



A family vacation

along the Costa

Del Sol that begs

the question, “why

couldn’t we have just

done this at home?”

A COAST OF FAMILIARITY

by Sean Crane

I have always harbored glorified illusions of Spain. Too much Hemingway can do that to you. I wouldn't go so far as to say the big man misled me, but *The Sun Also Rises* and *Death in the Afternoon* hardly prepares one for the bland reality of a week at the Marriott Marbella resort in the heart of the Costa Del Sol. Of course, Hemingway's cast of characters included a group of twenty something hep cats heading to Pamplona for the running of the bulls, not a 37 year old man with his mother, his sister, her husband and two kids, all staying together at an American chain resort.

Now let me get this straight right off—The Marriott Marbella is a nice resort: clean, spacious rooms, nicely manicured grounds, beachfront location, two beautiful pools, several adequate restaurants, all the amenities of a self-contained resort. Which is precisely the problem—it's a self-contained resort. It's designed, as are all such resorts, so that you never have to leave. Get up in the morning, go lay by the pool, head over to the tennis courts for your 11 o'clock appointment, head back to the pool, shower, head to dinner, go for drinks at the bar, go to bed, wake up and do it all over again. Sure, it beats working 9 to 5, but why do you need to fly all the way to Spain to do it? I don't know if there's a Marriott Resort Southern California, but if there is I imagine it looks exactly like the one in Marbella. I've been told that the cookie-cutter layout is one of the things people like most about the hotel resort chains—you know what you're getting into. Once you're securely settled, however, the only thing that reminds you you're in Spain is the accent on your waiter—not that a Spanish accent is a rarity in Southern California.

But there I was, day one, in all my pampered glory, visions of conquistadors and flamenco dancers still clouding my underdeveloped sense of reality. After the long flight, the friendly confines of the resort were actually a welcome sight. A day at the beach was in order. I had an

entire week ahead of me—the real Spain could wait a few hours. I grabbed my spf15 and a fresh beach towel and headed to the famed coast of the sun. On the way, I passed by the two beautiful pools, each with its fair share of grotesquely over-browned vacationers, sweating profusely in the name of rest and relaxation. There's nothing like a rich, leathery man in a Speedo to make you reconsider life as a rich leathery man in a Speedo.

Behind the second pool was a sign that read "Zona Topless." The sign was flanked by a 15 x 30-foot patch of grass containing ten or so lounge chairs. Two of the chairs were occupied. I proceeded to veer much closer to the patch of grass than was necessary to reach the



Plaza de Toros de Ronda — aka the bullring — is one of the oldest operational bullrings in Spain, and from what I was told, the most beautiful.

beach. Hoping to see a Penelope Cruz look alike and her twin sister, I was instead greeted by Bea Arthur and her twin brother. An old issue of National Geographic featuring a pictorial essay on the tribes of Papua New Guinea came to mind. I immediately veered back on course and through the fence to the sea.

Now I've been to many beaches in my day, some good some bad, but they've all had two things in common—water and sand. Apparently, along the Costa Del Sol the definition of beach has been modified to water and dirt. It didn't take long to realize why the majority of the resort's guests were lying poolside. Rather than lay my towel upon the topsoil, I opted for one of the bright cloth lounge chairs lined up in military fashion

along the Marriott's 50-yard stretch of beach. I looked to my left and realized I wasn't alone, as another member of the New Guanine tribe was leathering her 70-year-old breasts in the afternoon sun. I slept until dinner.

Continuing with the day's theme of home away from home, we ate at El Mediterraneo, the resort's main restaurant. As I perused the menu I had an odd sensation that I had been there before. But then I realized it was just the time my mother had taken me to a great new restaurant she discovered called Chilis. In any case, the food was decent. Decent in the kind of way that the Macaroni Grill is decent, just not what I was expecting. No tapas, no exotic olives, no twenty something hep cats on their way to Pamplona. But they did have paella, which my sister assures me was very good and they did have sangria which I assure you was very good.

Over the next week, we would spend many days and nights at the El Mediterraneo, a good deal of time at the pool (or on the dirt), an hour here or there at the tennis courts and several lazy afternoons on our balcony sipping Spanish beer while nibbling cheese and crackers bought from the local, Marriott convenience store. I for one never missed an opportunity to check the Zona Topless—my wandering eyes safe

behind the shelter of a pair of dark sunglasses, still clinging to the dream of Penelope. All in all, not a bad way to spend your day, but when we needed to remind ourselves we were actually in Spain, we piled into the Ford Focus we had rented from Hertz and hit the road.

