

Clipping Highlights

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Marbella for All Seasons

Spain's Costa del Sol is a glorious day at the beach, any time of year.

BY ELAINE SRNKA

SET IN SOUTHERN SPAIN'S ANDALUSIA REGION IN THE province of Málaga, Marbella is famed for its sun-kissed glamour, and even in the off season it doesn't disappoint. I traveled there recently with a group of travel agency executives for Virtuoso's annual Chairman's Event, a trip to recognize the top travel agencies around the world, allowing them to experience a destination firsthand and learn more about what it offers travelers.

"Marbella's best season is really during the so-called 'winter' months from November to March, and real connoisseurs never miss them." So proclaimed Prince Alfonso von Hohenlohe, the aristocrat developer who in the 1950s fashioned the former fishing village into a stylish retreat for jet-setting Hollywood celebrities and European royalty.



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A packing tip: Don't trust the weather app on your phone – plan for nicer weather than the predicted temperatures. Marbella's "Golden Mile" owes its microclimate to La Concha mountain, which protects it from winter's cold winds or summer's heat waves. During our November visit, the jackets and light sweaters we brought stayed in our suitcases.

Glorious weather year-round isn't the

only reason to visit. "There is so much to do and yet you can relax on one of the most beautiful coasts in the world," says Coronado, California-based travel agency executive Tania Swasbrook. It's ideal for families and couples alike.

"Marbella is perfect for travelers who may have been to Spain, but never knew how different the Mediterranean coast, culture, and food are there," says Grace DeVita, an

agency executive in Hollywood, Florida.

Andalusia's intertwined history of Roman and Moorish rule is evident in grand mosques, cathedrals, and palaces everywhere. Marbella makes an ideal base for day trips to cities such as Ronda (perched atop a mountain above a dramatic gorge, it's also the birthplace of bullfighting), Seville (where the cathedral houses Christopher Columbus' tomb), Granada (don't miss



Clockwise from top left: Puerto Banús marina, Old Town charm, Puente Romano's Central Court, agency executives Tania Swasbrook and Fabian Lebrija ready to race the Ascari track, and agency executive Nancy Yale on a more leisurely set of wheels.

(MARINA) ARTUR BOGACH/GETTY IMAGES; (OLD TOWN) PIERRE BRUMBER/ALAMY



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the Moorish Alhambra fortress), Córdoba (famed for its mosque-turned-cathedral) and Málaga (a modern port that serves as Marbella’s rail and air hub).

The group spent their days exploring those places, but Marbella is a destination in its own right. Our host hotels: Marbella Club and Puente Romano, sister properties with decidedly different styles.

“Marbella Club is steeped in history, with an old-world elegance and charm,” says Tim Krenzien, a Chicago-based travel agency executive.

Yvonne Verstandig, a travel agency executive from Melbourne, Australia, agrees: “It’s the iconic hotel in Marbella.” Trendier Puente Romano, she notes, is double the size. “It replicates an Andalusian village, with 13 restaurants and bars and plenty of sports and nightlife. It’s a more casual luxury experience.” Both properties boast beachfront locations; sprawling, lush gardens; wellness spas (Puente Romano’s is a Six Senses outpost); and dynamic kids’ clubs. In a few months, Puente Romano will expand its portfolio of accommodations when Nobu Hotel opens at the resort.

You’ll get VIP treatment at either hotel. “Virtuoso clients are special,” says Jorge Manzur, Puente Romano’s general manager. “I review arrivals every day with the staff.”

HERE’S A GUIDE TO A PERFECT DAY IN Marbella: Bike or walk along the miles-long waterfront promenade – you can go all the way to Puerto Banús, a glitzy marina with high-end shopping, including Spanish design house Loewe, Bulgari, and El Corte Inglés department store. Perfect your tennis swing with a pro on one of ten courts at Puente Romano (which hosts the Davis Cup tournament in February), or hit the links – Marbella’s many courses make it Spain’s top golf destination. While away the afternoon over a long,

rosé-fueled lunch at either hotel’s beach club; both have waterfront restaurants featuring decadent buffets laden with fresh seafood, paella, meats grilled to order, and gorgeous ocean views. Moving on to the next meal (remember, Spaniards typically eat dinner later, around 8:30,

after an afternoon siesta), you don’t even need to leave the hotel grounds: Choose from Marbella Club’s legendary Grill restaurant, Michelin-starred dining at Puente Romano’s Dani García, or a range of more casual options. After dinner, “Channel your inner cool kid and go to La Suite



Clockwise from top: Mingling at a Marbella Club reception; Puente Romano’s Jorge Manzur and Francesco Roccato flank agency executives Dena Krenzien and Karen Howland; and Jaime Leon, Count Rudi von Schönberg, Laura Asilis, and Carlos Quereda.



Virtuoso Reports

nightclub at Punte Romano,” says Shawna Owen, a Chicago travel agency owner. “It’s the real deal and not to be missed.”

At a reception in Old Town, a district of cobblestone pedestrian walkways and whitewashed buildings bedecked with flower boxes, attendees were welcomed by Marbella mayor Ángeles Muñoz and danced the “Macarena” performed by Los del Río, the Spanish pop duo that made the song an international hit in the 1990s.

Another day, several in our group headed to Ascari, a high-end race facility near Ronda with the longest track in Spain. “The Ascari luxury racing experience was perhaps one of the most exhilarating events I have ever taken part in,” says Gerard Bellino, a travel agency executive in Paramus, New Jersey.

“Picture a country club, but one where you race cars,” explains Swasbrook. “I highly recommend the experience for anyone who loves cars, racing, or just wants to experience the incredible thrill of being at a race track.”

History and culture, food and wine, golf and tennis, sun and spa – Marbella has it all. As Owen notes, “It’s one of the few European beach destinations open year-round” – one where you can tour in the morning and relax at the beach in the afternoon. And while many advisors recommend Marbella as a single destination, Owen says, “I almost always include Marbella at the end of a Spain or Spain-and-Portugal itinerary. It’s a great way to end with some R & R.”

As Miami Beach agency executive Carlos Edery advises, “Marbella is a place that you must enjoy for what it is – and that means a place to relax and just absorb. You can be as active as you want, but you get the most out of it when you take it easy and don’t rush it.” VI



Party people, clockwise from top: A cocktail reception at Punte Romano, the Virtuoso events team, agency executives and their guests, a dessert detail, and Marbella mayor Ángeles Muñoz and Virtuoso CEO Matthew Upchurch (with Los del Río onstage).