of help from their parents (renovating and painting) they have got this place finally open and with its simple decor, amazing paintings by local artist Paco Sanguino and cool jazz, it is a real



top tip for lovers of fine food. For just 49 euros including iva you can have 12 courses including caviar, or without the caviar just 35 euros.

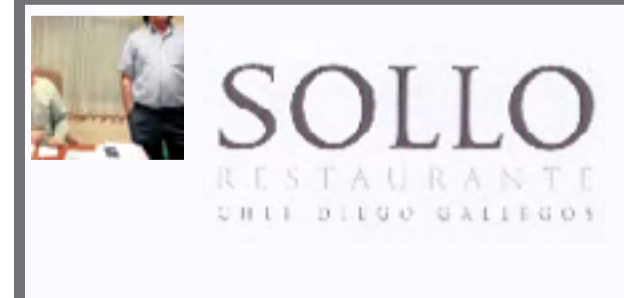
Looking for somewhere good to stay in the old town to flop after a meal then Hotel Pueblo is an excellent choice.

Just two months old this lovely spot just beside the town hall has recently been completely renovated by a talented German, Jan.

Most of the charming rooms look across a sleepy square and they are well appointed with a bottle of water and wine for new guests.

Of course if you are looking for something down on the beach, then you must try the Sunset Beach Club (see adjacent article).

By Jon Clarke



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# All about Benalmadena

With butterfly and crocodile parks, a sealife centre, a theme park and the more conventional Parque de Paloma, Benalmadena boasts a huge range of outdoor attractions

## Fanfare of fun



FEAST: Butterfly lunch, a hatchery (right) and iguana (top)

**B**ASED inside a huge hothouse, Benalmadena's Butterfly Park - the biggest in Europe - offers visitors the chance to see an incredible 1,500 exotic butterflies from all around the world in what it describes as, "a tropical paradise of waterfalls and flowers".

With a group of chameleons and iguanas to boot, it is an educational experience and visitors of any age can learn how butterflies are born and how they reproduce. It is open every day from 10am until 7:30pm. If butterflies seem a bit tame, then the nearby Crocodile Park may be a better option. With over 200 crocodiles,

including the largest in Europe - Big Daddy who weighs a terrifying 600 kg - the park provides the chance to get up close and even hold one of the world's most fascinating creatures. There is a crocodile nursery - probably not as cute as it sounds - as well as a 'Masai village', and African fortress. Tours operate all year

round at 11:30am, 1:30, 3:30 and 5pm. Another option is Selwo Marina, which is home to dolphins, sea lions, penguins, turtles, piranhas and tortoises as well as reptiles, parrots and tarantulas. Visitors can swim with a sea lion, make friends with Squirrel Monkeys, or if that sounds like too much - just sit back and watch a display of exotic birds from around the world.

There are also a few different cafes and restaurants within the park. With opening hours limited in the winter months, it is advisable to check the Selwo website for up to date information. Thrill seekers will want to make their way to the Disneyland of the Costa del Sol, Tivoli World which has 40 rides for various ages, including a roller coaster, a 60-metre sudden drop, a giant ferris wheel, go-karting, a 'passage of terror' and pony rides.

Sadly it is closed from November to February. Opening hours are available on the Tivoli website.

The Parque de La Paloma - a normal park - covers 200,000 square metres and - back with the animal theme - is home to ostriches, turtles, peacocks and goats, as well as a cactus garden.

It has cafes, bars, and a playpark within its grounds, as well as a huge artificial lake complete with water fountain, providing plenty of options to cater for any interest.



### ELEPHANT ISLAND

**EYE OPENER:** You could be excused for thinking you had arrived in a scene from *Out of Africa* but this is actually one of the town's famous roundabouts

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### More in the marina

**B**ENALMADENA Marina may be known as a base for some of the most luxurious vessels in the Mediterranean, but there are plenty of reasons to visit even for those who do not own a luxury yacht (yet). Opened in 1979, the Marina - officially called the Puerto Deportivo de Benalmadena - has space for over 1,000 boats, making it the biggest in Andalusia. But it is also a social hub where people

can go to eat, drink, dance and see live music, while at night the area becomes transformed by a breathtaking display of lights.

Fishing trips leave from the Marina during the day, as well as boats for dolphin and wildlife spotting.

There are regular food fairs, and the harbour has recently played host to events ranging from fashion shows to a meet-up for Ferrari enthusiasts.



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