

# WILL THE 'REAL SPAIN' PLEASE STAND UP?

Stewart Hastings reports



Top: Arcos Gardens golf course;  
Above: Stewart Hastings

Where is 'the' real Spain? For some it is Gaudi's Barcelona with its stunning Sagrada Familia cathedral. For others it might be the capital Madrid for its sheer size, inspiring art of Velazquez at the Prado museum and endless tapas bars. For wine lovers, maybe the Rioja region with the pretty Cantabrian Mountain range nearby. Or is it the bustling boulevards and gin-palace excesses of Marbella and its surrounding moneyed towns full of royalty, aristocrats and decidedly less salubrious types.

Spain is a nation of wildly contrasting vistas, traditions, people, architecture and history. One of the few places in Spain where all of these ingredients come together is in Jerez de la Frontera in the heart of Andalusia. With 200,000 inhabitants, this is a modest sized city, but it packs a punch way above its weight with some of the best of 'real Spain' there is.

Take sherry for example. You can buy sherry just about anywhere in the World these days. Bahrain? Sri Lanka? Costa Rica? All of them import sherry. Brits are still the biggest

drinkers of this unusual wine – more so than the Spanish even. Jerez is the worldwide centre of sherry. It all comes from Jerez. Today there are still some very British sounding companies including Harveys (everyone's favourite Auntie has a bottle of Harvey's Bristol Cream don't they?) and Sandman's. But the giant of them all is the colossal bodega of Gonzalez Byass who amongst other brands, produces Tio Pepe. A tour of this fascinating place on their little tourist train is educating and ends with a welcome tasting. I came home with quite a taste for it!

Jerez is the cradle of flamenco. You can't really get much more Spanish than the somewhat gypsy-esque sight of traditional flamenco dancing and the unmistakable music which accompanies it. There are more than a dozen flamenco penas in Jerez although surprisingly none of them are much over 40 years old. Try Centro Cultural Flamenco Don Antonio Chacón in c/salas 2. They don't charge to get in, but they do expect you to drink!

Little known to many English visitors, and visited by even fewer, this City nevertheless has direct air links with UK airports and is gradually putting itself on the UK tourist trail.

The new golf resort of Arcos Gardens in nearby Arcos de la Frontera has been a great influence in promoting Jerez and the surrounding area to the UK market. And with good reason too as I recently found out.

Arcos Gardens is being created from 440 acres of a former olive farm on gently sloping land, with wonderful views towards the whitewashed hilltop town of Arcos de la Frontera.

At the heart of the development is a World class 18 hole golf course designed by Landmark (who designed amongst others, the Ocean Course at Kiawah Island). With wide and fairly forgiving fairways, the greens are well protected with accuracy a must. But with 5 tees on each hole, the course is fun for higher handicappers from the forward tees, and a challenge for top players from the back tees.

The course has been in play for two years

now and you'd be forgiven for thinking it had been there for many more years. The fairways are as green as green could be, fringed by mature olive trees. The greens are fast and as good as you'll find in the US. The views towards Arcos de la Frontera and the surrounding Andalusian countryside make this a memorable course to play.

Around the golf course 470 new homes of Andalusian style are under construction – a very low density which means more open spaces and good sized gardens for many of the homes. Of the 80 two bedroom townhouses, just six are still available are about £275,000. There is a very well organized rental programme for these houses and already there repeat corporate bookings which is testament to the quality of service and facilities this resort has to offer.

Three and four bedroom detached villas in good sized plots range in price from £543,000 to £1,000,000 and will be ready for early 2009.

The final phases will be finished in 2012.

Despite this resort having a real Spanish feel about it, the sales director Regan Berger is very definitely English although he and his family have lived in Spain for many years now. Ashley Northridge is the golf pro who originally came from Wentworth Golf Club in Surrey. Ashley also runs the rental programme. Also on site is the Simon Holmes Golf Academy. Simon is well known on Sky TV as a golf pundit, and has coached Nick Faldo, Ernie Els, Darren Clarke and many others. Simon (42) has decided to move to Arcos Gardens permanently with his wife Melanie and young family when his house on the 10th fairway has been completed. He is also a consultant to the Swedish Golf Federation who base themselves at Arcos Gardens over the winter months.

The centerpiece of Arcos Gardens may be the golf course, but there is so much more to do. The gorgeous 300 year old Cortijo Fain is currently a boutique nine bedroom hotel with a competent restaurant and atmospheric bar where residents can enjoy tapas and drink the excellent local wine late into the evening.

Future plans include the new Clubhouse which will be finished early next year and which will provide superb facilities including a

very smart Spa. Tennis, equestrian facilities, mountain biking and plenty for the kids to do are all coming soon.

Outside Arcos Gardens there is almost too much to do – from Motor Racing at the F1 circuit outside Jerez to rock climbing, fishing and all manner of water sports on the local lakes. Some of the prettiest and most unspoilt coastline is about 45 minutes away.

Right on the Arcos Gardens doorstep though is Arcos de la Frontera. In my search for the 'real Spain', this is as good as it gets. It has been described as the 'romantic queen' of the white cities (the other favourites of mine being Ronda, Zahara, Grazalema and Estepa). Arcos is set atop a spectacular sheer cliff and is a delightful mish-mash of steep narrow streets – a strong reminder of its Arab inheritance. About 30,000 people call this home. It is a town for walking and there is plenty to keep you walking for a long time. The many churches were nearly all started in the 16th century and there is also a closed convent. The 8 nuns sell home made biscuits which you can buy from them through a blind spinning cupboard and a one way mirror. Look closely enough and you can actually see the nuns behind!

Just around the corner is the main town square, the Plaza del Cabildo where the views down the river and the surrounding countryside are majestic. The unbalanced local men use this as their preferred suicide point (the ladies strangely use the other side of town!).

The market, shops, bars, restaurants and so on make this a genuinely 'A' grade real Spanish town.

The mix of Arcos Gardens with its new locally influenced architecture and World class golf course, and the traditional towns of Arcos de la Frontera and Jerez de la Frontera is a delightful combination. It is, the 'real Spain' at its best.

[www.jerez.org](http://www.jerez.org)  
[www.gonzalezbyass.com/en](http://www.gonzalezbyass.com/en)  
[www.bw-international.com](http://www.bw-international.com) (01344 843000)

Clockwise, from top left: Cortijo Fain; Orange trees are part of the local scenery; The author plays at the Arcos Gardens golf course

