

9 Humano–Cat Cultures and Tourist Attitudes Towards Local Free-Living Cats of the Costa Del Sol

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Abstract

As a species the domestic cat (*Felis catus*) occupies a somewhat liminal status between a domesticated and wild, or 'wild-like' animal. While free-living urban cats are not typical tourist attractions, their presence does not go entirely unnoticed. This is especially so when they frequent restaurants and hotel grounds, feeding off food dropped by diners or thrown out by kitchen staff. This chapter takes an excursion into the world of the cats who live at one of two sites on the Costa del Sol, Spain. Personal encounters with free-living cats, and observations of how the cats interacted with each other and with humans provided a window into the local cat–human cultures. To gain insight into the tourist perspective, a thematic discourse analysis of English-language TripAdvisor reviews of hotels, cafes and restaurants in the area was employed. Emerging themes demonstrate how free-living cats are adored, abhorred, pitied and ignored by human visitors. Comments expressing the sentiment that local cats are an unsightly and unwelcome presence are examined within a broader framework of entitlement and tourist expectations. However, most visitors appear either indifferent towards the cats or express delight at watching and interacting with them. That the cats are well fed and human friendly suggests that most of their interactions with both human residents and tourists are positive. However, harmonious multispecies coexistence depends on an appreciation of cat–human cultures within the context of a traditional 'sun and sea' holiday destination and an economy built around tourism.

Introduction

My personal photo collections from the 1990s and 2000s, and social media feeds from the 2010s onwards, feature quite a few random cats I have encountered on my travels. Social media is testimony to the fact that I am not unique in enjoying seeing healthy, happy, cats going about their lives. Indeed, a study of how Turkey is presented in travel blogs found that photos of street cats attract the same level of attention as the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul

(Bical and Öztürk, 2021). As a species, the domestic cat (*Felis catus*) occupies a somewhat liminal status between a domesticated and wild, or 'wild-like' animal, perceived interchangeably as a 'pet', pest, problem or pitiful creature in need of rescuing (Crowley *et al.*, 2020; Hill, 2022). Tourism predominantly prioritizes the human and pays little attention to other-than-human animals beyond how they serve or affect the tourist experience (Cohen, 2019). While academic study has focused on how tourism impacts human locals or wildlife (e.g. Higgins-Desbiolles *et al.*, 2021), and animals

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'used' within tourism (e.g. Carr, 2019; Kline, 2021), free-living cats who inhabit urban tourist destinations are largely overlooked. Thus, I set out to determine what the prominent discourses are among English-speaking tourists regarding local cat populations, as well as gain insight into the lived experiences of these cats. This chapter takes an excursion into the world of the cats who live at one of two sites on the Costa del Sol, Spain. The first site is a gated community, comprising privately owned properties that are either occupied permanently or used as vacation homes, predominantly by British migrants or holidaymakers. The second site is further up the coast, namely the promenade of Torremolinos and home to an ageing colony of free-living cats.

The Costa del Sol, Málaga, Spain, is a mature Mediterranean tourist destination based on the classic 'sun and sea' style holidays of the late 1950s (Navarro-Jurado *et al.*, 2019). During the 1990s package tourism in Spain started to decline as holidays were becoming more individualized and alternative destinations established (O'Reilly, 2017). However, the low cost of living, high quality of life, and winter sunshine underpins the popularity of the Costa del Sol as a retirement destination among Northern Europeans (O'Reilly, 2000; Fàbrega-Domènech, 2019). 'Brits in Spain' became a phenomenon in the 1980s and the subject of bad press throughout the 1990s, earning a reputation as rowdy tourists or entitled migrants who were unwilling to integrate (O'Reilly, 2000). To understand how the popular representations and stereotypes were constructed, O'Reilly (2000) undertook an extensive ethnographic study of British migrants living on the Costa del Sol and found many contradictions. 'Their relationship to Spain is circumscribed by the fact that for them Spain symbolizes holiday and escape (and tourism), but they insist they are not tourists themselves' (O'Reilly, 2009, p. 191). Although informants in O'Reilly's ethnographic studies disagreed with it, the Spanish use the term 'residential tourism' to refer to Brits living seasonally or permanently on the Costa del Sol (O'Reilly, 2009). Just like free-living cats are neither pets nor wildlife, these British-born migrants occupy a liminal space between tourist and resident.

My ethnographic observations seek to understand how different cats interact with each

other, with humans, and their environments. I make use of the concept of street cat and humano-cat cultures (Jaroš, 2018, 2021), which recognizes that different groups of cats develop distinct cultures (established companion cats in an urban neighbourhood, city colonies, free-living rural groups, etc.) and develop unique relationships with different human groups (e.g. colony caretakers, restaurants who provision for free-living cats). However, to decentralize the human I prefer the term cat-human culture. Here I examine the cat-human cultures embedded within a touristic landscape to gain insight into how the cats relate to tourists and vice versa.

