

Secret. Spain

Orange blossom-scented beaches, Roman ruins and Michelin-starred restaurants. **Arabella Youens** discovers Spain beyond the stereotypes



Remains of the day: the beach at Bolonia, in Costa de la Luz, Andalusia, is peppered with Roman ruins

A golden mound of saffron-infused rice peppered with shellfish; the austere earthiness of a Rioja Gran Reserva; the skyscrapers, like giant figurines of square-necked soldiers, cemented in the frontline along Benidorm's ochre beach—for better or worse, most Britons think they have Spain figured out.

It's hardly surprising. Spain is, after all, the second most popular destination among British travellers and a fleeting visit to its most obvious resorts will

only confirm these stereotypes. A bit of digging around and a willingness to venture off piste, however, will reveal the silver lining of Spain she successfully hides from the hordes of package tourists that descend there every summer.

Inland from the Costa del Sol

Former Black Watch officer turned safari guide, Hugh Arbuthnott, tripped into owning a property in southern Andalusia after a 'somewhat boozy dinner party' held some 17 years ago. Unlike most second-home buyers, he made no research trips, contacted no property agent, and took very little professional advice at all.

'We could have ended up being co-owners of a farm in Croatia, for all we knew,' he says. Nearly two decades later, he and his wife happily run walking and cultural tours near Gaucín, which, fortuitously, has gone from being a larger than average Moorish citadel village (or *pueblo blanco*) to something of a honeytrap for artists, bohos and, increasingly, wealthy foreigners who can afford the sky scraping property prices.

'The real gem of southern Andalusia are the huge swathes of untouched land which are designated *parque naturales*,' enthuses Mr Arbuthnott, adding: 'There are simply miles and miles of beautiful scenery, which is ideal for walking, riding, picnics or even driving through.'

Planning laws laid out by the Junta de Andalusia have undergone something of a divergence in recent years: on the coastline, developments continue apace (although there appears to be a hiatus while the Marbella Town Hall is under investigation); inland, they have rendered it virtually impossible to issue building licenses. Crack open the champagne. Behind whichever epithet you'd like to give the coastline, the hills, villages, views and bounty of Andalusia have had a mantle of protection laid over them. For the time being, anyway.

Other insiders, however, argue that travellers in search of the bucolic Spanish idyll, with old men in black caps and donkeys causing traffic jams, need to venture further into the province.

'We recommend anyone in search of real Andalusia taking a look at Cazalla de la Sierra, north of Seville, or Alcalá la Real, near Granada,' says John Clarke,

PHOTOGRAPHS: SARAH DOGSON; ANDRÉS AGUIJO/RONDA TOURIST BOARD
GBP EQUIVALENT USE A CONVERSION RATE OF €1 = ABOUT £1.49



(Above): southern Andalusia boasts huge swathes of breathtaking scenery, such as this powerful waterfall (Far left): stark white churches that stand out from deep blue skies are just one part of hidden Spain

a writer based in Ronda, who, together with partner Robert Barclay, has just started up a company to help buyers find properties off the beaten track.

Mr Clarke also points people towards the good stock of 18th-century palaces ripe for restoration in towns like Ecija, which lies between Seville and Córdoba. 'It can get a little hot (it's dubbed the frying pan of Andalusia), but the town sits on a plain where there are literally thousands of Roman ruins

waiting to be excavated. The French have already started buying up properties there,' he says.

Costa Azahar

North east of Ecija, Valencia, Spain's third largest city and host to next year's America's Cup, has triggered the imagination of property investors in the past couple of years.

The results of this 'Barcelona effect' of improved infrastructure are already

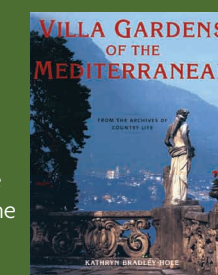
being felt with a new high-speed rail link from Madrid, and the extension of the main airport, which already receives a number of low-cost flights from the UK.

Unsurprisingly, the orange-grove-peppered Costa Azahar, which stretches for 75 miles along the Castellón province north of Valencia, is now being heralded as the next coastal hotspot.

The beaches and plenty of nature reserves make the coastline ideal for

DISCOVERING ANDALUCÍA

In her new book *Villa Gardens of the Mediterranean* (Aurum Press, £40), COUNTRY LIFE's gardens editor, Kathryn Bradley-Hole, recommends a visit to both the Moorish inspired palace of the first Marquis of Tarifa, Casa de Pilatos in Seville and the Jardin de Moratalla in Córdoba. The latter has a maze water feature designed to amuse the ladies of the Seraglio in the secret walled courtyards of Moorish Spain. Also worth a trip is Malaga's botanical garden, which was established in the mid-19th century by Amalia Livermore, the daughter of a British consul, and her husband, Jorge Loring.



(Right): the 18th-century Puente Nuevo stretches across the spectacular Tajo Gorge in Ronda
(Below): Spanish property prices could be about to rise due to the introduction of new land laws (Facing page): there are still many rugged and unspoilt areas in rural Spain



families. However, canny travellers in search of the true Spain might again want to venture inland, according to Jason Webster, the author of *Guerra* and two other books on Spain. Mr Webster moved to Spain 12 years ago and lives in Valencia with his Spanish wife.

He has travelled all over the country but recommends forays into the hills of the Castellón province.

'Vilafamés is a beautiful hilltop town about half-an-hour from the coast, which is famous as a home to artists and painters, a bit like a Spanish version of St Ives,' he says.

'It's also worth driving to Puertomingalvo via Villahermosa del Río,' he adds. 'The valley is thick with pines and evergreen oaks and is quite spectacular. When you get to the town, again on a hilltop, the views over the Teruel countryside are breathtaking. The town itself is also a delight. Cobble streets take you past artisans' workshops including a leather worker and a pottery.'

