



The next big thing?

Glasgow was it in 1990. Liverpool will be it in 2008. And in 2016 it could well be the turn of **Málaga**.

Paul Murphy argues the case for why this "very Spanish city" should be crowned European Capital of Culture

Getting to grips with cutting-edge art at Málaga's Centro de Arte Contemporáneo



Above: The Picasso Museum is a must-visit Below: Host to Spain's prestigious Festival de Cine, the Teatro Cervantes

or gave to his family, now bequested back or on permanent loan from them. There's no doubting the seismic effect that Picasso had on European art but, to answer the selection criterion, did Málaga inspire Picasso? You bet. Take a five-minute stroll to the buzzing Plaza de la Merced, site of some of the city's liveliest bars and also the Casa Natal de Picasso (Picasso's birthplace). Still flying all around the square are the doves that are a leitmotif in Picasso's art. A 30-minute stroll away is the bullring, the Plaza de Toros de La Malagueta – a source of inspiration from 'El Picador Amarillo' in 1890, ▶

Museum. The city has long had its (low-key) Picasso Birthplace Museum, and the new gallery, the 16th-century Buenavista Palace, designated a national monument in its own right, was incredibly chosen by Picasso himself as the possible site for a museum of his works in the city of his birth way back in 1953. It has wowed art critics and the public, exceeding visitor number expectations from day one, and now proudly takes its place alongside the other great Picasso museums in Barcelona and Paris. The collection comprises around 160 paintings, drawings, sculptures and ceramics from his earliest works up to the 1970s, and is notable for the portrayal of the women and children in his life. It's a very personal, biographical collection being mostly pieces that Picasso kept

So why, you may ask, is Málaga worthy of European Capital of Culture (or ECC as we shall call it from here on) status? Firstly, let's forget logic and give a shout for the underdog. For three decades it was Andalucía's forgotten, even spurned, city, with millions of holidaymakers flying into Málaga, barely wiping their feet on the welcome mat before flopping on a towel 20km west. And thank goodness for that.

So, instead of swish marinas, all-day breakfasts and tourist trappings, Málaga remains a very Spanish city where excellent local food, and simple bars are still the norm, they siesta and, no matter how hot it is, men still wear long trousers.

As an Andalusian city Málaga may lack the whitewashed romance of Seville's Barrio de Santa Cruz, or world-famous buildings such as the Alhambra but it does have its own mini-Alhambra, the splendid Alcazaba, with Moorish gardens and a Roman theatre. Málaga also lacks the crowds of Andalucía's honeypots; on a balmy spring or autumn day you can have the Alcazaba and adjacent Castillo de Gibralfaro, with its magnificent views all to yourself – bliss!

The city has three other priceless assets: character in spades (more of that in a minute); the most important museum to open in Spain this millennium; and a certain Pablo Diego José Francisco de Paula Juan Nepomuceno María de los Remedios Cipriano de la Santísima Trinidad Clito Ruiz y Picasso. Or Picasso as he's better known.

One selection criteria to become an ECC is that the contender should "highlight artistic movements and styles shared by Europeans which they [the city] have inspired". Enter Picasso, arguably the greatest and unarguably the most iconic artist of the 20th century.

In 2003 Málaga 'reclaimed' its most famous son with the opening of the new Picasso

Málaga has some rivals also vying for the ECC crown...

Main contenders



In 2016 it's the turn of Spain and Poland to jointly host the ECC, and bids are also being submitted from fellow Andalusians Granada and Córdoba. We've tried to find out their plans, but aside from a few "strategic objectives" platitudes from their respective tourist boards, whatever they're plotting they're keeping close to their chest. But with Málaga in the running we reckon they'll have to show more than an old Arab palace and a big mosque to win the nomination.



to 'Guernica' in 1936. Young Pablo learned his first brushstrokes in Málaga and when he was 15 he was 're-christened' with cava – maybe Formula 1-style – in the Liceo Artístico y Literario on Plaza de San Francisco to mark his gold medal in the 1897 National and Provincial Fine Arts exhibitions.

You can follow in the footsteps of Picasso, boy and man, at: the bustling Mercado Atarazanas (once a Moorish ship repair yard and still boasting an original horseshoe archway); El Pimpi, the town's famous rambling cavernous bodega – note the barrel signed by Paloma Picasso (Pablo's daughter), and while we're name dropping Antonio Banderas is a regular visitor; and the Antigua Casa de Guardia where you can raise a glass of Málaga dulce – try the Pedro Ximen – to the great man, who is photographed drinking here.

Of course, Picasso alone won't win Málaga ECC status. Which is why the city is creating an amazing 13 new galleries between now and 2016, the most exciting of which is the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza de Málaga gallery. This will house over 350 works from the world-famous

Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection concentrating on 19th and 20th-century Spanish masters such as Sorolla and Juan Gris and will include Old Masters such as Zurbarán. Other museums and galleries will be devoted to wine, glass, cars, 20th-century Malagueño artists, the history of the city, flamenco, cinema and 'Art & Nature' respectively. The latter, according to its publicity, will boast the best collection of precious stones in the world. Other major projects which will enhance the city as a visitor attraction include an Oceanarium and a new music auditorium.

There's no need to wait, however. Just opened (May 2007) is the state-of-the-art Municipal Museum, featuring sculptures, paintings and graphic arts. Two other 'nearly-new' (2003) establishments to see are the Málaga Interactive Music Museum where hands-on stations let you make your own music, from classical to punk, and the fashionable Centro de Arte Contemporáneo (CAC), which features touring exhibitions by major 20th and 21st-century international artists. The city is no slouch in the performing arts either. The Teatro Cervantes is a beautiful

Málaga's favourite son's influence abounds in the city's street art (top). Bang up-to-date at temple of contemporary art CAC

late 19th-century theatre, equally at home with the resident Málaga Philharmonic Orchestra as Nick Cave. Every April it rolls out the red carpet to Spanish movie stars at the prestigious annual Festival de Cine, which the city hosts.

And finally we should briefly mention the massive improvements in the city's infrastructure leading up to 2016: the new AVE (High Speed Train) to Córdoba and Madrid; a new airport terminal; and the Córdoba-Málaga motorway and toll road – 'the Mediterranean motorway' along the coast to Granada.

The only drawback is it will bring more people to discover the city – so see it now while it's still the bridesmaid of Andalucía. ml

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