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RURAL REFUGE

Jerez de la Frontera

Sherry and dancing horses

Barrel of laughs: clockwise from top left, sherry-tasting is de rigueur in this area; Jerez's Moorish Alcázar; outside the Royal Equestrian School; cafe life in Jerez

Why? White and golden under palms and jacarandas, Jerez is the essence of the Spanish South: home of the Anglo-Hispanic sherry dynasties, the Royal Andalucian School of Equestrian Art and superb flamenco.

The weekend: Spend a morning with the magnificent Andalusian stallions at the equestrian school, watching either a flamboyant horse ballet or training session, depending on the date (Ave Duque de Abrantes; realescuela.org/en; from £8). Follow with a succulent steak at nearby Parrilla La Pampa (Calle Guadalete 24; 00 34 956 341749, parrillalapampa.com; mains about £13), perfect prep for a boozy tour of the Tio Pepe bodega (Calle Manuel María González 12; bodegastiopepe.com; £9).

Next morning, visit Jerez's Moorish Alcázar, mosque and 19th-century pharmacy, and look through the fun camera obscura in one of its towers (Alameda Vieja; jerez.es; £4). Lunch on clams in sherry vinegar at Albores (Calle Consistorio 12; 00 34 956 320266;

mains about £10), take a siesta, and at 10.30pm, catch the pounding guitars and castanets at Taberna Flamenco (Calle Angostillo de Santiago 3; 00 34 956 323693, latabernaflamenca.com; dinner and show £28).

Sleep: Just northeast of Jerez, Casa Viña de Alcántara (00 34 956 393010, vinadealcantara.com; doubles from £124, B&B) does rural elegance in a seductive garden oasis.

Make a week of it: From Jerez, visit the other corners of the 'sherry triangle', Sanlúcar de Barrameda and El Puerto de Santa María — each is worth a day. Then drive to the pueblos blancos, spending a day in spectacular Arcos de la Frontera, before checking in to six-room La Mejorana in Grazalema (00 34 956 132327, lamejorana.net; doubles from £42, B&B). From there, hike through the Sierra de Grazalema gorges, and tour other 'white villages' such as Zahara, Olvera and Setenil de las Bodegas.

Nearest airport: Jerez is a mere eight kilometres northeast of the city.

HOTEL HEAVEN



OUR RURAL FAVES

CASA OLEA

Here's a pretty B&B (pictured), tucked in an isolated spot in Priego de Córdoba, between Granada and Córdoba. Ease into peaceful siestas in rustic-chic rooms, laze in hammocks by the pool, stroll or cycle through rolling olive groves — and idle over home-cooked meals. Doubles from £87, B&B (00 34 696 748209, casaolea.com).

LA ALMENDRA Y EL GITANO

At this stylish oasis in the Cabo de Gata National Park, all six rooms have picture windows looking out to the desert plains. Expect, too, private terraces (some rooms have whirlpool tubs) and an outdoor pool. Doubles from £82, B&B (00 34 678 502911, laalmendrayelgitano.com).

CORTIJO DEL MARQUES

Surrounded by sunflower fields and olive groves just north of Granada, this boutique country house, with 11 rooms and suites, has exposed brick walls, wooden beams and four-poster beds. Cool off in the outdoor pool and inspect the pretty stone chapel, which sometimes hosts blessings and concerts. Doubles from £79, B&B (00 34 958 340077, cortijodelmarques.com).

HACIENDA DE SAN RAFAEL

Deep in the countryside near Jerez, this converted 18th-century family olive estate has bougainvillea-laced gardens with two swimming pools and fragrant orchards of citrus, pomegranate and quince trees. Three cottages share a private pool. Doubles from £137, B&B (00 34 954 227116, haciendadesanrafael.com).

Perfect moment: Idling at a beach bar

What? Chiringuitos are loved by Andalusians. These days they're called 'pop-ups', but the seasonal bar has been part of culture here since the early 20th century. You'll find them on beaches and beside rivers, and the perfect moment occurs in two phases. First, you realise that that quick lunch of charcoal-grilled sardines can continue until sunset, and secondly, the family at the next table is

insisting you join them and meet uncle Pepe, aunt Rosita, granny Maria and tell them all about Inglaterra.

Make it happen: Málaga has a great chain of chiringuitos stretching east from Pedregalejo, but Malagueños can be picky, so the usual advice counts: go where the crowd is Spanish, and squeeze in. In the countryside, always pause on bridges and scan upstream and down for parked cars — a sure sign of a riverside chiringuito.

