

Do you want to know a secret?

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One of the coast's forgotten villages is now one of its most desirable locations

Ask most people in Marbella if they have heard of Istan and you will probably be met with a blank stare. Just 15 minute's drive from the marina of Puerto Banus, this authentic pueblo blanco has been one of the coast's best kept secrets for decades. The past few years, however, have witnessed new developments and luxury villas being constructed as investors discover this hidden gem.

Let's start with the location and history, as both are interwoven. To get to Istan, head towards the Manola Santana Tennis Club – established by the late Spanish Grand Slam winning legend – and you will find yourself on the Istan road. A word of warning at this point. The way up to the village is twisty, narrow and very popular with cyclists, so driving slowly is advised.

Climbing up, with superb views of Marbella's famous La Concha mountain on the right, you soon find yourself deep in the gorgeous Andalusian countryside. You glimpse the impressive Finca La Concepcion on the left, a popular venue for weddings, events and the brilliant Boho Project festival, that brought Ibiza style to Marbella this summer, and was also the setting for a Jamiroquai video.

Keep going and you will suddenly see the Embalse de la Concepcion. Often mistakenly called Istan lake, this large

reservoir supplies water to the coast and is a popular kayaking and fishing destination. Before you hitch up the jet ski, however, be advised that there are strict rules on what is allowed on the water, and petrol motors are a definite no no.

After about 10 minutes, passing some impressive villas that enjoy spectacular views of the 'lake' and across to Gibraltar and the Rif Mountains of Morocco, you find yourself in Istan. While other villages such as Benahavis and Mijas have all the trappings that you would expect of a tourist destination, Istan is an authentic pueblo. There are a few bars and restaurants, a 'mirador' with wonderful views of the reservoir and a small square with a modest church, but that is about it.

That is largely due to its history. So pay attention at the back. After the 'reconquest' of Spain, which finished in 1492, the Moorish population were largely banished from living within sight of the sea. This was to stop them signaling to any potential Moorish raiders from Morocco. They settled in three villages – Istan, Daidin, and Arboto, but during an uprising in the following years, the later two were repressed so brutally that they were literally erased from the maps.

Gradually the number of Moorish inhabitants dwindled, and new settlers from Murcia arrived. Many of these came from the village of El Cristo de Panocho, and this gives villagers their nickname 'panochos'.

The Moorish influence can still be felt, however, especially in water system that flows through the village. The Moors were highly skilled in irrigation and their ancient water channels are still used in the surrounding fields at the village's old washing house – lavedero – which is now a beautifully preserved reminder of Istan's past.

The village is also the gateway to the Sierra de Los Nieves nature park, an area of outstanding natural beauty that is a paradise for mountain biking, hiking, 4x4 safaris and exploring the fascinating wildlife and flora.

This authentic charm and unhurried lifestyle has become more attractive to those wanting to live away from the hedonistic hustle of the coast, yet be within twenty minute's drive of Marbella. Several new developments and individual properties have sold quickly as investors recognise the unique charms and potential of the area. If Marbella is the Costa del Sol's answer to Hollywood, then the Istan road is Marbella's very own Laurel Canyon!