

REPORT NICKY MACEDO

Umesh Dhanji is a businessman on a mission: to create the most amazing collection of stylish places to stay on the planet. His business proposition is to search out, market and promote hotels and properties that stand out from the rest, and to provide high levels of service to discerning clients. "I'm going to visit each one myself. Personally. Even if it takes me 10 years," he says.

The company name, Stylish Places to Stay, says it all. "We represent properties from chic boutique hotels to five star hotels, cool loft apartments to luxury penthouses, beachfront houses, stunning private villas with great views, country residences, romantic castles. The one thing they have in common is style."

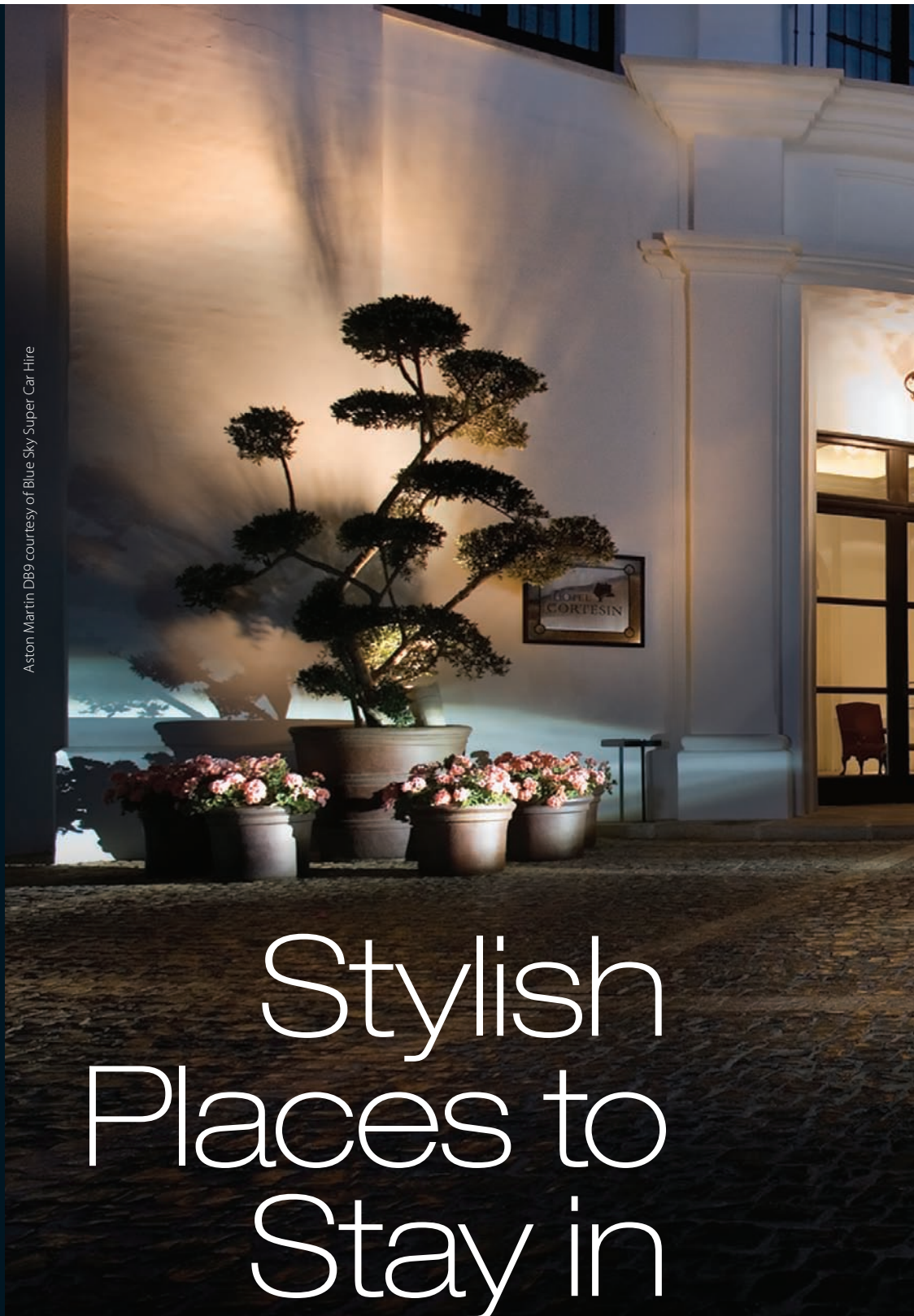
What is style? "An inspired balance between surroundings, service and facilities that meets or exceeds the client's expectations." And the ultimate stylish experience? "The property that's a destination in itself, has an element of excitement, gives you a sense of belonging. It's pure pleasure, aspirational, inspirational, memorable. It adds up to this: Go for the experience, not for the night."

