DEALS
SCHOOL'S OUT, POOL'S IN
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THE SUNDAY TIMES

The best of Spain and Portugal 2015

Chris Stewart Published: 1 February 2015

(Altrendo - Getty) Photograph: Getty Images/Altrendo

In this article, we'll showcase the best of Iberia. We'll find you the perfect hotel, villa or beach; we'll head to a culinary outpost that — officially at least — will be outgunning San Sebastian and Barcelona this year; we'll pick out the essential events from a crowded calendar of festivities; and we'll dig out active options from golf to paragliding. First up, the author of the bestselling Driving Over Lemons explains the enduring appeal of his adopted homeland

See the special edition in full below, or skip to your preferred section using the following links:

Chris Stewart's love letter to Spain
Spain and Portugal's hottest hotels and villas
The best beaches in Spain
Spain and Portugal's culture calendar 2015
Culinary outpost Caceres savours its year in the sun
Take a break from relaxation

Everyone said it was the romantic thing to do, but, frankly, it was a bit of a cliché. Come to Spain — Seville, no less — to study flamenco guitar. I was a romantically inclined youth, so, at 21, I packed my bags and did exactly that.

My girlfriend of the time was horrified. I was going to live in a dictatorship. (It was 1972, and I was to catch the last three years of Franco's rule.) It was a crazy time, and I wish I had noted down some of the things I saw. But I found Seville the most intensely seductive city, and from that first visit to Spain, it was always a dream to relocate permanently.

I finally did it in 1988, and I've been here ever since.

For me, the landscape is the big thing about Spain. It's not gentle and comfortable, like England. It's colossal and awe-inspiring and uncomfortable and hot and thorny and inhospitable. It feels somehow stronger and more extreme. There's a saying that Africa begins at the Pyrenees, and in many ways it's true: wide, sweltering plains; huge ranges of mountains, 12,000ft high. I like nature to make me feel small, and Spain does that.

With its architecture and the underlying Moorish influences, I feel here that I am living deep in history. It seems a foolish thing to say, because I'm from Britain, and we certainly have no shortage. But here the history somehow feels more real and important. It runs like a thread through the language, the customs, the politics. History is living.

I have wonderful friends in Madrid, which is often what makes a city. So too Barcelona. Everyone sees the Catalan capital as this vibrant, dynamic city, the Rio of Europe. But what many don't realise is that, until relatively recently, it was a grim little town — you couldn't even find the sea. In the past 20 years, they've succeeded in somehow bringing the sea into the city. It's the same with Malaga, and Bilbao and Valencia. A real sea change, you could call it.

More widely, Spain has changed for the better, too. It's only a slight exaggeration to say that this was a Third World country 30 years ago, suffering the most awful hangover from the dictatorship. There are still traces of that, but Spanish culture is really strong. The music, the art, the architecture — it hasn't allowed itself to be swamped by North American hegemony. Spanish music is still the main thing they listen to here. You feel you're part of a culture, and we don't always have that in Britain.

There's this incredible noisiness to the people and life here. They're not happy unless there's noise — if you're enjoying a conversation in a bar, they'll put the music on loud to make you feel comfortable.

The Spanish take great pride in their country — they're real chauvinists, in fact. You admire this extreme patriotism in a way, but it has also held

them back. Twenty-five years ago, you rarely saw a Spaniard outside Spain. “Why bother leaving when I have everything I could want here?” was the line they took, and they were right in a sense. But with the economic crisis, young Spaniards are going out into the world.

I’m particularly fond of Andalusia, where we live. It fulfils all the stereotypes: endless beaches, flamenco, white villages, the Moorish legacy. Seville, Granada, Cordoba — even now, after all these years, when I see those names on road signs, I get a frisson of excitement.

This was the worst place in Spain to eat for a long time, but it’s changing in a big way. They are getting more adventurous. We go out to eat around here and we always find new places that blow our minds, extraordinary places.

Jamon Iberico de bellota is a firm favourite. The pigs from which it comes roam around holm-oak forests, and it costs the farmer three times as much to do it this way, but it’s worth it. The Spanish are obsessed with ham. Every house has a jamonera, a clamp on a wooden stand that holds a leg of jamon. I once met a professional ham-cutter: he travelled the country with a guitarist who would accompany him as he cut the ham.

In my long and happy time living in this magnificent country, I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more Spanish than that.

