

Travel

LET A SENSE OF ADVENTURE GET THE BETTER OF YOU

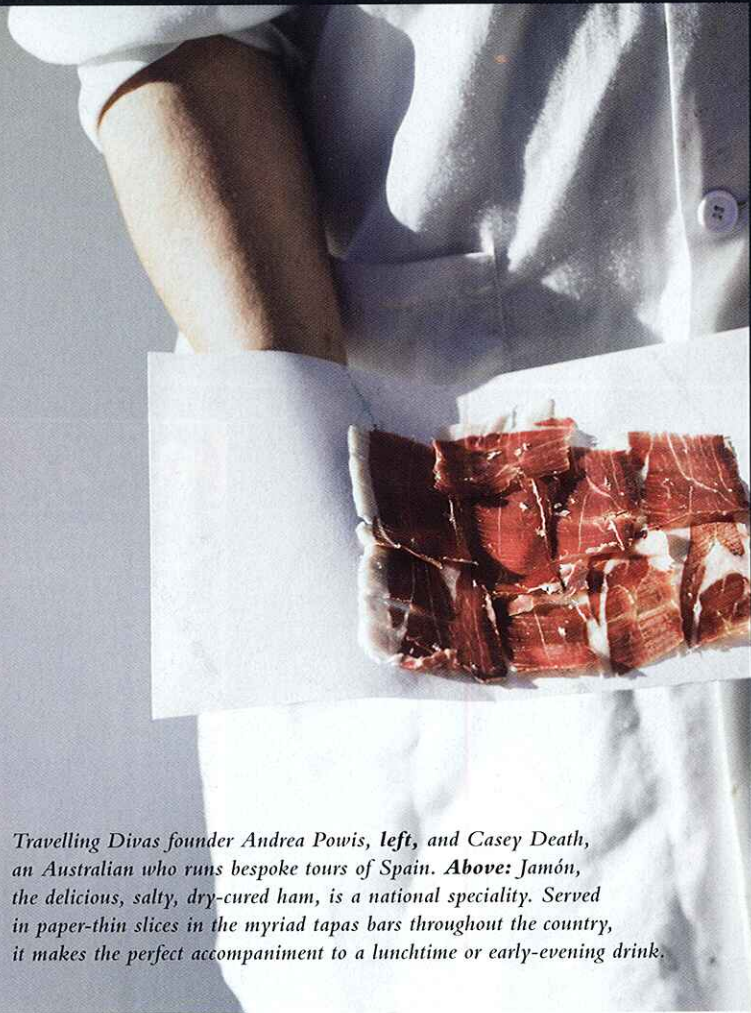
VINOS Y REFRESCO

Dazzling divas... Casey Death, Liza Harris and Stephanie DuPlessis seek out tapas in Madrid.

SEÑORITAS IN SPAIN

Travel editor Lee Tulloch hits Spain with the Travelling Divas, a style-savvy, women-only tour, to shop, cook, dance, eat, and holiday in true chica style.

PHOTOGRAPHER: PABLO ZAMORA PRODUCER/WRITER LEE TULLOCH



Travelling Divas founder Andrea Powis, left, and Casey Death, an Australian who runs bespoke tours of Spain. Above: Jamón, the delicious, salty, dry-cured ham, is a national speciality. Served in paper-thin slices in the myriad tapas bars throughout the country, it makes the perfect accompaniment to a lunchtime or early-evening drink.

Monday

THE LIMOUSINE DRIVER who collects me from Madrid-Barajas Airport tells me the location of my hotel is excellent, because it's central and lively. There are only three cities that are awake all night – Madrid, New York and Sydney, he says confidently. The ME Madrid hotel is at the top of the lovely Plaza de Santa Ana and my balcony has views over the rooftops of the city. Famous as the hotel where bullfighters once lodged, it has recently been grooved-up. The only clues to its colourful history are stuffed bulls' heads on the walls of the downstairs bar. In my room is a welcoming gift of sparkling wine (cava), chocolates and a bottle of Mavala 'Madrid' red nail polish.

