

SOUTHERN SPAIN

'Eternal Andalucia'

10 days

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Day 1 Arrive in Madrid

Today we arrive in Madrid and transfer to our hotel.

The capital of Spain, located in the heart of the peninsula and right in the center of the Castillian plain, is a cosmopolitan city, a business center, headquarters for the Public Administration, Government, Spanish Parliament and the home of the Spanish Royal Family.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Madrid & The Prado

Madrid reveals its imperial grandeur through a panoramic tour culminating at the world-renowned Prado Museum, where Spanish artistic genius spans five centuries.

Our route to the museum passes Plaza España and the Cervantes Monument, honouring Spain's greatest literary figure whose Don Quixote captured the Spanish spirit of impossible dreams pursued with noble determination.

Originally opened in 1819, the Prado houses the finest works collected by Spanish royalty alongside Spanish paintings gathered from diverse sources over two centuries. This represents one of the world's most important art repositories, including vast collections of Italian masterpieces reflecting Spain's historical connections to the Italian peninsula.

For our purposes, however, we concentrate on Spanish masters whose works define national artistic identity: Velázquez's court portraits revealing imperial Spain's complexity, Goya's paintings spanning from royal commissions to haunting war scenes, Ribera's dramatic chiaroscuro, El Greco's mystical elongated figures, and Zurbarán's contemplative religious scenes.

After our guided tour, we stroll up Gran Vía into Madrid's old quarter, experiencing the capital's vibrant street life firsthand. Free time for lunch and independent exploration follows, with your Tour Leader providing recommendations for shopping, historical sites, and galleries.

Consider visiting the nearby Reina Sofía for important modern art collections, including Picasso's masterpiece "Guernica," or the Museo Naval, among the world's most significant naval museums, documenting Spanish maritime history from the Armada through contemporary times.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Madrid: Toledo Day Trip

Toledo beckons from its rocky promontory surrounded by the Tagus River's protective embrace, where Arab, Jewish, Christian, Roman, and Visigothic elements blend into Spain's most culturally complex city.

Perched dramatically above the meandering river, Toledo's unique position fostered the remarkable cultural synthesis palpable throughout its ancient streets. Narrow alleyways wind between houses, synagogues, churches, and mosques, each architectural style contributing to the city's extraordinary historical tapestry reflecting over two millennia of continuous habitation.

We visit the stunning Cathedral, a Gothic architecture masterpiece whose soaring spaces and intricate stonework demonstrate medieval Christian ambition. The Santa María la Blanca Synagogue showcases Moorish design influences from Granada, illustrating Toledo's position as medieval Spain's multicultural crossroads where different faiths coexisted and cross-pollinated.

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Toledo's crown jewel awaits in the Church of Santo Tomé, housing El Greco's breathtaking masterpiece "The Burial of the Count of Orgaz." This painting represents Spanish Renaissance art's pinnacle, demonstrating how the Greek-born artist synthesised Byzantine traditions with Spanish mysticism to create uniquely powerful religious imagery.

Wandering Toledo's labyrinthine streets, we uncover secrets spanning from Roman foundations through Visigothic capitals to Moorish innovations and Christian reconquest. The city's architecture, art, and atmosphere testify to civilisations that shaped its identity through conquest, coexistence, and cultural exchange.

After a break for lunch, free time allows exploration of Toledo's shops, markets, and hidden corners before returning to Madrid.

Overnight in Madrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Madrid - Train to Cordoba: City Tour

Spain's efficient rail network carries us south across the Despeñaperros Mountains, crossing the dramatic border pass between Castile and Andalusia as landscapes transform from central plateau to southern valleys.

Córdoba, a UNESCO World Heritage City, reveals its extraordinary multicultural heritage through monuments spanning Roman foundations, Visigothic churches, Islamic masterpieces, and Christian reconquest. Our exploration begins at the Roman Bridge and Calahorra Tower, an Arab defensive structure guarding the Guadalquivir River crossing for over a millennium.

