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Spain holidays

Holiday guides



Once upon a time in Almería ... the Fort Bravo film set turned Western-styled theme park. Photograph: Stuart Black/Alamy

Sorrel Downer

If you want to scramble down to a cove and jump into crystal clear water the colour of sapphires, spend a night drinking mojitos in the desert, lounge on the vine-covered terrace of a *cortijo*, eat fish you've never heard of and explore the wild west, then hire a vehicle and travel 30 minutes out of the city of Almería, in [Andalucía](#).

Head west and you'll end up hitting a vast expanse of polytunnels, but to the north there's the 100 square miles

of the Tabernas desert, the backdrop to Spaghetti Westerns, where Sergio Leone's sets still stand. And south-east, there's the volcanic cliffs, white cube pueblos, and coves of Cabo de Gata natural park. Although a much-loved tourist destination, the park's towns – San José, Las Negras, Agua Amarga and Níjar – are very small, and there's nothing much but cactus and beach in between them. All these attractions can be accessed from the ever-lively Almería city. Just remember, some of the coastal bars, restaurants and hotels close at the end of September.

WHAT TO DO

Hiking to coves beyond coves



Mónsul beach. Photograph: Jesús Sierra/Corbis

The easy option is to choose a town or village with a beach and enjoy the benefits of bars, restaurants, kayaks and easy parking. The more challenging and rewarding option is to hike over headlands, or down tracks signposted from the coastal roads, to the dozens of hidden coves or *calas* accessible only by foot or boat. For the energetic, there's the 11km hike from Las Negras north-east to Agua Amarga, passing half a dozen gems

including Cala San Pedro (with castle, and low-key community of euro-hippies) 40 minutes from the start, and the dreamy Cala de Enmedio, near the end. For the less ambitious, there is the spectacular playa Los Muertos, well worth the pleasant 1km amble down a track off the Agua Amarga-Carboneras road. It's also worth noting that if Cabo's most famous beaches – Genoveses (a location used in Lawrence of Arabia) and Mónsul (Indiana Jones and the Lost Crusade) – are packed, a short hike from either will lead you to lonelier coves. (The 5km road from San José to Genoveses and Mónsul is closed to cars from 10am in summer, and an hourly shuttle bus service provided instead.)

Fort Bravo Texas Hollywood, Tabernas



Fort of Tabernas. Photograph: Alamy

This is the best preserved of three film sets built when the Tabernas desert was the epicentre of the Spaghetti Western boom. Created for Sergio Leone's *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966), it's been the backdrop for hundreds of productions since, including a 2003

Manchester United versus Real Madrid Pepsi advert featuring David Beckham and Roberto Carlos, and the 2012 Dr Who episode A Town Called Mercy. It makes for a great, if surreal day out, what with tourists texting in the saloon and the music of Ennio Morricone drifting over the car park. Twice-daily wild west shoot-out shows are full of kid-friendly buffoonery, and a pool, restaurant and accommodation have been added with families in mind. Despite all this, there's still something poignant about this strangely beautiful place and its macho history. Film buffs can head on to Los Albaricoques, on the other side of Nijar from Fort Bravo, a real village used as a location in many Spaghetti Westerns.

· Adults €19.40, teenagers/seniors/students €15.90, children €9.90, fortbravoofficial.com

Rodalquilar



Rodalquilar natural park. Photograph: Alamy

This semi-ghost town is dominated by a gold mine, closed since the 1960s (tours available). You can also visit a nine-hectare botanical garden dedicated to all things deserty, hike through the surrounding valley, swim at the family-friendly El Playazo beach, and then hike or drive

the five miles north along a bad track to the most famous of Cabo's many abandoned places, Cortijo del Fraile, scene of the murder that inspired Lorca's Blood Wedding and a key location in The Good, The Bad and The Ugly. It's pretty dilapidated, even for a ruin, and fenced off, but an atmospheric spot.

parquenatural.com

City of Almería: highs and lows

The 10th-century Alcazaba is one of the most impressive citadels of the medieval Islamic al-Andalus territory and is second in size only to Granada's Alhambra. It's quite a hoof getting to the top of it, let alone fully exploring its many towers, rooms, squares and courtyards (this of course was the architect's plan), but can be visited in the cool of the evening – there are guided tours at 8.30pm. Beneath the city are 4½km of tunnels, the Refugios de la Guerra Civil, which were constructed by volunteers with picks and shovels to shelter the population from bombing raids during the Spanish civil war. Guided tours only; book in advance.

· *Alcazabar: free admission, museosdeandalucia.es.*

Refugios: guided tours €3, almeriacultura.com

Above and below the sea



Arrecife de las Sirenas in the Cabo de Gata natural park. Photograph: David Santiago Garcia/Westend61/Corbis

The rocky coastline is as spectacular under the clear water as over it. There are 40 designated dive sites around the Cabo de Gata Unesco marine reserve, many involving caves and tunnels, shoals of mullet and amberjack. The 50-metre [Tunel Naranja](#), Cueva del Frío, and the underwater chamber at Cerro Negro are highly recommended. Local dive companies also offer boat trips, kayak rental, and guided kayak tours into navigable caves and between the pinnacles at Arrecife de las Sirenas. Widely advertised and widely available (until the end of September), as are kayaks and pedalos for rent by the hour on the beach at seaside towns.