Methodology

My data collection and analyses consist of three complementary approaches, namely a thematic analysis of observations and interactions with free-roaming cats, combined with a qualitative interview, and a discourse analysis of TripAdvisor reviews. I visited two sites on the Costa del Sol, Spain, in person, namely a resort near Estepona (September 2021) and the seafront of Torremolinos (February 2022). I stayed in tourist accommodation (a self-contained holiday let and a hotel, respectively) for 2 weeks at each site. I spent each day sitting, walking or eating within the locality, observing how the cats interacted with each other, with me, and with other humans. I took photos and video footage of cats I encountered to accompany field notes, and these provided visual data and served as prompts when writing up my field notes. I took care not to impose myself on any cats, allowing the cat to take the lead in terms of contact. Photos were taken from a distance, and if the cat did not run off, I took closer pictures. I was often able to sit and observe groups of cats playing with each other or take note of how they reacted to passing adults, children and dogs. However, I took great care to ensure any interactions were cat led and that the cat continued to assent to any proximity or contact. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Exeter College of Social Science and International Studies (SSIS) Ethics Committee on 1 August 2019.

An ethnographic-style approach to bringing in the feline perspective

By observing how cats behave around human volunteers, Alger and Alger's (2003) multispecies ethnography of a cat shelter noted that cats readily adapted their behaviour to novel circumstances. These cats were learning from their experiences of interactions with both humans and other cats. In their studies, Alger and Alger (1999, 2003) ascribe to a widely held sociological perspective that social interactions are fundamental to the emergence of consciousness, the mind and self-awareness. Among human groups, 'the belief that we can know the intentions, goals, and desires of other selves allows us to act in this world' (Kohn, 2007, p. 7). This does not mean we need to know exactly what the other thinks or feels, just that we believe it possible to relate, empathize, and can subjectively interact using shared meanings. While I recognize that I cannot know what my ethnographic subjects are thinking or feeling, I assume they (both humans and cats) possess subjective minds and can participate in joint meaning making. Studies have shown that cats communicate with humans using social referencing (Merola *et al.*, 2015) and engaging in intersubjective joint meaning making with humans (e.g. Alger and Alger, 2003; Vitale Shreve and Udell, 2015; Jaroš, 2018).

Thematic and discourse analysis

The ethnographic observations from the Estepona resort were supplemented by two unstructured interviews with a long-term resident, James (pseudonym), following my visit (September 2021). James is a British immigrant who has lived in the gated community for approximately two decades and is a long-time cat guardian and carer of local free-living cats. The interviews were subjected to a thematic discourse analysis that complemented the field-note analysis.

Thematic analysis is a strategy that facilitates the search for themes that culminate in a description of those themes (Ayers, 2008). I combined and contrasted emergent themes from my field notes to understand different ways in

which cats interact with each other, residents, visitors, and their environment. To gain further insight into the tourist perspective, I performed a thematic discourse analysis of English-language reviews written on TripAdvisor (TripAdvisor, n.d.) by guests visiting restaurants, cafes, hotels and resorts that mention cats. Online reviews are written by consumers for consumers and have been shown to influence the decision making processes of prospective clients or visitors (Manap and Adzharudin, 2013). Although its popularity was decreasing even prior to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) travel restrictions, TripAdvisor remains the largest user-generated tourist-review site (Filieri *et al.*, 2021). Scholars have used TripAdvisor comments in multispecies ethnographies where a particular animal group is a key feature of the destination, such as captive civets within curated Balinese kopi luwak (civet coffee) tours (Hooper, 2022), wildlife tourist attractions (Cong *et al.*, 2014; Moorhouse *et al.*, 2015), or visitors to Japan's 'Rabbit Island' (Usui, 2021). Any concerns about fake promotional reviews or personal attacks on businesses (Filieri *et al.*, 2021) will probably have less impact on the discourses surrounding cats because they are not directly part of the restaurants or hotels they frequent.

I searched TripAdvisor for all English reviews from hotels and eating establishments in Torremolinos that contained the word 'cat' and manually removed any that were using cat as a turn of phrase, such as 'not enough room to swing a cat' or when part of the restaurant's name. I retrieved 101 reviews from 24 establishments (11 hotels and 13 food and drink businesses), written between January 2010 and January 2022. These peaked in 2016 and 2017 and only three were written after March 2020, which coincided with the COVID-19 lockdown and business closures. I recorded the number of total reviews for each establishment to get a picture of the overall percentage that mentioned cats. I placed the headline and entire comment on a spreadsheet, together with: (i) the URL; (ii) demographic information provided on the date of visit (e.g. age, gender and country of residence of the reviewer); and (iii) the subject of the review (name of hotel, cafe or restaurant). This allowed me to code the comments independently and

readily retrieve potentially relevant information about the location, season and reviewer.

I first coded the comments as cat positive (pro-cat), cat negative (anti-cat), and cat neutral (off-hand acknowledgement of feline presences, or not discernible as pro- or anti-cat). Table 9.1 provides example quotes from each category. The initial coding allowed a quantitative assessment of how many reviews were pro-cat, anti-cat or indifferent (neutral). These were then subjected to a qualitative thematic discourse analysis. Emergent themes that informed, or synergistically combined with those arising

from the ethnographic data, were of particular interest.

I did not observe the cats interacting with diners at either of the two eating establishments within the Estepona resort. Furthermore, none of the TripAdvisor comments mentioned the cats.

