

Bena Vista:

NOT YOUR STANDARD HPB SITE...



by Jonathan Broom

LET'S GET A FEW MISCONCEPTIONS OUT OF THE WAY FIRST...

WHAT BENA VISTA ISN'T:

A remote, tranquil HPB home, deep in the wilds of the southern Spanish hinterland. An HPB-exclusive site, where the only folk you'll encounter are your fellow Bondholders (or friends and families thereof). A recent HPB development, bristling with 21st-Century fixtures and fittings.

WHAT BENA VISTA IS:

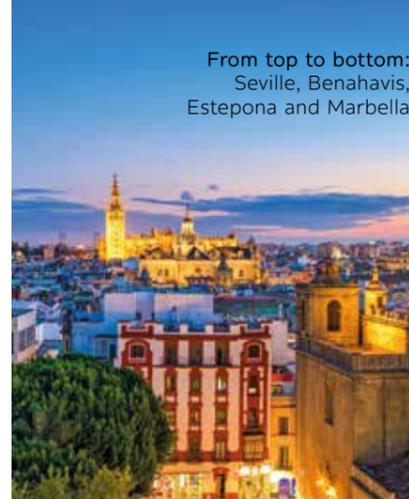
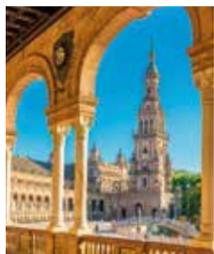
A site shielded from, but close to, all the 'pluses' of urbanisation; shops, bars, restaurants, public transport – all just a few steps away. A 'mixed dish' of a site, where a diverse range of properties and facilities – and occupants – go to create a very appealing whole. A friendly place – homely (in the best way); and, while not in the first flush of youth, enjoying a comfortable middle age. And presiding over all, Diego Barranco, Mister Bena Vista, if you will.

Just as Bena Vista is not a standard site, Diego is not your standard site manager. Bena Vista is a collection of some 120 properties, plus a similar

number on the adjacent Las Palmeras site. The properties range from one-bedroom apartments to sumptuous villas. Some are privately owned; some are occupied all year round; some are timeshare. Owners and occupants might be British, Spanish, German, Russian – anyone who wants a slice of Costa del Sol sunshine. Including, of course, the Holiday Property Bond, which owns 18 one and two-bedroom, garden, first floor and penthouse apartments, distributed throughout the complex.

And Diego – an owner himself – runs the whole show. A busy man, then. But Bondholders who fear that Snr Barranco might be spreading himself too thin needn't worry; Diego somehow manages to make himself available whenever he's needed – indeed at the Bondholders' Barbecue I attended (Tuesday evenings, a very reasonable €10.50 per head) he was on hand serving dinner – and should he be required elsewhere, his assistant manager Ali Pope and her colleague Jarka Stepanikova are more than capable of answering any queries or resolving any problems.

The site is easy to get to, too. Me being me, I hired a car – but really I needn't have bothered. Transfers to and from the site from Malaga airport (bookable through the HPB Travel Club, naturally) cost just shy



From top to bottom: Seville, Benahavis, Estepona and Marbella



of £200 return for up to four people and, once on site, public transport is excellent and local taxis are eminently affordable.

Still, the car was there to be driven, and it seemed a shame to waste it. So, having arrived on an overcast Monday afternoon I broke out the map and the guidebooks and looked for somewhere to visit the following day.

To say that nothing becomes Bena Vista like the leaving of it is both to misquote the Bard (a speciality of mine) and to damn the site with the faintest of praise. But the fact is that it is in a fantastic location from which to explore the whole of Andalucia. Bena Vista is almost exactly equidistant from the region's eastern and western borders. Striking out north, or north-east, or north-west will give you a real flavour of rural southern Spain.

But it's good to have a destination in mind. There are numerous organised excursions from Bena Vista: to the seaside town of Fuengirola and the mountain village of Mijas; to Jerez and Cadiz; to Tangiers (so beautifully described by Bondholder Ruth Burns Warrens in the May 2015 BOND Magazine, issue 63); to Granada and the Alhambra Palace; to Gibraltar; to the old Moorish town of Ronda; to Seville (of which more later); and to Córdoba, Andalucia's one-time capital city.

The last of which was on my Spanish bucket list, as it happened. But the site-



BENA VISITORS

Tony and Jane Parker from East Sheen, London are frequent guests at the Bond's urban Costa del Sol home, having been 15 times – and counting. What's the attraction?