Costa Brava

Farther up the coast, past Barcelona, lies the Costa Brava and the sizzling mass of concrete that is Lloret de Mar, the resort that holds the dubious claim of spawning the Club 18-30 holidays.

Throughout the years of the boom-bust cycle of the Costa Brava's package-holiday resorts, there has always been a quiet seaside enclave of sophistication on this coast, dubbed by some media as 'the posh strip'.

In the pine-clad horseshoe bays that wind between the villages of Calella de Palafrugell and Begur, wealthy Catalans, wily northern Europeans, and those with a few roubles to spare have all bought homes. Among them is David Miller, an engineer from Buckinghamshire who decided to buy a property here in the early 1980s.

The place, says Mr Miller, has witnessed modest changes since the British started coming to the Aiguablavas paradour in the 1950s and 60s.

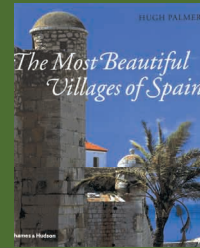
'Today, it's still about lots of blue rinse and tea dancing,' he laughs. Perhaps this is because Begur has remained popular with affluent Catalan families looking for a second home. Testament to the type of people who visit this stretch of coast is the fact that Ferrán Adrià, the multi-awarding winning Catalan chef, chose it as a spot to set up his successful and expensive restaurant, El Bulli.

Beyond Michelin-star cuisine, another advantage of Begur is that it offers plenty to do when the beach gets too busy, which it can do at times.

'The hinterland around the hilltop villages of Banyoles and Olot is fantastically beautiful. You can drive up from there to the ski resorts, or just go for long walks in the mountains,' says Mr Miller, adding: 'Many clever *Barceloneses* have sold their second homes to foreigners for vast sums to move into traditional stone farmhouses in the hills. To keep a toe in the sea, they can always park a boat in the marina.'

TOP BOOKS ON SPAIN

Hidden Gardens of Spain, Eduardo Mencos (Frances Lincoln, £30)
The Houses and Palaces of Andalucía, Patricia Espinosa de los Monteros (Cartago, £39,95)
The Most Beautiful Villages of Spain, Hugh Palmer (Thames Hudson, £24,95)
Guerra, Jason Webster (Doubleday, £12.99)



Spanish property prices look set to rise

Local lore in Andalucía states that there are those who buy on the coast and stay on the coast, those who buy on the coast, sell up once they've had their fill of parties and move inland, and those who head straight to the hills. This year, however, the tide might be turning in favour of the countryside. According to figures by Kyero.com, a Spanish property portal, the number of buyers heading to the hills is about to match the number of those who want to buy on the coast.

Kyero also reports that property around Castellón, the quintessentially Spanish coastal town north of Valencia, has jumped in value by up to 35%, testament to the increase in popularity of the Costa del Azahar.

But prices could be about to rise by a tenth throughout Spain, according to the Association of Spanish Property Investors (APCE), as a result of the introduction of new land laws. Although the Spanish government drew up these laws to encourage more property investment by lowering house prices, APCE believes they will actually lead to an increase in land prices (and hence in property prices), because they require developers to hand over between 15% and 20% of land that had previously been classified for urban use.

Spanish property brokers Propertyinspain.net, however, believe the new laws will be beneficial: 'We do not see there will be any great increase in prices, other than the forecast equity gains of 10% this year and next,' says Propertyinspain.net CEO Terry Walker. 'The same new laws call for increased specifications and safeguards to comply with EU rulings and the leading property developers already comply with these. I think it is going to raise standards to a uniform level.'



On the Market

Costa del Sol

Casa Calista, Benhavis, is set in one of Andalucía's most exclusive estates, El Madronal. Just off the road to Ronda, within 20 minutes of Marbella. This property, priced at €3.6m (about £2.4m), has incredible views of the coast, and, for those who need it, parking space for 10 cars. Contact Sarah Dogdson at Hermosa



Homes in Spain (00 34 952 76 54 58).

Diana Morales (00 34 952 76 51 38; www.dmpproperties.com) are marketing a five-bedroom Andalusian-style house in the hills above the Marbella Club Golf Resort, with views down to Gibraltar. The house, which was built three years ago, has under floor heating and carved wooden doors throughout. It is on the market for €3.75m (about £2.5m) and comes with two golf club memberships.

Costa Brava

'The pretty seaside village of Begur is one of the most exclusive areas of the Costa Brava,' says Alex Vaughan of Barcelona-based agents Lucas Fox (00 34 933 56 29 89). 'It's completely unspoilt, has some great beaches and good access (the nearest airport is Gerona about 40 minutes by car),' he says. Lucas Fox



are currently selling a nine-bedroom property in Begur, which dates from 1860 and has previously been run as a boutique hotel, for €1.7m (£1.1m). Also on their books is a larger villa set in the hills above the coastline with views over Aiguablava, for €2.6m (£1.8m).

Costa Azahar

The Jackson Stops representative in Valencia, Lionel R. Westell often negotiates for clients buying around the village of Macizo de Caroig, about half an hour's drive inland from Valencia airport. 'It's a stunning area: wild and rural but also only 20 minutes from the coast and a short drive to Valencia city,' he says. Mr Westell is currently marketing a large masia (farmhouse) complete with fully functioning fruit orchards. The property, which has been recently renovated and run as a rural hotel, is on the market for €1.8m (£1.2m). For more information, contact Lionel R. Westell at Gabinete Inmobiliario (00 34 627 97 06 70).