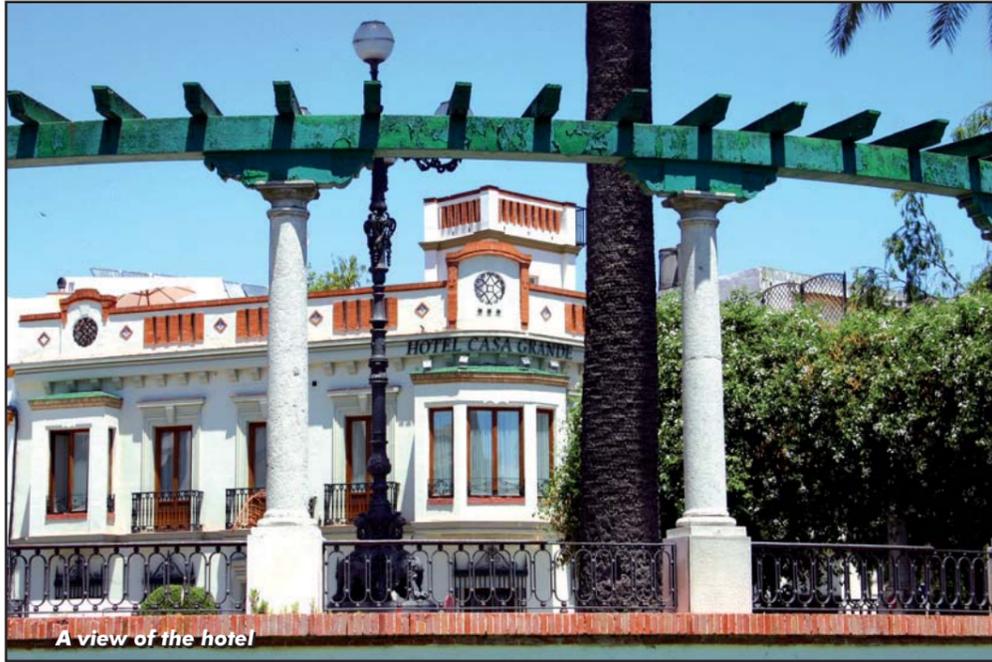


# Hotel Casa Grande

By Derek Workman



A view of the hotel

EVERYONE NEEDS a pal like Monika, someone who you know genuinely has your interests at heart and really - really - wants you to have a good time on holiday. Not only does she know all the best places in Jerez to visit, to eat, to shop and to relax, she knows all those snickerty little corners that you'd never find on your own but will add bundles of fun to your hols - and if you have trouble finding them she'll probably take you by the hand and lead you there.

The estimable Ms Schroeder began thinking about life in Spain thirty years ago, when she first stepped onto the Iberian peninsula on holiday, and became enamoured with the people, the country and the way of life. But it was to be another 21 years before she finally decided to leave the corporate environment (she had been a linguist working in various parts of the globe, and, for the last decade, in Vienna with Coca Cola in Human Resources). After a couple of years of foraying into various parts of Spain, more to discount places she didn't want to go to than places she did, in 2001 she arrived in Valencia, not 100 per cent sure of what she wanted to do, but 'something in tourism'.

"I lived in Valencia for over a year, nipping out into the

countryside looking for properties. I had images of me swanning around in a long frock and a big hat, and then one day I suddenly thought, "Why am I looking for a casa rural, I'm a city girl, I'd hate the idea of living full time in the country!" so I changed my whole approach and began looking at cities."

Jerez came as a pure coincidence - her visit there because someone had offered her a hotel for sale. "I'd not really thought of Jerez - it's practically in Africa! But I stumbled around the city and found this house for sale. It wasn't exactly a ruin but in a pretty bad state and the owners wanted too much money for it. It took eighteen months for us to finally agree a price, but during that time I did a lot of research in and around the city and became totally committed to Jerez. I realised that someone could stay here for two weeks on holiday and never be bored, because there is so much to see and do. Jerez has the famous horses, flamenco, sherry, and plenty of wonderful places to visit; it's twenty minutes from beautiful beaches and the same from the pueblos blancos; a few minutes more and you are in the Coto Doñana, Spain's biggest nature park; an hour from Seville and Córdoba and a bit more to Granada - and you can be in Africa in a couple of

hours, on the hovercraft from Tarifa to Morocco."

When I walked through the big double doors of Casa Grande from the searing heat of an Andalusian summer day it was like stepping from a baking beach into the cool of the sea, because when you step inside you are still, in a peculiar way, outside. This is because the delightful hexagonal patio that you see beyond the reception desk is open to the air and the fluttering birds, and provides a wonderful oasis of light and freshness, while the overhanging rooms above provide pockets of languorous shade.