"We're maybe not typical," says Jane, "but we really like shared sites. Rocha Brava in Portugal is

another favourite for that reason – it's nice meeting folk from other parts of the world, from other backgrounds, with different stories to tell. Also, Bena Vista's gardens are beautiful, really well kept. And all the management staff – Diego, Ali and Jarka – are lovely, and so helpful." "There's no getting round it: there is noise from the dualised A-7 coast road that runs in front of the site," adds Tony. "And there's traffic 24 hours a day; it's

a major trunk route, after all. But Bena Vista is easy to get to, flights-wise; and easy to reach without a car. And once you're off the A-7 and in the property, the place is delightful. We usually try to book unit 3-4A – 'Leo' – which is a fair way back from the road; but in all honesty the noise really isn't that intrusive." "Our children have stayed at the site, on our Bond," continues Jane, "and they usually don't bother with car hire. And my brother regularly joins us there – he lives a bit north of us, but flies in from West Midlands airport." "We like other sites too, of course we do," says Tony. "El Pueblito de Alfaix, to the east of Bena Vista, is a frequent destination of ours; but Bena Vista is a little bit special for us. There are loads of things to do – we're never bored – and sometimes it's nice to have all those shops, bars and eateries right on your doorstep."

organised visit wasn't till Friday: too late for my short sojourn. So, on a cool, overcast day: time to hit the road.

It's a 2½-hour drive from Bena Vista to Córdoba – but, as I discovered, well worth it.

The elegant, wealthy city of Córdoba is one of the most beautiful in Andalucía, and home to the Mezquita, the only mosque/cathedral in the world. It's impossible to overemphasise the wonder of Córdoba's great mosque, with its remarkably serene (despite tourist crowds) and spacious interior. One of the world's greatest works of Islamic architecture, the Mezquita hints, with all its lustrous decoration, at a refined age when Muslims, Jews and Christians lived side by side and enriched their city with a heady interaction of diverse, vibrant cultures.

Arab chronicles recount how Abd ar-Rahman I purchased half of the Visigothic church of San Vicente for the Muslim community's Friday prayers, and then, in AD 784, bought the other half on which to erect a new mosque. Three later extensions nearly quintupled the size of the mosque and brought it to the form you see today – with one major alteration: Córdoba returned to Christian rule in 1236 during the 'Reconquista' of Spain by King Ferdinand III of Castile, and the building was converted to a Roman Catholic church, culminating in the insertion – there's no other word for it – of a Renaissance cathedral in the 16th Century, slap-bang in the middle of the mosque. Jarring? Well, yes and no. Both structures are sublime in different ways. Entrance to the Mezquita is €10 per person, and well worth it.

As with most ancient cities, in Córdoba history overlays history; the Roman bridge (the 'Puente Romano') across the Guadalquivir River leads to the mainly Moorish, and to my eye pretty robust, ancient Andalusian capital, sitting cheek-by-jowl with plenty of post-13th-Century Roman Catholicism (including the Alcázar de Los Reyes Cristianos), the whole interlaced with charming little streets and alleyways. You could spend a day here, or do the place in a few hours (as I did).

The following day dawned bright and sunny, with just a hint of spring warmth in the air. Just the day to join the organised excursion to Seville.

Bena Vista doesn't offer HPB-exclusive excursions, but has teamed up with local tour operator TransAndalucía (AKA VivAndalucía), experts on the region and its



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de España, built in 1929 as the focal point for the Iberoamerican Exhibition world's fair – a meeting intended to improve relations between Spain and its former colonies and (then-) current trading partners.

Then as now, Andalucía was a poor region – but that didn't stop the Andalusians from building this breathtaking centrepiece; or from widening the streets and erecting new hotels to prepare for the anticipated crowds. Or, indeed, from freeing up the centrally-located Parque Maria Louisa for other participating nations to build their 'pavilions' (though the natives did stop short of building the visitors' pavilions for them). You can almost imagine the town planners sitting round a table going: “Double or quits! Hell – what have we got to lose?”

So: a successful roll of the dice? Arguable; though it left an extraordinary architectural legacy. The city owes much of its present-day cosmopolitanism and sophistication to the bravery (or foolhardiness, take your pick) of the 1929 Iberoamerican Exhibition committee.

Though by no means all. Seville has its old quarter all right: wherein is located what many of us had

attractions and flexible enough to alter their itinerary depending on how many folk are on the trip and what they want to see. There were about 15 in our group, including six Bondholders (well, five plus a friend). And, of course, me.