Chris Stewart’s books about Spain include Driving Over Lemons: An Optimist in Andalucia, and A Parrot in the Pepper Tree. His latest, Last Days of the Bus Club, is out now (Sort of Books £9). He leads guided walks in the Alpujarras, in Andalusia, in spring and autumn, for guests staying at Casa Ana, in Ferreirola (casa-ana.com), and Las Chimeneas, in Mairena (laschimeneas.com)

Spain and Portugal's hottest hotels and villas

Cool urban bolthole? Cottage for two in the mountains? Beachfront retreat? We know all the best spots

Hotels

1 For food: Hotel Villa Soro, San Sebastian
The marble-floored villa that houses 15 of the hotel’s 25 bedroomswas built in 1898 and is a peaceful retreat, decorated in soothing tones of cream and milky brown. It’s a restrained contrast to the fireworks going on further down the tree-lined Alcalde J Elosegi Hiribidea. For here lies Arzak, a temple to Basque fusion cuisine that has held three Michelin stars since the late 1980s. Run by Juan Mari Arzak and his daughter Elena, the restaurant serves up an array of dizzying molecular creations, including seaweed and kokotxas de merluza — delicate tufts of meat from a hake’s throat (arzak.es).
Doubles from £103, B&B, 00 34 943 297970, villasoro.es

Abadia Retuerta Le Domaine, Castile and Leon (5)

2 For isolation: La Rectoria de Sant Miquel de Pineda, Garrotxa
With dormant volcanoes, cave complexes that drip with stalactites, medieval villages and ruined castles, the little-known Catalan region of La Garrotxa is a mountainous frontier nudging the French border. This former rectory, dating from the 12th century, has been restored by the chef Roy Lawson, formerly of the Balmoral hotel, in Edinburgh, and his wife, Goretti, a Catalan whisky expert he met in the Scottish capital. The refurb exudes a roughly hewn feel, with exposed oak beams, monastic white decor and a menu that reflects Roy’s Scottish roots, blending Catalan with the Clyde in dishes such as squid stuffed with black pudding.
Doubles from £67, B&B, 00 34 691 353111, larectoriadesantmiquel.com

3 For nightlife: Hotel Pulitzer, Barcelona
Among the boisterous throngs of Las Ramblas and Placa de Catalunya, this sleek urban bolthole treads the fine line between stylish and informal with aplomb. Leather and wood abound, the lobby morphs into a bar and library area with blinding white sofas, and the 91 rooms are as snug as they are soundless. Begin your night with a cocktail or two at the rooftop bar; with thick wooden furniture, trellises and exuberant vegetation, it’s more home-counties garden than urban hang-out. You could take one of the hotel’s foldaway Brompton bikes as you head out into the sultry night, but the Raval district, on the other side of Las Ramblas, is an easy walk away — and bursting with cool nocturnal haunts.
Doubles from £120, B&B, 00 34 934 816767, hotelpulitzer.es

4 For relaxation: Six Senses Douro Valley, Viseu
Set on the fringes of the Douro Valley, this is Six Senses resorts’ first foray into the European market. The 57 villas, rooms and suites are built around a renovated 19th-century manor house, with views across vine-coated slopes to the lazy River Douro. The spa is as superb as you’d expect from these masters of pampered loafing, and there are local winemakers on hand to showcase the best varietals of this rich wine- and port-making region.
Doubles from £192, B&B, 00 351 254 660600, sixsenses.com

5 For indulgence: Abadia Retuerta le Domaine, Castile and Leon
The medieval meets the postmodern at this 12th-century former abbey. Last year, the Abadia became the first hotel in Europe to offer Google Glass free to visitors, and its cutting-edge credentials extend to the new El Santuario spa. Opening in the former stables in July, it will offer vinotherapy sessions, with a “spa sommelier” deducing your palate and prescribing the most effective treatment. You’ll get to drink some of the stuff when you head to dinner at Pablo Montero’s Michelin-starred in-house restaurant.
Doubles from £280, B&B, 00 34 983 680368, ledomaine.es

6 For culture: Urso Hotel, Madrid
This is the big new hitter in the Spanish capital, and its neoclassical frontage leads to 78 rooms decorated in muted grey tones, with marble bathrooms and huge windows that suck in the Iberian sun. Its restaurant, The Table By, features a rotating cast of Michelin-starred chefs; manning the stoves right now is Fernando Canales, of the Bilbao restaurant Etxanobe. Within walking distance are the baroque Museo de Historia buildingand Spain’s finest art museum, the Prado, which until September is hosting an exhibition of monumental views of Spanish cities by Genaro Perez Villaamil.
Doubles from £150, B&B, 00 34 914 444458, hotelurso.com/es