The Estepona Resort Cats

The first site was a resort near Estepona, comprising around 300 privately owned

Table 9.1. Examples of comments about cats collected from TripAdvisor reviews from hotels and food and drink establishments in Torremolinos January 2010–January 2022

Type of establishment	Comments		
	Cat positive (pro-cats)	Cat negative (anti-cats)	Cat neutral
Hotel	We loved the resident cat. Who made a visit each day.	... there are cats roaming in the grounds totally out of control sitting on sun beds urinating in the gardens.	Lots of local cats!
	Great to see the little tortoiseshell cat who has little sight, still about and well, after 3 years.	The pool was dirty and even had sardines from [the] restaurant situated in various areas around the pool where cats had been eating.	Our view was that of a hedged area where all the wild cats roamed.
	There are also a lot of cats around the hotel. You can feed them and children love them.	... cats yowling throughout the night.	... the cats get better treatment than the guests.
Food and drink	There is a huge cat who seemingly belongs to this venue and many visitors, like us, loved to take pictures of him.	... and there was a cat crawling everywhere not very nice at all.	I fed one of the local cats most of the chicken.
	And cats all over :) Highly recommend that place.	The only negative was that there were cats roaming around and lying on the cushion seats. One even jumped on my lap.	I was not in a confrontational mood so ate the chips but took the fish to feed the local cats.
	If you are lucky, their unofficial owner 'El gato (the cat)' will welcome you! She's so cute.	Only downside was the cat on the sofa right next to our table, we did not need to see it cleaning its backside while we [were] eating.	Cats roam free but not in your face!

properties that are either rented out as vacation homes or occupied by long-term residents. The vacationers are of mixed nationalities, but predominantly Spanish or English, and the residents are predominantly British-born migrants. The groundskeepers and cleaning staff are mostly Spanish locals. During my stay, I encountered 11 cats living within the resort (Table 9.2).

Owned and unowned status within cat-human cultures

Many cats had a clipped ear, which I presumed to be a sign they were part of a trap-neuter-release programme, an assumption James confirmed. Other cats wore a collar (Table 9.2). James said that the council would send a team round every so often to round up all the stray cats and kill them. However, they would leave those with either a clipped ear or collar. Thus, the visible

clipped ear protected the free-living cats, and the collar was a symbol that a cat belonged to a human household. During check-in my host mentioned that a 'beautiful tortoiseshell cat' lived nearby who was 'very friendly, but also a bit noisy'. I soon became acquainted with said feline, who I refer to here as Tortie. Most mornings I woke to Tortie's loud meowing outside my window, and she kept me company while I was drinking my morning coffee on the patio. The 'demanding' meow and the way Tortie gazed up at me (Fig. 9.1) is reminiscent of my own cats when they are seeking attention or food.

All the cats I met who were wearing collars approached me and initiated physical contact, such as rubbing on my legs. Many of the clipped-ear cats were also friendly and appeared mostly unbothered by my presence. Marbles (Fig. 9.2), Blue and Friday all exhibited affiliative proximity behaviours such as approaching and sitting close by (Bernstein, 2007). Marbles sat next to

Table 9.2. Estepona resort cat profiles^a

Given name	Physical description	Sex	Cat-initiated interactions	Ear/collar
Red	Black	n.d.	Initiated physical contract on first meeting.	Collar
Marbles	Tortoiseshell	F	Approached me on multiple occasions, but no physical contact initiated.	Ear clipped
Blue	Small, grey, possibly a very young adult	n.d.	Approached me on multiple occasions, but no physical contact initiated.	Neither
Ginger	Ginger	n.d.	Approached me twice and initiated physical contract.	Collar
Tortie	Tortoiseshell	F	Visited daily, entered my apartment and initiated physical contract.	Collar
Beau	White	M	Approached me several times and initiated physical contract.	Neither
Cream	Cream	n.d.	I only saw this cat on the rooftops.	Collar
Moo	Black and white	n.d.	Approached me twice and initiated physical contract.	Collar
Mystery	Dark coat colour	n.d.	Ran off in front of me and hid behind a hedge.	n.d.
Autumn	Tortoiseshell	n.d.	Did not approach me.	Ear clipped
Friday	Black cat	F	Approached me, but no physical contact initiated.	Ear clipped

^aF, female; M, male; n.d., not determined.



Fig. 9.1. Tortie interacting with the author during breakfast. Photos taken by author, September 2021.



Fig. 9.2. Marbles exhibiting affiliative proximity behaviours. Photos taken by author, September 2021.

me and exposed her belly on several occasions, behaviour indicative of trust (Bernstein, 2007). However, all clipped-ear cats withdrew from an outstretched hand. The only time Marbles touched me was when I accidentally found what I believe was her pile of kibble (dry cat food). I was idly rolling bits of kibble between my fingers, when Marbles ran up to me and batted at my hand as if to say, 'NO that's mine, leave it alone!' This suggests she was not scared of me, just that she did not want to be petted.

