

The next big thing

With some of the most exotic landscapes in Europe and a wealth of colourful wildlife to match, could Andalucía be the next must-visit destination for photographers? Niall Benvie thinks so...

I've been a wildlife photographer for long enough to see various trends come and go, including those related to places people like to shoot. Thirty or more years ago, East Africa was a major draw, and while it remains popular, interest has shifted north in the last 10 or 15 years, with Norway, Finland and Iceland attracting ever more foreign photographers.

The case of Iceland is an interesting one. For long enough it was widely regarded as an expensive, off-the-beaten-track destination. Swedish photographer Anders Geidemark, produced a sensitive body of work there in the early 1990s, but at the time this was something of an exception. Not so today. Against most expectations, the 2010 eruption of the volcano, Eyafjallajökull, while causing enormous problems for aviation, set the current Icelandic tourism boom on its way. Night after night television coverage across the globe and cleverly timed, high-profile advertising campaigns put Iceland near the top of a lot of bucket lists – and not only for outdoor enthusiasts. Suddenly everyone wanted to see the northern lights. The 2008 economic crisis also had the unexpected benefit of bringing prices more in line with those in Britain than elsewhere in Scandinavia. Icelandair (and, latterly, Wow Airlines) has played a central role in the boom (visitor numbers have doubled to almost one million since 2010) by capitalising on Iceland's strategic mid-Atlantic position and making it easy for transatlantic travellers to break their journey on the island.

Even those of us who have been visiting Iceland for a relatively short time have seen a dramatic growth in the number of photographers at well-known locations. The intensely beautiful ice caves that were almost unknown to outsiders just five years ago are

today 'overcrowded', in the words of a local guide. Iceland is undoubtedly a land of photo opportunities with a host of well-known sites that lure photographers in droves. The ice beach of Breidamerkursandur is a case in point, but one where it is increasingly difficult to find your own space – physically and psychologically. This situation is repeated at Vik, Skógafoss and a number of other easy-access spots. And yet there are many other opportunities to photograph the land, given an adventurous spirit and a bit of imagination (*Ed's note: see Bernd Nicolaisen's ice images on page 16 and Darren Ciolli-Leach's Icelandic landscapes on page 64 for evidence of this*). And here's the rub; with

limited holiday time, most folks aren't interested in spending time exploring: they need sure-fire chances, even if that means producing pictures we've seen a thousand times before. When we put together a tour itinerary, the focus always has to be on the photo opportunities, a list of things to point the camera at rather than the opportunities for photography – or the potential of the place to yield photographs to the observant explorer. Sooner or later, though, interest wanes in shooting the same things over and over again.

For this reason, I believe that interest will begin to shift south again to environments that may lack some of Iceland's drama but which

make up for this in the number of things you can point your camera at. And in Europe, one place that offers this in abundance is Andalucía.

This part of the Iberian peninsula acted as a refuge for plants and animals during previous glaciations, a continuity that has contributed to the region's extraordinary biodiversity. Within the IUCN-designated Mediterranean biodiversity hot spot, Andalucía is a jewel, full of surprises. The Los Alcornocales Natural Park near Cadiz, for example, is a huge, epiphyte-festooned cork oak forest that receives more than a metre of rain a year in places and is often wreathed in the sort of fogs you might associate with somewhere more northern. A few hours'

drive east takes you to the badlands of Tabernas; the closest Europe gets to a true desert and a popular backdrop to films such as Lawrence of Arabia. It's home to sand grouse, trumpeter finch and other arid-land species. For contrast, head west again and you'll come upon one of Europe's richest wetlands, the Coto Doñana, occupying a large swathe of the coast between Huelva and Seville. Here, thousands of gaudy greater flamingoes honk like common farmyard geese, for all their airs, sharing the lagoons, ponds and marshes with exotics such as marbled and white-headed ducks, purple gallinule and Audouin's gull. And that's not to mention the world's rarest cat, the Iberian lynx, which is

seen more often than you might imagine round the area near Aznalcázar.

In respect of the diversity of wildlife and landscapes, Andalucía has a lot more to offer the nature photographer than most other parts of Europe. But to northern Europeans, it largely remains a land of opportunities to photograph nature rather than one of photo opportunities: there are relatively few guaranteed chances to photograph wildlife. I'm pretty sure it won't be too long before this changes, and once the area is 'discovered' we'll see a lot more pictures from the Rio Tinto and other extraordinary locations. It could even happen without the help of an active volcano.

