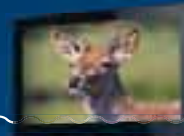


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Eddis Autoquest 180  
Costa del Sol, Spain





# Spain's winter-sun set

ROB GANLEY escapes Britain's January freeze with a family tour of Spain's southern and Mediterranean coasts, where he encounters veteran sun birds and learns to see the Costas with new eyes

Rob and his wife Anna admire the sunset on a stretch of beach near the Camping Cabopino site, between Marbella and Málaga

**R**eader Keith Penning cast the phenomenon of mass motorhome migration to the Iberian Peninsula every winter in new light for me. I met him at the Cabo de Gata site in Spain's Almería. I think I was in a froth about the wonders of Ronda in the province of Málaga, or about the stunning, moonlike terrain of Cabo de Gata's own Natural Park, when he simply said: "We don't treat it as a holiday. We come here to live for winter. It's a way of life for us, not a sightseeing tour."

Of course, he was right. I'd packed my family (that is, wife Anna, four-month-old son Joe, and parents Terry and Beryl) into a six-berth Autoquest 180 from Elddis (for my full review of this, see p106) with the promise of a fortnight relaxing on Spanish costas, a spot of golf and some high





The C&CC's Winter Sun Camping 2009/10 is a 104-page guide on all aspects of Winter Sun sites and travel. It costs £10

For more information, call Carefree on 0845 130 7701

living on good food and wine. It was an easy sell.

The plan was also to catch up with several of the thousands of British motorcaravanners who up sticks and see out the coldest months in baking coastal sunshine. Many do this independently, taking advantage of low-season membership schemes such as ACSI or Camping Cheque to ensure discounted rates on campsites and often ferries, too. Others throw their lot in with larger organisations, such as the Camping and Caravanning Club, which is the option we decided to go for.

#### JOIN THE CLUB

The Club initially tapped the scene in 1993, when it organised its first rally, at Albufeira in the Algarve, Portugal (by rally, we mean a block booking of campers at a site for an extended stay, where discounts are usually greater than offered by the site's pricing structure to independent campers, and at



Lunch in the Autoquest 180 during the stay at Camping Cabopino

which there is a programme of entertainments and activities exclusive to ralliers). Word spread among members, so the Club widened the search for rally sites. By 1998, rallies were also organised at La Manga del Mar Menor on the Costa Calida and at Vinaròs on the Costa del Azahar.

Since then, the Club also began to offer reservation-only campsites for those who want

to be more independent and who don't fancy the rally social programme. Today it features 19 sites from just south of Barcelona, all the way around the coast to the most westerly point of Europe in Portugal; rallies are arranged on 12 of them, running from the end of September until May. There's also a choice of ferry route to Bilbao or Santander, or shorter Channel crossings, and a

choice of en route sites in France and Spain to break up the long drive down. In the Winter season of 2008-2009, the Club made more than 8500 bookings for members, mostly couples.

Dave and Rose Lee, from Broughty Ferry near Dundee, were assistant rally stewards at Almafra near Benidorm, which we visited near the end of our Spanish stay. They explained why motorcaravanners love Spain and the Club's rallies:

"We're retired and we've previously over-wintered here in Spain in our Auto-Trail Miami, so we approached the Club about becoming rally stewards. Escaping the British winter is what it's all about - it's not always sunny, but it's always around 20 degrees warmer here than in the UK. Everywhere else in Europe is just too cold at this time of year. Alicante and Valencia are the warmest, though not necessarily the driest. The mountainous surroundings

mean you tend to get a micro-climate here.

"The rallies are good fun, and feel like a home from home. Plus, you can't beat the price of a pitch on a Club-run rally. We enjoy leading cycling and hiking trips from the campsite"

We took advantage of the Club's discounted rates on a ferry crossing and the chance to visit a handful of winter-sun and rally sites, plus vehicle breakdown insurance with the Club's own Club Care, but declined help with en route sites. I'm a disciple of the *aires*

**"We drove down France's Atlantic coast, then through central Spain, and arrived just in time for the New Year"**

network, and given that we set off late - that is, we spent Christmas Day and Boxing Day in a stupor on the sofa before catching the Portsmouth-Le Havre ferry on December 28 - and planned to celebrate New Year's Eve on the Costa del Sol with friends, I wanted the ability to arrive at sites late and leave early. For our pick of *aires* and sites en route, see tour essentials (p38).