. *Dive centres include: isub, San Jose, isubsanjose.com (all year); Buceo Las Negras, buceolasnegras.com (all year); Clear Kayak, Playa San José, clearkayak.es (July-September)*

WHERE TO EAT

Casa Puga, Almería



Casa Puga restaurant. Photograph: Alamy

The oldest bar in town (1906) is still the standout choice in this dense patch of bars and cafes close to the cathedral.

It's authentically decorated (tiled walls, hams, religious artwork, framed cartoons and photos of deceased clientele), popular with locals, and the menu hasn't changed in 30 years according to Adolfo, one of the five fast, wise-cracking bartenders. Enjoy tapas – grilled artichoke, skewers of chicken, grilled prawns, cheese or salty hot pork on warm bread – while standing at the marble bar, or *raciones* at a table round the back.

· C/Jovellanos 7, +34 950 231 530, barcasapuga.es

Restaurante Isleta del Moro

A family-run institution on the water's edge in an isolated bay on Isleta del Moro, this started as a bar in 1969 when only four families lived in the village. It's now packed at weekends – but retains its quirky, homely feel – with people converging from far and wide for pre-ordered paella, and the heartily recommended house speciality, *cuajadera*, a saffron-rich seafood stew (intriguingly, erroneously translated as “junktet of sandpiper” on the menu). Duck through a tiny door onto the table-wide balcony for the best seats in the house. If the names on the infinite list of available fish are baffling – *mero*, *lecha*, *breca*, *zama* – refer to illustrations at the back of the menu or opt for the *surtido*, the mix. It's all good.

· C/Isleta del Moro, +34 950 389 713

Teteria Almedina, Almería



Before reaching the Arab fortress, the Alcazabar, you pass the Almedina barrio, a tumble of narrow streets and cheerfully coloured houses, where a neighbourhood association is at work conserving Almería's Muslim heritage, the spirit of al-Andalus. This tiny restaurant with courtyard is part of that initiative, and well worth visiting en route to the fort for its legendary *limón a la hierbabuena* (mint and lemon cordial) alone ... although while there you could also go for a tagine and a few pastries stuffed with dates, chocolate, honey and nuts.

· C/Paz 2, +34 629 827, teteriaalmedina.com

Asador la Chumbera, Agua Amarga

It is possible to tire of fried fish at the beach. Luckily, this quietly elegant Cabo favourite, a short drive uphill, offers sophistication and variety, and you still get sea views from the outdoor tables. Everything here is rendered super-tempting with purées, caviar, truffle oils and whatnot, but for a hot day, try the red tuna sashimi with wakame followed by mandarin sorbet with vodka. With mains averaging €15 this isn't a budget option, but a lunchtime or starry night treat. Book ahead.

. *Paraje Los Ventorrillos, in the direction of Carboneras, +34 609 079 944, asadorlachumbera.com*

El Jardin, San José

This busy little seaside town is comprised predominantly of fish restaurants and flip-flop shops. Several of the former are outstanding (try 4 Nudos), but El Jardin is a gem, particularly if you happen to be a vegetarian, lactose or gluten intolerant or partial to healthy, imaginative food. Here, finally, are salads with more than three ingredients, plus savoury crêpes, pizzas, imaginative stuff like carpaccio of squash, an apple ravioli, and dishes using truffles or ginger and almonds. The setting, a tiny terrace at the port end of the beach has no sea view (unless you stand) but the focus is the food. Top value with a menu of the day at €9, and a fair selection of non-vegetarian dishes for carnivores.

. *C/del Puerto 8, +34 635 797 432*

WHERE TO DRINK

Capitán de las Sardinias, Las Negras



Capitán de las Sardinias

A drink at the minuscule La Bodeguiya on the stony beach is obligatory at this lively cove, but don't miss out on visiting this retro mariner-themed bar with en suite surf shop on a strip of bars near the roundabout. With good music, icy cocktails, and a cheery, fine-looking clientele, Capitán de las Sardinias is the creation of the charismatic Carlos who went bust in the crisis, languished as a barista in London, and has returned to try again. He's pretty much a poster boy for surfing, for the powers of positive thinking and the rise of a generation of people in Spain who've had a tough time but are now the stronger for it.

· *C/Cantos Rodados, [on facebook](#)*

El Vino en un Barco, Almería

A cool spot in Almería's historic heart renowned for ingenious cocktails (try mescal sour, or the house special, kraken sour concocted from spiced rum, lemon, ginger beer), and tapas. The black pudding and apple *empanadas* are good but the crisp, sugary *Inés Rosales tortas de aceite*, topped with tomato, goat's cheese and salty anchovies, then grilled, are fabulous. Everything here is exquisitely designed, from lighting, to arty menus, and the ladies' toilets.