A knock on the door and Andrea Powis arrives to greet me. She's the Brisbane-based former British Airways executive whose brainchild is Travelling Divas, which sounds like a circus troupe, but in fact specialises in escorted tours tailored to women travelling together. With her is Casey Death, a young Australian woman who lives in Málaga and manages Biznaga Travel Company, specialising in bespoke tours of Spain's south. Kisses on cheeks and we're instant friends. As another welcome treat, two local girls arrive to do my nails and give me a massage and there's time for a little siesta before I meet my other travelling companions at the bar downstairs at 8pm. There are two sisters, a mother-and-daughter duo, and four of us are travelling solo, which adds up to 10 divas including our guides. Ages span 31 to 71, but I estimate most divas are in their thirties or forties. We're soon chatting madly over tapas at a nearby bar called Prada a Tope. Lavished with massive servings of jamón, cheese, chorizo, mushrooms and tortilla by a waiter who tells us, "You are not eating enough." By the time the honey liqueur is brought out, the divas have unwound sufficiently to flirt outrageously with the owner. Much more fun than travelling alone!

Tuesday

The divas are keen to shop so Casey has arranged for a stylist friend, Estelle, to give us a tour of Chueca, an alternative neighbourhood where many of Madrid's young designers have their boutiques, and home to corpulent and superannuated prostitutes boldly plying their trade by day. The divas prove champions at shopping, egged on by discounts arranged by Estelle at each store. Shoes are especially cheap in Madrid, so we comb Augusto Figueroa, a narrow street filled with bargain shoe stores. Espadrille overload! Casey, whose fluent Spanish will rescue us many times, translates a sign on a closed boutique as: "I open when I open, I close when I close and if I'm not here, it means we haven't coincided." Welcome to Madrid time, where nothing opens much before 11am, much of the city is closed in the afternoon for siesta, and your stomach better get used to dining at 10pm.

After a siesta, we grab our swimmers from the hotel and take a 10-minute walk to an ancient hammam, Medina Mayrit, tucked away downstairs off a busy street. The bathhouse is absolutely beautiful – a subterranean vault, lit by the glow coming from the pavement through filigree screens, and by dozens of candles – and boasts warm and hot pools heated by a central brazier, a steam room and an icy plunge pool. Swim up to the relaxation room for pots of delicious mint tea. We're forbidden to talk, but the divas are like naughty schoolgirls, whispering and giggling away at the sheer bliss of it. After an hour of soaking, we're taken for individual scrubs and massages.

Barely enough time to bang on make-up in the hotel and head to the roof for cocktails in the VIP bar. Then a walk at dusk through beautiful squares to the Mercado de San Miguel, a restored market hall bursting with stalls selling everything from buttery jamón from acorn-fed pigs to scrumptious crema catalana. We commandeer a table, feast on tapas and red wine, then stagger back to the hotel on brand-new heels. In Madrid less than two days, and I have already eaten my weight in jamón.