We took the autoroutes down France's Atlantic coast, then autopistas through central Spain and past Madrid, and arrived just outside Mijas to a glass of cold bubbly for New Year's Eve with a couple of hours to spare.

The Costa del Sol also goes by the name Costa del Golf in marketing slogans, so after a couple of rounds at our friends' local course, Calanova, carved out from the undulating territory here, we set off to explore, first making the two-hour trip south west to Gibraltar.

## PEOPLE LIKE US

### WHERE? CAMPING CABOPINO

A7 - Km 194.7 Salida Cabopino, 29600 Marbella, Málaga

Tel +34 952 83 43 73 Web [www.campingcabopino.com](http://www.campingcabopino.com)

Open All year Cost €22 per night (\*van, two adults + hook-up)



**We say...** On the N340 Costa del Sol coast road, some eight miles east of Marbella, this site is set among tall pine trees, which give shade to some 500 touring pitches. These are banked in long terraces, all with 10A hook-up. There are five toilet blocks, and the beach is a 600m walk over the road and down the hill. Roughly half of the 'vans on site during our stay were GB-registered, many taking advantage of substantial discounts for an extended stay (40 per cent if you stay for more than 30 nights). The site advises a maximum rig length of 8m (26'2"), and you'll need your levelling blocks on many of the pitches, too. Dogs cost an extra €1.70 per night, and some pitches may suffer road noise from the N340.

### WHO? John Stainer

From Derrington (near Salisbury), Wiltshire  
\*Van Swift Suntor



John is retired and has been motorcaravanning for three years. He was enjoying his second winter-sun adventure in Spain, arriving this time around in early November at Santander with plans to stay until the end of March.

"I drove down to Cadiz, and I've visited more sites this year than last. It costs more to do it this way, because we're not taking advantage of the long-stay discounts most sites offer at this time of year, but I wanted more variety. Many people come here to Cabopino year after year - there were a lot more here last year. I guess the recession has clipped some people's wings. I think next year we might try Portugal instead - I'm told the sites are cheaper.

"This is our fourth stop here in Spain this time around. We stayed at El Quinto in Mojácar (Almería), and El Raco (Benidorm). We're ACSI scheme members - if you haven't pre-booked all your sites with a Club, you'd be a fool not to be a member. The discount we got on our first two nights' camping paid for the card.

"What makes me keep coming back? I'd say it would have to be that big ball of fire up in the sky! But I'm also one for the old Spanish towns up in the hills, like Ronda and Mijas."



### OUR ROUTE...

Portsmouth to Le Havre, down France's Atlantic coast, through central Spain and back up the Mediterranean coast

Turn to page 38 for route details ➔



The lighthouse at Gibraltar and the view into the Straits of Gibraltar







On Gibraltar, road signs are in English and there are dedicated ‘No Motorhomes’ warning signs. Ignore them at your peril!

For info on driving in Gibraltar visit [www.gibraltar.gov.uk](http://www.gibraltar.gov.uk)



The main bridge in Ronda spans the dramatic gorge that cleaves the town in two

#### GIBRALTAR ROCKS

It’s not well signposted from the main motorway, but you can’t really miss the Rock itself, which soars above the flat land for miles around off Spain’s southern tip, appearing through the sun haze like a sharp behemoth. Access is through the small town of La Linea de la Concepcion.

Gibraltar remains a British colony, with Gibraltarians speaking English and Spanish. Signposts are in English, and the currency is the Gibraltar pound, although British pounds are accepted, too. Fortifications, gates and gun emplacements are still everywhere you look.

Parking on Gibraltar in a motorhome is difficult, and camping a no-no. A lot of people recommend free camping in La Linea de la Concepcion, where there’s a large dirt car park north of the border crossing that costs around €15 a month, and has some security. We passed it and saw around 100 trucks and motorhomes parked here, just a 10-minute walk from Gibraltar, but we fancied exploring in our ’van, against



The whitewashed dwellings in Ronda add to the town’s charm

the advice of Gibraltar’s official website. It says: “Drivers of campervans are warned that Gibraltar’s streets are narrow. It is best that they be parked outside the city walls. ’Vans are not allowed into the Upper Rock or at most tourist sites, and are not allowed to park anywhere in Gibraltar.”

And although we certainly weren’t alone – I counted dozens of other ’vans on the roads there – with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, I’d probably have left the ’van behind and walked on to Gibraltar instead.

