

Somewhat smitten by Cadiz, Spain

It's a delicious thirty degrees and a cool wind is washing over Alameda, the exquisitely designed coastal promenade of Cadiz, as I sip a small cold beer and watch the tall ships regatta slide into the Bay of Cadiz after a three day festival in the port. They serve the beer small in these parts for one simple reason: to keep it cold. On the heels of a week-long festival of evening jazz concerts, jam sessions, and acid jazz rooftop acoustic sets the regatta rounded off the week nicely. But it was, frankly, just another week in July in this astonishingly bewitching city, the oldest continuously inhabited in Europe, founded in 1100 BC.

I am smitten. I have been a student at the K2 Internacional Spanish Language school in Plaza Mentidero in the captivating heart of the old city, signing up for a relatively intensive four week course of four immersive lessons a day with the allure of some culture and sport in the downtime from school. Now I am struggling to come to terms with leaving, the city pulling at my heartstrings as if I were a giddy young man.

I am no polyglot: my secondary school French followed me only as far as Paris where one *patisserie faux pas* too many (the attempted purchase of a *pain au chocolat* outside the protocol window for such procurements) led to a loss of appetite, and so I had approached the course with a great deal of enthusiasm tinged with a smidgen of apprehension for what lay ahead. I needn't have worried, indeed I feel like I now possess the key of knowledge to a richer adventure wherever I go: language schools afford an opportunity to meet lots of new people and experience the local culture through the eyes of locals alongside equally inquisitive counterparts, rather than amble around thumbing endlessly through a guide book.

K2 attracts students from around the world, and for no particularly good reason I am surprised when in my first week I meet an eclectic mix of students, young and old, including longer term students from as far away as South Korea and China. Without giving it much thought I was guilty of pre-supposing that the students would typically be folk taking a career break or retired but I am pleasantly surprised that all ages are represented and it makes for an intoxicating mix as the common glue is open-mindedness: in this case to a new language.

Accommodation is usually provided by the school and students can choose between a host family situation (undoubtedly a smart move for those prepared for full immersion), or an apartment in the city with other students. I have elected for an apartment, preferring to have a little downtime to myself after school, and the spacious flat on Calle Torre, a stone's throw from the school, is perfect offering sufficient respite from the heat at night and the enthusiastic evening street cleaning.

In the workplace in London I am regarded as somewhat of a wordsmith but the reality is that up until a month ago, I couldn't tell a past participle from a pastry puff. Driven by a desire to be slightly more useful than ordering a beer when on holiday and to understand more deeply a culture which is patently similar to my native Irish roots, I have taken a deep breath, submerged myself totally, and am putty in the hands of the teachers here. I must confess that I had understood 'immersive' to mean 'intensive' and the fact that no-one was going to explain anything to me in English was a bit of a shock at first, but you quickly get used to the rhythm of the classes and do indeed become immersed. Doe-eyed and tanned Spanish teachers ease that journey of course and before you know it you are engaging with your classmates in the sort of getting-to-know-you-banter that goes with the first baby steps in any language.

I had set out to balance learning some Spanish with surfing lessons and had debated the merits of various schools in Andalucia, a part of Spain that fascinates me. There are options in Tarifa, in Conil de la Frontera and Cadiz and I spoke to all of them but something about the incredibly helpful staff at K2 swung it for me, with them patiently going through the options that they could assist with

organising. As I reflect on my last week at school, with two fascinating excursions around the city complete with tasks to interact with the locals overseen by the teachers, I can't imagine having studied anywhere else. Despite being split into groups for moral encouragement there is nothing quite like the fear that strikes when prompted to go and ask a local a question armed with just a few weeks of the language, but the enjoyment of the always enthusiastic and patient response of the 'Gaditanos' (residents of Cadiz, from its Latin name 'Gades') is difficult to quantify. "What would you save if the city was raided by pirates", I ask a gentle looking man in Plaza Mira, outside the Museum of Cadiz. "The people of course" he quips back. I can't disagree.

Indeed there is much to save: this city has the most exceptional history and cultural heritage. Founded by the Phoenicians, raided multiple times, laid siege to by the English six times (including by Drake), enormous centre of international trade in the eighteenth century (with the Irish being one of the largest and wealthiest trading partners) bolstered by the transfer of trading from Seville after the Guadalquivir river silted up and the blueprint for many a South American city with its gorgeous tight streets deliberately designed to protect from any wind and afford shade from the sun.

Favourite historical and cultural stops would have to include Cadiz Cathedral complete with spectacular views from the dome, the Museo de Cadiz housing some exquisite paintings as well as Phoenician artefacts, and most of all the Caso Iberoamerica gallery home to superb sculptures from Zitman. Churches abound with a treasure trove of artefacts including Goya paintings and the Catholicism that shaped this majestic city is still there to be seen with some significant religious festivals in particular Semana Santa (Holy Week) in March or April and Corpus Christi in May or June.

Cadiz rests within the wider region of Andalucia, an overwhelmingly sedimentary landscape with creamy white sierras to match the whitewashed Andalucian villages. The topography is heavily influenced by the advances and retreats of Africa relative to Spain over geological history and mountain landscapes flirt with alluring plains for attention. Cadiz, on the edge of a flat basin formed of sediments from the Guadalquivir river which flows up to Seville, utilises golden limestone building stone that never fails to trap and reflect the evening sunshine, a welcome distraction from being perennially ever-so-slightly lost in the winding streets, though in truth being lost has never been so much fun.