I observed 11 cats within the Estepona resort (Table 9.2). However, cats who don't want to be observed are very good at hiding (Gunther *et al.*, 2020). One evening I became aware I was being watched from behind a bush, and as I approached the cat jumped out and ran off ahead of me. This was the only cat I noticed hiding or who seemed nervous of my presence. Autumn was another cat I observed only from a distance, one time while eating from a food bowl. This cat also had a clipped ear, and although unbothered by my presence clearly

had no interest in me either. James mentioned a few cats that live in a field behind the resort and said, 'There's a few cats up the top end now there, but I don't know if they're neutered or not. I don't go up there very much.' Also, I learned that not all the resort cats are human friendly. James shared a couple of stories about cats who were fed by neighbours but that would not let you near them and became quite feisty when it came to trapping them for veterinary intervention.

I observed Beau interacting with several humans, approaching them as they walked by and rubbing against their legs. James believes most of the people who live or stay at the resort like cats, or at least are not 'anti-cats'. He also shared that the ground staff were 'pro-cat' and would look out for any who got trapped in properties. I observed piles of dry cat food around the resort, and James said that even though they are not supposed to, residents feed the free-living cats. James did say there are a couple of people that 'hate' animals, but that

the cats know which houses to avoid and who to stay away from.

Cat parishes and clubs

I noted how the cats seemed to be hanging out within the same relatively small locality and I got the impression these cats had their own sub-territories within the less than 1 km² area of the resort. While individual cats have been shown to have home ranges (territories) up to almost 10 km², in cities they tend to be less than 800 m² (Liberg *et al.*, 2000). Smaller and exclusive (non-overlapping) ranges are more likely when the food resources are stable and evenly distributed (Liberg *et al.*, 2000; Natoli *et al.*, 2006). Thus, my observation was unsurprising, and was also backed up by James who commented (unprompted) on how territorial his cats were and how 'the street cats have their little parishes too'. He said a couple of his cats venture up to the field behind them, but mostly they stay within the block. I never saw a cat fight during my short stay, and James told me, 'they hiss and spit

a bit, but they don't fight much.' In established colonies, well-fed cats display minimum aggression toward conspecifics (Vitale, 2022). The cats I met seem to have common groupings (Fig. 9.3) and the daily lives of the free-living cats appeared not to be that different from those of free-roaming companion cats. Even though they interacted differently with humans, the status of the cats within the human social world had less bearing on their social status among other cats who were seen playing or hanging out together.

The anthropogenic landscape

Life for the cats of the Estepona resort might seem idyllic. There is the busy main road, but around the gated community there is no through traffic. The cats can wander through gardens and pedestrian walkways between the houses, and their interactions with cars are limited to the car park and service road to the restaurant. James says the cats love the weather and, unlike Britain, 'Winters are great for animals here, they can sit out here all summer, and most don't even

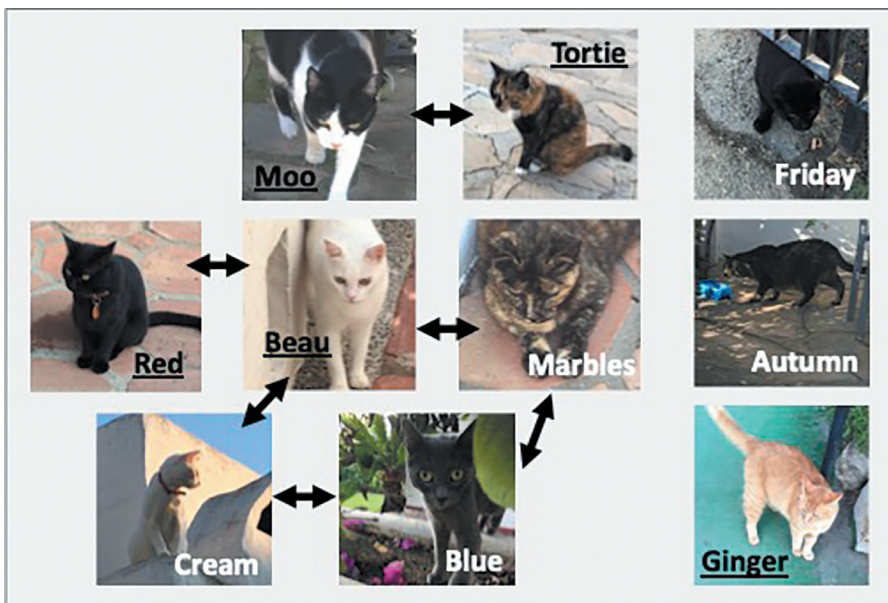


Fig. 9.3. Resort cat-cat interactions. Arrows indicate which cats were observed as bonded pairs, playing or laying together, on multiple occasions. Underlined, dark-coloured names indicate cats who initiated physical contact with the author (see Table 9.2). All photos taken by author, September 2021.

come in at night.' Of James' five cats, only two come inside regularly, and a third one comes inside at night during the winter months.

However, living alongside humans can present unique dangers that are in part born out of their lack of fear for humans or human machines. For example, James told me Friday 'will sit in front of a car and threaten it.' Another one of the cats shares a similar lack of caution and will likewise 'just sit in front of a car and challenge the car to stop' (James). If they have become accustomed to something, especially as kittens, cats are unlikely to become fearful without a negative experience (Vitale Shreve and Udell, 2015). Thus, while the resort is relatively safe from traffic, the cats do not learn to respect the road. As an unfortunate consequence, James witnessed one of their cats being killed on the quiet road just outside their home. He said he was working in the garage and watched as a cat ran out and straight under a delivery van. Although the van stopped and one of the gardeners ran up to help, the cat was already dead (James).

