

Late deals

EASTER/BANK HOLIDAY

SRI LANKA: Kuoni (01306 747008) offers eight nights bed and breakfast at four-star Bentota Beach from £639, from Heathrow on Sri Lankan Airlines, April 24.

PEMBROKESHIRE: Coastal Cottages (01437 772760) offers seven-nights self-catering in cosy cottage for two close to seaside town of Goodwick for £305, saving £25, from April 9, 16 and 23.

ROYAL DEESIDE: Ecosse Unique (01835 822277) offers seven-nights self-catering from April 23 in converted Victorian church (sleeping four) in Braemar for £345, saving £50.

MAJORCA: First Choice (0871 2004455) offers seven-nights all-inclusive at four-star holiday village in Ca'n Picafort from £449, from Bournemouth April 23.

SKI/LAKES & MOUNTAINS

AUSTRIA: Inghams (020 87804454) offers seven-nights half-board at three-star Hotel Kristall in Mayrhofen from £349, saving £246, from Gatwick into Innsbruck and transfers.

FRENCH ALPS: Inghams (020 87804454) offers seven-nights fully-catered chalet-hotel accommodation in Chamonix from May 21 from £397, saving £102, includes Gatwick to Geneva return flights and resort transfers, daily lunch packs and wine.

AUSTRIA: Esprit Ski (01252 618300) offers seven-nights catered chalet accommodation in St Anton from April 10 for £325, (based on two adults and two under-11s), includes Gatwick to Innsbruck return flights, transfers, afternoon tea and four-course dinners.

UK/IRELAND

CORNWALL: Breaks in Cornwall (01621 784666) offers four-nights self-catering for five adults and one child in two-bedroom villa in St Merryn from total £169 until May 26, down from £375.

COUNTY CORK: Cresta (0844 8798014) offers seven-nights self-catering from April 24 in cottage sleeping four in Kinsale from £796, includes ferry crossing for drivers.



The art of doing nothing

Sometimes we need to get off the treadmill of everyday life and go to a place where the only thing demanded of you is relaxation. Jenna Richardson did exactly this on a recent trip to Spain's Almanzora Valley

I find it impossible to do absolutely nothing, in fact it's very hard work.

So, when I jetted off to a secluded villa in Spain's Almanzora Valley I decided to do just that – nothing.

Tucked away in the spacious, well-equipped accommodation near the village of La Alfoquia, I found my new lifestyle remarkably easy to adopt – well almost.

Perched at the end of a tiny cluster of houses next to a farm, Casa Peral felt as though it was miles from civilisation, but in reality was just a short hop from one of Spain's main highways.

The isolated location made a car essential, so days out discovering the typically Spanish surroundings were inevitable – despite my vow of idleness.

Having flown in with a budget airline and rented a car for the two-hour drive from Alicante airport, I arrived in the small hours, but was soon settled on the sofa in the homely front room, sipping red wine left as a welcome gift.

The villa with its gardens and luxurious pool area was bathed in sunshine when I awoke the next morning and the grogginess caused by my late arrival soon evaporated.

Seeing the inviting pool water twinkling in the sunlight I couldn't resist an early morning swim. I dived into the cooling water, the sun beating down and swam uninterrupted until hunger pangs forced me into the kitchen for breakfast.

A tin of fruit salad, left kindly by the previous occupants, did the trick and I settled back onto a sun lounger with a book.

Closing my eyes I could hear the water lapping gently against the side of the pool and the occasional splash as my holiday companions swam. I recalled the bustle of beach holidays, the piercing screams of young children having fun in the sand and realised how lucky I was to be tucked away in this haven where only those I invited in could enter.

But, just as I was getting the hang of doing nothing, my idle bliss was interrupted by the need to stock the cupboards with a trip to the supermarket in nearby Albox.

An information pack thoughtfully compiled by the villa's owners and added to by previous occupants, gave



■ PEACE AND QUIET: Taking a stroll near the isolated villa Casa Peral, and above, the pool

us directions to the nearest supermarket, details of nearby restaurants and ideas for wonderful days out.

Albox, a traditional though unremarkable Spanish town was just a 20-minute drive from La Alfoquia. It has all the facilities and services expected in a small town.

