

Still think
of **Málaga** as
the preserve
of tanned
pensioners and
stag parties?
Think again.
This is the new-
look “Costa del
Culture”, where
art institutions
vie for space
with tapas bars,
and **gallery-**
hopping rivals
sun-seeking
as the leading
attraction...





Words / Nione Meakin → Photography / Joachim Lundgren



Málaga has had some famous visitors of late. Tracey Emin, Anish Kapoor, Marina Abramović and Ai Weiwei have all been seen

in the southern Spanish city in the past few years, with Jackson Pollock on his way in April, and rumours gathering pace of Banksy's imminent arrival. Although their physical beings may not always make it, the arrival of their work is headline-grabbing enough, given that the city was, until recently, seen as little more than the gateway to the Costa del Sol.

Following the example of Bilbao, which successfully shook off its monicker *el boxto* ("the hole") after welcoming the Guggenheim back in 1997, Málaga has embarked on an art-focused transformation. Spearheaded by Mayor Francisco de la Torre, who has spent more than €100m (NOK934m) on arts and culture during his 15 years in office, there has been a stampede of openings, from the Museo Picasso and Centro de Arte Contemporáneo in 2003, to the Carmen Thyssen Museum in 2011.

Last year two high-profile pop-ups – the St Petersburg State Russian State Museum and a Pompidou Centre (the first outside France) – took Málaga's total museum and gallery count to more than 30. Not bad for a city of around half a million people.

De la Torre's experiment is an expensive one – the Pompidou building alone cost €6.7m (NOK63m) and the city pays €1m (NOK9.4m) a year for the rights to use the name – and there has been some local backlash about the expenditure, but the investment appears to be paying off. In the past decade visitor numbers have increased by 127 per cent to 3.5 million last year, making Málaga Spain's fastest-growing tourist destination.

"Culture is not an expense, it is an investment," the mayor says, "and from the point of view of tourism, the economic impact has been much greater than the investment. In 2015, the economic impact of tourists and visitors to the city exceeded €1.375 billion [NOK12.8bn], with a consequent effect on employment and wealth generation."

The impact is not purely about boosting tourism either – de la Torre believes it has also improved life for locals, pointing to Málaga's ranking in 11th place out of 79 »

Opening pages
Málaga's Centro de
Arte Contemporáneo
opened in 2003
These pages
The Pompidou Centre
pop-up outpost will
remain in Málaga for
five years, with the
option to extend



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**It's fantastic
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locations in a 2016 European Commission quality-of-life survey. Whether this is accurate or not (the most significant factor in the survey was Málaga’s reasonably priced housing), there’s no disputing the city is in better shape than it was.

“The Málaga of now and the Málaga of 20 years ago is the difference between day and night,” says writer Joanna Styles over coffee in Plaza de la Merced, where a statue of Picasso marks the birthplace of the city’s most famous son. “It used to be run-down, dilapidated and had a lot of dodgy areas – especially the port.” A resident of the Costa del Sol since 1990, Styles moved to Málaga a few years ago, attracted by the house prices and the lifestyle. Last year she launched the downloadable Guide to Málaga in response to growing tourist numbers. “Málaga is very different to places like Marbella and Torremolinos,” she says. “It attracts a different sort of tourist. It’s not a bucket-and-spade resort, it’s a proper city with fantastic architecture and – now – a real sense of culture.”

A chance meeting at a France-Spain football friendly is said to be behind one of the main draws on the city’s cultural scene. Málaga’s mayor and Spain’s French ambassador allegedly came up with the idea of the city’s Pompidou Centre outpost in 2008 – and the centre opened at newly revamped port areas Muelle Uno and Muelle Dos (piers one and two) last year, just three days after the St Petersburg State Museum. It’s worth seeing for the colourful glass-cube façade alone, while inside, the 6,300m² space houses permanent collections on loan from and curated by the Paris museum.

Away from the coast, the start of the transformation can be traced to a few streets from Plaza de la Merced in Calle San Agustín, formerly a struggling Jewish neighbourhood that many residents had abandoned. The Museo Picasso opened here in 2003 in the 16th-century Palacio de Buenavista. Housing nearly 300 permanent works, the museum is a fraction of the size of Barcelona’s Museu Picasso but has had a huge impact nonetheless.

“In 2003 there was no major cultural institutions,” explains the museum’s head of education, Lucía Vázquez García. “Then we opened right in the heart of the city and people started to see Málaga differently.” »

From below Left
Part of the local MAUS
graffiti project; the
Museu Picasso in the
Buenavista Palaca
opened its doors
in 2003 - and its
courtyard





She remembers, as an art student, having to travel outside the city to see works of any importance. “Málaga was a place for holidays but not for culture. Now you can see modern art, Russian art, street art, all on the doorstep.”