On my second day I found Tortie in my kitchen, acting like it was her home and she had every right to be there. And who am I to say she did not? It is likely that she has entered this apartment many times before my arrival and temporary occupation. I'd often leave the door to my apartment open during breakfast as the patio was a walled garden with a gate. However, cats can easily pass through and Tortie did not see any boundaries. As James said, some 'people put up fences to keep the cats out of their garden, but the cats, they go up onto the roof' and 'if the cat wants to come in, he's going to

get in.' Sometimes the cats get stuck inside the walled gardens, but the gardeners open the gates so they can get out. A greater concern is if a cat gets locked in an apartment for an extended period, for example between holidaymaker check-in dates. I overheard a woman talking to a man who was standing in the doorway of an apartment. Snippets of their conversation suggests the white cat (Beau?) she was looking for had a habit of sneaking into apartments and getting shut in.

The pools are enclosed with a transparent, reinforced glass fence and gate. I assumed this was a safety measure to ensure small children did not fall in. The glass looked aesthetically pleasing, and the material also kept cats from climbing into the pool area. James told me how, prior to being fenced off, a few of their cats had fallen in the pools. Although they could swim, they had to be rescued: 'You gotta pull them out. They can't climb out ...' Thus, enclosing the pool protects both children and cats from the potential danger of drowning.

Torremolinos Beach Cats

The second site is further up the coast along the seafront of Torremolinos. Unlike the free-living resort cats further down the coast, those who live along the 2.3 km promenade between La Carihuella and Bajondillo would initiate physical contact. Some cats sleep in the shallow caves of the cliff front, which are sheltered by bushes and shrubbery (Fig. 9.4).



Fig. 9.4. 'Cat caves' in the cliff face. Photos taken by author, February 2022.

A couple of cats did wear collars and appeared to 'belong' to a seafront cafe. However, they also had clipped ears, indicating they were part of the managed colony's trap-neuter-release programme. Thus, while some cats may have become 'owned' companion cats, behaviourally there were no discernible differences between these and the colony cats regarding how they interacted with humans.

On my first day I was taken by surprise when I sat down and a cat immediately jumped on my lap. Even when I tried to gently remove her, she snuggled down further (Fig. 9.5). TripAdvisor comments as far back as 2008 mention these cats, commenting on their abundance and friendliness. In 2017 cat overpopulation in Torremolinos was deemed a public health hazard, and fearing a mass killing, animal organizations got together and conducted a large-scale trap-neuter-release initiative (*EuroWeekly News*, 2017). The cats continue to be cared for by colony caretakers (Rivas, 2023).

Regarding cat-cat cultures, these cats also appeared to have their own sub-territories with the same cat or cats occupying the same area each day. Two cats shown in Fig. 9.5 appeared to be a bonded pair and were often seen together. The cats are fed by colony caretakers, evidenced by the regularly filled food and water bowls (see Fig. 9.4, middle) laid out along the parts of the boulevard where there are no bars, cafes or restaurants. However, I also observed visitors feeding cats, both from their tables and from their pockets. I was not the only one taking photographs of the cats, and on one occasion I

witnessed someone picking up a cat to pose with it. The cat did not seem to be overly bothered, which is surprising as many companion cats do not tolerate being picked up by strangers. The friendliness and lack of fear observed in the Torremolinos colony cats could be attributed to the positive interactions (and food) they receive from visitors.

The tourist perspective

To gain further insight into tourist/visitor perspectives of the local cats I collected TripAdvisor comments from hotels and eating establishments in Torremolinos. Although there were sufficient reviews mentioning the cats (101) to perform a qualitative analysis, these comprise a minority of the total reviews. Cats were only specifically mentioned in 1% and 3% of the English-language reviews for hotels and food and drink establishments, respectively. This is unsurprising as cats are not the focus of these businesses. The abundance of cats is sometimes evident in how they are referenced in the context of complaints about the food, for example 'even the cats wouldn't eat it' or to complain about the lack of hospitality, such as 'the cats are treated better than the guests' (such comments are coded as 'cat neutral') (see Table 9.1). However, it was comments related to how a feline presence was contributing to a positive or negative experience that provided greatest insight into how visitors perceive and relate to free-living

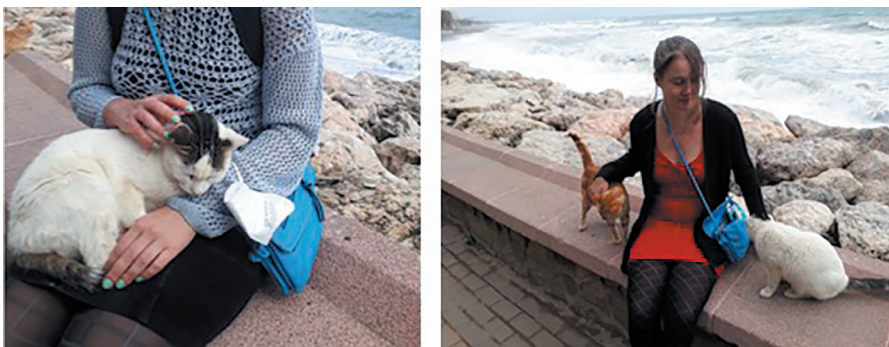


Fig. 9.5. Author with free-living cats of the promenade, Torremolinos. Photo taken by author's partner, February 2022.

cats. Overall, the comments about cats were predominantly cat positive (61%), with visitors generally enjoying the cats' presence. However, more complained about cats in hotel reviews, compared with write-ups on food and drink establishments (Fig. 9.6).

