


THE SUNDAY TIMES
FEATURES

Spain's little regions with big hearts

Join Chris Haslam on a road trip through the country's
five most rewarding provinces

Chris Haslam Published: 7 February 2016

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Space for everyone: the five-mile Playa de la Plata, in La Janda
(Reinhard Schmid/4Corners)

La Janda, Andalusia

Where the Atlantic meets the Mediterranean, at Europe's southwestern corner, lies the *comarca* — or county — of La Janda. It's bound from north to south by the ancient town of Medina-Sidonia and the tuna-fishing village of Zahara de los Atunes, and from east to west by the cork forests of the Alcornocales hills and the Atlantic. This stretch of coast, with its wide beaches, consistent surf and foodie seaside towns, has long been popular with the Spanish and Germans, but has only recently been discovered by the British.

Start in Medina-Sidonia, thought by many to be the oldest town in Europe. Founded by the Phoenicians on the site of an even older Iberian stronghold, it has passed through the hands of the Romans, the Arabs and the dukes of Medina-Sidonia, one of whom rather reluctantly commanded the Spanish Armada.

It's a pretty spot: cobbled streets, flower-filled alleyways and sudden splashes of ancient history, from the Roman sewers at Calle Espiritu Santo 3 to the hilltop ruins of Torrestrella castle and the jewel box that is the Iglesia de Santa Maria la Coronada. While wandering, pop into the Confiteria Nuestra Señora de la Paz, at Calle San Juan 14, for an *alfajor de Medina*, a scrumptious cake of honey, almonds, hazelnuts and sugar, made to the original Arab recipe.

Half an hour northeast is Alcala de los Gazules, one of the most striking — and least touristy — of all the region's *pueblos blancos* (white villages). There's nothing here you need to see: simply drop in for a tapa or two at Bar Dominguito (Plaza Alameda de la Cruz 6) and let all that fag-smoking, lottery-entering, sherry-sipping Andalusian-ness soak in.

South of here, the Ruta del Toro takes you round the Alcornocales Natural Park to Castellar de la Frontera and the magnificent La Almoraima, a 17th-century convent turned country-house hotel (doubles from £55; laalmoraimahotel.com). It's on the edge of what was once the biggest private estate in Europe — 54 square miles of crags, cork oaks, cobbled mule tracks and cool mountain streams, populated with boar, deer, eagles and hundreds of *pata negra* pigs, all working hard to become *jamon*.

The hotel is grand — chandeliers, antiques, a snooker room —

but the estate is grander. La Almoraima can arrange tours on horseback, on mountain bikes and on foot.

Go straight from here to the seaside, taking the N340 via Algeciras to Zahara de los Atunes and the Costa de la Luz, in the middle of a five-mile stretch of pale gold sand and dunes. Look left and there's Africa. Turn right and you could walk all the way to Barbate. (Not that you'd want to: Franco's favourite resort is a modern port with little charm.) Look straight ahead and you'll see the finest sunsets in Europe.

You'll also eat the finest tuna, especially if you come in May, when the migration passes just offshore. They used to butcher the catch in the church, and today the town serves everything from tuna lollipops and ice cream to tuna G&Ts. Best restaurant in a highly competitive market is El Refugio, right on the beach (mains from £8; elrefugiodezahara.com).

Good hotels are thin on the ground in these parts, so rent a villa with a pool. Los Caños de Meca is a lively, surf-loving resort just up the road by the Trafalgar lighthouse. Expect beach parties, live music in the bars and a happy holiday vibe in high season, when you can rent the two-bedroom Casa Meca, just across the lane from the beach, for £688 a week (spain-holiday.com).

Getting there Ryanair flies from Stansted to Jerez.

Almeria, Andalusia

East of Malaga and south of the Sierra Alhamilla mountains lies Spain's Empty Quarter. Summer temperatures can reach 48C, and this parched earth — home to Europe's only real desert — is the driest place in the continent.

