



Sweet & Strong: The magic of Jerez

Andalucía has long been famed for its Moorish history and traditional Spanish spirit with cities like Seville, Granada and Cordoba hogging the limelight. But to overlook Jerez is to miss a thrilling take on Spanish culture, says **Sarah Lee**...

Uno mas?" asked the bartender pointing to dark, weathered barrels. I nodded and he dispensed another glass of the local fino – a dry sherry. I thought it would be rude not to partake. After all, I was in sherry country and Jerez, the Andalusian city where I was embarking upon a few days away, is actually named after this delectable tippie.

Much of this beautiful city is owned by the Domecq family, purveyors of some of the region's finest finos and moscatels over hundreds of years. The company's bodega, La Mezquita, which curiously translates as The Mosque, has atmospheric cellars with row upon row of aged wooden barrels ▶

Left: Jerez's historic architecture dates back centuries

Above: Sherry country



nestled beneath Moorish arches.

I arrived in Jerez after driving the short distance from my accommodation at the sweeping Arcos Gardens Golf and Country Estate – a fine country mansion house (or "Cortijo") transformed into a boutique hotel with fractional villas and whole ownership homes in the Andalucian countryside. The property is close to the delightful white town of Arcos de la Frontera, which boasts stunning views from its precipitous hilltop location.

About half an hour's drive from Arcos de la Frontera, I reached Jerez. Parking near its main square Plaza del Arenal, I sauntered past chain stores and chic boutiques to the city's historic heart. I emerged from narrow cobbled streets into a wide square to find Jerez Cathedral elevated before me as though in a race towards the heavens. The cathedral embraces many architectural styles including gothic, baroque and neoclassical and I took time to study the intricacies of its architecture and marvel at the mastery of its 17th century builders.

After a short walk from the cathedral, I came to the Arabic Baths. At this 18th century townhouse, surrounded by Moorish splendour, I enjoyed decadent treatments, such as the Andaluz Bath - a full body exfoliation, clay bath, facial mask, followed by a 30 minute massage. Feeling blissfully relaxed, I headed back through Jerez's streets and plazas in search of a lunch spot.

La Cruz Blanca came highly recommended and rightly so. Artistically presented tapas were served at tables made from up-turned sherry barrels and I enjoyed a tasty mix of *jamón ibérico*, goat's cheese with walnuts and chutney and delicious balls of fish sprinkled with honey and sesame seeds.

They say that Seville is the home of tapas, but the food at La Cruz Blanca would give anywhere a run for its money.

Feisty flamenco

That evening I ventured to Jerez's Damajuana Cafe Bar to see the city's culture in its rawest form. Andalucía ►

Above:

The cathedral at Jerez dates back to the 17th century

draws much pride from its flamenco traditions, borne from a wild gypsy heritage, and I was here to discover this passionate art form. As an expectant crowd gathered, the air filled with heart-in-the-mouth excitement and a fiery Andaluz fervour for life, love and all things flamenco. Then there was a skiffled beat from an instrument known as a tambour as guitars strummed to life and a guttural chorus rang out across the patio of the bar. The flamenco band sang and clapped their way through a feisty two hour performance that left me mesmerised.

As I tried to further understand the passion-charged air I asked a local to explain some of the more famous flamenco dance moves. Locking me with a piercing stare, she grabbed at the air, before saying, "You take the apple, you eat the apple, you throw it away", tossing the imaginary fruit aside with certain defiance. My instant flamenco lesson complete, I decided to join the throng and danced the night away.

Mane event

The next morning I headed back to the city to take in the wonders of a completely different type of dance show. The Royal Andalucian School of Equestrian Art is no less passionate in its love of dance than the city's flamenco lovers, but its dancers are very, very different.

With a swish of white mane, a horse and its smartly-suited rider sailed through a sharp bend and then almost tip-toed 'en pointe' across the arena. The school is world famous for its show, How the Andalucian Horses Dance, a routine that takes horse and rider years to perfect. The highlight was a ten-horse formation, where stallions slipped in and out of line dancing daintily and spinning in circles; horses and riders moving as one in a delightful finale. I've witnessed many spectacles on my travels but this was one of the most charming and hypnotically relaxing shows ever.

The Royal School of Equestrian Arts teaches all aspects of horsemanship and details the history of these art forms in an interactive museum housed in the picture-perfect Las Cadenas Palace. Amid bold baroque interiors I discovered its unusual features such as a mirror that gives no reflection and its spectacular black room.

After wandering the school's stables and inspecting their magnificent steeds, I took in another museum – a delightful display of carriages, complete with Spanish Princess Elena's delicately brocaded wedding carriage.

As the pink hues of a warm sun set that evening, I enjoyed a last sherry in the clubhouse at Arcos Gardens reflecting on a culturally illuminating visit to this elegant corner of southern Spain. ■



Above: The cobblestone chic of Jerez

ARCOS GARDENS & COUNTRY ESTATE

Sarah stayed at Arcos Gardens Golf and Country Estate. Located in the heart of Andalucia's sherry region, Arcos is a favourite with celebrities such as former England rugby legend Matt Dawson, who owns a fractional property there.

Its 1.5million euro fully furnished four-bedroom fractional villas are priced from 125,000 euro per three week fraction. A draw to golfers and holiday-makers looking for the real Spain, they have fully-fitted SieMatic kitchens, Gaggenau appliances, Bang & Olufsen sound system, games rooms, home cinema, Wi-Fi, swimming pool, jacuzzi and under-floor heating. Accessible from Jerez and Seville airports, Arcos Gardens also features a boutique country hotel with double rooms from 93 euro a night. www.arcosgardens.com