The cat-positive hotel comments tended to refer to one or two resident cats who the guest had met, often naming the cats in the reviews. Although a few did find the abundance of local cats endearing, especially those with children, negative comments tended to cite the noise and untidiness of multiple cats. Six low-rated hotel reviews specifically mention the smell of cat urine and others complained of cat presences in their room or the lobby.

Themes shown in Table 9.3 that correlated with my observational data were Resident cat, So many cats! (although I would not describe the current situation as overpopulation), Friendly cats, Cat watching, Feeding the cats, and Well-cared for cats. Additional insights provided by the TripAdvisor comments were Nuisance cats, Unhygienic, and Cat-related insults. These themes are interrelated and discussed below under two broad subheadings related to the cats' condition and status.

Well-cared for and well-fed cats

Perhaps most notable from my analysis of TripAdvisor reports was an absence of comments concerned with cat welfare. I found no mention of sick, distressed or underfed cats, or any accusations of cats being mistreated. This is probably because the cats are monitored by a dedicated group of colony caretakers, who ensure they are fed and newcomers sterilized to prevent overpopulation (Rivas, 2023).

References to how well cared for the free-living cats were, as well as those associated with bars, restaurants or hotels, was implicit in many of the TripAdvisor reports. Other reviewers were more explicit and took time to write about restaurants and hotels putting food out for visiting cats. One report said the owners of a family-run restaurant fed all the cats in the area and others commented on how well looked after the resident hotel cats were.

Despite signs asking visitors not to feed the cats, who are provided wet and dry food by colony caretakers (Rivas, 2023), many did feed them. I observed a child feeding one a cat chew stick, given to her by her mother for this purpose. Others were sharing what may have been cat treats or could have been leftover human food. Several TripAdvisor reports on the beaches of La Carihuela and Bajondillo also said 'be sure to feed the cats' (or similar). TripAdvisor reports also suggested the cats were often the benefactors of dissatisfied diners. For example, one reads: 'I was not in a confrontational mood so ate the chips but took the fish to feed the local cats' (TripAdvisor review, 2015). Some noted that the 'Community cats love what you drop on the floor' (TripAdvisor review, 2017) and others confessed to intentionally feeding the cats. For example, one self-proclaimed cat lover said of the resident cat, 'He thoroughly enjoyed my tuna ceviche!' (TripAdvisor review, 2017).

The resident cat (feline patrons)

Like other Mediterranean destinations I have visited, I noted individual cats were often associated with specific restaurants. Furthermore, many (42) of the TripAdvisor reports mentioned the resident cat. The majority

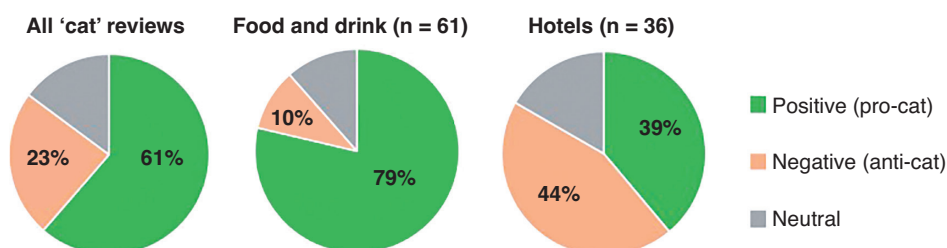


Fig. 9.6. Proportion of pro-cat, anti-cat and cat-neutral TripAdvisor reviews of hotels and food and drink establishments in Torremolinos January 2010–January 2022.

Table 9.3. Themes of TripAdvisor discourse analysis of English-language reviews of hotels, cafes and restaurants in Torremolinos