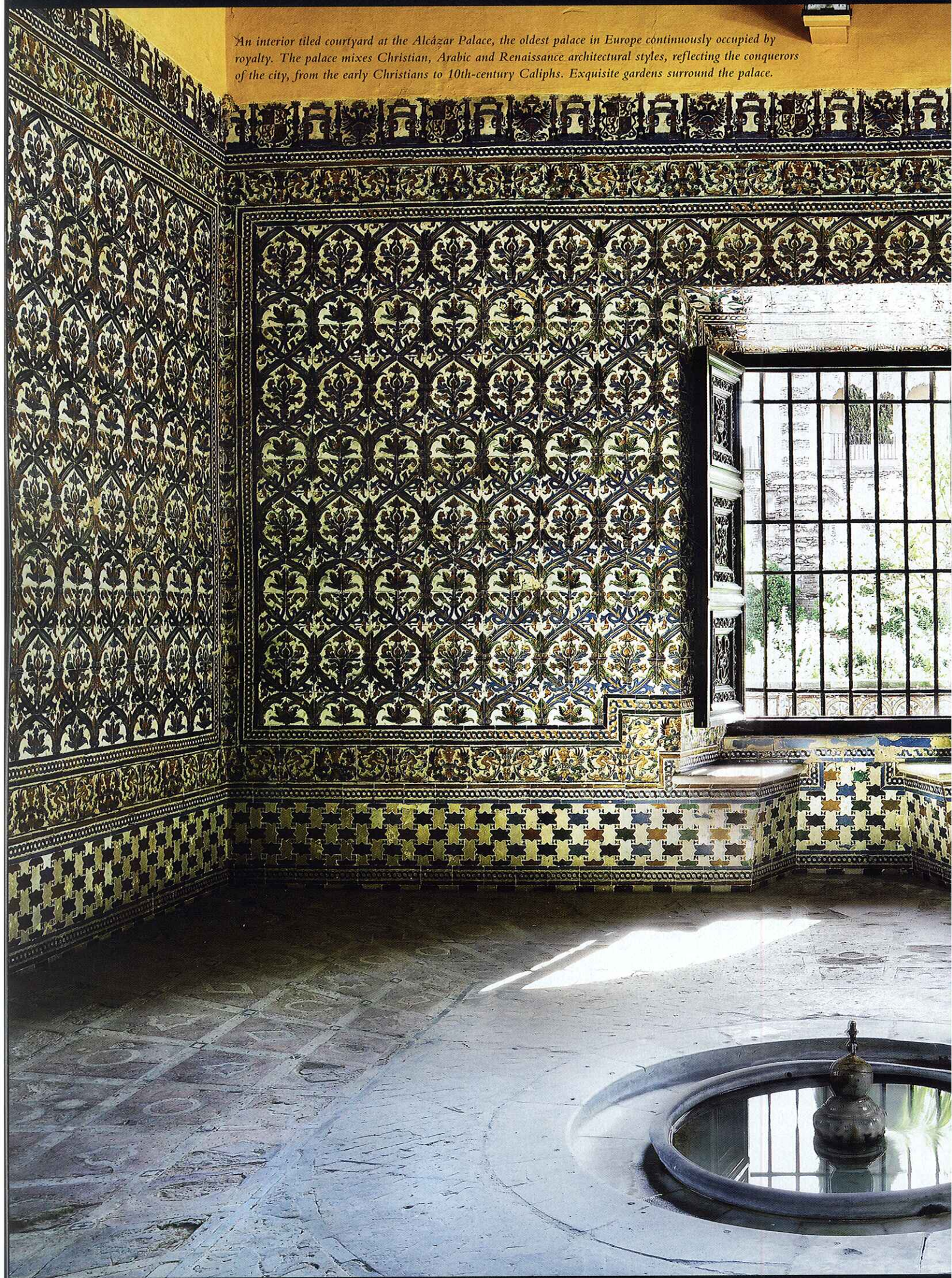


Tapas bars such as this one in Seville are the social and culinary hubs of Spanish communities. Locals call in on their way to work, during the afternoon siesta, on the way home or in the evening for café con leche, aperitifs, light snacks, beers, meals and the regional wine varieties.

Wednesday

At Madrid's stately central train station, rebuilt after the terror attacks of 2004, we board the AVE fast train for Seville. Spain's fast trains are the best in Europe – we cover 600 kilometres in two-and-a-half hours, flying past the olive groves, vineyards and salt plains of Andalucía. Seville, the country's fourth largest city, is considered, along with Toledo, to be its most beautiful – and it has its best frock on for us. Jacarandas and mimosas line the streets, cerise-coloured bougainvillea climb walls, and leafy trees drop huge, fleshy Seville oranges at our feet. Narrow, cobbled streets are lined with buildings of apartments in a house on quiet Quiros Street, oozing with charm. I'm in the *ático* with a terrace looking over terracotta rooftops and flowerboxes of geraniums to the cathedral. Over a late lunch in a tapas bar with stuffed bulls' heads eyeing us off – Seville is the home of Spain's most prestigious bullfighting and the bullring is across the road – we discover *tinto de verano*, a red wine-and-soda combo that the locals drink instead of sangria. A walk along the serene river and in the elegant Parque de Maria Louisa, with its lakes, rowboats and beautifully dressed children, before frocking up for sunset mojitos on the higgledy-piggledy rooftop of the fashionable EME Cathedral Hotel, which sits almost in the spires of the Cathedral of Seville, with swallows swooping overhead. Close to heaven here. 'Fortissima' is written on the Giralda tower – and we'll need strength to get through the tapas tour of neighbourhood bars with a local expert. At the third tapas bar, after our umpteenth glass of manzanilla sherry, Liza from Brisbane gives her verdict: "Life is good!"

An interior tiled courtyard at the Alcázar Palace, the oldest palace in Europe continuously occupied by royalty. The palace mixes Christian, Arabic and Renaissance architectural styles, reflecting the conquerors of the city, from the early Christians to 10th-century Caliphs. Exquisite gardens surround the palace.



