

With three new museums this year the capital of the Costa del Sol is becoming a cultural powerhouse

I'm peering down into El Cubo, the huge, sparkling glass cube in Malaga's marina that tops the Pompidou Centre's first foreign outpost. It's still under wraps — the atrium below is empty apart from some rolls of paper — but by the time you read this, 93 works by the likes of Chagall, Bacon and Magritte will have been installed and scissors sharpened for the ribbon cutting today.

This is not the only major museum opening in Malaga this year. The first overseas branch of the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg, crammed with 15th-century icons and masterpieces of Soviet realism, opened in a former tobacco factory on Wednesday, while a fine arts and archaeological museum housed in the magnificent Aduana Palace will throw open its doors at the end of the year.

One new museum in a city is a happy incident and two a coincidence. Here, however, the pattern of three is because of the efforts of mover and shaker par excellence Francisco de la Torre, the mayor, whose mission is to transform his home town into a cultural powerhouse. Job done. Malaga now has no fewer than 30 museums and

galleries, with two dedicated to its most famous son, Picasso, as well as wine, glass and vintage cars. There's also a renovated, palm tree-lined waterfront full of chic shops and restaurants, plus — hurrah — a pedestrianised old town to display its 3,000 years of history and woo visitors who, like me, are looking for more than sun, sea and sherry.

As the Pompidou Malaga's director José Maria Luna tells me, an awful lot has changed in the Costa del Sol's capital. "Thirty years ago, when I arrived as a student, this was a city in black and white. I'm not speaking metaphorically, it was old and dirty, now we have a city in CinemaScope."

This is nowhere more obvious than when I wander in Soho, once a seedy district around the former wholesale market between the Alameda Principal and the port and now the home of the wonderful, Tate Modern-style CAC Malaga centre for contemporary art and a street art project, MAUS, that has given it a new, happier identity. There's graffiti, photography and startling images — I particularly like the tumbling rats and a chameleon — on walls, shop shutters and windows as well as two seven-storey-high murals by D*Face (Dean Stockton) and Shepard Fairey, aka Obey. At the opening of CAC's exhibition by French artist Yan Pei-Ming, its director Fernando Francés explains what a difference MAUS has made. "Two years ago people weren't proud to live here — now they are. I met an old lady in the street who put down her shopping bags, hugged me and said thank you."

Back in the gussied up old town it couldn't feel more vibrant. As I head down the smart, marble-paved Calle Larios and through the surrounding maze of streets, the shops are crowded with Malagueños snapping up the new

outfits that are de rigueur for Holy Week and seating is being hammered into place for the huge parades in which brooding baroque religious effigies will be carried aloft on thrones by robed and hooded members of the “brotherhoods”. Swarms of cruise ship passengers are clacking castanets in the flamenco dress shops (I’m sorely tempted by a purple ruffled number) and as there are no free tables I have to stand at the bar of Casa Aranda for a pick-me-up of thick hot chocolate and its excellent (and remarkably good value) churros before dipping into the restored Atarazanas market to bag some more bargains — raisins, almonds and olives.

Atarazanas, with a stained-glass window worthy of any cathedral, is a history lesson in itself. Built as a shipyard in the 14th century when the Moors still ruled Malaga, it was variously a convent and an arsenal before being rebuilt in cast iron in the 1860s, leaving just one original marble horseshoe arch. It’s a glorious space with three naves of stalls to explore — and tapas bars at each end that are almost impossible to resist. At El Yerno it’s standing room only again for boquerones al limón, the local fried whitebait with lemon, which I wash down with a cheeky little draught vermouth.

It’s a bit quieter when, later, I pay homage, as all tourists must, at the Picasso Museum in the Buenavista Palace. Picasso left Malaga at the age of 19, never to return, and here they make most of the connection, reverentially displaying more than 270 ceramics and sculptures and paintings including the brilliant Bañista (and, for good measure, Roman and Phoenician ruins in the basement).

More peaceful still is the Hammam al Andalus, a lovely recreation of an Arab bath-house and the perfect place to wind down after a tough day’s sightseeing. Soaking in one

of the candlelit warm pools as soft music plays and couples canoodle, I reflect that Malaga, for so long dismissed as an airport with a city attached, really has got this weekend break business cracked. Go — you'll be amazed.

Where to stay

The luxury hotel
Malaga is short on luxe hotels but the Molina Lario (hotelmolinalario.com) is a comfortable four-star bolthole with a prime location near the cathedral and a rooftop pool and bar that's a choice spot for a coffee or a sundowner. Its restaurant is popular for lunch and there's a great value three-course set menu for £13.50. Book a superior (slightly bigger) room on a higher floor to avoid traffic noise. These start at about £104.

The budget B&B
Alcazaba Premium Hostel (alcazabapremiumhostel.com), one of the new generation of designer hostels, is next to the cinema that hosts the Malaga Film Festival in April — and opposite Malaga native Antonio Banderas's new penthouse flat. Rooms are simply decorated, there are parquet floors throughout, and most have views of the Alcazaba fortress (as well as air-con and sound-proofing). A night in a dorm starts at £14 but doubles starting at £58 and superior doubles with a balcony for £63 would be my pick.

Where to eat

El

Pimpi (elpimpi.com)

With its boisterous bordering on raucous atmosphere, celebrity pics, vintage posters of Malaga fairs on the walls and a warren of dining rooms carved out of a flamenco dance hall, El Pimpi looks as if it could be a tourist trap. But it's really very good. Don't miss the slightly sweet jamon (from chestnut-fed pigs, €15) with meaty bull's ball tomatoes, goat shepherd's pie and orange sorbet in olive oil. On a warm night, the place to be is the terrace overlooking the Moorish Alcazaba fortress and the Roman theatre.

El Palmeral (palmeralmalaga.com)
Kick back at the glass-fronted El Palmeral, next to the palms a few hundreds yards from the Pompidou. After lunch (three courses with wine is about €22), you could hire a go-kart — or go for a nap.

Los Patios de Beatas (lospatiosdebeatas.com)
One of Malaga's top wine bars, Los Patios is two beautifully restored 18th-century mansion houses with plenty of space for wine tasting and buying (shipping charges to the UK are reasonable) as well as tapas and full meals. The chef here is English — Christopher Gould, a former MasterChef contestant from Nottingham. His tuna with pickled Chinese salad with wasabi guacamole and pig's cheek terrine would have wowed Gregg and John, and three courses with wine is about £25.

Need to know
Julia Brookes was a guest of Kirker Holidays (020 7593 2283, kirkerholidays.com) which has three nights at the Molina Lario hotel from £498pp including flights from Gatwick, private transfers, B&B, Pompidou tickets and the

services of the excellent Kirker Concierge to book expert local guides or a table for dinner. For more information on Malaga: malagaturismo.com.

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