

Box clever

Surprise! The smartest (and hippest, and most authentic) city in Spain right now is Málaga, says **Laura Goodman**



State of the art: left, the Centre Pompidou; right, clockwise from top left, scooting about town; churros con chocolate; the port-side Palmeral de las Sorpresas boardwalk; inside the Picasso Museum



Russia. Sixteenth century. I'm in a peasant hut, surrounded by icons and gilded paintings of Jesus and Mary. Except the time is now and I'm in Málaga, of all places. I'm experiencing the engrossing power of its brand-new Russian Collection – a branch of the St Petersburg State Russian Museum. The Collection takes you from the icons of 16th-century Russia through to the social and political work of the 20th. There's surely no more unlikely – or invigorating – way to kick off a break on the Costa del Sol.

This museum isn't the only thing that convinced me to give this underdog Spanish city a chance. A pop-up Centre Pompidou opened in March, and there's been a Museo Picasso here for 12 years (it's his birthplace). Finally – the last piece of every great travel puzzle – Málaga's food scene is on fire, according to the internet. That's not to mention the Costa del Sol's ever-alluring trinity: sun, sea and £41 Monarch flights.

But even as I boarded said flight, something niggled: would it actually be *nice* in Málaga? Why didn't I go to Barcelona like a normal person? Or Madrid?

After 90 minutes of elaborate Russian splendour, I am full of hope. Málaga is already exceeding expectations.

I stroll back into town. Along Calle Granada, the bars are full of folk with frothy beers, hovering by baskets of fried octopus, squid and aubergine. It's insanely convivial. I find a patch of sunlight at La Campana, where a lady lets me use half of her barrel to rest my *boquerones* (anchovies) and I drink a perfect, cold Coca-Cola.

Isn't this the city break everyone dreams of? Art, snacks and strolls. Immediately I love how contained Málaga is, how I can walk everywhere, with no need for subways or buses. Tapas bars seem to reveal themselves to me – I don't have to nose around for unnamed drinking dens. It all feels so easy. And so not what I was expecting...

My apartment happens to be close to Atarazanas food market. There is shouting and laughing, live snipping and filleting; there are perky silvery anchovies, majestic hams and perfectly formed strawberries. I buy a box of roasted and salted Málaga almonds, a bunch of asparagus and some olive oil (the region is getting really good at olive oil, I'm told). It costs me less than a fiver.

My mid-morning snack is *churros con chocolate* because – as is becoming obvious – you can eat 'authentically' in Málaga. At Casa Aranda, there is outside seating in a shady little courtyard, and the *churros* come on silver platters. The architecture that surrounds my snack and me is grandiose and distinctly Spanish.



IF I FIND A PATCH OF SUNLIGHT WHERE A LADY LETS ME USE HALF HER BARREL TO REST MY ANCHOVIES AND DRINK A PERFECT COLD COKE



Once I have coaxed the last of the chocolate out of my mug, I'm high on doughnuts and giddy about getting to the Pompidou. My walk takes me via Paseo del Parque, a path that runs alongside the ferry terminal – and is also an exotic garden. I can't believe my luck. I walk beneath the palm-tree canopy, and nip to my left or right whenever I want to get closer to some landscaped roses, glance at a mosaic-covered fountain, or sniff a lemon tree. I am perhaps 400m from the cruise ships, but I can't see them.

From the end of the park, it's a 10-minute walk to Centre Pompidou, marked by a big glass cube, on a snazzy, modernised port where shops sell things like gourmet jelly beans, *gelato* and silk scarves. Beneath the cube, in a big, white basement space, is the main collection (the cube itself is for visiting exhibitions). I pass a very happy hour down there. There is Frida Kahlo, Francis Bacon and Picasso, and my favourite thing of all: Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra's *I See a Woman Crying*, a video that shows a group of Liverpool schoolkids reacting to Picasso's *The Weeping Woman*. I love that I am in Málaga and all these worlds are colliding.

It's not busy. I can be on my own with Pablo, or whomever I fancy; I never have to peer through someone else's iPad. I think about other city breaks I've been on, where I've had to arrive at precisely the right time

to 'skip the crowds', and still been forced to jostle. This is how taking in art should be – relaxed.

At dinnertime, I make a final and important discovery: that not only can you eat authentic food here, it can be exciting, too. Uvedoble is a plain-looking tapas bar, which serves me a steady stream of electrifying morsels: cold almond soup (*ajo blanco*) with slivers of anchovy; a pork-cheek meatball with skinny fries; cubes of tuna with cauliflower emulsion; and fried noodles with squid, plus several glasses of red wine. This gourmet voyage costs me £14. Eat that, Barcelona.

I go for a nightcap at KGB, a shiny, modern spot which is slightly tricky to find (Calle Fresca 12). My neighbours at the bar recommend the house Vermouth and I am sceptical, but polite, so I order it, while looking forlornly at the red wines. As the people around me receive their dinners, I realise that despite having already eaten, I'll also need a KGB burger (more pork cheek) and a *flamenquín* (a deep-fried roll of ham and cheese).

As I delve into these two wonders of Spanish gastronomy, I realise that my sweet, delicious Vermouth – ordered nervously and under duress – has run out, and that I really want another. Tomorrow, I'll find a bottle to take home. And just maybe, from now on, I'll stop knocking things before I've tried them. ■



Where to stay: **Solaga** (solaga.co.uk) has holiday apartments across the city; from £36 to £130.

Room Mate (room-matehotels.com) has two hotels; doubles cost from £56, B&B.

Where to eat: **La Campana** (Calle Granada 35). **Casa Aranda** (Calle Herrería del Rey 3). **Uvedoble** (Calle Cister 15).