

All about Fuengirola

Fuengirola's in fashion

Celebs over beer bellies; the much maligned Costa town is smartening up, writes Sarah Gordon

It is hard to imagine that one of Lady Diana's favourite holiday resorts was Fuengirola.

But according to local legend she stayed no less than three times at the leafy Hotel Byblos in the hills above the town, enjoying the clement weather and countryside.

But the celebrated Costa del Sol


resort has long been popular with a host of British and Spanish celebrities, including actors Antonio Banderas and Donald Pleasence and footballers Michael Owen and Frank Rijkaard, who have holiday homes in the nearby hills.

On top of that, TV motormouth

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2 Fuengirola special

'We were the country cousins of the busier Torremolinos and more sophisticated Marbella'

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Chris Evans is a regular visitor to play golf, while England football captain David Beckham and family have been occasional visitors to the port, when staying at his wife's family's holiday home in nearby Riviera.

And then there is chef Anthony Worrall-Thompson, who owns an avocado farm up on the Mijas road. And on the subject of celebrity spotting *the Olive Press* saw Spain's most famous singer, Isabel Pantoja, having lunch in one of its best beach restaurants La Ponderosa Playa, during Semana Santa.

With eight kilometres of



beach, varied restaurants and a buzzing centre the one-time fishing village has become a cosmopolitan

centre with 25 per cent of its population made up of expatriates. This, of course, has not always been a positive thing with the resort becoming associated with tatty, cheap tourism in the 80s and 90s, a reputation that has been difficult to live down.

But over the last couple of years the town has worked hard to improve its image with new initiatives aiming to encourage quality tourism.

This can be summed up with this year's catchphrase 'Fuengirola's in fashion', highlighted by a string of excellent new restaurants, bars and boutique shops that have recently opened.

Whether you want stylish clothes, a decent bite of tapas, at El Granaino, or the largest selection of wines anywhere on the Costa del Sol at the shop Talipec, Fuengirola has plenty of choice.

"Fuengirola has changed a lot over the last decade in the sense of better shops and restaurants," says Jesus Luque, 28, owner of Talipec wine shop.

"The tawdry old image is being eroded and the town is finally bringing in a lot more quality tourists and I think the phrase 'Fuengirola's in Fashion' is a good



James, the owner of Taco Nacho, one of the town's most popular takeaways, moved from Peru to Fuengirola to start his Mexican food business. "Fuengirola has been good to me and I like it here. I now have a couple of takeaways on the coast and here as they are not too spicy. The idea is you choose your own spices, as much as you want. We have the best burritos outside Mexico."



one."

The owner of nearby Ponderosa Playa beach restaurant, Daniel Lupion, is in agreement.

"The quality of food here is perhaps the best on the Costa del Sol and we only use the best suppliers," he says.

Lupion, whose family opened the first pub for tourists, Bar Pepe, in 1965, regularly caters for footballers and other celebrities in his popular restaurant.

"We have had Dutch players like Cocu and Frank Rijkaard in and Isabel Pantoja is often in for lunch."

Marcus Church, manager of Julian's Bookshop: "Fuengirola is a real melting pot with residents here from all over the world. I think it can definitely be considered a modern European town."

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COUNTRY BUMPKINS: From left Angela Horne and Jackie Austin from the Forum Bar and Kaj Helming and Amanda Jane Reynolds have been living in 'Fuengi' for over 100 years between them

it to become a battlefield during the Peninsular Wars of 1810. Polish and British troops clashed in an epic battle of wills to lay claim to the precious coast, understanding the strategic importance of little Fuengirola and its castle.

Spain had become part of Napoleon's empire in the early 1800s and Spain was desperate to win back lost land, working with the British to stage an invasion.

More than 3,000 British and Spanish troops set off from Gibraltar in an attempt to take Fuengirola as their first stronghold on the coast.

British commander Lord Blayney greeted the 200-strong Polish army and their defiant leader to demand their surrender. He mistakenly believed at such unlikely odds the outnumbered Poles would immediately give up and flee.

However, a bloody battle took place and eventually Blayney was captured and forced on to the wall of the castle to signal to the ships to cease fire.

Felipe Bernejo Martin, owner of a fishing fleet: "I came back to Fuengirola as it has some of the most fertile sea beds on the coast and I like the variety of people who settle here."

