

Welcome to Malaga – the new Barcelona!

by Chloe Lambert

CHANCES are you've been to Malaga – well, the airport at any rate. Every year, millions of us pass through on the way to the beaches of the Costa del Sol or palaces of Granada.

But, now, the southern Spanish port is having a moment. Thanks to a multi-million pound regeneration project, and several new galleries and museums, this once down-at-heel city has become one of Europe's hippest destinations. Along with a thriving cultural scene, there are good restaurants, great shopping and exciting nightlife.

This week saw the opening of Centre Pompidou Malaga, the first of several pop-up versions of the famous Parisian gallery planned outside France. It is housed in a low-slung white building topped with a giant glass cube in the trendy harbour area.

When I turn up, a large crowd is queuing to pay the £6.70 entrance fee to view 90 works by artists such as Miro, Magritte and Picasso on loan from the Pompidou in France, plus an exhibition exploring dance and

choreography. There's a brilliant room of self-portraits, including a Francis Bacon and Frida Kahlo. Drawing a big huddle is Kader Attia's striking installation, Ghost – a mass of Muslim women in prayer, made from tin foil.

Pompidou is the latest bold step in branding Malaga a 'City of Museums'. Across town, the first overseas branch of St Petersburg State Russian Museum has just opened in a refurbished tobacco factory. Next door is the Malaga Automobile Museum, an extraordinary celebration of cars, fashion and art. By 2016, a Museum of Fine Arts and Archaeology will complete the set.

Malaga's Picasso Museum opened in 2003 – a long-held dream of the artist, who was born in the city in 1881. Round the corner, you can peek into Santiago church where he was baptised. The Picasso Birth-place Museum in the house where he lived until he was ten, contains more paintings, ceramics, early photos, belongings and sketchbooks.

What sets Malaga apart – for now, at least – is that all these galleries tend to be uncrowded, refreshingly small, and most in walking distance of each other.

That means there's plenty of time to explore Andalusian cuisine. Get in the

mood at the buzzing Atarazanas market, then try the terrace at El Pimpi, which overlooks the Roman amphitheatre.

For unbeatable seafood, take the bus to the beach at Pedregalejo on the city's outskirts, where locals feast on freshly caught boquerones (anchovies, often deep fried), espetos (sardines, barbecued on sticks) and platters of enormous mussels, prawns and clams.

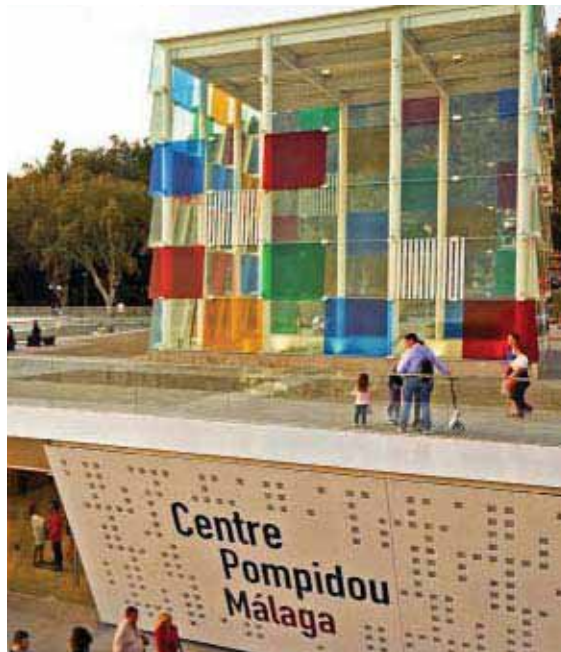
For modern minimalism, head to the sleek gastropubs of the arty Sono district, such as KGB, where punky young things queue for tables. 'Seville just stays the same,' one girl tells me over fusion tapas and a beer. 'Malaga is moving on.'

Near the Pompidou is the city's botanic gardens, rated as one of the best in Europe and bursting with palms, exotic plants and squawking birds. Also to see are the Moorish Alcazaba fortress and Gibralfaro castle, where you can enjoy fabulous panoramic views of the city.

Visitor numbers are already soaring – with some people saying Malaga will be like Barcelona in ten years' time. I'm tempted to agree with them.

TRAVEL FACTS

BRITISH Airways (0844 4930787, ba.com) has daily flights from London to Malaga from £82 return. The four-star Hotel Guadalmedina has doubles from €70, room only. More on the Pompidou, centrepompidou.es



Picture: ALAMY

Main attraction: Malaga's Pompidou gallery
