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*Distant views of the Alhambra in Granada, from the public plaza in the Albaicin quarter*

# WINDING DOWN THE ANDALUSIAN TRAIL

THE ALLURE OF SPAIN IS A LOT MORE THAN FLAMENCO AND BULL FIGHTING, AS A ROAD TRIP DOWN SOUTH UNVEILS

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY  
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**I**t is a late spring day in Cordoba, and the Andalusian landscape is ablaze with flowers, growing wild along the highways and carefully nurtured in colourful mud pots hanging from balconies inside the towns. I have always thought of

Spain as a series of clichés: bullfighting, flamenco and tapas, liberally doused with sunshine and served up with sangria. My road trip through Andalusia turned out to be all that and some more.

The region collectively known as Andalusia (or Andalucía) is the golden triangle of travel in the south of Spain, with Cordoba sitting at its tip, Granada and Seville

as its arms. This area, historically known as Al-Andalus or Islamic Iberia is where remnants of the land's Muslim and Moorish past are starkly visible, especially in the opulent palaces studded with brilliant blue azulejo tiles and the decadent hammams that offer soak, scrub and spa services to weary travellers. And of course, in the magnificent places of worship that have been smoothly repurposed across various faiths and continue to wear the symbols of their multi-layered history.

Of the last, there is no example more splendid than Cordoba, with the Mezquita as its crown jewel. The Mezquita is a glorious symbol of a time – a few hundred years beginning in the 8th century – when three major faiths lived and prayed in harmony. Now a museum, the Mezquita is an ornate cathedral built right in the midst of what was an austere mosque. The peaceful interiors of this mosque-cathedral with the tall pillars and high arches carry the whispered prayers of visitors, undisturbed by the buzz of eager tourists with their selfie sticks just outside. It is the kind of place my husband and I both



want to go back to again and again, and we do, until it's time to leave Cordoba.

Of course, Cordoba – and indeed, Andalusia itself – is much more than this syncretism. It is also about duende, Spanish for the overwhelming emotion that finds expression in art, or powerful magnetism and charisma. In Cordoba, my first brush with duende is the flamenco. On a sultry night, sitting in a small, dark room with a bunch of strangers at the Tablao Flamenco Cardenal, watching the man and woman on stage whirl and whip around, stamping their feet and moving their hands to the earthy music, I also come to realise that duende can be contagious, affecting the artist and audience equally.

I am smitten with the flamenco, and watch a performance again in Granada, tapping my foot and clapping my hands late into the night. Located at the edge of the Sierra Nevada mountains, Granada is a living celebration of its Moorish past. From the open terrace of our guesthouse in Albayzin (also Albaicin), high up in the old Arab Quarter, I can see a mosaic of terracotta-tiled white houses down below. From here, we walk up and down, up and down the city's winding narrow lanes to the Alhambra citadel-palace.

With its multiple royal chambers and places of worship, landscaped gardens and terraces with expansive vistas of the rocky landscape, the Alhambra is considered Granada's crowning highlight. The crowds waiting to get in are spilling over to the streets we reach late in the afternoon, and all we can manage is a quick tour of the gardens. In a nod to what the Moors considered most precious in their land, there is water, water everywhere in these gardens: cascading fountains and crystal-clear ponds that add a bit of nip to the air.

The next morning is at the Christian heart of Granada, reaching which takes another minor hike through the old town. The Granada Cathedral and the Royal Chapel are quickly ticked off a mental list, but at the Basilica San Juan de Dios, we linger, stunned by the unexpected grandeur of the gilded baroque interiors. Medieval European cathedrals were clearly built to strike a sense of awe and even fear among people. And this basilica does that with aplomb.



*Sprawling views of Seville city from the terrace of Catedral de Santa María de la Sede*

It is the same with the Cathedral de Santa María de la Sede at Seville, our last leg on this trip. This is the world's largest Gothic cathedral, built in the mid 15th century on the remains of what used to be, yes, a mosque. The interiors of this massive cathedral hold the final resting place of Christopher Columbus, as well as several exquisite paintings by Spanish artists, such as Francisco de Goya and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo.

After the church tour, we climb up the Giralda, the bell tower that was once a minaret of the mosque. And from the top, I can see the Plaza del Triunfo, one of the main open squares of the city, with its numerous al fresco cafés and tapas bars, and the Alcazar, the royal palace that is a mishmash of Christian and Mudéjar (post Moorish) architectural styles, built and rebuilt over the centuries.

The Alcazar still functions as a palace for the royal family, particularly during weddings and important ceremonies. The gardens are particularly delightful here too, perfect spots to laze around on a sultry spring morning, and I can see that most tourists in Seville have the same idea. Children are jumping in and out of the fountains, and adults chat animatedly, while keeping a watchful eye on them.

This Andalusian road trip has been one of many firsts for me – tapping my foot to flamenco late into the warm night; unwinding in the hot and cold pools of a hammam after a long day of walking; eating delicious churros straight from the pan and dipped in frothy hot chocolate; downing creamy paella with multiple glasses of Tinto de Verano, the summery cousin of Sangria. Just thinking back on it is enough to brighten any dreary day back home. **W**

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*The Mezquita in Cordoba*



*The ornate interiors of the Basilica San Juan de Dios in Granada*



*Flamenco is an unmissable experience in Andalusia*