Torremolinos
Transformed

Frank Sinatra ended up in jail the last time Ruth Rees was in town. She returns to the heart of the Costa del Sol and witnesses some big changes.

There was a time, before the big bang of Spanish tourism exploded onto the international holiday scene. When Torremolinos was a modest little village with one main street, a charming central square with a well, some wooden benches, and a donkey tethered nearby while its owner went for this morning’s fundador. This was the era when the manager of a well-known UK tour operator, asked whether he had considered the Costa del Sol as a possible summer destination, replied, “Good heavens no! It’s much too hot for British people, they’d never go there”.

By the late 1950’s, Torremolinos had proved what an unreliable prophet that tour operator had been as many thousands of people from the UK discovered the coastal delights of the best climate in Europe, and with the Costa del Sol stretching hundreds of kilometres from east to west, its sunlit heart was Torremolinos.

But in the 1980’s, deteriorating infrastructure over-building resulted in the very name of Torremolinos becoming a scathingly jokey word in some sections of tourism and the media, while down the coast, Marbella basked in its fame as one of the world’s most glamorous resorts.

Independence movement

Local people believed there wouldn’t be any improvement until Torremolinos controlled its own destiny instead of being just a suburb of Málaga. So campaign was launched for municipal independence, led by Pedro Fernandez Montes who, supported by other leading citizens, drew up a formal Constitution in 1979. Impatient at continuing bureaucratic delays, the pro-autonomy committee declared a general strike bringing thousands of residents and business people onto the streets. Then in 1988, Torremolinos joyfully celebrated its independence.

When the Partido Popular (similar to our Conservative Party) won the Spanish elections in 1995, the man who had led the independence movement became – and continues to be – Mayor of Torremolinos and during my recent interview with him, Don Pedro told me in faultless English about the series of initiatives taken by the municipality that have transformed Torremolinos.

These include the greening of the town; 50,000 trees have already been planted and the once featureless main road is now lined with tall, bushy palm trees, and sunlight sparkles through the curved sprays of central fountains. An annual opera season; open-air cinema on the beach (the first in Spain); and a sensationally successful European Ballroom Dancing Competition, Baile Retro, are among other cultural and leisure activities that are now permanent features of the new Torremolinos.
The town’s centre is as lively as ever, with elegant shops, cafés and arcades outweighing the usual tourist-tat outlets and gaudy overhead commercial signs, which don’t detract from the sheer fun of the place. Pablo Picasso used to come to Torremolinos to visit his Aunt Heliodora at her home there, and Salvador Dalí rented a villa, raising local eyebrows when he and his wife, Gala, went to Torremolinos beaches and became Spain’s first nude sunbathers.

However, the modern transformation of Torremolinos is particularly apparent in its best-kept secret just a mile down the road: the former fishing village know as the Carihuela.

Here, the once narrow seafront walk is now a wide, delightful paseo maritimo, this promenade stretching as far as the eye can see, and the street behind is lined with typically Andalucian whitewashed cottages, more restaurants, art galleries and small shops.

Soon after my arrival, I was sitting on the terrace at one of the seafront restaurants, and became worried about a group of children playing on the sand, shrieking as the took turns on the slide, while around me their families, completely unconcerned, were immersed in lively chatter as they started on their tapas. Worried about a normal seaside scene? Well, yes. You see it was midnight. And on the moonlit sea were the bobbing lights of boats as the remaining Carihuela fishermen spread their nets, just as their ancestors had done for centuries.

Whether you’re just sitting having a coffee or a meal at any time of the day or night, watching the passing parade is fascinating; the majority of people are Spanish, mostly local residents or those on holiday from other regions of Spain.

Tranformation has enhanced the beaches too, with regularly spaced oases of grass and palm trees, as well as chiringuitos, these simple fish restaurants noisy with laughter and music, where for moderate cost you can feast on boquerones or sardines caught the night before.

Strolling along the promenade, you pass many of the most desirable properties on the Costa del Sol: well-designed apartment buildings, fronted by lawns and the obligatory swimming pools. Here, too, are some of the best hotels, including the famous Pez Espada – the first luxury hotel in Torremolinos. Like others, it went through a bad patch but now under new management and extensive refurbishment it has brought categoria, back to the area. The hotel offers half-board: breakfast, and a dinner-time buffet which is the most varied and delicious I’ve come across in Spain, and the staff there are most attentive and profesional.