For decades, the only tourists who came were hippies in search of barefoot hedonism on beaches that the law couldn't reach, but gradually the rest of us are waking up to the charms of the last stretch of the southern coast to have fallen to the developers.

Start in the *pueblo blanco* of Mojacar, which, in keeping with its hippie history, has become a bit of a wellness centre in recent years. Yoga, reiki and other alternative therapies are on offer, and if you search the whitewashed alleys, you're bound to find a shop selling crystals.

The best choice for couples here is the venerable Hotel Mamabel's, which has been doing boutique chic since 1975. It

has just seven rooms, most with huge views of the sea, a mile distant (doubles from £53; hotelmamabels.com). If you're with kids, rent a flat: a high-season week in a two-bedroom pad with a shared pool, down the hill in Mojacar Playa, costs £425 (ref 20391; spain-holiday.com).

An essential excursion is a drive across the Desierto de Tabernas. If you've never been to New Mexico, there's no longer any need. The landscape here is exactly the same, down to the cacti and thrusting buttes. And the cowboys: Sergio Leone shot spaghetti westerns here, and the film set has become a tourist attraction, with daily gunfights, bar brawls and a gratuitous but not unenjoyable cancan show. Do try to dress the part, otherwise your selfies — outside the saloon in shorts and flip-flops — will be rubbish (£15, children £7.50; fortbravoofficial.com).

And do go hiking. But not on your own: Tabernas is both staggeringly beautiful and exceptionally easy to get lost in, so hire someone who knows the ground. A full-day guided hike for a group of four starts at £35pp with spanishhighs.co.uk. Just south lies the Parque Natural Sierra Alhamilla, where, in an oasis that belongs somewhere in the Sahara, mineral-rich waters emerge from hot springs. They've been enjoyed by the Romans, the Moors and, now, a handful of tourists in the know at the ornate Balneario Sierra Alhamilla, where you can poach in Arab-style marble baths and be basted in volcanic mud, then blasted with hosepipes (couples' spa packages from £103; balneariosierraalhamilla.es).

That's the hinterland. Now for the beaches, and specifically those around the wild Cabo de Gata. There are no high-rise hotels here. Sophistication is noticeably absent. What you get instead is dirt tracks running through abandoned villages to extraordinarily beautiful coves where, if you're lucky, you'll find that an enterprising hippie has set up a *chiringuito*, or beach bar.

The best of them lie on a 22-mile stretch between Las Negras and the Cabo de Gata lighthouse, so get a room in the neighbourhood: the foodie Hotel Los Patios, just up the lane from Playa El Playazo, is sleek, white and thoroughly green (doubles from £65; lospatioshotel.es). Or try Cortijo El Paraiso, a former farmhouse near the fishing village of Los

Escullos and within walking distance of Playa del Arco, with the added attraction of a pool (doubles from £39; booking.com).

Time to go exploring. Must-sees include Playa de los Genoveses and Playa de Monsul, for their bizarre volcanic rock formations, and the hidden coves of Cala de los Amarillos and Cala Chica, which can only be reached on foot. Take a hat, a picnic and plenty of water — and if you spot a *chiringuito* selling the local *gambas rojas*, pile in.

Getting there Monarch and easyJet fly from Gatwick to Almeria.

Castellon, Valencia

As white elephants go, you don't get much bigger than a £106m airport that nobody wanted. Such was the fate of Castellon airport. The brainchild of a local politician, Carlos Fabra, who is now doing four years for fraud, it was unused after its inauguration in 2011 — until late last year, when Ryanair launched flights to the ghost airport. This has opened up not just the Costa del Azahar, or Orange Blossom Coast, which is pretty much unknown to British tourists, but a fascinating hinterland of mountains, rivers, castles and superb ham.

Head inland first, into Spain's secret spa country. It gets hilly quite quickly — after the Pyrenees, this is the most mountainous area in the country — and your first stop is La Vall d'Uixo, for a boat trip down the Rio San Jose, the longest subterranean river in Europe. Whether you find it thrilling or relaxing depends on how you feel about places with names such as the Devil's Lake and the Room of Bats (£7.70; riosubterraneo.com).

