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# Find your El Dorado

When it comes to metropolitan living, Spain has cities to suit every buyer – and every budget. **Laura Latham** investigates

**M**adrid and Barcelona may be Spain's fast track to cosmopolitan culture but if you want the charm of Latin life, with the benefits of an urban setting, the country's smaller cities are the perfect compromise.

Many of Spain's provincial towns have resisted the mass urbanisations seen in coastal areas. Development is often on a smaller scale, with a tendency towards renovating older, historic properties.

Jerez is a classic example: situated 15km from the Atlantic coast, it's surrounded by beautiful countryside that includes mountains, vineyards and pretty hilltop villages.

The city has quaint cobbled streets, 19th-century buildings and a Moorish castle. Known as the home of sherry, Jerez also lays claim to being the place where flamenco started. As a result, areas of town that were once neglected are undergoing rejuvenation. "It's remarkable that more people don't know about Jerez," says agent Chris Mercer, "it's lovely, close to the coast and countryside with great restaurants and a combination of grand 19th-century buildings and the gypsy vibe from its flamenco roots."

Mercer says properties tend to be apartments in con-

verted older buildings, such as palaces and *bodegas* (sherry warehouses). He says prices start from £92,000 for one bedroom in a conversion but it depends on the area, with properties in the sought-after south-west of the city commanding higher prices.

"Two-bedroom apartments

in a restored palace start from £144,000," he explains, "while two-beds in a converted *bodega* cost from £240,000, because these homes usually have real 'wow' factor."

According to Mercer, cheaper apartments in need of restoration are hard to find and sell pretty quickly, and the same is true of detached properties. Mercer says villas range from £400,000 to more than £800,000, depending on whether they need renovation, "but for around the same price you could buy an old palace with a courtyard and original features".

History is also a factor in the popularity of Girona, near the Costa Brava. With its medieval centre built alongside the River Onyar, the town is also well placed for the coast, 40 km away, and is regularly voted the most desirable city to live in Spain.

Another attraction is that it's around an hour by train from Barcelona, which will drop to 30 minutes once the new high-speed rail link opens in a few years. With property

prices in the Catalan capital sky-high, could Girona be a more cost-effective option?

"Girona is probably more affordable than central Barcelona," says Tom Maidment of Lucas Fox, "but it's catching up. It's very pretty, with a historic centre, a great location near the coast and within commuting distance of Barcelona."

Properties in central Girona tend to be relatively pricey. Maidment says you'd be hard-pressed to find much below £250,000, with refurbished one-bedroom apartments starting at £280,000 or conversions in historic buildings from £320,000.

The lack of supply forces many buyers to look outside the city, where they can find *masias* at reasonable prices. These traditional country houses usually have at least 10 to 15 hectares of land, making them ideal for families. In a dilapidated state, such properties can be picked up from £200,000 going up to between £360,000 and £960,000 if restored.

Urbanites may be happier in Valencia, which has a revamped harbour, a new Formula One track and is packed with gothic and baroque architecture. Despite its modern architecture the city still feels very Spanish, with sandy beaches, plenty of bars and

restaurants and a lively cultural, arts and clubbing scene.

Prices in the city have risen substantially in recent times but, according to Dermot Quinn of Valencia Property Hound, there's still plenty of affordable homes. "Around 60 per cent of apartments are sold privately," he says, "but if you know where to look you can find nice properties in older buildings, even within some of the best districts in the city, for under £120,000."

Quinn says a budget of £200,000 to £400,000 would get you something with two to four bedrooms, possibly near the marina. He says rents on such places will bring in around £400 per week but over Grand Prix weekend that can rise to around £1,000.

"Valencia offers great value and prospects," he says. "In fact, with all the new investment in the city, the lifestyle in Valencia is getting better every year."

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### # Buyers' guide

- Planning laws regarding historic property are strict. Exteriors must be restored to the original; but interiors may be modernised.
- **Off-plan property in Valencia does not always offer as good value as older resale apartments in the city.**
- Before you can buy in Spain you will need a fiscal number

(*numero de identificacion de extranjeros*), obtained from the local police department.

■ **Ensure you get a copy of the Nota Simple Informativa. This tells you if the property has clean title, is legally the vendor's and will include a full description of the property, its size and boundaries.**

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**Casa Flores Jerez: a renovated block  
in Jerez; one-bedroom apartments  
from £132,000 with Mercers**

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**Plaza Mirabal, Jerez: eight apartments within a restored palace; from £94,000 through Mercers**



**Palace conversion: two-bedroom apartment in Jerez's ancient medina; £200,000 with Mercers**



**Girona townhouse: beautifully restored two-bedroom 1920s apartments; from £308,000 with Lucas Fox**