A comparatively short drive away is Grazalema Natural Park offering endless well-marked walking and running trails as well as adventure activities such as canyoning and kayaking, not to mention endless vistas from the 1800m mountains. Several very pretty white villages, or Pueblos Blancos, are within easy reach of Cadiz for a day trip, with the most unmissable ones including Archos de la Frontera and Vejer de la Frontera. But the main attraction of this part of Spain will, for many, always be the endless superb beaches stretching into the distance south of Cadiz, with the expanses at Zahara and Bolonia unforgettable.

If, however, you are unlikely to stray far from the confines of the city then it is equally unlikely you will be disappointed. Cadiz represents a cradle of culture for Spain, with its February carnival of theatre, song, dance and literature including stinging satire attracting national and international attention. In the summer months it feels like stages are constantly being erected and dismantled around the city for everything from outdoor cinema, music and dance at sunset, rock and jazz concerts and musicals not to mention flamenco. Many of these are staged in attractive open air venues once part of the military fortifications of the city and moreover many are completely free, meaning that the intoxicatingly inclusive nature of this city is hard to over-state.

The ever helpful Lucia from the language school has organised some surf lessons for me with Fernando (Fer) at Offshore Surf School, a short bus ride away in the new part of town and a five day introductory offer for €90 is a good value way of trying out this perennially popular activity on the virtually ever present waves arriving on the beaches of Cadiz. Longer courses are available and once you've had a lesson or two the school are very good about letting you keep your beginner board for a little longer and keep practising.

Fer patiently gives direction on the appropriate gymnastics to get up on the board and announces the imminent arrival of an appropriate wave which I can't see coming for toffee. Sure enough a few seconds after wheeling my arms to extract some speed the swell arrives and for all too brief a moment I am up on the board, only to bruise my ego with a soft landing into the foam. By the second lesson I am hanging out in the water, straddling my board waiting for "the one". It's hardly Point Break but I am progressing enough to see the huge attraction of the sport (even if this mature chassis has needed a little coaxing) and the copious beaches of Cadiz provide plenty of scope for practice.

There are indeed countless options to keep active in the area. Cadiz, at the end of a long sand spit, is surrounded by great beaches, and of course the sea, which keeps it temperate and a world away from the stifling heat of Seville in summer. One of the main beaches, Caleta, was utilised by Halle Berry in the emerging-from-the-sea-Ursula-Andress-style scene in a James Bond movie and I can assure you if it's good enough for her it's good enough for you and me. If you want more solitude Cortadura at the end of the city and a short bus ride from the centre is hard to beat for a chilled sunset with the option of nursing a beer from one of the beach side bars (chiringuitos), perfecting your warrior pose or just absorbing the scene.

Aside from sand based activities surfing, swimming, kayaking and paddle surfing are the easiest water sport options in Cadiz, with a fabulous yoga school at Plaza Espana and various gyms around town offering variable membership packages for land based activity.

No account of Cadiz would be complete without mention of its cuisine. Whether you want a plate of exquisite octopus at a beach front bar as the sun goes down, to dip in and out of scrumptious tapas propping up the bar armed with a glass of local wine, float around the market in the evening sampling from the various artisan stalls and wine sellers or something more formal, Cadiz simply will not disappoint. You will eat better here, I wager, than in many a capital city and indeed you will forever frame future meals by the astonishing quality and value for money here.

Three superb tapas dishes and a couple of glasses of incredible house white at *La Candela* (my favourite sit-down tapas restaurant) on Calle Feduchy will set you back €20 a head and will probably be unsurpassed, including local raw tuna, fantastic tempura and a delicate thai green curry with apple. *La Tabernita*, a tiny but hugely popular tapas bar in La Vina barrio (the wine district) has a well-deserved reputation for great atmosphere, superb wine and delicious simple tapas with the owner Rafa and his family working hard every day to make each visit special. Pisto (ratatouille), ensaladilla de gambas and cuttlefish in black ink are all highly recommended. Finally, *El Tio de La Tiza* is a sea food restaurant a world away from the cruise ship traffic. This delightful jewel, with seating virtually overwhelming the tiny square it occupies also in La Vina offers fresh enticing seafood everyday including local tuna, generous plates of *gambas*, *dorada* (bream) and *bacalao* (cod). The Uncle of the Chalk, as the name translates, was Antonio Rodríguez Martínez, a writer of some repute for the famous annual carnival who had a habit of scribing in chalk.

And so as I sip what should be my final glass of wine leaning on a barrel outside *La Tabernita* contemplating where the wind will blow me for more culinary entertainment this evening, there will be more than a tinge of sadness in leaving this wonderful city. "Que tal?" quips Rafa as he spies me from inside. "Una otra?" "Muy Bien....si" I reply, reflecting how many more weeks of language class it would take before I could brave a conversation with him about how business is. Several glasses later I have my answer: not long at all.

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Info:

Getting there: various flight options from the UK and Ireland directly to Seville, Jerez or Malaga with easier onward connections from Jerez and Seville.

For more information on K2 Internacional language school, Plaza Mentidero, 19, 11003 Cádiz, info@k2internacional.com

A typical offer for a two week intensive course (four hours a day) with the school works out at c. €175 per week for lessons and €100-130 per week for accommodation depending on the type chosen.

La Tabernita: Calle Virgen de la Palma, 32, 11002 Cádiz

El Tio de la Tiza: Plaza Tío de la Tiza, 12, 11002 Cádiz

La Candela: 11001, Calle Feduchy, 3, 11001 Cádiz

For more about the city and its surrounding province, see www.cadizturismo.com and www.institucional.cadiz.es

For more about Spain, see www.spain.info.

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