Thursday

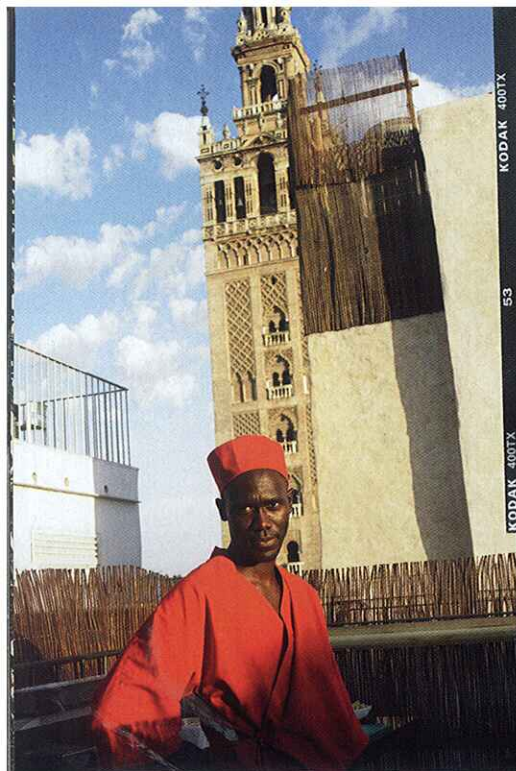
Woken by the cathedral chimes. Cakes and *cafe con leche* at a cafe near the cathedral before a stroll through the Alcázar Palace, the oldest continuously occupied palace in Europe. Christians, Muslims and Jews lived tolerantly together in Seville over the ages and the building and its breathtaking gardens incorporate decorative emblems of successive civilisations from Roman times: ancient columns, Arabic tiles, Gothic cloisters, Spanish tapestries. Ferdinand and Isabella welcomed Columbus here on his return from the Americas.

The fittest divas hike up to the top of the cathedral tower for spectacular views. Some of us peel off for more *croquetas* and *tinto de verano* (red wine and mild lemonade) at a local bar before a brief siesta. We're then surprised by the arrival of horse-drawn carriages at the apartment, with Casey and Andrea on board, handing out cups of sparkling rosé (going to need it for what's ahead!). We're driven at a clip through the cobbled streets to an authentic flamenco school. Our teacher, Sara, young, petite and enviously straight-backed, speaks little English. We start with the arm movements; difficult enough, but when the stamping feet are added, we're as uncoordinated as a herd of moose in tap shoes. Sara doesn't let up: after 90 minutes we're doing a complicated routine, complete with turns and tossed heads. All that stomping is incredibly therapeutic; however, the calorific benefits reaped by the divas are rather negated by the plate of potatoes in spicy sauce at a bodega on the way home.

Friday

Early start – a walk along the river to El Postigo, a little outdoor stall that serves King Juan Carlos's favourite, *churros con chocolate*. Would get up at 5am for these! Cups of warm, thick custardy chocolate are accompanied by two kinds of *churros*: soft, hot doughnut-style pastry in a coiled sausage or crisp star-shaped tubes. Hard to tell which is best, so keep eating. Crowd into a minibus for the drive to Sanlúcar de Barrameda, a coastal city in the 'Sherry Triangle', the small region of Spain where this style of fortified wine originates. First off, a tour of the Barbadillo Bodega, family-owned since 1821, followed by a tasting of many varieties from elegant *manzanilla* to raisiny Pedro Ximénez. We've arrived in Sanlúcar on the first day of the *Feria de la Manzanilla*, the festival celebrating the main type of sherry produced here, and it's a glorious sight. The main boulevards are strung with striped lanterns, bodegas are set up beside the roads in colourful marquees, and everyone is out in their traditional costumes – flamenco dresses, *caballero* outfits – parading up and down the street in horse-drawn carriages and pony carts or dancing flamenco in the tents.

