

## Crèches and Red Underwear

If you find yourself in the department store El Corte Ingles in Malaga, Spain, on Dec. 23, you'd be forgiven for wondering where all the people are. There are no signs for Christmas sales or tinsel displays.

In Spain, Christmas day is spent with family and friends. Shopping doesn't start until Dec. 26, and gifts are given on Jan. 6, or Dia de los Tres Magos. This is Three King's Day, when the baby Jesus received frankincense, myrrh, and gold. Presents are generally bought only for children or close relatives—the Spanish are actually shocked and a little embarrassed when a friend gives them a Christmas gift.



The main shopping in Malaga is done at two outdoor Christmas markets. The larger of these is along the Alameda Principal, the wide poplar-tree-lined main street. In this market you'll find mainly nativity sets, candy, books, red underwear, and gag gifts for The Day of the Innocents, officially celebrated on Dec. 28, but which drags on through New Year's Eve.

### Show Your Red Underwear

This holiday is similar to April Fools' Day in the States, but with one big difference: If you do receive a gift from a friend, it'll probably be a pair of red panties, from slinky thongs to homely knickers. Every pair you receive in the week after Christmas, regardless of the total number, must be worn on New Year's Eve—and revealed on demand.

The supply of "add on" pieces for your crèche is never-ending. Although there is no biblical evidence that the chorizo and ham seller was at the original nativity, that probably won't stop you from adding a model of one to your own display, alongside a miniature tapas bar complete with a pan of paella and sardines on the spit.

The market goes on for blocks—at least 50 stalls on each side of the avenue. There's a carnival atmosphere, and entire families stroll through, the children snacking on cotton candy and candy apples. Don't worry if you don't speak Spanish—many multilingual art books are on offer at the book sellers' stalls. You'll also find children's picture books and coloring books, and leather-bound volumes of classics in Spanish, English, French, and German.

The way to the second market at the Plaza Merced is along the lit-up pedestrian street, Calle Marques de Larios. Roaming families of minstrels in traditional dress sing Spanish carols along the way, accompanied by guitar, drum, and a half-empty anisette liqueur bottle played with a wooden spoon. You'll also see Christmas-tree-sized arrangements of live poinsettias, a larger-than-life Nativity scene made of flowers and tree bark with kings on camels, palm trees with trunks wrapped in white holiday lights, and even a seasonal outdoor ice rink.

The historic Plaza Merced is lit by lanterns strung between trees, and the merchants wear shepherds' robes. Goods are arranged on wooden tables inside canvas tents. This market features Andalusian handicrafts, artisanal cheeses, handmade candies like pine nut brittle, and locally made small leather goods. A fine leather wallet can be had for around 10 euro, and a half-pound piece of sheep's milk cheese is about 2 euro. Decorative metal and glass lanterns from Granada cost between 15 and 40 euro. Because no one buys enormous gifts, you'll also be able to buy single sheets of high-quality wrapping paper.

Walking around the plaza, it's not hard to imagine yourself here 500 years ago, but you'll be quickly nudged back to the present by the arrival of the open-sided San Miguel Beer truck featuring six rock n' roll Santas playing American Christmas songs at full blast.

#### **SIDEBAR: Crèche Costs**

Prices for crèche pieces depend on the crèche size and the amount of detail and decoration: Small simple stables start at around 9 euro, and more elaborate versions can cost up to 75 euro. Individual figures such as shepherds or angels cost from 0.90 to 3 euro. Small motorized fountains and light-up bread ovens cost about 15 euro, and windmills and castles cost anywhere from 10 to 50 euro.

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