Next, Montanejos, for a dip in the hot springs. With sheer cliffs, soaring eagles, fragrant pines and turquoise waters bubbling up at a constant 25C, this earthly paradise, complete with waterslide, is absolutely free — in 1863, it was declared a public utility. If you want to stay, try to book cabin No 1 at Albergue El Refugio de Montanejos (from £20pp, B&B, albergueelrefugio.com). Otherwise, push on to El Cid country. Teruel is known as the forgotten province of Spain, and the mountains of Gudar-Javalambre form one of the emptiest quarters of Europe: 24 villages and just over 8,000 people

living in an area the size of Cheshire. It wasn't always this way: the vast mansions, huge churches and impregnable castles proclaim a long-gone wealth based on the 16th-century wool trade. In the 21st century, the locals are betting not on wool, but on *la trufa negra* — the black truffle — which seems to adore the poor Teruelo soil.

Aim for the village of Mora de Rubielos, trying not to end up in neighbouring Rubielos de Mora, and check in at La Trufa Negra. Run by sisters Alexandra and Alba Perez, this foodie boutique serves truffles from their dad's farm. You can have them on toast with olive oil, with salt-roasted pork and foie gras, or in *croquetas*. You can also have them massaged into your skin at the spa. They claim that it has Botox-like effects (doubles from £100; latrufanegra.com).

Push west to cross the Maestrazgo. This was once Europe's Afghanistan, a mountainous land where the law was kept by merciless armies of religious zealots. They've left their castles behind, from the scary mountaintop redoubt at Alcala de la Selva to the citadel at Morella, a beautifully preserved medieval hill town that's best visited in August, during the month-long fiesta of Sant Roc, when the locals, wearing period costume, drag you back in time.

First stop on the coast is Peñíscola, one of Spain's prettiest resorts. You might recognise its walled town, which is almost entirely surrounded by the sea, is topped by yet another castle and has starred in productions from *El Cid* to *Game of Thrones*. Come for the superb town beach, backed by cafes, bars and restaurants, to wander the streets of the old centre, to attend classical concerts at the castle (dipc.es) and to devour the tasting menu at the extraordinary Restaurant Carmen Guillemot, set in the dining room of Carmen's art-filled house (menus from £21; carmenguillemot.com/wp).

You'll need a bed after a dinner like that. The *Game of Thrones* A-listers stayed at the stylish Hotel Boutique La Mar, so that should do (doubles from £56; hotelboutiquelamar.com).

South of Peñíscola, the N340 passes through rice paddies and the citrus plantations that gave this coast its name. Left turns will take you to tiny seaside hamlets such as Torrenostra, utterly deserted beaches such as Quartell Vell, Spanish family favourites such as Oropesa del Mar and banging resorts like

Benicassim — famous for its rock festival in July.

Getting there Ryanair flies from Stansted to Castellon.

Garrotxa and Emporda, Catalonia

The most beautiful part of Catalonia lies so close to France, you'd have thought they'd have found some pretext on which to annex it by now. The region offers terrific wines, a mysterious volcanic wilderness, tiny coastal hamlets, dense pine forests, glittering coves and some rather elegant seaside resorts. Think of it as the Costa Brava for the adventurous aesthete.

You'll be flying into Girona. It's a lovely city, with a terrific market, a charming medieval heart and one of the world's best restaurants, El Cellar de Can Roca, but leave all that for an off-season city break.

You're heading west along the twisty GI531 — stopping at a fab little roadhouse called Cal Ganso, just past Llorca, for lunch (mains from £6; 00 34 972 443085) — to Olot, in the volcanic region of La Garrotxa. This is one of Europe's truly wild places: a land of cliffs, forests, lakes, waterfalls — and a handful of medieval villages. There's enough going on here to fill a week, but the pick of the experiences involves bikes and goats.

