

Almeria, Spain

Cowboys ride in Europe's sunniest corner

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Low country: catch daily shows at Fort Bravo, where spaghetti westerns were shot

To be certain of blue skies this summer, choose Almeria, the Spanish province that's officially the sunniest region in Europe. It was one of the first areas in Spain to develop tourism, but it seems to have forgotten the brief: beyond the high-rise strips of Roquetas del Mar and Mojacar, this is an unspoilt land of scorched desert, empty beaches and the bewitching mountains of the Alpujarra Almeriense. Maybe that's down to the Almerian character. The locals are called lagañosos — or bleary-eyed — by fellow Spaniards, in recognition of their laid-back attitude. Or, as goat farmer Paco Arceano puts it: "It's hard to concentrate when God has given so many distractions."

British Airways is launching a new flight to Almeria

on March 27, departing from Heathrow on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Getting distracted has never been easier.

The beaches

The Cabo de Gata Natural Park is home to some of the last truly wild beaches in Spain: 56 of them, some shingle, others glittering sand. The best include Playa de Monsul, where petrified dragon's tongues of lava lap the water; Los Genoveses, a curve of gold with shallow seas, ideal for families; the tiny black-sand cove of Los Toros; Cala de Enmedio, a secret natural water park of turquoise pools and bone-white rocks; and Cala de las Hermanicas, east of San Jose, for awesome snorkelling.

What to do

Head out into the Tabernas desert, where the adventures range from guided day hikes (from £40pp; spanishhighs.co.uk) to week-long horseback expeditions (from £1,399pp; unicorntrails.com).

Then there are the film studios where they shot spaghetti westerns: Fort Bravo (£17; fortbravoofficial.com) and Western Leone (£10; western-leone.es) both put on saloon shows and bank robberies.

In dramatic contrast to the parched and silent Tabernas, the Alpujarras — the foothills of the

Sierra Nevada — are green and loud with the rush of water. Tourists drive up to see the white villages, but to truly appreciate the beauty, you need to explore on foot. The delightful 10-mile circular hike around the Barranco de Aguadero from Laujar de Andarax will make you a believer; search Del Aguadero at juntadeandalucia.es for details. In the city of Almeria, the 10th-century **Alcazaba** is the biggest Arab fortress in Spain (free; museosdeandalucia.es). Its walls and gardens will steal more time than you expected, while the Catedral de la Encarnacion — a fortress built to keep pirates at bay — will nick even more. And don't forget to ask for tapas with your drinks: in Almeria, they're free.

Where to Eat

Memorabilia from films shot in the region cover the walls of Casa Miguel, in the Cabo de Gata fishing port of San Jose, but the true stars are on the menu — especially the arroz marinera (mains from £9; casamiguelentierradecine.es). Up the coast in Agua Amarga is Asador La Chumbera, rightly famous for fire-grilled meat (mains from £14; asadorlachumbera.com). Further east, in Carboneras, Chiringuito J Mariano serves the best gambas rojas (red prawns) on the coast (mains from £8; Calle Nueva 2).

Where to stay

Hotel MC San Jose is an unexpectedly chic boutique for a laid-back place such as San Jose. It has 31 rooms, the priciest of which have private

rooftop terraces. There's a pool and a cellar stocked with Almerian wines (doubles from £75, B&B; hotelesmcsanjose.com). For rural romance, try La Almendra y el Gitano: eight rooms and a pool in a luxurious oasis dedicated to the cult of silence, three miles inland from Agua Amarga (doubles from £103, B&B; laalmendrayelgitano.com). In Agua Amarga, choose El Tio Kiko, a stack of whitewashed rooms with a pool, 10 minutes' walk from the beach (doubles from £84, B&B; eltiokiko.com).

Between them, BA, easyJet, Jet2, Ryanair and Thomas Cook fly to Almeria from most UK airports