

Travel

This cultured city is secretly Europe's finest winter week

For the history-loving traveller, few spots compare with Cádiz, an ancient outpost on Spain's Atlantic coast, says *Norman Miller*

Arriving on a winter evening, I find the air is still warm as I cast myself into the fishnet tangle of Cádiz's cobbled medieval lanes in search of dinner. In the old fishing quarter of La Viña, I dive into Casa Manteca (Calle Corralón de los Carros 66), and sidle to the bar to order plates of *chicharrones* (fried pork belly eaten with lemon and salt), succulent Iberian ham and *mojama* (wonderful air-dried tuna), handing over just a few euros for each (cash remains king in food spots).

For a nightcap, La Manzanilla (Calle Feduchy 19) is a shrine to sherry in a city cradled within the Sherry Triangle of Jerez, El Puerto



de Santa Maria and Sanlúcar de Barrameda. Beneath vintage posters, barman Pepe guides me through unfamiliar varieties, such as *madura* and *pasada*, chalking each delicious glass on a tab on a burnished wood bar.

Western Europe's oldest city – and host to a satire-filled annual carnival (Feb 27-Mar 9 in 2025) – Cádiz has had time to work on stirring the senses: the Phoenicians founded a port here – Gadir (locals are still called *gaditanos*) – around 1,100 BC. Surrounded on three sides by the Atlantic, anchored to the rest of Europe by a thread of land, it spreads into the ocean like a mile-wide palm, open in welcome.

The city's historic focus looked out towards Africa and the Americas – literally so, with about 120 distinctive towers thrusting above the rooftops of merchant mansions where traders watched for ships returning from distant lands. At street level, old cannons have been set upright in walls as idiosyncratic corner protectors, repurposed from the Napoleonic Wars, during which Cádiz became Spain's capital from 1810-13.

Strolling along the seafront at Campo del Sur, I snap the colourful facades that helped inspire Cádiz's nickname of Little Havana – a city it doubled for in the James Bond film *Die Another Day*. Nowhere in Cuba, though, can boast both a 1st-century Roman theatre (entrance on Calle Mesón), and 3,000-year-old Phoenician docks within yards of a neoclassical cathedral.

Further on, I sink into the sandy half-moon curve of La Caleta beach, bookended by 300-year-old forts, where colourful boats bob in the bay. But it's Parque Genovés I like the most, its ornately tiled fountains shaded by banyan trees, their huge roots sprawling like a giant woody octopus. And you can delve into contemporary Cádiz art and photography at the adjacent Ecco cultural centre.

Another banyan spreads in front of the Museum of Cádiz, on Plaza de Mina, where I tick off Phoenician and Roman artefacts, paintings by Rubens and Murillo, plus a taster of the city's passion for puppets. This colourful facet of the local culture is chronicled in a wonderful panoply of stringed wonders at the Museo del Títere, by the grand 18th-century old city gateway of Puerta de Tierra.

Distinctive flavours light up each meal. There's *cazón en adobo* (dogfish fried in breadcrumbs with cumin) and *tortillita de camarones* (shrimp-speckled wafery sheets of deliciousness), savoured amid the colonnades at Spain's oldest covered market on Plaza de la Libertad, and then *choco* (grilled cuttlefish) at the Rick Stein favourite Taberna el Tío de la Tiza, on the tiny cobbled square of the same name. At the wood-panelled Mesón Cumbres Mayores (Calle Zorrilla 4), I stuff myself on slabs of tuna and the rich *berza* stew of chickpeas, green beans and chorizo.

Cádiz is also a beacon of flamenco, whose music inspired the *gaditano* maestro Manuel de Falla, Spain's greatest modern composer. I head for the Taberna Flamenca La Cava, near the Museum of Cádiz, and settle in for a show in its intimate old bar space, and as a kaleidoscopic whirl of music and fabric begins, I give myself up again to the sensual blast of this ancient city.

Seafront skyline: the towers and golden dome of the 18th-century Cádiz Cathedral

Essentials

EasyJet (easyjet.com) flies year-round to Seville (an hour from Cádiz by car or train), from £50 return, while Ryanair (ryanair.com) flies to Jerez (45 minutes by car or train) between April and October, from £75 return.

Hotel Argantonio is a Moorish-influenced, 18th-century Old Town jewel, with spacious rooms, from £45 per night.

Norman Miller was a guest of Kirker Holidays (kirkerholidays.com), which offers a three-night package from £628pp B&B at the Hotel Argantonio, including return flights, private car transfers to Cádiz, and the services of a Kirker Concierge. For more information, visit spain.info.

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