



Weekend treat

New low cost flights from the UK to Galicia mean a new city break option. Forget Santiago and St James, treat your taste buds to the treasures further North

LA CORUÑA, or La Coru, as it's affectionately known to its inhabitants, is inextricably linked to at least two momentous events in British history. After the close shave of the Spanish Armada in 1588, England's spymaster general, Sir Francis Walsingham, convinced Queen Elizabeth I to take the war straight back to the Spaniards, to deliver such a withering blow that they would never again entertain the idea of launching an invasion of England. His plan was to torch the remains of the Atlantic Fleet, then under refurbishment in San Sebastián and Santander, thereby forcing Spain to seek surrender terms. The cunning plan would have also included intercepting the much coveted *Flota de Indias* or Treasure Fleet, and installing the pretender Dom Antonio on the Portuguese throne. So amid much hue and cry and beacon lighting, the so-called English Armada set sail, but instead of dealing the blow in the previously mentioned ports, they disembarked in La Coruña to disastrous results. After encountering some mild resistance, Drake's men finally managed to open a breach in the city's defences. At that

moment, an English lieutenant, clutching the flag of St. George, was about to scale the top of the wall when he was taken out by a single musket shot. When the smoke had cleared, the English forces saw that the shot had come from a woman, and not only that, but that she was also in the company of other female sharpshooters. The ladies were so fast reloading and firing that the enemy, demoralised, beat a hasty retreat. The sharpshooter in question, Maria Pita then harangued the brow-beaten men into action, accusing them, amongst other things, of 'not having enough eggs', as the delightful Spanish expression goes. The men, having their virility questioned by a 'mere woman', threw themselves into the meleé and by sheer force of numbers, the English were finally repulsed. The *Coruñeses* today honour the grand heroine *María Mayor Fernández de Cámara y Pita* in the city's summer fiestas and also in the *Plaza Maria Pita*, the monumental square in front of the *Ayuntamiento*.

The Ciudad Vieja, or old town, is small and compact, boasting some lovely mansions, town houses and a couple of stunning Romanesque

churches, Iglesia de Santiago and Colegiata de Santa María del Campo. The charming Plaza de la Harina or Flour Square, known these days as the Plaza de Azcárraga, was the most important square in town until the 19th century, being the former location of the Town Hall and Artillery stores, fiestas and other knees-ups. Today it's simply a nice place to unwind on a terrace and people watch. The beguiling 14th century Convento y Plaza de las Bárbaras, with its squat *Cruceiro* or granite calvary and trees providing a leafy shade, is the perfect place to rest a while.

Ask in *Turismo* for the excellent *Ruta Ciudad Vieja*, or old town route map, which will take you step by step through this cluttered maze of steep, narrow streets, and blind alleyways.

A soldier's lament

After walking a while along the battlements, you will arrive at the *Jardines de San Carlos*. Here lies another of the city's great heroes, this time, oddly, an Englishman. This charming and tranquil corner of the city is the final resting place of British Lt. General Sir John Moore. In 1808,



Sir John Moore's grave at Jardín de San Carlos



Plaza María Pita

Spain, like much of Europe, was under Napoleon Bonaparte's boot. In order to help counter this situation, the British government landed a huge army of 16,000 men and 2000 horses in La Coruña, under the able command of General Sir David Baird. At the same time our man landed in Lisbon with a similar force, doggedly making his way up through the peninsula via Salamanca, before being held back by fierce artillery fire near Astorga. At this point, Napoleon Bonaparte gave personal orders to the French Field Marshall Soult to rout the English and drive them back into the sea. The final confrontation took place at the Battle of Elviña with catastrophic consequences for both the British and the French forces. Lt. General Sir John Moore bled to death from a gaping shoulder wound, after being carried on a stretcher to a merchant's house in the city. His last words were for his secret love the beautiful Lady Hester Stanhope, who, inconsolable at this loss, embarked on a tour of the Middle East, becoming the very first Western woman to visit the Middle Eastern cities of Damascus and Palmyra. Legend has it that when

she docked in Piraeus, Lord Byron, ecstatic with joy, threw himself off the quay and swam to the ship just to greet her. Many historians believe that were it not for Moore's supreme sacrifice that day, the Duke of Wellington might not have assumed command of the British forces and Napoleon's plans for the domination of Europe might not have been thwarted.