All in all there is a lot more to the town (population 65,000) than first meets the eye, the cafe-lined streets and hidden squares lie waiting to be discovered while the renowned 'Fish Alley' acts as the main thoroughfare for visiting tourists looking for a good bite to eat.

But, of course, Fuengirola has not always been a modern beach resort and its history dates back centuries.

Indeed it was back in the 1700s that it accepted its first tourists, opening an inn just across from the castle near the beach.

The town was first described as a 'pretty, sophisticated town' by British historian Temboury, who arrived with crusaders in 1485.

In fact it was Fuengirola's desirability which caused

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Show stopper on the coast

THE cultural heart of Fuengirola for expatriates, Salon Varieties is the only English language theatre on the Costa del Sol. The historic theatre shows a huge variety of high quality productions from dramas to musicals and farce. From April 17-21 *Thanks for the Memories* offers a relaxed evening of favourite tunes from the golden age of the 1940s and 50s. Call the box office on 952 474 542

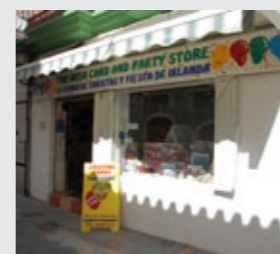
The Luque family have started an ambitious project opening one of the best wine shops on the Costa del Sol. With more than 700 different brands from over a dozen countries, it is perhaps ambitious for a town that a decade ago was known for its beer and spirit drinkers. "But increasingly people are showing an interest in wines and particularly from abroad," said owner Jesus Luque, 28. "Even better, because our prices are a lot more reasonable we have over 100 clients from Marbella and Puerto Banus who come up every week." As a special introductory offer to *Olive Press* readers, the shop, next to the main Post Office is offering a ten per cent discount on a mixed case of 12 bottles and five per cent on six bottles.



The British and Spanish returned to Gibraltar nursing their wounds and plotting their next move, while Blayney was kept prisoner for ten years. His sabre is still displayed today in the National Museum of Krakow as an example of Polish bravery on the battlefield and victory over Britain. Modern tourism really began to take off in the 1960s and 1970s with expatriates moving to the quiet, undeveloped town for a taste of the good life.

"We were like the country cousins of the busier Torremolinos and more sophisticated Marbella," said Jackie Austin, co-owner of sleek cafe-bar The Forum, who has lived in Fuengirola since the mid 1960s. "There was a real sense of community and everyone looked out

Stephen and Jane Gilks came to Fuengirola in 2000 with their two boys. Previously living in Brighton they were professional ice skating dancers for Holiday on Ice and worked with Torville and Dean and Robin Cousins. "We love the lifestyle of Fuengirola," Stephen says. "The nightlife, weather and the schools for our boys". Jane and Stephen bought the Irish Card



and Party Store in 2004 and kept the name. "We're the largest card store on the coast and we do our best business from September to

May," says Jane. "We bought the store after running a small hostel next door." "We also run a small mail service and do passport renewals as well". The restaurants in Fuengirola are fabulous especially along Fish Alley...we eat there all the time" said Stephen. The card store is open six days a week and is located in c/Troncon in the old town. Call 952 588 731

Paulo Spigolon, owner of Don Miguel restaurant: "Of all the places I had visited on the costa I decided to set up business in Fuengirola as it is always busy with all the amenities you could ever need nearby."

back then the roads were bad and we used to cross to Gibraltar to get hold of basic goods. "The town has a real cosmopolitan feel now with people from all over the place mixing in the many restaurants and bars." Restaurant owner Israel Ruiz agrees. "The tourists and the expatriates fill the town with life."

"It's a desirable place for people to settle whether they are from Eastern Europe, Britain or as far away as Argentina. But the town still manages to maintain its Spanish feel." This special mix is best summed up by Brian Hindley, who has lived in the town for 25 years. "I don't need the car and can walk around everywhere safely without fear of a yobbo hitting me over the head. There is a great general ambience, plenty of entertainment and always good food."

for each other." Her parents opened one of the first expatriate restaurants in town and used to cater for foreign residents and Madrilenos visiting for the weekend.

The tourists and the expatriates fill the town with life and give it a buzz

She can still recall the cobbled streets and squares and the mayor riding into town on the back of a donkey. "And there were always people sat out in the squares watching the world go by," she says. Forum co-owner Angela Horne added: "There was a bar in the square called La Cepa where everyone went."