Every Tuesday Albox hosts a bustling local market. Providing a fantastic atmosphere in which to immerse yourself and watch the Spanish way of life pass by. The market boasts a variety of clothes and goods plus an extensive food section. Jamons (cured ham on the bone) can be found hanging from stalls and shop windows; dozens of varieties of queso (cheese), chorizo (cured sausage) and much more created a myriad of noise, colour and smells.

The Almanzora Valley is enveloped in stunning countryside of olive groves, citrus orchards and dramatic hills. The hills seem to rise in front and to the side no matter which direction you travel. But some of the most stunning scenery comes once you arrive at the coast.

Less than an hour's drive from Casa Peral is the busy coastal resort of Mojácar. The sea front is home to numerous A-boards boasting English menus for a plethora of beach fronted cafes. I drove at snail's pace along the front, but for me it was uninspiring.

Offering nothing I haven't seen in plenty of other Spanish coastal holiday resorts.

I bypassed the resort leaving with a feeling there could have been much more. And there was. I'd missed the main town of Mojácar, discovered days later by two friends.

The town is perched high on a hill with white washed houses, cool courtyards and cobbled streets overlooking the coast and its long sandy beaches. With its Moorish appearance and commanding views it has been a focal point for artists and writers throughout the ages. It will certainly be on my list of places to visit on a return trip to the region.

A short hop along the coast from the seafront of Mojácar the main road rose into the hills. Driving around sharp bends with death-defying drops I caught the odd glimpse of stunning coastal scenery, the ragged hills protruding into the distance and coming to an abrupt stop as the water met the land.

Viewing points dotted along the road were filled with holiday makers brandishing cameras. I pulled the car into a lay-by, taking a moment to drink in the view before I joined the camera-wielding tourists at the roadside.

Back at sea level I ventured along a dirt track beside the interesting looking Castillo de Macenas. The track, barely wide enough for one vehicle with no safety barrier, dropped sharply to the crashing waves below. But at the end of the narrow dirt-track nestled a gem; the recently restored Torre de Pirulico.

The ancient watchtower stands guard over Macenas beach and is believed to have been built by the Moors between the 12th and 14th centuries. The top of the tower, although a challenge to reach for those of us, like me, who are scared of heights, is well worth the climb as it offers stunning views along the length of the coastline.

Standing at the top of the tower the breeze blowing my hair and the sun warming my skin was one of those rare opportunities to be still, silent, enjoy the spectacular scenery nature had thrown together.

Back at Casa Peral a short stroll took me along a dirt track and into the farmers' land. On one side crops thrived despite the parched, dry land. On the other massive aloe plants and

prickly pears fascinated me as I meandered slowly in the heat. There wasn't another person in sight, the only sounds were those made by animals as they scurried in the undergrowth. Away from my friends and the villa the walk was the perfect opportunity to be completely alone and enjoy the isolation.

Another day neglecting my vow of idleness saw me driving for 20 minutes to one of Almeria's oldest towns, Cuevas del Almanzora. The name comes from the many artificial caves in the nearby Sierra Almagrera Mountains where silver miners lived in the 19th century. With the discovery of silver came prosperity evidenced in the grand houses, avenues and churches in the town. It is well worth a look around at the impressive bourgeois architecture.

Imposing itself at the top of the town is the 16th century gothic built Castillo del Marques de Velez. The impressive castle dominates the town rising well above all that surrounds it. Modern walkways near the top of the battlements offer far-reaching views of the Almanzora Valley for those brave enough to peek over the top.

Built in 1770, it was expanded in the neoclassic style, with the oldest part the Torre del Homenaje, thought to be medieval. Inside it boasts the Museum of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture, the Cuevas Archaeology Museum and the Archive and Municipal Library. But arriving mid afternoon I was afforded no more than a cursory look around the buildings as everything else was closed, I assume for siesta.

Back in the car I noticed cliff faces dotted with openings that once must have formed doorways. Some unfeasibly high left me wondering who would live there and how they found their way home. I can only imagine a honeycomb of rooms hidden by the smooth cliff faces. On the roadside some still inhabited houses were built partly in the rock and partly protruding from it offering a unique architectural concept.