Lunch on baby pipi, calamari and paella at a waterfront restaurant, as handsome young *caballeros* in polo shirts, smoking and drinking beer, ride past on the sand on immaculate horses. Check into the gorgeous Posada de Palacio, an old villa-turned-hotel, with lush, flowering courtyards and ancient rooms with beams and stone floors (and a ghost, as Liza discovers when woken by an unearthly chill in the middle of the night). After siesta, the divas wander down to Casa Balbino for a new addiction – *tortillitas de camarones*, teeny shrimp cooked in lacy, crisp chickpea batter. One diva slips on the marble cobblestones and thus the 'Slippery Diva' is invented – a take on the mojito (made with fresh cherries or strawberries or whatever is going) that we ask bemused bartenders to mix for us across Spain.



Left: A waiter at the EME Cathedral Hotel, Seville. **Above:** Salud! The divas check out the rooftop bar of the ME Hotel, Madrid. Sanlúcar de Barrameda is in the 'Sherry Triangle', famous for its bodegas, right, that produce the fortified wine.



Saturday

The divas are not prima donnas. Despite diverse backgrounds, everyone's getting on famously. No one is late or spoils the fun. The two older women don't have the younger ones' stamina for partying, but there's no pack mentality. Casey, who part of the year helps run her mother's B&B in coastal NSW, takes us on a tour of the local produce market. Admire greatly her local knowledge and her unfailingly sunny spirit. Chief diva Andrea is a class act – great warmth and style. After lunch, wander alone through the tranquil gardens of the palace of the Red Duchess, the scandalous 21st Duquesa de Medina Sidonia, atheist and republican, who left the 16th-century ducal palace to her German-born secretary/wife when she died in 2008. Now it's a small hotel, a tearoom and repository of Europe's biggest archive of historical documents.

Across the road at the hotel, a wedding party is leaving for church, dressed to the nines – the men in their morning suits, the grandmother of the bride wearing a long black lace mantilla. After a day at the feria, everyone meets for drinks, prepared by the hotel's handsome barman, on the terrace. Leaving Sanlúcar the next day, we find out there's been a *corrida*, a bullfight, on Saturday night... and we've missed it. Unsure whether this is bad luck or a blessing. We watch the replays on local television anyway.

Sunday

Back in the minibus for the drive to Vejer de la Frontera, an exquisite whitewashed village built on twin steep hills by the Moors, a spit across the Gulf of Cádiz from Morocco. Met at the bottom of town by the ebullient Annie Manson, a Scottish woman who runs Annie B's, a Spanish cooking school in her beautiful townhouse at the pinnacle of the village. Wind up narrow, car-free paths past white walls, brightly painted doors and rambling bougainvillea to be greeted with jugs of ice-cold *tinto de verano* in Annie's kitchen. Don green aprons and sit around the kitchen table, nibbling on juicy olives and sticky dates stuffed with fresh walnuts while we're given hands-on demonstrations of how to make *ajo blanco*, a cold Andalusian peasant soup made from almonds, apples and garlic. A local woman, Pepi, demonstrates how to make paella, and Amina, pastry chef at the local La Casa del Califa hotel, arrives to teach us how to make Moroccan sweets and mint tea. Annie breaks out various bottles of sherry and good red wine during the class. The food we've helped

prepare is laid out on a long table by the pool, where divas splash their feet. Although we've been sampling throughout the class, we're ravenous. Afterwards, we climb to the whitewashed roof with views across the village to the sea for mint tea and pastries. Blissed-out divas nap in the sun before making our reluctant farewells and a ramble back downhill to the bus for the drive to nearby Tarifa. Another unforgettable day.

Monday

Tarifa is the windsurfing capital of the world. The beach is long, wild and windy. From here you can cross the strait to Tangier in only 35 minutes on the ferry. Staying in the funky Posada La Sacristía on a cobbled street right in the centre of town. (Again, an inspired choice of hotel.) Tarifa is hippy-trippy, rather like Ibiza. Narrow streets are filled with little shops selling Balinese clothing, Indian jewellery, Moroccan teapots, Spanish espadrilles – and surfwear. For today's surprise, we visit a local primary school to teach the children English as a way for the divas to 'give back' to the community. Armed with Caramello Koalas and storybooks, we're very popular.

Lunch at a local cafe, Las Cuatro Esquinas, brings a new culinary discovery: fried eggplant doused in honey. Stroll along the beach at dusk, showing off new purchases – pretty dresses and shoes. Order Slippery Divas at a bar in the dunes (mojitos the size of milkshakes – the best ever), then dinner at a wonderful Moroccan restaurant, Souk, before walking home under a crescent moon.

