

The weather forecast for Granada showed sunny blue skies, but the temperatures listed seemed startlingly low. In fact they were well into the minuses. So, on a fine early March day, I arrived at Malaga airport (the nearest one to Granada) with a coat, scarf, gloves and even, God help me, the winter snow boots I got in Germany.

By the time the bus from the airport reached Malaga town centre, I was stifling and feeling very stupid.

I had forgotten that, for the colder half of the year, coastal towns like Malaga are much warmer than mountain towns like Granada. Even if Granada is freezing, Malaga can be like June.

After struggling out of the boots and winter woollies, though, I quickly realised that Malaga was my kind of city, a cheery place with a down-to-earth atmosphere, a remarkably blue sea and a gleaming new cruise port with spiky white architecture and waving palm trees.

Surprises

It's true (though strange) that most travel guides have little to say about Malaga, so perhaps they're put off by the multi-storey development of its coastline and its large numbers of clubs and bars. But there is a lot there – some good museums, a ruined castle and a fabulous cathedral.

I stayed in the historic centre of town, in a converted mansion with a big carved door, and discovered that the hotel, the Petit Plaza, offered some interesting modernist surprises like a jacuzzi that illuminated the bathwater in various colours.

The surrounding streets were full of little shops selling what local people wanted to buy – shoes, spectacles, religious supplies, ham, cheese.

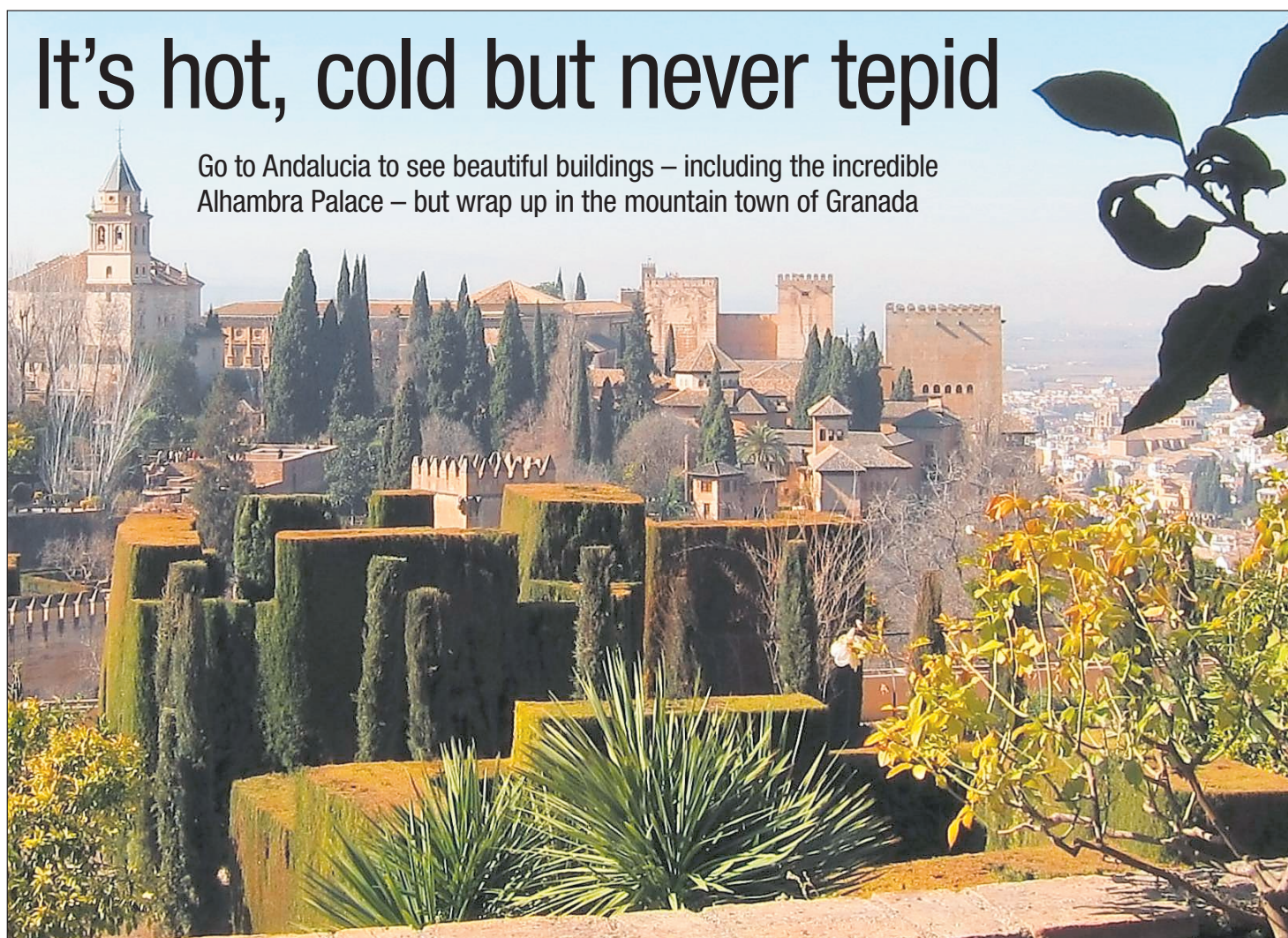
There were any number of tapas bars and restaurants, and the cathedral square was just round the corner. Food from the covered produce market was perfect for picnics by the sea. The new museum of Picasso is a work of art in itself, and we had some good meals out, including a specially memorable paella in quirky old Café Jardin near the cathedral.