Art Nouveau route

Enthusiasts of the Art Nouveau style of architecture will not be disappointed in La Coruña. The English designer Owen Jones was to greatly influence architectural styles in the city at the turn of the 20th century. Local artists richly decorated facades and entrances with lilies, horse chestnut leaves, aquatic plants, roses and camellias in multi-coloured garlands. The Far East was also a major source of inspiration and the Japanese influence is often present in the use of reeds and butterflies resting on water-lilies, star-shaped holly and lotus flowers, all giving rise to a new ecological style of architecture. Ask at Turismo for the *Ruta Modernista* map.



RESTAURANT SPLURGES

If you tire of the tapas route then treat yourself to a sit-down do in either or both of these

■ O BEBEDEIRO

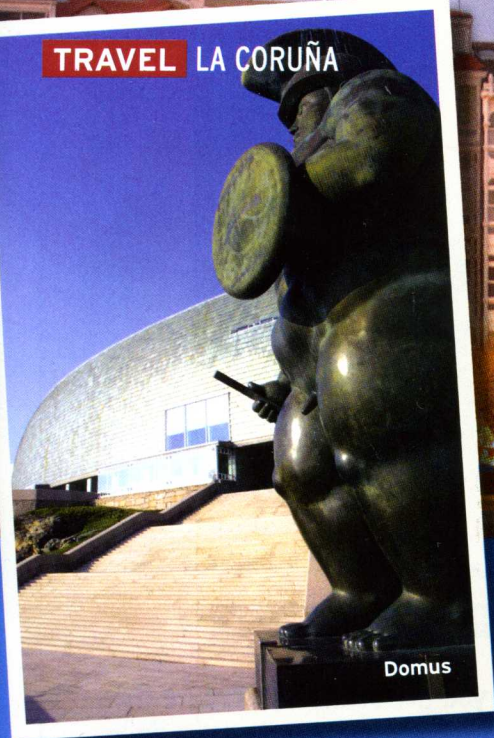
c/ Angel Rebollo, 34
LA CORUÑA
Tel: +34 981 210 609

The superb O Bebedeiro is near *La Domus*. Its unassuming entrance gives way to a lovely dining area decorated with carriage lamps, bellows and other bric-a-brac. The service is impeccable and the owner, Alberto, speaks superb English, having lived and worked in the UK for a number of years. While I was there I tried the succulent *Pulpo marinado en Albariño con almejas de la ría a la plancha*, or Octopus marinated in *Albariño* wine with local clams a la plancha, *Zamburiñas con espuma de ajo, cebolla y langostinos*, or Queen scallops with 'foam' of garlic, onion and langoustines. As a main course, I was recommended *Salmonete con crema de puerros, almejas and vieira*, or Red Mullet with creamed leek, local clams and scallops. To wash it all down, a splendid *Ribeiro Viña Martín*, a gloriously fruity wine from the Ourense area, and currently giving the undisputed Queen of Spanish whites, *Rias Baixas Albariño* a very good run for its money. Alberto's philosophy is to serve outstandingly fresh, local produce in a creative and imaginative manner without the dish losing its essential Galician character. Weekend reservations are needed up to a week in advance if you want to secure a table here.

■ RESTAURANTE DOMUS

c/ Angel Rebollo s/n
LA CORUÑA
Tel: +34 981 201 136

Another good reason for visiting the *Domus* is the superb restaurant located here. Run by the brilliantly innovative young chef Eduardo Pardo, the restaurant is part of *Grupo Nove*, an elite culinary group currently at the vanguard of the *Nueva Cocina Gallega*, or New Galician Cuisine. With its superb ocean views and imaginative dishes, lunch or dinner here is a veritable riot of the senses. Dinner is served only on Fridays and Saturdays and the restaurant is open for lunch from Tuesdays to Sundays. Try the excellent *Menu de Degustación* and prepare yourself for the ride.