"We even had our fair share of celebrities back then with tennis star Lew Hoad and Great Escape actor Donald Pleasence popping in now and again." Another English

grand dame Amanda Jane Reynolds mourns the loss of the charming old town that she knew when she was a child. Reynolds, now in her 50s, arrived in Fuengirola in the 1970s. "It was a really small village then with a strong emphasis on horse riding and equestrianism. "All the foreigners knew each other and we used

to love riding out into the hills at the weekends to a variety of different *ventas*, where you could normally get a meal and a choice of three drinks sherry, brandy and Ponche.

"But now it has grown and grown, way too much and nowadays you would be suicidal to try and negotiate your way around by horseback."

It is easy to mourn the lost days of quiet streets and fishermen's huts but most residents are quick to acknowledge that change has been good for the town. Marcus Church, whose father moved the family to Fuengirola in 1978 and bought Julian's bookshop, says: "Fuengirola is now a modern European town with a lot more amenities,



Jackie Austin, co-owner of The Forum cafe-bar says: "Fuengirola has changed completely since the 1960s, it is now truly cosmopolitan with a fantastic mix of shops and bars."

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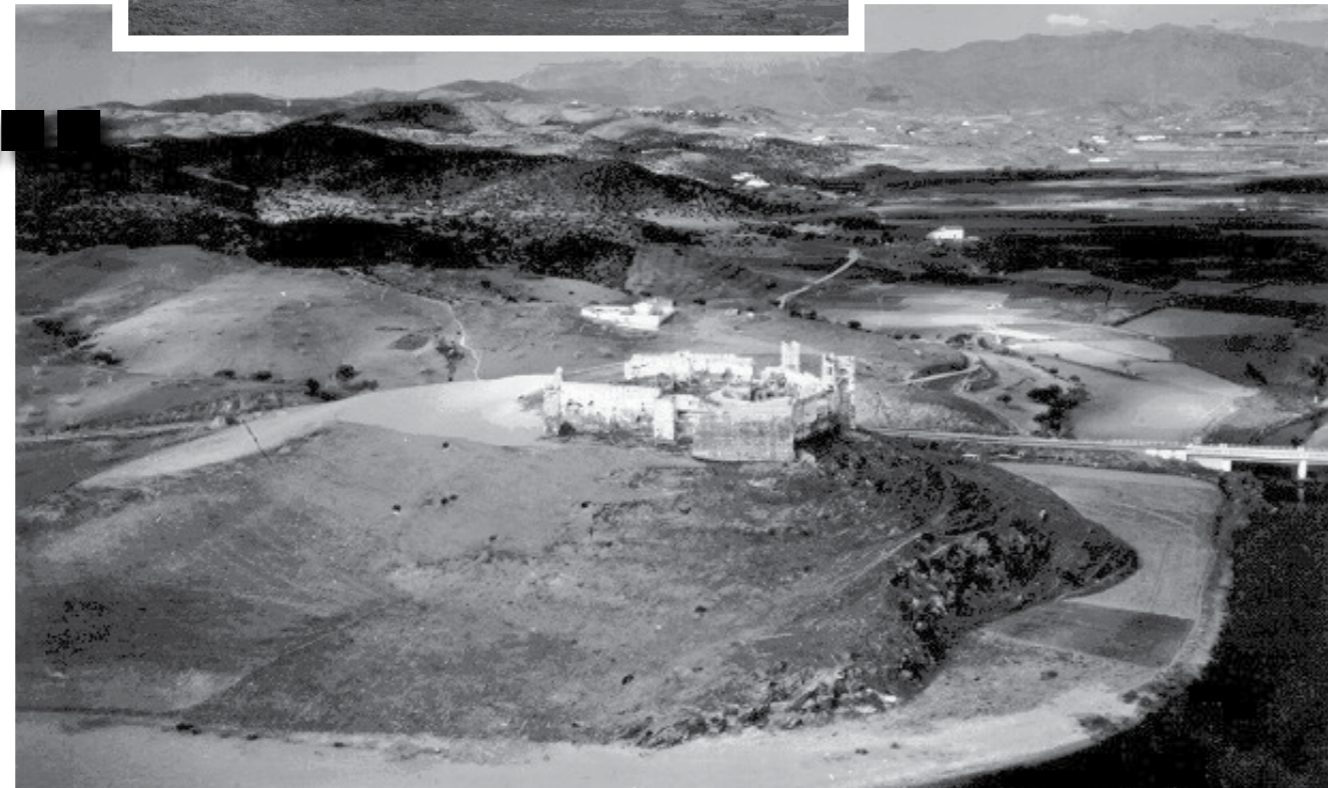
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and how it is