Some people believe a hotel is a bed for the night and it just needs to be clean, comfortable and does what it says on the tin label. "We're not in the bed-for-the-night market," says Umesh, "and we're the opposite end of the galaxy from the self-service market that has clients spending hours trawling through countless online hotel sites, not knowing if they're any good and hoping for the best."

Every client of Stylish Places to Stay has a personal travel PA at their disposal who provides a private, discreet and multilingual service. Clients include professionals, business executives, A-list celebrities and their families. "Our property descriptions are brief, clear, informative and to the point," explains Umesh. "Transparency is key: we give you the up side and the down side, the complete picture about a place you've never seen, so you can decide on the spot if you want to stay there or go somewhere else. This means there aren't any unpleasant surprises when you get there – the property is as you expected."

Stylish Places to Stay visits and assesses each property under consideration for a place in the collections. "Our aim is to seek out and promote small collections of the most stylish properties in each destination. Sometimes, we don't find any that meet our exacting criteria. Properties can join our collections only if they're invited to do so," Umesh explains.

Aston Martin DB9 courtesy of Blue Sky Super Car Hire



# Stylish Places to Stay in

Passion for design, creativity, originality, knowhow, enthusiasm and over one year of work has gone into putting together the cutting edge website: "It's stylish and easy to operate," says Umesh. "You can use it in two ways: if you know what you want, just go straight there. If you prefer a surprise, select the style, destination or type of property that catches your imagination and enjoy surfing through the options."

What do users feel about the website? "I would hope that the discerning traveller looks at our website and think 'Yes, I'll be in safe hands'. And that, second time around, they'll book blind."

Give a top architect a blank sheet and a blank cheque and you expect wonders, but the perfection of the brand-new Hotel Finca Cortesin in Casares exceeds expectations. The entrance, through a cobbled courtyard with fountains, leads into the hall of what feels like a large and charming private hacienda that has been around a few hundred years. Fresh flowers are everywhere. Soaring ceilings, stone-flagged floors, arches and the 67 suites of



# ANDALUCÍA

perfect proportions are complemented by society decorator Duarte Pinto Coelho's aristocratic touches of aesthetic luxury. Spa, gym, pools, gardens and inspired cuisine are just what you would expect. Serious golfers are a fixture: the 7,000-metre course is home to the Volvo World Match Play Championship.

Andalucía, nearest Spanish province to Africa, is also the largest. The greedy eyes of Romans, Visigoths, Arabs and Christians desired it, possessed it and left their mark in the architecture of the old frontier towns of the interior, in the language, food, music, dance, and in the people themselves. The result was sheer magic. But Andalucía is also blessed with a long, sunny coastline, and 90 per cent of visitors are perfectly satisfied to stay in beachfront hotels, fill nightclubs, shops and restaurants and work up a tan before they leave again.

