



The striking Alhambra Palace from the Sans Nicholas Plaza stands tall above the woody ridge with a backdrop of rugged mountains

Discovering the history of Andalusia

The legacy of the Moors who flourished for more than 700 years

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"Tabarak alladhi biyyadi ill mulku" are the words inscribed in front of me in Kufic – ancient Arabic calligraphy. You may think I'm in a mosque, but I am in the Room of Thrones in the magnificent Alhambra Palace in Granada, Southern Spain.

The 67th chapter of The Quran, "Al-Mulk" meaning "The Dominion", is inscribed on the walls and ceiling. Standing here it's not hard to believe that the Muslims ruled over Spain for over 700 years. Although a period of conquest and re-conquest, Spain in this period was flourishing.

The rest of Europe may have been in the Dark Ages but Andalusia, the region stretching from present-day Portugal to Almeria in the southeast of Spain, was in a golden era of discovery, invention, and enlightenment.

The legacy of the Muslims, or the Moors as they are referred to, can be seen throughout Spain, but more significantly in Andalusia in the culture, cuisine, architecture, and language. For example, there are about 10,000 Arabic words in the Spanish language.

The conquest of Spain in AD 711

In the 8th century when a minority Christian group was being oppressed by the ruling Visigoth Catholic King, they turned to the North Africans for help. At that time the Ummayyad Caliphate governed across the Middle East to North Africa. After approval from the leader – the caliph in Syria – a man named Tariq Ibn Zayd took his army of Berbers – native North Africans – across the sea from Tangier. The mountain at the tip of Southern Spain was consequently named Jabal Tariq (Mount of Tariq) and later renamed Gibraltar. The region that was conquered was called Al-Andalus.

How did the Moors rule?

The minority groups such as the Jews welcomed the Moors, as they allowed them to freely practise their religion. The Jews refer to this age as the Golden Age as this is when Jewish artists, poets, and philosophers were free to think and speak, and therefore thrived. The three main religions lived in harmony or "convivencia" in Spanish. Tolerance and justice for all regardless of religion was key to the success of the Moors' rule.

The model in Andalusia became a centre of light and wisdom where people from other parts of the world came to gain knowledge. In the 10th century Cordoba was the largest and wealthiest city in Europe. Certain things that

didn't exist in the rest of Europe were prevalent in Andalusia. An aqueduct, bathhouses, universities, street paving, street lighting, libraries, and many hospitals were all created in this time.

The legacy

Although they spoke Arabic, the Moors (Muslims) didn't impose Arabic on the Spanish even though the Spanish alphabet was written in Arabic script at the time. Many of the well-known books in philosophy, poetry, and medicine were written in Arabic, which encouraged Europeans to learn the language. Muslim scientists excelled in botany, zoology, and medicine, and also invented revolutionary navigation devices such as the astrolabe and the quadrant. The word "algebra" derived from the Arabic word "al-jabr" meaning "reuniting broken parts".

The Moors introduced honey, almonds, saffron, nutmeg, and pepper from North Africa, among other foods to Spanish cuisine. Being masters of agricultural engineering, they were able to plant other crops such as lemons, rice, pomegranates, aubergines, artichokes, asparagus, and the well-known Seville orange. The extensive craftsmanship in Cordoba like hand-tooled leather, pottery, silk, silver and gold filigree jewellery all originated from then.

The Alhambra Palace

The most visited tourist attraction in Spain with up to 2 million visitors a year is the Alhambra Palace originally built in the 8th century as a fort. The renovations started in the 11th century and ended as a royal palace in 1333 for Yusuf I, emir of Granada and sultan of Al-Andalus.

The UNESCO world heritage site comprises four sections – the Palaces, Medina (city), Alcazaba (military zone), and the Generalife palace and gardens. Apart from the beautiful Kufic and cursive calligraphy that can be viewed in the different monuments in Alhambra, the most staggering is the geometry and symmetry in design.

Although the Moors rule was generally a peaceful one, there was a lot of rivalry among the Moors and Christian kings in other regions and this was often expressed through architecture. Yusuf I built parts of the Alhambra to display his intelligent design and brilliance in an attempt to out do King Pedro I from Seville.

The best part of a day can be spent in the grounds of the Alhambra soaking up the serene atmosphere created by the different garden and water features. To capture some great views of

Sierra Nevada go to the top of the Alcazaba fortress.

Albaicin

Henri Matisse said, "Granada thrills to the point that all the senses melt and merge." With the scent of geraniums and jasmine, narrow streets and tiny sloping alleyways with cobbled paving, whitewashed houses with flowers hanging from balconies, and some of the best views of the Alhambra, nothing could be more true. Known as the old Arab quarters, Albaicin is an area in Granada full of charm and romanticism.

