

The picturesque Andalusian town of Gaucin is surrounded by mountains, cliffs and forests — and is the birthplace of the opera heroine Carmen



Wish you lived in?

Andalusia, southern Spain

Think idyllic country villas, not Costa del Sol high-rises, says Emanuele Midolo

Malaga may geographically sit in Britain's favourite riviera, but just don't call it the Costa del Sol.

The city, which is the birthplace of Pablo Picasso, has experienced a fresh "cultural revolution" over the past decade, is becoming more popular with international home buyers.

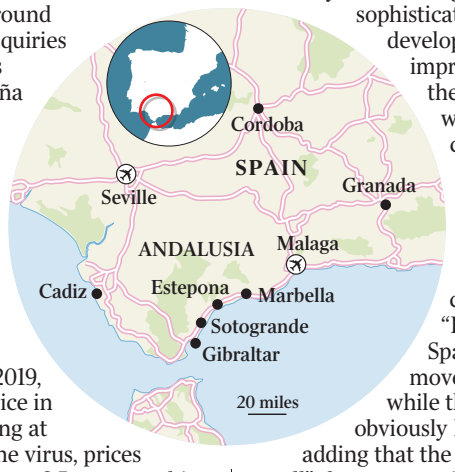
"Malaga used to be a poor fourth to Seville, Cordoba and Granada, but over the past 10 or 15 years that has changed completely," James Stewart says. He is the managing director of the Spanish estate agency James Stewart, Savills's associate in Sotogrande, and has been working in the region since 1982. His children were born in Malaga and went to school there. "It's absolutely fantastic. It has become a great city. It's up there where it should be."

Stewart explains that the Costa del Sol became a mass tourist destination in the late 1950s, with small towns and beach resorts such as Fuengirola, Torremolinos and Benalmadena. "Those were the fairly cheap mass-tourism destinations with high-rise hotels that started the Costa del Sol," he says.

Marbella, which Stewart describes as "an oasis with a jet-set element", became popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Estepona, a small town in the Malaga province with 13 miles of beaches, followed suit in the 1980s and 1990s. Malaga, on the other hand, was a late bloomer and only started to flourish in the mid-2000s under a new city administration, which invested more than €100 million in culture and tourism. A new international airport, Malaga-Costa del Sol, opened in 2011 and has quickly become Spain's fourth busiest airport.

Now Malaga commands some of the highest property prices in the region. In the historic centre of the city prices are €3,092 a square metre on average, with high-end properties reaching €6,150 a square metre, according to Savills. In the seaside district of Carretera de Cadiz prices can go to €11,350 a square metre. These, however, are still cheap when compared with other Spanish cities, such as Madrid or Barcelona. A five-storey semi-detached property near the Mercado Central de Atarazanas market in Malaga city centre is for sale with the Spanish estate agency Lucas Fox. The 456 sq m property, which has four bedrooms, four bathrooms and a private lift, costs €1.9 million.

"It's crazy busy at the moment. We are receiving around 10 per cent more inquiries than last year," says José Felix Pérez-Peña Garrido, the director of the Malaga-Andalusia office at Savills Aguirre Newman who was born and bred in the city. He explains that prices went up by about 25 per cent between 2018 and 2019, with the average price in the city now standing at €368,515. Despite the virus, prices are still going up about 2.5 per cent this year, while in nearby cities such as Cadiz and Cordoba they have gone down by almost 5 per cent.



Most of the buyers are Spanish — at least for now. If international buyers account for about 70 per cent of the residential property market in the Costa del Sol (locals account for 30 per cent), the numbers are reversed in Malaga and its countryside, with the Spanish still having the lion's share. "Malaga needs to take some of the international demand that is out there," Pérez-Peña Garrido explains. "Developers are working to improve the quality of their projects to become more attractive internationally."

Last year was a record for new-builds in the city. Cranes went up in the districts of Puerto de la Torre-Teatinos, Carretera de Cadiz, Malaga Este and Rincon de la Victoria. According to Savills, within these four districts alone more than 4,000 units have been built over the past 12 months.

Mark Harvey, a partner and the head of the international department at the estate agency Knight Frank, agrees that if you want to attract international buyers with "slightly more sophisticated needs", local developers need to improve the quality of the build. However, where foreign buyers can strike bargains is in the Andalusian countryside. Harvey explains that is due to a key cultural difference. "It's not in the Spaniards' nature to move to the country, while the foreigners obviously love that," he says, adding that the Spanish are "happy to sell" these properties to them. "They think they are crazy," he adds, laughing. "'You want my finca? Yeah, take it!'"

This, Harvey argues, is because historically locals who elevated their social status moved out of the country into the cities. "They moved into town because there they have jobs, opportunities, education. Why go back to their fincas?"

Knight Frank is offering a finca between Malaga and Seville with its own 8.6-acre estate. The seven-bedroom, seven-bathroom *palacio*, now run as a luxury boutique hotel, is for sale with a £3.1 million price tag.

So is Malaga the answer to the overbuilt, overcrowded Costa del Sol? Rodolfo Núñez, a director of Lucas Fox Malaga, argues that you can't really compare the two. "[The Costa] is one of the most attractive tourist destinations in the world," he says. "Malaga is a city with abundant economic, social and cultural life all year long, not just during the summer. For the first time we've seen a high number of homeowners living in Marbella moving to Malaga."

He is echoed by Pérez-Peña Garrido, who calls Andalusia's cultural capital "a little *joya escondida*" — a hidden gem. "I think people realise now that Malaga is a city that offers many things that the Costa del Sol doesn't have."



Top: a four-bedroom villa with views of Lake Viñuela is on sale for €399,500 with Lucas Fox. Above: the village of Juzcar was painted blue for a Smurfs movie in 2011, and the residents loved it so much they have kept it that way