During three perfect days last August, the Stylish Places to Stay team toured southern Andalucía by car, visiting some of the most stylish hotels and properties in Málaga, Seville, Granada and Cádiz. This is our diary. ➔



Palacio Garvey, Jerez: contemporary hotel, fusion cuisine

Away from the anaesthetic playground of the Costa del Sol, we take the scenic route from Casares to Jerez via Gaucín and Benarrabá, two of the fortified pueblos blancos which marked the frontier between Christian and Muslim Spain. An underground passage linked the fortresses of Casares and Gaucín with the hilltop castle of Benarrabá, and from this strategic viewpoint the Berber Arabs watched the comings and goings of their neighbours for 700 years. These are ancient smuggling villages, and dealers in brandy, tobacco and darker commodities shared the forest trails with wildcats, deer, stoats and wild boar. The road to Jerez is relatively tame these days except in springtime, when you drive past fields where a dozen or so large black bulls with business-like curved horns are apparently floating on a mist of purple bugloss.

The pattern of everyday life in Jerez includes any or all of three local ingredients: flamenco and the art of the cantaor; the Andalusian horse, admired since antiquity; and the wines growing on the chalky hills nearby. It's a must to visit the dusky bodegas steeped in the sweet, heavy scent of generations of grape juice and sample the wines, from dry finos to dark brown syrupy liquids scooped lovingly from the bottom of the barrel. The solera system blends wine from the harvests of many years, giving the end product the complex, mature flavour of the older wines and the fresh, crisp taste of the younger ones. Frenchmen and Irishmen in the wine trade married centuries ago into the old sherry families and their tall, deep-voiced descendants have evocative names like Domecq, González Byass and Garvey.

The Palacio Garvey, 19th century town residence of the sherry family, was built in the historical town centre. Now a boutique hotel, behind its neo-classical façade are 16 spacious rooms done in a crisp, funky style with large four-poster beds, sublime bedlinen, romantic clawfoot baths with hydromassage and the requisite electronic mod cons. Simple, contemporary and well-presented, it's an excellent choice for a pleasant stay

where the action is. The clincher is the restaurant, where products in season are transformed into great dishes via an outstanding collection of recipes in the local culinary tradition, and an inspired chef whisks up on-the-spot specials for choosy appetites. Interesting winelist.



Hotel Finca Cortesin exudes sumptuous luxury

## Andalusian wines

**Aperitivos:** Chilled dry fino sherry, La Ina or Tío Pepe; slightly sweeter La Quinta, Solear, San Patricio; PX/Pedro Ximénez on the rocks. Try chilled manzanilla La Gitana with seafood, the way it's served in Bajo de Guía, on the coast in Sanlúcar.

**Blancos:** Pale yellow Barbadillo, light fruity table white for summer days; other whites Valdepeñas, Alvear, Gadir.

**Tintos:** Señorío de Nevada; reds from Ronda.

**Dessert wine:** Sweet dark Málaga Virgen, seriously good served with cakes and puddings or drizzled over ice cream.



Villa Jerez: a sense of belonging



Those visitors who seek out hotels combining the required level of comfort with a sense of belonging to the local scene will enjoy the 5\* Hotel Villa Jerez. Once a traditional family country house attached to the bodega, it's in a quiet residential area 10 minutes from the city centre. There are 18 large rooms with oversized beds and generous bathrooms; the décor is well-used in one or two places but close attention to detail, spotless housekeeping and charming personal service make a delightful stay. The pool is not large but pleasant, designed for relaxing, and surrounded with beautiful gardens. The endless breakfast buffet would satisfy an army and the honesty bar has a discerning selection of sherries and wine.

The Jerez experience includes a visit to the Real Escuela Andaluza del Arte Ecuestre to see the fairytale Andalusian horses – elegant greys of ancient lineage with soft eyes, noble faces and rippling manes halfway to the ground, they look as if they'd just high-stepped out of a Narnia filmset. Horses and riders spend years learning supremely difficult dressage manoeuvres, with stunning results. Formal wear for the riders is a romantic 18th century uniform: long embroidered jacket, waistcoat, buttoned breeches and pointed calañé hat with an upturned brim.

Heading for a country hacienda north of Jerez, we drive through an arid landscape where nothing much moves except the hot wind carrying the smell of dry grass; the zing of the cicadas comes through the open windows of the car.

