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Casa de Carmona, Carmona

Just off the beaten track there are destinations low on crowds yet high on style – and at every price level

By Kate O'Donnell, Niki Browes and Louise Sugrue

Real gems

SPAIN

In the crenellated and castellated Alhambra palace, Granada may have the most beautiful monument in Europe. And as a result, the city is firmly on the tourist track (and on the celebrity trail – in happier times, **Brad Pitt** and **Jennifer Aniston** were photographed wandering hand in hand around the Alhambra's gardens).

Lovely though it is to be in such an iconic place, sometimes you need to escape the crowds. The **Palacio de los Patos** in the centre of Granada's business district (so it's quiet at weekends) is a genuine urban oasis and the perfect place to do so. Only a year old, this former palace has a stunning white-on-white interior that is hidden behind a crisply renovated

ornate 19th-century Andalusian façade. The ceilings are high, the staircases are dramatic, the furniture is sleek and modern. Even the simpler attic rooms have masses of drama and impact. As befits such a pure and immaculate hotel, there is an on-site spa to soothe weary souls (chocoholics should sample the chocolate massage).

Equally palatial, yet more traditional in style, is **Casa de Carmona** in the hilltop town of Carmona, 25km east of Seville. The hotel, which dates back to the 16th century, has pretty, individually decorated bedrooms perfect for that all-important



Above and below, Palacio de los Patos, Granada



siesta. Its formal courtyards and open-air quadrangles, shaded by orange trees and scented by jasmine plants, are a blissful spot to retreat from the baking summer sun while being lulled by the sound of tinkling fountains. Carmona itself is all cobbled streets, high adobe walls, baroque and Renaissance churches, Roman and Arab ruins, and lots of tapas bars to dip in and out of while you explore the town.

When the sightseeing gets too much, return to the Casa, help yourself to a drink from the honesty bar and dial a therapist for a well-deserved massage in

the cool, shaded privacy of your own room.

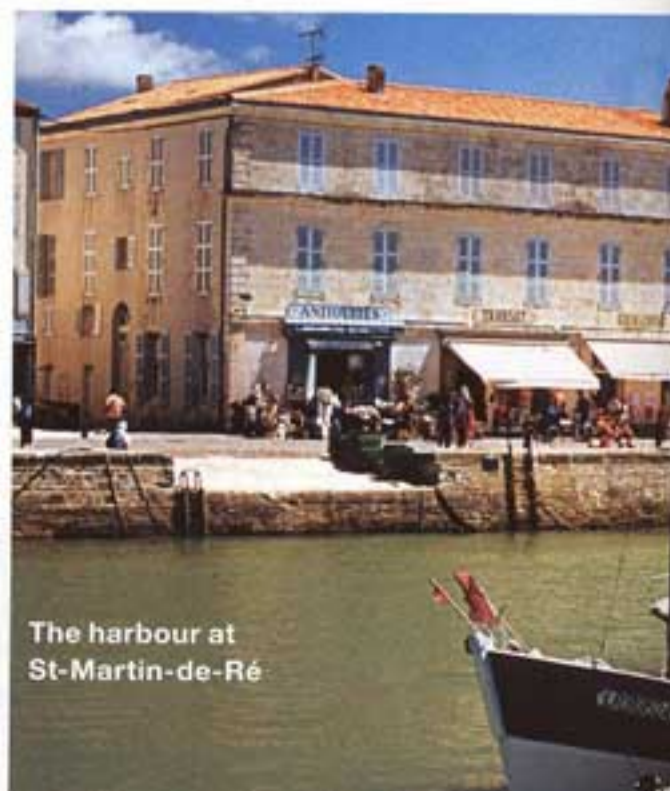
THE LOWDOWN: Palacio de los Patos offers double rooms from 220 euros (about £153), room only (020 7580 2663; travelintelligence.com). Casa de Carmona offers double rooms from 90 euros (about £62), b&b (00 34 9 54 14 41 51; casadecarmona.com).

FRANCE



He may be known as a celluloid pirate of the Caribbean, but in real life, **Johnny Depp**, left, and partner **Vanessa Paradis**

prefer an island closer to home. Ile de Ré, a sliver of land off France's Atlantic coast, is an idyllic retreat much loved by the French, yet barely known to the British. With soft sandy beaches, salt marshes and oyster parks, its winning feature is the climate (it gets 2,600 hours of sunshine a year). The other jewel in its crown is the captivating walled capital,



The harbour at St-Martin-de-Ré



Pestana Palace, Lisbon



Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria, Sorrento

which incorporates Gothic and Moorish architectural styles. The rooms are spacious but cosy and peacocks have the run of the grounds, which feature a pool and mini amphitheatre. The don't-miss dish here is cod cooked with herbs fresh from the garden and the wines are excellent, too – nearby is Vidigueira, home to Portugal's finest vineyards. And do go to the nearby historical town of Beja to pick up some souvenirs, made from local hand-turned wood, iron, cork and pottery.

THE LOWDOWN: Pousadas de Portugal offers double rooms from £34 per person per night, b&b; Pestana Palace offers double rooms from £50 per person per night, b&b (Keytel International; 020 7616 0300; keytel.co.uk). For further information, visit pousadas.pt and pestana.com/hotels/en

ITALY



Some parts of the Italian countryside are well-trodden, but it is still possible to find lesser-known getaways as ancient, crumbling castles, forts, country houses and olive farms are restored and opened up to paying guests. One interesting newcomer is **Castello del Nero**, situated

in Tavarnelle Val di Pesa, deep in the heart of Chianti. Surrounded by 400 hectares of private vineyards and olive groves, the castle is only a short drive from Tuscany's must-see cities Florence, Siena and Pisa. Sensitively renovated – the castle dates back to the 12th century and its original frescoes have been beautifully restored – the hotel's 50 rooms and suites are all individually decorated. But the latest hi-tech facilities are on tap (LCD TVs, broadband internet access), as well as luxe touches (cashmere blankets, Egyptian cotton sheets) that you'll wish you had at home.

Standing proud on a headland overlooking the Bay of Naples is the as-grand-as-it-sounds **Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria** in Sorrento on the breathtakingly beautiful Amalfi coast, where **Brad Pitt** (again) and **Angelina Jolie** filmed *Mr & Mrs Smith*. An old-school getaway, built in the days when Italy's urban set escaped the heat of summer by heading for the sea, the Grand makes a glamorous refuge from the crowds thronging Ravello, Positano and Amalfi itself. But Capri is only 20 minutes away by hydrofoil, Ischia 60 minutes away, so must-see sights are still within striking distance.

Fifty years ago, movie legends such as **Jack Lemmon** and **Sophia Loren**, *far left*, holidayed at the hotel and it still has a



Castello del Nero, Tavarnelle Val di Pesa

retro, nostalgic feel with its hand-painted ceilings, thick silk curtains and unchanging views of Vesuvius. It wouldn't take much here to imagine yourself as the star of your own Hollywood movie. And that's an irresistible feeling.

THE LOWDOWN: Castello del Nero offers double rooms from £385 per night, room only (Exsus Travel; 020 7292 5050; exsus.com). Citalia offers three nights at Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria in a double room, from £824 per person, b&b, including return flights (0870 909 7554; citalia.com). ■