

# The Telegraph

## Almeria, Spain: a cultural city guide

Nick Harrison visits a seaside city colonised by the Moors 1,000 years ago and by film-makers in the 20th century.



By Nick Harrison

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In AD 955, to defend his flourishing trade in silk and textiles, the blue-eyed Abd ar-Rahman III, the Caliph of Cordoba, built his magnificent fortress, the Alcazaba, transforming Almeria from a small coastal neighbourhood into a thriving port for the next two centuries.

Today, the views from the 16th-century Christian castle built on the highest point of the original Islamic foundations by the conquering Catholic kings are magnificent. North is the Tabernas, Europe's only desert, used to shoot Lawrence of Arabia, while down the steep hillside to the south the colourful rooftops of the old Medina stretch as far as the dazzling blue of the Mediterranean.

While it freezes in most of Europe, it is a hot February day in eastern Andalusia and I have the Alcazaba all to myself, as well as a city full of wonderful churches, squares and parks to explore. Catastrophic earthquakes in the 16th century left little of the original Alcazaba but within the beautifully reconstructed walls and towers, and amid the manicured gardens, ornamental pond and fountains, the remains of the former palace, ancient streets and wells are enough to evoke grand former days.

The peacefulness is a far cry from the scene in *Never Say Never Again* when James Bond dodges bullets from Arab bandits here. On leaving through the Puerta de la Justicia, I reach another film set – Spielberg chose Almanzor Street for a jeep chase in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Today the charisma of Sean Connery and Harrison Ford is replaced by cats slumbering on this traditional Moorish street.

I wander through the cramped streets of the old town down to Parque Nicolás Salmerón, which honours the Almeria-born first president of the Spanish Republic. Here among the palms and landscaped gardens Clint Eastwood and other Hollywood A-listers made movies. I stop for coffee at El Barril, where actors, extras and crew mingled with locals.

From the park it is a short walk to the imposing 16th-century cathedral and the large, palm-fringed square, easily recognisable from the Oscar-winning biographical Second World War film *Patton*. The defensive facade of Europe's only cathedral built to double as a fortress is unforgettable.

At the adjacent Plaza Bendicho I visit the Casa de los Puche, the city's oldest house, before admiring the town hall in the vast main square, Plaza de la Constitución. This was once a bustling venue for Arab markets, bullfights, games and fiestas and, you guessed it, Hollywood films.

After lunch at a tapas bar on the lively Puerta de Purchena, the former gateway to the great Arab city, I resist a siesta and head for the Paseo Marítimo, the beach promenade, in search of John Lennon, who stayed in Almeria city in 1966 while filming *How I Won the War* in the desert.



Luckily, it is only a short walk to Almeria's sandy beach, where I find a cafe outside Hostal Delfin Verde. I watch the sunset from below the large window of Room 3 where the former Beatle lodged, got sunburnt and supposedly wrote some lyrics to Strawberry Fields Forever.

When Almeria reawakens I take advantage of evening services to visit the city's splendid churches. The oldest, the 15th-century Santiago Church, is my highlight. I finish the night at Casa Puga, one of the city's oldest tapas bars, where a barman tells me that his father was an extra in Lawrence of Arabia. Europe's warmest city really is extra special.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

John Lennon, it has been said, started wearing his famous round glasses in Almeria

### **What to avoid**

- One of Almeria's biggest exports is fruit and vegetables. Unfortunately, this means if you drive around the district you will encounter swathes of land coated in ugly plastic polytunnels.
- The city's archaeological museum ([museosdeandalucia.es](http://museosdeandalucia.es)) is impressive. But unless you're heavily into ancient digs, skip the first two floors and head straight to the top floor that deals with Almeria in its heyday from the 10th to 12th centuries.
- During the day all areas of the city are considered safe. But avoid

walking in the old fishermen's quarter of La Chanca and to the top of the castle of San Cristóbal at night.

- Avoid missing out – remember to ask for the free tapas that are often included when you order an alcoholic drink at a bar.

## GETTING THERE

EasyJet (0843 104 5000; [easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)) flies from London Gatwick to Almeria from the end of February. Ryanair (0871 246 0000; [ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)) started a regular service from Stansted and East Midlands in March. Monarch (0871 940 5040; [monarch.co.uk](http://monarch.co.uk)) flies from Birmingham and Manchester from May. All these airline services stop in November. Between November and February fly to Malaga, Granada or Murcia, from where it is no more than three hours' drive or bus journey to Almeria.

## INSIDE TRACK

- Carry your passport, as most of the city sites are free to European Union residents.
- Walk or take a short taxi ride to La Casa del Cine on the outskirts of the city to learn the extensive story of Almeria's film history.
- The Tabernas desert, which is 45 minutes away, is easy to visit independently. Alternatively, let the experts at Malcamino's ([malcaminos.com](http://malcaminos.com)) bring the great movie locations to life by taking one of their 4 x 4 tours.
- Visit the open sections of the three miles of Europe's largest underground galleries, which were used as bomb shelters during the Spanish Civil War.
- Many directors have used the interior and courtyard of the wonderful School of Arts and Crafts. Find out why for yourself; it is open daily Sept-June, 8am-10pm.
- The tourist office is in Plaza Bendicho. To know what was filmed where in the city, pick up the locations guidebook from here.
- For a cooler alternative to the desert, visit the spectacular nearby Cabo de Gata national park. Stop for a dip at Monsul beach near San José, where Indiana Jones was filmed.

## **BEST HOTELS**

### **Catedral Hotel ££**

This small hotel next to Almeria's unique cathedral is on the square in which Patton was filmed. It has 20 modern rooms and one of the best restaurants in the city (0034 950 278178; [hotelcatedral.net](http://hotelcatedral.net); doubles from £45).

### **AC Almeria ££**

Located in pretty Plaza de las Flores facing the John Lennon statue, this modern hotel has comfortable rooms, an excellent rooftop pool and is within walking distance of all the sights (234999; [marriott.com](http://marriott.com); doubles from £50).

### **Plaza Vieja Hotel £££**

Occupying one side of the quiet main square, the newest hotel in the city offers modern luxury in an exceptional setting. Relax in its Arabian baths after a long day sightseeing (282096; [plazaviejahl.com](http://plazaviejahl.com); doubles from £70).

## **BEST RESTAURANTS**

### **Taberna Vasca ££**

An unassuming little place that lets its food do the talking. Imaginative dishes are served with a smile. It is also a good place to drop in for a drink (Calle de Padre Alfonso Torres 4; 268623).

### **La Casa Puga Taberna ££**

Arguably the best tapas place in Almeria. Go early to find a table around the back of the bar or stand surrounded by hams and bottles at the long bar and let the smart waiters take your order (Jovellanos Street 7; 231530; closed Sundays).

### **Las Botas Bodega £££**

Tucked away down a quiet street off Calle de Tiendas. Enjoy home-made Spanish cooking surrounded by bullfighting pictures and memorabilia (Fructuoso Pere Street 3; 234239; closed Sundays).