

Go Spain

THERE'S A MOMENT in every beginner language class when you're asked to turn to the stranger beside you and describe their eye and hair colour. It's one of the odder experiences that anyone who has plunged into a new language gets to enjoy. It can immediately spark friends, enemies or lovers, and I suspect that language teachers secretly enjoy the embarrassment it creates.

And so, on my first morning at the Melkart school, in the walled town of Cadiz, in southern Spain, I turned to Robert, the mountainy man from the Canadian Rockies, and told him his eyes were blue, his hair was black. They weren't, but my vocabulary was lacking, and neither of us wanted to prolong such a delicate encounter: there's a fine line between casual observation and drinking in the moment. But at the Melkart school intimate encounters are the order of the day and language acquisition is just a by-product of a lot of fun.

I had signed up for a week of intensive classes in a language I had always liked but never tackled. Not content with just that, Eurolanguages.com, the Dublin-based organisation that put my Spanish-language package together, had talked me into taking up a new sport, too: surfing. Knowing exercise is great for the mind, I agreed, and my week was set: mornings in the classroom, afternoons on the beach and evenings eating and drinking in the squares and winding streets of Cadiz.

But this was no random agenda; everything was designed around the same goal: learning Spanish.

I'm a bit of a language-school junkie, so I was geared up for a packed programme. I've taken residential classes in France and Croatia and made lots of trips to the Gaeltacht as an adult, so I know exactly what I'm looking for in a school. That's not to say I'm a linguist – far from it – but I get a kick out of the atmosphere and challenge of starting something new.

Building a holiday around a language school has a lot of benefits: you can go alone and know that you'll meet new friends; you get to learn about the city and country that you're in from the people who live there; and you forsake lounging by the pool for thinking like a local – and, without realising it, have built a siesta into your day and forgotten you ever needed a map to get around.

In short, you become immersed in a culture rather than simply looking at it through a camera lens, and you come away not only proud of yourself for learning a new language but also deeply attached to the place you have been in. Of course, choosing the right school and location matters, and this is where a good organiser such as Eurolanguages.com comes in (see panel, right).

Cadiz is an incredibly friendly place. As it is the oldest city in Spain, and said to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in Europe, its residents, the *Gaditanos*, have had many years to perfect their gracious welcome.

Cadiz has experienced incredible waves of wealth and hardship, joy and sorrow in its long life, and its city walls and narrow streets have contained the excitement and trepidation of so many journeys and lives lived. Christopher Columbus set out for the New World on two of his voyages from Cadiz, leading millions to do likewise and building a period of expansion that would change Spain and Cadiz forever.

The architecture of the historic centre of the town, where I was based, reflects its long history with a series of beautiful plazas linked by long winding streets, with each leading ultimately to the sea. The most famous beach in the town is La Caleta, best known as a substitute for Cuba in the opening scenes of the James Bond film *Die Another Day*.

I signed up for three hours of Spanish tuition per day: one class of grammar and one class of conversation based on that grammar. It worked, plain and simple. With small classes and expert, friendly tuition, Spanish



Reign in Spain: Gary Quinn with Ali, one of the teachers at Melkart School of Languages, in Cadiz, coming in from one of his daily surfing lessons with Brazilian co-



Morning . . . noon

Spanish classes before lunch, surfing classes after – and evenings with fellow students in the bar

just seemed to fit.

During that week I was taken from being a complete beginner to knowing that speaking Spanish is only a matter of time, study and the willingness to let it seduce you. And seduction is easy when you are being enveloped by a culture that retains food, rest, song and dance at its heart.

It wasn't a trial to fit into a slower pace of life. I love food and drink, and even moderately good weather makes me think of having a nap, so the siesta that came with every day was easy to take on board. And as I was out each night, eating, listening to flamenco or just hanging out with the other students in local bars, I began to see why the siesta matters. You can't live the Spanish lifestyle on an Irish schedule.

Central to this is the food. Cadiz is a paradise for food lovers. While vegetarians might not find what they're looking for, the rest of us will. In one restaurant I ate from a menu that hasn't changed since 1812; in another, Show de Tapas bar, on Calle San Francisco, I was presented with a plate of octopus cooked in its own ink. It was black as the night sky, incredibly fresh

Go there

Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com) flies from Dublin, Cork and Belfast to Malaga. Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) flies from Dublin and Shannon to Malaga. From there you can take a bus to Cadiz.

and bursting with flavour, and it cost less than €3.

In Meson Cumbres Mayores, on Calle Zorrilla, I had a huge tuna steak cooked with garlic, the flavour and texture of which were an utter surprise to someone who has only eaten tuna from a tin. I returned a second night for an evening of tapas and *tinto de verano* – Rioja and lemonade – surrounded by locals who confirmed that I had found a gem.

A visit to the fish market in the centre of Cadiz is a fantastic experience that lets you see where the *Gaditanos'* appreciation of fish comes from. There is no going back after that. As for the wine that accompanied it all, well, just choose local and relax. It

really is that easy.

For me this is the key to any holiday, particularly a residential language course. You have to relax, let the language wash over you, make mistakes, get confused and then forget about those mistakes. You have to dive into the lifestyle around you and simply enjoy it.

The hardest thing to gain is confidence, and this is where your school comes in. I've been to classes in other places where teachers are more than willing to converse, explain grammar or teach in English. It doesn't work, and Melkart staff know this. They work at a pace that suits the group, they cover topics that are relevant and they use a system proven over years of experience. They teach incredibly well and help you through a minefield of grammar.

The other students matter, too. Melkart attracts students from all over the world and from all age groups. There are a lot of twenty- and thirtysomethings, but older students as well, and from all kinds of backgrounds. I met engineers, teachers, graduates, chefs and carpenters, each one travel-

ling alone but more than ready to meet up and explore Cadiz as a group.

They had all chosen different types of accommodation, each organised by Melkart. If your goal is to really perfect your Spanish, then the best and most cost-effective way is to stay with a family and eat breakfast and dinner together. Melkart chooses families that are experienced with foreigners and enjoy having them in their homes. It's also possible to share an apartment with other students. Or, as in my case, you can stay in a hotel. I stayed at Hotel Argantonio, a beautiful Andalusian house that has been converted into a hotel. The staff are fabulous and make you feel at home. It only has two stars but deserves far more for its welcome, comfort, location and attention to guests. It's a place to which I will certainly be returning.

CADIZ TODAY IS a Mecca for sports enthusiasts. It would be a lazy man indeed who could walk the polished coastal paths of Cadiz and not want to cycle, run or rollerblade with the *Gaditanos*, or not imagine a lifestyle where exercise and sunshine were just part of a