Flamboyant

So cheers to Malaga, I thought; Granada would have much to live up to. And a few days later, a bus ride away through forbidding mountains, we found that the noble old city was indeed very cold and rather austere, despite the flamboyant gilded interiors hidden behind so many of its walls.

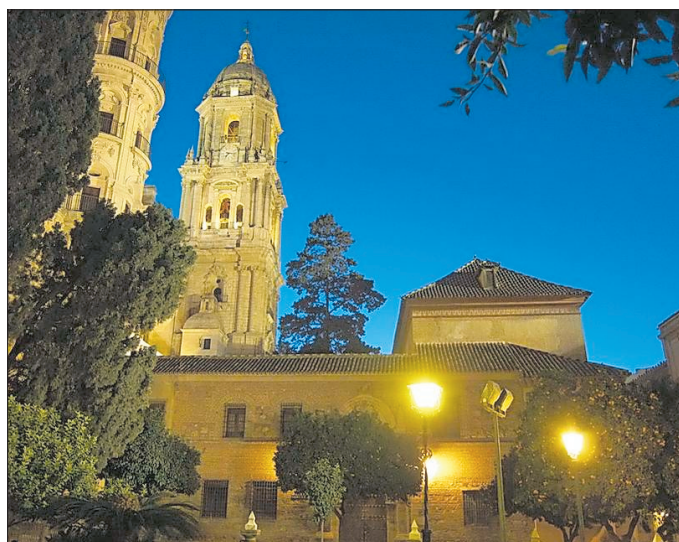
But, of course, the main thing about Granada is that it, and its surrounding countryside, is overlooked by the Alhambra Palace, which is truly one of the wonders of the world.

We set off to see the Alhambra the morning after we arrived. The steep upward climb through the forest in the early light, with the sun



It's hot, cold but never tepid

Go to Andalucia to see beautiful buildings – including the incredible Alhambra Palace – but wrap up in the mountain town of Granada



■ Top: a view over the Alhambra gardens; far left, Malaga Cathedral by night; above, curd pie, a speciality of Granada

Pictures: Jenny Woolf

Factfile

■ For more information about holidays in Granada and Malaga, contact the Spanish Tourist Office on 020 7317 2029, www.spain.info.

■ Information about the Alhambra can be found at www.alhambra-granada.org/

slanting through the trees, was oddly theatrical, like scrambling through a stage set.

When we reached the main entrance we found that the Alhambra is not one building but a whole group, almost like a walled village.

The astonishing Moorish buildings are, perhaps deservedly, the most famous of these buildings. Nothing had prepared me for the experience of going through rooms of ever increasing beauty, tiled and adorned in impossibly intricate patterns.

The many courtyards, fountains and trees were intended to suggest Paradise on Earth and, indeed, the roof of the Hall of the Abencerrajes almost seemed to transcend the stone from which it was made, with delicately decorated stalactites rising to a domed ceiling pierced with tiny stars.

This Paradise, though, was freezing cold. Ice floated on the water in the scented Courtyard of the Myrtles, and the sky maintained a consistent deep, frosty blue fading towards horizons of snow-capped mountains.

After a few shivery hours I was quite glad to escape into the Alhambra parador for a warm-up over lunch.

Elegance

A mosque and palace in the 14th century, this parador became a convent in the 15th century and now it combines modern elegance with interesting period architecture.

Its restaurant offers a menu of interesting local specialities, and, though I wasn't too tempted by the Sacromonte omelette – with lambs' brains, kidneys and

testicles – my snowy white almond soup was a downright glamorous choice in its beautiful gilded plate.

After lunch, we climbed to the top of the Alcazar, or fortress, where you get the best view of the city. Its streets and houses stretched white and intricate below, framed in feathery trees, and squares, public buildings, churches and little gardens fitted together like some complex jigsaw puzzle.

There is so much to see in Granada – the cathedral, the Chapel Royal, the eye-popping church of S. Juan de

Dios and the touching outdoor shrine at the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows were high on my list. The city has a large modern shopping centre, too, and I'd been advised to try a local curd tart in the charming Pasteleria Bernina, founded 1930.

Ice shone on the ground as I trudged down the hill back to town to do some of these things. I'm glad to say that my feet were beautifully warm, though. It is true that I'd felt a fool in Malaga, but in Granada those winter boots had turned out to be worth their weight in gold.