Sohail Castle under fire



FORE AND AFT: Fuengirola beach with boat today and left, as it was 30 years ago. While above a typical bar owner sups a cup of tea inside his beachfront bar, while a fish seller (far left) sells his wares in the 1960s. Most incredible of all are the changes since the pictures of Sohail Castle were taken in the 1920s and the castle and backdrop as it is today



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WHILE bustling with eateries and bars of every theme imaginable, Fish Alley is best known for its fish. The restaurant-lined thoroughfare, offering traditional tapas, international cuisine or just the chance to catch the latest football game, is certainly the spiritual heart of the town. By day the locals mingle in the street, taking deliveries, popping to their neighbours' bars and catching up on the latest gossip. But as the sun goes down and the beaches empty Fish Alley really comes to life, with chattering tourists and residents filling the terraces, as sellers weave through the crowds with their wares. Those looking for international dishes with a hint of Italian passion should try Don Miguel for hearty, well-priced fare.



Owner Paulo Spigolon chose Fish Alley - which comprises a series of pedestrianised lanes and alleys - over any other destination on the Costa del Sol for his restaurant.

"The alley was ideal, an extensive and busy area where I knew I could make a success of the business."

"We have such a mix of people coming through the doors, from local regulars to tourists who flock in over Easter and Summer."

Traditional fish and chips can be found just a little further along the road at Friar Tuck's. The traditional seaside dish and other offerings of pies and mushy peas are particularly popular among expats looking for a taste of home.

Zest offers a different flavour altogether, a variety

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: Fish Alley (above) offers so much, but Ponderosa Playa (top) is the place for local celebs, while El Taco Nacho (right) is a good spot to find something spicy on the run

of fresh, home-made favourites are offered throughout the day, making it an ideal lunch spot. It is not just restaurants that make up Fish Alley but a whole host of different bars with differing themes and specialities.



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Tropical paradise in the centre of town

ONCE considered one of the most depressing in Europe, Fuengirola zoo has really turned itself around in recent years. So bad was it that an investigation by Born Free (and coupled with a series of news stories in the UK) led to the zoo being closed in the 1990s. But, after a complete re-think, the zoo reopened again in 2001 with a totally new philosophy.

Collaborates

Gone then are the concrete and cramped cages constructed in the 1970s and instead a tropical ecosystem transports visitors into deep jungle in Fuengirola centre. Rivers, waterfalls and caves separate different areas creating a realistic habitat for the animals.

So good is it that the National Geographic magazine has voted it the most modern zoo in Spain and one of the best in Europe.

The zoo collaborates on international research and



IMPRESSIVE: Once shut due to poor conditions, today the zoo is one of the best in Europe

breeding programmes for endangered species and creates opportunities for schools and the public to become involved with the centre.

During the summer season the park is open until midnight so visitors can see the animals by moonlight and witness their nocturnal activities.

WHERE TO SHOP

Shopping Heaven

SEVERAL British-run shops have made a big impact in Fuengirola. Scott's the Butchers and The Real Sausage Company are among the best purveyors of high quality meats and meat products along the Costa del Sol. Both sourcing excellent quality meats, you won't even have to bother taking a trip to the supermarket. Nearby, wine shop Talipec offers more than 700 different wines from more than a dozen countries.

Dunne's Stores, the costawide chain of Irish department stores, has a branch in Fuengirola and the local Iceland store stocks some Waitrose products.

Finally the Miramar shopping centre offers a wide-range of specialist stores to meet all needs.

WHERE TO EAT

A top table

IN the words of the owner of established restaurant Ponderosa Playa (see top left), Fuengirola has the 'best quality food on the Costa del Sol'.

While this might seem surprising when compared to say Malaga, or Marbella, he might have a fair claim. His restaurant, which is popular with local celebrities such as Isabel Pantoja and Dutch footballers Cocu and Frank Rijkaard, serves up some of the freshest seafood I have tried in Andalucia.

But there is no doubt the quality of food has increased dramatically over the last decade.

While the restaurants in Fish Alley, see over, are varied and interesting, the pick of the town's eateries must be El Toston, a well-established tapas bar right next to the bus station (see top right).

Said to have the best wine list of any restaurant on the Costa del Sol, with some 420 listings, the food is always excellent and there are specials by the day.

