

## Feasting on the Beach

You slip off your shoes and feel cool sand on the soles of your feet as your waiter arrives with a saffron-hued paella. “Caliente,” he warns you, pointing to the napkin-wrapped handles of the scalding pan brimming with rice, chicken, and pork, topped with shiny black mussels, miniature striped clams, and bright pink langoustines. You order another bottle of the house white, a crisp, mineral-rich Verdejo, which sells for around 8 euros (just over \$10). This is a national holiday, La Fiesta de los Tres Reyes, or Feast of the Three Kings, and after your luxurious but inexpensive lunch you only have to wander uphill to your magnificent villa with sea and mountain views and figure out what to have for dinner—if you’re still hungry after feasting like a king.



### **Catching candy.**

Here on the Costa del Sol, large extended families gather at beachfront restaurants called merenderos, to celebrate the Feast of the Three Kings—the Twelfth day of Christmas—over a midday meal. While the adults eat, drink, and enjoy each other’s company, their children play with their new toys—a modern variation on the gifts of frankincense, myrrh, and gold that were given on this day.

On the eve of this holiday, every city, town, and village holds a parade that winds through the narrow cobblestone streets, and everyone cheers and tries to catch candy as the three floats, each bearing a king, pass by accompanied by marching bands, baton twirlers, and children dressed as angels. Each parade will end up in front of the local church, and the kings will present their symbolic gifts to a real live baby wrapped in swaddling clothes in a living nativity scene.

### **Three surprises inside?**

Immediately after the parade, families rush home or to a restaurant to enjoy such delicacies as lamb chops grilled with rosemary, pork chops with bacon, and shrimp in hot garlic oil. After dinner, each family will enjoy a Roscon de Reyes, a layer cake filled with whipped cream and topped with a foil crown. Three surprises are baked inside—a bean, a small toy, and the baby Jesus. The finder of the toy gets to wear the crown, the finder of Jesus will be blessed all year, and the one who gets the bean has to buy the cake next year.

Life on the eastern edge of the Costa del Sol is just one holiday and fiesta after another. Whether you live right near the Mediterranean or inland a few miles, every month brings a different saint’s day or local festival. Unlike the overbuilt tourist Meccas to the west, many towns do not allow buildings of more than three stories, and it is hard to tell the difference between an 800-year-old Moorish mansion and a brand-new townhouse, built in the style of a traditional white village dwelling, or pueblo blanco. While housing prices have gone up consistently since the advent of the euro, the cost of everyday living—including bottles of good Spanish wine and delicious paella—is so low you will wonder how you ever afforded to live anywhere else.

**Mike DeSimone For International Living**

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