The centrepiece awaits in the Mezquita-Catedral, or Great Mosque of Córdoba, among the oldest structures surviving from Al-Andalus's Islamic period. This architectural palimpsest illustrates Córdoba's complex history: historians believe a Roman temple to Janus originally occupied this site, converted into a Visigothic church after the 572 conquest, then transformed into a mosque and completely rebuilt by exiled Umayyad descendants.

The Umayyads, originally ruling from Damascus until 750, established their western capital here, creating an architectural marvel of horseshoe arches and alternating red and white stonework that influenced Islamic architecture throughout the Mediterranean. We visit the Alcázar fortress built by King Alfonso XI, containing remarkable mosaics and Roman sarcophagi that reveal Córdoba's archaeological depth.

Finally, we stroll through the Jewish Quarter where the synagogue represents medieval Iberian Jewish culture's architectural achievements.

Please note: Our official meal plan includes breakfast and dinner; however, due to variables such as hotel location, your Tour Leader may substitute lunch for dinner today, with advance notice provided.

Overnight in Cordoba.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Cordoba - Granada

Granada awaits in Andalusia's heart, where the majestic Sierra Nevada mountains create a snow-capped backdrop for Spain's most romantically situated city.

Conquered by Moors in 711 AD, Granada blossomed into one of Europe's wealthiest and most refined cities, becoming the final Muslim stronghold in Iberia. The Nasrid dynasty transformed Granada into a jewel of Islamic civilisation, creating architectural masterpieces that survive as testaments to medieval Muslim cultural achievement.

Granada's rich history and heritage remain visible throughout the city centre through cobblestone streets and lovely plazas that witnessed the end of Al-Andalus. In 1992, Granada commemorated the 500th anniversary of Christian reconquest by the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, marking the completion of the centuries-long Reconquista.

Upon arrival, we visit the Royal Chapel featuring tombs carved from marble by Tuscan sculptor Domenico Fancelli. Both Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand died before the chapel's completion, requiring temporary burial in the Friary of San Francisco within the Alhambra. They

were later moved to the chapel once finished, buried alongside King Philip and Queen Juana.

Although their original intention called for all future Spanish monarchs to rest here, this didn't materialise as the monastery at El Escorial became the preferred royal burial site instead.

Granada's position beneath snow-capped peaks, combined with its Moorish architectural heritage and gypsy traditions, creates an atmosphere unmatched elsewhere in Spain.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Granada: The Alhambra

The Alhambra commands our attention as Granada's supreme attraction—a mighty fortress housing an extraordinarily delicate Moorish palace begun in the 13th century by Nasrid sultans ruling the last Spanish Muslim kingdom.

This fantasy of "lace in stone" surrounded by arabesque gardens and fountains offers superb views across the Old Quarter and Sacromonte, the mountain occupied by Roma cave dwellers whose flamenco traditions echo through Granada's evening air. The Alhambra represents the Moorish concept of life itself—something glorious to be ennobled by learning and enlivened by every form of earthly pleasure.

Walking through the Court of Lions, Hall of Ambassadors, and other palatial chambers, we witness Islamic architectural genius at its pinnacle. Intricate geometric patterns, muqarnas ceilings, and Arabic calligraphy transform structural elements into spiritual meditation, creating spaces that blur boundaries between earthly and divine realms.

The adjoining Generalife Gardens demonstrate sophisticated hydraulic engineering, where water channels, fountains, and reflecting pools create cooling microclimates within Andalusia's intense summer heat. These pleasure gardens allowed Nasrid rulers to enjoy paradise on earth, their design principles influencing Islamic garden traditions from Morocco to Central Asia.

We conclude with an informal stroll through the old Moorish quarter of Albaicín, where narrow streets climb hillsides dotted with traditional white houses offering glimpses into Granada's continuing Andalusian lifestyle.

The balance of the day allows independent exploration of Granada's countless treasures.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Granada - Reserva Tauro - Ronda: Town Tour

Our route winds through Málaga Province's mountains toward historic Ronda, perched dramatically on a towering plateau above deep gorges carved by geological forces over millions of years.

En route, we visit Reserva Tauro, a 500-acre bull and horse breeding farm providing insight into Andalusian cultural traditions surrounding bulls without attending actual bullfights. This educational approach presents bullfighting's cultural and historical context objectively, allowing understanding of controversial practices that remain integral to Spanish heritage in certain regions.