· *C/Real 12, on facebook*

Discoteca Chaman, Escullos



Chaman bar/club/restaurant

It's an interesting idea to have a club open onto a cliff edge, but it's clear from the footprints that a scramble down to the beach for a swim is part and parcel of a hot night at the Chaman. The attractive terrace with its spectacular views is open from 1pm for lunch, dinner and cocktails, and the late-night DJ action follows until dawn. Should you decide to take a break from the raggatek and dubwize, or whatever, take a look at the building next door

– a vast 18th-century fort, Castillo San Felipe, built to keep the barbary pirates out.

· *C/Chaman, Los Escullos, San José, +34 658 939 279, chamanalmeria.es*

Jo Bar aka Jolie Rouge, Escullos

If Apocalypse Now were a feel-good movie, Kurtz would be hanging out at Jo Bar. More a desert encampment, an assembly of mismatched seating, pallet decking, curios (skulls, art, a mannequin dressed as a pirate), it sits among shrubbery off a sandy track – coloured lights, the sounds of motorbikes and the music of the 1970s are the only clues to its existence. The open-air hangout, founded in 1993 by Frenchman Jo Belle, is legendary in a clandestine way, attracting bikers, rockers, and celebrities – Damien Hirst, Rob Spragg, and the late Joe Strummer among them. Jo is an artist, and his metal sculptures stand proud under the desert skies. But this bar is itself a crazily magnificent piece of work.

· *Off the AL4200 road, west of Isleta del Moro, [on Facebook](#)*

WHERE TO STAY

La Almendra y El Gitano, Agua Amarga



La Almendra y El Gitano

A heavenly place, with pergolas (shaded, plant-covered walkways) and creamy polished floors, tasteful Moroccan-style rooms (four doubles, four suites) set in an oasis of palms and succulents, it looks like a hotel, feels like the holiday home of a wealthy, tasteful friend, and is actually a casa rural, hence shared kitchen, no restaurant. Eat at nearby La Villa, Asador La Chumbera, or the many beach bars down the hill in Agua Amarga, the prettiest of Cabo's seaside villages.

· *Doubles from €115 B&B, laalmendrayelgitano.com*

Hotel MC San José

A chic and stylish boutique hotel in a seaside town, with a proper seaside holiday feel courtesy of the boat in the lobby and liberal use of driftwood and pebbles. Copious basking space includes a central pool and flower-filled chill-out terrace, well-equipped games room, glass-walled dining room, subterranean lounge with soft white leather sofas, and bodega stocked with local wines. Standard rooms are great value, superior rooms have spiral staircases to sun roofs, and the small but sophisticated family suite with direct access to the pool is superb. Cool and sweet, with friendly and informative staff, and ideally located for quick access to the beaches of Genoveses and Mónsul.

· *Doubles from €70 B&B, hotelesmcsanjose.com, closed in winter*

Complejo Turístico y Camping Los Escullos, San José



Restaurant area at Complejo Turístico y Camping Los Escullos, San Jose
You don't commune with nature here, but you do get free zumba, karaoke, mini-disco, water polo, aerobics, and drinking games along with access to the pool, snack bar,

pizzeria, shop and toilet block. One of four official campsites in Cabo de Gato, its dense concentration of bungalows, safari tents, and pitches for camper van and tents, and the exuberance of Spanish campers, can be overwhelming, but kids will love it. There's a good beach a short walk down a sandy track, and some of the natural park's very best are a few minutes' drive away.

· €30 for two-adult tent pitch with car,

losescullossanjose.com

Cortijo La Alberca, Nijar

Spanish country life is at its most idyllic at this 250-year-old farmhouse set amid grape vines, lemons, figs, and bougainvillea in the Ribera de Huebro valley, ideal hiking country in cooler months. The rooms, some converted outbuildings, are authentically restored with their original hefty doors and beams and shuttered windows; the pool, an ancient water deposit, has the look of an Arab bath. Whether it's for the hospitality offered by Celeste, who runs this *casa rural* with her parents, her mother's home-cooked dinners of rabbit and paella served on the terrace, or the quiet loveliness of the location, few places earn such euphoric reviews. "A lot of guests cry when they leave," says Celeste, baffled but flattered.

· Doubles from €55 B&B, cortijolaalberca.com

Nuevo Torreluz, Almería

Spotless, sleek and comfortable, this is a good-value, modern option in the historic centre of the small city, close to the Alcazabar, cathedral and myriad bars and restaurants squeezed into narrow streets. The hotel's Taberna bar is a popular post-work meeting spot, both for the quality of its tapas and the refreshing misty spray puffed over the outdoor seating area in summer.

· Doubles from €57, breakfast not included, torreluz.com

Cala Chica, Las Negras

Everything in this cool and classy haven, from breakfasts and bathrooms to the front door, is so much more stylish than you'd expect for the price. The picture window in the upper floor lobby frames a view of enticing blue sea. The lower level rooms each have shady balconies and white-cushioned loungers on which to doze before a dip in the attractive pool. It's a two-minute stroll back to the beach to book a boat ride, eat fish, dance and buy hippy trinkets.

· *Doubles from €72 B&B, calachica.com Follow Sorrel Downer at [@somewheresville](https://www.instagram.com/somewheresville)*

· *Various airlines operate direct flights to Almería from London airports and Manchester*