

# Delicioso! Forget The Only Way Is Essex, Marbella is fast becoming one of Spain's best destinations for foodies

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When I told friends and colleagues I was going to Marbella for the weekend, there were a few predictable jokes about The Only Way Is Essex association with the resort.

However, long before the reality show came to town, Marbella has long been a hot destination on Spain's Costa De Sol.

Known for being a playground for the rich and famous, there has to be more than just good weather and a beach to attract such a clientèle and I was about to find out.



Micro-climate: Even in November, Marbella was still enjoying warm sunshine





Prime location: The Sea Grill overlooking the Mediterranean for a big draw for breakfast, lunch or dinner

Situated about 40 minute drive west of Malaga airport, Marbella is one of the most popular resorts in Andalusia, with its own micro-climate being one of the big draws. I spent three days in Marbella in early November and couldn't believe how warm it was, averaging about 22C with lots of sunshine.

Located not far from Moroccan coast, the Moorish influence can be seen in the Old Town - a charming and historic place, a stark contrast from the luxury hotels and villas lining the coastline.

I was staying the Puente Romano Hotel on the 'Golden Mile' - located between Marbella and Puerto Banus. Having recently undergone a multi-million Euro refurbishment, the five-star resort includes seven restaurants and world-class tennis courts, which hosts international tournaments and concerts.



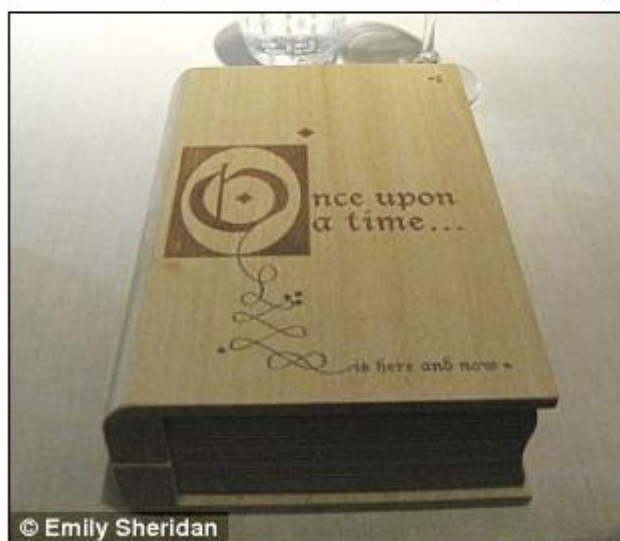
Comfort: The comfortable suites feature living areas and balconies, with many offering sea views

The hotel is named after the 1st century Roman bridge - believed to be part of the route from Rome to Cadiz - which still stands today in the new Plaza Village - a hub for many of the resort's restaurants and bars, used by both guests and Marbella locals.

Upon arrival, I was surprised by the sheer size and design of the resort. While many other luxury hotels fail with their aim for a 'village feel' with different blocks of rooms and suites, Puente Romano actually achieved this.

Rooms and suites were located in separate blocks, with their white walls, hanging baskets and tiling making you feel you were walking around an old Andalusian village.

The expansive grounds also featured a sub-tropical garden, so nature lovers will be in their element. Also on site is the world renowned tennis club, which also features a gym, so I did pay a visit to burn off one of my meals with an exhausting spinning class.



**Magical:** One of the courses at the Dani Garcia restaurante was presented in a wooden book, bringing a sense of theatre to the art of dining

I was staying in a Junior Suite - the dominant style of room in the resort, which included a lounge area, balcony, separate dressing room and expansive bathroom with Jacuzzi-style bath. My suite was located close to the beach and the Sea Grill restaurant - where I took breakfast and lunch on the first day. While I was loving my suite and the overall look of the resort, the main focus for me on this weekend was Puente Romano's gastronomic choices.



With its prime location overlooking the Mediterranean, it's no surprise the Sea Grill was a popular lunch spot. Having checked in a short time earlier, I joined my group in the restaurant for a seven-course tasting menu lunch, with mushroom risotto and tuna Carpaccio among my favourites. Our waiter had also wine-matched our courses so we were taken on a journey through predominantly Andalusian wine, as well as other Spanish creations.