Arriving in Ronda, we explore the old town where Romans, Arabs, and Christians left indelible marks on this ancient settlement. Our walking tour includes the Casa Museo Don Bosco, offering unique glimpses into Saint John Bosco's life and work—the 19th-century Italian Catholic priest renowned for his dedication to young people's education and welfare.

The museum's collections include personal artifacts, historical documents, and materials related to Bosco's revolutionary educational methods that influenced Catholic pedagogy worldwide.

Ronda captivates visitors with its dramatic escarpments and panoramic views, particularly the deep El Tajo gorge carrying the Rio Guadalevín through the city centre. We suggest walking to the 18th-century Puente Nuevo bridge, which spans the 100-metre (328-foot) chasm below, offering unparalleled views across the Serranía de Ronda mountains.

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Overnight in Ronda.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Ronda - Pileta Caves - Olive Oil Tour - Sevilla

We journey to Seville via the well-preserved rock paintings at Pileta Caves, where 25,000-year-old Neolithic and Paleolithic drawings reveal humanity's earliest artistic expressions. Walking required on wet stone with no handrails - please consult your Tour Leader for guidance.

These ancient artworks of black, ochre, and red pigments, created from clay and fat mixtures, depict mostly abstract lines and patterns alongside recognisable horses, goats, cattle, and a rare giant fish. This authentic archaeological site requires steady footing and patience for slow walking through naturally formed chambers.

We then follow "the Route of the White Villages" (Pueblos Blancos)—a series of whitewashed towns in the Sierra de Grazalema Natural Park. These charming settlements feature brilliant white houses adorned with colourful flower pots, mountain vistas, and traces of Islamic and Christian heritage creating quintessentially Andalusian landscapes. Here we visit one of the region's olive oil producers for a comprehensive tour and included lunch (replacing dinner today). This area produces renowned extra virgin olive oil transmitting the complete aroma, flavour, and essence of Zahara de la Sierra's olive groves.

The demanding process involves steep slopes requiring manual caretaking and harvesting, rewarded by exceptionally fruity, sweet, and gentle flavours enhanced by the area's high rainfall. We learn about traditional production methods while tasting both olive oil and locally made wine. Our regional lunch features assorted tapas, local cheeses, fruits, and sweets (vegetarians well accommodated), providing authentic Andalusian gastronomy.

Overnight in Sevilla.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 9 Sevilla: City Tour

Sevilla unveils itself as a vibrant tapestry of Andalusian charm, Spain's fourth-largest city and the cultural heart of this captivating region. Picturesque streets lined with restored Moorish architecture, fragrant orange groves, and flower-filled patios create an atmosphere enhanced by castanets' rhythmic sounds—hallmarks of Sevilla's flamenco heritage.

We immerse ourselves in Sevilla's architectural wonders, beginning with the magnificent Cathedral—the world's largest Gothic cathedral boasting stunning stained-glass windows, a magnificent choir, and numerous chapels. Time permitting, we ascend the iconic Giralda Tower for breathtaking panoramic views across this historic city.

Next, we step back in time at the Alcázar Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and among Europe's oldest continuously used royal residences. We explore intricate Moorish architecture, lush gardens, and grand halls where Christian and Islamic artistic traditions merge seamlessly. The palace's evolution through Almohad, Mudéjar, and Renaissance periods creates architectural layers revealing Sevilla's complex cultural heritage.

Along the Guadalquivir River banks, we encounter historic landmarks including the Maestranza Bullring, symbolising Sevilla's bullfighting traditions, and the Torre del Oro, a 13th-century watchtower that once protected the city's river approaches.

For contemporary appreciation, we admire the Monument to Tolerance by Eduardo Chillida, a striking sculpture symbolising peace and understanding that reflects modern Sevilla's commitment to cultural harmony.

Overnight in Sevilla.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Depart

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Our Iberian odyssey concludes as we depart from Sevilla.

BUEN VIAJE! (Have a good journey!)

Included Meal(s): Breakfast