Theme	Description	Examples of comments	No. of comments
Resident cat	Interactions with a cat associated with a particular premises	• ‘... and Lily the resident cat is gorgeous’ • ‘We had a great table and were joined by the resident cat for dinner.’	<u>46 Total</u> 41 Positive 2 Negative 3 Neutral
So many cats!	References to feline abundance or multiple cats hanging around the general area	• ‘Lots of local cats’ • ‘... the army of local cats which seem to live on the cliff side.’	<u>43 Total</u> 23 Positive 9 Negative 11 Neutral
Friendly cats	Comments about how friendly the cats were and how they initiated physical contact	• ‘The cats are friendly too.’ • ‘A bonus was of course the darling restaurant cat who slept in my lap while I ate.’	<u>35 Total</u> <u>33</u> Positive 2 Negative
Cat watching	Expressions of delight at watching or interacting with local cats	• ‘Loved their ginger cat antic’s.’ [sic] • ‘The cats/view make the place a lovely spot to sit and watch the world go by.’	<u>29 Total</u> 29 Positive
Feeding the cats	Giving cats human food as a treat or to get rid of bad food	• ‘The cats were very friendly, our one especially loved the garlic mayo.’ • ‘fed one of the local cats most of the chicken.’	<u>15 Total</u> 10 Positive 1 Negative 4 Neutral
Unhygienic	Reference to cats being unhygienic/dirty	• ‘... the smell of cat pee in the corridor’ • ‘... the thought of him [the server] messing with the cat and then pouring our drinks.’	<u>13 Total</u> 1 Positive 11 Negative 1 Neutral
Nuisance cats	Cats begging for food, getting in the way, or making noise at night, or a general disdain for cats	• ‘... we could hear cats yowling throughout the night.’ • ‘One even jumped on my lap. Gave it a four star instead of 5 [sic] because of the cats.’	<u>10 Total</u> 1 Positive 8 Negative 1 Neutral
Cat-related insults	Using references to the cats to make a point related to bad service	• ‘Even the cats would not eat it.’ • ‘The cats get better treatment than the guests.’	<u>8 Total</u> 1 Positive 4 Negative 3 Neutral
Well-cared for cats	Mention of locals and hotel/restaurant managers feeding the cats, or generally healthy-looking cats	• ‘The hotel cat was a nice extra and was very well looked after.’ • ‘The area around has numerous cats (well fed and looked after).’	<u>6 Total</u> 5 Positive 1 Neutral

of these were cat positive and sometimes named the cat(s). A cat named Lola was specifically mentioned in six independent TripAdvisor reports written in 2018 and 2019. The fact that they knew her name implies a conversation centred around the cat had occurred between the diners and the owner or staff, although none explicitly stated this. For example, a typical comment read, 'Great staff and atmosphere, especially with Lola the cat' (TripAdvisor review, 2019). Cats in general were viewed as positive and negative attributes to tourist venues. For example, a five-star review stated 'and the lovely cat made the waiting time fly quickly and brought a big smile on our kids' faces' (TripAdvisor review, 2018). Another five-star review noted, 'the local moggies [cats] provide a homely presence as they curl up and snooze in the odd empty seat' (TripAdvisor review, 2015).

Some TripAdvisor writers implied cats were inherently unhygienic or took objection to serving staff stroking the cats. Arguably this, and especially the complaints of hotel spaces smelling of cat urine, are due to poor sanitary and cleaning practices rather than directed at the cats themselves. However, the notion that the cats do not belong or need 'controlling' was expressed in some reports. Others defended the cats saying, the 'cat was there but unobtrusive' (TripAdvisor review, 2015) or that 'Cats roam free but not in your face!' (TripAdvisor review, 2017). However, both these speak to human exceptionalism and the notion that human comfort comes first.

Discussion

Humano-cat cultures and tourism

The home ranges of individual cats have been shown to vary greatly, from 9.9 km² in the countryside to less than 800 m² in cities (Liberg *et al.*, 2000). Exclusive (non-overlapping) ranges are more likely when the food resources are stable and evenly distributed (Liberg *et al.*, 2000; Natoli *et al.*, 2006), as would be the case in both the Estepona resort and the Torremolinos boulevard.

Compared to the wealth of studies on intraspecies social interactions in cat colonies,

only a handful of studies have looked at social interactions between free-living cats and humans (Jaroš, 2018; Vitale, 2022). The key difference between the free-living cats of the Torremolinos seafront and those of the Estepona resort was their interspecific interactions with humans. The former would initiate affiliative and physical contact (rubbing on legs and jumping into laps) with humans. Many of the free-living cats of the resort were also unafraid of humans and would engage in affiliative proximity behaviours (approaching and sitting close by) but would withdraw from an outstretched hand. It is likely that the Torremolinos cats, although free living, were socialized to humans as kittens by interactions with colony caregivers and the high-volume of human tourists. Conversely, the resort cats may have grown less wary of humans over time, but cats who are not exposed to humans as kittens rarely engage in affiliative behaviours towards humans (Slater, 2004).

A TripAdvisor report stated 'beautiful resort, but my wife got rather upset with the amount of stray cats'. In comments such as these, the upset seems to have been caused by them not having human homes, rather than them being in poor condition. Another user started a thread asking for advice about where to stay in the Malaga area:

My problem is that I am a real animal lover and I keep reading about the large number of stray cats on Costa del Sol. ... is there anywhere we can go where there aren't lots of stray cats or dogs. I would worry about them and it would spoil my holiday.

(TripAdvisor review, 2018)

The belief that all free-living cats are to be pitied or need 'rescuing' is a prominent theme in my doctoral studies (Hill, 2023), but in many cases this is unfounded. Cats accustomed to free living often do not fare well in animal shelters or being confined to human homes and are best cared for as community or colony cats (Slater, 2004; Natoli *et al.*, 2006). In response to the above question, several posts pointed out that the cats of Torremolinos were very well-cared for. A TripAdvisor member with 'Destination Expert for Torremolinos' status explained they were:

not strays ... they're the most pampered beasts imaginable. There really isn't any need to worry

about them, the females are spayed wherever possible to keep the numbers down, and the local vets keep an eye on them on a regular basis.