Frank hits out

In the 60s and 70s, the hotel Pez Espada (it means ‘swordfish’) was the magnet which drew international royalty, celebrities, statesmen and stars to Torremolinos – photos of some of these guests line the walls in the newly decorated hotel’s corridor of fame, and include Sean Connery, Sophia Loren, and the King of Spain. But the most famous guest of all was Frank Sinatra.
He had been filming in another region of Andalucia, and was taking a break at the Pez Espada, but, unknown to the super-confident star, he was about to become, the victim of a set-up. (I’ve wanted to put the record straight for years, so you, dear readers, are the first to learn the true facts).

A journalist from a Madrid newspaper who had come to Torremolinos to cover Sinatra’s visit, was my Spanish press pals told me, a nasty piece of work who specialised in ‘creating’ shock-horror new stories, and he had brought with him a pretty little puta from Cuba, planted her in the bar close to the star’s table, while he sat nearby, carefully concealing his camera.

The girl sent out the right signals to the group and eventually she was invited over to join them. About ten minutes later, out of the blue, she suddenly grabbed Sinatra, and kissed him on the mouth. Flash! Flash! From the camera. Sinatra pushed her away. She threw her drink in his face, more flashlights. In a reflex action, he slapped her. Pandemonium broke out and the journalist rushed off to file his story.

The police were called and when the girl tearfully accused Sinatra of attacking her without provocation, the singer was arrested and jailed. Next day, the incident made international headlines, and the poor ‘victim’ grave heart-rending interviews mentioning en passant that she planned a career in the movies. Sinatra was released the following day, incandescent with rage, and swore he would never return to Spain.

But there is a happy postscript to this accident. The Pez Espada now boasts a Bar Sinatra where guests can listen to that incomparable voice and study the record covers of Frankies’s hits covering one wall of the bar.

Just two minutes walk away is another excellent hotel, the Amaragua. Also facing the promenade, the beautifully furnished Amaragua combines spaciousness and cosiness. The garden leading down to the promenade has two swimming pools –one for children, As the hotel operates on a bed and breakfast basis, guests can lunch or have snacks on the terrace.

Both these hotels are in Montemar, an essentially residential district with private villas owned by families who have lived there for generations. If you hate windy places this is the spot for you because the air is extraordinarily still. Perhaps it’s simply an environmental characteristic, or maybe it has something to do with the contemplative influence of a Carmelite convent not far away!

Benalmádena

Nearby Puerto de Benalmádena is another under-publicised delight. Although Marbella’s high-profile Puerto Banús is often in the gossip columns (odd to think that Marbella was once the playground of Osama Ben Laden before he gave up his millionaire playboy’s life for more serious activities), Benalmádena’s marina comes as a refreshing surprise to visitors. Its unusual design is vaguely oriental and allows some yachts to be moored just below their owners’ luxury apartments. Wandering around the berths and curving walkaways, I felt a patriotic – and envious – thrill to see so many smart yachts with Red Ensigns Fluttering in the sea breeze. The marina has a good mix of restaurants, bars and local cruises.
Top Secret

Finally, another secret, called La Consula. Built in 1835 and once the palatial home of a British Consul, it was bought by an American millionaire whose famous guests included Ernest Hemingway, who held his lavish 60th birthday party there. Just a ten-minute drive from Torremolinos, La Consula is now La Escuela de Hostelería, a hotel school of such distinction that its fame has spread throughout Europe. Rafael de la Fuente, a former director of 5-star hotels, runs an operation as smooth-running as a Rolls Royce, with super efficiency, charm and total professionalism, where every detail is honed to perfection.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the delicious cuisine of its restaurant – both kitchen and dining-room are staffed by the students – a favourite of the region’s politicians, civil servants and other VIPs, especially Málaga’s own movie star, Antonio Banderas, who a few years ago, invited ten members of La Consula’s teaching staff and students to organise the food and reception for a flamenco party at his home in Los Ángeles.

With all its improvements and new indoor and outdoor attractions, Torremolinos fully deserves to regain its historic title: the heart of the Costa del Sol.