



Marbella's historical centre is a tranquil delight; below, the Amàre hotel

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Sol of discretion

Forget your preconceptions. Marbella has an elegant old town you'll long to get lost in – and, as **John Clarke** discovers, a new hotel with a very grown-up ambience

Alarmed by the potential dip in tourism that might take place after Brexit, Spain has launched a “Spain in My Heart” campaign aimed at strengthening the country's appeal to British tourists.

But I have to tell the country's tourist bosses that there may be better ways of spending their money. For despite Brexit – and a little local difficulty over Gibraltar – Spain is increasingly seen by UK visitors as an attractive and stable holiday destination, well away from the troubles and uncertainties that have beset other once-popular tourist areas.

Of the record-breaking 75 million visitors to Spain last year, more than 17 million came from the UK, and that figure is likely to grow. Most will be returning holidaymakers but some, like myself, will be discovering that parts of the country are far from being as lurid or disreputable as they've been painted in the past.

I have to confess that I was one of the guilty ones. I'd always written off the Costa del Sol as being glamorous but slightly seedy. An area that, to borrow the phrase Keith Waterhouse famously used about Brighton, looked as if it was helping the police with their enquiries.

Now, after a short but enlightening visit, I can fully admit that I was wrong. Andalucia, and more particularly Marbella, does have it all. There may be lots of untidy, rather than unsightly, ribbon development along the busy coast road that links Malaga airport to Marbella, but that doesn't distract from a magnificent coastline, and a climate that even last month was warm enough for sunbathing and poking a toe in the still slightly chilly Mediterranean.

Marbella itself was a revelation. Still relatively low-rise, with white-washed walls framed by the peaks of the not-too-distant Sierra Blanca, it reeks of history and class. The

labyrinthine old town, with its winding, narrow streets, garlanded with pot-bound flowers and expansive shrubs, encompasses centuries-old shrines and exclusive-looking restaurants before leading you to an orange tree-filled central square.

One restaurant proudly proclaimed, on a mosaic of blue tiles that made up an attractive seascape view, the 33 varieties of seafood it offered, including “Big Red Clams” at No 1, “Smooth Dogfish” at No 13 and “Elephant Fish” at No 26, which I've since Googled in vain.

It's a place to get lost in, which I managed to do once we'd dispensed with our welcoming and informative official guide. I did finally find my way out, eventually, but only after being forced to buy presents for home from some very attractive local boutiques.

In contrast to the old town, the Amàre Marbella Beach Hotel is newly refurbished and less easy to get lost in – although it did take me some time to find the “secret” lift and stairway to the underground pool and spa (turn right after the reception desk, if you must know).

The hotel is a grown-up one. That is, it's termed “adults only”, which, in other settings, can have different connotations but

here means simply that it is child-free. It also means that occupancy rates – without school holidays having to be accounted for – remain high throughout the year.

And it's easy to see why. The clue's in the name. The hotel is actually on the beach, with the outdoor pool and sand beyond perfect suntraps. Each table also has a bit of high-tech wizardry in the shape of a call-button console which you can use to summon a waiter for a towel, a drink or extra ice for your daiquiri.

If you have a head for heights, the hotel also boasts an attractive, on-trend rooftop bar with panoramic views over the sea and the city, and a front-row seat for the spectacular sunsets. It was there we were given a cocktail masterclass by resident mixologist Juan, who produced an Aperol Martini that looked rather violent but tasted less threatening, and something called “I Feel Pleasure”, which I'm afraid wasn't reciprocated on my side of the bar.

So for those who haven't, I'd certainly stick Andalucia – and Marbella – on your go-to list. Sarah Lee, who is involved in the “Spain in My Heart” campaign and runs the LiveShare Travel blog, told *i*: “British travellers have an abiding love for Spain and I don't think that's going to change, even with recent controversies. Brexit may mean Brexit, but what would we do without our regular dose of Spanish sunshine?”

I'll drink to that – just as long as it's not a glass of “I Feel Pleasure”.



Nightly rates at the Amàre Marbella Beach Hotel from £200 in an ‘I Was Here’ room on a B&B basis. A minimum stay is required on selected dates (amarehotels.com). Monarch operates flights to Malaga from Birmingham, London Gatwick, London Luton, Leeds Bradford and Manchester from £75 return (monarch.co.uk)



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