Domus

Coruña skyline

The longest seafront promenade in Europe (13km) starts at the imposing Castillo de San Antón. It then takes us past the oldest working lighthouse in the world, La Torre de Hercules, 2000 years old, an eternal symbol and mute testimony to the many changes and upheavals the city has gone through down the centuries. Built during the reign of the Roman Emperor Trajan in the 2nd century AD, mainly to guide ships heading to the British Isles in search of tin, copper and iron, it was totally renovated in the 18th century. After the *Torre*, the promenade winds its way past the imposing granite façade of the *Domus*, then rounds a bend, before heading past the fabulous municipal beaches of



Torre de Hercules

Orzán and Riazor. These white sand beauties are a big draw in summer and only a stone's throw from the hotels and shops. In 1997, the authorities reintroduced the old tram system after a 35 year hiatus, and a turn of the century tram, rescued from a shed in Zaragoza, now toots her way along most of the route, affording all those who ride in her fine views of the Coruña skyline and the Ocean. Local information and tickets can be obtained in *Turismo*.

House Of Man

La Domus or House of Man, is an enormous granite and slate edifice, work of the highly acclaimed Japanese architect Arata Isozaki. Featuring some superb interactive displays on genetics and evolution, it manages to tell the story of Mankind in such a way that both adults and children will find intriguing. For information on this and other city excellent city attractions such as the Planetarium and the Aquarium Finis terrae, ask in *Turismo* for the *Coruña Card* which entitles you to free entry or reduced

admission to many of these sites and also 10% discount in most of the stores in the Zona Obelisco.

Tapas trials and trails

The *Premios Picadillo* is an award ceremony held every year during the summer fiestas, where hotels, restaurants and bars compete against each other for the best *Tapas* and *Pinchos* award. The idea is to promote creativity, competitiveness and quality in the city's service industry, which already enjoys considerable prestige among the top food critics, namely the citizens of La Coruña. A panel of distinguished food buffs spends a week sampling the entries with one clear goal to sort the wheat from the chaff and recommend the outstanding to friends and visitors alike. The *tapas* in the historic *Bodega O Ribeiro* in c/ José Luís Bugallal Marchesi are certainly a hit with the cognoscenti, in particular with their *bonito en rollo*, a wonderful, rolled mixture of *bonito fresco* or fresh white tuna with red peppers, egg and onion. *Empanada Gallega* addicts must head for *Casa Saqués* in the unpronounceable Avenida General Sanjurjo. A 70 year-old tavern that





Galerías de La Mariña



Betanzos



Valeros Puerto



Colegiata de Santa María del Campo

SHOPPING AND NIGHTLIFE

Just off Plaza María Pita is the shopping area known as the Zona Obelisco, taking in c/ Real and c/ Bailén. This is where the major clothing emporiums are based. *Roberto Verino*, *Adolfo Dominguez* and *Purificación Garcia* are some of the major local designers to look out for. The area is excellent for *zapaterías*, or shoe shops and *joyerías* or jewellers. Here you'll also find a couple of grand old turn-of-the-century pharmacies, kooky bookshops and the ever dwindling plus size ladies girdle stores.

The city's greatest concentration of drinking holes is in the streets behind the Playa de Orzán. Names to look out for are: *Dublin*, *Tranvía*, *Filloa*, *Café Coruña*, *Madeira*, *A Cova Folk*, *Grietax*, *Amadeus*, *Chip* and *Garibaldi*. These don't really start to fill until after 1am, so most people have a couple of *copas* in the old city after dinner, before moving on to the Orzán area. Some Old Town haunts on your itinerary might include: *La Gata*, *La Fundación*, *El Deseo*, *Itaca*, *Fun House* and *Belbet*. For those still willing to man the trenches after 3am, *El Playa Club* right at the end of the *Playa Riazor* attracts a trendy crowd and it's also very nice for a paddle when you step out into the morning light at 7am, bright and breezy after your night on the tiles.



