

# COUNTRY & TOWN HOUSE

A LIFE IN BALANCE

JULY/AUGUST 2021 £3.90

**LOVE IS  
ALL AROUND**

Weddings are back

ODE to  
JOY

*Let's celebrate  
summer*

All-action

OLGA

THE ACTOR'S LATEST MARVELLOUS ROLE

SIGN  
*of the*  
TIMES  
*Watches to stop  
the clock for*

**PRIVATE  
PARTIES**

Book your villa  
holiday now  
(for later)



# MÁLAGA, TAKE TWO

The Andalusian city's transformation from B-list to A-list is complete. *Caroline Phillips* checks in for a five-star stay

Children dressed as clowns and adults wearing fairy wings – all enjoying a fiesta – stroll past the remains of a Roman amphitheatre. The sun is setting as we sit, *al fresco*, in an old bodega nibbling local almonds, anchovy olives and drinking fresh Seville orange juice. Above us, an 11th-century Moorish hilltop fortress, Alcazaba, dominates the city. This is the Andalusian coastal city of Málaga, a provincial capital that seems to enjoy a permanent party.

Once a B-list destination, Málaga is now being reborn as an A-list hotspot. It used to be traffic-clogged and full of TOWIE wannabes en route to high-rises and Fuengirola. Now Antonio Banderas is back in his home town, having resurrected its theatre (Teatro del Soho) just before lockdown; the old town is pedestrianised – its pavements white marble buffed by footfall; its shops and galleries are chic; its visitors are fashionable, *very sexy* Spaniards.

Málaga also boasts a boutique hotel, Palacio Solecio, which opened just before the world closed down. It's a former 1879 palace (restored for £30 million) with a sgraffito paintwork façade, wrought-iron balconies and, inside, the heaviest of Castilian oak doors, arches and pebble-mosaic floors. Some bedrooms have views onto the 280-foot bell tower of the city's baroque cathedral. It's also bang opposite the Santiago church in which Málaga's poster boy, Picasso, received his first communion.

Málaga – founded by the Phoenicians and an important port in Roman times – has a seafront, fishing, and harbour (for 500-ish boats). We wander by houses of ochre, pastel pink and sea blue, and on past flamenco clubs and sherry and tapas bars with walls of decorative tiles and Iberico hams. Soon we reach the cathedral with its stained-glass windows, fine stalls and domed ceilings. 'Wow! Smell those orange trees,' says Anya, my 20-something daughter, as we leave, sniffing air that's like the contents of a scent bottle.

We amble next along the narrow alleys to some of the city's six museums. The Museo Carmen Thyssen, housed in the Palacio de Villalón – is like walking into 19th-century Spain with its paintings of bullrings, Spanish courting and religious processions. Then there's Andalusia's big draw: the intimate Museo Picasso in the 16th-century Buenavista Palace. We leg it past a big queue clutching our pre-bought tickets, but it would have been worth the wait: the museum covers almost eight decades of the artist's work, including the monumental Three Graces.

Afterwards, we indulge in retail therapy, discovering endless niche, independent shops. A fascinating religious shop, Cerería Zalo, sells that must-have Opus Dei outfit, terracotta essential-oil burners and spooky religious effigies.

Toni Pons stocks nothing but hand-made espadrilles, from suede to taupe leather and silver wedges. Another emporium, Cork Pel, deals only in cork – think cork purses to cork necklaces and pencil cases. And Alfajar, in the baroque Zea-Salvatierra Palace, offers Andalusian handicrafts, especially ceramics, with a nod to their Iberian, Phoenician, Roman and Muslim roots.

After all that, we need food. The Malagueños are big on sweet almonds, olive oil, *adobo*-style fried fish and Málaga *dulce* (sweet wine). A big local treat is the Mercado Central de Atarazanas (closed Sundays) – a wrought-iron market building with a Moorish revival arch and enormous stained-glass window. Sunlight floods through as we walk among mounds of fresh *boquerones* (anchovies) and *bacalao* (salt cod). We eat market tapas – superb fried *pimientos* (peppers), *pulpo a la plancha* (octopus) and *calamares fritos* (squid) – standing amidst the hustling, bustling throng.

The following day, we go for a serenity fix, and attend mass at Iglesia de San Juan Bautista. Its façade is painted with 18th-century geometric murals, a typical Málaga feature. Inside it's filled to its gilded rafters with worshippers (many on iPhones), nuns (not on phones), incense and candles. When did iPhones replace Bibles? Is that a thing?

Then it's time for food again. We expand our girths on old-school tapas whilst sitting on high bar stools in Casa Lola, a place full of buzz and chilled beer. In the artisanal nougat shop, Vicens (established 1775), we try most of the 200 flavours. And at Casa Mira parlour (established 1890), we savour soft-cheese-with-honey-and-pine-nut ice cream.

A little stroll afterwards towards Parque de Málaga – with its palm trees and horses and carriages waiting for rides – got rid of a calorie or two. We ambled ten minutes further to La Malagueta bullring in the Plaza de Toros, designed in 1876 by municipal architect, Joaquín Rucoba. The bullfighting season is from April to September, with a major festival in August, otherwise it's a concert venue.

We finish our stay in The Palacio Solecio's restaurant, Balausta. In its galleried courtyard with original 18th-century columns we dine on delicious Andalusian cuisine of *concha fina* (raw clams), lettuce hearts with anchovies and beef *croquetas* – a menu devised by Michelin-starred chef José Carlos García. What better ending to a long weekend of sexy galleries, shopping and food? Just two-and-a-half hours by plane from the UK and with a year-round subtropical climate, it's hard to imagine a better post-Covid break.

**BOOKIT:** Palacio Solecio rooms start from €169 per night, room only. [reservas@palaciosolecio.com](mailto:reservas@palaciosolecio.com); [palaciosolecio.com](http://palaciosolecio.com) ■







*'We WANDER by houses of OCHRE, pastel pink and sea blue, and on past FLAMENCO clubs and sherry and TAPAS bars with walls of DECORATIVE tiles and Iberico hams'*



Palacio Solecio is a beautiful 18th-century Andalusian palace, lovingly restored to its former glory and beyond