

La Zambra

MIJAS

After nearly a decade of closure, Andalusia's iconic Byblos hotel undergoes a complete transformation, reopening as a minimalistic retreat within Hyatt's Unbound Collection.

Words: Agnish Ray • Photography: Courtesy of La Zambra

Secluded and atmospheric, the latest arrival to the Andalusian coastal area of Mijas is tucked well away from the flashy seafront, nestled among golf courses and private estates. Half an hour's drive from Málaga Airport, the town has long been a hotspot for European sunseekers, but the new property feels fresh and contemporary.

La Zambra is new, though the site's reputation precedes it; until 2010 it was the Byblos, a hideaway known for merriment and relaxation in equally healthy measure, capturing the heyday of the Costa del Sol. Princess Diana was famously papped topless here – despite its claims of privacy from prying eyes – while Julio Iglesias and the Rolling Stones are among the other names dropped by those familiar with the glitzy hangout.

After nearly a decade of closure, London-based investment firm Intriva Capital poured nearly €50 million into reviving the site, appointing hotel management firm Marugal – which operates 12 properties across Spain, Portugal, France, Switzerland and the UK – to take on the new incarnation that opened in Autumn 2022.

Light, air and movement define the design of the 197-key property, which Marugal operates as a franchise with Hyatt under The Unbound Collection. Spacious, high-ceilinged interiors are flooded with sunlight, while large windows expose gardens populated with cypress and palm trees. The eye is drawn from front to back through several layers of carefully placed arches.

Muted and minimalistic, La Zambra's whitewashed walls mimic Andalusia's pueblos blancos – or white villages – with nearby Mijas being just one example. Touches of bougainvillea and lavender add colour, as do the blue ceramic roof tiles that were preserved from the previous hotel. Passages of water also trickle throughout, a feature inspired by Moorish palaces like Granada's Alhambra and Seville's Alcazar.

Architect Tomeu Esteva says the transition between spaces is crucial to the concept of Andalusia's Islamic architecture, which he has tried to capture in the layout. "It's all about the journey," he explains. "A sense of discovery, mysterious sequences and crossing thresholds." The walkways reflect this idea, guiding guests between covered and open-air spaces, from one patio to another, with cool cement underfoot encouraging barefoot reverie.

One of the main walkways leads to Bamboleo bar, a semi-circular, copper-coloured space with ochre, ruby and mustard furniture. The rounded edges of the sofas, armchairs and rugs create a vintage modernist feel, while the doors to the back lead to outdoor seating, rolling grounds and two swimming pools.

Bamboleo is among a series of F&B spaces overseen by Basque chef Iker González Ayerbe. The atmospheric Picador for instance is designed like a welcoming Andalusian tavern, with wooden beams, colourful tiled floors and a square central bar to perch at, accompanied by flamenco tunes.





Characterised by neutral tones and natural fabrics, guestrooms showcase traditional Andalusian craftsmanship

The mood is friendly and the food is flavoursome; squid croquettes are rich bitesize explosions, which the sommelier suggests washing down with a blanc de noirs champagne. The octopus is marinated in chimichurri, topped with dollops of kimchi mayonnaise and served in a pool of frothed potato, with a rosé moscatel from Málaga winery F. Schatz making for a refreshing pairing.

The all-day dining offer at Palmito meanwhile ranges from a casual buffet breakfast in the morning to an ambient dinner in the evening. Here, Barcelona-based interior designer Sandra Tarruella went for a sombre, stony colour scheme that evokes the use of lime mortar in traditional Andalusian villages. Textured walls, microcement flooring and herringbone-patterned rugs create an earthy feel, while large circular lamps are crafted from rattan and a wall installation has been created using straw hats.

The decoration hints at the hotel's passion for local craft traditions, which guests are invited to experience through visits to Puerta del Agora,

a crafts co-operative in Mijas, where they can learn about age-old traditions like esparto grass weaving. The atelier also houses ceramics, dress-making and leatherwork practitioners.

While sun and sea keep this region thriving in the warmer months, golf takes over in the winter; a 2020 study valued the overall impact of golf tourism at nearly €3.3 billion per year. Mijas is home to 12 golf courses and La Zambra has direct access to two of them, predicting 30% of its annual clientele to be aficionados.

And for wellness lovers, La Zambra's spa innovates in areas from ayurveda, shiatsu and reiki to Indiba radiofrequency therapy. Said to be the largest in the Costa del Sol, spanning over 2,000m², its extensive offer ranges across five journeys: relax, heal, reconnect, vitalise and glow, with a selection of traditional, innovative and holistic treatments under each. Bespoke scents and teas accompany the experiences, which include certain signature treatments like shibori facials on a Swaywaver bed and anti-ageing rituals using La Foux spring water.



It was over a decade ago that Spain’s financial crisis forced the Byblos’ closure, and today, destinations like the Costa del Sol yet again face economic hardship. But the team behind La Zambra are confident about bouncing back, and General Manager Joost Kruissen sees its opening as part of a wider renaissance in the region.

“Ten or 15 years ago, Marbella dipped slightly,” he explains. “Suddenly it was less hip, while places like southern France, the Balearic Islands, Tulum and Mykonos began to grow.”

Previously at Formentera’s Gecko Hotel & Beach Club – also a Marugal property – Kruissen lived in Ibiza for a decade. Now a south coast local, he believes things are looking up here, with the development of Malaga’s capital city adding to the region’s other longstanding success factors, like its climate and infrastructure.

“What’s happened here in the last five years is certainly marking a before and after,” he says. “Malaga has gained so much quality in culture and gastronomy, and investment in the area is huge, so it can go back to what it used to be.”

A new era means a new audience. La Zambra’s target demographic has a different sense of luxury today; less excessive and opulent, more refined and minimalistic. “We’re trying to get away from the flashy image that the Byblos used to have,” says Kruissen. “That did great in the 1980s and ‘90s but it’s not a product that could function nowadays.”

When Esteva visited the Byblos as a guest around 30 years ago, he remembers “a mishmash of styles” full of details, columns, cornices and different patterns. “It was fun,” recalls the architect, “but we’ve opened the property up and lightened the interiors to make everything feel more human and gentle.”

To create something fitting with its location and context, his studio Esteva i Esteva wanted La Zambra to convey values of austerity, simplicity and imperfection. These represent the essence of Andalusian architecture, he explains, while also evoking the vision of a new generation with greater appetite for all things slow, local and carefully crafted.



EXPRESS CHECK-OUT

Owner: Intriva Capital

Operator: Marugal

Architecture: Esteva i Esteva

Interior Design: Esteva i Esteva,

Sandra Tarruella Interioristas

Project Manager: CBRE

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