By lucky coincidence, the old railway that ran through the heart of this wonderland has been converted into a cycle track. Possibly the biggest thrill of your holiday, it's all but flat, and if you do the 15-mile section from Olot to Les Planes d'Hostoles, the bike-hire company will pick you up (bike hire £14, transfer for up to five people £30; bicicletes.atma.cat). Stay at Can Blanc, a wonderfully calming hotel on the edge of Olot (doubles from £67, B&B, canblanc.es).

Fancy life as a goatherd? A three-day package lets you loose in the heart of La Garrotxa, with a herd of goats. Good luck with that. Prices start at £250pp, including two nights' half-board on the farm, an excursion on electric bikes and an early-morning flight over the region's 40 volcanic cones in a hot-air balloon (voldecoloms.cat).

A la playa: head east on the A26/N260 to Figueres, a town dedicated to Salvador Dali, its favourite son. The painter of a million student posters has made the Teatre-Museu Dali ludicrously popular (£10.50; salvador-dali.org). Unless you're

there as it opens, or desperately want to see that Mae West sofa, keep driving to the rocky, herb-scented Cap de Creus, the surrealist's other hang-out.

You need to book ahead to see his home in Portlligat, but it's worth the effort: Dali moved out after his muse, Gala, died in 1982, and with its unfinished paintings and open gouache tubes, it looks as if he just upped and went (£8; salvador-dali.org).

Over the headland lies Cadaques, a dazzling spot for a lazy couple of days. Whitewashed and pantiled, it exudes effortless chic, enhanced by the fact that it doesn't really try. The place to stay is the Hotel Horta d'en Rahola, a flower-filled seven-room boutique just up the hill from the tiny beach (doubles from £80; hortacadaques.com). As for dinner, eat whatever Anita tells you to at Casa Anita (£22; casaanitavip.com).

If you can drag yourself away, head south, past Roses, Empuriabrava and Estartit, to the Baix Emporda. Despite its suburbanisation — villas peer over each other's shoulders for a view of the sea — this is wonderful country, with steep roads looping down to sparkling coves and tiny beaches, all linked by a spectacular coastal path.

The solution here is to pick a beach, park the car, find the nearest room and stay put. The problem is choosing the beach. I'd go for Aiguafreda, a tiny patch of shingle surrounded by flat rocks and pine trees, and Sa Rascassa, with five lovely rooms, a fine restaurant and a no-kids policy (doubles from £80; hostalsarascassa.com).

Families should head to Aigua Blava, in Playa de Fornells. Rambling and village-like, it's as perfect a family hotel as you'll ever find. The manager, Josep de Vehi, says children who used to holiday here now bring their own kids — so, if you like the look of it, book now (adjoining doubles from £226; hotelaiguablava.com).

Getting there Ryanair flies from Stansted to Girona.

Rias Baixas, Galicia

With secret beaches, Celtic culture and a love of seafood, the Rias Baixas — named after the four estuarine inlets that rend this coast — bears a striking similarity to Finistère, in Brittany, but there's a crucial difference. This wild land of witches and pilgrims gets about a fifth as many visitors as its Gallic rival,

and considerably less rain.

This tour presumes you've flown into Santiago de Compostela, and runs north to south. If you're arriving via Porto, do it in reverse.

First stop is O Grove, a peninsula in the Ria de Arousa, presumably named for the arousal of desire to plunge into its emerald waters. You'll find 15 exquisite beaches here, a scattering of superb fish restaurants — Beiramar just wins for its grilled razor clams (from £15; Avenida de Beiramar 30) — and a couple of hotels. Choose between the five-star Gran Hotel La Toja, set on a private islet (doubles from £110, B&B, eurostarsgranhotellatoja.com), and the more family-friendly Hotel Spa Atlantico, which treats the Atlantic-facing San Vicente Beach as its own (doubles from £53, B&B, hotelspatlantico.com).