The 300 year old Hacienda de San Rafael is a haven of traditional rustic sophistication where oriental fabrics, antiques and artefacts blend with the Anglo-Spanish owners' art collection and family memorabilia. Round the cobbled central courtyard are 11 charming duplex rooms with peaked ceilings and galleried bathrooms, and three generous casitas share an infinity pool in the gardens. The Hacienda has a guest capacity of 28 and catering for up to 100; the whole property can be reserved for private corporate functions, weddings and large parties. Many guests visit regularly, drawn by the delicate Mediterranean cuisine, manor-house service and outstanding personal attention. ➔



### Café, por favor

In Andalucía, explaining how you want your coffee can be a trial.

Nube: a dash of coffee in a glass of milk.  
Sombra: slightly more coffee in the milk than a nube, about a finger.

Corto: just under half a glass of coffee.

Mitad: no prizes for guessing, is half coffee - and half milk.

Largo: just over half a glass of coffee.

Mancha'o: a dash of milk in a glass of coffee, or in other words, the opposite of a nube.

And yes, it often comes in a glass.



Behind the wide avenues are pebbled courtyards with scented bitter orange and lemon trees, jacaranda, acacia and magnolia; and an elegant maze of passages and alleyways a small car can just scrape through. The infamous Don Juan lived here in the *barrio* Santa Cruz, next to the gipsy quarter of Triana where now, as then, half a hundred bars offer wine, some of the world's great tapas and a *tablaó flamenco*. In Seville, Roman arches can erupt from one hotel room wall and disappear just as unexpectedly into another; dig down, and mosaics and ancient chapels rise out of the ground. Some hotels feature a glass floor, well or balcony overlooking the ruins below.

And so to Seville. Andalucía's largest city stands by the banks of the Guadalquivir whose green waters launched Columbus on his way to America. This is the heart of Andalucía, where partying is a way of life: on hot, languorous summer days, lunch is never before 2.30, dinner before ten or bed before two, and the Saturday *marcha* carries on till Sunday morning. Little girls are taught the graceful arm movements of the Sevillanas dance before they can walk, twisting an imaginary apple from a tree and putting it into a basket at hip height. It's a city to fall in love with. The Sevillanos are compulsive talkers, famous for their wit - "Soy Sevillano, ¡pero no lo digo para no presumir!" - "I'm from Seville, but I don't tell anyone because I don't like to brag!" - said one charming *señorito* with silver hair, when I asked where he was from.

Tucked away behind iron-bossed Mudéjar doors in the nearby Barrio de La Alfalfa is the Hotel Corral del Rey, a unique XVII century *casa palacio* lovingly converted into a stylishly bohemian and sophisticated small boutique hotel. Six cool, spacious rooms offer supremely comfortable beds, iPod docks, WiFi, plasma screen TVs with surround sound and large marble bathrooms with walk-in rain showers. Contemporary Spanish cuisine is on the menu. Ideal for house-parties, exhibitions and private functions, Corral del Rey has a discreet client list of stars and celebrities looking for privacy and the feel-good factor, a stone's throw from the Giralda.



On the way to Granada another day, we pass the Cuesta de la Reina. The very name used to stiffen the backs of vintage car owners 50 years ago and passengers, dogs, picnic baskets and *piporros* of water were ejected from the car and walked, or carried, uphill while the car toiled up in first gear. We make a pitstop for coffee and pan tostado with crushed tomato and a trickle of olive oil, and drive on through a switchback landscape of olive groves, vineyards and the occasional *hacienda* with walls covered in flowers.

The sudden scent of jasmine, roses, dama de noche and honeysuckle is never far away in Andalucía. Inherited from the Arabs, the famous *cármenes* of Granada with their scented hanging gardens, fountains of cool, clear water and hidden courtyards provide an enchanted escape from hot summer days and nights, not just in country *haciendas*: the *cármén* is a treasured feature of some city restaurants and hotels.

