

Sotogrande – Subtle Style

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There is an old English expression “Money talks, but wealth whispers”, and in Sotogrande cold hard cash is almost silent. In contrast to the heady hedonism of Marbella, where it “Don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that Bling”, Sotogrande is the embodiment of stealth wealth, where millionaires drive electric Mini Mokes rather than Maybachs.

August, when the well-heeled descend from Madrid, Mayfair and old money locations, is the perfect month to visit Sotogrande. It is the season for discreet private parties in family villas set well back from impeccably maintained avenues, watching some of the world’s best polo players in civilised surroundings or gracefully gliding out from the marina towards Gibraltar on a classic yacht.

The history of Sotogrande is fascinating. Joseph McMicking was a Filipino-American businessman who had served in General MacArthur’s General Staff during the Second World War. Tragically, McMicking was present at the liberation of Manila when he discovered that the Japanese Secret Police had executed his mother, two sisters and brother during the brutal battle for the capital.

By the late 50s he was president of the Ayala Corporation, one of the biggest companies in the Philippines and, inspired by the luxury resort development called The Forbes in his home country, as well as the Pebble Beach resort in California, decided to create an exclusive resort and residential community. He decided it must have fertile land, a river, access to plenty of water, large and unspoiled beaches, and close proximity to an airport.

McMicking's cousin, Freddy Melian, was sent to southern Spain to look for areas that fitted the criteria. Freddy set out on a motorbike and soon discovered a finca called Paniagua near San Roque, which had everything his cousin was looking for. Large, unspoiled beaches along the Mediterranean coast, the river Guadiaro and the nearby natural water reserves, plenty of rural and fertile land, and within close proximity to the airstrip of Gibraltar.

Sotogrande was founded in 1962 by the Filipino-American businessman Joseph McMicking, who was the president of the Ayala Corporation in Makati, in the Philippines. He also served for the United States Army as a pilot in World War II. He was inspired by the luxury resort development called The Forbes in the Philippines, as well as the Pebble Beach resort in California from his time studying at Stanford University, and was looking to create something similar, an exclusive resort and community. His requirements in his search included fertile land, a river, access to plenty of water, large and unspoiled beaches, and close proximity to an airport.

Along with his nephews, Jaime and Enrique Zobel, they purchased an area of 1800 hectares and on September 19, 1962, Financiera Sotogrande de Guadiaro SA was incorporated.

One of the first objectives was to create a golf course. McMicking commissioned the renowned golf course designer Robert Trent Jones, who created the Club Real de Golf Sotogrande. The club quickly became the central hub for life in Sotogrande, becoming the meeting point for golf, parties and social life in general.

The sporting theme continued - Enrique Zóbel was a keen polo player and president of Manila Polo Club, and in 1965, he oversaw the construction of the first polo field, with the first tournament taking place in 1967. As Sotogrande grew, so was the need for accommodation, with an old hostel being completely refurbished in 1997 to become Sotogrande's first hotel – the Hotel Tennis. In the same year, they also created the first beach club – El Cururucho – which is now Trocadero Sotogrande.

In 1969, ailing dictator Franco threw a diplomatic hissy fit and closed the border with Gibraltar, a decision that actually benefitted Sotogrande. With the airport now out of bounds, Sotogrande became a discrete destination that was spared the concrete tsunami that engulfed the fishing towns of Torremolinos and Benalmadena close to Malaga airport.

In 1974 McMicking once again turned to Robert Trent Jones to construct the second golf course for the resort, called Nuevo Sotogrande. In 1984 it was bought by local resident Jaime Ortiz-Patiño, who had it remodelled and renamed as Valderrama. This became one of the most prestigious golf courses not just in Spain, but in Europe, hosting the Volvo Masters from 1986-96 and 2000-08, the 1997 Ryder Cup, the Amex World Golf Championship in 1999 and 2000, and the 2016 Spanish Open.

Polo also continued to be a focal point. Santa María Polo Club began hosting more games and tournaments every year, as well as attracting more visitors and more sponsorship. In 1992 the fields of Puente de Hierro I and II opened; and in 1995 the Hacienda de San Enrique I and II fields were built. In 2003 two of four new Los Pinos fields were inaugurated, and in 2008 the 2,500 square metre pavillion was opened. The end of August sees the most important tournament, the Copa de Oro, attract some of the finest polo players from around the world.

The final piece of the puzzle was Sotogrande Marina. In 1987, the marina was inaugurated with the official name Puerto Deportivo Sotogrande, with a new hotel, the Club Marítimo, was constructed in the port, as well as beachfront apartments. This became not only a new social hub for Sotogrande, but also attracted notaries, accountants, lawyers

and architects, who joined the traditional aristocrats and financiers in making the resort their year round base.

So wherever you find yourself in Sotogrande this summer – in the clubhouse after a round of golf, in a terrace overlooking the marina, on your hotel balcony enjoying a sundowner or watching the frenetic action on the polo fields, pause for a moment and raise a glass to the incredible Joseph McMicking. His singular vision resulted in something, subtle, stylish and singularly Sotogrande!