Back at the villa it was time for another evening sipping Spanish wine and sitting by the pool listening to the things I don't normally take the time to hear. The cicadas in the bushes, the crickets in the undergrowth, a dog barking in the distance and another evening doing that thing I came here to do – absolutely nothing.

FACTFILE

Casa Peral, Llanos del Peral, Zurgena, Almeria. For bookings or more information please contact Karen or Phil on 01392 811663 or 07717 218017. Casa Peral just 40 minutes from Almeria airport and about one-and-a-half-hours from either Alicante or Murcia airports.

There are plenty of attractions within easy driving distance of Casa Peral including:

Vera Aquatico water park; Mini Hollywood, a theme park based around Spaghetti Westerns; The beautiful scenic area of Cabo de Gata national park; The Sierra Nevada mountains are a 90 minute drive away – you can go skiing in the morning and sunbathing at the beach in the afternoon; the stunning Alhambra is also within driving distance. The area is also a golfer's dream with numerous courses nearby including Desert Springs, the only desert course in mainland Europe.

Casa Peral offers very spacious air conditioned accommodation including a large double master bedroom with en-suite, two further large twin rooms, separate bathroom with shower, very large lounge with dining area, superb fitted kitchen with fridge/freezer, washing machine, oven and hob and a spacious covered front porch. The 700m2 plot includes gardens and a very large patio area to the rear with a pool shower, sun-loungers, patio furniture, barbecue and a fantastic 10m by 5m pool – big enough for a proper swim.

The lounge also includes a television and DVD player with Sky TV offering all of the standard freeview channels. Take your own Sky viewing card if you wish to watch your own Sky package as at home.

If further sleeping accommodation is required there is a double sofa bed in the lounge. Each bedroom has fitted wardrobes with plenty of hanging and drawer space and a hairdryer.

Bedding and towels will be provided together with a weekly maid service.

There is plenty of parking. Budget airlines fly to the area from both Exeter and Bristol. There are numerous car hire companies who can have a car ready for collection at the airport. I used Car Jet and was impressed with their service, www.carjet.com.



■ STUNNING SCENERY: An undeveloped piece of Spanish coast. The view from Torre de Pirulico

THIS WEEK: Fundraising fashion show by the WI at Ipplepen Village Hall



■ CHARITABLE SOULS: From left, Ann Elwell, Elizabeth Patrick, and Jill Aiers



■ TEAM EFFORT: From left, Pat Tozer, Marian Munday and Doreen Dale



■ ENJOYABLE: From left, Pauline Wood, Jean Came and Jo Donaldson



■ DRESSED UP: From left, Kathleen Williams, Janet Marshall, and Val Collyer



■ TWO'S COMPANY: From left, Bev Dyer and Betty Bonell

■ ALL SMILES: From left, Carole Russell, Margaret Madicott and Carol Smith

Herald Express Reader Offer

From £649

DEPARTS 15, 28 JUN, 4 SEP 2011

Krakow, Zakopane & the High Tatras

7 nights from only £649

This two centre holiday offers a wonderful contrast: firstly the medieval university city of Krakow, home town of Chopin and Pope John Paul II. Our second centre is Zakopane which has a majestic setting amidst the Tatra Mountains and is a haven for skiers in winter, and walkers in summer.

- The price includes:
- Return direct flights from Bristol
 - 7 nights B&B hotel accommodation (3 in Krakow, 4 in Zakopane)
 - Walking tours of Krakow and Zakopane, raft trip in the Dunajec gorge
 - Services of a tour representative

For more information on this special offer call today!

0844 472 4617 Quote TORQ

0844 cost 5p per minute from 017 landline plus a connection fee of 10p. Offer operated by Preferred Travel Services, ATOL protected 1037. 4874. 48282. A company wholly independent of Herald Express. Prices are per person, from, and subject to flight availability. Conditions apply contact Preferred Travel Services. When you request Newsletter Mails (if and other companies in the TRUST Group may contact you with offers/news that may be of interest. Please give your mobile or email details if you wish to receive such offers by SMS or email. We will not give your details to other companies without your permission, please let us know if you and happy for us to do so.

HEX-ED-53

HEX-ED-53

PICTURES BY ANDY STYLES

ORDER YOUR PARTY PICTURES ONLINE