

Southern Spain and Moore

At the southernmost tip of Spain sits Tarifa, a walled city with the most spectacular views of Africa. This Andalusian border town, which is situated between the mountainous eastern region and the western flatlands, until recently was known mostly for its high suicide rate -- attributed to the unrelenting winds that blow mercilessly up the Strait of Gibraltar from the Atlantic.

When the rest of Europe discovered Tarifa's potential as a prime windsurfing locale, the wind, once cursed as the Grim Reaper, turned misery to gold. Today Tarifa is a popular and prosperous resort in competition with Hoopika in Hawaii and Fuerta Venuta in the Canary Islands for the title of Windsurfing Capital of the World.

Using the blustery weather to his advantage, Arab aggressor Tariq ibn Ziyad led the first band of burly Berber invaders from Africa's northwest coast across the Strait on a reconnaissance trip. The following year, 711 A.D., Tariq and his Moors began their assault on Spain in earnest, conquering this former Carthaginian and Roman outpost and renaming it Tarifa (Arabic for Tariq) before heading inland to establish eight centuries of rule.

Much of Tarifa spills out over the walls of the ancient Moorish village. By no means a luxurious beach-side resort, this is a simple village where stray, skinny dogs patrol the gutters for scraps, kids rumble in the streets, and local men gather in the bars to drink,

smoke and watch soccer. Basic homes and comfortable pensions dot the shoreline of Tarifa's front beach, a huge expanse of blowing sand constantly on the move. Beyond, the pounding surf tumbles in from Africa.

The expanse of beach continues northwest along the Costa de la Luz, eventually running into the port city of Cadiz. Surrounded on three sides by the Atlantic, Cadiz (pronounced Cadish) is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the Western world. Its real intrigue is its African appearance, so noted in the 1930s by British writer Laurie Lee: "Cadiz from a distance was a city of sharp incandescence a scribble of white on a sheet of blue grass lying curved on a bay like a scimitar and sparkling with African light."

Founded by Phoenician traders in 100 B.C., then inhabited by the Romans who boasted such auspicious residents as Hannibal, and for a time, Julius Caesar, Cadiz architecture, under 11th century Moorish rule, evolved according to the vernacular. The golden cupolas of the Baroque cathedral loom above low whitewashed houses and pastel-colored miradors which have seen more glorious days, but which nevertheless, maintain some of the elegant majesty of yesteryears.

Today, the area of the old city jutting up against the headland is in decline, decaying from the corrosive effects of air laden with salt. It looks and feels slightly seedy from the outside, but wandering into the city from the sea wall, travelers will be intrigued by the mystique of narrow streets that wind maze-like, only to dead-end into enchanting squares where cafes seat customers outdoors under flowering fruit trees.

At night, using the sea wall as a landmark, one can easily and safely navigate the streets of the old city. Apartment houses join commercial buildings that share a wall with a restaurant, pension, hotel or shop. Above the shops, second floor homes come alive with the rich aroma of heady cooking smells and evening revelry.

Meandering more deeply into Cadiz's ancient barrio back streets and blind alleys, one must listen for scooters since pedestrians have no right of way here. In a dimly lit bar doorway a small crowd gathers, clapping flamenco to an accomplished lone guitarist – at 11 p.m., Southern Spain's ancient port city is just beginning the transition from evening into the intoxicating rhythms of the night.