The roof terrace

Casa Grande originally belonged to a wealthy lawyer and housed his extended family and their servants. As many as thirty people lived there at one time, about as many as do now when the hotel is full. A house for that amount of people differs completely in its function to that of an hotel, so an awful lot of adaptation had to be taken into account - adaptation in the sense of ripping virtually everything out and starting again. Walls, floors, windows, electrics and plumbing, but Monika was

determined to throw nothing away of the original material unless it was absolutely necessary, hence wardrobes, cupboards and internal doors are ex-shutters of varying sizes, and give the feel that they've been in place since the lawyer and his family moved in after its first lick of fresh paint.

The transformation from damp old house to delightful hotel took eighteen months to complete, and, this being Spain, half of that was dealing with bureaucracy. The building work went like a dream, although, again this being Spain, and particularly Andalucia, the builders were a bit unsure about a woman ducking and diving around them, watching them work and asking questions. "I got over that by buying their beer on Friday nights when they finished work. They soon got used to me, but it was strange how many people would come to the house asking is they could speak to my husband. When I told them I didn't have one and I was the owner, quite a few of them turned around and walked out. They couldn't quite get the hang of dealing with a woman."

Despite the fact that major building works have to have a sign saying what the project is, Monika recalls one day being approached by an elderly lady who said, "Excuse me for saying this, my dear, but some people seem to think you are going to open a club." Unfortunately, Monika didn't realise at the time that 'club' is synonymous with 'brothel' in Spain. "You never know, it could have been another business," she says, laughing at the memory.

I'd had an exhausting two-hour drive along twisting mountain roads and as soon as I slithered stickily into the Hotel, Lola, Monika's marvelous right-hand woman, leapt across the reception saying, "Don't get settled in yet, I've saved you a parking space" and hared out of the front door shouting for me to drive



Casa Grande's lounge

around the corner and she'd wave to show me where to park. Sure enough, there she was, disputing my space with a Peugeot owner. Always trouble, those Peugeot owners. I should know, I am one.

In a couple of minutes I'm back in Casa Grande sitting at one of the glass-topped tables in the cool of the patio, with a cold glass of sparkling water and Monika chatting away, getting my itinerary up to date. Better than a secretary any day, because in the days prior to my arrival, her and Lola had organised interviews with all the best people and had a list prepared of what and who I should see. Later, after I'd had a splendid stretch out in my room, with the delightful oriel window overlooking the Plaza de Angustias, I went to reception to ask directions for my first interview. "I'll give you my directions and then Lola will give you hers," said Monika. "Hers will be the best." Lola gave a little smile and nod in agreement.

The next morning I took breakfast in the patio, in the muted shade of what promised to be another vibrant blue day. Total tranquillity accompanied by the merest whisper of a breeze. The buffet breakfast was spread magnificently along a large table in the breakfast room to the side of the patio and, totally relaxed as I was, instead of pouring my orange juice into a glass I poured it into the milk jug. Now why did I do that! No idea, but it gave Lola a giggle.

Hotel visits when I'm working are usually limited to one night or, very rarely, two. Such was the delight of

Casa Grande, and the Laurel and Hardy act of Monika and Lola that I stayed for four. That is about the best recommendation I can give - and it's not just mine. Have a look at [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com), where forty-one people have left comments, every single one of them rating Casa Grande five stars. And it thoroughly deserves them!

Monika Schroeder has kindly offered two lucky Costa del Sol News readers the opportunity to visit her delightful hotel absolutely free. Fill in the coupon below for the chance to win a two-night stay. The prize is for two night's bed and breakfast for two people. The dates are by arrangement with the hotel and all other drinks, meals and extras must be paid for separately. For further information contact Casa Grande, [www.casagrande.com](http://www.casagrande.com), or tel. 956 34 50 70. As an extra bonus the lucky winners will also receive an invitation to the Hammam Andalusi in Jerez to experience the luxury of the arab baths and massage, free of charge. Be sure to pick up the September 6 edition of the Costa del Sol News and read all about the Hammam Andalusi ([www.hammamandalusi.com](http://www.hammamandalusi.com)). Monika is also offering readers of the Costa del Sol News a special 10 per cent discount on selected rooms during November, December and January for a minimum of three nights. Hammam Andalusi is also offering the same discount during those months.

Derek Workman visited the Hotel Casablanca with An Amazing Hotel. [www.anamazinghotel.com](http://www.anamazinghotel.com) Tel. 659 734 684



The hotel's cool interior patio

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The draw will be held on September 18 and the winners announced in our September 20 issue. Send as many coupons as you like but no photocopies please. This competition is not open to Rotativos del Mediterraneo SL/Noticias del Mediterraneo SL/Media SL staff or their families.