



LAND OF THE HORSE

Andalusia is a land of ancient cities and pretty white villages; landscapes studded with olive groves; stunning beaches, and colourful festivals. And whenever there's a festival, you can be sure horses will play a prominent role. Andalusia's relationship with these noble creatures stretches back centuries. Here we take a look at the region's equestrian heritage and traditions that are still very much alive, and nowhere more so than in Jerez de la Frontera.

Bélen Bautista - The Royal Andalusian School of Equine Art's only horsewoman, with Académico, her purebred Spanish horse.



::: Jerez de La Frontera – a celebration of equine heritage :::

It's that thought horses existed on the Iberian Peninsula as long as 3,000 years ago. During his reign, Felipe II planned the improvement of the then existing Spanish stock, achieving enormous success in producing pure thoroughbred Spanish horses. They are now famous throughout the world.

Elegant and strongly built, with beautiful arched necks, thick long manes and tails, Andalusian horses are well-known for their agility, natural rhythm, poise and grace. Because of this, and their ability to learn difficult moves quickly, Spanish horses are considered to be the best breed for the arena, displays, and parades.

Jerez de la Frontera's equine heritage is world famous because of its international equestrian art school, and colourful annual horse fair.

The Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art Foundation is renowned the world over, largely because of its spectacular show - 'How the Andalusian Horses Dance', devised by founder, Alvaro Domecq Romero. The show is the embodiment of the School's work.

Based in Jerez de la Frontera since 1973, the School is now one of the four most important riding schools in the world along with Le Cadre Noir de Saumur in France, the Spanish Riding school in Austria and La Escola Portuguesa de Arte Equestre in Portugal.

Today it is a specialised training centre whose main objectives are to promote equestrian art, and to preserve Andalusia's traditions and heritage of horsemanship.

Its many activities include training in horsemanship by internationally renowned expert riders, carriage driving, saddlery, and breeding. There are courses for stable hands and clinical assistants too. Other work includes selecting purebred Spanish horses for breeding and preservation, research, and the promotion of equestrian art, including classical and country dressage (doma vaquera).

The School's home is Recreo de Las Cadenas, a magnificent 19th century palace set in a beautiful botanical garden, and it's open to visitors for daily tours.

As well as an arena, seating up to 1,600 spectators, and stables for 60 horses, the palace also houses the Museum of Equestrian Art. Its eleven rooms take you through the origins and history of equestrian art and the horse in Andalusia.

The richly historical collection includes horse-drawn carriages and their harnesses, some dating back to 1730, as well as saddles and embroidered clothes for both horses and coachmen.

The saddlery, tack room, and stables, as well as the indoor arena and the training exercise rings, are included in the tour, the highlight of which must surely be Como

Bailan Los Caballos Andaluces (How the Andalusian Horses Dance).

Performed several times a week, this stunning equestrian ballet incorporates movements based on classical dressage, Doma Vaquera and traditional equestrian skills. One of these skills is 'work in hand' in which the horse performs without a rider.

The show builds to its spectacular finale – the carousel, involving horses and riders performing in awe-inspiring unison.

When you've finished looking around the museums, and enjoyed the show, take a stroll around the botanical garden. And don't forget to take the sherry tasting tour at the Sandeman Bodega, next door to the school!

But the town's love of horses isn't confined to the School. Every May, thousands of visitors from around the world descend upon Jerez de la Frontera. They come to enjoy the lively, colourful spectacle of the Feria del Caballo (Jerez Horse Fair). Horses, flamenco, and the finest local food and wine, come together in perfect harmony for an unforgettable few days.

Gonzalez Hontoria Park is the focal point for the major events that comprise superb displays of horsemanship

including doma vaquera and doma classica – cowboy and classical dressage; riding competitions; polo, and carriage driving.

Over 200 marquees sell delicious traditional food such as Jabugo ham paired, of course, with locally produced sherry. Why not do as the locals and mix it with lemonade to make a 'rebujito'?

The streets of Jerez are taken over by parades of horses – official and unofficial! You'll be enchanted to see horses strolling elegantly around the town, mounted by immaculately dressed riders. Don't be too surprised if you see women riders in full flamenco dress, still managing to look poised and sophisticated.

Keep a look out too for English, Hungarian, Russian and Spanish-style carriages, all exquisitely decorated, as they parade through the cobbled streets of the old town.

At night, the atmosphere changes as guitar and stomping flamencos rhythms take over from the tempo of horses hoofs, and parties last well into the early hours.

Although it is a major tourist attraction, Feria del Caballo, remains at heart a uniquely Andalusian festival beloved by locals as much as by visitors. ■



JEREZ DE LA FRONTERA IS INTRINSICALLY LINKED WITH THE HORSE THROUGH THE RENOWNED ROYAL ANDALUSIAN SCHOOL OF EQUINE ART, AS WELL AS ITS ANNUAL FERIA DEL CABALLO, FAMOUS FOR ITS SPECTACULAR SHOW. THE SCHOOL IS ALSO A SPECIALISED TRAINING CENTRE FOR EQUESTRIAN ART AND HORSEMANSHIP. **BOTTOM LEFT:** THE SCHOOL'S IGNACIO RAMBLA PERFORMS A HIGHER LEVADE WITH HIS HORSE, DECLIVE EVERY MAY. TOURISTS AND LOCALS TAKE TO THE TOWN'S STREETS FOR THE HORSE FAIR – A LIVELY CELEBRATION OF ALL THINGS EQUINE, TOGETHER WITH TRADITIONAL MUSIC, AND LOCAL FOOD AND DRINK. THIS YEAR, THE MUCH LOVED ILLUMINATIONS INCORPORATED 1,260,000 LIGHTS.