As we wended our way to Córdoba's successor as Andalusian capital, our guide Americo regaled us with interesting facts. “There to your left is Gibraltar... A little further distant, those mountains: that's North Africa... Did you know that 20% of the world's shipping passes through the Straits of Gibraltar?” I didn't; but I do now. And so do you. Travelling along the A-381 through scrubby, mountainous terrain, we saw storks nesting atop telegraph poles. We started to see livestock, too: cattle, especially black bulls. This, it transpired, is where they rear the bulls for the corridas.

Seville is spectacular, a truly elegant city with a very cosmopolitan feel – all wide boulevards, pretty, well-tended public parks and, as you might expect, orange trees (planted for shade rather than fruit). While the city has its share of narrow streets and little hidden alleyways, the place feels more... expansive than Córdoba.

And nowhere is this better exemplified than at the Plaza

come to see – the Catedral de Santa María de la Sede, the largest Gothic cathedral in the world.

The cathedral is, by any standards, extraordinary. Whether or not it appeals will depend on your own aesthetics and, to be blunt, on what brand of Christianity (if any) floats your boat; but aside from being absolutely huge, it is the most ornate, jewel-bedecked structure I've ever seen. I might have glimpsed an un-gilded, un-filigreed spare foot of wall space in the south transept; but I doubt it. Once again, as with Córdoba, the place is built on the site of a mosque; but in Seville, little trace of mosque remains. How could it? There simply isn't room. As it is, the cathedral is home to the catafalque of Christopher Columbus; devotional artworks by Goya, Zurbarán, Murillo and others; and enough silver and gold to... well, the Duraglit bill alone must run into thousands.

Back at Bena Vista that evening, I went bar-hopping. Just so you don't have to. I can report that the Bar Los Arcos, near the clubhouse and overlooking the bowling green, is a find – not least because beer is €2 a pint during a happy hour that extends from 1pm until 6pm. More like a happy afternoon, then. The 19th Hole is a woeful, desolate place; the less said about it, the better. And the best is probably the Terrace, near the swimming pool and run by English couple Marcus and Joanne; a little more expensive, but properly convivial.

Thus refreshed, I went in search of dinner. The Centro Commercial to the front of the site is a place of plenty: as well as a bank, a grocery store and a butcher's shop, within a couple of hundred yards you've got all manner of restaurant, from Chinese to Japanese to Italian to Indian... and of course Spanish: the Don Juan.

Thursday was my last full day at Bena Vista, and with the sun now determinedly beating down (and warm to boot) I was equally determined to see some more of what was on my (and your) doorstep. So I earmarked three 'destination' towns within a 20-minute radius of the site: Estepona, Benahavis and Marbella. In reverse order...

Marbella's Casco Antiguo is a picture-perfect maze of narrow, twisty-turny streets, offering something



lovely to see at every corner. The tiny, winding paths wend their way past glistening white buildings adorned with small flower-filled balconies; chic boutiques; and trendy cafes. With its

lively terrazas and fragrant orange trees, the Plaza de los Naranjos (Orange Square) is not to be missed, especially at night when Marbella's cafe culture comes alive.

A little inland, Benahavis is a charmer. Built on a hill and surrounded by more of the same, it's a sleepy but picturesque little town – a village really – with numerous art galleries and a selection of lovely small cafe-bars and restaurants. Be warned, though: there isn't much in Benahavis that isn't hilly – and some of the hills are lung-bursting.

And finally my favourite: Estepona. All the charm of old Marbella, but smaller. Different streets feature colour-coded flowerpots – which at first I took to be a rudimentary form of postcoding for a pre-digital age, until I discovered that the Esteponans just like it like that. The scent of orange blossom is intoxicating. The oh-so-pretty streets lead to lots of small plazas, with shortsleeve-shirted folk sitting outside cafes and soaking up the warm sunshine (on 22nd March). There's a glorious, child-friendly beach, where parents and children in shorts and T-shirts were already happily playing. Young families staying at Bena Vista in the summer could reach this easily, by car or by public transport.

What a dull old world it would be if we all wanted the same thing, all the time. Easy for HPB of course – if the demand were solely for quiet contemplation and bucolic beauty, we'd build 30 Upper Nortons. Fun in the sun? Simple: a load more La Gomerias or Biniorellas. History and grandeur? We'd restrict our house-hunting to Italian palazzos, French châteaux and Peak District manor houses.

But what Bondholders want is a range of sites, and types of sites, to choose from. And Bena Vista fully deserves to be in that number. ②



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