Tuesday

Driving from Tarifa to Málaga Airport, we pass close to Gibraltar, the rockface scarred by high-rises. Gradually the ugliness of the Costa del Sol starts to appear – hideous McMansions, artificial golf courses, high-rise apartment buildings languishing in the middle of nowhere. The flight to Barcelona takes a little over an hour. Bucketing down when we arrive in the Catalan capital. Lodging at the grand old Hotel Regina. The nearby Placa de Catalunya has been taken over by the Indignats, a popular movement protesting about government corruption and high unemployment. Looks rather like the whole of NSW hippy encampment Nimbin has moved to Barcelona.



Wednesday

The divas are keen to get shopping again, as it's 24 hours since they've bought anything. But first, we visit the Codorníu winery, where the same family has produced cava (Spanish sparkling wine) for 17 generations. Inspecting the cellars on little trains, we're trailed by a group of about 50 lecherous old Spanish men on an excursion. Glad to escape to the Cal Blay restaurant in the nearby village of Sant Sadurní d'Anoia, where we're lavished with more delicious local produce and wine. Siesta back at the hotel, followed by a group ramble down La Rambla and more shopping.

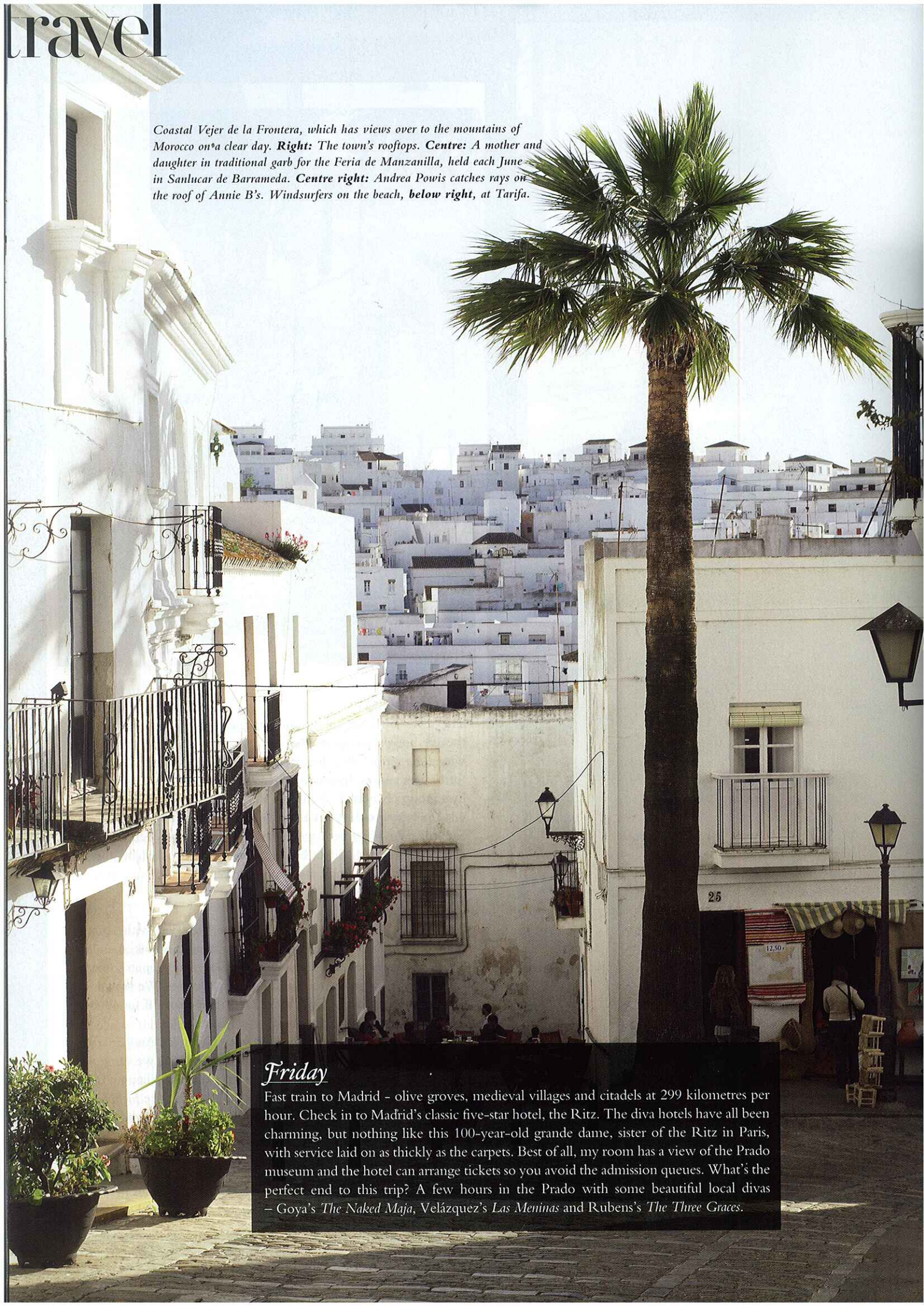
Thursday

Not loving Barcelona – heresy! It's too crowded with ambling tourists (beware the Americans wobbling around on bikes) and the weather today is bad. An hilarious local guide, Sandra, puts some fun back into the obligatory tour of the Gothic Quarter. We crowd into Gaudí's mind-blowing Casa Batlló, and then head off for El Born shopping district and lunch on the waterfront.

Meeting us in the hotel's bar for farewell drinks, Andrea arrives with an armful of feather boas. Wrapped in feathers, we vamp next door to the rooftop of the Hotel Pulitzer for our final Slippery Divas, made with fresh cherries. Feels like a cult. "It's a bit like *Fight Club*," someone says, even though our injuries come not from boxing but shopping. Kylie has a paper cut, Stephanie has a bruise, everyone else complains of RSI from repeated credit-card usage. Dinner at the fabulous Monvínic restaurant, devoted to wine culture. A private room and a feast of fresh local produce matched with wines. "Another crap meal," someone jokes. Teary goodbyes in the hotel lobby.