(TripAdvisor member, 2018)

The liminal status of *E. catus* as not fully domesticated, yet not completely wild (Crowley *et al.*, 2020), bears resemblance to the status of British migrants living in Spain (O'Reilly, 2000, 2017). These migrants occupy a liminal status of being residents but not fully integrated into the local Spanish culture, with many retaining British passports (O'Reilly, 2017). The Brits in Spain have been subject to bad press over the years for their uncouth behaviours and refusal to integrate into Spanish society (O'Reilly, 2017), and much like free-living cats might be seen by some as transgressive and out of place (Holmberg, 2015).

In the case of the resort cats, many were companion cats belonging to resident Brits, so arguably their presence is an extension of the geographies created by the British migrants (Wolch *et al.*, 2002). British migrants are central players within the animal charity that oversees and takes care of the Torremolinos colony cats (Rivas, 2023). However, cats are also kept as companion animals by Spanish residents, and Spain has similar regulations and volunteer-led approaches surrounding the management of free-living cats as the UK (Natoli *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, James spoke of positive relations with the Spanish groundskeepers, who were looking out for the cats, and of the Spanish vets who waived fees for treating free-living cats. However, as members of a companion animal species, living independently, the Torremolinos colony cats represent an escape from human control. All over the world free-living cats occupy this liminal space of not behaving like domesticated animals but not being fully wild or considered a 'native' species (Griffiths *et al.*, 2004; Crowley *et al.*, 2020). This status endears the cats to some people and offends others who see them as 'invasive' or a nuisance within human-dominated urban spaces (Houston *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, there are different cultural ideas about how cats should behave or places they are allowed to enter (Griffiths *et al.*, 2004), and entitled tourists might deem their complaints justified based on these (Martin *et al.*, 2017).

Human exceptionalism and entitled tourists

Discourses surrounding free-roaming cats are invariably human centred and dominated by human exceptionalism – the belief that humans are inherently different from, or superior to other animals (Hill, 2022). Western tourism was based on ontological and ethical assumptions that prioritize the human and pays little attention to other animals beyond how they serve or affect the tourist experience (Cohen, 2019). Regarding the cats and tourists, my human informant said 'the Brits are the worst complainers' especially the ones who don't live in the Estepona resort. He went on to explain that the 'Spanish generally don't complain so much, but because of COVID-19 travel restrictions abroad, a lot came down from Madrid in 2020 'and they all got very anti the cats'. James proceeded to express the opinion that those who did not live there (in the resort) had no right to complain. However, it was unclear if he believed the visitors had no right to complain about 'our' (the residents') cats, or if he was defending the cats' inherent right to exist (it is likely it was a bit of both). However, the cats might be caught in between existing tensions between British and Spanish-born residents and tourists described by O'Reilly (2009). Certainly, future research could be directed towards an understanding of how Spanish locals relate to the cats and how this impacts relations with resident Brits and tourists.

TripAdvisor reports demonstrate how cats are sometimes not considered as being sentient beings, being written about as one might complain about mould growing in the shower. Comments expressing the sentiment that local cats are an unsightly and an unwelcome presence can be examined within a broader framework of entitlement and tourist expectations. Personality influences the emotions a tourist experiences on vacation in response to expectations not being met, and this can determine whether they have a positive or negative experience (Lin *et al.*, 2014). Campbell *et al.* (2004) conceptualized 'psychological entitlement' as 'a stable and pervasive sense that one deserves more and is entitled to more

than others' and examined some of potential interpersonal consequences of such entitlement. Psychological entitlement is experienced across a multitude of situations, including expectations for services received on vacation. Non-entitled tourists enjoy the immersive cultural experience of local cuisine and TV stations, whereas more entitled visitors expect options that they are familiar with (Martin *et al.*, 2017). This leads them to feel uncomfortable and complain about that which is unfamiliar, including the local language and resident cats.

Conclusion

While my brief visits do provide the visitor perspective and an appreciation of how the cats interact and quickly befriend strangers, I recognize much more could be gained from a longer multispecies ethnography. The emergent themes from my analysis could be used to inform further studies that included the restaurant owners and staff who fed the cats as well as local colony caretakers. Furthermore, both visits were

conducted outside of the main tourist season, and future ethnographic studies could benefit from interacting with feline informants during the summer months.

Emerging themes demonstrate how free-living cats are adored, abhorred, pitied and ignored by human visitors. They are also well-cared for by resident humans and spoiled by visitors, and any expression of pity is not based on poor living conditions. Most visitors would appear indifferent to the cats, to the point of not even commenting on them. However, 'ignored' is perhaps not the best term as it implies a need is being overlooked. Many people do enjoy healthy, happy cats and would be disturbed by an abundance of sick or abused cats. None the less, there is a vocal anti-cat element to the discourses, which associate cats with being dirty and a nuisance. I believe cats have a right to exist independent of whether human visitors (or residents) enjoy their presence, but a deeper understanding of both feline and human needs, wants and desires, within the context of a popular holiday destination, is imperative for continued harmonious multispecies coexistence.

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