Ronda was our first destination, and as it turned out, an excellent choice. The hour-long drive was an adventure in itself as we meandered up and through the picturesque Sierra Bermeja Mountains. In Oz-like fashion, the city majestically revealed itself, charmingly perched atop a towering plateau—its fortunate geographic positioning affording great views in all directions. As we strolled through the medieval town center, the Marriott seemed centuries off. Despite all its old

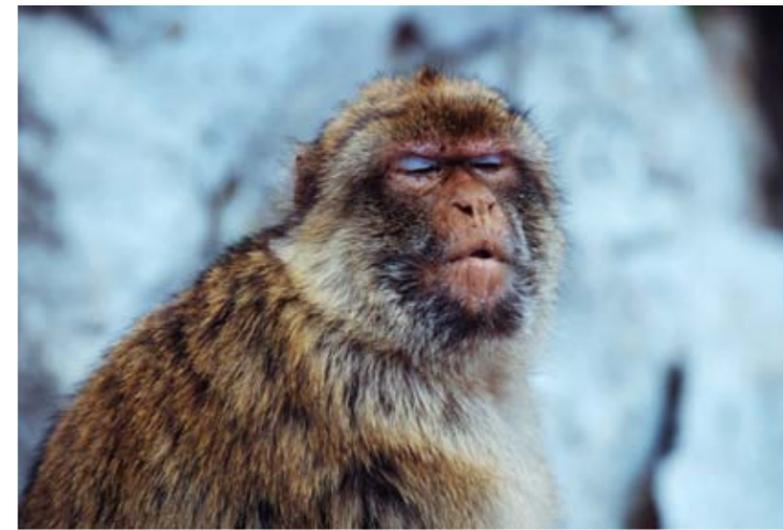
world charm, however, the town of Ronda is clearly all about one thing—the bullring. From what I was told, it's not only Spain's largest, but also the most beautiful in all the land—and on days when there's no bull scheduled for an afternoon pulverization, visitors are free to enter for a look around. Having no other bullrings to compare it to, I'll have to take the locals' word on it and agree that it was a damn fine looking ring. No Fenway Park, of course, but a fine looking ring.

Mijas was our next stop. Like Ronda, it also enjoys a favorable mountain setting. This time, however, we approached from above the city—the view being just as spectacular as we looked down upon the red tile rooftops and pine-covered mountains beyond. After parking, we descended through the narrow alleyways to find a picturesque town of whitewashed buildings and cobbled streets. Mijas is no undiscovered jewel mind you—the effects of tourism are present throughout the city—but somehow the artisan gift shops, international restaurants, and donkey taxis seem to blend together in an authentically pleasant fashion. And if there's one thing I can say about the people of Mijas, it's that they like their flowers. Geranium-lined balconies were proudly on display reminding me of one of those suburban neighborhoods in a place like Des Moines where neighbors try to outdo each other for the most garishly spectacular Christmas light display. Not that I'm calling geraniums garish, I'm just saying these people really get into their flowers.

A few days later it was time for our third and final outing. No vacation to the Costa Del Sol is complete without a day trip to the British territory of Gibraltar—it is, after all, more than just a rock serving as the logo for an insurance company. We're talking the steward of the western Mediterranean here, the Meeting Place of Continents, a Pillar of Hercules!

Entering Gibraltar is a strange experience. You park on the Spanish side (at least we did and it seemed to be

what everyone else was doing) and walk through a border crossing checkpoint station. When you walk through to the other side, you're in a different country (a fact which Spain is none too happy about). You're also standing on the edge of an airport runway. If the coast is clear, you continue across the runway toward town and the great rock that looms over all. In Gibraltar, everything feels different from Spain, albeit similar in many ways to any Euro tourist spot you've ever been. A bustling downtown of pubs, upscale shops, and restaurants of every conceivable price range is marginally charming. The place feels oddly like a giant outdoor airport terminal where everyone is grabbing a quick



The apes of Gibraltar were a highlight of my trip to Spain, albeit technically, not a part of Spain. As legend has it, if the apes go, the Brits go.

bite before moving along to someplace else. All activity leads to the base of the rock. And when I say rock, I'm not talking about some oversized boulder. The Rock of Gibraltar is more a mountain—a giant slab of sediment that rises almost 1400 feet from the water that surrounds it. And because it rises so precipitously from the sea, it is visible for miles in all directions. The rock is what we came for and to the rock we went.

It's not a big feat to climb to the top of the rock. But why climb when you can take the cable car, which is really much more a gondola than any sort of tram. As soon as the car starts, you realize that the ascent isn't exactly gradual. I appreciated this. My mother did not. Either

way, in no time we were at the top.

Stepping from the car, we were greeted by a very touristy restaurant, great views in all directions and Gibraltar's most famous residents—the apes. Technically, they're Barbary Macaques, but I don't usually like to drop terms like "Barbary Macaque" in casual conversation. The "apes" have the distinction of being the only free-ranging monkeys in Europe, although they hardly seem wild. "Do not feed the apes" signs are everywhere which is kind of like putting a "do not look" sign in the Zona Topless. An ape perched atop one of these signs while eating out of the hand of a tour guide is a common sighting.

One-time natives of Morocco and Algeria, it's somewhat of a mystery as to how the apes first got to Gibraltar. Legend has it that they are a symbol of British sovereignty and if they go, so will the Brits. For this reason, Winston Churchill gave strict orders—after their numbers diminished during World War II—to maintain a population of at least 24 at all times. For my niece and nephew, the apes were clearly a highlight of the trip and we spent a good part of the day watching them not be fed by the mob of international tourists.

That evening as we drove home along the coast, we passed what seemed an endless stream of development. More and more cookie-cutter resorts for more and more grotesquely tanned rich guys in Speedos. Just off the coast, however, the land rises relatively unscathed on its way to the mountains. Sitting in the passenger seat, it was the mountains that held my gaze. I know you're out there Spain, I thought to myself, and when I return I will find you—conquistadors, flamenco dancers, hep cats and all.

For more of Sean Crane's adventures, visit www.seancrane.com.