A day spent at Annie B's, a cookery school run by Annie Manson, top, in Vejer de la Frontera, is a deliciously rewarding experience. Above: The divas learnt to make ajo blanco, a cold soup of almonds, apple, garlic and sherry, served chilled with frozen grapes. Top right: The whitewashed walls of a street in hilly Vejer de la Frontera, which was a Moorish village.

Coastal Vejer de la Frontera, which has views over to the mountains of Morocco on a clear day. **Right:** The town's rooftops. **Centre:** A mother and daughter in traditional garb for the Feria de Manzanilla, held each June in Sanlúcar de Barrameda. **Centre right:** Andrea Powis catches rays on the roof of Annie B's. Windsurfers on the beach, **below right**, at Tarifa.



Friday

Fast train to Madrid – olive groves, medieval villages and citadels at 299 kilometres per hour. Check in to Madrid's classic five-star hotel, the Ritz. The diva hotels have all been charming, but nothing like this 100-year-old grande dame, sister of the Ritz in Paris, with service laid on as thickly as the carpets. Best of all, my room has a view of the Prado museum and the hotel can arrange tickets so you avoid the admission queues. What's the perfect end to this trip? A few hours in the Prado with some beautiful local divas – Goya's *The Naked Maja*, Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and Rubens's *The Three Graces*.



GETTING THERE...

VL FLEW WITH EMIRATES FROM SYDNEY TO MADRID VIA DUBAI – THE MOST SEAMLESS AND EFFICIENT WAY TO GET TO SPAIN'S CAPITAL CITY. EMIRATES' EXTENSIVE NETWORK ALSO ALLOWED US TO FLY DIRECTLY TO SHANGHAI FROM MADRID, VIA A SHORT STOPOVER IN DUBAI. EMIRATES' A380 BUSINESS CLASS SERVICE TO DUBAI ASSURED A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP (PROVIDED WE WERE NOT TOO CLOSE TO THE LIVELY INFLIGHT BARI) WITH SUPERBLY DESIGNED SEATS, OFFERING FULLY FLAT BED, PERSONAL MINI-BAR AND AN ENORMOUS RANGE OF ENTERTAINMENT OPTIONS. WE WERE IMPRESSED WITH THE SERVICE ON EACH LEG, BUT ESPECIALLY DUBAI TO MADRID, WHERE AN ILL PASSENGER WAS TREATED WITH GREAT CARE. EMIRATES' CHAUFFEUR SERVICE TO AND FROM THE AIRPORT SMOOTHED PRE-FLIGHT TENSIONS. ALTHOUGH WE FIND EMIRATES' NEW BUSINESS CLASS LOUNGE IN DUBAI MIND-BOGGLINGLY VAST, THE SYDNEY BUSINESS CLASS LOUNGE IS COMFORTABLE AND INTIMATE, SERVING UP SOME OF THE BEST LOUNGE FOOD AROUND. EMIRATES.COM.

