

EXPAT

WITH ANDY CHAPELL



They are the stars of the ocean - and of the plate, whether at an upmarket restaurant or one with plastic tables and paper cloths. On a trip to the coast our Expat takes time out to go tuna tasting

Fine tuna-ing



Fishermen in Tarifa unloading bluefin tuna in port.

IT'S been a hectic few weeks for this working man and woman. Our hotel and restaurant are dealing with large (for us) numbers of people and we do try to make contact with most of them. There are always stories to be shared and often wine and food to be sampled. It's not a bad life, of course, but sometimes we just need a break from being charming and host-like.

So when circumstances allow, we head off west: a two-hour drive to those breathtaking Atlantic beaches for some R&R while our wonderful staff keep the good ship Molino del Santo on course for us. Usually we visit the coast with family and friends, but this time we politely dissuaded some folk who subtly hinted that they had the weekend free and took some 'us' time.

The weather forecast was not great and we arrived to stair-roads - but who cares? We had books to read, DVDs to watch and cookery manuals to peruse. It was going to be a luxury not to feel you need to be outdoors and be active. Lazy afternoons curled up with no agenda other than to do whatever appeals. An indulgence indeed.

The climate, though, was determined to defy predictions and the sun appeared within an hour and stayed with us for five days. But this is autumn, and the threat of an easterly wind - the Levante - is ever-present.

The main reason this coast remains relatively undeveloped - and, in my terms, delightful - is because of the force this wind can exert. It drives people to distraction - literally stir-crazy. Doors and windows bang incessantly, loose articles are rolled down streets. There is no peace, sometimes for days on end. No one knows how long it will last. We asked a local friend about the forecast for tomorrow and he said he'd tell us tomorrow.

All those exfoliating products that are consumed by those in need of rejuvenation are totally unnecessary here. Lie on the beach for an hour when

the Levante is at full strength and all of your loose bits will be sand-blasted away. Given that nudism is commonly practised here, caution is advised. This visit though, the threatened wind did not materialise. We relaxed with our toes in the warm sand and read while watching sunsets to rival - I daren't say they're better than - those you can see at Cobo. We chilled, big time. Just what was needed.

However, we do have professional responsibilities and so we also needed to try a couple of the excellent local restaurants to see if we could pick up some good ideas. Someone has to do it. Conil de la Frontera and Barbate are small fishing towns which have survived in the far south-west of Spain because of just one creature to be found offshore in the spring: the blue-finned or the red tuna. Since Phoenician times, these enormous fish have been harvested in traditional ways by rounding them up into nets - the Almadraba. Given that spears and incandined seas are part of the process, we have passed on seeing the spectacle at first hand. If you'd like to, it is possible to join the local fishermen, but expect to part with 300 euros per person for the privilege. It is not surprising that this star of the ocean features heavily on menus in local eateries. Last visit I enjoyed a fresh

Andy's hotel and restaurant is located near Ronda in Andalucia. www.molinosdelosanto.com. Special rates are available for Expats readers - email andychapell@yahoo.co.uk.

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tuna fillet as part of the great Spanish tradition of the menu del dia - the cheap, three-course set menu introduced during Franco's dictatorship to provide working men with one substantial meal per day.

The surroundings were, shall we say, basic - paper table cloths and plastic chairs - but if it means you eat a salad, a bowl of porra (a thick gazpacho with diced air-cured ham and egg) followed by a perfectly grilled tuna fillet, fresh fruit and wine and get change from a 10 euro note, then it seems churlish to dwell on the functionality.

This time we went upmarket to a restaurant in Barbate, where you can choose not to eat tuna, but you'll be in a minority. These days the spring harvest is frozen at -60C as soon as it's landed, meaning that it can be eaten all year round in optimum condition. And optimum it was.

Every single part of the fish is on offer: all of the expected loin and fillet cuts along with the heart, the liver, the belly, the roe, the brain, and even - this is true - the reproductive fluids. Perhaps due to the Japanese influence, since they buy 80% of the catch, sashimi and tataki dishes are very popular in the restaurant. We were the only foreigners in for lunch but the many locals were tucking into the raw versions of tuna on offer.

We were guided by our waiter, who suggested, after a shared alga and prawn starter, that we try the parpatana, one of the fins, and the ventresca, the highly-prized belly.

Unbelievably delicious. I have eaten ventresca before and am always more than impressed with its subtle flavour and its rich oils, but this was superb eaten on its own, sealed and little more. Absolutely wonderful, melt-in-the-mouth ecstasy.

The fin was so different it was hard to believe it was part of the same creature, with a flavour and consistency most easily compared with oxtail. If you haven't ever, you really should - and you'd be well-advised, as we were, to enjoy a full-bodied red wine with this. They claim here to prepare tuna in a thousand different ways and I can't wait to return to notch up a few more variations.

There are sustainability issues with tuna, of course, and the fact that so much is being rushed off to the Far East is probably not helping the big picture. But in the meantime, if you ever get to south-western Spain, do a little restaurant research and be prepared to spend a little for an unforgettable experience.

Do I eat tuna out of a tin? Not if I can possibly help it. And is a fresh Guernsey longnose (or garfish) still my favourite seafood? Yes, it is, but it's got some serious competition.