For our first dinner of the break (and my ultimate culinary highlight of the whole weekend), we ate in the two Michelin-starred Dani García restaurante. Malaga-raised chef Garcia has created an exciting and unique culinary adventure with his 16-course 'Once Upon A Time' tasting menu. The excellent waiting staff really turned each course into theatre with their presentation, with many dishes arriving covered to produce that 'ta-dah' moment. Many courses, such as the Nitro-Tomato-Ceviche and

'Crochet' (seafood cream with squid ink lace) were so surreal and fantastical, you almost didn't want to ruin them by sticking your fork in to eat. The perfect portions of the dishes meant we had room to continue straight through to the final course, when we were presented with the Mad Hatter's teapot serving petit fours from a little drawer which was a magical end to the banquet.



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**Surreal: A metallic tomato served with 'Nitro'**







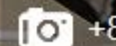
© Emily Sheridan



The real Marbella: Venture out of the resorts to discover the winding streets of Marbella's charming Old Town



© Belen Arriaza



Forget Italian, it's all about Spanish olive oil! Olive oil tasting at D.Oliva in the Old Town

On my second day, we were keen to see the 'real Marbella' so headed into the Old Town for a guided tour. After ambling about the charming winding streets and alleys and checking out the Moorish and Medieval remains, we headed to D.Oliva's shop for an olive oil tasting session. We were enlightened with the surprising fact that Italy actually buys a lot of its olive oil in from Spain and labels it 'bottled in Italy' and was advised to steer clear of plain old olive oil in favour of virgin and extra virgin.

With our appetite well and truly whet by this stage, we headed to Taberna la Niña del Pisto, a traditional tapas bar serving Cordoban cuisine. I can highly recommend the Salmonrejo (similar to gazpacho topped with Iberian ham and boiled egg) and fried aubergine with cane honey.



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Perfection: A mini mushroom risotto on the tasting menu at the Sea Grill



Following our sojourn into the old town, we had the remainder of our meals on the trip in the resort. For those looking for a break from Spanish cuisine, there's the Japanese Namasake restaurant serving sushi and sashimi, with an extensive Sake menu. In contrast to the other light and airy venues on site, Namasake was dark and sleek and gave more of a nightlife vibe, helped along by its creative cocktail menu. Our tasting menu was delicious, particularly the fried crab and fish sashimi.

The following day we headed across the plaza to the bistro BiBo by Dani García, for a nine course tasting menu. Having the standard set high by his namesake restaurant next door two days previously, we had high expectations and weren't disappointed. The Crab Kimuchi served on an ice plate with Ajoblanco Oysters and the Fried Marinated Sea Bass were sumptuous.

Overall, I left Marbella completely surprised with what I found. The Old Town brought a cultural and historical side to those looking for more than just a sunshine break. However, my lasting

impression was how Marbella was a perfect destination for foodies and wine lovers, having thoroughly enjoyed a range of high quality and delicious dishes. As we finished our dessert at BiBo during our last meal, we all admitted our own home cooking was looking a grim prospect in comparison, no matter how handy we were in the kitchen!



Fantastical: The petit four at Dani Garcia is served Alice in Wonderland Mad Hatter-style

## TRAVEL TIPS: PLAN YOUR OWN ANDALUSIAN GASTRO ESCAPE

Puente Romano Beach Resort is £254 per room/night (€320). For bookings visit [www.puenteromano.com](http://www.puenteromano.com) or phone +34 952 820 900.

Monarch, the scheduled leisure airline, operates flights to Malaga from Birmingham, East Midlands, London Gatwick, London Luton and Manchester airports with fares, including taxes, starting from £27.99 one way (£49.13 return). For further information or to book Monarch flights, Monarch Holidays or Monarch Hotels, please visit [www.monarch.co.uk](http://www.monarch.co.uk)



**World class:** After all that eating, you may want to head to the tennis club, complete with gym, to burn off some calories

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