7 For wine: Estalagem de Monsaraz, Alentejo

Casa Dali, Cadaques, Catalonia (12)

Urso Hotel, Madrid (6)

Casa Dali, Cadaques, Catalonia (12)

The popping of corks will drown out the ploughing of crops in Reguengos de Monsaraz, European Wine City 2015. Its focal point is the village of Monsaraz, a fortified settlement of just a few hundred people. Amid a garden filled with lemon trees, the whitewashed, two-storey Estalagem is built partly into the town's walls, and its rooms are stocked with charmingly creaky dressers and inviting beds. A short drive from the village is the property's vineyard, Herdade do Esporão, where tasting sessions are curated by the Aussie expat David Baverstock; don't miss the sweet red Garrafeira and the oaky Reserva Branco.
Doubles from £39, B&B, 00 351 266 557112, estalagemdemonsaraz.com

8 For great outdoors, La Escondida Hotel & Restaurant, Alicante
Swapping the raucous roar of Wembley for the gentle rustle of olive groves, the former England and Barcelona boss Terry Venables is the gaffer at this former hunting lodge. Always one with an eye for a new signing, El Tel snapped up the property when it came onto the market and has turned it into a 10-room retreat with exposed beams and original masonry. Don't get too comfy: the Font Roja nature reserve is a playground for the active, with hiking, mountain-biking and riding among the extras on offer. Or, if retired-footballer activities are your bag, there's a great golf course nearby.
Doubles from £134, B&B, 00 34 965 513046, hotelescondida.com

9 For family: La Manga Club, Murcia
This long-standing resort favourite now has extra appeal for any budding young Rory McIlroys, with the opening last November of its Golf Academy, which offers specialised tuition packages for children. This is all alongside a wealth of other junior academies in tennis, cricket, rugby and football. Don't worry about the young ones hogging the facilities: you'll have 28 tennis courts and three 18-hole golf courses to choose from.
Doubles from £77, B&B, 00 34 968 175577, lamangaclub.com

10 For beach: Fuerte Conil Costa Luz, Conil de la Frontera
The Costa de la Luz is the better-looking, more refined brother of the Costa del Sol. La Fontanilla, a vanilla-coloured ribbon of sand below amber cliffs in Conil, is one of the best beaches along here, and is presided over by the Fuerte Conil. It's large (more than 400 rooms), but not without character — witness the donkey employed to "mow" the grass. Got youngsters in tow? Release them into one of a string of kids' clubs and kick back on the flower-bedecked terraces or soft sands down the hill.
Doubles from £46, B&B, 00 34 956 443344, fuertehoteles.com

Villas

11 For design: Lovers Dezanove House, Galicia
With more than a hint of Scandi sauna about it, this contemporary beach house near the Cies archipelago, 35 miles from Santiago de Compostela, has won architectural awards for innovative design. Its sustainability credentials are certainly hefty — much of the house is made from recycled bateas, seaborne wooden platforms on which mussels grow. Inside, touches include a "float therapy" bathtub, a teppanyaki table and underfloor heating.
Sleeps 6; from £2,206 a week; 07460 815443, dezanove-house.com

12 For art lovers: Casa Dali, Cadaques, Catalonia
In the home village of Salvador Dali, up near the French border, this colonial-style villa is more sybaritic than surreal, with views over a sleepy bay and a pleasingly laid-back air. The warren-like interior is all sloping beams, wrought-iron chandeliers and rustic farmhouse tables. Patio doors lead out into a garden awash with bougainvillea. Don't expect any original masterpieces in the small Museo de Cadaques nearby — but regular exhibitions explore Dali's life and work.
Sleeps 9; from £3,700 a week; 020 7351 6384, sjvillas.co.uk

13 For views: Trujillo villas, Extremadura
Three hours from Madrid, but centuries behind in terms of development, Trujillo is a 16th-century time trap of crumbling castle walls and squat churches. These seven granite villas and studios, built into the old town's walls are stylish and individual, with the Artists Studio the most bijou. Prints by local talents should help bring out your inner Miró, while the views towards the Gredos Mountains from Villa Moritos may ignite a