PHOTOGRAPHERS: PABLO ZAMORA, LEE TULLOCH ILLUSTRATION: KANAKO KUNO



SPAIN MY LIST Casey Death

Australian Casey Death lives in Málaga and manages Biznaga Travel Company, specialising in bespoke tours of southern Spain.

CASA TABERNA MANTECA
'Arte puro' (pure art) is the slogan of this fantastic low-key bar. It's where all the locals go for anything from a quick drink to an entire afternoon of eating and imbibing with friends. They only serve fresh seafood, *conservas* (tinned products, but strictly of the highest quality) and *embutidos* (cured meats such as chorizo) and cheese, all delivered on waxed paper at the bar or on one of the barrels out in the street.
CALLE CORRALON DE LOS CARROS, 66, CADIZ, PHONE: (+34) 9 5621 3603.

LA MORAGA
This upmarket tapas bar is owned by two Michelin-starred Dani García. Traditional flavours get a modern spin and the *milbojas de queso de cabra* (goat's cheese strudel) is phenomenal! García has worked in some of the best restaurants in the world, but has brought his talents back to his hometown of Málaga (and we love him for it!).
CALLE FRESCA, 12, MÁLAGA, PHONE: (+34) 9 5222 6851; LAMORAGA.COM.

RESTAURANTE ABEN HUMEYA
This gorgeous restaurant overlooks the Alhambra Palace from the Albaicín (old town) in Granada. As well as stunning views and traditional Moorish design and decoration, its food is exceptional.
CUESTA DE LAS TOMASES, 12, GRANADA, PHONE: (+34) 9 5822 6665; ABENHUMEYA.COM.

PUERTO DE CUBA
The summer terrace on the banks of the Guadalquivir River in Seville is full of locals every day of the week. The cocktails flow as you admire the views of the *Torre del Oro* (Golden Tower) from your day bed (reservations essential).
CALLE BETIS, 69, SEVILLA COMO LLEGAR, PHONE: (+34) 9 5427 3956; RIOGRANDE-SEVILLA.COM.

EL MERCAT DE SANTA CATARINA
La Boqueria is a popular market, but Santa Catarina is where the locals go. It's quite upmarket and its incredible produce is displayed beautifully. La Torna serves excellent coffee and pastries; my top spot for a light lunch in Barcelona.
AVINGUDA DE FRANCESC CAMBO, 16, BARCELONA; MERCATSANTACATERINA.NET.

Stay ME MADRID
PLAZA DE SANTA ANA, 14, MADRID; MEMADRID.COM.

APARTAMENTOS QUIROS
CALLE QUIROS, 4, SEVILLA; SLEEPINSEVILLA.COM.

POSADA DE PALACIO
CALLE CABALLEROS, 9-11, SANLUCAR DE BARRAMEDA; POSADADEPALACIO.COM.

POSADA LA SACRISTIA
SAN DONATO, 8, TARIFA; LASACRISTIA.NET.

HOTEL REGINA
CARRER BERGARA, 4, BARCELONA; REGINAHOTEL.COM.

HOTEL RITZ MADRID
PLAZA DE LA LEALTAD, 5, MADRID; LHW.COM.

Eat CAL BLAY
CALLE DE JOSEP ROVIRA, 27, SANT SADURNI D'ANOLA; CALBLAY.COM.

SOUK
CALLE DE MAR TIRRENO, 46, TARIFA; SOUK-TARIFA.ES.

MONVINIC
DIPUTACIO 249, BARCELONA; MONVINIC.COM.

The Travelling Divas 'Spanish Soirée' costs from \$6859 per person, inclusive of most meals, accommodation, internal transportation, Madrid airport transfers and a number of 'surprises'. International airfares not included. For information on Travelling Divas escorted tours, go to travellingdivas.com.au.

For information on bespoke tours of Spain with Biznaga Travel Company, go to biznagatravelcompany.com.

For information on day classes at Annie B's Spanish Kitchen Cookery School, go to anniebs.es.