Inaugurated in 2007, the intimate city-centre Hotel Villa Oniria in Granada retains all the welcome, charm and romance of the 19th century palace it once was. The scented garden and interior courtyard are filled with the sound of water. Waiters with long aprons slip discreetly among the clients in the hall lounge, a favourite local meeting place for coffee, an aperitivo and an informal business chat. Neutral, modern interiors by Pascual Ortega are carefully backlit and have a particular magic; and new technology has been skilfully incorporated into the 31 rooms. The heated indoor pool, spa and exercise room are not large but impeccably designed and well worth a visit. Great cuisine from San Sebastian.



Villa Oniria: intimate city-centre hotel



Kempinski Imperial Suite: the largest in Spain

**i** To reserve at any of the properties in this article, contact your personal travel PA at Stylish Places to Stay, Tel. (+34) 952 88 76 37, Email: [res@stylishplacestostay.com](mailto:res@stylishplacestostay.com), [www.stylishplacestostay.com](http://www.stylishplacestostay.com)



On the coast 45 minutes from Granada and an hour north of Málaga is a well-kept secret: the medieval walled town of Salobreña, with fine sandy beaches and a strong Moorish influence. A 10-minute drive into the terraced hills brings us to an elegant country retreat with panoramic views over the Mediterranean, ideal for a short or long stay.

The main house stands in 9,000 m<sup>2</sup> of landscaped garden with areas of lawn, mature palm trees and cypresses, mosaic walkways and fountains and a large swimming pool and open-air dining area. The house is fully equipped for eight guests, with four bedrooms and bathrooms and a children's room. Daily housekeeping services are available. There is a separate satellite TV room with high-speed internet, and a golf course just 15 minutes away.

Company incentive trips are frowned on in the present economic climate but one small boutique hotel 30 minutes from Málaga has a pricetag that won't break the bank, regularly attracts Directors' conferences (and weddings, family get-togethers and weekend groups) from outside Spain, and gives visitors a glimpse of Andalucía.

The Hotel Palacio Blanco in Vélez-Málaga is a converted 17th century bishop's palace, one of the finest townhouses in this historic old town near the coast. An imposing Mudéjar door leads into a central courtyard, around which are eight impeccably presented en-suite guest rooms with iPod docking stations, flat-screen TV, WiFi and Internet, and bathrooms with walk-in showers. A generous breakfast is served, there is an honesty bar and a list of recommended restaurants is available.

The sunny province of Málaga, with its fast cars, opulent yachts, glitz, glamour and golf clubs, has a string of coastal towns and villages lying in the skirts of the Sierra Nevada. One of these is Guadalmina, 10 minutes from Puerto Banús's concentration of highly sophisticated vessels and nightclubs, and 15 from Marbella's 2,000-year-old town centre.

The Mediterranean washes the garden wall of one

sophisticated, bohemian-style villa in Guadalmina. This beachfront villa has six bedrooms, five bathrooms, three reception rooms – one a cosy Moroccan living room – and large back of the house with staff quarters. It's a great place to throw a house party or entertain an extended family. The original U-shape design is all on one floor except the tower bedroom, which has a great view to Gibraltar and Jebel Musa in Africa.

Another spectacular version of the Costa del Sol's most iconic view can be had from the exclusive Sky Bar of the Kempinski Bahía Estepona's 750m<sup>2</sup> Imperial Suite, the largest hotel suite in Spain. VIP guests are brought by helicopter from the airport to the beachfront hotel, where a private lift operated by personal swipecard goes only to the duplex penthouse. Here a personal butler is on standby, the permanent buffet replenishes itself as if by magic and you can practice your golf swing while, down in the garage, a stable of luxury sports cars including a Lamborghini, a Ferrari and a Porsche stands waiting for a run. Wardrobe top-ups are five minutes' walk away at the stylish Laguna Village shopping mall. It's the ultimate pampering treatment, Kempinski style. ■

Guadalmina: sophisticated bohemian beachfront villa

