

Editor's Choice From This Month's Issue

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Cliffs, caves, sunshine, and sea—the coast of Nerja has a look of Malibu about it. ©Marsha Scarbrough/International Living

BONUS CONTENT

By David Gibb [January 2022](#)

Out of Portugal and Into Spain—Exploring Málaga and the Costa del Sol

The picturesque, painting-worthy views between Almeria and Nerja in southern Spain were so spectacular that our only regrets were being unable to

spend time at each town Beverly and I passed along our three-hour journey.

Decorated with lush greenery, sandy beaches, and white-washed, mountainside homes—seemingly sprinkled down by the hand of God—these former fishing villages seemed straight from a fairy tale fantasy.

Climbing off the bus, we filled our lungs with the fresh, salty Mediterranean air and gazed upon our storybook surroundings. With the majestic Sierra Almjara mountains rising triumphantly behind us, we read each other's awestruck faces: This might just be our place!

It was a memorable way to begin our tour of the Costa del Sol region of southern Spain, an area that, with over 70 popular golf courses, has also been nicknamed "the Costa del Golf."

After settling in, Beverley and I strolled down by Nerja's famous Balcon de Europa, a round, elevated, palm-lined platform (hence its name, meaning "balcony"), jutting on a cliffside over the Mediterranean Sea. King Alfonso XII unknowingly christened it in 1884, when he proclaimed, "This is the balcony of Europe", during a visit following a devastating earthquake.

Stairs descend from the balcony to the sandy beaches far below. Or you can head inland and up. Follow the Rio Chillar, one of three rivers that flow through the town, up toward the mountains, and you'll pass cascading waterfalls and scenic, panoramic ocean views along the way.

Venture just a little bit farther, to a district called Maro, and you'll discover the Nerja caves (easily accessible by regular bus service from town). This expansive cave system is home to 589 rock paintings, many believed to be from the Upper Paleolithic period. These include the oldest pieces of Stone Age art known to exist—six crude paintings of seals—which many believe were created by Neanderthals about 43,000 years ago! Sadly, these paintings are in a

protected area and, for conservation reasons, are not publicly accessible.

However, visitors can still observe a record-breaking natural phenomenon during their tour of these limestone caverns. Formed over millions of years, a 100-foot stalactite has been verified by Guinness World Records as the longest such formation in the world. Even Batman would be impressed!

With its intrinsic beauty, gorgeous beaches, and friendly locals, it's no wonder Nerja has become so popular with expats, especially the British. It's hard not to fall in love with this place.

So, to avoid the risk of becoming stalactites ourselves, we hopped back onto the bus to continue our journey along the coast. Next stop: Málaga.

As we walked up Calle Larios, in Málaga's historical ("old town") center, we felt as though we were passing through a winter wonderland along the Champs Elysées in Paris. Colorful Christmas lights and festive decorations adorned the sea of arches that flowed down the street like a wave of overhead canopies.

Carols played softly in the background (popular 15-minute light shows—set to holiday music—entertain crowds three times each night). It's difficult to imagine that, two decades ago, this thoroughfare was a multi-laned road jam-packed with cars. Today, it's exclusively a lively pedestrian affair—the aorta of Malaga's main shopping district. You'll also find a variety of small bars, restaurants, and coffee shops dotting the narrow, cobblestoned streets and alleyways that radiate from it—great venues for people-watching! Today, being Sunday, everyone in Malaga seemed to be out strolling with their families—indulging in ice cream and other candied treats.

The architecture in this area is remarkable, mixing old-school charm with modern sophistication—completely unlike the clone-style buildings of typical shopping districts in North America. Many wonderful examples of *Mudejar*—a Christian architectural style that incorporates decorative Moorish motifs,

popularized in Iberian kingdoms between the 13th and 16th centuries—abound here, as do several examples of its modern revival in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Sitting high on the hill as backdrops to the city, the Alcazaba, an 11th-century Moorish fortress, and the 14th-century Castillo de Gibralfaro, along with a Roman theater from the second century B.C. (discovered during excavation work in 1951), is sure to appeal to archeological buffs. The Moors took many marble blocks and columns from the Roman theater to use in building their adjacent fortress. (Perhaps an inspiration for today's Blue Box recycling program!)

Málaga has some very nice beaches, however Beverley and I preferred those in the nearby bedroom communities of Torremolinos and Benalmadena—cheap and easy 20 and 30-minute train rides from the central station. Popular expat enclaves, these communities have wide, sandy beaches and beachfront promenades, lined with cafés, restaurants, bars, and stores.

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