Empanada Casa Saques



Sardiñada

turns out what the majority of people believe is the best *empanada de zamburínas*, or queen scallop pie in town. The owner, Tonecho Saqués, is no slouch on the wines either, so in short, all roads in La Coruña lead to *Casa Saqués*. Ask in *Turismo* for their excellent *La Coruña 2006 Guía de Tapas y Pinchos*. Armed with this, you simply can't go wrong.

Endangered bars

For a more down to earth tapas crawl, the streets and alleys near and around the *c/ Barrera* are home to some great watering holes. Some of the owners have joined forces to put together a munching route of up to eleven bars. A *talonnario*, or book of vouchers, can be bought in most hotels and also at *Turismo* for just 18 euros. Each voucher buys you the special *pincho de la casa* and a small beer or mineral water or glass of *vino joven*, or young wine. Though not included in the voucher scheme, special mention must definitely be made here of *La Bombilla, c/ Torreiro/Galera*. This tiny place has been churning out excellent value for money *tapas* for more than 50 years. Try their excellent giant *croquetas* and *tortilla con pimiento rojo*, a wedge of Spanish omelette with a roast red pepper draped over it and skewered with a cocktail stick. Heaven! Another compulsory visit is *Munin c/ Franja 59*, a lovely old-fashioned place with white tiles and prim, aproned ladies that resolutely spend hours slicing ham, cheese, bacon and other cured products

for customers who drop by for a chat. Sadly, these types of establishments are on the endangered species list. Ask for a *bocata de tetilla con membrillo*. This is a thick wedge of creamy, tart *tetilla* cheese and sweet quince jelly, which is then stuffed into a hunk of *pan de leña*, traditional bread, baked in a wood fired oven. You can wash this down with an *Estrella de Galicia*, probably Spain's best beer and brewed in the city since 1906 by *Hijos de Rivera*.

Go soon

See elsewhere in the magazine for elaborate St John's Eve celebrations but *San Juan* in midsummer is a magical time to visit La Coruña. On the night of June 23, huge bonfires are lit all along the two beaches of Orzán and Riazor and thousands of townfolk gather on the beach for a communal *sardiñada* or grilled sardine feast. The *parrocha*, or young sardine, at its plump and juiciest around this time of the year, is served on top of a lump of the local *pan de millo* or cornbread and is quite delicious. When the bonfire begins to die down, tradition demands that you write down a wish on a piece of paper, throw it onto the bonfire, and then leap wildly across the flames.

Sounds a tad dangerous but not as bad as it used to be for Brits in La Coruña what with the French trying to drive them back into the sea (as usual) or an army of local women opening fire. ■

FURTHER INFORMATION

■ GETTING THERE

Clickair, Europe's newest low cost airline, commenced an expansive summer season with the launch of daily flights on March 25 from London Heathrow to La Coruña.

Airbus A320 flights to La Coruña depart London Heathrow at 11.35am, arriving into La Coruña at 2.30pm and from La Coruña at 3.05pm, arriving London Heathrow at 4.05pm.

www.clickair.com

UK Reservations: Tel: 00800 25425247

■ STAYING THERE

NH ATLANTICO ****

Jardines de Méndez Núñez

LA CORUÑA

Tel: +34 981 226 500

www.nh-hotels.com/nh/es/hoteles/espana/coruña-la---c/nh-atlantico.ht

Absolutely immaculate city centre hotel located in the pleasant tree, shrub and fountain lined *Jardines de Méndez Núñez*, where many *Coruñeses* take their evening *paseo* or stroll with the kids.

HOTEL ZENIT CORUÑA ****

Comandante Fontanes, 19

LA CORUÑA

Tel: +34 981 218 484

www.zenithoteles.com/hoteles.asp

The Zenit is a stylish, modern hotel and located a convenient fifty metres from the beaches of Riazor and Orzán.

■ VISITOR INFORMATION

The main Tourist Information Point is conveniently located in the Plaza María Pita and is a veritable mine of information with maps, walking routes, tapas vouchers, etc.

Tel: +34 981 184 344

The Tourist Board's excellent website provides up to the minute information on cultural events in this vibrant city.

www.turismocoruña.com

Hoquera de San Juan