Gibraltar has its own red-bordered ‘no motorhomes’ sign. We encountered the



“Gibraltar remains a British colony. Fortifications, gates and gun emplacements can still be seen in every direction you look”



Tours in a horse-drawn carriage are one of Ronda’s many visitor attractions

### PEOPLE LIKE US

#### WHERE? CAMPING CASTILLO DE BAÑOS

CN 340 – Km 360, Castillo de Baños, La Mamola, E18750 Granada

Tel +34 958 82 95 28 Web [www.campingcastillo.com](http://www.campingcastillo.com)

Open All year Cost €5.80 per adult, €11.90 pitch, €4 hook-up



**We say...** Site manager Valeria explained on our arrival that: “We’re undergoing some development work at the moment,” which made the seafront pitches inaccessible. Nevertheless, it’s still a nice looking, site, host to around 100 C&CC members from January to March.

#### WHO? Bob & Ann Penning

From Swindon

’Van Frankia

“I run an international courier company,” explains Bob, “but I can free up time for extended tours. We’re here for five weeks, door to door, and arrived at Bilbao just before Christmas. We’ve been coming to this site for four years now. The area has its own fabulous micro-climate – last year we had just three days of rain during our stay.

“Why Spain? It’s the easiest place to reach that guarantees the best weather at this time of year, and it’s well-trodden, so you know what you’re getting. For us, our annual trip here really cuts the winter short.”



#### Simon & Fiona Bishop, and daughter Freya

’Van VW SW Camper

The Bishops began their 11-month tour of Europe in October.

“We arrived at Santander and have wound our way around to here, always staying at campsites. The best site so far was La Rosaleda at Conil de la Frontera: the facilities were absolutely excellent. We’re planning our trip from site to site, following weather reports and chasing the sun, although we chose to stay here so we can head up to the Sierra Nevada. We thought Spain was flat, but we’ve found the countryside here very diverse.”



#### Nicola Morgan, Daniel Brooks, Lily & dog Santa

’Van VW T2 Bus

“We’ve owned the Bus for more than 15 years, and we’ve been touring here in Spain since October. We’re planning to stay in Spain for a year. We came in at Bilbao, then drove down through central Spain, and next we’ll be heading up the east coast. We love the freedom of touring. It’s a different way of life to the daily grind, and we thought we’d escape the rubbish economic situation back home, so we sold up and hit the road. Our best attraction so far has to be Ronda – the gorge there is just stunning!”





## PEOPLE LIKE US

### WHERE? CAMPING CABO DE GATA

**Ctra.** Cabo de Gata s/n, 04150 Cabo de Gata, Almeria  
**Tel** +34 950 16 04 43 **Web** [www.campingcabodegata.com](http://www.campingcabodegata.com)  
**Open All year** **Cost** €5.95 per adult, €12.95 pitch, €4.30-€5.25 hook-up (6A-16A)



**We say...** Sited around 20km south of Almeria, in the semi-arid Cabo de Gata-Nijar Natural Park, which is one of the most southerly and driest points in Europe, this is an other-worldly feeling place with its salt pans, flat dunes and volcanic surrounds. It's just 900m from the beach, and is a well-maintained park with excellent facilities. The 250 gravel touring pitches all come with 6A, 10A or 16A electricity, and there's a pool and restaurant on site. There were around 40 GB-plated motorhomes on site during our stay.

**WHO?** Keith & Sandra Minnet, and friend Jackie  
**From** Huntingdon, Cambs  
**Van** Niesmann+Bischoff Arto

Keith is a part-time postmaster, and the Arto is his first motorhome, which he bought on eBay in 2008. We met him enjoying his second winter abroad with his wife Sandra and dog Ben.

"We started out in October and plan to stay until the end of April. We're C&CC members and use some of their Winter Sun sites, but prefer to go independently. We'd definitely recommend ACSI: without it, it's not easy to meander in Spain and find open sites. We also love France Passion sites, and always feel safer on them than on *aires*. When you're the only one there in low-season, you can feel vulnerable. And we're certainly not fans of wild camping.