Drink wines by the glass and enjoy such dishes as wild boar croquettes and mountain asparagus from the Serrania de Ronda, with eggs and black truffle shavings.

Nearby are two other good tapas bars, El Picoteo in Calle Larga and the excellent El Granaino in Calle Emancipacion, 13, opposite the Salon de Varieties theatre (pictured bottom right). Set up by a charming Granaino girl, it also has the charming Granada habit of serving up a tapa with every drink. With a delightful ambience, you can't do much better.



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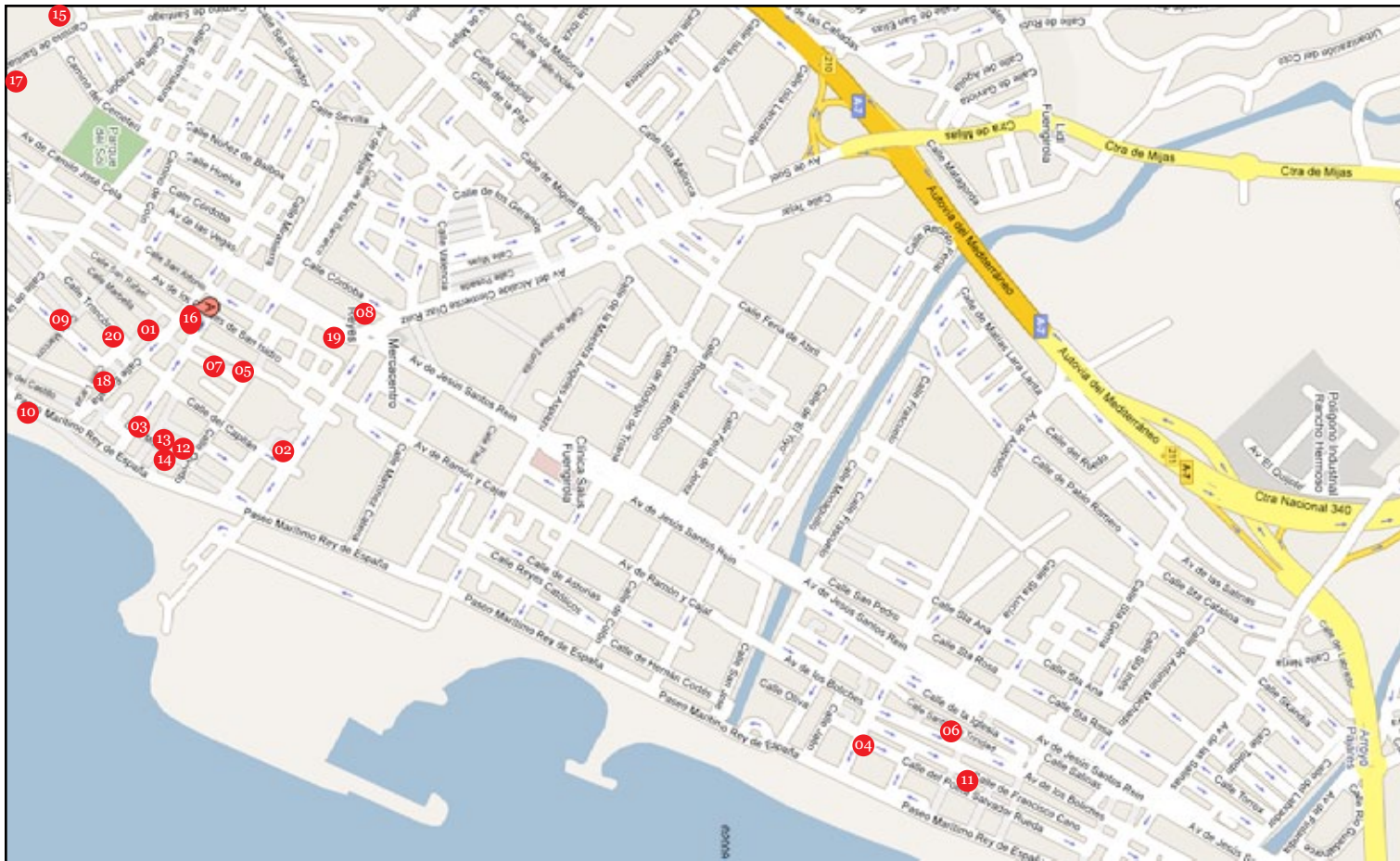


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