As you take the PO-308 south, you'll spot what appear to be tombs raised on granite mushrooms in the fields. They're *horreos* — ancient grain stores — and they're oddly disconcerting. You're heading to Combarro, often described as the prettiest village in Galicia. While it's certainly attractive, with stone cottages, lanes hacked out of the bedrock and *horreos* overhanging the sea, enchanting is a better word. You'll eat mussels pulled straight from the ria before the local shopkeepers entice you into their Brothers Grimm-style shops to sip *orujo* — the local brandy — and hear talk of witchcraft. You'll suddenly feel the urge to stay. For ever. Be strong. Onwards to Pontevedra — known in Spain as “*la bella desconocida*”, the beautiful stranger. The old town, on the south bank of the Rio Lerez, is a pedestrianised maze of granite alleys, pilgrim churches and film-set squares. Back when invading and pillaging other countries was an acceptable career choice, Pontevedranos made a mint as *conquistadors*. Stay at the Parador de Pontevedra, former home of the counts of Maceda (doubles from £60; parador.es).

Next, take the coast road via Marin onto the Morrazo peninsula. This is the Ruta das Praias — the road of beaches — and the further west you drive, the better it gets. There are about 40 beaches here: at least a dozen are world-class, and at least two welcome nudists. Start with Praia do Portal, then the gorgeous twins Praias de Barra and Viño, and lovely, pine-

fringed Praia de Limens — where, if you'd care to stop the tour right here, you can rent the three-bedroom La Pintoresca from £595 a week (vintagetraavel.co.uk).

If you're here at midnight on Midsummer's Eve, you'll see the entire coast ablaze with bonfires, as amiably drunken locals celebrate the Fiesta de San Juan and pretend to cast out the witches they're secretly rather proud of.

Push on to Vigo, the biggest city in the region and home to the Galician fishing fleet. Largely overlooked by tourists, it's worth a visit, if only for the oysters served on Rua Pescaderia and a night out in the rock'n'roll Churruca quarter. Stay at the cracking Hotel Nautico (doubles from £27, B&B, hotelnautico.net).

The highlight of the holiday is the boat trip from Vigo to the Illas Cies — an outcrop of the Caribbean in the Bay of Vigo, where the islands of Monteagudo and Faro are joined by the isthmus that is Rodas beach (£14 return; crucerosriasbaixas.com). There are no hotels, but if you want to stay over (and you should), here's the secret: rent a double tent with proper beds on the campsite for £57 a night (minimum two nights in July and August; campingislascies.com).

Getting there EasyJet flies from Gatwick to Santiago de Compostela, Ryanair flies there from Stansted, and Brittany Ferries sails from Portsmouth and Plymouth to Santander.

I love the Spanish but... A national character assassination by Matt Rudd

There really are a lot of pickpockets in Barcelona, they really do think *mañana* is a way to run a bus timetable, then there's the siesta.

Joan Faus Vitoria, the mayor of Ador, in the province of Valencia, has made the siesta compulsory. No children are allowed out between 2pm and 5pm. Shops shut. Business grinds to a halt. Everything stops. Isn't that wonderful? They really know what's important in life. Aren't those Englishmen stupid, wandering around town in the heat of the day with the mad dogs?

Well, no. I don't want to have a siesta. Even if I did, my children don't want to have a siesta. And if they did, they'd be up all night. I'd like to go out and look at a couple of churches,

have lunch, walk around the old town, have dinner and go to bed, but that's just uncivilised. That's almost... American. You must sleep all afternoon, which is impossible, then wait until 11pm to have your dinner.

But I'll be starving by then.

Ah, no, you can have tapas.

But then I won't have an appetite for dinner.

It's all out of sync. And the only alternative is to subject yourself to the Spanish approximation of British culture, widely available along all the tourist beaches. Fish'n'chips with a pint of lager. Roast beef and yorkshire pudding, with a pint of lager. The full English, served all day, including the time when civilised people siesta. With a pint of lager.

You can be a traveller, which means sleep deprivation and hunger anger. Or you can be a tourist, which means fry-ups and Stella. It's exhausting. I need a lie-down.