It seems incredible that the birthplace of Picasso only really tapped into his legacy 30 years after his death, but the museum has made up for lost time. It attracted nearly 500,000 visitors last year to a number of exhibitions by major artists with a connection to the Cubist master. In September, it counted record numbers for its Louise Bourgeois show, while this month it will host Jackson Pollock’s imposing 1943 *Mural*, which was inspired by Picasso’s *Guernica*. “It’s fantastic to me that a museum the size of ours is working with MoMA in New York, and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection,” says Vazquez. “It shows how seriously Málaga is starting to be taken in the wider art world.”

Another major reason for this raised profile can be found in a converted wholesale market on the banks of the dried-up Guadalmedina river. The vast, warehouse-style galleries of the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo (CAC) have hosted an array of major names over the past 13 years.

Driven by powerhouse curator Fernando Francés, last year saw the arrival of a video work by New York performance artist Marina Abramović, bronzes by Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei and the first major Spanish exhibition of one-time YBA Marc Quinn. *Cell of Emotions*, a mesmerising collection of photographs by Dutch photographer Erwin Olaf, runs until 1 May and, like all CAC shows, entry is free. The gallery has become a definite asset to the city – but it wasn’t always considered so.

“Málaga is very traditional – all Holy Week parades and Picasso – and people didn’t seem sure there was a place for a contemporary art gallery,” says exhibition coordinator Alicia Gutiérrez. But visitor numbers proved the doubters wrong.

What’s more, the impact doesn’t stop at the gallery walls, as CAC has gone on to head an equally ambitious urban regeneration project, helping to transform the triangle of land behind the gallery into Málaga’s hippest new neighbourhood.

The area south of the Alameda Principal down to Málaga’s port had become »



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From left ✓
Shepard Fairey
(OBEY) contributed
his signature Mujer
Fatal to the MAUS
project; more murals
by D*Face and OBEY

What else to do in Málaga



Al-Andalus baths

Suffering from sore feet and museum-neck?

Unwind at the Hammam Al-Andalus Arab baths in the old Medina.

Geothermal energy heats pools located under star-studded domed ceilings, and massages include an invigorating and traditional hammam scrub-down. 📍 malaga.hammamalandalus.com



Best for food

Málaga's reputation for food is more than a match for its culture. Check out minimalist tapas bar Uvedoble for its swordfish ceviche and truffled potato omelette, Mamuchis for a taste of eclectic Soho eccentricity, Los Patios de Beatas for old-meets-new charm and the Atarazanas Market Bar for fresh-off-the-boat *boquerones*.

📍 uvedobletaberna.com, lospatiosdebeatas.com



Pay in Valerios

Forget euros and pay your way in Valerios. Created by local artist Valerio Gentile, the "currency" can be traded for artworks where accepted.

📍 valeriogentile.net

Outdoor sculpture outside CAC Málaga



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The economic impact of the mayor's investment is obvious: the streets act as an impressive outdoor gallery

run-down over the past few decades. Many of its elegant 19th-century buildings were empty and crumbling, and the best any visitor could hope to find was somewhere to park their car. In 2013, CAC set out to change this with MAUS (Málaga Arte Urbano en el Soho) – a mural project featuring a number of high-profile international graffiti artists.

Things got off to a shaky start when Belgian artist ROA sprayed an image of tumbling rats on the side of a Franco-era car park. “This wasn’t a favourite for the locals,” smiles Victor Garrido, whose company We Love Málaga leads tours of the area. But the public response improved with the arrival of other big names like Frank Shepard Fairey – aka OBEY, fêted for his Barack Obama “Hope” image – and London artists D*Face and Ben Eine, whose trademark alphabet lettering already adorned shop shutters in Paris, Stockholm and London.

These days, the streets act as an impressive outdoor gallery for a collection of artists including South Africa's Faith47, Spanish-born Andi Rivas and China's DALeast, not to mention many less well known graffiti artists. It is in this area – renamed Soho, in a bid to piggyback on London and New York's reputation – that the economic impact of the mayor's investment is most obvious.

Since MAUS began, streets that used to house insurance offices and launderettes have been repopulated with hipster hallmarks including juice bars, artisan coffee shops, craft-beer bars, Dutch bike shops and barbers. Numerous hoardings advertise new hotel openings – to cater for the 1.1 million tourists that stayed in Málaga last year – and Garrido says his landlord is increasing the rent on his flat.

Still, he isn't complaining. He feels these are good times for the city. “Ten or 20 years ago, most of the buildings here were empty and the businesses were closed. Now the area has been revived. This is the place where young people in the city want to live, and visitors want to stay.” 📍 museopicassomalaga.com, cacmalaga.eu, centrepompidou-malaga.eu, mausmalaga.com, guidetomalaga.com, welovemalaga.com



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