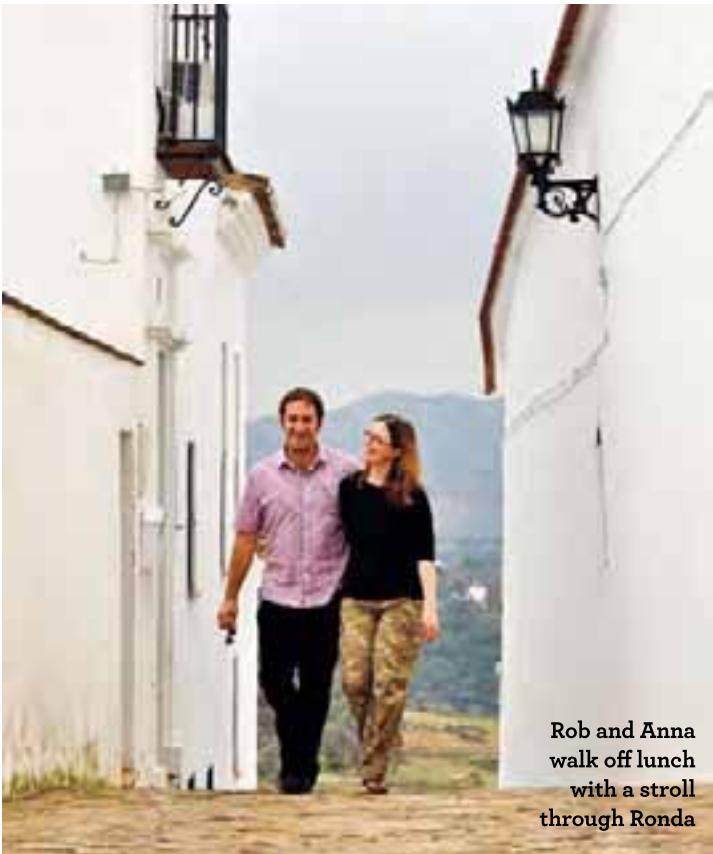
"Last year we visited around 40 sites. We started out at Calais, wound down through France then

around Spain's northern coast, through Portugal into the south, then back up along Spain's east coast. We felt very comfortable here at Cabo de Gata last year, and also enjoyed Rota near Cadiz. We like wildlife and our sites have to be dog-friendly. Here, you can take a day trip out into Almeria where it's raining, and return to the site where it's sunny. That's why most of the campers here have been coming back to this site for 10 years.

"Why Spain? It's easy to get to, and I don't believe Greece or Italy or wherever would suit us any better, to be honest."



Pausing for refreshment at a restaurant overlooking the gorge in Ronda



Rob and Anna walk off lunch with a stroll through Ronda



Sunset on a warm evening at a beach near the Camping Cabopino site

first of these the moment we crossed the Gibraltar airport runway strip and tried to head for the town centre. No motorhomes allowed.

We followed the route for the port, and parked up at Morrisons to get our bearings. Inside, a handful of British expats enjoyed a smoke over a beer at Morrisons' in-house bar. Nearby, garages advertised diesel for sale at 66p per litre in the local currency.

The town and harbours lie along the Rock's less steep western side, facing the Bay of Gibraltar. After a short wander around the shops in the pedestrianised Main Street, we decided to head for the southern tip and the lighthouse, the Christian Shrine of our Land of Europe, which stands a stone's throw from the Mosque of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques (scaffolded during

our visit). If you do this yourself, be sure to follow signs for the 'Upper Rock', which takes you there along a road big enough to accommodate buses; otherwise you'll find yourself in a narrow, hair-raising warren of streets, many of which are signed with the same 'No Motorhome' plate and a handful of quite specific height and width dimensions.

We learned this the hard way, and occasionally bar-keepers and shop owners popped their head out of a door to direct us not to go down a certain road.

Nevertheless, it was worth persevering. The view south across the Strait of Gibraltar to Africa is stunning, and we were lucky enough to encounter an inquisitive Barbary Macaque monkey on the rocks there, too. After a

few hours, we returned to join the massive five-vehicle-wide traffic queue to exit the island at the end of the day.

### RONDA AND MIJAS

Using Camping Cabopino as a base, we made day trips out to Ronda and Mijas, two of the day-trip jewels in Andalucia's impressive crown.

Approaching Ronda from the south means driving on a beautiful, winding mountain road, and you'll need a head for heights. On arrival to the walled town, we turned left at the roundabout before entering and followed signs toward Camping en Sur. We parked on the street here, and walked into the old town (La Ciudad) on rather steep cobbled streets. A dramatic gorge that may test your vertigo separates the old and new towns, and on the western side cliffs plummet down into the valley. It's easy to while



The Andalusian town of Mijas is home to the smallest bull-ring in Spain



Wild camping is illegal in Spain, but plenty of informal coastal spots and market squares (like this one at La Cala de Mijas) are overnight homes to 'vans

Take a look at wild camping fan site [www.worldofwildcamping.com](http://www.worldofwildcamping.com)