There are plenty of lovely tea-rooms and handicraft shops with a Moroccan influence here. Spend an afternoon absorbing the enchanting character of the town with a pot of mint tea. For stunning views visit San Nicholas Plaza, which is adjacent to the small Granada Mosque, where the hosts are happy and welcoming to anyone that wanders through. Granada has a special significance, as it was the last stronghold of the Muslim rule until it fell in 1492.

Cordoba Mezquita

Two hundred kilometres away in Cordoba you can find the paradoxical landmark known as the Cordoba Cathedral or Mezquita – mosque in Spanish. Although used as a cathedral today, this monument has had its fair share of transition.

The transformations throughout history are visually depicted through varying styles within the building. Roman inspired columns, Arabesque arches, geometric and beehive ceilings, Quranic calligraphy, and Gothic and Baroque churches can all be found here.

The construction of the mosque began with the caliph Abdur Rehman I from the highly regarded Umayyad dynasty where the prophet of Islam, Muhammad, held his ancestry one century before him.

When Abdur Rehman I arrived in Andalusia in 756, he purchased half of the church and used it as a mosque for 70 years. As the popularity of the Muslims had spread far and wide, many natives became Muslim and the mosque started becoming crowded. The other half was then purchased, and the whole area reconstructed and extended over time.

Spirituality was first priority and the mosque's design of 1,100 columns was intended to show the eternity of God. Similarly, the symmetry and simple colours were used so the worshipper could not be distracted, but instead focus on prayer and the oneness of God. King Ferdinand III recap-

tured Cordoba in 1236 and it was again used as a church but reconstruction didn't begin until 1523.

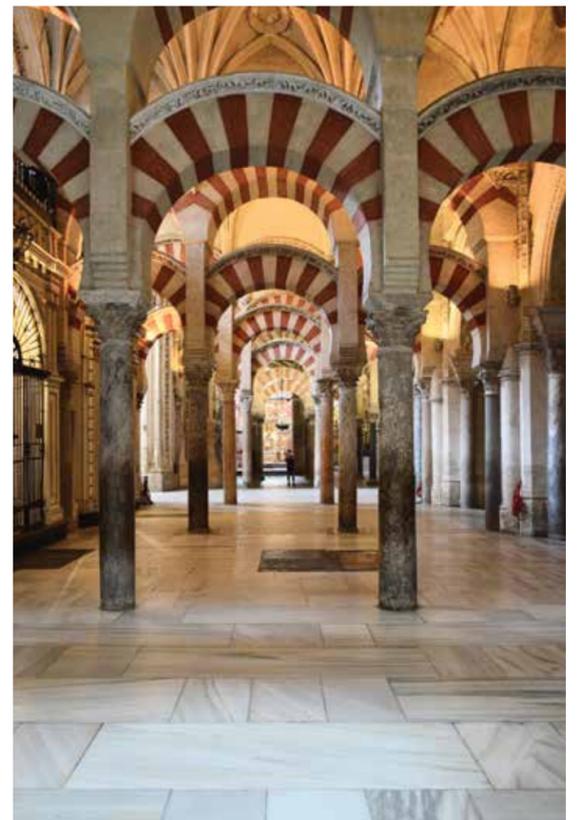
Medinat Al Zahra

Six kilometres from Cordoba city centre stands the archaeological site of Medinat Al Zahra. This ancient city was discovered in the 20th century but dates back to AD 936. Only 10 per cent has been excavated so far.

Under the rule of Abdur Rehman III, the entire city was designed by Ibn Zaryab who became known as the "blackbird of Al-Andalus" for his innovative expertise in fashion, style, and music. Ibn Zaryab was responsible for bringing the guitar, toothpaste, chess, and many other things to Europe.

Abdur Rehman III hired Ibn Zaryab and embarked on this project to show his own authority and hegemony. Medinat Al-Zahra was a city built from scratch. The city was made of two areas, the medina-city, and the Alcazar, which was the residence of the caliph and site of government offices and delegations.

This colossal city had everything from soldiers to merchants, religious advisers, and servants, all of whom lived with their families. A sophisticated irrigation system was implemented making the city self sufficient and functional. The flamboyant caliph also used the city to invite rulers from other regions to show off his wealth and



The Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba (World Heritage Site): a view of some of the 800 pillars and warm tones of red and white arches which remain intact

status. Such grandeur proved to be unsustainable and the city only survived 70 years after political instability in Cordoba brought on its demise.

This is just a snapshot of what awaits the traveller in a region spanning over 85,000 square kilometres. The best way to explore is by car, so fly to Malaga and take an unforgettable road trip steeped in culture and history.

Further information

Nearest airports: Malaga/Granada

Andalucian Routes: www.andalucianroutes.com for specialised tours
Granada Tourism Board: www.turgranada.es/en
Spanish Tourist Board: www.spain.info

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