

Jerez de la Frontera: Sherry, Horses, Flamenco ... and muchas tapas!

By Sarah McInerney

Jerez de la Frontera is situated in the heart of Andalucía, about an hour and a half from the magnificent monuments of Seville and half an hour from the Atlantic-lapped shores of the Costa de la Luz. It's an ideal place for a weekend of Spanish culture, only two and a half hours on average from the UK, with low cost flights from RyanAir.

Jerez is well known throughout the world as the crux of the sherry producing triangle of Andalucía. It is home to dozens of bodegas, including the famous Gonzalez Byass, well-known for its Tio Pepe brand. I visited Bodegas Tio Pepe and was very impressed by the tour, which included, amongst other things, an interesting film, and a trip round the vineyards and gardens. Another popular Bodega is Williams and Humbert, whose tour includes an equestrian show. Some of the bodegas, including this one, require advance booking, so check before you go.

One of my favourite sights in Jerez was the Alcázar, a 12th Century Islamic Fortress. I spent a blissful afternoon in the glorious sunny surroundings of the gardens, punctuated with cooling water features and filled with the scent of spring and summer flowers in a cascading kaleidoscope of blooming colour. Ducking out of the sun for some shady relief was easy: the Arab Baths, the Mezquita and the Oil Mill were cool – and very interesting.

Any visit to the Alcázar must – without fail - take in the Camara Oscura, an innovative feature that really is worth the few Euros it costs to see. You are taken to the highest point of the Palacio Villavicencio, another highlight of the Alcázar complex. Here, you are ushered into a private room with about 10 or 12 other people, and gathered round what looks like a large white satellite dish. The doors are closed, the lights turned off, and your guide introduces you to this innovate 'camera' which involves refracting lenses and results in a panoramic, real-time view of Jerez where you can see exactly what is going on at the time across the city: people walking, sitting chatting - even waiting for a bus! Our guide warned, 'be careful what you do when you are in Jerez, you may be caught on camera!'

Another highlight of Jerez is the Fundación Real Escuela Andaluza del Arte Ecuestre (The Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art – www.realescuela.org), known all over the world for its show "How the Andalusian Horses Dance", a unique exhibition of horsemanship. The show takes place every Tuesday and Thursday, and Fridays in August only, at 12pm.

Mention must also be made of the city's Flamenco Heritage. The Flamenco Centre, with its studios and museum, must be on the itinerary of anyone who harbors a passion for this art.

On a walk through the pretty cobbled streets, where you'll find an orange tree-lined square at almost every turn, you will not go hungry. Tapas is the name of the game here, in fact, it is so much considered the staple diet, that you'll not find very many 'proper' restaurants at all. The best tapas we sampled were at the famous Gallo Azul. It was standing room only on the night of Easter Thursday, but we tucked our elbows in and literally rubbed shoulders with the Spanish, joining them for dishes of duck in plum sauce, smoked salmon and cream cheese terrine, octopus on 'paprickered' potatoes and something that involved tuna and puff pastry – we didn't catch the name – but it certainly tasted good washed down with a cold cerveza.

You can find out more about the city by visiting www.turismojerez.com.