

5 Beauty Secrets I Learned on My Latest Trip to Spain

One woman embarked on a trip to learn how to live and look effortlessly beautiful. She found her answer in Southern Spain's sun-drenched region of Andalucía

Mar 8, 2017 Sharlene Chiu 0

As I've entered my early 30s, I've become obsessed with living effortlessly. I've tried to let go of rigid expectations, minimize my wardrobe and curb my smokey eye addiction. It's a process, I've learned.

Which brings me to my recent adventures in Spain. Having met lots of badass girlfriends along the way, I've realized that many of Spain's Andalusian women have elevated effortless beauty to an art form: it's all about *duende*, I've learned, an alluring energy connected to the passionate emotions of flamenco. *Duende* is a natural charm that yields great power and doesn't necessarily necessitate the wiles of makeup (see the inimitable Penélope Cruz, or up-and-coming model/actress [Alba Galocha](#), who stars in the recently released Spanish

rom com *No culpes al karma de lo que te pasa por gilipollas*).

So to get in touch with my own *duende*, I'm embarking on another trip through Southern Spain's sun-drenched region of Andalucía—this time to immerse myself in local beauty practices just like the gorge goddesses do.



SHARLENE CHIU, ON THE STREETS OF CORDOBA, SET OUT TO DISCOVER THE SECRET TO LIVING EFFORTLESSLY (COURTESY: SHARLENE CHIU)

Practice #1: Eat, Slather, Love

In the heart of the Costa del Sol, Màlaga, I'm quickly schooled on the most vital ingredient to health, diet and beauty: olive oil. Road tripping through Andalucía, with pit stops in Granada, Úbeda and Córdoba, I see bottles of locally produced, heart-healthy extra virgin olive oils ranging in

degrees of spiciness and sweetness line practically every restaurant table. It's hard not to get swept up in the rhythm of passing the EVOO—bottles clink as one is carefully picked up, then lovingly drizzled over carefully cooked dishes. It's an infectious dance that helped me taste food in an entirely different way.

Yet olive oil is for more than just drenching your bread. Nourishing, oil-based shampoos and conditioners, soaps and body lotions are everywhere, from the corner grocery store to independent boutiques. My favourite: the impeccably curated shop in Baeza, [La Casa Del Aceite](#), a.k.a. The House of Oil.

For the purists though, I learn that olive oil's intense hydration benefits are maximized by applying it straight from the source, onto hands, nails and hair. "My mother taught me that olive oil can be used as a serum to remove and prevent split ends, leaving hair soft and shiny," my friend Marta Trigo tells me, sharing secrets passed from generation to generation in her family. One envious glance at Marta's lush brunette waves is all it takes for me to buy nearly a suitcase full of decadent olives to bring back home with me.



MORE THAN JUST GOOD TO EAT: OLIVE OIL-BASED BEAUTY PRODUCTS AT SINAGOGA DEL AGUA (PHOTO: SHARLENE CHIU)

Practice #2: Hail to the Hammam

Hammam, or public baths, is a traditional Islamic practice of cleansing, however it was introduced by the Moors from North Africa when they ruled parts of the region in the early 8th to late 15th centuries—and it's endured ever since. You can still see Moorish influence in Andalucía's architecture, arts, culture, cuisine and health practices. And nowhere is this more apparent than at **Hammam Al-Andalús** in Málaga, one of the first Moorish baths in Spain. This enormous space perfectly replicates the grandeur of the traditional hammams from centuries ago. And it's here that I'm met with soothing steam and the calming aromas of argan, jasmine and amber. Unlike typical hotel

spas that offer hammam treatments in a single room, the Al-Andalús contains several separate areas for bathing, plunging and steaming at various temperatures as well as quiet tea rooms to unwind in and treatment floors for massages.

“When you go to a hammam, it feels like Andalucía a thousand years ago. As you care for your body and relax, you can forget everything,” says Nani Estepa López, a vivacious and incredibly knowledgeable local guide in Córdoba. To ease my mind into effortless beauty, I start with a long soak in the tiled warm bath before moving to the hot marble room to relax my muscles, and then quickly plunging into the cold bath that I’m told might help boost my metabolism and immunity. Whether those claims are true, I can honestly say I left the hammam free from stress, my skin noticeably softer and brighter.



HEALING WATERS AT HAMMAN AL-ANDALÚS
(PHOTO: COURTESY HAMMAN AL-ANDALÚS)

Practice #3: Carb Your Enthusiasm

Small plates, called tapas, reign supreme here. Perfectly compact-sized dishes range from the comforting tortilla and pan con tomate to the addictive can't-have-just-one patatas bravas. My gal pals laughed at me when I insisted for their ultimate secret to staying so slim and fit despite all the amazing bread and deep fried ham croquetas?! Nani admits she doesn't indulge in the bread and croqueta often.

Instead, she says she fills her plate with fresh fish and lots of vegetables; she avoids carbs and overeating, opting for quality over quantity. It's a challenge not to fall into the traditional deep-fried coma, but admittedly easier (and just as satisfying) if you with so many incredible local restaurants offering fresh, modern approaches to tapas, like luxe hotspot **Barceló La Bobadilla** and its almost too-beautiful-to-eat shrimp and sea bass carpaccio, or **Cantina La Estación** in Úbeda which serves up innovative dishes in a space uniquely designed as the interior of a vintage train. Although my girlfriends do curb their carb intake, they don't cut bread out entirely. For my friend Marta, summer's mean salmorejo, a cold soup made with tomatoes, bread, olive oil and salt, typically from Córdoba. She calls it a healthy treat, and it strikes me how high-quality vegetables can indeed be considered a treat. If this is what eating to your health looks like, sign me up!



A PORTRAIT OF THE WRITER IN UBEDA (COURTESY:
SHARLENE CHIU)

Practice #4: Salute the Sun

This isn't a yoga move. As I ask women all across Andalucía about how to live with true *duende*, they respond with the same answer: the sun. "It's our weather. The sun makes you happy and smile often," says my former roommate Sandra Martin Asencio. Marta couldn't agree more: "Beauty comes from the inside, and it's what makes you shine on the outside. There is so much good food, culture, beautiful beaches and constant sun here that it's easy to be happy. It's an attitude." It makes sense: port cities in Southern Spain boast a stunning 295 sunny, rain-free days a year, so I get the feeling living with *duende* can come quite naturally in Andalucía's naturally perma-vacay climate.